Vanishing Act

by Shocker

Summary

Shizuka Joestar, Joseph's adopted daughter, has grown a lot since the Bizarre Summer of 1999. Now in 2016, following the passing of both her parents, she returns to Japan to get away from some of the pressure of the United States. Soon she finds herself weaved into something far wilder than she ever could have imagined, joining a group of mysterious thieves against a new slew of insidious Stand users and a conspiracy that threatens the world at large.

Originally posted on Spacebattles, I finally decided to crosspost here too. Original editing/proofreading by Nitewind over on SB.

Notes

Well here we are. I said ages ago on SB that I was considering porting this work to here, and I eventually decided to go ahead and do it. I do still think SB has a bit better formatting for music and the like, but I was curious to broaden the reach of this story. As this is a rather old fic, I doubt I'll change it much over the course of this upload. I plan on doing it in blocks at a time.

A big shoutout to Nitewind, my editor, who helped sharpen and improve this story.
She heard the voices through the thick wooden double doors, a shouting match between an irritated Brit and a boorish Texan. Each word reached her, but as she sat on the bench and stared at the slowly rotating ceiling fan above her, and the stray dust particles passing through the gaps of the blades, the words felt a million miles away.

"You posturing little bastard! The young miss has lost her father, and now you presume to pressure her on-"

"Look Pennybags, it's a real simple matter. Joestar's empire was goddamn huge. All that property, all them investments, that all belongs to her now. An' you're trying to tell me that all that can be trusted to a sixteen year old?"

The discussion of the will had gone well, all things considered. Holly had no interest in big business, and seemed to be fine with getting a sum of money in her inheritance. Same for Josuke, who had no ambitions to be a mogul and contend with those responsibilities. And so that left all that real estate to Joseph's youngest child.

The grieving was over, the funeral just under a fortnight ago, but already the vultures were circling.

"I want to disappear," Shizuka whispered to herself, in a voice that didn't feel like her own.

The air to her left distorted almost imperceptibly, a figure coming into existence beside her that was invisible to the human eye. Her Stand, that had been with her since she was a baby. It had grown and evolved over the years, becoming a golden humanoid figure with a pointed head, a furry white feather boa, chitinous plates on the arms and legs, and bright pink compound eyes. A belt of padlocks were positioned on the waistline. The solid gold breasts made it clear that the thing was every bit as female as Shizuka was.

"No, not like that..." She waved her Stand off, and it vanished back into her subconscious. She really needed to name the thing... 'Achtung Baby' might have worked when she was still in transparent diapers, but it didn't really work now.

Once more she focused on the shouting match coming through the door. The Limey spoke first. "As it stands 'Sir'," he sneered in that sharp way only a posh Brit could manage "Miss Joestar's new holdings will be maintained by the company until such time as she comes of age. And I will most certainly not give you the opportunity to take it out from under her. You vulture."

"Hmph." The Texan seemed undeterred. "We'll see. An industry like this, it can't be trusted to some punk kid like her. Market needs good, capable hands of guiding it. And I'll make sure those hands are mine."

"Yeah?" Shizuka asked herself. "Just try it, shithead. See how far you get."

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4/12
She thought back on that day with some regret. She should have stormed the room, and given that loudmouth a taste of her fist. It's what Jotaro or her big bro would have done, right? But, on the other hand, that probably would have just proved his point. But right about now that felt like the only option she had.

Shizuka Joestar was, after all, a kid. At sixteen she wasn't really articulate enough to defend herself, and yeah the property market was a mystery to her. But she could learn, right? Couldn't have been that hard if her Dad had made it big, and he had been a total goofball.

She looked to her reflection in the subway window, the darkness of the tunnel. A somewhat short and athletic figure, her raven locks reaching around her shoulders. Her green eyes were hidden behind the dark lenses of her heart-shaped sunglasses, her dark school uniform partially hidden under her varsity jacket. A red vest with snow white sleeves, the back emblazoned with solid gold letters: J✪ – J✪. Joestar Fashion was a rather popular label these past few years- got even more popular when they got Rohan to join up from Gucci.

Yeah, Shizuka was a slip of a girl alright. And something about her, some vibe, did make her seem like a bit of a punk. And she had gotten into some fights in her time. Wasn't her fault. Amber Wright goaded Shizuka into it, and it wasn't like it was Shizuka's fault that the dumb blonde bitch couldn't take a punch.

At any rate, the troubles stateside led to her guardian suggesting they moved away for a year or two. And Japanese, being Shizuka's second language, made it the best choice in her mind. Going to Morioh was a bad idea though- Josuke's existence was well known by her father's business rivals, for how big a scandal it had been when he was discovered, and those same men would know to look there. She'd go hang out with her big bro at some point, but for now she needed to stay somewhere crowded where she could blend in. So, why not Tokyo?

The crowded train came to a slow halt, and immediately crowds of people started pouring out and in with record swiftness. It was shocking, even to a girl who had spent plenty of time on grimy New York trains. But she recognised the name on the platform and weaved in through the crowd gracefully until she was off the train an on the tiled platform.

"Okay, so..." Shizuka reached into her pocket and clicked her phone on. It took her a moment to find the note she had taken for the directions, but once she had then the young woman adjusted her sunglasses and made her way out of the underground.

Shujin Academy... apparently it had quite a good reputation, according to Simmons, and they had churned out some big wigs from their alumni. Even a former Olympian, much to his surprise and excitement. Originally they had no vacancies, but the prospect of Joestar money had won the principal over in a heartbeat, and that 180 led to a rather sudden opening being 'discovered.'

Nothing she wasn't used to. People had been looking at her like a floating bag of money for as long as she could remember anyway. And really it was either go along with that, or waste time hunting down another school.

As it turned out, she didn't really need to check directions on her phone. The crowds of students, with the distinct prison-print legwear of the Shujin uniform, made for a pretty good signpost to follow. Before she knew it she was nearing an ornate black iron gate, her eyes roaming up to take in the sheer scale of the school. "Geez." The boxy structure, stark walls, all available space used efficiently... looked like every high school from every anime Shizuka had ever seen.
Now that she thought about it, she had seen photos of Josuke and Jotaro's high schools, interiors and exteriors, and they looked about the same... and that had been twenty and thirty-something years ago!

Weird.

Shizuka shook her head and made her way through the gates. A few eyes were on her in passing, but she ignored them. And equally ignored the urge to vanish before their very eyes.

"Miss Kawakami. Got it," she murmured under her breath.

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"So this girl... Joestar's daughter. Seems like she could be a challenge to take on, even for me."

"What do you mean? You're supposed to be the best that money can buy. You got a flawless record on your side, and she's only some... punk kid."

"All those things are true, but... well look, sir, you don't follow the same 'world' that I do. You're only human, after all. And the rumors that have flown around Joestar family members in my social circles... Hmph."

"Be more specific."

"Shizuka's 'nephew.' Her brother. Their friends. They're all rather dangerous people to be on the bad side of. So if I trip up, things will end very badly for me... and even worse for you. You don't even want to know half the stories I've heard about them."

"I don't give a crap about urban legends. All I need you to do is find Shizuka and 'persuade' her to give up her inheritance. Don't. Kill her. That'll just make things more difficult."

"Fine fine. It'll be a while before I have any updates for you though. I'll call again when I have something... Haven't even left for Japan yet. You just go about your business, and I'll go about mine."

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"... And that's your map of the school, and your timetable. And if you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask." Kawakami forced a smile. Clearly she didn't want to be making this spiel, but the principal did like the sound of Joestar-brand yen.

"Sorry for the imposition," Shizuka nonchalantly replied.

"Oh it's no trouble." She was trying, god bless her, but she really wasn't that good at lying.

The door noisily rolled open behind her, and Shizuka slowly turned to see another Shujin student. A brunette who looked abnormally prim and proper, her shoulder length hair having a delightful silky flow. At a glance Shizuka could tell the white sweater and brown boots she was wearing were of expensive brands.

"Ah, this is Makoto Niijima, the student council president," Kawakami hastily said, gesturing to the young brunette. Shizuka bowed quickly, a gesture that made Makoto cough into her fist.
"There's... no need to be so formal, Joestar-san," Makoto said.

"Sorry. Been a while since I was in Japan, so some of the cultural norms are rusty on my end." She made a quick mental note to ditch bowing. Her usual experiences for coming here involved Josuke and his friends, and that wasn't exactly a formal crowd. "But ah, you can ditch the honorifics too. I really don't need 'em." Still, 'Joestar-san' did sound rather nice. Almost nostalgic in a way she couldn't grasp.

Makoto nodded, quick to brush the matter aside. "At any rate, the pri-... I decided to come here to offer my services. If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to come to me for them and I'll do all I can to resolve the issues."

Student council president too? They were really gonna work hard to get her on the schools side. "I'll keep that in mind, but you really don't gotta go far on my behalf," Shizuka said in return, managing her own awkward and forced smile. Man this was weird. Nobody had made any leaps for her back in America. Then again, most everyone in that school had been in and around her family's level of wealth.

"Well... please keep the offer in mind," Makoto said, smiling. Hers was a little more earnest than the teacher's. Perhaps she hadn't been expecting any politeness from Shizuka? She was a rich foreigner after all.

But, well, old as Suzy Q and Joseph Joestar had been when they raised her, they sure as hell didn't suffer disrespect under their roof. She knew to have some manners.

It was at that point that Kawakami stood up behind Shizuka, moving away from her paper-strewn desk. "Well, ah... It's almost time for class. Come on, I'll lead the way." Nodding, Shizuka followed suit. They left the faculty office, and once out the door Shizuka removed her sunglasses and pocketed them. Just as the door was closing, she caught a final glimpse of Makoto. In that moment there was some lingering aura of sadness hanging around the student council president... and once the door shut, it was gone.

The trip to 2-D was a quick one, and before she knew it Shizuka was standing before a whole class room. Some eyes were admiring the raven haired girls, while others seemed more curious or apprehensive. A few barely even glanced her ways.

"Alright everyone, settle down," Miss Kawakami said, sounding markedly more frazzled, The few people in the class still murmuring quieted down. "This is Shizuka Joestar, our new transfer student. I know two transfers in one year, especially so close together, is a little weird... but these are some extra weird times after all."

Shizuka made a very quick mental note to not bow and, forcing something that could vaguely be considered a smile, said "It's very nice to meet all of you."

"Very good. You can take that seat in the left hand corner."

Wasting no more time, she headed down to the empty desk. But, as she walked, Shizuka briefly met the gaze of a young man in the right hand corner. A bespectacled boy with frizzled dark hair, Harry Potter without the scar. There was something about him, something that felt... extra-normal. Something that Shizuka couldn't quite put her finger on. But, the young Joestar knew that he had felt it too...
Classes in Japan were much like those she’d gone through in America. They were boring, dragged minutes into hours, and left her with a dull headache by the end. Not helping was her kanji being a little rustier than she had expected. Shizuka took notes throughout the day, filling about two pages per class, but she was sure glad nobody could see her handwriting.

She was just out of practice, she told herself. Just needed to keep at it and she’d get it down pat.

When the last bell rang out, Glasses was gone so fast that Shizuka didn’t even get a glimpse of where he headed. Whatever it was about him that seemed off, Shizuka would have to find out later. The real shock was the presence of another westerner in class. Not a whole lot of blue-eyed blonde girls in Japan, outside of that one garish subculture of tanned broads. But, she too, left quickly. Like she was trying to avoid someone.

As she left the classroom, Shizuka was able to overhear the whispers of a few students. She was able to hear her own name clear enough.

"That new girl, Joestar..."
"Another transfer? For real? What do you think she did?"
"... I mean she IS American, right?"
"Yeah. Probably a real troublemaker. Heard a lot about how nuts American high schools are."
"... Well, I heard the principal is dying to crack her wallet open..."

Shizuka sighed. Great, that didn’t take long at all. Nobody had questioned her in Morioh. All the Stand users had known her, treated her like family, and with such a wide group nobody else in town had questioned her. But here, she only really now realized, she was alone. And Japan had a... history in regards to foreigners. Seemed that apprehension was only dulled with time, not removed.

Things would get better. Life would change.

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For the next two years they’d be calling this apartment home. It was around the edges of Shibuya, mostly removed from the more hectic parts, and had decent rent that her funds could afford. Two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a living room and a kitchen. It was far removed from the Joestar penthouse in New York, but it was more than good enough.

It was a quick walk up the outside staircase to the second floor, and soon enough Shizuka reached the stark red door of apartment 24.

“I’m home!”

The sound of a boiling pot reached her ears, while the scent of cooking beef slowly filled her senses. A warm, comforting and nostalgic smell that melted the tensions away like butter. Simmons was a hell of a cook, that was for sure.

“Ah, young miss! Welcome home!” Simmons looked... well, like a butler. Old, sharply dressed, pale brown hair thinning. Looked like he’d be perfect for playing a butler in a movie. On the counter near the chopping board was some kind of portable speaker with an iPhone slotted in it.
The speakers said “Where can I find the shopping district?”, chirped the same saying in Japanese, to which Simmons hastily repeated the words. It was a good effort. Right now he only knew some stock phrases and basic questions. “How was school?” he asked politely.

“Dull,” she sincerely replied. She slipped her brown leather bag off her shoulder and settled it near the doorway. Shizuka slipped out of her shoes and walked along the hardwood to the kitchen. “So, what’s on the menu?”

“Beef stew. I felt you’d like something familiar, and the man at the butchers was rather kind. Even spoke a little English.”

“I need a doctor,” the phone spoke. Simmons repeated the translation perfectly.

The young heiress nodded slowly. “Well... thanks. I’m gonna go lay down for a bit. Had a lot of stuff to take in after all.”

Simmons quickly nodded. “Y-yes, well if you need anything feel free to talk to me. You have been through quite a lot after all, and... well you are at a difficult enough age already.” He was worried, despite his best attempts to not let it show. Stiff upper lip, and all that.

“Thanks, Simmons,” Shizuka replied, before walking into her room.

For a few moments, the only sound was the simmering stew.

“You misunderstand, I was not trying to grope you,” said the phone.

“Wait, what?”

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Simmons had been working for the family for around seven years now, and had largely been assigned to watch Shizuka whenever her parents were unavailable. She trusted him quite a bit, and so she felt him being her legal guardian was better than being an imposition on Holy or Jotaro.

Holy was nice, for a fact, but she was also a very gentle woman. Shizuka couldn’t bear the thought of some of those damn sharks harassing her to get at Shizuka. And Jotaro was... himself. Nice, in a quiet and terrifying sort of way, but if he couldn’t make time for his own daughter as a kid then he probably couldn’t for her. So Simmons was her best choice.

Her room was a simple affair- a big box with wooden floors and undecorated white walls with a window currently closed off by her dark curtains. Several unopened boxes were stacked around the room, and thus far the only furnishings Shizuka had were her bed, her bureau, a rotating rack of sunglasses atop the bureau, and the desk and chair pushed into the wall. She’d decorate and fully unpack in time, she told herself. But for now, all she needed was a few outfits she could readily access.

Shizuka flicked the light on and made for the rack, taking her shades from her pocket. She neatly slid them onto the right slot and nodded to herself. The sunglasses were... well, this tradition her dad had created. Every year, on her birthday, he’d give her a new set to go with whatever present he had gotten her. She liked them quite a bit. It helped that, when wearing sunglasses, she looked rather similar to her grandmother Lisa Lisa despite sharing no blood with her. And Lisa Lisa was apparently the baddest bitch to ever walk the earth, and that was pretty goddamn cool.

Sixteen pairs in total. The collection would never get any bigger. Once more that thought reached her, and she turned away from the glasses rack.
After drawing her phone and going through her contacts, she dialed a number and flopped down on the plush white duvet. After a few rings, the person at the other end of the line answered.

"Hello? That you Shizuka?"

"Ha... yeah, it's me. Nice to hear your voice again Josuke. Just got back from my first day at Shujin."

"Oh yeah?" he sounded pleased, his voice raising a bit in energy. "Well... how did it go?"

"Pretty good, I..." Shizuka sighed "Well it's an adjustment, I guess. Don't know anyone out here. I mean I expected that but being 'the rich American' seems to be spreading around school fast. I'll try not to let it bug me too much, but I was hoping I'd get a few days without that label sticking."

Josuke hummed on his end, sounding like he was in deep thought. "Sorry to hear that Shizuka. But, you know, if you wanted I could take some time out and head up from here. Morioh's been quieter than usual, and if anything happens then I'm sure Oku... Ah, Koichi could handle it."

"Thanks but, that won't be necessary. You can just focus on work and junk." Josuke had developed a strong liking for motorbikes, stemming from a 'kick-ass Stand chase' he and Koichi got into back in the day. That, and Crazy Diamond, meant that he'd founded a pretty lucrative auto repair shop in Morioh. "Just wanted to hear a friendly voice."

"I see. If you change your mind, or if anyone starts shit on your end... I'll be over in a heartbeat. Got it?"

"Mm." She smiled gently. It was strange, really. Josuke was her brother in a loose sense, and the time they shared together was in fleeting intervals, but he felt as much her brother as Joseph had been her father. And anyone who hurt her, as would be the fate of anyone who tried to harm his friends or family, well... the kindest way to put it was that there were worse fates than death. "I'll keep that in mind. And if you ever need something from me, I'll come running too."

"Stay safe."

After hanging up, Shizuka sighed and let her phone slide from her hands. She closed her eyes, the air around her shimmering with a halo of rainbow light. Just like that she was gone, invisible to the human eye.

Josuke was incredible. He helped take down a depraved psycho-killer, and beat up like... a hundred evil Stand users. And Jotaro had beaten even more, and a crazy powerful vampire. And her dad had beaten a literal God before he even got his Stand. And then there was... her.

No sense in dwelling on that. Not right now when she had a new school life to adapt to.

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4/13

Looking at Kamoshida in action gave Akira a solid idea of how his mind and heart had become so distorted. The idolization of the other staff members was obvious in how they watched him on the volleyball court, like he was still in his Olympian prime.

They practically worshiped the man. And, in fairness, he did know his way around the sport. Plain truth was he could bring any team through on a national level.
Which was perhaps why the principal, and the parents according to some sources, were willing to turn a blind eye to the simple fact that Kamoshida was a perverted thug. That had become all too clear on the first accidental trip to the Metaverse.

As the volleyball rally was going on, the bespectacled youth found himself leaning against a wall beside Ryuji, the loudmouth blond watching the match unfold with a barely restrained contempt. He hated Kamoshida with every fiber of his being, and even with only a passing knowledge of what had transpired at Shujin in the past... Akira really couldn't blame him.

The ball went high over the net, sailing toward the teacher's side. Kamoshida leapt high, spiked the ball down... and it smashed into Mishima's face with a resounding sound that reverberated throughout the gym. Several students gasped as the bruised bluenette was sent sailing backward, noisily smacking the floor like a wet noodle. Out cold.

"Jesus!" Akira turned his head to his right, glancing at the new girl. Even behind silver-rimmed shades he could see the shock in her expression, and the shock had surprised her. She was watching Kamoshida closely, and it seemed that she was getting a similar vibe to the event that Akira was. That Kamoshida had been all too deliberate in that shot. It hadn't taken Akira long to figure out that Mishima was the favourite whipping boy.

Just who was she? 'Shizuka Joestar.' The name was odd, but that wasn't the reason why she stuck out. Something about her, the very air that circulated around her, had an unnatural edge to it. It reminded him vaguely of Morgana, or the aura Ryuji held after getting his Persona yesterday.

"Someone, take him to the nurses office!" Kamoshida lifted Mishima's prone form until one of the upperclassmen lifted him by the underarms and led Mishima from the gym. Then, as if nothing had happened, Kamoshida stood upright, smiled, and the game got started right back up again.

"He'll pay soon enough," Ryuji growled, looking set to snap.

"Easy," Akira calmly replied. He adjusted his glasses and briefly glanced to the blond. Even in the school's track uniform Ryuji had a punk air to him, Akira noted. The legs of his trousers were rolled up as makeshift shorts and he had ditched the track jacket entirely. "I know you're pissed, and I don't blame you, but here and now our options are limited."

"Yeah, I know," Ryuji replied. He was seething still, looking set to erupt. This could only end badly if they didn't get out of the gym, and give him a spot to vent a little more openly.

Akira sighed and rose up. "Come on." He motioned for Ryuji to follow him as they moved through the gathered crowd of students, heading for the back door of the gym. But even through a throng of people, Akira knew vaguely that Shizuka was glancing briefly toward them.

It took a few moments for the duo to arrive at the courtyard, whereupon they made for a shaded alcove by the vending machines. Ryuji grunted in frustration, driving his right fist into the plastic window of the drinks machine so forcefully that the entire structure shook for a few seconds. "That asshole's acting like a king here too! 'Get to know each other better' my ass! This volleyball bullshit is just an excuse for a one man ego stroking show!"

"Let it all out here and now," Akira said firmly. "I'm disgusted by him too, but there's nothing we can do here. And if you get too riled up and have a public outburst..."

"I get it, I get it," Ryuji replied, looking like a wounded puppy. "Look, now's our chance to look for the guys we saw in the castle yesterday."
"And hopefully we can find someone willing to talk about Kamoshida abusing the team," Akira finished.

"First dude was saw was around class D, your class. Hopefully we can get him to talk without any issues. People have been avoiding me lately, so... Oh, but you're in kinda in the same boat, huh."

"Yeah, thanks for reminding me." Knowledge about Akira's criminal record had leaked 'conveniently' around the same time he officially joined Shujin. And he had a pretty solid idea of who to blame for that.

Palaces, the Metaverse, Personas, Morgana... it had all started two days ago, when that strange app on his phone brought him and Ryuji into a twisted, castle-version of Shujin. And within was Kamoshida's shadow self, his dark and thuggish desires left to run free. His true inner thoughts. A man like him, untouchable by any conventional means... it was too big a threat to just leave unchecked.

And so the two set off, going all around the school to interview every student they had seen a facsimile of in the Palace...

... And turned up flat zero in the realm of answers. People were already wary of Ryuji and Akira, and they were either too scare of Kamoshida's torture or desperately needed volleyball success that they couldn't speak out against him either. It was ultimately a wasted effort. They agreed to meet back up at the courtyard again after a brief string of texts.

Akira arrived first, and he wasn't at the vending machines long before a voice reached him. A female one. "Can I talk to you for a sec?" He recognised her quickly enough, the twin-tailed blonde that sat in front of him in class. A girl like her tended to stick out.

"What is it?" Akira asked.

"What's with you?" she replied, sounding a touch uncertain. "Like, how you were late the other day being a lie and all. And there's that weird rumor about you too..."

"Whadda ya want with him?" Ryuji's voice cut through the air like a knife and quickly caught the attention of Akira and the blonde as he approached.

They seemed to know each other, Akira reasoned, as she had no strong reaction to his sudden appearance while everyone else looked at Ryuji like a swamp monster. "Right back at you. You're not even in our class."

"... We just happened to get to know each other," Ryuji answered. And that was technically true, the best kind of truth.

"What're you planning to do to Mr. Kamoshida?"

"Huh?!" Ryuji's expression quickly moved from surprise, to betrayed annoyance. Akira had the impression that it was an emotion Ryuji was very familiar with. "I see. I getcha. You're all buddy-buddy with Kamoshida after all," he said accusingly.

Akira saw the blonde wince ever so slightly. Yeah, they knew each other alright. You had to have some knowledge of a person to twist words into a knife like that. "This has nothing to do with you Sakamato!"

"If you found out what he's been doin' behind your back, you'd dump him right away!"
"Ryuji has a point," Akira stated. He took a moment to fix his glasses, and then hastily glanced away from her steely gaze. "We've... seen and heard some very troublesome things."

"You wouldn't get it," Ryuji added. Which, again, was true. Nobody sane would believe a word about the Metaverse.

The blonde remained silent for a few moments, then sighed and shook her head. "I don't know what you're trying to pull, but no one's gonna help you out. I'm just warning you, that's all." And then she stormed off, leaving the two boys to their own devices.

"So... you know her?" Akira asked, deciding to get confirmation on all he had suspected thus far.

"Yeah, we... went to the same middle school. But that's not important! Did anything turn up on your end? Any names?"

Akira reclined against a vending machine, closing his eyes briefly. "Mishima. He's a guy in my class. You know, the scrawny one that got brained in the volleyball match. Apparently he's on the receiving end of some 'special coaching' he shook his head at the despicable euphemism he'd heard "Hence all the bruises."

If he were a betting man, he'd assume that Mishima was Kamoshida's underling. Took a brunt of abuse, but also followed more orders than the other dumb bastards on that team.

"In that case," Ryuji clapped his hands together noisily "How about we have a little chat with him before school ends?"

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It didn't take too long to rush from the courtyard through to the main entrance of the school, and it seemed they arrived just in time to see Mishima reached the door. He had a noticeable hunch in his posture, and a fresh bandage on his forehead from what happened today.

"Hey, got a sec?" Ryuji's voice made the bluenette visibly bristle, looking as if he might drop his bag from the fright of his sudden address.

"Sakamato?" He looked to Akira "And, you too Kurusu?"

"We just wanna talk," Ryuji said, trying his hardest to be non threatening for a change. "Heard talk that Kamoshida's been 'coaching' you... ya sure it's not just physical abuse?"

Mishima recoiled "C-certainly not!"

"We did see him spike you in the face. Literally an hour ago. On purpose," Akira chimed. A man like Kamoshida he knew what he was doing. A guy like him 'accidentally' hitting a stationary target... It was beyond unlikely.

"That was just because I'm not very good at the sport," Mishima mumbled.

"Still, that doesn't explain all the other bruises you got," said Ryuji. He leaned back, inspecting the shorter student. At a glance it was easy to tell from all the bumps and bandages that he'd taken plenty of knocks.

Again, Mishima recoiled. "They're from practice!" he hastily said.

Seemed he had raised his voice a little too much. A broad-shouldered shadow fell over Mishima,
approaching from the central staircase. "What's going on here?" Kamoshida's muscular bulk loomed over the three students, emphasized further by his sporting attire, and it made it quite clear to Akira how terrifyingly easy it must have been for him to break Ryuji's leg in the past. "Mishima? Isn't it time for practice?"

"I'm... not, feeling well today." He couldn't bring himself to look up from the floor.

Kamoshida scoffed. "What? Maybe you're better off quitting then. You're never going to improve that crappy form unless you show up to practice." Already Ryuji was seething, bubbling under the surface.

"Didn't you hear? He ain't feeling well." Ryuji firmly met Kamoshida's gaze, trying to keep his tone level.

"Well Mishima? Are you coming to practice or not?" Kamoshida glanced away from Ryuji, as if he didn't even exist.

Mishima, still casting his eyes downward, mumbled "I'll go," in defeat.

Now Kamoshida looked down on Ryuji. On the outside he was smiling, but there was a sinister edge to that smile, and a rigid tension in how he held himself "As for you, any more trouble and you'll be gone from this school for sure." Now he glared at Akira "That goes for you too, Kurusu. And with a record like yours, it really wouldn't take much to have you thrown out."

"You have an amazing spike," Akira nonchalantly said. He'd been getting threatened over his record ever since he got the thing, he stopped being bothered much by the threats. After all, that kind of fear would just give people more power over him.

"Hmph. Just don't get in the way of my practice. All these unsettling rumors are making the students anxious, after all."

"That's your own goddamn fault," Ryuji growled.

Kamoshida brushed them aside and marched off with Mishima in tow. Their investigation had turned up precisely jack and shit, and it was clear that nobody was going to give up information willingly. And it served as a painful reminder of the fundamental unfairness of the world, of the corruption that seeded society, where kids like Mishima, and Akira, and Ryuji, and... countless others were ultimately helpless in the confines of an uncaring world.

A conventional investigation hadn't worked. And so, Akira reasoned, there was nothing to stop them using some unconventional methods.

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Chapter End Notes

Keep in mind this story was written weeeerellllll before DSN and the anime were announced, so Ren Amamiya wasn't a thing at this point. But I probably would've stuck with Akira Kurusu regardless.
The plain truth was, Akira had known that conventional methods wouldn't have worked from the very beginning. Perhaps he still had some naive belief in 'the system', despite getting a criminal record dumped on his head by some corrupt politician bastard, but he wanted to at least hope they could get Kamoshida in the confines of the law.

No, that wouldn't work. Certainly not. In class Ryuji had texted him a few times, thinking that Takamaki (As he understood it, she was the blonde who sat in front of him) could be a source of intel. If all the rumors were to be believed then she had some kind of 'relationship' with him. But, already, Akira knew that would be futile. All the same he had agreed to meet up with Ryuji at the courtyard.

As he reached the glass double doors he paused at the sight of an unfamiliar figure. A dark haired girl in a white Shujin sweater and prison-patterned skirt. She also had one hell of a shiner on her left eye. A volleyball member then.

She stood staring at her phone, and only looked up when Akira's slim shadow fell over her. "...What? Oh... I'm in the way aren't I? Sorry."

Akira regarded her in stone-faced silence for a few moments. Some voice in his head said to not get involved. The rest of him couldn't resist the impulse. "Are you hurt?" he asked.

"Huh?" The raven haired girl seemed to wince slightly. "Um, Well..." She quickly changed the subject, deciding to divert some attention away from her condition. "You don't look familiar. Could you be that transfer student from Class D?"

"Yes. I'm THAT transfer student," he replied. Akira had frankly expected her to slip away, or just outright run when she heard that. But, to his pleasant surprise, she managed some close approximation of a smile.

"This might not be any of my business but don't let any of the rumors get to you."

Genuine concern? Well, that was a new one. "Why do you say that?" he asked.

"Well, I've helped with a similar situation before... My friend is often misunderstood too, all because of her looks. Sorry, I didn't mean to drag on like that. Anyway, I have to go to practice... I'll see you around." She brushed past him with her eyes cast to the ground, looking as if her very soul had been strangled from her being. Akira shook his head. Try as he might, he just couldn't understand why students let things get this bad. He went on through to the courtyard.

Much like yesterday, Ryuji was leaning against one of the vending machines with an anxious tension in his posture. Like he could snap any second. "Damn it. What the hell..."

"Did you find someone?" Akira asked.

"Is that what it looks like?" he sarcastically retorted. The bottom of his fist met the vending machine with a loud crack. "All of 'em kept saying the same shit Mishima was talkin' about. Kamoshida must have told them something!"

Akira nodded. "I figured as much. I had hoped something might have changed, but it's clear to me
that we can't simply rely on the authorities to deal with this. But I have an idea." Ryuji leaned in expectantly. "We can't do anything. Out here, we're powerless students that everyone distrusts. But over there, on the other side... we can do something. We can punish the King."

"The King? Ya mean... that other world's Kamoshida?"

"Just so. And I have a theory that.-" Just as Akira was set to rattle off his plan, a semi-familiar voice suddenly came from behind him.

"I finally found you!" The youthful voice said, tinged with annoyance. The two boys glanced around, just as a small black cat trotted up to the circular table.

Ryuji looked to Akira. "Uh... did you say something?"

The cat suddenly jumped onto the table between them, and the voice was coming... from the cat? "Don't think you can get away with not paying me back for helping you earlier." The form was different, an actual cat as opposed to some cartoony... thing. But the voice was unmistakable. "How dare you! Up and leaving me like that the other day!"

"Th-the cat's talkin'!" Ryuji blurted.

"I am NOT a cat! This is just what happened when I came to this world! And for the record, it was a lot of trouble finding you two." The cat huffed, turning his nose up in the air with all the natural haughtiness of a feline.

Ryuji, wide eyed, made his way closer. "Wait, you can come over to our world? Does that mean you have a phone?!"

"Asking all the important questions Ryuji," Akira wearily murmured.

Morgana maintained a cocky and defiant air. "You don't need one when you're at my level. I did get pretty lost making my escape though." He licked his left paw and used this to brush the top of his head. For as much as Morgana hated being called a cat, he sure was good at acting like one.

Ryuji gave Morgana another glare. "That aside, why can you talk?! You're a cat!"

"How should I know?!"

With an almost deliberate slowness, Akira removed his glasses and wiped the lenses with the edge of his school blazer and then slowly slid them back into place. "Riveting as this line of conversation is, it's not going to help deal with our current problem. Morgana, while it is nice to see you again, we have some pressing problems."

Morgana smiled, or as best he could with a feline face. "So I heard. You two definitely sounded at your wits' end. But I COULD tell you guys a thing or two about what to do about Kamoshida. You were pretty close, just a moment ago." He was quite a master at sounding smug.

"God, that condescendin' attitude..." Ryuji scoffed "This thing's gotta be Morgana."

"You were still doubting me?!!" the feline snapped.

"Ack! Quiet down!"

There was a sound of footsteps not too far from their alcove on the courtyard. Both boys went rigid, and from his spot at the railings Ryuji was able to see two teachers walking down the paved path.
Clearly they were unhappy, muttering about their dissatisfaction at having to go and track down some stray cat. And apparently, all they had heard was meowing.

Akira hummed to himself. "Seems that only we can understand Morgana when he speaks. Might be a side effect of having a Persona." He brushed the thought aside as unimportant. "What were you talking about earlier? You have a solution to our problem?" Akira asked.

Ryuji glanced from side to side. "If the teachers are looking for this guy, this mightn't be the best place to chat." He abruptly lifted Morgana by the back of his collar, making the feline yowl and twist around in the air. "Here! Stick it in your bag for now! It should be small enough to fit!"

"Hey! How dare you treat me like-!"

"Pee on my books, and you die."

The trip up to the roof was a quick enough one, and after Morgana's initial frustration at being carried around like that had subsided, they decided to rapidly get to the task at hand: Dealing with Kamoshida. Akira quickly asked him to get down to business.

"Dealing with Kamoshida has to do with what you were talking about earlier. Attacking Kamoshida's palace," the feline began. "That castle is how Kamoshida views the school. He doesn't realise what happens in there, but it's deeply connected to the depths of his heart. Thus, if the castle disappears, it would naturally impact the real Kamoshida. A Palace is a manifestation of a person's distorted desires, so if that castle were no more..."

Akira grinned and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose "His desires would go too..." He had expected something like that to be the case. The supernatural wasn't his forte, but he knew there had to be some link between the real Kamoshida and his sexed-up 'shadow.' Impacting one would affect the other.

Morgana chirped in delight " Precisely! You sure pick up things fast!"

For as odd as the topic of discussion was, Ryuji seemed enthused. "For real? He'd turn good?! ... But, is that really gettin' back at him?"

Despite Ryuji's concerns, Morgana continued. "Erasing a Palace essentially means forcing the owner to have a change of heart. However, even though their warped wants disappear, their crimes remain. Kamoshida will be unable to bear the weight of those crimes and he'll confess them himself!"

Akira snickered softly. "So... we can't destroy him ourselves. But we CAN make him destroy himself. Oh Morgana, I like that. I like that quite a lot."

"And since the Palace will no longer exist, he'll forget what we did there as well. We'll be able to take him down, without even leaving a trace of our involvement."

Ryuji grinned broadly and almost leapt skyward in his joy. "That's amazing! You are one incredible cat!" he eagerly said.

"True. Except for the cat part."

It was at that point that Ryuji moved onto the question that had been on Akira's mind. "So? How do we get rid of the Palace?" Morgana went on to explain that they had to steal the 'treasure' in the heart of the Palace, but he wouldn't divulge further until they agreed to go through with helping him. He was keeping his methods a secret for the time being. And ultimately, as they knew from
their fruitless investigation, they had no other options. The two agreed to his plan.

Morgana carried on with more intimate details. "There's one more thing I should tell you. If we erase a Palace, there is no doubt that the person's distorted desires will be erased as well... But desires are what we all need in order to survive. The will to sleep, eat, fall in love-- those sorts of things. And if all those yearnings were to vanish, they'd be no different to someone who has shut down entirely. They may even die if they're not given proper care."

"They might die?!" Ryuji took a step back in surprise. Akira stood in the same casual stance, his hands in his pockets.

Morgana groaned. "Would you listen to everything I have to say first?"

"Would his death be our fault?" asked Ryuji.

Morgana gave his head a brief shake, seemingly annoyed at the hesitation. "Aren't you determined enough to take those kinds of risks?" The question hung in the air for a few silent moments.

"I'm interested," Akira casually said. "There's a risk, certainly, but I don't see any other options if we're going to deal with that bastard." He thought back on that drunken asshole who ruined his life with a stray word, landed him on probation for trying to do the right thing. And got away with it. And Akira couldn't just sit back and let that happen again, regardless of the consequences.

Morgana left them to make up their minds. Ryuji seemed uncertain, wanting to find another way. But Akira had a heart of ice. One way or another, there would be justice.

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The train ride from Shujin back to the backstreets of Yongen was a pain in the ass. Long, cramped, and involved a transfer at the midsection. Akira supposed he couldn't complain too much, it wasn't the worst thing about his life at the moment, but after all he had spoken to Ryuji and Morgana about he wasn't in the mood for it. And it he was late then Sojiro would chew him out, and he REALLY wasn't in the mood for that.

He made his way down to the Shibuya platform, and heard a familiar and flustered voice through the crowd. He stopped, looking toward a blonde head of hair. Takamaki? Whoever she was on the phone with, it left her royally pissed off.

"Will you please give it a rest already? I told you, I'm not feeling up to it. Wait, what?! That's not what you promised! And you call yourself a teacher?! ... This has nothing to do with Shiho!" The dial tone kicked in, and Takamaki fell into stunned silence. She stood this way for several moments, and then crouched down, her head resting on her forearms. "Shiho's... starting position." Akira's shadow fell over her, and she sprang up to her feet suddenly. "Were you... listening?"

"Not on purpose."

"Haven't you ever heard of privacy?" she asked, annoyed.

Akira shrugged. "You know, it's been so long since I've had any, that I almost forgot the meaning of the word."

Ann sighed and looked down at her feet. "No, I was out of line. Sorry." She reached up, drying under her right eye. "How much did you hear?"

"You mentioned something about a friend. Sounds like you're in a bad position," Akira mused. It
didn't take a genius to put two and two together. Between all the rumors about her, and having seen Kamoshida pestering Ann over the past few days, and having seen a rather risque version of Ann in the Palace... His desires were clear, and beyond unpleasant.

"Shiho..." She shook her head abruptly "It's nothing at all." Tears welled in her eyes, and despite her best efforts Ann couldn't quite wipe them away. "Nothing." She turned and bolted down the platform, almost vanishing into the crowd. But the blonde hair worked wonders at making her stick out.

A part of Akira's mind told him not to get involved. That following her and helping her would only lead to more trouble. After all, helping a girl in need led to the ruination of his life the last time he tried it. Then he sighed, resigned to his fate, and followed Takamaki deeper into the station. As if he could ever turn a blind eye.

It didn't take long to find her in the underground walkway. He settled his hands in his pockets and cleared his throat. "Takamaki-san."

"Stop following me... Just leave me alone!"

"Calm down."

"Why...? Why do you keep worrying about me?" Ann trailed off into another sob, taking a moment to dry her eyes off with her wrists.

Sighing, Akira adjusted his glasses. He just couldn't leave well enough alone. And if his hunch was correct, she was just as much a victim in all this as those guys on the volleyball team were. She needed help, and much like those students, she would find none from any official channels. "Someone has to. Come on, let's go find somewhere to talk."

"I really don't get you," Ann murmured.

There was a cafe not too far from the station. A little pricey by Akira's usual standards, but it was the closest option. They found a booth in the corner and ordered two teas. He left his steaming brown cup to his side, while Ann had her pale fingers clasped gently around the porcelain of hers.

After some awkward silence, she managed to say "I don't have anything to talk about with you. It was just... an argument."

"With Kamoshida?" he asked.

She didn't answer, and looked instead into her cup. "You've heard the rumors, haven't you? About Mr. Kamoshida." Ann closed her eyes, her left hand drifting from her cup to instead idly push and pull at a napkin resting on the table. "Everyone says we're getting it on. But... that's so not true! That was him on the phone. I avoided giving him my number... for the longest time... He told me... told me to go to his place. You know what that means." She suddenly crushed the napkin in her grasp, tremors rattling her body.

He remained silent. Now was not the time to be witty or sarcastic. "If I turn him down, he said he'd my friend off as a regular on the team. I've been telling myself that this is all for Shiho's sake. But I... I can't take it anymore." She grit her teeth, her whole body shaking from a cocktail of rage, fear, disgust... a maelstrom of horrible feelings really. "I've had enough of this! I hate him! But... Shiho's my best friend. She's all I have left in that sorry excuse of a school!" The tears were flowing freely now, rage giving way to sadness. "Tell me... what should I do?"

Akira gripped his knees briefly, fighting back a brief bubble of anger. "Takamaki-san, I'll be frank.
I don't care about the rumors circulating around you, I'd be a major hypocrite if I did. But it's clear to me that they're all false." He took a long sip of his tea, let it linger to calm his nerves. "I'll just ask you a simple question: Does Kamoshida strike you as a man who will stick to his word?"

Ann looked into the dark depths of her tea. "No, he doesn't."

"Well, there you go. This threat... if you comply to it, he'll have that power over you for... years. He'll hold your friend over your head and use that as leverage for... unspeakable things. Giving into this demand wouldn't help anyone but him." Akira finished his tea and slowly stood up from his seat. "I have to go now. If I'm out too late, my guardian will think I've gone off to join the Yakuza or something. Probation is a bitch like that." He slowly made for the door, and Ann regarded him in stunned silence as new clarity dawned on her.

"For your own sake, please. Stay away from him."

It was the best he could do. If he spoke of Palaces, she'd call him a nut and completely disregard him.

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4/15

A few days in her new school, and Shizuka still didn't have anyone she'd really regard as a friend. It was partially her own fault, of course, as she hadn't made much of an effort. People had only spoken to her because they were curious about her last name (Joestar was weird, even by English standards) or needed help with English.

So she was going through the motions. Get up, have breakfast, go to school, come home. She'd killed time at the arcade, hit the bookstore once, but she was still mostly keeping to herself. Mundane life was something she wanted but, still, it was weird. Her brother couldn't go one week without meeting some new Stand user, who wanted to either be his friend or cause trouble. She had yet to get a hint of anything bizarre.

Maybe that was for the best. Stuff like that would potentially draw attention to her.

Classes were halfway over for the day, and she was emerging from the bathroom after a quick break. English classes here were trivial and so she had headed out for a few minutes just to kill some time. The halls were mostly empty, so nobody paid her much mind. But as she made her way down the hall a girl nearly bumped into her at the junction. "Whoa!"

Shizuka stopped on her heels and caught her dark rimmed glasses before they could slide down her nose. It took her only a few moments to recognize the sharply dressed brunette girl. "Oh. Hey Prez," she greeted.

"'Prez'?" Makoto asked, adjusting the stack of papers that had nearly fallen from her hands.

"Yeah, you know... short for president. Since you're the student council pr- uh, it's not important." Shizuka sighed and scratched the back of her head. Smooth. "I was just heading back to class. Take it that's some important student council stuff?"

"Documentation for a planned field trip. It's nothing too important Joestar-san," Makoto explained. She managed to fully regain her balance and, with refined skill, shuffled the papers back into an even stack without a single stray centimeter of paper protruding from the bulk.

Shizuka snickered and scratched the back of her head. "Come on, no need to be so formal. I'm a
rich girl, not a princess. Besides that, I'm American. I'm not used to people being all formal."

"It's the norm here," Makoto said, sounding a little sheepish. "Maybe... Shizuka-chan would sound better?"

"It's not as formal, and that's fine by me." She smiled thinly. "So..." This was probably gonna sound awkward no matter how she phrased it, but she decided to just follow through. She'd never get to know new people if she didn't try. "You seem like a pretty interesting person. If you're interested, I'd like to hang out with you sometime."

The offer genuinely surprised her, her brows raised. Seemed that people didn't often ask her such things. "Truth be told, I'm a little curious about you too. Shizuka-chan. I took the time to do a little research on your family history. You have a rather... intriguing background." She supposed that was a more polite way of putting it. If Shizuka were to describe her family, particularly the elements that were not public knowledge, the phrase 'fucking demented' would likely spring up repeatedly.

"Heh. Let's try later this week then. I should let you get down to business," Shizuka replied. She slid her hands into the pockets of her leather jacket.

Smiling faintly, Makoto gave Shizuka a reassuring nod. "I'll look forward to it." She made for the stairs and headed up to the third floor. Shizuka made her way back toward 2-D.

Why was she interested in Makoto? Shizuka couldn't accurately explain why. Perhaps it was because she was the first student Shizuka had met, familiarity and all that. Or perhaps she was curious about the air of sadness that had lingered around her when they first met. Either way it was a start on making friends.

Just as she was nearing the classroom something odd occurred to Shizuka. Something that she only now noticed. There were quite a few people congregating at the windows, all looking up toward the same spot outside.

"Holy shit!"
"You see that too?"
"Is this for real?"
"We gotta grab the teachers, fast!"
"Do you think she's gonna jump?!"

"Jump...?" Shizuka murmured to herself. She turned toward the nearest window and lowered her sunglasses. That was when she saw her- a female figure on the school roof, past the guard rail and looking down into the courtyard. Shizuka couldn't make out many details just the slouch to her posture and the obvious fact that she was in a very unsafe position. "Holy shit!"

She was at the other end of the building, and if Shizuka was guessing right... when she reached the second floor she'd definitely be in range of her Stand. But did she dare risk it? Could she even catch a falling target?

What happened next all happened so fast, so much occuring in the span of what was only a few seconds. Students and staff rushed to the hall and made for the window, an atmosphere of shock filling the area. Down below she could see people rushing to the courtyard, and someone was shouting quite severely over the phone. Desperately trying to get an ambulance as quickly as possible.

The girl dropped.
On a reflex Shizuka's stand flew from her body, the golden frame darting across the open air like a speeding bullet. Unseen to human eyes. Shizuka grunted as the weight hit her Stand's arms, one instinctively locking around the girl's neck for the sake of support. The back of her Stand hit the grass and disturbed the earth beneath them... and despite the distance Shizuka thought she heard the sound of a bone snapping.

She recalled her Stand to her, her heart beating in her ears while students murmured their shock and horror of what had transpired. "Dude you... you saw that right? The... the thing that flew out of the new girl?"

Shizuka's eyes widened, and she quickly glanced to her left. Akira and his crass blond friend were looking at her, stunned. She and the two boys were the only one not looking out the windows.

She turned and quickly bolted, making her way down the stairs. With everyone else making a beeline for the courtyard, nobody even noticed as she rushed out of the front door. The fact that Shizuka was flickering in and out of visibility was perhaps helping in her quick escape.

Soon enough she had reached the vending machines outside the school and was pressing her forehead to a wall, breathing and sweating heavily. "I caught her, but what if that made it worse... what if I hurt her... sudden stopping isn't a good idea... no, shit, I... Oh God what if that was her neck that broke?" Shizuka was still flickering in and out of visibility.

Ever since she was a baby, her Stand had been tied to her emotions. Anxiety, sadness, fear, stress... too much of any of those and she'd just pop out of all visibility. It wasn't as bad as it had been when she was a baby, but still. She reached into her pocket, rooted through a small plastic bag and took out a mini jawbreaker from the bag. Shizuka popped it into her mouth and started sucking the crimson colouring from the sugary ball. Her heartbeat began to slow down and she felt herself become more... defined as a result.

"What was that?" Akira's voice made her stiffen. Shizuka wiped the sweat from her brow and turned around slowly.

"You saw it, didn't you? I had a feeling you were a user. And I'm guessing your friend is too," Shizuka said. She remained tense. When meeting another Stand user, they would either be a friend or a foe from the start. No middle ground.

Akira seemed almost as tense despite all attempts to appear confident. "Ryuji's checking on things in the courtyard. I'm here to see your ability up close." Yeah, he was a user alright. Potentially dangerous if there was any truth to the rumors circulating around him. But, at the same time, he really didn't strike her as a violent psycho thug.

"Yes." She tipped her head back slightly, her right hand resting on the matching hip while the other tipped her glasses upward. A halo of yellow light formed around her, as Shizuka's mysterious Stand appeared at her side, floating in the air on her back with her hands netted on the back of her head. "My Stand."
Asmodeus Kamoshida (I)

Yeah, he could see it alright. Akira was staring right at it with his glasses resting at the very tip of his nose. "Holy..." He blinked slowly and then looked at Shizuka. "You can summon yours in the real world?"

"The real world?" Shizuka asked. Now it was her turn to be surprised. Her Stand vanished from sight and she inspected Akira once he had regained his composure. "Well... you saw mine. So show me yours." That was how it worked, right?

"I... can't. I don't know how to summon mine outside the Metaverse."

Shizuka looked at him as if he had just grown a second head. "Meta-wh... What the hell are you talking about?" It hadn't taken long for this meeting to reach a sudden roadblock for both of them. What kind of Stand user couldn't summon their Stand?

"Geez! Don't just run off like that!" The new voice was entirely unfamiliar to Shizuka. Small and boyish, causing her to look around sharply. But after some moments of frantic glancing the only other thing she could see was a small black cat. Then the cat spoke again. "I know things are crazy in the school right but we seriously need to talk about a plan of attack."

Shizuka's jaw almost dropped. She knew that Jotaro had known a dog that could control a Stand, and Okuyasu had that weird... cat-flower thing living in his house, and there was Mikitaka, and that weird tower in Morioh, but still... this was definitely a new one to her.

"A t-talking cat?! OH MY GOD!!"

The cat flinched. "Oh, this girl can uh... hear me... huh..." It blinked up at her, and then looked at Akira. "F-friend of yours?"

Akira scratched the back of his head. "She's a girl in my class. And a Persona user apparently," he explained. Persona? Metaverse? This was getting interesting. Maybe he and the blond had only recently gained the ability, didn't know any of the Stand user communities and just made up their own term for it. But then again, he apparently couldn't summon his. And that didn't explain what he meant by a 'Metaverse.'

"Okay, look..." Shizuka cleared her throat "What the hell is this Metaverse thing? And why do you have a talking cat?!"

The two exchanged a curious glance. Then, Akira sighed softly. "You tried to save that falling girl, so it's clear you're a good person, and I feel that makes you deserving of some trust. So, after school..." The bespectacled boy seemed a little hesitant to speak openly. But with the whole school focused on the courtyard, they did have some room to breathe. "After school, Ryuji, Morgana and I will show you the Metaverse. Morgana is the cat."

"You sure this is a good idea?" Morgana asked.

"She has the power."

"Yeah, I'm also standing right here you two."
Akira sighed. "Right..." He took just a moment to stroke the bridge of his nose, trying to wipe away some dull frustration. "The thing is, that it will take time to show you what I'm referring to. And for all the drama going on in the courtyard, classes will resume soon enough. We should make an effort to get back in and act normal," Akira explained.

Footsteps resounded off the asphalt and made both teens tense. Morgana seemed more at ease, likely aware of who was coming by scent alone. "Akira! Dude, we got a situation!" Ryuji skidded to a halt around the corner, tensing briefly when he saw Shizuka.

"I know about your abilities. I have them too, I guess. So no need to get all secretive on my behalf," Shizuka said.

"Right... uh..." He cleared his throat and reached out, gripping Akira by his right shoulder. "That girl, the one who jumped, she... I know her. S-since middle school. Shiho Suzui." The name made Akira's eyes widen from a sudden familiarity. "I think she jumped cause she... she's a volleyball player, right? And Kamoshida called her into his office last night, and he..." Ryuji grit his teeth and looked like he wanted to just put his fist through someone's head. He didn't finish the sentence, but Shizuka understood the implications.

Kamoshida. Some hotshot athlete volleyball star, beloved by the faculty. Something about him gave Shizuka some major 'creep vibes.' And in only a few days as a Shujin student, she had heard a few unsettling rumors of him having 'relations' with some female students. To think he would go so far...

"Ryuji," Akira plainly began "What did you do?"

"I..." He grunted in annoyance and looked down at his feet. "I lost my cool, that's what. Shiho was my friend, but I still woulda' gone ballistic if it had been anyone else in her position. And I just... after shaking the answers from Mishima, I went to the faculty office. That bastard... he knows what he did, and he doesn't care! A girl almost killed herself over what he did! AND HE DOESN'T CARE!" Akira was looking at him, and that was enough to make him draw a calming breath. "But I... I messed up. Pissed him off. He said he was gonna call for my expulsion at the next major faculty meeting. And he says he's going to do the same to you too... guess he was tired of us poking around."

Akira nodded slowly. "Well then. We're not in a good position in that case... We'll both be sent down the river, the school will turn a blind eye to this scandal, and it'll all be hushed up. Unless we do something."

"Ah-ha," Morgana said. "Coming around to my plan eh? Well, time isn't on your side. But I should remind you two that there's still the risk he might suffer a mental shutdown."

Ryuji narrowed his eyes "I know. Someone almost died because a' him. I don't give a rat's ass what happens to him anymore!"

Now this was interesting. Shizuka was already intrigued to find Stand users at this school, and now all this talk about the gym teacher being some kind of fiend. He was no Kira or Dio, but he was a demon all the same. If she was to prove herself worthy of her own last name, that she deserves to be a part of this family, then she knew she couldn't turn a blind eye to this. Getting involved was the right thing to do.
"That girl, Shiho," Shizuka began. "Is she okay?"

Ryuji looked at her, examined her closely and then nodded. "Yeah. You mighta just saved her life... from what I overheard, her left leg is busted, and she got some fractures in her left arm. But the alternative... Shit, how did you even do that? Make your Persona jump out like that?"

Shizuka sighed in relief. Well, if it had been bad, she would have done all she could to get help. Call Josuke, or ask for a favour from the Speedwagon Foundation... even call Mister Trendy for help, if that was her only option. At some point, Shizuka told herself, she would try and see Shiho. Talk to her, generally do whatever she could to try and help her. As a starting point however, she figured she'd make some calls to the Speedwagon Foundation and ask them to cover all those upcoming medical expenses.

The family would be going through quite a lot in due time. Last thing they needed was a storm cloud of debt hanging over them.

"We'll talk about it after class."

"We'll talk about it after class." She brushed past the two and made her way back toward the school building. Morgana hopped into Akira's bag, and the trio quickly followed after Shizuka.

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The last bell seemed to fly in. Much as the teachers tried to regain some order in class, the news of an attempted suicide was the kind of thing that agitated the students and prevented much actual teaching from being done. And besides that the threat of expulsion had loomed overhead, making it even harder to focus.

Akira wasn't mad at Ryuji. He knew the blond was 'passionate', and now he had twice as many reasons to hate Kamoshida's guts. And perhaps he should have stayed with him, as deep down he knew something like this could happen. And with how the last few months of his life had gone, Akira had grown a little... apathetic to any new negative circumstance in life.

Still. They had about a month to act by his reckoning, before Kamoshida would move to expel them at the staff meeting. Plenty of time, even if he and Ryuji were novices to this Palace business.

Once class ended Akira motioned for Shizuka to follow, and led the way down toward the main entrance of the school. They stood by waiting for several minutes, first for Ryuji to show up, and then for the crowds of students heading home to grow far more sparse in number.

When it was just the four of them, Shizuka spoke up. "Let's start out simple. What exactly is this 'Metaverse' thing you guys were talking about."

The two boys left it to Morgana to answer. "Think of the world around you, all those other humans. Their hearts and minds are all linked together in a vast sea, a collective unconsciousness that most people are unaware of in their daily lives. But while they might be unaware of it, that other world can have a great effect on this world and vice versa."

Morgana paused and gave Shizuka room to ponder that opening salvo. She knit her brow in thought and crossed her arms over her chest. "So it's like... how an iceberg only has a small portion showing above water, but there's this whole... gigantic mass under the water, invisible to the naked eye?"

"Somewhat. You've already got a better idea of things than Ryuji does."
"Hey!"

"In any case, that other world is largely shaped by the general public. However there are rare cases where an individual with warped desires grows so out of whack with the rest of the world that it has a great effect on the other world. This corrupt individual creates a Palace, an area based around the focal point of their distorted desire." Morgana trailed off into a small hum, and then seemed to decide on using their current situation as a good example. "In this world, Kamoshida essentially has free reign of the school. He sees himself as 'the king of the castle.' And so the school in the other world is a castle, and Kamoshida's shadow is quite literally a king. Get it?"

"You kinda lost me," Shizuka sheepishly admitted. "But... it might make more sense if you show me. I'm more of a hands on learner anyway."

"Fair enough. Now, a Persona-"

"Oh I know that. It's like, your fighting spirit given form, or something like that," she interrupted.

Morgana grumbled something. "Well... I suppose that's one way of looking at it. It's a part of yourself, your rebel soul given form. And in the Metaverse, it's the best defense against Shadows. And a Shadow is... well, they're also born from the collective unconsciousness. All mankind's most negative emotions. And there are a LOT of them. Go into the other world, and you run the risk of being prey to them," Morgana explained.

"So yeah... if you tag along, you're gonna have to pull your weight," Ryuji quickly cut in. He was tense. Clearly still on edge from what had happened earlier this afternoon. Shizuka waved him off quickly. "Alright. Let's show her and get started for real."

"I'm curious. And if that volleyball douchebag seriously... did that to a student, then he needs to go down. So count me in. I got all the power needed to help out."

They led on to a small alley just across from the school gates, whereupon Akira drew his phone from his pocket. Shizuka stood on her toes to peer over his shoulder, looking down at a strange app tile glowing and pulsating at the bottom of his screen. A black and red eye that had a malignant aura to it. Akira tapped onto the tile, and a purple haze throbbed around the group.

In an instant Akira, Ryuji and the cat changed. No longer were they wearing the school uniforms—now they were sporting some sleek getups, facial features obscured by masks. Akira was dressed in a long black coat over a reinforced silver doublet, dark trousers leading to a pair of heavy boots. His gloves were a stark crimson shade, and his eyes and nose were covered by a silvery domino mask, the eyes framed by dark dagger patterns.

Ryuji was dressed in an armoured biker jacket and dark leather trousers, his belt loaded with heavy shotgun shells. His mask was like a steel plate, sculpted to resemble the top half of a skull. A red scarf, tied loosely around his front, offered a splash of colour.

And Morgana... looked like some kind of weird Ghibli creature. Now he reached up to her knees, with a bulbous head, working fingers and toes, and wearing a yellow neckerchief and a leather utility belt. "Holy shit!" Shizuka nearly jumped backward in surprise at the sudden wardrobe change.

"Yeah. Entering the Metaverse causes our clothes to change. I guess it's a side effect of the powers.
Just check yourself out Shizuka,” Akira said.

With some hesitation, Shizuka glanced down at herself. Oh yeah, this was new. Her jacket had been replaced with a gold leather jacket with 'Go! Go! emblazoned on the back in large dark letters. Both sides of her collar had pins in them, sculpted to look like the profile view of a bumblebee. She felt a silky red scarf around her neck, flowing gently in the breeze. The Shujin skirt was gone, replaced with dark trousers that led down toward a pair of pale leather boots. Her hands felt heavier too, and it took only a moment to realise why. Just as Ryuji's gloves were marked by heavy iron studs, she was wearing heavy rings on all her fingers, Those on her left hand were initialed to spell 'L-O-V-E' while those on her right spelled 'H-A-T-E' She had to admit, the bling looked quite nice. "E-eh?"

Shizuka glanced down to a puddle at her feet and saw her reflection. On her face was a mask, as was the case for Akira and Ryuji. Some kind of gold sculpture with two small pointed horns protruding from the top corners of her mark. Her eyes were covered by a pair of pink, heart-shaped lenses designed to vaguely resemble the compound eyes of a bug. But she could still see clearly, as if the mask wasn't a physical object at all.

"What is this?!" A new voice joined the fray, causing Shizuka to turn sharply to the exit of the alley. This time Akira and Ryuji seemed similarly shocked. It didn't take her long to recognise the girl in the alleyway as Takamaki, probably the only blue-eyed blonde she had ever seen in Japan, and behind her was... that sure as shit wasn't the school. The whole building had been replaced by a towering medieval castle, the sky above a twisting haze of red and purple.

"T-Takamaki?!" Ryuji gasped.

"That voice... S-Sakamato?" Ann glanced to Shizuka "Joestar?" then lastly to Akira "K-Kurusu?"

"Why are you here?!" Ryuji asked. Morgana, standing atop a silvery trashcan for a better vantage point, seemed a little smitten at the sight of her.

Ann swallowed, unable to really maintain her composure in the face of such a strange scenario. "How should I know? I was just... I knew you guys were planning to get back at Kamoshida, and I want in!" Ann said firmly. "I... when Shiho hit the ground, I spoke to her in the ambulance! And she... she told me what he did to her! I want to make him pay! I wanted to ask what you guys were planning, b-but..."

"I see... Perhaps she was dragged in because of that app thing," Morgana mused. Akira nodded at the talking feline. It stood to reason that anyone close enough when the app was in use got pulled along for the ride. Though none of them had expected Ann to be eavesdropping.

"Wait... so this is related to Kamoshida?" Ann asked in surprise.

Ryuji sighed loudly. "Look, you gotta leave!"

"No way!"

Shizuka was able to feel the air grow more intense for a brief second, glancing sharply from side to side. Something felt off. Even more off than it already did. "Calm down. The Shadows are going to find us if you make a scene," Morgana said. Seemed that was the reason for the brief tension in the air.
Ann almost jumped out of her skin. "No way! I-it talked! Oh my god, it's a monster cat!"

"Monster?" Morgana whined, looking crestfallen.

It was enough to make Shizuka shrug. "She's got a point. You do look kinda shocking."

"You better explain what's going on! I won't leave until you do!"

She was determined. It was admirable, since she seemed particularly out of her depth here. Shizuka was willing to bet that Shiho was a close friend of Ann's, and if that was the case then she could hardly be blamed for being headstrong about this.

"Looks like we gotta' force her then," Ryuji said with some resignation. "Sorry. We'll explain once everything's over Ann." And, despite Ann's protests, Ryuji casually hoisted Ann onto his shoulder, carried her further into the alley and then seemed to dump her back into reality, the air shimmering around where he let her go. He dusted his hands off and made his way quickly back to the others.

Akira turned and led the way toward the main gate of the castle. Shizuka and the others were quick to follow his lead, and as they walked Shizuka had to crane her neck to see some of the taller spires of the ornate castle. So this was a Palace. "We'll have to be careful when we use that app in the future. No telling who we could drag in if we're not careful," Akira said.

"You should have checked the tools you used!" Morgana said, exhasperated. "Why do I, the one who was just watching, know more about it than you two?!"

"Aw shuddup!" Ryuji said firmly. "Geez... getting caught by Ann as soon as we got started... we better get to work fast."

"That girl's name is Ann Takamaki, right?" Morgana asked. He sighed dreamily. "Lady Ann~"

The strange outburst was enough to make the other three glance to each other in some mild discomfort. "You uh... you feeling alright there, little guy?" Shizuka asked.

"I feel perfect~"

Akira shook his head slowly. "Look, we're here, so let's just get down to business. Stick close," he looked Shizuka in the eye "Right now, we're only getting started."

"He's right," Morgana added, making his way quickly up a set of small stone steps. The path ahead led toward a series of ornate windows, with vibrant light shining through from the inside. "From here on out, we're phantom thieves. Those who covertly sneak in and stylishly steal treasure!" It had a nice ring to it, it had to be said, and was enough to make Akira and Ryuji grin. "We're counting on you Joker!"

"Joker?" Akira repeated. Whatever the nickname was, Morgana had just sprung it on him.

"It's a code name. No self respecting phantom thief would use their real name! Plus, yelling your real name inside a Palace could lead to negative side effects..."

Ryuji scratched the back of his head. "Uh... but why Joker?"

"Because," Morgana grinned sharply "He's our trump card for dealing with Shadows. With his
ability to summon multiple Personas, he can theoretically get us out of any situation." The assessment of 'multiple Personas' nearly made Shizuka faint on the spot.

"I see, I getcha. In that case... heh, for me the name's gotta come from the mask. Honestly, I actually kinda like it. Ooooh! Let's go with Skull! That sounds so cool!" Morgana rolled his eyes, while Akira seemed impassive. The punkish blond looked to Shizuka. "Okay, what about you?"

Shizuka hummed and pinched her chin with her right hand. "Wish we'd known we were doing code names sooner so I coulda' thought one up. But how about..." She glanced down at her get up, to the bees on her collar, and thought back on her Stand and the powers it had. "How about... Sting?"

"Nice. Suits that outfit of yours." Ryuji turned his attention over to Morgana and looked the feline creature up and down. "As for this one... how about Mona?"

"Well, if Joker thinks that it's easier to call me that, then I'll go with it," Morgana said in a non-committed fashion.
As Shizuka understood it, this place was meant to be crawling with enemies. Strange creatures that Morgana referred to as 'Shadows.' And if they weren't human, as was the general logic her family tended to follow, there was no need to go easy. Still, she was a little nervous. Most of her combat experience came from little sparring matches Josuke had given her, and there was a world of difference between getting self defense from your big brother, and fighting for your life against something that wished you dead.

Oh well. So what? She wasn't at this alone, and with the power they all had, what could really pose a threat to them?

Akira led on toward a row of boxes positioned against the wall, mantled them swiftly and leapt higher up to crawl into a damaged vent. The others followed suit, until they landed inside a small, white-tiled room, climbing down to the floor from a book case positioned near the vent opening. "Through here," Akira said in a low tone of voice. "Hang back. I need to see if there are any Shadows on the other side of the door."

"I think I can help with that," Shizuka said. She tried to summon her stand, and then furrowed her brow. She could feel her there, but it wasn't coming readily. "That's weird... I can't call my Stand right now. How do you guys...?"

Ryuji grinned broadly and tapped the steel plate of his mask. "Just like this. It's tied to the mask," he explained. As he pressed his hand to it, the metal became engulfed in a halo of blue fire... but Ryuji had no reaction to the sudden crackle of fire. And as he did this a figure materialized over his shoulder- a towering hulk of a man standing atop a spectral boat. Between that, the skull head, the cannon for a hand, the buccaneer hat, eyepatch and the overcoat, it was some kind of... Pirate Stand? "Say hello to Captain Kidd."

"I see. So it's like..." Shizuka tapped her own mask, and gasped as the presence of her Stand grew more pronounced in her mind. She felt the halo of fire around her face, but no reaction of pain rose in her. Her Stand floated over her shoulder and touched the front door with her right index finger. The golden digit ran across the wood, and as her finger passed the wood beneath it became transparent, providing a clean view through to the hall outside. "Seems clear." So the mask was some kind of... Stand button? It was a weird extra step, but she made sure to keep it in mind. It was a different world with different rules, and Stands had to adapt to those rules.

"Whoa, that's pretty cool. So that's your power huh?" Ryuji asked.

Shizuka nodded and withdrew her Stand, the altered area returning to normal soon after. "Yeah. I can make myself or other stuff invisible with it. Had it since I was a baby. It's also pretty good at punching stuff," she explained.

Her explanation made Morgana gasp excitedly. "A thief that can turn invisible... Sting, you just made my day!" Then he paused and thought back on the rest of what she had said. "Wait, since you were a baby?"

"Yup. I was born with my Stand. Caused a whole lot of trouble until I was a toddler and had some level of self control." Morgana watched on, looking a little slack jawed at the explanation. It was a
day of surprises for all of them it seemed.

"You got a name for it?" Akira asked. "Ours told us their names when we got them. His was Kidd, mine is Arsene. His is Zorro," he explained, gesturing toward Morgana.

Shizuka mulled the question over for a few quiet seconds. She had put off naming her Stand for a while, but here and now, in her current situation, a name soon swam into her mind. "Call her... Houdini."

They let Akira take point out of the small room, but it wasn't long after they left the small room that they had to stop in the hallway. And from there they had a solid view of a grand main hallway, filled with heavily armoured knights, and a figure that looked vaguely like the volleyball coach. Kamoshida himself.

He was dressed in a gaudy crown, cheap slippers, a fuzzy pink cape and... presumably nothing else to Shizuka's rapidly mounting disgust. He was barking orders to his knights, and from this distance they could tell he was telling them to up security and keep an eye out for 'intruders.' Well, these guys had been here in the past after all.

The group clung to the shadows, obscured from view. Going through the main hallway was not an option. "So that's his... 'Shadow', yeah?" Shizuka asked.

"Mm. It's Kamoshida's distorted inner self, and the ruler of this Palace. An individual with that much power over here... It would be best to avoid attacking him if we can help it. Plus there's all those knights with him right now," Morgana explained. He turned from his position to the way they had come from, and pointed to an unopened white door. Akira nodded, needing no further instruction.

The door led into a small room with a few tables and loaded bookshelves. And one of the hulking knight figures, with his back to the door. In a flash Akira darted over, leapt onto his ironclad back and... tore the knights face clean off? A metal mask clattered to the floor as Akira leapt away from the armoured body as it rapidly melted into a black sludge, and then exploded out into two new figures. A pair of small women in blue, both floating in the air on glittering butterfly wings. Pixies?

Akira brought his hand to his mask, causing his Persona to materialize above him- a winged humanoid who was towering in height, dressed in red with a jagged demonic face. His wings were dark, and long chains floated around his tall form. Arsene dashed forward, his claws glowing with a swirl of red, black and white energy. His fist met the Pixie to his right, the orb flashing out and engulfing the strange figure, reducing her to a pitch black stain that was soon oozing down the pale brickwork of the wall.

The second aimed at Shizuka, giggling as the fingers of her left hand took the shape of a gun. She winked, coils of electricity sparking around her arm and then erupting into a bolt of lightning that surged Shizuka's way. She yelped, summoning Houdini on reflex and then letting out a pained gasp as tingles of electricity rocked her body. Houdini had taken a brunt of it, but she still felt her muscles locking up briefly.

As soon as the stream of sparks ended, Houdini was able to lunge forward and delivered a sharp kick to the Pixie's face, sending the winged creature hurtling backward. "BAZU!" Another spectral figure materialized behind the sailing figure, bigger than Arsene and almost as large as Captain Kidd. The hulking man in black swung his rapier in a single fluid move, cutting the Pixie in half mid-flight and reducing her to another stain of black goo.

Morgana lifted his hands (paws?) off his head and grinned wickedly. So that was Zorro. Looked a
whole lot different from Banderas, that was for sure. "I don't think they heard us over all that
chatter in the main hall... Okay, let's keep going guys," Morgana said confidently. It was only now
that Shizuka noticed the pirate cutlass clutched in Morgana's right hand, and the cartoony slingshot
held on his belt.

Now that she took a look at Akira and Ryuji, she could see they were packing heat too. Akira had
some kind of hunting knife in his right hand, and a pistol tucked into a holster on his hip. Ryuji
had, naturally, gone for less subtle weaponry: A large metal pipe clutched in his hand, resting on
his right shoulder, while a large shotgun was holstered onto his back.

"Wait, where did..." Shizuka trailed off and looked down at herself. "Whoa!" She was armed too?
It took her a moment to realise, but now she could see that she had a short sword sheathed on her
belt, and her jacket had a back holster for some kind of lever-action rifle. But as soon as she noticed
these, the weapons vanished in quick flourishes of light. "What the heck?"

"Oh, right," Morgana said "The Metaverse is all new to you, even if you've been a Persona user for
so long. The weapons are a package deal with the outfit, and materialize whenever you're in
danger. For the most part it's best to leave the fighting to your Persona, but... if a Shadow gets past
that, it doesn't hurt to have a little something extra on hand."

Yeah, this was definitely different from anything Stand related. But it wasn't a bad idea, she
supposed. Too bad she had no idea how to shoot.

The thieves continued on, making a beeline deeper into the castle, set to take on any other knights
that appeared before them.

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It was perhaps fate, or perhaps something far more insidious, that allowed Ann back into the
Metaverse. Only a few minutes after being unceremoniously dumped outside by Ryuji, she had
checked her phone and found something new and alien saved on it. A new app, with the symbol of
a pulsating black and red eye.

And after clicking on it, and repeating what she had heard from Ryuji, she found herself once more
walking into the strange hazy world of the castle. Whatever this weirdness was, she had to brave it
for Shiho's sake. That son of a bitch had destroyed her, and she couldn't just sit back when he was
likely going to get away with all of it.

"This is that place from earlier..." Ann murmured to herself. "What's up with this app...?"

As she was musing on the strangeness of all this, she could hear the pounding of metal footsteps
drawing nearer to her. "Princess?!" Three knights seemed to appear from the ether, and Ann could
only scream as one abruptly grabbed her.

Perhaps the others had had a point in sending her out of here...

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The group had gone through a few different rooms. While they were aiming to keep a low profile,
as the Shadows would only grow stronger as they moved in deeper, some fights had been
unavoidable as they worked their way in deeper. After a few battles the gang decided to take a
breather in a safe room.

According to Morgana, Palaces could have rooms in which the ruler didn't have full control, or
didn't factor overmuch into the owner's cognition. Rooms like these were largely ignored by
Shadows, and they could relax a little here.

"Aren't there more Shadows here than last time? Just gettin' this far has been a real pain in my ass," Ryuji admitted with an annoyed groan.

"Really? They don't strike me as that bad," Shizuka remarked. "They're annoying, but they don't hit all that hard at all. Besides that they're... kinda dumb. I mean that pumpkin-headed one ran right into Captain Kidd's fist."

Morgana adjusted himself from his seat on the tiles and cast a glance her way. "Don't get too cocky. The nearer we get to the treasure, the more powerful and numerous the Shadows will become. Still... Kamoshida does seem awfully on guard." And if the real world could have an effect on this cognitive one, then Akira reasoned Ryuji pissing Kamoshida off earlier probably hadn't done them any favours. "We're only getting started anyways. So listen up rookies," he seemed to address this to Ryuji and Shizuka in particular "We need to secure an infiltration route, a clear path toward the treasure of the Palace. Might be a little difficult, even with our current numbers..."

Ryuji hummed, pressing his back against the shimmering door. "You know... you say you have no memories and junk, but you know an awful lot about this stuff. You sure you've got amnesia?"

"I believe in Mona," Akira casually replied.

"Hah. At least you're a step above that moron," Morgana said with a quick snicker.

"Don't call me a moron!"

Shizuka sat back and watched the banter unfold. It was enough to make her smile, thinking back on the regular sharp bickering she had seen between Josuke and Rohan. They continued their back and forth for a moment, until Shizuka broke in. "So... what exactly are you Mona?" A cat with a Stand was the theory she was operating on, that unlocking Zorro had caused the strange transformation she was now seeing, but all this 'Metaverse' stuff added a layer of uncertainty to her regular assumptions.

"I'm a human, I know that much. But something changed me into this and I... well I don't have all the details, but I know that investigating Palaces and stealing treasure is a part of me getting my memories back."

The explanation made her shrug. Wasn't the weirdest thing she had been told, and she just decided to roll with it. Morgana seemed a little surprised at her lack of confusion, but simultaneously seemed a little glad of it.

"Still, why was the princess in such an odd place?" The ominous echoing voice came from beyond the door, and was enough to make the group tense up.

"I could have sworn we were pursuing the readings of an intruder..."

"Well it doesn't matter now. We must take her back to King Kamoshida!"

Once the footsteps outside had faded away, Ryuji spoke up. "Who's this princess they're talkin' about?"

"I should probably look into this!" Morgana said. He confidently pushed the door open and strode outside. Or, as best a person could 'stride' on such stubby legs.
"And another question goes unanswered," Ryuji murmured in frustration.

After a moment, Shizuka swung her legs forward and hopped off the large table in the centre of the room. "Well come on, we should probably get after him. Lil' guy is stealthy and all, but I wouldn't give him good odds if he gets caught alone out there."

Morgana scurried back in swiftly. "This is bad! Your friend, Lady Ann... she's been taken by Shadows!"

"But... we sent her back," Akira said. "Unless..." He thought back to the other day, when Ryuji had gotten his Persona, and how he had gotten the same app as soon as they returned to the real world. "Sting, check your phone."

"Eh? What the heck's this eyeball thing?" Shizuka asked, raising her phone up from her pocket.

So, she had it too now. Realising this made Akira sigh and shake his head. "My guess is, anyone who enters the Metaverse winds up with the same app. So even though we sent her out, she could come back. And she probably overheard the keywords we used to get in here." An unfortunate oversight. They'd have to deal with it quickly, without powers of her own she was in real danger.

Particularly given what they'd already seen of Shadow Kamoshida. And the real one for that matter.

Knowing this, the thieves left the safe room at a swift pace, retracing the route they had used to get this far. Having cleared more than a few Shadows on the way through, they were mostly able to navigate the corridor and adjoining dining room in a stealthy silence. Occasionally they could hear Ann's voice in the distance, her muffled protests guiding them.

The group soon reached a small hallway with empty suits of armour lining both sides, leading toward a set of heavy iron double doors. "Look, I'll totally apologize for touching the armour without permission!"

"She totally doesn't get what's going on... We better hurry!" Ryuji led on, and after gaining some momentum he rammed the doors open with one well aimed shoulder charge. The other three thieves quickly followed his lead.

Sure enough, there was Ann- presently locked into some X-shaped device that was restraining her by her wrists and ankles. Worryingly, ther were a few racks for swords and spears positioned at one end of the room. Two knights were guarding her, and no doubt they had nabbed her as soon as she entered. And, standing by the guards was the 'King' and some kind of doppelganger of Ann who was... definitely not dressed for winter.

"Whoa." Shizuka blinked behind her mask, trying to hold her jaw in place. She quickly glanced to Morgana "Aha... W-why the heck are there two of her?"

"That's a cognition of Lady Ann. How Kamoshida perceives her in reality." Well, that explained some things. At once Shizuka felt a little guilty for staring, and then even more worried about what this asshole would get up to if nothing was done to deal with him.

"This is effed up," Ryuji grunted. He clenched his fists and jogged forward, with Akira in tow. "Takamaki!"

Kamoshida sighed in annoyance, turning to glare at Ryuji "Just when I was about to start enjoying myself." His guards promptly stood to attention, and they surrounded Ann in such a way that it would be a whole lot harder for Houdini to get over and break the restraints. Kamoshida's 'princess'
looked beyond bored. "How many times are you gonna come back?" He turned his attention to the real Ann. "I bet you're just like these thieves. You came because you're pissed at me huh? I see now, I get it. But ah... Shit, I forget that chick's name. It's your fault she jumped you know." Ann's eyes widened in shock. "You were so reluctant to throw yourself onto me that I had her take your place."

Ryuji had clenched his fists so hard that it was some miracle he wasn't bleeding from his palms. But with several knights positioned dangerously close to Ann, he didn't dare make a move.

"You bastard!" Ann shrieked. One of the knights, covered in gold platemail to distinguish him from the dull grey grunts, advanced closer at her outburst.

"No!" Ryuji said, set to advance before Kamoshida raised a hand up.

"Take one more step and I'll kill her on the spot!" A malicious grin broke out onto his inhuman face. "Just sit back and enjoy the show."

The situation was rapidly getting worse, and Shizuka was aware that Akira was looking at her expectantly. "If I do anything... if they know Houdini is doing anything, they'll kill her. I need a distraction."

Ann hung her head. Even from their end of the room, the group could hear her clearly. "Is this... my punishment for what happened to Shiho? Shiho... I'm so sorry."

It was at that moment that an idea seemed to occur to Akira, his attention focused solely on Ann while he tuned out Kamoshida's mocking ravings. They couldn't reach her. But if Ann was in this world, then surely she could unlock the same power and save herself. "Don't give in," he firmly told her. Ann looked up slowly.

There was a brief beat, before her brow set and her misery was replaced with an angry resolve. "You're right. Letting this piece of shit toy with me..." Ann trailed off into a bitter laugh and shook her head. "What was I thinking?!"

"Like I always say, slaves should just-,

Ann quickly cut him off. "Shut. Up. I've had enough of you... You've pissed me off you son of a bitch!"

A pulse rocked Ann's body, pain racking every nerve in her body. She gasped in shock and thrashed against her restraints, and from where she was it felt as if a spike was being driven into her brain. As had been the case for Akira and Ryuji when they awoke to her power. The air around her grew hotter, shimmering with thin coils of fire gradually growing more intense. And through it all, Ann heard a voice in her head. Feminine. Confident. Powerful.

"My... it's taken far too long. Tell me, who is going to avenge her if you don't? Forgiving him was never an option. Such is the scream of the other you that dwells within. I am thou, thou art I. We can finally forge a contract!"

"I hear you... Carmen," Ann whispered. The flames grew more intense, until a flash of blue fire engulfed her face, forming into scarlet mask that looked vaguely like that of a cat. Had a sculpted pair of ears and everything. "No more holding back!" Akira was smiling. Just what he was hoping would happen. It had worked for Ryuji after all.

"There you go. Nothing can be solved by restraining yourself. Understand? Then I'll gladly lend you my strength."
Blue fire wrapped around the iron restraints on Ann's limbs, the metal snapping and exploding outward and letting her drop down to her feet. In one quick motion she reached over and grabbed her mask, snarling in pain and anger as she tore the material from her face. A splash of blood erupted from around her eyes as the mask was torn away, the snarl becoming a scream halfway through. Light exploded around her, engulfing Ann's entire body.

The light vanished, replaced with a more tame aura of blue energy shimmering around Ann's whole body. Ann's school attire had been replaced by some kind of scarlet cat suit, a whip holstered on her right hip. Her newly summoned Persona floated at her side, a female figure in a black and scarlet gown, her face concealed by a mask while a large cigar was wedged in her lips. Two smaller figures, males with strange heart-shaped masks encasing their heads. They were chained to Carmen's body, and floating like lifeless dolls.

"Oh... well... never mind the rescue then," Shizuka murmured, awestruck. Whatever that was, it was definitely different than getting a Stand.

As if to further impress the others, Ann abruptly darted from the block that had restrained her. In the span of only a few seconds she snatched a sword from one stunned guard, leapt high, and then brought the blade crashing down on her copy. The doppelganger exploded into a cloud of black goo that melted to the floor.

"She's pissed," Ryuji said. Despite his shock at the sudden display of wrath, he was rather pleased by this turn of events.

"She's wonderful~" Morgana dreamily purred.

The king was cowering, falling behind the armoured line of his knights. "I'm not some cheap girl you can toy with... you scumbag! You stole everything from Shiho. You destroyed her! Now it's your turn!" The others formed up around Ann as she tossed her sword away. Carmen's glow filled the room as she cast an accusing finger at Kamoshida. "I will rob you of everything!"

The golden knight scoffed, dropping his sword and shield to the ground as his body began to ripple and distort. "Such insolence!" In a single explosion of black goo he had transformed, becoming some kind of... hulking purple demon, sitting on a floating toilet.

"Aw that's just gross," Shizuka said.

"It... somewhat undercuts the mood, yes," Morgana added. The two other knights followed their leader, morphing in explosive bursts of black goo. Their transformation was finished swiftly, leaving the demon flanked on both sides by a pair of dark horses with sharp, twisting horns of their own.

Carmen flicked a hand out dismissively, unleashing a burst of fire that struck the tremendous demon and launched him clean across the torture room, his body smashing into the brickwork and sending clouds of mortar erupting from around him. It left him more than a little dazed, his head swaying as he tried to realign his thoughts.

In an instant the two bicorns made a rushing beeline for Ann, hooves pounding the tiles. Zorro rushed in from the right and swung his rapier up in a quick Z-shaped series of slashes. Such was his speed that it sent a green gale rushing out from his blade, smashing into one of the beasts and sending it spiraling across the room. Captain Kidd intercepted the other, the spectral pirate ship at his feet crashing into the creatures horns with a resounding, earth rattling shockwave.

It didn't take long for the demon to shake his head clean of the daze, his sharp gaze falling on Ann
and Akira. He raised his right hand raised up quickly, nails elongating and sharpening as the air grew ice cold. Long icicles sprouted from his digits, and then exploded outward in a hail of sharp frozen diamonds.

Ann braced, set to dodge, until Arsene lunged in the way of the incoming hail with his wings folded in front of him as a shield. Each shard of ice exploded on impact, making Akira grunt from the strain. It stung quite a bit, but he could endure.

Chilled air was already gathering at the demons hand again, another volley set to fire. A sudden gout of blood erupted from his outstretched arm, making the creature gasp in shock and pain. Wide eyes glanced down to the wound in his arm. It was as if a hole had been punched clean through the limb, but... he could still feel something lodged in there. A second unseen spear was suddenly lodged in his body, punching through his right shoulder and drawing a pained howl from the creature.

With one eye open, the other clenched shut, he could see something swim across his vision. Something barely visible, a golden female figure. Just as this realisation dawned on the demon, the golden figure's fist came rushing outward in a hail of punches, dozens of strikes nailing him in the face with each passing second.

"BAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZU!!"

"Get clear!" Ann called. Houdini leapt away from the bloodied and battered ruin of the demon's face, as Carmen let loose another fireball that erupted and engulfed the toilet bound creature. His shadowy remains were plastered along the wall, and then sizzled out of existence entirely. It didn't take long for Ryuji and Morgana to deal with the two steeds, with the blond boy taking down the hulking beast with a splattering burst of shotgun fire.

With the Shadows dealt with, the group went to gather again in the center of the torture room.

The smoke cleared in the bombed out room, and it became clear that Kamoshida had slipped away in the chaos. "Damnit... where did he..." Ann took a step forward, only for fatigue to set in and bring her down to her right knee, her breathing growing heavier. It was only now that she looked at herself, and the scarlet catsuit that had formed on her body. "And what the heck am I wearing?!" She instinctively moved to cover herself... as best she could anyway.

"You seriously only noticed that now?" Ryuji asked, exasperated.

Akira looked down at the blonde and nodded slowly. "So, just like with Ryuji... unlocking your Persona exhausted you," he said.

"Not that I want to interrupt or anything, but spooking the King like that... I don't doubt there'll be a patrol coming to investigate. Let's retreat for now," Morgana advised.

Ryuji groaned and looked down at his feet, shaking his head in annoyance. "We were just getting fired up and you had to go and get in the way... Gimme your arm." He approached Ann's right, letting her support herself on that end. "Joker, you grab the other."

"Think you can get us out of here stealthily Sting?" Akira asked, looking Shizuka's way.

The raven-haired girl flashed a toothy smile, Houdini's spectral form forming behind her. "You kidding? That's my specialty." She clenched her fist, and in an instant the phantom thieves became invisible to the naked eye.

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Their escape from the Metaverse was a swift one, and they just barely evaded passing patrols of knights thanks to Shizuka's Stand. After returning to reality, the group headed to the subway station near Shujin and grabbed a quiet alcove at the platform to catch their breath.

It took a few minutes for Ann to catch her breath. A lot had happened, physically and mentally, and it was naturally very draining. But, Shizuka would admit, the blonde was hardier than she looked.

"Have you calmed down Lady Ann?" Morgana asked. Now stuck in a normal feline form he was using Akira's bag as a 'nest', standing atop it while his front paws rested on Akira's shoulder.

"Um... Morgana, right? I really am talking to a cat... this feels so strange."

Shizuka shrugged from her position by the wall. "Could be worse. Least he's not a sentient flower." Ann gave her a curious glance. "Uh, sorry. Never mind. Still, for as weird as all this must seem... you have to admit that it's pretty kickass. I mean you totally beat the shit outta' that huge toilet guy!"

It was an assessment that made Ann smile sheepishly. "You think so? Ha, honestly the whole thing is kind of a blur now that I think about it... my power, my Persona."

"It's the will of your rebellion Lady Ann. And with it, you'll be able to fight in the other world. And the other world is the key to making Kamoshida change his ways," Morgana said.

"Yeah and if what these guys say is true, it's the only option we have. Students, teachers, parents... they know all about what's going on, and they're keeping quiet. So getting help from the people in power isn't happening. And besides that, you're the only guys who know what a shit-heel he is," Shizuka added. She pointed to Ryuji and Akira "Not that anyone's gonna listen to what these two have to say. I've been here for less than a week and all I've heard is that you two are worthless thugs."

Akira shrugged. "Well... at least it's a step up from being called a murderer."

After a long silence Ann nodded and looked up at the group. "In that case, I'm in too. I want to make him pay for what he did to Shiho. He just keeps going like nothing happened, even after what he did. I'll never forgive him!"

"You serious?" Ryuji looked as if he was trying to mask concern with annoyance, reaching a hand up to scratch the back of his head. "I mean... it's gonna be pretty dangerous you know."

"Don't be ridiculous, she'll be great. I mean, she was incredible in her first fight," Akira reasoned. "Besides. She has the app, so it's not like we could stop her going in. Better to do it as a group."

Morgana purred his approval. "I agree. Lady Ann was quite impressive, and for a job like this we could do with extra manpower."

"Then it's settled." Ann grinned and clenched her fist in triumph. Ryuji didn't protest further, and seemed to shelve his concerns when it seemed the majority was against his worries. It would be more dangerous if Ann decided to fly solo. "I'm going to make Kamoshida atone for what he did. Not just for Shiho's sake, but for everything he's done."

"Well, that's the end goal. But uh... we prolly only have until these two get expelled to change things. How long is that?" Shizuka asked.

"About a fortnight. Bastard said he's gonna call for our expulsion at the next board meeting, so..."
He trailed off with a quick shake of his head. A fortnight to save their asses. If they didn't take the treasure before then, it would be too late to undo the damage he'd do at the board meeting.

The group exchanged contact info so they could keep in touch, after which Ann parted from them and headed for home. With how hectic today was, nobody blamed her.

That just left the matter of Morgana, and who would be taking care of him in his cat form. After all, a wandering stray cat could only land in trouble.

"No way I can take him at my place," Ryuji remarked.

"And Simmons is allergic to cats. But more than that I'm not living with a talking cat because it's damn weird," Shizuka said. She tucked her hands into her pockets, pushed off the wall, and looked to the cat perched in Akira's bag. "Eh. Seems he's taken a shine to you anyway Akira-kun."

"Uh... who's Simmons?" Ryuji asked.

"My butler."

"You have a butler?!"

"I mean he's more my legal guardian but," Shizuka rolled her shoulders in a carefree manner. "He'd call himself my butler above all else."

It was all settled then. Akira raised no protests. With how drab and depressing Leblanc's attic was, he could do with the company anyway. "Well, it's getting late, so we should all start heading home. But for future reference we should decide on a meeting place where we'll gather before our missions." He thought back and then smiled "Ah. How about the school roof? Relatively isolated, and it looks 'off limits.' Should give us some privacy."

"Gotcha. Well, guess we're gonna be starting properly tomorrow" Shizuka mused.

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By the time she got home, Shizuka felt ready to collapse. Seeing a girl almost kill herself, going into another world, getting into her first real fight with her Stand, and then compounded with a long train ride home... she hadn't realised how tired she was until she found herself actively struggling just to get off the train.

The smell of Simmons' cooking did perk her up a bit though. As Shizuka stepped out of her shoes she sniffed the air like a curious dog and unconsciously licked her lips. "Rogan josh? Hot damn, just what the doctor ordered." Her mom was what some would politely call 'adventurous' when it came to her food. She liked cuisines from all around the world and insisted that all the Joestar staff try to learn at least one non-American recipe. Rogan josh was Simmons' specialty.

"I'm home!"

"Welcome back young miss!" Simmons called from the kitchen. He emerged from around the corner, drying his hands in his apron. "So good to see you again. I heard a very ghastly rumor that a girl at your school... well."

"It's not a rumor. A girl tried to jump off the roof, but... she's fine," Shizuka said. Physically at least. Much as it annoyed her to think on the suffering Shiho had gone through, and that Kamoshida would get away with it if nothing was done, she was glad that Simmons had reminded her. "Uh, gimme a sec Simmons. I got a call to make." She drew her phone from her pocket and
When she was younger, her dad had told her all about Speedwagon— the best friend of his grandfather and grandmother, who had dedicated his whole life to repaying the kindness Jonathan Joestar had shown him. That gratitude was embodied in the research and charity group now known globally as the ‘Speedwagon Foundation.’

To most of the world it was a multifaceted, benevolent group. Medical research, environmental conservation, charity ventures. All things the group were proudly involved in. But their real raison d'etre was to provide aid and support to all member of the Joestar family. Just as Speedwagon had done for Jonathan.

And after making sure Shizuka knew the importance of this, certain that some insane circumstance would befall her as it managed to befall everyone in his family, he had given her the personal phone number of their current CEO, the man who had been running the show for several years.

The phone rang a few times before an answer came on the other line. "Ah, Shizuka. It's nice to hear from you. Haven't seen you since the ah... well... h-how are you?"

"I'm fine Mister Christo," it was technically true, she supposed. "Um, listen, there's been ah... an incident on my end. The Speedwagon Foundation has facilities in Tokyo, right?"

"Why yes. Operations were expanded heavily after... well, it was before your time. But we have a few clinics and offices dotted around Japan. Why do you ask?" Mister Christo asked.

"There's this girl at my school. Shiho Suzui," the name had been murmured rather frequently after she jumped. "She was in an... an accident. And so, with how heavy things are gonna be for her family... I was thinking that maybe we could foot her hospital bills? Any way to arrange that on your end?"

Christo chuckled briefly on his end. "You've got a big heart. Yes, that should be easy enough to deal with. I believe Doctor Lifeson is working in... China, at the moment. Transferring him to Tokyo should be easy enough, and it'll make your friends hospital stay much quicker. If you're fine with that," he informed her.

"That would be wonderful, thank you so much."

It was a start. But for as easily as Christo's people could handle Shiho's physical injuries, her problems ran far deeper than that. And even dealing with Kamoshida, and making him have a change of heart, wouldn't undo the pain she felt. Something had to be done. And so, thinking on this, Shizuka resolved to meet Shiho in person at some point.

Chapter End Notes

Houdini, in this context, is a dual reference. The Harry Houdini connection is obvious, being a world-famous trickster figure with a great prominence in both real-world and fictional material. That's in keeping with Persona 5's naming scheme. But, as a JJBA reference, the name is also linked to the song 'Houdini' by Foster The People.
The group had been making steady progress through the Palace over the course of several visits, but it was tough going. As Morgana had said the Shadows grew stronger as they moved in deeper, and more numerous to boot. But they had a good idea of where the treasure was, at the top of a large tower at the back of the Castle. And on their last visit they had reached an area where the distortion was particularly bad, where the floor was constantly warping and reshaping.

Morgana said that the treasure was guaranteed to be nearby in that case.

But they couldn't go in today. Akira apparently had to work at the cafe he was living at (which sounded simultaneously cool and depressing) and Ryuji had to help his mom with something. Still, Shizuka had seen an opportunity in this and invited Ann to hang out.

They met up at a diner on Shibuya's central street, talking over coffee in a comfortable booth they had managed to snag in the corner.

"My parents mainly leave me to my own devices. I mean they're busy, I get it, and I totally appreciate their hard work but... still," Ann shrugged helplessly. "I suppose by now I'm used to it."

Shizuka nodded slowly. She lifted her coffee up, took a brief sip, and set it back down. "I get ya. My dad was involved in work whenever he was healthy enough for it, and it could take him away for long periods of time. It sucks but... it's a necessity. Still, doing modelling at your age... Japan sure is an interesting place."

Ann apparently did modelling as a part time job, and her foreign appearance and natural good looks had helped score her a bit of success in that regard. It was definitely a surprise to Shizuka, given her age, but it suited her.

"It puts bread on the table... That's like, an American saying, right?"

"Yeah if you're like, ninety," Shizuka replied. The two snickered and enjoyed their coffee for a few moments. "Truth be told though... well I had ulterior motives for inviting you out here. I mean, of course I want to get to know you better if we're gonna be teammates. But um... there's something important I feel you have a right to know about," she said.

From what she could tell, Ann apparently had no idea about Houdini saving Shiho's life. Akira and Ryuji had perhaps thought it was none of their business to talk about it, or it had slipped their minds entirely.

"When... when Shiho jumped, I saw it and... I caught her mid fall." To elaborate, Shizuka summoned Houdini to her side, with the golden figure floating above the young woman. Ann's eyes widened, wide as dinner plates as they surveyed Shizuka's Stand.

"O-oh, right, you... the guys said you could summon yours in the real world." The sight of Houdini stunned Ann for a few moments before she managed to snap back to attention, understanding just what Shizuka had said. "Wait, you were... you caught her and... so that's why the doctors said her injuries were so limited. A broken leg and some fractures. It was because you..." Shizuka nodded. A gentle smile touched on Ann's face, and she quickly reached up to dry the corners of her eyes "Th-thank you."
Shizuka smiled sheepishly. She fixed up her heart-shaped sunglasses, trying to keep her embarrassment from being obvious. "I did it reflexively. Because I... I couldn't just stay still and watch. My Stand had no choice but to act."

"Still, doing that to save a person you've never even met before. That's more than anyone else in the school did. It's more than... I did..."

"Come on Ann, don't think like that."

"But it's true!" Ann looked into the inky depths of her half-empty coffee mug. "Everyone... so many people had to know how bad things were getting. The kinds of things he was doing. And everyone turned a blind eye, or kept quiet about it, or acted like it wasn't their problem. And I, I should have known that that bastard would have done something like that to Shiho."

Shizuka reached across the table, pressing a strong hand to Ann's left shoulder and squeezing reassuringly. "Ann, the only people to blame to blame for what happened are Kamoshida, and any rat bastard teacher who knew the stuff he was into. You go blaming yourself, and you're just giving him power."

But, she supposed Ann's worrying was to be expected. This whole situation was the kind of thing that nobody ever wanted to go through, and the after effects would linger for some time.

"She said my paintings sucked." The words came out of the blue and had Shizuka raising one eyebrow from behind her shades. "When we first met, when we became friends in middle school. We were doing art and she said my paintings sucked. And you know, that might sound mean but..."

She smiled from the nostalgia, slowly rolling a finger around the rim of her mug. "At the time nobody really spoke to me, but she was... genuine, and never had any issues with who I was or how I appeared. It was the first time anyone in middle school ever spoke to me without bringing up my looks. She's my oldest and closest friend and I-

"You did nothing wrong," Shizuka assured her.

"Still... I wish there was something I could do..." Ann said, giving a quick shake of her head.

An idea popped into Shizuka's head. It was a dangerous one, to be sure, and definitely one of the wildest things she had ever thought to do. But then again, when had a Joestar gotten anywhere by playing it safe? "Is Shiho taking visitors?"

The question disarmed Ann a bit. "Yeah. I've met with her a few times... you saving her like that has really helped in that regard. She's free to leave the hospital but... well she hasn't. I think she's afraid. Or ashamed. Or both. Why do you want to know?"

"Figure it's about time to pay her a visit. I mean at a time like this... she could do with more people to talk to, right?"

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Ann had hesitated for a bit, but ultimately decided there was little harm in bringing someone along. And if Shizuka had saved Shiho's life, then she supposed she was a safe person to bring around. And clearly she wasn't judgemental of Shiho's action.

The hospital was, as hospitals often were, a cramped and depressing area positively stuffed with people. Mainly the elderly. Shizuka noted that a Japanese hospital had nowhere near as many injured drunk idiots as she had seen in American hospitals. A scent of medicine and disinfectant followed them all throughout the building, and medical machines maintained a chorus of hisses and
beeps and hums throughout the corridors.

They encountered Doctor Lifeson on the way, who brightened a bit at the sight of Shizuka. "Oh! Ko-knee-chee-wah, Shizuka-san!" he said, sounding each syllable quickly.

"Relax dude, we both speak English."

"Well thank fucking god for that. My translator is in the bathroom," the doctor replied with a small sigh of relief. He was a large man, about a head taller than Ann and rather broadly built even under the loose white material of a doctor's coat. He was bald and had a trimmed brown beard, his right ear marked by a few diamond studs.

Nothing about him really 'screamed' doctor (other than the coat) but he did indeed have all the qualifications. But more than that, Doctor Lifeson had some 'extra talents' that made him a cut above anyone else in the medical world.

"You guys know each other?" Ann asked.

"Yeah. He's from the Speedwagon Foundation. Asked them to help handle Shiho's medical bills, and they then offered to send Lifeson over," Shizuka explained.

"I... heard you were rich but... how rich are you?" Ann asked.

She shrugged weakly. "I unno. Very? I've never really stopped to think about it, and the number probably changes on the hour so... meh. Besides this is for a good cause. I figured her folks would have a lot on their minds, and that having big medical bills hanging overhead would just make things worse," Shizuka explained.

A sudden realisation hit Ann. "Oh gosh! Shiho's mom said that the bills were taken care of but... that was really you?" Shizuka nodded. "Then... w-wow, that's incredible. But what about this... Doctor Lifeson?"

"Aha... well I have special talents that make me quite useful to the Speedwagon Foundation. We're all about helping people, after all."

"She knows about Stands doc, it's fine. She's got one of her own, kinda." When Shizuka said this, the bearded man nodded slowly. The air shimmered around him, becoming distorted with an aura of shimmering blue light. A spectral form materialized at Lifeson's side, a floating orb of blue metal with a ring of glowing golden eyes at the equator, and a tangle of gold briars growing from the underside of the orb.

"This is my stand, Panacea. It might not look too imposing, but then again it's not designed for combat," Lifeson explained. He smiled, each glowing eye blinking in sequence. The eyelids were like those of a doll, clearly mechanical. "With his power, I can instantly know the exact issues affecting a person's body, and then Panacea can create special medicines that will help accelerate the recovery."

Ann blinked "That's... that's incredible. S-so you gave Shiho something to heal her bones quicker?" Lifeson nodded in confirmation. "I knew she was recovering fast, but... wow, to think it was something like this behind it all..."

"It's not instantaneous. At present she'll have a bit of a limp for a while now, but she's certainly recovering far faster than she normally would," Lifeson paused, seeming to hesitate before continuing on. "That said... Well, my Stand can only deal with physical trauma. Outside of neurochemical manipulation, I can't do much for emotional trauma. And Miss Suzui seems to need
a lot of help in that regard." Though they had known that well in advance.

"Well... thanks doc," Shizuka said. They let him pass, as he seemed to be dying for some coffee. "I figured that'd be the case. But... I don't know any Stand-using therapists."

"There are some things that you shouldn't try and find a magical solution for," Ann replied. She tapped her chin slowly and then smiled gently at the young Joestar. "Doing all this for someone you don't know... it's impressive."

Shizuka adjusted her sunglasses. "I mean... it's the right thing to do. She's young, and she needs to be able to know that her life is worth living. That she's not worthless, like that scumbag teacher made her feel." She shook her head slowly. How had things gotten so bad? How could so many people turn a blind eye to what had been going on? Not just the people on the volleyball team, but the principal and teachers who had to know that something wasn't right.

But simply being pissed off about this wouldn't help. They'd set things right. If what Morgana said was true, and he did seem to be an expert, they could get Kamoshida to confess and then blow the whole case wide open for all Japan to see.

Shiho was seated at the side of her hospital bed, her crutches propped up near her side. A cast lingered on her left leg, and with the sleeves of her white shirt rolled up Shizuka could see a bandage on the matching arm. Lifeson did good work.

"H-hey there. How are you feeling today?" Ann asked as the two entered. The dark haired girl looked at Ann over her shoulder, and tried her best to smile. But her eyes conveyed such sadness that it was clear it was all an act.

Shiho shrugged gently. "I can walk around a bit better. Doctor Lifeson is a little strange, but whatever medicine he's giving me really works..." She noticed Shizuka standing in the doorway, specifically the prison-patterned Shujin skirt she was wearing under the hem of her leather jacket. "Oh um... are you the second transfer student in Ann's class?"

Well, it was better than what Akira was commonly referred to as: 'That fucking transfer student."

"Yup. Shizuka Joestar. Pleased to meet you," she said, smiling brightly. She thought about extending a hand out to shake, but then wasn't sure if that was the right thing to do. So she bowed stiffly and cleared her throat once she stood upright again. "Sorry. I'm not a native, I dunno what the whole... procedure is when you're meeting someone new."

And despite herself Shiho laughed. It was small, but it seemed more genuine than her earlier smile. "It's nice to meet you," Shiho remarked.

"I know you don't know me, but... well Ann and I have been getting to know each other, and I was... concerned." She wasn't quite sure how to put it. After all, this whole situation was very much new to her. But, she supposed it would be best to be slow and polite, to try and keep the atmosphere calm and civil.

She leaned in the doorway as the two friends spoke. Ann spoke, mainly, and Shiho listened for the most part. She didn't seem particularly talkative, and Shizuka couldn't exactly blame her. But Ann was determined and seemed to really want to reach her friend.

"Shiho I know this is something you're not going to want to talk about, but... but I'm sorry."

"Huh?" The dark haired girl looked up, suddenly snapped to attention.
"Kamoshida. For a while now he's been trying to... get with me. And I kept turning him down, but the last time he did..." She didn't finish, not when it was clear what she was referring to.

Shiho shook her head, taking a moment to fix her ponytail back into place as a means to occupy her hands. "No Ann, I... I'm sorry. I should have seen how bad things are. I should have left a long time ago, but instead I just... let him. And I was such a coward that I tried to... to end it all. It was like there was... something inside my head, screaming at me to escape. And standing there on the roof, i-it... it was the only escape I could think of." She sighed, her voice shaking. "It doesn't matter. He'll get away with it. Like he gets away with everything else."

"Nah. We got a little plan in mind to take that fucker down," Shizuka said. She grinned, clearly a little pleased with herself.

Shiho blinked. "Huh? What do you mean?"

Her statement earned Shizuka a quick glare from Ann. "It's nothing. You really don't need to worry about it too much," Ann said, quickly trying to brush the conversation under the rug.

"Ann," there was a firmness to Shiho's voice now, and it was clear she wouldn't be placated eagerly "What is she talking about?"

It was a tough question to answer. After all if you tried to explain the Metaverse to a person who had never been there, they would call you crazy by the time you got to the end of the first sentence. And more than that Shiho and Ann knew each other well enough that Shiho would see through any lie Ann would spin. It probably didn't help that Ann's acting sucked.

Ann quickly scooched across the room toward Shizuka. "Uh... this is bad. What should we do?" she asked in a low whisper.

"Show her?" Shizuka suggested bluntly.

"WHAT?!" Ann nearly jumped out of her skin, and quickly settled down when she realised she startled her friend. "Y-you nuts? It's way too dangerous!"

"Not if we just show her the entrance. I mean, Shadows rarely go there. And the ones near the entrance are weak as shit anyway. Even if it's just us, we can handle any trouble." Ann seemed unconvinced, humming slightly. "Look... Don't you think this could be good for her? Could give her some faith that something is gonna be done about that shithead?"

Ann hummed, hugging her arms. "I dunno..."

"It's just the entrance. It'll be fine. Even if we get in trouble, I can just get us out all sneaky like. A perfect vanishing act," Shizuka explained.

Then Ann sighed and relented. Shiho wanted to know what was going on, and Shizuka gave a somewhat compelling argument. For something like this, the only way they could get Shiho to understand was with a practical demonstration.

"Alright alright..." Ann sighed and moved to Shiho's side. "Your folks are still at work, right?" Shiho nodded "Then we should be free to slip out for a little while. Follow us." She couldn't believe she was going along with this...
"Why are we here?" Shiho asked from the alley they had settled in. The shadow of Shujin falling over them had left her a little worried and no doubt it was bringing up some painful memories.

"It's... part of the plan," Ann remarked. She glanced to Shizuka, seeing the uncertainty in Shiho's eyes. "You sure this is a good idea?"

"Sure I'm sure," Shizuka said. She had seen Ann in action, and Akira had said Ryuji had been like a goddamn hurricane when he got his Stand. They were both pissed at Kamoshida, and got some pretty impressive power from it. And so, she reasoned, if Shiho could do the same then she'd be an invaluable asset. After all she had the most motive to be pissed at Kamoshida.

But more than that, it would be good for her. She could settle the score, take her misery and turn it into a righteous anger to power through that pain. And get justice.

Shizuka took her phone from her pocket and let her thumb hover over the glowing tile of the Meta Nav. "Okay Shiho, this is gonna be really weird at first, but... well, just take a deep breath and trust that it's all gonna be okay." Before Shiho could ask what she meant, Shizuka pressed on the tile and felt the air ripple and distort around them with a rushing purple hue.

Just like that, Shujin was replaced with the looming towers and high walls of the mysterious castle. "O-oh my god!" Shiho exclaimed in a shocked gasp, nearly falling off her crutches until Ann managed to catch her from behind. And then she noticed that Ann and Shizuka's entire wardrobe had changed. "W-what just... your clothes... what..."

"I-it's okay Shiho, it's still us, we're just... uh... in another dimension?" Ann groaned and wanted to slap herself. Yeah, like saying stuff like that would help Shiho stay calm. "I know this is gonna sound super weird, and I doubt I can describe it right but... this is a cognitive world. A place shaped by the human mind. And that castle is Kamoshida's heart, it's how he views the school."

Shizuka nodded. "Yeah, that about sums it up. I mean Mona would probably get anal about some details but..." She rolled her hand in the air and decided to give Shiho some more details. "Uh... the new clothes are a side effect of this world. If you get powers, you get some new duds and a mask. Oh yeah, and we use codenames. Cause apparently it'd be bad news to shout our real names inside a Palace. I'm Sting, she's Panther... for the record I'm still pissed you didn't go for Catwoman."

"Is now really the best time to be talking about that?" Ann asked with an annoyed sigh.

The two spent several minutes explaining the finer points to Shiho. The Metaverse, Shadows, the powers a person gained here (Ann said Persona, Shizuka liked to insist on Stand) and their plan.

"So if you take the treasure..." Shiho said, slotting the pieces together in her head "It'll cause Kamoshida to change as a person? He'd... confess to all the things he's done?" Both girls nodded. "You sure that will work?"

"Well... Mona thinks so, and Mona's kinda the expert on this place," Ann began "So I'll trust the cat
on it. And conventional methods... won't work." They both knew that Akira and Ryuji had given it the old college try, but nobody on the volleyball team was willing to speak up. Even after one of their teammates tried to kill herself.

Shiho pondered this news for a few quiet moments. Then she looked at the duo with a strong intensity in her expression. "Show me more. I want to see inside." Ann knew the look in her eye. It was clear she wouldn't change her mind on this.

"Just... stick close to us. Sting, work your magic."

Houdini appeared above the raven-haired girl, and it instantly became clear Shiho couldn't see Shizuka's Stand. In a split second the trio were suddenly invisible, making the injured girl gasp in surprise. "Follow our lead," Shizuka explained.

She led on until the trio moved through the vent they used for all their infiltrations, moving into the warm interior of the castle. As had been the last time they were here, the main entrance was devoid of any knights. It seemed that with the thieves moving in deeper, the guards were being reassigned to follow suit.

As soon as they were inside, it didn't take Shiho long to see all the banners and portraits with Kamoshida's face on them. "You said this is how he views the school, right?" Shiho asked in a soft whisper. She laughed bitterly. "All these pictures of him... yeah... that matches his ego alright. Everyone not on the volleyball team practically worships him. I really wish... I could have realised as much sooner."

"Shiho..." Ann murmured.

They continued on, down into the dungeon. Few guards were to be found here, and those that were were probably the weakest in the whole castle. And the cognitive versions of the volleyball team would help motivate Shiho further.

The walls became stony and grey, encrusted with grime that looked surprisingly ancient. The light became much duller, provided only by small candles mounted on the walls that were half eroded away. Cells lined the walls, and Shiho seemed to slow down with each one they passed. The injured volleyball members in those cells were definitely familiar to her.

"These people..."

"They're not real," Ann quickly said. "They're like... how Kamoshida views the school as his castle, he views the volleyball team as his uh... his..."

"Slaves?" Shiho finished with a sad sigh.

When Houdini rendered things invisible, Shizuka could still see an outline of them through her eyes. It left her aware that Shiho was gripping one of the bars for support, and she proceeded to settle a strong hand on her shoulder.

Just as Shiho was catching her breath, all three became aware of the sound of heavy metal footsteps approaching them. And those ironclad feet carried voices with them, the leisurely chatting of guards. "King Kamoshida's been more uh... tense than usual, don't you think?"

"Quiet down dumbass! The captain might be nearby... but, you have a point. I guess all this stuff
about the thieves is really gettin' to him. He'll probably wanna use the Concubine again tonight."

"The Concubine? Yeesh. Don't wanna be anywhere nearby when that happens. The last beating was pretty brutal."

Ann and Shizuka shared an uncertain glance. That was a new one to them. From their position they could look down the long hallway, toward a small drawbridge over running water that bridged a gap toward more cells. The trio of chatting knights passed by their field of view and continued their rounds.

Suddenly Shiho pushed forward, and even though she was invisible Ann and Shizuka both felt a little nervous and quickly followed after her across the drawbridge. Soon they found one cell in particular that Shiho was rendered stone still at the sight of. Inside the cell was herself, or a cognitive version at least, bruised and covered by rags... and the other female figures in the cell weren't much better. "That's... me... and that's how he sees me, and the other girls on the volleyball team, right? The 'Concubine' huh..."

Shizuka glanced from side to side and then dropped the invisibility field Houdini created. They were in the clear for the time being.

"You gonna let him get away with this?" she asked. "If something about him isn't done, then he's just gonna keep on like he's been doing. No, he's gonna get worse. But if we steal his treasure, then he's never gonna hurt another person," Shizuka explained.

After a few quiet moments, Shiho clenched her fists. Then she trembled, and it quickly became clear that she wasn't shaking from fear, or tears, but anger. A rage that was quickly bubbling to the surface.

"We... should really get out of here," Ann said. She seemed worried, watching her best friend closely. She turned on her heel, and then immediately went rigid as she hear metal footsteps rapidly approaching them.

"Intruders! Halt!"

The trio from earlier were rapidly coming back the way they came, and to their right Ann could see two more coming up from their left. The way over the drawbridge was clear, but if they didn't move quickly they'd likely be surrounded. Shizuka sighed. "Of course they'd come back as soon as I turn it off..."

But even though they were at risk at being caught, Shiho didn't move. She kept her eyes on the cell, of the cowering facsimile of herself she could see. "If something isn't done, he's going to get worse," she repeated to herself. There would be more victims, more people like her. People who would be too terrified to do anything about it. Shiho gasped as she felt a wave of agony wash over her, as if a spike of hot iron had been drive into her brain.

"You see it now, yes? Running away accomplishes nothing. Closing your eyes and covering your ears solves nothing. If you wish for justice... if you wish for vengeance... if you wish for what is fair... then the only path is to strike back!"

Ann and Shizuka shielded Shiho from both sides, Carmen and Houdini hovering above them. The knights hadn't made any moves, but their blades were drawn and their shields were raised, and they would strike at any moment.
"Is she... unlocking her power?" Ann asked, awestruck.

Shiho clutched the sides of her head, her crutches clattering to the ground as her legs wobbled and nearly buckled beneath them. But, for reasons she couldn't quite understand, it felt as if the broken bones were mended completely. She blinked then, the pain subsiding until she was aware of something. The top half of her face was covered in an ivory blindfold, a red eye painted into the center of it.

"Are you done running? Are you ready to call my name?"

"Yes... this... this needs to be done. Come to me, Aradia."

The pain returned with a vengeance as Shiho gripped the blindfold, wisps of blue fire coiling around her. She screamed in pain, blood seeping out from under the fabric as she struggled to tear it from her flesh. "Yes! You have felt corruption firsthand, and now you are free to strike back! I am thou, thou art I. I am Aradia, the breaker of chains!"

Shiho tore the blindfold off with one bloodied pull, screaming as the fire engulfed her with a wave of force that blew the encroaching Shadows backward. Ann and Shizuka shielded their eyes until the blowed died down, revealing Shiho's changed attire. She was dressed in some sort of dark ninja garb with white plate gauntlets and boots, the chest looking about as armoured and reinforced. Her belt was weighed with throwing stars, and in her left hand she held a dangerously sharp naginata.


For as impressive as Shiho's change was, her Persona was nothing to sneeze at either. It was a tall and strong female with ice white skin, dressed in a similar dark suit to Shiho. A white shawl was draped over her shoulders, and broken chains dangles around her wrists. The top half of her face was concealed with a sparkling ruby that seemed almost embedded in her flesh, and glowed with an imposing power.

"If this is how Kamoshida views the world... then I can see now that just running away won't accomplish anything. It won't help me, and it won't help anyone stuck on the team." She turned, glaring toward the trio of guards at her right. "So you're going to fight for him? Fine, take your best shot!"

The armoured figures bubbled and shifted, rapidly transforming into a group of floating Pyro Jacks, and scowling amorphous Slimes. They were still surrounded and the enemy numbers had only increased.

Houdini shot forward, catching the first Pyro Jack with a crushing kick that launched it across the room, leaving it to explode into a pile of goo as it connected with a grimy wall. Another of the pumpkin headed creatures raised his lantern and fired off an explosive bolt of fire that erupted against Houdini's crossed arms, making Shizuka grunt from a stinging wave of discomfort rocking her.

Ann quickly swung around, lashing her whip out and catching another of the Pyro Jack's. These ones were particularly weak, cleaved in half from that single strike, but Ann knew well enough that Carmen's firepower wouldn't work against these particular Shadow's.

The numbers were still impressive, and Shiho wasn't in a mood to be left behind. She clenched her
fist and quickly took aim at a group of Slimes rapidly sliding across the filthy floor toward her. Aradia raised her hands, a golden energy shimmering around her until several daggers of holy light suddenly formed into existence around her. "Get 'em!"

The blades of light lanced outward, striking the incoming Slimes and tearing them apart with quick stabbing motions. Like the rest of their kin, the Shadows melted to goo and then faded into nothing.

The last Pyro Jack took a swing at Ann with his lantern, making her yelp as the hard iron collided with her forearm and nearly knocked her clean off balance. Shizuka lunged forward with her short sword held tight, and swung down with all the might of her right arm. It went through the Pyro Jack's body like a hot knife through butter, inky goo bursting outward and coating the floor.

"Whoof... those guys were weaklings, but... we should really run before reinforcements come to check up on them," Ann said, managing a small laugh. She turned quickly and looked over the drawbridge. "Still... Shiho, that was incredible," Ann said, grinning at her friend.

Shiho managed to smile but, as had been the case for Ryuji and Ann before her, a wave of fatigue suddenly hit her. She gasped, gripping her naginata tight for support. "This power... m-my Persona..." she murmured, trying to ignore how heavy her body felt. "I don't understand I... I felt so powerful but right now I can't, I just can't..."

"It's okay... it's normal to get tired out," Ann said. She made her way over and let Shiho rest her weight against her. Shizuka quickly snatched up the two crutches and turned her back on the cells. If Morgana was to be believed, then there was nothing that could be done for the people imprisoned here. They were about as alive as the portraits on the wall, nothing more than very convincing dolls. "Come on, let's get going."

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It was only once they were outside the Palace, and back in the alley across from Shujin, that Ann and Shizuka took the time to give Shiho some extra information. Their role as Phantom Thieves, the risk of expulsion hanging over Akira and Ryuji, and that Shizuka had used her power to catch Shiho mid-fall.

"... I see," Shiho murmured, leaning against the wall for support. "Yes, that makes sense now. I didn't think much of it at the time, but... yeah, something felt odd about that. Like someone had caught me." She smiled up at Shizuka "Thank you."

A brief wave of embarrassment crept through the young Joestar, causing her to tip her head back while she scratched under her nose. "Yeah well... I had to. I mean, I couldn't just sit back."

After a brief pause, Shiho stood up fully on her crutches "Listen, all this thief stuff... it all sounds weird to me, but count me in." Ann bounced back in surprise. "In that Palace, I realised something... I realised that trying to kill myself was just some desperate attempt to escape how horrible things had become. And thinking back on it, it felt like there was a... a voice in my head driving me forward. But I saw the depths of his depravity. And if something isn't done, then there'll be some other poor girl in my position before I know it. Turning a blind eye just isn't possible."

"Shiho..." Ann seemed to hesitate and then shook her head. "If I can do it, then you can definitely do it. We'll have to talk to Akira and Ryuji though. Oh, and meet Morgna! You'll totally flip when
you meet him," the blonde happily said. "Ryuji will probably be concerned but... well, he'll come around quick." She paused and turned, looking to Shizuka. "You planned for this, didn't you Shizuka-chan?"

Shizuka dismissively rolled her shoulders "Pff, as if. I don't ever plan for anything. This is all just a delightful turn of events. And besides, it all worked out for the best. We could use some extra manpower to deal with Kamoshida."

"I'm gonna kick his ass," Shiho murmured. "Oh, but ah... thanks again, Joestar-san."

"Naaah, no need to be so formal! Just call me Shizuka. Or JoJo, if that sounds better. Cause, you know, some of the kanji on 'Shizuka' can be read as 'Jo.' And my family has a loooong tradition of people being called JoJo."

Ann smiled "Well, I'll definitely keep that in mind. But, for today..." She settled an arm around Shiho's shoulders "We better get you back to the hospital before your folks arrive."

"Ah, right..." Shiho snickered. "It's strange but, for the first time in a while I'm really not worried about things like that. Getting my Persona... it's like a huge weight got lifted off my shoulders. I'll help you guys with everything I have. And Lifeson's a cool guy, I'm sure I can slip out every once in a while."

"Well, see you tomorrow," Ann said, smiling at Shizuka.

"See you," she replied. She leaned against the alley wall. Shizuka remained there for a few moments and pondered all that had happened today. Yeah, bringing Shiho had been a risk. Even with their powers it was a big one to take.

But... in the end, Shizuka couldn't sit back and see someone be abandoned. Ann aside, the people at Shujin had just discarded Shiho. Almost as soon as she dropped, the topic of discussion and gossip seemed to slither along to something new. And it was the kind of thing she couldn't abide, not when she had been abandoned too. Joseph, his entire family, they had taken her in and gave her a place to belong. So why not try to do the same to others who had been in that position?

She let the tension melt from her shoulders and resolved to head home.

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The concrete bubbled and shimmered. A pair of neon yellow eyes abruptly sprouted from the solid ground, and watched Shizuka's back for several long minutes. Then they receded back into the cement, as if they had never been there at all.

Chapter End Notes

Aradia refers to the character from Charles Godfrey Leland's 'Gospel of the Witches', wherein Aradia is a trickster figure who stood in opposition to the church. As a Persona her whole shtick is bless attacks and buffs.
The angelic figure loomed above them, purple light reflecting off the ornate knights armour that adorned him. "Vile thieves!" the creature bellowed "In the name of almighty King Kamoshida, I shall strike you down! Your crime spree ends here!"

"It's not really a spree dude," Ryuji said. He let the bent iron bar he used as a makeshift club rest on his strong shoulders, glaring at the winged figure. He was perhaps the third 'Archangel' the group had encountered in the entirety of the castle, and it seemed they were all of some high status.

Didn't much matter. The thieves had taken down the others easily enough.

By now it seemed they had made it through the majority of the Palace, particularly when they had two maps outlining a route to the treasure Morgana spoke so eagerly of. They had scaled much of the tower, getting past a corridor of swinging guillotines in the process, and it seemed this angel was the last barrier between the thieves and the throne room. And past that throne room, the treasure.

"You wanna take this one Nemesis?" Akira asked, glancing Shiho's way. She was standing back, clutching her naginata in her right hand as she inspected the angel. Even with that blindfold in place, she could apparently see just fine. It was perhaps another strange aspect of this mask/disguise business.

"You know... something tells me light attacks wouldn't do much damage to a guy like that," Shiho mused "Maybe it's the angel wings, but that's the vibe I get!"

Ryuji shrugged "Eh, fair enough. Sit back, I got this." Captain Kidd suddenly lunged forward, springing into existence in front of Ryuji. The bowsprit of the spectral pirate ship smashed into the angel and flung him backward, leaving the Shadow hissing and rapidly fanning his wings to halt his momentum.

He raised his right hand, extending his blade, and then suddenly slashed forward so violently that it sent a spiraling gale surging out toward Ryuji. He yelped and jumped back, but the explosion still hit and sent him skidding across the ground, forcing the other thieves to jump away to avoid being hit by him.

A barrage of steel ball bearings suddenly smacked into the angel's right wing, making it hiss and spin around. Morgana grinned from behind his cartoonish slingshot, just as Zorro lunged across the hallway and struck the winged figure with a flurry of swift stabbing motions. Spurts of black goo lanced out from the newly formed punctures, before the knight gave an annoyed snarl and headbutted Zorro with an audible clang that drove the bulky Persona into the ground and skidding away.

"Fools!" The Shadow raised his sword high, catching the light on the sharpened steel "Do you think yourselves better than noble King Kamoshida! I shall slay all of y-"

There was the sound of metal tearing overhead, before something tremendous suddenly landed atop the Shadow with a resounding crash, punctuated with flourishes of shattering glass. The
creature lay prone on the floor for several seconds, groaned weakly, and then dissolved into the earth. The large chandelier that had crashed atop him abruptly became visible again, as Houdini slowly floated down from the ceiling.

"Whoof. Good thing he stopped to monologue, otherwise that would've missed," Shizuka said. "And man, those chains were hard to cut through."

"Well done. We should keep going though, we're nearly at the end," Akira said. Well he was assuming his much. None of the maps they had found charted anything beyond the throne room after all.

"Anyone get the number o' that truck that hit me?" Ryuji slurred from the far end of the hallway. As Shizuka understood it, these Stands that the thieves used had weaknesses that could be exploited. Electricity bounced off Ryuji no problem, but wind always knocked him flat.

"Oh, s-sorry Ry- um, Skull. Lemme help you up," Shiho said, quickly hurrying over to the blond and helping him up. Whatever it was about the Metaverse, it made people physically stronger than most. Shiho didn't need her crutches, and Ryuji's bum leg was a non issue. It was strange but it definitely helped speed things up.

The thieves continued on up the tower, reaching higher and higher until they came upon a pair of ornate double doors. According to the map, the throne room was just beyond those. And they could hear the familiar chatter of knights through the heavy material.

Morgana hummed and hopped up onto Akira's shoulder, using this higher vantage point to examine the heavy doors. "Barging straight through here would be dangerous. We'd easily alert all the chumps in there," Morgana mused.

Ryuji scratched the back of his head "Well that and... I doubt we could get those things open anyway. They're 'effin huge."

"Right. So..." Shiho glanced around "How do we get in?"

Morgana turned his attention to his left, toward a tall statue that led to an open window seeming to lead into the throne room. "There!" the feline said excitedly. The group regarded the statue uncertainly. It was a rather detailed sculpture of a female form, dressed in a volleyball uniform.

"Do we... really have to climb the butt statue?" Ann asked.

"I'm sorry Lady Ann, but needs must!" Morgana hopped up onto the backside of the statue, onto the decapitated marble neck, and from there jumped clean through the open window. With some annoyance, the others followed suit.

They wound up on a horseshoe-shaped walkway overlooking the throne room, and from the ornate railing they could look down and plainly see Kamoshida's Shadow barking orders at a retinue of his knights. Akira glanced to his comrades and pressed a gloved finger to his lips, then quietly made his way down the walkway in a crouched position.

"How can you idiots be having this much trouble with a gang of thieves?!"

"F-forgive us, your majesty!"
"I don't have time to humour losers like you! Get me results, or you're all going on the chopping block!"

Shiho stopped mid step and clenched her fist, and looked like she wanted nothing more than to leap over the railing and let Aradia go hog wild. Ann settled a hand on Shiho's shoulder, pulling a small sigh from the raven haired girl. Hearing his voice again dug up plenty of unpleasant memories and thoughts.

"I'm alright," she said, smiling over her shoulder at Ann. They proceeded onward at their quiet pace, coming upon an ornate door that opened quickly, leading into a darkened chamber that was illuminated only by stray sunbeams coming through a single window and reflecting off a mini Scrooge McDuck pool of gold coins.

"Whoa! Holy shit!" Ryuji gasped as they steadily advanced into the chamber, glancing from side to side. "Is this place... for real?"

Shizuka plucked a single coin up and rolled it over her fingers. "Nah, it's fake. I know my gold when I see it," she remarked. "This is just like a... a cognition or whatever, right?" she asked, looking to Morgana.

But the feline didn't answer. Instead his wide eyed stare was directed to... something floating above the sea of fake coins. 'Something' was perhaps an apt label. It was an amorphous, pale cloud that was continually shifting and warping above the thieves, filled with golden, glittering pinpricks of light.

"What... is that?" Akira asked in a curious tone.

"That is the treasure," Morgana said matter-of-factly.

"No, that's a cloud," replied Akira.

That was enough to make Morgana sigh and shake his head, diminutive paws resting on his hips. "Since we've made it this far, I should probably give you some extra details. Things that wouldn't have made sense to you before now. Now that we have a route to the treasure, we need to make it materialize before we can steal it."

"You sure? I mean we could probably put that cloud thing in a plastic bag or a... vacuum cleaner, or something," Shizuka remarked. She summoned Houdini, let her Stand float up until it was pawing impotently at the formless cloud. Sure enough, there was nothing to grab onto.

"If that were possible, I would have said so. You see, desires don't have physical forms. Hence we first need to make the Palace-owner aware that their desires are in fact a treasure. And once they're conscious of that, the treasure will show itself."

"I see... so since this world is created by Kamoshida's mind, if we make him aware that this 'treasure' exists, then the world of his mind will change accordingly?" Shiho asked.

Morgana nodded and flashed a toothy grin "Right on the money Nemesis. We change their cognition and the Palace changes to match. But now you're all asking 'Aha, but Mona how exactly do we make the treasure materialize'?

"Well don't keep us in suspense," Ryuji impatiently remarked.
"We warn him. We're going to let Kamoshida know that we're gonna 'steal his heart.'"

Ryuji stood up from the mound of gold he had been propped up against, seeming to be filled with a youthful glee. "We're gonna send him a calling card?! Aw dude, that's totally something a phantom thief would do!"

Well, they had come this far. An extra step wasn't much to worry about. Shizuka frowned and stroked her chin "Yeah but... 'steal his heart'? That makes it sound like we're hitting on him and that's just... gugh."

"I don't make the rules," Morgana replied with another shake of his head "Anyway, once he's been alerted the treasure will materialize for certain... I think. Anyway! All we need to do now is deliver a calling card in reality, and then come back here for the treasure. But... well there's one more thing you guys should know about. A treasure can only materialize for so long, meaning that the effect of a calling card is limited in scope. Once we send it out, we'd only have about a day before the treasure returns to that formless state. And once that happens, we won't be able to repeat the effect and the treasure would be lost to us."

"So once we send it, our deadline will grow a whole lot smaller..." Shiho sighed and scratched the back of her head "God, that's a whole lot of extra pressure. But if that's how it works, that's how it works."

Once the news had settled, Akira nodded and gradually made for the door they had come through "In that case, we should send it out tomorrow. We've come this far, we won't lose now," Akira mused.

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Ultimately they left it up to Ryuji to design the 'calling card' the group would use. Ann and Morgana were more than a little apprehensive, but Akira had said he trusted Ryuji with the task and Shiho wanted to be supportive. Shizuka hadn't cared much either way. As long as she wasn't the one saddled with extra work.

Still, she would admit to being curious about what Ryuji had planned. He had seemed oddly giddy in the group chat when they had headed home for the day.

When she got to school that Thursday morning, she didn't have to look hard to see just what Ryuji had done. The notice boards on the front floor had been covered with a shotgun spread of red cards. While she couldn't read them from afar, Shizuka could tell that the 'text' had been made from compiled newspaper/magazine clippings. Like something out of a cheesy thriller. As she understood it that was supposed to be an easy thing for police to track, apparently.

Already there were some people crowded around the notice boards, chatting about the strange occurrence. No doubt things like this never happened at Shujin.

"I heard it was already posted by the time everyone got here this morning."

"Whoa... I wonder who put all this stuff up?"
"I don't get it. Did Mister Kamoshida do something?"

"Damn... you work fast Ryuji," Shizuka murmured under her breath. She was a little impressed actually given all she had heard of him. Seemed when it came to something like this, he was all business and relentlessly efficient.

She found Ryuji, Ann and Akira positioned not too far down the hall, seeming to enjoy the little spectacle that had been created. As she drew near she could see Morgana poking his fluffy head up through the opening of Akira's bag. "Gotta admit dude, you sure know how to rile people up. It's pretty awesome," she said.

Ann wrinkled her nose ever so slightly. "I mean... it's impressive that he had all these cards done in one night, but... did you actually read the uh 'message' he put?" Shizuka shook her head. "It went something like... 'Sir Suguru Kamoshida, the bastard of lust. We know how shitty you are, and that you place your twisted desire on students who can't fight back. That's why we have decided to steal away those desires and make you confess your sins. We hope you are ready. From, the Phantom Thieves of Hearts.' Or something like that," Ann recited. She turned to Ryuji and shook her head "Honestly. I get the point of the message but you sounded like you were trying waaay too hard."

"Plus the logo was lacking," Morgana remarked.

The assessment made Ryuji snort. "Ah, you're just mad that you didn't come up with it." He pointed quickly to Morgana "And you, shut up."

"I liked it," Akira remarked. "Got the point across just right. But, well, the real measure of how good the message is has just arrived," he added, pointing to the notice boards. Sure enough, there was Kamoshida... looking slightly more pissed than usual.

"Who's responsible for this?!" Kamoshida barked.

Morgana peaked up a little further. "Well, look at that. A predictable reaction for someone who knows what we mean by distorted desires." As usual the cat sounded delightfully smug.

And Ryuji couldn't help but feel just as smug. "Looks like it's hitting him pretty hard." Kamoshida was fuming, and it was enough to make the students quickly scatter from the notice board. Ryuji snickered and rubbed under his nose with his left index finger, while Akira gave him a light clap on the shoulder. The sign for 'good work.'

Kamoshida turned and spied both boys, seeming to ignore Ann and Shizuka entirely. Morgana reflexively dove back into Akira's bag. "Was it you two?!"

"Us, sir?" Akira asked, feigning offence. "Why I'm on probation, as you know. I wouldn't dream of doing something so daring," he explained with an undercurrent of sarcasm to every syllable.

"So you're playing dumb?" Kamoshida sneered at the two "It's not a problem. You'll be expelled soon enough anyway." The air suddenly distorted with a halo of static, the surrounding of the school melting away into an inky void. For a few brief seconds they saw Kamoshida's physical form replaced by his Shadow self, who glared at the four empowered teens. "Come. Steal it if you can!" The world returned to normal, and Kamoshida marched away.

Shizuka glanced from side to side and then checked her hands "Did... anyone else just have a hyper weird out of body experience?"
"Yeah... what the heck...?" Ann replied, seeming to be just as stunned.

For as strange as it was, it wasn't strange enough to dissuade any of them. "Never mind all that. We'll just take that as confirmation that the calling card worked. Shiho knows to meet us after school, right?" Ann nodded in confirmation. "Looks like we're all set then"

"Alright," Shizuka grinned broadly and flicked her sunglasses up the bridge of her nose "Our first big battle... I'm psyched! O la vittoria, o tutti accoppati!"

"Eh? Whazzat, French or something?" Ryuji asked.

"Nah, it's Italian. My mom told it to me since her dad served in World War 1. It was the motto of the Arditi. 'We either win, or we all die,'" Shizuka explained.

Ann felt a shiver run down her spine "Kinda morbid."

Akira shrugged "It's accurate though. And it sounds pretty daring. A perfect motto for a phantom thief," he said. And if they did fail, then they were all likely as good as dead.

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The atmosphere outside the castle was noticeably heavy as the gang made a beeline through their usual infiltration route. The air had become thicker, the heat agitating and itchy, and the ground seemed to almost crawl beneath their feet. Yeah, they had really gotten under Kamoshida's skin.

And the guards were on high alert too. The group made a point of avoiding the patrols to save time, and relied on every shortcut they had found to rapidly reach the throne room. It was empty, to the surprise of everyone. No knights, and no king either. Perhaps everyone had been scattered as part of those patrols? Whatever the case, it didn't dissuade them from rushing to the treasure room.

Once inside they found what they had been seeking: A floating, cartoonishly huge crown that cast a shade over the group. "Awww yeah! The treasure has appeared!" Morgana said enthusiastically "What do you think?! It's just as I said! Now we can steal it! The shine brings tears to my eyes..."

The others remained transfixed by the huge scale of the crown.

"We should get moving quickly..." Shiho remarked, looking at the treasure and then over her shoulder at the doorway. "It probably won't be easy to lug it out though with how big it is... hey Mona, do you-"

Whatever Shiho was about to say was cut off by a prolonged purr from Morgana. "T-Treasure," he cooed, almost drooling.

"Uh..." Ryuji awkwardly scratched the back of his neck "The cat's getting awfully excited..."

Morgana leapt high and landed on the crown, hugging himself to the golden frame with all the might he had in his minuscule body. And soon the room was filled with the sounds of his elongated, exaggerated meows.

The sight was a tad embarrassing, and looked rather intimate to boot. "That's not catnip," Akira said.
"Alright, that's enough you stupid cat!" said Ryuji, managing to finally snap Morgana out of his giddy state. The cat landed on the floor and cleared his throat quickly.

"Oh um... s-sorry. Forgive me for displaying such an insolent sight in front of some ladies."

Even the others were a little worried by Morgana's outburst. But with the current situation being what it was, Shizuka figured it would be best to move things back on track. "Mona you can get all weird over the crown later. We gotta get outta here first while we still have an opening.

Ryuji, Ann and Akira made for the crown and pulled it down, holding the weight between the three of them with some effort. "Agh... j-jeez. This thing's freakin' heavy!" Ryuji grunted.

"Uh... the hell are you guys doing?" Shizuka asked.

"Could ask you the same thing! Get over here and help!" Ryuji quickly replied.

Shizuka rolled her eyes behind her mask. "Just lift if with your Stand genius. I know you guys are new to this but it's not that hard."

The suggestion made all three stop abruptly. With a little effort Arsene and Captain Kidd materialized behind their users, catching the edges of the crown under their forearms and raising it with much greater ease.

"Well... that makes more sense. Come on, let's get to it," Akira said, starting to lead the way while the remaining thieves followed after him. All things considered the mission was going smoothly, with no interruptions.

Morgana rubbed his paws together as they went, grinning up at Akira. "I made the right choice in making a deal with you guys! Our first heist is going well! As usual, my instincts were correct. Nyahahaha!"

The gang moved from the treasure room quickly, and quietly debated how best to get the treasure out of the castle. Going back the way they came was an option, of course. But the crown was heavy, and awkward, which would make the more narrow shortcuts a tight effort. And if they had to slow down, that added to the risk of being caught. Shizuka could make them invisible, but going through the whole palace like that could tax her powers. Ryuji wanted to just break the window outside the throne room and dump the thing down, picking the crown up again near the entrance. The suggestion of potentially damaging the crown left Morgana aghast.

Their debate didn't get past the throne room, when they were interrupted by an unwelcome cheering voice. "Go, go! Let's get to it! Ka-mo-shida!"

A volleyball suddenly shot across the room, striking the crown and knocking it from the grasp of the two Personae carrying it. The thieves jumped in surprise, as the form of Kamoshida's Shadow sailed over them and landed beside his throne, a sickening smirk on his face. He raised his hand, causing the fallen treasure to glow and shrink to a more manageable size. It floated into his outstretched hand and was deftly caught.

"I won't let anyone take this!" Another facsimile of Ann bounded over eagerly and clung tight to the king, making the real Ann visibly seethe.
"That rat bastard... that's really how he sees me!" In the chaos of awakening her Persona, she had managed to largely forget her first encounter with that cognitive version of herself. But now she had a full look at the damn thing, and little else to focus on.

"He must have a lot of those copies," Akira mused. He recalled Arsene, but remained on guard. This wasn't part of the plan, but if they had to fight him for the treasure then he was willing to go that far.

Ryuji took a step forward as his pipe materialized in his hand. "Yo pervert! Were you waitin' to ambush us?"

"I just made it easier to find you dirty thieves. I'll dispose of you myself, right here, right now."

Shiho clenched her free hand and took a step forward. Even with the blindfold covering top of her face, her glare was an impressive one. "Big talk from an overgrown coward... Think you're ready to fight someone who'll hit back?! We're not people you can abuse to your heart's content!"

"Abuse? Hmph. I haven't done anything wrong. If the people around me are the ones who want to keep it a secret, then I can't be held responsible. The adults who want to share in my accomplishments, the students who want to become winners. They willingly protect me, so that all may profit from me. But naive brats like you, and that idiot girl who tried to kill herself, just don't understand that!"

Shiho looked down at her feet, and then snickered. "Yeah, I'm an idiot alright. Anyone who lets you manipulate them, lets you push them around while thinking you have anything but your own self interest in mind... yeah, they're idiots. But that all ends today! We're not going to let you hurt another person, or ruin another life! You're not a king, you're a jumped up thug!"

"Ooooh, daaaaang!" Ryuji gasped, looking like he wanted to high five Shiho with all his might for that crack.

"Tch! I shouldn't have expected gutter trash like you to understand! I'm above peasants like you!" The air grew hotter as the entire throne room began to rumble, swirling black clouds forming rapidly around Kamoshida's feet. "I'm the ruler of this world!" An explosion of black and red abruptly engulfed Kamoshida and the Ann cognition, and the thieves all took a step back as a tremendous shape began to take form in the ballooning smoke.

"W-what the hell?!" Ryuji clenched his club tight, reflexively calling Captain Kidd to his side.

Akira's knife appeared in his hand, and he gripped it firmly as he surveyed the tremendous figure that appeared over them. "On your guard everyone... this is gonna be stronger than anything we've fought so far."

Kamoshida was gone, replaced instead with an immense demonic figure with stark pink skin. His four arms extended above his head, one hand clutching a massive glass of red wine, another holding a heavy club, while the lower arms were sporting a golden knife and fork. His crown, massive again, rested atop his horned head. Huge bug eyes glowered down at them, while his fanged mouth hung open to reveal an abnormally long blue tongue.

"I'm allowed to do whatever the hell I want!" he barked in a booming, echoing voice that shook the throne room.
"You're wrong," Akira plainly replied. "Guys... let's finish this!"
Kamoshida's golden knife lanced across the room at a rocketing speed, carving a trench from the ground in passing and sending a cloud of debris exploding outward. Ann and Shiho dodged to the side, landing deftly away from the falling marble, and the Personae quickly appeared above them. Carmen tipped her head up in a dismissive fashion and waved the tremendous beast off, sending a wave of fire from her palm that struck Kamoshida and sent him reeling.

Arsene and Captain Kidd leapt high and seemed to lunge in unison, the base of Kidd's ship colliding with Kamoshida's chin while Arsene drove his heel into the demon's neck. Kamoshida bellowed, and then suddenly swung his knife and fork forward, lashing both spectral figures and sending them smashing down into the earth.

A sudden pressure rocked Akira's body and nearly brought him to his knees. "Sh-shit... he hits hard," Akira gasped. Ryuji was moving quickly to recall his Persona, and Akira moved to give him an opening by raising his pistol and firing a volley of shots Kamoshida's way. The round bounced off Kamoshida's chin, making him seethe and growl, turning his focus from Ryuji.

"Mona, what the heck?" Shizuka called "This dude was a total puss the last time we saw him! What's up with this Godzilla bullshit?!"

"It's a side effect of the calling card! With Kamoshida's desires at risk, it's made his Shadow even more out of whack in a desperate bid to keep them safe! It's magnified the power his Shadow has considerably!"

"It would have been nice to have been told that sooner!" Shizuka barked.

"I WASN'T PLANNING ON FIGHTING HIM DIRECTLY!"

Shiho reached up and pressed her fingers to her bandanna, summoning Aradia to herself. Her Persona raised her hands and focused on Akira, causing an aura of green light to flash around him. It sped the young thief up immensely, allowing him to sprint away from Kamoshida's next stab in a superhuman dash.

Before Kamoshida could draw his arm back, a blade of light shot from Aradia's hands and crashed into his forearm, scorching the pink flesh black and earning a scornful snarl from the beast. He threw his head back and howled again, the horrible noise making the vaulted ceiling rumble in protest.

"You worthless shitty brats! You think you can do this to me?! This is my world, and you exist only for my amusement!" He whipped the air with his club, causing the stumpy chained figures at his feet to spring to their feet. "Show these idiots what I've taught you!"

In a flash the six creatures jumped up and started launching salvos of volleyballs at the thieves, each orb striking the ground hard enough to break through the marble. The group quickly scattered, Ryuji, Morgana and Shizuka ducking behind the pillars to the right while Akira, Ann and Shiho took cover behind those to the left. "Sh-shit! What're those volleyballs made of?!!"

A stray ball struck the pillar Shizuka was behind, knocking a great chunk out of the side and sending a shard of marble cutting across her cheek. "Holy shit!!" She felt the warm blood oozing down her pale cheek and retreated deeper into cover, glancing then to the pile of rubble that had landed beside her. Several chunks of marble littered the floor, some larger than her fist. It gave her...
"We need an opening, or we'll never get near the damn crown," Akira hissed reeling away as a volleyball smashed into the pillar he had taken cover behind. "Skull! Think you can clear a path?"

Ryuji punched his right fist into his open palm, grinning sharply. "You kidding? It's my specialty Joker!" Captain Kidd rushed from around cover, making a beeline for Kamoshida's Shadow with a great gale blowing behind his ship. The slaves at Kamoshida's feet took aim, each volleyball striking off Kidd in some way. Ryuji hissed, but remained firm at the wave of pain rushing over him. He could take it, he'd had worse.

The air around the ghostly pirate crackled with a wave of static, and with one sweep of his cannon arm he sent out an arc of lightning that smashed into the slaves and launched them away from their cruel master. Kamoshida snarled in frustration, driving his fork down so fast that Kidd only barely weaved away.

"Breaking into my castle! Attacking my good name! Trying to steal my treasure! And now you're attacking my property too?! I'll kill you all, slowly and pai-"

Kamoshida was cut short when his left eye abruptly exploded with several black jets of goo, the eruption of pain making him shriek loud enough to shake the entire throne room. His arms waved wildly, striking and lashing out until another eruption hit the same eye and knocked his head back.

"Heh. You mighta' made yourself stronger, but you made yourself a bigger target too." Houdini appeared several feet away from him, and the chunks of debris resting in her hands became visible too. She had thrown those other chunks with all her might, and as the debris had been invisible he'd had no reflexive thought to defend his vulnerable areas.

Kamoshida was howling, swinging wildly with his knife in a way that forced Shizuka to recall her Stand for her own safety. "Taking a hit like that hasn't slowed him down at all," Ann remarked "And he's so fast that we can't risk getting close again!"

"I have an idea!" Morgana called back. Kamoshida was still swinging wildly, looking like he was blindly trying to strike down the figure that took out his eye. "That crown is the center of this world, and if we take it away from him it'll really shake him up. It'll give us the opening we need... someone's gonna have to go for it while the rest of us keep him busy." Morgana pointed to the walkway they had first used to reach the treasure room. That would be as good a vantage point as any.

"Right... Sting, looks like you were made for this," Akira said, earning a quick salute from the young Joestar. "As for the rest of us... Panther, Nemesis, dazzle him with something flashy." Both girls nodded in turn.

Carmen and Aradia sprang out of their users and swiftly moved into view, lining up with each other as Kamoshida glared down through his functioning eye. Their hands glowed, followed then by a combined burst of heat and light lancing out and striking Kamoshida, the ensuing flash almost blinding to stare directly into. Kamoshida swung his fork out, striking both Personae and sending the users skidding backward. But in that time, Shizuka had already turned invisible and vaulted up onto the walkway with the help of her Stand.

Morgana darted out from behind cover, summoning Zorro to him quickly. The bulky Persona raised his hands up, blocking the prongs of Kamoshida's fork as he drove it down. The pressure made the feline yelp in pain, but he held his ground and maintained a tight enough grip to keep him from pulling back.
"Come forth!" An aura of blue fire engulfed Akira, magnifying as Arsene's winged visage hovered above him "Berith!" In an instant Arsene was gone, replaced with a black knight on a chestnut horse, clutching the reins in one hand and a golden trident in the other.

The spectral horse galloped forward at a thunderous pace, the knight atop drawing his arm back. In one fluid sweep he sent the trident lashing up Kamoshida's restrained arm, causing a wave of black pus to explode from the newly formed wound. Berith pulled back for another stab, only for Kamoshida to swing his club down with a resounding crack. The outpouring shockwave sent Berth and Zorro sailing backward, pulling some pained grunts from Akira and Morgana. They very nearly lost their balance, but it seemed Kamoshida's ungodly might was slowly ebbing away.

"Wait a minute..." Kamoshida growled "One of you is missing."

"And for my next trick..." Shizuka remarked to herself. She leapt forward, propelled by Houdini's uncanny strength. Her shoulder drove against the crown, and she willed herself to ignore the immense burning pain that caused in her right shoulder, and in an instant she and the crown clattered to the throne room floor.

"Noooo! My... my precious... !" Just as Morgana had said, losing the crown had rattled Kamoshida quite a bit, leaving his hulking frame slumped forward in despair.

"Looks like we have our opening!" Akira said "Nice going Sting."

"Uagh... think I just broke something," Shizuka replied. She rose up and dusted herself off, as the thieves moved from behind cover.

Shiho pulled some of the throwing stars from her belt and took aim. "We could just leave with the crown, but since we have the opportunity... I'm looking to give this bastard a taste of his own medicine."

"My thoughts exactly Nem," Ryuji added, grinning broadly at her.

In an instant the Phantom Thieves set upon him, their weapons crashing upon Kamoshida's form with a clear ferocity. Their speed was uncanny, their strength immense, and the group seemed to attack him from all sides simultaneously. An all-out attack that made them faster than the human eye could follow.

With their beatdown finished, Kamoshida's monstrous form hit the ground hard enough to rattle the Palace, groaning weakly while his new lumps and bruises oozed black goo. The thieves landed a few feet away, watching as his excess mass turned black and melted away to reveal the weakened and dazed form of the king.

"And that..." Shiho blew on the knuckles of her right hand "Is what catharsis feels like."

"Soooo worth the wait," Ryuji added, snickering.

"Yep! I'm not usually one for violence, buuuut..." Ann trailed off with some bubbling joy in her tone, settling her hands on her scarlet-clad hips "Well, that was a long time coming! So, about that treasure..."

She turned to the crown, set to snatch it up. But before she could move, Kamoshida suddenly darted past the group and grabbed the crown, not that it had shrank back down to a normal size. He clutched it tight and ran from the group, only to come to a screeching halt when he reached a balcony overlooking the entirety of his Palace. It was a long way down.
"What's the matter?" Ann mockingly called "Not running away? I thought you were a great athlete." The thieves had closed in, and despite their injuries they were more than capable of stopping him if he tried to get by.

"It's always been like this!" Kamoshida barked "All those damn hyenas forcing their expectations on me! I'm doing this all for them! What's wrong about demanding a reward for that?!"

Ryuji shook his head. "Now you're makin' excuses? Hmph. We'll have to do something about that distorted heart of yours."

Shiho took a step forward. Ann looked ready to move with her, and then stopped. This was something that Shiho had to do alone.

"That's a handy excuse. 'It's not me, everyone else is to blame.' When you think like that, it's easy to distance yourself from your actions. You don't have to think what a horrible piece of shit you are, if you just blame someone else..." She reached up, slipping her blindfold off. Kamoshida tensed visibly, before his knees threatened to buckle. "I don't know what it was that twisted you so far out of whack... did you just get drunk off the power? Bitter because your glory days are long gone? I suppose I should thank you for this much... your abuse really opened my eyes to what kind of person you are."

Kamoshida was trembling, tears in his eyes. He knew he had lost. "So... you- you're going to kill me huh? You've earned the right."

"Kill you? It's tempting, I'm not going to lie. And it probably would feel pretty good... at first," Shiho said. Aradia loomed over her, and an uncomfortable air filled the thieves. "But I think I'd regret it. Knowing I gave into weakness again... look over that balcony. See that drop? Now you know how I felt, staring down from the school roof. Do you have any idea how f*cked up it is, to look down from a three storey fall and feel... relief? That's what you did to me. And I don't doubt that there are plenty of other people on the team slowly reaching that point too."

She shook her head "So no, I'm not going to kill you. Seeing you dead won't satisfy those people. You're going to confess your crimes, and you're going to spend every day seeking to atone for those crimes. And the people you hurt will take some satisfaction from that. Then some day, maybe... some day you'll find forgiveness."

"Right." Kamoshida let his head drop and set the crown down in front of him. "I'll return to myself in reality. Come clean for everything I've done. It's the right thing to do." A pale light enveloped him, and soon he had vanished from view entirely.

With Kamoshida gone, Akira casually approached the crown and plucked it up into his right hand. "Shiho that was freaking awesome," Ryuji said, grinning broadly. It earned a nervous laugh from the raven haired girl.

"Oh it, it was nothing, really. I was kind of just running my mouth, I doubt I sounded all that articula-"

A mighty tremor rocked the entire Palace, great chunks of stone falling from the ceiling and shattering on the ground. "What the heck?!" Shizuka gasped.

"We don't have time to waste! With the treasure and the Shadow dealt with, this whole place is going to collapse!" Morgana swiftly said. The group needed no more incentive than that, and took of sprinting.
The castle was falling apart around them, tremors shaking the entire structure as walls began to crack and break apart. A continuous column of dust and debris chased them through the Palace as they ran, and even going full sprint they were only just barely outrunning the collapse.

"We're gonna die! We're so gonna die!" Ann screamed, narrowly dodging around a car-sized lump of ceiling that smashed into the floor in front of her.

"Shut uuuuuup!" Shizuka called back, eyes wide as she maintained her high speed sprint. She yelped, feeling something tap her shoulder and jump off. A black cat? "What th- Mona?!"

Morgana deftly leapt from Shizuka, to Ryuji, and then landed neatly on Akira's shoulder as he led the pack. The difference now was that he had changed from his cartoony normal form, back into the form of a regular sassy cat.

A blinding white light was ahead of them, at the far end of a corridor that seemed to have no end. So close to freedom!

Both Ryuji and Shiho nearly buckled at the exit, Shiho grabbing a nearby table support while Ryuji fell over entirely. With the cognition growing weaker, it seemed they were losing power too. "Ah... i-it's been a while, I just tripped is all!" Ryuji lied. His old leg injury was flaring up with a vengeance.

The tide of destruction was rapidly closing in, and that was more than enough motivation to make the two push past the pain and continue onward. The thieves broke into a mad dash, sprinting for the light until at last they passed through-and all six promptly collapsed in the alleyway across from Shujin. Now that they were in the real world again, Shizuka abruptly felt about ten times heavier.

Ann took in a few gulps of precious oxygen and managed to stand upright. "That... that sucked..."

After a moment Ryuji checked his phone and went wide-eyed at a sudden realization. "Whoa! Look at the nav!" The group followed his lead, checking their phones. It was the same for all of them- Kamoshida's Palace had been deleted from the Metaverse app, as if it had never existed at all.

"Well... that's not too surprising. We did see the whole place come down around our ears," Shiho remarked.

Morgana managed to perk up, having previously looked like he had melted onto the road after their escape. "What about the treasure?!

"Check it." Akira reached into his pocket and flicked his right hand up, revealing a sparkling gold medal.

"A medal? Wait, where'd the crown go?" Ann asked, bewildered.

"The medal was the source of Kamoshida's desires," Morgana began "To him, this medal is worth as much as the crown we saw." It seemed, ultimately, that Kamoshida couldn't let go of his past Olympic glory. Even when it had passed him by years ago.

Ann scratched her cheek with some hesitation. "So... that means we did it? He's going to have a change of heart, right?"

"Probably," was Morgana's non-committed reply.
"What th- our asses are on the line here!" Ryuji hastily said, gesturing to himself and Akira.

"This is the first successful heist for me too. But... judging by what we saw with his Shadow, there's no doubt that his personality has been heavily affected."

Akira shrugged and found himself leaning against the wall of the alley "I guess we'll just have to wait and see if he really has changed." Though he wasn't happy at the lack of confirmation. It would be a tense wait.

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Shiho said, smiling kindly at the gathered thieves. "After a whooping like that... well something like that has to have had an effect."

"See? Shiho's got the right idea! No need to be all gloomy and anxious, we totally won! And with great success might I add." Morgana stretched himself slowly, an act that made his fluffy tail twitch. Shizuka resisted the urge to pet it. It was weird if the cat could talk to you. "Kamoshida was scum, but... from what we saw of his Shadow, he seemed to regain his conscience in the end." The others nodded in agreement.

Shiho moved to change the subject. "So, that medal... do you think it's worth anything? I mean we are thieves, and thieves do aim to get rich..." she trailed off.

Shizuka moved closer and leaned in, openly examining the medal. She gasped sharply. "Holy... that's not fake gold like the stuff in the Palace. This is legit." Her mother had wanted to make sure her daughter was able to tell fakes from the real deal. That thing was solid gold alright, and pretty damn big too. "This could net some decent cash..."

As soon as Shizuka said this, Ryuji was once more on his phone trying to discern the truth of the claim. The number that came up on his screen made his eyes bulge.

"For real?!" he balked. With cash like this... if all worked out well, and they were to celebrate a job well done, they'd have some real scratch to do it with.

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5/2

On the day the staff meeting was due, the school day began with a sudden assembly. It was apparently something unscheduled, going by the chatter Shizuka had heard. But the Principal had gone on for about five minutes now without saying anything of substance.

'My god that man is fat...' Shizuka thought to herself as she examined the squat principal. 'I mean holy shit... like, a perfect sphere. How the hell is that even possible?' His speech had grown so dull that this was the only thing her mind could focus on. And from what she could see, behind the dark lenses of her heart-shaped sunglasses, Ann seemed just as adrift.

She couldn't see Akira or Ryuji from here, just the occasional glimpse of Ryuji's sharp blonde hair at the far end of the auditorium, obscured by the crowd.

"Everyone here has a bright future ahead," Principal Kobayakawa continued, his voice partially distorted by the podium mic. Shiho's attempted suicide seemed to have lit a fire under the faculty, and the principal was taking it upon himself to try and alleviate some concerns. Or save his own ass, depending on how you saw things. "I implore that you all rethink the importance of life and-"
The auditorium doors opened abruptly and noisily, an act that drew the attention of both the students and staff. There, in the doorway, was Kamoshida. But he looked rather deflated now, certainly when compared to the smug figure he had been when his desires were out of control. He had apparently been out sick since the day of the calling card.

"Mister Kamoshida? What's the-"

"I... have been reborn," Kamoshida said, seeming to be talking to himself rather than the students. "That is why, I will confess everything to you all." He slowly made for the stage, while the student chatter grew progressively more confused.

"I have repeatedly done things that were... unbecoming of a teacher. Verbally abusing students, physically abusing my team and... sexually harassing female students." As Kamoshida spoke, a dawning realization came over the gathered students. Those 'weird rumors' that had been circulating around their famous volleyball coach weren't mere rumors at all. "And I... I am the reason why Shiho Suzui tried to kill herself!"

That earned a loud gasp from the crowd. Akira and Ryuji exchanged a glance from their end of the room. Both would freely admit that vindication felt rather nice.

Kamoshida collapsed to his knees on stage. "I thought of this school as my own personal castle. There were even students that I sentenced to expulsion, simply because I didn't like them. I will, of course, rescind those..." Kamoshida let his head hang low and slowly shook his head. "I am truly sorry for putting innocent youths through such horrible acts... I did horrible things to Takamaki-san as well."

A few eyes turned Ann's way, as the principal hastily made his way from around the podium. "Mister Kamoshida, would you please get off the stage?!" Kobayakawa hurriedly asked, while the staff in the auditorium appealed for calm.

"In return for giving Suzui-san a position on the team... I tried to force Takamaki-san into having relations." A few students were quick to voice their disgust, while others quickly understood that the ugly rumors that followed Ann around were nothing more than rumors. Stemming from a rather unpleasant place at that. "As of today I... I will resign as the instructor of the volleyball team, and turn myself in to police custody. I... I will endeavor to spend every day, atoning for the horrible things I have done... in the hopes that some day, I may be worthy of forgiveness. S-so... someone, please call the police!"

Ryuji looked quite stunned, glancing to Akira briefly. A few of the teachers were moving to call an end to the assembly, and were already in the process of ushering some students from the auditorium.

"This is just like what that calling card thing said..."
"Does this mean what that that Phantom Thieves thing was for real?"
"Did someone actually steal his heart or whatever?"
"Man, Kamoshida turned out to be one sick bastard..."

Eventually, the auditorium had cleared out entirely. But Akira, Ryuji, Ann and Shizuka had managed to stay behind, and were taking advantage of that privacy. "All's well that ends well, as old Shakespeare said, eh?" Shizuka asked, grinning and giving Ann a light nudge with her elbow.

Ann smiled faintly at the young Joestar. "Yeah... I only wish Shiho had been here to see that."

"Eh, she'll probably see it on Youtube by tonight. Saw a few guys film the whole thing on their
phones," Ryuji remarked. "Buuut we'll have to give her all the deets in person. We actually did it, we totally changed his heart..."

"Yes indeed. I'm surprised at how effective it actually was... But we made sure Kamoshida won't hurt another student, or get away with his crimes any longer. And as a plus, we won't be getting expelled," Akira explained. All in all, their first big heist had been a great success.

"Yyyyyep!" Shizuka punched her palm happily. "Gotta admit, it's different than the adventures some of my family have gone on... but the end result did good, and we should be proud of that."

"Family adventures?" Ann asked.

"Ahhh, I'll tell ya later. It's a long ass story..."

Or, as she understood it, five long ass stories. And really any story that began with 'My great grandfather's vampire adopted brother' was one that would take would need to regularly stop to add in a new appendix.

It was at that point that they became aware of footsteps approaching their group from behind: Mishima and some of the girls from class 2-D. "Takamaki-san I'm... I'm sorry..." Mishima bowed sharply to the blonde. "We all knew... but we pretended we didn't."

"Takamaki-san, I had you all wrong! I'm sorry that I spread rumors about you," one of the girls hastily added.

"I didn't know at all... that Kamoshida was forcing himself on you. That must have been so hard for you!" the other said. "I'm sure there's a ton of people who want to apologize to you. We're so sorry!"

Ann shook her head "No, it's alright. All that stuff is in the past now." Shizuka was impressed. Ann basically had the focus of an entire high school on her, viewing her in a negative light for how she looked. But she was willing to put it all aside... She had to admit, she doubted she could do the same in Ann's shoes.

As those girls left, Mishima looked squarely at Akira. He wrung his hands together nervously, trying hard to maintain eye contact. "I can't apologize enough for what I did to you... leaking your criminal record on Kamoshida's orders... I swear, I'll make it up to you someday."

Once Mishima had left, Ryuji settled his hands on his hips. "Looks like Kamoshida ain't the only one who had a change of heart..."

'All's well that ends well,' Shizuka thought to herself. 'But who says we have to end it here...?'
As it turned out, the medal they retrieved from their first big job was equal to thirty thousand yen, enough cash for a neat celebration. And, having taken down Kamoshida's Palace without triggering a mental shutdown, they all felt they were due a reward. Ann and Shiho had a place in mind, a spot that would be perfectly decadent. The plan was to go there by the 5th, Children's Day, to enjoy the last day of the holidays before school started again.

Ultimately Akira would be the one to deal with pawning the thing, they apparently knew of a good pawn shop, and with that in mind Shizuka decided she could spend the next few days a little more leisurely.

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Chat Log Key = Chat participants are listed by their initials.

A.T: If that gold medal is real when did it get inside the Palace?

A.K: Morgana said Kamoshida still has the real one. The one we have is just a copy.

R.S: aw what? Kamoshida still has the real deal?

S.S: Well, somehow I doubt he'll feel much pride in it anymore.

S.S: To think, that medal was the cause of so much pain. He really couldn't get past that his glory days were behind him.

S.J: meh, most athletes are like that rly. difference is, back in the states, athletes past their prime just retire or do some shitty acting stuff.

A.T: he won't be proud of it alright. And we succeeded in changing his heart.

R.S: You sure do let stuff go easy... any chance you can forget about the debt I owe you?

A.T: That's different. 500 yen is a lot of money to a middle schooler.

R.S: It was years ago!!

A.T: btw, do you even still have that dolphin?

A.K: Wait what?

A.T: back in middle school we went on a field trip to an aquarium, but ryuji spent his cash on a souvenir so i had to lend him some money for a train fare.

R.S: Yeah uh

R.S: it was a gift for my mom.
S.J: OMG
S.J: that is so adorbs!
S.S: oh i remember that. That was really sweet of you Ryuji
R.S: Ugh. Come on Ann, after everything we just went through, think you can just call it even?
A.T: Well, I guess so.
R.S: Thank you! All we gotta do now is sell the medal.
S.J: Yo Akira, let me know when you're gonna sell that thing. I'm bored and could do with seeing this pawn shop.

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5/3

As Akira had to work at the cafe today, and as it was a day off, Shizuka saw today as good a chance as any to hang out with Makoto. They had been meaning to meet up but, between phantom thievery and student council business they had only had the chance to meet up today. Shizuka suggested meeting up at the diner off Shibuya's main street, and getting a booth seat at this early hour had been easy enough.

"I seriously can't believe one of our own teachers was doing such depraved things," Makoto remarked. Makoto looked up from her gyudon, her chopsticks resting atop a stack of meat slices. "I'm sure that really hasn't given you a good impression on Shujin, huh?" She had dressed casually for the day, a deep navy blazer and dark trousers, suited for the chilly weather.

Shizuka partially looked up from her chicken katsu, swallowing another mouthful. "Nah I mean... It's a shock but, I guess it took a lot of people by surprise. And it didn't really hit me or anything."

"Right," Makoto nodded. "Still I... With all this happening, I can't help but feel like I failed."

The statement made Shizuka raise a curious brow. She had removed her sunglasses soon after entering, slipping them into a pocket of her pale brown leather jacket. It left her expression much more open. It seemed Makoto caught onto this quickly.

"What I mean is," Makoto elaborated "As student council president, one of my duties is to be a liaison to students. They should be able to come to me with their concerns. But the entire volleyball team was suffering under Mister Kamoshida. And Suzui-san..." Well, she didn't need to elaborate on that part.

"I doubt even their parents knew what was going on. I mean come on Makoto-chan, you seriously can't blame yourself for any of the shit Kamoshida did. As for Shiho..." Shizuka scratched the back of her neck. "Well... you know that Ann Takamaki is in my class, right? Well she's Shiho's best friend, and she told me that Shiho is doing great. Set to make a full recovery."

Makoto nodded, and seemed a little happy to hear that. "That's reassuring. But this whole
business... it makes me feel useless. That I couldn't help anyone, especially Suzui-san." She took up a slice of cooked beef in her chopsticks, and ate it with a quiet elegance. Every action she took was measured and careful, and a touch refined too.

"For something like that, the person has to ask for help. And if they didn't tell anyone at all what was going on..." Shizuka shrugged "Look, you're too hard on yourself."

Despite herself, Makoto smiled. Shizuka had to admit, she had a very pretty smile. Subtle, but warm. And far more genuine than what she'd seen when they first met. "It's nice to hear you say that." She ate quietly for a few moments and then calmly added "Still, that whole incident was odd. If people were covering for him, it doesn't make sense that he would so suddenly come clean in front of the whole school."

No doubt the whole event would be baffling to anyone who hadn't seen a Palace. But of course, Shizuka couldn't divulge such matters to her.

"Maybe he just had a change of heart, or his conscience got to him," Shizuka mused.

"Ha. Well whatever the case, I doubt that 'Phantom Thieves' business had anything to do with it. Probably just a prank... Given past history, I already have an idea who might have been behind it."

In retrospect, Shizuka supposed the low quality of the calling cards did make it look like a prank. But hell, it had worked in getting Kamoshida riled and on the defensive.

They really did need an artist on their side. She considered asking Rohan, and then immediately changed her mind. That could only end one way, and it wasn't very nice.

So, doing her best to look impassive, Shizuka finished her katsu and casually said "It's probably only a rumor anyway." It was for the best really. She couldn't act too invested in that stuff, otherwise there was the chance of some suspicious eyes being turned her way. More than usual at any rate, 'the new American girl' was already kinda suspicious in the eyes of many.

Having finished her beef bowl, Makoto gave the corner of her mouth a light dab with her napkin. "It's strange," she admitted. "I don't ever really... hang out with anyone. But this is nice, just being able to talk to someone."

It was a sad surprise. Shizuka would have thought, given the culture around here, Makoto would have been popular. Or perhaps people were intimidated by her? It was hard to say.

"I'd be more than happy to keep doing this when we have the time," Shizuka said. "I take it hanging out with people really is a rarity for you?"

"Yes. I only really spend time with my older sister when she's not at work, and beyond that a lot of my time is spent studying. Preparing for college entrance exams, preparing for my future. Things like that." While it sounded like she knew what she wanted, an undertone of sadness laced her words. She seemed a little unhappy with the sound of her own future. "It's just been Sis and I since our father passed."

"Ah, I'm sorry to hear that. I'm in the same boat."

"Don't worry about it, it was... some time ago. But I am aware of your own family situation... sorry for your loss," Makoto replied. Shizuka didn't doubt Makoto knew a good deal about her, given how interested Kobayakawa was in getting some investment from Shizuka. But she didn't mind, it was nice to meet someone who didn't judge the oddness of her family situation.

"Thanks but... you don't have to worry about it. I mean my folks were plenty old when they
adopted me."

Makoto nodded. "Yes I uh... heard that as well." It was, after all, one of the better known things about her upbringing. The persistent rumor, particularly among Joseph's biggest rivals, was that she was another illicit lovechild... which would have been some accomplishment for a man who was nearly a century old. "It was very admirable of them to do that at their age."

"Heh. Well that was my dad for you, always helping people no matter how old he got," Shizuka said. And apparently, though her early childhood memories didn't stretch that far back, she had apparently helped him become sharp again when his old age had previously left him on the border of senility. She took a good deal of pride in that.

The two chatted idly for a few more minutes before deciding to resolve their bill, and continued chatting as they headed down the staircase that led from the diner back down to Shibuya's main street.

"This was fun," Makoto said, smiling faintly. "I felt like I lifted a little weight off my shoulders talking to you... think we could meet up more in the future?"

"No problem boblem," Shizuka said, grinning and giving a quick thumbs up. "Er, by which I mean I'd be happy to."

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5/4

Yesterday had been a bust, as Akira had been strongarmed into a lot of cafe work that took up the entire day. And with their proposed celebration happening tomorrow, Akira knew it was of the utmost importance to deal with pawning the medal today. But as he made his way down from Leblanc's attic, his dusty and slightly cluttered residence for the next year, he felt some apprehension fill him.

Sojiro was behind the counter, as he was every morning, and the scent of freshly brewing coffee was wafting through the cafe. As it was another day off, no doubt he wanted Akira to do some work. Akira didn't mind necessarily. As it turned out, he had a bit of a knack for barista work and he wasn't above earning his keep. But still, he couldn't afford to let the guys down.

Worst came to worst he could give the medal to Morgana and have him run along to one of the others, but that presented other problems. Chiefly that Morgana didn't know where the others lived (neither did Akira to be perfectly honest) and a cat running around with a gold medal would quickly draw some eyes. Greedy, money-grubbing eyes.

He attempted to go by quickly, but the bespectacled dark-haired man behind the counter stopped him with a casual sentence. "Make sure to do the dishes."

"Uh... I can't, right now." Sakura-san was a pretty imposing dude, likely without meaning to be, and even the newly minted thief felt a little uncomfortable going against him.

Sojiro sighed in annoyance. "Don't get cocky with me." Before Sojiro could go into a lecture, the bell above the door chimed and a woman strode in. She was rather tall and quite beautiful, her chestnut hair flowing luxuriously. But her dark pant suit and expensive handbag made it clear that she was all business. She seemed a little too 'upscale' for Leblanc in all honesty. "Welcome."

"Am I interrupting something?" she asked.
"Not at all," Sojiro casually replied.

As she took a seat, the TV on the far wall continued to rattle on about the news. Specifically it was talking about a runaway train accident that had occurred soon after Akira moved to Tokyo. The driver had abruptly gone berserk in what was termed a 'psychotic breakdown' and drove the thing full pelt into the station. And still, the police had no notion of what was causing them. The breakdowns were happening with a worrying regularity.

"Oh... is that the thing everyone's been talking about?" Sojiro asked, seemingly to himself rather than anyone else in the room.

"Doesn't it make you curious?" The brunette woman asked from the counter. "People who were leading normal lives, suddenly going deranged out of the blue. And incidents like these are happening one after another. Could they really be coincidental?"

Sojiro shrugged. Whatever the woman's angle was, he didn't have the answers she wanted. Who possibly could? "Well, leaving that aside... what'll you have?"

"The house blend please," she politely replied. It was at that point that the classy woman turned her focus to Akira. "Are you a part-timer? I'm surprised this place can afford one."

"Something like that," said Akira. It was a more dignified response than the reality of his situation. And getting into that would be a hit to this places reputation.

"Are you a high school student? Where do you attend?"

"Shujin," Akira replied.

"Oh? I know someone who goes there too. Though I've heard that things are rough right now. That Kamoshida business has been making a lot of rounds on the news... And he confessed to his crimes as if he was a totally different person. Just... all of a sudden. Ha... can a person really change so easily?" She turned her focus back to Sojiro and, as he was busy preparing the blend, Akira took this as his chance to subtly slip out.

Once in the cramped backstreets of Yongen he breathed a small sigh of relief and sent a quick text to Shizuka to meet him in Shibuya. He'd probably get chewed out for this later.

Morgana quickly poked his head out of Akira's bag and snickered. "Sneaky as always Akira. Alright, let's carry out our mission!"

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He found Shizuka leaning up against the wall of the Central Street bookstore, the chilly breeze ruffling the red scarf she wore. Her hands were stuffed into the pockets of her leather jacket, dark boots scuffing the paved road. Her dark trousers were a little baggy, snapping occasionally in the breeze.

"Yo," she curtly greeted, pushing herself off the wall as Akira approached. "You see the news? I was watching last night. Kamoshida is the talk of the town, and I saw 'em interview some students too. I'm surprised the story got so big so fast."

Akira nodded. "It is a huge scandal, and Shujin is a rather distinguished school. But I imagine news will blow over soon enough, replaced with something new." Though it did mean that there would be a lens of focus over Shujin for the next while, and that meant they would need to lay low and avoid any 'thief' business around the school.
He led on past the bookstore, heading into a small alleyway. He stopped for just a second, spying a spectral blue prison door. It emitted a velvet blue ghostlight and the air grew colder around it. There, sitting atop the glowing door frame, was a little girl in a warden uniform. Her right eye was covered by an intricate eyepatch while the exposed eye was gold and sharp, like the eye of a cat. She held a truncheon in her hand and looked down on Akira with some disdain.

She was Caroline, one of the two youthful 'wardens' of the Velvet Room. And the more abrasive of the two. On occasion Akira had been brought into that strange dimension in his sleep. But thus far he had also found two doorways there in the waking world: One was here, in Shibuya, and the other had been outside Kamoshida's Palace. Caroline watched him quietly, as if expecting him to come over so she'd have reason to scold him.

"Uh... you okay dude?" Shizuka asked "You're staring pretty hard at that wall."

"Hm? Oh, sorry, I guess my mind wandered for a second there." He has suspected that Shizuka, like the others, couldn't see the Velvet Room, but it was nice to have confirmation. After all, she was a little different than the others.

Akira led on toward the airsoft shop, the neon green sign of 'Untouchable' emitting a faint glow into the obscured alleyway. "This it?" Shizuka asked.

"It's an airsoft shop. It's a strange story but... when Morgana and I bought weapons here before, they replaced those we summon into the Metaverse. They got stronger as a result. But the owner... well, he's a bit odd and terrifying guy but he hasn't been above buying some of the stuff we stole from the Palace before." Akira scratched his neck for a few quiet moments. "I should probably go in alone. This whole situation is already strange, and he might think it's stranger if someone he doesn't know comes in wit me." Shizuka nodded and gave him the go ahead.

He spent several minutes in there, getting past Iwai's skepticism of the bizarre object Akira wanted to sell him, but eventually relented and gave him thirty thousand yen for the medal. In addition to a brown paper bag that he hastily shoved into Akira's hand, telling him to quickly head home.

Not too long after he strode out, two men in suits barged into Untouchable. There was some kind of muffled argument on the inside of the shop, but Iwai's voice was inflappable. Akira made his way back to Shizuka.

"What's that all about?" she asked.

"Uh.... I don't know honestly. I mean he paid me for the medal and then told me to take this bag from the shop."

Morgana quickly poked his head from Akira's bag. "Well... maybe we should have a look?" the feisty feline suggested.

"He told us not to look," Akira flatly replied.

"So?"

"Morgana, he's a very scary man," Akira said in the same deadpan tone. But, seeing that the cat wasn't backing down, he sighed and opened up the paper bag. In addition to the yen he had been given, there was a very realistic looking model handgun resting atop the bills. "Well... this won't reflect well on my probation," Akira said, hastily squeezing the bag shut again.

Shizuka tilted her head to the side, wrinkling her nose for a fraction of a second. "Weird... guess you'll have to ask the dude about this some time." Akira nodded. "You know, I wanted to thank
you. This Phantom Thief stuff has been pretty fun... but... you think we could keep at it?"

Morgana and Akira watched her closely. Finally the bespectacled boy shrugged "I wouldn't entirely be against it, in time. I mean we did do some real good for all Kamoshida's victims. Still... why are you so interested?" Akira asked.

"Uh... well... it's a strange thing. And you probably will think it's weird but my family have a history for getting involved in weird supernatural shit, saving lives... It leaves me with some big shoes to fill. And I'm thinking that I can make my family proud by doing this." She sighed and shook her head "I mean getting into the specifics would take too long but... suffice to say, considering that my relatives have taken down vampires and evil Stand users, dealing with psycho criminals that the law can't touch is the kind of thing I can handle."

"Vampires?!" Morgana balked.

"Like I said, long story."

Akira seemed less surprised. "Well... I wouldn't be against doing more, of course. But we'll need to talk with the others first. Guess we'll find time tomorrow, right?" he asked.

"Thanks! And if we do keep it going, then... huh, guess I'll have to find some way to thank you. So how about... I try and teach you guys how to use your Stands in the real world?"

It was a nice prospect. And no doubt it would come in handy to have an invisible weapon to call upon in the event things got hairy in the real world. But still, it warranted some skepticism. There were similarities with their powers, no doubt, but subtle enough differences that it left Akira uncertain.

"You think it'll work?" Akira asked, looking at the feline face poking out of his bag. Morgana shrugged as best he could.

"Anything's worth a shot... right, bud?" Shizuka asked, grinning at the frizzy-haired boy. And her smile proved infectious enough to make him smile too.

I am thou, thou art I...
Thou hast acquired a new vow.

It shall become the wings of rebellion
that breaketh thy chains of captivity.

With the birth of the Aeon Persona,
I have obtained the winds of blessing that
shall lead to freedom and new power...

"Wellp!" Shizuka casually said "If those two dudes that went into the shop were a couple of plainclothes, we should probably jet."

"Yeah... no doubt. See you tomorrow," Akira said cheerily.

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With how crowded the streets of Tokyo, at times making her haunts in New York look... well,
haunted, by comparison, Shizuka had taken up a habit of trying to go through alleys to speed things up. She wasn't afraid of crowds or anything, but she could get a little uncomfortable if she felt compressed.

And when that happened, there was a likelihood of her turning invisible out of that anxiety.

As she cut through the grimy grey alley however, she felt a whole new kind of anxiety creep up inside her. It was the kind of tension she had only felt a few times in Morioh, the feeling that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. The air felt wrong around here- electrically charged, and far too heavy in her lungs.

Shizuka stopped walking entirely.

"I know you're there. So cut the crap and just show yourself."

Shizuka turned around slowly, watching as the concrete behind her began to bubble as if a great heat had suddenly brought it to a boil. And from that churning greyness, a figure slowly emerged.

It was hunched over and reached up to Shizuka's waist in that posture, long gangly arms reaching down while the knuckles of the creature supported it's weight.

The two eyes that looked up at her were large, glowing a vibrant yellow shade. A long curling tail rolled out from the base of it's spine, the tip a razor sharp blade. The whole thing, Shizuka now realized, looked to be made of concrete. Concrete that had been shaped into the form of a horned baboon. Dark rings of asphalt lined his arms.

"Shizukaaaa Joestaaaaaaar!" the creature growled "You're more astute than I was expecting!"

He spoke to her in English, and Shizuka resolved to do the same. "And just who are you supposed to be?"

"Kikikiki... Who I am is unimportant. But you can call my Stand by his proper name, 『Paradise City』!!"

"Uh huh. Yeah. Nice to meet you," Shizuka nonchalantly replied. "Doesn't answer why you're stalking me, you creep."

Paradise City grinned, baring his sharpened baboon fangs while the glow of his eyes grew more intense. "Let's just say a... friend of your father hired me. He's very concerned that you've been burdened by the assets your old man left behind. And he wants me to make sure you relinquish them."

The statement hadn't surprised her. Part of the reason they left for Japan was to give her some peace from the vultures who had been circling overhead, but to think one of them would go so far as to hire a Stand user for the job...

"Look... I get that you're a mercenary-"

"I prefer the term 'freelance problem solver,'" Paradise City cut in.

"Right. So you're clearly not to blame for any of this. You're just getting paid by some greedy asshole, so I won't hold it against you... But even so, I'm only going to warn you once. Turn around. Fly back to wherever you came from, and tell whoever hired you that it's not worth it. Trust me."

The baboon threw his head back, letting out a long yowling laugh that echoed throughout the alley "Oh Joestar, you are a funny one... I won't kill ya, don't worry... but I'm not above hurting you to
get what I want. This is just a verbal warning for now, but if we meet again... kikiki..."

The earth around the monkey Stand began to bubble, and soon the strange creature had receded back into the ground without a single trace that he had ever been there at all.

Shizuka sighed in annoyance. "Tch... take your best shot."
Wilton was a rather popular hotel chain that had branches across the globe, and in every country they were renowned for their catering services. Not to be confused with the *Hilton* hotel chain, of course. It had been years since Shizuka had been at a Wilton, but now that she was here, all those nostalgic memories of delicious food were wafting back into her mind.

Shiho and Ann had wanted to come here for a while, and Shizuka could hardly blame them.

After putting the entirety of their heist money into this, they had been shown to a table with a long couch on one side and comfy armchairs on the ends, and had been given free reign to weigh their table with whatever they wanted from the buffet. They were starting slow, some cakes and meats, but they were set to get more intense.

"Jesus..." Shizuka murmured after swallowing another prawn. The salty fishy taste lingered on her tongue, and she washed it down with the sweetest and freshest cranberry juice that she had ever been graced with.

"Sho good!" Ryuji gasped through a mouthful of gravy-laden beef, looking so happy that he might die on the spot from his joy. His purple hoodie and dark jeans definitely stuck out in this environment, but it was clear that Ryuji didn't care.

Akira, seated in the middle of the couch between Shizuka and Shiho, was lazily spooning meat to Morgana with one hand while actively eating with his other hand. With the amount of money they had put in for this, there would likely be no issue in having a pet here. But even so they had told Morgana to keep a low profile. "No wonder Lady Ann chose this place!"

As with yesterday, Akira dressed smart in his time off- a dark blazer over a white shirt, with his trousers crisp and pressed. He was being quite careful in how he ate, wanting to leave no risk of making a mess.

"Of course it's good! This is a famous hotel after all," Ann said enthusiastically. She took a stroke of strawberry frosting onto her fork and downed it casually. She had talked about desserts all the way here, and had been contenting herself on strawberry shortcake since they got here.

Ann looked quite fashionable, and Shizuka's discerning eye spotted a few Euro brands adorning her. Her red varsity jacket, chic blue blouse, dark skirt and leggings... they must have cost a pretty penny even taken separately, but then again her folks were involved in fashion.

Shiho smiled kindly. "Me and Ann came by this hotel plenty of times when walking home together. And every time we'd be able to look in through the windows at this food paradise... never thought we'd actually get to enjoy it ourselves!" Shizuka was used to seeing Shiho dressed in either her uniform or thief attire, but she looked quite good when dressed casually. Her dark sweater and white skirt suited her nicely, and her dark boots seemed to be of a good brand.

She seemed as if a great weight had been lifted off her, and with Kamoshida set to spend some time behind bars she couldn't fault her for it.
"Hey JoJo," Shiho asked, glancing at Shizuka. "Are those new sunglasses?"

"These? Oh, no, I've had these for some time. I just haven't worn them in a while is all," she said, slowly slipping them off so Shiho could get a better look. The dark frames looked rather standard, a little boxy, but both of the temple tips had tiny chains from which miniature largemouth bass ornaments dangled. "Got 'em from my dad. We had this tradition where he'd buy me a pair of sunglasses every birthday."

"Aw, that sounds cute," Shiho said, before having a rather sharp realisation about Shizuka's 'parent' situation "I-I mean uh-"

"I know what you mean, it's fine," Shizuka assured her, smiling. It stung to think back on that, it really did, but she could hardly fall to pieces every time she thought about it. "I hear talk that the police are gonna be coming to Shujin when school resumes. Guess that Kamoshida business made a big splash," she said, wanting to try and take the pressure off Shiho.

Morgana’s furry brow creased in concern. "That's troublesome... but not really surprising given the nature of the scandal."

The topic was enough to make Ryuji groan, distracting him from his meat platter. "Shit... our names are gonna come up for sure," he said, giving a quick gesture to Akira. "People have been saying all kindsa' shit about us and Kamoshida, like that we threatened him into confessing." The punkish blond suddenly grinned "Still, we got people pumped! People around the school really believe we exist! Well, most people don't actually believe in us but others are grateful. Check this out."

Ryuji fished around in his hoodie pocket for a few seconds and drew his phone, causing the others to lean in closely. On the screen was a website with a crimson background and ivory text posts. A logo of a white domino mask lingered in the bottom left corner.

"The Phantom Afficianado Website?" Ann read aloud. She continued reading, speaking some posts of praise that thanked them for bringing Kamoshida to justice. It was enough to make her smile.

"That's... amazing," Shiho said, blinking briefly.

"Truth be told... at the time I was hoping to just deal with my own problems, but seeing these comments feels pretty nice," said Ann.

Akira cleared his throat. "Uh... are you guys planning on eating?" he asked, gesturing to how sparse everyone's plate had gotten. He was pleased by what they had accomplished, but didn't need reassurance from strangers. Particularly from the Shujin students who would treat him like a wacky sociopath no matter what.

Ryuji blinked. "Huh? Oh, shit, you're right! We only got an hour to eat!" he said urgently. Such was the nature of the Wilton. Ryuji and Ann rose up in unison. "I'm not gonna finish all the beef dishes at this rate!"

"And I need to eat through the entire dessert menu!" Ann added just as quickly.

"Look after our stuff!" Ryuji quickly told Akira, who was just polishing off his own steak. "Don't worry, we'll snag you something too." With that Ryuji and Ann made their way through the throngs of people scattered around the buffet.
Shizuka watched them go and cast a nonchalant gaze to her shrimp plate. Nothing left but a few flakes of shell. "Well... I guess I'm still pretty hungry too." A few silent seconds passed, in which Houdini made a stealthy trip around the buffet. Suddenly a hefty bowl of Singapore noodles materialized in front of her, rendered abruptly visible. Freshly diced vegetables stood out among the oily noodles, scented steam wafting up to greet her. "Theeere we go. Their noodle table is pretty nice, I have to admit. But I had to go for something I wouldn't get at any standard restaurant here."

"You've got amazing control of your Persona," Shiho said.

"Stand," Shizuka gently corrected. "Anyway... want me to grab something for you too? What about you Akira?"

"The steaks here did look rather nice." Shiho sighed "I'd get fat if I ate like this everyday. Then again it's not like I need to worry about volleyball anymore..."

Akira smiled and set his fork own on the plate. "I'll just wait for my chance to get something. I don't quite know what I want yet anyway."

They weren't left waiting long for Ann and Ryuji to return, and sure enough they were positively loaded with food balanced precariously on their arms. Desserts for Ann, and a cow yard of meat from Ryuji. Along with a conspicuous plate of... something piled rather high. Without a word they set their food on the table and got back to the swing of eating.

"You guys really are gonna make the most of this hour..." Shiho said in muted surprise, looking up from the fat steak Shizuka had nabbed for her.

"Seriously? Only meat?" Morgana asked, reaching over to rest his paws on the table. He cast a glance to Ann "And she's all about the cake." Despite Morgana's confusion, Ann and Ryuji both looked like they were in heaven.

Ryuji smirked at Ann in between quick bites. "Hey. Calories."

"Shuddup! How much do you think one of these costs?! I'll never get the chance to do this again!" Ann sighed dreamily and went back to the lemon cake in her grasp. "The Wilton Hotel cake buffet! I'd heard all the rumors but I never thought it'd be this amazing!"

Morgana cleared his throat proudly. "And... where's our share?" the cat asked.

Ryuji nudged over the strange plate of... something without looking up from his array of meat. "I didn't know what you wanted, so I just grabbed you some beans."

"B-beans?" Morgana incredulously replied.

"There were some pretty bizarre things over there too, so we got you a variety of those. Fried bananas, preserved eggs, some beans," added Ann. Shizuka looked about ready to throw up.

"M-more beans?!"

"We put so much on the plate that it all kinda got mixed up. But it should probably still taste good!" Ann said.
Shiho sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Sometimes I forget how scatterbrained Ann can get when there are sweets on the horizon."

"I am not scatterbrained! I just really like these cakes."

Morgana shook his head mournfully. "This is just plain grotesque." He gestured to Akira "Let's go Akira. These two just don't know what fine dining is, so it falls to us to show 'em! So you guys watch our stuff until we get back! Wait patiently for us." Ann and Ryuji seemed not to notice him. "They're not even listening..." Regardless, the two headed off.

With the brief distraction over, Shizuka resumed eating. She had to admit that this was all rather nice. She didn't have a whole lot of friends back in the States, and so simply enjoying the company of others like this... Okay sure, they were getting into dangerous territory with this 'phantom thief' stuff, but besides the danger this was all very fun.

"Hey uh... Shiho," Ann looked to her friend, distracted from her cake by a serious train of thought. "When I spoke to your mom the other day she was talking about transferring schools... are you really going to?"

It was a fair question. Something like an attempted suicide was the kind of thing that would linger around a person, and Kamoshida's confession had reignited some of the discussions about Shiho around the school. And no doubt Shujin brought back some painful memories. Shizuka and Ryuji leaned in closer.

"I'd considered it, and my mom really encouraged me too, but..." Shiho shook her head "Running away from things is what led me to that roof in the first place. It's gonna be hard, and I don't doubt that some people at school will judge me despite all that happened. Even so I want to brave my troubles and face them head on."

"I'm proud of ya," Ryuji said, grinning. "And if anyone gives you grief, then you've got all of us to back you up."

Shiho smiled and rubbed under her nose with her left index finger. "Truth be told Ryuji, you kind of inspired me." Ann blinked in shock, and Ryuji seemed even more stunned. "Kamoshida nearly ruined your life too. I mean you were a track star idol and he destroyed the track team, broke your leg, and made everyone in school hate you." She sighed and shook her head "I feel like an idiot for not supporting you back then... but nobody but you saw Kamoshida for what he was. Despite all that though, you didn't leave. You took what everyone said about you in stride, and you didn't run away."

"Heh, yeah well uh... all the praise is totally deserved an' all, but it was more like... I couldn't run away? With the rep I had, I doubted any school would take me. It's some crazy miracle I wasn't expelled at Shujin..." Ryuji shrugged his broad shoulders "But... I couldn't leave, you're right. If I had run away that'd be like, admitting that Kamoshida won. And I'd live my whole life sick to my stomach, imagining how smug that effin' bastard would be."

Yeah, that was Ryuji alright. Stubborn like an ox, but noble in a strange way. It had all worked out in the end.

Ann frowned "I never thought about it like that. We were friends in middle school, but when Kamoshida attacked you we... kind of turned our backs on you like everyone else."
"Don't sweat it Ann. It's in the past anyway."

"That all said," Shiho interjected "My mom is insisting I go through some therapy. And I can't say I blame her... that's gonna keep me busy after school on some days."

Akira and Morgana returned to their table, carrying two plates weighted down by fish, rice and meat. And for as impassive as Akira usually tried to appear, he was smiling as he sat down. A few of the guests at the various tables had been chatting about the 'Phantom Thieves' that had been involved in the Kamoshida case. Not with much seriousness, but it was nice to hear the name dropped.

The spectacle made Shizuka lean across the table a bit "Huh, you really got a... variety there. Did you just grab whatever you could find?" she asked. "With the amount you brought, it'd be a miracle if you managed to eat it all before our hour's up."

"We'll manage," Akira assured her. "Though, if you guys want to chip in..."

And so they ate. It was an uphill battle, even for the famed phantom thieves, as they struggled through meat, vegetables, rice, fish and cake. The armies of the Wilton buffet had amassed against them, but they were resolute. Finally they were victorious, and every plate on the table was empty.

"We... we did it," Ryuji said, wheezing for breath. "This is a... a victory f'r all of us..."

"My belt feels three sizes too small..." Akira murmured, looking glass eyed at the ceiling as if having a flashback to Vietnam.

Throughout the chaotic battle of the Wilton Buffet, Ann had kept to her desserts and seemed more composed for the time being. "Good job you guys. How about one last dish to cleanse your palates? I recommend the seasonal tart! The grapefruit has both alluring sweetness and a tangy sourness."

Ryuji pressed his fist to his mouth and swallowed hard. "God... don't talk to me about sour stuff. Geez, I gotta go to the bathroom."

"Me... too..." Morgana weakly mewed from the inside of Akira's bag. "Please carry me gently..."

While Akira was trying to get his mind and body running at the same wavelength, two guests suddenly stopped by the sofa and examined them. "My, look at the table," one of them, a woman, began.

"They must not normally have the opportunity to enjoy such exquisite food," her male counterpart rudely mused.

"I can only imagine what their parents must be like," the woman added.

"What was that?!" Ryuji hissed, trying to stand as the two walked off without a care. People shit-talking his mother was a sore spot for him. The weight in his stomach hit him, and he was forced to sit back down. "We don't got time for arguments... come on, let's hit the bathroom."

As Akira, Morgana and Ryuji left, Shiho reclined in the couch and sighed. "Most of the people here are businessmen and rich tourists... I guess we really stick out." It had been on their minds
since they got here- the table of rowdy high school students in a high class environment. It stuck out alright, but nobody had wanted to say it aloud.

Ann sighed. "Do rich people eat like this every day?" the pretty blonde asked, looking to Shizuka for her insight.

"God no." She had fought the good fight, but the buffet had left her stomach heavier than Rohan's ego. Right about now she wished Tonio was working as a chef around here, that his Pearl Jam could make her feel better. But then a grizzly mental image of what that would entail entered her head, and she shoved the thought far from the front of her mind.

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The trek to the bathroom had been a little more arduous than Akira had expected. For one the trio had to take it slow, given that they were all stuffed and moving too fast would be a rather bad idea. And the first bathroom they found hadn't exactly been usable.

But, eventually, they got it done and they resolved to meet up with the girls as quickly as possible.

"Ugh. I'm stuffed," Morgana moaned.

They strode across the immaculate marble floor, making for the row of golden elevator doors. A few other hotel guests were milling around, but nobody spared the teens a passing glance.

"I totally panicked when I saw the 'Closed for Cleaning' sign at the bathrooms," Ryuji admitted.

"You were talking big about eating until you puked. Boy, did you puke... are you some kind of moron?" asked Morgana.

Ryuji's right eye twitched. "Same goes for you furball!" Deciding to put his rivalry with the cat aside for now, he turned his finger to the call button and gave it a quick press. "Uh... what floor was the restaurant on again?"

"We came up here, so we have to go down. But..." Akira trailed off into an annoyed sigh "Shit. I got so wrapped up in everything that I never thought to memorize the floor. I guess we'll just have to hope it's labelled in the elevator."

As they were waiting for the elevator, the other hotel guests proceed to part as a crowd of black approached them. Several burly men in expensive three-piece suits, crowded around a smaller figure that was just barely visible through the gaps, made a beeline for the elevator and proceeded to barge past Akira and Ryuji. Akira got his footing back quickly, while Ryuji glared up at the man who had muscled past him.

"There's still no update on the case?" the man in the middle asked. All that could be discerned through the fortress of hired muscle surrounding him was that he was well dressed, and had one hell of a chrome dome.

His nearest subordinate shook his head. "Not yet... Uh, pardon me for asking but why are you so involved? It doesn't really relate to our office."

"I don't care about your opinion you incompetent buffoon! When I say pick up the pace, you do it!"
The voice sent a sudden chill down his spine, making Akira's whole body go rigid. His fists clenched on a reflex, and the nausea in his stomach became far more intense. "That voice..." he whispered under his breath.

"Hey, you're cuttin' in line!" Ryuji barked.

"What do you want?" one of the subordinates asked, barely bothering to look Ryuji's way. "We're in a hurry."

"Oh I'm sorry. So you can butt in front of other people if you're in a hurry?" Ryuji squared his shoulders, looking set to make a fight of him. Through the worry that had gripped him, Akira shot his friend a dissuading glare. The last thing either of them needed was to get into a fight here.

The bald figure in the center of the crowd kept his focus on the elevator. "It seems the customer base has changed since I was here last. Have they started a day care?"

Once more a chill ran down Akira's spine. He thought back on the night he got slapped with the assault charge. It had been a dark night, and in the confusion he barely got a good look at the man he had 'attacked.' But the voice was unmistakable. Could it really be him? Right here, right now?

"Sir, we don't have time for this," one of the lackeys said.

"I know."

The elevator arrived with a resounding ding, and the man and his entourage started to file in. Ryuji took a step forward, only to be immediately shoved backward by one of the lackeys. It left Ryuji seething, glaring at the doors as they rolled shut.

"The hell was with that guy?!" Ryuji grunted.

Morgana proceeded to poke his head from Akira's bag. He had kept quiet through the whole exchange, but he still seemed tense. "We should head back down," the cat said.

"Yeah, but..." He tried to push aside his impotent frustration as he called another elevator, but his other hand was clenched into a tight fist. "That dick really pissed me off! He wasn't even hidin' the fact that he looks down on everyone!"

"Come on, don't lose your temper over this." It was rare for Ryuji and Morgana to ever share any kind of compassion for each other, but Morgana got plenty pissed at injustices too.

And Ryuji, to his credit, was trying to keep his anger from boiling over. Not very well, but he was trying. "I just can't forgive shitty adults like him!" He looked to Akira for advice, only to see that he was looking to the floor in deep contemplation. "Huh? What's wrong?"

"Oh, uh... it's nothing." Akira forced a smile

"He's probably just not used to eating well," Morgana blithely quipped "I'm always stuck with canned cat food too."

Their elevator arrived, and they proceeded to file in. But Akira's mind was still locked firmly on that night, when his whole life changed. When his family, and those he had considered his friends, turned their backs on him.
There was no way. It couldn't be that same man...

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The mood at their table was a little more downcast by the time the three boys returned, with Shiho and Shizuka looking a little more on edge. Ann just looked pissed.

"What took you so long?!" the blonde hastily asked.

Ryuji jumped onto the backs of his heels. "Wh- why're you all pissy?"

"She kinda got into an argument with some bitch," Shizuka said. "She bumped into Ann and spilled the stuff she had been carrying, but... well, blamed Ann for it." She sighed and stroked the bridge of her nose "And then people were staring at us, and since we're teens and she was an adult... you can guess who they thought was in the wrong."

"People are the worst..." Shiho muttered darkly.

"Sounds like she was a real bitch," Ryuji remarked. He took his seat again, and Akira took up the same spot between Shiho and Shizuka.

Ann nodded. "Yeah... thanks though," she said. She appreciated the concern, and managed to smile for all her earlier annoyance. "I wonder if we're out of place here..." she said sadly.

"It always feels like this." Akira leaned forward and clasped his hands together, and the others shifted uncomfortably.

It was on their minds alright. They had hoped to just enjoy themselves and celebrate their win, but it became increasingly clear that this wasn't their kind of place. Even Shizuka, the rich girl of the group, didn't fit in with a place so orderly and highbrow. But the others were far more used to feeling like outcasts in general. The undesirables who always managed to stick out.

After a moments pause, Ryuji spoke up. "Hey, Morgana."

"What is it?"

"Anyone could have a Palace, yeah?" he ventured.

"Anyone with a strong, distorted desire."

"And anyone with a Treasure to be stolen can have a change of heart?" The rest of the group exchanged curious glances. Morgana nodded in confirmation.

"Why do you ask?" Shiho inquired "Are you... thinking of continuing with thief stuff?"

The question hung in the air for a few moments, before Ryuji nodded in confirmation. "Me and Akira had a run in with some selfish shithead adults earlier too. And it got me thinking... could we change people like that too? I mean... we put a lot of work into taking Kamoshida down, yet most people don't believe in us. But his victims are thanking us. Us, of all people!"

"Like... on that Phan-site thing?" asked Akira. It was true, they were getting some gratitude there. It
certainly was nice, given how people at Shujin usually regarded them.

There was silence, as the group mulled this over. "Well, Akira already knows how I feel. I wanna keep doing this," Shizuka said. "There are plenty of people like Kamoshida in the world. Assholes that can't be touched by normal means. And if we have the power to stop them, but don't, then it reflects badly on us. With great power, comes great responsibility. Spider-Man isn't obscure in Japan, right?"

"Yeah... if we ignore people who are in trouble, I'd go back to being how I was before," said Ann.

Shiho nodded firmly at her best friend. "Same goes for me too. There are probably plenty of people in the same position I was in. Powerless, and being abused by someone in power... it just wouldn't sit right with me if I didn't do something for them."

Throughout all this, Akira was nodding along without protest. It seemed everyone was on the same page. They had a rare power, and it gave them more leverage than just owning a Stand. If everyone was on board, they could make one hell of a legendary name for themselves.

"You're under my tutelage," Morgana interjected. He climbed from Akira's bag and sauntered onto the table. "There's nothing we can't accomplish as phantom thieves! I have faith in you guys, we can overcome any challenge."

"We'll manage. Right?" Ryuji grinned slyly at Akira.

"I want to help people too," Akira admitted. Perhaps he always had. Even if helping someone was what landed him on probation in the first place.

Morgana smiled. "Heh... even if you guys are just fledglings, we're an actual organization now."

"Then it's settled! We're gonna catch all the shitty adults by surprise and make ourselves known to the world!" Ryuji said.

All eyes turned to Akira. Ann leaned into the table and smiled brightly. "You okay being our leader? I'd feel pretty safe if it was your cool head guiding us." The others nodded to Akira's assessment. And he had really taken charge in navigating the Palace, and in fighting Kamoshida. Letting him call the shots officially just made sense to them.

"If that's what everyone wants," said Akira. There were no objections, so he nodded his confirmation with the plan.

"In that case, should we decide on a name for our group?" Ryuji clasped his hands together, still grinning. It seemed the excitement of thievery had made him forget all about the unpleasantness at the elevator.

Ann nodded. "Oooh, I've got it! I want it to be something cute and luxurious. Let me see... How about 'The Diamonds'!" Shiho shook her head.

An idea struck Shizuka and caused her to lean in closer. "How about... something that sounds cool and mysterious. Like uh, like... 'Stardust Crusaders!' You know, has a kind of mystical air about it."
"Yeah but like... we're not crusaders, and I dunno how stardust fits into taking hearts and stuff," Ryuji said.

As the group lobbed suggestions too and fro, Akira was humming in quiet thought. Finally some inspiration hit him. "Hey, JoJo," he said, causing Shizuka to look his way. "When we went into Kamoshida's Palace, you said the Italian motto of some group... who were they?"

"The Arditi?" she asked, thinking back on her mothers fleeting lessons on Italian. "Yeah they were like... a spec ops group in World War One. 'The Daring Ones' is the translation of the name, I think."

Akira smiled. "Then how about 'Arditi, the Phantom Thieves of Hearts'?"

"A lil' long winded, but it sounds cool," Ryuji said.

"Well, people could always call us Arditi, or just the Phantom Thieves," Morgana reasoned.

"And since it sounds foreign, it makes the name cool and mysterious too," Shiho added happily.

"It's settled then." A confident smile broke out on Akira's handsome visage. "The Arditi are open for business."
The Phantom Aficionado website had seen a little traffic, with some people posting requests for the Phantom Thieves. But ultimately these were minor, quibbling issues that people could handle themselves if they weren't so damn lazy.

Nothing the Arditi needed to waste their time on, particularly when they were interested in making a name for themselves. To do that, and to genuinely help people, they needed some criminals to nab. This was a fact that the gang unanimously agreed on.

The schoolday had just come to an end, and the students were starting to mill around now that the day was over. Akira stood up from his desk and stretched slowly, only faintly aware of Mishima approaching him. In truth it was hard to recognize the bluenette boy when he wasn't covered in bruises.

"Hey. Have you seen that Phantom Aficionado Website?" he casually asked.

"That? Oh, yeah, I think I've heard of it," he vaguely answered. While there wasn't much hype around their group yet, he didn't want to give the impression that he was invested or supportive. It would look odd if he did, particularly if people started seriously investigating the Arditi.

"I'm the one who started it," Mishima proudly stated. Akira's brows raised up in surprise, and rose higher at Mishima's quietly posed question. "... You guys are the Phantom Thieves, right?" Going by the situation they had all been in, he was going to assume 'you guys' at least included Ann and Ryuji.

It was a little surprising he caught on so quick, but Akira managed to maintain an aloof and somewhat airheaded manner. "Hm? What?"

"Well uh..." Mishima cleared his throat and tried to play it cool. As was so often the case with kids like Mishima, it was a failed attempt. "If things are as I think, I should keep it a secret. Um... Kamoshida used me, and I did some horrible things because of that. The site isn't much of an apology, but if there's anything I can do to help let me know!" Akira quietly regarded him. He had grown a lot since they first met.

Still, having him suspecting their nature as the Phantom Thieves was a little worrying. Best to try and steer him away from that line of thought. "I appreciate that, but..."

Mishima, in his excitement, cut Akira off before he could finish. "I'm glad to hear it! There are many more evil people like Kamoshida, and I'm sure that the Phantom Thieves will keep going to do something about them. And that's why I made the forum, so people could post their problems. I even added a poll on the site, to see if people believe in the Thieves." He hesitated for a moment and then quickly added "I'd really like to help the Phantom Thieves out... c-can I, please?"

"Do what you want," was his noncommittal response.

"Then I'll do whatever I can to meet your expectations." Just like that, Akira had another confidant to empower his Personae with.
Mishima left, looking quite giddy and eager. Shizuka, Shiho, Ann and Ryuji (who had previously been standing around at the far end of 2-D to covertly observe things) made their way over. This was Shiho's first day back, and thanks to Lifeson's Stand she didn't need any crutches. She just had to be mindful of the pressure she put on her bad leg. "Wow. He really wants your D," Shizuka flatly said.

The raven haired boy reached up, pushing his glasses further up the bridge of his nose. "Please, don't..." This was going to be a real pain in the ass.

"It was real awkward tryin' to figure out when to come over here," Ryuji remarked.

"So Mishima-kun is behind that forum... well he did say he wanted to make up for leaking your record," said Ann.

"Has he really figured out our identities?" Morgana asked from the alcove of Akira's desk.

Shiho shrugged "Well, he has his suspicions on Akira and Ryuji no doubt. But I wouldn't bet that he has any idea who you are Morgana."

"I will say though," Morgana smiled vaguely "A forum where people can post their problems may turn out to be useful."

"Maybe, but..." Shizuka propped herself up on one of the nearby desks, her arms crossed over her chest. "We've been checking that site and it's nothing but petty crap right now. Stuff that won't lead to Palaces or anythin' exciting like that." Getting more notoriety would let them net some big fish, but they needed actual jobs before that could happen.

"We should all try to stay sharp until we find a target, keep our equipment prepped and then-"

Ann was cut short by Ryuji dramatically exclaiming "Oh crap!" with a look on his face akin to that of a camper coming face to face with a hungry bear.

"Ow." Shiho winced a bit. "Calm down... what's wrong?"

"Don't we have exams coming up?!" Ryuji asked.

For as terrified as Ryuji looked, the others looked a little more impassive. "Judging by your reaction, I assume you'll struggle this time too?"

"It's not like you're any better! All you're good at is English!" Ryuji snapped in return.

"Oh yeah," Shizuka murmured to herself "Well, I have that one down pat at least. As for the rest..." She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose, making the bass ornaments on her glasses swing a bit. "Well my kanji writing still sucks."

"We could all study together?" Shiho suggested "Truth be told, I... may have missed a lot of stuff. Even before my stint in the hospital, volleyball was a big distraction on my schoolwork," she admitted. "How about you Akira-kun?"
He shrugged "I haven't been actively studying, but I'm not too worried. All the same, if you guys want to postpone Arditi business until we're finished exams then I wouldn't mind taking the time to revise with you all. Could be fun."

"Dunno what kinda definition of 'fun' you have dude..." Ryuji said.

Morgana snickered. "I dunno guys. Studying with Ryuji might be an active drain on your grades."

"Can it cat! Otherwise you're gettin' a one way trip to the nearest dumpster!"

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They parted for the day, resolving to find the time to study together in the coming days. Shizuka had a good deal on her mind, mentally shuffling around the subjects she needed to revise, and how best to study them. Her body was on autopilot as she walked the backstreets of Shibuya, her mind aflutter.

For as exciting and fulfilling as the stuff with Kamoshida's Palace had been, Shizuka was now aware that it had been a bit of a disruption to her studies. She hadn't been paying as much attention in class, and the Palace trips left her drained so that she couldn't take the time to study in the evenings. She made a note to actually focus harder whenever their next mission came around.

She supposed she only had herself to blame really. She knew how big academics were in Japan, had been told as much from Okuyasu regularly bemoaning his grades. And she'd be in the same boat if she kept this trend up.

Slowly and steadily she advanced down an alley, until she once more felt an unwelcome tension in the air. She came to a stop near a pair of large dumpsters, ancient and fading posters lining the old concrete wall to her left. Strange dry stains and cigarette butts littered the ground. It became clear that this place was largely unseen by anyone remotely resembling a cleaner.

Shizuka sighed and took her hands out of her pockets, rolling her wrists around slowly to loosen up. "You're really shit at Sneaking up on people."

"Kikikiki..." The concrete bubbled and started to part, and Paradise City rose up from the ground about ten feet in front of her. "Still a sharp little knife, aren't you? I like that. Know what I don't like? The fact that you ignored my warning." He grinned, flashing a row of sharp monkey teeth sculpted for tearing flesh from bone. "You didn't give up your old man's assets."

"Oh, right. That." Shizuka kept her right hand lingering on the matching up, giving her dark bangs a noncommittal flip with her left. "See, the thing is, I kind of loved my parents, and everything they did for me. And giving away all they worked for 'cause some piece of shit asked me to, would leave a bad taste in my mouth." Even behind her sunglasses, her stare was withering. "And I see you didn't heed my warning either."

Paradise City growled. "Don't get coy with me you little shit. You're not your brother, and you're sure as shit not your nephew. Think I'm afraid of a Stand like yours?" He scoffed noisily. Suddenly he raised his arms up, the lanky forearms suddenly thickening until they were the size of bollards and no doubt just as tough. "And like I said, I'm not above hurting y-"

"BAZU!"
Houdini’s fist connected with the baboon’s brow with lightning swiftness, sending the figure careening backward as chips of cement flaked off and were sent flying in the breeze. ‘Sh-shit! She’s fast!’

Shizuka pressed her advantage, her Stand continuing forward and raining down dozens of blows every second. It was true, Houdini wasn’t as strong as Star Platinum or Crazy Diamond. But punching hard enough to crack through cement was something she could manage, particularly when her speed was added to the mix.

"BAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZU!"

Which was not to say she was focused solely on beating him down. She injected a little strategy into her actions, with Houdini rapidly weaving in and out of visibility. She would twist to the right, a mere feint, and then strike from the left while invisible and with Paradise City aiming elsewhere.

The furious flurry of fists filled the alley with cracking shockwaves, sending clouds of cement fragments spraying out from around the monkey Stand. He howled and suddenly shot his arms out, limbs expanding into a pair of spiked barriers that forced Houdini to pull back before she got skewered.

"Hrr..." Paradise City's glowing golden eyes glared her way, and from the distance she could tell she had done a real number on him. Great cracks covered his face, while whole chunks had been knocked off his body. "Not bad. You've got some power, I suppose."

"Tch. And it'll get worse if you don't fuck off. Now."

Paradise City was suddenly grinning again. "Don't get too cocky." A sudden slurping sound reverberated through the filthy alleyway, and Shizuka was faintly aware of the concrete around Paradise City rumbling and pulling toward him. The cracks filled up, and the cracked chunks came back into existence. "So long as there is concrete nearby, my Paradise City can regenerate from any damage!" he boasted.

Having let this nugget of information sink in, Paradise City lunged forward at a shocking speed, swinging his arms around like giant clubs. It forced Houdini onto the defensive immediately, as every swing of his arms swept up and crunched the cement beneath him.

‘Okay, that's not good,’ Shizuka thought. Once more her body was on the defensive, jumping back quickly while her mind was focused on more important matters. *He can regenerate so long as there's concrete. Solution: Get him away from concrete. Problem: I'm in the middle of fucking Tokyo.*

Paradise City suddenly slammed his arms into the ground with a resounding crash, and Shizuka quickly became aware of the hardened nubs slowly growing from his forearms. He was absorbing more cement into his body...

A hail of cement 'bullets' came rushing out in a sudden burst, Shizuka's eyes widening behind her shades. Houdini rushed in front of her, arms ablaze with blinding sweeps of motion that punched each bullet to powder on impact. They were fast, but she was faster. Alas, the sheer volume was such that one managed to go flying past Houdini's shoulder.

Shizuka's head snapped back, a shattering sound echoing through the alley. She stumbled for a brief second and was then knocked clean off her feet, her back striking the ground hard. She lay
there for a few moments with her ears ringing, and then became aware of a few dribbles of blood flowing over her nose.

It took a moment for her to sit up, ignoring Paradise City's cackling as she tried to register what had just happened. She was bleeding from the forehead, she gathered that much quickly. The cement bullet had grazed her there and made a nasty cut, but it still felt like something else had absorbed the brunt of the impact.

Then she became aware that she was seeing unfiltered light around her.

"You get it now?! You can't hurt me, but I can definitely hurt you."

Shizuka ignored him and looked around until she had her worst fears confirmed. Lying just in arms reach were her sunglasses, snapped in half at the bridge. The little bass ornaments brushed the ground lazily in the breeze. The cement bullet had hit that initially, shattered through the thick plastic, and then cut her forehead. Slowly, wordlessly, and with blood dripping over her furrowed brow, Shizuka lifted the halves into her hands.

"You know, it's funny. I was originally gonna let you off easy," Shizuka slowly rose to her feet, a flat smile on her pretty face. "After all, you're just some scumfuck hitman. All you do is what other people pay you to do. But now..."

A tremor rocked the alleyway, as everything not nailed down was suddenly rendered invisible. An aura of psionic light engulfed Shizuka, her hair literally standing on end as she glared at Paradise City with white hot hatred. The ape recoiled ever so slightly despite all attempts to appear cocky and in control.

"Now I'm gonna break you the fuck in half!"
Paradise City (IV)

"Great weather today eh?"

"Mm."

The warm sunlight glittered across the waters of Lake Mead, broken occasionally by the silhouettes of other boats on the water. For as wealthy as they were, Joseph had resolved on getting a rather simple white boat. So long as it wasn't leaking and had a good motor, and had room for fish, then Joseph was fine with it. And Shizuka was fine with anything, she just wanted to know how to fish.

In the lead up to her eleventh birthday Joseph had casually suggested teaching her how to fish, given that camping had been her birthday trip last year. And he settled on Lake Mead because, well, Speedwagon had brought him out here when he was eleven and it had been a blast. So much so that he had put a good deal of company resources toward conservation of Lake Mead among other national parks in the States.

"It's real quiet out here," Shizuka said, looking up at her father through her dark glasses. "Even with all those other boats out there, I can't hear those people."

Joseph smiled faintly and pushed his glasses up with his mechanical hand, the other keeping a good grip on his fishing rod. "Heh. Speedwagon really wanted to keep this place looking good. And when we're so far from the city, you can appreciate the quiet of nature."

His line snagged abruptly, making Shizuka nearly drop her own fishing rod in surprise. "Oooh! It's a big one! Kkkh! You're not getting away from me you slippery shit!" He gave the rod a sharp tug, a burst of motion sending water spraying high once he fished loose a fat bass. It wriggled on the line, fought hard as Joseph reeled it in, and then finally went still as it hit the deck.

"Holy crud! It's huge!" Shizuka said in awe. It was bigger than her forearm!

"Hehe! Told you your old man knew his stuff!" Joseph boasted. "Hey Shizuka, do me a favor an snag me some bait from the box there."

"Mkay dad!" Shizuka turned away and moved to the small box of recently bought bait, taking up a worm that looked particularly juicy. She moved to stand, turned, and yelped as she was face to face with Joseph's catch. He squeezed the fish's cheeks together and made a dramatic 'boo' noise, making Shizuka squeak again, falling over and turning invisible in her shock.

Joseph snickered, looking like he might just topple over from laughing too hard. "Eheeehe! Tried that one on Jotaro and didn't even get him to blink! You're too easy Shizuka!" Then he opened his eyes and realized that she was still invisible. "H-holy shit! Did she fall into the water? O-or hit her head?"

He leaned in closer, and suddenly yowled as strong fingers pinches his cheeks and pulled them wide. "Bleeeeh!" Shizuka was in hystericas as she materialized behind him and let go of his cheeks. "Who's the easy one now?" she said, before father and daughter collapsed into hystericas.
They fished together for a few more hours, until the sun was halfway down the sky. Then, Joseph decided to venture a more serious topic. "Hey, Shizuka..." She looked up, blinking behind her shades. She was still small, but she was growing up fast. It spurred a sad thought in his mind, making him aware that he’d be dead while she was still young. And the world was a dangerous place. It hadn’t felt that way with Holy.

Back then the world seemed simple. Dio was dead, as far as the world knew, and Kars was on a one way trip out of the solar system. His only definition of a 'Stand' back then was something you’d put a mannequin on. And it would be a dangerous world for Shizuka to grow up in now.

She would have Jotaro, Jolyne and Josuke, and all their friends... but sooner or later she would try to branch out on her own. "You know, Stand users are drawn to each other. Sometimes it's good, and you'll make new friends. Sometimes it's bad, and you might meet someone who wants to hurt you. And you'll need to be able to defend yourself."

Shizuka nodded firmly. "Right!"

"Well... I suppose I should say that when it comes to fighting, brute force isn't always an option. Especially when Stands are involved. You need to be smart- assess your situation, and try to find a way to win with your head." He smiled, rheumy eyes twinkling. "Keep that big brain of yours chugging, and always be trying to win with a quick plan. Thinking on the fly has saved my dumb ass plenty of times!"

He thought back on the mental image of Kars floating in space, impotently furious that Joseph had 'planned' for the volcano to erupt and launch him into space. He snickered to himself like a schoolboy finding a Playboy in the bushes.

"Use my head! Got it!" She grinned, showing the tiny gap in her front teeth. Tis being before she got the dental work to have that fixed up.

"Heh. Good. Oh that reminds me! I saw these in the bait shop, and thought they looked pretty cool," Joseph said. He reached into a large pocket on his fishing vest, and slowly pulled out a large black glasses case.

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This thought was at the front of Shizuka's thinking, despite her white hot anger. Use her head... yes, that was a necessity. Fun as it would be to pummel Paradise City senseless it would all be for nought if he could just regenerate. The solution was to lead the fight somewhere he couldn't heal in, but where?

The park? She knew one was nearby and outside of the pavement there was no cement... but then, would Paradise City follow her there? Perhaps a construction site. Outside of the buildings, those lots usually had sand on the ground. The realisation hit her like a freight train, and she cast her eyes up.

Looming high above was a large red crane, visible amidst a bouquet of buildings. It was only a few blocks away, by her reckoning.

Paradise City lunged forward, his waist gliding along the concrete at a frightful speed. He was making a beeline for Shizuka, cackling wildly... only come to a sudden stop as he smashed into an invisible wall. "Guh?!" Weight hit him from all sides, and
suddenly the dumpster that Houdini had dropped on him became visible. The golden Stand shot down and stomped on the dumpster from above, crushing the walls down and causing every black bag inside to explode with blinding sprays of... nasty garbage juice.

The baboon Stand grunted and gagged, fighting to tear through the dumpster. Shizuka pocketed her sunglasses and took off running, only slowing down at the exit to the alley when Paradise City burst through, tearing the dumpster in twain. She let him get a good look at her and got to running, weaving through the crowds on a busy Shibuya street.

"Running won't help! Running's just gonna make it worse for ya when I catch up to you!"

Where was the user? Shizuka asked herself as she continued moving through the bustling Tokyo crowd. Occasionally someone behind her would stop or stumble, smacking into Paradise City without realizing it. It was a remote control Stand, but rather powerful to boot. And with power like that, the user had to be nearby. And he spoke English fluently, so perhaps he would stick out as a white guy or a black guy? Then again, she supposed, he could be Asian-American like she was.

Whatever the case, nobody stood out to her in the crowd.

Shizuka burst into another empty alley and turned invisible, footsteps softly echoing. 'He saw me come here' she thought to herself 'But I don't want to make it too easy for him to keep up with me and catch up.'

A pair of arms suddenly scythed out of the ground in front of her, forcing Shizuka to jump back. "HOLY SHIT!! What th-"

"Kikikiki..." Paradise City emerged from the rippling concrete, grinning from ear to ear. "You might be invisible, but that doesn't stop me. I can feel vibrations through the ground!"

"Great..." Shizuka held her ground, becoming like a statue as Paradise City probed around in search for her. She needed an opening. Spying some trash cans she summoned Houdini to herself, sending her Stand over swiftly. It grabbed the lid off the can and suddenly flung it into a far wall, the loud clang causing Paradise City to spin around. Shizuka sprinted past him, panting as she felt the ground erupt behind each step. he was chasing her down at a shocking speed, swinging his arm like hard cement whips.

The crane was still in her line of sight, and growing larger with each step. She dared glance over her shoulder and saw, faintly, a silhouette at the far end of the alleyway. It was following her, while Paradise City nipped at her heels. Just as she thought, the user had to be close by.

A few more bullets of concrete whizzed her way and missed by scant inches, until one got lucky and scraped the outside of her right thigh. She stumbled, cursed, and powered through the pain, running forward as warm trickles of blood ran down her leg. She could handle it.

If she slowed down now, if she got caught, she was as good as dead.
And there it was, just up ahead: A chain link fence marked with various caution and safety signs that marked the perimeter of the construction site. A few unfinished buildings dotted the area, alongside large unused vehicles. And, sure enough, the ground was sand.

Shizuka rendered herself visible and ran for the fence, vaulting over it quickly with a little help from her Stand. She landed on the sand and quickly took note of a few blue tarps fluttering in the breeze, tied to a few girders from a largely unfinished structure. "Perfect," she purred to herself.

"Think I can't follow you in there? Think again!"

Paradise City launched himself from the ground with a hard downward press of his hands, flinging him over the fence. He landed on the sand and had to slow down to running along on his knuckles, but he still maintained a good pace as Shizuka ran into one of the unfinished buildings.

"Lemme ask you something," Shizuka asked. She turned invisible and jumped onto the stairs, making a quick dash to the second floor. "Any damage I do to you, can your user feel it?"

"Nope!" A large fist, bigger than Shizuka's torso, shot out from the second floor, and missed her by a few inches. She sucked in air through her teeth, rummaging in her right pocket for some coins. "So you can for get about beating me that way either!"

The young Joestar quickly tossed a few coins behind her, the vibrations drawing Paradise City away until he dove on top of where the money had landed. He growled in frustration, while Shizuka made for the third floor. There was no third floor as of yet, just a skeleton of red steel girders. She was quick to jump up and gripped the lip of one near her, holding on to keep her feet off the ground.

"Tch... good to know." She watched closely as Paradise City bubbled up from the floor, having slithered up this high through one of the walls. "Got you." Houdini suddenly appeared above him, causing the baboon to look up in shock. Houdini's left hand lanced over his face, brushed over his eyes... and suddenly Paradise City was screaming as his eyes vanished entirely.

"M-my eyes! I can't see, what the hell did you do?!!" He swung around wildly, but Shizuka's Stand had already been drawn back. "They, they're still there, I can't regenerate... so why the fuck am I blind?!"

Shizuka smirked confidently. "When I was younger, I wanted to know how vision worked so I could understand my own powers. Everything we see is just 'cause of light being reflected off it, and into our eyes... So I decided to use that principle, and stopped any light from entering your eyes!"

"So what?!! I'll find you you little shit, and when I do I'll wring your scrawny neck until candy pops out!"

"Yeah? And I'm gonna use your face like a fucking trampoline!"

A spray of cement bullets shout out in random directions, many missing Shizuka
entirely. Another spray went wide, but was growing nearer. She pulled herself higher up the girder and ignored the throbbing pain in her arms. Houdini was working fast, but...

One bullet grazed her left calf and cut the skin, making her hiss as another wave of bleeding pain hit her. Just a little more, a little more... now!

Shizuka swung back and forth on the girder and suddenly let go, throwing herself across the third floor until she reached the leftmost edge of the area. She made sure to land hard, making a lot of vibration to draw Paradise City in. "Hey, shitface! Over here!"

Paradise City snarled in fury and shot her way at a terrible speed, growing closer and closer until only about a meter separated them. Shizuka jumped over the edge, and Paradise City came sailing over the edge after her with a shocked gasp.

"Heh." Shizuka snapped her fingers, rendering Paradise City's eyes visible again. Just in time for him to see where they were falling.

On that skeleton of girders she had seen earlier, she had used Houdini to remove a flapping blue tarp and wrapped the edges around three of the towering girders, creating what looked to be a safety net. Shizuka hit the fabric and bounced off it, going into a quick roll as she then landed on her feet with only a brief wobble. Paradise City hit the tarp and, before he could roll off the edge, Houdini suddenly pulled the three corners together and squeezed them tight to trap Paradise City in the tarp.

"W-what the?! You little shit, let me go!"

"What was it you said earlier?" Shizuka asked with an air of false kindness "That you needed cement to regenerate?"

"E-eh?"

"Good to fucking know!"

Houdini brought the tarp down with a thunderous crash. And then did so again, and again, and again, until her arms built up a terrifying speed, smashing Paradise City down so fast that her arms were a blur.

"BAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZU!"

With an elegant flourish, Houdini opened the tarp and let the shattered remnants of Paradise City clatter onto the sandy ground. A few of his chunks were still twitching and writhing, trying to pull themselves back together. But they were having no luck.

Shizuka slowly strode forward until her shadow fell over one of Paradise City's broken and upturned eyes. "And your user is going to end up... even worse!"

"Eeeeeeeh?!"

"Ah." Shizuka smiled to herself as she heard that girlish squeal. "There you are." Houdini shot out from behind her, rushing for the nearest fence and grabbing the figure who had been hiding behind it, hoisting him up and then suddenly dumping him on the ground behind her. He was white, a pale redhead, and had an array of silver piercings in both ears. Whoever he was he was bigger than Shizuka by quite a
margin... but she seemed to loom high over him now, and looked downright terrifying with that dried blood clouded around her eyes.

Paradise City's user looked up at her. "H-hey now, let's be reasonable."

"I don't remember saying you could talk." Shizuka gave him a hard kick in the face, making him gag loudly. Slowly, she lifted her phone up until the camera was on and recording. "So you're Paradise City huh? Dunno what I was expecting, but you sure do look like a piece of shit."

He glared up at her, but held his tongue for now. "I'm not gonna kill you. In fact, you're gonna help me. You're going to go back to the States, and tell whoever hired you this little nugget of information: It's not fucking worth it. And if I have to deal with another shitty hitman, then I'm gonna charter the first plane home, and stick my foot so far up his fucking ass that I'll be able to wear him like a boot! Am I clear?!"

"Y-yes. Crystal. C-can I go?"

Shizuka smiled grimly and shook her head. "Oh no, I'm not done. See these?" Shizuka lifted one half of her broken sunglasses from her pocket. "These were a gift from my dad. He gave 'em to me when I turned eleven, on a nice fishing trip to Lake Mead. A precious memento of my time with my dad, which I only have a few of. And you broke them." She glowered intensely. "I loved my dad... And losing one of the few things I have to remember him by, well that just makes me... punchy."

"W-wait, I'm sorry! I didn't know!"

"You'll have plenty of time to repent for what you did... in the hospital!"

Houdini's fist caught his chin in a cracking uppercut, raising him up into the air. Her golden fists maintained a frightful speed, juggling him on her knuckles while the echoing sounds of each punch resoind through the lot. "BAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZU!" The assault relented for just a fraction of a second, in which Paradise City's user was left floating suspended in the air. Then she summoned her might and delivered a thunderous right hook to his face. "BAZU!"

"Gwaaaah!" His body sailed through the air until he struck an unfinished brick wall, the material shattering like a pane of glass and then collapsing atop him. Shizuka spat on the ground and strode away, with every second of his Stand-related beatdown already circling on a few secretive Stand user forums.

[Yngwie, user of the Stand『Paradise City』: Beaten badly, and had his reputation destroyed. He retires!]

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It was late by the time Shizuka got home, pushing open the door to the large apartment with a tired sigh. "I'm home!" she called, stepping out of her shoes.

Simmons looked up from the sushi he had ordered and made his way around the corner. He gasped as he saw the dried blood on Shizuka's legs and forehead. She had tried her best to clean up before coming home, but she hadn't gotten everything. "Y-young miss! You're bleeding!"
She smiled faintly "I'm okay Simmons, don't worry. It was just family business."

Everyone who worked for the Joestar family knew that there was something strange about them. And for their own good the family made this point fully known to them, with 'family business' being a codeword for 'freaky weird shit.' Just saying it was enough to let the staff know they shouldn't pry.

Simmons hesitated for a moment. "Are... are you okay?"

"Yep!" She smiled faintly and took the time to lift a small pill bottle out of her interior pocket. She had made a quick trip to Lifeson on the way home, and creating pills to quickly heal cuts was a trivial matter for him. In only two doses they'd be dealt with, without leaving a scar. "The sushi looks good. I just wanna' change first."

Shizuka made her way to her bedroom, trying to not feel guilty about making her butler worry. She knew he wanted to help, and appreciated the effort, but there was nothing he could do when it came to Stands.

She entered her room and closed the door behind her. The exhaustion hit her in a wave and she sat down hastily on her bed. "Fucking hell..."

Well, with any luck, there wouldn't be any more people sent to get her inheritance from her.

As she thought on this Shizuka took her broken sunglasses from her pocket and quietly regarded them. And despite herself, and her best efforts to be strong, she wound up crying.
Melancholy piano music drifted through Crossroads, a tune that fitted the atmosphere of the red-hued bar quite nicely. By now the song was ingrained in their memories just like Lala's hospitality, and served as the background music to their brains.

They had an office, supplied by their employer, but a good deal of their time was spent here. After all, these days 'official business' was hard to come by, and spending all their time sitting around might as well have been done somewhere comfortable rather than somewhere sterile and boring.

They had their usual booth in the far corner, away from prying eyes, and at present there were only three of them seated around. Evening was rolling in, and so they had moved onto alcohol.

The man in the middle was the leader, no doubt about it. Had that air about him, and the other two looked at him in the way underlings tended to. He was a tall man, his dark hair and beard clipped short. Silvery glasses rested on his slightly wrinkled visage, while the outer rim of his right eye was marked by a long faded scar. In his right hand he held a pale white cigar, slowly rolling it between his fingers with practiced skill.

"And you're sure this was in Tokyo?" The leader's gaze was directed to a phone resting on their table, seeing a paused frame of a golden fist making hamburger meat out of a man's face. Yngwie had been on the list of their department for some time, but they hadn't expected him to come out to Japan.

When it came to electronics, cameras had trouble picking up on Stands and their abilities. But they could still be seen in footage by Stand users, better than a non-user at least. The beatdown was blurry and out of focus, but the group at the table could tell it was the end result of a Stand battle well enough.

"Yessir," the man to his left said earnestly "I pass that place on the way to work every morning. Believe me, I know that construction site and surrounding buildings quite well." He was a shorter man. Younger too. His silky brown hair was swept back into a loose ponytail, his black pinstripe tie loosened around the neck of his pale shirt.

"Great, just when I was getting into a nice state of ennui... I knew shit would be starting up as soon as I heard a Joestar was moving our way," the leader remarked. He took a long drag of his cigar and closed his eyes behind his glasses. "Better bring her in an' have a little chat with her then. But uh... don't tell Sergio about any of this."

The younger man tilted his head a bit. "Uh, why sir?"

"Because," he plainly began "I know Sergio. And I know he'll do some stupid egotistical shit if he knows there's a Joestar around to compete with." Sighing then, his free hand reached up to stroke his chin. "Christ. Things can never be easy."

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"You sure you're okay?" Ann asked, perched up on the air conditioner unit of the school rooftop.
She had directed the question of Shizuka as she pressed against the wall of the accessway.

Lifeson's medication had, at the very least, managed to heal the scabs on her forehead. But the same couldn't be totally said for those on her legs. She had some visible bandages there, and would be stuck with them until tomorrow.

"Yeah it's cool, don't sweat it." She smiled and tipped the bridge of her heart-shaped shades "I mean it hurt at the time, but I know how to take a lump or two." Though she had been worried about her shades, and had posted them to Josuke without explaining how they got broken in the first place. Hopefully he wouldn't ask. But she already knew he would.

The group had gathered on the rooftop in a bid to find something to do to pass time, as none of them were in the mood to study today. And it was around that time that they had stopped to ask where Shizuka had gotten her injuries from.

"Another Persona-user active in the real world," Morgana mused "What a frightful concept."

"Stand user," Shizuka corrected "And really it's not that shocking. If you realized how many Stand users are going around right now, it'd make your head spin. Don't worry about it, that bastard learned a hard lesson about messing with a Joestar."

Shiho rubbed her chin in thought. "To think that someone would go so far just to get your dad's holdings from you... adults can be really horrible people," she mused.

"Are you sure you don't want one of us walking home with you?" Akira asked.

"I told you, I'm fine. I appreciate the concern, but that bastard's done and dusted. Besides that..." She bit her bottom lip in mild concern. "And... besides that, it'd be too dangerous for you guys to get involved in stuff like that until you can control your powers in reality."

The others nodded solemnly. It was an unfortunate truth, but she had a point. Outside of Palaces they were basically just teenagers. "Yeah... sucks that we can't do anything there. Buuut, what we can do is more thief stuff." Ryuji whipped his phone out and was soon scrolling through the Phansite. "Getting a target and practicing there will keep us on our toes for the future... ugh, too bad all these posts on the forum suck ass. Just people bitching about their parents or boyfriends."

"I suppose we can't get everything online. And it probably doesn't help that most people don't take us seriously." Ann sighed at the realization. The Phantom Thieves were little more than an urban legend for the time being, and it seemed unlikely that people would come to them with any serious request.

Ryuji rocked in his chair, looking down at his phone again. "Guess we gotta find one ourselves in that case. But it's not like criminals are just lining up at our door."

"Are you seriously suggesting we look for a target that even the police haven't found?" Morgana asked from his perch atop some abandoned desks.

"Yeah, maybe you're right," he said, even if it hurt to say that Morgana was right about literally anything ever. "Guess we just gotta hold off until exams. If we're lucky something good'll come up by then."

The roof access opened noisily with a loud whining squeak on the hinges. Morgana darted into
Akira's bag as the others stood to attention. They immediately shelved their conversation away from prying ears.

They stood slightly to attention as Makoto came into view. Well, the others did. Shizuka was more confident around their senpai. "This place is off limits you know," she said.

Ryuji sighed in a way that suggested he had heard words to that effect many times over the years. "We'll get out of here once we're done chattin'. Anyways, what's Miss Student Council President want with us?" he asked.

"I'm just noting that it's an interesting combination you have here," Makoto said, keeping her focus solely on Ryuji, Ann and Akira. "The troublemaker, the girl of rumor, and the infamous transfer student. That reminds me-"

"Hey prez!" Shizuka waved from her position by the wall. Makoto blinked in surprise, as if only now realizing that the Joestar girl had been there at all. But, well, Shizuka had a knack for blending in with the scenery.

Makoto seemed to have had a bit of steam deflated from her as she realized Shizuka was in on this too. "You know these guys?" Makoto asked. The gang seemed just as stunned that the two knew each other too.

"Mm. They're my friends," she confirmed.

Their senpai nodded stiffly. This had not been the plan. She had hoped to go to the infamous students of the school, three that had a clear beef with Kamoshida (she discounted Shiho as, as far as she knew, she had still been in the hospital when Kamoshida had his change of heart) and get under their skin. And if that worked, she could have some kind of lead on the 'Phantom Thief' stuff that had the principal so worked up.

But now, with Shizuka involved, it put something of a wrench in the works. She liked Shizuka and didn't want her getting wrapped up in any of this.

"Well uh... just know that the school roof is off limits because," she wanted to say 'the incident' but Shiho was standing right there and she already felt bad enough about what happened to her. "Ah. Yes, s-so it will be closed off soon," Makoto finished lamely before quickly bowing out.

As the door shut Ryuji nearly jumped out of his seat. "For real?! You and the student council president are friends?!" he asked.

"Yeah. We met when I transferred here, and she seemed nice," Shizuka explained. She took her phone out and leafed through some chat logs. "Yeah, and see, the other day she was texting me, and she said that Kobayakawa is really worried about this Phantom Thieves, and wants her investigating it."

"It's as I feared. That girl really is onto us." Morgana jumped from Akira's bag, back onto his previous perch on the old desks. "And she seems like a sharp one to boot. We should be cautious."

Ryuji groaned and leaned forward in his seat. "Shit... why's she looking our way?" he asked, seeming to the universe rather than anyone in particular.

"Your delinquent reputation and past skirmishes with Kamoshida," Shiho replied with flat honesty.
It made Ryuji sigh again. "But really, you guys shouldn't sweat it. It's not like anyone could ever prove what we could get up to. Still..." Shiho scratched the back of her head "It might be for the best if we do find a new hideout."

The others watched her closely. They had offered to move to another spot, well aware of what the school roof meant to her. But Shiho hadn't wanted them to go to any extra trouble on her behalf.

"Well uh... hey, don't worry. Our next hideout will be way cooler," Ryuji said with surprising kindness, grinning at Shiho. She smiled ever so slightly in return.

Ann sighed "Still, I'm kinda pissed off. Between all her looking over our shoulders, and the exams coming up... ugh, it's stressful."

And Morgana, always eager for a chance to butter up Ann, smiled. "Well, I do have something interesting I wanted to show you guys. And you guys did promise to help me with my mission after all," Morgana said. "Follow my lead. To Shibuya station!" He hopped into Akira's bag, and the dark haired boy took the lead to the exit.

"So seriously, you're friends with Niijima-senpai?" he asked, glancing Shizuka's way.

"Why're you guys making it seem so weird?" Shizuka replied, puffing her cheeks out.

"I mean, the staff kind of pointed me as far away from the student council as possible when I arrived," Akira replied with a noncommittal shrug. Down they went.

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"Hey Shizuka," Ann said as they neared the outside of Shibuya's station. She spoke with a tone that suggested this had been on her mind for some time now. "Why do they call it a Stand?" she asked.

"Cause it stands beside you," she answered plainly.

Ryuji lifted one curious eyebrow, the blunt statement enough to make him look up from his phone. "Seriously? That's the reason?"

"Why in the heck are you looking at me like that for? I didn't come up with the name!"

The group settled near the entrance to the station while Ryuji brought up the Phan-site once more. "Okay," Morgana began "I need you guys to look for a request with a full name attached to it," he said.

"Like I said before, there's no big shots on the list. But man... people actually do put names and stuff on here. It's scary shit when you think about it," Ryuji mused. It earned a nod from Shizuka, but she wasn't wholly shocked by it. Social media tended to bring trouble with it.

Ann checked her phone, her brows slowly lifting as she read one post. "Oh, there might be something here. He won't listen to what I say and..." she trailed off with an irritated sigh "Wait, crap. No name on this one."

"It needs to be something serious, right?" Shizuka asked, making Morgana nod. "Geez. I dunno, you think something will actually be there? With some of the comments I've seen on there, it
doesn't seem like people would go to us before they go to the police or something."

"I don't know what to do about my ex who's stalking me. His name is Natsuhiko Nakanohara," Ann read aloud. "And it says here that he's a teller at city hall!"

Shiho tilted her head a bit "To think someone in the government is doing something like that." She supposed she shouldn't have been too shocked though.

And from his perch, Morgana was beaming. "That should be a suitable target. Now, get the Nav ready," he instructed.

"We're just gonna jump into a Palace? Works for me!" said Ryuji enthusiastically.

"Hey! Aren't we supposed to make unanimous decisions about stuff like this?" asked Ann. She turned her gaze to the others "What do you guys think?"

Akira shrugged. "I'm curious to see where Morgana's going with this. And besides, I had nothing else planned for today." The evening, however, was another matter entirely.

Whatever Morgana was planning, he was being quite tight lipped about it. But if they knew about another big target to go for, then it would help them get through the tedium of exams. "Might as well," Shizuka conceded.

"And I was hoping for a little workout anyway," Shiho said.

Ann nodded, pleased that the whole group had had a say. "Alright then, let's go."

"We need a name and a place, right? So the name is..."

"Actually, we don't need a location this time. Just enter exactly what I say," Morgana hastily interrupted. "The keyword is 'Mementos.'"

"Candidate found."

The phone chimed, and the air resonated with a distorted purple static. Ryuji's eyes widened in mild surprise. "Just as I thought," Morgana proudly said. The air distorted again, and in a single second the Arditi found themselves standing in the exact same spot in Shibuya... only now, the streets were completely empty.

A horrible chill permeated the air, and the sky seemed... muted. The great television screens adorning various buildings were pitch black, and the advertisements of the city were blank. A few cars were parked in place on the streets, but they seemed more like stage props than actual vehicles.

"W-what the shit..." Ryuji said, looking around wide eyed. Tokyo being a ghost town filled the group with an uncertain dread. The sight alone just felt so fundamentally wrong. "Is this that Nakanohara guys Palace?"

"Half right, and half wrong Ryuji," Morgana cryptically answered. "This is a type of Palace, but it's different from the normal ones. Let's head down. The Shadows only lurk underground. I don't quite know why though. It's as if they're drawn to something," Morgana explained.
"Underground?" Ann asked uncertainly "How are we gonna get there?"

"How? You use it every day on your way to school," Morgana replied. He hopped down and casually strode down the staircase toward the train platforms. The others, deciding to push past how unsettling the vacant facsimile of Tokyo was, followed Morgana's lead.

"Wait up cat!" Ryuji said hurriedly.

"Not a cat!" Morgana called in return.

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At some point, as they walked down the darkened and immobile escalators, their clothing changed into their thief attire. It happened so suddenly that none of them had noticed until they emerged from the shadows.

"Oh my goodness!" Shiho exclaimed in shock, eyes wide.

Ann checked herself slowly, humming. "So the Shadows know we're here?" she asked.

"Pretty much since we got here." Morgana hopped toward them at a growing speed, able to move faster even on such stubby legs. "Not that you need worry. I've been here several times, and the Shadows never come up this far. But it's a different story down below. If I were to find a term to describe it, think of this place as a... a nest for Shadows."

Their surroundings were like a red hued nightmare version of the Tokyo subway, the walls a bloody colour while strange growths and masses of slime decorated the walls and oozed in the corners. The various screens, normally used to show advertisements, instead showed only static. It was like the set of a horror movie.

In a brief wave of movie nostalgia, Shizuka murmured "Game over man, game over..." to herself.

"What even is this Mementos place?" Akira asked, turning slightly to examine his trusty cat.

Morgana confidently settled his paws on his rounded hips. "The best way to think of Mementos is to view it as... everyone's Palace." The sharp statement earned surprised stares from the rest of the Arditi. "A Palace as grand as that castle we cleared only appear when a person's wishes are extremely distorted. As cases like this are rare, the general public instead has one giant shared Palace. Mementos."

"So it's like..." Shizuka paused for a moment, mentally aligning the words in her head to try and make something coherent. "Everyone in the world has a spot in this Mementos place, and if they get really fucked up then they branch off with a Palace outside of here, in a new spot in the Metaverse?" Morgana nodded in confirmation.

"And we can change the hearts of people who don't have Palaces of their own?" Ann asked.

Morgana smiled. "Correct! You're as astute as ever Lady Ann!" he said eagerly. "Though I should stress that the steps for changing a heart in Mementos are slightly different. No calling card needed, for one."

All the while Ryuji had been stroking his chin in deep thought, and finally thought to voice a
concern that his mind had been gradually cogitating. "By the way you're talkin' about it Mona, it sounds like this place is a lot huger than a regular Palace. Are we really gonna be able to just walk around?"

The question made Morgana flash a mischievous grin, pleased to have a secret that the rest of the gang hadn't known about. With his usual speediness he made for a blank space near the lower escalators. "The time has finally come. Morganaaa..." He suddenly struck a dramatic pose, his left fist cocked back by his hip while his left paw moved upward in a clockwise motion. Even Shizuka was impressed. "Transform!"

The feline jumped high and, in a cartoony puff of smoke, suddenly transformed into a large black van that clattered noisily to the ground. It had a long black tail swishing from the back bumper, and its headlights were a pair of clear blue eyes. The others jumped back in shock.

"Come now Panther, ladies first!" Shiho and Shizuka shared an annoyed look.

"How in the... what in the..." Ryuji murmured, unable to string a proper sentence in his tremendous shock.

Morgana, for a change, ventured to explain himself. "This comes from the way cognition materializes in the Metaverse. With a little bit of extra training. For some reason 'cats turning into buses' is a widespread cognition among the general public."

The gang chewed on this for a few seconds. "Oooooh," Shizuka said in a dawning realization. Totoro most have been a bigger cultural thing here than she had anticipated. Still, it was a little funny.

Once Akira recovered from his shock, he smiled wickedly. "This will be a great help Mona. Come on guys, let's get going and see if we can find that Nakanohara guy." The Arditi quickly filed into the back bench of the expansive van, and found that it was a little bigger on the inside than it appeared on the outside.

They sat there in silence for several moments, in which the Monamobile didn't move.

"Uh... why are you guys just sitting there?" asked Morgana. "I'm a car. I can't drive myself."

"Oh. Uh..." Shiho scratched the back of her head in embarrassment. "Do any of you guys know how to drive? I never even tried to learn," she said.

Shizuka pondered this. She did drive once in the past...

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"GYAHAHA! Higashikata Josuke! If you think you and your Crazy Diamond will ever get near me, you're sorely mistaken! Ain't nobody gonna catch up with my "Eternal Idol!"

The mocking tones were coming from a cocky silver haired youth, standing on the flat back of his Stand. It was vaguely humanoid in shape, with a large three eyes head and lanky arms. But from the waist down it was just one large tire, glowing red hot from how fast it was turning.

And Josuke, for his part, was leaning out the passenger side window of a van roaring down an empty countryside road, the tires shrieking noisily. As it turned out, Eternal Idol had a nasty power
to remove the friction from any surface the wheel passed over, while it maintained a sharp speed.

His plan had simply been to rob some doddering old codgers from Morioh and breeze out of town, but Josuke had taken exception to this.

Clinging onto a rope attached to the back of the van for dear life was Okuyasu, howling as he desperately tried to pull himself to the back doors. He had been aiming to use The Hand to pull Eternal Idol in closer, but it.... hadn't worked out quite well. "J-Josuke! I can't hold much longer, hurry!"

"Shizuka, hold the wheel steady!" Josuke called, as Crazy Diamond suddenly punched the earth, scraping up several chunks of asphalt that immediately reshaped and merged together into a spear in Crazy Diamond's hand.

And there was Shizuka, just twelve, and clinging to the wheel of the van for dear life. "I can't reach the pedals!" she exclaimed. Oh dear, they were heading for a very steep hill.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

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Shizuka blinked impassively. "Someone else should probably drive."

Akira was quick to move around to the drivers seat, while Ryuji deftly slid to the passengers side. He was, after all, Akira's right hand. "Alright, let's do this." He turned on the ignition, and then felt his spine shudder in some dread as he was left briefly wondering how the hell Morgana had an engine inside him.

As a general rule, train tunnels weren't particularly well lit. Aside from the headlights of oncoming trains, there wasn't a whole lot of light to be found. But Mementos was darker than even that, a choking blackness that seemed to almost stare back into the group. Morgana's lights barely cut through the pitch.

And there were Shadows here, as Morgana had said. Not too different from those the Arditi had fought in Kamoshida's castle. And with how strong they had become, dealing with them on the way was a simple enough task.

But eventually the group came upon something that stood out amidst the urban decay. A swirling vortex of black and red that glowed in the gloom, with several twistes train tracks being pulled toward it, as if tugged upon by some unseen gravity.

"Mona... what is that?" Akira asked, genuinely surprised for a change. Whatever it was, it didn't look very appealing.

"Our target is through here, I can feel it." His headlamps narrowed in a cartoonish fashion. "By the sounds of that post, his desires are on the verge of reaching critically distorted levels. He already has his own section of Mementos growing outward like a tumor, and if his distorted desires grow any stronger he'll branch off into his own Palace entirely."

Ryuji punched his left fist into his palm. "Alright! Let's do something about that twisted heart o' his!"
Morgana's back wheel whirred noisily before the van sprang through the vortex. They were immediately spat out on the other end- a large concrete tomb where the gooey trappings of Mementos were steadily eroding away into something new. The group hopped out of Morgana, who changed swiftly back into his feline form.

Standing several feet away from them was a well dressed human figure. Swirls of darkness rotated violently at his feet, and even from afar they could tell the bespectacled brunette male had glowing golden eyes just as Kamoshida's Shadow did. They could hear him muttering to himself, something about a woman and how he 'owned' her, and how dare she do this to him. And so on.

"Looks like this is our stalker," Shizuka said. She clenched her left fist a few times and then shook her wrist loose. "Normally I'd feel bad about hitting a guy in glasses, but if he's making life shit for his ex, I think I'll manage."

Shiho cracked her neck loudly and then summoned her naginata in a rather nonchalant fashion. "I'm gonna beat him like a drum." Akira led the way forward until they reached the figure, who grew hunched and defensive once they were in his field of view.

"You Natsuhiko?" Akira asked.

The bespectacled little man hissed noisily "Who are you?!

"Are you the stalker we've been hearing about? Ever stop to consider how your ex feels?" Ann asked, glaring at him. She knew from experience that, of course, he hadn't.

"She's my property! I can do whatever I want with her! She treated me like a plaything, so what's wrong with me doing the same?!

"You can't treat someone like shit just cause they did that to you!" Ryuji replied hastily.

Shiho raised her naginata and took aim. "Well, he's not denying it. Get ready, the Phantom Thieves are here to fix that twisted heart of yours!"

"There are millions of people far worse than me! What about Madarame? He stole everything from me, and you brats are gonna let him off the hook?!

The others shared an uncertain glance, all conveying the same question: Who the hell is Madarame? A wave of darkness suddenly washed over Natsuhiko, and in an instant the spindly city worker was replaced by some manner of squat creature, eyes hidden beneath black bangs. It was grinning with a mouthful of razor sharp teeth and hopping from foot to foot with his enlarged fists clenched tight.

Shiho suddenly dashed forward, swinging her naginata with two powerful swings that sliced against his upraised forearms, causing Natsuhiko to cackle and jump backward. "Aradia!" Her Persona appeared above her, glowing with a radiant light before firing a golden dagger that the boisterous shadow, the ensuing explosion sending Natsuhiko sailing backward.

She turned sharply and gave Ann a resounding high five "Panther, you're up!" The blonde grinned and raised her machine gun up, and soon the darkened chamber was lit up by the vibrant hail of gunfire that kept the Shadow pinned down and on the defensive.

"Skull, move to flank him from behind! Mona, be ready to intercept when Skull hits him. Sting..." Akira grinned at their local invisible girl "Set a trap."

Ryuji broke into the high speed sprint of a track star, making a beeline around the edge of the room while Ann laid down some suppressing fire. With one fluid motion he summoned Captain Kidd to himself and let out a sturdy yell as the phantom pirate suddenly shot forward. The front of his ship rammed into Natsuhiko from behind, catapulting the Shadow across the room whereupon Zorro shot down from above and smashed him into the concrete floor with a strong gale of wind.

"Grah!" The Shadow shot up through the dust and caught Zorro with a powerful left hook, making Morgana reel back with a yelp of pain.

He had been slowed down, but not by much. Natsuhiko raised his left fist and then punched the air in front of him, sending a sudden blade of wind toward Ann. The blonde raised her arms to block and let out a pained gasp as the wave of pressure sent her skidding back on her sharp high heels.

"He's strong for a pipsqueak," Akira murmured. He looked up, watching Natsuhiko lift two chunks of debris from the ground and abruptly launched them at Ann as she was struggling to get her balance again. Akira acted quickly, summoning Arsene who lunged forward and destroyed both chunks of concrete to dust with a single swing of his chains. The crimson figure cackled in delight, and turned his flaming gaze to Natsuhiko.

"You damn brats! I had everything taken from me once before, and I won't anything be taken from me again!"

He took a step forward, only for several shapes to explode into the cement around him. He pressed a hand to some kind of unseen wall, like a mime in an invisible box. Shizuka snapped her fingers, and in an instant his surroundings became clear. A cage that had been formed by strips of railway steel, tied together at the ends. Houdini was weaker than Crazy Diamond, but twisting steel was a simple task.

"Oi, Skull," she said, grinning at the infamous blond. "Fry 'em."

If you were to ask Ryuji for any scientific information about electricity, he was likely going to say it was invented in a team up of Ben Franklin and Thomas Edison. But even he knew that electricity and steel were a match made in heaven.

"One fried douchebag coming up! Hit it Captain Kidd!" The spectral pirate cackled and aimed his cannon arm outward, firing out a bolt of golden lightning that struck the makeshift cage. Natsuhiko shrieked and writhed, his whole body glowing from the voltage bombarding him, the voltage so intense that the metal slowly melted around him. The Shadow swayed, staggered forward drunkenly while smoke billowed off his scorched body. Shiho knocked him flat on his back with a dismissive kick.

Compared to Kamoshida's transformed state, he wasn't much of a challenge. But, given time, his Shadow could have grown into a real menace.

His exterior bubbled and blackened, before the dark mass melted away to reveal Natsuhiko's more human shape. "I... I'm sorry. It's just that I already lost everything I loved, and my girlfriend was the only thing I had left. It was wrong but, I couldn't bear to lose her too."

Akira approached and looked down at the Shadow. "Repent for what you've done, and never bother your ex again. Then maybe some day you'll be forgiven."
"Right..." the brunette replied. His Shadow glowed with a shimmering blue light and then vanished entirely, the distortion removed from the equation.

"Well, that worked out rather nicely," Akira said, smiling at his companions. "And I think this Mementos place could make for some good practice in the future. Give us some small fries to work on."

"Speaking of," Ann said "Who do you think he was talking about earlier? Who's Madarame?"

Shizuka pondered this "Dunno. Sounds kinda familiar though, like something that was on the news or something. Guess we could look into it though..." Then she sighed and closed her eyes "After exams at least..."
Let's Get Cultured! (I)

5/14

Their exams came along in a rush, and managed to take up several days of their time. They had little time to spend outside of the exams, and with how draining they managed to be the group was of a mind that it was too dangerous to explore Mementos at this time.

It was a shame really. Shizuka kind of wanted a chance to unwind by punching something.

It was early in the morning when she spied Ryuji and Akira chatting at the train platform. Ryuji looked emotionally drained and Akira was Akira. An unflappable man who looked almost like part of the scenery if he stood still for too long.

"... Nah, I gave up on the exam. I was playing video games instead, and before I knew it it was morning," she heard Ryuji said as she made for the two.

"Sheesh man... I know you don't like school but you could at least try," Shizuka said.

Ryuji folded his arms over his chest. "Oh yeah? An' how are exams going for you JoJo?" he asked, head cocked to the side.

The question made Shizuka scratch her neck uncertainly. "Dunno. I think I got a lot of right answers, but my writing still sucks..."

"Whatever the case," Morgana said, poking his head from Akira's bag "I'm sure you're doing better than this blond monkey."

"What was that?!"

Akira sighed and glanced down at his feline adviser. "Be nice," he chided. "At any rate, we're nearly done. So just grin and bear it for today and the Arditi will be back in business in no time."

It was at that point that Ann and Shiho approached on the platform and they, much like Ryuji, both seemed a little drained. "Heh. Looks like these two were studying," Ryuji mused.

"Morning guys," Shiho greeted. She smiled primly "Well, we're nearly done!"

"Too true," Shizuka said. "Ugh. School on Saturdays, and exams to boot... Japanese school is rough man."

Ann shrugged in a 'what can you do' kind of way. "I thought the same when I first moved out here, but truth be told it'd be weird to adjust to the other way now," she mused. "And it'll make Sunday all the sw-" she stopped, bristling suddenly and looking from side to side. It earned a concerned glance from Shiho while the others looked mildly confused. "Am I imagining things?" she asked aloud.

"Something wrong?" Akira asked. He eyed the crowd closely, but nobody seemed to stick out. The throngs of people had that effect.
"Ann thinks someone is stalking her," Shiho said. "For the last few days at least, though neither of us have really seen anything. Still, she feels like someone's watching her."

Akira tilted his head slightly. "Maybe it's Nijjima-senpai?" The others gave him a curious look. "She's been hovering around me at school. Then again," he flicked his dark bangs back elegantly "Perhaps that's just my devilishly good looks getting me in trouble again." Morgana rolled his eyes.

"Yeah well... don't take this the wrong way Ann, but you're a blonde haired blue eyed white girl in Japan. Of course people are watching you," Shizuka said.

Ann set her hands on her hips "I'm used to that, but this feels different. I'm really kinda worried," she said.

Ryuji looked to his middle school friend and then gave his head a quick shake. "Alright alright, let's do something about it then." He could be a tease, and maybe insensitive at points, but when it came down to it he really couldn't stand to see his friends in trouble. "Here's my plan..."

The rest of their commute went as planned, acting casual so that Ann's stalker (if that person even existed) wouldn't think anything was going on. And, as they got off their last train at Aoyama-Itchome, the group of young thieves made their way up the stairs as normal. Then, once outside, they left Ann standing by at the entryway while they took up stealthy positions to observe.

If Ann's stalker existed, then it stood to reason that that person wouldn't act if her friends were crowded around her. It was risky, but then they were ready to run in at the first sign of trouble.

The crowd leaving the train grew thinner and thinner, until Ann felt a shadow fall over her. She grew tense, hearing soft footsteps growing closer and closer to her. Akira and Ryuji suddenly moved in from her sides, stopping the incoming figure from putting a hand on her shoulder. Shiho moved in from behind to cut off his retreat.

Whatever the gang had envisioned, the stalker was a very different kind of young man. A rather tall and thin young man with well styled blue hair, dressed in some kind of formal high school uniform. A white blazer to contrast Shujin's black. He looked like some kind of manga prettyboy. Not a main character, but the dashing and cool headed rival to the hot blooded protagonist.

Ryuji gave him the once over. The bluenette really didn't match the mental image of 'creepy stalker.' "Uh... you sure this is the guy? Or are you just that self-conscious?"

"W-why you!" Ann snapped, set to launch into some kind of rant before the mysterious stranger interrupted them.

"W-why you!" Ann snapped, set to launch into some kind of rant before the mysterious stranger interrupted them.

"Is there something you want?" he asked in a velvety smooth voice.

Shiho cocked her head to the side. "Well... whoever he is, I don't think we need to worry too much about him. JoJo, you can come down now."

The others looked up at a nearby lamppost, able to see that Shizuka had perched herself at the top and was set to jump down if things took a bad turn. "You sure? Man I was all set to legdrop this guy Hulk Hogan style. Was gonna be rad."

"You should probably jump down before any police come around," Akira said. The bluenette seemed nonplussed by all this.
Shizuka shimmered down the post and landed neatly on her feet. "It was gonna be really cool," she assured the group. "Shizukamania's running wild, ya know? Wait, do you guys even know who Hulk Hogan is? Agh, not important. What is important is," she pointed decisively at the young man "Who in the heck are you?"

A sleek black car pulled up to the side of the road, immediately drawing the focus of the blue haired boy. A tinted back window rolled down, revealing an aged old man dressed in some kind of formal green and blue robes, his silver hair tied back in a loose ponytail. "My goodness. I was wondering why you left the car. So this is where your passion led you. All's well that ends well," the old man remarked, trailing off into a quick chuckle.

Shizuka's eyes widened. While the incident with the stalker in Mementos had largely fallen to the back of her mind, she had at least taken the time to search 'Madarame' online. All the results that came up were about some famous Japanese artist, and the man pictured in those articles was the same geezer that was sitting in the car before them now.

"Hm?" Ryuji gave Shizuka a sideways glance "What's up?"

"I'll tell you later," she whispered in return. This old dude was some kind of thief? It seemed hard to believe and she didn't want to jump to conclusions.

"Apologies sensei," the bluenette said, bowing stiffly toward the older man. His attention snapped back to Ann. "I saw you from the car, and I couldn't help but chase after you. I didn't even notice the calls from sensei. Thank goodness I caught up with you."

"Ooookay?" Ann replied, sounding like she was getting set to make a run for it at a moments notice.

Shiho gave him a quick once over. He didn't seem dangerous. Some would say pleasant, and conventionally he was a rather attractive young man. Still, appearances could be deceiving. "And why were you chasing after her?" she asked.

"I have been searching for a woman like her for years. She is the muse I seek. So please," the young man clenched a hand over his heart, his left arm shooting to his side in a dramatic fashion "Let me paint you for my next art piece!"


"Well... yeah, but," Ann didn't quite know how to finish her sentence. The people who she usually modeled for weren't quite so... intense.

"Geez..." Shizuka scratched the side of her head "First the cat's all over her, and now there are guys dying to capture her on canvas in the streets. What am I, chopped liver?" Then again, she of course had to admit to Ann's undeniable hotness.

"This feels a little sketchy," Shiho remarked. And this was coming from someone regularly used to strangers gawking at Ann.

"Ya think?" said Ryuji.
The blue-haired boy clasped his hands together over his chest. "Will you cooperate with me? What do you say?" he asked hastily.

"Whoa hold your horses!" Ryuji said, set to step between the two. "Just who are you anyway?!!"

He straightened up swiftly. "Oh, where are my manners? I'm a second year at Kosei High's fine-arts division. My name is Yusuke Kitagawa." He shouldered past Ryuji, a gesture that made his right eye twitch in frustration. "I'm Madarame-sensei's pupil, and I'm being allowed residence at his home. I'm striving to become an artist," he said enthusiastically.

Akira rolled his eyes. "And people think I'm scary..."

Now Ann seemed a bit intrigued. "You mean that Madarame? The famous artist who's been on the news lately?" she asked.

"The very same."

"Yusuke!" Madarame called from the backseat of his car. Not in a particularly angry fashion, but in the way one would address a dog who insisted on running off.

Yusuke cleared his throat, mildly embarrassed. "I'm sorry Sensei, I'll be right there." He turned his attentions back to Ann. "Madarame-sensei's new exhibition will begin at the department store near the station tomorrow. I'll be there to help out, so please come by. You know, to give an answer on modelling." And, begrudgingly, he glanced to Ann's friends. "I doubt you have any interest in the fine arts, but I'll give you tickets too."

"Nuts to you," Shizuka murmured as she pocketed the ticket Yusuke handed her. "I'm totally fuckin' cultured." Though, in truth, she had little interest in any artwork that wasn't in a manga or comic book. A girl raised to the lofty tastes of her old man.

"Well then. I hope to see you tomorrow." Yusuke smiled pleasantly at Ann, and then calmly slid into Madarame's car. They drove off down the rainslick streets, leaving the Arditi to ponder the strange encounter.

"Effin' dick," Ryuji grumbled.

Their leader stroked his chin in a ponderous thought and then looked Shizuka in the eye. "You seemed troubled when we saw the old man. What's up?"

Shizuka shrugged. "Well... you remember in Mementos, when that guy spoke about a 'Madarame'? I looked him up online, and that geezer was the only thing that came up. Some super famous artist who's starting to make waves outside of Japan too."

"Mm." Akira nodded slightly. "It's not much to go on though. We didn't get to find out what Nakanohara's beef was with Madarame was, and truth be told the guy was nuts. The old man doesn't strike me as a bad guy."

"People said the same thing about Kamoshida," said Shiho darkly.

"Granted." They had heard sentiments much to that effect already. Akira sighed. "Well, we have no leads to go on, and I didn't have plans for tomorrow. We could use this exhibition as a chance to see if there's anything shady about this Madarame guy."
Morgana poked his head from Akira's bag. "And we need to keep an eye on that Yusuke weirdo too! For the sake of Lady Ann's chastity!"

"Would you stop?! Nothing's gonna happen between me and him!"

Ryuji still seemed a little peeved that he had been brushed aside earlier, but he had no objections to the arrangement. "He's a smug dick, but Yusuke's right. Art ain't my scene. But hell, if that old timer is up to any shady shit it'd be a big deal if the Phantom Thieves took him down. He's famous an' all."

"True," Morgana said. "An artist known around the nation would resonate more with the public than a gym teacher who is past his glory years. But we'll need to be cautious. We could end up in a lot of trouble if we end up making any false accusations."

The group nodded in agreement. Shiho glanced down to her watch. "Are we uh... going to school?"

Ryuji's eyebrows raised up suddenly. "Oh shit! Come on, we better haul ass!"

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The last exam went by in a blur, and Shizuka supposed the prospect of a new case had infused her with a little more energy than normal. She got through the day without incident and, satisfied with all she had done, she made to head home.

By the time she reached Shibuya, she felt something was off. Just as she had when that Paradise City creep had been pursuing her.

She kept up a good pace through the crowds, her hands stuffed in her jacket pockets. It was going to start raining soon, and she really wanted to get in before that started. The game would be afoot tomorrow, and she wanted to be rested after today.

The world, however, had other plans.

"Shizuka Joestar. A word?" the voice came from behind her and made her stop entirely. The young woman turned and spied two figures approaching her. To her left was a tall and thin bespectacled man with silver glasses, wearing a white shirt, dark trousers and matching suspenders. His shoes were polished and dazzlingly clean.

Beside him was a woman several years Shizuka's senior, dressed in a dark suit of her own. A sparkling pearl necklace rested around her neck, and her hair cut was a short and spiked crop of silver. She definitely wasn't old, nor did her hair look dyed. It seemed silver was just her natural colour.

"You looking to fight me too?" Shizuka asked cautiously. The two carried themselves with a confident swagger that said 'Stand user' in pulsating neon letters. Fighting two on one, that was a tall order.

"Wh- oh, no, not at all!" the young woman said, raising her hands up as a gesture of peace. "We know about your skirmish the other day. It certainly made its rounds on the internet. And that's why we wanted to talk to you."
Shizuka hummed to herself for a few thoughtful seconds. "How do I know you're not just saying that to lull me into a false sense of security so you can attack me that way?"

"Seems like a lot of work if we just wanted to fight," the bespectacled man said. "Trust me, you're not in any trouble or anything." He reached into his pocket with a deliberate slowness and proceeded to take out his wallet, sliding an ID card into view. Shizuka lifted her sunglasses to examine it.

The name listed was 'Yoshio Aikawa', with other details including his date of birth and blood type. A sparkling Speedwagon Foundation watermark glimmered on the card whenever the light hit it.

The woman followed his lead and took her own ID card from her right pocket. 'Aya Riko.'

"Okay, you guys are legit," she said, satisfied. "What do you need?"

"Would you mind coming with us?" Yoshio asked "It's going to start raining soon, and we have an office not too far from here."

Shizuka raised no objection to this, and silently followed the duo off the central street. It didn't take long to reach a squat concrete building, flanked on both sides by smaller stores. The sign by the door read 'Pakistan Cricket Bat Imports.'

"Uh..."

Aya sighed. "Ignore that. The work we do here is a secretive one. As such we keep the sign vague, and related to a topic nobody in Tokyo would give a crap about. People pass this building every day in their hundreds and never give it a passing glance."

Aya swiped her card down the reader at the door, and led the way in through the newly unlocked doors. They automatically clicked shut behind the group. They were metal, steel most likely. If it came down to it, Houdini could take out the hinges to make an escape.

The office was, well, an office. It reminded her of those old detective movies that her dad had a bountiful collection of, with six steel desks dominating the room with stacks of papers and folders weighing on each desk. Each spot had modern looking terminal at it, though Aya and Yoshio's were turned off. The windows were marked by aged blinds, slightly askew.

From her spot near the entryway Shizuka could see other doorways, one leading to a storage room, two bathroom doors, and a door leading to a staff kitchen. Not a bad place, she supposed.

A dark haired man with a neat beard was seated behind the center desk, regarding Shizuka silently behind his glasses. The scar near his eye stood out, even from afar. "So you're Joestar huh? You're shorter than I was expecting. I'm Satoshi Morihiro. I'm chief investigator of Tokyo's SID branch."

Shizuka cocked her head to the side. "SID?" she repeated.

"Stand Investigation Department," Satoshi elaborated. "We're a division of the Foundation, dealing with... well, Stand-related incidents."

"Never heard of you before today."

Aya made for her desk and sat down behind it, sighing happily as she sank into her plush rotating
Nah, you wouldn't have. Like I said we try to keep our existence on the down low. Works out pretty well, since the SID has been active for over ten years."

Not even Jotaro had mentioned these guys. Then again Jotaro likely wouldn't mention anything unless asked specifically. "Over ten years?" she repeated, a little stunned.

"Ever since Morioh. I'm sure you don't remember, being a baby at the time, but Yoshikage Kira was a... wake up call for the Foundation." Satoshi tented his fingers in front of his face and regarded Shizuka impassively. "At the time, nobody had stopped to consider the existence of such a man. A serial killer living such a mundane life, and using his Stand to ensure his crimes never came to light. That man killed over fifty people, and the Foundation didn't even have an inkling it was going on. Not wanting such a situation to arise again, they created the SID to look into any mysterious disappearances, or any murders that left the police stumped, with branches across the globe. Because, let me tell you..." Satoshi sighed and gently closed his eyes "The world is full of Kira's."

The thought alone sent a chill down her spine. She didn't know much about Kira, beyond that he had existed, and the others all seemed on edge whenever she'd wanted to know more. Even Josuke seemed to tense up. Whoever he had been, the scars he inflicted on her hometown ran deep. "So you guys are all Stand-users?" she asked, wanting to change the subject.

"Right," Yoshio confirmed. "Even if you got regular police officers to believe in Stands, they'd still be sitting ducks and have no idea how to defend themselves. So our skills are oriented towards tracking, fighting, and trapping enemy users."

His left shoulder glimmered with light as a figure materialized there, perched with perfect balance. It looked to be some kind of white lizard with large red eyes, tendrils sprouting from its sharpened claws and seeming to merge into the flesh of Yoshio's neck and shoulders. It had two tails, both dotted with small red points, and they swished back and forth at rotating intervals. "This is Kashmir, my Stand. I can sense people by their neuroelectricity and track them over a few hundred meters. Stand users have heightened neuroelectricity, so it makes my job easier. That said, he's not much for combat outside of giving people mean headaches."

Next it was Aya's turn. She held her right arm up, with a wave of light glowing above her forearm. The figure that appeared was a bird of metal, looking almost like an owl. Its chest was made of polished brass, its wings rows of sleek silver knives acting like feathers. It had a long neck shaped like a steel coil, leading up to a brass avian head with a worryingly sharp beak. There was a hole in the bird's chest, giving a glimpse at slowly grinding clockwork gears. "Big Iron, my Stand. I'm the trapper, and so... well, actions speak louder than words." She lifted up a coaster from her desk, whereupon Big Iron immediately stabbed a feather into the material. It rippled in Aya's hand and suddenly transformed into a mousetrap with a puff of smoke. Shizuka's eyes widened. "Anything non-living Big Iron stabs with those feathers gets turned into a trap."

It was impressive, and those two working in tandem could make things rather hard for a fleeing Stand user. Her attention turned to Satoshi, who held his right hand up. The air rippled with light, and something formed between his index and middle fingers. A large white cigar with a sapphire embedded in the skin.

"Eh?" Shizuka asked. "Your Stand is a cigar?"
He furrowed his brow. "Not just a cigar, you punk. This is \textit{Instant Crush}, and it generates explosions of fire and smoke. Hot enough to melt steel like butter. And the smoke and fire are invisible for non-users. It's helped us breeze through Yakuza types in the past."

So that was their firepower, literally. Her attention turned to the fourth, vacant desk. It had the least amount of paperwork on it. "What about this one? It's empty."

"Our fourth member has classes today," Satoshi said. "Probably for the best. I bet he's dying to meet you."

"Wait... he's a high school student?!"

Aya nodded. "A transfer from Italy. With how strong his Stand is, the SID moved to recruit him last year. And then he got a scholarship out here in Tokyo, so he works with us."

She supposed there was no point in getting indignant about it. Her age hadn't stopped her from doing Stand stuff, as had been the case with a lot of her family. Still it was surprising that the Speedwagon Foundation went ahead with this.

"We called you in today because, um, well... we're concerned. We know Yngwie came after you, and you were just defending yourself. But still, there are a lot of Stand users in Tokyo. Dangerous men in high positions who know about your family. Just be careful when you use your Stand, you could bring a lot of trouble on yourself."

"Like... Yakuza?" Shizuka asked.

Satoshi nodded. "We can't divulge much, but just know there's some kind of Stand user behind a lot of the criminal element in Tokyo." He pushed his glasses up his nose and looked down at his feet. "He calls himself... Mr. A."

A thought occurred to Shizuka about some of the events that had been happening around the city-people going apeshit all of a sudden and causing chaos and violence without explanation. It was the kind of thing that didn't happen through any normal means. "Is he behind the psychotic breakdown incidents?"

"We don't know. Those incidents are taking up a lot of our time, and even we don't have leads to go on," Yoshio explained. Satoshi glared at him, as if he had said something they weren't supposed to speak of to others.

"Well... I appreciate the heads up. Let me know if you guys need anything. But, I really should head home," Shizuka said.

Aya nodded. "Well, stay safe. And take this, it's our card. Has our number on it if you ever find yourself in trouble." Shizuka pocketed the card and nodded her thanks. With that, she left them and made for home.

Silence filled the office before Aya remarked "Interesting girl. Think she'll try and avoid Mr. A?"

Satoshi was silent. He reached into his pocket and took out his wallet, spending a few moments staring at an old photograph with sadness written on his face. "One thing's for sure... we definitely will."
"You seem distracted Yusuke."

The words snapped the blue haired boy from his stupor, his paintbrush still aimed at a canvas that only had a few strokes of dark paint on it. The bristles had dried up since he last made a stroke on the canvas. "Oh. My apologies."

It was just the two of them in the studio, Yusuke and his friend with the slicked-back blond hair. Many paintings filled the room, and orange sunlight drifted into the Kosei High room to provide some illumination.

"Well... what's on your mind?" the blond asked. He had his gaze firmly affixed to a perfect cube of clay positioned on the pedestal in front of him, but Yusuke knew he was also paying attention to him.

"Do you remember when I told you about that girl the other day? I finally worked up the nerve to talk to her," Yusuke said, smiling as he set his brush in the water. "Why, Sergio, I feel I've finally found my muse! My own Sayuri!"

"How delightful." Sergio smiled warmly, finally taking his hazel eyes away from his untouched clay. "And is she willing to work with you?" he asked.

"Not... as such," Yusuke admitted. He netted his fingers between his knees and leaned forward on his stool. "She will be at the exhibition tomorrow with her... friends," he added, saying 'friends' in the same way someone would say 'malignant tumor.' "But, if all goes well, I can convince her to work with me."

Sergio chuckled a bit. "I'm sure that will help with that lovesick heart of yours, compagno," Sergio teased. As Yusuke was one of the few people he knew here that spoke any Italian, a side effect of his passion for Renaissance history, Sergio would occasionally fit some of his mother tongue into conversation to keep his knowledge fresh.

"It's not like that," retorted Yusuke, rolling his eyes. "In any event, waiting on a response from her has left me on edge. I suppose I'm just not in much of a creative mood today. Uncertainty has doused my passions."

"Then take a break. Your sensei has his show tomorrow, after all."

"Yes... yes, you may be right. Good day Sergio." Yusuke smiled pleasantly, spent a few moments putting his supplies away, and then made to leave the studio.

Alone, Sergio side. "Good luck, Yusuke. Hopefully that girl can free you from that old bastard." Madarame... he had people eating out of the palm of his hands, and everyone was so convinced that the old turd was some kind of saintly genius. But he'd seen the conditions Yusuke lived in, and he'd seen just what Madarame did with Yusuke's pieces.

But alas, Yusuke loved the man. And he was the one who had taken Yusuke in after he'd been orphaned. Of course Yusuke couldn't see how bad things were. Or he could, and just wouldn't admit as much to himself. Much as Sergio wanted to help, he had no idea how to approach the situation without pissing one of his few friends off.
Alone, Sergio pulled up a tarp and pinned it to the wall behind his block of clay. The hallway behind him was silent, and he allowed himself to smile. It was time to put his real talents to use.

"Breakthru."

His body shimmered with light as a massive, ghostly frame appeared above him. A hulking humanoid shape of black metal, its fist oversized even for its large arms and a sparkling golden shade. The knuckles of its stands were large blocks that protruded outward. The head had no face to speak of, just a large silver eye in the center, while the sides of his head sported sweeping golden horns.

With impressive quickness, Breakthru lunged at the block of clay and struck it from several sides, yet somehow didn't leave a mark in the pale material, the blocky knuckles just barely brushed the material.

Sergio pulled his Stand back and watched in silence as several sections of the cube wobbled with the shaking rapidly growing more violent. Several sections shot off abruptly, the same areas Breakthru had touched earlier, and spattered noisily against the tarp, leaving only one piece of clay undamaged in the center.

A neat, to scale replica of the Venus de Milo.

"Perfetto," he purred.
Let's Get Cultured! (II)

M.N: I'm still having a hard time believing it

M.N: That you're friends with the likes of Sakamato and Kurusu.

S.J: come on, they're not so bad.

S.J: i know they got bad reps but they're really nice. just misunderstood

M.N: It's just, I've been at Shujin for a few years, and some of the stories I've heard about Sakamato, and the rumors about Kurusu's criminal records are all worrying.

S.J.: A lot of it's just rumor tho.

M.N: Well I suppose that's one way to look at it.

S.J: Makoto, i promise. If you got to know 'em, you'd really like 'em. Ryuji, Akira, Ann and Shiho are some of the nicest people I know.

M.N: I'll keep that in mind

M.N: but please be careful Shizuka.

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Makoto sighed as she looked down at her screen. She leaned comfortably at her desk, Shizuka proving one of the few things that could distract her from her studies. Not that she'd ever tell Sae as much.

When she thought about the whole situation logically, the implications were worrying.

If people really were covering for Kamoshida, both on and off the volleyball team, then he had no reason to come clean. And all the witness reports the news had been showing went into great detail on what a sadist he was. A sudden attack of guilt seemed unlikely. And nobody outside the school at all would have any inkling of what was going on with Kamoshida. So it had to be someone on the inside.

Ann and Shiho were both victims of Kamoshida's sexual advances, with the latter also being a punching bag too and the former had seen her best friend driven to attempted suicide. Sakamato had lost the track team because of Kamoshida and became the maligned school thug soon after. And then there was Kurusu, who had his criminal record leaked by Kamoshida, tarnishing any chance he may have had for a fresh start.

When she thought about it like that, there was nobody else that fit better as suspects. With the exception of Suzui, she supposed. But then there was Shizuka, the odd one out. She had no
personal grudge against Kamoshida. Perhaps she was told what he had been doing, and joined up out of moral outrage?

Makoto weighed the possibility in her mind, and then set her phone on her desk. She didn't want to think of her friend getting involved in something that could land her in a lot of trouble.

Maybe she was just an innocent bystander? Even if that was the case, she could likely wind up in a lot of trouble if that group turned out to be the Phantom Thieves. Makoto gently sighed.

The principal wanted her investigating this for the sake of a college recommendation, but she really didn't want to get Shizuka in trouble. And what if Shizuka was right about the others? Maybe they were just unfairly labelled, and Kamoshida had indeed been a bastard. Exposing him didn't seem entirely wrong to her. It was something her dad would have agreed with, the intention at least.

Even so, Makoto didn't have a single clue on how they got Kamoshida to confess his crimes so publicly. Her investigation was going nowhere fast.

Makoto glanced to Shizuka's chat icon. There was a strong likelihood that Shizuka could wind up in a lot of trouble. *I'll protect you,* she told herself. After all, Shizuka was the only genuine friend she had.

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5/15

By the time the group arrived at the exhibit, the place was already crowded with a throng of people. Photographers and journalists stood out well enough, but the rest of the crowd was filled with stuffy individuals. Art snobs and critics mainly.

"So crowded..." Morgana mused.

"It'd be a pain in the ass if anyone sees you, so don't stick your head out too much," Ryuji hastily said.

Shizuka nodded. "Right. Places like this don't like any animals that aren't like, guide dogs. Oh yeah, and no eating anything while we're in here." She looked at Ryuji, who scuffed a foot along the ground. Shizuka was no art fan, but her mother had been an enthusiast. *Galleria Zeppeli* had been a passion project of hers, and had been a major hotspot in the New York art world for several years now. She knew the scene to some extent.

They saw Yusuke approach through the crowd, the blue hair stood out, and he was dressed sharply for the exhibition. A smart beige jacket and dark slacks that complimented his polished black shoes.

He smiled warmly at Ann. "You came!" he said happily. Then, looking at her friends as if they were a pack of stray winos, he much less happily added "You really came."

"Free tickets are free tickets," Shiho said with a helpless shrug. And like hell was she gonna leave Ann alone in a situation like this.

"Whatever the case, try not to get in the way of our other patrons," said Yusuke. Akira and Ryuji glared at him briefly. His focus returned promptly to Ann. "Come now, I'd like to show you
around. And while we walk I'd like to speak to you about the picture I envisioned."

Ann nodded. "I'll see you guys later." They knew what their job was: To keep an open ear for anything shady about Madarame.

"I'm going with Ann," Shiho told the others in a low tone. "Just to make sure this artist stays on the level." Morgana sighed in relief from the confines of Akira's bag. The trio took off, leaving Akira, Shizuka and Ryuji to their own devices.

Shizuka led on, and the others fell in behind her. The rich girl knew this kind of place better than they did after all. She stopped, briefly, when she spied a couple chatting about a portrait of the old geezer, the colours inverted from how they would appear in reality.

"Clearly," Shizuka interjected, catching the attention of the two. "Madarame-sama was influenced by the style of the late van Gogh, who was also known for his distinctive brush stroke technique, and the alien colour palette he used to alienate the viewer, and project a barrier between artist and viewer."

"Why yes, yes of course," the older man watching her remarked. "That ah... o-of course that aspect of this piece was obvious."

The teenagers carried on, and Ryuji looked at her as if she had grown a second head. "What the heck was that? You an art snob?"

"Ha! Hell no," Shizuka snorted "I was just repeating some of the same crap I heard from my moms old gallery. Got no idea what half the people in there were talking about. But if you sound like you know what you're talking about, people will think you do. It's an ancient Joestar family technique: The art of bullshit," she boasted.

It didn't take long to find Madarame himself at the heart of the exhibit, standing next to a distinguished landscape painting of Mount Fuji. A perky young woman from a news crew was interviewing him, and the old man looked quite modest and cheerful in front of the camera.

"We're here to learn about this guy, yeah?" Ryuji asked. The rest of the gang nodded "Seems a good a chance as any. Let's try and listen in." As covertly as possible, they moved closer to try and eavesdrop.

"We continue to be truly surprised by your imagination. You have such a wide range of styles, it's hard to believe that it all stems from one person. Where in the world does all your inspiration come from?"

Madarame stroked his bearded chin in ponderous thought. "Well, it is rather difficult to put into words. "The ideas naturally well up in my heart like bubbles rising one after another in a spring."

"Naturally, you say?" asked his interviewer.

The artist smiled in a grandfatherly fashion. "What's important is to distance oneself from worldly desires such as money and fame." Akira quirked one brow and looked to Shizuka. Avoid money and fame, while broadcasting your face on the news in the heart of a lofty art show. Seemed dishonest to him. "My atelier is a modest shack, but it is more than enough to pursue true beauty."

"A shack?" Ryuji murmured.
"I see." The young reporter smiled brightly. "I see, so the act of emptying your mind gives rise to true beauty. Still, to think that the great Madarame would live such a humble life."

It was at this point that more people seemed to notice Madarame's presence, the crowds growing so thick that the young thieves were forced back closer to the wall. "Shit!" Ryuji grunted, only barely avoiding getting his feet trampled.

"Guy seems pretty phony to me," Akira said, being mindful of where he walked. The group pulled back, making for a more empty stretch of the exhibition. "If he really is so humble, then why bother being the face for something as famous as this? That aside though, he doesn't seem like a particularly bad guy."

Ryuji nodded. "Yeah. I get kind of a 'two faced dick' vibe from him, but that ain't a crime. If it was, every prison would be overflowing," he mused. He was about to ask Shizuka for her input, only to see that she was looking to the far end of the room.

"Something on your mind?" Morgana asked, just barely peeping from Akira's bag.

"That's..." Shizuka was staring at a man who, in turn, was examining a landscape piece with the sharp and discerning eye of a true artist. He was a tall and thin man with side swept dark hair, a green headband just around his hairline. He was dressed in a crisp white shirt and a sleeveless rose vest, his trousers and boots a deep charcoal colour. Without another word Shizuka bounded toward him, leaving her curious friends tailing after her. "Rohan! Hey, Rohan!"

Rohan Kishibe, world famous mangaka and infamous sourpuss, turned and regarded Shizuka quietly. "Oh, that's right. Koichi told me that you were moving to Tokyo. My condolences for your father," he said by way of greeting.

She smiled, despite herself. She knew he was being genuine, and meant some kindness through his words. For Rohan, that was quite a step. "Thanks." Shizuka's earliest memories of Rohan came from when she was six, though she had known him since she was an infant. And he looked just as young then as he did now. It gave the impression that he was secretly a vampire.

"Wait..." Ryuji felt his mouth gape a little. "Rohan as in... Rohan Kishibe?! Aw dude, I'm such a fan! Pink Dark Boy: Iron Sea was probably my favourite manga ever!"

"Friends of yours?" Rohan asked, earning a nod from Shizuka. "Well, they have some good taste I suppose. Though I didn't think this sort of place was your 'scene'," he said.

"Same to you. You're a Madarame fan?"

Rohan scoffed. "Please. I've come out to Tokyo to research urban landscape, and I wanted to take the time off to explore. And I had a ticket to this exhibition. But..." Rohan gave his head a testy shake. "The man's a hack, a fraud."

Akira scratched the back of his neck. Art wasn't his field of interest, so he was willing to trust what Rohan had to say on the matter. "How do you mean?" he asked.

"That should be obvious," Rohan replied. And, if something was obvious to him, then he felt no need to broadcast his knowledge to anyone else when they should have caught on immediately.
Shizuka sighed. "Pleeeeeease Rohan-sensei?" she asked, standing on her toes. She exaggerated her tone into an incredibly sweet one, and once again Ryuji and Akira were watching her as if she had become someone else entirely.

Rohan scowled faintly. "Ugh. Enough with the overly cute act. It might have worked when you were a child, but you're almost a grown woman now." Shizuka puffed her cheeks out in annoyance. "Fine, I'll tell you. Look at all these pieces. Look at the disparate styles, how every one looks completely different from the other. Any single artist having so many different techniques and styles in their possession is unheard of. And then consider that Madarame goes through 'pupils' like clockwork. It seems obvious to me that he is taking the work of his students, and calling it his own."

"That's quite a claim," Akira said. He pinched his chin with his thumb and index finger and let his eyes sweep across the paintings on the wall. There may have been some stock in what Rohan was saying. If you took the 'Madarame' name away from the paintings here, there seemed very little in common between them. There remained the prospect that Madarame was just that freakishly talented, but...

"It would be obvious to the art critics here too, if art critics weren't all morons," Rohan casually added. He crossed his arms over his chest, tutted slightly and turned to leave. "Not that it really matters much to me. Oh, and Shizuka?"

"Hm?" the young woman tilted her head slightly.

"If you see Josuke anytime soon... tell him he's a moron."

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While Akira and the others got to know an eccentric artist, Ann and Shiho had their own eccentric artist to deal with.

Yusuke had taken them around much of the exhibition and chatted amiably with Ann most of the time, speaking of his hopes that she would be his muse, and that he could ultimately grow to be an artisy in the image of his mentor.

"All these pieces..." Shiho murmured, examining a few landscape pieces in passing. "Your sensei must have spent his whole life building a collection this size."

"Oh? Are you an art enthusiast?" Yusuke asked.

"I wouldn't say that exactly. But I know good art when I see it." Though, she personally felt her art was a higher grade than Ann's.

Ann stopped mid-step, her attention drawn to a particular piece. "Whoa... look at this one," she said, smiling fondly. "This is the one I saw online Shiho, I was really hoping to see it in person." It was a painting of a mountain valley, with the mountains a sharp ice white against the darkness of a sunset. The brush strokes seemed particularly aggressive, as if done by a frustrated hand.

"It really is amazing... It just feels so passionate, and there's this kind of anger to it," Shiho said.

"You get that feeling too?" asked Ann. "To think someone as cheerful as Madarame would make something like this..." Yusuke grew pensive, looking at his feet for a moment. "Something
wrong?” Ann asked, looking his way.

"O-oh, don't mind me. Ah, this way. There are nicer pieces than this one to be seen." He forced a smile and led on, while Shiho and Ann shared a look of mild confusion.

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Having seen as much as they wanted to see, and with the whole exhibit getting rather crowded, Akira, Ryuji, Morgana and Shizuka convened at an accessway adjoined to the building. From here the row of windows gave a view of the busy rainy Shibuya streets below, cars moving through the roads like blood cells in veins.

"So seriously... Rohan Kishibe?” Ryuji asked "For real?"

Shizuka shrugged "He's from my hometown. Apparently I saved his life once when I was a baby," she said.

Akira tilted his head and leaned nonchalantly against the railings. "How did you manage that?"

"You know, it's funny... he never really gave me all the details," Shizuka began. "But... I get this feeling, like he saved me once too. So, I don't really think much of it. He's kind of prickly, but he likes me, and that's pretty nice."

"He seemed to know your brother. Is he friends with Josuke?" He was going with the assumption that 'moron' was some twisted term of endearment.

"Nope!" Shizuka replied earnestly, a broad grin on her pretty face.

As the two spoke, Ryuji took a moment to turn his phone on and quickly brought up the Phan-site. "Actually, what Rohan said reminded me of a post I saw on the site last night. There might be some truth in what he was saying."

As the others leaned in, the noise of footsteps grew closer. "Did you guys seriously ditch us?" Ann asked, huffing in frustration. Shiho was following closely behind.

"It got kinda crowded in there," Ryuji said, scratching the back of his head. "But never mind all that... check this post out: ‘A master of the Japanese arts is plagiarizing his pupil's work. Only his public face is shown on TV.'” He looked up at the others "Ties into what Rohan was saying, right?"

"Rohan?" Ann repeated.

Akira nodded. "Rohan Kishibe, a friend of Shizuka's. We met him in the exhibit and he said that Madarame is stealing works from his pupils."

"Wait, Rohan Kishibe?! The mangaka?!" Shiho gasped. She paused, realizing that everyone was staring at her. "I er... I may have read his stuff when I was younger," she said unconvincingly, her cheeks a scarlet shade.

"In any event, between what Rohan said, and what this post says, it seems there's a strong possibility that he's an art thief," said Akira. He had his doubts about the man going by his public persona, and there was indeed something shady about him now.
Ann pondered this and turned her attention to the windows. "Now that I think about it, Kitagawa-kun seemed on edge when he was showing us one piece in particular. Maybe... maybe that was his art, and Madarame was calling it his own?"

It explained, perhaps, why he had been so quick to lead Ann and Shiho away. It must have hurt to have someone else's name on your work, with them getting none of the praise or attention they deserved.

"Uh... not to sound mean or anything, but is this really something we should be looking into?" Shizuka asked. "Yeah plagiarism is scummy and all, and Madarame is a douchebag if it's true. But it's pretty tame compared to what Kamoshida did," she explained.

"On the other hand," Akira interjected "If there's truth to these rumors, then there's a chance that he's up to even worse things."

"There's more to the post too," Ryuji said "If you guys'd let me finish... 'His treatment of the pupils who live with him is awful. He teaches nothing and bosses them around. He treats them inhumanely, as if disciplining a dog.' So it's not just stealing from 'em, he treats those students like shit too."

Shizuka nodded along. That seemed more substantial. "There's no harm in taking a look at least. And we have the perfect way in." She pointed at Ann with her right hand, the left positioned neatly on the corresponding hip. "Our own darling model!" Shizuka boldly said.

Morgana poked out of Akira's bag on the floor. "I don't particularly like the idea of using Lady Ann as bait, but it's clear that Yusuke is only interested in her. Still, we should be cautious in how we investigate, in case Madarame catches onto us."

The plan earned an annoyed groan from Ann. "Come on, I really don't want to sit for a painting for hours at a time... But, Kitagawa-kun doesn't seem like a bad guy, and if Madarame is mistreating him..." she trailed off and shook her head from side to side.

"Way I see it, we should head over on a day when the old timer won't be in his home. Which should be soon, with this exhibition set to continue for a while. You got his number Ann?" The blonde nodded. "In that case, try and set up an appointment. When he's painting, you can chat with him and get him to open up... I mean, he clearly thinks highly of the old guy. Just up and asking him will only get him pissed off and flighty. Oh yeah, and we'll be there too. For moral support. But mostly 'cause I want a chance to snoop around," Shizuka explained. This earned a nod from Morgana, who had some similar plans in mind.

After a brief pause, Ryuji lifted his phone up and gave it a little wave. "And while we're there, we can use the Nav to see if Madarame has a Palace, right?" Again, Morgana nodded. They couldn't do much if there wasn't a Palace to work through.

Madarame was a big fish, and if he was some kind of criminal then it would make their popularity balloon quite a bit if the Phantom Thieves caught him out. And any of his students would be much better off, just like the volleyball members were.

"I won't be available after school for a little while," Shiho said "Therapy. My mom insists," she explained.
"Well... don't worry about it. If we find a Palace, then we won't go in too deep. I'll try and set up a meeting, and I'll see if he can make it for a time when Madarame isn't home." It was a solid starting point for this investigation, Ann reasoned.

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"I'm home!"

As was routine, Shizuka started to step out of her shoes only to stop when she realized there was an extra pair at the entryway of the apartment. "Eh? Hey Simmons, do we have a guest?"

"Something like that."

The familiar voice made Shizuka nearly jump, and she turned sharply when a shadow fell over her. "J-Josuke!" There he was, in the flesh.

Over the years Josuke had finished growing. He wasn't as towering as Jotaro, but he was still as sturdy as a baseball star, and the kind of person that only an idiot would fuck with. As ever, his perfectly maintained pompadour was in place. Never, in all her years, had Shizuka seen a single hair out of place there. He was dressed in a warm leather jacket, an anchor and peace sign badge on the high collar, and dark purple trousers with heavy pockets.

He hugged her and she hugged him back just as tight despite her shock. First Rohan and now Josuke. She was half expecting to find Koichi and Yukako at the dinner table too.

"Your brother arrived earlier... thankfully you got here when you did, I used up all my Japanese," Simmons said, peering from the kitchen.

As the two parted, Josuke led the way to the couch and sat down. "How's Morioh?" she asked along the way.

"Same as always. Not that that's a bad thing."

Shizuka joined him on the couch and watched as he quietly pulled her sunglasses from his pocket. Good as new. The bass ornaments seemed even shinier now, actually. He held them to himself, preventing her from snatching them up. "First... how did they get broken in the first place?"

She knew this meeting was coming. As soon as she sent the things off in the post, she knew that Josuke would come sprinting up here just to find out what had happened. He was fiercely protective of his family, after all.

Just ask Angelo and Terunosuke.

"I got into a fight with a Stand user," Shizuka admitted. She brought her knees up and tucked them under her chin. "Some asshole hired him to try and take dad's holdings from me. But I kicked his ass," she said, smiling faintly. Josuke smiled too, despite his concern.

"I don't doubt that Shizuka," he said, snickering. "I know for a fact how hard your Stand can punch." His smile vanished quickly. "Seriously though... a Stand user attacked you, but you didn't tell me sooner? Why?"

Shizuka gave her legs a squeeze. "I dunno... I guess I wanted to do things like this on my own. You
have your own life and your own people to protect, so I didn't want you to worry about me too," she replied.

"Yeah... and now I'm pretty worried about you," said Josuke. "There's nothing wrong with asking for help. And no matter what, you're my little sister. Of course I'm gonna come help you, no matter what's going on on my end," he added.

It was enough to make her smile, even if her gaze was still on the floor. When she was with her friends, the world felt small and safe. She could just live in the moment and not have to think about anything else. But at home, or whenever she was alone, was a dangerous time when she had only her thoughts for company.

These days the world seemed so infinitely vast and deeply scary, and she thought of her own future stretching on into infinity. And so many different worries dotted her thoughts. Was she good enough to be a Joestar? Would more Stand users come out to attack her? How was she going to get through her whole life never seeing her parents again? Why did her birth parents abandon her? What if her friends got hurt because of the bullshit with her inheritance?

"Hey, Josuke..." She leaned in a little closer and slowly removed her glasses. Her eyes were still turned to the floor. "I miss my parents."

"Yeah," Josuke replied simply. The punkish-looking young man settled a strong arm on her shoulders and gave her a comforting squeeze. "I miss the old man too. But you know... you made them very happy in all the years they had you. So don't ever doubt that."

Josuke, ultimately, had to return to Morioh tomorrow. Such was life. But he told Simmons, in some broken English, that if it ever seemed like Shizuka was in trouble he was to send a call out immediately.

She was keeping something from him. Josuke had no idea what, and so had no idea what questions to ask. But whatever the case, he wanted to be ready if anything happened.
"Okay, so let's say a Stand and a Persona really are different things... the fact that I can use mine on both sides of the fence, it still gives me a feeling that you can too."

Inokashira Park was an oasis of green in the urban jungle- expansive and peaceful, with the verdant plant life carefully tended and preserved. For something like this, attempting to teach Akira to summon his Persona in the real world, it was the best space Shizuka could hope to find. Quiet, spacious, and with plenty of coverage to keep them away from prying eyes.

"So, I guess... just kinda think about how you summon Arsene in the Metaverse, and try it here?" Shizuka suggested. Her back was propped up against a thick tree, shading her from the radiating sunlight.

Akira shook his head. "I tried that at home a few days ago, but..." He reached up and pressed his left hand to his forehead, just as he did in the Metaverse. "It doesn't seem to work. I can feel Arsene there, but that's it."

Shizuka nodded. "Yeah, yeah... had a feeling that it wouldn't be so easy."

This was new territory for her. She hadn't had to think about how to use her Stand. She had been able to use it since before she could walk, and so using her Stand was as natural to her as breathing. She didn't quite know how to phrase something that came naturally to her.

"A Stand is a fighting spirit given form. On some level it usually reflects the kind of person you are deep down. You have to have a will to fight, to take control of that power and exert that will on the world," Shizuka said, recalling some of the explanations she had been given in the past. "And Morgana said that a Persona is uh..." She snapped her fingers, trying to recall one of the feline's many, many lectures.

"Morgana said people wear masks in their daily lives, shielding their heart. And if you remove that, you weaponize your heart and use that inner power as a Persona," Akira said. It seemed to gel with what she had seen from Ann and Shiho unlocking the power. "It's like... your inner self, tamed and projected outward."

Shizuka sighed and scratched the side of her head. "Feels like I'm wading outta' my depth here. But I agreed to help you, so I'm gonna help you." She pondered the situation for a moment and snapped her fingers again in a realization. "I saw Ann and Shiho awaken to their power, but how did it happen for you?"

"Well..." Akira sat down on the grass and leaned against a skinnier tree positioned opposite Shizuka. "This was on my first day at Shujin. I had a glimpse of Kamoshida offering Ann a ride to school, and Ryuji ran up near me as his car was pulling away. Ryuji called Kamoshida a 'pervy teacher' and I think that that triggered the Nav on my phone. It had installed itself on my phone a few days prior," Akira explained.

"You have any idea where the Nav came from?" Shizuka asked.
"No," he said simply. Well, he had some idea. The app came from Igor apparently, but getting into Igor and the Velvet Room was another matter entirely. And since the others had no knowledge of the long-nosed weirdo, he was willing to bet his Persona didn't specifically stem from Igor. "At any rate, we started walking to school while the Nav activated. We walked right into the Metaverse, and didn't realize it until we ran smack dab into the castle instead of the school."

Even Shizuka would have had a hard time believing it if she hadn't seen it herself. And the truth was the world looked largely unchanged in the Metaverse, except for the Palaces and Mementos.

"So you got attacked when you got in there?"

Akira nodded. "Yeah. Me and Ryuji got dumped in the castle dungeon, and soon after Kamoshida and his knights were getting set to kill Ryuji." He thought back on the memory and gave a sickened shake of his head. "It was a dire situation. I don't mind admitting that I'd never been so scared in all my life. But a voice appeared in my head: Arsene. And he asked if I was really going to stand there and watch. I said no, and then...." He gestured vaguely to his handsome face "I tore off the mask, and there he was. The day was saved."

"Huh. Lemme try something then." She had no idea if this would work or not, but hey. Anything was worth a shot. "I want you to close your eyes. And then picture yourself in that moment where Ryuji was nearly killed."

He did as Shizuka bid him and closed his eyes, directing his thoughts to that moment. His brow furrowed as he thought back. As Shizuka saw it, summoning a Persona for the first time required a strong emotional stimulus. And if she could trigger it again, maybe it would be enough to inspire his Persona to break out in reality too.

"Just think on that moment," Shizuka began "Your best friend, with a bunch of knights looming over him. That smug gym teacher bastard, grinning at the prospect of butchering him like a pig." Each word made Akira screw his eyes a little bit tighter, his brow furrowed as he visibly seethed. Was it working? The air around Akira seemed to shimmer ever so slightly, and the memory was definitely getting a rise out of him.

"They're about to skewer him, dice him up before his very eyes. You just gonna stand there and let him die?!!"

"No!"

A blue flash lit up around Akira, and a sudden gale of wind nearly bowled Shizuka over. She gripped the tree tight and went wide eyed. She saw it. Only for a few second, but she saw it. Arsene, or a ghostly outline of him at least, was hovering a foot above Akira. Then he faded, and Akira was stuck leaning back against the tree, panting for breath.

Akira swallowed and wiped a few beads of sweat from his forehead. "I... wow. That hit me like a truck," he admitted. "I feel... really heavy all of a sudden."

"Yeah, let's just... let's just leave it for now." Shizuka managed to grin and proceeded to push her small half-moon shades up her nose. "Still, we made a lot of progress! I think we're on the cusp of letting you use your Persona in the real world!"

The two settled on the grass and spent a few minutes drinking soda, letting Akira catch his breath.
from the rush. Shizuka kept her eyes toward the nearest pathway, and watched in silence as a young couple pushed a stroller through the park, with their baby burbling and making random noises as she surveyed nature.

"Hey, Akira," Shizua said without looking his way.

"Hm? What's up?"

"You came from a small town, right?"

"Yeah?"

Shizuka pondered asking this question for several quiet moments. "Well... what were your parents like?"

"Before I got slapped with probation?" Akira dryly replied. "They were just... parents, I guess. Kind of distant, but they took care of me the way any parents would. But, ultimately, they've pretty much disowned me. Why do you want to know?"

Perhaps Akira wasn't the best person to ask. But, then again, who was?

"Nah, it's nothing. Just thinking about life and junk," Shizuka said. Or, at least, the life she might have had if her birth parents had stayed around. She thought about them often these days, much to her own annoyance. Mainly, she had to wonder... why did they abandon her?

She could understand them losing her. She had been an invisible baby and all. But, well, she had been told there had been no missing child reports at the time. It was likely they hadn't looked for her at all. What a depressing thought.

"Well, anyway... our appointment with Yusuke is tomorrow, right? We should probably prep for then."

Akira nodded in return. "Right. Well, if you ever wanna talk, you know where I'll be."

Something was on her mind, clearly. But Akira supposed, in time, she would trust him enough to open up. Whatever the current issue was, it was likely a deeply personal one.

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5/17

"THIS is Madarame's place?!" Ryuji said, his eyes wide as they surveyed what could only be described as a two storey tin shack. The walls were made of aged corrugated metal, and what few windows could be seen, they were rather smudged and dirty.

"Jeez." Akira scratched his chin and seemed equally as shocked. "It looks like a stiff breeze would lift the whole thing off the foundation. And it must be hell in there when it's raining."

Ann had tried to get to know Yusuke over the phone as they organized this appointment. As she knew, Yusuke was an orphan and Madarame was both his sensei and legal guardian. "To think, Kitagawa-kun really lives like this," she murmured.
"So, what're we up for first? Going inside, or checking for a Palace?" asked Ryuji.

"We have about an hour before I'm due in there. So... I guess, check for a Palace." She brought her fuchsia pink phone from her pocket. "What do we need? A name, a... distortion and a location, right?" Morgana nodded from his spot in Akira's bag. "So... Madarame," the Nav beeped noisily, making the others tense in surprise. "Plagiarism," she said, drawing on the crimes they saw in the post and heard from Rohan. The Nav pinged again "Shack." Another hit.

Morgana had been nodding along to all this. "So Madarame really does have a Palace... seems we were right to look into him, he's up to something fishy. Now then, the last thing we need is the thing Madarame views this shack as. The same way Kamoshida saw the school as his personal castle."

The group rolled the notion around for a few seconds. "He's an artist, so it's probably something artsy like a museum." The air around them flickered purple. "Shizuka for the win."

"Got it in one. I'm impressed rookie," Morgana said. "After you Lady Ann."

Nodding, Ann pressed a button on the Nav. The real world bled away around them.

The change to the Metaverse was a stark one. The clear blue sky had been replaced with a starry night, with strobing search lights moving across the black sky. The tin shack had been replaced with a cubic gold structure with sculpted protruding points, large paintings attached to the outer walls. A long line of people stretched from the entrance of the building, and went on for so long that the group couldn't see where it ended.

"That's how Madarame sees this place?" Shizuka asked aloud. "Jeez... we might have to take a look around inside, see what's on his mind."

Ann looked down and gave a sudden jump. Her school attire had been replaced with her crimson Panther catsuit, and it had happened so suddenly that she only now realized it. "Our clothes have changed already? Wait, so Madarame already sees us as a threat?"

Morgana hopped down to join the group and leisurely led the way along to a darkened wall near the entrance, away from the prying eyes of the crowd. "If rumors are already circulating about Madarame's shady practices, it's possible he's more on guard than he appears in public. Granted, having a Palace doesn't necessarily mean that a person is evil. Just distorted in some regard. Still, we should head inside and get a better look at how Madarame sees the world," Morgana explained.

"And naturally, we won't be taking the front door," Akira said. The raven haired boy jumped the wall in one quick and elegant motion, with his teammates following suit.

They moved in silence, taking a shaded garden path around the side of the lavish golden museum. Already, through the brush, they could see hulking security guards formed from bubbling dark matter patrolling the area. Their inhuman proportions were much like the knights from Kamoshida's castle, but Akira got the vibe that these were marginally stronger than Kamoshida's goons.

Eventually the winding path took them to the side of the building, which they swiftly scaled until they reached a low roof with a skylight. Morgana flashed the group a grin as he approached the glass, his claws popping out and glinting in the moonlight. "Leave it to me."
His sharpened claws sank into the glass, and in one fluid motion he was able to cut a circle large enough for a human hand to fit through. Morgana set the cut glass down and reached in, undoing the lock with a quick motion. He opened the skylight and quickly pulled a length of rope from his fanny pack.

"Wait, you have rope?" Ryuji asked.

"Of course. It's a standard thief tool," Morgana haughtily said. It sounded obvious to him, but he did like having an edge over his fellow thieves. Morgana was quick to anchor the rope on the roof and tossed it down the window. The group quickly slid down into the darkened museum, and the interior looked rather normal.

Plush carpeted floors, a general musty smell in the air. The walls were lined with paintings, as was to be expected. But as the Arditi moved slowly deeper inside they noticed that all these paintings were the same. They were all portraits of people, with their names attached.

"The inspirations of the magnificent master artist Madarame," Akira said, murmuring the title from a wall mounted plaque at the entryway. "So the 'humble old man' thing is just a front. In reality he's got an ego, and likes the fame. Called it."

They continued on their way, covertly avoiding the patrolling guards prowling the exhibits. They found Nakanohara's portrait, confirming their suspicion that he had been a pupil of Madarame's.

After heading through the first room, they came upon a long hallway with more large portraits affixed to the wall. They checked each one in turn, only stopping when Ann came to a sudden halt and gasped at the sight of a particular painting. A portrait of a well-dressed blue-haired boy.

"K-Kitagawa-kun?"

The group examined it for a few moments. "If Yusuke and Nakanohara were both in here, and with Rohan saying Madarame goes through a lot of pupils... Hey, Mona," Shizuka said. "This is how Madarame sees his pupils, right? You know, like that sexed up version of Ann that Kamoshida had in his Palace?"

Morgana nodded. "This is Madarame's cognition of his pupils. If the rumors of plagiarism and abuse are true, then it seems he sees those people as products. Objects that he can use as he sees fit."

"That's pretty scummy," Shizuka remarked. "But if it's true, why has nobody said anything? There are a lot of students here, and if all of them have suffered..."

"Madarame's a big name in the art world," Akira said. "It's likely nobody would believe his students if they said anything, and more than that he could probably control any news that comes through that scene." He paused and checked his watch. "It's nearly time for your appointment. Let's just look a little deeper in and then head back."

The end of the hallway led into the lobby of the museum, darkened to the point where the crowd outside couldn't see in. Akira snagged a pamphlet from a stand near the door, opened it out and surveyed the floor plan it had.

"Seriously? The Palace has like, an official guide to it?" Ryuji asked. "The eff man... talk about attention to detail."
"He is an artist," Ann said with a helpless shrug.

"Not a very good one if he's stealing shit from his pupils," Akira added quickly.

Just to complete their initial probe, they walked through a door in the foyer that led deeper into the main body of the museum. They were greeted by a statue. A swirling tornado of solid gold, with human shapes protruding outward. It was grotesque, and looking into it gave Shizuka a headache. Something about it just felt fundamentally unsettling. Large posters with Madarame's face hung from the edges of the rounded ceiling, further adding to the unsettling vibe.

Ann ran a finger over the text on the plaque. "The Infinite Spring," she read aloud, then guided her gloved finger down to a smaller blurb under the title. "A conglomerate work of art that the great director Madarame created with his own funds. These individuals must offer their ideas to the director for the rest of their lives." Her eyes narrowed, and audible anger started to bubble into her tone. "Those who cannot do so have no worth living"?

"Guess that confirms it then," Shizuka said. "There's no way he'd have something like this if he wasn't taking the work of his pupils. And naturally he's twisted it into something noble from his point of view."

Ryuji stuck his thumbs into his belt and shook his head. "Ya think Yusuke even knows how bad he's got it? Shit... Madarame adopted him, so I guess he just thinks anything that geezer does is okay. But... now that I think about it, any of you guys think it's weird Madarame adopted him in the first place?"

"Might just be a PR thing," Ann mused "You know, 'look at how kindly and charitable I am.' I'd like to believe Madarame took him in out of the kindness of his heart, but after seeing all this..."

She didn't need to finish, they all saw how worrying the situation was. Akira casually ventured back toward the doorway. "Let's head back to reality. We can try and get Yusuke to spill the beans there."
"I must admit Ann, when you agreed to pose for me, I did not think your... friends would be joining you," Yusuke said. He had led the way in through the sliding door, down a hardwood corridor. The whole building felt breezy, and a small of dust and tin hung in the air. Living here must have been a treat.

Ryuji kept his hands on his hips. "We're here for moral support. And to make sure you keep those hands to yourself." Psh, yeah right. He knew better than anyone that if a person tried to creep on Ann, she'd kick his ass single-handedly. She wasn't about to get stuck in another Kamoshida situation.

"I have no interest in such debased things," the bluenette flatly said. "My interest in Ann is purely through the detached lens of an artist. I see her aesthetic appeal on a human level."

"I'm... not sure how I feel about that."

Shizuka snickered. "Eh, I dunno, makes me feel a little better. Wait... shit, that means I don't have aesthetic appeal?"

"You do, just not in the way I'm seeking. Ann inspires in me the same passion I felt when I first saw the Sayuri," Yusuke explained.

Akira tilted his head as the group came to a stop in the hallway. "The Sayuri? Is that a Madarame piece?" he asked "I don't think we saw that one at the exhibit."

The tall and thin artist leaned against the wall to his right, smiling sadly. "No, you wouldn't have. The original was stolen some years ago, and so now only photographs remain." He took his phone out and quickly brought a picture up: A portrait made in a traditional Japanese style, of a pale woman in red set against a placid background of a warm sun and cherry blossom. Her expression was equally warm, but whatever she was looking at couldn't be seen on the canvas. "When I first saw this painting, it filled me with a passion and joy that I can't quite describe, even now. And I feel that Ann can inspire those same feelings in others."

They entered a large and well lit room with several heavy canvases positioned at the left hand wall. Yusuke had already set up a canvas and two stools at the center of the room, and that left the others pulling up seats near the doorway.

"Now, pick a comfortable position and I'll do my best to commit you to canvas."

Ann did as he bid her, and took up a pose with her left leg crossed over her right knee, her chin perched on her right hand. Almost immediately Yusuke got down to business, staring at the canvas with a sharp gaze. It was worryingly intense.

But, then again, Shizuka had seen Rohan wrapped up in a similarly intense passion when making manga pages. So maybe this was just, for want of a better word, a thing that artists did.

They all knew the plan going on. While Yusuke worked, try to talk to him and see if they could get him to open up. So, Ann made the first attempt. "Hey, Kitagawa-kun." No response.
Akira raised his right eyebrow slowly. "Yusuke?" he asked. Again, no response.

"The hell..." Ryuji slouched in his stool, the wall at his back supporting him. "I knew this guy was big on art, but he's like a brick wall when he's painting. I don't think this plan is gonna work." Yusuke didn't stir, so it was clear Ryuji's assessment was right.

Akira's bag rustled on the floor, and Morgana quickly popped out. "Well, this is boring. I'm gonna take a look around," Morgana casually said. With that he strode nonchalantly out the door and continued further into the house.

"Yeah, me too. Better make sure the cat doesn't get into trouble." Shizuka quickly moved to stand.

"What th- what're we supposed to do?!" Ryuji called in return.

Shizuka shrugged "I unno. Sit around and give moral support?"

The rest of the house was drab and uninspiring, with a general breeze following Shizuka around. How on earth did Yusuke live like this? And, for that matter, did Madarame seriously live here? His Palace had been so opulent and belonged to a guy with an ego the size of an ocean liner.

Would a man like that really lay down under a shabby tin roof at night? No, it definitely didn't gel with her.

After some time spent exploring, as it seemed that Morgana was sniffing around every nook and cranny he could reach, she found Morgana outside a door with a heavy golden padlock on the handle. It was quite distinct with the surface painted to resemble a row of peacock feathers. "What do you make of this?" Morgana asked.

"Pretty sturdy lock. And I'm of a mind that a place like this doesn't have a whole lot of stuff worth locking up. I mean... jeez, what robber would think to hit a place that looks like this?" She glanced to Morgana and summoned Houdini to her side.

"You gonna bust the lock?" Morgana asked with a hint of caution in his tone.

"Nah. Too much of a hassle. And it'd be difficult to explain if there was nothing worth looking at... I'm just gonna take a sneaky peak." Houdini floated over to the sliding door and gave it a light tap. In an instant the whole door seemed to vanish, rendered utterly invisible. But whatever was beyond that door was shrouded in darkness.

Morgana sighed. "No windows or lights on. I guess it's not too surprising... we might just have to leave it for now. If we break that lock Yusuke could end up in a lot of trouble, particularly if Madarame is physically abusive. I knew I should have had Akira make some lockpicks last night."

While the two were left to debate the predicament of the door, Yusuke gave a frustrated sigh and set his brush down. For all his intense focus he hadn't even really made a mark on the canvas. Not much had changed in the many minutes since Shizuka and Morgana got down to exploring. "It's no good," he painfully admitted.

"I'm sorry. Am I the problem?" Ann asked. As the young artist had set his brush down, she had adjusted herself into a more comfortable and natural seating position.

"No no, it's not that," Yusuke replied kindly. "I'm just having trouble staying focused today. We
may have to pick this up another time."

Ryuji groaned loudly. He rose to his feet in a hurried and clearly annoyed fashion. "Seriously?! My ass fell asleep watching you, and you didn't even do anything? Ugh, nuts to this, let's just get to what we came here for."

"What you came here for?" Yusuke quizzically repeated.

"Well..." Ann clasped her hands together and shot Ryuji a pointed glare. She had hoped to move onto this subject more delicately. "We did have an ulterior motive for coming here today. They're about the rumors that have been circulating around Madarame."

At once Yusuke looked quite uncomfortable. "I'm well aware of... some of the comments that have been made about Sensei. But those claims are nothing but rubbish."

"That painting that Shiho and I were looking at," Ann interrupted. "You were the one who actually painted that, right?" Yusuke looked like he wanted to respond, but the words had caught in his throat. "I knew it." It was confirmation enough for her.

"Dude, if your sensei is stealing stuff from his pupils, then that's seriously messed up." It was clear that Ryuji didn't like Yusuke (and no doubt the feeling was mutual) but he was the kind of man who couldn't stand to see injustice, regardless of who the victim was. "Whether he's calling their work his, or treating them like dirt, he clearly doesn't give a shit. No point in lying, we already know plenty."

"I... have no idea what you're talking about!" Yusuke replied. He hardly sounded convincing.

Akira decided to step in. Ryuji was getting antsy, and Ann was perhaps too soft to really get through to him. So, a more measured approach would be of use. "I know this is an awkward situation for you to be in Kitagawa. You owe Madarame a lot, clearly. But he's still using and exploiting you, just as he has his previous students. And if this goes on, it... won't end well for you," he explained.

Yusuke hesitated. Then, sighing, he moved to explain himself a little. "We are our sensei's 'artwork', it's true. But don't misunderstand. Though that painting was done by my hand, sporting my Sensei's name, I gave him my work willingly. As such it can't be called plagiarism," he reasoned. "Sensei does not to this out of any... malice. He's simply suffering an artist's block, and requires extra aid."

Ryuji grunted in annoyance. If Nakanohara wasn't unique, and that Madarame had cast all his old pupils aside, then he couldn't abide Yusuke sticking up for him. "Artist's block my ass. All his other pupils ran away because of the shit he pulled, you're the only one still here!"

"What's wrong with a pupil helping out his master?! I'm no victim, so don't push any of your self-righteousness on me!"

"Even if you don't think of yourself as a victim, what about his other students?" Akira asked simply. Yusuke tensed, and didn't answer for a few moments.

"I'm supporting Sensei as his pupil. Where's the wrong in that?" Sighing, he sank back into his chair. "I would prefer if you two didn't come back here again. If you do, I'll be forced to take legal action. Particularly for the slander you have used against my Sensei."
Now it was Akira's turn to tense. Any kind of legal issue in his current state, and he was looking at a long stint in juvenile hall. A situation he certainly wanted to avoid.

"Hold it!" Ryuji took a step forward. "We're not done talking about this!"

Akira felt a few nervous beads of sweat form on the back of his neck. "Ryuji," he said through clenched teeth "What the fuck are you doing?"

"You leave me no choice." Yusuke slipped his blue covered phone from his pocket and quickly turned it on. "I'm reporting you to the police for your intrusion. I invited Takamaki-san here, but I have no recollection of ever inviting the rest of you! I don't know where your third friend it, but I'm sure she's complicit in this too."

Ann raised her hands quickly. "Just... calm down, please." It seemed to be directed as Ryuji as much as it was Yusuke, with the blonde looking like he wanted to take a swing. It was impressive he still had that much restraint.

Sudden realization dawned on Yusuke's face, as if hit with the inspiration he previously had been missing out on. "I won't report your friends, but on one condition. I want you to stay on as my model Takamaki-san."

It seemed a fair condition, but Akira had a sneaking suspicion that a catch was coming up. "But, you said it wasn't working out earlier," Ann replied.

"I believe I was being unconsciously modest for your sake. However, I have nothing to worry about anymore. If you're willing to bare everything to me... I will pour my heart and soul into creating the greatest nude painting ever!"

"What?!" Ryuji and Akira yelled in unison.

"NUDE?!" Ann shrieked.

"WHAT?!" Shizuka yelled from somewhere deep in the house.

In the span of a few seconds she had raced back toward Yusuke's studio and skidded to a sudden halt at the door. Morgana followed behind shortly after. "Did I just hear that right?!"

Yusuke carried on, heedless of the shock of the others. "To think, I'd be able to create a nude painting with my ideal model." His expression became sharp as he regarded the two boys. "Of course, this will be conducted without you three. And I ask that you forget about our earlier discussion as well. If I don't submit a new piece to Sensei soon, there may be some inconveniences."

Meanwhile Ann seemed to have only finally caught up with events, just barely getting over her earlier shock. "N-nude?! Like, without any clothes?! W-why are things escalating so suddenly?!"

"Those are my terms. You need not feel embarrassed. With the exhibit going on, Sensei will be busy and we will be free to work here in peace." He smiled politely. "I look forward to working with you in the future, Takamaki-san."

Defeated, the Phantom Thieves were left to withdraw from the shack. Yusuke had the upper hand,
and it was quite clear they wouldn't get any dirt from him. More than that the threat of legal action made it clear they would have to be cautious in going near the shack.

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As they convened at the railings across the road from Madarame's shack, Akira breathed an annoyed sigh. "Aesthetic appeal my ass. His interests seem pretty black and white to me," he mumbled. Not that he would wholly condemn Yusuke for finding Ann attractive.

"How did things go so far downhill? I was out of the room for like, ten minutes!" Shizuka said with an annoyed groan. Somehow they had pissed Yusuke off to the point where there was a threat of legal action overhead, creating a painful obstacle to navigate.

They would still manage, thanks to the Metaverse, but their best source of intel was actively covering for the old guy. If they wanted to know more about his crimes, his Palace was the best source of information they had access to.

"He is totally out of his mind! There's no way I'm posing nude for him!" Ann yelled, heedless of the fact that they were in public.

"How dare that Yusuke!" Morgana called, once more inside Akira's schoolbag. "Asking Lady Ann to bare herself in such a way! Th-there's no way Lady Ann would do that, unless it was to the love of her life! F-f-full on nudity!"

"Drop it!" Ann snapped.

"You don't gotta worry about it if we make Madarame have a change of heart before the exhibit ends," said Ryuji. "So don't sweat it. We'll take care of this even if Kitagawa doesn't want to help us out," he explained.

Ann frowned and folded her arms over her chest. "If Kitagawa-kun thinks he owes so much to Madarame, is there really a need to make him confess?"

Morgana's clear blue eyes widened in horror. "Th-then... Lady Ann, you're really fine with baring it all?!" he asked. Akira slowly shook his head.

"I am not!"

Shizuka languidly strolled over to the railings and leaned against them. "Look, even if Yusuke doesn't wanna rat Madarame out, it doesn't change that the guy is up to something. If all those pictures in the Palace are his former students, then he's gone through and discarded plenty of people. And profited off of them while they got nothing from the deal," she explained. She didn't think it was as bad as what Kamoshida was up to, but it warranted dealing with. God knew the police wouldn't catch on.

"Exactly. That asshole's using Yusuke, and that blue-haired idiot doesn't have any family to stick up for him. We can't just ignore that," Ryuji chimed in.

"Yeah... we can't just leave it alone, even if Kitagawa seems fine with it," the blonde replied. She sighed in impotent frustration. They had all been in similar situations, strung up by shitty adults and told to just endure. Watching someone else go through that was the kind of thing they couldn't leave well enough alone.
"We'll need to look into Madarame first. Yusuke might be a dead end, but he did indeed have plenty of other pupils," Morgana explained. He climbed fully out of Akira's bag, his front paws resting on the bespectacled boy's shoulder. "So we might be able to get some information if we try to pursue things from that angle. Maybe Mishima could get into contact with the person who posted about Madarame on the website?"

"I'll talk to him tonight," Akira replied. If anyone could dig up dirt on the web, it was Mishima. He was more savvy to that sort of thing.

A thought occurred to Ann, and she seemed to visibly shiver. "There's also the matter of me modelling. Oh crap... Kitagawa-kun said there'd be 'inconveniences' if he doesn't submit a new piece to Madarame soon. S-so does that mean he's going to give that painting over?!

Ryuji leaned forward with a slightly slackened jaw. "Does that mean the whole country's gonna see you nude?!" he asked, his tone an odd mix of shock and intrigue.

"Yeah. Probably," Akira said flatly. It would no doubt be a very popular piece.

The very notion made Ann jump. "No way! Hell no!"

The mental image left Shizuka leaning against the railing, her gaze turned up to the sky. She felt a warm glow on her cheeks. "Well hot damn... don't worry Ann, I'd buy it off the old timer before he shows it in public. Hang it up in my room like a motivational poster." She could see Ann glaring at her, and if looks could kill then she was sporting a fifty caliber rifle. "No jokes? Yeah, okay."

"We can start again tomorrow, but we'll need a new hideout with the school roof off limits," Akira remarked. "So, let's go for the accessway at Shibuya station. It's quick to get to from school, relatively close to here and nobody would notice a group of students hanging around there."

Morgana nodded his approval to the idea.

Just as the group were getting ready to disband for the day, as it had been a long and eventful one that tired them out, a voice called to them from behind. "Hey, can I talk to you kids for a sec?"

The woman who addressed them was about Akira's height, but several years his senior. Her short dark hair was marked by the sunglasses she had positioned above her forehead. Whoever this woman was she dressed casually, wearing a dark shirt and blue jeans. A camera hung around her neck, and she had a fanny pack positioned on her hip.

"Yes?" Akira replied with a hint of caution.

"Since you just came out of Madarame's shack, I was thinking you might have a bit of information on him. I'm looking for people that know his pupils. See there's this painting, 'Sayuri', that was supposedly stolen in the past. But the rumor I've heard is that it was stolen by one of Madarame's pupils as an act of revenge. Did you... happen to hear anything about that while you were there?"

"Sorry, but," Akira adjusted his glasses "We really don't know anything about that."

The camera-sporting woman sighed in visible disappointment. "I see... There's no case unless there's a victim, and if there's no proof of abuse then I have nothing to write on. Back to square one... sorry for taking up your time." She approached Akira and handed him a card. "I'm a journalist. If you happen to find any leads while hanging around here, mind getting in touch?"
nodded his approval at the idea.

'Ichiko Ohya.' He made a mental note of her name and number.

As she left, Ryuji slowly stretched his arms over his head. "Between school, that freaky museum, and nearly getting the cops on us... I'm tired man. Let's head home for today."

Once the thieves started making their way back to Shibuya, they were left unaware of a pair of eyes watching them from around the corner. Sergio emerged and hummed softly to himself.

Yusuke had been quite excited when he spoke of his 'muse' visiting him today, and he had hoped to catch a glimpse on the way home. But to think that this Takamaki girl was friends with Joestar...

He had seen a few snapshots of Joseph's sunglasses-sporting daughter and recognised her easily enough, even from afar. And she carried herself with as much confidence as he imagined she would.

Perhaps this was an opportunity to see her for himself. Stand-users were always drawn together. It was fate, or some unseen hand pushing events from behind the scenes. And he had to know how she compared with the stories he had heard about her family.

Yes, this job was about to get very interesting...
"I seriously hate this effin’ museum," Ryuji muttered. He gave his club a shake, splattering some dark matter onto the floor. "Damn Shadows all over the place... and those stupid laser tripwires everywhere. Kamoshida didn't have any shit like that."

"Best to be ready for anything Skull," Morgana nonchalantly replied. "The more distorted the target, the more complex their Palaces become. The security measures are likely going to get even more intense in the future."

"What is this? A videogame?" Ann asked with an irritated sigh.

They had begun their exploration in earnest yesterday, having first explained the situation to Shiho (and having to dissuade her from tracking Yusuke down and kicking his ass for his proposition) and then meeting with Nakanohara. Mishima had managed to get in touch and Nakanohara, in turn, had been happy to meet up with the 'liaisons' of the Phantom Thieves.

With his heart changed, he had been kind enough to meet up with the others and explain himself. He had indeed been a former pupil of Madarame, another man who had his work stolen. And according to Nakanohara, another pupil who had been serving under Madarame eventually committed suicide over having his work stolen. Knowing that Madarame had a body under his belt had been enough to shake away any lingering doubts the Arditi had about this mission.

The death of this student had caused Nakanohara to leave Madarame's home, and in retaliation the old man had made sure that his former pupil was blacklisted from the art community. Ultimately he wanted to see Madarame pay his penance, and to ensure that Madarame's last remaining pupil didn't suffer another horrible fate.

Easier said than done.

The random security lasers were bad enough, but it was clear that the Shadows Madarame had under his control were stronger than anything they had found so far in Mementos.

They moved quietly through a darkened corridor, the walls lined by abstract paintings distinct from the portraits they had seen earlier. The darkness of the museum made it harder for them to be detected, but it also made sure they had to be mindful of where they stepped. Morgana stayed low to the ground, keeping a sharp eye for any of the laser tripwires.

"Hey, Mona," Shiho asked in a hushed whisper. "Any idea how close the treasure is from here?"

"Sorry Nemesis. My nose is sharp, but not that sharp. And the map we have seems to be missing half the structure. But as with all Palaces the treasure has to be very deep inside," he explained with a small sigh. They had a long walk ahead.

As the group wandered in through to a large chamber, with several pillars dotting the room each surface sporting a painting of its own, there was a sudden shift in the air. A whirring sound filled the vacant chamber, causing the thieves to tense up.
"You guys hear that?" Ann asked.

Suddenly a pair of metal poles sprouted out of the floor behind them and then suddenly came alight with a neon blue glow as coils of electricity flickered and flashed between them. It cut off their retreat, and a similar pair of poles sprouted up by the door across from them.

Shizuka sighed loudly. "Well shit... guess that's triggers automatically." Whatever set off that trap, they weren't given much of an opening to figure it out. The ground rippled ahead of them, followed by several explosions of inky blackness filling the room. By the time the dust settled, the large chamber had quite a few Shadows milling around.

"Alright..." Akira cracked his neck. "Let's deal with these guys first, and then find a way to deal with the trap. Skull, Panther- you two hang a left and deal with those two Apsaras'. Nemesis, Mona, you stick with me and we'll deal with," he pointed his left hand at the fairy like figures who were only low starting to take notice of the Thieves "Those Hua Po's. And Sting, I want you to it the guard at the far end and then see if you can find a switch for this trap."

Shizuka grinned, her body swiftly fading from sight. "Gotcha boss."

"Ready? Break!"

Ann and Ryuji made a swift ash to the two female figures positioned at the left edge of the room. The air around them glittered with frost, and the two blue skinned women spun around in a synchronised pattern that made their silken outfits flutter. Several large shards of ice suddenly materialized around them and shot outward, aimed for Ann.

"Captain Kidd!" The spectral pirate violently flashed into existence, hulking arms raised up and shielding Ann. The shards struck against him and exploded into pale clouds, making Ryuji seethe in a brief flash of pain.

Ann deftly flipped over Ryuji, her left hand pressed to her mask. "Dance, Carmen!" The air around Ann glowed red hot as her Persona appeared above her, glaring at the two Apsaras' in a baleful manner. A lash of fire erupted outward and drove the two figures to the wall, smashing the plaster apart. They recovered quickly and shot forward, more coils of ice dancing around them.

Meanwhile, Morgana, Shiho and Akira were forced to split up as the trio of scarlet fairies ahead started unleashing hales of fireballs toward them. Each bolt struck the ground and exploded violently, and it was like trying to cross a minefield with the intense volume.

"I'll make an opening!" Morgana shouted. Blue fire glowed beneath his feet as Zorro's tremendous bulk rose up behind him. He drove his rapier forward and twirled it around at a frightful speed, generating a hurricane of green wind that struck the Hua Po crowd and forced them backward.

Just as Morgana claimed, it gave them the opening they craved.

"Speeding up!" Shiho soon had a glow of her own as she summoned Aradia to her side. The ethereal woman raised her left hand and suddenly clenched it into a fist, radiating a neon green energy. That same light flashed around Akira, his speed suddenly increasing and allowing him to cross the distance at an accelerated rate.

Arsene appeared above Akira in a wave of blue fire, before his form abruptly became transparent and reshaped itself. Shizuka spared only a passing glance to watch as Akira changed his Persona,
with Arsene's dapper image replaced with that of a squat snow creature in blue boots and a twin-tailed blue cap. Jack Frost, a recent acquisition.

Akira's knife went for the nearest fairy, and in one lightning fast movement he cut her at the waist and sent black goo smearing over his right sleeve. Meanwhile Jack Frost raised his large hands up, swirls of twinkling icy air condensing at his palms and forming into a large morning star of dense ice. "Hee-HO!" He flung his construct with one mighty toss, letting it crash into the second Hua Po, an explosion of ice shards raining down from the impact.

Lastly there was Shizuka, making a beeline for the biggest figure. This Shadow was a new breed, one that she knew for sure they had never met before. It looked vaguely like a hulking gorilla, with streaky black and yellow fur. His face was a dark void with glowing red eyes and a set of grinning ice white fangs. The beats stood on his knuckles and watched the fight unfold, set to jump in at a moment's notice. He just wanted a clear shot first.

"BAZU!"

Houdini's unseen fist collided with the side of the beast's skull, making him shriek in shock as jets of black goo sprayed from his damaged temple. He stumble and lashed out wildly, managing to clip Houdini by complete luck. The blow lifted Shizuka off her feet, making her gasp in pain as she was suddenly knocked backward. It was enough of a shock to briefly jolt her from her invisibility.

The hulking beast came racing forward, knuckles pounding the earth hard enough to crack the floor with every motion. She quickly turned invisible, barely avoiding a strong uppercut from the beast's right fist. Houdini closed the gap, landing a flurry of punches to the creature's face. He snarled, swaying off balance. He swung his beefy arms wildly, hoping for another lucky strike. But Shizuka had already darted to the edge of the room.

The damn thing was tougher than it looked. And it looked pretty tough to start with!

"Hey Sting, why don't you go over and duel that overgrown fucker while we take the cute fire fairies! Oh okay Joker, want me to do any other stupid shit while I'm at it?" Shizuka muttered to herself, quickly slinging her lever-action rifle off her back. She took aim while her target was still fruitlessly swinging around hoping to get a hit in.

She fired off three shots that echoed through the room, each bullet striking his head and sending more black sprays erupting from the back of his skull. The creature shrieked and resumed stomping around, up until a wave of fire smashed into him and blew him apart. Carmen stood behind the smoldering ash, taking a languid drag from her cigar.

"Geez... that thing really took a beating," Ann said as the group gathered at the far end of the room. "Are they really gonna keep getting stronger?"

"Most likely," Morgana explained. He was slowly catching his breath, his ears flat on his head. "But keep in mind that we're trying to stick to stealth. Ambushes like these, hopefully, will be rare... anyway, let's get to looking around. I'm sure there's a switch for that trap somewhere," he explained.

Ryuji glanced at the walls surrounding them. Save for the paintings, they were outright blank. "Must be hidden. I can't see anything out of place," the blond said.

"Right. It's hidden, but I think..." Akira narrowed his eyes behind his domino mask, inspecting
some of the paintings until he spied one that seemed tilted slightly. He approached and lifted it off the wall, and grinned as he spied a switch on the wall where the portrait had been. He flicked it quickly, killing the current dancing between the poles at the door.

With that obstacle removed, the group carried on. They were a little tired, but they were hoping to map the interior a little further before retreating for the day.

But things took a surprising turn as they emerged into an open air courtyard, the night sky fully exposed over a well tended garden path. At the other end of the courtyard was another museum building, golden in colour and rather tall. The structure seemed to bend and twist in strange ways, like an Escher painting rendered in 3D.

The Arditi entered slowly and came upon a pair of double doors with ornate paintings etched onto them. They parted, revealing an identical set of doors. Then another, and another, parting in sequence until they passed through about eight identical doors.

The last one opened out to reveal a web of glowing red bands of laser light, almost like a crimson maze, that walled off a straight passage through to the other building.

"That's... new," Shiho murmured. "Is this going to be like that... swinging blade room in Kamoshida's castle?"

"These lasers are pretty tall... even with our powers I doubt we can jump them," Ann added.

"If Madarame has taken measures like this, then something really important must be up ahead. My guess is we're a lot closer to the treasure than I previously thought," said Morgana.

Shiho took a quick step around Morgana and came to a stop at a small sign positioned beside them. "Attention all personnel: This door can only be opened via the security room that lies beyond it. Please be cautious. It is impossible to open from the outside.' Uh oh..."

Ryuji slumped forward. "For real?! Then... how're we supposed to get through here?!" he asked in shock.

All the while Morgana had been watching the door at the other end of the laser grid. A looming set of doors that had peacock feathers painted onto the surface. "That door... I recognise the pattern. Seems familiar, right Sting?"

"Oh shit, yeah... the one in Madarame's house with the big ass padlock on it," Shizuka said. "But uh... why's it here? Is this some sorta'... cognition thingy?"

"Pretty much. That door in reality is no doubt hiding something very important to Madarame. In his cognition that doorway is an impenetrable barrier that nobody can access. So that manifests in his Palace in the form of these security lasers," Morgana explained. It made sense, in an incredibly bizarre kind of way.

"You have a plan?" asked Akira.

"Well... to an extent."

"In that case let's head back to the real world everyone. It'll be safer to talk there."
The exit point to the Palace was positioned across the street from Madarame's, in a darkened alley where prying eyes were less likely to see them. After they returned, the group took a moment to catch their breath and recover a little from their earlier exploration.

Ryuji leaned up against the wall and peered at the tin-walled shack across the road. "So... there's a door in there, that's like the door in the Palace. And if we open the door here, it'll be open over there?" he asked.

"Something like that." Morgana did seem mildly surprised that Ryuji had gotten so close to the mark. "Madarame has to see that door, that he believes to be impassable, as being open. What I propose is that we have someone open the door on this end, and then the rest of the team will head through in the Palace, and disable that security system fully."

"Slight problem with that plan. Yusuke's gonna call the cops if we go back there," Akira interjected.

"Well... not all of us." Ryuji pointed vaguely to Ann, who proceeded to nearly jump out of her skin.

Shiho quickly took a step in front of her friend. "Y-you guys can't seriously be suggesting that she... pose naked for that pervy artist!" she hastily said. Her urge to run right across the street and kick Yusuke in the face was rising again.

The current line of thinking was enough to make Morgana's tail bristle. "L-leaving Lady Ann in the clutches of Yusuke... d-don't worry, you just need to hold his attention long enough for me to pick the lock. And I can get it done even faster if Shizuka is on hand." He nodded briefly at their trusty invisible girl.

"Yeah. I can make the outer layer of the lock invisible, let you see all the tumblers clear as day," she explained. "Man, what could even be in that room... Nazi gold? Dead bodies? Must be something major."

"Why am I the one who has to pose nude?! Why can't you guys do it?!" Ann snapped, glaring pointedly at Ryuji and Akira.

"That ain't what he wants," Ryuji said plainly.

"Well make it so he does!"

Akira hummed and stroked his chin lazily. "Well... we do make for a rather handsome pair."

His flippant response made Ann sigh. Her gaze shifted to Shizuka. "Say... JoJo, you wouldn't mind doing me a major favor? Aahaha- how about you pose for him?" she suggested.

Shizuka's hands settled on her hips, her gaze turned skyward. "Well, for you Ann..." Suddenly she gripped the hem of her school blouse and lifted it up, making the rest of the group yelp and jump backward in shock. They relaxed soon enough, seeing now that the dark-haired girl had rendered her entire torso invisible. "Ha! Joke's on you guys, I'm wearing a t-shirt under this anyway!"

Ryuji wiped the sweat from his forehead and groaned. "You have one weird sense of humor Shizuka..."
While Shizuka lowered her blouse, Akira settled a hand on Ann's shoulder as a gesture of comfort. "Nobody's asking you to... 'expose' yourself. You just need to get a foot in the door for Morgana, and then keep Yusuke busy until he gets the lock open. So... maybe just keep him busy with small talk or something?"

"And if you get into trouble, you can jump into the Palace for a quick escape," Ryuji chimed.

It was, unfortunately, their best option. It seemed that Yusuke came back here immediately after school, and Kosei was closer to here than Shujin was. So breaking in wasn't an option when they couldn't afford to skip class. And they did want to clear this barrier as quickly as possible.

Frowning, Ann raised her hands in defeat. "Fiiiiine... but I am NOT taking everything off! So you better work fast Morgana!" she said, pointing sharply at the feline.

"Good. Then make an appointment for tomorrow," Akira added.

"TOMORROW?!

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The more she thought about Madarame, the worse the old man seemed.

Shizuka was rolling the facts around in her head as she casually strode down the streets of Shibuya, her hands resting in her leather jacket pockets.

Why had Madarame taken Yusuke in at all? That was the stumbling block she couldn't quite scale over. He had apparently adopted the guy when he was very young and taken him on as a student from then on. Either Yosuke was some Mozart-grade child prodigy, or something else had motivated that.

Maybe Madarame was a nicer man back then, and had some genuinely altruistic motives? Or perhaps it was as Ann said earlier, and he only took Yusuke in for some good PR? But all the stuff she saw on the news only referenced his artwork and how 'humble' he was. Madarame didn't need to put in any extra effort to have a good public image.

There was something else to all this. It genuinely felt that she was missing a piece of the puzzle, and if she had that...

"Ciao."

The word made her stop abruptly, causing Shizuka to stop and turn to the young man who had addressed her. He was leaning in the archway of a jewelry store, dressed in a distinguished Kosei uniform. His well maintained blond hair and olive skin made him stick out a good deal.

"Oh? Do you not know any Italian? Perhaps English would be better?"

Shizuka sighed. "My mom was Italian. Doesn't mean she taught me a whole lot of it." She regarded him quietly behind her red-rimmed shades. Foreigner, Kosei uniform, seemed to single her out of the crowd... it wasn't hard to figure out who he was. "You're with the SID."

"Correct. Sergio Esposito, at your service," he said, giving her a casual bow of his head. "And I already know about you, Shizuka Joestar. Or perhaps JoJo-chan would be better?"
"Please never call me that again."

He snickered and went back to leaning against the wall. "Oh very well. I mean no offense, of course. After all, I've seen what happens to those that make you angry... I got a glimpse of your fight with that assassin, and part of me wanted to see you in action up close... but, that can wait for another time. Truth be told, I wanted to see you for a more personal reason."

Right about now Shizuka was sizing this guy up. He definitely had a Stand, and with how casual and confident he seemed to be she didn't doubt that it was a strong one.

"I'm all ears," she replied. "There like ah... some rogue Stand user running around that you need help with?"

"No, nothing quite so paranormal." Sergio pushed off the wall and started walking, with Shizuka keeping pace beside him. "Yusuke Kitagawa is a close friend of mine... and so I'm concerned about his mentor, Madarame... And I know that you and your friends have been coming and going to his home these past few days. I'm not sure why but that's ultimately unimportant. Don't misunderstand, of course. I hate that old man, and I know that he's stealing Yusuke's work as his own," Sergio explained.

Shizuka nodded. "Yeah. Too bad that's not how Yusuke sees it."

It was clear that it hurt having his work praised under Madarame's name, but it was also clear Yusuke didn't want to change things. "Yes. He feels he owes Madarame everything, that disgusting old bastard. He has the audacity to call himself an artist despite being a flagrant fraud." Sergio glanced at the slightly shorter girl, much of her feelings hidden away behind her red-rimmed shades. "I want to help him, but... I also know he wouldn't believe anything bad about Madarame. And I don't want to risk losing a friend."

"Yeah, Yusuke being in denial was pretty clear too." As he spoke and expressed his interest in helping Yusuke, she was pondering if he would be a good fit for the team. He had the drive, he had a Stand... but perhaps it would be best to hold off until she knew what his Stand actually did. "You got any info me and my friends can work with? We're just looking into him for now," she explained.

Sergio sighed, slowing his pace just a tad. "... nothing concrete, I'm afraid. But I do have some interesting knowledge you might not have come across. Did you know that Yusuke's mother used to be a pupil of Madarame's?"

The statement made her stop entirely. Was that why Madarame took Yusuke into his care? Because he and Yusuke's mother had been friends?

While she was mulling this over, Sergio continued on. "She was, apparently, an ill woman. I was able to tell that much with just a little bit of investigation into her records. The thing that I find most interesting... is that the Sayuri was debuted to the public not too long after her death."

"W-what?!" Shizuka nearly doubled over. "You're not suggesting that Madarame... killed her and took that painting?" she asked. The guy was scum, but to go that far just seemed crazy to her. Then again the Sayuri had been some kind of smash hit back in the day, and had been a massive boost to Madarame's career.
"Who can say? All I have is conjecture on my end. But with Madarame's penchant for stealing from his students, I wouldn't put it past him. Sadly none of her works are around for public viewing, and the Sayuri itself is missing. So I have no way of knowing what her technique was. Maybe I'm out of line, but the timing of the Sayuri's release always strikes me as odd when I think about it."

"Yeah, it does seem strange," she agreed. "I'll keep it in mind, since I've been unable to figure out why Madarame would have adopted Yusuke at all." And if Sergio's hunch was correct, it meant at least two people were dead because of that goddamn 'artist.' And he still carried on without a care. He had to be dealt with, and made to own up. And it was something that only the Phantom Thieves could accomplish.

Sergio nodded. "I had a terrible vibe about Madarame as soon as Yusuke introduced me to him, and I fear... I fear something terrible might happen to Yusuke if he isn't exposed soon. It's getting to the point where I might even have to use my Stand to force the truth from him. And I'd rather not run that risk for fear that I go too far in my anger." He exhaled slowly through his nose.

"What I will say Shizuka... what I implore of you... is that you please save Yusuke, before it's too late."
"To think you'd really come... I feared you were lying when you contacted me." Yusuke had a gentle smile on his face as he gathered up his paints, his back turned to his model.

"Well um... I'm sorry it was so sudden," replied Ann. She had positioned herself in the open doorway of Yusuke's studio, looking set to bolt. She probably would, were it not for the two invisible figures positioned behind her.

Yusuke maintained his smile. "Oh it's not a problem. Though, I should say that Sensei will be back in around half an hour. And so I must apologize if this causes you any anxiety."

"That's why I'm here today dammit," Ann muttered under her breath.

Yusuke lifted his brush up and turned to examine Ann. "By the way... have you er..." The bluenette hesitated visibly. Even a man as removed from social norms as Yusuke knew this was going to be a dangerous area of discussion. "Have you... gained some weight?" he asked as gently as he could muster.

They had all known going in that Ann had no intention of 'baring it all' to Yusuke. What none of them had expected were the lengths she was willing to go to just to prevent it from getting to that. The blonde was covered in at least a dozen layers of clothing- shirts, sweaters, hoodies, all so densely packed together that the normally slim young woman looked like Violet Beauregarde. No doubt it would buy her some time at undressing.

"Y-you think so? Ahaha... I guess I'm just bloated or something!" Morgana and Shizuka shared a glance and shook their heads.

Yusuke nodded stiffly. "In any event can you er... get ready here?" he asked.

"You mean... take my clothes off?" Yusuke nodded stiffly. "I'm a little embarrassed. Could you look the other way?" Once Yusuke complied, Ann started removing the outermost articles of clothing. "Phew... these are tight."

The bluenette's eyes widened in shock. "T-tight?" He swallowed hard and stared at the wall as if it were the most interesting blank surface in the history of creation. "No, I'm doing this for art," he said solemnly.

"Any chance we could do this somewhere else? A room with a little more... atmosphere would be lovely."

While Ann was holding Yusuke's attention, Morgana and Shizuka took this as their cue to head in deeper. The intention, ultimately was for her to lead Madarame toward that opened door so that his cognition would change. And from there, the others would head on through and disable the security. But they needed her to stall for time first.

"I can't believe Yusuke is buying into Lady Ann's hokey acting," Morgana said.
"I can't believe Ann didn't have heatstroke with all them layers on." It didn't take long to reach the door with the peacock pattern, and Morgana quickly jumped up and sank his front claws into the thin material. He quickly lifted the lockpick under his collar out with his teeth and proceeded to stick it into the keyhole.

"Okay Shizhukah, you're uph!" he said through clenched teeth.

Shizuka was quick to stick a blue jawbreaker into her mouth, sucking it in her right cheek while she lifted her hands up, her thumbs and index fingers meeting together in a makeshift picture frame overlaid at the heavy padlock. The outer layer shimmered with a brief haze of rainbow light and then melted from view, revealing the inner workings. "Off you go Morgana, lets see that hot lockpicking action!"

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For as dangerous as Palaces tended to be, they were ungodly dull whenever there were no Shadows around. This was something the other thieves were coming to understand as they were left waiting around near the laser grid. Ultimately, they'd know if Ann succeeded whenever those lights died out.

Akira and Ryuji were passing the time with small talk, while Shiho paced from side to side uncertainly. "So this guy, this new track team coach... you really think he's gonna be as bad for the team as you-know-who?" Akira asked, earning a nod in return. "Alright... well I'll head out to the monja shop tomorrow in that case, see if he's drinking like you say."

He had been hanging out with Ryuji quite often, usually whenever there wasn't Metaverse business to deal with. And this was what led to them discovering that the track team was being reformed, in light of Kamoshida's abuses being uncovered, and that the new coach was a bastard in his own right. Ryuji had a hunch he was up to something, and Akira was happy to help as always.

Though now that they had another Palace, it made his schedule more hectic. Between working at Leblanc, helping Iwai at the airsoft shop, training with Shizuka, helping Ann make her heart stronger and working with Yoshida at the station square... well, Akira was the sort who liked helping people whenever he could. And the fact that these bonds made his Personae stronger was a nice bonus.

"I appreciate it man. I'll text you when I'm ready to go." As he said this he glanced to Shiho, who was still pacing nervously. "You okay?"

"Not really," Shiho said, stopping and shaking her head. "I'm just worried about... Panther. And if that artist tries any funny stuff. And I know I shouldn't, because she can take care of herself and it sounds like I don't trust her but..."

"Panther can take care of herself, like you said. And besides, Sting and Mona are there too. It'll be fine," Ryuji assured her. He grinned, and it was enough to make Shiho smile faintly. "But man... this waiting is murder."

Akira let his hands rest in the pockets of his black longcoat. For a few moments he quietly watched the two, putting two and two together in a sudden realization. "Huh." The two looked his way, causing the dark haired boy to tense. "Oh, it's nothing... I'm just thinking. We could probably ah... I dunno, just chat some more to kill time. I'm sure Mona and Sting will have that door wide open in no time." Well, he hoped so. How a cat was going to pick a lock was still a mystery to him.
"Jusht... abouthh... there!" Morgana spat the lockpick from his mouth as the last tumbler clicked into place, the top of the lock noisily popping open. "Blehgh... I'm gonna be tasting that for a while. Thank goodness for Chief's curry," Morgana said, hopping down from the door.

"I'll really have to check out Leblanc sometime. Sounds nice." Shizuka set her hands down and worked the stiffness from her fingers. They could hear Ann and Yusuke down the hall, footsteps drawing closer. Ann was still making idle chatter and asking for somewhere 'private' to work in. Yusuke was trying to get some control of the situation, to no avail.

Shizuka gestured to the open doorway. "Well come on fuzzy. Let's take a peek and see what kind of dirty laundry Madarame has stashed here." They headed inside, but deep down Shizuka was a little fearful of what they would find.

"It would be just too embarrassing to do this stuff elsewhere. Ooooh, maybe there's a nice private room down this way?" Ann asked. She was speaking in an exaggerated tone, her hokey acting adding strange emphasis to almost everything.

By now Ann had worked her way through much of her excessive clothing, reduced to a dark tank top and jean shorts. Fortunately, she didn't need to go any further.

"B-but Takamaki-san, we can't go this way! The only thing down here is-"

The sound of a door loudly sliding open filled the rickety rundown shack, just to compound Yusuke's troubles. "Yusuke? What's going on? Why are there... clothes strewn about the place?" Madarame called out, his voice echoing through the vacant halls. He was right on time. Shizuka hoped the others were ready to move on their end.

Yusuke glanced over his shoulder, panick overtaking him briefly. "S-Sensei is back! T-Takamaki-san, we really should-" The blonde suddenly gripped him by the back of his collar and all but dragged him toward the newly opened door.

"OH GOSH KITAGAWA-KUN, MAYBE WE COULD USE THIS ROOM WITH THE PEACOCK FEATHERS ON THE DOOR!"

That would get the old man hurrying. "What?! You can't go in there!" He quickly grew closer, just as Ann finished pulling Yusuke inside the darkened room.

Shizuka and Morgana made for the back end of the room, pressing into the wall. Even with the room so dark, they could just barely see the outlines of some of the largest things in the room and knew to avoid them.

Madarame reached the doorway, nervous sweat beading on his furrowed brow. "No, not in there!"

"This shit is taking forever..." Ryuji groaned, settling his hands on his hips. "Hey Joker, how much longer do you think this-"

The rows of glowing crimson bands suddenly flickered off, steam rising from the black poles that
had generated them. The towering doors at the other end of the courtyard began to rumble and slowly pulled apart, leaving a clear path to the new building.

"Not much longer," Akira flatly said. "Let's get going. Be careful, we're still going to be short three people, and we have no idea what's beyond this point. Swiftness is key."

The black haired boy took point, as always, and his two companions quickly followed his lead. Once entering, it soon became clear that this new building was far cleaner and more illuminated than the other building. The gold coloured walls and floors spoke of a decadence that surpassed even that of Kamoshida's regal castle.

"So the security room is in here, right? But..." Shiho glanced around the immediate surroundings of the foyer and sighed. "Must be deeper inside... and to make matters worse," Shiho pointed forward, through an open doorway that led into a massive hallway.

Even from afar, the group could glimpse a great statue that seemed to be intricately detailed. The top of the doorway cut off the figure from the waist up, but the golden robe stood out to Akira. He did recall that they had yet to see Madarame's Shadow, and it seemed to him that he could well be seeing a statue of his Shadow.

But, his focus then drifted to where Shiho was pointing.

A hulking guard Shadow was lurking just beyond the doorway, sniffing the air. Wisps of crimson light rose off his back in coiling waves, hinting at the strength he contained. He was looking to his left, and seemed not to have noticed the thieves yet.

"I see... so we have to beat this guy if we want to go forward..." Akira mused. "Well, let's get to it. We need to disable the security ASAP."

"Time to kick some Shadow ass," Shiho remarked. And she supposed, ultimately, she didn't mind. It was therepeutic.

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After a few seconds of pawing at the wall, Ann was able to hit the light switch, a golden flash quickly illuminating the cramped room. The contents were immensely shocking. Both sides of the room were loaded with copies of the Sayuri. Row upon row of the same painting stacked together in repeating canvases.

No dead bodies, that was a plus. Though this was definitely strange as far as secrets went.

"What the..." Yusuke said, his voice barely a whisper.

"These pictures... they're all..." Ann was just as surprised at the sight. Morgana and Shizuka remained tight lipped and invisible, watching as Madarame appeared in the doorway. "Why are there so many of them?"

Yusuke remained slackjawed for a few quiet moments. "I have no idea."

"Both of you, get out of here!" Madarame said firmly, directing a sharp glare at the duo.

"Sensei... what is the meaning of this?" Yusuke looked to his mentor, the man who adopted him,
with very visible pain in his expression. In one moment his whole world had been dramatically shifted.

Seeing that look in Yusuke's eyes made Madarame tense briefly. Them slowly, he shifted from anger to sadness. "I suppose I can't keep quiet now that you've seen this. Truth be told... I'm in severe debt. You see, I've been creating these Sayuri copies and have been selling them through a special connection of mine..."

"But... why?" Yusuke asked.

"The real Sayuri was stolen years ago by one of my pupils. I assume he begrudged my strictness. The shock of that incident is what caused my artist's block. And to counter this, some of my students gave their creations to me from time to time, to keep the world from knowing." He sighed and gave a gentle shake of his head. "I tried to recreate the Sayuri a number of times. It only resulted in these replicas... Someone came to buy these paintings, even knowing they weren't originals. That was where this... trend started. And I could not refuse. I needed the money to help further your talents, and I ask that you please forgive your cowardly teacher."

Shizuka narrowed her eyes. It was a convincing sob story, and she might even have believed it if they hadn't glimpsed his Palace, or heard from his former student. He was doing this for Yusuke's sake? Doubtful, since he saw Yusuke as nothing more than a resource. And if all his students had been giving their works willingly, then why had they all left him? Why had one gone so far as to kill himself in despair? Nakanohara had had a change of heart. He couldn't be insincere, so they could take him at his word.

And it seemed Ann realized that this was fishy as hell too. "Hold on... something doesn't add up. If the original painting was stolen, how did you make copies of it?"

A nervous bead of sweat quickly formed on the side of Madarame's forehead. The old man hesitated briefly. "I... happened to find a detailed photograph of it in an artbook," he said.

Ann tilted her head to the side. "So you managed to sell copies of a photo of the original? I'm not sure how this works but... wouldn't people who buy fine art be able to see through that sort of thing? I mean, that whole story sounds like a lie to me."

'Damn Ann, look at you go. Hot and cunning,' Shizuka thought briefly to herself. She could see Madarame's expression shift to one of anger, and the invisible girl remained coiled to strike in case he tried anything.

"What would you know?!" he snapped in return. Yusuke tensed and looked between the two, unsure of what to believe.

Ann didn't back down. "Something just doesn't feel right." She turned around and glanced at a canvas directly behind her, one that had been covered with a heavy blue tarp. She pulled it aside to reveal another Sayuri, one that looked slightly older than the rest.

"This..." Yusuke swallowed hard, his keen eye taking in every detail in the way only a true artist could. "This is the real Sayuri... But you just said the real one was stolen!"

"That's a replica!" Madarame hastily replied.

It was clear Yusuke could tolerate a lot from Madarame, but this was the kind of betrayal that even
he couldn't overlook. "No, it's nothing of the sort! This painting... this painting kept me going. It's the reason I made it this far, I know it when I see it. Sensei... don't tell me..."

By now it seemed Madarame was starting to abandon any attempts to appear sad and downtrodden. "It's fake! A counterfeit! I... I heard there was a counterfeit spreading around, so I bought it!"

"So you're telling me that the actual artist behind the painting bought a counterfeit? That's pushing it," said Ann.

Yusuke narrowed his eyes. "You're lying Sensei. Please, tell the truth."

'And look at Art Boy go. Seems he's got a spine after all,' Shizuka briefly mused.

"You too, Yusuke?" Madarame reached into his left sleeve, the gesture making Shizuka clench her unseen fists in anticipation. But rather than draw a weapon, he pulled out a phone. "I'm reporting you to my security company."

"What?!" Ann recoiled sharply, while Shizuka took a step away from the wall. Morgana followed her lead. They needed to get out of here ASAP, or shit would quickly go south.

"I hired them to deal with some troublesome paparazzi, but I'm certainly getting use from them now."

Yusuke quickly took a step forward. "Wait, let us talk about this!"

"You can talk all you like to the police."

"Run!" The voice seemed to come from the ether, leaving Yusuke and Madarame glancing around in surprise. Their confusion only grew stronger as luminous bubbles flashed around the room, punching holes in the walls and floor as random pieces of them were rendered invisible. It left the old man distracted long enough for the others to make a run for it, Ann taking a firm grip on Yusuke's left wrist to practically drag him along.

Shizuka drew her phone from her pocket and quickly tapped on the Nav icon. If there was a security group heading their way, then the front door wasn't the best option. Besides, they had to meet back up with the others in the Palace to make sure they hadn't gotten into trouble.

Granted, they'd be dragging Yusuke along, but they had gotten him into this mess and he didn't deserve to get arrested. Especially when he actually stood up to his teacher.

The air turned purple and the ground vanished beneath them. They were falling from the darkened sky, on a collision course with the courtyard.

Shizuka hit the ground with a grunt, and then grunted harder as a weight landed on her back. Through slightly blurred vision she could see that her thief clothes had materialized on her. With some effort, the young Joestar slowly looked up to see Ann's crimson clad body was the weight on her.

"Ohmigosh! Sting, are you okay?"

"I'm feelin... pretty good," Shizuka said, giving the blonde a quick thumbs up in her slightly dizzy
A bush to her right exploded open as Morgana burst from the leaves, gasping for air. "Why... the heck... did the portal open in the sky?!"

"Beats me," Ann replied "I thought we were seriously gonna die..." She moved to stand and helped Shizuka up. It was only as they rose up that they became aware of Akira, Ryuji, and Shiho staring at them in wide-eyed surprise. They were also looking a little scruffy and banged up. Security had apparently not been particularly kind to them.

Akira scratched the back of his head. "Well er... we disabled the security after you opened the doorway. So... mission accomplished on both ends," he remarked. He glanced over the two girls and watched as Yusuke slowly rose up to a seated position on the ground. "Why is..." Akira pointed to the bluenette.

Yusuke gasped loudly in shock. "Who are you all?!

"C-calm down Kitagawa-kun, it's me!" Ann said hastily.

Yusuke hesitated, looking at Ann closely and then turned his attention to Shizuka, Akira, Shiho, and Ryuji. "So that means you four are..." Shiho nodded. "Though... I don't recall ever seeing this cat costume before," he said, looking at Morgana. The 'cat' part made Morgana grumble, but he held his tongue for now. It had already been a turbulent day for Yusuke. "Where... are we?"

"This is Madarame's heart," Akira said.

"Sensei's... heart? That's... what?"

"It's the truth," said Ryuji. "This is how that money-grubbing geezer really sees things."

Yusuke shot a quick glare at the blond. "That's utter rubbish!"

His response drew a weary sigh from Shizuka. Her hands settled on her hips. "Seriously dude? You saw all those fake paintings, and the fact that he had the real deal hidden away all this time. For fuck's sake, the guy's a con artist! Get your head out of your ass!"

While Yusuke was flinching, Akira glanced from side to side and took a step toward the main building. "We can talk about all this later. Right now we need to get out of here before the Shadows come to investigate... Especially since Yusuke is defenseless."

Yusuke didn't want to believe that Madarame was a bad guy. That he was a liar, a thief, and generally a fraud. Even after seeing the Sayuri hidden away, and having his mentor threaten him with arrest, he wanted to deny the truth. But the museum made that all the harder.

Avarice oozed from every display, each word on the plaques sycophantically singing Madarame's praises. Then they reached the paintings of Madarame's former pupils, faces that Yusuke recognised. And the reality of the situation sank in further.

Eventually they reached the Infinite Spring. "The exit is just past here. Stick close," Shiho said, gesturing for Yusuke to follow. She didn't like the guy, but she certainly didn't want to see him hurt by Shadows. As they walked, Yusuke couldn't bring himself to look away from the human forms twisted in agony in the sculptures. This was how Sensei saw his students...
Two dark figures burst into existence at the doorway, cutting off their escape. Akira glared, drawing his knife quickly. As they squared up to power through the guards, a horrid cackling caught his attention, causing him to turn quickly.

Coming in the room from behind them, flanked by two more guards, was Madarame's Shadow. He looked much like the real deal, though his Shadow wore bright golden robes and had his hair tied up in some absurd top knot. As with King Kamoshida, this Shadow's eyes were a piercing glowing yellow in colour.

"Talk about bullshit clothes... first a king, and now some kinda' shogun?" Ryuji scoffed.

"Welcome to the museum of the master artist Madarame!" the Shadow boldly proclaimed.

Yusuke recoiled slightly. "S-Sensei? Is that you? That attire... this museum... this is all one big lie, isn't it?"

Shadow Madaram scoffed. He slowly tucked his hands into his sleeves and coldly regarded his protege. "My usual ragged attire is nothing but an act. A famous artist living in that shack? Of course I have another home. Under the name of a mistress."

"Wow. I'm so surprised," Akira flatly said. He'd had a feeling Madarame was sitting on money ever since he saw this Palace. No way a guy like that would be content to sleep under a rickety tin roof.

"If the Sayuri was stolen, why was it in your storage room? And if you had the real one, why make copies?! If it's really you Sensei... please tell me!"

Madarame sighed gently. "Foolish boy, you still don't see? The painting being stolen was a calculated rumor I spread. How does this sound? 'I found the real painting. I can't go public with it though. But you can have it for a special price.' Ha! How's that for preferential treatment? Art snobs lap it up, and pay good cash to boot!"

The truth made Yusuke sway, causing him to drop suddenly to one knee. The Shadow continued on callously. "The worth of art is purely subjective. Thus, it's a perfectly legitimate business transaction! Not that a brat like you could ever come up with such a brilliant scheme."

At that, Ryuji took a sudden step forward. Wisps of blue fire coiled at his feet as he kept Captain Kidd at the ready just in case. "Money this, money that... no wonder you wound up with this disgusting museum!"

"You're despicable. You have the whole nation fooled with this 'humble old man' act, but deep down you want to fleece everyone you meet," Shiho growled.

"Do you seriously not feel any shame for robbing the people who put their trust in you?!" Ann had narrowed her eyes sharply, her own body glowing with the power of her Persona threatening to burst loose.

Madarame scoffed. "Art is nothing but a tool to gain money and fame. You helped me greatly Yusuke."

"But what about the people who believe in you? The people who believe you to be a master"
artist?" Yusuke asked.

"I'll tell you this alone Yusuke. If you wish to succeed in this world, don't try to rise against me. Do you believe anyone could find success with my objections holding them down?! Hahaha!"

The reality of the situation had fully set in, making Yusuke glare at the ground. He simply couldn't deny the truth anymore. "To think I was under the care of this wretched man..."

"You thought I took you in out of the kindness of my heart?! Please. Plucking up talented yet troubled young artists gives me a fresh and easy wellspring of ideas to exploit. After all, it's easier to steal the futures of children who can't fight back! Livestock that I can use and dispose of as I see fit! But, I tire of this little chat. I suppose it's time I-

"You are unforgivable..." Yusuke suddenly growled. "I will never... forgive you!"

Madarame took a step back, the guards at his side moving in front of him like a wall of muscle. "You repay me with this ingratitude? You damn brat! Men, dispose of these filthy thieves!"

The guards advanced closer, making the others tense. "There's only four of them... think we can take 'em, or should I try and sneak us out?" Shizuka asked, glancing sideways at Akira.

But despite the danger closing in on them, Yusuke managed something close to a smile. "How amusing... It seems truth really is stranger than fiction. I so desperately wanted to believe the rumors weren't true. It clouded my vision for so long. My eyes were blind to the truth of this horrible man!"

"Have you finally come to your senses?" The voice in his skull made Yusuke stand ramrod straight for a few brief moments, before clutching the sides of his head. "How foolishly you averted your eyes from the truth. A deplorable imitation indeed... Best you part with that aspect of yourself!"

Yusuke gave a pained scream and hit the ground while the others looked on. For as painful as it looked, they all knew that this was what the first time was like for everyone. 'Let us now forge a contract.' Yusuke dug his fingers into the ground and dragged his hand back until blood was seeping from his digits. 'I am thou, thou art I. The world is filled with beauty and vice. It is time you teach people which is which!' A flash of light engulfed Yusuke's face, taking the form of an ivory fox mask with sharp ears and diamond markings under the eyes.

"Very well." Yusuke gripped his mask, red streaks oozing down the white material. "Come, Goemon!" He tore the mask off with a spray of blood and a flash of velvet fire erupting around him.

The light subsided, giving the thieves a chance to see Yusuke's transformation. His Kosei uniform was gone, replaced with dark uniform, a blue belt, stark ivory boots and a high collar. A katana was perched on his right hip.

His Persona made for a strange sight. A towering metal humanoid in flowing navy shogun robes. The top of his head was distinct for his dark pompadour, and in his right hand he held an exceptionally large smoking pipe. Blue fire lurked around Yusuke and Goemon, casting a dark blue hue around the room.

"A breathtaking sight... Imitations they may be, but together they make a fine spectacle. Though the flowers of evil blossom, be it known... Abominations are fated to perish!" Yusuke gave a sharp
sweep of his hand, an action that Goemon repeated. A wave of light exploded from the duo, growing into a wave of ice that knocked back the encroaching guards and left them frozen solid, suspended in the ice that now encased the wall and floor.

"Whoa!" Morgana's tail bristled "That... that was seriously impressive!"

"No kidding. I didn't think he had it in him," Ryuji murmured.

Madarame took a step back, having only barely been out of range of the ice explosion. "Who do you think you are?!" the Shadow snarled. "The price for your insolence is death! Guards!" The floor rumbled around Madarame as more Shadowy guards exploded into existence around him.

"Those who adored you," Yusuke said, taking a confident step forward. "The prospects of your pupils... How many did you trample on? How many dreams did you exchange for riches?! No matter what it takes, I will bring you to justice!"

Akira grinned wickedly. "Alright Kitagawa... let's see what you can do!"

"Very well!" Yusuke pointed sharply at Madarame's guards "Bring it on!"

Three tremendous figures lunged at the bluenette, his sharp glare watching them closely. Goemon swung his pipe out with surprising speed, smashing into the nearest Shadow and driving him into the floor hard enough to make the whole room shudder in protest.

"Whoa... that thing must be as strong as Captain Kidd," Ryuji remarked in some surprise. He turned, watching the two guards blocking their exit as they rapidly closed the distance.

Aradia appeared at Shiho's side, firing off a dagger of light that embedded in the nearest guard and scorched his ebony flesh. The creature powered through the pain and swung his baton down, the blow releasing a shockwave that knocked Shiho and Morgana backward.

He was still flanked on the left by the others. Akira drew his pistol and fired off three rounds. Each bullet grazed the side of the Shadow's head, making the creature snarl before he was obliterated by a flashing bolt of lightning from Captain Kidd's cannon.

Goemon proved his strength once more, flinching only briefly as the two remaining guards slammed their full weight into him. He swung his arms forward and threw them clean across the room, smashing them into the far wall. Just as they were starting to recover Goemon held his left hand up, firing off two giant shards of ice that drove into their prone forms and reduced them to black goo on impact.

"Hah... hah..." The aura of fire was slowly fading around Yusuke, before he suddenly fell to his knees again. "Madarame... where is... where did he go...?"

The other thieves looked around quickly. Sure enough, there was no hint of the Shadow. "Must've run away in the confusion... we should get out of here while we have an opening," Shiho said.

"I can't let him get away!" Yusuke hastily said.

"You won't be able to get justice if you're dead, and you're clearly in no condition to fight," Akira replied. He held a hand out to Yusuke, who hesitated for a moment and then took Akira's hand. "Come on, let's find somewhere to explain everything to our new friend."
Ryuji hooked his thumbs into his belt. "Somewhere that sells food, maybe? All this running around has me effin' starving."

"Monkey," Morgana lazily said.

"Shut it cat!"

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Getting a booth at Big Bang Burger had been a relatively easy matter and it was ultimately the best place for a group of their size. After leaving the Metaverse they had been able to see a few suspicious black cars positioned around Madarame's place, making it clear that there was a real danger in directly going at the man again.

"You know, sad part is this is the best spot in Japan to get a decent burger," Shizuka remarked, staring into the contents of her half eaten burger. "Man, I'd goddamn kill for a Baconator. Or a Shake Shack burger... Shake Shack was the best damn thing about New York."

"I kind of have to agree. Big Bang Burger isn't BAD or anything, but... I dunno, it's just not the same as the fast food you'd get out west," Ann mused.

Ryuji took a long and languid slurp of soda, regarding the two girls closely. "Uh... this really ain't the best time to talk about food ya know. We're still trying to get Yusuke all caught up."

So far they had explained as much as they could about the Metaverse and changing hearts, even going so far as to tell Yusuke of them dealing with Kamoshida. It had been a big enough deal that even Kosei students were aware of the Kamoshida scandal.

"It's so strange. The 'Phantom Thieves' of those rumors are actually real," Yusuke remarked. He dipped his plastic fork into the most unhealthy salad a person could ever buy. "But after seeing that world, I have no choice but to believe. And you want to cause one of these 'change of heart' things in Sens-" Yusuke caught himself quickly "Madarame's heart?"

Akira nodded. "That's correct. We were a little unsure at first... Just because a person has a Palace, doesn't mean they're evil. But after seeing everything in Madarame's heart, and hearing from his Shadow... well, we have no choice but to do something. Particularly if there's a threat of legal action hanging over us."

"Then... please allow me to join you. Consider it a form of atonement. Had I not been so blind to Madarame's true nature, then perhaps I could have done something sooner. And as his student, I feel an obligation to avenge myself and all those who came before me." Yusuke hesitated for a moment, keeping his eyes gently closed. "And I... owe all of you an apology. I was so caught up in trying to defend that man that I even threatened all of you. I've been such a fool."

"Yeah, you were. But eh, bygones. Don't sweat it dude," Ryuji nonchalantly said. "Plus we could do with some extra help. Your Persona seriously kicks ass."

Akira's bag rustled beside him, until Morgana popped out of the top. He cleared his throat and earned a small sigh from the dark haired boy. He took a discarded piece of cheese from his burger wrapper and fed it to the cat, who then proceeded to watch Yusuke closely. "Just know that it's going to be a dangerous venture. And while we'll work to avoid it, there's a slim risk that
Madarame might have a mental shutdown from our actions."

"That is a risk that must be taken. Not dealing with Madarame is a crime of the highest caliber. Besides that, a man with Madarame's connections cannot be exposed through any traditional methods," Yusuke replied.

"Looks like we have a new member in that case," Ann smiled broadly as she said this. Shiho, on the other hand, seemed a little less pleased. While Kitagawa wasn't as bad in person as he seemed in the stories from earlier, she still wouldn't forget the 'nude modelling' thing all that quickly. But it had been a rough day for the bluenette, and he had a strong Persona too. No point in raising objections now.

Akira smiled. "Welcome aboard in that case. A little extra manpower wouldn't go amiss."

"That reminds me... Madarame was threatening you with the cops too, so I guess that means you can't go back to his place... where are you gonna crash?" Shizuka asked. She wouldn't necessarily mind letting him crash on her couch, but Simmons might.

"I have been to my friend Sergio's apartment on occasion. I can only hope he's willing to house me for a few days... Once Madarame calms down, he will likely relent in sending people after us. At least until the exhibition ends. In the meantime he will want to avoid creating any scandal around his show."

"All about the fame and big bucks with that guy..." Ryuji remarked. At the very least, they had some breathing room to work with. "He's gonna go after Ann and Yusuke at least... hell, he might even know that me and Akira were snooping around your place before. How long do we got?" the blond asked.

"The exhibition ends on the fifth of June," Yusuke clarified.

Morgana gave a firm nod. "We'll want to trigger a change of heart in the span of a fortnight then if we want to avoid any of that 'legal action' stuff. But if my hunch is correct, we're already really close to the treasure."

The group nodded in unison. It had been an eventful day, but there had been a positive gain from it all. They were close to the treasure, they had a new member and nobody had gotten seriously hurt.

"By the way." Yusuke pointed at Morgana "What is... this?" With all that had happened today, he hadn't thought to ask about the talking cat.

"It's a cat," Ryuji nonchalantly said.

"It's talking," Yusuke retorted.

Morgana's fur bristled noticeably. "You got a problem with that?!" Morgana snapped.

"No, not really," Yusuke said, as if resigned to the fact that this strangeness would be his daily life from now on.

Snickering, Shizuka gave the bluenette a thumbs up. "Well, welcome to the Arditi! I'm sure you'll fit in like ah... like a can of soup at a Warhol exhibit!"
For as much as they wanted to clear Madarame's Palace, there were ultimately factors that arose in their daily lives that hindered any Phantom Thief business. Akira was expected at Leblanc today, naturally taking Morgana along with him. And Ann had a modelling gig to get to. That left them short three people, leader included, and that prevented any exploration for the day.

Shizuka entered the main courtyard of Shujin with a small sigh. She really had no idea what she wanted to do, since going straight home seemed dull. Makoto had student council BS to do, but at the very least they had something planned for tomorrow.

"Man..." Shizuka glanced from side to side, pondering her options until she heard a grunt of exertion off to her right.

She turned, watching a puffy-haired strawberry-blonde in a Shujin tracksuit slowly lift a bag of fertilizer off a trolley loaded with similar bags. Even looking at her from behind she could tell that this girl was dainty. "You need a hand with those?" Shizuka asked.

"Oh!" The girl turned, struggling a bit with the weight. "Well um... I-it's all right, I wouldn't want to be a burden," she replied.

"Nah it's cool, don't worry about it." Shizuka took the bag from her hands and held it with greater ease than the strawberry-blonde did. As she held the bag, she looked to the rest of the fertilizer on the trolley. "You got a lot of these... you part of like a gardening club or something?"

"Something like that," she replied, smiling politely. She moved to take up another bag and led the way to a long flowerbed at the far end of the courtyard. Various scarlet flowers were starting to bloom from the soil. "I'm Haru Okumura. It's very nice to meet you."

Shizuka nodded politely. "Okumura... that sounds kinda familiar."

"My father owns Okumura Foods," Haru clarified. She knelt down by the flowerbed and set the fertilizer down beside her, breathing a soft sigh. She said it in a rather nonchalant way, as if she thought little of the brand. Or perhaps, on some level, she was a little ashamed of the connection.

Shizuka was quick to join her, holding her breath as the opened the fertilizer. She waited a few seconds for the odour to pass and then asked "Oh right... the Big Bang Burger people, right?" She had spied the logo on their menu yesterday but honestly hadn't thought much of it at the time. Haru nodded, still smiling kindly. "Well, pleased t' meet ya Haru Okumura! I'm Shizuka Joestar. But you can just call me Shizuka. Or JoJo, if you want."

"Oh!" She blinked quickly. "I've heard of you actually. Your family has quite a reputation in the business world. I had wanted to say hello to you before, but I thought it might have seemed strange, given that I'm your senpai. And so... I was nervous about saying anything."

"Hehe... don't sweat it Haru. I'm pretty relaxed, honestly. I'd be pretty happy to hang out with you. Cause, you know, us rich girls gotta stick together." She seemed rather nice, Shizuka would admit. And, well, it couldn't hurt to have more friends.

Haru's gentle smile broadened. "I'd like that very much."
"Alrighty! Then let's plant some plants!" Shizuka proudly said.

Granted, she had never done anything with plants outside of watering some of her mother's rose bushes at the old penthouse. Which she hadn't been very good at. But hey, it was a nice way to pass the time. And Haru made for good company. She was shy, and seemed a little bit of a doormat, but she was genuinely nice.

Ultimately they didn't spend much time together, but they did exchange contact info. Another connection was always nice.

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5/22

Things were not going too well, Makoto felt. She had made flat zero progress in her investigation on the 'phantom thief' business. That was partially because she had been hesitant to investigate at all. Exposing Kamoshida hardly seemed like a bad thing in her eyes, so why try and expose the people who did it?

Then there was the likelihood that Shizuka was involved. She didn't want to land her in trouble, especially over doing something that Makoto couldn't find any fault in. Assuming she was involved, and that the 'delinquents' weren't just hanging around her as some kind of alibi.

Shizuka said they were good people that just had a lot of negative press around them, but... Well if the faculty didn't trust a student, could they really be wrong?

And on top of those worries, there was another concern that was steadily growing more pronounced. There had been rumors of late about an extortion racket targeting high school students, where they were blackmailed into working for some unsavory characters. It was just hearsay for now, but if any Shujin students got involved it would be something she'd have to look into.

Those thoughts lingered in her mind as she stood around outside Shibuya station, and only vanished when she heard Shizuka approaching her. "Sorry! Sorry!" The girl said, panting as she came to a halt beside Makoto. "There was ah... some kinda' demonstration going on and I had to go around it!"

"It's no problem." Makoto smiled and took a step away from the station entrance. She smoothed a few creases from her white blouse and glanced to her left. "Well, shall we go? The cinema is just down here."

"Yep!" She followed Makoto diligently. Once more it seemed she had changed her sunglasses, and was now wearing some tinted orange Ray Ban glasses. She had quite the selection, as Makoto knew by now. But, she had to admit, she did like the little glimpse she got at Shizuka's eyes. And those glasses did match her bomber jacket quite nicely. "So, what're we watching?"

"Well um..." Makoto hesitated for a moment. The brunette had been so excited when she saw posters for the movie in question, that she hadn't stopped to think that her selection in movies might come off as a little embarrassing. "Wolf Brother. I-it's a gangster movie."

Shizuka grinned and gave a delighted clap of her hands. "Awesome! Been a long time since I saw a crime flick!" she enthusiastically said.

As far as Shizuka knew, Japan had a tendency to be more 'traditional' in regards to a lot of things. It certainly wasn't a strong a sentiment as it used to be, but even she knew that it would reflect badly
on most girls here if they mentioned they were into anything not traditionally 'feminine.' But Shizuka, being an American at heart, had no such hangups. And she wanted Makoto to know as much.

"I didn't think you'd be a fan," Makoto said, an embarrassed smile on her face.

"Ahhh, you kiddin'? My old man introduced me to Scorsese and Coppola when I was eleven." On the grounds that 'Suzi never hears a word about this.' "You should come by my place sometime and we can watch 'em together. I'm sure I've got subtitles on the DVD's."

The offer sent a wave of excitement through her. Makoto chalked it up to the fact that she rarely got to 'hang out' at all. "I'd like that," she quickly replied. Even if she had no idea who Scorsese or Coppola were.

They continued on, but as they reached the entrance a thought crossed Shizuka's mind. "Hey," she said, glancing up at Makoto. "When I saw you at the station you looked kinda, um... thoughtful? There something bothering you?"

The question seemed to genuinely surprise her. As student council president she was used to most people dumping their problems on her, with nobody stopping to ask about her troubles. This girl really was different... "It's this 'phantom thief' stuff the principal wants me to investigate." Maybe it wasn't a good idea to talk about it with one of the suspects, but then again she didn't want Shizuka to think she was a suspect. "I've really had no luck. And if I don't find something, then Principal Kobayakawa won't give me a college letter of recommendation."

"So what?" Shizuka casually replied. She saw quickly that this required some clarification. "Okay, so like... you're top of your class, right?" Makoto nodded. "And you're student council president. American colleges love shit like that, and I bet it's the same over here. So... don't sweat it. Doesn't matter if chubs isn't gonna give you a recommendation, you can get to wherever you want on your own merits."

The casual assessment made Makoto stop mid-step, looking at the American as she strode on toward the cinema doors. Makoto watched her closely for a moment. Nobody had told her anything like that since her dad died...

"Hey Makoto? You comin'?" she asked.

Makoto blinked in surprise. "O-oh! Sorry," Makoto said, making her way quickly to Shizuka. This girl, Makoto thought, really was something else. And that was definitely not a bad thing.

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The way Shiho saw it, if she didn't get her thoughts on Yusuke out in the open to the man himself, the team would likely suffer from some underlying tension. Normally she was the kind of girl who didn't like conflict, but she was also trying to avoid hiding from her troubles. It hadn't ended well the last time she tried that.

Having decided on this, she asked to meet Yusuke in Inokashira park. She knew money was tight on his end, tighter still since he had been forced to flee from Madarame's. With this mind she thought it fairest to meet up somewhere that was free. This was a matter that needed dealing with, and Shiho was of a mind that it should be done sooner rather than later.

"I must say Suzui-san, I did not expect you to call me up out of the blue like this. But I suppose, if our leader is busy and we cannot enter the Palace, then we have time to spare."
They came to a stop at a bench by the lakeside, with Shiho settling her hands in the pockets of her denim jacket. It was a breezy day, so she had settled for dark slacks instead of a skirt. Her boots were heavy and dark, ideal for the weather. Yusuke, she would admit, also looked fashionable in a slate grey jacket, dark trousers, and fine leather shoes. Leave it to an artist to look trendy.

"Well, there was something I wanted to talk to you about," Shiho replied. "So... the others didn't tell you about what happened with me and Kamoshida, right?" Yusuke shook his head. They knew it wasn't their story to go spreading around. Really, none of them knew how to approach the topic whenever Shiho was around. "Suffice to say, I was abused and mistreated by a shitty adult that I thought knew better too. So I can relate to you for that. But... I still can't get over your 'intentions' for Ann."

"My 'intentions'?" Yusuke curiously repeated.

"You know..." Shiho replied, expecting it to be obvious. Yusuke's expression remained as blank as a brick wall. Shiho sighed "The nude modelling thing," she elaborated.

Yusuke tilted his head ever so slightly. "I only intended to capture Ann on canvas. Her aesthetic appeal is such that it inspired me in ways I had never been inspired before. The nudity is simply a means to remove all barriers separate the viewer from the artistic subject."

His response gave Shiho pause, and she regarded him with greater scrutiny. Was he for real? He seemed genuine and honest, but... Well, he was a teenage boy.

"Are you... are you for real right now?"

"Yes...?" Yusuke hesitantly replied, still unsure what Shiho was getting at.

Shiho gripped her chin tight. "So... you only wanted to paint Ann? You seriously didn't have anything else in mind when you made that pervy offer?" she asked.

"Pervy offer? Ah, I see the misunderstanding. Ryuji had a similar one." He netted his fingers neatly. "My intentions for Ann were entirely gentlemanly. But, in retrospect, I can see that they were easily misconstrued. I truly only wished to capture Ann's beauty on a canvas, as she inspired my creativity the way the Sayuri..." Yusuke sighed "... used to."

Something told her that if Yusuke were to lie, he would be extremely bad at it. Shiho breathed a small sigh of relief. "Well... it makes me pretty happy to hear that. I guess I misjudged you Yusuke," Shiho said, smiling. "So, I'm sorry about that. Here's hoping we can get along in the future."

The bluenette had a calm smile on his face. "I would like that. Outside of Sergio, I've been rather lacking in friends. And I don't doubt that my reputation at Kosei will take a hit when Madarame is exposed."

"Well, never mind all that. As long as you're committed to taking down shitty adults, then you'll have a place with us!" she said, giving Yusuke a thumbs up.

Perhaps she had him figured wrong. But, in this instance, Shiho didn't wholly mind being wrong.

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5/25

The last two days had largely been filled with the Arditi making up for lost time, blazing a trail
through the remainder of Madarame's museum. It had been a challenge, but ultimately they were able to reach the top of the second building. And at that apex was the treasure.

The problem, as they found out yesterday, was that Madarame's Shadow was far more concerned with security than Kamoshida had been. The treasure was at the center of a tremendous chamber with guards regularly patrolling the perimeter. A fence of lasers surrounded the treasure, making a direct approach even harder. To make matters worse, the control room just outside that chamber could only knock the lights out for a few seconds before backup generators kicked in and brought them back.

It was a challenge, but Akira had devised a plan to get the treasure when it materialised. A daring plan, but they were the Arditi. Daring was in the name. They were happy to go along with his plan, which just left the matter of the calling card. This time it would be a joint effort between Yusuke and Ryuji.

Ryuji's artwork, they all admitted, was lacking. And they were all ultimately curious to see the kind of logo Yusuke could create. They parted for the day from their meeting spot at Shibuya station, with Shizuka and Akira heading on to the park. He wanted to learn more about summoning his Persona in the real world, and she was happy to oblige.

The air around Akira seemed to almost steam, and a blue glow radiated off his body. He was getting better at this, and was getting better at this by degrees. Now as he knelt on the grass Arsene's figure loomed over him and flickered with a luminous blue light. But, nobody passing by seemed to register the vision of a floating winged red man with a dapper hat. It seemed Personas, like Stands, could only be seen by people on the same 'wavelength' as other users.

"Dang dude, you're getting good at that," Shizuka remarked. She reached down slowly, plucking a stone from the grass. She was quick to fling the stone up, which was promptly caught by Arsene as it neared him.

"Heh. Coming from the girl who could do this as a baby."

She shrugged. "What can I say? I'm gifted." And, indeed, she understood that babies using Stands was some kind of rare occurrence. But then again, even inanimate objects could apparently use Stands. "I mean it though. Your progress has been impressive."

As she understood it, Akira had been passing on these lessons to the others to practice in their free time. It took two things that they had found so far: A vivid recollection of the events that caused one's Persona to manifest in the first place, and a strong will to exert your Persona on reality. All they needed was to build up that willpower, to let the others adjust to the strain of this new ability.

After a few more moments, Akira slowly exhaled through his nose. Arsene faded from view and then vanished entirely. "It always gives me a headache... but at least the headaches are getting weaker," the dark haired boy mused. "So uh... how have you been? You seemed a little worried about... parent stuff before."

Shizuka swallowed. She pondered the question for a moment, and then spoke up. "You know there uh... there was a time when my dad didn't like the Japanese. Partially 'cause he was an American who lived through World War 2, and mainly cause his first daughter married a Japanese guy and moved all the way out here. But uh... I guess it a lot of it was just posturing. Guy had an affair with a Japanese woman and all... It was probably around that time that he started learning the language."

She smiled thinly. "He must've had some strange sense of humor when he named me. Shizuka. 'Quiet.' I might have been invisible, but I apparently had some big lungs when I was a baby."
The description made him smile. "He really cared about you... You said before that your parents were rather old when they adopted you. How'd that come to happen?"

"It was..." Shizuka reached up and pinched the bridge of her nose. "My dad went to Morioh, my hometown, because they wanted to use his Stand to track down a killer. It gave him a chance to get to know Josuke, my brother... and one day they were on this country road, and my dad sees these... teeny tiny little handprints forming in the dirt." She pointed to herself with her thumb. "Yours truly. Invisible baby."

Akira nodded along to Shizuka's story. She carried on. "Long story short my dad started to look after me while he was in Morioh, trying to find out who my parents were. Babies just don't... just don't appear on country roads, y-you know? But..." She leaned back against the tree, pushing her sunglasses up to keep her eyes fully covered. "He never found anything. No missing person's report came up, no appeals to the media... and nobody turned up. Nobody was asking for me," Shizuka said.

"I see..." Akira replied. Must have hurt a whole lot to think about. "But, it all worked out in the end. The people who adopted you loved you very much."

"Yeah... yeah they did. Thing is though, I've had a whole lot of time to think about it. And I think... I think I want to investigate who my real parents are. To know... why I was there. Why I was just abandoned like that. There has to be a reason, right?"

Akira hesitated. "Do you think knowing that would make you happy?" When he thought about it, it seemed that Shizuka wanted to know if she had any biological family out there. Losing her parents must have hurt a lot, and so perhaps she wanted to feel like she still had parents out there in some capacity.

"Dunno. But I don't think I can just... not know. Oh but uh, don't worry. I'm still gonna work hard on Phantom Thief stuff," Shizuka said. She leaned against the tree and regarded Akira for a few quiet seconds. "You're one strange guy Akira. I dunno what it is about you, but you're really good at getting me talking. Hear it's the same for the others too."

He shrugged dismissively. "I'm just a good listener," he reasoned. He paused, aware that their bond had grown a bit stronger. He was sure he could put the Aeon arcana to good use.

"So..." Shizuka pushed away from the tree and languidly stretched her arms over her head. "Enough of that... mushy stuff. We got a mission tomorrow, right? Guess we oughta rest up for it."

A broad smile formed on her face "Let's go kick that old man's ass."

"I don't think that came out the way you thought it would," Akira said flatly.
As ever, the Madarame exhibit was bustling. While it was set to go soon, that seemed to only draw in more people who wanted to get a glimpse before it ended. And the old man was in the heart of it all, soaking in the praise while sycophants crowded around him.

It was as he was enjoying the praise that a man in a sharp black suit and tinted glasses approached Madarame. One of his security staff, looking quite worried. This was the kind of news that would no doubt raise the old man's ire. And as his staff knew, the old man was pretty fucking worrying when he dropped the 'kindly grandpa' shtick.

"Sir, there's a matter we need to notify you about." Madarame excused himself from his fans, leading his guard away from the crowd until they came to a halt beside an abstract portrait of the sun and moon orbiting a purple vortex. The guard reached into his pocket, pulling out a small crimson card that had strangely formatted text on the face of it. On the back was an equally strange logo of a crimson top hat and burning eyeball. The words 'Take Your Heart' were printed beneath the logo. "We found this outside."

Madarame examined the logo closely. "What is this? Some kind of business card?" He leaned in closer for a better look at the text.

'Sir Ichiryusai Madarame, a great sinner of vanity whose talent has been exhausted. You are an artist who uses his authority to shamelessly steal the futures of his pupils. We have decided to make you confess your crimes with your own mouth. We will take your distorted desires without fail.

-The Arditi, Phantom Thieves of Hearts.'

Madarame's eyes narrowed and he proceeded to crush the card in his left hand. "Who is responsible for this?!!" he sharply hissed to the guard.

"We, we don't know sir! We just found several cards like this one posted around the area! Even the cameras didn't see anything, they just... appeared!"

"Then remove those damn cards at once!" Madarame snapped.

Flickers of purple light washed around Madarame, unseen by the common masses. For just a few brief moments, his Shadow self appeared in place of the real thing, his golden eyes glowing with an even greater intensity. "It's those damn brats' doing, isn't it? Well it means nothing... As soon as this exhibit is over, they're finished."

Madarame returned to his fans, trying to play it off as little more than a prank to anyone inquiring. But inside he was bubbling, the security in his palace growing all the stronger as his treasure took shape.

And, in a lonely corner of the exhibit, a gang of invisible teens and their talking cat were beaming with pride. "I have to say Yusuke, that new logo is pretty awesome. Has a nice air of mystery and style to it, just like what you'd expect of a Phantom Thief," said Akira.
"Your old logo was good too Ryuji. But, I really think you're better at writing the letters, that one really shook Madarame up," Shiho said.

"Ehehe... y-yeah well uh, I did have to get a little help from Yusuke on that part too."

Shizuka pushed off the wall while the rest of them made for the exit of the exhibit. "We might as well make for the Metaverse. You know, I'm quite proud of putting those cards up without getting caught. I just love doing ghost shit."

"You do have a knack for it," Ann remarked. "Just don't... do any sneaky invisible stuff around us."

"Perish the thought!"

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♫

For as alert as the museum guards were now, the Arditi still had a clear route through to the treasure room. And as they reached the second building the team split off in two directions. Ryuji, Ann, and Shiho made for the control room while the others headed higher up in the building.

The treasure was surrounded by infrared lasers, but it was exposed from above. And, fortunately, the group had come upon a ceiling-mounted crane that was used to hang and control certain art pieces. That was all they needed.

It would fall to the first three to head to the control room and rid it of any Shadows inside. While they got to grips with the lights, the others would make for the crane. Joker would handle raising and lowering it while Morgana, tied in place with a length of rope, would be lowered down through the gap to snatch the treasure when the light was off. All while Shizuka and Yusuke looked on from the catwalk to make sure nobody caught on. Shizuka was even going so far as to render Morgana invisible on the downward trip.

Shiho stood at the far end of the corridor, her gaze affixed to the sliding door of the security room. They had seen a Shadow stomping around in there, set to defend the controls from any intruders. "Hey!" She called as loud as she could, forcing her tone to go as deep as she could make it. "Get your ass out here! Those dang dirty thieves are running around this hallway!"

The door slid open suddenly, with the guard sprinting out in a mad rush. "Really?!" He called, only just now noticing Shiho's figure as he moved in closer. Ryuji suddenly sprang around from behind a large cubic flowerpot, swinging his club as hard as he could, with the edge slamming into the Shadow guard and making him double over with a loud gag of pain.

Ann swiftly moved from behind another pot, her whip lashing out and suddenly coiling tight around the guard's neck. She gave a harsh tug and sliced clean through his neck with the neon pink length, his whole body falling to pieces and melting into the floor.

"That was pretty brutal Panther," Ryuji remarked, before turning and making a run for the security room. A spectral hand was wedged in the doorway, keeping it from sliding shut. As he drew closer, Ryuji could see Aradia's form grow more defined as the ghostly Persona proceeded to slide the door open fully.

Ann shrugged helplessly. "Girl's gotta know how to handle a whip, right?"
While the trio took over the control room, Shizuka and Yusuke put the finishing touches on the knots keeping Morgana securely tied to the heavy steel hook. "You good?" Shizuka asked.

"Should be. These knots are pretty sturdy," the feline remarked.

While they waited for the signal they proceeded to look down from the catwalk, examining the floating form in the center of the room. The treasure was wrapped up in some kind of blue tarp, obscuring even the general shape of it. "What do you suppose his treasure is?" Yusuke asked in morbid curiosity.

"Dunno yet. The treasure is supposed to be the thing that caused a person's desires to become distorted in the first place, and from what we've seen of Madarame so far... it's hard to say when that even happened," Morgana explained.

The lights suddenly died, the room becoming pitch black as the guards below gasped in shock. From above they heard Madarame's Shadow call out "Get the lights back on! Now!"

Akira hit the switch and the steel cable started to lower downward with a low hum of machinery. Shizuka held her breath, Morgana and the heavy hook slowly being rendered invisible to the human eye. They only had a short amount of time to act before the backup generators kicked in, but fortunately the hook managed to reach the hovering shape in only a few seconds. Morgana gripped the canvas in his surprisingly strong paws.

"Okay, he's got it. Pull him up Joker," Shizuka quickly said, looking to the archway that joined the control panel and the catwalk. Joker flicked the switch the other way, reeling Morgana up at a steady rate. By now the others were likely making a beeline to the upper floor. As soon as they realized that the treasure was missing this place would be so lousy with guards that it'd be impossible to go back the way they came.

By the time the lights came back on, they had managed to untie Morgana and hoisted him back up onto the walkway, using the same ropes to tie the treasure to his back. "Awww yeah! Got it in one!" Morgana beamed.

Akira hoisted himself onto the catwalk, glancing over his shoulder as he saw the other three enter the room. He motioned quickly for them to follow.

"The treasure is gone! Find it, and find those damn thieves! I'll deal with them personally!"

"Good luck with that," Akira said flatly. For as confident as he sounded, a downward glance to the floor below confirmed their worst fears. More and more guards were streaming into the room and then running off in different directions, set to clog the various hallways of the building.

"I suppose a conventional escape is out the window..." Yusuke mused as he looked down.

"Window..." Akira murmured, as if recalling something important. When the lights had been killed there had only been one faint source of illumination: Moonlight, coming from somewhere above them. He looked quickly to his right and grinned sharply. There it was, a large square window that had the looming full moon in view outside. "Who's up for a little parkour?"

The dark haired boy leapt deftly from catwalk to catwalk with his crew in tow, making for the window. They could have picked the lock, but they were also in a bit of a hurry. Jack Frost lunged
from his body and drove his cartoonish fist downward, crushing the lock and flicking the window open in one fluid movement.

There was only one way down from this high up, and fortunately the wall below the window sloped downward toward a lower rooftop. The architecture of this place was anarchic for a fact, but as the Arditi reached the lower roof Akira was glad of it. Yet more roofs were beneath them, steadily going downward toward a section that overlooked the courtyard. Akira led on, and fortunately no guards managed to follow them out this far.

"We have to keep going. If we get to the courtyard, we can get back to the first building and cut through it. Most of the guards must have moved into the second building to look for us," Akira said. He hopped down to the doorway of the second building, landing neatly on the concrete slabs of the garden.

"Does any o' this feel weird to you guys?" Ryuji asked. He jumped down, looking quickly from side to side. "I mean, as soon as we grabbed Kamoshida's crown from him, his whole castle started crumbling. But we got Madarame's treasure, and..." he gestured to how stable the Palace seemed to be.

"He's got a point," Akira remarked. He looked to Morgana for insight.

The feline stepped down to join the others and untied the rope around his midsection. "Yeah, he does... surprisingly." Ryuji glared harshly at the talking cat, looking set to punt him over the nearest wall until Ann held him back with her left arm. "Well, we should probably take a look at this treasure all the same, just to see what we're dealing with." This too, Akira noticed, was different. Last time they had a treasure, Morgana had nearly fainted. Now he seemed to be... well, himself.

They set the bundled object down, with Morgana's small paws moving with lightning swiftness to uncover what was housed within. The treasure... was not what they had anticipated. "Hrm?!" Morgana growled, his blue eyes going cartoonishly wide in shock. The 'treasure' was some kind of smiley face painted on a white canvas, held within a brown picture frame.

"This is the treasure?!!" Ryuji asked in shock.

"Uh... I was sort of hoping the source of Madarame's distortion would be a little more substantial..." Shiho murmured.

As the group surveyed their 'prize', a small whirring sound filled the courtyard. Long black poles of metal suddenly sprouted from the earth, electricity crackling around the peak of each pole. Yusuke, who had been observing the treasure from more of a distance, was quick to notice this and snapped to attention. "Get back!"

And, with a superhuman swiftness that the Arditi had come to excel at, the group leapt away in unison as the metal poles formed a cage of lightning around where they had previously been standing. "That was close..." Shizuka murmured. "That old fuck played us! I'm... okay shit I'll admit, I'm a little impressed."

"If only the praise of a thief was worth anything." The group turned at the familiar sound of Madarame's voice, watching as the old man emerged from the second building with a hulking guard flanking him on either side. The guard to his right was holding a golden picture frame under his arm. "Looking for this?"
"So you had a fake prepped?" Ryuji growled. "Shoulda' known. This guy's all about cheating people."

"Hmph. Don't waste your breath grandstanding at me, boy. 'Cheating' people is perfectly acceptable in the art world," the Shadow casually replied.

Yusuke's eyes narrowed behind his mask. "What made you change like this?! Was it the fame?! The money?! I know you were a good man once. You were my foster father!"

"Fox..." Ann said sadly, reaching up and settling a hand on his shoulder.

Madarame gave Yusuke a cold glance, his brow a flat line of annoyance. "Thinking back on it, the only reason I took you in was because of my ties to your mother. Even when her husband died, that woman never lost her passion for painting. Her skills were breathtaking, and that is why I decided to look after her. Your mother and her artwork... they're all my works of art. "He snickered to himself, as if noticing something hilarious. "I suppose I can give you a gift before you die. A look at the real Sayuri."

The guard at Madarame's side took a step forward and held the painting up for the group to inspect. While much of the painting was familiar, a woman in red positioned by a cherry blossom, one difference was immediately apparent: The woman in the painting was clutching a sleeping baby. In the version known to the public, everything from the shoulders down was obscured by painted clouds of grey fog.

"The magnum opus of your mother," Madarame remarked, trailing into a haughty chuckle.

Shizuka thought back on what she had heard from Sergio, and gave the Sayuri a long look. She was quick to put two and two together. "That's a portrait of her and..." she pointed to Yusuke. Slowly, she turned back to Madarame and glared fiercely behind her mask. "Oh you fucker!"

"You guessed right. This is a self portrait of Yusuke's mother, and the child in the picture..."

"You're despicable!" Shiho gasped. "You took a work that personal to her and... defaced it! For money!"

"I wouldn't expect mere children to understand. The mystery of the Sayuri is a cornerstone of its popularity. Art snobs flock from all around, wondering about her expression. Why does she look that way, they often ask. Those parasites just love a mystery! And having an infant in the picture spoils that." Madarame's ruby lips pulled back into a worrying smile, glowing eyes locked intensely on Yusuke. "She knew she wasn't long for this world, Yusuke. A very frail woman. And this painting was a gift for the son she loved... Ah, perhaps it was fate that landed the Sayuri in my hands. One day, you see, she had a seizure right before my eyes. If I didn't call for help, and simply let nature run its course, I could own her prized painting with no strings attached."

His grin broadened, a wave of mutual nausea and disgust seeming to hit the thieves as Madarame spoke. "Anyone who knew her wouldn't be shocked if she died from a sudden seizure, such was her frailty. Honestly, did you never suspect anything Yusuke? Did you ever stop to ask why I found out your talents when you were only three? I kept you around, just to make sure you never suspected anything. So that I could control that idiotic young mind of yours."

Ryuji clenched his fists tight, flashing his teeth as anger bubbled up inside him. "Okay... so that's
at least two people dead 'cause of this asshole," he growled.

"You... You killed her!" A general chill seemed to permeate around Yusuke, a layer of cracking frost forming around his feet and dyeing the slabs blue from the supernatural chill.

"I will admit though, your actual talents were an unexpected twist. If I'm to steal ideas, it's far better to steal ideas from brats who can't fight back! But now, alas, you've strayed out of line and outlived your usefulness. I've crushed all who stood against me, and you and your friends will be no different!"

Surprisingly, Yusuke started laughing, hanging his head slightly. The others regarded him with some surprise. "Yusuke?" Akira asked. After hearing a bombshell like that, a chuckle wasn't the reaction he had anticipated.

Yusuke suddenly glowered at his former teacher. "I thank you, Madarame. Every reason I had to forgive you has vanished without a trace at this very moment." The ground rumbled beneath him, the ice at his feet erupting with several sharpened icicles bursting through the surface. "You're no artist! You're merely a rotten fiend!"

"You worthless fool! I'll teach you what happens when you defy me!" Madarame snapped in return. His whole body was suddenly growing crimson, the guards flanking him starting to bubble and melt. "Those who have the connections make the rules; those who don't, follow them. And in the art world, the rules are mine to dictate! I am the supreme being! I am the god of this world!"

"Ah boy, here we go..." Shizuka murmured.

A violent burst of black and red light exploded around Madarame, engulfing him and his two guards. In seconds they were torn apart, broken down to their base components of dark tar, and then rapidly reassembled into a hulking mass that cast a vast shadow over the Arditi. The dust cleared, slowly giving them a good look at Madarame's transformed state.

He had morphed into a series of paintings. Two floating eyeballs of moving paint, each one larger than a human torso. Below them was a large floating nose, equally large. Lastly ther was a giant mouth of moving ivory teeth, snapping at thin air and occasionally giving a glimpse at the cartoonishly large red tongue behind the teeth. The giant paintings seemed to move independent of each other, floating in the air.

"Now... let's begin, you vermin!"

"Splittin' yourself into four? You're still outnumbered dipshit!" Ryuji boasted. He pressed a hand to his mask, waves of blue fire forming around him. Captain Kidd lunged from his body, growing to his full hulking size as he moved forward. He was making a beeline for Madarame's floating eyeball, only for the mouth to swiftly intercept him. There was a thunderous boom, the courtyard shaking violently, and Captain Kidd was forced backward from the shockwave. "What the... it didn't do anything?!

Akira narrowed his eyes. "The mouth is immune to physical attacks," he noted. Akira pressed two fingers to his mask, calling on his own power.

"Hee-HO!" Jack frost thrust his large hands upward, rapidly forming a ball of ice larger than his head between his palms. He threw it forward in one hard motion, the orb of ice striking the teeth and exploding into blue vapor. The ensuing impact made the living painting recoil with a loud gag
of pain.

"But not elemental attacks," Morgana finished. He hummed loudly in thought and looked back at the others. "We better see if the others are the same way. Panther, let's go!"

Two more vibrant blue flashes lit up the courtyard, Carmen and Zorro's spectral forms coming into existence. The others jumped back to put some distance between them, not wanting to be one big target for Madarame. Zorro and Carmen moved in unison, Zorro swinging his rapier up while Carmen took a long drag on her cigar. A column of vibrant fire and a wave of neon green wind lanced forward from the two, aimed at the floating mouth.

However, mere inches away, the two floating eyes moved to intercept. Flames and wind crashed against the twin portraits, the points of impact glowing white hot for a few seconds. When their attacks ended, the floating eyes remained unharmed.

"Lame..." Ann grumbled.

Akira gave an annoyed grunt. "So the mouth is immune to physical damage, the eyes take on elemental damage... we need to split them apart, otherwise they're just gonna block everything." But how to do that. Akira paused, listening to the cackling of the floating mouth. Boasting and mocking. It seemed, even in this form, Madarame was chatty. And that was just what they needed. He pointed briefly at Shizuka, who had taken up a defensive position by a large flowerpot. "Sting, think you can keep the mouth busy? Be a distraction?"

"You kidding? Distraction is my middle name!" Shizuka hopped up, Houdini's golden arms raising the pot up. *Actually, it's Elizabeth. But Shizuka Distraction Joestar sounds pretty nice too.* She threw it with all her might, the cubic mass of ceramic sailing through the air like a bullet until it smashed noisily against Madarame's floating teeth. "Geez guy! I knew your paintings were shit, but this new form of yours looks even worse!"

"Hrr..." Madarame's mouth floated forward, putting a few feet of distance between it and the eyes and nose. "You dare to mock the great Madarame?! Your insole-"

"Great? Pff, what's so great about a guy who's so shit at art he has to steal from teenagers? Get over yourself dude!"

Madarame let out an enraged howl, his mouth flying forward and slamming into where Shizuka had been standing, the young woman leaping backward a few seconds before the impact. She grunted, raising her arms to shield her face from the incoming cloud of shrapnel, with only a few sharp chunks cutting into her sleeves. She landed neatly and vanished into the smoke, her invisible body making a sprint toward the other end of the courtyard.

Skidding to a halt, Shizuka rendered herself visible once more. "And that's another thing. Could you be any more of a pussy? I mean fuck. What kinda' sad loser boasts about robbing from kids? A pretty pathetic one if you ask me." Just like that Madarame's mouth was lunging her way. His giant ivory teeth parted, before suddenly spewing out a wad of bubbling black paint. Shizuka yelped, Houdini's hands gripping her scarf and yanking her backward. The bubble of paint hit the earth, concrete hissing and smoking beneath the dark goo. It didn't take long for them to realize that it was some kind of acid, melting a deep ring into the ground.

Meanwhile, the others were focusing on the three remaining paintings. But even without the mouth acting as a shield, they were still a dangerous combo.
The nose shot downward and smashed into the ground a few feet from Akira, the ensuing shockwave knocking the dark haired boy off his feet and sending him skidding across the ground. Grunting, Akira began to slowly rise up only to freeze for a fraction of a second when he saw a shadow rapidly growing above him. He launched himself away with a quick throw from Jack Frost, the left eye painting smashing into the earth where his left hand had been mere seconds ago.

"Nemesis, Panther!" He called, summoning Jack Frost back to his side. He raised his large snowy hands up, catching the incoming eyeball and holding it steady with all the might in his stout body. "Go back up Sting! If these pictures are element-proof, you guys can't do much against them!"

"Got it!" Shiho replied. She and Ann turned tail, making a beeline for the raven-haired girl as she was left bouncing from spot to spot.

With Jack Frost holding the frame in place, it gave Yusuke room to maneuver. Goemon's tremendous body dropped down from on high, elevated heels crashing into the floating eyeball and driving it into the ground, uprooting several concrete slabs from the impact. Their upper hand lasted for only a few seconds before the nose sliced through the air, the edge of the frame crashing into Jack Frost and Goemon, the strike sweeping Akira and Yusuke off their feet and sending them soaring backward.

Pain lingered in Akira's body as he forced himself to stand upright. It left him soon enough, a warm wave of blue light washing over him. He glanced to his side, smiling faintly at Morgana as the feline came to a stop near him. Zorro specialised in wind and healing abilities, and he had proven quite handy at both. "Thanks for the assist."

"No problem. But these things are pretty strong for a bunch of overgrown portraits," Morgana said. "Got a plan in mind Joker?"

"Maybe." Akira's whole body glowed for a moment as he swapped Jack Frost for Arsene. "Elemental attacks can't damage these ones, but... I'm willing to bet a strong enough wind can still pull them in, right?" He leaned in closer, whispering his idea into Morgana's ear.

The feline grinned wickedly. "I like the way you think Joker. Let's do it!"

If they were to beat Madarame, they'd need to crush these components in one fell swoop. And then that big mouth of his would be shit out of luck...
On a warm afternoon like this, with the golden sun slowly sinking behind tremendous concrete buildings, investigating a murder scene was not a particularly pleasing prospect. The stiff had been called in by a friend who had narrowly avoided being killed in the scuffle, and the nature of the 'assault' was right up the SID's alley if the report was to be believed. The guy had been attacked on the way to his apartment, leaving the concrete staircase in the middle of the three story block taped off to the general public.

The police officers on the scene had been a little wary of letting Satoshi and Yoshio pass, up until Satoshi showed them some rather official looking paperwork. They had access that went above their paygrade and, not wanting to get into any trouble, they had rolled back the police tape to let the two well dressed men pass.

"Special consultants," one officer said to the other, speaking in a tone that said 'what can you do?"

"They look more like plainclothes to me. But better them than me... you see what happened to the guy up there?"

"Grisly," the first replied. "Crimes like that, the rampage accidents, the mental shutdowns... the hell's Japan coming to?" he asked.

"You know, I was thinking the same thing the other day. And I heard this really great speech from this politician on the news, guy said he was gonna clean Japan up an'...

Their conversation became muted chatter as the two Stand-users made their way to the halfway point on the stairs. Streaks of blood were stained onto the wall, droplets having run down and dried into place by now. On the upper portion of the stairwell, leading upward, several chunks of crushed human meat were splattered onto the steps.

Yoshio stopped at the halfway point and took in the corpse. Male, early thirties, dressed in some shabby clothes. A few holes had been blown out of his chest, and his left hand had been destroyed too. A chunk had been knocked out of his head, revealing a few hunks of grey matter that had been spray painted onto the wall behind him. "Yeesh... killer really didn't like this guy. You think this was A's doing?"

Satoshi left Instant Crush positioned between his lips, his hands reaching into his pockets so he could quickly snap on a pair of white surgical gloves. Yoshio quickly emulated his boss. In the scuffle it seemed the young man's wallet had fallen from his coat pocket, left open on the steps. Lifting it, Satoshi examined its contents. "Doubt it. This guy could probably barely afford a bus ticket, way too smalltime for A to personally get involved in," he casually said. "Besides that, the witness report made this pretty clear cut. Our vic got into an argument with some 'bad smelling redheaded guy' he bumped into on the street. Red followed them back here and then 'the air caught fire and all those black shards shredded my friend.' Our guy only barely got away."

"Sounds like a Stand user to me," Yoshio replied. "Black shards huh..." Reaching into the breast pocket of his blue jacket, he took out a titanium case. He opened it to reveal an array of small tools, his gloved right hand casually taking out an immaculately clean forceps. "Our witness wasn't a Stand user, but he could still see the projectiles that hit his friend, meaning they were physical objects. I wonder if our killer left them behind."
Yoshio carefully stepped over the spilled dregs of human flesh as he moved upstairs, stopping at a hole that had been punched into the concrete behind the victim. He reached in carefully with the forceps and slowly took out a small black lump. Incredibly smooth, despite the impact with the wall, and shaped like a teardrop with how the black material tapered to one end.

While Kashmir's main ability was sensing neuroelectricity, his Stand also enhanced his senses above the human peak. The ivory lizard appeared on his shoulder in a wave of shimmering light, long extremities merging into the flesh of his neck. He held the black lump close to his face, highly tuned vision examining it with the intensity of a master appraiser.

"It's carbon," he said simply. "Very dense, very hard carbon. Incredibly smooth and perfectly shaped too... It must have been fired at some speed to punch through flesh and bone."

Satoshi nodded. He took a long drag of limitless, spectral tobacco, and blew a ring of unseen smoke into the air. "Matches reports of a murder case from last month. Some girl, found in the gutter, with 'unknown foreign objects' embedded in her body. Got to see a sample from the evidence locker, and they looked exactly like those." He weighed this information for a few moments. "What're we looking at here? A Stand that generates these carbon 'bullets'?"

"If it's something created entirely by the Stand, it couldn't be seen by a normal person. I'm thinking the user might use coal or something to create the bullets, shaping them and then firing them out," the younger agent said. He set the black teardrop onto the floor. "There was another case like this?"

"Right," Satoshi confirmed. "We were busy with that girl at Harajuku. The one with the money stealing scarf... well, there was no trail by the time I had a look at the case. But if you ask me, that witness report makes me think our killer is the type who's easily snubbed. He probably hit on that girl, got shot down... so he shot her up. After all, if you have a Stand then the police aren't gonna find you."

"That's true." Yoshio sighed and turned his focus back to his boss, Kashmir vanishing off his shoulder. "We have a vague descriptor to go off of at least. You want in on this one?" Yoshio asked.

Satoshi adjusted his glasses, his right hand elegantly rolling Instant Crush over his knuckles. "Can't. I'm already working with Aya on that drowner case... she says she's got a good lead, and we might be able to corner him easily enough. If we deal with him in the next two days, I'll help you. If not, stick with Sergio," he stated.

The younger man nodded slowly and moved to stand fully. At this rate they'd have to clear out and make way for the crime scene techs. "Sergio's Breakthru is pretty strong against most any ranged Stand. Still, we might need a little extra help if our perp can do THAT to a guy. Oh! Maybe I could ask Joestar for help?"

"The girl?" Satoshi incredulously asked. "She can handle herself in a scrap, but do you really think she's got a clear head for work like this?"

"Ah relax sir," Yoshio said. He grinned vibrantly at his superior. "I'm sure she's a totally mature and level headed girl."
"AS SOON AS WE'RE DONE HERE, I'M GONNA TRACK YOU DOWN IN THE REAL WORLD AND KICK YOU RIGHT IN YOUR BONY OLD BEHIND!"

Shizuka was maintaining a rapid running pace around the far edge of the courtyard, with Madarame's gnashing mouth tearing up the ground behind her. He was snarling in a blind fury, waves of molten black paint oozing from the corners of his mouth. Well, nobody could say she hadn't done a good job at distracting the mouth.

A sudden flash of green light washed over Shizuka's body, and she felt the strain leave her legs immediately. Her whole body sped up, putting some extra feet between herself and the giant floating painting. "Whoop! Thanks Nemesis!"

She maintained her high pace and suddenly turned invisible. Houdini caught her incoming left foot and tossed her upward, the slim thief flipping through the air until she landed neatly on a towering sculpture. A fat bubble of acidic black paint struck where she had been standing previously, melting that section of ground into bubbling sludge. "HOLY SHIT! That was close!"

"You damn shitty brat! Disappear all you like, I will find you! And when I do-" A fireball suddenly exploded against the floating mouth, making the portrait writhe briefly in pain. "Gah! What th-" More flashes of flame exploded against it, driving the figure into the earth as lances of condensed light stabbed into the frame.

Shiho and Ann took up positions a few feet away, maintaining a continuous volley to pin the overgrown mouth down. "Geez... this thing's tough for an overgrown canvas," Shiho murmured.

Meanwhile, things were looking a little hairier for the others. The two eyes joined each other side-by-side, pupils glowing red for a brief second before twin waves of fire lanced out from them. The arcs of fire crossed the courtyard swiftly, heading Yusuke's way. Goemon reflexively appeared in front of him, blocking the scorching wave. But, ultimately, Goemon didn't handle fire too well. The explosion knocked them both backward, making Yusuke gasp as he was knocked flat on his back.

"Fox!" Ryuji exclaimed. He made a rush toward his downed teammate, only to feel something rapidly close the distance toward him. The giant nose, twirling like the rotor of a helicopter. It closed in on him rapidly, the edge of the frame striking Ryuji in the ribs and knocking him away.

The three portraits were quick to join back together. No doubt they would have been laughing, had the mouth not been busy elsewhere.

But, before they could move in on the two downed thieves, something started to tug at them from behind. An unseen pull that was drawing them in like a strong tide. This force grew stronger and stronger despite the paintings bid to fight against it, and suddenly they were violently yanked into the center of the courtyard.

Zorro stood at the heart of the open space, his rapier raised overhead with his left wrist spinning it fast enough to generate the strong cyclone. Morgana stood a few feet away from his Persona, watching the churning maelstrom spinning the trio of paintings around. "Joker, I can't... keep this up forever..."

"Don't worry, you won't have to. Skull, Fox, with me!"
Arsene jumped down into the eye of the hurricane, one bladed heel crashing into the nose portrait and smashing it downward. It caught one of the eyes and brought it along for the ride, both crashing into the concrete slabs below.

"Heh... well damn Joker, you shoulda told me it was time for the smackdown," Ryuji said. He rose up, dusted himself off, and quickly called upon Captain Kidd's power.

"I'd be lying if I said I hadn't been looking forward to this," Yusuke added, rising to his full imposing height.

The spectral pirate and hulking thief shot down in unison, the hull of Kidd's boat driving the remaining eyeball down to the ground. The elevated heels of Goemon's sandals drove all three into the concrete, the whole courtyard rumbling in violent protest. Zorro flicked his rapier down, the whirlwind vanishing away. A quick glance at the portraits let the gang see that they were steadily melting into a pile of black sludge.

"Now then..." Akira looked off to his side, watching a flashing explosion light up the darkened sky. The mouth portrait was flung upward, smoke rippling off the frame, until it crashed into its brothers. And, slowly, it melted into the ground with the others.

As the sludge oozed into the earth, a figure emerged from the center of it. Madarame's Shadow, still glowing with a malevolent crimson aura. "Agh... hah..." He tried to stand fully, tendrils of dark matter still linked to his body. "You... damn brats..."

Suddenly he shot his right hand out, the sleeve of his robe hovering up in contempt of gravity. Arcs of purple light condensed in his palm and shot outward in a bullet of energy larger than his head, making a beeline for Yusuke at a fierce speed. Arsene suddenly intercepted it, clasping his hands around it. He squeezed it tight, howling in pain as it burned into his palms.

He was fighting to hold the orb steady, feeling the throbbing energy risking to explode and engulf the whole courtyard. Arsene swung his arms up sharply, catapulting the dense orb of light skyward. It exploded high above the museum and briefly lit the sky up, distant sparkles trailing off into the distance like fireworks. "You..." Madarame watched as his last ditch attack vanished like dust in the wind. "You impudent..."

"You really need some new material dude." He turned sharply, his glowing eyes affixed to Shizuka as she seemed to practically materialize directly behind him. "Oh, and by the way..." Shizuka clenched her teeth, taking a step forward as her own aura lit up her body. "We're not done kicking your ass."

Houdini's golden fist clocked Madarame across the feet with a thunderous crack, like the resounding noise of a gunshot. "BAZU!" Time seemed to slow to a crawl as that first blow hit, lifting Madarame ever so slightly from the lake of tar his transformation had left behind.

"BAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZU!!!" The chorus of blows lifted Madarame upward, his body being juggled upon Houdini's knuckles. A tremendous uppercut caught him on the chin and launched him skyward, those long tentacles of black goo still linked to his body and being stretched tight.

"Hey Fox. You wanna do the honours?" Shizuka asked.

"I have no qualms. Consider this the avenging of my mother." Goemon leapt high from Yusuke's
growing body, crossing the distance towards Madarame's body in the blink of an eye. He raised his ornate smoking pipe high overhead and smashed it down abruptly, the strike sending Madarame's screaming body plummeting to earth. He struck the ground with an earthmoving shudder, the impact sending the black tar spraying away from him.

The dust settled, leaving only Madarame and the untouched Sayuri. The aura of energy left Madarame, leaving him powerless and cowering as Yusuke approached him.

"Well, Madarame... I think it's about time we take our leave. But this has been... an experience," Akira said, trying his best to stay casual. This guy had been tougher than even Kamoshida, and he knew they weren't done. They still had to make an escape, after all.

Madarame trembled, trying to grab for the Sayuri. "Y-Yusuke... no one cares for true art. All the people want are easily recognizable brands! I'm a victim in this too! The art world revolves around money... you can't rise up without it. I... I knew that poverty once, I just couldn't stand to go back to it!"

"A fiend like you," Yusuke quickly plucked the Sayuri up, while his left ivory boot planted itself firmly on Madarame's chest to keep him pinned to the ground. "Has no right to speak about the world of art! You, and this abominable world, are done for! We're going to change your heart, and undo the harm you've caused."

"Please! J-just don't kill me!" Madarame shrieked.

"Return to the real world and confess your crimes," Yusuke ordered, his tone ice cold.

"Y-you're not going to kill me?"

"Swear it!" Yusuke shouted, adding an extra push onto Madarame's chest.

Once more Madarame shrieked in fear. "Yes! I swear, I swear!" he cried. It seemed, Shizuka noted, that after a little 'tenderizing' the Shadows would fold faster than Superman on laundry day. Kamoshida, and now Madarame. It wasn't hard at all to knock them from their high horses.

"Tch... the nerve of this geezer. We don't kill people," Ryuji said.

"But... but what about the other one? The one in the black mask?"

The group exchanged an uncertain glance. Nobody in their group had a black mask (well, possibly Morgana, but it was hard to tell if he had a mask or if that was just how he 'naturally' looked) and they had hardly seen anyone else here other than the Shadows. "Don't try to fool us," Akira said firmly.

"Was there..." Shiho looked down at Morgana for some clarity. "Was someone else in here with us?"

"That shouldn't be possible..." Ann added. Or at the very least, if someone else was here... surely they would have seen a sign of them. That was what Ann wanted to believe, at any rate.

While the others were feeling confused, Shizuka felt as if a puzzle piece had landed abruptly in their laps. Something about this Metaverse business had been bothering her, lingering in the back of her mind since she first found out about it. It was something about the other world that she could
only focus on with greater clarity now: The mental shutdowns.

When they had set off after Kamoshida, Morgana had expressed that the victim suffering a mental shutdown was a risk of their actions. Doing enough damage on a person's Palace would naturally have a strong effect on the person in question. Then there were the scattered reports of mental shutdowns and rampage incidents throughout Tokyo, incidents that the SID couldn't link to any individual Stand user. It was at least partially safe to assume that it wasn't a Stand user causing them, in that case.

No. If Stand users could be found all around the world, it would be foolish to think that the people around her were the only Persona users in the whole wide world. So someone else somehow knew about the Metaverse, and was using that power to kill people?

But, she asked herself, to what end? It could all be a big lie, of course. Something Madarame was spitting out in a last desperate attempt to trick the others.

Just as she was really getting the ball rolling, the whole Palace started to rumble around them. Now that the treasure was out of Madarame's grasp, the integrity of the area was rapidly crumbling apart.

"Damnit, we don't got time for this... Mona, think you can drive through the museum?" Ryuji asked.

"It's worth a shot." The feline took a few paces from the others and jumped high. A puff of cartoony smoke enveloped him, parting then to reveal a large black van that noisily landed on the broken concrete slabs. "Hop in!" The group were quick to file in, with Yusuke as the last heading for the van.

"Yusuke..." Madarame's Shadow weakly called. A shimmering white light began to overtake his body, as he faded from existence piece by piece. "What should I do?"

And, for just a moment, Yusuke gave a passing glance to the man who had one been his father and mentor. "Put an end to the lies. And atone for all you have done." And, with no more time to waste, he moved to join the others.

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After a hectic drive, during which Morgana plowed through about half a dozen walls, they found themselves once more in the darkened alleyway opposite Madarame's shack. The group moved to catch their breath, the pain of the last battle now catching up with them. Akira lifted his phone, checking the app.

"The destination has been deleted," his phone chimed.

"Job well done everybody," Akira said. "But we should probably get out of here. If Madarame has his security lurking around. We should find somewhere a little safer to chat in," he said.

The dark haired boy gestured for the others to leave, and as ever they followed his lead. Yusuke lingered for just a moment and looked at the shack, clutching the true Sayuri in his hands. Now in the real world, some kind of wrapping had appeared around it to hide the canvas from prying eyes. "Goodbye, Sensei."
It didn't take long to reach the accessway at Shibuya station, whereupon the group struggled to get comfy at the windows overlooking the main street. "Ugh... this place sucks as a hideout," Shizuka grumbled, slumping against the railings by the window.

"Not much was can do about it with the school roof being closed off," Ann said. "We can't risk getting caught sneaking up there."

"Yeah well... leave it to me. I'll look for a replacement... hopefully one that at least has seating."

Yusuke examined the treasure in his hands. "The real Sayuri," he murmured. "This painting had a profound effect on me, from the moment I first laid eyes on the fake. But I never would have dreamed it was so connected to me... I can only hope my mother rests easy now."

"It's finally yours Yusuke. Just as your mother wanted," Shiho remarked.

Ann nodded, a warm smile on her face. "Right. But I don't think you could ever show the real version to the public."

"Maybe that's how it should be," Akira replied. He let his elbows rest on the railing, his eyes partially turned to the ceiling. "She didn't paint that portrait for fame and money. She painted it for you," he reasoned.

"Yes. That's quite right," Yusuke replied, a gentle smile on his face.

After some thought, Shiho looked Yusuke's way. "By the way, what are you going to tell your roommate? I doubt he'd believe the whole story."

"I suppose I'll just keep this under the tarp for the time being. I plan on moving out of Sergio's apartment soon anyway... as welcoming as he is, his apartment is still a little small for two people. If it comes to it, I suppose I could take up my spot at the Kosei dorms."

"Sergio might believe some of the story. He is a Stand user after all," Shizuka nonchalantly said.

Ryuji nearly bolted to his feet. "For real?!"

"Uh. How do you know?" asked Ann.

"I met him a few days ago, and he knew a good deal about me in advance. I guess he saw us lurking around Madarame's one day and wanted to know what we were up to. And, well, he asked me to help Yusuke. Said he was afraid of what would happen to Yusuke if we didn't expose Madarame."

"Really? But why wouldn't he come to me personally?" Yusuke asked, cocking his head partially to one side.

How would she put this politely? "He said he was afraid of alienating you if he said anything."

"Ah... well, that's fair. I threatened to call the police on you for speaking ill of Madarame after all. I was rather wilfully blind," Yusuke admitted with a few notes of shame in his voice.

After a moment, Ryuji stood up and downed the last of the soda he'd bought a few minutes previously. He crushed the can and tossed it clean into the garbage can a few feet away. "Speaking
of which, what're you gonna do now?" the blond asked. "I mean, with that geezer set to have a change of heart, I guess you don't have any more personal investment in this. But we're gonna keep targeting corrupt big shots."

"To what end?" Yusuke replied.

"It's like hitting back at scumbags and... society, an' stuff."

"That and with a power like ours, it's the right thing to do. People like Kamoshida and Madarame could never be exposed through conventional means. And the world is full of corrupt bastards like that," Akira added. At this point he doubted he could just 'give up' being a phantom thief. Not when he'd been a victim of such corruption too.

Yusuke hummed faintly, dwelling on this. "You do have a point. I was a victim too, after all... and moreover, the exotic locales of Palaces may expand my artistic repertoire!" he eagerly said.

Ryuji snickered. "You really do love art huh? You're pretty impressive."

"You can count me in as a full member of the Arditi. But I won't take part in any inelegant plans, alright?"

"Don't sweat it. We're fabulous as shit," Shizuka boasted, pumping her right fist upward.

A playful smile briefly formed on Akira's face. "Dunno if I'd go that far. But yeah, we do like to do things in style. Well, its been a long day. I suppose we should call it and head home," he said. His whole body felt heavy, and he was dying for a nap.

Shizuka cleared her throat. "One more thing... the guy in the black mask that Madarame mentioned. What should we make of that?" she asked.

"Eh? The old timer was prolly just bullshitting to try an' throw us off, or keep us busy long enough so we couldn't escape. Don't sweat it," Ryuji said flippantly.

"But think about it. Palaces have a huge effect on the people they belong to. You steal a treasure, the Shadow vanishes and the person does a total 180. But what if you kill the Shadow?" Shizuka asked. She turned to Morgana, feeling he would quickly see what she was getting at.

"They would have a mental shutdown, and likely die soon after," Morgana said.

The young Joestar nodded. "And those mental shutdowns have been popping up in Japan for some time now. I know you guys are new to this whole 'paranormal' scene, but you have to admit... by all appearances, it seems we're not the only people who can enter the Metaverse."

The statement made the whole group tense. And when they thought about it seriously, it seemed unlikely that these mental shutdowns were being triggered by any 'natural' means. Not when the police couldn't find a hint of foul play in those strange cases. "Also means that someone else managed to somehow get the app... I guess it just randomly happened, like it did for Akira," Shizuka added.

"Not necessarily. Mona can go between worlds without the app. If there is a killer using the Metaverse, then it's possible they have a similar power," Akira said. The alternatives weren't too pleasant in his mind. Either Igor had given the same app to a killer, for whatever reason, or Igor
wasn't even the source of the app to start with. "But, assuming this person exists... why are they using the Metaverse to kill people? I haven't researched the shutdowns, but those I've heard about seem totally unrelated."

"Who can say? Maybe the guy's just a sick fuck," Shizuka said simply. It was often the case with evil Stand users. They had a power that put them above normal people, made them largely untouchable by the law. Why not abuse it? That was the logic for them, and she was willing to bet it was the same for whoever was stomping around the Metaverse.

After some thought, Shiho adjusted her bag on her shoulder and took a step away from the railings. "It won't do us any good to tear our hair out over this now. All we have that suggests that this guy even exists is the word of a pathological liar, and no evidence beyond that. For now we'll just have to be more careful in the Metaverse, just in case."

"Right," Ann said. "I really hope that there isn't seriously a killer in that word, but... JoJo and her family are proof that there's plenty of superpowered people in the world. It's entirely possible there's someone dangerous lurking around there."

Nodding, Akira moved to the front of his gathered friends. "Right. For now though, let's put a lid on all this. And keep an eye to see if Madarame's change of heart takes effect." It was about all they could do for the time being.

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Akira was grateful that Sojiro was moving to lock up by the time he got back to Yongen. He was engrossed in some kind of phone call about mail order ramen, or something to that effect, and barely paid his 'tennant' any mind. It suited Akira fine. He wasn't in the mood for any kind of lecture, or holier-than-thou cracks.

Not with the prospect Shizuka had raised being fresh in his mind. On the one hand he wanted to celebrate a well earned victory, but the other half of his mind was juggling some shock and disgust. Was there really someone out there using the Metaverse as a murder weapon? It warranted looking into, and if it was true... then what kind of sick bastard were they going up against?

Fighting Shadows was one thing. But fighting a possible Persona user? That notion seemed to worry Akira more. The only relief he had was the knowledge that a Persona user couldn't have a Palace, meaning that this guy couldn't just kill them suddenly or whatever. It was a small comfort.

Akira hit his mattress like a ton of bricks, falling asleep almost immediately with Morgana's furry weight on his abdomen. His rest was not a peaceful one.

Akira's eyes opened, revealing a world in a velvet hued room. His bedroom in Leblanc's attic was gone, replaced with a cramped prison cell in a ringed brickwork prison. Beyond his chained cell door were the young twin wardens, and at the center of the room was a varnished oak desk that had a bald old man with an eery elongated nose behind it. He watched Akira with veiny bulging eyes, a perpetual grin etched onto his face.

"Great," he said under his breath. In the Velvet Room, as in Palaces, his clothes changed too. He had gone from his casual attire to a gnatty, black and white striped prisoner uniform.

With some effort he rose up off the cot, the chains on his wrists and ankles rattling noisily at the motions. It didn't take long to reach the door of his cell. "Evening ladies," Akira greeted, glancing
down at the two silver-haired girls. "Hope I didn't keep you waiting long."

"Show some respect Inmate!" Caroline snapped, her one good eye glaring up at him.

"Our master has requested your presence once more Inmate. Please heed his words," Justine said, as cool and dispassionate as ever.

Whatever the twins were, Akira would safely assume they weren't human. The feline eyes and sleek silver hair were a bit of a giveaway. And there was something else, a sort of... power that lingered around the two. They only reached Akira's waist, and the twins didn't even look to be 13 years old, but he definitely wouldn't want to take them on in a fight.

That all said, Akira quite liked the twins. Justine acted a little cold, but genuinely seemed to mean well. Caroline was... well, 'abrasive' was probably the only polite word to describe her, but Akira could also tell she somewhat cared about the so-called rehabilitation he was taking part in. And there was a little bit of a sweet side that very rarely broke through her harsh exterior.

On the other hand, he couldn't say he cared much at all for Igor. The twins at least spoke with him. Whenever he came to the Velvet Room, for whatever reason, Igor would usually just stare at him from behind his desk. And, on rare occasions, would talk at Akira about vague things, and so rarely explain anything. Akira was not a fan.

"You have expelled a man who was stained with vanity. You are now one step closer to your rehabilitation," Igor said, his deep rumbling tone seeming to fill every square inch of the room. "How delightful..."

"Our master is pleased," Justine said gently "You should be honored, Inmate."

"However, that man's remarks are rather disconcerting. It seems there is another using the Metaverse."

Akira raised a curious eyebrow. "You... had nothing to do with that?" he asked.

"Correct. Whoever they may be, it is beyond my knowledge," he said simply. So much for getting answers here. "Regardless, your rehabilitation is proceeding smoothly. Of that I am certain. May the devotion to your rehabilitation grow even deeper. I have high hopes of you..."
Shizuka was of a mind that, if her friends wanted to hang out with her on Sunday, they would likely call or text in advance to set things up a little. That was why the doorbell to her apartment ringing so early in the day came as a bit of a surprise to her.

"Oh, I wonder who that could be...?" Simmons asked. The greying Brit turned off his Japanese language app, setting his phone down on the table. He was set to head out for some shopping when the buzz had chimed through the apartment.

"I'll get it." Shizuka set the property listings in the morning paper down on the coffee table and moved to stand. Having been expecting a leisurely Sunday she was dressed simply enough in a purple tank top and khaki shorts, a few silver bangles jingling around her wrists. It was getting warmer by the day, and soon Shujin would be making the student body change to their Summer uniforms. She made her way to the door and opened it. She definitely wasn't expecting a tall, olive-skinned blond to be waiting on the other end.

Sergio smiled warmly at her. "Buongiorno, JoJo-chan," he greeted. Sergio was dressed well in an ivory Polo shirt and dark jeans, the fabric contouring well to the athletic musculature he had built up. For an art student, he was pretty damn built.

"I told you not to call me that," Shizuka said with an irritated sigh. "What brings you by?" She supposed if it was anything too serious, he wouldn't be acting so flippant about this meeting. Then again, Sergio seemed the type who would remain confident even if the world was ending.

After a moments pause, Sergio took a step back from the doorway. He seemed to spy Simmons inside the apartment, and wanted to avoid catching any suspicious glances. "Two things. I wanted to first thank you for helping Yusuke... he seems to be in very high spirits now, and I've heard that Madarame has fallen ill, avoiding pubic appearances for a few days now. Yusuke said he's probably going to have a 'change of heart' soon. Whatever that means."

Shizuka nodded. "Well, that's good to hear," she said simply. For now, she felt it would be best to act a little distant and avoid letting Sergio know more than he needed to know.

"I don't quite know what you did, but it helped Yusuke a good deal. So, let's just say I owe you one. As for the other reason why I came here..." he lowered his tone to keep anyone from overhearing. "How would you like to help me track down a murderer?" he asked.

"Who's at the door young miss?" Simmons called.

"Just a friend from school." He was sort of a friend from a school, so it wasn't lying as far as she was concerned. "How did you find out where I live anyway?"

Sergio gestured over his shoulder to a man leaning against the railings beyond the door. She leaned out, getting a glimpse of Yoshio as he checked his phone. He looked up briefly, smiling awkwardly and waving to the two teens.

"Huh. He really is a good tracker," Shizuka murmured. She turned her gaze back to Sergio. "So I
"Take it this guy you're looking for is a Stand user?" Sergio nodded in confirmation. "And he's killed a few people?" he nodded again.

"Yoshio and I have been trying to track him down, and we've narrowed his movements down to a few blocks in Akihabara. What we do know about him is that his Stand fires out bullets of carbon, the velocity enough to tear through flesh and bone. And he seems quite keen on using his power to settle any grudges he has," Sergio explained. A worryingly common breed of Stand user.

Shizuka weighed the offer for a few moments and then casually shrugged her shoulders. "Well, I suppose it's either that or watching the TV for the afternoon. Lead on." She looked over her shoulder at Simmons. "I'm goin' out for the afternoon!"

"Yes well..." Simmons forced a smile. He wanted to appear brave, but it was clear he knew that Shizuka was heading off to do something dangerous. But he couldn't stop her. The girl was a master of stealth, after all. And too headstrong to leave injustices alone. "Be safe. And er, try to be home for dinner," he said.

The younger woman smiled at her butler. "No worries. It's gonna be all casual," she assured him. As if some lame killer was gonna get the upper hand on her!

After donning her shoes, she headed outside and let Sergio and Yoshio lead on. She was curious as to how this was going to go down. And, this was likely as good a chance as any to see Sergio's Stand in action.

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While they were waiting for Madarame's change of heart to be made official, the rest of their time was spent either doing smaller jobs in Mementos or goofing off as teenagers were wont to do. The case of the former boosted the Phantom Thieves rep with each job, and allowed them to plumb progressively deeper into the strange eldritch dungeon. And as Morgana was convinced he'd find his lost memories down there, it was extra incentive to explore.

But, as to the latter, Akira was quite fond of spending time with his ragtag group of friends. And there was no shortage of issues to resolve for them.

The other evening he had helped Ryuji eavesdrop on the replacement coach for the track team, a man who was supposed to be almost as bad as Kamoshida. Just not as audacious or perverted. It seemed he planned on manipulating the track team for his own fame, wanting to build up a reputation as some kind of 'school hero' without putting the work in. And, with one of the track team member's parents being in the PTA, it left him with a runner he wanted to manipulate to those ends.

Being perfectly honest, Akira didn't know why Ryuji still wanted to help those guys. They had turned their backs on him when Ryuji snapped at Kamoshida, despite knowing what a bastard he was and how out of line Kamoshida had been to bring up Ryuji's drunken deadbeat dad.

Ryuji, it seemed, still felt guilty for being the one to get the track team canned. But it seemed to Akira that Kamoshida would have just found another excuse if Ryuji hadn't buckled. He had no idea how that shit wasn't obvious to the others.

Surprisingly however, Shiho had wanted to tag along today. Ann was off working on some kind of function for her parents, and she had been curious to see what was going to go down.
They met up with Ryuji at Shujin's heavy iron gate, the blond resting his hands in the pockets of his purple hoodie. "Yo. I called Nakaoka and Takeishi over here, so I could tell 'em what that bastard Yamauchi has been up to."

"Those two from the track team? Ugh, oh yeah, I remember them from middle school," Shiho said giving a shake of her head. She crossed her leather-clad sleeves over her chest and leaned back against the wall. "I can admire you for wanting to expose Yamauchi, but... why would you want to help those dicks from the track team?" she asked.

"I mean... the team was heading for nationals and I screwed it all up for 'em," said Ryuji. Shiho held her tongue for now, of a mind that he wouldn't change his mind on this.

"You sure they'll even believe you?" asked Akira.

A cocky grin crossed Ryuji's face, the kind he got whenever he had an idea he found particularly brilliant. "I recorded Yamauchi's whole spiel when we were at the monja shop. I'm a genius, I know." Akira was thankful that Morgana was still lazing around Leblanc right now. "Anyway, uh, I still think I need some backup for this."

"I've got your back," Akira assured him.

Shiho nodded firmly. "Yeah, me too." She held no trust for Takeishi or Nakaoka.

The two arrived only a few moments apart, Takeishi wearing a red soccer jersey and pale blue jeans, while Nakaoka was wearing a white hoodie and dark jeans. They were relatively well off, even without the track team. It was a realization that made Shiho's eyes narrow further.

"What do you want Sakamoto?" Takeishi asked. He and Nakaoka exchanged a quick glare.

"I'm here to talk. And I've got something you guys are gonna want to hear," Ryuji said. He raised his phone up and started playing the recording they had taken of Yamauchi. His desire was to manipulate Takeishi, given that his mother was on the PTA, and ultimately he'd shape himself as a 'grand hero' and crush anyone on the team that tried to get in his way.

Once the recording ended, Ryuji slipped his phone into his pocket.

"This has to be a joke," Takeishi murmured "Yamauchi said he was gonna make me captain..."

"Is this for real?" Nakaoka asked.

Ryuji let out a stiff grunt of annoyance. "That's his voice ain't it? And things are gonna go down just like he said."

"Geez... Yamauchi's right. I really don't got any talent... no matter how hard I ran, you and Nakaoka were always ahead of me. I was just so desperate to succeed," Takeishi admitted. And no doubt Yamauchi had been able to read him like a book. "How am I supposed to be proud of myself?" he asked aloud.

"What do you mean by proud?" Akira asked, cocking his head slightly.

"My dad always talks about how proud he is of his son, and told everyone I'd get a track
scholarship like he did. And Yamauchi said he'd give me a great letter of recommendation to help make that come true..."

The statement earned a scoff from Ryuji. "And you seriously bought that crap?" he asked.

"Sh-shut up! What does a thug like you know?" Takeishi snapped.

"A whole hell of a lot more than you by the look of things," Shiho quickly added. "Yamauchi pulls the exact same crap that Kamoshida pulled, and you eat it up?"

"Damn Shiho..." Ryuji said, drinking in the mutual shock of the group. After a moment he managed to collect himself. "Look man, you shouldn't be trying to live life the way other people want you to. Just try an' live for yourself. If you wanna be proud of yourself, then betraying your friends is hardly the way to do it," said Ryuji. Takeishi hung his head. He hardly wanted to admit it, but Ryuji was right. The blond turned his focus on Nakaoka. "You knew something was up with Yamauchi too, didn't you? You know what the bastard is like. And you kept quiet, letting him walk all over you."

Sighing, Nakaoka nodded in confirmation. "Yeah... yeah, I knew. I was afraid. Afraid that if I said or did anything, we'd lose the track team again. Lose the place where I belong," he explained.

"It ain't that scary, not having a place where you belong. Lets you be free like that. That ain't so bad. What's worse is being a crappy person. I used to be afraid like you guys too, lyin' to myself. Then I met this dude," he said, gesturing to Akira. "I don't wanna insult you guys or nothin', but I know you're prolly pissed about all of this. So if you wanna hit me or something, go ahead." The offer hung in the air for a moment.

"If you insist." Nakaoka took a step forward, lifting his right fist.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Shiho's sudden outburst left everyone taken aback. "Seriously? Seriously? Even with you guys treating Ryuji like dogshit since last year, he still stuck his neck out to help you guys. And you're still going to try and treat him this way? You can look down on Ryuji all you want, but at least he has the guts to stand up for himself, unlike you two!"

Takeishi swallowed hard. "What th- Look who's talking Suzui! Who're you to judge?" he snapped.

"You're right, I was a coward and an idiot. But I wish I had been even half as brave as Ryuji had been," Shiho said. Ryuji's jaw had nearly dropped clean off at this point. "I also know a pussy when I see one. And right now I'm looking at two huge vaginas."

"For as much as you guys like to blame Ryuji for what happened to the track team, you should know that Kamoshida was looking for any excuse to have you guys shut down. And if Ryuji hadn't snapped, he would have gotten someone to break at some point. So why are you still treating him like the bad guy, instead of blaming the scumbag who was out for you guys from the start?" he asked.

The pointed question made Nakaoka and Takeishi exchange uncertain glances. "They... kind of have a point," Takeishi admitted. He sighed and scratched the back of his head. "Thinking back, I guess I knew that was true. It was just easier to blame you since... Kamoshida was untouchable," the brunette admitted.

After some hesitation Nakaoka nodded along. "Yeah. Maybe... maybe if we had stood up for you,
tried to explain your side of things, things woulda' been better. Guess we were kinda crappy teammates to you too." Akira nodded at the two of them.

With some hesitation, Ryuji shook hands with both boys. They made some smalltalk about the future of the track team, specifically how to get Yamauchi dumped, and then the two left.

Now just the three of them, Ryuji looked set to faint. "Holy. Crap." He turned to his two friends, scratching the back of his head while his left hand rested on his hip. "Damn Shiho, you were on fire. That was like... I'm still shocked, that was awesome!"

The vaguest hint of pink appeared on her pale cheeks. "A-ahaha... well um. I told you before, but I always felt bad for not sticking up for you when Kamoshida tore up the track team. I know we were never best friends or anything in middle school, but I knew you weren't the type to just flip out on a teacher for no reason. And I... I think you were the only person who saw Kamoshida for the kind of snake he was. You should be vindicated, but people are still treating you like crap. It... It's not right."

"Hah... wow, you mean that? Man, Ann's lucky to have a best friend as nice as you," Ryuji replied. "One thing though. Back then I wasn't brave or anything, I was just dumb and angry," he explained.

"Come on man," Akira took a step forward and gave Ryuji a firm pat on the back. "Cut the modesty BS. You did good back then, regardless of what anyone thinks of you."

Ryuji grinned, a strong arm reaching up to catch Akira in a headlock. He brought his head down, giving the frizzy haired boy a quick noogie. "And that's another thing Shiho. This lanky bastard here is a pretty awesome friend. Don't think I woulda' got through this without you guys here." He released his grip, giving Akira the chance to smooth his hair back into a style that could only be described as 'deliberately messy.' A particular frizziness that only Akira could manage.

"Well shit... the day's still young guys. Wanna head up to Ogikubo for some ramen?" Ryuji asked, leading a few steps away from the group, heading in the direction of Aoyama-Itchiome station.

"Yeah, I'd be down for that." Akira moved to follow Ryuji's lead, only to stop when he felt Shiho tap him on the shoulder. "Hm? Something wrong?"

Shiho tapped her index fingers together briefly. "Well... with Ryuji talking about how awesome you are as a friend, it's made me realize that you and I haven't ever hung out. Not like you do with Ann, JoJo, or Ryuji. And, well, you do seem like a pretty cool guy Akira. So, maybe we could spend some time together outside of Arditi stuff?" she asked.

"I'd like that," Akira replied simply, a smile gracing his features.

"Great! Well, if you stick with me I might just be able to teach you a thing or two about aiming," the former volleyball star said, giving Akira a thumbs up. And Akira supposed that was as good a contract as any.

I am thou, thou art I...
Thou hast acquired a new vow.

It shall become the wings of rebellion
that breaketh thy chains of captivity.
With the birth of the *Star Persona*,
I have obtained the winds of blessing that
shall *lead* to freedom and new power...

"Hey!" Ryuji called in the distance "You guys coming or what?"

"Hmph. Well, we better get going before Ryuji cleans out the whole shop," Akira said, motioning for Shiho to follow. It had been an eventful day already, but Akira felt quite good about himself.

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Akihabara must have been weeb central.

The thought crossed Shizuka's mind as she stood upon a street corner, moving advertisements for anime down one road, and a series of cosplay cafes down the other. Had she the time, she'd probably enjoy walking around here. But there was a killer to find, and that put a damper on fun.

She glanced briefly to the electronics store to her right, watching the entertainment news as it scrolled on. *'Rise Kujikawa confirms engagement to her long term boyfriend,'* went the current headline, showing footage of the giddy redhead idol clinging tight to the arm of an ice cool silver-haired young man.

"Huh. That guy kinda reminds me of Akira," she mused briefly to herself. He had that same sort of 'kinda cool, kinda weird' air about him.

After some more window shopping she raised her phone to her ear. "Yoshio, not gonna lie," Shizuka said "I'm not exactly keen on being 'bait.'"

"*It's not ideal, but... we have a feeling that this guy is drawn to girls, and will likely attack if he's spurned. And if that's the case he'll reveal his Stand and be left open. And besides, Stand users are drawn toward each other anyway so this'll be quick,*" Yoshio said on the other end of the line.

"And your womanly charms will lure him like a charm JoJo-chan," Sergio said. Shizuka looked to the alleyway across from her, her eyes examining the blond leaning up against the wall. He was partially shrouded in shadow. His Stand hovered behind him, the overgrown knuckles on its left hand idly tapping a trash can lid across from Sergio.

Shizuka scowled at him. "You call me that again, and the only Stand user getting his ass kicked is you," she replied firmly.

After a brief pause, she heard Yoshio over the phone again. *'Alright, I can sense a Stand user moving in to your left Shizuka. Be careful you two.'* Sure enough, there was a guy walking her way. Slouched posture, wearing a shirt and trousers too big for him. His hair was red and dirty, a scar marking under his right eye. The street around them had mostly emptied out by now.

"H-hey." He stopped a few feet away from Shizuka, and she could soon tell he was a few years her senior. "You... you alone?"

*'This fucker's got 'train molestor' written all over him,'* Shizuka briefly thought to herself. "So what if I am?" Shizuka asked, giving him a pointed look from behind her silver-rimmed sunglasses.
"You..." He took in a sharp breath, a scent of stale tobacco seeping out from between his teeth. "You want to go on a date with me?"

"You're not my type," Shizuka flatly replied. It took a special kind of guy to catch her eye, and this dude definitely wasn't it. She kept a casual look about her, but she was ready for anything, with Houdini positioned through the wall. And, with Sergio just across from her, she felt no worry.

The dirty redhead clenched his fists, and a shimmer of red light started to form over his right shoulder. "You... you're like everyone else... you people are all the same!"

Shizuka narrowed her eyes, well aware there was an attack coming. "Aww... did I hurt your widdle feewings? Grow a pair." She watched the stranger's eyes narrow, the glow on his shoulder growing brighter and more pronounced. 'Okay scratch that. This dude is more like a school shooter than a perv.'

His Stand took form on his shoulder, looking like a long white worm the length of his arm. It had a human head with deep black eyes, and a mouthful of razor sharp crimson teeth. Dark veins pulsed under gooey ivory skin. It was probably the grossest Stand Shizuka had ever seen.

"\[Smash Mouth!\]

Breakthru's knuckles rapped on the trash can lid gently. It remained still for a single second, and then rocketed forward at a frightful speed, slicing through the air and smashing into the wall between Shizuka and the stranger, steel being embedded in the red brickwork. Even Shizuka seemed a little surprised at that.

What the hell power was that? She knew that it hadn't been simple strength, not when Sergio's Stand had barely even touched the lid.

Sergio made his way around the corner, smiling wryly. "Ah, so you are the Stand user we've been seeking. I'll have to thank Yoshio later... yes, you definitely have the look of a crazy killer." The contempt was obvious in his voice, his posture casual.

"You... you guys have the power too?" the redhead asked, his eyes widening. "W-whatever! I'll kill anyone who pisses me off! No matter what!"

Smash Mouth's long tongue lashed out of his gaping maw and wrapped around the trash can lid, tearing it clean in half and rapidly sucking the metal into his mouth. He chewed on it for a few rapid seconds, and then suddenly fired out a spew of black bullets that whizzed swiftly through the air.

Sergio and Shizuka split off, the hail of carbon bullets spewing in both directions. Breakthru moved to shield his user, enlarged forearms raised like a shield. The bullets struck off him and shattered apart, but while the damage was minimal is still made Sergio grimace.

Houdini took up a similar position, her golden fists a blur as she punched each incoming carbon bullet apart until the volley had finished. "BAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZU!!" She kept a good grip on her phone, and felt pinpricks of blood dapple her knuckles. Well, she wouldn't be deflecting too many of those bullets. Not without hurting herself.

"I'll kill you both! You hear me?! You're both dead!"
"Better lead this nut somewhere nice and isolated," Shizuka murmured to Sergio, as the blond surveyed their foe. He nodded solemnly in agreement.

Breakthru's left fist shot down and tapped the ground, the concrete slab of the sidewalk rattling briefly in protest. Suddenly it was dislodged from its moorings and shot toward the enemy Stand user, who sprang backward in shock. Smash Mouth's long tongue lashed out like a saliva-coated whip, crashing against the slab and shattering it apart. The two were already gone as the dust settled, sprinting into the alleyway Sergio had previously used for cover.

"Okay, so..." Shizuka glanced to her side, directing Houdini toward a dumpster at her right. Her Stand hoisted it overhead easily and slammed it into the ground behind them, immediately rendering it invisible. "That gross slug thing swallows things and makes 'em into those bullets. And the tongue is freaky strong... it's a strong Stand, but not unbeatable," she cast a glance to Sergio as they ran along. "More importantly... what the hell does your Stand even do?!"

Sergio grinned sharply. "You a fan? My Breakthru is a rather potent Stand." There was a loud clanging from behind them, followed by a slew of swears as their target ran face first into the unseen dumpster. "Anything that Breakthru touches with his fists becomes 'infused' with momentum, launching them in a direction of my choosing. And, if fast enough, he can catch things and steal their momentum away. Can't work on living things though," he explained, evidently pleased with himself.

The explanation made Shizuka swallow. "That's... pretty damn badass." Small wonder the SID had snatched this guy up.

A loud tearing sound echoed from behind them as Smash Mouth lashed out ahead of them, tearing up the dumpster that was gradually becoming more visible. Another spray of carbon bullets tore after them, forcing both teens to dash into the cover of a deep doorway. The sharp black bullets tore into the wall nearest to them, chunks of masonry exploding away at each point of impact.

Shizuka lifted her phone to her ear. "Hey, Yoshio, you got a reading on us?"

"Ah... y-yeah, you guys spooked me for a second there. This guy's even more of a psycho than we thought, he just jumps straight to killing as soon as someone offends him. We gotta deal with him quickly."

"No doubt." She caught a glimpse of Smash Mouth's prehensile tongue tearing a chunk of asphalt from the ground. It swallowed it briefly and suddenly fired out a bullet the size of Shizuka's fist. "Holy-!" She watched as Breakthru moved toward the wall and tapped its left knuckle against one of the damaged bricks. It flew out from the mortar, sailing at an angle and then crashing into the incoming carbon bullet. Both projectiles exploded into dust, with particles raining to the floor. "What's the building beside us?"

"Lemme just check my map here... it's some kind of model store. It closed down about two months ago and has been vacant ever since."

"Works for me!" Houdini's foot swung backward, kicking the locked door hard enough to shatter the lock and break the door clean off its hinges. "Come in Sergio, in here." She led on, sprinting along the dust covered floor. Beating this guy would be doable, but she didn't want to run the risk of anyone else being shredded by this psycho.
And naturally, he was in hot pursuit. "You can't run from me! I'm gonna find you both!"

"This guy..." Sergio murmured. "Bit of a dull blade I'd say. What do you have in mind JoJo-chan?"

With how serious things were, Shizuka was willing to let that one slide this time.

From behind, Smash Mouth tore a section of the fallen door apart and swallowed it, crunching it into a fresh volley of bullets. Houdini moved quickly, snatching up a shard of concrete from one of the crumbling walls. She took aim quickly and flicked the debris with her thumb, the makeshift projectile firing outward and stabbing into the stranger's left shoulder, making him hiss loudly as blood spurted from the fresh injury.

"Lead him fully in here, and then take him out? Doubt we'll need a plan for this guy."

Sergio shrugged. "Well, works for me."

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It had been an uphill battle to get here, but it had all been worth it. The thought crossed Kaneshiro's mind as his lumbering frame reclined into the plush surface of a padded purple couch, his beady eyes affixed to the heavy suitcase filled with money resting on the glass table.

Around him, his cohorts were grabbing drinks from the bar and chatting amiably, seeming to enjoy the opulence as much as their boss did. And why not? They had an ingenious scam going, one where they could break the law without the police ever catching on. Kaneshiro was particularly proud of that.

Their drug trade was going swimmingly, and they got to extort a good deal of cash from chickenshit high school students who wouldn't dare fight back after being photographed in the act of working for his gang. It was an ideal setup.

A quick look at Kaneshiro made it clear that he was a man who greatly enjoyed greed. From his expensive purple jacket and tailored black trousers, to the fact that his gut distended from a daily diet of expensive food. And in his current position of power, his thumb pressed over all of Shibuya, none would defy him.

But, there was one man that even Kaneshiro feared. The true kingpin of Tokyo.

His phone buzzed powerfully in his pocket, making the brunette grunt in annoyance as he pulled the gold-plated length from his right pocket. His annoyed expression immediately chilled once he saw the caller ID listed as 'unknown.' Only one person ever called him from an unknown number, a man who went to great pains to keep his identity obscured.

Mr. A.

"Quiet down, all of you!" he shouted suddenly, sending a hush through the purple-hued room. They knew to comply quickly. Kaneshiro answered the phone with a trembling hand. "A-sama, so good to hear from you."

"Save the small talk and pleasantries for your mother Kaneshiro. This is important, and I need you to listen carefully."

"O-of course." Kaneshiro considered himself a tough sort. He had fought his way from the gutter, in true gritty crime drama fashion, and would never back down from any challenge. But Mr. A was different. Mr. A had real power, the kind only seen in manga and movies. And Kaneshiro had glimpsed it for himself.
Of course, he hadn't seen A in person. Few people had. But one of his former associates, a few years back, had gotten too big for his britches and thought he could run his own 'side business' of human trafficking without Mr. A knowing. That had apparently incensed their superior by quite a degree.

And so that man's bodyguards had watched helplessly as their boss was suddenly and viciously torn limb from limb by something they couldn't see. And that same unseen force had used his blood to leave a message for the bodyguards to read.

'MR. A SEES EVERYTHING'

As far as messages went, that was a rather clear one.

"You've done a serviceable job with Shibuya. Earned a steady income without raising any police attention. I daresay I'm impressed."

"Th-thank you sir. It was easy enough to trick those hi-"

"Shut. Up. Kaneshiro," Mr. A said, keeping his tone dangerously level and crisp. Kaneshiro swallowed hard and complied without protest. "Now then. My benefactor will be campaigning soon, and that means we need a little extra revenue. So, do us both a favor and double down and increase productivity. Oh, and, one more thing... it should go without saying, but if you come up short, or if I find out you've been lining your pocket by any more than what I allow you... then I'm going to open up a butcher shop and start selling hog meat by the pound. If you catch my drift."

He hung up, leaving Kaneshiro staring blankly at his phone. Well, that was how those calls with Mr.A tended to go. If he called you, he would keep it brief and get to the meat of things. Though, more often than not, it would be a member of his inner circle that handled such matters.

A was the kind of man who thrived on anonymity, and given his prominence in the Tokyo underworld this was not surprising. Nobody even had a notion of what he looked like, if Mr.A was even just one man to begin with.

Make more money? Fine, easily done. Shibuya was his to control, after all.

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Old display cases and fallen shelves lined the dusty interior, joined by faded anime posters and broken models that had been left behind when the owners hauled out. It provided a degree of cover, with the two teens vaulting over one of the cases as Smash Mouth's user moved in behind them.

"You can't get away from me! And nobody's gonna stop me from using this power however the hell I want! It's mine!" the redhead snapped. The prehensile tongue of his Stand shot down, taking an array of model parts in a single scoop and bringing them into its jaws.

"I don't think this cover will last long under fire," Sergio remarked. "I really hope you have an actual plan."

"Pshaw. Of course I do." She didn't.

Approaching him head on, even invisible, wasn't the best idea. That lashing tongue was fast as all hell, and a stray hit would knock her head off. To say nothing for the fact that this asshole was constantly spitting bullets at them, making it all the harder to get close to him.
But, if she had a distraction to let her close the gap, then she could take him easy.

Suddenly more bullets filled the air, spraying out of Smash Mouth's jaws with terrifying speed. But, rather than aim squarely for their cover, several of the carbon rounds curved off to the walls at their sides.

Those same bullets bounced off, ricocheting around the room and trying to bank around to strike them from behind cover. "Shit!" Houdini appeared in front of Shizuka, punching away any bullets that got too close. The bleeding on her knuckles grew a little more pronounced with each strike. One stray shot whizzed around and grazed her left calf, making her hiss as blood seeped down her leg in small droplets. "Oh you fucker..."

It seemed Smash Mouth was swallowing more and more material with each passing second, the volume of bullets whizzing through the air getting more intense as time went on. More than a few shots banked high and smacked into the ceiling, tearing large holes in it and making the area above them rattle in protest.

"Oi, Sergio," Shizuka said, tapping her foot against the shelves behind them. By now, a few carbon bullets had struck their cover, knocking a few chunks from the metal frame. "How about you give this thing a push and send it to our friend there?"

Sergio smiled wryly. "What a friendly gesture."

Breakthru's left hand tapped against the metal frame, the whole structure trembling for a few seconds before it rocketed toward the redhead. The volley of bullets halted abruptly, the young man gasping and directing Smash Mouth forward in the span of a split second. His Stand's tongue swung downward like a whip and smashed into the case, metal warping and glass shattering from the impact. It hit hard enough to halt the display case, the surface grinding into the ground.

But, in that split second, Shizuka had turned invisible and dashed around. She closed the distance, a golden fist clocking the redhead in the jaw. His head snapped back, gagging in pain before Houdini gripped him by the hair.

"Eat. SHIT!" Houdini yanked his head down, driving it into Shizuka's left knee as she swiftly swung it upward. Twin spurts of blood gushed from his nose and painted her knee with streaks of crimson. They too were soon rendered invisible.

A flurry of rapid punches pummeled his face, each impact echoing through the abandoned store. She only pulled back as Smash Mouth's tongue flailed out wildly, leaving her ducking and rolling across the floor to avoid the blows that uprooted sections of the ground.

"You think that just 'cause you got a Stand, you can murder people you don't like? Actions have consequences motherfucker, so line up for yours!" Shizuka snapped.

"Shut up! What the hell do you know?!" He struggled, swaying on his feet. The blows to his face had left his left eye swollen, and he was fighting hard to keep balance. His Stand was working to keep upright, his long tongue reaching for the rubble on the ground.

Sergio's voice suddenly filled the room. "Well, I don't know. I'd say we're experts when it comes to the Stand user lifestyle, unlike you," during the scuffle he had managed to close the gap, Breakthru's hulking body hovering over him. "VATTENE!"

Breakthru's left fist tapped lightly against the floor beneath the redhead, moving at a relatively impressive speed. Suddenly his whole body was launched away, propelled on a section of torn
flooring, crashing headfirst into the wall at the far end of the room. He was left in a heap, gasping in pain as Shizuka and Sergio cautiously watched him.

"You... you..." He turned sharply, Smash Mouth perched on his right shoulder with his cheeks puffed out. Another spew of carbon bullets lanced across the air, his aim askew with his eye swollen shut. Shizuka hung low to the ground, still invisible, while Sergio swiftly weaved off to the right. One of the rounds caught him on his right shoulder, slicing open the sleeve of his polo shirt and sending a spray of red along his shoulder. Sergio hissed loudly from the flush of pain, but held firm.

Breakthru tapped the ground in three different spots, sending three chunks of the floor rising upward until three more taps left them frozen in the air.

Smash Mouth tore a chunk out of the wall, swallowed it, and then fired out another storm of shrapnel that left the two other Stand users recoiling. Sergio had his cover in place, bracing as several of the bullets hit off his floating sections of floor and ricocheted toward the ceiling. They hit with a terrifying force, plowing fresh holes into the surface and making the ceiling shudder violently in protest.

"I'm going to... kill you both... so help me g-" A loud tearing sound filled the air, a cracking noise that reverberated through the abandoned store. A chunk of the ceiling gave way, large mounds of it falling apart and landing atop the redhead. The cacophony drowned out his screams, and Shizuka and Sergio both winced as he was crushed by the weight.

The dust settled slowly. Shizuka moved to stand, making herself visible again. Sergio's crumbling cover fell to the floor with a clatter. "Geez... didn't think things were gonna go that way..." Shizuka muttered. She dusted herself off slowly.

"But that was perhaps for the best. Even the Speedwagon Foundation can't have a specially made prison for Stand users." Sergio approached the rubble slowly, keeping Breakthru floating in front of him as a shield. "And a man like him, clearly would not be talked down."

"Yeah, true." Shizuka lifted her phone to her ear again. "Hey Yoshio, we got the guy... he's dead."

There was a brief pause before the tracker replied. "Can't say I'm shocked. And this was perhaps the only possible outcome. He was deranged, too dangerous to be left alone. I'll call Satoshi and Aya, they should be here soon."

She ended the call and pocketed her phone. "So do you usually kill people?" Shizuka asked.

"Personally? One or two. Stand-using serial killers. But the SID operates on a case by case basis. Thieves and lesser criminals receive a stern... lecture, and they're made aware that they're being watched. So long as their crimes don't accelerate, then we usually leave them alone. Murderers and rapists however, are too dangerous to just 'lecture.'" Sergio slid a white hankerchief from his trouser pocket, applying some pressure to the cut on his right shoulder. "You seem calm about this. Have you ever killed before?"

Shizuka looked at the rubble, focusing on one broken arm protruding from the dusty debris. "Personally? Never. But this guy killed at least two people, so I won't lose any sleep over this. My family doesn't really hesitate. If you're a bad dude, you're likely gonna die... Still, this is a bit of a shock to me... you mind if I borrow that hankerchief?"

This guy wasn't Dio or Kira, but given enough time... he definitely would have grown to that level of monstrosity. She'd get past this, but the shock was still strong.
It wasn't until half an hour later that Satoshi and Aya arrived, with Yoshio coming in behind them. Aya inspected the damage done to the store interior, looking at all the scars that had been carved into the walls. By now Sergio and Shizuka had moved away from the damaged section of the roof, just in case more caved in.

"This one guy did all this damage? He really was dangerous," Aya said. She settled her hands on her hips, watching Satoshi crouch beside the rubble. "All the same, a rotten end for a rotten guy."

"No doubt," Satoshi said. Of course, he had expected this to be how this guy went down. The crazies either died by their own hand, or got put down by the SID. "Well, you two did good. I'm impressed," he said.

A small smile graced Shizuka's face. "Yeah? Well, it was nothing too special." She gestured to Sergio with her left hand. "This guy might be annoying, but he knows his stuff."

"Annoying? Hmph, I'm nothing of the sort JoJo-chan." Shizuka growled at him in return, but the blond paid that no mind. "What now Morihiro-san? This will need some covering up."

Satoshi shrugged, rising to his feet. "It'll be taken care of. Ozuma's Stand is pretty good at 'persuading' people. Our friend here, God have mercy on him, was clearly disturbed. Broke into this abandoned store at the peak of some crazy fit. And, well, this place is awfully rundown and damaged. He was just hammering on the walls like a loon and then..." He drove his right fist into his left palm, letting out a cartoonish 'splat' sound in the process.

Aya nodded. "Right. I'll put the call into Ozuma, and he'll get the police on board with that theory quickly enough." She paused, focusing briefly at Sergio and Shizuka. "You two okay? Lifeson's going to be stationed in Japan for a few months you know."

"I'll be okay," said Shizuka. "But... I suppose I'll need to wash my clothes now. This place is filthy as hell."

Taking down a killer was quite a thrill, and she knew she'd feel even better if Madarame's change of heart went through. Beyond that she also got a glimpse of Sergio's powers in action. A guy like him... the Arditi could make use of a Stand power like that.
It was early in the morning when the press conference began, a fleet of cameras and microphones aimed toward the old man as he took up a seat behind a wide desk. Occasional flutters of camera flashes lit up the room, capturing Madarame from all angles. Nobody knew just what the meaning of this meeting was, but Madarame was popular, and that warranted a strong response from the media.

Madarame looked as if the world was about to end.

Then, after some hesitation, Madarame began to speak. His words were broadcast across the nation. "I... have committed crimes that are unbecoming of an artist. Plainly put, I... plagiarized work from my students."

His whole body trembled, the horror of his own actions wracking his body. "I... I tainted this country's art world. And even the Sayuri..." Suddenly he broke down, sobbing loudly in front of the cameras. "I even... killed a person very close to me, all for the sake of money and fame! How can I possibly apologize for all I've done?!"

As the news conference went on, Rohan closely watched the footage. "Hmph. I knew he was a charlatan," Rohan said, speaking in his usual 'I'm right about everything' tone of voice.

Still, this was odd. Why suddenly come clean about all this? Why reveal the truth to the world, when he was at the peak of his fame? Perhaps he was being pressured by some outside group?

Rohan spent a few seconds pondering such thoughts, and then shrugged as he made for his drawing room. Ultimately, it didn't matter much to him. Though he would certainly take solace in the fact that he wouldn't have to hear people crowing about that hack anymore.

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While Rohan was quick to discard Madarame's change of heart, others were looking at the event with much greater scrutiny.

She had paused the press conference just as Madarame broke down, his image spread across the broad flatscreen at the far end of her office. She had taken up a seat at the nearby sofa to watch, a cup of Earl Grey tea clasped with her left hand.

Madarame's crimes had been tallied, and were listed on the screen. Stealing the work of his pupils, driving one pupil to suicide, and standing idle as one of his students (the real painter of the famous Sayuri) died of a seizure. And, by all appearances, Madarame could have kept the world from knowing for as long as he lived. And if he had been doing this for years, then he must have been comfortable with being a wretched human being before now.

So why the sudden change?

The thought left Mitsuru more than a little concerned. Of course, it wasn't just Madarame. The elegant redhead cast a glance to the expensive phone resting beside her, the screen currently
showing the front page of the 'Phantom Aficionado' website.

The forum of that site was flooded with requests from people throughout Tokyo, speaking of abusive boyfriends, corrupt managers, horrible stalkers, and all manner of equally dangerous people that the posters needed help dealing with. And several requests had apparently been answered by the mysterious 'Phantom Thieves' that the site had been built for.

Those horrible people, like Madarame, had been hit with a 'change of heart.' Just like that they changed their ways, and the people who made those requests were singing the praises of the thieves.

It all had to be connected, there were no coincidences. Mitsuru thought back on Minato and the tragic, starcrossed, and all-too-short life he had led, and all the strange parts of it that brought him to the end of the world. For as disjointed as his life seemed at a glance, none of it had been a coincidence. So these 'thieves' were dealing with requests on their website, and had seemingly taken it upon themselves to go after Madarame too.

How did they change these people? It didn't seem to be simple coercion. Mitsuru hummed gently, her hawklike gaze affixed firmly to the image of Madarame's sobbing face. That was genuine sorrow. It was as if the very core of his being had changed dramatically.

Mitsuru would daresay something supernatural was going on here.

"I wonder..." Mitsuru murmured to herself. "I'll have to get someone on this." Something major was going on in Tokyo, and Mitsuru wanted to keep an eye on it.

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6/9

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For as much as the group wanted to celebrate a well earned victory, the issues of daily life interrupted them. Namely there was school, and then a class trip to occupy their time. Beyond that there was the fact that they didn't have any ill gotten gains to use for funding. Shizuka had offered, but Akira was insistent that she not use her money just for a celebration. The Sayuri was Yusuke's, to use as he saw fit, and they still had no idea what the heck they were going to do with that in the end.

They decided to postpone celebrating until the trip was done with. Leblanc seemed as good a spot to celebrate at as any, particularly with everyone being curious to see where Akira hung his hat.

By now the school had transitioned to using summer uniforms, discarding blazers for white shirts. Though Ryuji had discarded even that, using a red T-shirt instead. Ann had a blue hoodie wrapped around her waist, and Shizuka had taken to wearing a yellow neckerchief, with a silver bumblebee pin positioned by the knot. Akira and Shiho on the other hand, well they wore the summer uniform mostly unmodified.

The well lit studio was bustling with the Shujin tour group and TV station staff. A PR woman in a green suit had been leading the tour group, and each passing word made this meeting progressively more boring. "... And that's why we recruit sponsors to help make TV shows. I'm sure you know about commercial breaks? Well, those are actually sponsor related product placements."
"Ugh..." Shizuka adjusted her Ray-Ban's, giving Ann a sideways glance. "Does this woman think we're five year olds or something?"

"C'mon, at least try to look interested," Ann replied.

"I've been trying for ten minutes."

Even Akira, master of the poker face, looked set to fall asleep at a given moment. "So... sleepy..." Akira murmured, his eyes half lidded.

"He ain't even listening..." Ryuji remarked, resting his hands on his hips. He was actually a little impressed, it was the first time he had ever seen something bore Akira.

And as the tour went on, with each aspect of the TV studio being explained in exhaustive detail, even Ann couldn't feign interest. "Could this be any more obvious?"

"So... sleepy..." Akira repeated.

Ann blinked. "Wow."

"I know, right?" Ryuji added. He turned his focus back to the PR woman, just as she was launching into another insightful explanation. Apparently footage was edited in a room called the editing room. "Ugh... I'm not gonna last..."

In his sleepy state, Akira was nearly bowled over as a news anchor rudely brushed past him, leaving him wobbling on his feet in protest. Morgana yelped inside his bag. "Wait, you brought Morgana with you?" Shiho asked in a hushed tone.

Akira shot a quick glare to the anchor, his left hand roaming up to rub the sleep from his eye. "He wanted to see what a TV station is like. Right now I'm really starting to wonder why," he explained.

"Hey, assho-" Ryuji was cut off by the PR woman quickly trying to reign in the anchor's ire.

"M-my apologies for the noise sir! I'll have the students get to work on some hands on experience right away!" she said, starting to quickly direct groups of students around the studio.

Ryuji glowered in annoyance. "Don't let it get to you," Shiho said. "That guy might be a dickhead, but there's nothing we can really do about it here. Let's just try and enjoy the trip. Well, maybe 'enjoy' is too strong a word."

One of the assistant directors came to a halt near Shizuka, looking at her from head to heel. "Hey there. You wanna be on TV? You're looking pretty damn fine after all."

Shizuka looked at him in silence for a few moments, her brow a long flat line of annoyance. "Dude I don't ah... I dunno where to even start on how fucked up this line of conversation is."

"Well, keep the offer in mind. I'm sure you'd go pretty far," the AD said, seeming not to pay much heed to her protest. She kept Houdini coiled at her side, set to lash out at a moments notice.

"Goddamn pervy asshole... what's with all these twisted shitheads? The damn TV station is full of
'em." If Houdini didn't do something, then it seemed Ryuji would do it himself. His annoyed growling seemed to draw Kawakami over, the ever-exasperated teacher seeming even more irritated than usual.

"I know you're bored, but please try to keep out of trouble," Kawakami said.

Akira bristled to attention, recalling a certain incident that had happened a few days ago. An incident that Ryuji and Mishima had roped him into when they found a weird flyer advertising a cosplay maid service. 'Kawakami moonlights as a maid, Kawakami moonlights as a maid, Kawakami moonlights as a maid...' He knew he had to keep that information to himself, but the discovery had been so bizarre that it was hard to think of anything else when he was in Kawakami's presence.

The AD turned his attention to Ryuji. "Let's see uh... I'm gonna teach you guys what it's like to be an assistant camera. Blondie, you'll do. Looks like you got energy to spare," he said, making Ryuji's eyes widen.

"Arigato, Ryuji..." Akira said, giving his best friend a pat on the back.

"Don't make it sound like I'm gonna die!"

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Several hours passed, in which the Shujin students got to experience a variety of tasks conducted daily at a TV station. It was ultimately rigorous work, and the gang were feeling rather tired by the time they got a break. Left to wander, they found their way to the back offices of the station.

"I am so pissed off!" Ryuji yelled. "We're supposed to be guests here, right?! So what the hell are we doing manual labour for?"

Akira shrugged lazily. "I'd much rather that than get another boring lecture. That said, I'm pretty annoyed too. Felt more like them getting free workers, than them teaching us anything," he said.

The group came to a halt at one empty hallway, letting the fatigue settle in. "We have to come back here tomorrow you know. It's a two day trip," Shiho explained. Today had been a tour of the grounds, while tomorrow they were going to be the audience to a live studio recording. Tomorrow would be more interesting at least.

"Well, we gotta go straight home from here today," said Ann. "Well, we've never really been to this part of Tokyo, right? So why don't relax and explore the area a little?" There was a broad grin on her face, and she was clearly pleased at the idea.

"Well, you got a point. I've been wanting to see more of Tokyo... you got somewhere in mind?" Shizuka asked. She propped herself by the wall, surveying the others.

Morgana suddenly emerged from Akira's bag, perching himself on the frizzy-haired boys shoulder. "Oh, I know a place! I wanna go to that huge pancake-looking place we passed on the way here! It looked so delicious! What was that place?" he asked enthusiastically.

Ryuji pondered the description for a moment. "Oh!" he said in a sudden realization. "You mean Dome Town? Yeah, the dome we saw is a baseball stadium. There's a big ass amusement park beside it."
"Oh shit, seriously? Damn, we gotta go then," Shizuka said, grinning eagerly. "Been way too long since I got to ride a rollercoaster. Not since I conquered The Incredible Hulk in Florida." Even after scarfing two snow cones and a pretzel larger than her fist, she had gone through it without puking. And that was a victory in her eyes.

"Are we really gonna bring the him along? I mean, he ain't exactly built for roller coasters. Especially if he's gonna be in your bag," Ryuji said, gesturing to Morgana.

There was a brief beat, with Akira casting a quick glance to the sapient feline. "Puke on my books, and you die."

"Well, that aside, let's hit Dome Town! I'm totally pumped for some roller coasters!" Ann said, practically jumping with excitement.

Shiho shrugged, a helpless smile on her face. "I haven't been to Suidobashi in some time. and after today... it sounds like the perfect way to unwind."

A series of footsteps echoed down the hall, growing louder as they drew nearer to the group. A figure emerged suddenly from behind cover, a young smartly dressed brunette boy. He wore the green blazer of some fancy private school, his dark shoes and trousers immaculately clean. In his right hand he held a stainless steel briefcase.

The group regarded him curiously for a moment. 'Look at this Light Yagami looking dude...' Shizuka briefly thought to herself.

"Excuse me, I couldn't help but notice your uniforms. Are you students at Shujin Academy?" The prison-print trousers were a bit of a rarity.

Shiho tilted her head slightly. "Ah... yes, that's correct," she politely said. It wasn't hard to tell that he wasn't a worker here, but that just made her more curious about who he was and why he was here. But there was something vaguely familiar about the young man, as if she had seen his face around town before.

"Nice to meet you all. Since we're going to be filming together tomorrow, I thought it only appropriate to greet any Shujin students I came across." The young brunette approached them, his smile gentle and pleasant. "Ah, where are my manners? My name is Goro Akechi."

Shiho blinked in an abrupt realization. "Oh, you're that high school detective that's been on the news recently," she said.

"Eh?" Shizuka cocked her head slightly to one side. "High school detective? Is that a thing?"

Akechi chuckled lightly. "I see my reputation has precedes me. I was invited to this studio for an interview. Well, I must be going. I really was just passing through," he told them. He gave the group a brief smile. "I take it you're going to go have cake now? I missed lunch today, so I'm quite hungry myself."

"Cake? Huh?" Ryuji scratched the bac of his head. "What're you talkin' about?"

"Oh, am I mistaken? I thought I heard something about delicious pancakes. No matter. See you tomorrow!" Still smiling, Akechi left the group to attend to other matters. Shizuka watched him
with great scrutiny until he rounded the corner. His footsteps grew distant, and then faded entirely.

"Well, that aside..." Ryuji trailed off, grinning at the others. "Let's get going. We better hit those coasters and put some time in." He led on, Ann and Shiho following after him. Just as Akira went to leave, Shizuka tapped him on the shoulder.

The dark haired boy paused, turning Shizuka's way. "What's up?" Akira asked.

"Did something about that whole exchange feel... weird to you?" Shizuka asked. Something about Akechi, something about that whole conversation, it just didn't gel with her. But she wasn't sure just what was bothering her.

Akira frowned, giving her a small nod. "So it's not just me huh? Yeah, I don't know how to describe it, but I got a vibe of something weird there." He hesitated and stroked his chin, but it seemed he too was drawing a blank. "Agh... I guess it doesn't matter. Doubt we'll see much of that guy anyway... come on, let's make for Dome Town."

Deciding not to protest, Shizuka followed after him. But inwardly she was a lot less calm. 'You're up to something Goro Asketchy. I dunno what, but I've got my eye on you.'

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Almost as soon as they got to the station, the Shujin students were directed to rows of chairs positioned opposite the main stage. The male and female hosts of the show had taken up spots on one end of the long red couch, while the other half was left empty. The wall behind them was well lit, and marked by all manner of strobing colours.

The Arditi had been lucky, managing to snag a whole row of seats near the front. It gave them a pretty good angle to watch from.

"Mister Akechi's coming on!" one of the assistant directors called, earning some applause from the crowd. And some squeals of delight from some of the female Shujin students as they boy detective made his way onto the stage. "Cutting back from commercial! Seven, six, five seconds till start, four, three," he pointed to the two hosts, giving them the all-clear.

"And now, onto the "Hottest Meet-and-Greet" segment of our show," the female announcer said. "After his last appearance was so well-received, we decided to bring back this fine gentleman today. It's the high school detective, Goro Akechi!"

"Hello there," Akechi amiably greeted, giving a brief wave to the cheering audience. A nervous bead of sweat rolled down the side of Ann's head as she saw just how giddy the other girls in the class were.

"Thank you for taking the time to join us today Akechi-kun. Your popularity is stunning," the male host enthusiastically said.

"Even I found it to be quite a surprise. It is a bit embarrassing though..." Akechi admitted, smiling to the audience. Shizuka watched him closely. Something about this guy just seemed so phony. Maybe she was being unfair, but she had been around enough New York socialites to know an act when she saw one.
The female host leaned in a bit. "Moving along, we've been told that you're hard at work on a brand new case. Care to share some details?"

Still smiling, Akechi gave her a polite nod. "Of course. It's about the scandal involving the master artist, Madarame." Ryuji leaned in expectantly. He was like an eager dog when it came to any Phantom Thief publicity.

"Ah, the mysterious Phantom Thieves no doubt! What do you think of these justice-oriented thieves?" the male host asked, clearly wasting no time.

"If they truly are heroes of justice as the rumors say, then I really do hope they exist."

The male host cocked his head a bit. "Ah, so you don't deny the possibility that they're real?" he asked.

A large grin rested on Akechi's face for a few moments. "I may not seem like it, but sometimes I genuinely wish that Santa Clause existed... although if he did, I suppose I'd have to arrest him for breaking and entering." A few chuckles broke out through the audience. Ryuji grunted in annoyance, and Akira fought a particularly strong urge to roll his eyes.

"But, hypothetically speaking," Akechi continued "If these Phantom Thieves are real, I believe they should be tried in a court of law." A wave of shock washed over the audience, and Ryuji instinctively tensed. Shiho reached over, setting a hand on his shoulder. Partly to try and calm him down, partly to remind him of just where they were right now.

"That's quite a bold statement. Are they committing any crimes?" the male host asked. "There's been plenty of chatter online that say the thieves have greatly inspired people suffering from abuse, and are making criminals abandon their evil ways."

Akechi nodded, his expression growing a touch more serious. "Madarame truly was a reprehensible criminal. However this 'Arditi' group are taking the law into their own hands. Such actions are far from justice. More importantly, if we put any stock into how their message was worded, you shouldn't forcibly change a person's heart."

"Amazing as always Akechi-kun! I could listen to your radiant charisma for days," said the male host.

Akechi chuckled, keeping quiet as the audience applauded. Save for the row of thieves. Ryuji looked set to head up to the stage and clock him, and likely would have if Akira wasn't looking directly at him.

"Of course, I'd be rather embarrassed if it turns out these mysterious thieves don't even exist. If that were the case, I'd summarize it into a report for a school project," Akechi explained. Another wave of chuckles rolled through the audience.

The female host turned to the audience. "Now then, let's try asking some students the same age as Akechi-kun about the Phantom Thieves! First, press your button now if you think the Phantom Thieves exist." A few seconds passed, the results quickly being tallied. A noise chimed through the studio once the number was gathered. "Ah, about 40% believe in the thieves," the female host remarked.
"I'm a bit surprised. That's higher than I was expecting," Akechi remarked. "I'd love to hear some more detailed opinions on the Arditi's actions."

Nodding, the female host rose from the couch and made her way down the center aisle of the audience. As Akira was at the far end, she came to a stop beside him. A brief wave of dread washed through several students once they saw that she was about to talk with 'the delinquent.' "Let's try asking this student here. Hypothetically speaking, what are your thoughts on the Phantom Thieves if they exist?"

Akira hesitated for a moment. Of all the people in the audience, she just had to home on the damn leader of the Arditi. But what could he even say? Akira couldn't exactly look too keen on the thieves, not when he was trying to act like and appear as a normal high school student. But at the same time he couldn't just let someone badmouth the group and get away with it. Someone had to try and put a good word in...

"I'm not saying I'm much of a fan or anything, but..." He could practically feel Ryuji's gaze burning a hole through him. "It seems to me that they did far more about Kamoshida and Madarame than the police did. If they hadn't, those two would still be committing crimes."

A bit of murmuring broke out among the audience. "My, this runs quite strongly against your views Akechi-kun," the male host said.

"Indeed. It's rather intriguing to hear such an opinion," Akechi replied. He was looking directly at Akira, still smiling pleasantly. In that case, there's one more question I'd like to ask... If someone close to you, for example your friend beside you, if his heart suddenly changed, would you think it was the work of the Phantom Thieves?"

He shrugged. "I doubt it. They only go after criminals," said Akira.

"Ah, but how can you be so sure? Regardless of the morality of the thieves' actions, I feel there is a more important issue at hand. I'm more interested in how they change people. With an ability like that, it could be used for more than just extracting confessions. It could be that what seem like ordinary crimes are actually being perpetrated through these extraordinary means."

"You know, you're absolutely right," the male host said.

"Oh, please don't misunderstand. This is all purely hypothetical. I'm only speaking if such a power truly exists. If that were the case, these thieves would pose a threat to our daily lives. As a result, I'm already collaborating with the police to investigate this matter." A chill ran down the spines of the thieves in the audience. They'd have to let Yusuke know, make him aware of this little complication.

The show went on for several more minutes, before they cut the feed. The rows of the audience filed out slowly, while the Arditi gathered at one end of the studio away from the filming crew.

Shiho gave a small sigh. "Well... that sucked. He wasn't even talking to us and we still got grilled in front of the whole country," she murmured.

"He tried to make us sound like the bad guys. Did that damn 'detective' not even look at Kamoshida or Madarame's rap sheets?" Ryuji asked, still bristling with anger.

"I know you're pissed, but don't let it get to you. Who gives a shit what that guy thinks?" Shizuka
asked. She was definitely annoyed, but she could understand his concerns a little. People would be pretty paranoid if they had any notion of the existence of the Metaverse, just as they would be if the world had any common knowledge on Stands. "We know we're doing good, and we'll keep doing good if we keep our focus on scummy criminals."

Ann stroked her chin in thought for a few seconds. "Still... should we be worried? I mean, if the police are seriously looking into us..."

"Let them look. They won't find any evidence on how we operate," Akira assured her. "We just need to be a little wary when we're in public together. That's all." Even if some 'detective prodigy' was looking into them, it wouldn't amount to anything. Nor would it dissuade him to give up being a Phantom Thief.

Morgana briefly poked his head out from Akira's bag. "The justice of our actions is something we can decide for ourselves. Remember, the criminals we've dealt with are people that the police hadn't even looked at. We've helped a whole lot of people," Morgana assured them.

The group nodded in agreement. "Well, guess I better go take a leak before we go. Back in a sec." Ryuji jogged off quickly.

"Wanna go grab some fresh air? It's all stuffy in here," Shizuka remarked. She pointed over her shoulder to one of the open doorways that the Shujin students were using.

"You guys go on ahead, I'll wait for Ryuji," Akira told them. The three girls went on ahead, leaving Akira and Morgana alone. But it wasn't long until the dark-haired boy managed to draw some attention.

From the corner of his eye, Akira just barely saw Akechi approaching him. At some point he managed to move away from his throng of fangirls, and found his way over without being pursued. "I'm glad I found you. I wanted to thank you in person," Akechi said. "To paraphrase Hegel, advancement cannot occur without thesis and antithesis."

Akira nodded. Philosophy wasn't exactly his strong suit, but he understood what Akechi meant well enough. They had opposing views, but they still forwarded each other. Or something to that effect. "Well... I wasn't really aiming for anything profound. I just said what I believed in," the bespectacled boy said.

"That's what I admire. So few people are willing to actually speak their mind around me. Adults are only interested in using the young, while the young usually just go along with what adults ask of them." Akira nodded vaguely in agreement. "If you wouldn't mind, perhaps we could chat more in the future? I feel a mental sparring partner like you would be a great benefit to both of us."

"Hm. If the opportunity arises. We're both busy guys, I'd say. You doing detective stuff, me dealing with schoolwork." Akira pondered the offer internally. If this guy was investigating the Arditi, it might not be a bad idea to keep tabs on him and pick up on any intel he may have. Though, given the nature of their work, Akira doubted Akechi would find much.

"I'm glad to hear that. I look forward to our next meeting, Mister...?" Akechi held a gloved hand out.

Akira met it with one of his own, giving it a light shake. "Kurusu Akira, but you can just call me Akira," he replied.
"Then I'll look forward to our next meeting."

Akechi strode off to attend to other manners, while Akira propped himself up against a wall. Had he really just made friends with his own Sherlock? Well, nobody ever said it was easy to be Moriarity. Or, perhaps Lupin would be more appropriate in his case.

"Justice huh..." Akira murmured under his breath. He supposed that was an appropriate arcana for a guy like that.
As was often the case at lunch, Akira and Ryuji had made for one of the alcoves in the center courtyard, taking up a spot by the vending machines. Even though Kamoshida had been outed, they were still outcasts. Though it suited them just fine.

Ryuji was tapping his foot impatiently, resting his weight on one of the machines. "Man, that detective from yesterday really pissed me off! We're some kinda' threat? Seriously? Let's see him do it then! If someone else coulda' done what we did, then we wouldn't be doing stuff as the Phantom Thieves to start with!"

"Dude, shut the fuck up!" A voice urgently hissed. Both Akira and Ryuji nearly jumped from their skin, and their shock only grew more apparent as Shizuka suddenly materialized on one of the blue benches. "I was hoping to prank you guys, but you just had to force my hand... seriously, why the hell are you shouting that stuff out loud for? It's suppose to be a secret!"

Ryuji scratched the back of his head. "Relax... everyone knows me an' Akira have lunch here, so they avoid this spot anyway."

"That's no excuse!" Ann's voice nearly made Ryuji jump again, his whole body growing tense as Ann and Shiho entered the alcove. Ann had a pocky packet in her right hand, languidly munching on one as she spoke. "Serously, what if a teacher was just walking by and heard you blurt that stuff out?"

"I doubt they'd take it seriously," Shiho mused. "But... well, maybe we should be a little more cautious after what we heard yesterday."

Akira nodded. "If we can put any stock in what Akechi said yesterday, then there's definitely reason for us to be a little cautious. The police seem to treat us like we actually exist, and even if they'll never know the full extent of things, they could still really disrupt us if we end up being watched." He sighed and scratched the back of his head. "We'll need to find a more private meeting spot."

At that, Shizuka snickered and leaned forward on the bench. "Leave that to me, nerds. I've been browsing property for some time now, and once I get a little paperwork sorted we'll have a brand new meeting place." She beamed with pride.

"Whoa, for real? Splashing a little of that rich girl cash around huh?" Ryuji asked.

Ann finished the last of her pocky, tossing the carton in the bin quickly. "Wait, so you bought a place? Or rented it? Is that even legal if you're a high school student."

"Renting. But the rent is cheap, and I didn't feel like outright buying a place if there's no guarantee for how long we'll use it. As to the rules..." Shizuka hesitated for a moment, rolling her right hand around in the air. "Sounds scummy to say this, but... the rules tend to bend a bit when you're offering the right price."

"Hm... I'm impressed," Akira said. "Well, I can't complain. None of us can afford a place, and..."
using the Shibuya station is just too exposed these days."

"It's not concrete yet, but I'll definitely show you," Shizuka said. The thought of them hanging out directed her thoughts elsewhere, and she pointed suddenly at their leader. "Anyway! Since we got no new jobs, no new target, and no school trip going on... I think we're overdue celebrating our last big job!"

Shiho nodded in agreement. "It sounds nice, but we haven't had the time to make any reservations. Or the money for that matter, since we can't sell the painting. But... we could try going somewhere cheap?"

Ryuji propped himself fully against the vending machine. "Uh... we could try Akira's place?" he suggested. "It's a restaurant, right?"

"Sojiro's hardly gonna serve us..." Akira replied. He pondered the idea for a few moments. Yeah, Sojiro definitely wouldn't do any cooking for them, not as far as Akira was concerned. But they could at least chat up in his attic room, and as Sojiro's 'protege' (to use a loose term) Akira could do a little cooking himself.

"I'm actually really curious to see Leblanc. Sounds like a really nice place, even had a magazine article about it a few years back," Ann said. "So... can we go?"

Akira relented with a small sigh. "Fine fine... I'll text Yusuke and let him know where to meet us. Guess I'll have to try my hand at cooking for friends," he mused.

While the group plotted out their afternoon, they were unaware that someone else had been listening in on the entire conversation.

Makoto had her right hand pressed to her mouth, her left still holding her phone as it continued recording audio. It really was them... Makoto had only come out here to investigate, with all the rumors about Sakamoto and Kurusu hanging out here drawing her in.

She hadn't expected to get much of value, but then Sakamoto up and said that they were the Phantom Thieves. And Shizuka was... in on it too. The realization stung a bit, and now she was stuck in a rather worrying position.

She couldn't betray Shizuka, but Principal Kobayakawa was getting antsy (even moreso now that the Madarame case was in the news) and expected results. But on the other hand, were the Phantom Thieves really... bad people? They went after terrible people, they fought corruption, and the idea of Shizuka being a criminal just seemed... silly.

Ultimately, Makoto knew she couldn't just leave this hanging. She'd have to talk to Shizuka directly about it.

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They had met up with Yusuke at Yongen-Jaya station, and walked as a group through the narrow backstreets. A few grade school kids were running around, acting out their own 'Phoenix Ranger' episode, while housewives chattered lazily. By now Akira had been around long enough to be known as 'that kid living at Sakura-san's place' and earned a few waves from people in passing.

Kosei had also changed to their summer uniform, discarding the formal white jacket and leaving
the students wearing purple short-sleeve shirts instead. Shizuka would admit that the look suited
Yusuke nicely. Under his left arm Yusuke was carrying the Sayuri, the frame wrapped neatly in a
tarp.

"So you just... carrying that around now?" Ryuji asked by way of smalltalk.

"I'm aiming to move out of Sergio's apartment. For as grateful as I am for his hospitality, his
apartment is a little... small for two people." His free hand roamed up to his hair, elegantly
adjusting his blue bangs. More than one housewife watched him in passing, and inwardly cursed
their married status. "I suppose I'll ultimately move back into the Kosei dorms, but I'd rather not
have the Sayuri hanging there. After Madarame's confession, there are already enough curious eyes
on me there."

"Yeah but..." Ann raised her right eyebrow "Why are you carrying it around?" she asked.

Yusuke flushed in mild embarrassment. "I was hoping inspiration would strike, and I would find a
nice place to leave it. Somewhere subtle and warm. The kind of place my mother would have
liked."

"We're here," Akira said, coming to a stop by the storefront.

Leblanc naturally blended in with the scenery of Yongen, as if it had been part of the landscape for
centuries. The front window gave a view to the booths inside, and the counter of the shop. Sojiro
had perched himself at his usual spot, casually combing through a crossword. A cluster of freshly
watered plants were positioned by the window, while a chalkboard by the front door listed the
specials of the day. 'Leblanc Coffee and Curry' was written clearly on the awning above the
doorway.

Shizuka examined the storefront, a smile on her face. "It's nice. Has kinda' a cosy, classic feel to it.
Like the kinda place a detective would go to in a noir movie."

The bell over the doorway rattled as Akira pushed inside. Sojiro glanced up from his crossword,
immediately drawn in by the sound of potential customers. "Ooooh..." Ann sniffed the air, and
looked set to faint with delight. "That coffee smell is heavenly!"

Sojiro quirked a brow, turning his attention to Akira. "Who're they?" Given Akira's 'reputation' it
was a little hard to believe he'd have such a large group of friends.

"Howdy!" Shizuka greeted earnestly, giving the bespectacled man a brief wave.

"We're friends of Akira," Shiho explained, giving a respectful bow. "It's nice to meet you. We were
actually curious to check this place out."

"Girls too?" Sojiro regarded his tennant with great scrutiny. "Girls too? Hmph. Maybe my charisma
is rubbing off on you after all." Akira cringed a little.

While Yusuke was busily looking around Leblanc's interior, committing every image to memory,
Ann smiled brightly at Sojiro. "He's been a great friend. And we were really hoping to see where
he lives... a person living in a cafe is pretty unique after all."

"Huh." So the kid had friends. Ones that seemed nice and mannerly at that. Yeah, he was definitely
a whole lot better than the rumors made him out to be. "Grab a seat, I'll get you guys something to
While Sojiro brewed up some coffee, the group took up seats at the counter and gave him their names one by one. Akira had moved in behind the counter and helped with the brewing. He needed no instruction, already able to efficiently prepare coffee with a refined touch.

Ann sipped hers first, letting out a sigh of delight as she sampled the steaming dark liquid. "Wow... its delicious," she breathed.

Then came Shizuka, who sipped her coffee and gave a modest smack of her lips as she finished. "Dang... you really know your stuff Akira! I got good artisanal stuff in New York, and this is still amazing!"

"Oh? An American?" Sojiro asked.

"Mostly," Shizuka admitted. "I mean I was born in Japan, and raised almost entirely back in the States."

"I was wondering where that cute accent of yours came from," Sojiro replied, earning a small snicker from her.

Yusuke and Shiho were quietly enjoying their own servings, drinking deep. His curiosity piqued, Ryuji took a sip of his own coffee... and very nearly spat it back out, before forcing himself to swallow and coughing loudly into his hand. "That's so damn bitter! That's like... what the hell?!"

"I warned you," Akira remarked. He finished pouring a serving for himself, sniffed it slowly, and took an elegant sip. "It's an acquired taste, and you never touch coffee."

"In any event," Sojiro said, looking to his student/tenant. "Since these are friends of yours, I guess there's no harm in them checking your room out. Besides that, can't exactly have you guys taking up all my seating," he explained.

Yusuke rose up from his chair first, following Akira as he led to the staircase at the back of the restaurant. "Thank you for the coffee," he said curtly, before being joined by a chorus of thanks as the others moved to stand.

Ryuji, being himself, was the first upstairs after Akira, and gave a small gasp as he saw the scope of Akira's attic room. "Whoa! This place is freakin' huge!"

Akira set his bag down on a table by the staircase, giving Morgana an opportunity to hop out and stretch his legs. "It's cleaner than I thought it would be," said Ann.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Akira replied, adjusting his glasses.

"As if I'd let this layabout keep our room in shabby condition," Morgana chimed.

"It's very nice Akira. Spacious and tidy... Can we just sit anywhere?" Shiho asked, earning a quick nod from their leader. Ann and Shiho took up spots on the couch by the wall, Ryuji leaning against Akira's workbench, while Shizuka neatly perched herself on the windowsill. Yusuke opted to remain standing, while Akira sat down on his modest bed.

After a few moments, Yusuke took out his phone and quickly started browsing online. "That
detective's comments have had a strong effect on the general public. Even our supporters seem a little uncertain of us now."

"Effin' Akechi..." Ryuji darkly muttered.

"It's definitely concerning... but I can sort of understand what he said. I mean, we know that we only go after bad people, but the public doesn't. They don't know anything about us, and I guess that makes them a little paranoid." That was the reasoning Shiho wanted to believe in. It was better than accepting that people were just that fickle.

Shizuka shrugged from her position. "So what?" She drew the others attention to her. "We're not doing this to be celebrities or whatever. We're doing this to help people, and expose scumbags. If people have a problem with us, well fuck them. But, realistically, people will change their tune as we expose more criminals and help more people."

The explanation made Ann nod, her attention shifting to Ryuji. "Well there you go Ryuji. We can make Akechi eat his words, and keep helping people. Win-win!" she said enthusiastically.

"The problem with that is we need a new target, one even bigger than Madarame, and nobody has stood out as of late." Akira sighed as he thought back on how fruitless his research had been. But he supposed it made sense. If someone was to be a viable target, they had to be the kind of criminal that the police weren't aware of. And people like that weren't exactly broadcasting their crimes.

Even the Phan-site wasn't giving much. Just the usual cases of small-time corruption.

Just as the group were pondering how best to search out a new target, a loud rumbling sound filled the attic. All eyes turned to Yusuke, his gaze shifting to his feet in his embarrassment. "Apologies. I missed lunch today."

"Oh, that's right. We came here to celebrate!" Shiho smiled faintly, her focus turning to Akira. "You think Sakura-san would let us borrow some of his ingredients? If not, we could try and order something for delivery."

Akira scratched the back of his neck. "He'd let us cook here, and there's a portable stove stashed up here, but as for ingredients..." he pondered the suggestion for a moment, suddenly snapping his fingers. "Oh, we could get some ingredients from the convenience store just around the corner."

Ann grinned "If we have a little stove here, maybe we could make hot pot?"

The suggestion earned a delighted purr from Morgana. "That sounds great! I've heard that eating hot pot as a group brings people closer together!" he enthusiastically said.

"What's a hot pot?" Shizuka asked, tilting her head partially to the left.

"It's like..." Ryuji raised his right hand and twirled it slightly in the air as he fought for the right words to use. "You got this big pot in the center, and it's got this hot broth in it. And you like, add ingredients to it and cook 'em in that broth." The young Joestar nodded in understanding, seeming to be on board with the idea.

"I only ask that we finish it off with porridge. Extra parsley, of course," Yusuke added.

Akira stood up, smirking faintly. "I'll leave the ingredients to you guys. You let me handle the
stove and pot.” He had to admit, it sounded fun.

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It took some doing, but eventually they had a large yellow pot simmering atop Akira’s portable stove. They had reoriented a bit of furniture around his room, setting up seating around the center of the attic. Bit by bit, they ate their way through the produce they had bought and generally worked to forget about the frustrations that Akechi had generated.

"Hey, JoJo," Ryuji remarked, hit by a sudden bolt of inspiration. "Since we got plenty of time, how about you tell us about your family? You're always saying that crazy shit is normal for you guys."

"You guys really wanna know?" Shizuka asked, cocking her head a bit.

Shiho nodded. "I have to say, some of the stuff you've mentioned before sounds... crazy. But also incredible. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't itching to know more."

"Alright," Shizuka said with a shrug. "Our story begins thousands of years ago in Mesoamerica-"

"Come on, tell the real story," Ann interjected.

"I am telling the real story."

"Oh."

She began by speaking of the Pillar Men, the mostly forgotten race of superhumans who populated that region of the Americas. They were ultimately wiped out by one of their own, a mad genius by the name of Kars who created a stone mask designed to unlock great power in the wearer.

Many, many years later, that same stone mask wound up in the possession of George Joestar I, a British noble. And that same British noble took in an orphan boy out of the kindness of his heart.

'Dio Brando,' Shizuka had said. 'Everything always comes back to Dio Brando.' The words confused her companions, but she said they would understand as the story went on.

As Shizuka explained, Dio was one of those people who was born bad. Even given a golden opportunity, he had to try and take advantage of it further. He tried to oust his adopted brother Jonathan of his inheritance by making Jonathan's life hell. But Shizuka's great grandfather was a hell of a guy, and didn't buckle to the pressure. 'And so here's where that stone mask comes in. Dio got his hands on it, and bam, it made him into a vampire.'

'What? Vampires are real?' Ryuji had incredulously asked.

She went on with her story, speaking of Zeppeli, Speedwagon, and Erina. Of Hamon, and the monsters Dio created. Yusuke had tried not to chuckle at the idea of Jack the Ripper being a vampire henchman. Eventually, Jonathan managed to best Dio and seemingly killed him. But then she spoke of Jonathan's honeymoon cruise with Erina, where Dio's severed head attacked and his minions sought to destroy the ship they were using. Mortally wounded, Jonathan gave up his life to hold Dio in place as the ship sunk to the bottom of the sea.

Ann had tried her best not to cry.
Shizuka carried on, telling the others of Erina managing to save one young baby from the sinking ship. A girl who would go onto become Elizabeth Joestar, who would in turn give birth to her father Joseph Joestar.

'Dad was a hamon prodigy. And a total punk,' Shizuka explained. 'It didn't take long for some crazy bullshit to come his way. Remember those Pillar Men I was telling you guys about? A few of 'em came back around the start of World War 2.'

The others had listened with rapt attention as she spoke of Joseph's guile, his quest to beat the remaining Pillar Men as their leader sought out a special gem that would make him immune to his greatest weakness: Sunlight. By the time Joseph beat the other Pillar Men, Kars had gotten his wish and basically became God. It was only by blind luck that Joseph managed to trigger a volcanic eruption in their last fight, with the force enough to eject Kars from earth's gravity. Presumably, Shizuka had mused, he was still floating around up there.

'That's effin' insane... he beat a guy using a volcano, and then got a brand spankin' new robot hand?' Ryuji had asked.

'Your dad was friends with a Nazi cyborg?' Akira flatly asked.

'It was uh... a different time.'

Things became quiet for Shizuka's family after that, up until the 1980s. Joseph's grandson, a Japanese student by the name of Jotaro, was convinced he had an 'evil spirit' haunting him. In actuality, his Stand had simply materialized at this time. Just as it had for Joseph.

Yusuke had wanted to know how such a thing was possible, and Shizuka explained of Dio's return. He and Jonathan had sunken to the ocean floor and lingered for several decades. In that time, Dio's head had jacked Jonathan's body (To the shock and dismay of Ann and Shiho) and gained a Stand. Anyone with Joestar blood was similarly effected.

Jotaro's mother, and Shizuka's much older sister, Holy had also gained a Stand. But without a strong fighting spirit, a Stand would start to actively kill its user. Desperate to save Holy's life, Jotaro, Joseph, and their freshly assembled Scooby gang set off to take Dio down in Egypt.

By the time they got there, their numbers started to dwindle. Ryuji was trying his best not to cry as she brought up the deaths of Avdol and Iggy, and it seemed all efforts for the group were failing when she got to Kakyoin's death.

'Things were looking bad. But in the end, Jotaro managed to one up that vampire bastard. Star Platinum could stop time, just like Dio's World could. So, bam! Down goes Dio, after a century of causing misery. Holy's saved, my dad gets revived by an emergency transfusion... things were looking good. But Dio's actions would still have consequences. But, I gotta rewind a few years. See, one year when my dad had an affair with a Japanese woman...''

"Oh Joseph..." Shiho had said, exasperated and pinching the bridge of her nose.

Dio's minion, Enya, had wound up selling off a few 'Stand arrows' to willing buyers, leading to at least two ending up in the small town of Morioh. It was this incident that led to Shizuka's brother, Josuke, chasing down a Stand using serial killer. A journey that led to him making a lot of new friends, Shizuka's adoption, the death of a close friend... and the ultimate end of a man who had killed over fifty people.
"That basically brings us up to now. My grand niece, who is like seven years older than me, had a run in with one of Dio's old allies. Some black gay priest who was gonna reset time. But he went down when she and Jotaro managed to get the drop on him... so yeah, I guess the current weirdness in my family is this Phantom Thief stuff.'

A good deal of time had passed by the time Shizuka finished her story, and they had gone through the majority of the food they bought for the hot pot. "Holy shit," Ryuji eventually said. "That was nuts."

"All true." Shizuka doubted that needed to be reinforced. They were in the same room as a talking cat, this should have been a story they could swallow.

They slowly digested the story, and after a few moments Yusuke turned his attention to Akira. "Since we're sharing stories... I really don't know much about you Akira. All I was told is that you apparently have a criminal record."

"I... never told you the whole story?" Yusuke shook his head.

"Actually, I don't think you gave me the details either," Ann said.

"Or me. And thinking on it, you having an assault charge seems like nonsense." Shizuka reached over and lightly pinched Akira's cheeks together. "And lookit this face. Does this look like the face of a criminal?"

"Pleash shtop." Once Shizuka released her grip, Akira looked over his friends. "Really? I never told you guys? I know I told Ryuji, I just assumed... well, I suppose I might as well get to it. It's not as extravagant as Shizuka's story though."

He sighed, thinking back to the fateful night his life was ruined. "I'm not from Tokyo originally. I'm from a small town a few miles north. One night I was coming home from school and I heard this... commotion. A man and a woman arguing. From the sounds of things, the woman was in distress. So I went looking and saw that the guy was trying to drag her into his car... sharply dressed man, nice car, clearly drunk off his ass. So I went to pull him off her and he fell, hitting the ground. He was so drunk that he couldn't keep any balance."

Shiho cocked her head slightly. "Wait... that was the 'assault' you got charged with? Seriously?" she asked. The disbelief was clear on her face.

"Sort of... Whoever that guy was, he had power and connections. He basically just told the first responders to arrest me, and they did so without even questioning me... they clearly knew him. And that guy was influential enough to keep his name from being mentioned in any news stories. Even the woman I helped agreed to go along with his testimony. She sold me out," Akira explained.

"How frightful..." Yusuke murmured. "It seems you're no stranger to an adult abusing their power either."

Ryuji shook his head. "Pisses me off just thinking about it. That dick went out of his way to ruin Akira's life, and just got away with it. And everyone at school thinks Akira is some kinda criminal now. It ain't right. The weak have to fend for themselves, while corrupt shitheads do whatever they want."
"I suppose I'm used to it by now," Akira said plainly. "No point in getting mad over something I can't change. But, if we're lucky, we might run across that guy in the future. A man like that has to have a Palace after all." But, even if that were the case, Akira doubted it would make his criminal record go away.

"Right," Morgana said from his position by the small sofa. "Anyone who'd go that far just to spite a high school student clearly has some strong distortions."

Silence filled the attic. After a few moments, Yusuke looked up. "Oh... should we prepare the porridge now?"

"Dude..." Shizuka shot him a quick glare. "I think I'll puke if I eat anything else. Anyone else agree?" The others raised their hands. "Looks like porridge is defeated."

"I must admit though," Yusuke admitted, his brain instantly jumping to a new train of thought. "Leblanc is quite a place. It's been some time since I felt so comfortable, and the atmosphere here truly warms my heart. I feel as if I could stay here for hours, simply telling stories." Inspiration seemed to strike.

The mention of time caused Ryuji to glance to the windows, letting him see that the sun had all but set. "Shit... it's getting late. Guess we better call it a night an' head home."

Akira slowly stretched his arms over his head, grunting in exertion. "After a meal like that, I figure I'll take a dip at the bathhouse before I call it a night," he said, moving to stifle a yawn.

"Sounds good. Think I'll join you... any o' you guys coming?" Ryuji asked. Yusuke nodded in agreement, while the girls moved to stand.

"Stew around in a big bathtub full a' old people. You sure do know a good time," Shizuka sarcastically replied. "But nah, I better head home. Don't want Simmons worrying about me."

"And my mom will worry if I'm out late," Shiho said. Though, given all that had happened she supposed she couldn't blame her mother for worrying.

"Oh. Want me to walk you to the station? These backstreets are kinda cluttered ya know," Ryuji said.

A pleasant smile graced Shiho's face. "That sounds nice. I've never been to Yongen before after all."

The two made for the staircase, and once they vanished from view Ann's jaw nearly hit the floor. She cast a glance to Akira, as if mentally asking him if he had seen that too. Akira nodded sagely. Well, at least he wasn't the only one who saw it now.

Shizuka and Morgana seemed to catch onto the mental conversation, quickly putting two and two together with the same amount of shock. Yusuke, meanwhile, was deeply engrossed envisioning the landscape of a bathhouse.

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Akira was alone when he awoke the next morning, but something had changed in Leblanc
overnight. It seemed Yusuke had found a place to hang the Sayuri: Right next to the entryway of Leblanc. Sojiro had been happy enough to oblige.

A warm and casual environment, suiting the Sayuri far better than any glitzy museum.

Adding a hint of colour to an otherwise ordinary day. Just as Yusuke's mother would have wanted it.
It was late in the afternoon when Shizuka caught up with Akira, saying that things were all wrapped up with the paperwork for their new hideout. He had fortunately been in Shibuya at the time, helping Ann deal with one of her modeling gigs (it didn't take him long to note that Mika, one of Ann's fellow models, was a total bitch) and so he didn't need to travel far to meet her.

Shizuka had led on to a location a few blocks from Shibuya's main street, a brief walk from the station, and stopped at a squat white building with a heavy red metal door. The other buildings that surrounded them were either empty, or housed small office buildings. Not too many people came by here.

"The rent for here was pretty modest," Shizuka explained. She reached into the pocket of her dark jeans, taking out a small silver ring of keys. Several of the keys were identical, and she took one off to hand to Akira. "Got a few extras cut for the rest of the gang. But we gotta remember to lock up whenever we're leaving."

The lock of the red metal door clicked noisily as Shizuka undid the lock, pushing the heavy doorway open. The hinges squeaked as Shizuka pushed. "I'm gonna' uh... get those oiled," she assured him. Akira nodded in return.

The interior was rather sparse. The entryway consisted of a hardwood floor and a space for leaving shoes, leading then into a wide open area with faded white walls and a dusty blue carpet. Shizuka flicked the lights on as they entered. Thankfully they were in working order, and provided decent illumination to the area.

The layout was rather simple. The large main room, splitting off into two smaller rooms to the right, while there were two small bathrooms at the back wall. The kanji for 'Men' and 'Women' had faded from their original positions.

"It needs a bit of fixin', I'll admit," she said as she lead the way inside. "Some cleaning and furnishing, but I can get that taken care of. On the plus side all the electricity works, and the plumbing is fine too. Main point is, it's a private location we can do all our Phantom Thief stuff from."

Akira nodded, pressing his hand to one of the walls. "It's a little shabby, but I think it'll really shine with a little spit and polish. Definitely beats hanging around the Shibuya station," he mused. "You got something lined up for the furnishing?"

"Yup." Shizuka grinned broadly. "Hired a cleaner who's gonna swing by here tomorrow morning. She'll clean up the walls and carpet, and get rid of any crap the old owners left behind. And I got a hook up on some decent furniture... When it comes to decorating though, I figure Yusuke can handle that shit. Let his artistic spirit run wild."

"Sounds like a plan. He's been in a bit of a creative slump after what happened with Madarame," Akira said. He had been trying to help him out of said slump, but it was already an uphill battle. "So... what was this place originally?"
She pondered the question, ultimately shrugging. "Search me. I'm thinking it was a call center or something. But I guess it ultimately doesn't matter. So, will this place do?" Shizuka asked.

"Definitely. We'll make it shine like a diamond," Akira replied.

"Great! Cause if we're gonna be an actual organization, we need a cool hideout. The Legion of Doom never met up at a metro station." She could see the mild bemusement in Akira's expression, earning a sigh from her. "Come on dude, that's not obscure... is it?"

"In any event, I like it... You're a hell of a girl JoJo," Akira said. He held a hand up, and the two quickly high fived. He had to admit, this was a pretty neat perk to their bond.

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6/13

Makoto had a knot in her stomach the size of a soccer ball as she waited in the student council room, her gaze directed to her phone. She was really going to do this, really going to confront her best (and only) friend about her being a Phantom Thief. She had sent Shizuka a text during lunch, asking her to meet here, and Shizuka had agreed without question.

That just made her feel worse about all this. But it had to be done. If Shizuka was involved in something dangerous, then Makoto had to know about it.

But as she sat there, Makoto really didn't know where she would go from here. Deep down she knew she couldn't sell Shizuka out. Whatever Principal Kobayakawa threatened her with, she wouldn't give Shizuka up. But there was a matter she needed help with, a matter that she couldn't deal with on her own. Even so, would she really turn to the mysterious 'Phantom Thieves' for help?

She thought back a few days, to her last dinner with Sae. Sis had been clear that she didn't think too highly of these thieves, and ultimately felt Makoto shouldn't waste time on anything other than getting good grades.

Then Makoto thought of yesterday, when she ran into Akechi. He had called her 'the good-girl type of pushover.' Those words lingered with her, and the more she dwelled on them the more she realized that was how everyone at Shujin saw her. Everyone but Shizuka, at least.

The brunette's train of thought came to a screeching halt as the door slid open. "Yo!" Shizuka greeted cheerily. "So this is where the magic happens huh? Pretty cool." It wasn't really 'cool' by any definition, but she couldn't help but be nice to Makoto. "So ah, what's up? You didn't give many details in your text."

Makoto visibly hesitated. Well, it was now or never. She lifted her phone, and played the recording from the other day.

"Man, that detective from yesterday really pissed me off! We're some kinda' threat? Seriously? Let's see him do it then! If someone else coulda' done what we did, then we wouldn't be doing stuff as the Phantom Thieves to start with!"

"Dude, shut the fuck up! I was hoping to prank you guys, but you just had to force my hand... seriously, why the hell are you shouting that stuff out loud for? It's suppose to be a secret!"
Shizuka screamed internally.

Silence lingered between them. Shizuka slowly took a seat, tenting her fingers together on the surface of the table. Finally, Makoto spoke. "Do you have anything to say about all this?"

What could she say? That was clearly Ryuji's voice, and her voice, talking about being the Phantom Thieves. And clearly Makoto must have been close by to get this recording. Damn Ryuji and his oversized mouth... "I'm not gonna lie to you. I respect you too much to even try crap like that." If she did lie, there was a chance Makoto would want to believe her. "I'll tell you the truth. I'm a member of the Arditi."

"I assume the others you were with are involved too?" Makoto asked. "Kurusu, Sakamoto, Takamaki... even Suzui." Shizuka nodded. "It wasn't hard to figure out who to look at. They all had their own reasons for going after Kamoshida... and my concerns became even more justified when I saw you all hanging around with a known student of Madarame. It's not much of a coincidence to think that people with deeply personal grudges against those two men would go after them and expose them."

Though, being totally honest, she still had no idea what means they were using to extract those confessions from people. It ultimately didn't matter much, as long as it worked.

"Well when you put it that way, we're not all that inconspicuous," Shizuka murmured. A pout briefly crossed her face. "So the question is... what do we do now?" she asked.

"I'm not going to turn you in, if that's what you're asking," Makoto replied. Even with such a damning recording, and the group regularly being seen together, there wasn't a whole lot of concrete evidence to act on anyway. "The truth is I... I need help. The kind of help that only you guys can provide."

Shizuka raised her left brow from behind the dark rim of her shades. "Uh... what do you need? And I'm not just asking to save my ass, I'm asking as a friend." She knew Makoto didn't have a whole lot of people to turn to, and Shizuka knew she couldn't say no.

"As of late, there have been reports of a criminal group operating in Shibuya. A group that have been targeting and blackmailing high school students, extorting them for money. A few Shujin students are already being threatened by them." She netted her hands together, squeezing them tight. "I want to help them. It's my job to help them, but I can't. I just feel so... useless."

Shizuka settled a hand over Makoto's own, giving a small sigh. "Jeez... you've been worrying your ass off over this. Of course I'll help you."

"Will the others agree?" Makoto asked. She knew they weren't exactly her biggest fans.

"If it involves helping other students? Sure. I'll get 'em on board." Granted they didn't have a whole lot of information to go on, but every criminal enterprise had a leader. And a person like that was bound to have some kind of Palace, or at least a Shadow lurking somewhere in Mementos. "I was actually gonna meet up with the guys now. You better tag along so we can explain the situation."

Makoto blinked. "R-really?" Before she knew it she was following Shizuka out the door at a quick pace. Well, at least JoJo wasn't mad at her.

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His credentials, while fake, were good enough to fool the receptionist and the manager of the security company. As far as they knew he was some kind of police consultant inquiring about Madarame's case, and they didn't care enough to inquire further.

"Finding out about the old man's crimes was a real shock. I mean, I personally always knew he was shifty, but I never thought he got a woman killed. Talk about a scumbag, right? Problem is, since he's so old he's probably gonna get a nice cushy jail cell. If he even gets convicted at all."

As the schlubby head of the security firm chattered on, the tall and willowy man at his side kept his gaze focused dead ahead, his hands clasped neatly behind his back. He was well dressed, wearing a crisp white suit with a neat black shirt. A golden heart pin rested in his right lapel. His shoes, black leather, were immaculately clean. His hair was dark and slicked back, while the bones of his face were sharp and well defined. A pair of half-moon spectacles rested neatly on the bridge of his nose.

He was some kind of foreigner, but even so he was the kind of man who could perfectly blend into the scenery. So plain and unassuming that you would almost forget him as soon as he was out of your field of view. It was one of his best tools.

"But uh... if you don't mind me asking, Gunsche-san, why are the police even looking into this? Madarame's case seems rather open-shut."

"Because," he began in a calm, droning tone. "We are not specifically interested in Madarame. We are interested in the group that apparently targeted him prior to his public confession." His Japanese was accented, but he spoke the language fluently.

"Oh, the uh... the Arditi? Ah that was probably just a prank. Dunno why we bothered keeping those cards they left behind..." the manager replied.

Their walk down the concrete corridor came to a stop at a heavy steel door. The manager punched seven digits into the panel by the door, the heavy locks coming undone with a resounding clunking sound. The older man grunted and pushed the door open, leaving an opening for the mysterious man in white to stride through.

Both sides of the room were lined with small steel lockers, neatly numbered. The manager counted past several of the lockers, eventually coming to a stop at one of the labelled drawers. "Here we go. We kept them in number seventeen." He unlocked the drawer and pulled it open, revealing a stack of crimson cards.

"Very good. You can leave now, I just need a few moments alone." His tone was calm and level, but there was a sense of menace to it. The manager complied without hesitation, quickly leaving the storage chamber.

Now alone, he reached in and raised one card up. He inspected it with great scrutiny, even going so far to lift and sniff it. Thus satisfied, he lifted a sleek black phone from his pocket and took a few quick snapshots of the card from both sides, making sure that all details were readily recorded and clearly visible.

Once he was satisfied, he dialed a specific number and waited patiently for a response. The phone rang three times before there was a response on the other end. "A-sama," he greeted curtly.
"Ah, Lars. Efficient as always," the voice on the other end calmly replied. "I take it you have the evidence from the security company?"

"Yes. Getting into their storage area was not particularly difficult, and fortunately they kept the cards. It's an obvious upgrade from the card we got from Kobayakawa. As if an actual artist designed the graphics for this one," he explained. "Beyond that though, as with the last card, there are no prints we can find. I believe these ones were even dabbed with gasoline as a forensic countermeasure."

"Hmph. Clever."

"Indeed. But at least we have a good idea for the design these Phantom Thieves use. It may come in handy in the future. I'll be sure to send the photos along when I'm done here."

"So, no new leads?"

"Nothing I can find at present. And Kobayakawa is being no help. He might need to be cut loose, but I suppose that's at the director's discretion," Lars remarked. He turned the card over in his fingers, examining it one last time. He pocketed it neatly, and closed the drawer. "If you don't mind my asking sir, why do you care? These thieves have had no interaction with any of our agents, nor have they conflicted with our plans," he mused.

"You could consider it a preemptive measure. You and I both know that these 'changes of heart' their targets go through are clearly supernatural. Either we're dealing with some vigilante Stand-user group, or these Phantom Thieves have a power similar to the boy."

Lars rolled his eyes. "Ah yes. The boy," he said, a clear note of disdain in his tone. "Fine, I won't question it further. If you want to be ready to strike back, I'm fully prepared to help. That said, I do have a list of other targets I need to get to," he said.

"Of course. If only all my workers were as efficient as you Lars..."

The call ended. The willowy man pocketed his phone and turned on his heel, making for the heavy steel door. "My work is never done..."

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"I'll admit that I was a little hesitant to invite you over like this. I know how hectic your schedule is," Mitsuru remarked. She stopped at the coffee table, bending forward to fill two ivory cups with steaming black tea. It was rare for her to have visitors at the Kirijo mansion, and even home like this Mitsuru still managed to dress formally in a white blouse and dark trousers.

"It's quite alright. The alternative was working with Rise on wedding planning." The blue-haired girl seated at her coffee table was dressed just as smartly, wearing a pinstripe blue jacket and dark trousers. A blue cap was resting beside her on the sofa.

By the time Naoto had graduated high school, her 'figure' had developed to the point where she couldn't particularly hide her gender anymore. She still dressed in masculine clothing, but by now anyone could tell she was a woman with a passing glance. But, these days, Naoto didn't particularly mind how she was seen. Not when she had a strong arrest record.

"But..." Naoto raised the cup to her lips, taking in the strong aroma of freshly brewed tea. "I must
say, this 'Arditi' business is all rather interesting. Stealing hearts, making people change their ways all of a sudden. Do you believe that it's somehow Persona-related?"

"It's definitely supernatural, if nothing else. By all accounts men like Kamoshida and Madarame were reprehensible, and all of a sudden they apparently grew a conscience. Something like that wouldn't occur normally." Mitsuru took a seat opposite Naoto, perched neatly into a heavy leather armchair with her left leg crossed over the right. "I recall how Yu described the TV world. A place formed by human hearts, where the darkest parts of their being resided. Their Shadow. And if their Shadow was effected, so too was the person in reality," she explained.

Naoto nodded along. "True. But the Midnight Channel has been off the air for years now," she explained. "More than that, we destroyed the source of the corruption in that world," the bluenette added.

Indeed, Mitsuru knew this to be the case. When SEES and the Investigation Team had first met, they had shared their stories in great detail. Mitsuru had noted down every important point, and she didn't doubt that Naoto had a good memory of all the details of SEES' own story.

"But if two phenomena like the Dark Hour and Midnight Channel could both exist independently of each other, then I'm willing to believe that there's a similar third... 'supernatural environment' at play here. Only now the incidents are occurring in the capital of the country."

"That's entirely possible. There may well be something unnatural going on in Tokyo. That said while I don't fully condone vigilante action, it would be rather hypocritical of me to condemn it, I don't see why we should be pursuing these Phantom Thieves. Their targets so far have been horrible criminals that law enforcement never would have caught normally," Naoto explained. It wasn't easy to admit that law enforcement could be useless, but she had experienced it as far back as her teenage years.

Mitsuru sighed gently. "Do you remember Strega? The group of Persona users that my friends and I dealt with?" Naoto nodded. "Back in the day, they had a website much like this 'Phantom Aficionado' board. A site where people could list an individual they hated, pay Strega a large sum of money, and in turn Strega would use their powers to kill those targets during the Dark Hour. It was called 'Revenge Request.'" It was easy enough to forget, with all the other horrible and deeply personal things Strega had done against them. "The M.O sounds familiar, yes? I'm worried that these 'Phantom Thieves' might easily go down a similar path. I'd at least like to keep some tabs on them in that regard."

Naoto reclined into the couch, taking a long sip of tea. She mulled the prospect while mulling on the rich taste, swallowing after a few quiet seconds of thoughts. "I took the time to look over the information your people sent me. The Arditi are most likely high school students," she firmly said, letting the information hang in the air for a few moments. "Suguru Kamoshida's crimes were apparently being kept quiet by the principal, and the parents of some of the abused athletes. If no adult was willing to speak up, then a group of students likely took action. Particularly if they found an paranormal means to make Kamoshida confess."

"I'd considered that possibility too. I find it hard to believe teachers would have used that power and invited all that controversy on Shujin Academy. Students, on the other hand, likely would have acted against such injustices." Mitsuru frowned. "Supposedly, Shujin has a few delinquents in their student body. They might be worth looking into."

"Right," Naoto replied with a nod. "Kamoshida apparently made his fair share of enemies in the
student body. Those students will be my first line of inquiry."

"If we are dealing with high school students, it's all the more reason to get in touch with them. They might be doing good now, but if things keep escalating then they'll likely get in over their heads. And if that happens they could easily get hurt, or worse. The follies of youth, I suppose."

Ultimately, Mitsuru knew she could trust this investigation to Naoto. And if things wound up getting hairy, then she could easily get Aigis, Yukari, and Akihiko on the matter. She hoped it wouldn't come to that, but this whole situation could rapidly become more serious.

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Makoto examined the red metal door for a few quiet moments, then let her gaze run over the unassuming building that surrounded it. "So this is where you guys meet up? Or is this the new place you were talking about the other day?" Makoto asked.

"New place," Shizuka replied. She rummaged in her bag for a few moments until her hand returned, neatly clutching a key. "Here we go. The guys were gonna come over and check this place out today, so I guess it's a good time for an impromptu meeting."

As soon as Shizuka unlocked the door and pushed it slightly ajar, they could already hear chatter from within as her fellow thieves inspected their new surroundings. Shizuka sighed and shouldered the door open fully.

"Oh, that must be her now," Ann said, turning from the spot she had been examining. "Hey Jo-"

She swallowed hard, seeing Makoto enter in behind their American friend.

"What's she doin' here?" Ryuji asked. He looked set to bolt.

"She's here," Shizuka said through clenched teeth "Because somebody was shouting 'I'm a Phantom Thief' in public, where someone could record them."

The blond gulped hard. The others shifted uncomfortably, all except for Akira who seemed as impassive as usual "The fact that she's here makes me think she's not going to turn us in. But now I have to wonder why she's here."

He supposed he wasn't too surprised that Makoto had figured them out. He had grown so used to the student council president lurking around that he had almost forgotten about her. Something was bound to slip eventually. Though, in this case, 'slip' meant 'Ryuji shouting their biggest secret in public.'

"The truth is," Makoto hesitated for a moment. It was easier to ask JoJo for help, but talking to these guys. "I need help from the Phantom Thieves, and it's the kind of problem that the police can't deal with."

Yusuke, who had previously been envisioning a piece on a blank patch of wall, turned vaguely toward the brunette. "We do have a website for requests, you know," he said.

"That ran the risk of the request being buried under a mountain of others," Makoto explained. "More than that, I don't have an actual name that you guys can go off of. All I do know is that there's a criminal group working out of Shibuya, extorting and threatening high school students...and several Shujin students have already fallen victim."
"So, what, are you doing this to make yourself look good?" Ann asked. Shizuka shot her a quick glare that, impressively, was visible through the dark lenses of her glasses.

Makoto sighed faintly. "The truth is I want to help those students, but there's nothing I can do on my own. Even the police can't find any leads on these people. But if there's anyone who can find out the ringleader of all this, I have to believe it's you guys."

After a brief paused, Akira strode to the center of the room. "Well, we don't have any other big targets at the moment. And this does sound like a dangerous situation," Akira remarked. If these people were preying on high school students, then it was just the kind of heinous act the Phantom Thieves would have to put an end to. And he didn't doubt that the head would have a Palace too. "I take it you still have that recording of us?" Makoto nodded. "Then we'll help, on the condition that you keep that audio to yourself. And delete it when we've dealt with these criminals."

"I can live with that," said Makoto. She spared a quick glance to Shizuka, and deep down she knew she would be getting rid of that recording one way or the other.

"Niijima-senpai, do you have any details about these guys? We really don't have a whole lot of information of their motives or methods," Shiho said. She seemed to have no issues working with their student council president, but they needed at least some information to go off of.

"From what I've been told, these people approach high school students on Shibuya's main street, and offer them money for an easy job. Some sort of... delivery. However they also take pictures of students in the act, using this to blackmail them for more work or money." She sighed and gave a small shake of her head. "The worst part is, when they know the names of these students, their families are threatened just to ensure the students keep in line."

Ryuji snorted. "What a buncha' assholes. The blackmail is already bad enough, but how shitty do those bastards have to be to start threatening families too?" But, then again, Yakuza-types weren't really known for their kindness. Unless they were the kind who went around in stylish disco suits.

"At any rate, we'll look into it," Akira said. "The longer this problem persists, the worse it'll get. And by the time the police get involved, a lot of people will have gotten hurt." He had no love for the Shujin student body, but he also didn't want anyone getting genuinely hurt.

They'd have to cut this problem off at the root. Get rid of the leader, and his change of heart would lead to him dismantling his own criminal network. Or at least, that was what he was hoping for.
Dinner with her sister had been tense lately. Makoto wasn't quite sure how to describe it, but she could feel the pressure of Sae's job weighing down on her. It must have been building since their father passed, she supposed, but with things being so quiet at their modest dinner table she could feel that tension with crystal clarity.

Desperate to break the silence, Makoto broached a topic. "I've been thinking lately," she began. "About the Phantom Thieves, I mean. If Dad were still alive... well I- I probably shouldn't bring this up while we're eating, but would he have supported them?"

Sae coolly regarded her sister for a few moments. "The only reason you have time to think about things like that is because you depend on someone else."

"That's not-" Sae continued, cutting her off.

"You don't have to do a single thing, and you're provided with food, clothes, a home... And I've had no time to harbor the same kinds of ridiculous thoughts." Anger and bitterness was rising quickly in her voice, and she was gripping the chopsticks in her hand so tightly that they looked set to snap clean in half. "Would dad have been happy with them? I don't care. He died upholding some lofty sense of righteousness, leaving all his responsibilities on us!"

Makoto swallowed hard. "A-all I was trying to say was-"

"Isn't it about time you grew up and acknowledged our situation?! Right now, you're useless to me. All you do is eat away at my life!" Makoto gasped sharply, tears stinging at the corners of her eyes. Sae seemed to snap back to reality, growing silent and then staring at the floor. "Sorry, that was... that was uncalled for," she admitted. All the stress and anger from work had built up and then exploded out, being unleashed on a person who didn't deserve any of it. What could Sae even say about all that she'd just said?

Silence filled their whole home. You could hear a pin drop with crystal clarity. "I'll be... eating dinner out, from tomorrow on," Sae said, shame buried deep in her voice.

And even with that attempt at an apology, the harsh words had baked themselves into Makoto's mind.

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"So this girl, she's hitting on Yusuke right? And she's dropping all these hints that are so obvious a first grader would've picked up on 'em. But he's just there looking at this girl like a really confused dog. Y-ya know, like with the head tilt and all..." Shizuka had been going through this story for the better part of five minutes, and barely raised Makoto's interest at all.

It wasn't everyday they got to eat lunch together, and Shizuka had made a concerted effort to make this meetup happen. She wanted Makoto to know that she wasn't mad about her spying. They had even managed to snag a nice shady spot in the courtyard to chat.

After a brief pause, Shizuka sighed and poked her chopsticks into the tuna roll of her bento.
"C'mon Prez, you've barely said anything and you've barely touched your lunch. What's up?"

Makoto blinked to attention, turning her focus to her bento with a hint of shame in her expression. "You don't have to do a single thing, and you're provided with food, clothes, a home..." Makoto sighed. "It's no-"

"And don't give me any 'it's nothing' crap. I'm an American, and I have no sense of boundaries!" she boasted.

The brunette visibly hesitated. But, Shizuka genuinely cared. And if she had already invaded Shizuka's privacy, then maybe she should just be open about this?

"I was... having dinner with my sister last night. And while we were talking she sort of snapped at me. She..." Makoto sighed loudly. "She said that I was useless to her, and that I was a drain on her life..."

"WHAT?!" Shizuka nearly sprang clean to her feet, and it was only the weight in her lap that reminded her that this would be a bad idea. "What th... who the fuck says that to their kid sister?!" She tried to imagine Josuke saying something half as insensitive to her, and knew right away that Crazy Diamond would have kicked his ass on a reflex.

"I'm sure she was just... stressed from work." Makoto spared a glance to her side. "And part of me might think that... think that maybe she was right." What did she contribute to Sae's life? Hell, what did she contribute to the school? None of Kamoshida's victims had said a word to her, and now she couldn't help the victims of this mafia at all.

A strong hand settled on her back. "You're not useless. You're just having a rough month is all," Shizuka assured her. For now she resisted the urge to track Sae down and kick her ass, helping Makoto was more important. "Geez. I thought prosecutors were supposed to be smart," she mused.

Despite herself, Makoto laughed just a little. The sound was like music to Shizuka's ears. "You're a good friend," Makoto admitted.

"It's both a blessing and a curse," Shizuka admitted. Though, she would also say that she didn't quite want to be just 'a friend.' But this was neither the time nor the place to get into such sensitive topics. Makoto needed a friend, and that was what she was here to be.

After a few seconds of silence, the brunette sighed again. "I don't necessarily know what you do as a Phantom Thief," she said, keeping her tone low to prevent anyone listening in. "But I envy you. You guys get to help so many people, and it all sounds so exciting..."

"It's pretty cool," Shizuka admitted. "Dangerous though."

"You haven't gotten hurt, have you?" Makoto asked.

She pondered the question for a few moments, her chopsticks idly plucking and poking at a section of unagi in her lunchbox. "Uh. Not... majorly?" Thank goodness they had healers.

"Well... just be careful, alright? I don't know what I'd do if you got hurt," Makoto admitted, looking down at her lunch. "Dangerous or not though, I still envy you. I wish I could do half as much," Makoto mused.

Shizuka watched her closely. Maybe there was a way to help her out, Shizuka supposed. It had worked for Shiho after all.
Their investigation had been rather slow, and mostly fruitless. It wasn't hard to confirm the existence of this criminal group, they had all been approached several times by various creeps since their investigation began, but getting names had been a much harder matter. It had started to feel as if they were hitting a brick wall for how little progress they were making.

Eventually, Akira had bit the bullet and contacted the journalist they had met while staking out Madarame. It was a long shot, but the theory they had was that an investigative journalist would have some kind of knowledge on major criminals. Thus, last night, Akira and Ryuji had made a quick late night trip to Shinjuku to meet with her.

Fortunately, Ohya had come through for them. She wanted an interview with one of Kamoshida's victims, and Mishima was happy to oblige (Or so Akira had claimed) in exchange for her information.

The name she gave was Junya Kaneshiro. On the surface he ran some kind of opulent nightclub in Shibuya, but Ohya had said he had criminal ties since he was in middle school. One of those people who was simply 'born bad.' She was certain he was the head of this new crime ring operating in Shibuya, but had warned Akira against going after him.

But, they weren't 'the daring ones' for nothing.

They met up by their hideout after school, hanging around the front entrance. Akira was in the center, examining the interface of the Metaverse Nav while the others flanked him. The street around them was empty, but the group were making sure to regularly look around. They didn't want to get jumped again. "Let's see if there's any truth to Ohya's information," the black-haired boy began. "Junya Kaneshiro."

'Candidate found.'

"Aw shit!" Ryuji said, pumping his fist in the air. "That was totally worth a trip to the red light district."

"Don't get too excited," Yusuke warned. "While this Kaneshiro may have a Palace, this alone doesn't prove that he's the ringleader of this criminal group. We should try and see inside this Palace and see what his distortion is."

Ann tapped her chin. "We need a location next. What was the name of his club again?"

"Club Decadence," Akira said. The app rumbled in protest. "That's not it huh?" he murmured, clearly annoyed. They had gone through a bit of trouble to even find this guys name, and they still had some more trouble to go through.

The group groaned, slumping around the doorway of their hideout. "Well where else could the location be? Kaneshiro's guys must be active in all of Shibuya." The Meta-Nav suddenly chimed in agreement. Shiho felt her eyes widen suddenly. "W-wait, did I seriously get that right?" she asked, more to herself than anyone else.

"Hehe. Awesome as ever," Ryuji complimented.

Morgana licked his left paw, using that to wash his furry ears while the group worked their way through the keywords. "We still need to know what he views 'all of Shibuya' as. I'm assuming it's something to do with money, given all the extortion he's taking part in."
"Fort Knox!" Shizuka suddenly blurted. The Nav disagreed wholeheartedly. "Okay I'll admit that was a long shot..."

"If it's somewhere with money involved... how about a casino?" Ann suggested. The app disagreed again, earning an irritated grunt from the blonde.

"An area rich in money, that a person regularly extracts money from..." Yusuke knit his brow in thought, rolling the mental image in his head for several moments. "Perhaps he sees all of Shibuya as his own personal bank?" The Meta Nav chimed again.

'Begginning navigation.'

"Ah, it seems I was right. Do I get a prize?"

The world around them flickered and melted away, soon becoming replaced with a filthy, desolate version of the city. The sky was a filthy green colour, blanketed by jet black clouds that travelled in packs. Every building surrounding them was boarded up, graffiti marking most every wall. Even the doorway to their hideout, they now saw, had boards covering over it.

Ann swallowed hard "So this is how that Kaneshiro guy views the world huh?" She looked down at herself, realizing that her clothing had suddenly changed into her crimson catsuit. "He already sees us as a threat?"

Shiho inspected herself, examining the armoured components of her ninja garb. All of them had changed, it had just taken them a moment to realize. "Well he is a criminal... I guess he just sees everyone as a threat, not just us," said Shiho.

"Okay, that explains that. Question number two: Where the hell is the Palace?" Shizuka asked aloud. Indeed, none of their surroundings particularly screamed 'Palace.' Everything was filthy and closed off, like some kind of post-apocalyptic warzone.

Yusuke stroked his chin, examining some of the small floating pieces of paper that were steadily being pulled into the air. His left hand snapped outward, catching one in mid-air and pulling it close for examination. "A ten thousand yen note?!" He gasped. It turned to ash in his hand, the black particles being blown away in the breeze. Yusuke sighed. "Of course..."

A sly grin crossed Akira's face and he wasted no time striding away from their hideout. "No sense just standing around. Let's get a good look at this place." The Palace had to be around somewhere, though the specifics were lost on them. All the same Akira led on confidently, hoping to quickly get to the bottom of this case.

It didn't take long for them to navigate the narrow alleys and sidestreets that led to Shibuya's main street. As had been the case before, every storefront was boarded up. Even the subway station was blocked off by large blocks of debris and rubble. However that wasn't the most surprising part of all this. No, the true shock for the Arditi came in the form of the 'people' walking around.

"What the hell?!" Ryuji raised his mask with his left hand and rubbed his eyes with his right, just to make sure his eyes weren't playing tricks on him. Dotted around the central street were ATM's, each one having arms and legs. A few were walking around normally, while others were visibly broken down and piled up in the streets.

Morgana let his paws rest on his hips. "This must be Kaneshiro's cognition of his victims. Living breathing ATM's he can take money from, until they break down."

"And many of these individuals are high school students. How utterly despicable," Yusuke
murmured. "This may well confirm that he is leading that extortion racket. Niijima-san was right to get us involved in all this."

"I want to deal with this guy too, believe me," Akira said. "This scenery just motivates me more. But we still haven't seen the actual Pa-" Akira stopped mid-sentence, aware that a shadow was falling over them. A tremendous, moving shadow. All eyes turned skyward, watching in shock as a massive shape started to slowly drift over Shibuya.

It was some kind of massive flying saucer, much of the body being stainless steel while the outer ring was glowing bright green. From this angle it was hard to tell what was standing atop it, but there was clearly some kind of structure there. It also quickly became clear that all the money drifting through the air was being slowly pulled up toward the flying structure, collected in mechanisms on the underside.

"Ah... that must be it," Akira said flatly.

"How're we supposed to get there?" Shiho asked. "Even if we could somehow get into the taller buildings here, there's still a huge gap between them and that floating... thing!"

"Quickly Mona, turn into a helicopter!" Ann said, pumping her fists enthusiastically.

"I... can't do that."

Ryuji groaned, scratching the back of his head with his right hand. "Oh sure, turning into a bus is totally logical, but becoming a helicopter is a bridge too far..."

"I don't make the rules you idiot!" Morgana snapped.

"What was that?! You wanna go here and now fuzzball?!"

Sighing, Shiho moved between the two. "That's enough, both of you. Can we have one mission without you two being at each other's throats?" she asked.

"Agh..." Ryuji quickly glanced off to his side, giving the ground a kick with his left foot. "Sorry." Well, for her he could make an effort when it came to the overgrown hairball.

"He started it," Morgana muttered.

"And I'm ending it," Akira interjected. "We're supposed to be a team, we can't waste time squabbling like this." He didn't really want to take sides... but then again, he supposed Morgana had been treating Ryuji poorly ever since they first met. "That all said, if Morgana really can't transform... then I really have no idea how we're going to get there."

Shizuka examined the floating structure for several moments. An idea popped into her head, one that was a bit of a longshot. But they were desperate, and it would give her the opening she wanted.

"I know someone who might be able to help," she said, drawing the attention of the others. "We should probably head back first though. We dunno what could be lurking here."

"Right," Akira nodded and made back for the side street they had originally emerged from. "Let's head back to the hideout, we can chat a little openly there."

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The trip back to the real world was a quick one, and once they were back the Arditi quickly headed
inside their hideout. As they had owned the place for a few days, they had managed to fix it up just a little.

Just as Shizuka had said, a cleaner had come by and scrubbed away any remnants of the previous tenants. She had snagged some furniture too, a few foldout chairs and a collapsible white table that those same chairs were seated around. A whiteboard had been set up on the back wall, and Shizuka had taken up a position near it.

For the time being it was nothing glamorous, but it would suffice for now.

"Okay, so here's our problem." She drew a crude outline of Kaneshiro's UFO in the upper right corner of the board, and then drew a few stick figures in the lower left corner. "Kaneshiro's bank is waaaaay up there. And none of us can fly."

"Yes. We all came to the same conclusion already," Yusuke flatly said. He resisted the urge to swipe the markers from Shizuka's hands before she could defile the board with more doodles.

"But what if we knew someone who could make us fly?" The question hung in the air, with the group curiously watching her. Shizuka grinned sharply, twirling the marker between her fingers. She stopped, drawing it close to her nose and taking a sniff of it. She sighed in delight.

"Are you... going to tell us your plan?" Shiho awkwardly asked.

Shizuka blinked back to attention. "Huh? Oh! Right. Sergio's Stand might be able to help us. It can infuse momentum into things and launch them!" She turned, quickly making a crude scribble of the Monamobile shooting through the air toward Kaneshiro's Palace, accompanied by a cartoonish 'Pchew' sound coming from Shizuka. Yusuke rose quickly to his feet, only to be sat back down by Akira placing a hand on Yusuke's shoulder.

Morgana blinked from his position on the table. "You're gonna launch me?!" he asked in shock.

"Yup." Shizuka sniffed the marker again.

"It sounds a little dangerous, but... our options are limited right now. It's certainly worth a try, and another member wouldn't be the worst thing. Do you think he'd help?" Akira asked.

Shizuka shrugged. "He said he owes me one for helping Yusuke out, so he should."

At that, Yusuke nodded. "Sergio is seen as a little odd by some, but he has been a good friend in the time that I've known him. I'm sure he'll gladly help."

Shizuka briefly sniffed the marker again. "How did you guys become friends?" she asked.

"We were matched together on a school assignment once. I had few friends, and Sergio was somewhat ostracized due to being a foreigner. But we seemed to hit it off well enough."

Shizuka briefly sniffed the marker again. "How did you guys become friends?" she asked.

"We were matched together on a school assignment once. I had few friends, and Sergio was somewhat ostracized due to being a foreigner. But we seemed to hit it off well enough."

"I know what that's like," Ann said. She and Shiho shared a brief smile.

"Uh, don't I get a say in this?! You're planning on launching me through the air here!" Morgana protested, his fluffy tail bristling broadly.

Their leader sighed faintly. "Unless you can grow wings, it's the best option we have. And it's not exactly gonna be fun and games for us when we're sitting inside you." Morgana grumbled again.

"Thank you JoJo, this might work out."
"Glad you said that Akira. Cause I have another thing I wanna suggest." The others leaned in expectantly. They groaned in unison as Shizuka took another sniff of her marker. Satisfied with the scent, Shizuka continued. "I want Makoto to become a Phantom Thief."

"What?!" Ryuji blurted out.

"Just hear me out-"

"Sergio coming is one thing. He has a Stand so he can take care of himself, but Makoto is a normal human," Akira said.

Shizuka shrugged. "So what? Ann was a normal girl when she blundered into Kamoshida's castle. And even though it was dangerous, things worked out when we brought Shiho along. Hell, Yusuke and Ryuji both got theirs by accident. It's risky, but with all of us there, things won't get out of hand."

Ann seemed to ponder the suggestion. Shizuka had a point, they had all just kind of blundered into the Metaverse and got their Personas when they were at risk. But it was still dangerous. "Why though?" she asked plainly.

"I..." Shizuka hesitated for a moment. She was quick to click the cap on the marker and set it down on the table. "She's my friend. I can tell she's hurting, and that she wants to be able to help people... but right now she can't. Being a Phantom Thief though..."

As Shizuka explained herself, Ryuji scratched at the back of his head. "Uh... I'm not sure I get ya. Is she really hurtin' that bad?"

Shizuka nodded. "Look, I know you guys might not know her the way I do... But life's found a way to shit on her, just like it has for you guys too. Her folks are dead, she's got an emotionally distant older sister, the principal is pressuring her by hanging her future over her head... besides all that, the other students don't like or even respect her all that much. You guys might not have got off on the right foot but... I know Makoto has the kind of drive for justice that we have."

Her impassioned plea hung in the air for a few moments. After a while, Akira ventured to speak. "We have no guarantee that this will work, but... I'll trust your word about Makoto. We'll give it a shot. Either way, I'll leave it to you to set things up with her and Sergio."

Their recruitment process, Akira now realized, was perhaps a tad reckless. But these things did have a habit of working out for them.
Shroud Over Shibuya (III)

S.J: so

S.J: How would you like

M.N: What? I'm not sure I follow

S.J: We finally tracked the dude extorting the money

S.J: and we're gonna deal with him 2. and we have an opening for a new member.

M.N: But I don't know the first thing about being one of you!

M.N: I doubt I'd be much help to you.

S.J: nah its cool don't even sweat it

S.J: i mean its gonna be weird as fuck and risky too, but it'll all be worth it. i'll be there to help you through the whole thing.

M.N: Well

M.N: It's worth a try?

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6/21

When they all met up at the hideout after school, Sergio arrived to meet them first. The blond had gotten directions from Yusuke and, after finishing a little more of his current sculpture, had come along to meet with them. He stopped, surveying Yusuke's friends, and smiled once he had gauged all of them. "Buongiorno!" he greeted warmly.

"Eh? Bon-whatnow?" Ryuji asked.

"It's Italian for 'hello.' He has a tendency to speak in his native language," Yusuke explained.

"So nice to meet you all in person. Yusuke speaks the world of you," he explained, moving closer to the doorway of their building. "I'm Sergio Esposito, as I'm sure you've all been told. JoJo-chan has informed me that you need the help of my Stand." Shizuka visibly bristled.

Ryuji looked at her incredulously. "JoJo-ch-"

"Don't you start Sakamoto!"

Akira took a step forward and greeted Sergio with a firm handshake. "Glad you could make it. We've been tracking someone down these past few days and hit a bit of a roadblock... We're
"Right. But first we need to wait for someone else to arrive." Morgana had taken up a spot at the side of the road, and immediately drew all eyes to him.

Sergio regarded him closely. "Did that cat just talk?" he asked, surprisingly calm about the prospect. The others nodded. "Ah. Must be some manner of Stand-using cat. Hello puss-puss," he greeted, crouching down and reaching a hand out to Morgana.

"Hey! And just what do you think yo-" Morgana was cut short as Sergio's fingers started rubbing the side of Morgana's face, making the feline groan and flop onto his side, rubbing his face into Sergio's palm.

"Huh." Ryuji watched the strange display for a few moments and ultimately shrugged. "So that's all it takes to get Morgana to shut up."

They weren't left waiting long for Makoto to arrive, who rounded the corner and curiously watched the group for a few quiet seconds. She knew Kurusu had a cat that he kept in his bag, as unhygienic as that sounded, but the blond was new to her. He was clearly a Kosei student going by his purple shirt, but that was all she could tell at a glance.

"Yo Prez!" Shizuka greeted, standing to attention. "You ready for this?"

"Ah... I suppose so?" the brunette replied, making her approach. She stopped and gave her name to Sergio and Yusuke, introducing herself more formally. Sergio, in turn, got the names of Yusuke's friends and committed them to memory.

Akira raised his phone up. "I should warn you that things are about to get weird, even by your standards Sergio. But if you get a look at what we're dealing with, it should make our problem a little more apparent. Are you two ready?" he asked. Sergio and Makoto nodded. Akira gave the Meta Nav icon a tap, and reality melted away.

Once the grim phantom-world of Kaneshiro's Palace surrounded them, Makoto and Sergio gasped in unison. "What... what is this place?" Makoto asked, glancing from side to side. She stopped and found herself staring wide-eyed at the others. "A-and what happened to your clothes?"

Even Sergio had changed, as had been the case for Shizuka on her first Metaverse trip. His Kosei uniform was gone, replaced with an elegant three-piece suit with a diamond pin in both lapels. A deep purple mask covered the top half of his face, matching the hue of his gloves and his shirt, with two sharp ram horns protruding from the side. "My, this is so... intriguing." Sergio remarked.

"W-wait, is that your cat?" Makoto asked, pointing to the squat figure standing waist-level with Akira. Morgana groaned in annoyance. This really wasn't his day.

"This is the Metaverse," Akira said. "It's a parallel world created by the collective unconsciousness of the world. Where we are now is a 'Palace', a particularly distorted part of the Metaverse created by the distorted desires of a specific individual. In this case, Junya Kaneshiro. We believe he's the man in charge of all the extortion in Shibuya."

"It's our job to go into these Palaces, steal the 'treasure' at the heart of it, and this will make the person in the real world have a change of heart," Ann elaborated.
Sergio nodded along. "I see... so that's how you made Madarame give such a public confession. Destroying this Palace gave him a 'conscience' so to speak. I suppose that explains how nobody in the real world has any idea how you do the things you do."

"You seem quite accepting of all this," Yusuke remarked.

"Oh I've met a few Stand users that can change reality around them. This is strange, but not too big a leap for me," Sergio explained. And, truth be told, he did find all this rather exciting. It made for a nice change of pace.

"So... if a person becomes particularly corrupt, like Kamoshida and Madarame, it leaves a 'footprint' of some kind in this Metaverse place?" Makoto asked.

"Oh, she's a sharp one!" Morgana said, pleased that he wouldn't need to explain everything to another newcomer.

"And what about your clothing?" Makoto asked.

Akira raised his right hand, snapping the hem of his crimson glove for dramatic effect. "Stylish, right? It's a side effect of having a Persona, or a Stand. It's your inner rebel given form... or something like that anyway. Point is, we look cool." His statement made Makoto cock her head, and she was left watching as Akira breezed along to the side streets. "Oh, one more thing. While we're in the Metaverse. I'm Joker. They are Skull, Mona, Panther, Nemesis, Fox, and Sting."

Sergio grinned. "Ahaha. Unseen masked criminals who steal desires and commit crimes without ever being caught, how delightful. In that case, call me... Diabolik."

His choice made Shizuka hum. "I feel like he's referencing something but even I don't know what..." she murmured.

It didn't take long to reach central street, their position giving them a good view of the floating structure of Kaneshiro's Palace. Makoto gasped, nearly falling over. Even Sergio seemed a little stunned at the sight of it.

"That is... rather far away," Sergio muttered. "So this is what you want my Stand for?" he asked.

Makoto raised her left hand. "Ah... b-before we go any further, what is this... 'Stand' thing you guys keep talking about?"

"Stands and Personas are a... some kinda pet ghost that follows you around. It's your fighting spirit or some junk like that," Ryuji said.

"And one of our goals today is to get one for you!" Shizuka enthusiastically said. "But that can wait. For now, our main mission is getting into the Palace. Oh, one more thing Diabolik, you gotta touch your mask to use your Stand here. It's one of the rules. So Mona, after you!" She pointed sharply at the feisty feline, who groaned in meek protest. Even now he was hardly thrilled about this plan Shizuka set up.

Morgana jumped high and exploded into a cartoony cloud of smoke, followed then by the large black frame of the Monamobile landing noisily on the ground. "Oh." Sergio looked wide-eyed, and he seemed even more stunned now than he had previously. "Did your cat just..."
"I... what the..." Makoto looked into Morgana's headlights. They stared right back, and nearly made her faint on the spot.

"Yeah he can do that. He's a magic cat," Shizuka said. Really she had just gotten used to it with how useful Morgana's bus form was. Questioning it further would have been counterproductive.

The group filed into the Monamobile quickly, with Akira taking up the drivers seat. "Ah... do you have a drivers license?" Makoto asked. She buckled up quickly from her spot in the back, and the others followed suit. They all knew what was coming.

"Nope. But thankfully you don't need a license to drive a cat," Akira proudly said. Outside of the occasional crash in Mementos, Akira still handled the wheel better than the others. "So, Diabolik... can your Stand launch us up there?"

"It's possible. We need a good angle so someone will need to lift the cat... bus... and hold him up," Sergio explained.

"Can I just say how much I dislike this plan?!" Morgana said. He yelped as Houdini suddenly appeared in front of him, lifting Morgana by his front bumper.

"Your complaints have been noted Morgana," Akira firmly said. But it was either this or trying to somehow change Kaneshiro's cognition in the real world. Though none of them were willing to risk being in the line of sight of a guy like that. And while they could use their Personas in the real world, simply beating Kaneshiro up wouldn't solve anything.

Sergio raised his hands up, making a picture frame with his thumbs and index fingers, looking through his digits with a keen eye. He was mouthing something, and if one were to lean in they would hear him doing the math out loud. Ever since he first gained his Stand, Sergio had made a point of learning some math for angles and trajectories. The blond didn't consider himself an expert, but his math skills had gotten him out of a few tight jams.

After several seconds he nodded firmly. "Yes. This should do nicely. Hold on tight everybody."

Breakthru's fist tapped lightly against Morgana's rear. Everyone gripped their seats in anticipation, and Makoto thought her fingers were about to punch holes in the upholstery. The Monamobile briefly rattled, before the entire van was launched skyward with a tremendous boom.

The air was filled with the sounds of screaming as the Monamobile was rocketed high into the air, plowing through floating clouds of money as it arced toward the floating structure of the Palace. "BAD IDEA! BAD IDEA! BAD IDEA!" Ann screamed.

"I'm... gonna... puke!" Ryuji had been sucked into the leather of his seat from the g-force, and his complexion was noticeably more Hulk-ish.

"DON'T YOU DARE THROW UP INSIDE ME!"

From on high they were able to see the structure atop the floating platform (Those who could dare to look out the windows at least). It looked surprisingly normal, considering all they had seen thus far. A large brickwork structure with stained glass windows. There was a modest courtyard at the front entrance, distinct for having a few trees and wrought iron sculptures on the cobblestone path. In the brief glimpse Shizuka managed to take in, she realized that this was the 'bank' from Kaneshiro's keywords.
The Monamobile hit the ground with a clatter, landing on the cobblestones of the courtyard. Morgana wobbled on his wheels, the eyes of his headlights swirling around in a daze as he fought to gain some kind of control.

After a few seconds, Akira managed to ask "Is everyone still alive?" There was a long and mutual groan in return. "Okay everyone has... two minutes to go puke, and then we're going inside." They were all alive, and they made it to the Palace. Mission accomplished, he supposed.

Eventually the group exited Morgana and gathered in the courtyard. Morgana returned to normal and staggered over to the the group, groaning weakly. "You okay?" Shizuka asked, glancing to Makoto.

"Well... I think ten years just got shaved off my lifespan. Is it always like this?" Makoto asked. She took it better than Shizuka had expected.

"No, usually the Palace is just... right there when we go in." Though, already she could tell it would be 'fun' trying to escape this place.

Akira cleared his throat, drawing the attention of the others. "Alright everyone, listen up. We have no time limit on this guy, but I want to get this Palace cleared as quickly as possible. The longer we take, the more people Kaneshiro will hurt, and the worse things will get for his victims. And I'd rather make a trip like that as few times as possible," the dark haired boy said. "So, if the opportunity presents itself, we're going to split into two groups to cover more ground."

He approached the doors, and then stopped in his tracks, staring at the air for several seconds. As if his brain had just skipped a beat. Makoto watched him curiously. "Does he... do that often?" she asked.

Shizuka nodded. "Oh sure. Sometimes he just kinda trails off around the start of a mission. I think he likes to get hyped up for the job."

For the few seconds he was quiet in reality, Akira spent several minutes solving business matters in the Velvet room. He completed a request for Caroline and Justine, and then spent some time doing a little fusing. It was about time to test the Aeon arcana a bit.

"Alright," Akira said, snapping back to reality (or what passed for it at least) "Let's get to it."

"Is everyone ready?" Yusuke asked. He made for the wooden double doors of the bank, his palm pressing into the material. The others nodded, giving the bluenette all the encouragement he needed to push the doors open.

The foyer of the bank was opulent and immaculately clean, the black and white tiled floors catching every reflection that passed them by. Long benches were lined up in two aisles, leading toward a row of counters manned by figures more human than the ATM people down below.

It didn't take long to see the security guards of this place. Hulking, ink-black humanoids dressed in padded dark green riot gear. Their crimson eyes were visible behind the dark lenses of their visors.

"Those things are... pretty huge," Makoto said. Was she seriously going along with this? She looked to Shizuka, who gave her a reassuring smile. Well, that was that. She couldn't back out now.
To her shock, flashes of blue fire washed over the group, filling their hands with weaponry. A firearm and a melee weapon. Sergio seemed equally surprised, glancing down to the morning star and P90 now clasp in his hands. Then he shrugged and seemed to go along with it, another strange little element of this 'world.'

"So... are we starting loud?" Shiho asked. Her attention shifted to one of the guards positioned by the right wall, who seemed to now notice the newcomers in the bank. "I guess these guys won't be giving us much of a choice."

"Right," Akira said. "Nemesis, Fox, Mona, with me. The rest of you, hang right and deal with the guards on the left end of the room," he said. Akira's hand pressed to his mask, a wreath of blue fire washing over him. The power was such that even Makoto could see the glow, even if she couldn't see what came next. "Come, Camazotz!"

A tremendous figure burst into existence above him, a hairy black beast with tremendous leathery wings in place of arms. Large black spikes of keratin sprouted down his back, the sharp talons of his feet regularly flexing. His sharp bat-snout sniffed at the air, red eyes gazing dead ahead.

Camazotz suddenly shot toward the right end of the room, heading swiftly for the two guards advancing their way. His wings slammed into the figures, knocking them clean off their feet and smashing them into the tiled material of the wall. The ivory slates cracked and hit the ground from the blow, while the guards wobbled and hissed as they fought to recover. Suddenly the two figures exploded in a tide of black matter.

The first guard transformed into a tremendous, gold-skinned man in crimson shorts, sporting a fanged scowl and crimson eyes. In his right hand he clutched a large blade, almost the size of one of his spiked forearms. The second transformed into an equally large purple skinned man in lavender robes, his hands clasping an iron club that was longer than his torso.

While Akira's group made for the left end of the room, the remaining Arditi looked to the right and watched as two other guards suddenly changed shape. They shed their normal forms, morphing into a pair of crimson oni in sky blue robes, both figures clutching giant blades in their hands. Makoto took a few steps back, keeping a position by the open doors.

The first oni rushed in, growling like an enraged gorilla and swinging his blade down. The sharpened edge smashed against Captain Kidd's upraised cannon, the shock of the impact shattering the tiles beneath the two figures and pulling a pained grunt out of Ryuji.

The second was quick to charge forward, each heavy footstep cracking the tiles beneath him. Sergio raised his P90 and squeezed the trigger, cracks of gunfire resounding through the lobby from the hail of molten lead lancing toward the incoming beast. He was forced to halt, snarling and lifting his left hand to shield his eyes from the bullets. It left him wide open as Houdini rushed in, pummeling his torso with a volley of punches that staggered the beefy oni.

Captain Kidd recoiled, narrowly avoiding a downward swing from the oni's blade. The beast was swift, immediately swinging back up and smashing his weapon into the spectral pirate, sending Ryuji skidding backward until he hit into the wall behind him. The oni spun around and threw another swing, clipping Carmen and knocking the dancer away and making Ann hiss in pain.

These overgrown apes were tougher than they looked. Getting deeper inside was set to be a challenge.
Meanwhile, the manager of the bank was closely watching the chaos unfolding in his lobby.

His glowing golden eyes were affixed to the CCTV footage playing on his laptop, his right hand holding the stub of a half-smoked cigar. Kaneshiro's Shadow made for a sharply dressed man, clad in an expensive white suit that contrasted neatly with the plum shade of his skin. In some regards, he closely resembled a stereotypical American gangster from the thirties.

"Hrm... how the hell did they get here? The bank is supposed to be closed off to non-customers..." he growled to himself. And yet there they were, smacking around his guards and tearing up his lobby.

He watched as the one in the purple mask dodged away from a downward swing of his oni guard, a specter appearing at his side for just a fraction of a second. His ghostly guardian lightly touched one of the benches, which then immediately rocketed forward and crashed into the oni, exploding into a cloud of splinters.

And they had power too. That made this whole situation even more troubling, Kaneshiro would freely admit.

Damn thieves. They were no doubt here to rob him blind. But he wouldn't let anyone take away everything he had fought to earn, not without a fight at least. But they were already clearing up his lobby, and he didn't want to risk drawing too many men away from the vault.

Kaneshiro carefully reached over to the intercom resting on his broad desk. A direct line to his secretary. "Reinforce the underground floors. Let the men know to expect guests."

Of course people would come to cause him trouble, right when the going was getting good.

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Aradia raised her hands up, a glow of scarlet light wafting around her fingertips and then coiling around her allies, buffing their power significantly. The ghostly woman dashed back, narrowly avoiding a hard strike from the charging golden giant.

That same guard, for his trouble, was struck by a wave of freezing wind from Goemon's extended palm. It left him frozen in place for several seconds, while Morgana leapt high and struck him with a hail of steel ball bearings. The ice exploded off him, leaving the giant huffing and skidding backward, black matter oozing from his fresh wounds.

His purple skinned companion was doing a little bit better. He stood firm, watching Camazotz swooping toward him with a deafening shriek. He sidestepped and narrowly avoided the incoming strike, swinging his club down and smashing the overgrown bat into the floor. The ground shattered, plumes of dust exploding up around Camazotz. A puff of blood burst out of Akira's lips, a wave of pain washing through his ribs.

Akira quickly recalled his Persona, narrowly avoiding another crushing strike that sent tiles exploding into the air around the purple demon. While he may have missed, this didn't disrtract the creature for long. His glowing eyes locked on Akira, and he charged toward the thief like a rushing quarterback. Akira jumped high, vaulting over the demon and delivering a hard kick to the back of
his head in passing.

The beast staggered forward, knocked briefly off balance, and was then struck from behind by a combined blast from Aradia and Zorro. The burst of light and wind smashed into the demon, and then washed him away with the crushing force, leaving a smoldering black stain on the ground in his place.

"So..." Akira glanced to Shiho, leaving the last of their guards to Morgana and Yusuke. "You and Skull huh? You two seem pretty close these days."

"E-eh?" Shiho blinked behind the fabric of her blindfold, nearly dropping her naginata in surprise. "Is this... really the best time to talk about this?"

"I take my best friend duties very seriously. Besides," he gestured to Yusuke and Morgana. The bluenette deftly dodged under a swing from the golden giant, slashing the back of one of his ankles out with a clean swipe of his katana, "They have it covered."

Shiho hesitated. "Well... maybe a little. I mean um... I dunno how to describe it but... I really do admire him. And he is really cool and dependable. But relationships, after all I went through..."

"I can't even imagine," Akira remarked. He paused for a moment, summoning Camazotz once more. The tremendous bat lanced forward, driving the talons of his feet into the Shadow's chest. It exploded into a pool of black goo, oozing along the tiles. "But look... If there's any guy you could trust to treat you well, it's Ry- Skull. He's kinda boneheaded, but dependable. So... maybe you should consider asking him out?"

The dark haired girl pondered this. She had been considering this for a little while now. Maybe she should go for it? After all, she knew Ryuji wasn't half as much of a thug as he liked to let on he was. Yes, definitely something to try.

Meanwhile, at the far end of the lobby, things were taking a slight turn. Ann and Ryuji had their attention focused on one oni, quickly dodging the powerful swings of his blade as each motion carved through a section of the floor.

Captain Kidd turned sharply, the stern of his ship driving into the demon and smashing him clean through the brick wall. He and Ann quickly jumped through after him, explosive flashes of fire lighting up the area around the crater as Ann put Carmen's firepower to good use.

The second oni swerved his body to the side, avoiding a swipe from Breakthru's fist. His beefy red leg swept upward, smashing into the side of Sergio's Stand with enough force to knock the blond clean off his feet. He gagged in pain, his body smashing through two benches before he collapsed onto one of the broken remnants. He grunted, trying to get back to his feet. They were all marginally tougher in the Metaverse, but that oni hit like a freight train.

He raised his free hand up, and on a reflex Shizuka summoned Houdini in front of her. "Look out!" Makoto cried, only to scream as the oni's giant knuckles swung down. Even with Houdini in front of her, the blow still knocked her into the floor, the ground splitting beneath her with a resounding crack. Shizuka grunted, straining beneath the weight. Even when the beast raised his fist again it was only a brief respite before it swung down again, making Shizuka howl as pain racked her from end to end.

"Stop!" Makoto shouted, extending a hand out. "Don't... Don't you dare hurt her!"
The oni paused briefly. His glare was intense, scrutinizing every last detail of Makoto. He snorted loudly, steam spraying from his nostrils. "You not like them. What a useless girl like you gonna do? Stand and watch! Ha!"

Useless. The one word she never wanted to hear. And to make it worse, he was right. Her only friend was about to get mulched, and what could she even do about it? She asked this to herself, screamed into her own mind... and got a response.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl for Makoto as the oni raised his fist again, a piercing pain filling her head. Like a needle in her brain.

"Have you tired of people looking down on you? Treating you like a pawn, or a nuisance? Living a life dictated to you by everyone else... no, that's no way to live." The voice in her head was prim and feminine, but carried a strength and power that rivaled even Sae. "No... to be free, you must tread the path of strife. If you don't, your friend will surely die. Are you ready to be alone again?"

"No," Makoto breathed, her voice scarcely more than a whisper. "Come to me..." A wave of fire wrapped around Makoto's eyes, taking the form of a heavy iron visor. "Johanna!"

The oni paused for a brief moment, watching a fiery aura light up Makoto's body. "I said... get the fuck off her!" Makoto lunged forward, her right fist striking the oni in the face with such violence that a spray of black matter burst out of his mouth. He was sent sailing away, while Shizuka looked on in wide eyed shock.

Blood was dripping from Makoto's knuckles, and the rational part of her brain was fairly certain she just seriously hurt her hand. But for once, the rational part of her brain was far from the front of Makoto's consciousness.

The oni was grunting, starting to rise as Sergio stood up from his spot on the ground. Makoto gripped her visor, her teeth clenched. Even as she tore the visor from her face, blood exploding out from around her eyes, she didn't make a sound.

An explosion of fire lit up the lobby, drawing the attention of the thieves as Makoto's blossoming power rattled the bank. "Well I'll be..." Akira murmured. "Sting was right."

As the light died down, the Arditi got a glimpse of their newest member. The prim and proper student council president was gone, replaced with a girl dressed in black biker leather, spikes protruding from her shoulderpads. A black scarf was affixed around her neck, fluttering in an unseen breeze. Most shockingly of all was the form her Persona had taken: A gleaming white motorbike that had a sculpture of a human face at the front. The wheels were glowing with neon green fire, burning into the ruined floor beneath her.

Makoto glanced down at Shizuka, smiling gently. "You okay?" she asked, holding a hand out.

Shizuka shakily reached up, eyes unblinking, and gently took Makoto's hand. She was glad her mask hid the fact that her cheeks had gone tomato red. "Y-yeah," she squeaked, letting Makoto pull her to her feet.

"Alright then..." Makoto settled her harsh glare on the rising oni, giving her Persona a hard rev with her other hand. "LET'S DO THIS SHIT!"
Johanna crossed the lobby like a streak of light, with Makoto firmly pulling on the handlebars until she was travelling on the back wheel. The front smashed into the face of the rising oni, his howls drowned out as Makoto snarled and revved her bike. The glowing green tire erupted with more streams of green fire, the spinning wheel shredding through the beast’s skull and sending chunks of dark goo splattering off him as his head was crushed apart.

"HOLY SHIT!" Shizuka exclaimed. She wouldn't have thought Makoto had that much anger to spare, but damn if the girl wasn't itching to put it to good use.

Ann and Ryuji emerged from the hole they had blown through the wall, just catching the tail end of Makoto making mince meat out of a Shadow. "I am so never pissing her off..." Ann remarked to herself.

Once the Shadow had faded, Makoto dispelled Johanna and stood firmly, squaring her shoulders. "I really needed that." She reached her hands up and examined them, particularly the heavy steel knuckledusters she was now wearing. She cast a brief glance down to her hip, making a note of the revolver holstered neatly in place. "So that's what a Persona is... I couldn't even see yours at all until I got mine."

"Hers is a motorbike? That's... so freaking cool!" Ryuji said. "Damnit... that's so much better than a pirate ship."

Shizuka approached her, and for a moment she looked like she wanted to ask Makoto for an autograph. She had never been so enamoured, or so terrified, in all her life. "Prez that was... that was so fucking awesome! You just shredded that dude! And you clocked him right across the room! So! Goddamn! Cool!"

"You think I'm cool?" Makoto asked, smiling brightly.

Echoing footsteps resounded through the tarnished lobby, causing Akira to look up to a balcony overlooking them. More oni were moving in from above. He cast a glance toward Makoto. "Can you still fight?" he asked Makoto.

The brunette nodded. She was still burning from the high of her transformation, and could likely keep going for a little while before needing to return. If they had a safe room, it would make it easier to travel around through the app. Akira supposed finding one safe room and then leaving would be their objective for this visit.

The Meta Nav had a bookmark function that saved locations safe for travel. Usually this mainly involved bookmarking the entryway of a Palace, or the static safe zones in the depths of Mementos, but it was also handy for letting the Arditi travel between safe rooms inside of Palaces. Once they had one here, they could use the app to speedily teleport back to the entryway.

"Mona," he said "Is there a safe room nearby?"

While the others moved to gather near the leader, keeping a sharp eye on the beasts above them, Morgana sniffed around. He closed his eyes in concentration until he got a whiff of something that didn't blend into the cognitive world around them.
"It's faint, but... I think there might be something below us."

The ground shook as two hulking oni jumped down, their heavy feet smashing the tiles on impact. Akira nodded, motioning for the others to follow as he ran through the nearest doorway in the lobby. To their left was a small office, up ahead was the start of a staircase, and then to the right there were a pair of heavy steel doors for an elevator.

"Below us... alright everyone, follow me." Akira touched his mask, swapping Camazotz for Arsene. The crimson-clad specter shot across the room and made for the double doors, his sharp claws prying into the gap between the steel. He put his impressive strength to use, growling as he forced the doorway open to reveal the darkness of the shaft.

"Ah I see," Sergio remarked. "If this is a bank, then the 'treasure' you spoke of must be in a vault. And a vault would be down below."

The two oni were stampeding toward the Arditi, kicking up dust with each heavy footstep. In an instant Makoto summoned Johanna beneath her, her left hand pressing into her iron mask. She gave the engine a rev and sent twin waves of nuclear fire exploding from her tires, the wave nailing the incoming targets and sweeping them off their feet. The two red-skinned giants hit the ground hard, both growling in pain.

"The elevator likely needs some kind of key to use, and there's too much heat on us to go looking. So just follow my lead." Akira made a dash for the open elevator and jumped in, his gloved hands catching the steel cable. He started sliding down swiftly, Arsene's glowing form behind him acting as a safety net of sorts.

"I feel we should ask for job insurance," Yusuke murmured. One by one they hopped into the elevator shaft, sliding down the cables and into darkness. Their glowing auras provided some illumination but, for the most part, they were flying blind.

Every once in a while, as they went down, Morgana would note that the scent he picked up on was drawing closer. Always just a little bit further below them.

Eventually they landed atop the roof of an elevator, and Akira was quick to pry the hatch open with a hard pull. He was quick to slide through and used Arsene's might to force the elevator doors apart. It opened out into a large room, with murky green walls and a slightly faded carpet. His fellow thieves followed after him, striding along the musty floor.

"Is it on this floor?" he asked. Morgana sniffed the air for a few more seconds and then nodded in confirmation.

"Mona is pretty impressive," Makoto remarked. "Sharp senses, and a shapeshifter to boot... I just have no idea what he actually is."

"Yeah, you and me both senpai," said Ryuji, earning an irritated grunt from the feline.

Akira nodded. "He's come in handy for us. Though we usually don't tell him as much. He doesn't need a bigger head after all." The dark haired boy made his way a few steps deeper into the large room, staring down the corridor ahead. "Alright, we're going to try and find a safe room. After we do that we'll head home for today."
"Wait, we're leaving already?" Makoto asked. "But we only just..." She gasped, swaying on her feet. The adrenaline from earlier was fast fading, and she very nearly lost her footing until Shizuka's shorter frame caught her under her right arm.

"Don't overdo it," Shizuka said. "I mean that stuff you did was rad and all, but... awakening your Persona drains a lot out of you. We'll need to get you back home so you can rest," she explained. That and after getting smashed into the ground like a stake, she could do with catching a few Z's too.

Makoto sighed. "Well that's disappointing. I was kind of hoping to do more but... I'd only slow you guys down at this rate."

"Don't worry about it, you did great," Akira assured her. He looked dead ahead, examining the security cameras in the hallway that he was only now noticing. "Looks like this Palace is a little more secure than the others," he mused.

"Cameras? Heh, that's cute." Shizuka clenched her right fist and smirked as the entire group faded from visibility. "Let's get to hunting!"

The apartment Mitsuru had rented for her was nothing too fancy, as Naoto had insisted, and the bluenette had made sure that everything was immaculately tidy. She had a small living area, a modest kitchen, a personal bathroom, a cozy bedroom, and an extra room that she was using as her office. It was large enough for her desk, and positioned as far as possible from her unusually loud neighbours.

In the time since she arrived in Tokyo, it hadn't taken long for her to get a list of suspicious Shujin students that stuck out from their peers. She had interviewed a few students, flashing a PI badge to a few students in their prison-patterned uniforms (As far as they were concerned, a PI was the same thing as a cop) and they had been more than happy to answer her questions.

Those interviews, and a little cautious observation from afar, had given her a good deal to work with. She was quite proud of herself for getting so much done in a week of near-constant work. By now she had compiled a few neat little files on her suspects, each manila folder carefully labelled and set equidistant from each other on her large desk.

Hanging her navy jacket on the door, and rolling up the sleeves of her white blouse, Naoto took a seat and brought the first folder up. She opened it out to reveal a few recently developed snapshots, and every note she had been able to create. "Akira Kurusu," she read aloud.

This one was apparently infamous at Shujin, a recent transfer who most every student seemed to fear. And yet, from what she could gather, he hadn't actually done anything since arriving here. But, worryingly, he had a criminal record. Assault. What was infuriating Naoto however was the fact that she couldn't get any information on the case, even her connections in the police couldn't get any traction. No information on who he attacked or why.

Regardless, a young man his age having a criminal record wasn't a good sign. Particularly if he was a Persona-user. From what she could gather, Kamoshida used a student he was abusing to leak Kurusu's criminal record to the students, tarnishing his reputation irreparably on the day he started. So that was his motivation for going after the gym teacher, if he was indeed involved.
Naoto reached into the folder and pulled out one of the pictures she had taken from a distance. It was of his profile, giving a glimpse of his dark curls and polished glasses. "Hm. He reminds me of senpai," she idly mused.

In observing her suspects, she was quite convinced that he was the leader. It was just a hunch, but watching their body language and how the others were quick to defer to him, it definitely gave the impression that he was in charge.

She closed the folder and opened up the second in line. "Ryuji Sakamoto... Well now." She smirked slightly. Already this guy reminded her of Kanji. The dyed hair, grumpy exterior, foul reputation... if he was like Kanji, then he definitely wasn't as bad as he liked to let on. Kamoshida had apparently injured him in the past, and destroyed the track team that Sakamoto had been a part of. That was his motivation, definitely.

From what she had seen from afar, he seemed to be Kurusu's 'right hand.' Or his best friend, whichever term one would prefer to use.

After she closed the folder, a pair of spectral black hands reflexively moved from the front of her body, grabbing the third folder. Her pixie sized Persona, dressed in formal crimson military coat and navy riding trousers, raised the folder quickly to Naoto's hands. "Thank you, Yamato Sumeragi," she curtly said. The pointed head of her Persona nodded in return.

Ann Takamaki was clearly a distinct girl. Having the look of a blonde westerner would make any young woman stand out in Tokyo, and it was her looks that made her a target for Kamoshida's advances. It was this, in conjunction with the attempted suicide of a close friend on Shujin's volleyball team, that got her involved. Naoto was convinced of that much. Out of all the possible Phantom Thieves she had been observing, she had the most deeply personal motive to get involved in the first case.

When Naoto pondered the motivations of her suspects, there was one outlier that didn't really fit the mold. One 'Shizuka Joestar', an American transfer student. She was apparently the adopted daughter of a New York property mogul and had come to Japan after the death of her parents. And she arrived at Shujin not too long after Kurusu did.

But why did she get involved? That was what Naoto was racking her brain over. She definitely hung around with the others on her list, but she had no personal motive to get involved with Kamoshida or Madarame. It might have simply been a matter of personal morality, or just complete chance that she wound up in some Persona-based business. Whatever the case she was a mysterious young girl.

She'd need to speak to some of them directly at some point to learn what they were like. It was highly likely they were just good kids getting in over their heads, but she couldn't entirely turn her focus away from Kurusu's criminal record. What if he really was some kind of violent criminal? Some kind of violent sociopath manipulating the others in his group?

Naoto's phone buzzed powerfully in her pocket, snapping her from her thoughts. Naoto answered quickly. "Hello?"

"Yo." Kanji's gruff voice made her breath a small sigh of relief. Hearing him usually did put her in a better mood. "Just checking in. How's everything on your end? Those punks giving you any trouble?"
"I'm fine Kanji, there's no trouble. How are things with Rise and Senpai?" Of course, Yu didn't entirely like still being referred to as 'senpai', but with how much she and Kanji owed him they couldn't help slipping into it on occasion.

Kanji groaned from his end of the line. "Senpai's cool and all, I dunno how he handles a girl as stubborn as Rise... I keep goddamn tellin' her that Calla Lilies are ideal for wedding flowers, but she's obsessed with Tulips."

Naoto snickered a little to herself. She had had a feeling that planning Rise's wedding was going to cause a little trouble, and they were only at an early stage too. But it would all be worth it in the end. "Well, I'd come to help but Mitsuru did entrust this rather important job to me."

"Yeah, an' you wasted no time in running off to it." The two shared a brief laugh. "Well look, I'm never far if you need a hand. Those thief punks give you any grief, and I'll help you wreck face."

"Thank you Kanji." She smiled kindly, a modest pink tinge on her pale cheeks. Hopefully it wouldn't come to that.

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It fortunately hadn't taken long to find a safe room in the Palace, and once they had that they were able to make a speedy escape. Time would tell if the app could handle the distance of the bank and take them back there, or if they would be launching Mona for each trip to the Palace. Sergio could only freeze the momentum of non-living objects, leaving it a bit of a grey area if he could stop the Monamobile mid-drop.

No doubt they'd find out in the middle of a hectic escape.

They returned to the hideout, gathering around the modest table they had set up inside. Makoto was nursing her right hand, grimacing at the occasional wave of pain rolling up her arm. By now her knuckles had darkened a little and her whole hand ached. "In retrospect, I probably should have seen this happening."

"It was still seriously awesome though..." Ryuji remarked. "For real, none of us have ever done shit like that before transforming."

"I can't believe it actually worked," Ann asked, glancing to Shizuka.

"Pshaw, of course it did. My plans always work!" Shizuka boasted.

Yusuke raised his right brow slowly. "I wouldn't class 'let's bring Makoto into the Metaverse and see what happens' as a plan." The artist had a point, making Shizuka pout in annoyance.

"Well it worked..."

Makoto snickered a little. "I'm certainly glad you took a chance on me JoJo. Did you really go this far just because of our conversation the other day?"

The young Joestar awkwardly scratched the back of her neck. "Well... maybe a little. But I also figured you had a lot of repressed anger, and that's a great weapon to have. Plus you have a strong sense of justice too. You're the one that alerted us to this crime ring, after all," Shizuka explained.
"So... what're we gonna call her?" Ryuji asked, squirming a little in his seat. "For her code name, I mean."


Ann gave some thought to it, looking Makoto up and down. "Well she's got that motorbike, so... maybe Rider?" Ryuji snickered at something he found perverted in the proposed name, and immediately clamped a hand over his mouth when he realized all eyes were on him.

"It has to be something imposing, something that suggests power..." Akira rocked back a little in his seat, his eyes turned to the ceiling. 'Presidente' wouldn't cut it, but a professional title... "Well maybe something like Empress, or Queen or something like that..."

Makoto blinked to attention. "Queen sounds... rather nice actually." Powerful, dignified, definitely a little imposing... yes, she quite liked the sound of that.

"Queen it is! It's nice to have you aboard," Shiho said, smiling and giving their senpai a modest thumbs up. "We should probably call it for today. But someone needs to help Niijima-senpai home too. You look exhausted."

An awkward laugh left Makoto. "If we're going to be working together, and if this 'Arditi' group is supposed to be democratic... well you don't need to call me Niijima-senpai. Around here, I feel we're all equals."

"Except for yours truly... and Akira too, I suppose," Morgana haughtily remarked from his position on the table. Makoto swallowed hard. Seeing, and hearing, a modest black cat speaking fluent Japanese was going to take some getting used to.

"I'll help take her home. That okay with you Prez?" Shizuka asked. Smiling, Makoto nodded gently at Shizuka. It made her pulse quicken considerably.

'Wait... did I just get excited from my senpai noticing me? Christ, I'm an animu cliche...'

As the group parted ways for the evening, Ann followed along with Ryuji toward Shibuya station. She had something on her mind, just as Akira had earlier, and she wanted to tend to her own best friend duties.

"Mind if I talk to you about something?" Ann asked. Ryuji reflexively groaned, making the attractive blonde scowl briefly. "Oh come on! It's not always something bad!"

Ryuji shouldered his bag and stopped by the alleyway leading to Protein Lovers. He and Akira hit this gym relatively regularly, working to keep in good shape. It had become a familiar sight to him. "Alright, I'll bite. But if you try and rope me into moving a couch or some shit, I'm making for the station. And ain't no way you're outrunning me Ann."

Ann rolled her eyes. Goddamn he could be irritating. "It's nothing like that. I just wanted to talk about... well, you and Shiho," Ryuji immediately bristled, and instantly seemed to know where this conversation was heading. "You two seem pretty close these days."

"Well... we do have a lot in common. We're both athletes, we both love Pink Dark Boy, we both want Kamoshida to choke on his own barf and die... so yeah, I guess stuff like that would make us..."
get along," Ryuji said lamely. He knew what Ann was getting at, but wanted to try to shuffle away from the awkwardness.

He and Ann got along well enough these days. She was a good friend, but not in the same 'best friend' territory as Akira. That said he didn't know if he wanted to talk 'relationships' with her. On the other hand, Shiho was Ann's best friend, so he guessed this was partially Ann's business.

"You know what I mean. You have a crush on her, right?"

There was a brief silence between them. Finally, Ryuji nodded. "Right. But I mean I haven't acted on anything so you don't gotta get all concerned or tell me off or-"

"Whoa whoa, hold up," Ann said, raising her right hand. "I'm not gonna' tell you off, I'm..." She paused, hesitating visibly. She couldn't believe she was about to say any of what was on her mind. "Okay, you can't like... quote me on this. Ever. But you're a pretty good guy honestly. I mean sure you're loud, and annoying, and kinda dumb, an-"

"You're pretty effin' bad at compliments Takamaki!"

"Right, er... sorry. My point is, you might be good for Shiho. You're nice, dependable and I know you respect Shiho a lot after all she's been through. Relationships for her might be a bit awkward, but I think a healthy relationship would be good for her... so I know you'd treat her right, and with respect."

Ryuji glanced around himself, just to make sure Ann wasn't talking to someone positioned behind him. "Wait, for real? You actually thin-"

"Like I said, you can't ever quote me on any of that," Ann firmly stated. She folded her arms over her chest. "But... yes. I'd trust you with that. So maybe you should ask her out instead of... fumbling."

"I don't 'fumble'!" He was quite certain he didn't know what fumbling meant. "But... you might have a point. I should definitely try..." Really the idea of a girl liking him was a foreign concept with how he'd been treated since all the bullshit with Kamoshida.

But then again everything had been looking up since this Phantom Thief stuff started. So maybe this was all par for the course.

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It was late at night when Aya arrived at the port, a light drizzle coming down from on high and making the labyrinth of shipping containers slick with rainwater. When the nature of the killing became known to the SID, they had sent her along to investigate.

The police let her pass, leading on to an area ringed by tall stacks of shipping containers, all manner of colours walling her in. The techs had set up a large blue tarp to keep the incoming rain from impacting the scene too severely, and she was somewhat grateful for that.

The silver haired woman closed her umbrella and moved in under the tarp, taking a moment to survey the two bodies. It was a grizzly sight, but Aya had seen the aftermath of Stand battles since she was fifteen. This wasn't too huge a shock to her. One man had been killed quickly, his head sliced clean in half down the middle. A pool of blood and grey matter had spilled out, staining the...
ground around his well-dressed carcass.

The other hadn't been as fortunate for a quick death. His right arm had been sliced in two sections, the bloody chunks having skidded away from his body. His discarded hand was lightly clasping a pistol that had apparently fired off two shots, evident from the holes in the container behind her, before being disarmed. After that, something had cut into his throat so deeply that he'd very nearly been decapitated, his head now grotesquely lolling to one side.

Whatever killed these people, the police had no idea. No other bullets had been found, beyond those discharged by the dead man at her feet. Aya strode over slowly, crouching down to inspect the gunman. Big Iron was perched on her shoulder, clawed talons idly stroking over her pearl necklace. If the killer was still hanging around, well she had a whole ring of weapons at her disposal.

"Geez... what the hell got to you?" Not that Aya had much sympathy for these guys. According to the cops, they had been ID'd as criminals from some group in Yokohama. If that was the case, then she supposed she could tell what had happened. Either they were trying to muscle in on A's territory, or they made him an offer that he didn't particularly like.

If Mr. A was involved, then she knew Satoshi would want to drop the case. She knew the mortal terror that man inspired in him, what A had cost him in the past. Aya didn't wholly blame him for wanting to avoid all that, but it was still frustrating.

She could tell at a glance that some kind of bladed weaponry had been involved, but the cuts were too clean to have been conducted by normal human means. Aya inspected the scenery for a few moments until something stood out to her. A folded piece of paper, resting in the ground a few feet away from the gunman.

"Well now..." Aya approached it slowly and took a forceps from her interior coat pocket. "You leave a note behind this time? Usually you just use human blood for that. Not feel like putting in the effort today?"

As she raised the paper in the forceps, Aya could see that there was a distinct scar in the concrete beneath it. Red stains had soaked into the paper, making it flop slightly as she lifted it. With very careful effort, Aya unfolded the paper while keeping Big Iron primed on her left shoulder. To her surprise, there was nothing written on it.

Aya examined it silently, trying to puzzle its existence. A realization came to her, her free hand coming up to her mouth to stifle her gasp. She had heard of this guy, she now noticed. One of A's personal hitmen who would slice targets apart and, on rare occasions, leave only a single piece of paper behind. He had killed people throughout Japan for several years now, he had even killed some SID operatives in Singapore a few months previously. He was some kind of European who had carved a bloody path through the east, eventually settling into a role as A's attack dog.

"If this guy's back operating in Japan... oh shit..." She stood up quickly, reaching for her phone to call Satoshi. Between this Phantom Thief stuff, and now one of A's best hitmen being back in town, things were really heating up in Tokyo.
They were making good progress through Kaneshiro's bank, thanks in part to Shizuka's Stand making security a breeze to pass through. Not that it was all fun and games. Most every Shadow in his bank was some variety of beef shield, ungodly tough and strong. While the Arditi grew tougher from each encounter, it also meant they would tire out rather easily.

So there were no objections whenever Akira suggested an occasional day off. Morgana knew they were getting closer to the treasure, and soon enough they'd be able to send out a calling card. They had no deadline, for a change, and they didn't need to rush.

Haru had her own personal garden on the school roof, something she had told Shizuka only a few days previously. No doubt the school administration were fine with it due to the wealth of her family, but Haru still wanted to keep it a secret between them.

Well, she had no issues helping Haru with her flowers. The rich girl was pretty damn knowledeable when it came to plants, and it was oddly soothing to just work on the plants and listen to Haru's chatter.

Today, however, she noted that the strawberry blonde seemed a little distracted. Shizuka hummed, raising her watering can up to stop the flow into a pot of tulips. "Hey, Haru..." She said.

"Hm?" She seemed to snap to attention, having been staring into space while her fingers busied themselves planting a few flowers into a long bed. "Oh er... what is it Shizu-chan?"

"Well... are you okay? You seem a little 'off' today."

"I think something I ate for lunch disagreed with me. It's fine." She smiled brightly, waving off Shizuka's concerns. Shizuka knew that Haru was sweeter than Dr. Pepper, but couldn't lie all that well. After a brief pause, she once more looked Shizuka's way. "Hey... do you happen to know anything about arranged marriages?"

"Uh... not really? I know you get stuff like that in India and places like that, but it's not really done anymore. Why do you wanna know?" Shizuka asked.

Haru cocked her head slightly. "Oh, n-no reason. It was something that got brought up in class today, and I thought it was rather odd." She sighed dreamily, looking up at the clouds. "Maybe I'm just a fool, but I always thought marriage was supposed to be a sacred bond. Something to be done out of love and not out of potential gains," she wistfully said.

The sight made Shizuka sigh faintly. At this rate she was certain a flock of Disney animals were about to settle around her fellow heiress. "Yeah I uh... well I haven't thought much on stuff like marriage, but an arranged one would suck." Her own parents wouldn't have given such an idea the time of day. Partially because they cared deeply about her, and partially because they knew nobody would take them up on an offer like that. Shizuka was... distinct, after all.

"Right... it does sound rather horrible," Haru murmured. She checked her watch and moved to stand. "Well... I really should be off. My father is having a function this evening, and it will take
me some time to get ready."

"Mm. Well uh... text me if you need anything?" Shizuka asked. Something was clearly bugging Haru, and she clearly didn't want to say it aloud. But surely she wasn't getting married off, or anything like that...

Well, perhaps when Kaneshiro was dealt with, she would look into this later.

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Shizuka left soon after Haru did, not feeling comfortable being near Haru's plants without the Okumura heiress herself present. After all she didn't want to end up damaging them in some way with how much Haru cared for them. They could get back to gardening another day, and she had other things she wanted to handle.

On her way home she made a brief detour to the unassuming office of the SID. As usual there was nobody outside, and she felt safe as she made for the doorway. She gave the door buzzer a press and was left waiting for about two minutes before the locks clicked open. No doubt she was being observed from inside.

She entered slowly, walking into the main office to find only Satoshi present. He was positioned at the front of his desk, lazily smoking his Stand. "If you're looking for Sergio, he's not here. Has some piece he needs to finish for class," he explained.

"Actually, I was hoping to chat with you," Shizuka replied. The older man raised one slightly wrinkled brow and blew twin strands of pale smoke from his nostrils. "See, I have a favour to ask."

"Well, I'm all ears," he nonchalantly replied.

"Uh... you see..." This was a little embarrassing, and deeply personal to boot. But then again it wasn't like Satoshi was a close friend. Hell, if there was anything that could get a rise out of him, it definitely wouldn't come from her. "You have... investigators in Morioh, right?" she asked.

"There's an SID branch in that prefecture, right. They don't usually go to Morioh though. Your brother and his friends usually handle whatever trouble crops up there."

That made sense, Shizuka supposed. Online Stand forums would occasionally bring up the sleepy town of Morioh, and how it was a 'no go area' for anyone who wanted to cause trouble. The most recent thread coming from a Chinese Stand user who had tried to vandalize a few local landmarks and smack around some of the locals during his tour of Japan. For his trouble, a 'pompadour-haired punk' had broken both his legs and then reset them so that they were facing backward.

"I need someone to investigate something out that way. You prolly' know that I'm adopted, and ever since my parents died I've... uh, I've hoped to get some information on my birth parents. There's no information available on my folks, whoever they were, and I... w-well I want to know where I came from, who my folks were, and why they abandoned me."

Satoshi nodded along with all this, his expression unchanging. "Not knowing where you come from is no doubt pretty distressing. Can't even imagine how hard that must be." He rolled Instant Crush along the knuckles of his left hand, contemplating his connections in that prefecture. "Alright, I'll help you out," he eventually said.
Shizuka blinked behind her heart-shaped shades. "Wha... You mean just like that? No... favours or tasks you want me to do first?"

"You already helped us deal with a serial killer, so... yeah. Think nothing of it," he said. Satoshi closed his eyes and seemed to hesitate for a moment. "But... I should say that with a story like this, you might not like the truth."

She was anticipating this to not end well. Really there was no scenario she could think of where the end result was a happy one. Either her birth parents were dead, or they had simply discarded her like trash. But with her actual parents gone she supposed, on some level, she'd like to know if she still had parents in some form.

Would knowing make her happy? Deep down she doubted it. "How do you know?" she asked out of curiosity.

"Because... a long time ago, I too went out of my way to find out someone's identity. It cost me more than I care to mention," he began. Satoshi seemed to stare off into space for several long seconds and then drew himself back to reality. "My point is... sometimes it's better not to know."

Silence lingered between the two for several long moments. "You mean cause of Mr. A?" she eventually asked.

"Right," Satoshi sighed. "Well, you don't need to concern yourself with anything like that. Just focus on being an... ordinary high school student. Or as close as a Joestar can be," he said.

"And did you find out who he is?" Shizuka asked. With everything that had been going on, between Kaneshiro and the lingering mystery of some 'Black Mask' in the Metaverse, she had almost entirely forgotten about the existence of some Stand-using crime boss. If they had any information on the guy, he could make for a potential target for the Phantom Thieves.

"No," Satoshi replied. Shizuka doubted he was being entirely truthful to her, but he spoke with a calm and level tone that didn't waver in the slightest. "At any rate, I'll call in some favours, maybe get someone looking into your case. Might take a long time though. The trail's been cold for some time, after all."

Shizuka nodded "I don't mind waiting for answers, as long as they're being looked for," she replied.

"I'll tell you this much kid, I like you. You seem like you've got a good head on your shoulders, and a big heart. You remind me a little of someone I used to know," Satoshi said. "So yeah, I'll look into this for you. But I really can't make any guarantees."

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6/30

They were close to the finish line, Akira was certain of that. Their journey through the bank had brought them underground, to a series of vaults that they were going through one by one to the center of the underground chamber. And there, Morgana was convinced, they would find the treasure.

All they had to do now was handle the calling card. Shizuka would be dealing with that, thanks to her invisibility. Getting near his club would be too risky for any of the others, particularly given
that his group loved preying on high school students.

The bell above Leblanc's front door jingled noisily as Akira entered. He took a moment to survey the place and found that, as was often the case, the cafe was mostly empty. Just Sojiro and the well dressed brunette he had met the day he went to pawn Kamoshida's medal. "Hey," Sojiro greeted, only barely looking up from his crossword.

"Ah, we meet again," the older woman said, smiling faintly at him. Even as she sipped the jet black house blend, she seemed tired. "The part-time barista. You're arriving to work rather late."

He shrugged faintly. "Kurusu Akira. Nice to meet you."

"Niijima Sae. Likewise." Akira kept an impassive expression on his face, tensing ever so slightly. Now that he stopped to really look at her, he could see the resemblance. The hair colour, cheekbones, the eyes... yeah, she looked a good deal like Makoto.

"I take it you're a regular?" Akira asked. Sojiro paused to regard the two briefly. As Sae didn't seem to mind chatting with the kid, he didn't bother intervening. It was strange though, usually Akira didn't bother chatting with any customers other than Doctor Takemi.

"I come by from time to time. With work being how it is, I don't get to stop by here as often," Sae admitted. She sighed and took a long sip of coffee, savoring the taste. "Paperwork's been piling up. I'm only out tonight because my boss told me to get some rest." And she was here, rather than at home, because she couldn't bring herself to look at Makoto after the last 'chat' they had.

That shame was going to linger with her for some time.

"Sounds like you have a pretty hectic job," Akira remarked. "Well, Leblanc is always available. Great coffee and curry for a reasonable price," he added.

Sae smirked slightly. "Is that the sales pitch your boss taught you?" she asked, a rare touch of levity entering her tone. "Well, you have a point. This is probably the best coffee in Tokyo, even if it is a little out of my way... I'm a prosecutor by trade."

Akira nodded and made his way over to the brewing stands. "Sounds like an interesting job. Can I top you up?" Akira offered.

"No, that's quite alright. I suppose I should be going before closing time. Little over an hour left now," Sae remarked. She finished off the last of her coffee and once more examined Akira with her analytic gaze. "Are you perhaps interested in my job?"

"Maybe a little. Couldn't hurt to learn a few new things." Well, he wasn't all that interested. He was just making polite small talk more so than anything else.

The bell above the door rang again as another customer entered, a rather tall man dressed in a neatly pressed blue suit. He was exceptionally built, visible even through his suit. Like he subsisted on protein shakes instead of water. "Sorry, am I too late? I was hoping to grab some coffee to go."

"Not a problem," Sojiro replied. He gestured for Akira to get to work as he was already at the stand "What'll you have?"

While the newcomer relayed his order to Sojiro, Sae grabbed her handbag and moved to stand
from her stool. "Well, I should be going. But if I find the time I might teach you a thing or two. In exchange for some good coffee."

"I'd like that," Akira replied, a modest hint of a smile on his face. Once she had left he finished preparing the order for the newcomer. 'Judgement. Suits her alright.'

It was rare for Leblanc to get a 'to-go' order but fortunately they had more than a few disposable cups on hand. Akira handed the cup to their silver haired customer who, in turn, gave payment to Sojiro. Akira turned and made his way back toward the attic staircase, pausing only briefly when Morgana poked himself from Akira's bag and climbed up onto his right shoulder.

"First a detective and now a prosecutor? You live dangerously," the feline remarked. Akira shrugged faintly, seeming to have no issues.

"Geez Akira, take your cat upstairs and feed him. All that meowing will wake the dead," Sojiro remarked.

Once the dark haired boy had gone upstairs, their new customer took a sip of his dark roast and casually exited the cafe. Akihiko had been a little uncertain of getting involved when Naoto asked him to check this place out, but sure enough there was something unnatural about that boy.

He had definitely heard that cat talk, and since the owner of the shop hadn't he was willing to bet it was something only a Persona user could hear. Or something like that. Whatever the case, that 'Kurusu Akira' wasn't any normal kind of high school student.

Akihiko knew he'd have to investigate further. This wouldn't be a one-time trip to Leblanc.
Kaneshiro draped his broad arms over the back of the couch, his hawklike gaze affixed to the heavy steel briefcase resting on the glass table in front of him. The earnings over the past fortnight. Specifically it was the money that was going directly to Mr. A, to be used however he saw fit.

He was on target, having met the quota the mysterious crime boss had set for him. Even so, Kaneshiro felt nervous. Most people did when it came to dealing with Mr. A, but what was the alternative?

When the guy had first made the scene in the early 90s, it had quickly become clear that it was either capitulate to his demands, or die in agony. A lot of mobsters that had been operating in crime for many years beforehand suddenly vanished or washed up on some beach in pieces. His loudest critics and opponents were left arranged like gory modern art installations.

Eventually, the defiance stopped. Every criminal in Tokyo settled into the simple fact that Mr. A was their overlord, and knew better than to ever mention his name in public or the police. Trying to find out his identity was also a big no-no, and it never ended well for those who tried it.

There was one story Kaneshiro recalled, of one guy who had supposedly succeeded. A cop who pursued him relentlessly, and was left broken for his efforts. Not physically, but emotionally. Supposedly, Mr. A cut him deep and left him to wallow in that pain for the rest of his life, unconcerned that this cop knew his name. Because the guy would be too shattered to ever do anything with the knowledge, and that seemed to amuse Mr. A immensely.

Not that Kaneshiro put much stock into that tale. He'd heard enough stories to know how the guy felt about 'loose ends.'

For now though he focused on himself. He had met Mr. A's demands, and would likely get some kind of reward. Or, at the very least, the reward would be keeping his skin attached to his body. Yes, things were really looking up.

"BAZU!"

There was a clatter from outside his private room, his guards and girls turning to the door as it was abruptly flung open. The sharply-dressed guard he had posted outside the door came flying through, his back smacking into the ground as he flopped down unconscious. Kaneshiro and the other guards drew their guns, quickly moving to stand.

"The fuck..." the man nearest the door murmured.

Another approached the unconscious guard, looking him over. "S-sir, there's some kinda note pinned to his shirt."

Grunting, Kaneshiro approached and then removed the pin keeping the red card pinned to the guard's shirt. He lifted the card and inspected it with great scrutiny, reading it to himself. "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 Arditi, the Phantom Thieves of Hearts."

Kaneshiro growled and dropped the card, making for the open door. "Alright, who's the comedian? Who thinks they can get away with messing with m-" He came to a sudden halt just outside the door.

A message had been left in the wall opposite, as if sections of the wallpaper had been cut away with the point of a knife.

'YOU'LL NEVER SEE IT COMING.'

Kaneshiro swallowed hard, filled with a mortal dread he hadn't known for some years now. "Tear that wallpaper down. I don't want to see that crap!"

Several minutes later, and several blocks away, Shizuka made herself visible and was trying her hardest not to bust a gut laughing. Houdini flicked a few strands of shredded wallpaper from her fingertips, discarding them.

She was quite pleased with the message. An extra touch of character, for their biggest target to date.

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♫

The elevator came to a stop at the lower layer of Kaneshiro's bank, the doors sliding open to reveal rows upon rows of heavy steel vaults. They had parted to make a clear path toward another elevator at the center of the vault, leading lower still to the core where the treasure was kept. Money littered the floor and floated aimlessly through the air. As with the notes outside, they turned to ash whenever anyone tried to take them.

"So here we are," Akira remarked, leading on from the elevator. The air was thicker, noticeably tense. Everything about the Palace just felt agitated, reflecting the fear that the calling card had put in Kaneshiro's heart. "We have no idea what Kaneshiro's Shadow is capable of, but it's possible he'll be even stronger than Madarame. Everyone just keep close and be prepared for anything."

It had been a major pain to get through this vault, having to make use of a cipher Kaneshiro's Shadow had designed in order to unlock each vault in turn. A cipher that involved certain numbers corresponding to different letters, requiring a laborious hunt to track down his journal to get the full cipher.

Having gone through all that, there was a mutual desire to kick his Shadow around a bit.

"So how does this tend to go?" Sergio asked, following the others as they made a beeline for the elevator at the heart of the chamber. "They become stronger when their treasure is about to be taken?"

"Seems like," Morgana replied. For as short as he was, he could move his stubby legs at quite a rate to keep pace. "When the Palace ruler's desires are at risk they become defensive, and all their thoughts become directed to preserving their treasure. This empowers them, and they use the other Shadows in the area to get even more strength."
"They can be pretty tough but... well there's a lot of us now, so it shouldn't be a big deal," Shiho said. She smiled faintly. "I'm just looking forward to being done with this guy. We'll be helping a whole lot of people by taking him down."

"Yeah, no doubt," Ryuji said. "Plus it'll totally show that effin' Akechi who the real good guys are. Let's see him do shit like this!"

Something about the statement stood out in Shizuka's mind. She thought back, briefly, to their first meeting with the high school detective and the odd vibe he gave off. For now she shelved those thoughts, not wanting to be distracted from the task at hand.

It was a bit of a tight fit in the second elevator, but they endured for the sake of the mission. It didn't take long to reach the bottom floor of the bank, the doors sliding out to reveal a wide open chamber, the back wall dominated by a tremendous steel vault. No doubt it was the last barrier separating them from the treasure. And there, standing before it, was Kaneshiro's Shadow.

"I knew you'd be coming. No-good thieves scurrying around in my bank, trying to steal my hard-earned money. Well it's not going down like that, not at all!" Kaneshiro growled, glaring intensely at the gathered group.

"Why's he purple?" Shizuka murmured to Morgana.

"How the heck should I know?" the cat hissed in return.

"I mean it's like... okay the other Shadows were weird looking too, but they weren't like... technicolour or anything. Wait, does this mean Kaneshiro is purple in the real world too?"

"I doubt that," Shiho flatly said.

Ignoring the whispered chatter, Makoto took a step forward. "Hard earned money? What's hard-earned about stealing from high school kids that can't fight back?!"

"I had to fight my way out of the gutter! Worked tooth and nail to claw my way up the totem pole to where I am now. What's wrong with enjoying that? So what if some dumb kids get hurt? It's their own fault for being stupid enough to get conned in the first place."

"Ah." Sergio smiled faintly. "Might makes right. Is that your philosophy? The weak should fear the strong? A tad barbaric, as far as moral codes go. But this is your world, so let's play by those rules. If you lose, then you didn't deserve the money you 'earned.'"

Kaneshiro raised his left hand and clenched it tight, the veins pulsating grotesquely under the skin. A faint crimson aura was lingering around him, rippling off the white fabric of his suit. "I'm not going to lose! If I fall, then I'm as good as dead! Like any other idiot who fails him!"

The Arditi shared uncertain glances. "Fails who?" Ann asked. As far as they knew, Kaneshiro was the head of this extortion racket. But was there someone higher than even him?

"It's nothing you brats need to concern yourselves with... Not when you're all about to die here!" The aura around his body expanded outward in an explosive flash, the floor rattling beneath him. Kaneshiro doubled over, hissing and growling through clenched teeth. There was the sound of bones snapping and reshaping themselves, of muscles undulating under his suit.
Kaneshiro's head snapped up, his eyes briefly being smeared in black tar that parted to reveal that they had morphed into a pair of scarlet compound eyes. Long fly wings sprouted from his back, flapping noisily and briefly lifting his bulk off the ground. "Wassup yo?! Come get some!" he snarled.

"What." Shizuka quickly scratched inside her right ear, just to make sure her hearing wasn't fucked.

"Ye boi! Let's do this shit!" No she was hearing things just fine. Though that just seemed to make this situation worse as far as she was concerned. Still, she was pleased that Kaneshiro's transformation had been tame in a physical sense at least.

Kaneshiro lunged forward, making a beeline for Makoto, with her being at the front of the group. She jumped back, narrowly avoiding the downward swing of Kaneshiro's fist. His knuckles drove clean into the floor, fissures being split into the ground around the area of impact. Ryuji jumped forward and swung his club down, only for the metal to strike against Kaneshiro's left forearm as he raised it high.

A loud cracking noise came from above them, followed by sections of the ceiling exploding, debris falling from on high. The group scattered to avoid the falling rocks, a trio of hulking oni soon crashing down through the holes they had previously formed.

"Great..." Akira muttered. He had hoped they could just deal with Kaneshiro quickly, but fate had other plans. "Mona, Nemesis, Panther, Diabolik! I need you guys to keep those meatheads busy! Nemesis," he pointed briefly to their ninja as she quickly rose up "Give us a speed boost!"

Shiho pressed her left hand to her blindfold, Aradia's glow illuminating her briefly as she cast a spell, boosting the speed of her fellow thieves with green flashes lighting each one up in turn. The effect would last for only a few minutes before needing to be reapplied, but hopefully they would make good use of it.

Sergio and Ann jumped back swiftly, narrowly avoiding a crushing strike from one nearby oni. As Sergio landed, coming to a stop by a mound of rubble, an idea popped into his head. "You know Panther," he casually remarked "For as destructive as it is, lava is little more than molten, superheated rock. It's amazing what a little heat can do, yes?" Breakthru appeared at his side, both weighty fists pressing into the rubble.

"Ooooh, I get it." Ann grinned at the sudden realization. Carmen appeared in front of her in a flickering wave of fire, looking as dispassionate as always. The ghostly flamenco dancer held her cigar out, the end suddenly glowing white hot as it produced a halo of glowing energy the size of a beach ball. The oni was charging in rapidly, raising his blade overhead.

The slew of debris was launched forward, propelled by Breakthru's power and passing through the burning ring of fire. The intense heat turned it into glowing orange rock on the way through, a molten cloud hurtling straight toward the oncoming oni. The full salvo hit him, making the beast shriek and stumble mid-dash, the burning material latching onto him.

Kaneshiro had taken to the sky, flying high while Akira summoned Camazotz to his side. The bat-creature flew up after him at a frightful pace, but Kaneshiro was able to duck and dodge through the air, deftly avoiding the swipes of Camazotz' claws. "Faster than he looks... even Camazotz can't catch him."
Kaneshiro dodged another swipe and responded with one of his own, his large hard fist clocking the bat across the face. Akira recoiled, grimacing from the wave of pain rolling across his face. Camazotz shot backward, only barely avoiding another strike. "So we just need to slow him down, I guess," Shizuka remarked.

She quickly drew her rifle and took aim, popping the lever twice as twin gunshots echoed through the vaults. Even the bullets weren't fast enough, the overgrown fly narrowly avoiding the shots and cackling wildly. "Keep that piece to yourself muthafucka! Y'all bitches ain't ever gonna take this P-I-M-P down!"

"Stop talking like that!"

He threw his hands forward, a malignant aura glowing around him before a bullet of shrieking black and red light flew from his palms. With her speed enhanced, Shizuka was able to quickly jump backward. But the shockwave of the explosion still smacked into her, leaving her tumbling through the air and landing flat on her back. Kaneshiro growled and fired off another shot, the energy bullet quickly drawing in until a shadow fell over Shizuka.

The blast exploded against Goemon's back, Yusuke hissing and wobbling slightly on his feet from the jolt rocking him. "Goodness..." he muttered. "He may not look as monstrous as Madarame did, but his Shadow is still quite potent."

Shizuka hopped to her feet quickly. "Thanks Fox," she quickly said. She pondered their options, watching Kaneshiro flap around, avoiding nuclear bursts being fired from Johanna's tires. "Say Fox," she remarked. "I'm thinking if anyone can slow that blob down, it's you."

Meanwhile, the others were still contending with the oni guards. Morgana had summoned Zorro in front of him, the towering swordsman unleashing a flurry of gale-speed slashes the drove against the incoming demon. Each impact cracked the floor between them, but the oni was still coming at him.

Aradia appeared suddenly behind the oni, several blades of solid light shooting from her hands and embedding themselves in the creature's back. Sprays of black goo erupted from his fresh wounds, the oni howling in pain and swinging his right arm back. In his blind swing he managed to smack Aradia, making Shiho hiss and recoil from the pain throbbing in her ribs. They were winning, but it was going to be a painful win.

"Keep running asshole!" Makoto barked. "You're just gonna make it worse for yourself when we catch you!" She hadn't expected Kaneshiro to be half as fast, and the frustration was mounting. Johanna's eyes opened wide, briefly glowing gold as she called upon another ability. A pocket of air around Kaneshiro caught fire, exploding violently behind him and sending him spiraling around, smoke billowing behind him.

"Fox! Skull! Go for it!" Shizuka called.

Yusuke pressed his palm to his mask, calling Goemon to his side. The sharply dressed Persona shot his palms up, an ethereal white glow washing over him before a continuous gale of arctic wind blew from his cupped palms. The icy wind caught Kaneshiro in the air, enveloping him in the sharp chill as icicles grew around his limbs and wings. They were frozen mid-flap, while Kaneshiro sharply glanced from side to side.

"What... what the hell!?!" Kaneshiro barked, feeling gravity finally catch up with him, slowly
There was a boom from overhead as Captain Kidd came racing toward Kaneshiro, his cannon arm glowing red hot and crackling with arcs of golden lighting. "Home run!" Ryuji shouted, the cast iron smashing Kaneshiro across the face with a deafening boom. The well-dressed Shadow shot downward and hit the floor, great fissures being split around him and sending sprays of dust exploding upwards.

The shockwave caused from Kaneshiro's fall was enough to knock one oni off balance, leaving him wide open as Sergio fired a length of debris toward him. The thick section of roof smashed into his beefy crimson calves, knocking him off balance and smashing face first into the dust-caked floor.

Said oni was left wide open as Carmen loomed over him, a scornful expression on her face as she held her right hand out. A jet of fire erupted from her palm, the explosive wave driving into the downed demon and blasting him apart, leaving only a shadow burned into the ground in his place.

Kaneshiro rose to his feet, snorting and spitting loudly onto the cracked floor. He inspected himself briefly, specifically focusing on the tears that had been made in his expensive suit. "Ah heeeell naw! You ho's ain't gonna get away with damaging my shi-

A wet crunching sound echoed through the vault, splatters of green goo erupting from Kaneshiro's back. "Wh-what..." He looked over his shoulder, seeing that his see-through wings had been crunched flat, broken chunks falling away. Houdini materialized behind him, clutching a large mound of debris smeared in the same bug goo as Kaneshiro's back. "You little bitch!"

Houdini swung the lump of debris down with as much force as possible, the heavy chunk shattering against the top of Kaneshiro's head and leaving him stumbling backward, dazed. In his stunned state he was left wide open, Goemon taking the initiative and lunging forward. His large pipe cracked Kaneshiro across the face, knocking him off his feet and sending him sailing across the air toward the heavy steel vault.

One of the remaining oni had managed to drive Morgana into the ground with a hard punch, the cartoonish feline left groaning and struggling to rise from the crater that had been formed with his diminutive body. He fought to rise up, as the injured oni raised his blade high for a finishing blow. Morgana braced as best he could with his head swimming, only to realize that the killing strike never came. Morgana looked up, opening his eyes wide to see a dagger of light that had punched a hole through the oni's face from behind. He wobbled, and then collapsed into a mound of tar.

Shiho approached the downed feline, smiling and holding a hand out for Morgana to take.

"Guess my speed boost didn't last as long as I wanted."

Morgana grinned, gripping her hand with both paws as he moved to stand. "Good thing I've got nine lives to spare."

Fatigue was settling in for Kaneshiro, and it was an uphill battle for the Shadow to get back up when he came to a halt. His compound eyes swivelled up, getting a good look at Captain Kidd and Goemon as the two burly Personas made a speedy beeline for him. Kaneshiro snarled and raised his hands up, both palms glowing before a wave of black and red energy exploded outward. The wave smashed into the incoming figures and blasted them away, making Yusuke and Ryuji grunt in unison, nearly being brought to their knees from an intense wave of pain.
Kaneshiro turned, seeing Camazotz diving toward him. He shot another bullet of energy from his hands, only for the blast to flicker against Camazotz' wings, being absorbed into the leathery material. Camazotz head crashed into Kaneshiro's own, causing his body to noisily smash against the heavy steel of the vault. He slumped down against it, groaning loudly.

"It's over Kaneshiro," Akira said. He recalled Camazotz to his side and drew his gun, keeping it aimed at the downed gangster. By now the last of the oni guards had been dealt with, leaving the others gathering near their leader. "Do yourself a favor and open up that vault, or we'll tenderize you even more."

"This vault?" Kaneshiro grinned, pointing over his shoulder at the dense steel. "Hehe... you dumb bitches! This ain't no vault! It's my muthafuckin' Piggytr-"

Breakthru tapped Kaneshiro on the chest, launching him up and smacking him into the vault hard enough to warp the material. "Oh I'm sorry, did I interrupt you?" Sergio asked, watching Kaneshiro clatter to the floor. "By all means, do go on."

"This is... my Pi-" Another tap launched him into the vault door, denting the metal further and making the whole surface rattle in protest.

"Sorry. I have a hearing disability. Whenever I hear a piece of shit talk to me, all I can hear is 'please punt me into the nearest wall.' How rude of me." Again and again Breakthru smacked Kaneshiro into the vault, as if playing the worlds most bizarre game of squash. The noise reverberated through the chamber noisily.

*CLONG!*

*CLONG!*

*CLONG!*

One final smack drove Kaneshiro into the vault, the whole vault rattling and then collapsing, chunks of steel falling into a tremendous pile behind Kaneshiro. The gangster skidded to a halt, looking up now to reveal that his eyes had returned to normal. Seemed the last of his absorbed power had been burned away.

The gathered thieves looked to the glowing golden mass at the center of the fallen vault, their eyes growing wide as they got to see the scale of Kaneshiro's treasure. Several massive gold bars, like something taken straight from a Looney Tunes short from what Shizuka could see. Accordingly, Morgana's eyes had practically turned into dollar signs.

"T-treasure..."

"Is all that gonna fit in the cat?" Ryuji asked, scratching the side of his neck.

"It should," Akira casually said. "Morgana's bigger on the inside." It was one of those odd things he had noticed as their crew grew in scale. The Monamobile expanded internally to accommodate whatever was inside it, while looking the same on the outside. It was just one of the many strange little things about Morgana that they had no answers for.

Kaneshiro rolled onto his stomach and tried to crawl toward his treasure, grunting all the while. "My money... got to get... my money."
"It was never your money," Makoto pointedly said. "And you're going to give back what you stole from those kids, you greedy bastard."

"Greedy? What the hell do you know... I bet none of you brats know what poverty is like..." He grunted, coming to a halt when his injured body refused to move any further. "I couldn't go back to that. Not after everything I did to get here!"

"So your life was shit, and now it gives you an excuse to shit on other people? That's not how the world works asshole!" Ryuji snapped.

Akira gestured to Morgana. "Mona, time to transform so we can load up the treasure. Skull, Fox, I need you guys to start loading the bars. Diabolik," Akira pointed to the cracks that dotted the floor. A very faint breeze could be felt through the fissures. "See if you can fashion us an escape route."

Sergio grinned, punching his fist into his right palm. "No problem."

"Tch..." Kaneshiro glared toward the group. "Why are you punks even getting involved in this? What does helping a bunch of dumb high school students do for you?"

"It's the right thing to do," Shizuka firmly said. "We're interested in justice, and we could hardly let you do whatever the hell you feel like."

"Justice? That crap just shows how dumb you brats are," Kaneshiro snorted. He sat up, leaning against a warped section of steel for support. "With a power like yours, you could use Palaces to net loads of cash... if you had any business acumen. You could do whatever you wanted to people's hearts!" He paused, briefly trailing into a small chuckle. "I'll let you in on a little secret... you're not the only ones breaking into people's Palaces. That guy in the black mask is using Palaces to do whatever he pleases."

The group tensed as they heard this. Ryuji and Yusuke stopped mid-lift, and Morgana's headlights had noticeably widened. "There really is another intruder..." Akira muttered. He had hoped, on some level, that it was just some story Madarame had been telling to distract them. But with Kaneshiro telling them the same story...

"Whoever this guy is, he doesn't give a crap about the consequences of his actions. Psychotic breakdowns, mental shutdowns... he does whatever he pleases to get results," Kaneshiro explained. A powerfull tremor rocked the whole building, sections of the ceiling collapsing as Kaneshiro's treasure was lifted. "You brats keep this up, and you'll be in deeper shit than you can even imagine. You're gonna draw the eyes of some big figures... and they'll want you all dead."

The Palace was already breaking apart, and with Kaneshiro's Shadow glowing faintly it was clear he was about to vanish soon. Much as they wanted answers, they wouldn't do any good if they all died when the Palace collapsed.

Breakthru hit the ground again, the floor rumbling as a chunk of it was blown away, revealing the smog-stained sky above the warped version of Shibuya. It would be big enough for them to drive through. Yusuke and Ryuji finished loading the gold, and the group quickly began filing into the van.

Shizuka and Akira both stared Kaneshiro down. "Return to yourself in the real world and confess your crimes. Your extortion racket is done."
Kaneshiro laughed bitterly. "Whatever. I'm a dead man anyway..." A white flash enveloped him, and just like that he was gone. Akira and Shizuka dashed for the Monamobile and hopped inside, with Akira snagging the drivers seat. The engine revved powerfully before he shot forward, swiftly shooting through the hole Sergio had formed earlier. The world collapsed behind them.

The Bank of Gluttony was officially closed for business.

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Their escape to the real world dumped them back in front of their Shibuya hideout, and fortunately Kaneshiro's treasure had taken the shape of something far more manageable. A large golden briefcase, weighted by something inside the case.

The group quickly filed inside, setting the briefcase down in the center of the table and each of them taking a seat around it. A good deal had happened, and they were remaining quiet until the adrenaline wore off.

Eventually, Shiho spoke first. "So Madarame was telling the truth. There really is someone using the Metaverse to murder people." The group nodded gravely.

"And you haven't encountered anyone like that yet?" Makoto asked. The group shook their heads, making their senpai grimace. "It's definitely worrying. But I have to wonder what their end goal is? Greed is one thing, but Kaneshiro seemed to imply that something much bigger was going on here. It's not just that this 'Black Mask' is killing people for money, he must have some kind of agenda."

Akira reclined in his seat, adjusting his glasses slowly. "If we could maybe find some kind of correlation between the mental shutdown victims, we might be able to get a grip on whatever their motive is," he suggested.

"Easier said than done," Shizuka said with a weary sigh. She leaned forward, her elbows settled on the table with her hands propping her chin up. "I tried looking into mental shutdowns after Madarame told us about that Black Mask guy. But whoever he is, he's clever. Probably sets things up to look like suicide."

The statement hung in the air for a few moments. Eventually Ann ventured to ask "What do you mean?"

"I mean that if something is a mental shutdown, he stages it so that it just looks like a suicide from what the media and police can see. It's like..." She knit her brow, constructing a hypothetical in her head.

"Let's say I'm Black Mask. There's a guy I want to kill, but I need to make it look like something natural. He has a Palace, so I can kill him in the Metaverse by getting his Shadow. And this guy, he takes a bath every evening. Following me so far? So I kill him in the Metaverse while he's having his bath and bam! Mental shutdown. Target goes braindead and sinks into the water and drowns. Looks like he just offed himself or heart attack or someshit. Either way there's nothing on his body to suggest foul play, so no talk of murder gets out. Get it?"

A chill ran through the group. This guy could murder a person in the Metaverse, and even they'd have trouble identifying the cause.
"So even if a case gets reported, there's a good chance it won't be listed as a shutdown." Makoto sighed and rubbed her temples in impotent frustration. She had only just started as a Phantom Thief, and already they were on a precipice staring down into bloody hell.

"Well what about those rampage accidents on the news? Kaneshiro did say that the guy has been involved with the psychotic breakdowns too," Shiho suggested. She was hoping those would be easier to track down.

From his spot on the table Morgana sighed. "If the same person is involved in that, I have no idea how they're doing it. I know how to cause a change of heart or a mental shutdown, but I can't even begin to guess what force causes his targets to go berserk like that," he said.

"If this guy has powers even we don't have, then he's even more dangerous than we thought," Ryuji remarked.

Silence filled their hideout. The Arditi were faced with a real danger, a person just like them without any moral code. And if they were progressing higher up the food chain, and drawing more focus toward them, then it was all too likely they'd meet this Black Mask in person soon enough. The reality was a worrying one.

Eventually Akira spoke up. "Things are going to get a lot more dangerous from here on out," Akira began, drawing all eyes to him. "When the news of Kaneshiro's confession gets out, and the rumors start to circulate about us, we'll get a level of fame we never imagined. And with that fame, the person behind the mental shutdowns will start looking our way too. Kaneshiro was a lot of things, but I don't doubt he was being truthful when he said we were about to start wading into something big. What I mean is... things are going to get very dangerous from here on out. Dangerous as in 'someone will probably try to kill us.' If that's too much for you, or if any of you want to back out, you'll get no judgement from me."

Ryuji snorted. "You kidding? Come on dude, we've always had the odds stacked against us. Think I'm gonna abandon you just cause some loser in a black mask is gonna come for us? No way!"

"We became thieves because we couldn't stand by and let corrupt people do whatever they want. And right now it sounds like we're onto some biiiig corruption," said Ann.

"Right." Shiho nodded firmly. "If we don't get involved, then that killer will get away with his crimes forever. We're the only people who can track him and maybe take him down."

"I owe you my life, and I have no intention of abandoning you," Yusuke emphatically said.

"And it really wouldn't reflect well on me as a senpai if I didn't stick with you all," Makoto said, smiling slightly. And with this being like something out of a gangster flick, she couldn't help but be a little enthralled.

Grinning, Shizuka leaned into the table. "It's not like dealing with crazy assholes is new to me. Like hell am I gonna back off now."

"And you'd probably all die if I wasn't here," Morgana said, smirking as best a cat could. "And you do still need to help me find out about my past, so I need you guys."

Akira smiled slightly. Having friends he could depend on was something he was slowly getting used to, after being shunned by his whole hometown and most of Shujin. It was pretty damn nice.
"Thanks guys. It means a lot to hear that from you," he said.

"I would certainly like to help, particularly if it involves going after a man even the SID haven't been able to get any leads on, but..." Sergio sighed. "Well suffice to say I won't be quite as available over the next few weeks. Leading a double life is already hard enough, but a triple life is a massive challenge. Satoshi might get even more curious than he already is."

Shizuka raised a brow. "You haven't told those guys yet?"

"I felt there was little point, as it wasn't Stand-related. But if things grew dire, I'd let them know. For now though I'm still doing my job by investigating this."

"Alright. Well I'll continue sending texts out for meetings. Just let us know if you're available," Akira said. "We'll start looking into those psychotic breakdowns soon enough. But it's been a long day, so let's end on a high note: Popping open that case."

The group regarded it and, after a moment of thought, Ryuji sighed. "We... don't know the combination to that lock."

Makoto gripped the sides and brought it over to her end of the table. "Well if it's anything like the codes we saw in his vault... R-I-C-H." The locks clicked open and she proceeded to lift the lid, revealing the interior to be positively stuffed with wads of cash, neatly held in place by straps of black fabric.

"HOLY SHIT!" Ryuji nearly fell out of his chair, and a chorus of chattering broke out among the group as they spoke of how they wanted to spend their cuts. There must have been a few million yen in there.

Shizuka stood up slightly, inspecting the money from her end of the table. "It's fake," she flatly said.

"W-what?" Ryuji asked, evidently heartbroken.

"Yeah. See, I don't think the Japanese mint ever printed anything with Kaneshiro on it." She lifted one stack from the inside of the case and held it forward. Sure enough, the purple bills had Kaneshiro's face on them. No sane establishment would ever accept that as legal tender.

Sighing, Yusuke slumped a little in his seat. "Fate truly is a cruel mistress."

"Agh!" Ann slumped back, her gaze turning to the ceiling. "Can we go back to the Palace? I want to slap Kaneshiro around..."

"On the plus side, the briefcase is legit. Twenty-four karat gold." The young Joestar ran a finger over the top and grinned wryly.

Akira nodded. "Alright then. I'll get rid of the Monopoly money, and then we can sell the case and put the money to something good... After Kaneshiro has his change of heart at least." He gave a small sigh. "Now then, I don't know about the rest of you... but I'm tired. So let's call it for today."

"That would be best," Makoto admitted. She would say though, this Phantom Thief stuff was the most exciting thing she had ever been through.
They later learned from Makoto that Kaneshiro had turned himself into police custody, something she found out from her older sister being handed a major case. Kaneshiro had apparently wasted no time in giving the names and locations of his underlings. One by one, piece by piece, his extortion racket was being dismantled.

The victims of his crimes were returned whatever money the police could recover, and while not every cent was accounted for those people could still sleep easy. Most importantly however were the circulating rumors that the Phantom Thieves had caused his change of heart.

The Phan-site's poll reflected it perfectly. No longer were the Arditi an urban legend, most of Japan seemed to believe that they existed now. It was a hell of a leap.

Not only did they believe in the Phantom Thieves, but people were quickly swinging around to liking them. It was hard to dislike them when they'd gone after a horrible criminal who had deliberately been preying on students. That sentiment only grew stronger when the news started presenting Kaneshiro's rap sheet in its entirety.

Shizuka leaned into her couch, watching TV and idly munching a Meiji bar. Simmons was idly sipping tea in his armchair as the host of the show interviewed Akechi, who had been receiving a good deal of heat as of late for criticizing the Phantom Thieves only a month prior.

"A detective in high school. What a strange arrangement," Simmons idly remarked.

Shizuka watched the report, watched as Akechi defended and stood by his comments from before to the displeasure of the audience. Something about that guy bugged her, something she couldn't quite quite wrap her head around. But what?

She thought back, replaying that meeting in her head scene by scene. They had been in the hallway in the TV station, discussion what they wanted to do. Morgana said he wanted to eat pancakes. Then they decided to hit the rollercoasters. Then Akechi appeared. Then Akechi started talking about delicious-

Shizuka's free hand thumped the armrest of the couch in a sudden realization, nearly making Simmons jump from his skin. "Is everything alright young miss?"

"I..." Shizuka swallowed hard. "Aha... s-sorry. Just had a muscle cramp in my hand! Ha, must've overdone it trying to shake it off!" She smiled unconvincingly and took another bite of chocolate.

Okay. Okay so Asketchy had heard Morgana talk, and assumed it was one of the others. But that didn't necessarily mean anything. Maybe someone else had mentioned pancakes? No, not to her recollection. Maybe Akechi was just a Stand user?

It might explain how he was having success as a detective if he had those powers on his side. But the alternative was that Akechi was a Persona user, though that raised some worrying possibilities. But if that app could just appear one day for Akira, it could potentially happen to anyone. Either way if Akechi did have powers, it would go some way to explain the strange vibe he gave off.

She'd have to find Akechi at some point and then see if he really did have any power on his side. It
was positioned on her rather long to-do list.

"Kaneshiro's been compromised sir."

"I'm aware. The SIU director got in touch not too long ago and made us aware of the situation. He knows too much, he'll need to be cut loose before he can mention anything beyond his extortion racket."

"Well, Lars is back in the country. He could handle it discreetly, or one of the other Deadly Aspects could deal with him."

"No. I'll deal with Kaneshiro myself, he's my responsibility. What troubles me more is the stories I've heard, that it was the so-called 'Phantom Thieves' that exposed him. If that's the case, they've graduated from 'nuisance' to 'threat.'"

"Yes, I'd heard the same stories. We should invest some resources into finding out who they are."

"I don't doubt that Joestar is one of them. Only someone bound to that bloodline could get wrapped up in this at such a pivotal step. Hrm. Dio-sama once described the Joestar's as being like a cancer, and now I understand fully what he meant. Malignant growths that spring up in the worst possible places."

"Should we send someone to deal with her?"

"Perhaps to test her and see what she's capable of. But not kill her. We're at a critical stage, and I'd rather not run the risk of drawing Kujo or Higashikata to Tokyo with her death. But... perhaps Lynott could handle that job."
Ann had a spring in her step as she strode through Harajuku, the vibrant colours and chimes of J-pop brightening her mood. Yusuke, following at her side, seemed less thrilled at the music but he did seem oddly fascinated by the fashion on display. Had he the time he would definitely come back here. Perhaps the exotic finery was just what he needed to get out of his slump?

In truth, his meeting with the blonde had hardly been planned. They had simply ran into each other at the train station and she offered to let him tag along. She had done the same with Akira in the past, and saw no harm in extending the same offer to the Arditi's favourite artist. She knew of the troubles weighing on him, and hoped he could find some passion by watching the photographers in action.

Ann was normally chipper, but she seemed even more excited than usual today. Her agency was working with a big client, a name she had a lot of admiration for, and her idol had even gone so far as to personally request Ann's involvement in the shoot. Between that and their recent victory, it was hard not to be elated.

"I don't think I've ever been part of this Tokyo before Ann. Sen- That is to say, Madarame always told me Harujuku was a gaudy place. But this is all rather exciting and new," Yusuke remarked.

Ann grinned and settled her hands on the hips of her jean shorts. "Madarame was wrong about a whole lot of things, right? You don't need to worry about what he said. You're free to live life however you want now."

"That is true. I suppose I haven't had much time to explore for myself, between school and our extracurricular activities," Yusuke said. He was going to have to make more of an effort, particularly now that he had the freedom to do so.

Ann stopped when they could see the recently erected photography equipment, the staff milling around and setting up a scene in front of a wall spackled with a radiant tie-dye of multicoloured graffiti. And there, chatting with the lead photographer, was Ann's idol, a young woman who had been even more inspiring since Ann started taking her work seriously. The young brunette was well dressed, clad in an open white blouse over a pink tank top, her shorts exposing her smooth calves to the warm sun. She had a pair of sunglasses resting atop her head and wore a heart-shaped choker around her neck.

Yukari Takeba had taken up modelling during her college years, earning a good deal of attention in the process. But she had really struck gold when she was cast as Pink Argus in Phoenix Ranger Featherman Victory, and the job offers had kept rolling in after. She had even worked with Ann's parents a few times, and it was those events that first got Ann interested in Yukari's work. Something about her just seemed so fascinating to Ann, even if she couldn't put her finger on it.

"Ah, is that her?" Yusuke asked, seeming to see the stars in Ann's eyes. She nodded eagerly and made for the shoot, with Yusuke following behind.

Yukari parted from the photographer and smiled as Ann approached. "Takamaki-san! It's so nice to meet you," Yukari said, smiling kindly at the young woman. "Oh, did you bring a frie-..." She
looked at Yusuke and instantly felt her mind going blank.

Yusuke cocked his head slightly. "Is everything alright?" he asked.

"Sorry, I just uh..." Yukari exhaled and trailed into a stiff laugh. "You remind me a bit of someone I used to know. He wasn't as tall as you though." She had liked that about Minato though, being eye level with him. "It's nice to meet you. I'm Yukari Takeba."

"Yusuke Kitagawa. Likewise."

Yukari made a mental note of that. It was one of the names Mitsuru had brought up when she asked Yukari to do this. And, unfortunately, it was all too difficult to refuse a request from the intense redhead. Even being good friends with Mitsuru, saying no to her still seemed a worrying prospect.

Why had she agreed to this? Well... Mitsuru was concerned about this Phantom Thief stuff and wanted to investigate it. And Ann Takamaki was one of the suspects Naoto had uncovered. Given their mutual line of work, Mitsuru suggested she'd have a chance to get to know Ann and see the kind of person she was.

Ultimately they wanted to get some understanding for what their suspected thieves were like as people, to gauge how dangerous they potentially were. But personally she was hoping they were just good kids. It wasn't like she could fault them for exposing perverts and criminals.

"Anyway, I was really excited to work with you Ann. I've seen a lot of your work, and I'm sure you'll be a perfect fit for this shoot," Yukari said, smiling slightly. And that was technically true, she did find Ann's work rather good. "Though, I was a little worried about coming out to Tokyo."

"Hm?" Ann cocked her head. "What do you mean?"

Yukari reached her left hand up, tapping her chin slightly. "Well... all this stuff about the Phantom Thieves does have me a little concerned. Maybe I'm worried over nothing but a group of people who can steal hearts sounds a little scary."

Her statement made Yusuke nod. "I will admit that, on a conceptual level, the Arditi might seem a little worrying. But they have only paid focus to criminals so far. And so long as it stays that way, I doubt there's any reason to fear them."

They all knew how Akira wanted them to handle their public opinion of the Phantom Thieves. They could be positive and supportive, but they were ultimately not to get agitated if a person didn't like them. That comment had particularly been targeted at Ryuji, given how passionate he was on the subject.

"Yeah but... is there really any guarantee on that?" Yukari asked. She was aiming to make the question seem rhetorical, but she had no idea how good she was at it.

Ann seemed to think little of it, smiling warmly and waving off Yukari's concerns. "I'm sure it'll be fine. I really doubt they're gonna kill people or anything." She supposed she couldn't blame people for being worried. But, hopefully, they'd win over everyone in due time.
The Ogikubo ramen shop had become a favourite haunt of Akira and Ryuji whenever they moved to hang out together. Akira, who subsisted on a positively unhealthy amount of curry, was grateful for any meal that involved something different, and Ryuji knew the best eating spots around Tokyo.

But, as was often the case, Akira managed to be mannerly while he ate. He finished slurping and downing another mouthful, and once he had swallowed he smiled at his friend. "So, how'd your date go?" he asked.

"Oh, uh..." The blond scratched the back of his head, his right arm resting on the bar. "It was... pretty nice. Shiho said she had fun, and that's the important part. I mean it was nothing crazy, you know, we went to the planetarium and caught a show. I don't really care about that stuff but... Shiho liked it, and that made me pretty happy."

"Ha. You big softie," Akira replied, earning an annoyed grunt from Ryuji.

"You might be my best friend man, but I'm not above smacking you upside the head," he said. It was enough to make Akira snicker, but he at least held his tongue. "Still... if you told me this time last year that I'd have a great girlfriend, great friends and a cool-ass 'job', I would've laughed at you. But it's real... and I owe it all to you Akira."

"I owe you a lot too you know. When I first came to Tokyo, I was thinking I'd just keep my head down all year... then Kamoshida leaked my record, and destroyed any chance I had to just blend in. I would've been one lonely guy if you hadn't reached out to me. What I'm saying is... you're a hell of a friend."

"Ha! Who's the softie now?" The two boys laughed and resumed eating. Eventually, Ryuji carried on with what was on his mind. "You know the track team have really upped their game lately. Yamauchi's out, and they've got the old coach back. I think they might go pretty far... To tell you the truth, I was scared of actually talking to those guys again."

"Because of the past?" Akira asked. His friend nodded solemnly.

"Whenever I thought about the track team, I thought about how stupid I was. Made me think back about how I lost a place I really belonged... But I was able to change, thanks to you. You got wrapped up in my shit, but you stood by me. And that means a lot to me man."

Akira nodded firmly. "Well... it was no trouble, really. You and I are a lot alike, and I guess... I guess I wanted to help you, knowing how people misjudge you like the misjudge me." And with how Ryuji stuck by him, he felt it was the least he could do.

"I don't wanna be melodramatic or nothin', but... if I hadn't met you, I dunno how I'd be now. You kinda saved my life, and really helped me change into a stronger person. Thanks man." The two grinned at each other, and Akira felt their bond become unbreakable.

And inside Ryuji's heart, things were changing too.

There was a gleaming flash in some unseen part of his consciousness, a light consuming and then reshaping Captain Kidd. The spectral pirate was gone, replaced with an armoured grinning monkey king, holding a heavy staff in his right hand and standing atop a glowing golden cloud. Captain Kidd was gone, replaced with Seiten Taisei.
Ryuji's eyes widened as he became aware of the shift in his heart. He felt stronger than ever, and with a great weight off his mind he felt his Persona growing stronger as a result. "Dang man," Ryuji remarked. "That's a heck of a rush... Guess I owe ya even more now, huh? Well, don't sweat it. Whenever you need me, I'll be there."

"That means a lot to me. Now then... let's get back to eating."

Life could be challenging. But Akira knew he had great people he could rely on if the need ever arose.

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7/10

Another day, another long interrogation rattling off the names of his underlings and associates. Kaneshiro knew it was the right thing to do, his penance for fleecing and harming so many people. Even trading in his expensive suit for a prison grey jumpsuit didn't seem to bother him. He'd never know opulence again, and he seemed fine with that.

But, some part of his mind was still registering disgust at his own actions. He knew he was a dead man, deep down, likely to be killed by a former associate or Mr. A. And he seemed oddly calm, even knowing this. Perhaps he had known it would end in such a way, the fate of any man who got wrapped up in a world like that.

The police couldn't protect him, in fact he was sure a huge chunk of the whole Tokyo PD was corrupt, but Kaneshiro was fine with that.

He and the guard soon reached his cell, coming to a halt at the heavy steel door. He spent a few moments unlocking it and then waited for Kaneshiro to enter. Once the former criminal had entered, he unlocked Kaneshiro's cuffs and slipped them onto his belt. "Sleep tight 'bud.' You're gonna have another busy day of squealing tomorrow," the guard snidely remarked.

Kaneshiro remained quiet, not rising to the bait.

However as the guard turned to leave, Kaneshiro noticed something odd. Something on his belt was rattling from its holster and soon came loose, clattering to the ground and rolling toward Kaneshiro's feet. A simple ballpoint pen.

"Hey, you dropped your-" Kaneshiro heard the door to his cell close, followed then by the sounds of the guards footsteps growing progressively quieter as he made his way down the corridor. "Great."

Sighing, he reached down and snatched the pen into his left hand. Raising it, he regarded the pen quietly. Strange as it sounded, it was as if the thing had just jumped out of the guard's belt.

"What the hell..." Kaneshiro grumbled. He gripped it, and then suddenly felt it start to tug in his hand. Kaneshiro grimaced and gripped it tighter, trying his best to pull it back. But whatever force was acting on it was growing stronger.

Beads of sweat lined his forehead, his breathing growing harsher as he became distinctly aware that the pointed end was aimed toward his throat. "H-hey! Somebody, help!" he shouted, his words echoing through his cell.
But nobody came.

Kaneshiro gripped his left wrist with his right hand, fighting with all his might against the unseen force tugging on the pen. Sweat streaked his body, his eyes wide and bloodshot. He needed to do something, needed to-

The sweat in his hand lubricated his palms, and suddenly the pen shot clean from his grasp. Blood gushed out of his neck as over half of the pen drove clean over his throat, a horrendous gargling sound echoing off the concrete walls.

Kaneshiro swayed on his feet as the strength rapidly left his body. He hit the ground seconds later, convulsing as the life drained from his body. Rivulets of red were pumping from the wound in his neck, the pulses progressively growing weaker. He died in a pool of his own blood.

His killer left without a trace.

[Junya Kaneshiro- Deceased.]

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7/12

The atmosphere was tense in the hideout by the time everyone had gathered there. The only one absent was Sergio, off doing some SID business. All was silent, save for the hum of a recently purchased mini fridge buzzing away in the corner. By now the different members of the Arditi had taken up seats around the building, but nobody quite knew how to break the ice.

The news had come out just this morning about Kaneshiro's death, and the news outlets were giving conflicting reports that it was either a suicide, or a hit organized by some yakuza types. Regardless, the thieves were worried.

Eventually, Ann moved to speak. "Are we... are we responsible for his death?" she asked. "I mean... Kamoshida was apparently suicidal in the days leading up to his confession, and Kaneshiro... might have been the same way because we changed his heart."

Shizuka, who had been leaning up against the wall, snorted slightly. "We changed his heart because he was a scumbag rat bastard. Don't tell me you actually feel sorry for that guy," Shizuka said. "You saw that guy's rap sheet. The murders, the extortion... the things he's done to high school and college girls. I'm not gonna shed a tear for him... but if he's dead, something serious is going on."

The silence set in again. This time it was Akira who broke it. "I'm a dead man anyway..." he said cryptically, drawing all eyes to him. "Those were the last words Kaneshiro's Shadow said before he faded away from us. And with all his talk about the dangerous territory we're venturing into, I don't think he killed himself. I think somebody killed him to make sure he kept quiet."

"It's like something out of a gangster movie," Makoto remarked. "But... if someone did kill him, how would they manage it? They were keeping Kaneshiro in a secure facility, and with his Palace gone there was no way he could be killed in the Metaverse."

"A Stand-user could have done it. All they would need to do is get within a certain range, and then
they could get the job done without a trace." Shizuka clicked her tongue against her teeth, shaking her head. "Still, to go that far... whoever we're up against, they're definitely brazen. More than that, Kaneshiro must have known... something about them to warrant killing him like that."

Shizuka thought back to Mr. A, the mysterious Stand-using criminal that the SID feared to trifle with. Was he involved in some way? If he was, she doubted she'd get any answers on their end.

"Maybe the Black Mask guy did it. Kaneshiro knew who he was, so Black Mask prolly knew Kaneshiro too. And I mean, if he can use the Metaverse then it's possible he can use his powers in the real world too... Or maybe he's got a team on his side?" Ryuji suggested.

"A guy died because of us..." Ann shook her head. "I just can't get over that."

"Ann..." Shiho set a hand on her friend's back, giving her a reassuring pat. "A lot more people would have gotten hurt or killed if we didn't get involved. I'm not going to act like I'm glad he's dead, but we still did the right thing by stopping his gang."

"We won't accomplish anything tearing our hair out over this, particularly if we don't have any access to the crime scene," Yusuke quickly interjected. "But if we work with the assumption that Kaneshiro was murdered, and didn't simply kill himself, then we can believe his Shadow was being honest when he stated we were on the tail of powerful forces. Kaneshiro was likely a pawn of some far larger entity."

It was a disquieting thought. And no doubt that same group, whoever they were, were treating the existence of the Arditi with some suspicion and annoyance. Their opponent was dangerous, resourceful, ruthless, and, most worryingly, completely unknown to the group. If the Arditi were being pursued, they had no way of knowing it.

After a moment, Makoto raised her satchel and opened it up. "I took the time to do some research after our last meeting. Specifically, I was looking into rampage accidents, and anything that looked like a 'mental shutdown.'" After some rummaging Makoto lifted out a small sack of recently printed pages, news articles of the psychotic attacks that had happened over the last few years. "One correlation I've seen is that a lot of the psychotic breakdowns have involved public transport workers."

"Huh?" Shiho asked. "Oh right, I remember those. There was the train incident around the time Akira transferred here, right?"

Akira nodded. "Sojiro and I went to Shujin that day to get my paperwork signed. Traffic was a nightmare because of that conductor plowing his train into a platform... god the body count for that was..." Akira's eyes widened and he sat bolt upright. "Oh my god. If the Black Mask caused him to go berserk, then all those people..."

Makoto nodded gravely. "Two bus crashes, and the train crash. Those are the most prolific incidents, and there were a number of casualties in all three."

"Okay but... why though? Why target some drivers and use them to kill people? Some sick kicks?" Shizuka asked.

"That part I still haven't figured out yet. It's possible we're dealing with some kind of terrorist, but if that were the case no demands have been issued. It might just be the case that our opponent is a sociopath, but it seems strange they would target public transport three times in a row," Makoto
said. She raised up one printed article and examined it closely. "Although... there was a lot of criticism of the transport minister in these articles. The investigations found a lot of issues with the tracks, and the models of the busses involved."

Ann scratched the back of her neck. "Sooo... the person behind those incidents did them to make someone in the government look bad?" she suggested.

Makoto shrugged. "Who can say? It's one possibility, but even if that's the case I have no idea why he did it." That was perhaps the most infuriating thing to her. She was the kind of girl who liked logic, who liked to have answers, but their opponent was such an enigma to them right now.

After a moment, Akira gestured to the other sheets Makoto had printed out. "What about those? More rampages?" he asked.

"Not really. I took the time to try and find anything that could be viewed as a mental shutdown, and a few incidents did seem weird to me. There's one story in particular from about two years ago, about a government researcher called Senjuro Kamiya. He apparently just had a heart attack one day and fell down the stairs, breaking his neck in the process. A heart attack, despite having a clean bill of health according to his wife's testimony."

Shizuka made her way around, peering over Makoto's shoulder to examine the printed article. "Okay, but what's so special about this guy?" She squinted and read one line that Makoto had underlined. 'Kamiya-san's research was largely private, though he previously released an article detailing the alteration of human cognition...'

Morgana visibly tensed. "Wait... this guy was researching cognition?"

"Right. That's what really stood out about his story, that he was involved in something partially tied to the Metaverse," Makoto explained. "And that's not all. He was working with another scientist who claimed to be pursuing something she referred to as 'cognitive psience.'" The mention of cognition made Morgana's black fur bristle.

"Psience?" Ryuji repeated, scratching his left ear just to make sure he wasn't hearing things.

"That's how it's spelled. That aside though, finding any information related to it has been impossible. As if all traces of this woman's research were systematically scrubbed away." Makoto shifted through the pages, and then came to a stop on one small article. "Her name was Wakaba Isshiki, and she apparently just... threw herself into the road one day. Right in front of her daughter."

Akira scowled and shook his head. "Jesus... it would look like a suicide to anyone passing by, but... it's highly likely someone triggered a shutdown inside her, timing it perfectly." He clenched his fists tight. "Murdering a woman in front of her child... whoever we're up against is one cold bastard." It was possible that it was a suicide, but it was far too convenient that these related researchers, looking into something potentially tied to the Metaverse, would die so suddenly and so close together.

"He's been at this for two years apparently," Ann said. "Maybe even longer."

"It's possible," Akira conceded. "And likely they could have gotten away with it forever, until we stumbled on the Metaverse too."
"Damn Prez, you really did your homework. This is impressive!" Shizuka said, grinning broadly at Makoto.

The young brunette smiled slightly. "Oh this? Nothing special. I only wish I could have found more concrete things. Right now, we're in a sea of conjecture and theories."

"Still, we know more now than we did yesterday, that's the important part," Akira said. He shrugged. "For now we should just continue as we were. But I want everyone to be on guard from here on out. We don't know who we're up against, or what they know about us... but the threat they pose is all too real."
"So... what've you got planned for today? Gonna hang out with somebody, or deal with some business?" Morgana asked, prowling around Akira's bag. The young man in question was finishing pulling on his shirt and spared a glance to the feline.

"I spent time with Takemi and Yoshida yesterday. It'd be irresponsible not to get some business done, even if we don't have a larger target at the moment." He was sure something would come by, but if they were going after someone huge he was hoping there'd be some ties to the larger entity they were pursuing. "And there is that girl Mishima was talking about."

"Oh right, the stalker," Morgana remarked. He hopped into Akira's bag and got comfortable as his protege hoisted it onto his shoulder. "Love is a crazy thing Akira. You should keep that in mind if you start seeing anybody."

Akira snorted slightly. "Yeah okay, thanks Mom," he flatly replied. With how things were going right now, he doubted he'd have the time to think of dating in any capacity. And being the 'terrifying delinquent' of Shujin only seemed to draw in the wrong kind of girl.

He said his casual goodbye to Sojiro in passing and exited into the cramped backstreets of Yongen. There was still a wall between the two of them. They talked about brewing and cooking, but rarely exchanged words beyond business. And then there was Sojiro's occasional warning of 'don't screw around or you'll go straight to juvie.' Akira doubted they'd ever be friends, and he had no idea how the hell he was supposed to make a confidant of Sojiro.

"Oh, it's you." The voice from behind made Akira turn, finding himself facing the same towering mountain of protein that had come to Leblanc the other evening. "The high school barista. Would have thought you'd be working now."

He shrugged. "I'm a part-timer. I just happen to live in that building too."

"Interesting arrangement." The silver haired young man regarded Akira for a few moments. 'Height aside, he reminds me an awful lot of Arisato...’ he mused to himself. "You're a high school student, so you're probably more knowledgeable about this than a guy like me: What do you make of those Phantom Thief characters?"

Akira quirked his left brow. "Haven't given it much thought. Guess they're alright if they're only going after criminals," he said. It was a safe opinion to take, he felt. Aligned well with public opinion without making him seem like a total phanboy.

"Oh? Yeah, I've been hearing a lot of stuff like that so far. I also heard their last target died," he replied.

"Yeah, some mob boss. Heard he either offed himself or got killed by someone from his gang. Nasty business, but I doubt the Phantom Thieves had anything to do with it." Akira regarded him closely, but the silver-haired stranger seemed unreadable. "Why all the questions?" Akira eventually asked.
"Ha. Nothing sinister. I'm Akihiko," he replied, putting on a modest smile. It didn't do much to dissuade Akira's wariness, not when there was the prospect of some hidden cabal coming after them. "I'm new to town, just kind of drifting. I wanted to know more about this new craze sweeping Tokyo and figured a high schooler would know more than an adult."

"You might want to consider asking elsewhere. I try to avoid fads," Akira said. "At any case, I have to be off. But Leblanc will welcome your patronage anytime." With that he strode off, committing Akihiko's face to memory. The guy had a strange vibe to him, and his story felt flimsy. Something was off here, and if the group were being followed then it would put them all at risk.

Akihiko watched the younger man go, humming slightly to himself. The kid had some nice acting chops, but those responses were easy to see through. Akira Kurusu wasn't as normal as he liked to act, not when he had a talking cat in his bag.

Naoto had balked when Akihiko let that bit of intel slide her way. But then admitted it was highly possible, considering the strange existence of Teddie.

Yes, it seemed Akira was an interesting guy. But looking at him up close, Akihiko really doubted he was some kind of fearsome delinquent. Not when Shinji had been his best friend, and that guy had worn 'delinquent' with aplomb...

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A.K: Mishima gave us intel on a new Mementos target. everybody available for a meeting at the hideout?

S.E: Sadly, no. There's been reports of a Stand user lurking around, and Satoshi is busting my nuts over finding him. c'est la vie.

R.S: wut

Y.K: 'Such is life.'

A.K: According to Mishima, there's a girl at Shujin who's been stalking a male student. Her blog post is full of all sorts of obsessive stalkery shit. The worry is she'll turn violent now that he's seeing a girl.

S.S: A full yandere then? I think i might know the girl you mean.

S.J: oh, my friend Koichi had one of those.

A.T: how'd he deal with it?

S.J: married her

S.J: but i get the feeling that's not an option here

A.K: Certainly not. this girl is goddamn lethal
M.N: A girl like that at Shujin. The school is a lot more dangerous than I would have thought.

A.K: well, whoever can make it, feel free to come by the hideout.


Shizuka pocketed her phone and shrugged slightly. A yandere at Shujin. Between her and the pervy gym teacher, she was starting to wonder if the prestigious school was a magnet for dangerous freaks.

Then again, who was she to talk? Her family drew in weird bullshit like flies to honey. It, ultimately, was something that had defined the Joestar's for generations, so maybe her presence was only compounding things at Shujin.

Nah, couldn't be that.

Whatever the case, there was a psycho bitch in Mementos who needed her head straightened out. With no other big targets on the horizon, she saw no issue in getting involved in this. She'd make for a pretty crappy hero if she started turning down smaller jobs.

Besides that, if they didn't deal with her, she'd likely act on some of the violent things she had been writing about. Shujin was already under scrutiny, the last thing the school needed was a murderous lovesick broad. And there was the fireworks festival coming up in four days time. The gang had plans to attend, and it would be easier to enjoy the festivities if they didn't have this threat hanging over them.

As she made her way around Shibuya, Shizuka supposed it would be easier to take her usual route down to the hideout. Central street seemed even more packed than usual, and she really didn't want to waste time if she could help it. The shortcuts she tended to take involved a few grungy and relatively empty alleys and side streets, urban capillaries that went largely unseen by people.

She came to a stop at the entryway of another alley, staring down the length. It was a rather long alley and was primarily abandoned. What few windows were visible from here had been boarded up some time ago, and the asphalt was littered with trash cans and abandoned litter shored up beside an aged dumpster. A stack of steel pipes rested against the right wall, a few marked by thin cobwebs. There were several old washing lines linking the two sides of the alleyway, but it seemed that it had been some time since they saw any use.

Shizuka had come by here several times, but something felt a little different today. She couldn't describe what it was but... well she was probably imagining things. Everything looked exactly like it always did.

After a few moments of thought she pressed onward. The air shimmered imperceptibly behind her as she entered the alleyway and then closed off, forming a seal. Something completely unknown to her.

Shizuka strode down the alleyway at a casual pace, each step bouncing her white sneakers against the asphalt. The air around her felt warm and, for want of a better word, stale. It agitated her skin for some reason she couldn't fathom.
There was a rushing sound from above, causing her to look up as a figure came racing down toward her. A small humanoid figure with azure skin, lime green ridges covering the creatures shoulders and the top of his sloping, elongated head. A trio of large white eyes were all it had in the way of a face. A Stand!

Houdini appeared in front of Shizuka on a reflex, raising her arms up and just barely catching the downward swing of the enemy Stand's right arm. Her whole body rattled from the blow, a gasp being sucked from Shizuka's lungs. At this angle she could see the inside of the Stand's palm, aware of a large hemispherical growth on both of it's palms.

It moved quickly, weaving under Houdini's arms and striking the golden Stand across the face, the blow making Shizuka's head snap to the side with a spurt of blood suddenly spraying from her lips. She swayed slightly, only to quickly settle herself and brace as the enemy Stand lunged at her again.

Houdini's hands were a blur, moving swiftly to bat away a flurry of incoming punches being thrown by the smaller Stand. Houdini's right arm shot up, deflecting one incoming blow and giving her the opening she needed. "BAZU!" Houdini's fist mashed into the enemy Stand's face, cracks briefly running over the top of its elongated head. Shizuka pressed her advantage, her Stand lunging forward and landing another flurry of blows, juggling the Stand on her knuckles before launching him into the wall with a sturdy right cross. The aged bricks cracked slightly from the impact.

"Alright pal..." Shizuka spat a glob of blood onto the ground, slowly catching her breath. "Tell me who you are, or so help me-

The injured Stand raised its hands suddenly, and then firmly squeezed on the growths on its palms. "TIME IN A BOTTLE!" The colours around them became inverted, while the shrieking sound of grinding gears reverberated through the whole alley. Shizuka backed up as the alien colours washed over her... and just like that, everything reset.

Shizuka strode down the alleyway at a casual pace, each step bouncing her white sneakers against the asphalt. The air around her felt warm and, for want of a better word, stale. It agitated her skin for some reason she couldn't fathom. She came to a sudden stop, grunting as she felt the taste of iron in her mouth.

"The hell...?" Shizuka grumbled to herself. A faint pain throbbed along her knuckles too. What was that all about?

Unknown to Shizuka, someone was watching her from above. He was positioned neatly on the edge of a five story building overlooking the alley, his clear blue eyes watching Shizuka with great scrutiny. He was definitely foreign, evident from the deep tan to his skin and the shape of his face. His blond hair was swept back, while a neat golden Van Dyke adorned his mouth and chin.

Lynott regarded her closely. "So that's Joestar eh... quick little lady. Packs a mean punch to boot," he mused. Time in a Bottle lingered at his side, completely undamaged despite the earlier blows it had taken. "A-sama wanted me to test her and see what she could do, but I have to wonder how far he wants me to go. He doesn't want her dead, but..."

He shrugged, wrinkling the white sleeves of his navy Varsity jacket. "Guess I'll just smack her around a bit and see how fast an' strong she really is." Lynott reached down into the pocket of his baggy black trousers, lifting out a silver tally clicker. He gave it a firm press, the fourth zero
rolling back into a one.

"My Stand might be fragile, but... well, with a power like mine, it's still completely unbeatable."

Time in a Bottle rushed from his side, making a beeline toward Shizuka. Now she was on guard, drawn in by the taste of blood in her mouth. She reacted a little faster this time, jumping back from the first strike and summoning Houdini to catch an incoming kick.

Houdini shoved forward, both golden arms turning invisible for a brief instant before both fists slammed into Time in a Bottle's face. The force of the strike drove him into the ground, making Lynott grimace, nearly being knocked off his feet.

"Time in a Bottle!" Once more his Stand's palms clenched tight, a flash of energy inverting the colours in the alleyway. Once more, everything was returned to its original state. Time in a Bottle was at his side again, and completely unharmed.

Lynott sighed and clicked the tally counter again. "Alright, invisible punches. Better keep those in mind too."

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Yusuke entered the hideout last, finding the others seated around and waiting impatiently.

"Apologies. I saw a fantastic chalk mural on the way here, and I simply had to... well, I suppose that's no excuse for being the last here."

"You're not the last here," Ann replied, a tinge of worry in her voice. Yusuke hummed, cocking his head slightly, "Shizuka hasn't arrived yet."

"Odd," he remarked. "She's usually very eager about all this. I've never seen her run late to one of our meetings," Yusuke mused.

Ryuji nodded, a small frown on his face. "Yeah, that's the weird part. She even said she was on her way in the chat messages," he remarked.

None of them really wanted to dwell on worst case scenarios. But now they were aware of there being a murderous Stand user roaming around, and Shizuka's last name no doubt made her stand out to whoever they were against. It was hard not to think something had happened.

"I'm sure she just got distracted by some pretty girls or something," Akira remarked, lifting his phone from his pocket.

Makoto raised her left brow. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean she's... what, you really hadn't noticed?" Akira asked. He watched Ann lean into Makoto's ear, whispering something that made the brunette's eyes widen in a sudden realization.

"I... wasn't aware," Makoto admitted.

"She's really not subtle about it," Ann said, speaking from experience.

Akira brought up the chat icon and quickly typed a message out with his thumb. "I'll just send her something quick." He hit send and stood by her a few seconds, watching the screen closely. Then
his eyes widened slightly. "User is not available," he read aloud.

In an instant, the atmosphere in the hideout grew far more tense. "Okay, that's... that's definitely more worrying," Shiho admitted. Sighing, she quickly rose from her seat. "We should go look for her, just in case." She owed Shizuka a lot, and she wasn't about to sit by if she was in danger.

"Let's not get carried away. Shizuka is an odd girl, it's entirely possible she was distracted by something innocuous," Yusuke said. "What I mean is, it would be counterproductive if we all ran out looking for her, if she was just going to wander in soon after we left."

Ann nodded at the explanation. "More than that, if Shizuka is in danger it means that a Stand is likely involved. And if that's the case... can we do anything to help?"

Taking on danger in the Metaverse was one thing, they were all veterans of that by now. But a fight in reality was very new to them. "Have you all been practicing summoning in reality?" A chorus of nods answered him.

"Hell yeah man. Check it." Ryuji raised his right fist and clenched it tight, a wave of velvet blue light briefly washing over him. Seiten Taisei's spectral form floated behind him, grinning in much the same way Ryuji was.

"Whoa... that's not Captain Kidd," Ann said, a little stunned.

"You like? Got it from hanging out with Akira. Dunno how to describe it, but it was like... when I got over what was bugging me, my heart got stronger." It was fair to say that the prospect had soundly raised the interest of the others. "But uh... anyway, that ain't the point! If it comes down to fighting, I can hack it."

Akira nodded firmly. "Well, that's good. Ryuji and I are going to split up and go looking for Shizuka. Anyone else want to come along?" As Shiho and Makoto were the first to raise their hands among the group, he nodded at them first. "Alright, you two come along so we can cover more ground. The rest of you, it might be best if you stay back and get in touch if Shizuka does show up. But... if we're not back in an hour, and you don't hear from any of us, you should come looking too."

Ann nodded. "Alright. We'll keep an eye out."

They could only hope everything was fine. But these days, there were no guarantees of safety.

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"Alright, loop number five. Let's go." Lynott added another click to the tally.

Shizuka strode down the alleyway at a casual pace, but came to a sudden stop after two steps. A wave of pain racked her body, making her gasp and suddenly lean into the wall for support. "What... what the hell?"

She could feel a dull pain on her right cheek, but could not see the discolouration that had formed there. She touched the ribs on her right side and winced, well aware now that there were bruises hidden away there too.

All the pain had hit her at once, like walking into a brick wall. "Where did..." In her alert state she
became immediately aware of something knifing toward her, instantly calling Houdini to her side. Her Stand threw out two rapid punches, narrowly dodged by the smaller specter drawing in closer. Houdini’s knee shot up, colliding against Time in a Bottle's incoming fist hard enough to rattle the ground around them.

Shizuka jumped backward to avoid another swing, only to feel her back smack into something. "Eh... What..." She reached behind her, her palm tapping some kind of wall behind her. She looked over her shoulder, seeing nothing but thin air at the mouth of the alleyway. There was nothing visible blocking her in, but some barrier was sealing this area off from the rest of the world.

"Something wrong?" Time in a Bottle smugly asked. The short creature made another lunge for her, and soon the two Stand's were locked in a battle of parrying punches that echoed off the concrete surrounding them.

"Who the hell are you?!" Shizuka snapped. One punch went wide, just barely missing Time in a Bottle's elongated head. The Stand's three eyes narrowed sharply, closing the gap and striking Houdini in the stomach.

A horrible gagging noise escaped Shizuka, the wind being nearly knocked out of her. She landed on one knee, but managed to keep her eyes on her surroundings. Houdini recovered quickly and grabbed a trash can lid beside her. With impressive swiftness her Stand lashed out, smashing the lid into Time in a Bottle and driving the smaller Stand into the ground. The asphalt split and shattered as his body carved a path down the street. Lynott trembled violently above the scene, his body being flooded with excrutiating pain.

"T-Time in a Bottle!" The world around them reset with another powerful thrum of static.

Lynott sighed and clicked the counter again. "Girl reacts quick to danger. Getting the drop on her might be hard in the future." He watched from above as Shizuka took a step, and then very nearly doubled over. "Tougher than she looks but... kkh, she's definitely not as sturdy as Kujo." He clicked the tally again.

Shizuka leaned against the wall to her right for support, working hard to catch her breath. 'What the fuck? Why am I... sore all over? I was just walking down the street, and now all of a sudden I feel like I was mauled by Jesus...' Nothing afflicting her was life threatening, she knew that much, but the sudden shock had her heartbeat racing in her ears. From the corner of her eye she could see her fingertips flickering in and out of visibility.

She had been attacked by a Stand, clearly. But... when?!

"Oho, I can see that confused look on your face. Heh. Kids are so cute when they're scared." Shizuka looked up sharply to see a smaller Stand slowly floating down toward her. "You can call me Lynott. Or not. It's not like you'll remember my name or anything."

Shizuka watched him warily, squaring her shoulders and working to stand upright. Her ribs protested, but she powered through the pain. "What's that supposed to mean? Tch, can't even walk down the street without some two bit punk trying to shake me down."

"Oh this isn't a shakedown, Shizuka Elizabeth Joestar."

The younger woman tensed briefly. "Congratulations, you can use Wikipedia. Is you knowing my name supposed to frighten me?" she asked.
"Talk tough all you like. I can tell you're freaking out..." Time in a Bottle shot forward like a bullet, and Shizuka summoned her strength to dive to the side. The enemy Stand punched the wall behind her, a cobweb of cracks exploding from the brickwork. Shizuka swiftly turned invisible, holding her breath and moving quickly to the other end of the alley.

"Trying to run? Go ahead. My Stand has this alleyway sealed off, there's no way out!"

By the halfway point, Shizuka knew that to be true. She focused her vision dead ahead and could see an odd shimmer in the air. Something was going on here, something containing her in this alley. But where had her bruises come from? "So why the hell are you coming at me?" she barked, still invisible. He knew her name, but said he wasn't coming at her for money. That ruled out this being a job done by one of her dad's rivals. So, if that wasn't the case... Was this Lynott guy one of Mr. A's lackeys?

"Hm? Well I'm not here to kill you if that's what you're asking. This is a... a test, of sorts. I want to know what you're capable of. And I plan on finding out, no matter how many loops it takes."

'Loops? What the hell is this guy talking about...?'

She watched as Time in a Bottle suddenly lifted one of the discarded steel pipes into his hands, clutching it tight until the material bent in his grasp. He lunged forward, swinging wildly and at an intense speed, drawing progressively closer to Shizuka. The young woman swallowed hard, already calling Houdini to her side. She couldn't just slip past him, not when he was practically spinning down the alley like a plane propeller. She couldn't jump it, and that meant she'd have to meet his pipe head on!

Houdini's arms raised upward, bracing as the hardened steel collided against her. Shizuka let out a pained cry, very nearly being swept off her feet as her forearms rattled under the strike. "Ah, there you are," Time in a Bottle casually remarked.

In a flash Houdini had managed to snatch the slightly warped pipe from his grasp and gave it a hard swing, forcing Time in a Bottle to shift several feet backward to avoid the strike. "Motherfucker! Act coy all you like, I'll beat the answers I want out of you!"

"Think having a weapon on hand will even the odds? Go ahead. Any damage done to me can be reset. You have no such luck, little lady."

Houdini shot forward, swinging the pipe in rapid arcs, forcing Time in a Bottle backward to avoid being hit. 'Loops... reset... what is this guy talking about?' Another swing went wide, blowing a chunk out of the wall to her right.

'Alright Shizuka, think. This guy has the upper hand, but how did he manage it?' Houdini's next swing narrowly missed the mark, instead smashing into the face of the dumpster and badly warping the material. 'What do I know about all this? Shit, what do I know... His Stand has got me trapped in here, but that seems to be only part of his power. I have all these injuries, but no idea how I got them... but he clearly does."

The pipe in Houdini's hands slashed downward, the peak colliding with one of Time in a Bottle's upraised arms. Cracks ran down the Stand's skin as the impact hit, but the pipe got the worst of it. The peak snapped off entirely and noisily hit the ground.
'Loops... everything I do to him will be 'reset.' Does that mean... time is resetting in this alleyway?' Shizuka's eyes widened at the prospect alone. If his Stand could rewind time, then how could she beat it? If this battle had taken place several times already, she mused, that would explain where her injuries had come from. He remembered everything, but she remembered none of it. Damage done to him was undone, but she wasn't as fortunate. How much longer could she last, if that was the case?

She had to test this theory, to see if time was resetting. If it was, she couldn't afford to forget everything.

Houdini hurled the pipe with immense force, Time in a Bottle only barely avoiding the incoming projectile. In the time it took for him to dodge, Shizuka had turned invisible and called Houdini back to her side. She took off, making for the far end of the alley to buy herself a little more time.

"Ha! You got a lot of fight in you, for a girl. You're definitely an American brat."

"Yuck it up asshole," Shizuka growled. She came to a stop, gripping her right wrist and holding that arm up. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes tight as Houdini's sharpened fingertips moved in toward her limb. This was gonna sting like a motherfucker...

She tried her best to keep quiet, occasionally hissing in pain. This was definitely not something she thought she'd ever have to do. For as good as she was at keeping quiet, the occasional dribble of blood oozed from her broken skin and spattered onto the ground, becoming visible as small pools formed at her feet. That was enough to catch Time in a Bottle's eyes.

The smaller figure made a swift rush for her, but this time Shizuka was fully prepared. He was heading straight toward the blood stain, but was unaware of Houdini's invisible frame moving around to the wall opposite Shizuka. She waited until Time in a Bottle was just close enough, and then Houdini lunged forward like an uncoiling serpent.

"BAZU!" Houdini's heel crashed into Time in a Bottle's temple, smashing the smaller figure into the wall with such force that he was nearly driven clean through it. Houdini's fists lifted high and swung down sharply, aiming to smash into his head.

"Time in a Bottle!" A boom of inverted colour exploded around them, flooding the alleyway in neon. Just like that, everything was reset.

Shizuka took a step forward, and very nearly fell to her knees from a shock of pain rocking her whole body. "Ghh!" Her eyes widened, dark shades sliding down her nose. "What?!"

She rocked forward, and felt her eyes being drawn to the sharpest sensation of pain she was feeling. A burning sensation that was afflicting her right forearm. Once she saw it, Shizuka saw the message left for her by her past self. A message that Houdini had carved into her skin, leaving bloodied marks in several places. There, written in small, jagged letters was a simple message.

STAND
LOOPING
TIME

From above, Lynott sighed and gave another click to his tally.
"Onto loop twelve," Lynott remarked, idly adding another click to his tally.

The Joestar girl was smarter than she looked, he’d admit that outright. Leaving a message for herself, making herself alert to what was going on as soon as a new loop started. These last few rewinds had all started roughly the same way: The pain of her injuries would hit Shizuka all at once, and the most prominent source was her forearm. She'd look at it, and instantly be put on alert.

Clever. Not that she was the first person to try a trick like that. A few of his targets thought they'd be clever, try to leave a message on a wall or something. But Time in a Bottle would reset the environment too, making such efforts fruitless.

Shizuka, however, was the first person crazy enough to scar herself to get a message out. He'd give her points for resourcefulness, and chastised himself for being too cocky. He hadn't expected her to actually cop to what was going on, or warn herself so effectively.

Not that it much mattered. Her stamina was waning. While she had gotten through some of the recent loops without getting hit once, it was clear that she was slowing down. Lynott gave her ten more loops, tops, before she buckled. Once that happened he'd be able to leave and give his report.

Time in a Bottle leapt from his side, diving from the roof and making a beeline for the stack of steel pipes. It quickly snatched one up and drove on toward Shizuka, raising the pipe high overhead. "Let's see what you got!"

Shizuka winced, her right hand settling on her bruised abdomen. It was a little harder to see now, with a large purple bruise having formed above her right eye. "God damn... This is so unfair," she muttered.

Houdini appeared before her as a living shield, arms raised high and blocking the incoming swing. Shizuka grimaced, her balance waning. Her arms ached, and the message on her forearm aside her skin was dotted with several purple bruises. "Not gonna last much longer," she muttered.

But what could she do? Shizuka had already deduced that she was physically trapped here, and she knew she was going to get progressively more fucked up if this went on. Her opponent was pristine however, likely a side effect of his power.

So how the hell was she going to get out of this?

She could hope that the others would find her. By now they had to have realized something was up, she vaguely recalled saying she was heading to the hideout. But how long had she been here? If her eyes weren't playing tricks on her, a distinct possibility in her current state, then the alleyway seemed a little darker than she recalled. Was the looping time restricted to here?

Time in a Bottle swung the pipe two more times, both blows narrowly being blocked by the swings of Houdini's arms. Each blow rattled Shizuka's bones all the same. Houdini's leg swung up sharply and hit the pipe with such force that it was knocked from the enemy Stand's grasp, left skidding down the alley.

The alternative, Shizuka supposed, was hitting this fucker so hard that he couldn't rewind time
again. Which would likely mean killing him in the process. Could she even manage that, being as injured as she was?

If neither of those options panned out... if her friends didn't find her in time, or couldn't enter this alley for whatever reason, and if she couldn't beat this guy alone... Shizuka came to the grim realization that she could well die here.

Houdini lunged forward and threw the strongest punch possible in it's weakened state. Golden knuckles smashed into Time in a Bottle's face with a resounding force. His face split open, his third eye sailing off into the air.

"T-Time in a Bottle!" The Stand squeezes his hands tight in a blind panic... everything was reset once more, and Time in a Bottle was intact again.

Lynott breathed a small sigh of relief. "That was close... one more second and that damage would have hit me too." He scratched his chin and looked down from his tall vantage, watching Shizuka stagger forward. As had been the case the last few times, her eyes were drawn to the message she left herself. "To think she could hit that hard when she's so injured... definitely shouldn't underestimate her."

He added another click to his tally.

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It felt as if Ryuji had been running around blind for almost twenty minutes, checking everywhere along Shibuya's busy streets in a bid to find Shizuka. He'd even stopped to ask a few strangers if they'd seen a short girl with sunglasses on.

Those that bothered to reply to him (as Ryuji wasn't a particularly approachable person) had no clues to give him. Shizuka was good at disappearing, but this was getting obnoxious.

"Damnit!" Ryuji skidded to a halt outside the airsoft shop, and resisted a strong urge to put his foot through the nearest window in his frustration. He had a sinking feeling in his stomach, particularly as there had been no update from any of the others, and Shizuka's phone was still inaccessible.

"JoJo, where the hell are you?" he muttered to himself, setting his hands on his hips. He narrowed his eyes and scanned from side to side, racking his brain for any information to go on. He knew Shibuya better than any of the others, all the side streets and little alleys. If Shizuka wasn't at any hotspot, then maybe she was at a more remote area?

Ryuji breathed an agitated sigh. He just had to look at this situation logically, and then maybe he'd get some kind of answer to go on. The problem was, he wasn't much of a 'logic' oriented guy. But if it was to protect one of his friends, he'd make the attempt.

Shizuka had said she was heading over to the hideout, so if anything had happened then it must have been done when she was on the way over. Akira had been stressing using narrow streets to reach the hideout, just to lessen the chance of them being seen. Maybe...

Ryuji reached up and pinched his chin with the thumb and index finger of his right hand. "Maybe somebody had been watching Shizuka's route?" The blond thought long and hard, creating a map of Shibuya in his mind's eye. Thinking on it, there was that string of alleys that ended relatively near their hideout. It was worth a shot.
He took off running, vaulting over a bike railing near the airsoft shop, and continued on sprinting. Ryuji took a sharp right and kept running, weaving down side streets that grew progressively dirtier. This might have been nothing, but it was the best lead Ryuji could think of.

The alleys seemed to grow filthier as he went on, more rundown and abandoned. It made for a handy route to their hideout, unseen, but Ryuji supposed that also made it a handy spot for an ambush if anyone knew about it.

The blond skidded to a halt at one corner, finding himself staring down a long straightway. "There she is!" he said in between quick breaths. He could see her quite a distance away, the outline of her body distinct even from behind. Things definitely didn't look good with how she was slumped halfway against one wall. "Shizuka!"

He took off running, his speed impressive as he made a beeline for her. He was going at such a speed, and gripped with such blind panic, that he didn't notice the air ahead of him shimmering.

Ryuji came skidding to a halt beside Shizuka, immediately crouching down close to her. "Shizuka, are you-" He was nearly bowled over when he saw the bruises on her face, and he could tell from how she was carrying herself that they weren't the only injuries she was sporting. "Holy shit... what happened? Who did this to you?!

"Ryuji?" she looked him in the eye as best she could. "When did you..." She felt a stab in her right arm and looked toward it. "Ryuji you... have to get out of here. There's a Stand user here!" Ryuji examined the scars on her arm, squinting as he tried to read it. "It's English... the guy is rewinding time!"

"Eh?!" Ryuji tensed visibly. So that's what had kept her. Some psycho asshole had been keeping her trapped here, rewinding time. And now, Ryuji supposed, he was stuck here too.

Lynott looked down from his vantage, clicking his tongue against his teeth. "Great, one of her friends is here to spoil everything. Maybe I should bug out..." he mused to himself. "Then again... this could be a useful learning experience. Gives me a chance to see what one of Joestar's friends can do. A-sama might reward me if I give him that extra tidbit."

He grinned broadly, a blossoming aura of purple energy wrapping around his body as Time in a Bottle rose up beside him. "Better yet... if I kill this kid, it'll send a nice message to Joestar and her friends: Don't fuck with us."

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Time in a Bottle shot down, making a beeline toward the blond. Shizuka saw it first, struggling and failing to stand upright. "Ryuji, look out!" she called. He turned slightly in response, his body faintly glowing as Seiten Taisei appeared in front of him. Time in a Bottle's fist lashed across the monkey's face, making his head snap back and forcing a spew of blood out of Ryuji's mouth.

He responded in kind, roughly swinging his staff downward and narrowly missing the smaller figure. The end of the cudgel met the concrete of the ground, shaking the alley on impact and sending a cobweb of cracks erupting from beneath them.

Time in a Bottle shot forward again, burying both fists into Seiten Taisei's abdomen with such force that the wind was knocked out of Ryuji's lungs. But the blond held firm, grit his teeth and powered through the pain. "Eat this!" he snarled, his Persona's whole body glowing before a violent explosion of golden lightning erupted from his body. The explosion hit Time in a Bottle
and drove his smoking body into the concrete, leaving a deep imprint of his body in the ground. "What... the hell..."

His Stand tried to rise up, only to freeze as Seiten Taisei raised his staff again. "Get wrecked!" Ryuji snarled.

"Time in a Bottle!" An burst of inverted light struck the alleyway, rewinding everything once more.

Ryuji came skidding to a halt beside Shizuka, immediately crouching down close to her. "Shizuka, are you-" He grunted, clutching his stomach tight. "The hell...?" He raised his red shirt, examining two purple bruises that had formed on his abs. "Where did those come from?!"

Lynott grimaced and clicked his device again. "Seventeen," he idly remarked. "The hell kind of Stand was that? It was like punching a slab of granite... Hrmph. Electricity powers too... a dangerous combination. I should test this kid a little too, let A-sama know how dangerous Joestar's friends might be."

Down below, Shizuka tried to stand only to immediately slump down against the wall. She took in a few deep breaths and examined their surroundings. "Ryuji, there's... a Stand user in this alley, and he's very dangerous... Don't think I can do much right now."

Ryuji grit his teeth and glanced around sharply. "Don't worry, I'm gonna get you outta-"

"If it were easy to run away, I would've done it in one of the loops..." Shizuka shook her head. "We have to beat this guy. That's... that's the... the only way outta this."

She looked to her side, well aware of the short Stand rocketing toward them. Ryuji glared at the incoming figure, summoning Seiten Teisei to his side. "Don't worry, I got this... Let's tear 'em a new one Seiten Taisei!" he roared.

The first two swings of his staff went wide, the cudgel being deftly avoided by the short figure nimbly weaving around. The third swing smashed the ground, a shockwave hitting into Time in a Bottle and knocking him a few feet backward. Seiten Taisei growled loudly and swung his free hand forward, launching out an arc of lightning that narrowly missed and struck the ground behind Time in a Bottle, lighting the alleyway in a violent flash.

Time in a Bottle managed to close the gap and struck the floating monkey with a powerful right hook, violently snapping Ryuji's head to the side. "Ghhk!" The next punch however was deftly caught, with Seiten Taisei roughly swinging his target by the arm and smashing him spine first into the concrete.

"T-Time-" Shizuka watched as the Stand tried to clench his hands, only to be forced to leap away as Seiten Taisei's cudgel struck where he had been standing mere moments ago.

'What was he going to...' Shizuka paused, and through slightly blurring vision she could just about see the growths protruding from the enemy Stand's palms. Were those supposed to be buttons? 'Is that how his power works? He needs to squeeze those things?'

It wasn't much to go on, but if it was the case then it was the best bet they had for making it out of this. Shizuka lifted her left hand, wincing as Houdini drew a concise 'X' shape on her palm. A few dribbles of blood oozed from the fresh cuts.
Akira was beginning to feel the worry settle in. There had been no word from Shizuka, nothing from the other members of their little search party, and nothing from the guys still at the hideout. And to top it all off, he was turning up zilch too.

By now the dark-haired boy was certain something had happened. No way this was just a case of Shizuka being sidetracked. By now he wanted to make a dash for her home just to be sure she wasn't there... but if she wasn't, he didn't want to be the one to put her butler/guardian in a state of worry. That wouldn't help matters.

He only wished he knew Shibuya better. He had no idea where to look, but he was sure she had to have been around here when she sent that message. He clicked his tongue in his mouth in annoyance.

"Oh. What a pleasant surprise."

The refined voice made him pause, and he proceeded to glance over his shoulder. Goro Akechi. "Ah, the detective," Akira said, turning slightly. "This isn't really the best time for a chat."

"Keeping busy I take it? You do have a rather active group of friends."

Akira's eyes narrowed ever-so-slightly. "Oh? Been keeping tabs on me?" Akira idly asked.

Akechi chuckled pleasantly. "You seem tense. You and your friends do tend to stick out, no matter where you go. Two with gold hair, one with blue hair... it makes for a distinguished crowd," he said.

Well... Akira supposed he had a point. More than once they had hung out around Shibuya or Aoyama-itchome in a casual sense. And he knew Akechi travelled around the city extensively. Maybe he was just overreacting and seeing danger in every shadow.

But really, it was hard to not be a little on edge with things being the way they were.

"Well, I won't keep you. I have business of my own to attend to... but I do hope we can chat again in the future." Smiling pleasantly he strode off, answering a call on his phone as he went.

Akira breathed a small sigh once he was alone. Akechi was damn good at making Akira feel ill at ease. He couldn't even describe why. Whenever they met, always by complete chance, he was the model of a gentleman. But something about him...

The dark-haired boy brushed the thought aside and drew his own phone. He typed a quick text to Ryuji and fired it off, hoping the blond had been having better look.

Almost at once he received a message in return that made his blood run cold.

'User is not available.'
a hand over his bruised abdomen. He was wincing with his left eye, a purple bruise distinctly forming on that side of his head.

"Son of a..."

"Ryuji...?" Shizuka glanced up, seeing her close friend. She was trying to rise, but her legs weren't responding too kindly to the suggestion. "There's a..."

"Yes yes, 'there's a Stand user in this alley.' Heard it all before." Time in a Bottle floated above the two, three eyes glaring sharply down at them. "Honestly, you two are starting to sound like broken records."

"You-!" Shizuka clenched her left fist, wincing then from a sudden stab of pain the action caused. She opened her hand, cautiously examining her bloodied palm. An x-shaped scar? Was that something she got in one of the fights earlier? No, it seemed too precise. Almost as if it had been carved with one of Houdini's pointed fingers. But if so, why? Another message to herself?

Shizuka glanced at their floating foe, examining him with great detail. Her attention drifted to Time in a Bottle's hands, noticing the strange rounded growths protruding from the Stand's palms. At once an idea clicked in her head. A dangerous one, but one that could be a great benefit if it worked.

"Ryuji..." She motioned the blond to lean in a little closer, her tone dropping to a soft whisper. "That guy... is the enemy Stand. I need you to... to keep it busy, but don't damage it. And I need you to... keep your Persona's back to the right wall. Understand?" She whispered a few extra details to him, making sure he had a good idea of what she had in mind.

"I don't quite get it, but... I'll do my best," he told her. Ryuji rose up fully, glaring as Seiten Taisei materialized in front of him. "Alright shitbag! Come at me!"

"With pleasure, you overgrown ape!"

Seiten Taisei pressed its back against the wall as instructed, bracing as a flurry of punches struck against it's upraised cudgel. The noisy impacts echoed down the alley.

Drawing on the strength she had left, Shizuka directed her unseen Stand down the alleyway. Houdini quickly stole one of the abandoned pipes and made a beeline up for the abandoned washing lines. She only had one shot at this, and if she fucked up... well she didn't want to think of the consequences.

Seiten Taisei suddenly caught the enemy Stand's wrists, holding them firmly. "Hrr... and just what do you think this is going to accomplish? You can't keep me restrained!"

With some effort, Houdini positioned the pipe roughly in the middle of the washing line and started pulling backward. The line went back further and further, the tension mounting as she loaded this makeshift crossbow, aiming for Time in a Bottle's hands.

"Thing is dude," Ryuji slyly remarked "I don't need to do this for very long."

Houdini's aim steadied, pointing clearly at her mark. The line snapped, the pipe sailing through the air at an immense speed.
The world seemed to stand still as the steel bar penetrated through Time in a Bottle's hands, flesh exploding out of his palms with the length of steel now lodged in his grasp. "Ghhh..." His three eyes widened, unable to look away from his destroyed hands.

A sharp scream tore through the air, echoing off the rooftops, quickly drawing the attention of Shizuka and Ryuji. But ultimately, it was drowned out by the hustle and bustle of the surrounding city. Now they noticed a man standing high on a roof above them, staring at a pair of hands that now had two gaping, bleeding holes in them.

"Well now..." Shizuka managed a grin, forcing herself to stand on wobbling legs. "Looks like time is on our side!"
"That's the guy huh..." Ryuji narrowed his eyes, trying to keep his anger somewhat in check. But any guy who beat up on one of his friends, and a girl at that, was the kind of scum Ryuji really couldn't abide. He'd be shaking answers from this guy... even if Seiten Taisei had to rough him up a bit in the process.

Cause hey, he couldn't risk leaving fingerprints on the guy.

His Persona moved to the far wall and gave it a smack with his cudgel, sending a tremor up the building that rattled the ground under Lynott's feet. He fell from on high, screaming, until the cloud-mounted monkey caught him by the collar at the halfway point and held him aloft. Seiten Taisei leaned in, grinning broadly.

"Alright asshole... time for you to fess up! Why were you attacking my friend?"

"C-come on man," Lynott said, his eyes wide and his face smeared with sweat. "L-look at my hands! I need a doctor or something, quick!"

"Yeah? Well the longer you take, then the longer I'm gonna take to call an ambulance." Ryuji was bluffing. He knew he'd be calling an ambulance ASAP for Shizuka's sake (and for himself too, once the twinge in his ribs returned with a vengeance).

Shizuka nodded. "You didn't do this just for the hell of it... so who sent you?" she growled.

Seiten Taisei's fist cracked Lynott across the face, a spew of blood shooting from his lips and coating his Persona's knuckles. Lynott coughed noisily, glaring down at Ryuji. "Okay okay! Chill!" he said in a panicked tone. "But if I tell you, he... he'll kill me!"

"You really think we won't?" Shizuka was bluffing, of course. But with fury evident in her expression, she managed to be rather convincing with the act.

Lynott coughed up a gob of blood, crimson droplets oozing down his chin. "F-fine. Just take it easy, alright? I attacked ya c-cause... Cause Mr. A wanted me to test you!" That name again. Shizuka supposed that was one prospect that had been lingering in the back of her mind since this craziness began.

And she supposed she only had invited this kind of trouble for herself. If there were Stand using criminals in Japan, then there was a strong likelihood that her last name turned quite a few heads on her way in. Then again, Shizuka didn't have too many other options when it came to her name. She had no idea what her mother's maiden name was (She was all but certain it wasn't just 'Q') and naturally she had no idea what her birth name was, if her folks had given her one to start with.

She had drawn the eye of a crime boss primarily through her surname. But why attack her? Or 'test' her in this case. Was it possible that A had been related to Kaneshiro's death? Was he assuming she was related to the Arditi?

The guy was perceptive, if that were the case. Or perhaps he knew she was just going to be magnetically drawn to the extraordinary.
"Who is Mr. A? Where can we find him?" Shizuka asked.

"Ha... even I don't know that much. I'm an underling, one of his many fingers... but even if I knew that, even if you were gonna kill me... I still wouldn't tell you. A-sama puts a lot of stock in keeping his identity a secret, and I don't even want to think of what he'd do to any fucker who tried giving that name away." He gave a pained laugh, only to clench his teeth as the pain in his hands flared up again.

No luck getting information on that front. All they knew was who sent him, but they had no idea how to get to the source of the order. "Why did he send you after me?"

"Didn't... specify." He spat a stray blob of blood onto the ground, still dangling in Seiten Taisei's strong grasp. "This ain't right! Call me a damn ambulance!" He writhed in the air, kicking against the towering monkey, until something fell from his trouser pocket and skidded toward the young thieves.

"Huh?" Ryuji reached down and scooped the small silver object into his hands, examining it with great scrutiny. "This is one of those... whatchamacallit? It's like, you press a button and it counts a number on it."

Shizuka moved closer, peering at the device in his grip. "Twenty," she read aloud, before glaring at Lynott. "Were you keeping track of how many loops you put me through? Did you kick my ass twenty goddamn times?!"

Lynott swallowed hard "N-now, let's not be hasty he-"

Shizuka grimaced and glanced to her friend. "Dude... I don't even think I can throw a punch right now... you mind dumping this trash?" she asked.

"With pleasure!" Ryuji proudly said. Lynott shrieked as Seiten Taisei's grip loosened on his collar. The monkey's left fist pummeled his chest with several rapid punches, bouncing Lynott in the air vigorously, before hitting him with a brief tap from his cudgel. Lynott squealed through the air until he smashed into the dumpster, denting it on impact. He slumped against it, groaning weakly.

Ryuji examined him and snorted, slipping his phone from his pocket. "Serves you right asshole. Okay, I'm gonna tell the others I found you and then call an ambulance, alright?"

"Sounds... good..." Shizuka staggered and felt her legs give way, only barely being caught when Ryuji's left arm wrapped around her shoulders.

"W-whoa! Okay just hang on, we'll get you patched up in no time!"

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It took some doing to pull all the right strings but, as ever, the Speedwagon Foundation were on hand to help. They handled getting Lynott put into a hospital ('Damndest thing don't you know, he was working on a roof and fell right off. Hit that dumpster and must have got his hands caught in a pipe on the way down!') and then had Ryuji and Shizuka brought to a Speedwagon clinic. The rest of the Arditi had followed soon after.

The sun was setting by the time Lifeson finished tending to them, evident from the dull orange light filtering into the small white room. It was of a decent size, but by now the room was rather
cramped from all the people currently in it.

"Some bruises and minor fractures aside, you're going to be fine in a day or two. Just take two pills a day, one in the morning and one at night, and Panacea's power will resolve things quickly enough," Lifeson explained. He then gestured to a freshly applied bandage over Shizuka's right forearm. "The scarring there might take a little longer to heal. But just keep it covered and everything will be fine. As for you, Mr. Sakamoto, your bruises will heal up quickly too. No need to worry."

"Thanks doc," Shizuka replied, managing a small smile. Panacea's pills had managed to restore some of her lost energy, but she still felt as heavy as a ton of bricks. "Sorry about the inconvenience. Didn't think I'd be getting my ass kicked today," she said.

Lifeson shrugged his broad shoulders. "Hah. Think nothing of it, I live to help people."

"I must say, your Japanese has really improved Lifeson-san," Shiho said, smiling kindly at her former physician.

"Hah, really? Well I decided to double down on my classes since the Foundation wanted me to stick around in Tokyo. I guess they foresaw Shizuka running into trouble," he explained.

Yusuke, leaning against one wall, slowly examined Lifeson while stroking his chin in thought. "So your Stand ability allows you to heal people?" the bluenette asked.

Lifeson nodded. "To an extent. My Stand infuses objects with a healing essence that travels through the recipient, repairing damage or major imperfections in the body. Though I can't, say, use it to help a person grow a new hand or anything like that." His attention shifted back to Ryuji. "Speaking of, Panacea sensed some lingering damage in one of your knees. So that should fully pass soon too," he explained.

The revelation made Ryuji blink in mild surprise. "Oh uh... thanks man." He hadn't thought much about his old injury in recent months. Not when the injury was practically gone in the Metaverse, but if he could be at his peak in reality too... The news made Shiho smile warmly.

"Well, I've got other patients that need tending to. I'd be more than happy to patch you guys up whenever you need me, but ah... well, do try to avoid being messed up too badly, yeah?"

"Of course. Thanks for everything," Ann said, smiling and giving him a small bow as he passed.

Now alone, the group shared a mutual sigh of relief. They had dodged a bullet today, and come rather close to disaster. Yusuke kept his focus on the door for a few moments, still dwelling on the foreign doctor. "A power like his... he could live like a king if he chose to. It's strange to think that he prefers this more secretive lifestyle."

"He's a pretty nice guy. Actually made me laugh when we met with how poor his Japanese was... I think he was doing it deliberately though, and it worked. It had been a... a long time since I laughed," Shiho admitted. Smiling, Ann gave her best friend's shoulder a small squeeze. She returned to the present moment quickly enough. "You two got dinged pretty bad though... can I get you guys anything?"

"Nah, I'm good Shiho," Shizuka replied, trying to wave off her concerns.
Ryuji nodded. "Right. I'm fine too, just gotta wait for this medicine to kick in."

Akira came to a halt by the examination table, his attention affixed to the Shizuka and Ryuji. "I'm glad you're both alright... sorry that I didn't arrive to help out."

"Eh, don't sweat it man. Though you prolly would smashed that effin' shithead even faster than I did."

Makoto halted by the other side of the table, her hand settled on Shizuka's shoulder. "How're you holding up? That guy really went to town on you..." There was clear sadness in her expression, despite Makoto's attempts to remain strong. "I should have been there to help you."

"It only hurts when I laugh. Or breath," Shizuka said, forcing a smile. She was trying her best to alleviate Makoto's worries, but clearly it wasn't working.

"Makoto raises a good point... from here on out, it might be too dangerous to go down empty streets alone. I don't like admitting it, but we should try and stick to main streets in the future. If we have to go into less populated areas, don't do it alone. Even if it's just going around with one other member of the team." The others nodded at Akira's suggestion.

"Right. Getting attacked by a Stand user prolly isn't gonna be a one time thing," Ann mused. The others silently agreed with her worries. "Who was that guy anyway? And why did he come after you?"

Shizuka gave a long sigh. "The Speedwagon Foundation got his first name from the hospital he was sent to. 'Lynott.' He's a foreigner, and they're trying to run a background check on the guy. As for why he came at me..." Shizuka hesitated, clasping her hands together in her lap. "He was sent by a guy calling himself Mr. A. Some kinda Stand-using mobster. But Mr. A sent him after me specifically 'cause of my last name... I have a theory that Kaneshiro was one of his boys, and now he's looking into the Arditi. So he's thinking 'hey, supernatural people interfering with my plans. Bet there's a Joestar involved.' And if that's the case, then... then I'm sorry. I invited a shitton of trouble..."

"Don't worry about it," Akira assured her quickly. "We knew going in that we'd be drawing attention as we moved onto bigger targets, so this shouldn't come as too big a shock. And if Kaneshiro was one of his, it's possible he was involved in Kaneshiro's death. So... I guess it was only a matter of time before we encountered the guy."

"You're apologizing for being attacked? You are perhaps being a little hard on yourself," Yusuke mused. Ann nodded in agreement.

Shizuka felt her sunglasses slide down the bridge of her nose. "Geez... here I am being apologetic, and you guys manage to steal my thunder..." She snickered, shaking her head slightly. "Man... I've never had friends as good as you guys."

Ryuji slowly pushed himself off the table, wincing just a bit as his feet hit the floor. For as small as Time in a Bottle was, those little fists packed a wallop. "Don't go getting all mushy JoJo. It'll ruin that tough image you like so much."

"Psh. Don't you worry, I'm still tough as they come." She grinned again, doing her best to appear confident. But inwardly she felt set to throw up, and it was taking an awful lot of self control to avoid shaking.
"That reminds me, there was something about that fight I think I should tell you guys. I think... we're weaker here than in the Metaverse." The others tensed at the news, while Ryuji continued on. "It's like... in a Palace, if you get punted into a wall you can just like, walk it off. But here, every punch hurt like hell."

"It's a result of cognition." All eyes turned to Morgana, seated on the floor and washing behind his left ear with the corresponding paw. "In the Metaverse we all see ourselves as daring thieves, with that confidence and mental image making us tougher, faster, and stronger. Think of it this way: In the Metaverse I'm nimble, speedy and a deadeye with a slingshot. But in reality, I'm a cat. Er, a person stuck in the body of a cat. A very wise and handsome person stu-"

Makoto cut him off, sighing loudly. "So if we wound up fighting in the real world, we need to be extra cautious. I would personally recommend avoiding fighting if possible, but I doubt this 'Mr. A' would be so considerate."

The thought made Shiho grimace from her position by the right wall. "And we have no weapons in reality too. Then again, a naginata is hard to conceal. It's not like we could get away with hiding that stuff under our school uniforms."

"We could try getting real weapons! Like switchblades and junk!" Ryuji said.

"No," Makoto said, her tone flat and firm.

Just as Akira was starting to mull the prospect over, the door opened behind them. All eyes turned as a woman entered the room. A short and somewhat plain woman who had a kindly face, her dark hair tied back in a neat bun. There was a tiredness in her expression. She was dressed for business in a white blouse and dark skirt, but she seemed off duty at the moment. Her eyes settled on Ryuji, and relief washed over her face. "Ryuji-kun! You're okay!"

The blond breathed a small sigh. "Hey ma..." He knew the clinic had put some calls out, standard procedure, but he hadn't been looking forward to this. He loved his mother, he'd take a bullet for her, but he'd freely admit that Yumi Sakamoto could embarrass him like nobody else.

She took a few steps into the room, pausing by Ann and Shiho. "Oh, Ann-chan, Shiho-san. It's been so long, you've both grown so much!"

"Aha..." Shiho scratched the back of her head stiffly. "It's nice to see you again, Sakamoto-san. W-well, we should give you guys some privacy." Best to bow out before any awkward conversation topics could bubble up in the middle of this.

Nodding, Yusuke led the way out with Ann, Morgana, and Shiho following after. Makoto stayed by Shizuka's side for the time being. As Akira went to leave, Yumi examined him closely. "Are you... Akira-kun, by any chance?" Ryuji tensed slightly.

"Ah, yes I am."

"Oh! It's so nice to meet you! Ryuji speaks the world of you, like you're the brother he never had," Yumi enthusiastically said. Ryuji groaned, burying his crimson face in his palms.

Akira snickered slightly. "Oh? Well, I'm glad to hear that Sakamoto-san. I hope we can get to know each other in the future." He didn't know much about Ryuji's mother on a personal level, but with
how strongly Ryuji cared for her, it was clear she was a heck of a woman. "But, ah, I shouldn't linger. I'm glad you're both alright."

The dark-haired boy went to leave, but for as good as things had turned out he was still on edge. They were venturing into uncharted waters, and already they were surrounded by sharks.

Yumi approached her son. "The doctor on the phone told me that you'd been in a fight and I... and I rushed here as quickly as I could. What happened?"

"Some punk on the street attacked me but Ryuji jumped in and save me." Shizuka said. Hey, it was mostly true. "You've got a great son Sakamoto-san."

Yumi blinked slightly. She certainly believed in how good her son was, but this was the first time in a long while that anyone had shared the sentiment. "Yes, I really do," she said, giving Ryuji a brief hug. He sighed faintly, but accepted the gesture regardless.

The door opened once again, and Shizuka grimaced as Simmons rushed in. He looked a little short of breath, but stood to attention immediately once he saw his young charge. "Hey... Simmons..." she said with some awkwardness.

Yumi glanced over her shoulder at the butler. "Hm? Are you her... father?"

It took a few moments for Simmons to process the sentence. He had put a good deal of effort toward learning Japanese, but it was still a challenge to use it in casual conversation. "Not exactly. I am her... her butler," he said. Yumi nodded, though she seemed a little surprised to learn one of Ryuji's friends had her own butler. He approached Shizuka and breathed a sigh of relief. "Are you okay? Someone must have assaulted you..."

"I'm fine. This is nothi-"

"Shizuka." Simmons voice was firmer than Shizuka was used to, making her halt entirely. "I really wish you wouldn't treat me like an idiot. This... none of this is 'nothing.'"

Shizuka looked down at her feet in some shame. "That's not... I don't think you're an idiot or anything, I just didn't want you worrying about me," she murmured.

"It's my job to worry about you. No, it's my imperative to." The older man sighed, thinking back through the years. He used to not have to worry about Shizuka, particularly in her childhood years when she was afraid of making friends. Back then they lived in a bloody ivory tower in New York, away from any trouble. Now though, trouble seemed to be following Shizuka like a stray dog. "I love you as much as I love my own daughter. So... I wish you could trust me more in matters like these."

Shizuka kept her eyes on her feet. "Sorry," she murmured.

"I'm just glad you're alright. I'll have to cook you something special this evening. But first, I have some paperwork to attend to out front."

"Me too," Yumi said, sighing softly. "I was never very good at signing forms though, I always get very nervous about it... oh well!"

The two adults left the room, and Ryuji followed suit. This left Shizuka and Makoto alone for the
time being. Shizuka tried to stand, her arms shaking as she worked to push herself away from the examination table. "You... you okay?" Makoto asked, sitting down beside the dark haired girl.

Shizuka reached up, drying her eyes with the back of her right wrist. "Shit... hurts to cry with my face jacked up..." she murmured. As they were mostly alone, the fear of the past day was finally settling in, and she started to shake and tremble. "Putting you guys in danger... Ryuji getting banged up 'cause of me... Now Simmons thinks I don't trust him. It's... it's been a hell of a day."

Makoto settled a hand between Shizuka's shoulder blades, giving her back a few soothing strokes. "You're too hard on yourself. You're not at fault for being attacked, and your butler is just... worried about you. I know my sister would be too, if I was in your position."

"Heh. You may be right. But it's hard not to feel bad about this..." She sighed and closed her eyes tight. "Couldn't even beat one lousy scumbag on my own... sh-shit, guess I must seem pretty pathetic right now."

"Come on, don't talk about yourself like that. You went twenty rounds against that man. And that's just... incredible! I doubt I would have been able to fight half as long." She gave a warm smile and settled a strong arm around Shizuka's shoulders, giving them a modest squeeze. "But... I get the feeling there's more to this. So, please, if there's something on your mind... I'm all ears."

After a moment Shizuka managed to open her eyes. Makoto being by her side like this felt so nice and it managed to melt away some of the anxiety. "There was... a time in that alleyway, where I thought I was going to die. Even with Ryuji there, some horrible part of my brain was telling me that we couldn't win. We'd had nasty scrapes in the Metaverse, and sticky situations too, but this felt different. Hell, even the other Stand users I fought didn't hurt me this badly. The first guy got way too cocky and underestimated me, and I had Sergio with me for the other nutcase. This time it felt 'real' with how harsh my injuries were. And I thought... I thought 'Am I really gonna die in some alley?'"

Makoto nodded along. "I can imagine it being scary. If what Morgana says is true, then we must be a lot more confident in the Metaverse as well as more powerful. I'd be scared too, but you're not alone in this. And if you need someone by your side... then I'd be happy to be that person."

Shizuka smiled softly. "You're a hell of a friend Prez. I'd feel sorry for any guy giving me grief with you around."

Makoto chuckled slightly. "I'm not that scary, am I?" The duo shared a brief laugh, before Makoto moved to stand and helped Shizuka to her feet. "Come on, let's get you home. Hopefully without someone jumping you this time."

"Right," Shizuka replied. As they made for the door, she glanced to the slightly taller brunette. "We all still going to the fireworks festival?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world."

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7/15

Club Ravana had been a popular spot since the eighties, but it was only after being acquired by a new owner that it truly evolved into a decadent den for all of Tokyo's highest flyers. CEO's,
brokers, major players in the yakuza... any man with fat wads of yen to burn was welcome here, and many did so gladly. Simply being let through the door was seen as a symbol of status these days.

But ultimately, there was no higher symbol of power than being allowed into the top floor of the club. On the surface it was simply described as a 'VIP' area, the kind that few souls had ever seen the inside of.

In reality, it was a common meeting place for Mr. A and his Deadly Aspects.

Lars had breezed through the front door without any protest from the bouncer, much to the chagrin of the people who had been waiting outside for the better part of an hour, and had made a beeline for the express elevator at the back of the club. It only opened with the use of a special keycard, one that he carried on hand at all times.

The ride up to the seventh floor was a quick one, thumping music occasionally leaking through the walls of the heavy steel box that encased him. But he ignored it, as he did every time he came here.

The doors opened to reveal a large ringed room, the floors covered in a plush red carpet while the walls were painted a pristine white. There was a bar to the right edge of the wall, the shelves loaded with alcohol of most every shade and stripe. A few different lounges were positioned around the room, with one at the shaded far end of the room being occupied.

"Ah, Lars. So glad you could make it." The deep voice made Lars tense ever so slightly, but soon drew him in like a moth to a flame. "It's been far too long since you were in the country. But, then again, I did need you to attend to those other matters abroad."

"Of course, A-sama."

Currently four people were seated at the semi-circle of plush black couches, two expensive bottles of half-finished liquor resting on the table between them. At the left hand couch was a sharply dressed man with swept back brown hair. His white coat was draped over the back of the couch while the top buttons of his black shirt were undone. Toshi Okabe acted as a personal assistant of sorts to Mr. A, overseeing much of the intelligence network that their organization used. Not that he wasn't dangerous in his own right. "Gunsche-san. Hard at work as ever," he said calmly. Lars nodded in return.

Seated at the right was the oldest man in the room, likely pushing sixty by now. All the same he was broadly built and looked as if he could snap a person in half. He was dressed relatively well in a crisp maroon suit, a few gold chains resting around his thick neck. Between the harsh gaze, the scar that looped around the outside of his right eye, and the pockmarks on his right cheek, the guy had 'yakuza' written all over him. But, if the look wasn't enough of a giveaway, the fact that his left hand was missing a little finger was definitely proof enough for most.

In his right hand he held a skinning knife, the edge of the blade perpetually glowing red hot. He brought the blade to the cigarette perched in his cracked lips, until a smoldering orange glow hit the tip and thin wisps of smoke started to filter from the tip.

"Sanshiro-san," Lars said, directing a pointed look to the older man. "Club Ravana has a no-smoking policy. And I don't personally abide rule breakers in one of A-sama's clubs."

"That so, Lars?" He brought the knife away from the cigarette, pointing the tip toward the sharply
dressed foreigner. "American II." The blade morphed in his hand, taking the form of a sleek silver flintlock pistol. Lars slowly reached for the breast pocket of his shirt, gripping a neatly folded triangle of paper in his right hand. An inky black mass began to form over his digits and then his whole hand, taking the form of a writhing glove. A swivelling eye had formed on the back of his hand, looking all around him. "Gonna give me some grief over it?"

"If I must."

From his shaded seat, Mr. A chuckled softly. "Lars, Hideki... come now boys, no need to fight. We can bend the rules here." Lars nodded at his employers words, slipping the paper back into place. Sanshiro resumed smoking, his Stand vanishing from his grasp.

"Hmph. Eurotrash has been back for five minutes, and already he's killing the mood." The voice that addressed him was soft and feminine, coming from a short and slender figure currently pressed into Mr. A's right side. She was blonde and young, looking like she could make for the best hostess in town if she wanted to be. Her golden sequin dress contoured nicely to her body, and clearly it was being worn for Mr. A more so than anyone else. She looked to be in her early twenties, but was clearly confident beyond her years. A sinister air hung around her, for as pretty and innocent as she looked.

A small plush panda doll was resting on the chair beside her. Lars watched it warily for a few seconds, his posture still stiff. "Honestly... why do you keep him around?" the blonde asked, leaning into A's side.

Mr. A leaned a little forward, revealing the crisp material of his pinstriped black suit. His jawline was strong and partially shaven, marked by a thin layer of pale stubble. "Now now Miwa-chan, be nice. Lars can be a little stiff, but he's devoutly loyal. He's my closest friend," he admitted. "So by all means Lars, take a seat so we can get down to business."

"Of course sir," he replied. Finding Okabe to be the most tolerable of the Aspects, Lars took a seat beside him.

The well groomed assistant nodded at the group. "Lynott has been defeated. Bested by Shizuka Joestar. I believe one of her friends was also on the scene, but my agent didn't get a good look at him. Just described him as blond."

"Eh? Like Morihiro's foreign friend?" Sanshiro asked.

Toshi shook his head. "No. Different uniform. There's more too. Apparently Lynott's hands were destroyed in the fight, enabling Time in a Bottle's defeat."

"Disappointing. Without that power, Lynott is useless to me. We'll have to cut him loose," Mr. A remarked simply.

"Kill him, or give him a severance package to leave the country?" Lars asked.

Mr. A shrugged his broad shoulders. "Depends on how much he told them. I don't doubt that they asked him some questions, and how much he told them will strongly impact his welfare."

"Ahh... real shame there. He was pretty handy as a hitman," Sanshiro idly remarked. He removed his cigarette from his mouth, tipping a large chunk of ash into the tray.
"You know, he was planning on trying to replace one of us as a Deadly Aspect," Toshi interjected.

"Eh? Fuck him then. Fill his pockets with corn and toss him to the pigs."

After some thought, Mr. A turned his focus to Lars. "Well, we know the hospital he's staying at. Think you can get in there and get to the root of the matter?" Lars nodded firmly.

"Ehhh? I could totally do it honey! They'd never notice me sneaking in and killing him!" Miwa said, pouting up at the larger man.

Toshi snorted. "You're about as subtle as Fukushima. More than that, you're still the newest member here. You're not in a position to decide which jobs you take," he explained.

His curt assessment made Miwa grimace. "I'd have more seniority if Ai-chan had just bowed out gracefully! But the stubborn hag just had to cling on past her prime!" Mr. A was a man who appreciated having a beautiful woman on his arm. A beautiful, dangerous woman with a Stand of her own. Miwa was just the most recent, but the other men got the distinct feeling she wouldn't be usurped any time soon.

"Regardless, this girl could be dangerous. Particularly if she and a friend could handle Lynott... resourceful too. For now we should hang back and observe, see if we can get more information on 'em. If she and her pals are the 'Phantom Thieves', then we'll have to deal with them. But, not just yet. Shido-san wants 'em to build some fame first, before kicking their legs out from under them."

"Hm?" Lars looked up slightly. "How do you mean?"

"He didn't give me all the details, but... let's just say that the higher those thieves climb, the harder they're gonna fall."

After a moment, Sanshiro fully stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray. "Well, in that case, we done for tonight? I got a date lined up with two college girls. Told 'em I can get the two onto the idol scene," he said.

"Eh? Can you?" Toshi asked in genuinely surprised.

Sanshiro shrugged his broad shoulders. "That all depends on them, don't it?"

"Hmph. Well, no matter. You can be at ease for now and just go about your usual tasks. In time we'll have to deal with those Phantom Thieves properly. But for now, having gotten a taste of what they're capable of, we don't need to worry too much," Mr. A remarked.

But, A would freely admit that he was more excited now than he had been in several years.
The truth was that Shiho was only doing this to put her mother's worries at ease. She had been trying to get Shiho to change schools, something that the dark-haired girl had been adamantly against for several reasons. Agreeing to go to therapy was her compromise, something to put her parents at ease and get them to drop the idea of changing schools.

Still, her dissatisfaction was clear as she laid back on the couch in the therapist's office, her fingers netted together over her abdomen. Her eyes were affixed to the ceiling, while the doctor finished setting some paperwork on her desk. It was a nice enough office, the walls a deep blue colour while the plush dark carpet muted any footsteps. The bookshelf that took up the entirety of the wall beside her was laden with heavy leatherbound books, each one having an immensely detailed title on the spine. Shiho doubted she'd even get through the titles of some without being put to sleep.

Having finished sorting her paperwork, the doctor strode over to the chair by the couch and sat down casually. She was a nice young woman, pleasant enough so far. What surprised Shiho was how youthful she seemed. She was a tall young woman, smartly dressed in a dark sweater and white trousers, her red hair tied in a long braid that went over her right shoulder. Having taken her seat, she raised a notepad to her hand. "So, Suzui-san... how have you been?"

"Ah... I'm doing quite fine, Doctor Kazama." Well, it was mostly true. Still, it seemed an awkward way to start. No doubt her past was going to be a hard thing to bring up.

"Yes well I've heard that things have been rather hectic at Shujin recently. How have you been handling that? Must be tough."

"You mean with Kamoshida, right?" Kazama nodded curtly. "He's going to jail, likely for a long time. Even if he gets out early, his reputation is totally ruined. So, yeah, I'm pretty happy about that. Same with the other volleyball players."

Doctor Kazama made a brief note without taking her eyes off Shiho. "It must be nice, having some kind of closure. Even so, I can't even imagine how horrible the previous months must have been."

By now most every news outlet had given some details of Kamoshida's crimes, and his own 'style' of coaching. Now everyone was talking about how horrible it all was, and asking how it could have gone unnoticed for so long. Shiho bitterly noted that if it had mattered to those same people, what was going on at Shujin should have been obvious to any outsider looking in.

Athletes didn't get that banged up from any normal kind of practice.

"Am I glad he's going to jail? Of course I am. Am I glad that stigma's going to be with him till he dies? He's earned it. But... thinking on it, I'm not fully happy," Shiho admitted. "Cause, whenever I think about what happened, I think about how stupid I was. How I let things get as bad as they did... I could have left at any time, but I didn't. I was afraid to actually face the problem or try to move away from it, and it just built and built until... well, you know what happened."

Kazama nodded again. "You shouldn't be so hard on yourself. Fear is a powerful force that often makes us act against our own self-interests. What is important is that you've been working to
overcome those fears. Speaking so openly about Kamoshida now is a clear sign of that," she explained. "But, as to what happened... how have things been at Shujin? I understand your mother has wanted you to change schools?"

A small sigh escaped Shiho. She spent a few moments trying to get comfy on the couch, an act that seemed impossible at the moment. What she wouldn't give to be out with the guys. Looking into Madarame would be far more enjoyable than this...

"Truthfully? It hasn't come up much. Yet. Between exams and Kamoshida's arrest, that's all most people at Shujin have been talking about. Sometimes people stare, or say something behind my back but... I really don't care what people like that think." She shrugged faintly. "I can't change schools. No, scratch that... I don't want to change schools. If I do that, I'm just running away from another problem."

"That's definitely admirable," Kazama assured her. "I'll freely admit that facing your problems can be a daunting prospect, but it's a healthy course of action."

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6/4

It wasn't that Shiho enjoyed these sessions, or really looked forward to them, but she had grown to see them as something of a necessity. Getting a Persona had probably been the best thing to happen to her, and overcoming her own Shadow had helped a good deal. But when it came down to it, she still had her hangups over what happened at Shujin.

Doctor Kazama was a good listener and managed to be impartial. Some of the things on her mind felt too, for want of a better word, embarrassing to talk about even with Ann. So in order to get things off her chest, Doctor Kazama was as good a person as any to talk to.

"So how have you been lately, Suzui-san?" Kazama asked, taking up her usual seat.

"Pretty good, honestly. Made a new friend." Dealing with Madarame's Palace had taken up a great deal of time, coupled with the various little Mementos requests they tidied up in their spare time. Now that they had changed his heart, it was only a matter of time before he confessed to the world. And when that happened... well it would be big for the Arditi but, more than that, it would also mean they had helped plenty of people out.

"Oh? Someone from Shujin?" she casually asked.

Shiho hummed slightly, mentally arranging the best way to describe Yusuke. She wouldn't have to be too detailed, thankfully, "He's someone from another school. Kosei. We kinda just... ran into him one day, and hit it off." She chuckled a little "Ah, it's kinda strange, but he's a bit like me and the rest of the guys. He had a crappy abusive teacher too."

Kazama nodded. "I imagine you had something in common. But it is good to know you're expanding your relationships and making new friends."

"Speaking of friends..." Shiho hesitated for a moment. "Doctor Kazama, have you ever had something that you couldn't talk to your best friend about?"

"On occasion. There are times where there matters on your mind so personal that, ironically you
feel you can't talk about them to the people closest to you. It's so personal you're afraid of what they might think."

Well, it was reassuring to know that the feeling wasn't exclusive to her. "Well... I've told you about Ann before, right? My best friend? Yeah... Kamoshida was targeting her. He was really not subtle about it, and Ann kind of..." Shiho gave a weary sigh. It sucked even thinking about the situation. "The thing is, Ann partially 'played along' because Kamoshida hinted that my position on the volleyball team would be at risk. It never went too far, thank god, but... knowing Ann went that far for me... it's reassuring, but it also makes me feel so guilty whenever I think about it. That she was stuck in such a crappy situation partially because of me."

"You really shouldn't blame yourself for that situation. You both just found yourselves targeted by an exceptionally terrible man," Kazama said.

"I know that but, it's still hard not to feel that way sometimes. But more than that..." Shiho trailed off, spending several seconds trying to articulate her feelings. "Well, I knew that he was targeting Ann. And I think on some level I wanted to endure the beatings to distract that bastard. But sometimes I wonder if I'm just telling myself that to make it seem more... noble. That I think like that to make it seem less pathetic... and when I think like that, I feel like a pretty crappy friend."

Kazama pondered this for several moments, reclining into the chair. It was a conundrum to talk about. "Truthfully," she began "I believe you acted out of concern for your friend. You didn't want her coming to harm, and acted in a way that would keep her safe. But... perhaps its something you and Ann should talk about? You did say you wanted to face your problems directly."

Shiho pondered this, her eyes resting on the ceiling. "Ah... you might be right."

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6/8

It was after class and, since Akira seemed to have no interest in going to Mementos today (he said something about visiting Takemi for some kind of medical trial) the others went about their own business. It was probably for the best, since they had a TV station trip coming up tomorrow and needed the energy.

Ann and Shiho decided to use the opportunity to hang out. It was rare for them to meet up, just the two of them, these days. With all the Phantom Thief business they had been wrapped up in, it was more common for them to just hang out as one big group.

"This one?" Shiho asked, pointing to the narrow staircase that led up to an up and coming diner on Shibuya's main street. Shiho had never been, but Ann spoke highly of it.

"Yep! Me and Akira have come by here a few times, and it's really great. They have this strawberry cheesecake that's to die for!" Ann said enthusiastically. "One time I had two slices of it, and still wanted more."

Shiho gave a small sigh. "Have I ever told you how much I envy your metabolism?"

"It's a blessing, and a curse."

"I fail to see how," Shiho flatly replied. Then, shrugging, she made her way up the stairs. "Oh well.
Since you speak so highly of it, I'm pretty eager to try it out. And it's been too long since we got to hang out like this," she added.

Ann nodded, quickly following after her dark-haired friend. "Yeah. It wasn't that long ago that we only really had each other... It's great hanging with the guys and all, but it's really been too long since we could just hang out like this."

It didn't take long to get one of the booths, and the wait before they could order was mercifully short. Spurred on by Ann's praise, Shiho went for the strawberry cheesecake and some dark coffee. Ann, forever searching for a means to appease her sweet tooth, went for a chocolate parfait and a serving of fruit tea (Akira swore by it). Though now they would be stuck waiting for a few minutes.

"So..." Shiho's left hand settled on the table, her index finger idly drawing circles along the wood. "There's something I wanna talk about. I mean, I definitely want to hang out today, but there's something I need to get off my chest."

"Shoot," Ann casually said. Whatever Shiho had to say, she was all ears. Not speaking her mind in the past had left Shiho in a horrible situation after all.

How best to put this? Shiho supposed it would make sense to start near the beginning. "I've been thinking lately about... stuff. Kamoshida, the volleyball team... all the crap that happened there. I was thinking about how... you put up with a lot of horrible stuff, just to keep my spot on the volleyball team. And I... I can never thank you enough for going so far for me," she explained.

"Shiho..." She smiled sadly, reaching over and settling a hand over Shiho's own. "You really don't have to. But if I'd know how much of a bastard he really was, I would've done more to actually help you."

"You went to another dimension and got yourself a firebreathing demon to kick Kamoshida's ass with. That was more than enough," Shiho said. It was enough to make the blonde snicker slightly. "But, thinking on that made me also think about myself a little. It was pretty clear that Kamoshida had horrible intentions for you. And I think on some level I put up with the beatings to distract him from you, but... sometimes I wonder if I was just telling myself that to make myself feel better. And I'm... sorry about that."

Sighing, Ann gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. "C'mon... that doesn't matter Shiho. I know you had me in mind because I know you. You're a great person, you shouldn't let anything that bastard did stick in your mind or make you doubt yourself."

"I still think about it sometimes," Shiho admitted. "Not often. Sometimes when I'm alone I'll look at my reflection and just..." Her right hand reached up, encircling the corresponding eye. "And I'm just... looking at a big black eye, all over again. Stuff like that, it's pretty hard to forget. But he's gonna live with what he's done. And carry that stigma to the grave. That's enough to give me a bit of happiness."

Some silence lingered between the two for a few moments, but ultimately Ann agreed with the sentiment. "It's been a pretty crazy year already, huh?" Ann asked. "When the school year started, the worst I was expecting was mean comments from bitchy girls. But... then there was the volleyball scandal, the Metaverse, then Madarame... It's probably gonna get even crazier as we go along."
"Yeah, no doubt," Shiho said. Madarame had yet to confess, but Shiho didn't doubt it would have a huge impact on the public when it happened. And if that was the case, it meant that the Arditi were going to be dealing with progressively larger targets and their lives would get wilder in the process. "Think we'll be alright?" Shiho asked.

"I know we will." The blonde let a wide grin grace her features. Whenever Ann smiled, it was hard not to feel like all was right in the world. "But no matter what, I'm gonna have your back. Remember that."

"And I'm gonna always have your back too," Shiho said. She couldn't let her confidence be shaken, or let herself be swayed any further. A lot had changed over the past few months, but Shiho was determined to keep going, and keep getting better.
Her Sunday was free, making it as good a time as any to get some information. If Mr. A was targeting her, then Shizuka deserved to know everything she could about the guy. There was only one place to learn more about him.

She was left standing outside the 'cricket bat import' shop that acted as a front for the SID’s office, idly waiting for a minute or two before the door unlocked. Sighing, she pushed on inside. By now most of her injuries from her fight with Lynott had cleared up, save for the marks on her right forearm. She kept those wrapped under some pale bandages for the time being, and whenever someone asked about it she would simply say she had a nasty fall.

As far as excuses went, it was right up there with 'I walked into a door', and no doubt it still seemed shady. But it was the best idea she had to hand. She would have worn long sleeves if it hadn't been so damn hot lately, leaving her wearing a dark tank top and white cargo shorts for the day in a bid to beat the heat.

Shizuka strode into the office and found it mostly populated, with Aya and Yoshio both at their desks. Satoshi emerged from one of the other rooms, a white mug of steaming coffee clutched in his right hand. Aya smiled slightly. "Ah, Shizuka-chan. It's nice to see you again," the silver-haired woman remarked.

"Heard you got into another scrap recently. Glad to see you're doing okay," Yoshio said. From here she could see Kashmir's reptilian form resting on his right shoulder. No doubt he had been using his Stand to see who was at the door.

"I'm okay you guys, don't sweat it." Shizuka slowly slipped her bass-ornamented sunglasses off, sliding them into one of the large pockets of her shorts. "But I came here today to talk to your boss. I just have one question for him... who is Mister A?"

Shizuka met his steely gaze with one of her own, impressive for her age. A thick silence permeated the office, and one could easily feel the awkward tension rise in Aya and Yoshio. The two desperately wanted to make a speedy exit, but neither wanted to be in the eyeline of Satoshi or Shizuka right about now.

"And don't try to give me any 'I don't have enough info' crap. The top Stand investigator in the city, not knowing anything about a top level Stand-using criminal? I'm a teenager, not a moron... He sent someone to attack me, so I deserve some answers."

The silence persisted, until Satoshi took a long sip of his coffee. "Follow me." He led the way around the other side of his desk, heading for a door that he swiftly opened. As Shizuka moved inside, she could see that they were heading into some kind of small office kitchen. There wasn't much there to speak of, save for a fridge, a long counter, and a coffee machine. Once the door closed behind her, Satoshi continued speaking. "Aya and Yoshio don't know much about what happened with A, other than the fact that he exists and shouldn't be fucked with. They joined the SID some time after my encounter with Mr. A."

"Eh?" Shizuka leaned against the back wall. "So you actually met him, in person?"
"I didn't get a good look at his face, or learn his name. So you can calm down on that front. But yeah, I encountered him. About six years back, before he gained complete control over the last few crime families. He had been active at the time, mainly dealing with foreign criminal bodies from China and Korea. It meant that he made a lot of physical appearances," Satoshi explained. Instant Crush appeared in his left hand, nestled between two fingers. "And that, in turn, gave us something to track."

"Us?" Shizuka repeated.

He nodded sternly. "Mm. I had a different team back in the day. Shintaro Okuharu, our marksman. And my wife, Toujou Morihiro," he said.

It didn't take a whole lot of brainpower to put two and two together on what had happened to Satoshi's wife. "Oh," Shizuka simply said. It was about all she could think to say.

"Yeah. Anyway, we worked hard to track A's movements as he took on his rivals, doing a lot of his own dirty work as a show of strength. And eventually we managed to figure out where he'd hit next: A major triad outpost. All we had to do was lay in wait, and strike when he made the scene."

Satoshi brought his Stand to his lips and took a languid drag. "It was just him and his right hand on that night. A foreign guy with a lethal paper-based Stand. Triads didn't have a chance, not that I feel any sympathy for those guys."

Shizuka cocked her head a little. "So the plan was to let the Chinese guys soften them up a little?" she asked.

"Something like that. They did manage to tire the two out a bit... not that it mattered. Shintaro had taken up a position on a tall roof across the street and opened fire when A emerged, coming out into the dark of the night. Shintaro's Stand was a strong one, firing flesh-eating homing bullets on whatever he was looking at through the scope. He never missed, and those things could turn on a dime without losing any momentum. But... not a single round got even remotely close to A," Satoshi explained. He downed the last of his coffee, slowly setting his cup on the counter.

"What like, he was dodging them? Was he that fast?" Shizuka asked.

The older man shrugged slightly. "The wife and I were busy dealing with the henchman, and it was pretty dark. I'm just going by what Shintaro said when everything was done. Important thing is, he never missed before that day." With slow, measured step, he made his way to the counter and rested his weight against it. "Well... me and my wife occupied ourselves by taking care of the hitman. Toughest son of a bitch I ever had to fight, cut both of us real bad... but we knocked him out. And it gave us a clear path to A himself."

Shizuka nodded along, but by now she already had a good idea where this story was going. Nowhere nice. "By that point, he had used his Stand to fling a car at Shintaro's sniping nest. Missed him, but caved the roof in from under him. Broke his arm on the way down, leaving it as just the two of us against him. His Stand was... I barely saw it, particularly with how dark it was, but the thing was so dang fast, and strong. Broke through a wall of fire I made and hit me once, breaking two of my ribs. I was down and struggling to move... so then it was just Toujou up against him."

A frown graced Shizuka's features. "And he... killed her?"
He didn't deign to answer at first. Instead he let his Stand rest in his lips, the tip glowing orange and sending smoke slowly blooming into the air. "Thing is, Toujou's Stand was always a strong one. Much stronger than mine... and even so, she couldn't get near him. All I could do was lay there in the dirt as he killed my wife, right before my eyes... I just shut down. Couldn't move, not even when he came toward me. Even in the dark, I could feel him sneering. He saw the look on my face and recognised it instantly: The look of a broken man. He just didn't see a need to kill me," he explained.

"Jesus..." Shizuka pressed her back against the wall, staring off into space. "But he just... let you go?"

"Not quite," Satoshi admitted. "I remember that night in great detail. The pain in my ribs, the smell of iron in the air, and I remember just how damn cold it was too. He sneered and said 'Morihiro-san, I was wondering if we'd ever meet in person. Sorry about your wife, but it was her or me..." Satoshi sighed and closed his eyes tight. "He knew all about me. Knew all along but never saw us as a threat. 'Cause we weren't. He said to me 'I could kill you now, but I'm feeling nice. Stay out of my way in the future, or I'll purge your entire bloodline.' And I could only agree. I was numb, no other options existed..."

Satoshi drew his wallet from his pocket, quickly reaching in with his left hand. He took out an old photograph and presented it to Shizuka. It was clearly old and a little weathered, of himself and a gently smiling redhead. In the photo Satoshi was smiling too, an alien sight from what she was used to. "And I went along with it... partially out of fear, partially out of apathy. Without her, I wasn't strong enough," he explained.

Silence filled the room for a few moments. Then, eventually, Shizuka looked him in the eye. "Is he threatening someone else close to you?" she asked.

"My son. He's in his twenties now, moved out to Hawaii a few years back... but I don't doubt A could reach him if he really wanted to. The thought of losing him keeps me paralyzed." Satoshi lifted his Stand from his lips and dispelled it quickly. "I'm telling you all this because you deserve to know, now that he's casting an eye your way. Mr. A can't be beat, and I doubt there's anything I can do to help you."

Deep down, Shizuka supposed she knew he wouldn't be able to really aid her. Still, it stung to hear all this. "What happened to your sniper guy? Shintaro?" Shizuka asked.

"Retired. Couldn't handle the guilt that we were just letting A go... couldn't get past that he'd failed to even hurt him. As for me, I stuck with this job. Didn't have the drive to leave it... where else would I go? Anyway, that's about all I can tell you. If you want my advice, try and keep your head down. He'll likely get bored if he doesn't see you as a threat, and then leave you be. But if you start gunning for him..."

"He'll kill me, yeah?" Shizuka asked."Yeah, well, I'm not the kind to back down easily."

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Hospitals sucked.

When he tried to think back, Lynott couldn't really remember the last time he had been in a hospital. As near as his foggy memory could tell, the last major visit was when he was fifteen and tried his hand at drunken motocross. For as banged up as he'd been then, at least his hands had still
been intact.

Now he was stuck lying in a bed in a cramped room, his hands bound up in white wrappings to hide the holes that had been punched through them. "This sucks..." he grumbled. He had a few other injuries from being slapped around by that ape, but he could live with superficial stuff. But his hands were gonna be fucked up forever!

Lynott was snapped from his thoughts by the sound of the door opening, and from the corner of his eye he could see a man in a white coat entering the room. "Yo, doc," he moved to slowly sit upright, grimacing from a mild pain in his back. "I gotta-"

He froze when he got a good look at his 'doctor.' A foreign man with slick black hair and small glasses. With that uniform on he was able to blend in nicely with the hospital staff, but Lynott couldn't forget a face like his. "G-Gunschche-san, s-so good to see you!"

"Be quiet," Lars flatly said. "I have little time to waste here. So you should save me some time and only speak when spoken to." For as good as Lars was at blending in, and being largely unnoticed by the world around him, if he got caught here it could make for a sticky situation.

"R-right. Sorry."

Lars quietly surveyed him for a few seconds, his emotions hidden behind a stony facade. Whatever he was thinking, he was totally unreadable. "You were sent to test Shizuka Joestar, and assess her abilities. Going by your current state, it seems you were beaten handily." Lynott grimaced. "I would like your report. Now."

"Hah... the girl's a smart cookie. Resourceful and quick on her feet. She managed to send a warning to herself during one loop," Lynott raised his right arm slightly. "She wrote it on her own skin so the message wouldn't be undone. Nobody else ever tried that before."

Lars nodded slowly, making mental notes of the most important things that stood out to him. "What about her Stand? How strong is it?"

"Fragile. Not as frail as mine, but she can't afford to take too much damage. But the speed and strength are nothin' to sneeze at. Girl packs a mean punch," Lynott explained. While her punches hadn't lingered on him after those loops, he still remembered how much they had hurt. In a straight fight, without time resetting continuously, she likely could have won quickly.

"We have a report that she wasn't alone. Did she have a friend helping her?" Lars asked. He spared a slight glance to his side as a shadow moved across the door, but relaxed again once it had fully passed them.

"Yeah. Some punk kid. Japanese, but with dyed blond hair. A... what do you call 'em? A yankii?" Lynott shook his head. "Whatever. Point is he was a student from her school. His Stand was like... none that I've ever seen. Strong as hell, and fired electricity too. Hit me like a truck," he explained.

"I see. So her immediate friends are Stand users too. That makes sense, they are drawn to each other," he remarked. Lars nodded and took a step forward. Lynott visibly tensed under the covers of his cramped bed. "Now it falls to me to decide your fate."

Lynott swallowed hard. "Hey... c-come on man, no need to k-kill me or nothing. Ya know uh, th-the two of us... we could make an unbeatable team! Take over all of Tokyo! All we gotta do is find
someone to fix my hands and uh... h-hey man, I've got plenty of money saved up! I'll pay you plenty if you join me!"

Lars visibly bristled. His brow furrowed in a terrifying glare that made Lynott's blood run cold. "Money?" he repeated, coming to a sudden stop. He clenched his fists tight, black matter suddenly washing over his hands and fully encasing his skin. "Do you think I would ever betray A-sama for money?! Do you have any idea what people have paid me for my talents in the past? I was a millionaire before I was thirty! Money is worthless to me! Especially compared to A-sama! So don't go comparing me to money-grubbing trash like you!"

Lars had not moved in any closer, but his presence had still managed to fill the entire room. He was nowhere near Lynott, and yet the younger man felt as if the bespectacled foreigner was standing right over him.

"R-right... s-s-sorry..."

All at once Lars straightened himself back out, his calm front returning in the span of a few seconds. "Good. Then let us discuss your immediate future..."

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7/18

"It's soooohoooooot!" Ryuji's agitated groan echoed partially through Shibuya station, eventually being drowned out by the mutterings of the other people around them. Even in a tank top and shorts, the humidity of the night was intense. The boys had arrived at the station about ten minutes previously, all five gathering near one of the large pillars of the walkway.

"Probably doesn't help that we're underground... and that the station is positively packed with people," Akira remarked. He was dressed in his usual Summer attire, a white shirt partially clinging to his chest from sweat, his jeans likely doing little to keep him cool. The only difference now was that he had decided not to wear his glasses for the festivities.

"I feel like I'm being baked..." Morgana groaned, flopping over Akira's left shoulder. Ryuji glanced from side to side and gave an annoyed grunt. "The girls are way too late," he remarked in impotent frustration.

"Speaking of which," Sergio pushed off the pillar, smoothing out the wrinkles in his crisp white and gold Queen T-shirt. He gave Yusuke a once over. "Why are you wearing one?"

No doubt Yusuke was the classiest looking of the bunch, wearing a deep navy yukata with a golden sash around the waist. "Ah. I suppose you are new to all this Sergio, but this garment can be worn by men and women. To be frank," he turned his attention to Akira and Ryuji "I'm quite surprised they are not wearing the same."

Ryuji snorted. "Do I look like a yukata kinda guy?" he asked rhetorically.

"Not my style either," Akira admitted. "Besides that, I'd get no end of grief from Sojiro if he saw me wearing one, so there's that."
"Seems like it would be a lot of hassle to put on to boot," Sergio remarked, sighing. But, he knew Yusuke. He'd put an inordinate amount of effort into anything that even vaguely intrigued him.

They weren't waiting much longer before a few more figures came to join them. "Sorry we're late. This took... a little longer than I was expecting," Ann said. "It's been some time since I even wore a yukata. Kinda forgot how to put it on right."

"Yeah, but you still rock it," Shizuka idly said.

The girls did manage to stand out quite nicely. Ann's yukata, a floral patterned powder blue number with a pink sash, suited her quite nicely. The same could easily be said of Makoto's, a white yukata with a few crimson flowers with a yellow sash.

"Then we had to get through a whole lot of people just to get to this part of the station. Seems like the whole city's turned out for the show," Shiho said. Her own yukata was simple yet appealing, navy in colour with a few white flowers and a scarlet sash. Ryuji gave a quick glance, smiling faintly.

"You uh... you look really great," he said sincerely.

Shiho smiled. "Thanks. I was a little worried, since this is my first time using this yukata. Glad to see it's a hit."

"Aw... our little Ryuji's grown into a fine gentleman," Ann teased.

"Sh-shut up!"

The only standout was Shizuka, who wasn't wearing a yukata. Instead she had gone for a more casual look, an orange and black Hawaiian shirt and dark shorts. Akira hummed faintly. "No yukata?" he asked.

Shizuka shrugged. "Never thought I'd have reason to get one... and with everything going on this past week, I didn't think to go and buy one," she explained.

A small sigh escaped Makoto. "I really wish you'd told me sooner. I would've helped you do some shopping."

"W-well... there's always next time, yeah? Definitely gotta do it before Christmas," Shizuka said.

"As enthralling as the teenage hormones are, shall we be off? We're getting close to the start time." Sergio examined his gleaming silver watch, confirming his suspicions. "And it'll no doubt be a challenge to get through all the people up top."

Akira nodded and led on from the thick pillar, though Shizuka stuck close to his side to closely examine him. "No glasses huh? You sure you're gonna be okay?" the shorter girl asked.

He nodded. "I only need 'em for reading anyway, and even then I can usually do fine without them. Ann suggested going without 'em for something special," he said. And he didn't object, even if he didn't wholly understand her reasoning. "I started wearing them casually 'cause I thought they'd make me look more... normal at Shujin. Hasn't really worked out. I don't look weird without them, do I?"
"Nah. You're kinda hot actually," Shizuka casually said. "Got this whole... bishonen deer caught in the headlights thing going for you."

"Thanks?"

"I had a feeling the look would suit him," Ann remarked, beaming with pride.

Sergio snickered. "Ah, you do have a keen eye for style then. I only wish I had time to put on something a little nicer." Sighing, he planted his hands in his pockets. "But it's so hot and clammy that I just couldn't be assed," he added.

It didn't take long for the group to get topside, and soon they were mingling with the crowds on the busy streets of Shibuya. It had grown dark by now, with the sun having set a few hours ago. But, even so, there was a visible layer of dense black clouds rolling across the sky. The chatter of the crowds managed to drown out the distant rumbling of violent thunder.

Soon it started to rain. A light drizzle at first, gradually growing thicker and heavier, until the crowds started to quickly disperse. Miniature rivers rolled down the roads, and heavy puddles soon lined the sidewalks. Needless to say, the fireworks were called off.

The Arditi managed to take shelter under the awning of a convenience store, but not before taking on their share of the rain. Ann gave an annoyed sigh, raising the hem of her yukata slightly and ringing some of the water out of the blue material. She and Makoto seemed briefly unaware of the occasional glances they were getting from some of their companions.

"On second thought... I'm kinda glad I didn't get a yukata," Shizuka mused.

Morgana briefly poked his head from Akira's bag, and shuddered as a heavy drop of water fell on his pink nose. "Bleh... The TV said it was gonna rain tonight, but with how sunny it was during the day I didn't think much of it."

"Ah... I'd be lying if I said I was surprised that it turned out this way, given my luck," Akira reflected.

"Guess we better head in and buy some umbrellas or something," Ryuji remarked. He gave Shiho a slight smile. "Eh, I can afford two."

"I can appreciate your generosity, but it's really not necessary," Shiho assured him, giving a smile of her own.

Shizuka was about to agree with the suggestion, only to pause when her attention was drawn to something across the road. An expensive black car, currently pulled up against the curb. From where she stood, Shizuka could see a sharply dressed man holding a black umbrella above a slender young woman with puffy strawberry blonde hair, keeping the rain off her white and pink yukata. "Is that..." Shizuka focused her vision as best she could to get a better look. "Haru! Hey, Haru!"

The young heiress perked up quickly, looking to the figure calling her name. "Oh!" She took off with surprising grace and swiftness, moving so quickly that her dogged assistant was trying his damndest to keep the umbrella over her throughout the dash. "Shizu-chan! I didn't think I'd meet you out here!" she said eagerly.
"Ha! Didn't think a fireworks show was your kinda thing either. Too bad it got rained out." Shizuka soon became aware that her friends were watching her curiously, making her aware that she had yet to even mention Haru to them in the past. "Oh! Guys, this is Haru. She's one of our seniors, and pretty cool too. Haru, these are my friends. Akira, Ann, Ryuji, Shiho, Makoto, Yusuke, and Sergio. Oh, and that's Akira's cat, Morgana," she explained, gesturing to each person in turn.

"So nice to meet all of you," Haru said, giving a respectful bow.

Ann smiled warmly. "Ha. No need to be so formal. You're one of our senpai after all. Well, except for Makoto."

The brunette nodded. "Yeah. I thought I recognised her alright. It's nice to formally meet you Haru," Makoto said, giving a slight bow in her usual respectful fashion.

"Would you care to join us? The festivities may have been called off, but I'm sure we could find some way to enjoy the evening," Yusuke offered.

Haru smiled sadly. "Well I'd love to, but... something's just come up. I would have been called away from the fireworks even if the festival had gone ahead," she said.

It didn't take much detective work to see that something was bothering Haru. She had been acting odd for a little while, but Shizuka knew this wasn't the time or the place to ask about it. She doubted Haru would want to discuss any intimate matters around a group of people she had just met. Shizuka made a note to ask her about it soon. Most likely tomorrow at school.

"Okumura-san," her assistant murmured to her, a slight hint of urgency in his tone.

"Right," Haru said with a soft sigh. "Well... I hope to see you all again soon." With another small bow, she slowly followed after her assistant toward the expensive car.

Once she had gone, Sergio gave a small scoff. "So wait, she can call you 'Shizu-chan' without issue, but I get the third degree when I call you 'JoJo-chan'?"

"First, cause JoJo-chan sounds dumb. Secondly... it's fucking Haru! She's so sweet and nice! If I got mad at her for giving me a nickname, it'd be like being mad at a puppy for being cute, ya know?" Sighing, Shizuka glanced up at the rainfall. "Looks like this rain isn't letting up."

"Yeah. Come on, let's head in," Akira said, pointing over his shoulder to the store. He moved in first, and tried his best not to seem annoyed when he saw just how many people had come in ahead of them.

Ann examined their surroundings, sighing faintly. "Looks like everyone had the same idea," she said.

"This probably sounds bad, but... should we have asked Okumura-san for a ride?" Shiho asked. She glanced out the window at the rainfall, grumbling at the prospect of trying to get back to the train station.

"I doubt that car would have fit all of us," Yusuke remarked. "Morgana, could you perhaps transform and drive us home?"
"I can't do that in the real world," Morgana hastily replied.

"Guess we're gonna just have to go home for the day," Akira said. It wasn't how he envisioned tonight going, but there was no point in complaining about the unfairness of life. He'd already learned that lesson.

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The bell above Leblanc's door chimed at his entrance, and Akira immediately became aware that the cafe wasn't empty. Almost at once he felt the weight of a tense atmosphere crash down around him. There was Sae, watching Sojiro with a cold and analytical gaze. Sojiro, in turn, looked angrier than Akira had ever seen him before. The older man was practically bubbling.

"So you won't tell me, no matter what?" Sae asked.

"I have nothing more to say to you," Sojiro firmly said.

With deliberate slowness, Sae rose from her seat and watched Sojiro carefully. "I see. In that case, there are ways of making you talk." It seemed neither of them had noticed Akira, but he couldn't bring himself to try and creep around the two. Sae grabbed her bag and calmly made for the door "I'll be back in due time."

"H-hey!" Sojiro glared at her back, strong hands firmly gripping the counter beneath him. Sae didn't give him a parting glance, casually exiting the cafe.

Akira quirked a brow at the strange turn of events. Sae was a regular here, and generally seemed amicable (if naturally imposing). So what the hell was that about? It wasn't like Sojiro would be involved in anything illegal. "The hell was all that about?" Akira asked.

"Nothing you need to concern yourself with..." Sojiro grimaced and checked the clock on the wall. "It's past closing time. Clean up the place."

"Geez..." Akira murmured, heading around the counter to the modest kitchen area. "Excuse the hell out of me for asking..." Not that he was particularly shocked about getting pushed away. He supposed he didn't care either, so long as his living arrangements weren't impacted.

Akira was soon engrossed in washing dishes, clearing up what had been left behind before he left for the fireworks festival. Eventually Sojiro turned the TV on and switched onto the news. Almost at once the main headline managed to catch Akira's attention, even as he kept his hands busy scrubbing grime off the cafe's cups.

"These are the details of the message that was posted on Medjed's website. 'To the Arditi causing an uproar in Japan: Do not speak of your false justice.'" Medjed. The name definitely seemed familiar to Akira, a hacker group that had cropped up in the news plenty of times in the last year. From what he could recall, they had made a name for themselves by airing corporate corruption for the world to see. And now, it seemed, the Phantom Thieves were their newest target. He'd have to look into this later, to try and figure out why they were being challenged out of the blue like this.

"'We do not need the spread of such falsehood. We are the true executors of justice.'"

"The Phantom Thieves again?" Sojiro grumbled.
"However we are magnanimous. We will give you an opportunity to repent for your sins. If you agree to a change of heart, we will accept you as our own. If you reject our offer, the hammer of justice will find you."

Akira smirked faintly. 'Take your best shot.'
Medjed's recently issued challenge had managed to catch the attention of the other thieves quickly enough, but beyond that they had little to work with in regards to understanding their new foe. Even Mishima had little information to give them and, with none of them being particularly web savvy, they had already hit a brick wall in their investigation.

Not that Shizuka particularly cared. A bunch of computer nerds being butthurt at them didn't seem like anything that warranted their concern, since it wouldn't interfere with them changing hearts. And Medjed didn't seem like a potential target for a change of heart, being a collective of anonymous people that may or may not even be in Japan.

Until they had more concrete information, or until Medjed established themselves as an actual threat, she was going to focus on other matters. Particularly, she wanted to know what was eating Haru.

Shizuka's offer was a simple one, suggesting that they go grab something to drink from a bubble tea place not too far from Shujin. It was a path that took them on the narrow streets leading away from the train station, but with so many houses nearby she was willing to bet that no Stand user would risk trying something here. Not with the risk of collateral damage, and thus unwanted attention, being so high.

"So, Haru," Shizuka began, her hands pressed against the back of her head. Each step made her black bag bob against her shoulder blades. "What's been going on with you lately?"

"Hm?" She blinked slightly at her friend, bringing her left hand up to her chin. "W-well... oh, it's really nothing you need to worry about Shizu-chan."

Shizuka gave a small sigh. "Haru, come on. Telling me not to worry is just gonna make me worry more," she replied. "You're usually all happy and chipper, but lately you've been kinda bummed. And it sucks seeing you upset." It was like looking at a sad puppy.

Haru briefly bit her bottom lip. "Well... the thing is Shizu-chan, my father has..." She was clearly struggling to put her plight into words, fearing that they'd be seen as frivolous.

"There you are."

The unfamiliar voice made Shizuka stop mid-step, her whole body tensing as a figure emerged from around the corner. He was young, probably only a year or two older than Shizuka, and dressed in a crisp white suit. His orange hair was smoothed back into an even part at the middle. For a moment Shizuka thought he was talking to her, another agent of Mr. A, until she realized that the newcomer wasn't looking at her. He was looking at Haru.

"We had plans to meet up, and instead I find you running around with some kid?" he asked, his tone sharp and bitter. From the corner of her eye Shizuka could see the fear flicker onto Haru's face.
"I... I forgot that we had-"

"Oh, you forgot did you? Then you really need to get your head screwed on straight," the young man snapped. "Come on. You're not wasting anymore of my time." He reached out and firmly gripped Haru's wrist, giving a hard squeeze that made Haru cry out.

In an instant Shizuka had thrown all her weight forward, her right fist driving into the redhead's face. A burst of blood exploded over her knuckles, coating the skin as she knocked the young man back. He lost his grip on Haru, stumbling until his back hit the wall. His well-groomed hair was knocked loose, and he looked up at Shizuka with startled eyes. Twin streams of blood oozed from his nose.

"You... you hit me..." he muttered, the realization hitting him as Shizuka shook her knuckles clean. "You little shit, how dare you! When the police hear about this-"

"Oh? Are you gonna admit to the police that you got your ass kicked by a high school girl? I'm sure that'll reflect really well on you. Not that the police would even believe you... I'm a pretty good actor after all." Shizuka raised her hands to her chin, fake tears bubbling in the corners of her eyes. "Oh officer, i-it was terrible! I saw him grab my friends wrist, and he just looked so scary that I hit him in a blind panic!"

The young man growled in annoyance. "You... you goddamn..."

In an instant Shizuka lowered her hands, giving him a harsh glare. She could see the redhead clenching his right fist, his body tensing by the wall. "Oh? You gonna try and attack me now? Take your best shot shitheel! You take one fucking step towards me, and I'll break your fingers like matchsticks!" she snarled.

The redhead tensed again, but didn't draw any closer. This girl seemed stronger than she looked, and there had been something unnatural about the force of her punch. Seeing this, Shizuka nodded. "Truth is, I didn't hit you. You tripped and fell on your face, because you are just such a clumsy boy. Right? I can tell you're a rich prick. The attitude and suit give you away. But I am not the kind of girl you want to try and play the money game against. You try and sue me, I'll have the world's finest lawyers brought to Japan so fast that it'll make your head spin. Understand?"

By now the slightly older boy was fuming, a few bubbles of blood hissing from his nose. But he nodded in impotent frustration. "Fine," he growled through clenched teeth. With how brazenly confident the dark-haired stranger was, it was doubtful she was just boasting.

"Good. If you ever come near Haru again, it'll be with the utmost respect and courtesy. Get me? And it should go without saying that if I ever see so much as a fucking hair out of place on her head, then I will find you, and when I do..." She took a few steps forward, causing her prey to push his back against a wall. Her tone dropped to a low hiss. "They will never find your body. Understand?" He nodded dumbly.

"Good. Now get the fuck outta here!"

The redhead hauled ass so fast that he practically left a dust cloud where he had been standing, making a mad dash for whatever hole he had crawled out of. Shizuka gave a small sigh and quickly scanned around. Whatever windows she could see from this angle were either empty, or had the curtains drawn. It was doubtful anyone had seen that little outburst, except for Haru.
"Shizu-chan..." Haru said, gently rubbing her sore wrist.

Shizuka gulped. "Crap..." She had probably overdone it with her angry bullshit, and Shizuka didn't doubt that she had scared Haru in the pro-

"That was amazing!" In a flash she had pulled the slightly shorter girl in for a warm hug. "You were like a character out of an action movie! Just so... cool and confident!" Haru said, speaking with an enthusiasm Shizuka had never heard from her before now.

"E-eh? You watch action movies?" Boy, Haru's hugs felt nice... Shizuka focused hard, trying to get her mind back on the right track. The blushing young woman cleared her throat. "We should uh... get to the tea shop so we can talk."

Haru nodded slightly. "Oh, of course."

It fortunately didn't take long to reach the tea shop, and getting a nice comfy booth near the back was a simple task. The two girls sat across from her, Shizuka lazily sipping from her lime green plastic cup, while Haru seemed to stare into the depths of her strawberry-flavoured bubble tea.

"The man you just met was... my fiance."

Shizuka's cheeks ballooned around the straw in her mouth, the liquid bubbling violently as she shot back what she had been slurping. She pulled back, coughing loudly and wincing. "Holy shit!" she gasped, trailing off into a few loud coughs. "You're pulling my leg!"

Haru shook her head. "I wish I was, but..." Sighing, Haru decided it would be best to start at the beginning. "My father, the CEO of Okumura Foods, has been planning on going into politics for some time now. While he has wealth and influence, the political landscape is still a hard area to break into. So he needs all the help he can get." Sighing, Haru gently gripped the tip of her straw in her left hand, lazily spinning it in clockwise circles. "Sugimura-kun, my fiance... his father is a well-established politician. Not massively influential, but he could help my father get a start in politics. And so..."

"He's marrying you off to that prick for his job?!” Shizuka snapped. Haru gave a small nod. An annoyed sigh escaped her. "That's fucking low. So that's why you were talking about arranged marriages the other day." But the concept of an arranged marriage seemed so alien and distant a concept that Shizuka never even thought Haru was getting stuck in one.

Haru nodded again. "The thing is, my father wasn't always like this. When I was a child he was a kind man, and never mistreated me. But when he inherited control of Okumura Foods, bit by bit he began to change. He strove hard for success, at all costs, and the money he was making corrupted him. Soon it seemed that money was all that mattered to him," she explained.

If he was willing to give his daughter away to a man like that, Shizuka doubted Haru's old man had ever been a particularly nice guy. Sugimura might as well have had 'wife beater' tattooed on his forehead in giant neon letters with how obvious it was (and that was what had driven Shizuka to punch first and ask questions later) and yet that didn't seem to dissuade Haru's dad.

What perhaps annoyed Shizuka more was that Haru was likely the nicest person she had ever met. Any guy betrothed to her would have a pretty great life, so long as they were nice to her in turn. Haru's husband however, was like a lot of the rich pricks she had known in the US, where they saw everyone and everything as their property. Respect was a foreign notion to people like that.
"Perhaps it's selfish for me to try and stand in the way of my father's ambitions, but... I just wish he would change his mind on this," Haru softly said.

Shizuka fought hard to contain her annoyance, lest she crush the cup currently clasped between her pale hands. "It's not selfish Haru, you should be free to live your life. Your dad's the selfish one if he's willing to trample on you for the sake of a damn job," Shizuka said. Still, getting him to change his mind on this... an epiphany hit her suddenly. If he was willing to put her own daughter through this, then surely he had a Palace. Or at least, a presence in Mementos... "A change of heart might not be off the cards though."

"Hm? What do you mean?" she asked. Haru blinked slightly and took a sip of her bubble tea, using it as a means to calm her nerves.

"Eh, don't sweat it. But hey, I should prolly walk you home for the next few days. In case your 'fiancé' tries to get cute," Shizuka said. And then she'd have to take Haru to the gym at some point, teach her how to throw a punch. Just in case.

But, for now, she had a target to present to the others.

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The sun was setting in Yongen by the time Shizuka arrived at Leblanc. She had sent a few texts off soon after ensuring Haru got home safe, wanting to do a quick investigation into Haru's dad. It wasn't something that would require the entire team, but she wanted to get the ball rolling on this investigation ASAP.

Yusuke and Makoto were readily available, with the others having various commitments to deal with. A small number, but between herself, Akira, Morgana, Yusuke, and Makoto, it would give them a decent starting point for a mini investigation.

"And that's basically the gist of things. Haru's dad is gonna marry her off to that slimy bastard just to ensure his own future," Shizuka explained. She had spent some time recounting the events of the past while sitting at the small workbench Akira often worked at. As she spoke, Makoto and Akira had both taken to their phones to do some homework on Okumura.

From his position against Akira's blank wall, Yusuke made a small humming sound. "While Haru's plight is certainly a tragic one, and she is ultimately a victim of intrusive adults as we all are... but can we really afford to completely ignore Medjed's taunts?" the bluenette asked.

"Oh no, a bunch of nerds are threatening us! Yusuke, come on, what's the worst they can do? It's not like they know who we are. And if they do start causing trouble, there's not much we can do. None of us are hackers, and we don't know any hackers. At least Haru's problem is something we can deal with right now. A perfect target for Phantom Thief stuff," Shizuka explained.

"I don't want to just ignore Medjed either, but Shizuka has a point. As it stands we don't have any means to deal with Medjed, so for the time being we should try to focus on things we can deal with until Medjed actually does something," Makoto said. "More than that, from what I can see there may be more to Haru's father than this arranged marriage business."

Akira nodded firmly. "You got the same impression I did, right? I've been trying to understand Big Bang Burger's massive rise in popularity over the last two years... one thing that comes up is the
fact that Okumura's business hasn't changed much, it's that his competitors have been falling behind," Akira explained.

The revelation made Shizuka cock her head slightly. "How do you mean?"

"Well... a few of the news articles I read talked about some of the other major food chains in Japan. The foreign ones are still doing fine, but native groups have been facing tragedies. Major figures in these companies dying in accidents or from sudden illnesses. And with those issues affecting them, but not Okumura Foods, it's given him a chance to greatly expand his businesses," Akira said, keeping his focus on his phone.

He let the news hang in the air for a few moments before Yusuke spoke up. "Are you implying that... Okumura has employed the Black Mask to sabotage his rivals?" he asked.

"Who can say? It's a pretty bold accusation, and we can only speculate. But it really doesn't seem like a mere coincidence," Akira said. But, he supposed if Okumura did make use of the Black Mask's services, they could use him as a means to track that bastard down.

"There's more," Makoto said. "As I was looking up news stories about the company, I found several anonymous stories from people who claimed to be Okumura Foods employees. A lot of them talk about cruel and unsafe work conditions, and unfair working hours. It might be nothing, but if he's willing to put his daughter up for marriage like this, then I wouldn't be surprised if he's abusing his employees," the brunette explained.

Silence hung in the air for a few minutes as the group pondered the situation. So far they didn't have much solid evidence on Okumura's wrongdoings, beyond Haru's situation. "Well, there's only one way to find out if this guy deserves a serious investigation." Morgana hopped up on the workbench, seeming to beam with pride. "Check the Nav, see if the guy pops up. But if he's placing that much emphasis on getting his political career in the air, I'd say he has plenty of distorted desires."

"Right." Shizuka lifted her phone up and brought up the crimson eye logo of the Meta Nav. "What's the dudes full name?" Shizuka asked.

"Kunikazu Okumura," Akira said.

The nav chimed at the name, the map on Shizuka's screen quickly scrolling to an area of Tokyo. 'Candidate found.' Shizuka narrowed her eyes, examining the screen closely as she read the name of the highlighted location.

"His Palace is located at the Okumura Foods HQ. Hot damn, we got something to work with here," she said, her enthusiasm brimming to attention.

After some thought, Akira nodded and stood up from the small sofa positioned beside his television. "We're short on several people, and we usually have to vote on a target before going after them. But we can at least have a look inside his Palace if it'll help put your mind at ease JoJo," Akira assured her.

"Thanks dude. I appreciate it," Shizuka said, smiling genuinely. "Well, let's get some Arditi business rolling here."
Okumura Foods HQ represented the corporate arm of the brand, dealing with many different elements of the company. And as Okumura Foods was an umbrella for more than just the Big Bang Burger brand, it meant that a good deal of office space was needed to handle the behind the scenes aspects of these different brands. It left the Phantom Thieves standing near an exceptionally tall tower, just as the sun fully sank into the horizon line. At least there wasn't a glare coming from the rows of immaculate windows on the face of the ivory tower.

"Alright," Shizuka said, leaning against a large sign positioned by the front entrance of the building. "We got the guys name, so we need his other keywords... any suggestions?"

Akira stroked his chin. "It occurs to me that we really don't know much about Haru's dad, other than the fact that he's an ass. This might take a little guesswork," he mused. But the determined look on Shizuka's face made it clear that she had no intention of giving up easily.

Given the size of the tower, even Yusuke had to crane his neck to see up to the top of it. "If Okumura's Palace is based on a location of this scale... we may be dealing with something quite massive," he mused.

"We won't know until we get inside... 'Tower,'" Makoto said. The app gave a negative buzzing sound in return. "Hmph. Perhaps we need something more specific for this place... 'Okumura Foods main office'?" Another negative buzz came from Shizuka's food.

"What about... 'Okumura Foods corporate headquarters'?' Akira suggested. The Nav chimed its approval. "Great. Then all we need is something he perceives this place to be. Might as well go with a trusty starting point. 'Castle.'" No luck.

Yusuke examined the building with a keen eye, pondering what they knew about Okumura and his business. "If he's willing to barter the life of his daughter, and places a strong emphasis on money... perhaps his Palace is some kind of market?" The Nav buzzed in disagreement.

"Maybe his Palace has something to do with his brands?" Morgana suggested. "It might be more reflective of his tastes, and his cognition as a result."

Akira pondered this for several seconds. Big Bang Burger was his big contribution to the company, the restaurant chain that he was the most personally invested in, and when he thought back on all the visits he had paid there he could recall a very clear aesthetic to the place. "This might seem crazy but... what if his Palace is supposed to be in outer space?"

'Candidate found.'

"Damn Akira, I gotta buy you a Coke when we're finished here," Shizuka said. "Alright..." she leaned against the sign, ensuring they were mostly out of view. Once satisfied she summoned Houdini to her side, her Stand making the five of them invisible with a subtle flick of her wrist.

"And away we go..."

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With how eventful today had been, Haru had found herself unable to just sit around at home. There had been no word from her father about Sugimura, so it seemed safe to assume he was keeping today's embarrassment close to his chest. Even so, she knew that the respite from his horribleness
would be brief.

Sooner or later he'd get some confidence back and come for her, and the thought alone made her anxious. And in her nervous state she took a walk to clear her mind.

Her aimless wandering brought her to the corporate HQ of her father's company, her soft steps approaching the old sign positioned near the front entrance of the tower.

And so lost in her own thoughts was she, that Haru didn't even notice as the world around her flickered purple and melted away.

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The small group found themselves dumped inside a rounded chamber, the sleek black walls marked by bars of glowing neon light. An elevator platform was positioned in the center of the room, with a rotating holographic string of text floating above the platform reading 'BIG BANG BURGER.' A row of windows were positioned directly opposite them, giving a glimpse to a series of flying saucers and tremendous ships drifting through the vastness of space outside.

Shizuka examined the dark, neon-lit walls, and felt a strange sense of nostalgia fill her. "Great. Haru's dad thinks he's Emperor fucking Palpatine," she muttered.

Yusuke raised his arms, inspecting the thief attire that now adorned him. "Seems Okumura already views us as a threat."

"I imagine he doesn't trust anyone outside his inner circle," Akira mused. "And there are all those stories circulating about him online... anyway, let's take a deeper look inside."

Akira took the initiative, heading onto the rounded elevator platform with his friends quickly following his lead. He was quick to use the control panel at the center of the platform to reel them upward in a swift pull of anti-gravity. They moved so fast that none of them noticed one of the side rooms opening up in their wake, and a very confused heiress stumbling out into the rounded chamber.

The elevator came to a stop in a cubic room with strange chittering computer banks positioned around the room. As it was empty, they pressed on and explored deeper inside, passing through a long steely corridor that led out into a walkway overlooking a vast chamber. For as quiet as the last room had been, this room was filled with a cacophony of thrumming machinery and whirring mechanisms.

Akira crouched low and made for the railing of the catwalk, with the others moving in behind them until they were all in a position to peer below. From on high it was easy to see the source of the noise: A large conveyer belt, flanked on both sides with hulking machinery, and being tended to by a cadre of robot workers.

The robots had been built with human proportions, jerkily moving around the conveyer belt and continuously loading it with heavy boxes. Their armoured plates were painted blue, and most surprisingly it seemed that black ties had been painted onto their chestplates to give the illusion that the bulb-eyed robots were wearing suits. Makoto inspected them and made a small tutting sound. "This must be how Okumura perceives his workers. Robotic drones."

The Arditi watched as one robot leaned forward, only to come to a sudden jerking halt. The glow of
his eyes dimmed, before a burst of smoke exploded from the port in his back. It fell forward with a thud, loudly clanging off the metal floor. Another robot, marginally taller and striding on spindly flexing limbs, strode into view and loomed over the fallen worker. The crimson bot reached down and grabbed his broken companion by the ankle, unceremoniously dumping him on the conveying belt.

"Broken goods. Dispatch for recycling."

"And he sees those same workers as wholly disposable," Yusuke added.

Morgana quickly hurried to the other end of the catwalk, gesturing to a hallway positioned opposite the doorway they came from. "There might be something else this way. Wanna do a little more exploring before we head back?"

"Couldn't hurt," Akira quietly said. The group stayed low to avoid being seen by the robot workers, moving behind their feline member. The next doorway opened out to a huge cubic room, marked by having several storage shelves pressed against the walls, while the heart of the chamber was dominated by a huge holographic display of a giant flying saucer.

Shizuka inspected the hologram for several moments, while Akira and Makoto strode to the large steel door that led deeper into the facility. "Huh..." she muttered, casually inspecting the display. "Wonder what this is... is it an image of the Palace?" she asked herself.

Once Akira and Makoto were near enough to the door, a bar of neon green text briefly flashed over it. 'Initiating biometric scan.' The text lingered for several moments, before swiftly flashing red. 'Unknown user. Access denied.'

"A biometric scan...? How are we going to get past that?" Makoto asked.

"If it's based on Okumura's cognition, it might respond to someone close to him. This might be a roadblock in the fu-" Akira's thoughts were cut short by a shrill scream coming from the previous room. All eyes turned to the open doorway, followed by the group swiftly bolting back the way they came.

Shizuka came to a skidding halt on the catwalk, and quickly spied the source of the noise. There was Haru, having tripped and fallen on her backside, looking wide eyed up at a hovering robot sphere. The air around it bubbled with sinews of black mass, clearly marking it as a Shadow.

"Haru!" Shizuka called.

The Shadow quickly exploded into a shifting mass of black goo, an incorporeal form that rapidly reshaped itself into something much larger. The form it took was that of a thickly proportioned clay soldier, with orange almond-shaped eyes. A pointed crown ringed the top of its oddly shaped head, while the Shadow's hands were sharp and crescent-shaped. It loomed over the cowering heiress, both eyes starting to glow bright from a build up of energy.

Akira rapidly broke into a sprint, making a beeline for the two. He moved as a superhuman pace, abruptly scooping Haru into his arms and narrowly dodging an explosive burst of curse energy blasted from the Shadow's eyes. Akira skidded to a halt, still clutching Haru in his strong arms.

"Are you alright?"

The frame of Haru's vision was framed with a border of roses as she found herself looking up at the most dazzlingly handsome man she had ever seen in her life. Even with a mask on, Haru could tell
he was gorgeous. The breeze from the explosion ruffled his dark locks, and Haru felt her heart flutter a little in return. "Y-yes," she shakily said.

The floating clay soldier rotated around swiftly, glaring at the other thieves as he felt their power rising. "Goemon!" Yusuke summoned the ghostly thief to his side, the hulking frame looming over Yusuke "Strike!" Goemon shot forward, raising his pipe up and then swinging it down sharply. The blow connected but, in an instant, all the power behind it was redirected back at the source.

Yusuke howled as he was launched off his feet, his back colliding with the wall behind him hard enough to dent it. "Immune to physical attacks? Really?!" Morgana said, clearly exhasperated.

"We don't have time to waste here, not if Haru's in danger... and on top of that," Makoto glanced over the edge of the catwalk, watching as the robot workers started to riot at the sight of the intruders. One by one they started to rise upon each others shoulders, creating a living ladder up toward them. "We'll be overrun if we don't get out of here now!"

"Right," Akira remarked with a small sigh. "Queen, we need a distraction. Mona, help Fox up and get ready to run. They were strong, but right now they were massively outnumbered. They'd be torn to shreds against a crowd like that, especially when they had no idea what the affinities of the robot workers were.

Makoto leapt swiftly onto Johanna, her whole body glowing blue as she revved the handle of the ghostly motorbike. Johanna's eyes glowed, unleashing a blinding flash bomb that exploded in the air, blinding the incoming Shadows and giving the Arditi enough time to haul ass back toward the elevator room. However, soon there was a chorus of metal footsteps racing behind them, and as Shizuka took a glance over her shoulder she could practically see a tide of robots rushing after them.

"Spry little bastards, for a bunch of clankers!" she grunted. Spews of laser fire rushed in from behind them, crimson lances of energy narrowly missing the fleeing thieves by scant inches and leaving black scars on the walls. "Their aim sucks though. Well thank god Haru's dad copied that part from Star Wars too..."

A stray bolt struck Morgana's backside, causing the cat to shriek and leap high, before landing back on his small feet in a hasty sprint. "Speak for yourself!" Morgana cried, as a wave of smoke blew from above his butt.

A lance of fire grazed Yusuke's left shoulder, burning his sleeve and singing his skin. The bluenette grimaced, hastily calling on his Persona. "I have had quite enough of these... mechanical miscreants!" he shouted, as Goemon moved around to the back of the group. His metal hands slammed into the ground, white smoke wafting off his palms. In an instant a thick sheet of ice erupted from in front of Goemon, about two meters thick and pressing tight against the walls

Almost at once the robotic horde set about smashing their fists against the ice, crimson waves of energy lashing against the hastily erected wall. But by the time the robots broke through, their targets had already made their escape.

Having emerged back into the real world, the group brought Haru to a small park not too far from the Okumura Foods HQ. It was modest in size, but also quiet. And Haru just seemed thankful to be able to sit down to let her head catch up with her body.
After everyone had caught their breath, Haru spoke up. "I don't mean to... to sound ungrateful after you all saved me, but... what the heck was that?"

"She must have been nearby when we triggered the app. And then wandered after us... we're really lucky that last door wouldn't open for us," Makoto said with a weary sigh.

Akira leaned against a lamppost positioned near the bench, closing his eyes. "Been a long time since that happened." And, as had been the case with Ann too, the incident nearly ended in disaster.

"Haru that was... the world inside your father's heart. His Palace," Shizuka explained. She could see the confusion written across Haru's face, doe eyes looking up at her as if Shizuka had grown a second head. Shizuka sighed. "Okay, this is gonna get weird, so you better buckle up."

She started at the beginning, or as close to the beginning as she could. She explained the existence of the Metaverse, the strange appearance of the app that allowed people to explore that world. She spoke of Palaces and what they meant, and how those same Palaces could be used to change the owner dramatically. Most importantly she told Haru that she was talking to the Phantom Thieves who had been the talk of the town. Through it all, of course, she kept her tone low to keep intruding ears from listening in.

When she had finished, Haru looked down at her feet. "Oh my," she softly said. "To think that I'd become friends with a Phantom Thief... and who could have imagined that the way you 'steal hearts' would be like that?" Suddenly she understood. "Oh... were you looking into my father on my behalf?"

Shizuka nodded. "It's clear he's not gonna willingly take that slimeball away from you, so I'm aiming to persuade him. And if he has been screwing his workers over, that's even more reason to get involved. You're not mad, are you?"

"Truthfully? I had recently been considering posting a request on the Phan-site. But, part of me was afraid that my request would go unanswered," Haru admitted.

"We're really sorry you got caught up in all this," Akira said. "You're not hurt, are you?"

"No, I'm quite alright. Just a little shaken. But I appreciate your concern..." A bashful smile crossed her face "Aki-kun."

Akira cocked his head slightly, but ultimately he raised no objection to the sudden nickname. "At any rate, you don't need to worry. We'll fix your dad's distorted heart. He'll become a better man, and you'll be freed from that arranged marriage. Ultimately you just need to keep going as you normally do," he explained.

"Yes. We can't really promise to do it quickly, we still need to do a good deal of planning and exploring... but ultimately, we will get it done," Yusuke said. Though he still hadn't forgotten all this Medjed business, and he didn't doubt that would disrupt them significantly in the coming weeks. The bluenette winced, sparing a glance to his shoulder. "Morgana, I don't mean to be a bother, but do you think you could heal me?"

Morgana perched himself on Akira's shoulder. "Never tried healing someone in the real world, but..." the feline glanced to his backside and grunted. "Well, definitely worth a shot. I don't want to
have to go all the way to Lifeson with this pain in my butt." Zorro's glowing form appeared behind Morgana, raising his rapier and calling on some healing magic that steadily soothed their burns.

"Aki-kun," Haru said "Your cat is... talking."

The dark haired boy shrugged. "You get used to it," he admitted.
Class always seemed to drag on a little longer whenever they had a Phantom Thief job on the horizon. It was something Akira was currently acutely aware of, as even when lunch hit he was aware of every minute he still had to sit through.

"Hey," Morgana softly said from the small shelf in Akira's desk. "Your phone was buzzing earlier. You should probably check it out."

"It's probably just Shizuka or Ryuji texting me crude jokes again," Akira murmured. He raised his phone and quickly opened the chat icon. The sight that greeted him was definitely a foreign one. A string of messages, sent from an unknown account with some kind of grinning cat avatar. Akira narrowed his eyes slightly and opened up the messages.

Alibaba: Nice to meet you.

Alibaba: I am the one they call Alibaba.

Alibaba: I want to ask you something.

Alibaba: You're a phantom thief, aren't you?

Alibaba: Can you really steal hearts?

Alibaba: There is someone whose heart I would like you to steal. Fortunately, I'm not asking for charity. Let's make a deal.

Alibaba: You're worried about Medjed, right? As I understand it, your group can't actually deal with them.

Alibaba: If you can change the heart of the person I have in mind, I'll deal with Medjed easily. I can track them as easily as I tracked you.

Alibaba: I have the necessary tool prepared on my end. Look forward to it.

Akira tried to type a response, only to receive an error message in return. He tried to click on Alibaba's icon, only to run into the same issue. Whoever this 'Alibaba' was, he couldn't track them or even respond to them. He was playing their game now.

Most worryingly, whoever Alibaba was they knew his identity and somehow knew that the Phantom Thieves had no means to deal with Medjed.
Black Mask, Mr. A, Medjed, and now Alibaba... Akira was getting awfully sick of mystery men.

As soon as the group had gathered at the hideout, Akira relayed events to them and informed them of Alibaba. Just to ensure they understood how serious this was, he made a point of showing them the messages he had received. A heavy atmosphere soon filled the area.

"How does this Alibaba guy know so much?" Shiho asked, seemingly more to herself than anyone else. "We haven't really been broadcasting our identities or anything, have we?" she asked.

A few eyes turned to Ryuji, who bristled in indignation. "H-hey, what're you all looking at me for?!"

"This Alibaba dude knows that we steal hearts, but that's prolly something that came up in the news or something. What I wanna know is, how'd he know we couldn't deal with Medjed? It's something we were only talking about yesterday," Shizuka said.

Akira folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. "I've been thinking about that too. The implications are worrying, to put it bluntly." He sighed in annoyance, closing his eyes.

"Going by how Alibaba sent Akira those messages, setting things up in such a way to make his account untraceable and making it impossible to reply to him, it seems clear Alibaba is some kind of hacker." Makoto set her right hand on her chin, her eyes turned to the ceiling in thought. "If Medjed proves to be a threat, it might be handy to have someone like that on our side. On the other hand, we can't put complete trust into a total stranger."

Shizuka snorted slightly. "Come on, you guys aren't still taking those nerds seriously? What're they gonna do, send us some mean tweets?" she rhetorically asked.

"Actually, I've been thinking about that. Anyone else think it's weird that Medjed would make a big public threat like that, if they couldn't follow through?" Ann asked. The question made the tension rise slightly in the room. "I mean... well maybe they don't know who we are, but even if that's the case they could like, hack other businesses and say they're doing it because we didn't go along with their demands."

"What, and we'd be blamed for that stuff? The eff man," Ryuji said. "I mean, would people really turn on us like that?" he asked.

"People are fickle idiots, so yes," Akira replied grimly. "We don't know what, if anything, Medjed might be planning. But Ann has a point, it seems unlikely that Medjed have no actual plan. Dealing with them mightn't be a bad idea."

"But what about Haru's father?" Morgana asked. "I know we don't have a time limit on that, but it'd be best to deal with that as soon as possible."

Akira nodded curtly. It was something that had been on his mind ever since he got the message from Alibaba, the prospect of them having two targets to contend with at once. "I don't intend on leaving Haru to that fate, but if Alibaba's target is worth looking at we should deal with it too. And, given how big our group has become, we should be able to deal with a little multitasking if we split into two parties. Particularly if we can get Sergio involved in another mission."

"Actually," Makoto interjected "I've been thinking a bit about Okumura's Palace. We might need some outside help to get through it." She glanced around the table, seeming to place some focus on those who hadn't been in the party yesterday evening. "Just before we left we ran across a door that
wouldn't open because we didn't meet the requirements of the 'biometric scanner.' But we might be able to get the door to open if we have Haru with us."

Shizuka nearly fell out of her seat. "W-wait, seriously? You wanna bring Haru back in there?" the thought alone seemed to fill her with dread.

"I'm surprised you have an issue with that. You're the one who suggested bringing myself and Shiho into the Metaverse despite the danger," Makoto explained.

"Yeah but..." Shizuka awkwardly scratched the back of her neck at that fact. "Those were different. With Shiho it was kind of a spur of the moment thing. Plus I figured she deserved a chance to kick Kamoshida's ass. And Makoto you like, radiate raw badass so I figure you could handle it. But Haru's... I mean you guys saw her. She's super sweet, probably doesn't even know how to make a fist!"

Akira nodded. "That might be the case, but the alternative is trying to brute force those doors. And with how quickly the robot workers jumped us, that's a far more dangerous idea assuming it would even work in the first place."

That was unfortunately true. It was just their luck that a heavily populated conveyor belt had to be positioned right beside that door. "Well... I guess that's true. I better stick close to her in that case," Shizuka admitted.

Yusuke cleared his throat, drawing the attention of the group. "For now though, perhaps it would be best to wait a day or two and see how this Medjed situation develops? It would be wise to learn if there's an actual threat before we make plans to split up. If not, we likely won't need to take Alibaba's deal."

"Unless the target Alibaba has in mind is a major threat," Akira added. He supposed it was a blessing that summer vacation was fast approaching, because the next month was set to be a hectic one already.

"Maybe we should check Medjed's site now, just in case." Ryuji took out his phone, spending a few moments on some idle browsing before something caused his brows to perk up. "H-hey, there's something new on Medjed's website! Agh, crap it's in English!"

"Oh really? Let me check," Shizuka said, bringing the site up on her phone. An annoyed grimace quickly crossed her face. "They're saying they beat us 'cause we didn't rise to their challenge. Ya know, playground logic. And any citizen of Japan who supports us should stop it or uh face the consequences. 'We will discipline any who worship them. The punishment is confiscation of possessions.'" Shizuka scratched the back of her head with her left hand. "Huh. What do you suppose they mean by that?"

"Nothing good," Akira grimly said.

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7/21

Things only got stranger after Akira arrived home that evening to find some mail waiting for him at Leblanc. It was the first thing he had gotten in the mail since arriving in Tokyo, so he had known for a fact it wasn't from his parents.

In that envelope, addressed to him but with no indication as to who sent it, was a calling card. Or, at least, an intricate recreation of one. The 'necessary tool' Alibaba had mentioned, from what
Akira and Morgana could guess. But whoever the calling card was meant for, Akira couldn't say. There was no such information on the card itself.

Fortunately, it seemed he wasn't going to be left in the dark for long. It was halfway through the school day when he got another message from the enigmatic Alibaba. Only now, it seemed, he was able to reply to his messages. For as annoyed as he was at this situation, Akira resolved to be courteous and polite.

Alibaba: Good day.
A.K: Good day to you too.
Alibaba: Ah, you responded today. I was hoping you and I could chat.
Alibaba: After all you are the leader of the Arditi, correct?
A.K: How did you figure that one out?
Alibaba: I have my methods. More importantly, I appreciate that you didn't waste our time trying to deny it.
Alibaba: You got the calling card, correct? Are you at school right now?
A.K: Yes and yes.
Alibaba: You're surprisingly diligent. In any case, now that you have the calling card, when are you going to steal it?
A.K: Steal from who? We can't do a job if we don't know the target.
Alibaba: I assumed all you needed was a calling card. Can you really not do anything without that information?
A.K: The calling card is part of the process but it's complicated. First we need to know who we're going after.
Alibaba: I see. Maybe I was overeager.
Alibaba: Very well.
Alibaba: One moment.
Alibaba: The targets name is
Alibaba: Futaba Sakura.
Alibaba: If you fail to change her heart, I'll expose your identity to the world. I'm counting on you.

Just as Akira moved to reply again, another error message popped up and cut the conversation short. Well, they had one more piece of information to work with, but the mystery of this whole
affair still seemed impenetrable.

Akira strongly resisted the urge to fling his phone in a fit of rage. Alibaba was going to *report* them if they didn't do this? What gave them the right to throw around threats like that?

Worst of all, Akira knew they would have to acquiesce to Alibaba's demands. The impotence of this situation made Akira clench his free hand under his desk until he could swear something was about to pop. How did Alibaba know so much about them? And just who the hell was 'Futaba Sakura'?

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Any plans that the Arditi had for the afternoon were quickly scrapped once Akira made the others aware of the threat against them. Everyone had gathered at the hideout once again, with the atmosphere in the building being rather tense.

"Well... okay, I guess it's fair to say that this situation is a little more serious now," Shizuka said, trying to break the ice. "But ah... well, do we got any idea about who this Futaba person is?"

"I tried looking online, but nothing really came up. But if her last name is Sakura, maybe she's related to Boss?" Ann suggested from her end of the table.

"Oh right, you haven't been to Akira's place yet. The guy we're talking about is Sojiro Sakura, but most everyone calls him Boss. He's a cafe owner in Yongen," Ann explained, smiling slightly.

Akira nodded. "Yes, but he doesn't have any kids." He pondered that for a few moments, drumming his left hand on the table. "At least... I don't think he does. And if he has any other family, he sure hasn't told me anything about them," the dark haired boy explained.

"Seriously dude? You've been living under his roof for like, half a year and you don't even know if he has kids?" Ryuji asked.

"Dunno if you noticed Ryuji, but he and I aren't exactly friends," Akira remarked. Not for lack of trying on Akira's part. But trying to talk with Sojiro about anything other than coffee was like trying to talk to a brick wall.

Yusuke gave a soft sigh. "He may seem gruff, but I'm sure Boss does care a good deal about you. Perhaps if you simply ask him, he might be willing to talk about it?" he suggested.

"I don't mean to be a downer or anything, but Sakura isn't exactly an uncommon name," Shiho said. She folded her arms and reclined slightly. "I'd like it to be as convenient as Boss being related to her, but this Futaba girl might be completely unrelated."

"It's a good starting point though," Morgana suggested. "If we're right, then it'll save time on investigating. And if the message was hand delivered to Leblanc, it does seem that whoever brought it to Leblanc must be nearby. Still, I do have to wonder why Alibaba is interested in this Futaba girl. He didn't specify in his messages."

Shizuka rolled his eyes slightly behind her Ray-Ban's. "And that's not shady *at all.*"

"We can only hope they don't have anything sinister in mind. With our identities on the line... I really dunno what we're gonna do if that's the case," Shiho said. "Geez... when did this job get so complicated?"
Akira was in luck when he got back to the cafe, spying Sojiro at the counter just as he strode in. The older man looked up from his newspaper. A cigarette was perched neatly in his lips. "Hm? Oh, you're back," he remarked.

"Yo," Akira replied. He stood near the far booth for a few quiet moments, before deciding to just come out and ask. "Hey, who's Futaba Sakura?"

Sojiro visibly tensed, the cigarette nearly falling from his mouth in surprise. "How do you know about that?" His eyes narrowed slightly from behind his glasses, before he pushed himself away from the counter. "It's got nothing to do with you." He briskly strode past Akira, making for the door "Make sure you lock up the place."

Once Sojiro had left and the door shut behind him, Akira gave an annoyed groan. He fought the impulse to put his fist through the wall, as it would no doubt add to his troubles, but this whole situation was just ungodly frustrating.

Morgana quickly popped out of Akira's bag and landed on the counter. "Looks like it's a hit," the feline remarked.

"We've got that much going for us at least. Not that it helps if Sojiro isn't going to tell us anything," Akira said. He had expected this much, of course. Getting any information from the old guy was gonna be a challenge. "We don't even know who Futaba is to him. Could be a daughter, or sister or... hell, even his mother."

Their asses were on the line here. If he didn't get something substantial soon, then Alibaba would rat them out and the Arditi would be done for.

Akira couldn't let that happen. He wouldn't let that happen.

7/22

In a bid to try and gain a little more information, Akira spent a solid hour after school asking around Yongen to see if any of the locals knew about Futaba. He turned up diddly with a side order of squat for his troubles.

Most everyone was under the impression that Sojiro lived alone, a professional bachelor, or thought that the only person living with him was Akira. The only thing of note that came up was from the owner of the local grocery store, who claimed Sojiro had enough food for two delivered to his house. Sojiro was a rather thin man, and definitely didn't strike Akira as the gluttonous type.

When he thought about this, something else stuck out in Akira's mind.

More than once, when Sojiro was out running errands, deliveries would arrive at Leblanc with the deliveryman claiming there was nobody at home to take the packages. Those packages, he now realized, often had the label of some computer company stamped on the box.

Why? Sojiro didn't seem a tech literate sort, Akira reasoned. So if someone was living with him, maybe those packages were meant for Futaba? But why couldn't she get them herself? And how was it that nobody in Yongen knew she even existed?

Akira had some theories on that, but it was something that he'd need more evidence on before he
could say anything.

"So we know this Futaba girl is related to the Chief, but nobody in Yongen knows anything about her. Does that seem weird for you too?" Morgana asked, poking his head out of Akira's bag.

"A little. Sojiro's well known around here, so it's strange something like this could be kept a secret. Unless..." Akira stroked his chin slowly, sorting through the vocabulary of his brain. "What's the word... a hikikomori?"

"Huh? What's that?" Morgana asked.

"A shut-in, basically. Someone who's afraid of leaving their bedroom for whatever reason... I heard it was a big problem in Tokyo, but..." Maybe Akira had it wrong. The thought alone seemed horrifically sad, and he couldn't imagine how hard a life like that must be. What would drive a person to be like that? Akira couldn't fathom it.

Leblanc's bell rang above him as he opened the door, and Akira was immediately greeted with a tense atmosphere. As had been the case the other day, he was walking into an argument between Sae and Sojiro. One could easily cut the tension with a knife.

"You read the letter, did you not?" asked Sae.

Sojiro gave Akira a sideways glance, before setting his sights back on Sae. "So you're the one who tipped him off about Futaba. You really shouldn't have done that... and I have no intention of talking to you about Wakaba."

"I didn't say anything to Kurusu," Sae pointedly said. "This is a serious matter Sakura-san. Your parental authority will have to be suspended. I take it you're okay with that outcome?"

'Parental authority huh... guess that confirms how he's related to Futaba,' Akira thought to himself.

As he stood there, Sae continued on with the ruthless manner befitting a famous prosecutor. "Considering the state of your daughter and your family overall, there are no points in your favour. In a domestic court, our chances of victory are roughly 99.9%. This is without taking into account the suspicions of abuse currently placed on you, making your chances of retaining custody tenuous at best."

By now Sojiro was red around the ears, and looked angrier than Akira had ever seen him before. "You're going that far?! I told you, I don't know a damn thing about it!"

"We're extremely serious about this. If there's a chance that Isshiki's research is linked to the psychotic breakdowns... it's a stone we can't afford to leave unturned," Sae said firmly.


"Thank you. I'll contact you at a later date," Sae replied, seeming to be more amicable now.

"You're not going to hear anything you want to hear," Sojiro pointedly said. He glared at Sae as she moved to the door, and once she had left he let his anger bubble back to the surface. "And stay out!" Sojiro snapped. He grit his teeth, firmly planting his hands on the counter. "That woman is really good at pissing people off." As Sojiro was fuming, he quickly noticed that Akira was watching him closely. "What's with that look? You got something to say?"

"What was that all about?" Akira asked. He had a pretty good idea, but sometimes it was best to
"This doesn't involve you. All you need to concern yourself with is going to school and staying out of trouble, got that? Otherwise, you're running the risk of being thrown out on your ass."

Akira narrowed his eyes slightly, but remained silent as he made for the stairway leading up to the attic. He paused in the archway, but kept his gaze affixed to the wall. "You know, from the sound of things, the number of people you can call 'friends' is already few and far between. Personally, I'd advise against making that list even smaller." With that, he headed upstairs.

Getting pushed around and shoved aside was something he had gotten rather sick of. He'd deal with this Futaba business, but only for the Arditi. That was all that mattered.

7/24

Yesterday had been a bust. With Sergio and Yusuke caught up in some event at Kosei, Ryuji helping his mom with something, and Shizuka taking Haru to the gym it made their group a little smaller to the point where they decided to postpone discussing the current situation. Akira had busied himself helping Ann out, and felt certain she was close to a breakthrough. Whenever he found more free time, he'd be sure to hang out with Makoto too.

In that time, Akira had been contacted by Alibaba once more. The hacker was getting antsy, wondering why the group hadn't changed Futaba's heart yet. Once again, Alibaba mentioned the threat of outing their identities to Akira's eternal annoyance.

He had attempted to calm things, stating that the group were getting ready to do the job. All they needed, he had said, were the keywords of Futaba's Palace. At the time he reasoned that it would be easier to talk this matter through if they could meet face to face, rather than through text chains he had little control over. The prospect had freaked Alibaba out, who claimed to be unable to go out in public.

The prospect of meeting had made Alibaba cagey, and just like that the hacker cut off communications once again. It was something else he had to bring up when the gang met up, this time heading to a sushi bar.

With the fireworks festival having been rained out, they hadn't properly celebrated their last big win. And Kaneshiro's treasure had earned them a tidy sum, the kind of money that could pay for a damn fine sushi dinner. As Sergio had been a part of their victory, even he had found the time to join them today.

"Hot damn," Shizuka expertly plucked a section maguro with her chopsticks "Can't get a good burger in Japan, but the sushi here blows American sushi right out of the water. Literally!" She had gotten comfortable in her seat at the bar, legs swaying back and forth against the long wooden legs of her tall chair.

"So uh..." Ryuji gave the dark haired girl a sideways glance. "I'm just gonna come out and ask. You gonna tell us what that is?" He gestured to the slightly faded bruise on Shizuka's left cheek. She had covered it with some makeup earlier, but as the day went on it had become a little more pronounced.

"Oh, right... well uh, I invited Haru to the gym. Wanted to teach her how to throw a punch, just in case her slimeball 'fiance' came at her. She was uh... a fast learner..."
"Alright Haru, let's see that right hook! I can take it!"

"But... but Shizu-chan!" Haru hesitated, her right arm cocked back.

"Trust me, it's fine! If you wanna show that bastard you mean business and don't fear him, you gotta go right for the face. So show me what you got! I can take it!"

Haru's fist shot out with surprising speed, cracking Shizuka on the cheek and nearly knocking her off balance. She stumbled, coughing loudly as she caught her balance before managing to snap upright again. "HOLY SHIT!"

"I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry!" Haru hurriedly said.

"No! no, it's fine, I asked you to... what the hell is your hand made of?!"

"Bones?"

"Jesus... Muhammad Ali's been reborn as a waifish Japanese schoolgirl. The FUCK man... You uh, probably don't need to... need to worry about that fiance of yours."

"Yeah... fucking hell, for a sweet girl she packs a mean punch."

Makoto sighed, plucking a spicy tuna roll between her chopsticks. "You probably shouldn't let people punch you in the face. Even if you're trying to help them," Makoto said. And that definitely wasn't a piece of advice she ever thought she'd have to give.

"I thought it'd be like getting punched by cotton candy..."

"Well, that aside," Shiho chimed, turning to look at Akira from her end of the bar. "You were telling us about what you learned from Sakura-san. So... is Futaba really related to him?"

Akira nodded. "His daughter, from my understanding. Didn't get to see her in person, and nobody in Yongen knows about her... and trying to get information from Sojiro is like trying to get blood from a stone," he stated.

"But... why was the prosecutor asking about Wakaba Isshiki's research? How's Boss connected to that?" Ann asked.

"Oh dude! What if like, Futaba is Boss' and Wakaba's daughter? And like, they have some of her research in his house?" Ryuji suggested.

Makoto hummed at the prospect. "Sounds a little dramatic...though the article I read did mention Isshiki having a daughter, dying right in front of her. But other than that, I couldn't find any information on Isshiki's daughter, not even a name."

"They're going after Boss to get information on Isshiki, and... threatening to remove custody on his daughter if he doesn't help them. And they're saying he's abusing his daughter?" Ann asked, earning a nod from Akira in return. "That's crazy... Boss really doesn't strike me as the kind of guy to do something like that."

Akira exhaled slowly through his nose. "I have no love for the guy, but... I really doubt he'd abuse his daughter. Hell, he's never raised a hand to me, and he could get away with it easily in my case," the dark haired boy said.

Sergio took a section of prawn from his board and gently set it in Breakthru's palm. His Stand
floated over to where Akira was seated and held the pink shellfish out toward Akira's bag. Morgana's head shot out like a bolt of lightning, deftly nabbing the prawn from Breakthru's outstretched palm.

"For a guy who hates being called a cat, you sure do fit the stereotype," Ryuji flatly said.

Having sated his love of cats for the time being, Sergio focused on the task at hand. "I suppose the pressing matter is this: Who is Alibaba?" The blond let the question hang in the air, a sly smile crossing his face. "From the sound of things, this Wakaba woman's research is rather confidential stuff. A cafe owner and his young daughter somehow tie into this, enough to bring in a threat of legal action. More than that, Futaba's very existence seems a well guarded secret. And yet somehow Alibaba, a hermit by all appearances too, knows about her and wants us to help her out. Strange, no?"

"You're coming to the same line of thinking I am, right?" Akira asked. The others leaned in slightly, curious about what he had to say. "I think Alibaba is Futaba."

"Whoa, for real?" Ryuji asked. "Why all the mystery though? And why'd she want to have her own heart changed?"

Akira shrugged. "Who can say? It's 'none of my business' according to some, so I'm not exactly tearing my hair out over it. But the fact that Futaba seems to be a hikikomori, Alibaba seems just as shut-off from the world... add to that the fact that I've seen some strange packages going to Sojiro's house, the kinda stuff I doubt he'd have any interest in, it gives the impression that Futaba has some kind of computer den all to herself. She'd be in a position to sneakily deliver that 'calling card' to me. And as to how she knows my identity..." Akira pondered that one for a moment, idly tapping his chopsticks on the board in front of him. "Well, that part I still haven't figured that out. Don't think I'll be thrilled by the answer either way."

"So she's one of them... uh, what's the word? A NEET?" Shizuka asked. "Okay... well I can buy that, but... I can't wrap my head around someone wanting their heart changed. Does she even have a Palace?"

Akira nodded. "Checked her name in the Nav. No idea what her keywords are though."

"What kind of distorted desire would a shut-in even have?" Makoto asked. "I know a person doesn't necessarily need to be 'evil' to have a Palace, but I'm having trouble understanding her situation. And simply guessing Futaba's keywords might not work with how little we actually know about her."

A mutual sigh rolled across the team. So close and yet so far. The threat of having their identities exposed was still hanging over them, and so they couldn't afford to discard this current problem.

Sergio polished off the last of his sushi and languidly stretched his arms over his head. "Let's go and ask her then," he casually said.

"But Boss says he doesn't want anyone else involved," Shiho said.

"And? He's at his cafe, it's not like he'll notice us if we sneak into his home. If Futaba and Alibaba are the same person, she'll know why we're there. Simply scratching our heads won't accomplish anything, and she's the only reliable source of information we're going to find."

Shiho gave him a quizzical look. "Have you... broken into places before?" she asked in a whisper. Sergio playfully tapped his nose.
"I'd still feel pretty bad about just... waltzing in there. Especially if we get caught." An idea struck Makoto as she examined the remaining sushi in front of her. "But not if we show up with a gift. A nice helping of sushi!"

"M-my leftovers!" Morgana squeaked.
Having boxed up their leftovers, the group made a quick trip toward the train station. The horizon was already a dull orange colour, and no doubt the sun would have set by the time they got to Yongen's station. That meant, ultimately, they'd only have a brief window to act before Sojiro closed up shop for the day.

They were making a brisk pace through the station before a familiar voice reached the group. "Niijima-san. Fancy meeting you here."

Akechi approached the group, moving past a small throng of people. As it was Sunday, he was dressed casually. Or at least as casually as a person in a blue sweater vest and brown slacks could manage. Shizuka had to wonder what kind of sick man would wear a sweater in heat like this. As ever, he was clutching a steel briefcase in his hand.


"Akechi?" Ryuji turned a full 180, the annoyance visible on his face. Even now, with public opinion swinging in their favour, Akechi still took to the news and chat shows to critique them. Much to Ryuji's eternal annoyance. Shiho gave him a slight squeeze on his left shoulder, hoping to both reassure him and to remind Ryuji that they were in public.

"Didn't think you knew this guy," Shizuka said, glancing briefly to Makoto. Then again, if Makoto's older sister was a big shot prosecutor, it was likely she had worked with a big time detective more than once.

"Kurusu-san and his friends from the TV station... I didn't think you all knew Niijima-san," Akechi said. He scanned the group and paused as he saw Sergio. "You're new however."

The blond smirked slightly, giving the collar of his red polo shirt a modest tug. The humidity of the station was quite irritating. "Sergio, professional gaijin. I don't hang out with these guys too often, but today was one of the lucky days. Of course, I know who you are. The famous detective who's been all over the news."

Akechi chuckled at the assessment. "Would you believe me if I said I was camera shy?" His attention shifted to the bluenette of the team. "And I'm pleased to make your acquaintance too, Yusuke Kitagawa," he said.

Yusuke visibly tensed. "How did you know my name?"

"Well, because I'm a psychic of course," Akechi bluntly replied. Sergio seemed ready to believe that, showing no reaction. "Only joking. Your name came up as I was investigating Madarame. You are his pupil, after all. Getting involved in that case is what had me placed on the Arditi investigation." He smiled faintly, while some dread began to flow freely between the others. "Things are set to get a little more hectic. Medjed has just declared war on them, after all."

"Seriously? Don't those nerds have anything better to do...?" Shizuka sighed and took her phone out, quickly searching for the same shady website. As was the case last time, the text was in English. The contents of this message were certainly more sinister than the last one. "Oh."
Akechi tilted his head a little, seeming to feign concern. "You seem tense," he casually said.

"Just ah... surprised is all. Didn't think these guys would start making actual threats after their last few messages," Shizuka quickly replied. Though, having browsed the newest statement, she felt that Medjed weren't quite as harmless as she once wanted to believe.

Akechi's free hand roamed up to his chin, a small hum escaping him. "I'm surprised that any high school student would be following this story so closely, without personal attachment at least." For a few moments he seemed to simply observe the group. "You know, this is a rather interesting gathering of people. Prosecutor Niijima's sister, a former pupil of Madarame, and a group of Shujin students. All of you are connected to the Phantom Thieves in some way. Well, yourself excluded," he gestured to Sergio, who shrugged in return. "Speaking of the Phantom Thieves, there was something I wanted to ask Kurusu-kun. Given this Medjed situation, what would you do if you were a Phantom Thief?"

"Who can say? Haven't really been following this story so I can't give a fair answer," Akira curtly replied.

"Well, that's quite alright. Still, with things going the way they are, it seems likely that it will soon be impossible to ignore this commotion. Still, I imagine the actual Arditi are keeping a close eye on things. If my profiling is correct, the amount of free time needed to conduct their acts, and the nature of their first target being a Shujin Academy teacher, leads me to believe I'm looking for a group of juveniles. If that's the case, then they likely won't have the tools to deal with Medjed."

Ann and Makoto exchanged a brief glance. There was something sinister underpinning Akechi's comments, as if he knew the truth about them and was just acting coy. "Now that I think about it," Akechi began "A few of you do have personal ties to some of the Arditi's previous targets. How strange."

Akira's expression remained unflappable. "Is that so? Hm, it does seem odd when you put it like that. Just a coincidence," Akira said. If Akechi had any actual evidence, he wouldn't be wasting time acting 'playful' about all this.

"Of course. Well, much as I would like to continue this chat, I have other matters to attend to." He gave Akira a faint smile. "I hope we can chat again soon."

Akechi turned, heading one way while the Arditi made for the other. Shizuka lingered for a moment, watching Akechi's back. That guy... time to test my theory. 'By the sound of things, he knew more than he was letting on. That or he had some disability that made everything he said come out as cryptic and vaguely threatening. Houdini swiftly jumped from Shizuka's body, rendered invisible by her power. The golden figure moved around in front of Akechi and, for just a fraction of a second, Houdini's arm became visible.

Akechi flinched.

While Akechi tried his best to play off his sudden stop and got to moving again, Shizuka was quick to meld back into the crowd and rapidly made her way to the nearest underground platform. He saw it. He fucking saw it! There was nothing else there that could've made him stop mid-step!"

Ryuji glanced up as Shizuka quickly descended the steps by the elevator. "Geez, what kept ya? We were gonna have to send another search party out if you were any longer," the blond remarked, only half-joking.
"Guys, you're not gonna believe this..." She glanced over her shoulder briefly, just to make sure the detective hadn't secretly tailed them. "Akechi saw my Stand."

The others nearly doubled over at the curt statement. "W-what? Seriously?!" Ann's eyes had gone quite wide, and if the shock had hit her any harder they probably would have shot out of her head Tex Avery-style.

"You... you showed it to him? Uh... okay, on the one hand that's shocking, on the other it kinda gives him proof about who we are," Shiho said. She swallowed hard and quickly glanced from side to side, wanting to be sure that the boy detective wasn't lurking nearby.

"He didn't see me, and I only let him see Houdini's arm for a split second... but the fact that he reacted to it, that's what I wanted to see," the dark haired girl explained. "See, ever since we first met Akechi I knew something felt off about that guy. Took me a while to figure out why, and the answer may just surprise you. Pancakes."

Were it not for the bustle of the train station around them, one could have heard crickets chirping as the Arditi drank in what Shizuka just said. "I beg your pardon?" Yusuke flatly asked.

"Okay, so... we met Akechi at the TV station a while back. We were all talking about going out to Dome Town cause it was nearby, and then we ran into Asketchy. And he prattled on, and then said something about us talking about pancakes. But only one of us mentioned pancakes-"

"Morgana," Akira finished "He overheard Morgana..." He glanced to the feline peeping from his bag, who seemed to be just a little bashful.

"Truth be told, it's still weird to think that people can just overhear me. But anyone with a power like ours or Shizuka's should be able to... Something seemed off about our meeting with Akechi, but I never really thought much of it before now," Morgana mused. "Guess I'd better watch my mouth from here on out..."

Makoto had been silently processing all this information, her eyes cast to the dimly lit ceiling above them. "If Shizuka could hear Morgana before she went to the Metaverse, then it's possible Akechi is a Stand user too. It might explain why a high school student has done well as a detective, with his powers doing the legwork for him," she reasoned.

Her assessment made Akira nod. "It's possible. But we can't say anything for certain without investigating further... fortunately, Akechi's been treated like a damn idol for some time now. Finding a site detailing his cases shouldn't be too hard, and if we look into those cases..." he shrugged. "Who knows, something good might come up. Either way, simply being able to hear Morgana is proof enough that he's not a normal person. We need to be cautious around him."

A distant rumble echoed from the tunnel nearest to them, followed soon by twin piercing lights shining through the dark and growing brighter with each passing second. Ryuji gave a weary sigh. "Looks like our train's here... man, I really need to sit down. Akechi's got freaky powers, and he's on our asses... this day's draining me, and we haven't even gotten to Futaba yet!"

"At least the sushi was nice," Ann said with a forced smile.

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Medjed's threat, as Ann and Shizuka explained on the train ride to Yongen, was a more concrete one this time around. As the Arditi had remained 'silent' in the face of Medjed's previous threats, they wanted to carry out some retribution. If the Phantom Thieves didn't reveal their identities by the 21st of August, Medjed would launch a massive cyber attack on Japan.

They didn't mention specific targets, but their intention was clear. They wanted to strike at the Japanese economy, and any damage they did would no doubt be problematic. And if they got that far, it would destroy the reputation of the Arditi in the eyes of the public.

With that in mind, they couldn't afford to just ignore Medjed. They needed help and Futaba was the closest avenue they could go to. Even Shizuka's resources would take more time. After all, cyber crime had never been a part of the Speedwagon Foundation's resources. If Futaba was a bust, well she could always put the money into finding another solution. For as suspicious as it would doubtless look.

Sojiro's home was a modest one, a simple two story grey building surrounded by a dull grey wall that was about as tall as Yusuke. It was about the same as every other house bordering it, save for the 'Sakura' written on the plaque on the wall. The sun had fully set, leaving Yongen shrouded in dusk. Thick black clouds had gathered in the sky, and the night was set to be a rainy one.

"The old man's still in Leblanc, but if Futaba lives here..." Akira moved to the front of the group and gave the buzzer a quick ring. He stood by for a few moments before sighing softly. "Of course, since she's a shut-in..."

Sergio cracked his knuckles, then slowly dragged his arms up over his head in an exaggerated stretching motion. "Fortunately for you, Breakthru has a delicate touch. I just need to phase his hand through the door, give the components the right nudges..."

Akira squinted and leaned forward. It was a little hard to tell in the dark, but he soon made out what seemed off to him. "Wait a minute... the door's open." It was parted by only an inch or two, but the gap was quite visible to him now. "Seriously? He bitches at me to lock up the store every night, but he leaves his own front door open?" Akira said, exasperated. "Well, unless..." Unless Futaba had left it open? Maybe.

"Oh boo," Sergio tutted. "How am I supposed to show off now?"

After a brief pause Akira led on, sliding the door open fully and taking the first step inside. Even he was venturing into unknown territory now, having never even been invited into Sojiro's home before. Makoto moved in after him with Shizuka at her side, followed by Yusuke and Sergio, and then with Ryuji, Ann, and Shiho taking up the rear. "Sorry about the intrusion Sakura-san," Makoto softly said.

"Well, we won't get caught with any luck," Ann said. She gave a quick glance to the small box of sushi that Akira was carrying with him. "Plus we have a nice gift even if we do."

A low rumble rang through the clouds, faintly audible through the walls of the darkened house. With a deliberate slowness the group moved down the dark hallway of Sojiro's home, barely able to make out anything inside. Just a small counter near the entryway, and some of the doorframes. There was a muffled noise coming from somewhere inside, something bombastic and energetic. Something on TV, most likely.

"It's... pretty dark in here." Shizuka felt her whole body grow rigid as Makoto gripped her right
arm. "S-sorry, but do you mind if I stick close to you?"

"You..." Shizuka swallowed hard. Thank god it was so dark in here... though at the rate things were going, soon her face would be a big pink nightlight. "You afraid of the dark?" If the circumstances were a little different she might have teased Makoto, but it was hard to focus on anything but that grip on her arm.

Makoto nodded slightly. "Just a little... I-I'll be fine."

Ann squinted into the dark, but couldn't make out any details. "It's a small house, but with it being dark this place might as well be a labyrinth... how're we gonna find her room in all this?" the blonde asked.

"I could..." Shizuka fought hard to put her mind on the task at hand. "I could make the walls invisible and then she'd stick out like a sore thumb."

"We're trying to change her heart, not give her a heart attack," Morgana remarked.

A violent flash strobed through the clouds outside, followed seconds after by a tremendous boom of thunder. Ann screamed, nearly jumping out of her skin. The abrupt bolt of lightning caused a blackout across Yongen, with the few active electronics in the Sakura household clicking off abruptly.

"Seriously? We fight monsters every other day and thunder still gets to you?" Shiho asked in a hushed tone.

"It's thunder in a spooky empty house! Of course I'm scared! Can we please leave?"

Akira surveyed their surroundings and exhaled slowly through his nose. "If anyone wants to leave, they're free to. If it's just chatting with Futaba, we don't need the entire team here." He hadn't expected the hallways to be so cramped, after all.

A few members of the group turned and made to leave. "Um..." Makoto glanced to Shizuka "C-can you help guide me?" she asked. Shizuka nodded, resolving to keep her mouth shut in case she blurted out something stupid. As she turned and started to leave, the sound of a door opening startled Makoto and made her tense against Shizuka. "A-ah... my... my legs won't move!"

"You okay?" Shizuka asked softly, before feeling a wave of unease wash over her. It was hard to see anything in the dark, but she could just about feel the floorboards shifting under her feet.

Makoto and Shizuka slowly turned around until, for just a brief second, they got a glimpse of bespectacled eyes and flowing orange hair. A threeway scream broke through the house, before the orange-haired figure turned and sprinted deeper into the house.

"Wait!" Akira called, only barely able to react as the stranger bolted past them. He heard a door slam somewhere in the house, followed by the sound of a lock being clicked into place. "Damnit... if that was Futaba, I think we just messed up our first meeting."

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Please save me sis!" Makoto had practically collapsed onto her knees and had her arms wrapped tightly around Shizuka's legs, as if trying to cut off the circulation. The dark-haired girl was left staring off into the distance, frozen as still as a statue. It was, simultaneously, the most terrifying and most awesome moment of Shizuka's whole life.
"Are you okay Futaba?!" They could hear Sojiro's voice shouting through the front door, and he wasted no time in swiftly pulling it open. In a quick flourish he lifted the flashlight in his hands, quickly casting a blinding cone of light into his home. His eyes settled on Akira first, and then on the rest of the youths in his home. "What th- what are you all doing here?!!"

Akira scratched the back of his neck. "We... were bringing you some sushi we bought and saw that the door was unlocked," Akira said. "We thought you were in here already so we just decided to take a look." It wasn't the best lie ever, but fortunately Akira made for a convincing liar.

After a moment Sojiro glanced to Makoto as the brunette managed to pull herself to her feet. "And what is... all that about?" he asked, pointing between Makoto and Shizuka.

"Ah," Shizuka squeaked, her mind lagging several seconds behind what was going on around her.

Makoto hastily smoothed her black capris out, her rational mind filtering back now that her moment of irrational fear had faded. "This is... I um... I tripped," Makoto lamely said.

"These two are new to our group," Akira said, pointing first to Makoto and then to Sergio who was trying his hardest not to bust a gut at Shizuka's expense. "Makoto Niijima, the student council president at Shujin, and Sergio Esposito, a Kosei Academy student." He didn't want to leave Sojiro in the dark on the two strangers in his home. "More to the point, we... met someone else in here."

Sojiro gave an agitated sigh. "My daughter, Futaba... I knew you wanted to meet her, but I didn't think you'd do something this pigheaded," he grumbled.

Akira did his best to ignore that. "We... didn't expect her to be out of her room. We might have scared her there, and I was hoping we could apologize to her." That was largely true. While he definitely wanted to learn more about this 'Alibaba' business and get her on their side, not apologizing for scaring her would leave a bad taste in his mouth.

"That's..." Sojiro mulled the question over for a few moments, before sighing gently. "It's a complicated matter. For now you should probably leave her alone so she can calm down. Head on over to the shop... we can talk there. Just give me a few minutes to check on Futaba, and the circuit breakers."

The group were quick to get seated after Akira unlocked Leblanc's front door. Six of them sat down at the center booth, while Sergio and Ann sat at the counter. Morgana was nowhere to be found, but with how heavy the last few minutes had been none of the Arditi noticed this.

"Well, we just emotionally scarred a shut-in," Sergio remarked. "I... will take partial responsibility for that. I wasn't expecting her to be out of her room though."

"The brief blackout might have drawn her out," Akira mused "And then she heard people chatting inside her home..." He sighed and pressed his left hand to his face, pushing his glasses up in the process.

Ann had slumped forward onto the table, looking partially deflated with her chin resting on her hands. "I feel awful about all this... Things are probably hard enough for her without people barging into her home and terrifying her."
"If we're on the right track about her past, I really can't blame her for locking herself in her room," Shiho said, closing her eyes. "I know what that's like, wanting to shut yourself off from the world... Akira, we really have to help her." Akira raised no objection to that.

The bell above Leblanc's door rang out as Sojiro entered, with the older man quickly shutting the door behind him. "Everything's fine at the house, and Futaba seems fine now... thankfully." He grabbed one of the tall chairs and quickly took a seat, sighing softly. "This is going to be a long story, but... well I can imagine I'll look pretty bad if you don't know the whole story."

He propped his right arm on the corresponding leg, his chin resting on his open palm. "Futaba's mother and I knew each other long before Futaba was even born. She was a strange woman, but she and I got along well for some reason. Sharp-witted, stern, a little socially awkward, but always carefree... She truly was a great woman."

"From the sound of things, you and her weren't..." Shizuka trailed off, hoping the implication would be clear.

"No. Wakaba and I never got that far, despite my best efforts," he chuckled. "I tried, but every pick up line bounced right off her... I gave up on that whole pursuit, but we remained close. Wakaba was probably the best friend I ever had." He reached up, stroking his chin at the memories. "Whoever Futaba's biological father was, Wakaba never told me. She was alone before giving birth, and raised Futaba on her own too."

Ryuji nodded along to this. "Sounds familiar," he remarked.

"Even with a daughter in her life, Wakaba never lost sight of her research. She always tried her best to make time for those two parts of her life... it was really admirable how much passion she put into both," Sojiro explained.

"And... what was her research?" Akira asked. They already had some idea, or at least a name for her subject. But if Sojiro was so close to her, then maybe he had some of the information that had seemingly been scrubbed from the internet.

"I worked for the government at the time, doing... well it really isn't important. The important part is that Wakaba was a researcher, looking into something she referred to as 'cognitive psience'. I could never understand a lick of it, despite her best efforts to explain it. But that was Wakaba for you. So terrifyingly smart that it was as if she was on a different wavelength to everyone else... Even so she never looked down on anyone, and I could really admire that."

So much for that, Akira supposed.

"She loved her daughter, even if she couldn't always make time for her. And in a lot of ways, I can see so much of Wakaba in her. Futaba's a bright girl, incredibly smart. Trying to even talk with her is like trying to keep up with a computer, with how she always jumps from subject so subject. Heh, and the books she reads... I can't even understand the titles of them." Sojiro's expression shifted, progressively becoming more melancholy "But then, one day... Wakaba left Futaba behind. She killed herself, throwing herself into a moving car right in front of Futaba's eyes..."

"God..." Shizuka murmured. This was nothing new to the group, but Sojiro describing the event hit far harder for as close as he had been to Wakaba.
Sergio mulled this information over. "I don't wish to sound insensitive, but... why? If she was so passionate about her work and her daughter, what would drive her to do... that?"

Sojiro shook his head. "I don't know. And truth be told, I don't think I ever will. It just... happened one day." The thought alone seemed to frustrate Sojiro on a level none of them could understand. "A lot of things happened after that, her family was in total disarray, but I ended up taking custody of Futaba. As you can imagine, she was incredibly depressed. Wouldn't even talk to me at first. She opened up to me over time, but never seemed to totally come out of her shell. Then, one day she told me... that she blames herself for her mothers death," he explained.

Ann nearly sprang straight to her feet. "What? B-but... why?"

"I don't know, and I've never really been able to bring conversation to that point. Anything related to her mothers death nearly gives Futaba a panic attack, and I don't want to make things worse than they already are. But I don't think that's helping either... over the last year, Futaba's only gotten worse. Afraid of almost everything, especially the prospect of leaving her room. Can't even bring her to a doctor... and when I tried bringing someone to our house, she just locked herself in her room."

Sojiro strode out, leaving the Arditi to mull over all they had heard. The situation with Wakaba Isshiki was even worse than they'd previously thought, now that they knew two people who had been affected by it. And if Black Mask was behind Wakaba's death, they could potentially learn his identity if they understood the motive behind it.

"Can't be easy. I doubt Boss cares about what people think about him, so that's not the issue. But he can't help Futaba if she won't accept it... and now we're the only avenue she can turn to for help," Shiho said.

Shizuka, who had fallen silent for some time, finally spoke up. "Sergio had a point earlier. Boss is..."
a good judge of character, and I doubt he was wrong when he said Isshiki really loved her daughter. No way she'd kill herself, especially right in front of her daughter, if that was the case. Definitely some foul play going on there."

Akira nodded firmly. "Well... if we want to learn more about her research, then it seems we can only ask Futaba. We'll meet up at the hideout tomorrow and plan out our next move... for now though, it's been an eventful evening and we should probably all rest up. Right Morgana?" The question hung in the air for a few seconds without an answer. "Hm?" Akira scanned around Leblanc, but couldn't spy his fuzzy friend anywhere.

"Hrmph... I knew something was missing," Sergio remarked. "Well, chatty or otherwise, he's still a cat. And as with all cats, he has an inborn love of exploration. He'll find his way back here eventually."

"You... sure do seem big on cats," Ann said. "I'm not complaining, it's actually kinda sweet. But I wouldn't take you for the type."

Sergio shrugged faintly. "My grandmother owned an animal shelter, and I worked heavily with the cats. Morgana probably just decided to poke around Sakura-san's house now that he's had the chance."

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In a small and dimly lit bedroom, laden with trash, a short redhead sat perched by the glow of her high end computer monitor. The light reflected off her polished glasses as she rapidly scrolled through a few different imageboards.

The heavy headphones on her ears were buzzing, taking in audio directly from Leblanc. Her little bugs had come in handy, even if Akira and his friends didn't spend too much time there.

"Well... if we want to learn more about her research, then it seems we can only ask Futaba. We'll meet up at the hideout tomorrow and plan out our next move... for now though, it's been an eventful evening and we should probably all rest up. Right Morgana...? Hm?"

"Hrmph... I knew something was missing. Well, chatty or otherwise, he's still a cat. And as with all cats, he has an inborn love of exploration. He'll find his way back here eventually."

A loud meow echoed through her room, causing Futaba to yelp and nearly call right out of her chair as a black cat darted out from under her desk. "Wh... what the..." Futaba murmured.

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7/25

By the time everyone gathered at the hideout the next day, Akira had taken the time to write a few things on the whiteboard. Two lists of names, one written under the label of 'Team One' while the other was marked as 'Team Two.'

Under the first label the following names were listed: Joker, Skull, Mona, Nemesis, Panther.

The second label covered the remainder of their group: Queen, Sting, Fox, Diabolik, Haru.
"I was spending some time mulling over the way we'd divide our team, and I believe this arrangement to be pretty fair," Akira said, gesturing to the names listed on the whiteboard. "Makoto, I'm trusting you to be the field leader for Team Two."

"Oh! Well... I'm not complaining, but why me?" the brunette asked.

"You've got a sharp mind and good tactical coordination. That and everyone's very likely to follow your orders." Everyone knew by now how imposing Makoto could be. Truthfully, Makoto was probably the only person Akira could trust in a leadership role. He loved all his friends of course, but most of them likely wouldn't be able to coordinate a team.

He definitely couldn't leave a job like that in the hands of Ryuji, or Yusuke, or Ann.

"Uh..." Shizuka raised her sunglasses up slightly, squinting at the lists on the whiteboard. "I dunno dude, those teams look a little lopsided."

Akira nodded. "Futaba's Palace is completely unknown territory, where we have at least some idea what to expect in Okumura's. If the threat level is lower in Futaba's, then I can trim the numbers on my team. But, to be honest," he raised the marker in his left hand, tapping it under Haru's name. "There's a strong likelihood that Haru will somehow get a persona in her dad's Palace, let's not kid ourselves."

"One with giant spiky hands no doubt..." Shizuka murmured under her breath.

"Even so, Makoto's team is pretty strong as it stands. Johanna is speedy and has plenty of firepower. Houdini is the ultimate stealth tool, Breakthru has a lot of strength behind it, and Goemon has a perfect balance between physical power and magical attacks," Akira explained. On paper their team could handle a lot of threats, and if outmatched they could rely on Shizuka for a quick escape. "We should keep each other up to date on what our teams get up to. When it comes time to steal a treasure from either Palace, we'll group up to handle it. Understood?" A chorus of nods greeted him. "Good. Let's split up and get to work."

Ann rose from her chair first, stretching her toned arms over her head. "Wellp... we might not have a time limit on Okumura's Palace, but we should try and get both done as quickly as possible. Splitting the team up just feels... weird."

"One more thing," Akira said, stopping at the door. "Futaba's Palace is no doubt at Sojiro's house. So it'd likely be more efficient if Team One met up at Leblanc so we could move quickly from there," he explained. Nobody objected to the suggestion, since it would mean only one commute. As the Okumura Foods HQ wasn't too far from Shibuya, Team Two could likely stick to using the hideout.

Just as the group started to file out of their base, they became aware that they weren't alone. A figure was standing a few feet away from the entrance, managing to look rather casual as she leaned against the wall. But her interests were clear, her grey eyes affixed to the door of the hideout. The short young woman was well dressed, adorned with a thin black jacket and slate grey trousers, a small cap resting atop her silky blue hair.

She looked up, meeting Akira's gaze. "Ah. I was wondering how long you were going to be in there," she lazily greeted.

A wave of tension washed over the Arditi as they took in this stranger. Someone hanging around
outside their hideout, acting like they knew them, was definitely a worrying prospect. Yusuke ventured to speak first. "And who exactly might you be?"

"Naoto Shirogane. You could regard me as a private investigator," she began, pushing herself off the wall. "Though, I'm also closer to all of you than you know." A blue glow appeared around her and, while still standing casually, a spectral figure appeared just above her right shoulder. It was small, pixie-sized really. Her Persona was dressed in some red and black military regalia, a white cape and flowing blonde hair rippling behind it. The group tensed at the sight of it, and then relaxed as Naoto recalled it. "Ah, so you can see it. Seems I was right."

Akira narrowed his eyes slightly. "Are you going to tell us why you're here? Or are you just going to spout cryptic crap? Trust me, we already get enough of that from another detective."

Naoto nodded. "I'm not here in any official capacity of course. But a friend of mine tasked me with learning the identities of the 'celebrities' that have been causing a stir in Tokyo these past few months. You might think you're the only Persona-users in the world, but you're not," she remarked.

"Figured as much," Shizuka remarked. It had always seemed unlikely to her that the Arditi and Black Mask were the only people on the planet with access to Personas.

"The ability to change the human psyche so immensely. I don't know the medium you're operating through, but experience tells me that changes like that can only come about through the use of Personas and Shadows. That led my friend and I to believe that your endeavours were definitely supernatural. After deciding on this, all I had to do was find a group with sufficient motive. A few Shujin students with a vendetta against Suguru Kamoshida, spending time with a former student if Ichiryusai Madarame? It doesn't seem like mere coincidence."

"Is there a point to all this?" Ann asked. She didn't want to admit it, but it was a little obvious.

Naoto nodded faintly. "I'm here to give you some advice. Take a step away from this Phantom Thief business. Already your actions have made the nation a target for a terrorist group, and things are only likely to get worse from here on." She took a few steps closer to the curb, with the others watching her closely. "More than that, vigilantism is a thin line. I can't fault you for going after the people you first targeted, and I can applaud using non-lethal methods. I'm also certain you had no involvement in Junya Kaneshiro's death, not with the nature of his passing. But... At some point you may fully decide to become executioner, as well as judge and jury. Or perhaps the call of money will get to you. After all, you provide a service that nobody else can."

"That'd never happen!" Ryuji snapped, though his ire didn't seem to ruffle Naoto in the slightest.

Akira slowly exhaled through his nose. "Shirogane-san, was it? I can understand your concern. After all, there is a serial killer operating through the Metaverse." Despite her best efforts, Naoto couldn't entirely mask her surprise at that revelation. "But I already know what you think of us. That we're just dumb kids in over our heads, or that this is just a game to us. But you're wrong. We're doing this because we're the only people who can. Because corrupt bastards keep marching over people, with no other way of stopping them," he explained.

For just a brief moment, Naoto's mind went back to 2011. Her first 'proper' meeting with the Investigation Team, where Rise hit the core of her being. It hadn't been a game for them either.

"These are the most noble and honorable people I know, and were it not for them I would still be suffering. The suggestion that they would have sinister motives is laughable," Yusuke
emphatically stated.

"A lot of people are suffering. People that the law can't do anything to help," Shiho added. "Most of us have been in that boat, and we don't want anyone being stuck like we were."

Akira glanced up, looking above Naoto. Fortunately it seemed they were alone here, but he still kept his tone low. "Medjed came out because of us, so dealing with them is our responsibility. So unless you're here to pick a fight, please don't get in our way."

Naoto mulled the statement over for several moments. "I don't have any intention of turning you in, of course. There's no real evidence to suggest your identities, and anyone suggesting the existence of Personas or Shadows would be laughed out of a courtroom. And I do want to believe that you only have good intentions. But..." Her eyes met Akira's "If you start taking lives, that'll require some intervention."

The bluenette turned, briskly walking off. As she left, her mind wandered to what they had said. A serial killer with a Persona? A Metaverse? This situation might be more serious than any of them realized, Naoto noted.
Haru had been quick to meet up with the others. Even with Shizuka explaining the dangers, and the reason for their trip, she had been adamant in coming along. To her credit, and Shizuka's mild surprise, she seemed rather fearless about the prospect.

The group gathered near the Okumura Foods headquarters, and it would have no doubt looked odd and drawn security over if the boss' daughter hadn't been with them. Once they were certain nobody was around, Shizuka raised her left hand and created a cone of invisibility around their modest crowd.

"Are you sure about this Haru?" Makoto asked, looking up from the interface of the Nav. "Shizuka's powers will let us sneak in unseen, but it's still going to be incredibly dangerous. We won't think any less of you if you want to back out"

Haru nodded, determination clear in her eyes. "I'm aware of the danger, but if you need my help then I'll gladly provide it. And..." She hesitated for a moment, looking to her feet until Shizuka gave her shoulder a modest squeeze. "Dealing with my father is partially my responsibility," she added.

"Surely you don't blame yourself for your father's corruption," Yusuke said, his brows partially raised.

The strawberry blonde shook her head gently. "No, nothing quite like that. But this is my family, and I feel I should have some involvement in helping to bring my father back to sanity," she explained. "If I turned a blind eye, I would feel horrible."

"You have a kind heart, signora," Sergio said, smiling fondly. "And if Haru has no qualms, then we should get down to business."

Makoto nodded. "Alright, just stick close to us. Shizuka, you're up." The brunette gave the Nav a quick push, and in one flicker of purple light they left reality, sinking into the psionic underbelly.

As everyone adjusted to the shift, Haru took a moment to examine the others. "Oh!" she jumped slightly at how abruptly their clothing had changed, and took a moment to inspect them. "With how strange my last visit here was, I completely overlooked everyone's clothing changing. Why is that?"

"It represents your inner rebel... or something like that," Shizuka shrugged. "Mostly it makes us look cool." The others nodded in agreement.

Makoto took point, guiding the group back through the route they had taken on their first trip to this Palace. All the while, Houdini was drifting above the group and keeping them unseen. Shizuka's brow was knit in concentration, finding it a bit of a challenge to keep such a large group concealed and in motion. But, she endured. Houdini was a bit stronger in the Metaverse, and she could endure the strain better as a result. The noise of the assembly line was as vibrant as last time, a chorus of mechanical clangs and the pounding of steel feet.

It didn't take long to reach the shielded door that had stopped them last time. Shizuka exhaled, the cone of invisibility fading away to leave the group fully visible. "Okay." She nodded quickly at
Haru "You're up."

Nodding, Haru pressed on toward the door and stopped about a foot away from it. The scrolling text above the doorway quickly analysed her, before glowing green with an all-clear. The flickering barrier of energy in front of the door faded away, followed by the doors splitting open and sliding apart with a resounding hiss of steam to reveal a long steel corridor.

"Oh, it worked!" Haru enthusiastically said, smiling brightly.

"Nice Haru!" Shizuka replied, giving her a quick thumbs up. In truth she wanted to take Haru back home now that the door was open, but she had a feeling the strawberry blonde wouldn't want to leave. And there was a strong chance that they'd bump into more biometric doors as they ventured deeper inside the Palace.

Makoto nodded as she made for the open doorway. "Thanks for that Haru, you've been a great help. But I need you to stand back for a moment." The others watched as Makoto summoned Johanna beneath her (Now in the Metaverse even Haru could see it, nearly tripping over herself at the shocking spectacle), gripping the left handlebar tight.

A continuous stream of green light erupted from Johanna's front wheel, blasting against the left edge of the doorway. It persisted for several seconds, Makoto's brow furrowed at the effort. Fortunately the continuous hiss of energy wasn't loud enough to drown out the clamour from the assembly line.

She killed the surge and examined her handiwork. An entire half of the doorway looked horrible deformed, warped out of shape and glowing red hot for several seconds until the heat faded. "There," she proudly said, standing upright again. "That should hopefully save us some trouble from this door in the future. Either the doorframe has been welded shut on that end, or it'll be too warped to close even half-properly."

"Good thinking," Yusuke replied.

"Why thank you, Fox," Makoto replied, a proud smile on her face. "Well, let's keep moving. But be careful, we have no idea what to expect from this point on."

She took the lead, pressing on deeper into the mysterious Palace. They had no way of knowing that they were already being watched. The space station had more than a few eyes and ears built into the walls, after all.

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With streams of daylight coming into the house, Futaba's door was mercifully easy to make out. The big 'DO NOT ENTER' sign and the fake police tape affixed to the wood was a bit of a giveaway.

"Hey, you got a look at Futaba last night, right?" Ann asked, glancing down to Morgana as he padded along beside the group. "Well... what's she like?"

Morgana pondered the question for several moments. "I guess she'd be around your age Lady Ann. She's very short though... in truth, I didn't get a good look at her. Her room was really dark and full of trash. Living in squalor like that, it really can't be good for a person. Even Akira has higher standards."
"You know, you're more than welcome to mooch off someone else," Akira flatly replied. They continued on until coming to a stop by the heavily decorated door. "Futaba?" he called. There was a brief scrambling sound from the other side, followed by several seconds of silence. "We just want to talk to you. You still want your heart changed, right?" The question lingered in the air for several seconds without a reply.

"Well... she's in there," Shiho remarked. "But... maybe she's too afraid to speak directly?" she suggested.

Akira nodded and took his phone out quickly. "You don't have to talk to us. If it's any easier for you, you could text me again." There was another pause, before his phone buzzed powerfully in his palm. A message from the illusive account of Alibaba. For the benefit of the others, he read the message aloud. "How did you guys find me?"

"It was kinda obvious honestly. Some mysterious hacker asks us to steal Futaba Sakura's heart. Nobody knows who Futaba Sakura is. Futaba Sakura turns out to be a mysterious genius. Connect the dots, ya know?" Ryuji explained.

There was another message before his phone buzzed again. "Why are you here? Are you going to steal it?" He ventured to answer this time. "We will, but it's... a complicated process. We need to know more about you before we can do our job."

They had her name, and the location of 'Sojiro Sakura's House.' But they needed to know what this place was in Futaba's cognition, how she viewed it.

Eventually, another text came in. "I don't really understand it, but alright. What do you want to know?"

Ann pondered the question and was the first to provide a response. "What do you think of this place? How do you find living here?" she asked.

When the response came in, Akira's eyes narrowed partially. "It hurts," he read aloud, making the others wince. "How do you mean?" This time a reply came in quickly. "I'm going to die in here."

"D-die?!" Ann repeated in shock.

Shiho frowned. Knowing the trauma Futaba had gone through, and the psychological issues they had been told about, she already feared the worst from that statement.

"This place is going to be my tomb," Akira read aloud. He swallowed hard and affixed his focus to the door "No, it won't. Futaba I know you have little reason to trust us, or anyone for that matter, but we're going to help you. I promise."

There was some kind of squeak from the other side of the door, the sound coming out so fast and so softly that it was barely audible. But it sounded vaguely like 'thank you.'

"Alright..." Akira switched to the Meta Nav on his phone. "Let's try this keyword... 'tomb.'" The app pinged loudly, and there was a faint flicker of distortion in the corridor around them. "Looks like that did it... everyone ready to go?"

They were essentially being invited into the Palace, a completely new experience. By all logic they
should have an easy task ahead, a simple trek toward the treasure. But Futaba was also paranoid, closed off from the rest of the world. There was no way of knowing how that kind of emotional cocktail would impact on the Palace design.

"Let's go man," Ryuji said. "Can't go breaking a promise, right?" He was acting wry, but Akira knew how seriously Ryuji was taking this. He wanted to help Futaba ASAP.

Nodding, Akira gave a the icon a quick press. Sojiro Sakura's house faded away, instantly replaced with rolling dunes of desert sand under an oppressive golden sun. "Holy crap!" Ann gasped as the heat suddenly hit her like a brick wall, nearly making her double over. "This is her Palace?!"

Their clothing hadn't changed, save for Morgana who had changed into his cartoony two-legged form. "She doesn't see us as a threat at least..." Shiho started to fan her face, beads of sweat forming on her forehead. "Doesn't mean her Palace isn't trying to kill us though."

"Jack Frost!" Akira's whole body glowed as his spectral snowman materialized beside him. "I'm gonna get us cooled off. Mona, you mind giving us a ride?"

"Hee ho!" Jack Frost threw his cartoonishly large hands up, before twin bursts of frosty wind exploded from his palms and rapidly formed into a swirling breeze that encapsulated the small group. It didn't entirely ward off the heat, but it was certainly better than nothing.

Morgana nodded and took a few quick steps from the group before jumping high and exploding in a cloud of vibrant pink smoke. His four-wheeled form clattered onto the sands, his side doors sliding open. "No problem. I'll keep my AC on full blast! But uh... where are we heading?" he asked.

It was a fair question. Akira continued to examine their surroundings until he spied something protruding from the horizon line. A gleaming light, like a second sun. Curious, Akira marched up the edge of the dune nearest to him until he reached the top of an incline. That was when he saw it: A tremendous pyramid with a glowing golden peak. "I think that's what we're looking for," he flatly said.

The others quickly scrambled up to get a look, save for the immobile Morganamobile, and a few jaws went slack at the sight. "Futaba confines herself to her room, which is like some kind of sanctuary to her. And the rest of the world is just..." Shiho gestured to the sunbaked sand beneath them "A whole lot of nothing."

"Pyramids are tombs?" Ryuji asked, cocking his head slightly.

"Yeah. Pharaoh's were buried there in ancient times," Akira explained. "It might be for the best that we didn't bring Sting along with us for this Palace."

"Uh... why?" Ann asked.

Akira shrugged in a half-hearted manner. "She says Egypt is evil. Probably because of that Dio guy." Though, as he made his way back to Morgana, he had to wonder what kind of vampire would hide out in Egypt of all countries.

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Their journey into Okumura's space station brought them to another elevator platform, which in
turn reeled them to a higher section in the immense structure. Their journey gave them a chance to catch sight of the exterior through various viewports.

It was damn huge. Far larger than Kaneshiro's bank had been. All they could do for now was continue pushing forward, moving in a general direction toward the core of the Palace. But with how vast the station was, they would likely need Morgana's help to pinpoint the treasure once the time came.

Fortunately they didn't come upon any more biometric doors.

Makoto led on through narrow metal corridors, until they came upon a section of hallway that seemed unnaturally wide. The group thought little of it, walking under an archway that led into this broader section. But once they had all passed through, the archway suddenly glowed red hot, a barrier of scarlet laser light flickering into existence to block the path they had come through. The same happened to a matching archway at the far end of the broad corridor, the second laser barrier sealing them into this area.

"Oh boy..." Shizuka muttered.

A modest chuckle echoed around them, causing the group to tense. "Haru, keep back," Makoto said firmly, watching as a figure strode into view from the far end of the long hallway. A tall and thin young man with well groomed orange hair, dressed in some kind of white officer's uniform. He had a black cape draped over his right shoulder, and a visor covering his eyes.

"Tut tut. Such audacity, barging into Lord Okumura's spaceport uninvited. An act like that requires swift and decisive retribution."

Haru squinted, and very nearly fell over. "S-Sugimura?!" His clothing was definitely different, but she would recognise him anywhere.

Shizuka clicked her tongue inside her mouth. "That's not him Haru. Just a cognition created by Okumura's mind." He didn't seem to recognise Shizuka, and she doubted Sugimura was the kind of guy to forget having his face punched in.

"Ah, Haru. Are you the one who let these dirty intruders in? Shameful, really. Then again, Lord Okumura always said you were irresponsible." Haru flinched slightly, a sight that made Shizuka clench her fists tightly. "Fortunately, I might be willing to forgive you if you come over here. Right now."

Shizuka's eyes narrowed. 'This is how Sugimura is in Okumura's cognition. He knows that this kid is a bastard, and he's still selling his daughter off to him!'

Haru bit her bottom lip, before glaring fiercely at the sneering cognition. "No! I want nothing to do with you!" There was a fire in her voice, the kind Shizuka had never heard from her before. Deep down it seemed it seemed there was impressive strength under that sugary sweet surface.

"No? Such a shame. If you're going to be my wife, you could do with a little more discipline... so perhaps I'll tenderize you along with these friends of yours!" Sugimura raised his right hand, quickly pressing a button in his palms.

Two vents on the walls opened sharply, followed swiftly by twin bursts of black tar bursting from the newly opened spaces. Both masses pooled on the ground, before churning and swirling, rapidly
growing and reshaping into humanoid shapes. A pair of clay soldiers, just like the one that had chased them on their first trip to the Palace.

"Keep them away from Haru... and remember, no physical attacks," Makoto warned. In one swift motion she mounted Johanna, glancing over her shoulder at Sergio and Yusuke. "Fox, go for the one on the right. Diabolik, lay down some cover for him. Sting, you're with me. I need some concealment."

"No problem, Queen," Shizuka said, smirking. The sooner they tore through these overgrown lawn ornaments, the sooner she could pulverise Sugimura's face. She deftly hopped onto Johanna's back, strong hands gripping Makoto's upper arms for support. Curse those shoulder spikes. And she was too terrified to risk grabbing anywhere else.

Breakthru's fist drove into the floor, causing one large steel plate to fly up from its moorings until Sergio's Stand struck it again and forced it to hang in the air as a makeshift shield. The metal plate braced as a burst of scarlet light exploded from the floating soldier's eyes, warping the plate on impact but ultimately enduring the blow.

It gave Yusuke the opening he needed, as he swiftly dashed from around cover and launched Goemon from his body. The giant thief shoved his mechanical hands out in a titanic push, icy winds erupting from his palms and smashing into the floating Shadow like a giant tide. It drove the figure into the wall, shards of ice slicing into the enemy, sections of the beast's body becoming frozen with shards that suddenly exploded off it. By the time the tide ended, a few grizzly scars had formed along the Shadow's body.

But this did little to dissuade the monster. It snapped forward as soon as Goemon's attack subsided, firing another crimson bolt from its eyes. Yusuke jumped back to dodge, but was ultimately not fast enough. The edge of the beam grazed his ribs, burning his dark robes and sending a wave of pain rolling through his ribs. He hissed and hit the floor, landing on his back with a hard clang.

The Shadow was making a beeline toward him, eyes ablaze before he fired off another burst of scarlet light. It would have hit him dead on, were it not for a flying section of floor hurtling by and catching the shot. A resounding explosion obliterated the square of metal and sent the Shadow spiraling backward before it managed to right itself.

"Hehe..." Sergio stroked under his chin. "Don't underestimate my aim, fat boy."

The Shadow turned on a dime and suddenly shot toward Sergio like a torpedo. He had only a split second to react, summoning Breakthru in front of himself. His Stand's large arms were raised up, bracing as the giant clay soldier smashed into him. The blond cried out in pain, a jolt rattling his whole body as he was lifted off his feet and sent flying. Sergio sailed through the air until his back collided with a section of wall that he slowly slid down.

"Perhaps I... shouldn't underestimate... that fat head of yours..."

Meanwhile, Makoto was bombing toward the second Shadow, unseen thanks to Houdini's powers. The Shadow was firing wildly in their general direction, drawn by the powerful noise of Johanna's revving engine. Whenever an incoming shot grew relatively close, Makoto would knife around it while always maintaining her forward momentum.

"Hang on!" Makoto suddenly twisted Johanna to one side, driving her bike into a skid that drove the two under the floating Shadow. Shizuka did as she was bid, swallowing hard as she pressed...
into Makoto, ensuring she didn't touch any part of the floating abomination.

Once righted behind the Shadow, Makoto gave Johanna's engine another powerful rev. An explosive wave of green light lanced from the front wheel and collided with the Shadow's back, the ensuing explosion catapulting the Shadow into the ceiling. Chunks of broken metal rained down from above, followed by scorched chunks of dissolving black matter falling from the Shadow's damaged body.

But this wasn't enough to halt their attacker. It spun around sharply, half it's face crumbling, and started firing wildly at the area it had previously been floating near. Johanna shot forward, the first two blasts going wide. "Nuclear," Makoto breathed "I think they're weak to nuclear."

The shockwave of the third shot smasked into Johanna from the side, driving into the two girls and sending them flying. Makoto slammed into the ground on her right side, skidding along the floor as throbbing waves of pain lanced through her. Shizuka bounced along on her back, flipping and rolling until she came to a halt by the right hand wall. She groaned in pain, her vision swimming. Houdini's effect was broken, rendering the two dazed thieves visible for the floating Shadow to glare at.

"I'm sure the others are having a rough time too..." Shizuka murmured in a harsh tone.

"Shizu-chan," Haru whispered, bringing her hands to her mouth. She could only stand by and watch as the chaos unfolded. These people were risking their lives for her sake, to stop her father. Was there really nothing she could do but watch?

She felt a pulse in the deepest part of her being, a resonance in her soul that was progressively growing stronger. Like a beating drum, becoming louder and louder.

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Even with Jack Frost providing a continuous cooling breeze, the drive toward the pyramid was a long and arduous one. While the pyramid loomed on the horizon, it felt like an eternity before its form actually grew larger from their point of view.

"Ugh..." Ryuji flopped back in his seat, his eyes affixed to the roof of the van. "Geez... we better find a safe room as soon as we get here. No way I can survive this drive on every trip."

"It's definitely intense," Shiho said, watching as the dunes rolled by. "She must really be afraid of the outside world if this is how she sees it. But I know how she feels."

Ryuji reached over, giving her left hand a modest squeeze. "You gonna be alright?"

"Mm. If anything, it's just motivating me more," Shiho explained. She gave the blond a cordial smile "But... thanks. I appreciate the concern."

"Not that I want to interrupt your little moment, but I think we're nearly there," Akira said. He was narrowing his eyes to better examine the incoming scenery, watching as several structures began to materialize around them. Crumbling walls and aged wooden struts that looked as if they had been erected centuries ago.

Ann sighed in relief, moving her feet away from the dashboard. "Thank God. How're you holding up? Keeping your Persona out like that has gotta be a strain," the blonde said, glancing to the cute
snowman seated between them.

Akira nodded. "I'm fine. It's a little taxing, but I can manage." Practicing summoning his Persona in the real world had given him better stamina, but he definitely wouldn't enjoy doing this on a regular basis. He focused on the task at hand, continuing on toward the pyramid until they reached a long platform of sculpted sandstone. As he drove along he could see hieroglyphics etched into the material, but something seemed odd to him.

It was only when he pulled the van to a halt that he understood what seemed so odd to him. They weren't hieroglyphics. They were emojis and strings of code.

As soon as everyone left the van, Morgana quickly popped back into his normal form in a puff of pink smoke. "Been a while since I drove for that long," Morgana murmured, stroking his temples in slow concentric circles.

"Aw. Sorry Mona," Ann said, crouching in front of the feline and giving him a small stroke behind the ears. Morgana purred in return, delight clear in his expression.

"For you Lady Ann, I'd drive across a million deserts!"

"Er... thanks."

Akira gestured for the group to follow, making for a long sandstone staircase that led up to a doorway in the pyramid. For a moment he feared that they would have to force their way in, only for the doors to start rumbling as the group approached. They slid apart slowly, a chilly breeze blowing outward. As soon as they got a whiff of that, they practically charged into the pyramid, being greeted by a neatly air conditioned interior.

The interior of the pyramid was like something out of a textbook. The entryway was vast, distinct for having a series of sarcophagi positioned between two small staircases. Beyond that was a long stretch that led to a far longer stairway, seeming to stretch absurdly high. But there was no doubt it was a Palace, from the symbols etched into the walls, to the clouds of neon green text that occasionally flickered through the air.

"Aw yeah! Sweet sweet AC!" Ryuji enthusiastically said. "Guess she's got a great fan in her room or something."

"Probably," Ann said, sighing in relief. She fanned her face, working to dispel the last of the heat. "To be honest, I don't care a whole lot about why it's cool in here. I'm just glad it is."

The group ventured toward the small staircase, only to stop when a small voice reached them. "Halt." Akira turned, watching as a spectral figure materialized in front of the sarcophagi. A petite girl with flowing orange hair that reached near her waist. She was dressed in some kind of Egyptian garb, a silky white top and skirt, with a golden neck piece and belt adorned with intricate jewels. She wore golden bangles on her wrists and upper arms, and had some snake-shaped charm for a tiara. Most striking her bespectacled eyes, glowing yellow with intimidating feline slits for pupils.

"Why do you intrude in my pyramid?" she asked in a soft, dull tone. Unlike almost every other Palace ruler they had come across, she was quiet and reserved. In some ways she seemed almost afraid, particularly compared to the sneering fiends they had downed so far.
"You're... Futaba?" Akira asked, seeming just a little surprised. The Shadow nodded in return. "We came here to take your treasure and fix your heart."

The redhead was silent for several moments, before abruptly gesturing to the long staircase behind her. "The Pharaoh's tomb lies at the peak of this pyramid, beyond that stairwell. The 'treasure' you seek will be there."

Ryuji advanced to the stop of the left staircase and looked in as deep as he could. "What just... right up there? I can't see any Shadows or nothin'." Was it really going to be that easy? A straight walk up to the treasure? Sure they had to give the real Futaba a calling card, though how they would do that was a matter to decide later, but that wouldn't matter so long as they had an easy infiltration route.

The Shadow nodded again. "Okay... well, sit tight Futaba. We'll handle this," Akira assured her. He pressed on up the short staircase, spying the only real obstacle in their way. The area between the peak of the small stairs and base of the large stairs was a sand pit, having only a few protrusions a person could stand on to connect the two areas.

He took the lead, jumping from point to point with the others in hot pursuit. When they reached the base of the stairs Akira led on at a steady rate, feeling the exertion slowly building in his legs with every few steps.

"I was expecting to get ambushed or something," Shiho remarked. "I guess since she wants us in here, it means the Palace isn't trying to defend itself."

"It's entirely possible," Morgana mused. "I've never seen anything like this before though. It's a relief, on one hand. But also makes me deeply concerned for Futaba," he remarked.

They continued on in silence for some time, before Akira spoke up. "So that's what Futaba looks like? Egyptian clothes aside, I mean."

Morgana nodded slightly mid-sprint. "Pretty much from what I saw last night. Why do you want to know?" the feline asked.

"I'm just... surprised is all," Akira hurriedly replied, keeping his gaze dead ahead. Ryuji and Ann exchanged a curious glance.

Their path continued on, uninterrupted, as they made for a large glowing doorway of the apex of the staircase. If the Shadow was telling the truth, and the treasure really was beyond here, then this would be their easiest heist yet!

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Futaba's eyes parsed through several different web pages with uncanny speed, absorbing and processing the data as it came to her. "Tch..." She clicked off one thread and scrolled onto another, while paying no mind to the bustling chat window open in the right corner of her screen. "Pleb taste. Why are these threads so crap? Girls on anime boards have no taste," Futaba muttered to herself.

She knew she'd get nothing mentally stimulating from shitposting, but her mind was far too heavy to even attempt anything more taxing. Not when her future was on the line. Akira Kurusu, the enigmatic 'violent criminal' living in her father's attic. She really didn't know what to make of him.
Futaba had been observing him ever since Sojiro said that he'd have a 'guest' living at Leblanc, back before her agoraphobia had grown too intense and she had found the nerve to sneak to the cafe to plant her bugs. Once she had his name, she took the time to look into every detail she could find. The criminal record was definitely disconcerting, and had caused her to maintain her observation. Sojiro meant well, but he could be a bit naive at times. What good would she be if she let some criminal run amok and take advantage of Sojiro's kindness?

But ultimately, if Akira was a criminal, he definitely didn't seem the type. He studied dutifully, read often, and spent a good deal of time talking with that cute cat he had brought back to Leblanc. It was adorable, the way he seemed to almost hold a conversation with his mewling pet.

His friends were mixed, to say the least, but they also seemed good from what little she knew of them. Though she was still trying to figure out why Akira would occasionally hire a maid to come to his room, and then act as a therapist for said maid.

Still, he seemed like a good guy. And knowing that he was a Phantom Thief, it meant he was perhaps the only person that could help her. So could she trust him on this? It was the question she had been grappling with ever since he and the others left.

Would they really help her?

'Of course they won't. Who would want to help a worthless waste of a life like you?'

The voice in her ear was a menacing hiss, making Futaba's blood run cold. She felt her heartbeat grow faster, her throat growing tight. She wanted to call out for Sojiro's help, but no noise would come out.

'You're going to die in here, you wretched brat. You deserve it. And nobody, nobody will miss you!'

Futaba felt something stirring behind her, a shadow falling over her body and adding a crushing weight of dread onto her frayed nerves. Futaba glanced over her shoulder, watching as a bespectacled, dark-haired specter appeared behind her. It wasn't real, it was just a hallucination. She knew that deep down, but it felt all too real.

"M-mom," Futaba whimpered.

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A powerful tremor suddenly rocked the pyramid, the jolting shock sending plumes of sandy dust cascading down from overhead. The Arditi froze in unison, glancing around frantically as the Palace continued to rattle around them. "The hell?!" Ryuji exclaimed.

In a flash their clothing changed into their phantom attire, waves of neon blue fire washing over the young thieves in the process. It was safe to say that now the Palace saw them as a threat.

Akira glanced up, spying something that nearly made his heart stop. The ceiling overhead was slowly opening outward, gradually revealing an ornately carved bolder that was set to drop right on top of them.

"Run... RUN!" the dark haired boy roared, turning on his heel and immediately racing down the stairs. The others quickly saw what he was referring to, all four bombing after their leader as the
boulder dropped and started rapidly rolling toward them. It was gaining momentum with each passing second, the powerful rumbling threatening to buckle the stairs. Through the chaos Akira was distinctly aware of a rhythmic banging sound and dared to glance over his shoulder, whereupon he saw a doorway slamming shut along the staircase route after the boulder passed by.

So much for an easy job.

"Oh god oh god! Not like this, I don't wanna be a pancake!" Ann squealed.

"I'm not exactly thrilled about that either!" Shiho cried.

Ryuji, perhaps unsurprisingly, seemed even less eloquent than the two girls. "I thought she wanted our help! WHAT THE SHIT IS THIS?!

They quickly reached the sand pit, each thief crossing the gap in a series of swift jumps until they came to a stop on the other side. The boulder continued on, eventually falling into the sand pit and finally coming to a halt with an earth-rattling crash. It lingered for several seconds, before turning into a solid orb of black matter and melting away.

"Well..." Akira said, slowly catching his breath. He reached up, gloved fingers wiping the sweat off his forehead. "That was... something. Everyone alright?"

"I feel like I died... did I die?" Morgana asked, practically melting into the floor, his eyes swirling in his head.

"No. We got close though," Shiho said, before filling her lungs with a much needed gulp of air. "I just don't get it though... she wanted our help, but all of a sudden all... that just happened."

"If Futaba is paranoid and afraid, then... maybe something made her panic in the real world?" Akira reasoned. He glanced down toward the sarcophagy and sighed. "Her Shadow is gone too, so we're not getting answers there. To make matters worse, the stairs just got closed off. If we're gonna get her treasure, we need to find another route."

Ann sighed. "And we were so close too..." Perhaps they had jinxed themselves.

Akira strode onto the entryway by the sarcophagy with the others moving along behind him. They made it only a few steps before the pyramid rumbled again, this time with the ground buckling beneath them. The floor split in half like a giant stone trap door, causing the screaming thieves to fall through the newly formed hole into parts unknown.

This mission had taken a bit of a turn.

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Yusuke felt himself bracing as the giant Shadow came rushing toward him like a living missile, calling Goemon in front of him. The giant Persona crossed it's arms, blocking the impact of the Shadow's giant head. While that absorbed most of the blow, Yusuke still felt his whole body rattle as he was very nearly knocked on his back.

He had taken his share of lumps in this fight, these particular Shadows being as strong as they were durable. But his opponent wasn't looking too well either. The Shadow's right arm was missing, and the lower half of its face had been shaved off entirely. It was crumbling, falling to pieces.
The bluenette dodged to the side as a sweeping wave of crimson light erupted from his foe's eyes, leaving a black scar in the floor. Thinking on his feet he landed in a neat skin and called Goemon to his side. "Diabolik, I need an opening!"

"Consider it done!" Sergio called from a far end of the arena. Breakthru's palms struck several parts of the floor in rapid succession, the armoured plates beneath him rattling violently before three of them fired outward. They struck the Shadow from behind, becoming rooted in the air for a fraction of a second, before firing directly back toward him. Sergio grunted and let Breakthru's fists fire out, hitting all three plates and once more freezing them in the air. Incensed, the Shadow rolled around on its axis and glowered toward the blond.

Yusuke quickly took advantage of this, struggling to stand upright and ignore the throbbing pain in his ribs and back. "Die!" Goemon's hands shot forward, an ethereal white glow forming around him, before a powerful wave of ice exploded outward. The wave struck the back of the Shadow's head, his whole body rattling, before one particularly large shard pierced through the beast's damaged skull. His whole head exploded into a cloud of inky mist, followed shortly thereafter by his body melting into sludge. The two boys sighed in relief, glancing over to the other end of the room.

Makoto forced herself to stand, catching her breath after having been knocked aside by another blast of curse. The Shadow, now missing most of the right half of its torso, started to sharply close the gap between them, its remaining left eye glowing red hot.

It suddenly slammed into something, the surprising jolt making it reel back as something else smacked loudly into the wall behind Makoto. Shizuka and Houdini abruptly became visible, with Houdini soon dropping the metal plate it had been carrying. Hitting the wall had caused the left lens of Shizuka's mask to crack, but she managed to hold firm. "Queen, go! Finish it!"

Makoto nodded firmly and summoned Johanna, mounting the glowing motorbike. The Shadow recovered and reeled backward, firing off another blast that Makoto shot rightward to avoid. The Shadow suddenly bumped into something as it was pulling backward, only now becoming aware of the thick wall of ice Goemon had erected at it's backside.

"Take this shithead!" Makoto snarled. She revved Johanna's engine, the noise reverberating through the entire corridor. A powerful burst of green light erupted from the front wheel, clashing with the cornered Shadow and engulfing it in the sudden tide of energy. The explosive burst made the creature ripple and bubble, before exploding into a smouldering puddle that splattered onto the floor and swiftly evaporated.

Makoto breathed a sigh of relief, standing upright. "Everyone alright?" she asked, glancing to her companions. They nodded in return. "I'll heal you guys in a second. Haru, you okay?"

The strawberry blonde nodded swiftly. "That was incredible! You were all so amazing in action! Oh, b-but... you're all rather hurt." She watched as Makoto helped Shizuka stand, with the dark-haired girl slowly catching her breath. They had won that battle, but with how strong their foes had been and how narrow the arena had been, even Haru could see the fatigue settling in on them.

"Congratulations on defeating two underlings. Hmph. I suppose I'll have to deal with this myself," Sugimura remarked, striding through the barrier. The hard light flickered and morphed around him, but didn't halt him.
"You wanna go asshole?" Shizuka ignored the ringing in her ear, spitting some blood onto the ground. Her vision was still swimming from that last blow, but she was holding firm. "Then let's go."

Sugimura snickered "If that's how you want it. Do you really think you're the first pieces of trash that Lord Okumura has discarded? He won't allow anyone to stand in his way."

Makoto narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean by that?" They had a suspicion that Okumura had worked with the Black Mask to take out some of his rivals, but was his Palace outright saying as much.

The cognition didn't venture to answer, instead glaring toward Haru. "As for you my dear, I'll give you one more chance. Join me, and I won't wipe you out like these dirty intruders. If you're going to be my wife then you should learn how to follow orders!"

Haru glared at him. "I have no intention of being your wife! Keep away from me!"

'Damn Haru,' Shizuka thought to herself. Haru managed to impress her more with each passing day. Perhaps Shizuka was good at being a bad influence?

Sugimura grunted, his whole body flashing crimson. "Fine! Then you can die with the rats!" A churning tide of black matter rose up around his feet and suddenly engulfed him. He grew larger and larger, an intense aura illuminating the corridor. By the time the Shadow before them had finished growing, he had become so tall that his head nearly scraped the roof.

The humanoid form was gone, replaced with a hulking white robot. The segments of his arms and legs here massive, like eight heavily armoured boilers. He clenched his heavy titanium fingers, three digits per hand, while the tank-treads of his feet rolled forward. His head was cubic, his eye consisting of a long glowing red line. He dwarfed the last two Shadows considerably, and they could feel the strength radiating off him.

"Oh dear," Yusuke muttered.

Haru felt her heartbeat spiking sharply at the sight. The others were injured and tired already, and now they had to fight this abomination? If they failed, what then? Was she going to die here? Could she really just do nothing but watch?

Other than Shizuka, the others barely knew her. But they were still putting themselves at risk for her sake. She couldn't do the same for them? And then there was Sugimura.

This 'cognition' was just as sneering as the real one. What she wouldn't give to knock him down a notch... But thinking on this, Haru's mind drifted to a grim realization. If this was the world inside her father's heart, then this was how she saw the man he had betrothed her to. He knew what Sugimura was like, and was giving her away anyway?

The thought made her sway off balance. Her father truly had fallen far. And who knew how much worse he would become if he wasn't stopped?

The drumbeats in her head intensified, joined then by a sweet and melodic voice humming in the depths of her mind.

'Are you done running and hiding my dear? You've been backed into a corner now, with your
cohorts facing the chopping block! You've spent all your life living for the benefit of others, and now you're just going to die without ever having lived for yourself?"

"I don't want to die." She watched as the robot took a single plodding step, the motion making the thieves recoil sharply. Haru gripped the left side of her head as a sudden blinding pain struck her, a scorching sensation that rolled through her eyes and lanced into her brain. She very nearly doubled over, her lithe body trembling in pain. "And I don't... I don't want my friends to die either."

'Splendid! Then let us make a contract, and indulge in a power you've never known! My dear girl, cast off the chains of oppression! Freedom must stem from betrayal, a stab against the force that has conspired to constrain you! I am thou, thou art I! Let us adorn your departure into freedom with a beautiful betrayal!'

A wave of fire washed over Haru's eyes, taking the form of a shiny black domino mask. Shizuka and Makoto both glanced over, shocked at the radiating aura bursting from Haru's body. Even Sugimura came to a stop at the sight, unable to move as Haru gripped the blazing mask on her face.

"Come to me... Milady!"
The fall through the trap door led into a truly massive, mult-tiered chamber that had the group tumbling downward for some time. With how far they had fallen, Akira was expecting a rough landing. But the impact was a surprisingly soft one.

It didn't take him long to understand why, when he quickly noticed his whole body was sinking. The trap door had dumped them into a bed of quicksand.

"Crap, crap!" Akira mustered his strength and swiftly swam against the tide, as his friends also did, but he quickly realized how futile this gesture would be. His left hand pressed to his face, an aura of energy dying the sands an azure colour beneath him. "Kin-Ki!"

The golden giant materialized in front of Akira, his left golden hand swinging down toward the rim of the pit until his iron-hard fingers had sank into the rock as an anchor. Kin-ki's right arm stretched backward, with Akira swiftly latching onto his Persona. "Everyone!" Akira held his right arm out to the others "Grab on!" Within seconds Akira had a human daisy chain latched onto him, with Ryuji grabbing his arm, Ann grabbing Ryuji, Shiho pressed against Ann, and Morgana perched on Shiho's shoulders.

Kin-Ki moved his right arm in a single titanic motion, immense strength pulling all five loose and sending them spiraling overhead until they landed in a heap on the outside of the sand pit. It took the group a few seconds to roll away from each other, each one working to catch their breath from the second near death experience that day.

"That... sucked..." Ann said, slowly sitting upright on the floor. She gave an annoyed groan, removing her left boot to shake out some sand that had gotten stuck inside.

"Seriously!" Ryuji sprang to his feet, looking set to explode from annoyance. "A giant ass rock and freakin' quicksand?! What's next, a zombie horde?!" The blond took a moment to examine the tiers above them, level upon level that led up toward the entryway of the pyramid. It didn't take long to see a few Shadows plodding around, arms hanging limp at their sides while their crimson eyes stared off into space. Aged bandages clung limply to their inky bodies.

"Huh. Looks like Skull was right for once," Morgana blithely remarked. Ryuji growled in annoyance and promptly clocked the feline on the back of the head, making Morgana yelp loudly.

Shiho sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything. And no punching!"

After a few moments, Akira rose to his feet and shrugged his long black coat off, fully revealing his decorated silver shirt. He spent a few moments fanning his coat, working to shake out the sand that the previous fall had earned him. "Guess we should have seen it coming. Futaba wants us to help her, but she's also easily spooked. Something must have happened in the real world to make her close up shop," he explained.

"And we were so close to the treasure too..." Ann slipped her boots back on and took a few experimental footsteps, ensuring she had gotten the worst of the sand out. "Guess we're just gonna have to go through with a normal infiltration."

"For now," Akira confirmed. "Earning Futaba's trust in the real world might be a good idea too. Giving her some stability might make the Palace easier as a result." He was hoping for as much at
least. They only had a month to deal with Medjed and this place looked huge. If they could streamline the process, then they could deal with Medjed and Okumura in a timely fashion.

Ryuji sighed and kicked a stray pebble away. "Guess we just gotta focus on getting outta' here for now. Got any ideas Joker?"

"Keep going up?" Akira suggested with a shrug. The platforms that ringed this room went progressively higher, and no doubt would lead them to the mechanisms of the pyramid. Opening the doors that had been erected in front of the treasure was now top priority, and with any luck they'd find out how to through that exploration.

The group got to running, jumping up onto the lowest platform, then continuing upward in a clockwise fashion around the room, always seeking out the next platform that would lead higher up.

Futaba's Shadow was still nowhere to be seen, and nobody knew what to make of that. The fact that the Palace was still in tact meant that Futaba hadn't hurt herself, but... well whatever had happened in the real world, it couldn't have been good.

Akira gripped the edge of another protruding platform and pulled himself up, only to stop as he saw a sarcophagus mounted on the wall. It wobbled for a few seconds before the door popped open, a thick purple fog hissing from the interior. A Shadow shambled from the open coffin, clawed feet scraping the ground with each step. In one fluid motion the creature's head rotated around, glowing red eyes glaring his way.

"Oh. Sorry, did I wake you?"

The Shadow's whole body wobbled and writhed, before abruptly exploding into three separate chunks. Within seconds the formless black blobs had gained proportions and colours, two transforming into hulking blue birds distinct for their snarling lion heads. The third took a seat on the floor, an almost regal-looking baboon with soft white fur and an ornate usekh draped over his neck. A golden sun and crescent crown rested on his head. In his hands he held a strange leatherbound book, but did not look up from it.

The lion-bird on the right roared violently, flapping both wings forward and sending out a gale that slammed into Akira. The dark-haired boy was swept clean off his feet as the great weight drove against his ribs. He gasped, tumbling through the air until he landed against Ryuji. "W-whoa!" The blond gripped his shoulders to hold him steady, until Akira managed to regain his balance. "What the hell?"

"Shadows," their leader hastily said. "We need to split up, these platforms are too narrow for the five of us. Mona, Nemesis, I need you with me. Skull, Panther, lead the birds away from us." He knew already that the birds used wind attacks. While that meant they couldn't do much to hurt Morgana, his own attacks would likely be limited to his weapons. Carmen could handle wind attacks and had some of the best firepower (literally) on the team, and Seiten Taisei was sturdier against such attacks than Captain Kidd had been. He was sure they could handle a pair of bird-brains. Or lion-brains... whatever.

More importantly, he was of a mind that the monkey was probably the strongest of the three Shadows. Something about the cavalier attitude gave him that impression, and Akira wanted to ensure they had a strong numbers advantage against it until they knew more.

"You got it Joker!" Ann said, giving their leader a quick thumbs up. She turned her attention to the two hovering Shadows and smirked, pressing her thumbs to her temples with her fingers splayed
wide. "Hey you overgrown turkeys! Take your best shot!" She stuck her tongue out and blew a loud raspberry at the two, both beasts snarling in indignation.

Shiho blinked behind her blindfold. She didn't know what surprised her more: That Ann was using that for trash talk, or that it worked. Then again, having known Ann for so long, Shiho supposed one would have to really piss Ann off to get some A-material.

Ann and Ryuji took off running, joining down two levels toward a long platform. Their Persona's appeared at their sides, both thieves wreathed in azure light, bracing as the lion-headed Shadows dove toward them.

Akira swiftly jumped back onto the higher platform with Shiho and Morgana leaping up behind them. The baboon glanced up briefly from the tome in his grasp before rolling his eyes. In an instant he jumped to his feet, raising the book over his head and unleashing an echoing shriek. A shimmering orb of purple and white light rapidly formed above him, before shooting outward like a glowing missile.

In an instant Kin-Ki appeared in front of Akira, muscular arms braced forward. The orb of purple energy exploded against the golden giant, Akira's feet skidding a few inches backward as a pained howl left him. Morgana burst through the smoke, an azure glow enveloping him as Zorro's spectral form floated overhead. Morgana had a firm grip on his cutlass, his eyes narrowed in determination.

Zorro's rapier flicked up sharply, the abrupt motion unleashing a powerful green gale that slammed into the overgrown ape like a brick wall. The Shadow shrieked, tumbling backward and scraping up sections of the platform in passing. Morgana leapt high, giving a loud yell as he shot downward with his blade aimed toward the Shadow.

The sharpened edge of the cutlass bounced off the ground as the Shadow rolled back, coming to a halt on the tips of his toes by the very edge of the platform. The ape raised his book high overhead and shrieked loudly as a white hot glow enveloped the cover of the mysterious tome. A pulse of neon green light erupted from the Shadow, the energy impacting against Morgana and flinging him back across the platform.

Shiho narrowly caught the feline, his eyes swirling in a daze as a few ripples of smoke eased off him. "You okay big guy?" Shiho asked. She quickly brought her free hand to her blindfold, calling Aradia in front of her as the Shadow advanced a few steps forward.

"Just gimme a sec an' I'll get him! All five of him!"

"Yeah... you're doing fine."

"Nemesis," Akira said, stopping behind the dark haired girl. He was gripping his right forearm, rubbing the surface slowly as he worked to ward off the pain from the last attack. "I need you to keep that Shadow busy. I've got a little surprise for him, but I need an opening for my Persona to move around," he explained.

Shiho nodded firmly. "No problem Joker." She set Morgana down, giving the feline an opening to regain his balance. "Alright monkey, let's see what you got!" She pointed decisively at the Shadow, an action that Aradia emulated with an ethereal aura forming around her.

A row of light daggers swiftly formed above Aradia and then fired forward, the blade swarm narrowing as it rapidly drew closer to the Shadow. Surprisingly, it made no move to dodge. Each dagger hit dead on and exploded into a shower of radiant particles that swiftly evaporated, but not a single one managed to make a mark on her target. The baboon grinned snidely at her as the swarm
subsided.

"Oh." Shiho lowered her arm slightly. "Immunity to bless attacks... So that's what you've got."

The monkey shrieked loudly and unleashed another burst of purple energy, the shell of light exploding against Aradia and knocking Shiho and Morgana further back. Both figures came to a skidding halt at the edge of the platform, hisses of smoke oozing off their bodies and filtering through the air. Their foe hollered triumphantly before glaring at Akira, raising his book high as he swiftly charged another blast.

"Don't celebrate just yet you monkey-fuck," Akira growled. A darkness suddenly fell over the monkey from behind as something truly huge leapt up from the other side of the platform. The Shadow turned, letting out half a shriek as Kin-Ki's giant fist abruptly mashed into his face, an splatter of black matter swiftly coating the giant's forearm.

Further below, Ann and Ryuji were nearly back to back as the two swooping birds rapidly circled around them. One shot down sharply, claws raking against Ann's right arm and making her cry out as its talons cut into her arm. Red fabric from her suit hung loose down her upper arm as rivulets of red cascaded from the newly formed marks.

She grimaced, gripping her arm with her left hand and pressing hard to stop the bleeding. "Oh you are SO dead!" She leapt to the side as the second lion-headed Shadow dove toward her, only barely avoiding a second swipe. The creature quickly turned through the air and knifed back to the duo, only to be stopped as Ryuji abruptly dove forward and smashed his pipe into the top of the Shadow's skull, a spray of black matter coating the steel.

The Shadow roared violently and quickly flapped away, oozing darkness coating the creature's mane. The second whipped around sharply and lashed both wings forward, the oncoming gale driving into the blond and smashing him into the wall, a pained growl escaping him in the process.

The second lion-headed Shadow dove toward Ryuji as he was working to pick himself up, only to weave away as Seiten Taisei swung his cudgel toward it. The Shadow spiraled around, turning around sharply only to be snagged in the air as Ann's whip lashed around the creature's neck. She gave a harsh tug with her good arm, the harsh motion slicing clean through the Shadow's neck and leaving the beast to explode into a black cloud that swiftly evaporated.

The first Shadow managed to recover quickly, unleashing a hard gale that smacked into Ann from behind and knocked her off her feet. She hit the ground hard on her injured arm and hissed loudly at the white hot pain that lanced through her. She fought hard to get back up and breathed a sigh of relief as she glimpsed Ryuji drawing his shotgun. A resounding boom filled the chamber, several pellets grazing the chamber and sending jets of black matter bursting out of it's wings.

Ann rose to her feet and summoned Carmen, the scarlet dancer narrowing her eyes at the airborne Shadow. The cigar perched in her lips glowed brightly, before a salvo of fireballs erupted around the fleeing Shadow, guiding it along through the air as Ryuji worked to take aim ahead of it.

"Skull, to the left! Now!"

Ryuji opened fire, the second violent boom echoing around him as the spray sliced into the Shadow. Shards of molten lead cut through illusory flesh, obliterating the snarling head and reducing the creature to a rapidly dissipating cloud of dark mist.

For as relaxed as Futaba's pyramid had been on the surface, there was a dark and dangerous underbelly already trying to swallow them whole...
The wave of bright blue fire completely enveloped Haru, her silhouette faintly visible through the churning blaze. The blaze began to part, weaving along Haru's arms and legs in a fluid upward motion until she took a step forward, completely transformed.

Her thief attire managed to be rather fancy while still retaining a mysterious air. A pink blouse and black vest adorned her upper body, while her legs were covered by ruffled wine-coloured shorts and black tights that led down to flat-soled shoes. Her belt, much like Ryuji's, was weighted with ammunition. Except, instead of shotgun shells, she had grenades neatly tucked into the slots. A black domino mask adorned her pretty face, while a wide-brimmed feather cap rested atop her head.

"Sugimura," Haru said, taking a firm step forward. The powerful aura around her body didn't subside, only growing stronger as another form materialized above her. "I'm not your plaything!"

Haru's Persona was rather large, but much of that mass came from the rather wide pink ballgown she was wearing. As Shizuka inspected the frame from the side, she noticed something rather odd. It wasn't some kind of ruffled dress. It was some kind of... hull made of polished pink plates of armour. Her Persona had no face, or even a head. Instead she was holding a flowery pink domino mask on a stick in her right hand, positioning it where her face would be. In her left she held a fluffy pink fan, dismissively fanning at the air.

"You ungrateful little shit," Sugimura growled, taking a powerful plodding step forward and shaking the corridor in the process. "All you have to do is what you're told, and you're still causing trouble?! I'll be sure to knock that insubordination out of you!"

Haru narrowed her eyes at the looming mech. "The only one getting knocked around... will be you!" The front of Milady's dress shunted open abruptly, revealing a veritable arsenal of heavy ordnance that promptly shot into view. Heavy chain guns, miniature howitzers... even a small missile battery, tucked neatly into the center of the bouquet of weapons.

"OH MY GOD!" Shizuka shouted, nearly falling flat as Milady showed off her hidden arsenal.

In an instant all of Milady's guns lit up, a chorus of explosions resounding through the corridor. Shells, bullets, and missiles rocketed forward as a violent hailstorm, slicing through the air and striking against Sugimura's hull, the ensuing explosions engulfing him in smoke and obscuring him from prying eyes. The storm of lead ran on for several seconds, drowning out all noise in a deafening roar.

Eventually, the guns stopped firing. Great plumes of smoke hissed from Milady's guns until her dress slammed shut again. "Um... Queen, was it?" Haru asked, glancing to Makoto. The brunette nodded mutely, stunned into silence. "I believe you said you wanted to heal the others? You should do it quickly, I doubt that he's going to be stopped by that."

"R-right," Makoto replied, quickly settling her left hand on her iron mask. A warm white light briefly enveloped the others, healing their superficial injuries and dulling the pain they had received so far. While she couldn't fully undo the fatigue that had built up inside them, the healing light was still refreshing and invigorating.

"So uh... what's the play here?" Shizuka asked. Her whole body tensed as she saw a silhouette forming through the smoke, growing more defined as violent plodding footsteps echoed around them. Sugimura was rising fast and starting to advance through the smoke. "If that firepower didn't take him down... It's gonna take a whole lot to take care of him."
Makoto nodded firmly. "Right, that gunfire didn't take him down. But he wasn't impervious to it like his two friends were. We can use that to our advantage." Sugimura burst through the smoke, snarling loudly as a violent glow strobed from his lone eye. Haru hadn't stopped him, but the various scorch marks and dents on the hull of his armour made it clear that she'd managed to hurt him. "Sting, Diabolik... I need you two to hang back and wait for an opening. If he can be hurt with physical attacks, then Breakthru can take out his legs."

Nodding, Shizuka swiftly made herself and Sergio invisible. The two Stand users moved around sharply, making for the right side of the room as Sugimura stomped toward the others. Makoto swiftly mounted Johanna, rocketing around his left while Sugimura lifted his right ironclad hand, lightning crackling around the polished steel.

Two burning arcs narrowly missed the racing motorbike, exploding against the ground and leaving molten steel in their wake. Johanna drifted around behind the white mech, both eyes glowing brightly as the air behind Sugimura exploded violently. The blast knocked him forward a step, but Sugimura responded sharply and spun around, his fist clipping Makoto and sending her skidding across the room.

"Faster than he looks," Yusuke muttered. He quickly glanced to Haru as Sugimura turned their way, wasting no time in advancing toward. "Other than firearms, what else can your Persona do? We'll need to strike as one." Yusuke touched his mask, Goemon's ghostly visage soon floating above him.

"Well..." Haru seemed to hold a mental chat with Milady and smiled faintly, her eyes suddenly flashing gold. "There is this..."

A halo of oscillating purple and gold light suddenly thrummed around Sugimura's head, the mech shrieking loudly and writhing in place as the psi-burst rocked him to the core of his being. Yusuke blinked at the sight but quickly pushed past his surprised, swiftly pointing forward. "Goemon! Strike!"

Yusuke's Persona rocketed forward at a tremendous speed, rattling the floor beneath him in passing. He rammed a large fist into Sugimura's chest, the blow violently rattling the Shadow's body and leaving a deep fist-shaped dent on his chassis.

Sugimura snarled and shoved both fists outward, twin arcs of lightning exploding from his digits and striking the two thieves. Haru and Yusuke screamed in unison as the powerful voltage struck them, the two struggling to keep standing as the energy arced through them. "You worthless little shit! I'm going to make this an agonizingly slow death for you!"

His whole body glowed as he pulled his arms back, seeming to be rapidly drawing in more energy from the air around him. Electricity flickered and danced along the cracked portions of his armour, giving the briefest of glances at the inner workings of his synthetic body.

"Hurting Fox? I'm afraid that's just not something I can abide, my friend," Sergio softly remarked. "VATTENE!"

Sugimura became faintly aware of something brushing his left knee, before the rounded joint abruptly exploded off his body and sailed through the air. The ornate surface became embedded in the wall with a resounding boom. "W-what the hell?!" Sugimura wobbled on his remaining leg and fell forward, striking the ground and making it shudder beneath his bulk.

Just as Sergio was closing in to finish things, Breakthru's enlarged fist aimed at Sugimura's head, the giant Shadow swung blindly and caught the blond with his fist. Sergio howled as he was
knocked away, the gathered energy on Sugimura's fist exploding outward in the process and
coursing through the Stand users body. Sergio's back met the wall hard enough to leave an imprint,
before his smoking body was left writhing in the throes of pain.

"Filthy trash! You dare attack me?! I'll kill you, I'll kill you all!" Sugimura's bulk rolled slightly as
he took aim at Sergio, only to be blindsided by a flurry of high speed punches impacting against his
steely face.

"BAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAzuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!!!"

Houdini's unseen fists rained down on Sugimura with a surprising level of ferocity, denting and
warping the armour of his body on every third strike or so. The noise was like rain on a tin roof,
echoing around them. Sugimura snarled and swung blindly, only barely missing as Houdini
speedily dodged backward. Aware that he had missed, Sugimura's gigantic fist swung back down
and struck the floor hard enough to leave a meter-deep dent in the heavy plate, the shock from the
action kicking Shizuka's feet from under her and leaving her grunting as she hit the earth. She
could feel a distinct ringing in her ears and worked to crawl backward while she was still invisible.

During the chaos, Makoto had managed to right himself and quickly approached Sergio's
unmoving form. She pressed two fingers to his neck and breathed a sigh of relief as she felt his
pulse. "Diabolik's unconscious," she said to herself more than anyone else, as if thankful for the
simple reassurance. Even so she would need to heal him quickly.

Makoto lifted Sergio's unconscious form out of the wall, letting his weight rest against her right
shoulder. "Fox, Sting! And uh... Haru, I need you two to hit him again and take him out quickly! I
don't think we can take much more of this..."

Sugimura's damaged head swivelled around to face the other three thieves, his single eye glowing
powerfully despite the dented frame surrounding it. A mighty wave of ruby light burst forth,
making a beeline for the group at a terrifying pace. Goemon appeared in front of Yusuke,
slamming his palms into the ground and generating a thick sheet of ice to block the beam. But the
focused strike punched straight through the ice and slammed into Goemon, driving Yusuke back
until he was sandwiched between the energy wave and the laser barrier. He grimaced, struggling
against the crushing pressure.

Even with Goemon acting as a bulwark, it seemed unlikely that he could endure the strain for long.

Stray bursts of focused laser light were bouncing off Goemon's body, forcing Shizuka to tear a
plate from the war-torn floor for coverage. Houdini was propping the plate up, the intense energy
steadily making a red hot glow blossom outward from the center of the makeshift shield. "Haru,"
Shizuka grunted, glancing over to the strawberry blonde behind her. Even with how intense
everything was, she could still see Haru breathing heavily. The strain of her awakening was already
hitting hard. "That... purple thing you hit him with earlier. I dunno what it was, but I think
Sugimura was weak to it. I know you're feeling tired, but you gotta hit him again!" If she didn't,
then Shizuka and Yusuke would be goners in a few seconds!

Nodding, Haru narrowed her eyes and let the golden glow envelop her eyes once more. Milady
fanned herself casually before taking aim with her right arm, another oscillating bubble of purple
and gold light warping around Sugimura's head. He screamed in white hot pain, the pulses of
psychic power grinding against his head and scarring the armored plates. A section on the right
side of his head exploded off, revealing the pulsating electro-matter of his synthetic brain.

Sugimura's eye laser sputtered out and the machine slumped forward, greatly damaged but still
moving. Yusuke fell forward with the pressure off him, landing hard on his hands and knees. In the
midst of catching his breath, he brought his left hand to his ivory mask. Goemon drove both hands downward, unleashing a hail of ornately carved icicles that rained down from above and punched through Sugimura's arms, bolting him to the floor.

"Ngh... hgh..." Sugimura struggled weakly, glancing over to Haru. "W-wait! Haru, I-I can change!" he feverishly said.

A pleasant smile crossed Haru's face as she advanced forward a few steps. "Oh yes Sugimura, I truly believe you can change."

"You... you do?"

"Yes." Haru's gentle smile didn't falter as Milady's dress parted again, once more revealing her impressive arsenal. "I believe you can change into a stain on the floor."

All Milady's guns opened fire at once, a storm of explosions engulfing Sugimura's body as chunk after chunk of his mechanical body was vaporized. The salvo of hellfire kicked up a tremendous plume of choking smoke that filled the corridor, growing larger with each passing second. Haru only stopped when she felt a throbbing pain in her head, stumbling backward until Shizuka caught her.

"O-oh my... that... that's more taxing than I was expecting."

Shizuka nodded. "I've been told it's rough on the first time. But holy shit, you were amazing!" she enthusiastically said.

"I was?" Haru asked, seeming mildly surprised. She glanced back to where the cognitive Sugimura had been. Sure enough, all that remained of him was a scorch that had been burnt into the plating.

"Terrifying, but amazing," Shizuka assured her.

The two laser barriers that had fenced them in flickered and promptly vanished, leaving their path clear again. "Looks like he was the one keeping those shields up," Makoto remarked as she led Sergio back toward the group. He was leaning on her for support, but he seemed capable of walking.

"Are you alright?" Yusuke asked, approaching his friend.

The blond smiled wryly. "I've had worse. Why, one time I was chasing a Stand user who could alter the world around him to resemble Picasso paintings. And, well, long story short you haven't experienced discomfort until you've been split across fractal dimensions."

"It could have been worse. He could have turned the world into a Goya painting," Yusuke remarked. Both artists chuckled, to the mild confusion of the three girls.

"Well, regardless," Makoto said, wanting to swiftly move along from that. "That was truly incredible Haru. A power like yours, I think you'd make for a perfect Phantom Thief."

"You truly think so?" Haru asked, very nearly springing to her feet again in excitement.

Sergio nodded firmly. "You certainly saved our backsides. I doubt we could have beaten that damn robot without your help." Even after taking his legs out, his firepower had been nothing to sneeze at.

"Would... Aki-kun be alright with me joining?" Haru asked.
"I can't see him refusing. Your Persona is incredibly powerful, and with the current workload we have on hand we could always do with more assistance," Makoto remarked. She gave the strawberry blonde a light pat on her right shoulder. "You'll need a codename of course."

Haru pondered the statement, glancing to the vague reflection of herself that she could get from the wall. Her gloved digits stroked along the ebony surface of her domino mask. "The name you chose for your group, 'Arditi', is Italian. It was a special forces group in World War One, yes?" Shizuka nodded. "Oftentimes a foreign word can carry a great mystique and allure to it, simply by being alien to the person hearing it. I imagine that's another reason why Arditi sounds so appealing for a group of thieves. So perhaps choosing another foreign word would give me a similar mystique?"

"Go for it," Shizuka suggested. She had a feeling Haru would have learned a foreign language given her status. Even Shizuka's father had asked her to learn a few foreign words to greet some of his business partners with, just so she wouldn't be totally disarmed in such rare events.

Haru gave her mask another idle stroke. "Noir. French for 'black.' Sounds fitting, yes?" she asked.

"I quite like that," Sergio said "I'll at least admit to liking the French language..."

After a moment, Shizuka helped to shoulder Haru's weight to keep her from falling over. "It's definitely a cool name... but we oughtta' get out of here for today. You're looking wiped."

"Oh, of course. I feel like I'll sleep well tonight." Venting anger against an abusive fiance would likely have that effect.

Makoto led the way back the way they came, with Shizuka rendering the group invisible as they returned to the biometric door Makoto had previously destroyed. The workers on the conveyer belt hadn't changed position, but none of them wanted to risk another fight.

They had mostly been quiet up to that point, but something was gnawing at the back of Shizuka's mind and she simply had to bring it up. While keeping her tone low, of course.

"Hey uh, Noir... I owe you an apology," Shizuka said, glancing to the taller girl. The statement seemed to confuse Haru just a tad. "Back when this all started, when I learned about your situation I... well I thought you were just this weak girl who couldn't help herself. And I... I guess I looked down on you without meaning to. But you've really proved that there's a whole lot of badass buried under that fluffy exterior."

A gentle blush graced Haru's face. "You don't need to apologize. Before I met you, I really was helpless. I really was just going to go along with my father's demands, allow myself to be married off to that pig. But you're the first person to tell me that my life is mine. That I could do things for myself. Without that, I don't know if I'd have found that strength inside myself. And I'll never forget that."

"Aw jeez..." Shizuka murmured, awkwardly scratching the back of her head.

"Are you... crying?" Sergio asked, leaning in for a closer look.

"Sh-shut up! That was super beautiful, okay?!

Yusuke sighed gently and gave Haru an apologetic smile. "Apologies Noir. Silly squabbles are commonplace in our group, you should know."

Haru gently giggled. "I don't mind. This is all rather fun already."
Their first trip to Futaba's pyramid hadn't allowed them to accomplish much, outside of them managing to escape a double dose of death trap. That was why, upon their second entry, the group unanimously agreed to double down and try to explore more of the pyramid with the end goal of opening up a path back up the central staircase.

With this dedication in mind, the group had managed to cover a fair bit of ground. Even if the Shadows were actively working to stymie their progress.

A plate of steel drove into Akira's chest with a surprising whip of speed, the disarming blow knocking him off his feet. He hit the ground hard, grunting as his foe loomed over him. The greyscale naga hissed loudly, pulling his shield back with his left arm and raised his sharpened spear high with his right. He lunged forward, flowing black hair fluttering behind him in the process.

His motions were fast and furious, harsh stabs that sank the peak of his spear into the ancient stone floor as Akira dodged around. The flurries missed him by scant inches, one stray strike only barely avoiding jabbing through his left wrist, while another lightly brushed the side of his neck.

With one flourish Akira managed to snap his pistol upward, a cracking gunshot echoing through the narrow chamber as the bullet scraped the side of the Naga's head. The snake-man shrieked and recoiled, bubbling black goo oozing down over his right eye from the fresh wound.

Akira rolled backward and onto his feet, his right hand touching his mask. "Arsene!" His crimson Persona fluttered above him, chuckling darkly. "Ravage him!"

Arsene raised his right hand, a wave of silver twinkles washing over his palm. Suddenly a storm of small metal needles exploded from his palm, racing through the air at a terrifying speed. In his panic the Naga tried to raise his shield, all too late as the first few points made contact with him.

Though small, the sheer speed of the needles gave them enough force to punch into his flesh. The Naga shrieked and writhed from the several dozen needles now protruding from his body, making him look like a shuddering scaly pincushion. The impressive pain left him wide open as Arsene lunged forward, delivering a sharp downward kick that buried his bladed heel into the Shadow's face. His skull exploded outward in a shadow of gore, with his headless body rapidly decaying as it fell to the floor.

Akira breathed a small sigh of relief and dusted himself off. "Dream Needle... gonna have to thank Caroline and Justine for that one, even if it did the opposite of putting him to sleep."

A chorus of footsteps reached him, racing up the small staircase to his right. His friends soon reached the small boxy chamber that the Naga had pushed Akira towards, each of them breathing heavily. "You... you okay Joker?" Ann asked in between quick gulps of air.

He nodded. "Sorry about getting separated like that... those snake guys are crafty," he remarked.

"We took care of the other three, and the snake lady that was with 'em," Ryuji remarked. "But man, I am wiped... can we call it for today?"

"Mm. Just one thing first," Akira said. He pointed over his shoulder to the small doorway behind him. "I wanna see what's through here. With how far we've come, I think we're on the cusp of something big."
The dark-haired boy pressed on toward the doorway, with the others moving along behind him. The door led on to a narrow bridge, with the right-hand side overlooking the central staircase of the pyramid. The left was a black wall with some manner of broad screen affixed to the brickwork. In the center was a large sphere of green crystal, positioned atop a stone podium with a series of buttons on it.

Ann examined it for a few moments. "Another one of these things?" she asked.

"The second one... if there are more doors on the way up, we're likely going to run into even more of these mechanisms," Shiho explained.

Their earlier exploration of the day had brought them to one of these devices, which had beamed a scrambled image onto the blank screen. Having solved it, another beam of light had strobed from the green crystal and into a matching green plate on the first door of the central staircase. This had been enough to open the first hurdle in their path.

The image had been one of Futaba and her mother rendered in a hieroglyphic style, with Futaba cloying for her mother's attention. But with how busy Wakaba had been with her research, she apparently hadn't had much luck.

Akira pressed the largest button near the smooth green sphere, watching as another image appeared on screen. This one was larger, and even more scrambled than the first one had been.

"Ah crap..." Ryuji muttered, settling his hands on his hips. "Why can't a Palace ever just have like, a junior jumble as a puzzle? I'm good at those..."

"Well it's... like a jigsaw, right? If we can make the top and bottom look consistent, it should work out," Shiho suggested.

Nodding, Akira got started by using the controls to sort through the different chunks of the scrambled image. Futaba's Shadow was easy to make out, and he got to work quickly assembling her from the various pieces on the screen. The Pharaoh was seated on a small throne, facing right. He took the time to position her near the back of the image and took the time to examine the remaining parts.

It took some time to start assembling the pieces of the picture into something coherent, with regular prodding from the others directing him onward as he worked to solve the puzzle. Eventually, he got it right.

The end result was an image of Futaba, seated opposite a trio of owl-headed men in suits. The lead one was clutching a piece of paper in his hand and seemed to be offering it up to her, while the other two owl-headed men glared in contempt.

"Is that it?" Morgana asked, scratching the side of his head. "I don't get it, what's going on in that picture?"

Akira narrowed his eyes slightly and inspected the display. As he tried to puzzle out the meaning of the picture, he felt a presence to his right. Futaba's Shadow was positioned near the group, translucent and maintaining her focus on the image.

"I remember after my mom died," she said in a soft and level tone. "When the men in suits read her will in front of my family and I. 'I should never have had Futaba. She was always such a bother.' That was what was written there. That I caused her so much stress and trouble... I gave her some kind of maternal neurosis..." Futaba kept her eyes on the mural. "I drove my mother to commit..."
suicide, didn't I? And for that, I deserve to die too."

Her Shadow vanished in an instant, much to the shock of the others. "F-Futaba, wait! That's not-!"
Ann sighed when she realized her Shadow was long gone. "Geez... usually we can never get rid of a Palace ruler..."

A green beam of light burst from the sphere, burning away the image on the screen and carrying on toward the heavy door on the staircase. It illuminated the panel on the door, causing the mechanisms to jolt to life as the door noisily rolled open to allow their continued passage into the pyramid.

"She thinks she drove her mom to commit suicide?" Ryuji asked aloud, before grunting and shaking his head. "And what's the deal with those shitheads?! What kind of sick freak would read that in front of an already devastated kid! It's messed up!"

"On that we can agree," Morgana grimly said. "But thinking on what Boss said, the statement from that suicide note really doesn't make sense. He described Wakaba as a woman who deeply loved her daughter, and tried to find time for her and her research. If that wasn't the case, I think he would have been able to tell," he explained.

Shiho nodded. "While there's a slim chance Boss was wrong, I still think that this whole setup is sinister. Nobody would read something so damning in front of a kid unless there was some kind of motive."

"Right," Akira said with a soft sigh. "We've been rolling with the idea that Wakaba Isshiki didn't kill herself. That she was killed by Black Mask because of her research. Let's stick with that and examine this note. It might well be a forgery, something done to make Futaba a scapegoat and deflect any suspicion from what happened to Wakaba. Futaba must have been... what, twelve? Thirteen? Either way, a kid isn't going to be articulate enough to defend herself or question that, especially after seeing something so traumatizing."

"They made her think she killed her own mom because it would make things easy for them?!" Ann snapped. She clenched her fists as anger boiled inside her, wanting so desperately to vent it out. But, with no Shadows around, she had no outlet.

Akira nodded. He was no less disgusted, but was managing to keep his anger on a tighter leash. "Seems to be the case. If it is true then Black Mask isn't working alone. Whoever handled that note was involved too, framing that event to make Futaba an easy scapegoat. I doubt they had any personal vendetta against a kid, but doing anything like that just further shows how morally bankrupt the people we're up against are."

It was nauseating. Killing Isshiki for her research was bad enough, assuming that was the motive there at least, but emotionally destroying a child to cover their tracks was a whole other level of scum.

"Shit... we gotta tell Futaba about this," Ryuji hastily said.

"Not yet," Akira said, to the shock of the others. He quickly moved to elaborate. "I want to tell her the truth too. Hell, she deserves to know. But... she's also clearly not stable at the moment. And if we drop a bombshell like that on her now, especially without any hard evidence, there's no way of telling how she'd react."

"That's true... Futaba's current mental state isn't entirely solid, and if we told her something so emotionally shaking..." Shiho shook her head. "We should deal with her Palace first. Once her..."
"That's what I was thinking too. When everything's done here, we'll explain what we know to her."

It felt wrong, withholding this information from her. But ultimately Akira felt dropping something so heavy on her could drive her Palace wild. A single panic attack nearly got them squashed by a boulder, after all.

Thinking on this reminded him of another aspect of this mission: Earning Futaba's trust. He supposed he'd have to try talking to her personally as soon as possible.
7/28

Akira gently knocked on Futaba's door, a gesture that caused a small rustling sound to reverberate from behind the door. "Hey uh, Futaba?" he asked. A few seconds of silence passed before he got a message from Alibaba, which he promptly glanced to.

'Why are you here? Shouldn't you be working on my heart?'

"We're getting there. Trains are running a little late today, so I figured I'd take the time to chat with you before the others arrive," he explained. "How're you feeling today." His phone chimed again a few minutes later.

'Okay, I guess. I've binged on Miss Kobayashi's Dragon Maid, but I'm already done with all the episodes.'

Akira smiled faintly. Something told him this girl was a bit of an otaku. Not that he was going to judge someone for having hobbies. "Sounds like a monster girl series. Well, I'm sure you'll find a good replacement soon. Truth be told, I haven't had a chance to watch any anime lately."

'Because of your Phantom Thief stuff?'

Akira examined his phone and nodded. "Pretty much. We've been getting a lot more popular, so that eats into a lot of my free time. And my job as an exotic dancer doesn't help either." A muffled snort resounded from the other end of the door, making him smile faintly. "Ah, the great Alibaba has a sense of humor?"

'>:E don't tease me you dork.'

"Alright alright, I'm sorry," he replied with a modest snicker. "But, anyway, I think we're close to a breakthrough. We'll change your heart soon enough," he assured her. Another buzz rocked his phone a few seconds later.

'Is it really gonna take that long?'

"Afraid so," Akira replied. "The inner workings are... well, it's weird, just take my word on that. We can't just snap our fingers and change a person. But we're going to help you, I promise." There seemed to be a particularly long pause before he got another response from Futaba.

'Thanks, I really appreciate that. But don't forget, I can still turn you into the police.'

Akira's smile didn't falter. Something told him Futaba wouldn't go through with hurting them like that.

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7/30

Having two Palaces to contend with at once seemed to greatly increase the need for days off, with their numbers being spread apart those locations. Exploration could be taxing enough with a full team, and now they seemed to tire out just a little bit quicker.
Medjed's deadline was still a good bit of time away, they could afford to take time out on that. And having no deadline at all for Okumura was also welcome.

Having these openings meant that Akira was going to put some time in for his friends, particularly Yusuke and Ann. He felt that the bluenette was close to some kind of breakthrough on his art, particularly with a large painting competition looming on the horizon. But he was still hung up on the relationship between art and money.

Madarame hadn't been able to find any balance between passion for art and his own greed, ultimately becoming consumed by the latter. Akira knew that Yusuke didn't want to turn out the same way, but it was hard to convince him that he could still make money off his passion without falling into the same trap.

Trying to put that thought into words, it seemed, hadn't done much to persuade Yusuke. So for now he was leading the way through the city and casually chatting, hoping for some inspiration to hit.

They rounded one corner, striding away from streets drenched in advertisements and neon colours and into a long stretch of more conservative and serious structures. "You know, we had a customer in Leblanc who was really taken with the Sayuri the other day. Said it was one of the best paintings he had ever seen."

"Oh? Well, I'm glad that it's still bringing enjoyment to people."

Akira nodded slightly. "Guy even said he wanted to buy it. Had to turn him down though. It's not mine to sell, for one thing, and for another it just wouldn't be right to give that painting away for any price."

"I don't doubt Madarame would have jumped at the chance if he had been in your shoes. But I appreciate your restraint immensely Akira," said Yusuke.

The dark haired boy hummed gently, feeling that he was at some sort of dead end right now. He wanted to get to the root of Yusuke's problem, but couldn't seem to find the right words. However he stopped when Yusuke seemed to spot something just ahead of them.

"Oh, isn't that..." The two teens stopped and glanced to a small clinic, the front door opening as a pale and sturdily built man stepped out. The breeze flicked at his white doctor's coat. "Doctor Lifeson?"

Realization struck Akira like a bolt of lightning. When they last met the Stand-using doctor, Yusuke had been impressed by Lifeson's drive to help others, when his powers could have made him the most famous man on earth. But he still earned a living wage. So perhaps this was the kind man who could help sort Yusuke out...

"Doctor! Hey, Lifeson-san," Akira said as the two approached. The taller man looked up from his phone and gave the two a faint smile.

"Ah, you're Shizuka's friends from the other day. Is everything alright?" he asked.

"Ah, you're Shizuka's friends from the other day. Is everything alright?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing serious. I don't know if you caught our names the other day. I'm Akira, and he's Yusuke," he explained, gesturing to the tall and thin bluenette. "You working in here today?" Akira asked, gesturing to the unassuming grey building behind him.

Lifeson nodded slightly. "I go where the Foundation points me. Since I'm gonna be in Japan for a while, it means there's really no shortage of people around here who need a helping hand," he explained.
"It must be taxing," Yusuke said.

"Uh... if you don't mind me asking Lifeson-san, how did you get into this line of work? I know this is probably very personal, but... well, you seem very charitable. With a Stand like yours, you could be one of the richest men around," Akira said.

The older man hummed gently at the question. "It's something I'm asked relatively often, but I don't mind people being curious. The short version is that I tried fame and riches in the past and didn't care for it. The long version is that..." He tapped his chin. "I'm American originally, born and raised in Tennessee, a state in America that's part of what they call the 'Bible Belt'."

Lifeson leaned back against the wall for support, seeming to realise he'd be talking for some time. "As you can imagine from the name, it's a pretty religious area. Not that being religious is an inherently good or bad thing, it's just... well, it's something to keep in mind for the story. Back when I was a kid, when it was just me and my folks, we got by even when money was a little tight. But things got really difficult when my sister was born." He raised his left hand toward his eyes and made a slight circular motion. "She was born with this condition that damaged her eyes and left her functionally blind. The nerves didn't properly link to her brain and so, well, the brain couldn't receive information from her eyeballs. Having a blind child is tough enough, but the medicine she needed was pricey too."

"That must have been rather challenging," Yusuke gently said, glancing down to his feet.

"Oh yeah. My folks tried their best, and they never took their problems out on us or anything... but even as a kid, I could see how it was causing a lot of strain on them. Me, I just focused on keeping my sister safe. Even so, I really wanted to help her." Lifeson sighed and slowly scratched his right temple. "You know, there's this theory. It says that a persons Stand and the abilities it has are wholly shaped by their needs or desires. Not everyone fits that mold, but I'm pretty sure I did. Cause one day, when I was giving my sister her medicine, Panacea appeared. And a few seconds after she took her pills, she could see."

Akira blinked in surprise. "Your power was that strong on the first go? That's really impressive... I'd say you were shocked," he said.

Lifeson nodded. "My sister was really young at the time. She was surprised too, but I suspect she assumed it was just... natural in some way. My parents and I though, well we recognised that something paranormal had happened. And they wanted to experiment more, so they brought me to my grandfather." He lifted his left hand and lazily made a circling motion. "He'd had a limp for years now because of a farming accident. They handed me his painkillers, I gave those over to him... bam, no more limp."

"By the sound of things, you weren't too happy about that," Yusuke remarked. "But surely it must have been good to help your family."

"Oh it was. Believe me I was more than thrilled to help my sister and granddad, but... well, my parents saw dollar signs. I was the 'miracle healer boy' and they were pretty happy to advertise that fact. And soon we were touring around, with folks paying for me to heal them. On the one hand, I liked earning money for my folks. On the other, the fame really started to weigh on me."

The memories made him grimace. Regardless, he carried on with his story. "We were making money, travelling the states and doing these 'spiritual healing' shows. I liked helping people, hated the glitz. But the more people we helped, the flashier it all got. And then the crazies started showing up," Lifeson explained. "Like I said, I was in a pretty religious part of the states and while a lot of religious folks are great people, some take their worship to insane levels. And some people
got this idea in their head that I was a messenger of Satan, some kinda Antichrist."

Yusuke blinked a few times. "What? But that's... ludicrous. If you were helping people, how could anyone think you had nefarious intentions?"

"The Devil wouldn't be very dangerous if he couldn't beguile and tempt people. That was the logic, I guess. I was using Satanic powers to 'heal' people while robbing their souls in the process. Or something like that... It came to a head when, at the end of one show, someone from the crowd stabbed me."

The two boys were taken aback. "I... wow... I'm really sorry to hear that Doctor. That must have been really horrible," Akira said.

"Mm. Didn't hit anything vital, thankfully, but that whole incident... it made me aware that I needed to get out of that lifestyle. I was about... seventeen then, and I just... took off with whatever money I had to hand. But it didn't take long for the Foundation to find me. They'd had people following the news of my shows, and figured out I was a Stand user pretty quickly." A very faint smile crossed his face. "They offered me two things. A spot in medical school so I could get some credentials, and a job with them. I'd be helping people without any of that... bullshit that followed me around before,' Lifeson explained.

After a brief pause, Yusuke nodded. "That must have been rather nice. Still... have you been in contact with your parents since then?"

"At times. Things are awkward between us, since I think they know how overboard they went with that 'spiritual healer' stuff... I see my sister fairly regularly though. Hell, I even made sure she had the means to get into college," Lifeson explained. He pushed himself off the wall and slowly stretched his arms over his head. "Well, that's about it... Anyway, I was gonna go and grab a bite to eat before getting back to work," he said.

"Oh uh, one more thing," Akira said. "You still get paid for your work, right?"

"Of course. Helping people and using my abilities for good is the important part, but there's nothing wrong in earning a wage you can live off of." He strode by the two boys and carried on up the road. "Stay safe you two. I'll be happy to see you if it's not just for business."

As he left, Akira glanced to Yusuke and smiled faintly. "See? Nothing wrong with that. So really, as long as you keep the reason for your art in mind, there's no need to worry about turning out like Madarame."

"Ah." Yusuke smiled faintly and followed after Akira. He was slowly making his way to a small ramen shop, and seemed to have no qualms in paying for Yusuke too. "So that was the reason for that discussion?" Akira smiled impishly. "Well, you may well have a point... Say, Akira?"

The dark haired boy cocked his head toward the bluenette. "Hm? What's up?"

"When Lifeson was talking about Stand abilities being based on what you need most at that moment, it made me think of Shizuka. What do you suppose it was the caused her Stand to appear the way it did?"

Akira didn't answer him. But both boys agreed that whatever scenario resulted in an infant needing to be invisible, it couldn't have been a good one.
For as invested as Mitsuru was in looking into the supernatural affairs of Japan, she was still the owner of a massive company. As such it had taken a few days to put aside time to meet with Naoto. She was old fashioned despite her youth, preferring to do things in person if it could be helped.

Naoto sniffed the French roast Mitsuru had brewed, taking in the strong scent. "My thanks, Kirijo-san," Naoto said, before taking a modest sip. Savoring the taste she added "I got a chance to speak with them. They didn't deny the allegations, and they certainly seem proud of who they are. And they clearly have no intentions of stopping now, even with the situation being as serious as it is now."

Sighing, Mitsuru took a seat in the plush armchair across from the sofa. "I suppose this isn't too surprising. They are teenagers after all... a dangerous combination of being rebellious and flippant. Though personally I don't recall being too much of a rebel at their age."

"Nor I..." Naoto remarked. "But ultimately, I... don't think they're bad kids. Their targets have all been reprehensible criminals, so I can't entirely fault their methods either."

"What about Kurusu? The one with the criminal record?"

Naoto shrugged and took another brief sip. "That whole business seems odd to me. The boy I met seemed relatively level headed and calm, not the sort to randomly assault people. To say nothing of the fact that even I can't access any information on that case. I feel something about that case has been hidden from the public."

Mitsuru nodded sagely. "Akihiko said something similar about the boy. That he didn't seem the type to fly off the handle." So what exactly was going on there? It warranted some inspection.

"There is one other thing. They mentioned something called a 'Metaverse' when I confronted them."

That was enough to make Mitsuru blink in surprise. "A... A Metaverse. Yes, that would go some way to explaining how they can change a person's heart," she remarked. Seeing Naoto's confusion, Mitsuru elaborated. "A metaverse is a concept that has appeared a few times when researching Shadows. They are a type of parallel dimension that exist concurrently with our own, shaped and influenced by human emotions. You're actually rather familiar with an example of one."

"The television world," Naoto finished, earning a nod from the redhead. She recalled that it was the interests of Inaba's townfolk that controlled what appeared on the Midnight Channel, and how a person dumped in there had a world of their own fears and repressed emotions built up around them. Naoto briefly thought back to her embarrassing 'secret lab' and grimaced.

"Correct. But it seemed to be different to the situation we find ourselves in. The television world was isolated to Inaba, and the Midnight Channel was a local phenomenon. There were no reports of it anywhere else, and trying to enter a television outside of Inaba does not work. It seems that it was cordoned off by that Izanami entity. But this one... if it does encompass Tokyo, the danger it poses is quite great. It could perhaps be even larger still..." Mitsuru trailed off, shaking her head at
the thought alone.

As Mitsuru explained the nature of the abstract dimension, Naoto pondered all that they knew about Arditi's exploits thus far. "Madarame's position was accounted for up until his public confession, so it seems a person doesn't need to physically enter this Metaverse for their Shadow to be found and altered. It's a dangerous distinction from the television world."

"Right. And power like that is in the hands of morally-driven high school outcasts," Mitsuru mused.

"More than that, they also mentioned that there's a serial killer running around in that Metaverse," Naoto said. The statement made Mitsuru tense visibly. She thought back to Takaya, while Naoto briefly thought of Adachi. "A serial killer with a Persona."

Both women lapsed into silence, digesting the prospect. "Is there really any evidence to that claim? They might have just been trying to throw you off them," Mitsuru suggested.

"I had considered that possibility, of course. But the more I think about Tokyo, and knowing about this Metaverse, it seems entirely possible they were being truthful. If people could be manipulated through that dimension, then there's a chance incidents such as the psychotic breakdowns could be tied to this killer. Such incidents were taking place before Kurusu moved to Tokyo after all," Naoto explained. And with the regularity of those deranged rampages, she couldn't chalk them up as random incidents.

Mitsuru reached a hand up to her chin in thought. "I've heard rumors of supposed 'mental shutdowns' taking place in Tokyo too, where a person completely freezes up. As if the very soul has been sucked out of their body, like a vegetative state. If those incidents are related too, then we could be dealing with cases of weaponized Apathy Syndrome."

Now more than ever they couldn't afford to look away from this Phantom Thief business.

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8/3

Akira was of a mind that they were getting close to the end of Futaba's Palace, and found himself thankful that her Palace was rather small. The Okumura spaceport seemed much larger in contrast however. The last time they had all met up, Makoto had described their newest obstacle: A series of different chambers, floating in space and joined by a series of airlocks that had to be opened in a specific sequence.

Shizuka described the system as 'fucking annoying.'

Soon they'd be able to deal with Okumura as one large group, but there were just a few more steps that needed taking with Futaba. Akira pondered how to give her her calling card when the time came, only to snuff the thought as he reached her familiar doorway He instinctively raised his phone from his pocket. "Hey Futaba," he casually greeted.

'You sure do spend an awful lot of time here.'

He shrugged slightly. "I guess I just like chatting with you." Which was true, for as odd as the nature of their conversations were. For as enigmatic as she had been as Alibaba, she seemed rather
nice. And at times he could see the flickers of her impressive intellect. It seemed quite a shame that someone like her was cut off from the world.

'Really? I would have thought you'd get plenty of mental stimulation from the people you know. You can talk to them, for one thing.'

"Maybe so," Akira replied. "But I guess I'm a social person at heart. Can't help wanting to get to know people."

'That's pretty nice of you Akira.' There was a brief pause before she quickly sent another message. 'Can I ask you something sort of personal?'

"Fire away," Akira curtly replied.

'You seem like a really nice guy. Agreeing to help me, being a good friend to all those people you know. Did you really assault a person? I found out that you have a criminal record soon after you moved in, but you really don't seem like that kind of person.'

Akira sighed. He supposed it wasn't shocking that she knew. It was hardly a secret at this point, with the way things were going he might as well have 'criminal record' tattooed on his forehead. If she knew so much from listening in on Leblanc, then it was possible she knew the whole story. He had given all the details out when they were eating hotpot as a group. Maybe she just wanted to hear it directly from him? "No, I didn't. The man I 'assaulted', whoever he was, must have had a lot of power and influence. I tripped him when he was getting hands-on with some woman and... well I guess he's the sort of guy who doesn't like not getting his way. The police were in his pocket."

There was a long silence, which Akira assumed to be Futaba writing some long message. "I'm really sorry to hear that."

Akira reflexively went to look at his phone, only to halt entirely. Had she just...?

A warm smile briefly touched on his face, and he considered teasing her just a little before thinking better of it. This was probably the first time she had spoken to someone other than Sojiro in some time, he didn't want to spoil that. "Don't worry about it. Seems like you've had a much rougher time than I have," he replied.

"Well I... y-yeah, it... it hasn't been the best." Her tone was soft, and there seemed to be considerable effort behind every syllable.

"Don't worry. My friends and I are close to a breakthrough. Another few days and we'll be ready to make a move on your heart," Akira assured her.

There was another brief pause before Futaba spoke up. "W-why does it take s-so long? How do you guys... y-you know, do it?" Futaba asked.

"That's... complicated," Akira said. He was sure that if he gave all the details to her he'd sound insane. "It's not a physical process, it's something that... I guess involves tampering on a mental level, away from any physical dimension. But it can be a long and arduous process," Akira explained, deciding to be a little vague.

"I see... s-so it involves altering a world generated by my cognition. But the very nature of my mind is resistant to change and hindering the progress of your group?" Futaba quickly asked. Her concise
assessment left Akira standing still for several long moments, his eyes wide.

"I..." Akira paused. "How did you-

"M-my mom was heavily invested in researching cognition and the human mind. S-she called it 'Cognitive Psience.'" Futaba went silent for several seconds before quietly adding "With a 'p' at the start."

So Futaba had picked up information from her mother? It did make sense if she was a genius prodigy. And if that was the case, then they could potentially learn some interesting things about the Metaverse from her.

Futaba carried on as Akira was digesting this new slew of information. "I d-didn't think it would be possible for anyone to interface w-with that kind of cognitive world... e-especially in the hands of high school students."

The dark haired boy nodded. "We didn't expect it to happen to us either, but... it'd be wrong not to help people with this power," Akira remarked. "And so, as you can imagine, dealing with a cognitive world can be a long and dangerous process. Just trust that we're going to get to the root of things soon," he emphatically stated.

"I guess... I-I guess me being a m-mess doesn't help matters... s-sorry..." Futaba gently said.

"Don't apologize," Akira replied. "We'll get through this soon, I promise." But it wouldn't be today, or tomorrow, that they had Futaba's Palace dealt with.

No, tomorrow he had plans with Makoto. Plans he had been dreading ever since the brainy brunette had laid them out to him.

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8/4

As Shizuka wandered down the busy Shibuya streets she was able to casually overhear the chatter of the day. The topics seemed taken right from the headlines in some cases. More than a few people were talking about some up and coming politician, a smooth-talking 'man of the people' who had already earned himself a few voters.

Akechi came up a few times... usually in less than pleased tones. Seemed the boy detective had fallen out of favour for remaining an outspoken critic against the Phantom Thieves. Not that she had much sympathy for him if he was indeed a Stand user hunting them.

Then, most importantly, was all the chatter about the Phantom Thieves. A small smile lingered on Shizuka's face as she strolled along the main street, her ears drawn in by any mention of their names.

"I really hope Arditi do something about my boss... he's such a dick. I even put a request up on their website."

"Man, if they didn't catch that Kaneshiro guy, I dunno what I would've done. Those punk mobsters were gonna bleed me dry. Literally!"

While Shizuka didn't consider herself a gloryhound, it was still nice that they were being
appreciated for their work. 'Man... our fame's really been shooting up,' Shizuka thought to herself. 'Ever since we got done with Kaneshiro people have been hyped over us. When Okumura gets exposed and Medjed go down, it'll be goddamn huge."

"You wanna swing by Nakiri for dinner? I hear they've got something new in that's freakin' awesome!"

"Oh you mean that 'Phantom Steak' thing? Sure, I'm down for that. Looks pretty tasty."

'Wait what.' Shizuka paused mid-step as she heard this. 'Are people profiting off our brand? Seriously? Aw man I gotta get in on that shit. Ain't right that we're being left out in the cold. And Yusuke could do with some actual money...'

Well she didn't need the money, but it struck her as unfair that strangers were profiting off the Phantom Thief name. She knew that the logo from the Kaneshiro calling card had made it onto the news, and if that logo was being used by different brands... well it just wasn't fair that Yusuke's creation was being used to milk money for other companies while he wasn't getting a cent.

Her route was taking her along toward the diner on Shibuya's mainstreet, and by the time she reached Big Bang Burger she noticed something at that entryway that gave her pause. "Oh, that's..." She focused partially on the two figures, quickly recognising Akira and Makoto chatting in hushed tones. Seeing that she was unnoticed, and with curiosity getting the best of her, Shizuka dipped into a small alcove and emerged in an invisible state, subtly sneaking toward the two.

What were they being so hush-hush about? Maybe it was nothing, but Shizuka was curious. And she could use take the opportunity to spring out and spook them, which was always fun.

Still invisible, Shizuka drew near the crepe stand positioned by the stairway as two more figures approached. A girl in a Shujin uniform and... some kind of creep in his twenties in a tacky white suit. His skin was clearly marked with fake tan, and the coif of his hair was just a little offputting.

"Oh, Makoto-chan!" the other Shujin girl greeted. "Is this the boyfriend you've been telling me about?"

Shizuka's sunglasses slid down the bridge of her nose.

"S-sure is!" Makoto smiled awkwardly and suddenly clung tight to Akira's arm. The dark-haired boy remained statue-still, but still came off as more casual. "This is my darling Akira-kun!"

Shizuka's jaw hung open in an aghast state, her body recoiling until she was standing on one foot. 'What... WHAT?!

"Well, shall we head inside?" Akira asked, giving a faint smile to Makoto. The foursome headed up the stairwell to the diner, while Shizuka remained frozen in the same position for several long seconds.

It took some time for her brain to reboot, after which she suddenly snapped to attention on her two feet. 'Okay, I just... what?! Akira and Makoto?! When the fuck did that happen? Why didn't anyone say anything? How'd they keep that a secret?! Oh god no no no...'

She felt a very intense pain in her chest, her throat going dry. There was no way those two were dating, right? Makoto would have at least told her... right?
She wanted to slither in while still unseen, take up a position so she could continue to observe. But her legs wouldn't move, and deep down she knew she was afraid of what she could potentially find out.

But she also couldn't afford to leave this stone unturned... She'd have to talk to Akira about this, and the best way to do that was to wait around Yongen for him to head back home. There had to be something else going on...

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Akira heaved a small sigh as he exited the mouth of Yongen's train station, scratching slowly at the back of his neck. As soon as Makoto had explained that little plan to him, he knew he was going to hate it. Unfortunately he was very poor at turning people down when they needed his help.

Still, something shady was definitely going on with Makoto's friend. That 'boyfriend' of hers was a major creep, that much had become clear after only a brief chat with the guy. Eiko was smitten with the guy but if Akira was a betting man, he'd say he was only sticking to her to drain money from her.

Host's tended to be like vampires in that they-

"DUDE! What the hell?!"

Akira nearly had a massive heart attack as Shizuka quite literally materialized at the alleyway leading to the bathhouse. He gasped for air and pressed into the opposite wall for support. "Don't DO that!" he snapped. It took a few moments for him to catch his breath, after which he rose to his full standing. "What are you talking about?"

"You're dating Makoto?! Seriously?!" she asked, giving him an impressive glare through the dark lenses of her glasses.

The question made Akira pause for a few seconds, before he understood what she was talking about. "Oh you saw that? That was just an act," he casually said. "Yeah, Makoto's spying on this friend of hers, and we had to do this fake double date so she could learn more about her boyfriend. The oily looking guy."

Shizuka felt her annoyance subsiding slightly. "Wait what? When did all this happen?"

"Uh... a few weeks back? Makoto wanted to hang out with me. Said it was to get to know me and apologize for that bit of stalking she did at the start of the school year. I didn't mind, but she kinda insisted."

The statement made Shizuka nod. "Yeah, she's good at that," she replied.

"That and ever since Ryuji's Persona transformed, everyone's been a little interested in seeing if theirs can change too. Anyway, we were hanging out when we saw a girl from Makoto's class, Eiko, entering Shinjuku. It got her curious because... well, high school girls and the red light district is a bad combo. She befriended Eiko and then found out she was dating this guy named Tsukasa. A host."

Shizuka wrinkled her nose slightly. Hosts were one of those things about her country of origin that
She doubted she'd ever understand. Much like pachinko, and the entire idol industry.

"She thinks that Eiko's being taken advantage of, since she's loaning this Tsukasa guy a lot of money. Makoto wanted to get a good look at the guy, but we could only do that if we faked a double date..." Akira sighed at the thought. "Ryuji's already dating someone and would be all weird about it, and he sucks at acting besides. And Yusuke is... Yusuke, so he'd be no help at faking a date. And Sergio would likely spend the whole time flirting with Eiko. Or Makoto. Which left me."

Shizuka frowned, but his story made sense. Makoto and Akira both seemed to be little more than friends, and she doubted Makoto could act subtle about secretly dating someone. Makoto Niijima was a lot of things. A masterful liar was not one of them.

"She didn't tell me about any of this stuff..." Shizuka murmured.

"Like I said, she wanted a chance to get to know me. I guess she figured it'd be best if we handled this problem, just the two of us," Akira said. "More than that, you seem... pretty worked up about all this."

Shizuka leaned against the archway, glaring slightly. "How would you like it if Ryuji kept things from you?"

He pondered that question for several moments, thinking on the slew of dirty jokes Ryuji regularly texted him. Often in the dead of night, to Morgana and Akira's mutual annoyance. "You know, there are some things I kind of wish he would keep from me. But, that aside, it's more than that. Do you... like Makoto?"

The question hung in the air for several moments, with Shizuka struggling to get the words out. She exhaled sharply. "Of course I do. I mean she's so smart and brave and just so damn cute that I..." She grimaced, glancing away from Akira.

Seeing this, Akira sighed. "C'mon, let's head to Leblanc. A topic like this is best discussed over fresh coffee." This did seem to be eating Shizuka rather severely.

They only had to take a few steps along the narrow street to reach the cafe, with Akira leading the way inside. Sojiro glanced away from the news playing on the wall mounted TV. "Oh, you're back. Bringing a friend?" He paused, seeing the tension in Shizuka's shoulders. "Something up?"

"Girl trouble," Akira said, gesturing briefly to Shizuka.

"Oh." Sojiro's eyes widened slightly behind his circular glasses in a sudden realization. "Oh. Well uh... take a seat. I'm sure we can talk this out. Coffee, curry, and conversation can go a long way."

Nodding, Shizuka pulled a seat up at the counter and got comfortable. She watched Akira snag his apron from the far end of the room and swiftly set about brewing something fresh. "I uh, appreciate it. It's something that's been on my mind for a little while now, but I guess... I never thought to tell anyone about it before now," Shizuka said.

Several minutes passed before Akira set a large white cup before Shizuka. She thanked him and gently grasped the cup, taking the first steaming sip. "Well... have you actually said anything to Makoto yet?"

Shizuka let the taste linger in her mouth, processing the rich tones. "You know dude, you're really
good at making coffee." After taking another sip, she got back to the matter at hand. "Japan's a
great country. It's a lot of things, but being relatively liberal isn't one of them. Way I hear, being
gay isn't something wildly endorsed."

Sojiro shrugged from behind the counter. "It's not wildly popular, but you wouldn't get executed
over it," he said.

"Mm. But the point is it's still a big thing over here. A major, huge thing. And if she didn't feel the
same way... well it would be bad enough if she didn't have any feelings for me, but what if... well,
what if she hates me when she finds out?"

"Come on," Akira said. "You know Makoto. Does she really seem like the kind of person to react
like that?"

"Of course not," Shizuka said with a weary sigh. "I know she wouldn't. I know she'd at least be
understanding, because that's the kind of person she is. But you know what it's like... you're
thinking of something major, and the only thing you can imagine is the worst case scenario, you
know? I've been sitting on these thoughts pretty much since-" She stopped herself, remembering
that Sojiro was very much present. It wouldn't do to go mentioning the names of the Phantom
Thieves targets. "Uh, I guess since you guys met Sergio."

Akira nodded, quickly understanding her meaning. "I figure if anyone's got the guts to get their
feelings out in the open, whatever the consequences, it'd be you. And if its been on your mind for
that long..."

Sojiro's phone buzzed noisily in his pocket, earning a tut of annoyance from the older man. "Just a
sec..." he raised the phone to his ear and quickly got into a mildly frustrated conversation on the
other end. He headed for the door and strode outside, leaving the two teens alone.

Shizuka took another long sip of coffee and turned her attentions back to Akira. "Being honest
dude... you're probably one of the closest friends I've ever had. I uh... didn't have too many friends
back when I was a kid."

The statement earned some surprise from Akira. He leaned against the counter. "You didn't?
Seriously? You, the outspoken loudmouth?"

"I wasn't always like this ya know," Shizuka said. "Back when I was a kid, I really couldn't control
my powers... wasn't until I was four that I could be consistently visible, and even then I could
falter. So growing up I was... afraid of making friends. If I screwed up and suddenly vanished... it's
the kind of thing that raises a lot of issues," Shizuka explained.

Akira nodded. Anyone who wasn't a Stand user definitely wouldn't understand her powers, and the
daughter of a notable New York billionaire turning invisible was the kind of thing that would turn
heads. "So you just stuck to yourself?" he asked.

"Mm. Outside of my parents and our staff, I really couldn't risk connecting to people. That fear
stuck with me until I was about oh... thirteen? Course by then I had kind of garnered a reputation as
a loner of sorts. People thought I was either weird, or stuck-up. Either characterization wouldn't
make you popular with rich American kids."

"I can imagine," Akira replied. "Sorry to hear that though. Couldn't have been easy to keep to
yourself for so long... how'd you turn yourself around?" Akira asked.
"My big brother was a huge help. Ha, you two would probably get on great with how alike you are. Two aloof badass types who make friends wherever you go and fuck up anyone who gives you grief... well, anyway, he really gave me a lot of confidence. I felt like a stronger person every time I met him."

A small smile touched Akira's features. He stood back to watch as Shizuka finished her coffee, diligently taking her cup and making for the sink. "Refill?" he asked. She shook her head. As he washed her cup out, he gave her a brief glance over his shoulder. "Glad you can depend on me... after I got my criminal record, I never thought anyone would look at me in that way. You guys, you're a full time job..."

Shizuka smirked. "You love us and you know it."

"You're unfortunately correct." Akira turned toward her, pressing his weight against the sink. "Well look, you're a tough girl now, you really shouldn't be afraid of talking to Makoto. Even if it doesn't turn out perfectly, you know Makoto won't think bad of you. 'Cause sitting on your emotions isn't the healthy option," he explained.

Shizuka clicked her tongue against her teeth. "You're unfortunately correct." But keeping quiet until someone else noticed how awesome Makoto was... well she'd be kicking herself over that for a while if it happened. "With what's on our plate right now, Medjed and Okumura... it'd be irresponsible of me to drop that on Makoto. So I'll keep it to myself until we've got some free time again."

Akira nodded. "Speaking of, we're about ready to finish the pyramid. You set to help out?"

A wry grin crossed Shizuka's face. "You better believe it."

Still, with how unique Futaba's Palace was, they had to wonder what threat would await them after they delivered the calling card. Futaba wanted her treasure taken, but... well, things had a habit of taking a dangerous turn for the Arditi.
Everyone had been quick to gather at the Sakura residence, well aware that today was the day. Akira's team had secured a path to the treasure, meaning that everyone was to gather as one big group to help steal it. They had no idea if Futaba's Shadow would try and stop them, but they had done this enough times to know that grabbing the treasure always had some great danger lurking around it.

The corridor outside Futaba's room was a bit cramped, but fortunately everyone knew to try and keep quiet. They were all aware of Futaba's phobias and knew better than to do anything that could agitate them.

"Futaba-chan?" Akira asked, giving her door a light knock.

There was a long silence before Futaba mustered the courage to answer. "W-why are all of you here today? There's... there's a big crowd of you this time! A-are you going to take my heart?"

"That's the plan. We just need one more thing from you though," Akira said.

"O-okay... w-well, what is it?" Futaba gently asked.

Makoto ventured to answer, though she seemed a little hesitant. "You gave us a calling card when this all started, but that's not quite how the arrangement works. We need to give you a specifically tailored one, and it has to be done face to face."

"W-WHAT?!" Futaba squeaked. The group winced at her high pitched complaint.

"It doesn't have to be all of us," Akira said, reaching into his trouser pocket and taking out a recently finished crimson card. "If it helps, it can be just you and I." He had hoped he had built her trust enough to get a face to face meeting, and it was ultimately a necessity to hand the card to her. She had to understand the weight of her treasure being at risk, and they needed to be sure Futaba read the card so that her treasure would be made manifest.

Once more Futaba fell silent. Then, finally, she gave a long and agitated groan. "F-fine! Just you Kurusu, a-and just for this! And y-your friends need to back away f-from the door!"

The others did as Futaba wished, or as best they could in a confined hall. After some fumbling, Futaba ever so slowly opened the door until just the faintest look at her person was visible. Those who had seen her Shadow also saw the resemblance rather quickly. The short and slender build, the flowing orange hair and thick glasses. Her attire, obviously, was different. A black shirt with long black and white striped sleeves and green shorts.

Futaba hastily ushered Akira inside, with the door closing over soon after. "Holy shit, she is cute," Shizuka murmured. "Like a munchkin. Kinda want to carry her around in my pocket."

"You know, you're not that much taller than her," Sergio idly said.

"Shut up Sergio."
Akira had expected Futaba's room to be a mess. Anyone who lived exclusively from one area was bound to leave some trash lying around. But the reality was far worse than anything he could have anticipated.

The floor between Futaba's bed and the desk housing her large and doubtless expensive computer rig was positively flooded with heavy garbage bags loaded with food cartons. A stale smell filled the air... Akira didn't know what was worse: That a person was living like this, or that it was apparently preferable to the outside world.

Black Mask and whoever he was working with, they were cold-hearted bastards. Nothing could ever justify or explain putting her through this.

He could see several expensive models and miniatures resting on a shelf near Futaba's computer, each one immaculately clean. She clearly took good care of those and her computer at least.

"O-okay s-s-so..." Futaba was trembling, her fists clenched as she stared down at her feet. "J-just do it! I-if this'll impact the world of my cognition, th-then I can handle it!"

Akira nodded and slowly held out the card, leaving it there until Futaba gingerly took it from his grasp. She read it aloud. "F-Futaba Sakura has committed the great sin of drowning in sloth. Thus we will rob every last bit of those distorted desires..." She winced slightly.

Akira watched as the air around him flickered a sickly green colour, and for just a moment Futaba was replaced by her Shadow. Those glowing golden eyes looked directly into his own. "No. I'm going to die here."

Well, that was one objective complete. Now all that was left was the incredibly hard part.

"Is that... is that all?" Futaba asked, keeping her gaze on the calling card.

"Yep. Wish us luck," Akira said, turning back toward the door.

Futaba swallowed hard, and suddenly called out as his hand touched the doorknob. "W-wait!" Akira paused mid-step and glanced toward her. "H-how... how do you guys do it? I-I've asked b-before, but how do you even manipulate cognition?"

"You probably won't believe me, but it involves a phone app," Akira said. "Weird little icon with a big red eye... no idea where it comes from, but it comes in handy. Lets us enter a heart if we have a person, a location and a distortion," he explained.

Futaba's eyes widened behind the thick lenses of her glasses. "Th-that's impressive," she said. For as strange as the prospect was, anything that involved changing a persons heart had to be something rather bizarre indeed.

Akira gave her a parting smile and left, leaving Futaba to stew in her worries. Would they really be able to do it? Could they fix her? Only time would tell. She thought back on her mother, feeling a shiver of terror roll through her body.

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The atmosphere was noticeably tense as they entered the pyramid, sections of the brickwork shuddering as the Phantom Thieves strode in. The glowing strings of code that occasionally appeared in the air were glowing red this time, and flickered into view at a far faster pace than before.

"This is her Palace huh?" Shizuka asked as they strode up the left staircase by the sarcophagi. "Damn... it's definitely different to what we're used to."

"I know, right? We've explored every square inch of the place, and it's all so... desolate," Ann remarked. The group deftly crossed the sand pit, reaching the foot of the massive staircase leading toward the peak of the pyramid.

"A Palace is reflective of one's mental state, yes?" asked Haru. "Poor Futaba-chan. To think that a person could suffer through so much at a young age."

Akira nodded, maintaining his brisk sprint up the dusty steps. "We'll we're gonna fix that. We'll heal Futaba's heart, and then make sure she knows who's responsible for her mother's death... huh, this'll be the first time some of us get to see you in action Noir. I'm actually pretty excited."

Haru swallowed hard, pumping her fists enthusiastically. "I won't let you down!" she earnestly said.

It didn't take long to reach the apex of the massive staircase, with the large golden door looming over them. It rumbled powerfully as the group approached, before the heavy locks slowly started to pry open. Thick plumes of ancient dust exploded out from beneath the hulking frame, revealing another passage.

"From here on, we're heading into unknown territory," Morgana warned them. "I can definitely tell the treasure is up ahead, but we should still be cautious."

Akira and his feline companion led the charge with the others hurrying along behind. The passage opened out into a vast chamber that seemed to defy the dimensions of the pyramid's exterior. It was vast and expansive, the walls a neon blue hue while tangled strings of code drifted through the air like distorted clouds.

The terrain was equally bizarre. Floating islands of Egyptian architecture, littered with jumbled ornaments that seemed distorted and warped, as if suffering from graphical glitches. The walls of several islands were positively covered in sarcophagi.

"Oh damn it," Akira muttered, narrowing his eyes at the strange sight. He was just about able to make out another floating island near the apex of the vast glowing chamber, distinct for having another doorway. "Guess we have some climbing to do. Keep quiet, we don't want to wake the mummies."

Akira quickly took to running, his superhuman legs launching him clean off the tiled floor. He landed neatly on the next island and strode forward, giving room for the others to land after him.

They went progressively higher as the Palace occasionally pulsed around them, the landscape nettled now that Futaba knew her treasure was at risk. Even though she wanted her heart taken, there was a strong part of her subconscious that wanted to cling tight to her distortions. There was ultimately no telling what would be awaiting them at the treasure.
Higher and higher they went, until finally the Arditi reached the highest island. Akira breathed a sigh and made for the door, with the others gathering around him. "Didn't see any other doors on the way up here... I guess this is the only available path."

Morgana's tail had bristled slightly. "We're definitely on the right track! That treasure's so close, I can almost taste it!"

"Gross," Ryuji flatly said.

The last door opened into a narrow and dark chamber, the only source of illumination coming from sickly green strips of coding that had been hewn into the edges of the walls. "This it?" Shizuka asked, examining their surroundings and squinting into the dark.

Ryuji touched his mask, Seiten Taisei hovering up behind him. The towering monkey raised his cudgel, the ends glowing with crackling arcs of gold lightning that lit the area around them. The only thing that stood out in the small room was a great stone coffin positioned dead in the center of the chamber. "Wait, that's is? That's the treasure?" he incredulously asked.

"It's likely inside the coffin," Makoto reasoned. "It makes sense that it's nothing too opulent, given the nature of her Palace... let's pry it open quickly so we can get out of here."

"Um..." Ann raised her hand slightly. "You know how the Palaces always collapse when we grab the treasure? Well... we're kinda at the top of this really huge pyramid. Are we really going to be able to make it out in time?"

Akira nodded in understanding. "I was thinking about that too. Going back the way we came, with the pyramid falling around are ears, is too risky an option. The roof could fall on us, the exit could be blocked by debris, we could fall into the underground again... so instead we're going to punch a hole through this wall and drive Mona down the side of the pyramid."

"It's gonna be pretty bumpy," Morgana said casually. He took a few quick steps toward the heavy coffin, only to be nearly knocked off balance as the entire pyramid rattled around them.

The group froze, while Ryuji kept their immediate surroundings illuminated. Sprinkles of dust rained down from above, growing more intense as another tremor shook the ground beneath them. "What the..." Ryuji was cut off, several screams filling the chamber as something massive slammed into the wall in front of them. Most of the roof exploded off from the impact, fully revealing the vibrant sky overhead... and the creature now hunting them.

"WHO DARES INVADE THE PHARAOH'S TOMB?!"

The horrid shriek nearly bowled the group over, and their balance was disrupted further as a titanic swipe lashed into the wall in front of them. Most of the roof exploded off from the impact, fully revealing the vibrant sky overhead... and the creature now hunting them.

It could be most simply described as a gigantic sphinx, an enlarged human head resting on the body of a winged brown-furred lion. But the head was beyond unsettling, dark hair blowing in the wind while her scornful eyes glowered at the thieves behind the lenses of a pair of thick glasses.
"This is... pretty terrifying even by my standards," Sergio murmured under his breath, unable to glance away from the inhuman form.

Akira's eyes widened in a sudden realisation. "That's... that's Futaba's mother! That's Wakaba Isshiki!" he exclaimed, something that the others who had been exploring the pyramid noticed quickly enough. The short dark hair, the glasses... she perfectly matched the figure who had appeared in some of the murals inside the pyramid.

The sphinx lashed her wings forward, a hurricane gale rapidly lashing toward the group. In an instant they had all summoned their Personas and Stands, spectral forms swiftly blocking the incoming wall of wind that smashed into them. The pressure was intense, and even with their spirits guarding them the Arditi were very nearly floored.

"This is a cognition, right? Is this seriously how Futaba sees her mother?!!" Shiho asked, barely audible above the raging razor winds.

"Futaba thinks she killed her own mother, that Wakaba committed suicide because she couldn't stand her daughter! That fear has twisted the image of her mother!" Morgana shouted back, struggling behind Zorro's slender legs.

Wakaba suddenly pulled back, flying away from the pyramid until she was several dozen meters away. She was circling the air above them, but her glare never left the group.

For her immense size, she was able to glide through the air at a worrying speed. Ryuji called Seiten Taisei forth, his Persona raising both hands high. An arc of lightning erupted from Seiten Taisei's palms and rapidly closed the distance, only for Wakaba to weave slightly and avoid the blast by several meters. "Son of a..."

Akira watched as Wakaba sharply turned in the air, now suddenly knifing toward the group. "She's coming in hot! Brace yourselves!"

Arsene and Aradia shot forward at the same time, orbs or churning blackness and blades of hardened light lancing forward and striking Wakaba's right arm in a chorus of explosions. Goemon and Panther leapt high, swirling salvos of fire and ice racing downward and striking the cognition's twisted visage, while Breakthru rapidly propelled several chunks of debris at her jawline.

Wakaba suddenly shrieked again, the wall of sound slamming into Ann and Yusuke, slamming them into the partially destroyed back wall and very nearly knocking them out on impact. Her paw swept across the damaged floor of the tomb, striking Breakthru and instantly flooring Sergio. Just like that she pulled back again, flapping through the air above the thieves.

"We didn't even do that much damage to her..." Akira muttered. He had spied some scorches on her arm and face, but her pace hadn't slowed in the slightest. "We have to take her wings out and ground her if we're gonna have any chance at beating her."
Shiho quickly helped bring Ann and Yusuke to their feet, while Shizuka helped Sergio to stand. "Easier said than done," the young Joestar grunted. "She's way too fast, and she has the whole sky to herself..."

"Right... We need someone with great aim, with projectiles that can quickly close the gap," Makoto reasoned.

Haru raised her left hand. "I believe I might be able to do it," she said. Her gaze had never left the airborne sphinx, wary of another divebomb. "Milady's guns are exceptionally fast, and I did quite a bit of clay pigeon shooting in the past. The scale is rather different, but the principle is the same," Haru explained.

"Better make the shot count in that case. I'm giving you everything I can," Shiho said. Aradia raised her hands up, crimson bands of light spiraling around her wrists and then suddenly engulfing Haru until she was glowing a vibrant scarlet shade.

The strawberry-blond blinked and inspected herself, clenching her fists a few times. "O-oh my, this feels... magnificent!"

Wakaba was gaining momentum, her fierce glare aimed squarely toward the phantom thieves down below. With how she was tensing, it was clear she was getting set to torpedo them again.

Seeing this, Akira clenched his fists in annoyance. "We don't have much time... Noir, line your shot up quickly. Sting, Diabolik," he gestured to the debris and cracked brickwork of the collapsed walls. "Give us some cover."

Moving quickly, Sergio summoned Breakthru and drove his Stand toward the edge of the pyramid. Overgrown knuckles drove into the crumbled sections of the wall and floor that Wakaba had smashed earlier, fusing those sections into a hovering semi-circle of stone. Shizuka raised her left hand and swept it sideways, immediately rendering the bricks invisible.

Haru raised her right hand and made a gun-shape with her digits, extending her index and middle finger. Her other hand reached up, gripping the brim of her cap to ward off the glare of the sunlight. She closed her left eye and took careful aim while Milady floated above her, her onboard arsenal extended out through the opening of her dress.

"That's her Persona?" Ryuji asked in a low whisper. "Holy shit that's awesome..."

"Yeah... I definitely wouldn't want to get on her bad side," Ann murmured.

After a few more seconds Haru seemed satisfied, aiming several feet ahead of Wakaba's trajectory. "There." A violent salvo erupted from Milady's arsenal, bullets and shells swiftly lancing through the open air. They crossed the distance rapidly, and from their vantage point the thieves watched as A chunk exploded out of Wakaba's right wing, a shower of feathers sailing into the air and dissolving rapidly. Her shriek echoed throughout the desert.

"Holy shit! That was amazing Noir!" Shizuka enthusiastically grinned, only to pause and tense as Wakaba twisted and started making a beeline straight for them, with her right wing partially limp. "A-and now she's coming right for us!"

"Diabolik, get the barrier ready! Everyone, brace yourselves!" Akira ordered, feeling his whole body growing rigid as the cognition slammed violently into the unseen wall, crashing clean
"A phone app?" Futaba murmured to herself, her gaze affixed to the screen of her phone. "Is this what he was talking about?"

A new tile had appeared on the lineup of her apps, an image of a black and crimson eye that seemed to almost pulsate as she stared directly at it. 'It's creepy,' she thought to herself, her thumb hesitantly hovering over the icon.

After some internal debate she gave it a press, the eye expanding until it had overtaken the entire screen. The interface provided a map of Tokyo, in addition to three text boxes. "A name, a location, and a distortion..."

If she understood this correctly, this app could let her enter her own distorted heart, but... did she dare? Futaba hesitated for several more seconds. "F-Futaba Sakura... Sojiro Sakura's house..." the app chimed at her words, while she set her sights on the last line.

With her mind being as sharp as it was, recalling her first physical 'conversation' with Kurusu and his friends was a trivial matter. She said that this room was like a 'tomb' to her, and that answer seemed to have satisfied their curiosity. So it stood to reason, as far as she was concerned, that 'tomb' would fit in as the distortion.

If she wanted, she could enter her own heart. And if she did, she could probably help the others deal with her problems. Who would know her own heart better, after all? Still, it sounded dangerous from what little Akira had told her.

She grappled with this thought for several moments until she felt her breath catch inside her throat. A chill ran through Futaba's lithe body, while her eyes widened in mute terror. The colours of her dimly lit room started to warp and distort, shaping into malicious forms as the spectre of her mother appeared before her eyes. "M-Mom..."

As her fear mounted, Futaba heard voices in her head. Harsh, hateful tones that resonated in the most horrible memories she had fought so hard to forget.

"It's YOUR fault! You killed her!"

"You're a cursed child!"

"She's dead because of you!"

"N-no..." Futaba whispered. The walls were closing in on her, the air was all but gone... she had to get out of here. It was like she was being buried alive...

Futaba summoned her will and raced for the door, flinging it open and staggering into the hall outside. Her breathing was heavy and laboured, beads of sweat rolling down her face. The corridor seemed to stretch on for infinity, and an impenetrable blackness consumed her. The voices never left her.

She gripped the wall with her free hand, while her trembling vision settled on the interface of the app. She didn't know what it was like in there... but it had to be safer than here! "T-Tomb!"
Her home melted away, though Futaba had screwed her eyes so tight that she didn't even see the transition occur. When she opened them, she realised that the voices she was hearing were gone. For now, at least. She breathed a sigh of relief, only for that sensation to quickly leave her as she took in her new surroundings.

Futaba found herself standing on a floating island, at the peak of a massive chamber with neon blue walls. From where she stood she could see several other floating land masses beneath her, lined with ornate coffins.

She examined the area around her, the floating code and ancient Egyptian trappings that seemed simultaneously familiar and alien. Perhaps it was in how they blended together. "This is... inside my heart?" she asked herself. Futaba moved to stand and steadily made for the looming doorway ahead of her.

She felt a presence at her right side and froze up for several seconds, before daring to glance over. It was... herself? The glowing feline eyes and pharaoh attire were definitely different, but Futaba knew her own face when she saw it. The specter watched her intensely for several seconds. "Do you remember?"

"H-huh?"

Something else suddenly appeared at her left. A massive hieroglyphic mural detailing a scene that felt vaguely familiar to her. A picture of her 'pharaoh self' seated opposite a trio of owl-headed men wearing suits. Futaba swallowed hard. "The suicide note... the men in black suits read it right after Mom died," she murmured. It had been the second worst day of her young life. Thinking back, she was having a hard time recalling what few good days she had had.

Her mother's suicide, her whole family hating her for what that note said, that horrible period she spent living with her uncle... Then there was being shunned at middle school, and unintentionally driving Kana-chan away. Losing her only friend had only made school worse for her. For as much as Sojiro cared for her, and as much as she loved him as a father, he knew he couldn't do much to help her. So currently her days were a continuous grind of misery.

Thinking back, the only time she had ever been happy were the days when her mother was there.

"Look at the next one," her doppelganger said. The mural shifted, creating an image of the single worst day of her life: Her mother's visage, falling into the path of a moving car, while the image of herself was kneeling at the side of the road and crying.

"It's... it's from when mom..." She bit her bottom lip and clenched her fists tight. "W-why are you showing me this?"

Her copy didn't respond. She raised her left hand and the image of the mural shifted in turn. It was an image of herself, tugging at her mother's sweater and looking for attention. "Don't run from the truth. I thought you made up your mind when you contacted the Arditi."

Futaba swallowed hard and focused on the image. "I-it... it's a picture of me complaining to Mom. She scolded me for bothering her. I-I was being a burden, a-and... it's because of me that..." she trailed off, unable to finish the sentence. "I was a bad daughter, a-and I weighed her down..."

Futaba brought her left hand up, pushing at her glasses so she could dry her freshly forming tears.
Her copy continued to stare at her, unmoving. "Are you sure?" she asked plainly. "Remember everything. Don't avert your eyes. When did this happen?" her tone was firm, digging into knowledge rooted at the deepest part of Futaba's expansive mind.

"It was... just before she died. I whined about wanting to go on a family trip... but she scolded me and said no."

"Was that all she said?" her Shadow asked.

Futaba visibly hesitated, a buried memory resurfacing. "She said... 'I'm too busy right now. I need to finish my cognitive research as soon as possible.' And I... I threw a tantrum. Told her she thought her research was more important than I was. That was when she scolded me," Futaba explained, with shame underpinning her words.

The other Futaba nodded firmly. "There was more. What did she say afterwards?"

Futaba's eyes widened behind her thick glasses. "Th-that's right, I remember now... She... She said 'My research is almost over. Once it's finished, we can go wherever you like.' She said she was sorry f-for leaving me alone for so long."

"She didn't hate you," her Shadow remarked, a statement that made Futaba's balance sway slightly. The mural vanished entirely.

"All this time, I... I had forgotten. I was so wrapped up in believing that Mom killed herself because of me, that I..." Futaba gasped sharply. "M-mom's suicide... then... that note that the men in black read out," Futaba swallowed hard. "If Mom didn't hate me, did they... did they lie?!"

Her Shadow didn't answer.

A sudden tremor rocked the walls around them and nearly swept Futaba's feet out from under her. A violent shriek resonated faintly around her. "W-what the heck was that?!"

"The Phantom Thieves are fighting an opponent they cannot defeat, not when your perception of your mother is as distorted as it is. Only you can save them." Her Shadow vanished, while the door ahead of Futaba rolled open.

"Wha-?! Hey!" Futaba called, nearly falling over in shock. She had known that this was going to be an odd experience, but the danger was greater than what she had anticipated. The Phantom Thieves needed her help? Another quake rocked the ground beneath her feet, followed by a few pained cries coming through the doorway.

She swallowed hard. They were in this mess because of her, and they had done so much to try and help her already. She couldn't just sit back if they were in trouble because of her. Futaba summoned her nerve and advanced up the stairs. Out of the dark, and into the light.

The scene she emerged into was chaotic, to put it mildly. She stumbled out on the top level of a sandblasted ruin, able to see a vast golden desert bordering the structure and stretching on toward the horizon line. A vast shadow flew overhead for just a moment, and Futaba caught only a fleeting glimpse of a winged sphinx gliding by.

While the Phantom Thieves were dressed in some truly bizarre attire. She recognised one, Shizuka Joestar, and some manner of strange cat creature crouched beside a lanky blue-haired boy that she
quickly labelled as Yusuke Kitagawa. He was propped up against a wall, panting for breath, while the short creature pressed two paws to his right arm. Futaba watched, wide-eyed, as the bloodied bruises on his forearm started to fade.

Akira stood out well enough, with the Makoto Nijima standing at one side while Ann Takamaki was at his right. All three seemed a little short of breath. "Feels like we're headbutting a brick wall here... even damaging her wing didn't slow her down much," Akira remarked, reaching up and rubbing a purple mark on his right temple.

"What can we do? Her sweeps are coming in faster now, and even Haru can't get a clear shot," Makoto said.

Futaba glanced over toward Haru, who was working hard to catch her breath. The two blond boys were positioned near her as a bulwark, while Shiho gave one of her hands a reassuring squeeze. "I... I managed to graze her last time. I should definitely be able to get her on my next shot..."

"W-what... what is all this?!" Futaba's words caused all eyes to swiftly turn to her, shock clear on the faces of the young thieves.

"Wait, wha... Futaba's in here?!" Ann asked, nearly falling over.

"Huh?!!" Shizuka sprang to her feet as Yusuke moved to stand. "Okay, guys I swear this time it wasn't me! But... wait, we're inside Futaba's cognitive world, but her physical body is now inside her own cognitive world, but how does that... shouldn't one cancel the other out? Hang on, someone get me a piece of paper I can puzzle this out..."

"This is bad... we need to get her down below before-" Akira was cut off by a deafening scream from above.

"FUUUTAAABAAAAA!"

The teens turned their eyes to the sky, watching the sphinx glower at Futaba. She had looked pissed off before, but now she looked beyond furious. And all that anger was directed right at Futaba.

"N-no... M-mom..." Futaba whispered. "This... this c-can't be how I see her..."

Akira quickly raced to her side while the others kept close watch on their monstrous foe. "Futaba, I need you to listen carefully," Akira said. "I wanted to bring this up after your heart had been changed, but this thing is way too strong right now. We're certain you're mother didn't kill herself!"

The statement made Futaba swallowed hard. "Th-the other me s-said so too, but... but if she didn't kill herself..."

"YOU'RE A CURSED CHILD! YOU RUINED MY LIFE!"

Futaba winced. Akira clenched his left fist and resisted an urge to fire fruitlessly at the sphinx. His right hand settled gently on her shoulder. "Ignore it, that's just a distortion... We think that your mother was murdered. And whoever killed her made it look like a suicide to cover their tracks. They blamed you because it was easy for them," he explained.

"Joker!" Yusuke exclaimed. "She's coming in for another attack!"
"They... they killed her..." That was what her Shadow had implied, wasn't it? The note had been a fake, her Mother didn't hate her. Whenever she thought back she knew that her Mother had scolded her as necessary, but that aside had always been kind and loving. Jumping to suicide was too large a shift from what she remembered. So had they forged the note? And when she struggled and really thought back to that day, the suicide... She had been acting strange before it happened, so sluggish and unresponsive, with only her legs moving. It was as if she had been shutting down piece by piece, until they reached the side of the road.

Then Futaba considered where she was currently standing. The cognitive world was a real, tangible thing. People could enter easily, the Phantom Thieves were living proof of that, so if someone else had that power then they could easily murder a person through their cognitive world without leaving a trace. And if they staged it to look like a suicide, then nobody would question it.

And her Mother's research was no doubt quite valuable. She had been close to finishing, there was no telling what applications Cognitive Psience could have been used for. All of it had been confiscated, she remembered that much. These thoughts and memories, she had buried them for so long under a pit of self loathing. Everyone but Sojiro had treated her like a monster, until the lie was all she could believe in.

All these thoughts ran through her mind in the blink of an eye, until she fully processed the information. "They killed her! They made my whole family hate me! Made me hate myself!" Futaba snapped, a violent anger bubbling up in her throat. "They trampled over my life and ruined it! They murdered my Mother right in front of me! Those rotten adults! I'll- I'll..." Futaba clenched her fists and suddenly shouted at the top of her lungs. "I'll never forgive them!"

A chime ran out in her mind as Akira took an instinctive step back. For just a moment, Futaba's Shadow floated above her. Futaba grunted, gripping the sides of her head, a ghostly voice whispering through her mind. "What denies you is an illusion... A curse put upon you by the heartless. You knew from the very beginning... And yet, you cowered in fear."

Through the cacophony in her head, Futaba just barely heard a chorus of explosions scorching the air above the pyramid. The sphinx banked away, rushing to choose another angle to sweep in from. "That's right, I knew, but..." Futaba grit her teeth, feeling as if her head was going to split in two. "I won't believe the lie anymore! I won't let those monsters dictate my life anymore!" she shouted."

"THIS TIME YOU'LL BE THE ONE TO DIE!"

"And I refuse to believe in a twisted distortion like you!" Futaba snapped. Her whole body flashed white, before something massive simply materialized above her. A large black flying saucer with an underbelly coated in neon green runes. The peak was topped by an ornate black gargoyle. A series of segmented tentacles suddenly sprouted from the underside, coiling around Futaba's arms. "W-whoa!" she yelped, her fire partially doused by her surprise.

"Th-the hell?! Is that her Persona?!" Ryuji gawked.

"Aw man that's so fucking cool..." Shizuka whispered.

The underside opened like a blossoming flower, the material an alien blend of flesh and metal. As it sucked Futaba into the jet black cockpit, she heard the same gentle voice in her ear. "Contract: I am thou, thou art I." The interior lit up with a slew of floating green text boxes and camera screens detailing the battlefield around her. Futaba glanced down, able to see that her casual attire had been
replaced by a sleek black boysuit marked with glowing green lines, as if she had wandered out of a
Tron remake. "The forbidden wisdom has been revealed. No mysteries or illusions shall deceive
you. Necronomicon: Online."

Futaba examined the interface, a giddy grin breaking out across her face as Necronomicon's tools
examined her surroundings. It examined the Phantom Thieves, the cognitive creature turning
toward her in the air, the very building blocks of the world around her... The data filtered by in
scrolling streams of code which she analysed and understood instantly, as if her Persona were
spoon feeding the knowledge directly into her mind. "Oooh... this is so cool!"

"Futaba!" Makoto called out of concern.

"I'm alright!" Futaba replied, her words telepathically reaching the others. "You guys have helped
me so much already, so now it's my turn to help you."

"FUUUTAAABAAAAA! YOU'RE A WORTHLESS BURDEN!"

From her floating seat, Futaba witnessed one of Necronomicon's camera feeds expanding in front
of her view, detailing the sphinx as it dove toward her, so fast that sections of her body seemed to
almost be catching fire. The beast raised her right paw, massive claws protruding outward.

"And you..." Futaba growled, her eyes narrowing. Necronomicon's tentacles suddenly shot out
from the underside of the craft, closing the distance rapidly once Wakaba was in close enough. The
sharpened points punched clean through her limb, three tentacles stabbing into her flesh with
explosions of black blood erupting from the fresh wounds. Wakaba shrieked, immediately trying to
pull her trapped limb back. "... are not my Mother."
The cognition grunted, continually yanking her paw against Necronomicon's restraint to no avail. Her other paw swung down violently, colliding with a shockwave that rattled the pyramid below. While Necronomicon's tendrils did indeed pull back, the hull of the alien craft shimmered and suddenly launched out a dense spike of black iron that punched a hole through Wakaba's attacking paw.

Shrieking, Wakaba pulled back with several powerful flaps of her wings, taking to the air again. Seeing that they had an opening, Makoto and Morgana summoned their Personas, tapping into their power and sending a radiant pulse of healing light throughout the group. It dealt with their more pressing injuries, though it couldn't return the energy they had already spent on the battle thus far.

"Okay, she's pulling back," Akira said with a faint sigh of relief. "And with Futaba rejecting the distortion, it seems she's vulnerable now. We still need to take her wings out though."

"Leave that to me!" Futaba proudly boasted. From inside Necronomicon's faintly illuminated control center, she brought up a small text window. "This is my cognitive world, right? So if anyone can manipulate the scenery... Aha, this should do the trick! Here's some fire support for you guys!" The flying saucer flew to an unobstructed section of the roof, a glowing beam of white light flashing from the underbelly.

From that glowing light something quickly formed, as if being woven into existence with strings of energy until it took on a physical form. Standing proudly before them was a heavy ballista, with a bolt already loaded in. Most interesting however was the sharpened end of the bolt, a small crimson box affixed to the right slope.

"Explosive tipped," Futaba said. "One of you guys needs to fire it, then if it hits I'll trigger the bomb and blow one wing clean off."

"I'll handle that," Haru said, quickly dashing toward the ballista. "Oh, but I may need help. Panther, Fox, could you give me a hand? I need you two to fire projectiles at her from both sides, narrowing her path," the heiress explained.

"You got it Noir!" Ann enthusiastically said.

"I'll do my best," Yusuke replied.

The two strode ahead of the group, the others looking on as Wakaba tried to find a good position to dive in from. In an instant they called upon Goemon and Carmen, the two Personas looking skyward and taking aim. A continuous volley of fireballs erupted from Carmen's outstretched cigar, while sharpened icicles exploded from Goemon's palms in short bursts.

As to be expected, neither of them managed to even graze Wakaba's airborne form. Whenever a stray shot got close enough, she would weave ever so slightly and avoid it. However they were still doing their task admirably, guiding the sphinx on a westward path that Haru was following with a keen eye.

"Even if we ground her, you think we can take her?" Shizuka asked, giving Akira a sideways
The dark haired boy nodded firmly. "Her key strength is her mobility in the air. Take that away and she's basically a big target... to say nothing for the fact that she's massively outnumbered too," he said.

Shizuka frowned and turned her attention back to the skyward figure. "I dunno dude... an animal is most dangerous when it's cornered, right?" Something about this felt off, even if Shizuka couldn't quite put her finger on it. But for now, there was no point in worrying about anything other than the giant monster circling from above.

Meanwhile Haru was closely following Wakaba's motions, thankful to have Ann and Yusuke limiting her movements. With a keen eye she was able to examine the sphinx in motion, seeming to quietly calculate the direction she would take and the best angle to take. She was still speedy, but being stabbed by Necronomicon had managed to jolt her confidence slightly and slowed her down.

Haru held her breath, focusing intensely through her left eye. "There." She gave the lever a hard pull, the sharp bolt racing through the air at a rapid pace, far faster than Yusuke or Ann's projectiles.

The tip collided with the center of Wakaba's right wing just as Futaba hit the trigger, a mighty fireball erupting from the point of impact and reducing her wing to a rapidly dissolving cloud of goo. Wakaba shrieked as she was sent hurtling down to earth, her left wing flapping uselessly in a bid to keep her airborne before she met the side of the pyramid with a thunderous boom, rattling the entire structure from the immensity of her bulk. She struggled to stand, her furious face glowering at them from over the edge of the roof.

"I've been waiting to try this new fusion out. And this one's pretty fitting..." Akira grinned at the briefly dazed abomination, pressing his right hand firmly to his mask. A wave of fire washed over him as Arsene vanished, replaced with a new apparition. "Come forth, Medjed!"

The form now hovering over Akira looked akin to a cartoon ghost, a floating white sheet with two clawed avian legs protruding from the shadowy nebula under the hem. His eyes were ornate, designed to look like two solid gold Eyes of Horus.

Wakaba grimaced, struggling to pull herself upright. It left her wide open as Medjed's eyes glowed white hot, abruptly firing twin beams of blessed light outward. The focused waves slammed into Wakaba's chest with a turbulent explosion, pulling another shriek from her throat and leaving her wide open as Shiho and Morgana pushed forward.

Shiho swiftly drew a series of throwing stars from her holsters, throwing them with impressive speed and force with the sharpened stars rapidly closing in. The bladed metal dug into her neck, sections of illusory flesh splitting open with spews of black blood coating the fur on her shoulder. Meanwhile Zorro launched out from Morgana's diminutive body, his rapier flashing out at a rapid pace and unleashing a flurry of violent hurricane winds that smashed regularly against Wakaba's visage.

She gave a violent snarl and slammed her right paw on the floor, rattling the ground beneath them and knocking away the Persona-users nearest to her. Akira skidded back, watching as Wakaba inhaled deeply until her cheeks puffed outward. He just barely got a glimpse of an orange glow shining through her synthetic cheeks. "Makarakarn." A honeycombed barrier of glass flickered around him, Medjed's ethereal glow intensifying.
"HAAAAAAGH!" Wakaba threw her head forward, her mouth opening wide to fire out a vast fireball that slammed into Akira only to immediately bounce off his hastily erected barrier. The explosive fireball washed over Wakaba's right side, leaving a molten scorch in her fur. She snarled in pain, recoiling slightly.

'Huh. Caroline and Justine really outdid themselves on this one... I'll have to thank them.' Caroline would likely be furious if he didn't.

While Wakaba was reeling back, Shiho and Morgana advanced again. But the sphinx recovered with surprising swiftness, sweeping her right paw across the top of the pyramid at a violent pace. It clipped Shiho and Morgana, launching them off their feet until both figures slammed violently into the back wall and nearly shattered it apart. The two thieves hit the ground, out cold.

"You bitch!" Ann snapped.

"I'm gonna tear you apart!" Ryuji snarled. He sprinted forward at an impressive pace, raising his shotgun in his right hand. He fired a single burst, the pellets striking across Wakaba's forehead and leaving a series of thin wounds in her brow. She hissed, pulling back ever so slightly as Ryuji summoned Seiten Taisei with his left hand. The cloud-mounted monkey lunged forward, bristling with power, and slammed the butt of his cudgel into Wakaba's right temple so forcefully that her glasses shattered off her face.

The force from the blow snapped Wakaba's head back, leaving her wide open as Ann dashed in a bit closer. Carmen hovered above her and gave a sharp upward thrust of her cigar, the glowing peak aimed toward the Shadow's chin. A massive vent of flame erupted outward, swiftly engulfing her face with the roar of the fire drowning out Wakaba's screams.

The sphinx reared back and slammed both paws on the ground, thrashing as the flames scorched her face. Ryuji jumped back to avoid an uprooted shard of the floor, while a stray block of debris struck Ann in the ribs and left her lurching backward.

In the chaos Wakaba had thrown her head high, tongues of fire still dancing around her features and melting away the flesh of her face. A shrill avian shriek rose in her throat and echoed through the heavens, the deafening frequency forcing the thieves backward and leaving them covering their ears to protect their hearing. "The hell is she doing now?!!" Sergio snapped.

From the confines of her cockpit, Futaba was able to see the fire fading around the Shadow's features. Much of her face had been reduced to a molten red sludge, crudely affixed to her skull with sections of scorched bone in full view. Her eyes had become two piercing red orbs, glowing from the blackness of her eye sockets. 'It's not her... it's not Mom,' she told herself.

The text boxes floating around her suddenly flashed red, making Futaba's eyes widen. The display in front of her shifted abruptly as Necronomicon brought up an accurate 3D render of the pyramid, highlighting a section below the roof. "Huh? What's up?" she asked. She heard the whispers in her brain, the warning of her companion. The news made her swallow hard.

"Guys!" she mentally called out. "The chamber below us! The Cognition's scream just woke up every Shadow down there, and they're all rushing up here!" Futaba briefly thought of all those sarcophagi she had seen mounted to the walls, the image sending a chill down her spine.

Akira grit his teeth. "Damnit, this is the last thing we need... Sting, Fox, Diabolik, Panther, I need
you guys to move Nemesis and Mona away from that access point. Keep us covered and block any Shadows from getting up here."

"You got it bossman," Shizuka quickly replied. The coffins, that was what had been on her mind. They had stuck out at the time, leaving her wondering why there were so many gathered in a given spot. Seemed that Wakaba was willing to bring out every last nightmare at her disposal to take care of Futaba.

Shizuka helped hoist Shiho onto her shoulder, carting her toward an undamaged corner of the wall. Shiho groaned at the motion. "Hey Nem, how you doing?" Shizuka quietly asked.

The dark-haired girl raised her head slightly, her eyes covered from view. "Hits... really damn hard..." she murmured.

"Yeah, it really looks like it... you just sit this one out. We'll get through this in no time flat," Shizuka assured her. Panther was quick to set Morgana down beside Shiho, the feline's eyes like a pair of cartoonish swirls.

"You're the beeest Panther," Morgana said in a drawling daze.

The blonde sighed and scratched the top of her head with her right hand. "Geez, he's really out of it... hope he gets his head on straight soon, we really need his healing," Ann remarked.

"I don't mean to rush you two, but..." Yusuke trailed off as he and Sergio peered down into the lower chamber, having an angle that gave a good look at the different floating islands. Shizuka and Ann hastily joined the two boys and took in the same view, watching the small army of Shadows making a mad dash toward them. Like a living tide of tar.

"There's quite a lot of them," Sergio murmured. "But! We don't need to destroy them all. We just need to keep them back so the others can deal with the sphinx... any ideas?" he asked.

Yusuke nodded firmly. "Yes, I believe I can buy us a bit of time. I'm going to put them 'on ice!'" he boasted.

Shizuka wrinkled her nose slightly, disgusted. "Ugh."

Goemon rose above Yusuke, striking a dramatic pose with his right fist raised high overhead and his left palm aimed squarely at the accessway. His right hand shot down sharply, until a massive jet of ice cold wind exploded from his palms and drove into the gap, rapidly generating thick wads of ice along the walls and doorway. It built up and condensed rapidly, until the entire staircase had been clogged with a thick sheet of ice.

It didn't take long for the shambling crowd to reach the obstruction, drawn in by Wakaba's calls and the chaos wrought by the Arditi's attacks. Almost at once the nearest Shadows started hammering their fists on the dense ice, rattling the barrier more and more with each hard blow. It was clear that it wouldn't hold for long, but they'd be ready when their foes burst through.

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He was running as fast as he could, willing his brain to ignore the ache in his legs. His chest burned, each breath harder than the last. But he knew he couldn't afford to stop, not when his enemy was in hot pursuit. Nozomi continued pushing through the throngs of people on the busy
Tokyo streets, ignoring their shouts of protest at his rudeness, always keeping a tight grip on his shoulder bag.

For just a moment, a fleeting one, he dared glance over his shoulder. Even through the crowd he was able to stand out, the westerner with the slicked back hair, dressed in a crisp black suit. He was maintaining a more leisurely pace, but never seemed far behind Nozomi. Their eyes met for just a moment, making Nozomi's heart quiver with mortal dread.

How did Mr. A figure him out? Just a few days more, he could have had his escape from Japan perfectly planned out. But something had happened, he had tripped up at some point or perhaps somebody had squealed... or perhaps A knew what he had been doing all along and was simply getting some sick amusement from letting Nozomi think he was being clever.

Whatever the case, A had decided to put a stop to it. He didn't like anyone skimming from his protection money, and all that yen had simply been too tempting. Now Lars was hot on his trail, and fighting him would only make things worse.

He sprinted into a nearby alleyway, making a mad dash down it until he reached the back end of a four story building. Cats hissed at him in passing and rapidly darted into cover, perhaps on some instinctual level aware of the trouble the dark-haired man was bringing with him. "Come on, come on..." he hissed, glancing up the fire escape that was attached to the back wall of the building. An idea snapped into his head.

"You know you're just wasting both our time," Lars flatly said, his voice echoing from halfway down the alley. "My schedule is rather busy, Shinohara-san. I'd rather deal with this quickly so I can move onto other matters."

"Eat a dick!" Nozomi took to running, making his way swiftly up the fire escape until he reached the halfway point. Taking the time to catch his breath, he saw Lars casually rounding the corner and glaring up at him. "You think you can catch me? Last time I checked, you can't fly!

『Jailbreak!』"

A violet aura shimmered around Nozomi's body, followed swiftly after by Stand forming over his right shoulder. It was a strange thing, with a teal-coloured barrel-shaped torso and a stumpy three-eyed head. The arms were unnaturally long, leading gangly clawed hands. It had no legs to speak of, instead having a long slug-like tail coming from its waist. A gleaming slimy texture coated its body.

Jailbreak reached for the section of the fire escape below where Nozomi was standing, fingers sinking into the metal. Within seconds a visible wave of rust rolled down through the fire escape, maring the steps and railings all the way down to the surface. The lower half of the structure broke off, falling apart as the rusted metal landed in the alley with a loud crash. Nozomi wobbled, his balance slightly shaken, but he seemed quite happy to have two stories between himself and the hitman.

"Ha! Let's see you get up here, you foreign fuck!" he snarled.

Lars remained nonplussed. "Very well." He raised both hands up, a strange black matter washing over his skin to form a pair of inky black gloves, heavy swivelling eyeballs protruding from the backs of his hands. " 『Painkiller』."

Nozomi's eyes widened in horror as Lars jumped up, his covered fingers sinking into the brickwork
and adhering into the freshly formed finger holds. He started pulling himself up, hand by hand, seeming to have no issue in climbing this way.

"Oh shit, oh shit..." Unwilling to jump down and risk a compound fracture, Nozomi had no choice but to continue running upward. It was either that, or be a sitting duck as Lars reached his level. He continued upward, all too aware of the sound of crunching masonry drawing up after him. They weren't kidding when they said Lars was relentless. Still, some part of him would much rather deal with Lars than Miwa or Sanshiro.

He'd seen the nightmares conjured by Miwa's Stand, and Sanshiro's old Yakuza tricks made him a baron of torture and butchery. At least Lars would make this quick if he caught up.

He quickly reached the roof, making for the far end. The neighbouring building was slightly lower, he could easily make the jump. But just as he was reaching the edge, he felt his left leg give out from under him. It happened so slowly that he barely felt it, the sharp slice that went through the denim of his jeans and carved the flesh of his Achilles tendon.

Now stuck on his side he could only watch the blood pumping out of the fresh wound, pain shooting through him as the shock wore off. He could clearly see a neatly folded triangle of paper embedded in the ground near his bloodied leg, a red smear coating the left edge of it. Nozomi grit his teeth, glaring toward the figure on the edge of the roof. Lars was supporting himself with his left hand, while his right had remained outstretched.

Lars pulled himself up fully and dusted himself off, sighing vaguely. "Now I have to get this suit cleaned. Masonry dust can be such an infestation."

"I ain't afraid of you!" Nozomi snarled.

"All evidence to the contrary."

Lars took two steps forward, only to halt abruptly as Jailbreak lunged forward. He was acting out of desperation now, his Stand rapidly closing the distance and throwing out a fierce right hook. Lars left hand shot up, suddenly catching the incoming blow in his ebony fist. The shadowy material coating his digits seemed to seep in, adhering his hold even further.

"Your Stand isn't built for direct combat," Lars flatly said. "It's better suited to manipulating the environment and iron weapons... perhaps that's why you were chosen for your job. It's easy to threaten a mark when you can rot their business from the inside out. You should have stuck to what you were good at."

He gave a sudden hard squeeze, drawing on the inhuman strength of his Stand. Jailbreak's digits snapped like pieces of dry wood, and from his position on the ground Nozomi's hand seemed to almost explode as his digits twisted in horrid directions. He grit his teeth, eyes bulging in his head. "GGGHHHHKKK!"

Ignoring Nozomi's writhing, Lars released Painkiller's grip and took several casual steps forward. "I, for example, am good at killing people. I have been since I found out the potential for my Stand at an early age. Being able to manipulate paper in such a way... who could have ever imagined paper being a lethal cutting tool? But that is the very essence of a Stand. To manipulate the mundane world in a manner that defies all normal logic. And having a power like that allows you to 'cheat' at life. It gives you a leg up above all normal people," he said.
With an almost deliberate slowness, Lars reached into his coat and gripped something in the left breast pocket. "So believe me when I can understand why joining A-sama appealed to you. It gave you direction, an opportunity to abuse your power and make money from it. But you got greedy." He pulled a neatly folded paper plane from his pocket, the material seeming to become rather rigid in his grasp. "As with all things, there is a hierarchy among Stand users. A food chain, with A-sama at the top. He's worked hard to secure where he is now, and letting some young punk steal from him would harm his image."

Nozomi grit his teeth, trying not to scream in pain. "The rumors about you..." he hissed through his teeth. "Are right... when it comes to Mr. A... you're a total fag."

Lars' eyes narrowed ever-so-slightly behind the lenses of his glasses. "Not the most dignified final words I've ever heard." He gave a dismissive flick of his finger, launching the paper airplane through the air until the sharpened end made contact with Nozomi's neck. It punched clean into his throat, spurts of blood erupting outward while a horrific gargling sound rose from his mouth. Lars stood back to watch as the airplane steadily turned red, soaking in Nozomi's blood until it became waterlogged and began to wilt.

Tutting, Lars dispelled his Stand and made for Nozomi's bag. It had slid away from him in his fall, but fortunately it hadn't gone far. Crouching down, Lars flicked it open with his left hand and slipped his phone from his coat pocket with his right. He spent just a moment dialling A's private number, and then quietly counted the bound bundles of yen inside. "All accounted for," he remarked. Satisfied, he plucked the bloodied paper from Nozomi's torn neck and tossed the paper aside. It wasn't as if he needed to be worried about any normal police finding him, especially not when Painkiller prevented any fingerprints from being left behind.

It didn't take long for A to answer. "So good to hear from you. Shinohara's dealt with?"

Lars glanced over to the last twitching spasms of Nozomi's feet. "More or less," he admitted. "He's dealt with, and I have the money he was trying to run off with."

"Efficient as ever! I love it... but, well, another matter has come up. Something I need you to look into."

"Something that requires my delicate touch?"

"Mm. Information gathering, rather than assassination. We've heard from the boy that there's another detective looking into the Phantom Thieves. Supposedly he's a fan of her past work, but she's been watching those high school students. Joestar and her friends. He's seen her on several occasions while he's been keeping tabs on them, taking her own notes."

Pausing for a moment, Lars glanced skyward. "I don't mean to sound rude, but what's the issue? It's a matter of simple logic to connect those kids to the cases with how many of them have personal involvement in those targets. Not like she has any solid evidence on what the Phantom Thieves are up to."

"I would have said as much too, but..." A trailed off, giving a small grumble. "Did you ever hear about the rainy night murders in Inaba? I imagine not, Inaba is a rather small town after all. I only found out about it by chance, really. Those mysterious killings, that the police could never discern an actual cause of death for, have 'Stand user' written all over them. And this detective was apparently intrumental in catching the culprit," he explained.
Lars rose to his feet, taking the satchel up and mounting the bag on his right shoulder. "So she's not SID?" He made back for the way he came up, ignoring the corpse he was leaving behind. He summoned Painkiller onto his right hand and swiftly swung down over the edge of the roof. His ebony digits sank into the brickwork, supporting him as he rapidly slid down the wall, leaving four distinct clawmarks in the masonry all the way down.

"Satoshi knew nothing when I asked him, and he knows better than to lie. So that makes me wonder: Who is this Stand using PI and who hired her?"

"I'll be sure to ask her then. With any luck, we can both be spared some unpleasantness... what's her name?"

"The name the boy gave us was 'Naoto Shirogane. I trust you'll find her in due time."

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A flurry of molten lead erupted from Milady's guns, launching clouds of dust around Haru's feet. Wakaba raised her left paw, snarling as the high velocity bullets tore into her flesh and tore out fresh black chunks. By now the partially melted flesh of her face had adhered to the stark white bone of her exposed skull. Yet even without the means to make proper expressions, the hate was clear in her exposed crimson eyes.

Wakaba turned sharply, watching Seiten Taisei lunging at her right side. She gave a resounding roar and drove her palm down, slamming the towering Persona into the floor and making Ryuji's whole body shudder from the jolting impact. "Hgh!" He landed on his left knee, managing to glare briefly. "Damnit! Are we even hurting her?!!"

"Gradually!" Futaba called from on high. "I can tell from my scans that her stamina is rapidly dropping. She just has a lot of brute strength on her side... boy, I really do have issues. But you gotta deal with her quickly, before those other Shadows break through the defensive line!"

Wakaba breathed in deep and fired off another bullet of flame, only for Makoto to swiftly swing in and intercept it. She felt the blaze strike the side of her bike, a wave of fire slamming into her and being absorbed by the armoured plates. Makoto hissed through clenched teeth, glaring defiantly at the massive Shadow. "She's not the only one with dropping stamina... I dunno how much longer we can go at this," Makoto grunted.

With an opening made, Wakaba's left paw shot forward and slapped a large chunk of debris that had been resting by her side. The torso-sized rock was catapulted at a frightening speed, slamming into Milady and making Haru scream from the jolt of impact, the blow knocking her flat on her back.

It left her wide open as Wakaba's head lashed forward, unleashing another burst of flame that was making a beeline toward Haru's downed form. The heiress cringed, summoning Milady to shield her from a blast that never hit. She felt the ground rattle beneath her and took in the stench of fresh smoke... but she felt largely fine, the pain in her chest aside.

Haru popped her eyes open, gasping as she saw a figure standing in the field of smoke directly in front of her. Akira was slowly catching his breath, Medjed acting as a shield for the young man.
"Ak-" Haru caught herself quickly. "J-Joker, are you okay?"

"Been better," he replied, giving a long heave. "We gotta take care of her quickly, and we're all slowing down here..." Akira flashed Haru a wry grin. "Fortunately, I have an idea in mind..."

Meanwhile, things had taken a bit of a turn for the others.

One Shadow slammed into the cracked ice, ebony muscles bulging and his flesh glowing red hot as he directed all the alien energies in his body outward in a single violent flash that detonated his body. The explosion tore through the ice, launching a belch of smoke and fire out of the accessway that forced the thieves backward.

Another Shadow leapt through the smoke and swiftly landed beside Shizuka. He shrieked and gave a sharp swing of his left hand, two sharped digits cutting into her right arm. Yellow scraps flew off the sleeve of her jacket, followed by hot spurts of blood from the freshly formed cuts.

Shizuka grit her teeth, recoiling while her new foe lunged for her again. This time she was prepared, summoning Houdini to her side. The golden Stand shot forward, deftly parrying the next two strikes from the Shadow. Shizuka shoved herself back with a hard push of her foot, instantly rendering herself and Houdini invisible as she swiftly weaved to the side of the Shadow. Houdini's right fist shot forward sharply, golden knuckles slamming into the Shadow's head and very nearly tearing it clean off.

Having made that opening, Houdini's unseen fists rained down at a rapid pace, shockwaves echoing across the roof. It really didn't take long at all for the thunderous to tear the Shadow to shreds.

"BAZUBAZUBAZUBAZU!" A final hard blow splattered the Shadow across the ground, giving Shizuka an opening to turn back toward the entryway.

Ann had pushed forward, Carmen floating above her. The blonde's Persona shoved her cigar forward, unleashing a torrent of fire that slammed into two Shadows clambering through the entryway. The intense heat blew them apart instantaneously, but left Ann wide open as another Shadow leapt forward and kicked her hard in the stomach, knocking the wind straight out of her.

With Ann hitting the ground, Yusuke swiftly dashed toward the Shadow looming over her. His katana swiftly materialized in his left hand, with his right rapidly drawing the blade from the ornate black scabbard. Yusuke dashed forward and gave a harsh downward swing, the serrated edge cutting into the Shadow's neck and causing a spray of black goo to erupt around the intruding steel.

The living tide didn't seem to abate, more ebony figures racing from the smoky darkness. Sergio had taken up a position several feet away, using Breakthru to rapidly fire chunks of debris toward the oncoming horde. The immense velocity carrying his makeshift projectiles allowed them to hit hard enough to vaporize the incoming Shadows on impact. But no matter how many he destroyed, more seemed to always be right behind.

"Damnit," Sergio grunted. "Joker, we're running low on space here!"

"On it!" Akira called back. "Queen, Skull, you're up! Pincer attack!"

Ryuji dashed leftward while Makoto hung right, their rapid movements catching Wakaba's attention. The looming sphinx clenched her exposed fangs, wisps of smoke hissing through her
jaws and staining the twisted wads of warped flesh adhering to her exposed bone.

Seiten Taisei launched out of Ryuji, raising his cudgel high with arcs of electricity rapidly dancing around him. Seiten Taisei swung his weapon forward, a large bolt of lightning exploding out of the cudgel in a continuous white hot stream. Wakaba raised her right paw, blocking out the incoming blast.

Her left eye swivelled around, independent of the other, watching Makoto swiftly rushing for her other side. The female thief gave a hard rev of Johanna's engine, reeling onto her back wheel. A continuous stream of nuclear energy erupted from the front wheel, rapidly closing the distance only to be halted by Wakaba's left paw. The sphinx growled, struggling against the incoming barrage but still managing to hold fast against the tide.

"Joker!" Haru pressed her right hand to the corresponding temple, her whole body aglow as she drew upon Milady's potent psychic power. A pulsating wave of purple and yellow formed around the Shadow's head, grinding against her brain like a swarm of hornets. She shrieked, struggling against the three-pronged assault.

Akira took two firm steps forward, drawing on the last reserves of his energy. "Ravage her! Medjed!" The legendary smiter appeared in front of him, the ground rumbling beneath Akira while Medjed's eyes took on an immense glow.

All of Akira's remaining energy rushed forward in a powerful burst, like a glowing golden finger of god that slammed into Wakaba's torso and sent radiating waves of fire exploding off her body. Within seconds the churning wave started drilling into her flesh, chunks of black goo exploding out from the point of impact.

"FUUUTAAAABAAAA!"

Wakaba's violent scream was cut short as Medjed's beam of blessed light punched clean through her torso, the blazing fire rapidly expanding over her body. Her entire body exploded in a dazzling flash of white light, shaking the pyramid for a final time.

The attacking Shadows shrieked and died in unison, the death knell ringing from the lower chamber. All went silent.

The young thieves slowly gathered their breath, a collective sigh of relief rolling through them. Makoto made her way toward Morgana and Shiho, taking the time to heal the two of them as best she could. Shiho and Morgana rose up slowly, both groaning in discomfort.

"I feel like a mountain got dropped on me," Morgana said, scratching his temples.

"I'm gonna sleep for a week straight..." Shiho murmured, rubbing at her right arm to try and soothe some of the bruises that had formed during the brawl.

Necronomicon slowly lowered down through the air until the flying saucer was hovering a few inches over the roof of the temple. Her Persona glowed a bright white shade and then vanished entirely to reveal Futaba herself. In addition to her bodysuit, her eyes were now covered by a pair of heavy black goggles with round red lenses.

"Are you guys okay?" Futaba asked in concern.
"Ahhh this is nothin'," Ryuji dismissively said, doing his best to play it cool despite the lingering pain in his body. "Seriously, you were awesome! You totally shanked that oversized monster!"

"I think I'm gonna barf my lungs up..." Shizuka murmured, settling her hands on her knees as she bent forward, her legs shaking slightly.

Futaba frowned slightly and glanced over her shoulder to the shattered section of the roof the Shadow had been lodged on. "That thing, it came from my head didn't it? I can't believe I let those lies twist me so much... I can't believe I thought that way about my Mom."

"Hey, come on," Akira replied, scratching the back of his head. "You were emotionally devastated, and the corrupt bastards who caused all of this were probably counting on that. What's important now is that you know the truth, and don't lose track of how your Mother was."

Futaba nodded at his assessment. "Mom..." she gently said.

"Futaba?" The others turned in shock as a figure materialized on the far end of the pyramid roof: Wakaba Isshiki. The real Wakaba Isshiki. Or at least a close approximation of her, compared to the monster formed from Futaba's own terror.

"M-Mom?" Futaba squeaked.

"Thank you for choosing to remember the real me."

Futaba took a shaky step forward. "I... I'm sorry for being selfish! I with that I-"

"Please, don't come over here," Wakaba said. "This isn't where you're supposed to be, is it?"

"But... But I finally got to see you again," Futaba gently said, her voice cracking from her mounting sadness.

"Are you being selfish again?" Wakaba gently chided, a smile lingering on her face.

Futaba hesitated for a moment, swallowing hard. "I... I love you, Mom!"

"I love you too, Futaba," she replied without a moment's hesitation. "Now, you really should be going. And please, stay safe." A warm white light enveloped Wakaba's body, turning into a cloud of ivory dust that was blown away in the wind.

Futaba slowly lifted her goggles up, taking a moment to dry her eyes. The others looked on in silence, not daring to interrupt. "Goodbye, Mom," Futaba whispered. After some more time spent collecting herself, she turned her attention to the others. "S-so ah... you all have a way out of here, right?"

"Yep. We just need to make it down the pyramid and we'll be home free," Ann said.

"Oh, good. Because you see, the thing is..." She wobbled slightly, her legs threatening to buckle under her. "Th-the only thing k-keeping this place open is Necronomicon, w-wanting to get rid of that cognition. B-but with her gone..." A mighty quake rocked the structure beneath them, rolling into the distant horizon.

"Ah. I thought we were forgetting something," Yusuke said with surprising calmness.
Futaba suddenly fell backward, only for her body to be engulfed in one of Necronomicon's looping black tentacles. The two vanished from view, rapidly being shunted into the real world. As they exited, the tremors beneath them suddenly grew far more intense.

"We gotta get out of here!" Shiho quickly said.

"But what about the treasure?" asked Sergio.

Morgana pointed over to the center of the roof, where the large stone coffin had been. The container had been smashed in the chaos of their brawl, revealing it to be totally empty. "Futaba herself was the treasure! And since she's gone-

"Right. RUN!" Akira took off at a rapid sprint with the others in hot pursuit behind him. The group were soon racing down the battle-scarred face of the pyramid, jumping down from tier to tier as the upper levels of the structure started to explode into clouds of dust. The chaos was right at their heels, mere inches behind the back of the group.

"HOUDINI THE WORLD! HOUDINI THE WORLD!" Shizuka screamed.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOIN"?!” Ryuji barked.

"ASKING FOR A MIRACLE THAT CLEARLY AIN'T HAPPENING!" she replied.

"Morgana!" Ann shouted, suddenly gripping Morgana by his scarf. "Transform already!" She gave a mighty swing of her arms, shouting at the top of her lungs as she launched the feline ahead of the group.

Morgana deftly tumbled through the sky as a wave of pink smoke engulfed him. He fell through the cloud in a fully transformed state, heavy tires hitting the ground near the base of the pyramid, his back doors flying open.

An explosion smacked into the group as they reached the end of the pyramid, the ensuing shockwave catapulting the teens forward until they collapsed into a heap in the back of the Morganamobile. Makoto managed to pull herself out of the pile in her desperation, rapidly gripping the steering wheel and slamming her foot on the gas.

The black van rocketed forward at its top speed, tearing across the sandy dunes with a rolling tide of doom racing along behind them. The Palace was falling apart around them, and they were quickly running out of available ground.

"Everyone..." Akira pulled his phone from his inner pocket and brought up the Meta Nav. "Hang on, I'm getting us out of here!" He closed his eyes and quickly activated the app.

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The group landed in a heap outside of Leblanc, with the street around them being fortunately devoid of people. A chorus of groans filled the air as the young thieves worked to pull themselves up.

"That was... the worst freakin' escape ever..." Ryuji grunted.
Haru pressed her hand into the nearest wall, panting for breath. "Are these heists usually so chaotic? It's exciting, certainly, but... I'm worried that I may have just shaved ten years off my lifespan."

"It usually involves a lot of running," Akira said, sighing in annoyance. "Although, escaping the museum was pretty easy, since Madarame fought us at the halfway point of the building," he explained.

"Ha. I would've liked to have seen that old fuck's Palace collapse around him. Must have been a fun sight, right JoJo?" Sergio asked.

There was no response.

"Huh?" Ann looked around sharply. "Sh-she's not with us?! B-but I'm sure she was in the van!" she said, panic rising through her.

"I definitely caught her!" Morgana said from his position on the ground. Tension filled the air around them. What could have happened? Had she fallen out through the back door in the chaos? And if she had been left behind, did that mean she was...

"BLEEEEEEEUGH!"

The horrid barfing sound was soon joined with the noise of wet chunks slapping onto the ground, coming from the small alleyway that led to the laundromat and bathhouse. It was followed soon after by a few sounds of spitting and retching before Shizuka finally spoke up. "... I'm okay..."

"Huh. I guess she wasn't kidding about needing to barf," Ryuji remarked.

"Oh come on. I do my laundry there," Akira said, tutting in annoyance.

After a moment, Makoto gave Akira a light pat on the shoulder. "We should probably go and check on Futaba. She looked on the verge of passing out when we last saw her... I can't even imagine how taxing an awakening must have been for someone as sedentary as her..." Akira nodded in agreement,

Shizuka emerged from the alleyway, trying to play it cool as she slipped her sunglasses back on. "That was uh... a rough ride," she bashfully said.

"You two go on ahead. We're just gonna... catch our breath at Leblanc," Shiho said. After a battle like that, they were all dying for some coffee. And then a long, well deserved nap.

Shizuka paused for a moment to watch Akira and Makoto go. She thought back on Futaba's Palace, specifically the final appearance of her mother. What had that been? Wakaba's actual ghost? Or was it just a creation of Futaba's brain, a sign of her changed perceptions? She knew full well that ghosts were real, she had even met one as a baby, but it seemed just as likely that it had been another cognition.

But, for her own sake, Shizuka thought it was nicer to believe that Wakaba had reached out to give that final message of reassurance. So she would choose to believe that was the case.

Akira and Makoto swiftly went around the corner from Leblanc. Awakening their power had been a rough ride for all of them, but Futaba was younger and also physically weaker due to her shut-in
Akira stopped as he saw a figure emerging from the convenience store. With her dyed teal hair, dark platform shoes and stockings, coupled with the studded choker around her pale neck, she definitely gave off a 'goth' vibe. But the white labcoat draped over her shoulders partially disrupted that image. In her left hand she held a small plastic bag of groceries, while the stick of a lollipop protruded from her inky black lips.

"Doctor Takemi," Akira quickly said. "We might need your help with something."

"Oh, well if it isn't my little guinea pig," Tae casually said, flashing him a tiny smile. "Well, I am extraordinarily busy. But for you... I can make an exception."

They found Futaba passed out in the entryway of her house, with the door to her room having been opened at some point during the day. Takemi's assessment was a fortunately optimistic one. The excitement had simply made her pass out, her lazy lifestyle having left her with very little energy to spare. It was something she had been called to the Sakura house for in the past.

In a few days she would make a full recovery, and when that time came Akira knew he would tell her everything they knew. He was certain she'd want to know too.

And after that, Medjed would be as good as finished.
Akira rounded the corner of the stairs and emerged into Leblanc's first floor. It was early in the morning and Sojiro had just started on preparations, getting all the equipment started up for the day ahead.

The two glanced to each other briefly. "Oh, hey. Morning," Sojiro greeted. With what had been going on with Sae, and the painful memories that had been dredged up there, it seemed his mind was a thousand miles away from him.

"Morning," Akira greeted. Morgana padded down the stairs behind him and then fell in pace with the human as they made for the counter. "So ah... business as usual?" he asked.

Sojiro shrugged. "Most likely. That prosecutor isn't threatening to take the floor out from under us," he explained. The older man paused for a few seconds. "Speaking of which, have you been... talking to Futaba?" Akira didn't answer. "It's just that... it seems strange that you and your student council president friend just happened to find her passed out. Not that I'm ungrateful in this case."

Finally, the dark haired boy ventured to answer. "I can't ignore a person who needs help," he stated.

"I can understand that. It's that worldview that got you stuck with probation in the first place... but still, Futaba is unique. And honestly I don't really know what can help her at this point," he said.

The bell above the door rang.

Without any greetings or dramatic exclamations, Futaba strolled into the cafe and came to a stop a few feet away from Akira. She was dressed a little more sensibly, adorned in baggy grey trousers and a dark tank top, while her glasses and heavy headphones remained the same.

"Morning," she simply said. "Boy, it's empty out there... Guess Yongen's really slow in the morning." Both men looked at her in wide-eyed surprise.

"F-Futaba, you're-" Sojiro said. The redhead cocked her head to the side in mild confusion. Even Akira and Morgana seemed a little stunned. They knew the change of heart would have an effect, but not that it would be quite so strong.

"I'm ah... feeling a lot better now. So you don't need to worry so much," Futaba said, a faint smile touching on her face. "Oh, can I borrow Akira for a second? There's something I need to show him."

"Aha..." Sojiro smiled faintly, raising his glasses so he could dry his eyes. "Sure thing. Just ah, just be careful, alright?" With this shocking change, he didn't want to spook her or get too inquisitive about what had changed. He was more happy than curious.

The redhead casually led the way out of the cafe, while Akira and Morgana followed after in mute surprise. Sojiro watched them leave and paid particular attention to Akira until his shadow had left the doorway. That boy... Sojiro knew he was a social butterfly, but how had he managed that? Whatever the case, Sojiro knew already that he owed the kid some thanks.
Once they were outside, Futaba abruptly moved behind Akira and seemed to find comfort in his shadow. "Hm? Something up?" Akira asked. He looked ahead to see the old man who owned the second hand shop grunting as he raised the shutters to his store. "That old guy? He's nice, don't worry about it."

Futaba made a small grumbling sound. "Well he wasn't there when I left the house..."

He supposed he shouldn't have expected Futaba to be totally cured of her phobias. While she could leave her room now, even her house, strangers were still going to be worrying to her. And unfortunately, he and Sojiro were probably the only people she wouldn't class as a 'stranger.'

"Are you feeling better Futaba? You kind of had us all spooked when you passed out the other day," Morgana said.

Futaba glanced from side to side, eventually looking down toward the source of the noise. "W-whoa, your cat really can talk? I thought you were just kinda... quirky when you talked to it."

Akira's left brow raised slightly, and he continued to lead on toward the Sakura house. "Wait, how long have you been listening in on us?"

"Th-that's not important. Wait, is he the little chibi thing that was standing beside you guys in my cognitive world?" Futaba asked. Her friend nodded in turn. With how chaotic everything had been, it was perhaps unsurprising that asking about Morgana had been low on her list of priorities.

"I'd tell you what he is, but even we don't wholly know. But once you have a Persona or a Stand, you can hear him just fine," Akira explained.

They soon reached Futaba's home, and then her bedroom. While she had found the courage to leave her room, and Akira was very proud of her for that, she hadn't found the nerve to get around to cleaning up. The only source of light was coming from her monitors, displaying a series of computer programs that Akira had no clue about.

"So, dealing with Medjed. You change my heart, I crush them, that was the deal. You want me to take care of things now? We could leave it closer to the deadline. You know, build up some drama and suspense for the public," Futaba said. She made for her plush computer chair and proceeded to crouch down in the seat, her knees raised up close to her chin.

Akira silently inspected her squatting position for a moment, somewhat impressed at her ability to maintain that pose. "No, we better deal with them quickly. Soon as they're dealt with, we can focus all our attention on Okumura."

Futaba shrugged. "If you insist. These fake Medjed types are super easy to take care of either way."

Morgana tilted his head from his position on Futaba's plush bed. "Wait, fake Medjed? What do you mean?" the feline asked.

"I'm the original Medjed," Futaba casually said, much to the shock of her two companions. "Hacking was easy for me, and I was a natural. So I used it to expose corporate corruption and stuff like that... but it kind of got away from me. Other people started using the name 'Medjed' for their own hacking exploits. I got tired of crushing the imposters because there were so many of them."
That's when I became Alibaba," she explained.

Akira maintained a look of surprise throughout her explanation. "Heh... you've got a good heart Futaba," he remarked.

She smiled faintly in return. "Hmhmhm... well, guess I better take care of these chumps. But... one more thing, before I get started," Futaba said, raising her left hand with her index finger outstretched. "You said you think my Mother was murdered. So... I want you to tell me everything you know."

"And you've got a right to know," he said. Akira took a deep breath. "This is going to be a bit of a long story, but... for the past few months, ever since we went after Madarame, we've known that there was a killer roaming the Metaverse. The dimension where most everybody's hearts exist. When somebody's Shadow, the doppelganger that you encountered in the pyramid, is killed it causes the body to undergo what's commonly called a 'mental shutdown.'"

Futaba's eyes steadily widened behind her glasses. Regardless, Akira continued on with his story. "We did some investigation into the guy, but couldn't find much on him. He's crafty, you see. When a person suffers a shutdown it leaves their body defenseless. So he sets things up to look like an accident or a suicide. Shutting their brain off at the top of a tall staircase, or in the bath, or... at the side of a busy road. As near as we can tell, this has been going on for about two years. Your Mother's death definitely seemed like a shutdown, particularly with how fondly Sojiro spoke of her. Her suddenly committing suicide just didn't gel with what he told us," he explained.

Silence lingered in the room, before Futaba removed her glasses and dabbed her eyes with her right hand. "Th-thinking back on that day... for a long time I knew s-something wasn't right. M-Mom and I had been going out for a walk. Sh-she had been happy when we started out, b-but then she started slowing down. A-and I tried to talk to her, but she didn't say anything t-to me. It was like... like she became a zombie. Th-then she reached the side of the road..." She trembled, unable to continue. Akira reached over and set a strong, reassuring hand on her shoulder.

After some time, she gently sighed. "Do you know... do you know who this person is?" Futaba asked.

"Not... at the moment, I'm sorry to say. But I think we might be close to some answers. Going by what the others have learned inside Okumura's Palace, we believe he might have been making use of the Black Mask's services. Major players in other fast food chains have died suddenly of 'suicides' or 'accidents' and with an unnerving degree of frequency. It explains Okumura Food's massive rise in revenue and popularity, most of the competition being hindered by these tragedies."

"So what you're saying is, that if you guys continue at this you might get close to finding the culprit?" Akira nodded. "Then... let me help. I know this might sound selfish of me, but... I want to have a chance at finding the person who killed my Mom. And I'll help you guys however I can until we get to the truth," she firmly said.

Akira gave her a faint smile. "We'd be happy to have you. Between that big brain of yours, and that fancy Persona... I'd be an idiot not to take you on board," Akira assured her. And having helped Shiho, Ryuji, Ann, and Yusuke get justice against the people who wronged them he knew he couldn't sit back and leave Futaba hanging. She deserved a chance to avenge her mother.

"Great!" Futaba said cheerily, spinning around in her chair to face her monitors. "Now then, let's deal with these posers!" In a flash her fingers were gliding along her keyboard, rapidly hitting a
string of keys. From afar Akira could just barely see different screens and windows pop up along her screen, and he felt like a dog watching a human do their taxes: He could tell something important was going on, something big and complicated, but his understanding of the details was completely nonexistent.

"Futaba," Morgana said. The girl didn't respond. "Hey, Futaba!" Again, no response. "Geez, she's really engrossed in her work... Well, we might as well stick around until she's done." The feline sniffed the air quietly, his long tail bristling. "In the meantime, we should really clean this place up."

"You mean I should clean this place up, don't you?" Akira flatly replied. Still, he supposed it couldn't hurt. If Futaba was going to get better, then it would definitely help if he made her living space less of a shut-in paradise.

Over the next few hours Akira went about checking the old trash bags and discarded cartons that were strewn about Futaba's room, mainly making sure that nothing of value had accidentally been out there. Fortunately it seemed the hacker had put at least some sort of system into organizing her mess. From what he could tell, garbage was garbage and was kept deliberately away from the things she wanted to keep.

Throughout the process Futaba would occasionally murmur something cryptic. Things to the effect of 'sloppy', 'that's weird' and 'who even wrote this code.' But trying to get her to elaborate would have been a wasted effort, and Akira didn't make the attempt.

Eventually, after working extensively, Futaba gave a pleased yawn and stretched her arms over her head. "All done!" she happily said. Akira, who had been in the process of removing the last bag of trash, glanced at her from over his shoulder.

"What, seriously? Medjed's dealt with?" Morgana asked.

"Yep!" Futaba then abruptly grabbed a fluffy cat-shaped pillow from under her desk and planted it near her keyboard. She rested her arms and head on the material and immediately fell asleep.

Akira sighed at the sight. "We're really going to need to do something about her stamina problems if she's gonna work with us." He reached into his pocket and took his phone out, quickly checking Medjed's website. The sight that greeted him came as quite a shock.

Medjed's front page was replaced with a rich crimson background, sporting nothing but the logo of the Phantom Thieves and the words 'TAKE YOUR HEART' printed beneath it.

By midnight, all of Tokyo was abuzz with chatter of how the Phantom Thieves had crushed Medjed, putting a halt to their threat. Once again, their fame and public support rose massively.

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8/12

For as large as Akira's attic room was, the sheer scale of their group was such that it was rather cramped with everyone piled in there. "I'll admit that I rather like Leblanc," Sergio said from his seat at Akira's workbench. He took a sip of the coffee he'd bought before coming up into the attic. "The scent and taste remind me of home. But... why exactly are we here instead of the hideout?"
Akira pointed over his shoulder to the petite figure perched on his bed, seeming to be almost hiding in his shadow. Futaba had agreed to come along to the meeting, but she was still a little wary of the others. It seemed she was only here because the others had played a major rolling in helping her, but she still didn't know any of them as well as she knew Akira.

"Ah," Sergio said. "Too nervous to take the train?" Futaba nodded firmly.

Makoto took a moment to run a finger over the table in front of her, leaning against the plush couch. "Not that I wish to judge you Akira, but..." Makoto examined the dust that had built up on her index finger. "You should probably do a little more cleaning in here if we're going to be meeting here for the foreseeable future."

"His maid sucks at her job," Futaba quickly said.

"Wait, what?" Shiho quirked her brow and sat slightly upright.

Akira screamed internally. "Sh-she's just joking. It's an... otaku joke," he hastily said. "More to the point, I called you all here because Futaba wants to join our group, and I'm more than happy to oblige. She wants to know what happened with her Mom, and I believe we're close to figuring that out. Plus, with a mind like hers, and a Persona like that too, we could really use her on our side."

"Yeah, for real," Ryuji said, pushing himself off the wall near Akira's shelf of mementos. "The way she skewered the sphinx was effin' awesome!"

"I didn't do that," Futaba hastily said. "That was Necronomicon. He reflexively defended me from danger," she added, before immediately shrinking back into Akira's shadow.

Ann nodded in understanding. "I was kind of wondering why she wasn't fighting that cognition directly," she said. "So what does Necronomicon do?"

The group paused as Akira made his way to the redhead, leaning in so she could whisper in his ear. He made his way back over to the others. "He scans things. Enemies and the environment, things like that. It lets her instantly understand the landscape and enemy weaknesses. With some time and effort, her Persona can also manipulate the landscape. Like with the ballista. So I guess that means she can be our navigator?"

"Oh cool. We could use a new one of those, since our current one kinda-"

"Ryuji," Shiho scolded, making the blond stop abruptly. Morgana grumbled, turning his nose up from his spot on Akira's workbench.

Yusuke cleared his throat, drawing all eyes toward his position near the table. "A thought occurs. While I don't doubt Futaba could be incredibly useful to us, her anxiety may pose a problem for us. Her efficiency will be limited if she can only communicate with Akira."

Shiho nodded. "Right. It'd be foolish to think that getting a Persona would get rid of all of Futaba's problems." Several of the others nodded in understanding. Getting their Personas had managed to take a lot of their toxic and negative feelings out of their minds, redirecting that energy into something good... but even with the worst aspects taken care of, there was still a lot of negative debris to pick through.

"If hangin' out with Akira got her to trust him, then maybe she should hang out with us? You know,
take turns," Ryuji suggested. "But you know, Akira would be there so she already has the guy she trusts."

"That's... not a bad idea Ryuji," Makoto said in some mild surprise.

The blond shrugged. "Eh, I was due a good one."

After some thought, Akira turned his attention to Futaba. "Would you be fine with that?" he asked. Akira was certainly on board with Futaba trusting the whole team, it would be a necessity going forward, but this was something they'd have to do at her pace.

"F-fine... but only a few at a time! There's... a lot of you!" Futaba said.

Akira nodded. He turned his attention to Haru. "Doing this means we'd have to put your Father's Palace on the backburner for a few days. But once we're done and Futaba's friends with all of us, we can go in as one big group and clear it quickly. You okay with that?"

A gentle smile graced Haru's face. "I'm fine with that Aki-kun. Helping Futaba-chan is rather important, and it isn't as if there's any rush to clear my Father's Palace. There hasn't been any major changes between him or my fiance."

The mention of Sugimura made Shizuka scoff and lean forward in her chair. "That douche. He hasn't bothered you, has he?" she asked.

Haru shook her head. "I really haven't seen much of him since you hit him, but from my understanding our engagement is still in place. Father seems to have no knowledge of the assault either..." She paused in deep thought for several moments. "Now that I think about it... isn't the class trip in early September?"

Makoto nodded. "They leave on the seventh, I believe," she explained.

"And Kosei also has a trip in early September," Yusuke chimed in.

As he said this, Sergio chuckled and took another long sip of his coffee. "Mm, I do wonder if I'll finally get a chance to chat with Hifumi?"

"Just learn shogi and you'll get an opening," Akira lazily said.

"Oh I dunno... it always seems like such a chore. Wait, you know Hifumi?"

Akira nodded. "Yusuke told us about Kosei having a shogi idol who practices in Kanda. So I head there some evenings. I wanted to learn how to play."

"Eh?" Haru jumped ever so slightly in her seat.

"Really?" Sergio blinked slightly. "Well, I suppose I could put the effort in an-"

"More to the point," Makoto said at a slightly louder volume, drawing on her 'Student Council President of Doom' voice to keep the others focused on her. "If many of us are going to be abroad, then we can't do any work. And there's no telling what Okumura could do while that's happening. It would be sensible to deal with his Palace before the trip."
As Makoto explained her point, the others nodded along. Even Futaba understood the situation, even if she was unlikely to be leaving the country. "She's got a point. So we help Futaba, and then power through Okumura before the end of the month. Seems like a good setup to me," Shizuka remarked.

Ryuji grunted in agreement. "I'm down for taking Okumura's treasure by the end of the month and all, but we still gotta find some time to enjoy Summer, right?" he reasoned.

Akira pondered his best friends concern. "It depends on how fast we deal with Okumura, but... I really wouldn't mind. We do have two new members and a big victory over Medjed to celebrate," the dark haired boy said. "And since it's the Summer... how about a beach trip?"

"Eh?! A beach trip?!" Futaba said, nearly jumping clean out of her perch. "W-with sunlight, and l-l-lots of people?!"

"And swimwear," Shizuka dreamily said, earning a dull glare from Ann.

At the mention of the beach, Haru perked up slightly. "Depending on how things go, we could take my Father's yacht? It's been ages since he's really used it, and it's mainly been gathering dust. We can enjoy the sun, the sea, each other's company, and Futaba won't need to worry too much about other people."

Akira smiled. "Sounds like a plan." He glanced briefly to Futaba, who still seemed to be mulling the prospect over. "You okay with that Futaba?" he asked.

The redhead grumbled slightly. "W-well... i-if you guys are so excited, I c-could consider going. B-but we'll have to see how this hanging out stuff goes first."

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8/14

Yesterday had involved Futaba getting to know Ryuji, Ann, and Shiho in the comfortable environment of Akira's attic room. It had taken some effort, and a bit of gentle coaxing on Akira's part, but he had managed to steer Futaba into a bit of casual conversation with the trio. After that, bit by bit, she began to relax around them over the span of a day.

Once the ball was rolling, it seemed she could be quite a chatterbox.

Today, however, things were set to be a little more challenging. It was Haru and Shizuka's turn and Shizuka had proposed a solution to dealing with Futaba's lethargy. It involved taking a trip to Shibuya to meet a friend of hers.

While Futaba hadn't been thrilled, she did agree that dealing with her stamina issues would help her greatly. Shizuka making her invisible over the course of the train ride, and their walk through Shibuya, did help immensely.

"S-so you can just do this whenever?" Futaba asked as they walked along, keeping close to the side of the street. Akira could feel the occasional tug of Futaba on his sleeve, making sure that she was never too far away in her invisible state.

"Yep," Shizuka replied. "I mean, usually I only do it to prank people, but I figure it'd help you out
for this. Don't gotta worry about social anxiety if people can't see you, right?"

"Um, Shizu-chan?" Haru asked, glancing briefly to the dark-haired girl. "You didn't tell us much about this friend of yours. Who is he?" she asked.

After a moment, Futaba cleared her throat. "H-he's a Stand-user right? S-someone with some kind of healing power?"

"Oh, you know about that stuff?" Shizuka asked.

"Y-yeah. I overheard you explain your whole family history, and I... spent a lot of time looking at Stand-user websites and forums. They were hard to find, but I managed to learn a lot about them," Futaba explained. The redhead seemed to pause for several moments. "Um, If a Stand can operate in the real world, can a Persona do the same?"

Akira nodded. "Yeah. It takes some effort, and relying on the emotion that allowed you to awaken your Persona in the first place," their leader explained.

The explanation hung in the air for some time, with Futaba quietly following after them. "I see... if a person has been to both worlds, then their mind and body can act as a medium to direct the power from one world to the other. With sufficient willpower, they can exert their will on reality to the extent that they can force their Persona out from that cognitive world."

"Er... y-yeah, that's pretty much it." The girl was smart, scarily so. Good thing she was on their side. "So, Shizuka, this guy... who is he? What can he do? And couldn't we have just gone to Lifeson?"

Shizuka pondered the string of questions for a few quiet moments. "Lifeson's not available right now... I put a call in to the Foundation's CEO after we got done making our plans the other day, and he's apparently gonna be doing some stuff in Chugoku for the next week. But I think this guy might be more efficient for what we're doing today. His name is Tonio Trussardi, and he's from my hometown Morioh," she explained. "Would considered heading to Morioh to meet him, but I figured Futaba wouldn't have been good for the trip." The short redhead made a small noise of confirmation.

"Is he a doctor too?" asked Haru. She rounded a corner with her friend, watching as they entered the parking lot of a rather large and well maintained apartment block. The chatter of the city steadily melted away behind them.

She shrugged. "Not exactly... he's a chef, but his Stand works a lot like Panacea's does. He analyses a person and infuses his Stand into what he cooks, instantly fixing any problems he finds. But uh... Well before we go in, I oughta' warn you guys about something. Lifeson's Stand is clean and painless, but Tonio's... well, while it'll heal you and leave no injuries, it's kinda... horrific," she curtly said.

Her friends stopped behind her. "Aaand... what does that mean?" Akira asked.

"Okay, story time," Shizuka said.

"Oh no..." Akira murmured, pressing his left hand to his face. Something weird or terrifying (or most likely both) was bound to come up here.
"So, one time when I was in Morioh I wound up with two ingrown fingernails. It was gross and kinda uncomfortable, so my big brother's friend suggested trying Tonio's place. Josuke wasn't too crazy about the idea, but I really wanted to see what the fuss was about. So we go in, we sit down, and he spends a good minute examining my nails. After a lil' wait he came out with some specially designed garlic bread," Shizuka explained.

Haru cocked her head slightly. "And that fixed your nails?"

She nodded. "Oh yeah, like... instantly. But the thing with Tonio's Stand is that the way it heals you can be gory. Those two ingrown nails burst right off my fingers... it stung like shit for two seconds before another two quickly grew back in. The pain also left quickly, like it had never been there," she said. "My point is, Futaba, going through with this is gonna sting just a teeny tiny bit."

"Y-you couldn't have said something sooner?!" Futaba squeaked.

"Well... we got you on a train, so that's something," Shizuka said. "I know it's kinda worrying, but I promise the pain is really temporary. And if you're gonna be a thief, you do need some better stamina... it's either the quick way, or spending a lot of time at the gym. Full of sweaty people."

A modest grumble escaped Futaba. "Well... I do want to be a Phantom Thief... a-and getting fatigued is gonna really hamper how useful I can be," Futaba murmured. She sighed loudly. "Fiiine. I'll give him a shot."

Nodding, Shizuka rendered Futaba visible and the group continued up the central staircase until they reached Shizuka's floor. "Simmons is out for the afternoon, so my place is free for this. So lets get to it." She pushed the door open and led the way into the apartment, the group immediately being greeted by the scents of expensive cheese and pepper, coupled with the occasional flicker of garlic.

"Buongiorno!" The voice that greeted them was sweet and accented, reassuring like the tone of a kindly father. A man strode out from the modest kitchen of Shizuka's apartment, dressed in the crisp ivory attire of a chef with a neat hat resting atop his groomed blond locks. His chin was kept exceptionally well shaved, revealing a strong jawline.

Tonio was a man who didn't look a day over thirty, for all the time that had passed since his first visit to Morioh. Either it was a side effect of using Pearl Jam on his own food, or simply by winning the genetics lottery. Either way he looked shockingly young even as he was drawing close to fifty.

"Heya Tonio! Long time no see," she said, managing an eager smile.

"The littlest Joestar, in person," Tonio said, smiling kindly and giving Shizuka a brief bow. "Ah, and these are the friends you were telling me about? So nice to meet you."

"You too! I love your accent Trussardi-san," Haru cheerily said.

Smiling genially, Tonio gave a small shake of his head. "Now now, no need to be so formal. Please, call me Tonio," he replied. The chef paused and glanced between Akira and Haru, specifically focusing on the short redhead shrinking behind the two. His gaze was keen and analytical, drawing in the last bits of information he needed. "I take it you're the Futaba-chan I was told about? Nice to meet you too."
Futaba swallowed gently. "Th-that's me," she softly said. "N-nice to meet you," the redhead added.

"Excellent. Shizuka told me about your lethargy. A few people back in Morioh have had similar problems, and I believe I'm more than capable of helping. Though, I'd usually much rather work from a restaurant. On the plus side, Shizuka's guardian has kept this kitchen exceptionally clean," he explained, glancing to the modest space behind him.

With Shizuka leading the way to the main living area, Akira inspected their surroundings in silence. He would admit to being a little surprised. While this apartment was certainly spacious, and indeed the entire apartment block seemed a little more upscale than the norm, it wasn't the kind of home he expected for a rich girl like Shizuka given how wealthy her father had been. It seemed humble, in a sense.

Futaba took a seat on the couch, with Akira on one side of her and Haru on the other. Shizuka sat down in one armchair at the side of the table and soon got comfy, sniffing the air as Tonio made the finishing touches on the meal.

"Now then, a meal for my special customer," Tonio said as he made his way graciously toward the living area with a steaming plate balanced neatly on his right hand. "Pasta alla norma."

The others leaned in as Tonio set the dish down on the table, setting a fork and knife on either side of the plate. He stood erect, gave a brief bow, and sighed. "It's just not as good as serving in a restaurant."

"Sorry Tonio," Shizuka said.

"Oh, don't worry about it," the blond replied with a dismissive wave of his hand. "It's not so bad. And I did owe you a favour after you helped catch that bar-headed goose in my restaurant."

Akira slowly raised his left brow and glanced to Shizuka. "Bar-headed goose?" he asked.

"Stand user," Shizuka simply replied.

Futaba leaned forward in her crouched position on the couch, adjusting her spectacles as she inspected the food. Golden tubes of pasta cooked to perfection, an even spread of crimson tomato sauce glistening along the material sprinkles of white cheese dotted about the still steaming meal, and some eggplant was dotted throughout the dish. An occasional hint of garlic rose up from the arrangement, tickling Futaba's nose.

"This looks really good," Futaba murmured. "And expensive too." She plucked the fork up and gently skewered one tube of pasta, raising it to her nose and sniffing it slowly. She let her tongue poke out and gave it a gentle prod, her eyes immediately widening. She swallowed it in an instant, her fork stabbing out in rapid sweeps that always came back up with an extra portion for her to down.

"O-oh my," Haru said, her eyes gently widening. "Is it that good?" she asked.

"That and Futaba's table manners are prolly a little lacking," Shizuka said. She knew she wasn't exactly demure when eating alone, and Futaba had been eating alone for some time.

Regardless, Futaba ate with the rapid pace of a starving wolf, each additional bite growing progressively louder as the redhead deftly scooped with her fork. Perhaps most impressive was the
fact that she got through it without leaving a stain on her mouth or dropping anything on her fork. It was as if the pasta had entranced her.

Eventually she had polished off the last of her pasta, leaving streaks of red along her plate. Futaba groaned and flopped back on the couch, her gaze turned up to the ceiling. "Dang Tonio... you should be like, a billionaire." She reached up, lazily scratching her right arm.

"Grazie," Tonio happily said. He took a deliberate step back, watching as Futaba scratched her arms with a rapidly rising intensity.

Haru and Akira swallowed hard, well aware that something horrible was about to happen. "Futaba-chan, a-are you alright?" asked Haru.

"I dunno, I... Just feel kinda itchy all over, a-and-!" The skin of Futaba's arms erupted outward, unfolding like lengths of ribbon to expose the crimson lines of musculature below the surface. She, Akira, and Haru soon devolved into a chorus of screams as the red matter pulsed sharply, with the motions of Futaba's legs making it clear that the same thing was going on there too!

Then, after just a few seconds, her skin rapidly coiled back into place and reformed seamlessly as if nothing had happened. There wasn't even a stray drop of blood to imply anything gory had happened. The screaming slowly died down as the group tried to process the shock of what had just happened.

"Shizuka... what the fuck?!" Akira barked.

"I told you it was grisly!" Shizuka said. "But hey, it worked didn't it?"

After calming her breathing, Futaba inspected herself. "Y-yeah, it... it did! I feel great!" Futaba said, a broad grin breaking out across her face. "I haven't felt this energetic since elementary school! I feel like... l-like I could run for ages!"

Tonio smiled and lifted the stained plate up. "Keep in mind that this isn't permanent, not on its own. You should take up some form of regular exercise so you don't fall back into your former state." Though, running around the Metaverse was likely some of the best exercise available.

Haru breathed a small sigh of relief. "Shizu-chan, you're probably my dearest friend... but your world is incredibly scary at times," she said, wiping her brow.

"No kidding," Akira replied. He paused, realizing that Tonio was staring at him closely.

"I take it you've had some trouble sleeping as of late?" Tonio asked. "I have a perfect cappuccino recipe for that, ideal for flushing any irritants from your eyes and clearing away stress from the muscles."

"I-I'm good, thanks," Akira replied. While Tonio seemed exceptionally nice, he didn't want the guy anywhere near his eyes. Or any part of him, for that matter.

The remainder of their day together consisted of casual chatter, helping Futaba to get used to the other two girls. Though, having had her skin erupt off her body, the prospect of getting to know two new people seemed rather tame. Ultimately it had been a good day, and Futaba felt better now than she had in a long time.
The plastic grocery bag in Naoto's right hand swung heavily at her side as she walked along toward the door of her apartment. Thus far she was starting to wonder if she'd have to hang up her 'detective prince' title to that boy who had been on the news lately.

Following her conversation with Mitsuru, she had spent some time trying to figure out how to access this Metaverse that the Phantom Thieves made use of to no avail. There was nothing abnormal at Shujin, or the museum where Madarame's exhibition had been held. Out of desperation she had even tried entering a TV on two different occasions, to no avail.

She supposed she could ask the Thieves in person, but she doubted they'd be too eager to talk to her. And she supposed she'd have to eat a slice of humble pie now that they had somehow managed to topple Medjed and put an end to their threats. They had clearly gotten outside help for that, but Naoto had no idea who. The closest contact she could think of was the boy who owned the Phantom Afficianado website, one Yuuki Mishima. But, even if he had some clear skill with computers, he didn't seem to have the skill needed to take down a group like Medjed. Not from what she could tell.

Those kids were full of surprises, and they had certainly gone above and beyond if it meant taking out Medjed. Going from perverted teachers, to yakuza extortionists, and now bringing down a major hacking group. Their dedication was admirable, but Naoto had to wonder if they were on the cusp of something much bigger.

Medjed's sudden taunt, whenever she thought about it, struck her as bizarre. The hackers didn't meet conventional morality, true, but outright challenging a similar group and threatening an entire country in the process seemed out of line with their usual MO.

Something else was going on there. But, with the importance of the Arditi and the existence of a Persona-using serial killer, she filed that thought away as being of lesser importance. But the longer she stayed in Tokyo, the stranger things seemed to be.

It didn't help that an election was fast approaching. When all the campaigning started up, all the weirdos would come out of the woodwork. Especially if it was anything like the elections back in Inaba.

And on top of that, there was Yu and Rise's wedding. They hadn't set a date or anything, but knowing Rise they could have one set up any time between now and the next three years. It all depended on what the unpredictable redhead settled on. When it happened she knew she'd have to put this investigation on hold. Her friends came first.

Sighing, Naoto took her keys from her coat pocket and unlocked the door, taking a step inside her modest temporary home. She gingerly set her bag of groceries down in the doorway of her small kitchen area and continued on toward her living area.

First she'd take the time to wash her hands, and then get around to putting her shopping away. After that, she'd-

"Hello detective."

The voice that greeted her was curt and polite, but most definitely unfamiliar. Naoto whirled around sharply, toward the darkened corner of her living area. A man slowly rose from one of her
chairs, sharply dressed and with slicked back hair. A faint glint of light caught the lenses of his
glasses, obscuring them. But even in the dark she could tell he was a foreigner, and gave off an
unnaturally menacing aura.

"I was hoping you and I could have a chat."
"Hey, Josuke," Koichi gave the front page of the newspaper some particular scrutiny, seated neatly on an otherwise blank workbench as he did so. The headline plainly read 'The Arditi Crush Medjed!' and featured a screencap from Medjed's website, the taunting image of the Arditi's logo. "What do you make of these Phantom Thieves?"

Josuke wheeled out from under an elevated red Toyota, humming gently. A few oil stains marked his white tank top and smudged the exposed sections of his musculature. "Those guys out in Tokyo? Eh... I don't know much about 'em Koichi. I haven't exactly been paying much attention to that stuff," he replied.

While years had passed since the deadly summer of 1999, Koichi hadn't changed much. He was still short, his slicked-back grey hair and his youthful features remaining much the same. He was attractive in a few conventional regards, of course, but it came as quite a shock to see him standing next to his bombshell wife.

Of course, those who questioned Yukako's tastes soon found themselves against her wrath.

"Well... it's strange," the sharply dressed young man said, continuing to inspect the headline. "Being able to steal hearts sounds like some kind of Stand ability, right? And this all started around the time Shizuka moved to Tokyo, didn't it?"

Josuke sat up slightly on the floor and shrugged his strong shoulders. "So? That's nothing like Shizuka's Stand ability. And I'm sure Shizuka wouldn't get involved in anything crazy." Koichi looked at him plainly until the pompadour-headed mechanic grunted. "Well, okay, I don't think she'd get involved in something crazy without telling me," he said.

Another figure rolled out from under the other car in the garage, an ice white Honda. Okuyasu sat upright and gave a loud yawn, his left hand rubbing at his eye. "Uwah... I really gotta find a better place to sleep," the towering male said, slumping forward slightly in a sluggish manner. "Did I miss anythin'? What're you guys talkin' about?"

"The Phantom Thieves," Josuke said.

"Oh!" Okuyasu perked up almost instantly. "I totally love those guys! It's like a sentai show in real life!"

Josuke raised his right brow. "Uh... but they haven't appeared physically at all," he said.

"Yeah but that just makes it cool! Like, they're super mysterious and attack from the shadows!" Okuyasu enthusiastically said. "But... how come you guys are talkin' about them?" he asked.

"Koichi thinks my sister is one of them," Josuke said, clearly finding the idea to be silly. The short man scowled slightly. "I didn't say that exactly!"

"Eeeeh? Shizuka? Nah, she's way too sweet and nice to get into that kinda thing!" he said casually. Josuke and Koichi exchanged an uncertain glance. "Although, now that I think about it, an invisible girl is the kinda thing that thieves would want on their side, right? To sneak in and out of places? Oh! What if Shizuka and Rohan are the Phantom Thieves? She helps him sneak up on people, and he steals their hearts with Heaven's Door? I mean, he is in Tokyo right now, and-"

"Eh? We don't actually fix anything. We usually just sit around, pretend to work, and then Crazy Diamond does the fixing," Okuyasu said.

Koichi set the newspaper down on the workbench and took the time to examine the car behind Josuke. "Hey, wait a minute... That Toyota..." He narrowed his eyes and stroked his chin in thought. "I knew I wasn't imagining things, it was in here last week!"

Josuke cocked his head slightly and examined it from over his shoulder. "Yeah. That checkout girl from Kame Yu seems to get a whole lot of car trouble," he replied.

A small groan eased out of Koichi's mouth. Josuke was usually pretty smart, but it seemed he couldn't pick up on why so many of his customers were women. And why those same women seemed to have an unnatural amount of car trouble.

"By the way," Koichi said, deciding to change the subject. "Has anything been going on in Morioh lately? I think I've seen one of those SID guys poking around town."

Josuke and Okuyasu exchanged a look of uncertainty. "Those detective people?" Okuyasu asked, earning a curt nod from Koichi. "I haven't seen one around personally."

"Well, I didn't get a chance to talk to him, so I don't know if he even is SID. But if he is, it means something weird might be going on," he said.

Josuke hummed at the prospect. Usually whenever something was going on in Morioh, he and the others would deal with it. So what would bring the SID out here?

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"Who are you?" Naoto asked firmly, maintaining a cautious position at the far end of her living area. "How did you get in here? The door was-"

"Locked, yes." Her strange intruder raised his right hand, leaving Naoto transfixed as an inky material rolled up his skin until it had entirely engulfed his hand in a strange makeshift glove. A fat eyeball on the back of his hand stared directly at her. "But getting through a lock is easy with a little lateral thinking." The material on his index finger flickered and warped, the dark matter extending outward until it had taken the shape of a defined key.

Naoto felt her eyes narrow slightly. "You're a-"

"Stand user. Indeed. It's good to know that you can see it." Naoto quirked her left eyebrow slightly. "You're definitely not an ordinary detective. I had assumed as much when I first heard of you. Anyone who would be watching those high schoolers with such keen interest wouldn't be an ordinary investigator," he said.

"You know who I am and what I do. And what I'm looking into as well," Naoto said, maintaining her cautious stance. "Just who are you?"

He shrugged faintly. "My name doesn't matter. And if I came here to hurt you, we wouldn't be wasting time chatting right now. I'd rather avoid hurting people unless I'm told to deal with them," the stranger explained.

"So, you're some manner of hitman?" Naoto asked.
"Most commonly. But I don't work for money, if that's what you're thinking. I'm driven by the unseen hand that guides every human, whether they realize it or not. I work to have purpose. To belong." He folded his hands neatly into the pockets of his suit jacket, a gesture that left Naoto more on edge. "Not that you should dwell much on that. I just hate people thinking that I work for money... what's more important is you."

Naoto frowned. For as calm and amicable as this man seemed, she knew things could change at the drop of a hat. She was poised, set to summon Yamato Sumeragi as soon as the need arose. "I'm looking into the Phantom Thieves on behalf of the Tokyo poli-"

"No," the stranger pointedly said. "Our network stretches wide, we know nobody official hired you. If that were the case, I wouldn't be here," he said. "Although, having had some time to explore this modest abode of yours, I only found one thing of note." With a deliberate slowness, he reached into his suit. Naoto remained tense, only to relax ever so slightly as he pulled an envelope out.

She recognised it quickly enough. When this whole business had started, Mitsuru had arranged a document detailing the basic information they had on the Phantom Thief situation. Nothing inside the envelope was particularly incriminating... but the Kirijo Group logo in the upper right corner definitely stuck out.

"I'm wondering," he began, idly inspecting the paper. "What kind of interest does the Kirijo Group have in the Phantom Thieves? Their headquarters isn't even located in Tokyo, yet it seems they've been wrapped up in the same furor."

Naoto remained silent. "You've essentially admitted that you're a criminal, so why should I tell you anything?" she asked in a firm tone. "I've seen many criminals in my lifetime, and murderers always give off a similar vibe. And yours is one of the most wicked I've ever faced," she said.

He remained impassive, seeming disinterested in her accusations. "I have no interest in hurting you. I'm simply wondering why they're investigating. It certainly seems outside their wheelhouse."

Whoever this man was, Naoto had no intention of telling him. Not when he was a criminal, and the implication that even the police had some ties to him. He was looking into the Phantom Thieves too, and had his own Persona (What had he called it? A 'Stand'?), no doubt he was exceptionally dangerous. Could he have been the serial killer those kids were talking about?

Naoto's eyes widened slightly. Those kids. Was he after them too? She thought back to Adachi, when they encountered him in the bowels of the TV world. The fear she had felt in the pit of her stomach. There was something very different about fighting a remorseless killer, compared to a near-mindless shadow. It was something deeply unnerving. Had they faced anything like that? Fought a living person with criminal intentions?

"If you surrender peacefully," Naoto began. "And then give us the information on who you work for, then I guarantee you'll be treated fairly."

The stranger quirked his brow and neatly slid the envelope back into his jacket. "I told you before, I'm working so that I have a place to belong. And I won't discard that for anyone." His eyes narrowed slightly, and Naoto felt the menacing aura around him growing more intense. "Now I'll give an offer to you. Tell me about who sent you, and why they hired you, and I'll leave without laying a finger on you."

"I'm no stranger to violence," Naoto firmly retorted.

The stranger moved sharply, drawing a neatly folded triangle of paper from his pocket and flicking
it her way. It was only by pure reflex that Naoto thought to dodge, weaving partially to the side as the sharpened edge met the shoulder of her navy peacoat. The tip barely scraped her, but it went through the fabric as if it were butter and left a long gash in the fabric. Fortunately it hadn't met her skin.

Yamato Sumeragi appeared at her side, the pixie-sized figure dashing forward with her lance outstretched. He seemed momentarily surprised at the small scale of her Persona, but knew better than to let his guard down. "Painkiller!" he gave a sharp flick of his right wrist, a half-folded sheet of paper flying out from the inside of his sleeve. He swung it up sharply, the fold colliding with Yamato Sumeragi's lance and rattling the floor beneath them. Sparks erupted from the point of impact.

'What kind of power is that?' Naoto asked herself, the first of several thoughts bubbling to the forefront of her impressive brain. 'If he touches paper, it becomes as tough as steel? But with how easily he throws and swings it around, it must maintain roughly the same weight... I've never seen a Persona with an ability like that. Unless... a Stand is supposed to be something different?'

Their blades clashed several more times before a hard upward slash of Yamato Sumeragi's lance knocked the paper from his hand and sent the stranger skidding a few inches backward. He adjusted quickly and pulled something from his back trouser pocket: Another folded triangle.

He flicked it sharply, aiming low, the edge cutting through her left trouser leg with the blade leaving a thin bleeding scar along her calf. Naoto hissed through her teeth and staggered backward, quickly directing her Persona to intercept another incoming projectile and smash it away.

The pixie-sized Persona held her lance out, a series of golden lances abruptly appearing around her much to the stranger's shock. With uncanny swiftness he reached into his right coat pocket and threw several balled-up napkins into the air, the paper rapidly unfurling as the lances of energy rocketed forward.

A volley of flashes lit up the room as the two forces collided, the burning waves evaporating the makeshift shielding with the blessed energy vanishing in the process. A few burnt scraps floated aimlessly down toward the floor.

It seemed that the paper was not only razor sharp, but exceptionally durable too. Like wafer thin plates of steel. Her bless attacks had been powerful enough to rattle the room around them, but his paper had been dense enough to absorb the brunt of the impacts.

In an instant the stranger burst through the smoke, his gloved palm suddenly hitting Yamato Sumeragi. A pained gasp burst from Naoto's mouth and grew far more intense as he powered forward and slammed the Persona into the wall. The incredible strength of his body carried him forward, the wall behind her cracking and blistering under the pressure. The black matter of the stranger's gloves hardened, small points protruding along his palms and adding a needling discomfort that ran through Naoto's whole body as the points pressed into her Persona.

Yamato Sumeragi gave a sudden push, displaying her own impressive strength and sending him back a step much to his own shock. Pressing the advantage, the pixie lunged forward and slammed into the stranger's shoulder, knocking him off his feet.

It knocked him back and left him landing hard on his side, a pained growl hissing out through his teeth. He forced himself to one knee and quickly worked to rise up, seeming to quickly get over his shock.

While her foe scrambled to regain his footing, Naoto swiftly reached into her peacoat. Pain ran
through her body, a throb of discomfort resonating through her muscles. It had been a long time
since she had been in a proper fight, and the pain was all too real. In a flash she drew her gun and
aimed it level toward him, the light glinting along the dark metal of the Nambu M60.

"Stop!" Naoto barked.

The stranger lunged upward, raising his left hand toward his face with the inky material swimming
over his skin. Two loud bangs echoed through her apartment, both rounds slamming into the
stranger's chest and leaving him smacking into the cracked wall. The noise of hail hitting a tin roof
was just barely audible through the gunfire. He gasped sharply, looking as if he had just been
kicked by a mule. But, much to Naoto's shock, he swiftly righted himself and went into another
lunge.

A third bang filled the air, this shot aimed toward his right shoulder. This time a spatter of blood
painted the wall behind him as she grazed him, a harsh snarl rising in the stranger's throat. He
weaved away, his left hand vanishing toward his belt and swiftly retrieving something that the
bluenette just barely caught a glimpse of.

He swung his arm back out and flicked another projectile toward her: An origami throwing star. It
knifed through the air and rapidly tore through the sleeve on Naoto's right arm, the bladed edge
leaving a long cut up toward her elbow. She cried out, stumbling until she hit the wall, and fought
hard to recover as quickly as she could.

She clutched her bloodied forearm with her left hand and raised her Nambu, taking aim through
partially blurring vision. She became faintly aware of her front door slamming against the wall, her
eyes instantly being drawn to the swinging doorway. He was gone, vanished into the night.

The bluenette hissed loudly, setting her handgun down on the low table. Things were getting
serious, and were bound to get even worse. Whoever that man was, he was incredibly dangerous
and likely didn't work alone. And he was looking into the Phantom Thieves, it seemed.

A shuddering sigh escaped Naoto, the adrenaline slowly fading. She could have died tonight...

Trying to push past the pain lingering in her body, she quickly pulled her phone from her pocket.
She needed to get in touch with Mitsuru, ASAP.

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Lars' breathing was heavy as he came to a halt on a poorly lit corner. All the stores ahead of them
were aged and weathered, many of them closed for the night, while the others were mostly
ignored. He had some privacy here.

And a bleeding assassin was just the kind of man who needed privacy.

Panting, he reached into his trouser pocket and brushed past a few more folded weapons until he
found his phone and pulled it out. It was rare that he had to report a failure, but between getting hit,
and the attention the detective had likely brought to her apartment...

Lars grimaced, ignoring the burning sensation in his shoulder as best he could. He was left waiting
on the line for several seconds until there was an answer. "Ah, you're earlier than I expected. How
did it go?"

"Not... perfectly," he admitted through pained breaths. "The girl was faster than I anticipated, and
her Stand was like none I've ever seen before. It certainly caught me off guard. I... got sloppy," he
remarked. He usually liked to research his targets as best he could. But this girl, she was an
unknown factor. That was the biggest reason why her investigation was so concerning.

"What? What happened? Are you alright?"

"I got shot, but-"

"What?!" Lars winced slightly. "God, just... where are you now? I'll send you a pickup."

Lars swallowed. "I'm near Ozumi's, I'll meet your driver there. I got blindsided by her Stand, and she managed to draw her gun while I was righting myself... between getting shot, and the racket she made, I had to leave. Didn't want to run the risk of being caught out by the police, and all the attention that would have drawn..." He leaned back against the wall, digging his free hand into the wall to maintain his balance. The masonry cracked slightly at Painkiller's touch. "I did learn something though, something very interesting."

"Hrm... well, do tell," Mr. A replied.

"From what I gathered, she's working on behalf of the Kirijo Group. I don't know why, dealing with the paranormal seems outside their usual interests... But, it's definitely the best lead we have," Lars remarked.

"The Kirijo Group? They're some kind of trading company, right? But they also have interests in medical research... Hrm, interesting. We'll talk about this in more detail later. For now, go meet the driver and get patched up. Suchong will have you better in no time. I'm gonna pull some strings in the police department, make sure this incident gets shuffled around as quickly as possible."

"Thank you, A-sama." When his employer hung up, Lars sighed and pushed himself off the wall. The burning in his shoulder was getting worse, and he could feel blood hardening on his shirt. It only added to his discomfort.

Had he been a little quicker, he could have knocked the gun from her hand before she even got that first shot off. And if he had managed that, his odds for incapacitating her would have dramatically increased.

But dealing in hypotheticals would do him no good now. That woman, and whoever she was working for, already struck him as dangerous. Between them and the Phantom Thieves, the leadup to the election was bound to be tense.

He walked into the dark of the mounting night. His workload never seemed to lessen.

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8/18

By now, Futaba had had a chance to get to know most people on the team. But, with a few of them being kept busy by other commitments, they couldn't get back to business quite yet. With nothing else going on, and with Futaba having a specific livestream she wanted to watch, Akira decided to attend to other matters.

Specifically he settled on hanging out with Ann, feeling that she was close to a breakthrough. It had ultimately been an eventful afternoon, with her inviting him along to another one of her shoots.

It turned out that Mika, one of Ann's rivals, had been manipulating things behind the scenes. She had been causing other models to miss their appointments by giving them false information, posing as an agency official to do so. They had arrived just in time to see an official from the company
scolding her for it.

While Akira had no interest in the politics of modelling, he would admit that he was impressed when Ann plainly told Mika that, despite Mika's popularity, she was going to work hard and earn the top spot above her fair and square. She had certainly come a long way from viewing modelling as just a hobby, her newfound passion in the profession quite clear to Akira.

Even Mika had been impressed by Ann's newfound conviction. They came to agreement that, from that point on, any competition between them would be done fairly. Skill would be what decided their future.

Akira had stood by to watch the shoot, finding himself rather entertained by the show for as long as it went on. Once the two had wrapped up for the day, Ann and Akira headed to the cafe on Shibuya's main street, looking to grab some tea while they chatted.

"You know," Ann glanced up from the steaming cup of fruit tea clutched neatly in her pale palms. "Back when I first met Shiho, when she became my first real friend, I realized how important personal relationships are. They're something to be treasured... I've been thinking about that a lot lately. Shiho, you, the others in our group..."

Akira adjusted his glasses, reclining into his side of the booth. "How do you mean?" he asked.

"Well... when this Phantom Thief stuff started, I mainly got into it to avenge Shiho, and then I kind of got wound up in helping Yusuke before I really knew what was going on. It might sound horrible, but there were times where I wondered why I was sticking around as a... well you know, when I didn't really have a personal stake anymore. But then, seeing how invested you, Shiho... even Ryuji got invested in it, I guess my outlook started to change."

Akira nodded along. "There's no shame in feeling uncertain. But... do you still feel that way now?" he asked. If Ann wanted to leave, he wouldn't try and stop her... but it would definitely suck to lose one of their founding members.

Ann shook her head. "Oh, no... I don't feel that way now. Working with all of you, helping the people who really needed us like Yusuke, the people extorted by Kaneshiro, Futaba, and all the people who made requests on the forums... stuff like that gradually got me more interested in what we were doing. It felt good to do the right thing, to give people courage and stop corruption. And I guess..." she trailed off, sipping at her tea as she contemplated her words.

"Hm? Something up?" Akira asked.

"Sorry. Speaking from the heart is weird, and I'm kinda worried I'll sound dumb," she admitted with a small laugh. "But... well when we first started hanging out, I told you that I wanted to make my heart stronger. Before we dealt with Kamoshida, I guess I was living my life passively. And doing that, well... you saw where that got me."

As she said this, Akira sighed faintly. "Ann, come on. What happened to you and Shiho, with Kamoshida... that wasn't your fault." He had said as much the first time they actually spoke to each other, when he and Ryuji had been trying to expose Kamoshida.

"I know, I know," Ann assured him. She smiled faintly. "But... that's not how I want to be anymore. I want to follow Shiho's example. Heck, I want to be like you, and even Ryuji... that knucklehead." Even as she said this, she maintained her smile. "Whatever I put myself to, be it as a model or as a... you-know-what, I want to be the best at it as I can be. Helping people, inspiring them and giving courage... it's the kind of thing that feels really good. I'll face myself head on, and
help people however I can."

"Heh... you've really grown a lot Ann. I don't think you need to worry about making your heart stronger," Akira said.

"You really think so?" asked Ann.

And indeed, inside Ann's heart, a change was underway. The final chains that tethered her shattered like glass, unable to hold her back. Carmen's spectral form glowed white hot and vanished, replaced by something entirely new.

This new Persona was tall and black from end to end, with an hourglass build. She had three sets of eyes, two pairs instead of a face while the third were exceptionally large and protruded from the sides of her head like grotesque horns. Silver spikes adorned her dark dress, splashes of colour against the dark. A long crimson cape flowed from her back, marked by steel prongs like the wing of a bat. In each hand she held a long chain, both ends sporting cartoonish canine heads with menacing golden eyes and snapping jaws.

Carmen was gone. In her place stood Hecate: The triplicate goddess of magic.

Ann blinked as she snapped back to reality. "W-whoa, this is... this is my new power?" she asked. Akira glimpsed Ann's new Persona hovering over her before she vanished from view, the sight putting a smile on his face. "Just like with Ryuji huh?"

Akira chuckled slightly before downing the last of his tea. "Looks like. Glad I could help," he replied.

"Well... I can't guarantee I'll be perfect, or that I won't mess up from time to time... so I might still need your help Akira," she said. "But... I want you to be able to depend on me too. You do so much for all of us but... sometimes it feels like you need support too. So..." she trailed off, trying her best to articulate her point.

"I definitely appreciate it," Akira replied. Having people he could depend on, it was a nice feeling. A world away from his hometown. Truthfully, Akira didn't know what he'd do when the time came to leave Tokyo. But... he had no intention of stepping out just yet.
The door of the safe room opened out into a vast chamber of criss-crossing walkways positioned over a variety of different conveyer belts. Futaba took a moment to inspect the wall nearest to her, paying specific attention to the buttons and assorted features that were plainly visible. The aesthetic was certainly familiar.

"So this is Okumura's Palace, right?" Futaba asked. Then, of her own volition, she idly started humming the opening notes of Imperial March.

"Oh my god she is perfect," Shizuka flatly said. "Hey, if things don't work out with Sojiro, can I adopt her?"

Akira shook his head. "No. For several reasons."

"Just don't feed me after midnight!" Futaba chimed.

"Oh my god Joker please!" Shizuka hastily added.

Ann cleared her throat, catching the attention of the others. "Since you brought up codenames, we really should give her one too," the blonde pointed out. The others wanted to slap themselves for not noticing that sooner.

"Well, there was a heavy Egyptian theme in her Palace... how about Pharaoh?" Haru suggested.

Futaba shook her head. "I'll curse you."

"Alibaba?" Yusuke suggested.

"Veto. Too many syllables," Ryuji said.

Makoto rolled her eyes. "Oh come on it's not that many," the brunette said.

While the others banded some options around, Futaba stroked her chin and felt a wicked grin break out across her face. "I'm acting as your guide, right? My Necronomicon gives me the power to oversee a Palace and any creatures inside it. In that case, you guys could call me... Oracle."

The others pondered the notion for a few moments, before all seeming to nod in agreement. For Futaba, it fit perfectly. "I wonder if that's a reference to something... Babs," Shizuka said.

"Maaaaybe," Futaba coyly replied.

"There's two of them now," Ann said.

Eventually Akira strode forward. "Alright everyone, let's get to it. From what Queen's said, it seems we're relatively close to the Treasure from here. So Oracle, let's see what you can do," the dark-haired thief said.
The glow of Futaba's thick goggles intensified, followed by a spectral keyboard materializing beneath her raised right hand. A black tentacle appeared from the ether at her feet and abruptly plugged into the wall, filling the interior of her goggles with strings of alien text.

"Oooh. Queen was right, it is close. I can see the possible routes to the treasure from here. Boy, this module of the station sure is big... Oh, this might be the best one!" Futaba said, before closing off the extensions of her Persona and leading the way with the others close behind.

"Dang, you could learn all that from just a few seconds? You're the best navigator ever Oracle!" Ryuji said enthusiastically. Morgana made a small grumbling sound from his shorter position.

Their journey took them progressively deeper into the bowels of the station, walking through progressively more narrow corridors. Occasionally their progress would be halted by a random patrol of bots, but they were ultimately dealt with swiftly due to the sheer number of Phantom Thieves present.

All the while, Futaba would occasionally note how far they had left to travel, or outline the shape of the coming chambers. Necronomicon could give her a shocking degree of insight from only a brief scan, and already she had managed to impress the group. There was no telling how her power would develop as they went on.

It didn't take long, however, for something else to obstruct their progress. They entered a cramped chamber, and as soon as they were through the door one of the floorplates opened up. A small hose-like object poked out of the opening, generating a pale blue hologram of a man. To scale. He was clad in an armoured black suit, an array of buttons and dials dotting the chestplate of his suit. His head was covered by a thick glass fishbowl, a long cape flowing down from his shoulders.

Haru immediately recoiled at the sight of the dark-haired man.

"F-Father?" Haru gasped.

His sharp glare settled on her features. "So, the reports are correct. You really have been running around with human garbage, causing trouble on this station," he remarked in a low growl.

Shizuka examined Kunikazu's Vader suit. "Someone should sue," she idly said, earning a brief nod from some of the others.

Kunikazu ignored the others for now, his holographic visage focused solely on Haru. "You're an Okumura daughter, and should have more self-respect. I'm giving you this one final chance, out of the kindness of my heart. Abandon these dregs and fall in line," he firmly said.

Haru's shock quickly turned to anger, her brow knit tight. "Self-respect?! You dare lecture me on self-respect, while you're making me throw my life away for your own gain?!" the strawberry blonde shouted. "And now you want me to 'fall in line'? I'm not going to kowtow anymore!"

His eyes narrowed intensely. "Your own happiness, the wellbeing of others, that's all inconsequential if it gets in the way of my rise. I've ended lives in the pursuit of my political paradise. Do you really think I'll hesitate to use you as a bargaining tool?" he asked.

The others tensed. It seemed their hunch was correct, Okumura had been involved in some deeply shady business after all. "So it's true... you've been using the Black Mask to take care of your business rivals, haven't you?" Akira asked.
Kunikazu glanced to him, his expression bearing the kind of disdain a man would normally reserve for a particularly large insect. "And what if I have? What difference would it make to you, boy? I've become fortunate enough to fall in with the most powerful group in the nation, who have graciously provided me their best asset in return for my own contributions. You brats are messing with powers you can't even begin to comprehend."

Haru bit her bottom lip. The fact that her father had a Palace in the first place was already a sign that something very wrong was going on with him, but the reality seemed far worse than she had dared fear. People were dead, because of her own father.

"Who do you mean? Who are you working with?" Makoto asked, narrowing her eyes behind the heavy iron of her mask.

"It doesn't concern mere children like you. My offer for leniency was directed at Haru, not you urchins. And even if you defeat me, you'll never make a difference," Kunikazu mockingly said, crossing his arms over his chest.

Ryuji grit his teeth. "Keep dreamin' asshole! We're all about changing the world! The odds have been stacked against us for years, but we don't back down!"

"Hmph," the disdain became even more apparent on the Shadow's face. "Since you've spurned my offer Haru, expect no mercy from me. You should have done your duty as my daughter." The hologram flickered out of existence, with the plate in the floor closing shut soon after.

"What a piece of-" Shiho caught herself, clearing her throat in embarrassment. "Sorry Noir."

Haru shook her head slightly. "No, you may well be right. If my Father really has stooped to killing people for his own ambitions, then there's no need to be polite for my sake," she curtly replied. "Does my own Father truly think so little of me? Am I really just a pawn in his eyes?" she asked.

The others shifted uncomfortably. Much as they wanted to lie and reassure her, the existence of Kunikazu's Palace and everything found within was rather revealing of his innermost thoughts. That likely was how the old man really felt about his daughter, even if he would at least have the tact not to say as much outright to Haru's face.

"It may well be the case," Yusuke remarked with a sad sigh. "Being perfectly honest, I know exactly what you're feeling. My own Fa... With Madarame, I saw all his twisted innermost thoughts. I saw how he viewed me and the world around him... The truth hurt me more than anything else," he explained. "But I came to a realization. There was no point in letting my life be dictated by the views of such a man. If he truly was so twisted at heart, then his view ultimately mattered very little to me," he explained.

Haru smiled gently as she soaked in Yusuke's words. "Thank you Fox, you're too kind. I believe you may be right. If Father thinks so lowly of me, then I shouldn't let his feelings hinder me further."

"Glad to hear it," Akira happily said, giving the heiress a smile. "I'm sure your Dad was a good man at some point, he just got bent out of shape by greed... and once we change that twisted heart of his, we can make an honest man out of him again." After he had confessed his crimes and did the appropriate amount of time for them, he added internally. "You fine with going changing his heart?" Akira asked.
After willing the flutter in her heart to die down, Haru nodded firmly. "This has to end. And I can't allow my Father to get any worse. With how he treats me, his employees, and his competitors... I shudder to think what he may do if thing deteriorate further."

"Let's keep moving then. I'm sure we're near the treasure by now," Akira said, pushing forward and walking deeper into the Palace.

Their journey took them progressively deeper in, and as they went along they all were left to ponder the implications of what Shadow Okumura had told them. He had hardly denied that he made use of Black Mask, confirming their theory that he had been using the enigmatic killer to hobble the competition. More than that, Black Mask was apparently just one part of something much bigger.

But what did he mean by that? Was he tied to Mr. A? If Okumura's ambition was politics, then the worst prospect was that Black Mask in the pocket of some crooked politician.

"It's entirely possible," Futaba said, leading them down a sleek steel ramp that led toward the entryway of a tall corridor. "Okumura wants to get into politics, and he's trying to make his company as big and wealthy as possible so he can look good. But even with that kind of good press, he still needs some inside help to make it as a politician," Futaba said.

Haru nodded. "That's why Sugimura is involved in all this, with the connections his father has," she said.

The short redhead nodded. "I had a feeling it was something like that when the others were talking about this place. But, even crazier, is... well, my Mother's research." The others leaned in slightly as Futaba continued on down the hallway, keeping an even pace with her and their leader. "She was working at a government research center, hush hush stuff. As in, nobody outside of the government would know about her research. So if that's why she was targeted..."

"Holy shit," Ryuji murmured. "If we're on the right track, then this really is something huge."

"We shouldn't get too hasty. Having answers would be great and all, but we're really only working on conjecture. It'd be best if we could get the answers directly from Okumura... either the real one confessing, or his Shadow spilling the beans," Shiho said.

Yusuke nodded. "Nemesis has a point. The puzzle pieces are starting to fit together, but we mustn't act in haste. If we are indeed on the cusp of something big, it would make sense to pace ourselves. This may only just be the beginning."

"For a man who rarely watches movies, you certainly know your way around a cliche," Sergio teased.

The group came to a halt in a wide open chamber, the walls exceptionally far apart while the roof was massively tall. A glowing miasma of warping light was left hovering on a large platform in the center of the room.

Akira smiled slightly. "The treasure. Alright everyone, we've secured our route. Guess we're set to go on the heist."

Ann hummed and inspected the floating object. "I'm happy to get going on this heist and all, but..."
how're we gonna get away from here when we grab it? This place is a little different than the other Palace we've done. We're in space, for one thing. And this place is even huger than normal for another," the blonde said.

"It resembles space, but there's air outside this station. Thinner than conventional atmosphere, but we should be able to survive it in the catbus," Futaba said, pointing to Morgana.

"My time to shine?" the feline coyly asked.

"The nearest exit point is beyond that door," Futaba added, pointing to the far end of the room. "I spied it with Necronomicon in my original scan. It's sturdy, but enough raw power will break through it. Alternatively," Futaba pointed skyward, to the array of catwalks and doorways near the roof of the chamber. "Diabolik could catapult us up there to one of those doors. But that'd be slower."

Akira nodded. "Guess we'll be ready when the time comes. Noir, we're going to need you to deliver the calling card. You should probably have Milady hold it so you don't leave any evidence. Think you'll be fine with that?"

"I'll get it done. We'll be set to go tomorrow."

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"I'm not exactly poor or anything... Hell, that Pink Argus stuff has given me enough money to live on for years to come, but..." Yukari craned her neck slightly to examine the tower before them. The outer walls were a stark white shade, and the windows looked as if they had never known grime in the entirety of their existence. She couldn't even imagine the cost to rent an apartment here, let alone the penthouse that Mitsuru owned. And to think, it was just one of many homes in Japan that she could call her own. "The difference between my money and Mitsuru's... it's like the gulf between earth and the moon."

The blonde at her side smiled faintly, looking up toward the top of the complex. The optics of her unnaturally blue eyes began to magnify the image until she had a clear look at the apex. "It is rather nice," Aigis casually said. A chilly wind blew the hem of the dark overcoat she was wearing. While the Kirijo Group's robotics had grown more advanced, covering up the mechanical portions of her legs, hands, and shoulders, she still preferred to dress somewhat conservatively. "Though I'd still say the manor on Yakushima is the nicest of the Kirijo homes," the android said.

The same breeze sent a shiver up Yukari's spine, causing her to pull the lapels of her pink leather jacket tighter together. "G-geez it's kinda chilly tonight, considering the month... Come on, let's get inside." The brunette led on into the lobby, with Aigis casually following behind. The doorman had been expecting them and let them pass onto the VIP elevator without protest.

The ride was a quick one, with the doors rolling open to reveal the sleek hardwood interior of the expansive apartment. The walls were a deep indigo shade, and what few furnishings they could readily see were rather plush and modern looking. A few expensive paintings could be seen hanging on some of the walls.

"Mitsuru?" Yukari called.

She and Aigis continued on into the penthouse until they reached the living area, whereupon they found the wealthy redhead herself, seated neatly in an armchair. Akihiko was seated in the chair on
the opposite end of the low glass coffee table, while Naoto was on the far right seat of the plush couch.

Aigis smiled slightly at this sight. "This reminds me a bit of our meeting room, back in the SEES dorm," the blonde said, stifling a tiny laugh.

"I suppose that part of my past will always be with me," Mitsuru said, the left corner of her lips pulling into a coy smile. "It's even influencing me in how I decorate my home."

"Should we get down to business?" Akihiko asked.

"Right," Yukari replied, taking a seat on the couch beside Naoto. Aigis took the final seat. "Are you alright Naoto? I heard that guy managed to do some damage," the brunette added.

Naoto nodded. "I was... perhaps not as spry as I should have been. Fortunately, I had a good healer on hand," she explained, nodding toward Mitsuru.

"It's been some time, but Artemisia is still quite capable of healing wounds," Mitsuru added.

"But getting onto the task at hand, the fact that I was attacked at all is a rather worrying omen. The man in question wanted to know why the Kirijo Group was looking into the Phantom Thieves, as if my mere presence was an unknown factor in something much bigger." Naoto sighed and netted her hands together under her chin, leaning forward slightly. "I think we can agree that the Phantom Thieves themselves are well-meaning kids, driven by their own sense of justice. Given what we know of some of them, I can't blame them for not having much faith in the authorities... but it also seems clear that they might soon be getting in over their heads."

"Did you get any information out of him?" asked Yukari.

The bluenette shook her head. "Nothing much, other than the implication that the Tokyo police are corrupt." Naoto felt herself tensing slightly as she recalled the fight. "His power was different to anything I've seen before. Any piece of paper he touched became razor sharp and as dense as steel, while retaining the light weight of paper. He called it a 'Stand.'"

Mitsuru hummed faintly in thought. "I believe I've heard of that before. At least vaguely. My Grandfather and Ikutski, both of them heavily invested themselves into researching extranormal phenomena. While they settled on Shadows, some of their notes did reference the existence of a sort of psychic force they referred to as a 'Stand.' There have apparently been examples of them appearing all around the world," she explained.

"So it's something different than a Persona?" Aigis asked. Mitsuru nodded.

"From what little I could see in their notes. Neither of them focused much on the power before getting engrossed in Shadow research," Mitsuru said. "Though... there may be a group who has some knowledge. The Speedwagon Foundation, the same group that my Grandfather gained his robotics knowledge from," she added, gesturing briefly to Aigis. "They've apparently had a tendency to appear at the sites of strange occurrences. More than that, we've had sightings of their vehicles at several Shadow Operatives investigations. It may be a long shot, but it's worth investigating."

Yukari cleared her throat. "So... should Naoto be concerned about a police investigation or anything? I mean, Naoto did fire her gun in the city," she said.
Mitsuru shook her head. "No. The owner of that building is in my employ and has obfuscated a good deal of knowledge about the tenant of that apartment. But, more than that... Naoto's hunch about police corruption may be correct. The investigation into her apartment ended surprisingly quickly. Far too quickly for an incident such as that," Mitsuru explained. The news was quite unsettling to all of them.

"Shit..." Akihiko muttered. "A serial killer with a Persona, some paranormal criminals working with the police... we really do owe those Phantom Thieves, we probably never would have heard a peep about any of this if they hadn't been working away in the shadows. We should really try to get in touch with them."

Mitsuru nodded in agreement. "Indeed. But not just yet. We should keep a low profile for the time being, try and gain a solid understanding of what Stands are. Speaking of which, I believe the Speedwagon Foundation may explain Shizuka's involvement in all this, though I'm sure moral outrage motivated her to some extent. The story goes that the Foundation's founder, Robert E. O. Speedwagon, helped pull himself from the gutters of London thanks to the kindness of a British aristocrat, Jonathan Joestar."

Yukari blinked. "Wait, his name was REO Sp-"

"The Foundation have been close to the Joestar family ever since, but with how many strange occurrences have been tied to their family... I believe their family might be strongly tied to the supernatural too. Even an adopted daughter would likely be entrusted with a good deal of knowledge for her own protection," the redhead explained.

"So that's it..." Naoto remarked. "Between the Shadow Operatives and whatever group the Speedwagon Foundation may be running... I suppose it's only natural for a steady stream of paranormal groups to crop up."

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8/21

Kunikazu Okumura was perhaps best described as a joyless man, and he seemed particularly joyless this morning. The dark haired man reclined in his chair, the morning sun filling his expansive living room, while he regarded the small crimson card in his hand. Okumura had dressed in a sharp suit for the day ahead, but this bout of rubbish had slowed his progress thus far.

Haru had positioned herself just at the top of the stairway, listening in carefully. She had left the card in with Milady's unseen hands, just to make sure there was no physical evidence, but there was no way of knowing how her father would take this. She just had to ensure that she saw him read it.

"'Sir Kunikazu Okumura, the great profiteering sinner of greed. Your success and global fame exists due to the tyranny you rain over your employees. Thus, we have decided to make you confess all your crimes with your own mouth. From Arditi, the Phantom Thieves of Hearts.'"

Kunikazu gave a derisive snort and rose from his chair. Haru's eyes widened as reality flickered around him, and for just a moment her father replaced with the black-clad visage of his Shadow. The older man drew his phone from his pocket and quickly dialed a number.

"Threatening me eh? Not when I'm so close to my vision," Kunikazu said to himself, grimacing in
annoyance. "We'll see how those self-righteous punks feel when the police get wind of this. Threatening a private citizen? I don't think so!" The bespectacled man was practically steaming in annoyance, but he managed to at least partially contain his anger for the time being.

Haru slowly made her way back upstairs. Well, it seemed the calling card had had an effect. All they had to do was get through this mission without a hitch, and they'd make her Father a decent man again.

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Sae's office was about as orderly as the woman herself. As Akechi entered through the stark oak door, his expensive shoes walking along her soft carpet, he could instantly take in everything and note the complete lack of clutter present. Her heavy desk, her polished green filing cabinets, her modest bookshelf... everything was kept neat and tidy. Even the computer, keyboard, and papers on top of her desk were well organized.

The brunette glanced up from her paperwork. "Akechi? Is something wrong?" she asked, leaning back ever-so-slightly.

Akechi smiled pleasantly and took a few more steps inside. "Apologies if I'm intruding on your work Sae-san. I simply wanted to drop by and give you a gift," the young detective politely said.

She raised a brow curiously. "Hm? What for? My birthday was some months ago, and Christmas is still a good deal away," she replied.

Akechi presented a long black box to her, chuckling faintly. "It's to congratulate you on your last case. Another victory in your unbroken streak is the kind of thing that requires some kind of celebration, wouldn't you agree?"

"Well... I'm not sure I endorse your logic, but I appreciate your intentions." Sae reached out with her left hand and slowly slipped the lid from the box. The contents made her hum curiously.

It was a long and thin steel blade, sharp on both sides, with an expensive looking leather handle. Sae examined it closely, particularly the way light seemed to glint along the polished steel of the blade. At a glance she could tell it was quite pricey.

"Trying to tell me something Akechi?" she asked with a small laugh.

"Nothing so sinister, I assure you," Akechi said, laughing in turn. "It's a letter opener. I saw that your old one had grown rather dull and... well, I know they're old fashioned but I feel they make for a fine symbol of class," Akechi explained. "This one's Swiss. Supposedly indestructible, if you believe marketing blurbs."

Sae smiled faintly. "I'm sure I'll get a good deal of use out of it regardless. Thank you," Sae said, slowly closing the box up. "Our paperwork is about to mount up absurdly in the coming weeks, after all."

"Hm?" Akechi blinked slightly. "How do you mean?"

"You haven't heard?"

The detective shook his head. "I was out for a little while, retrieving that package. Given my
criticism of the Phantom Thieves, I've become something of a pariah and need to be a little discreet in public. Why, has something happened?" Akechi asked.

Sae nodded. "The Phantom Thieves sent a calling card to the president of Okumura Foods a few hours ago, marking him as their newest target. He called the police over the threat, but... well, already it appears there was nothing found on the card itself," the brunette explained.

A faint shiver ran through Akechi's body, while he worked to maintain a casual air and a friendly smile. "O-oh my, that's quite a shock. And so soon after their public tussle with Medjed too," he said. "I hadn't heard anything about President Okumura on the news. It's certainly bizarre that they would target him so suddenly."

"Who can say? Operating with the theory that the Arditi are a gang of juveniles, it's entirely possible that they're simply going for such a high profile target for a youthful thrill ride. With how they've escalated since Kamoshida, I suppose the rush of besting Medjed has already died down," Sae reasoned. She paused, examining Akechi carefully. "Are you alright? You seem a little... ill," Sae said.

That was an understatement. Akechi wanted to scream, but managed to have enough restraint to keep smiling. "Do I? Well, I suppose my breakfast wasn't the most wholesome," Akechi replied. He cleared his throat. "Well ah, I should be off Sae-san. I have a good deal of business to attend to, after all."

"Ah? Well, I'll see you later then."

As soon as he left Sae's office and started moving through the tight corridors, his pleasant expression turned far more grim. That news was definitely worrying. No, far beyond worrying. Just what the hell was going on?!

He had taken his eyes off the Phantom Thieves for just a short while, allowing more important projects to occupy him these previous weeks. But now it was as if the Thieves were reading ahead in the script.

The plan that he and his superior had laid out was a simple, structured affair. The fake Medjed would get the public nice and riled up, and when the deadline came up they would have killed the website. The Thieves actually putting a stop to the site was an unexpected surprise, but it hadn't impacted their plans. Then they'd boost a major public figure into the spotlight of the Thieves website and, after that, trigger a mental shutdown in that target during their confession press conference. It would shatter the public image of the Thieves when something so horrifying was broadcast across live television, and people would only think to blame the Thieves.

All Akechi had to do was be there when the time came, when the calling card went out. He'd murder the Shadow before they could steal the treasure, sealing the fates of everyone there.

Okumura had been high on their list of possible targets. Nobody had any intention of letting a fast food mogul sit at the big boy's table, but the money he contributed to the campaign had been welcome. There would have been no loss in his death.

But now that the Thieves were acting ahead of him, he had to get over there ASAP. He could still salvage things if he got there in time, but if he failed... then the newly changed Okumura would start spilling secrets and naming names.
He couldn't let that happen. Not when he was on the cusp of his own plan.

"When the hell did they get on Okumura's tail?" Akechi muttered to himself as he reached the elevator. He pressed the button, tapping his foot impatiently. "I've been keeping tabs on Kurusu, he's been meeting with the others at Leblanc... Or have they been multitasking?"

He supposed he'd have to congratulate them at some point. They had managed to graduate from 'amusing' to 'annoying.'

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Once they had entered the long and tall hallway, leading toward the massive chamber, they could feel the shift in atmosphere the Palace was going through. A constant alarm was blaring through the corridors, while the lights embedded in the ceiling occasionally flickered a deep crimson shade.

"Yeah. I think your old man got the message," Ryuji casually said.

"He took the calling card more seriously than I had expected. He even called the police after he read it," Haru said.

Ann scoffed slightly. "That's the first. Then again, he apparently has some big skeletons in his closet."

"And we're gonna make him spill the beans on all of them," Shizuka said, pride clear in her tone. "Buut I'd be lying if I said I'm not also excited at the chance of punching his stupid face a few times. No offense Noir."

"None taken," Haru said in a surprisingly calm tone.

As they entered the treasure room, they found the treasure itself perched neatly on the same platform. Although now it seemed the shimmering cloud had been replaced with a large steel ball with golden light emanating from the sides.

The group regarded the floating object, before turning to each other. "That's it?" Makoto asked aloud. "I was under the impression that a treasure was meant to be reflective of the Palace owners' corruption, the thing that started their distortion. A steel ball did that to President Okumura?"

Morgana sniffed the air. "The smell of treasure is undeniable, and it's definitely coming from up there," he said.

After some thought, Futaba touched the left side of her goggles with the lenses glowing briefly. "It's a container. A pretty dense one at that. My guess is that it's meant to slow us down slightly."

"Indeed it is." The semi-familiar voice came from on high, drawing all eyes toward the ceiling of the chamber. There was Okumura's Shadow, floating down toward them while seated on a heavily armoured throne. A large jet glowed beneath him, belching out a continuous tongue of fire. "I knew you thieves were coming, so I took the time to prepare my defenses," he added.

Shizuka squinted, watching the Shadow closely. "Wait... his skin is actually blue? I thought that was just like, part of the hologram," she said. "First Kaneshiro and now Okumura? What's up with
the technicolour people?"

"Is this really the best time to worry about that?" Shiho bluntly asked.

Ryuji took a step forward, his body glowing a vibrant blue shade as his power rapidly built up. "You think some dumb ball is gonna slow us down? We're gonna fix that twisted heart of yours, no matter what!"

Okumura scoffed. "This isn't the only thing I have set up, you dirty rat. Though I must say, you did all manage to take me somewhat by surprise," the Shadow said. "Another month or two, and I would have been fully prepared to ascend to the political world. You've become a minor speedbump in that plan. But, that's all."

He pressed a button on the left armrest of his throne, the expansive ceiling suddenly splitting apart to reveal an array of large metal containers. Several slots opened along the undersides, followed by rows of corporate robots falling from the containers and landing heavily on the floor until a crowd of company stooges had formed a ring around the thieves.

"A whole bunch of goons? That all you got?" Morgana asked, settling his hands on his hips.

Okumura smirked slightly. He pressed another button on the throne, causing the largest and centermost container to swing open. A truly remendous robot fell through the opening, seeming to orient itself mid descent until it had landed near the back wall of the chamber with an earthshaking impact. The others stared wide-eyed at the ebony-plated giant, his sole crimson eye glowing a vibrant shade as it powered up. The thing was almost as huge as Kamoshida's Shadow had been, but no doubt much stronger than he had ever been.

"Say hello to the Execurobo MDL-ED, my trusty right hand," Okumura confidently said. He extended his right hand outward, suddenly drawing the sphere into his grasp. The raised platform lowered itself, leaving the floor of the chamber completely level. "All complaints can be directed to him. Now then... the first robot to kill a Phantom Thief earns a promotion!"

A trio of blue robots immediately lunged forward, their advances halted as Ryuji summoned Seiten Taisei. The towering monkey raised his cudgel and held it horizontally, putting his considerable strength to use as he held the charging trio in place.

Yusuke moved quickly on the other side of the group, summoning Goemon in a vibrant blue flash. The ghostly thief gave a harsh sweep of his left hand, summoning a dense wall of ice to block out an incoming volley of laser fire from two lanky crimson droids. It wouldn't hold for long against a continuous attack.

"Mona!" Akira quickly said. "We need some space here!"

Nodding, the short feline quickly summoned Zorro's hulking frame into existence. His Persona's rapier flicked upward, swiftly twirling it overhead in a series of rapid clockwise swings that generated a raging green hurricane on the outside of their group. The winds slammed into the nearest robots with an immense force, sending them backward and providing the thieves some much needed breathing room.

"Mona, Panther, Fox, Noir! I need you guys to stick with me so we can take out the Execurobo!" Akira ordered. "The rest of you, focus on the small fries and beat them back. I doubt those are the only bots he has on hand! Oracle, hang back and scan the big guy. I want to know if he has any
weaknesses."

Medjed appeared in front of Akira, both eyes flashing with destructive rays of blessed light that blew apart the two drones in his path. He ran through the newly formed opening, those he had picked out earlier quickly following his lead. It didn't take long for two more robots to drop down from the ceiling to replace their fallen allies.

Akira made it several feet forward before calling Medjed again, the ghost-like Persona unleashing another arc of white light that flew high and made a beeline toward Okumura's Shadow. The air around him seemed to harden abruptly, as if a bubble of glass had formed around the sinister Shadow. Medjed's beam slammed into the barrier and lit the entire sphere up before sputtering out, leaving Okumura unharmed.

Akira clicked his tongue inside his mouth. "I was hoping to knock him out quickly and save ourselves some trouble."

Despite the distance, he heard Futaba in his ear as if she were standing right beside him. It was a phenomenon that all the Arditi were experiencing at that moment. "No such luck Joker. Old Man Okumura has a fancy forcefield around his body. I'm analysing it right now, but there's no telling how much force it can take. Just focus on his goons for now."

While Akira and his small group made for the Execurobo, the remainder of the thieves kept their focus on the small army that surrounded them. Shizuka felt herself pushing back, narrowly avoiding a sharp swing from one of the corporate drones, light glinting on both of his bulky arms.

She responded quickly, Houdini flashing in front of her and peppering the drone with a volley of high-speed punches. The first two blows dented and warped the dull robotic 'face' of her target, while the third blow struck hard enough to dislodge its head entirely. The bot swayed for a few seconds and exploded into a cloud of black goo, dissolving into the floor.

A second corporate drone quickly swept in to take the place of its fallen brother, making a beeline toward Shizuka. Houdini moved in front of her like a living shield, both arms upraised to block both incoming arms. The strike sent a tremor racing through Shizuka's body, a loud grunt leaving her.

These robots were fragile, it was a realization they had come to early in their exploration. But for as easy as they were to destroy, their physical strength was nothing to sneeze at.

"Jesus," Shizuka growled through clenched teeth. Houdini gave a sudden shove, knocking the droid backwards whereupon her golden left foot shot forward and drove into the droid's chestplate. It hit hard enough to fling the robot backward, smashing it into several of its kin and knocking them flat.

She was just about to catch her breath, only to cry out as a burst of lightning slammed into her side. Shizuka twisted, landing on one knee and catching a glimpse of one lanky robot with smoke slowly coiling off its extended right hand. Another crackle of energy rapidly formed between its clawed digits and suddenly lanced outward, crossing the distance toward her.

Houdini moved in to intercept, only for the burst of energy to instead be blocked by Aradia's shoulder. Shiho grimaced in discomfort, her balance swaying just a little. "I really hate these guys," Shiho said.
"You and me both," Shizuka replied, flashing Shiho a slight smile. "Thanks for the save."

"Anytime," Shiho replied. Shizuka rendered herself invisible and made a beeline for the nearest drone, while Shiho pressed her left hand to her blindfold. Waves of blue light washed over her allies, temporarily boosting their defense for the brawl ahead. They were going to need it at this rate.

The Execurobo's giant clawed fist drove downward at a frightful speed, titanium-plating striking the floor and unleashing a powerful shockwave that left the incoming thieves halting in their tracks. A long hiss of white steam erupted from the elbow joint of it's hulking arm, followed by the overgrown Shadow taking a powerful step forward. The plating on the Execurobo's shoulders opened outward, revealing small glowing mechanisms that crackled vibrantly with electricity for a few seconds before firing out twin bolts of lightning.

Ann and Yusuke leapt away, narrowly avoiding the energized burst as it struck the floor, leaving a blackened scorch where they had been standing mere moments ago. Akira and Haru were less fortunate, the tail end of the other explosion clipping the two and knocking them away. Haru yelped, skidding along on her heels, while Akira landed hard on his left shoulder. He grit his teeth, trembling visibly for a few seconds as the shock ran through him.

"Ak-" Haru stopped herself. "J-Joker, are you alright?"

He nodded, despite the grimace on his face. "I've... b-been... better," he replied.

It was clear that the Execurobo had no intention of letting him catch his breath. The ground shook with every step as the tremendous black droid rushed toward him, a sight that quickly drove Haru to act. Milady appeared in front of her, her armoured dress opening out swiftly to reveal her bouquet of heavy weapons. The air around her lit up under the cacophony of gunfire, hails of hot lead and explosive shells racing toward the mecha. The explosions glowed along his armoured hull, waves of smoke washing over his chest. But his pace didn't seem to slow.

Panic was slowly filling Haru as the Execurobo closed in, only to feel some relief fill her as Goemon slammed into the robot's abdomen. While marginally smaller, the Persona's immense strength was just enough to slow his advance. A massive tremor rolled out beneath the two, sections of the floor exploding out from beneath them.

Akira managed to rise to his feet, the shock now having fully left his body. "Hits pretty damn hard... we can't afford to give that thing too many free shots," Akira said, gradually catching his breath.

From her new position off to the side of the towering Execurobo, Ann pressed her left hand to her mask. The towering ebony specter of her Persona slowly rose up behind her, Hecate's chained familiars snapping at her sides. "Alright, let's see what you can do Hecate!" the blonde firmly said.

Goemon shoved forward with all his might, the titanic shove sending the Execurobo skidding several feet back. It left him wide open as a massive fireball erupted from Hecate's outstretched hands, almost as tall as the robot itself. The ball of fire collided with the Execurobo, engulfing him in waves of blazing orange light.

The towering inferno illuminated the chamber for several seconds before the massive fireball died down, replaced with a large plume of smoke. It only lasted for several seconds before the giant stomped through the miasma, only bearing a few smoldering orange scars from the impact.
"Well..." Ann swallowed as the Execurobo turned toward her. "That could've gone better..."
Mammon Okumura (II)

As Akira rose to his feet, he took a moment to touch his mask and quickly swapped Medjed for Arsene. The red-winged figure quickly flapped above him, arcs of curse energy quickly dancing around his floating body. He could see Ann quickly sprinting away from the Execurobo, moving as swiftly as she could while the glow around his eye grew more and more intense.

"Oh crap! Oh crap!" Ann squealed, maintaining her high-speed sprint. "I could really use a hand you guys!"

"Fox, slow him down," Akira ordered. He, meanwhile, returned his focus to Arsene. His Persona clasped both hands together above his head, the clawed fingertips glowing a vibrant red shade as dark energy began to rapidly build up between his palms. The longer he held this, the harder the ensuing curse burst would hit.

Yusuke pressed his right hand to his mask, his whole body wreathed in a pale blue light as Goemon rose above him. Goemon held his hands out, a slew of sharpened icicles erupting outward in a razor sharp hail that rapidly closed the distance toward the Execurobo. For as sharp and as dense as the summoned projectiles were, they only barely scuffed the armoured playing on impact.

The artist grit his teeth in annoyance, while Morgana carefully examined it from afar. "That armour's way too dense for your ice to pierce through," the feline said. "But it might just be able to trip him up. Do it quickly before he catches Panther!"

Goemon's hands shot forward again, this time firing off a continuous beam of arctic wind that was aimed squarely at the giant's stampeding feet. Within seconds it had managed to encase the lower half of the Execurobo's right leg, freezing it to the floor and giving Ann the opening she needed to run back toward the rest of the group. Large cracks raced down the ice block before it suddenly shattered under the droid's weight and forward momentum. It landed on its side with an earthshaking thud, the floor warping and splitting beneath it.

The Execurobo's head suddenly snapped in Yusuke's direction, its eye glowing red hot before firing off a thunderbolt of scarlet laser light. It drove into Goemon with an explosive burst of force, shaking the ground once moere and knocking Yusuke on his back with a pained gasp.

"Fox!" Haru gasped in shock.

Yusuke shakily raised his left hand to give her a thumbs up. "I'll get him back on his feet, give me just a second," Morgana said, quickly dashing toward their downed comrade.

Akira nodded and suddenly pointed forward. "Arsene! Ravage him!" The winged demon rocketed forward while the Execurobo slowly forced himself back to its full standing height. Arsene threw his right hand forward, launching a pulsating orb of black and red light toward the mighty droid. It slammed into the robot's back, twisting and tearing into the armour like the blade of a buzzsaw.

Shards of red hot metal flew from the droid's back, growing more intense in volume before a massive explosion lit up the Execurobo's back. The smoke swiftly cleared, giving the group a glimpse of the damage that had been inflicted. A few segments of twisted armor curled out from the point of impact, giving just a fleeting glance at the Execurobo's inner workings.
"So it's not as invulnerable as it looks," Morgana said, helping Yusuke rise up by tugging firmly on his left hand. The shorter figure watched the droid gradually rise to a full standing position. "Now all we have to do is capitalize on that."

Akira nodded. "Problem is, I just hit him as hard as I could with Arsene, only opening a small chink in his armour. If we're gonna have any chance at this, we'll need to focus our fire on tha-"

In an instant the Execurobo started charging at them like a raging bull, tearing chunks from the reinforced floor with each mighty step. Hisses of white hot steam erupted from its joints, his shoulder-plates starting to glow with a latent energy. The group reacted quickly to the oncoming freight train racing their way. Haru and Morgana swiftly jumped rightward, while Akira, Yusuke, and Ann made a leap to the left.

The Execurobo turned sharply, one arm swinging up at Akira. In the split second he had to act, he managed to summon Arsene as a living shield. The Execurobo's chrome knuckles slammed into Arsene's folded arms, Akira's entire body rattling as he was flung backward and left bouncing along the hard floor. He grit his teeth before gasping in pain.

Haru was aghast. "W-why you!" She raised her arms, summoning one of her weapons into existence: A bulky grenade launcher, light gleaming along the ebony barrels of the magazine. She fired off two bursts, both grenades swiftly sailing through the air and exploding against the Execurobo's back. It took a staggering step forward, crackles of electricity dancing between the long scar on the back of his chassis.

It slowly turned toward her. While unable to emote, there was a clear anger and indignation radiating from the sole glowing eye of the machine.

Morgana took advantage of the brief distraction, leaping up and getting boosted higher with a quick gale from Zorro. He drew his slingshot and swiftly fired off three metal ball bearings, all three striking the Execurobo in the eye. On the third hit, a modest crack spread across the reinforced glass.

The Execurobo glanced sharply up at him, giving Morgana the opening he was hoping for. Zorro gave a sharp downward swing of his rapier, a mighty gale following the path of his blade and driving into the Execurobo's right shoulder. There was a powerful rumble when the two met, armour crushing under the sudden titanic pressure with a burst of lightning exploding from under the damaged plate. The Execurobo wobbled for just a second before firing off another burst from his damaged eye, the beam clipping Morgana in the side.

Morgana yowled as he fell from the air, landing on his side with an audible thud. He groaned in discomfort, a faint smell of burnt hair coming from his downed form.

Okumura watched all this transpire from the comfort of his floating throne, a snide smirk lingering on his face. "Now do you understand? Do you see what happens when you try to rise up in the world, against your superiors?"

The smug Shadow watched as the Execurobo twisted partially to one side, his right arm lashing outward and smacking into Ann and Yusuke, swatting them away like bugs. "The cold hand of capitalism crushes you back down to where you belong!"

Meanwhile, across the vast chamber, the others were contending with a seemingly unending horde of robots. While smashing them was a simple matter, the gradual build up of damage was slowly
wearing the other thieves down.

Ryuji yelled at the top of his lungs, directing Seiten Taisei forward. His cudgel slammed down into the nearest two droids, crushing them flat on the initial hit while the erupting shockwave from the point of impact vaporized the other bots nearest to it. The blond grit his teeth and clenched his left fist. "TEAR 'EM APART!"

A sudden glow enveloped Seiten Taisei, just as a massive arc of lightning travelled down to the end of the cudgel. Explosive waves of electricity poured out from Seiten Taisei's staff, lancing toward a group of lanky droids that were trying to close the gap. Their spindly frames wobbled, jerking and spasming wildly under the mighty current before being blown to pieces by the overload.

For as many as he had just destroyed, the regular pounding sounds of heavy metal feet striking the ground signalled the arrival of yet more corporate stooges. They wasted no time in getting into the action, two of the shorter blue droids raising their arms and firing off a slew of laser bolts at the hotheaded blond.

Ryuji weaved away from the salvo as quickly as he could. But despite his best efforts a stray bolt grazed the left side of his chest and burned a hole in his dark leather jacket. He hissed in pain and clutched his side, his other hand maintaining the link to his Persona. Seiten Taisei moved in front of him, acting as a shield to ward off the incoming bursts of fire.

"Damnit! How many of these things are there?! I musta' smashed a hundred of 'em, but they keep going!"

Only a few feet away, Shiho and Makoto were very nearly back to back as they fought off the sinister metal horde. Shiho was slowly catching her breath, feeling Aradia's buffs slowly starting to wear off. She was slowing down, and the bruises along her arms and abdomen were starting to hurt with renewed intensity.

"Skull definitely has a point," Shiho said. She took a sharp step forward, avoiding an arc of lightning from one of the lanky droids. She swung her naginata fiercely, the serrated blade tearing through the armoured neck of the nearest bot and sending it sailing skyward. She ducked to avoid a stray arc of lightning, hissing in pain as she felt a distinct burning sensation dancing down her right shoulder blade.

Makoto took a sharp step forward, her hard steel knuckledusters colliding with the nearest droid in a sharp right hook that snapped its head around a full 180 degrees. She sidestepped a swift chop from the droid to her right, responding in kind by punching his face in with another hard blow. The brunette moved with impressive swiftnss, narrowly weaving through a series of blows from two short droids rushing her. Her ironclad fists swung out, decapitating one bot on the initial hit while the other was left skidding back into the crowd. "Agreed," Makoto swiftly said, her breaths coming out in hot huffs. "But I can't do much planning until we get some breathing room!"

"Oh! I think I can handle that!" Shizuka called from somewhere in the chaos. One of the droids to Makoto's right suddenly exploded, a large hole being blown through its chest from some unseen force. The scrap of its body was unceremoniously catapulted across the room, plowing into a few more robotic workers and knocking them down. It left a wide opening in the crowd.

Shiho and Makoto both felt something unseen grab their wrists, with the sudden contact leaving
them both invisible to the human eye. "I was wondering where you disappeared off to," Makoto said, a playful note in her voice.

Shizuka pouted. "Hey, I've been fighting plenty of bots," she said, quickly leading the two through the opening in the crowd. "But when the tide just didn't stop, I put my head to work thinking about how we can take all the robots out at once. 'Cause just smashing them as they come isn't getting us anywhere."

"Right," Makoto replied. "Diabolik, back up Skull!" she called.

Sergio seemed to have taken the least amount of damage out of all of them. Only a few tears and frayed sections adorned his suit. The girls watched Breakthru's quick motions, his left hand scraping along the the damaged floor and uprooting the steel plates from their moorings until they came to a halt in a vague ring-shape around him, acting as a deployable shield. Breakthru's right brushed the chest of a droid that ventured too close, launching him into the crowd and crushing several robots on impact.

"No problem Queen!" Sergio quickly said.

He crossed the distance toward Ryuji, and soon the two boys were kicking up vast clouds of twisted scrap metal from the force of their blows. Makoto regarded the situation in silence for a few moments and then turned her attention to the ceiling.

"Looking at the situation out here, it seems that the new bots only come down whenever one of them gets destroyed," Shizuka said. "So... You wanna test that theory out?"

Shiho nodded, summoning Aradia from their unseen position. A volley of golden daggers shot from around her, spearing into several of the droids from behind and shredding through their armour. Almost as soon as their mechanical frames had been shredded, more droids dropped down from the containers suspended above them.

"So if we stop destroying them, it might give us an opening to attack those containers directly... wiping them out in one fell swoop. But how are we going to..." Makoto trailed off, glancing to Sergio through the chaos. "Ah. He can freeze things, right?"

"Yeah, he takes the momentum out of non-living things. If the Morganamobile counts, then I guess those droids would have to count too," Shizuka reasoned.

While they were making their newest plan of attack, Okumura turned his attention from the Execurobo toward the other group, watching as they continued to plow through his stooges. "Time to speed this up," Okumura remarked to himself, pressing another button on the armrest of his throne. "Sacrifice Order- Prove your loyalty!"

The code beamed from his throne toward one random robot, hitting the short blue Corporobo. It tensed for several second before abruptly glowing red hot, bursts of steam erupting from its joints. It suddenly sprinted toward Sergio, quickly closing the distance, before suddenly and violently exploding in a vibrant fireball.

Sergio had only barely reacted in time, Breakthru moving between his user and the blossoming fireball. The burst smacked into him and flung Sergio backward, landing roughly on his right shoulder. A few hisses of smoke trailed off his body, while he forced himself to one knee. The blond was left panting, feeling a few lingering throbs of pain roll through his body.
"No offense to Noir... but I really hate her dad," he muttered.

From her end of the room, Futaba continued to examine Okumura and the Execurobo, her posture casual and unmoving. Any droid that ventured too close to her was summarily smashed to pieces by a fast-moving tendril, while the redhead barely seemed to register any action that directly reached her.

"Oh!" She bounced slightly, standing on her toes. "I think I've got it!"

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Back when their group had been making suggestions on possible execution targets, people to frame the Phantom Thieves over, Akechi had taken the time to research each prospective target. First to find out if they had a Palace they could exploit (they all did, which did not surprise him in the slightest) and then to find out the keywords needed to access them.

As Okumura was the one who was the most likely candidate for the frame-up, Akechi had spent the most time investigating his Palace. But this place, it disgusted him just to think of it. The childish science fiction fantasy infesting the heart of a wealthy public figure, it revolted him.

It pointed to the kind of rat-faced duplicitious man Okumura was, putting on such a respectable public persona while having such immature fantasies in his inner workings. While Akechi primarily worked with scum, their hearts at least reflected an adult mindset. Okumura, with this B-movie playground in his heart, clearly had no place in the higher rungs of society.

And thinking that a man with a heart like this, being able to rise so high in the world, it only added to the fiery anger burning inside him.

He was like a living shadow as he raced through the narrow metal corridors of the station, the dark cape of his cognitive attire flapping behind him. His mask was shaped like the head of a raven with a sharp protruding beak over his nose, his eyes concealed by scarlet lenses. The entirety of Akechi's attire was jet black from the neck down to his heavy boots, like the clothing of some shadowy military officer.

From what he could tell, the majority of Okumura's forces had been deployed toward the treasure room. It made his progress much quicker through the vacant corridor as he made a mad sprint throughout the complex, making a beeline toward the central chamber. In his preliminary investigation he had been fortunate in mapping a large chunk of the Palace, though the rest of the pursuit was now going on instinct.

Akechi rounded one corner sharply, skidding to a halt as he saw a small gathering of corporate robots in the hallway. They turned toward him and, naturally, instantly marked him as an intruder.

"Ugh..." Akechi's eyes narrowed behind the red lenses of his mask. "I do not have time for this bullshit."

A powerful shockwave exploded around his feet, tearing the plates from the walls as bubbling tumors of black cancerous matter blossomed from his power and split through the gaps in the structure. Swirls of scarlet and ebony light danced around his body, rapidly growing more intense while a shadowy shape grew solid above him.
The droids ahead of him seemed to halt, hesitating visibly and looking quite fearful for their inability to emote. One seemed to find some bravery, taking a single step forward. It was summarily sliced in half by a flying crimson blade, the machine exploding before its body even fully split in two.

The figure floating above Akechi was tall and spindly, a faceless horned specter with a body decorated with zig-zagging black and white lines. "Loki... annihilate them!"

A wave of light exploded from Loki's outstretched palms, rapidly gliding down the hallway in a blinding burst. As soon as the light had faded, there wasn't a single shred of the corporate droids remaining. Every square inch of the corridor had been burned in the passing tide of curse energy, with pustules of cancerous evil matter sprouting randomly around the corridor. A side effect born from his power.

Akechi sighed in annoyance and continued down the corridor, Loki vanishing into thin air. He raced down the twisted, distorted corridor, keeping with his instincts. All Palaces were the same in one regard: The treasure was always at the heart of the structure. He'd reach it soon enough.

"If I can kill Okumura, I'll be alright. If I can kill Okumura, I'll be alright. If I can kill Okumura, I'll be alright..."

How had this happened? When did those idiots even find out about Okumura? They had even gone out of their way to ensure any mention of Okumura was buried on the Phantom Aficionado website, making bundles of weak requests to drown out any reference of their prospective target.

And yet, here he was, more than a month ahead of schedule with his pants around his ankles.

He was sure the Arditi were focusing on Medjed. How could they not, with how public Medjed's taunts had been? Akechi was doubly sure that Kurusu was almost exclusively operating out of Leblanc this past month. It was definitely a trek to go from there to the Okumura Foods building.

As they had no doubt been busy with Medjed, Akechi had let them fall from his scrutiny for a little while. But now...

Akechi frowned, trying to keep his anger in check as he blew open the doorway to another corridor. Was it possible that... they had split their party? Their numbers were expansive these days, they could have pulled it off. Half their team dealing with Medjed, while the other half dealt with Okumura.

But that didn't explain how they even knew about him in the first place. He shook his head, pushing those thoughts aside for the time being. It didn't matter right now. All that did matter was securing the safety of his plan.

"If I can kill Okumura, I'll be alright."

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"Diabolik!" Shizuka called out. "We need you to freeze as many of those bots as you can! If we keep smashing them, they'll just keep coming out!"

Sergio frowned, Breakthru hovering in front of him to block an incoming burst of electricity. "I
don't know if I can steal the momentum from so many targets, or contain all of it. But... fuck it, if it'll make this process quicker..."

The blond took off into a sharp sprint, making for the corporate bot nearest to him. The machine's left hand swiftly brushed over his targets chassis, with the droid immediately freezing like a statue with his stumpy arms raised over his head. Sergio dashed quickly from droid to droid, each brush of Breakthru's hands freezing them in place until he had left eight robotic statues frozen in time behind him. Sweat was beginning to run down his face.

Still, with several of their enemies stuck in place, it made it significantly easier to weave through the crowd without fear of being struck by any projectiles. By the time he had stopped the twelfth droid nearest to him, Sergio had very nearly fallen to one knee. A few sparks of electricity crackled around Breakthru's body.

"I think..." Sergio said, panting hotly. "That's as many as I can freeze."

"That's great!" Makoto enthusiastically said. "Nemesis, I need you to keep him covered so none of the stragglers break his focus. Sting, think you can give Skull a leg up?" Makoto asked. Grinning, Shizuka nodded.

The three girls became visible again as they made a rush toward the boys. Shiho and Makoto quickly moved to cover Sergio from both sides, as some of the remaining robots worked to close in on him. They seemed to understand what was going on, at least that Sergio was the reason why many of their comrades couldn't move.

Four of the bots were ringing around Ryuji, with the athletic blond looking a little sluggish from the earlier brawling. There were a few cuts and burns in his attire, while his balance was swaying. "I don't care how many o' you there are! I'll smash you all!"

"Doesn't have to come to that Skull," Shizuka said, skidding to a halt beside Ryuji. Houdini appeared in front of the young Joestar, acting as a living shield. "All we really need to do is blow those things sky high. And you're the guy for the job!" she enthusiastically said, pointing to the containers high above them. "All I gotta do is give you a boost..."

Meanwhile, Futaba proceeded to call out to the others. Her words quickly reached the rest of the group, despite the chaos and distance between them. "Guys, I've been analysing Okumura and his pet Tetsujin, and I think I've figured out how to beat the two in one go! It's the power core of the Execurobo. If you can make it blow up near Okumura, the explosive yield should be strong enough to shatter that barrier of his. And if not... eh, just punch him a few times after and that should do it."

"Right. I think we might know how to make an opening," Akira said, gesturing to Yusuke. The bluenette nodded, following his leaders direction and swiftly sprinting around to reach the back end of the Execurobo as Haru and Morgana worked to keep it busy. Ann followed swiftly after him. "But how are we going to get the thing close enough to the Shadow? None of us can exactly lift it," he explained.

"Diabolik can handle that. His Stand is all juiced up on stolen momentum, and throwing all of it at the big guy oughta' do it," Futaba said.

Sergio nodded in understanding. "Just say when and I'll let him have it."
Akira nodded, focusing back on the task at hand. "Fox, Panther, you're up!"

The Execurobo punched the ground hard enough to embed his fist in the plates, the shockwave from his blow smashing into Morgana and sending him skidding away until he landed in a heap several feet away. The feline groaned, struggling to rise. His dark coat was marked with a few scuffs and bruises from the journey.

Haru's heels dragged along the floor as she halted her momentum, her Phantom attire slightly damaged from the battle thus far. Milady floated above her once more, her dress opening out to give her guns room to breathe. Slews of molten led erupted from her array of weapons, the bullets colliding with the Execurobo's head and shredding off a few chunks of his armour. Even so he was quick to turn his focus back toward her.

"I er..." Haru trailed off, though she maintained continuous fire from her Persona. "I don't think I can distract him for much longer!"

"Not to worry," Yusuke curtly said. "We have this firmly in hand."

Haru watched as Goemon suddenly appeared behind the Execurobo, both his hands raised high overhead while a swirl of arctic wind danced between his fingers. A large and exceptionally sharp icicle suddenly appeared in Goemon's hands, with the towering Persona suddenly driving it forward like a stake. The peak sank into the gap in the Execurobo's back, quickly becoming embedded in a briar of wires and circuits.

The hulking machine snapped to attention, his head snapping around a full 180 degrees. A crimson flash of light exploded from his eye and slammed into Goemon's chest, knocking the Persona away and sending shots of pain cascading through Yusuke's body.

The Execurobo raised his arms up, his armoured plates glowing a bright white shade from a current of energy flowing through him. The air above his arms began to blacken, becoming like a nebula with twinkling shooting stars. The most bizarre thing about it was the image that appeared at the heart of this miniature galaxy: A gigantic burger with a cartoonish face.

"Is that... the Big Bang Burger logo?" Akira asked.

"Yes it... certainly is," Haru replied, sounding just as confused.

Futaba gave a sharp gasping sound when she examined the Execurobo's attack, his mounting power making the room rattle. "G-Guys, he's prepping something huge! Whatever you're doing, do it now! Otherwise I don't think you can tank a hit like that!"

"My time to shine," Ann said. She grinned and examined the Execurobo's back, summoning Hecate. The witch dismissively flicked a fireball toward the Execurobo, with the spark of flame catching the outcropping icicle. In an instant it melted, the slew of water flowing through the crack in his armour. The effect was instantaneous.

Arcs of lightning danced around the Execurobo's hulking frame, hisses of steam erupting through the gaps in the droid's armoured plates. It spasmed and jerked, heavy feet pounding the floor before it blindly flung both arms forward. His accumulated energy shot forward as a beam of streaking rainbow light that struck a wall at the far end of the chamber, unleashing a blinding flash.

"Holy crap!" Akira gasped, having to shut his eyes from the blinding intensity. Once the tremors
had died down he called out "Everyone alright?"

"I'm good... kinda hungry though," Morgana said from his position on the floor.

Meanwhile, Ryuji made a sprint toward Houdini. Shizuka's Stand was crouched on the ground, her palms cupped together to embrace him. Ryuji's right foot landed on her golden palms and was suddenly catapulted skyward with a burst of immense strength. Ryuji grit his teeth, his right palm meeting the steel plate of his mask to summon his Persona on the sharp upward ascent.

The towering Persona raised his staff up, his entire body glowing golden before firing off a mighty ring of lightning that exploded outward around him. The wave of fire washed over the containers, vaporizing them in passing and sending shards of smoking wreckage raining down from on high.

With the prospect of reinforcements removed from the situation, Makoto and Shiho quickly blew away the remaining droids with twin bursts of nuclear and blessed light.

Shiho slumped forward, her hands on her knees, and panted heavily with drops of sweat falling from her brow. "I really... really hope... that's the last of them."

Akira breathed a small sigh of relief. "What's that thing Sting usually does? That super-fast punching thing?" he asked himself, keeping his gaze affixed to the looming mechanoid as it spasmed on the spot. "Go! Arsene!"

His Persona shot forward with impressive speed, his clawed hands moving forward with rapid whipping strikes that repeatedly clashed against the scorched section of the Execurobo's broad chest. The violent collisions were punctuated by Arsene's mad cackles, his claws ripping chunks from the Execurobo's chest until the glowing golden orb of his 'heart' had been unveiled.

"Diabolik!" Akira jumped back, putting some distance between himself and the Execurobo. The others followed his lead. "Hit it, now!"

Okumura could only look on in mounting horror. How had things gone so wrong? In one fell swoop the thieves had gone from being on the backfoot, to wiping out the small army he had amassed and putting his strongest worker on the ropes. And without either of those things, he was defenseless. He never saw it coming.

Sergio let out a loud yell as Breakthru shoved his arms forward, the stolen momentum in his body rocketing out in a mighty sonic boom of force. It shot out like a condensed bullet of air, closing in swiftly until the condensed momentum hit the Execurobo in the chest and catapulted him off his feet.

Arcs of energy throbbed around the power core with a violent intensity, growing larger until the light consumed the Execurobo's entire body. The ensuing explosion rocked the chamber and sent scorching waves of fire burning into the wall behind Okumura. The fireball soon died out, replaced with a continuous column of jet black smoke that wafted up to the ceiling.

Once the smoke parted, the group got a glimpse of Okumura. His shield had been stained dark from the flow of the ash and was marked by several visible cracks. The barrier of light wobbled visibly for a few seconds before shattering like a glass bauble.

He was wide eyed and panting, beads of sweat roaming down his face. "S-stay... Stay back!"

Akira cracked his neck and advanced toward Okumura, the breeze tugging at the torn sections of
his long coat. "No." Arsene appeared at Akira's side, suddenly grabbing Okumura by the collar and yanking him from his floating throne and throwing him to the ground. The winged demon casually caught the treasure sphere in his left hand, chuckling at a job well done.

Okumura crawled back slightly until he was pressed against a wall, panting loudly. He could only sit back and watch as Arsene's clawed digits started digging into the dense material of the container. A tremor rolled through the Palace.

"Mona, you good to drive?" Akira called, watching as Ann helped the feline to stand. He wobbled briefly on his stubby feet.

"Agh... y-yeah, I can manage. But I can handle it better if Queen patches me up a lil'," Morgana said.

While the others started to get set to leave, waiting on Akira to crack the sphere open, Haru strode over to Okumura's Shadow. Seeing this, Shizuka followed after her. This was probably going to be rough for her.

Okumura glanced to his empty palms and then up at his daughter. "H-Haru, I... What have I... what have I done?"

"You got corrupted by greed Father. I'm... sorry it had to come to this. But you were out of control, and somebody had to stop you," she said.

"You..." Okumura hesitated. "You're not gonna kill me, are you?"

"That's not who we are, dude," Shizuka replied, settling her hands on her hips. "Despite everything you've been putting your daughter through, she still cares about you. And I hope you understand what a piece of crap you've been." Okumura nodded dumbly.

"I know you were a good man once, and you can be again... but first you need to admit your crimes to the world. It will be difficult, but I'll support you as best I can Father," Haru gently said.

Okumura nodded again. "Y-yes I... you're right. This has all gone too far and I... I am solely to blame for the horrible man I've become. Ambition is... a powerful drug."

There was a cracking noise a few feet behind them, followed swiftly by Akira calling out to the two girls. "Hey, I got the treasure unlocked! We better get a move on before this whole place comes crashing down." As soon as he said this, more tremors started to rock the battle scarred room. Looking down the corridor they had entered through, Shizuka could see several panels exploding off their moorings. She placed a reassuring hand on Haru's left shoulder.

"Father..." Haru hesitated for a moment. "You've been using the Black Mask to harm your competitors, haven't you?" She asked.

"Y-yes, I have," Okumura admitted, shame lining his voice. A warm white glow slowly started to envelop his body. "I don't know who he is, but I know who he works for, and I promise that I'll sa-
"

The crack of a gunshot echoed through the chamber.
Those with the power of a Stand or a Persona were, by their very nature, stronger and tougher than their human counterparts. While it was not to any cartoonish degree (and indeed the extent varied from person to person), the amount of punishment that a person of that status could dish out or endure managed to exceed human limitations.

It was perhaps an effect of mastering ones inner darkness, or harnessing their fighting spirit as a physical force. The alteration on a mental and emotional level was strong enough to trigger a change on a physical level too.

Whatever the case, the effects were further amplified by the metaverse. All physical abilities were raised well above the human norm, all aspects amplified by the very nature of the Metaverse, from strength to speed.

That was why, at present, Shizuka found herself staring at a nine millimetre round pinched neatly between the index finger and thumb of Houdini's right hand. "HOLY SHIT!" She felt a distinct burn against her fingertips from how narrowly she had caught the bullet. She grit her teeth. Something in her index finger was definitely damaged from the sudden pressure. She must have been more drained than she thought.

Her body had jolted in the first fraction of a second when the violent boom of the gunshot echoed through the room, Houdini flying of her like an uncoiling serpent. Houdini wasn't as strong as Star Platinum, nor could she stop time, but her speed was nothing to underestimate. Especially in the Metaverse. She remained in place, holding the bullet that had come oh so close to decorating the floor with President Okumura's brains.

All eyes had turned to the catwalks positioned above the battle scarred room, and in the distance they could clearly see a figure positioned in the shadows. Between the distance, and the rising smoke being belched from the torn panels in the wall, it was impossible for the gathered Phantom Thieves to make out any details of him. Save one: They could clearly see that his face was concealed by a sharp black mask.

He had considered himself fortunate, having managed to arrive at a point where the thieves had done the heavy work and beaten Okumura's Shadow into submission. Ultimately he had hoped to just covertly cap Okumura, leave a mortal wound in his Shadow that would leave him slowly 'bleeding out' until he succumbed in the real world. Ideally he would have done this without being seen once by his foes.

But then those two bitches just insisted on talking to a goddamn Shadow of all things. And once that white light started to envelop Okumura, Black Mask knew it was now or never.

"Up there! That's-" Yusuke's eyes widened in shock. "Can it be?!"

"It's that Black Mask bastard, comin' to cover his tracks!" Ryuji shouted.

Undeterred, and clearly pissed, their enigmatic foe steadied his aim and rapidly let off three more shots with the noise echoing around the vast room. But Houdini was quick, her other hand whipping out and catching the incoming rounds. Shizuka grimaced and glanced briefly to her left palm, seeing pinpricks of blood oozing out from the material of her glove.
More tremors rocked the room as the wall panels began to explode from their moorings, waves of fire rising throughout the room. A jet of fire burst up at Black Mask, forcing him to recoil from the blazing heat. In those few seconds the white glow fully enveloped Okumura's Shadow, before he vanished entirely.

"Damnit!" he spat. Black Mask quickly doubled back, sprinting the way he came in.

"Y-you! Get back here!" Haru shouted, to no avail.

"Guys!" Akira called, hanging from Morgana's open driver-side door. "This place is falling apart, we can't afford to chase him! We have to go!"

With some modest hesitation, the two girls sprinted for Morgana's backdoor and hopped inside, shutting the doors as they leapt in. Morgana's engine roared to life before the black van rapidly raced through the chaos. The door of their escape route had been blown open as the world collapsed around them, leaving a path for them to follow.

The roof was caving in at a rapid rate, the fires growing more intense and seeming to now actively chase after the fleeing thieves. But they raced on, plowing through clouds of smoke and weaving around chunks of fallen wreckage, until a similar glow enveloped their getaway vehicle.

The world around them shattered, and in a flash they were spat out in a concealed alleyway near the back entrance of the Okumura Foods HQ. The group very nearly collapsed as a wave of exhaustion hit them like a brick wall, but after some seconds they managed to stand tall.

It took them some time before they began to calm down. A general noise of people hustling and bustling was echoing around them, making it clear that the surrounding area was busy. No point in looking for Black Mask with so many people around. Not when none of them had gotten a good look at the guy.

The adrenaline was wearing off. The young thieves were gradually becoming more aware of their own injuries, a few grunts of discomfort filling the alleyway.

"Geez that..." Shiho pressed her back against the wall and panted slightly. "Fighting those robots was bad enough, but that guy finally showed himself to us too," she said.

Ryuji nodded, taking his girlfriend's hand in his own. "Yeah, that was rough... Dude was a damn coward too, just like I thought. If the Palace hadn't been crumbling, we could wrecked him then and there." After a moment he smiled at Shiho. "Still, we got out alright. Plus we saved Haru's Dad in more ways than one."

"Thank you all so much for helping me," Haru said, clasping her hands under her chin. She breathed a faint sigh and turned her attention to Shizuka. "Are you okay Shizu-chan?" she asked.

Shrugging, the young woman raised her left hand to reveal the light cuts she had gotten from Houdini's daring deeds. The blood had smeared her pale skin. "I've had worse. Plus I can add 'Someone shot at me with a gun' to my list of experiences," she said.

Makoto abruptly gripped Shizuka's hands and pulled the two closer to inspect them, a gesture that immediately made Shizuka stand to attention. Akira smirked slightly. "You're really reckless, you know," Makoto said. "But... you're also really brave. It's pretty admirable." Makoto glowed briefly as Johanna appeared at her side. Within seconds some healing light had washed over Shizuka's sliced palm and broken finger, knitting the damaged parts back together in pristine condition.

Dealing with minor injuries, even in the real world, was no problem for her Persona.
"Th-thanks," Shizuka said, glancing up at the sky. It was a bit dark in the alley. She hoped it would conceal her pink cheeks without her having to go invisible.

Fortunately, Morgana managed to save her. "So... what's the treasure?" he asked, glancing from his spot on the ground toward Akira. They all looked to their leader, specifically the green-tinted cardboard box in his hands.

Even Akira seemed surprised when he looked down. "When I cracked the shell open in the Palace, it was just a glowing orb of light. But now it's a... model kit?" he asked, examining the painted image of a science fiction space station on the face of the box. "This is what started President Okumura's distortion?" The other treasures he could understand off the bat, but this was bizarre even by their standards.

Haru regarded the model for a few seconds before sighing sadly. "Back when my Father was a child, there was a model kit he really wanted. But now matter how much he begged my Grandfather, he never got it. For as large as Okumura Foods is now, the growth of the company only happened after Father took control. My Grandfather was a kind man, but not much when it came to business. So poverty was a large part of Father's childhood."

"I see," Makoto said. "So at a young age he was desperate for riches, and decided he would climb out of that poverty."

"But he let it get out of control," Akira remarked. "Well, you don't need to worry. With his heart changed, he'll go back to being a good man. And if he has some names to drop, then this whole conspiracy will come down like a house of cards."

Ann nodded at his assessment. "And now we have definite proof that Black Mask is real, now that we've run into him ourselves. And he apparently works from really powerful people," she said.

Her statement made Haru gasp slightly. "W-wait, will Father be okay? That man tried to kill him in the Metaverse, and if it's all part of a bigger conspiracy th-then-"

"Hey hey, it's cool," Shizuka assured her, settling her right hand on Haru's back while pocketing her bloodied left. "Look, that guy won't do anything in public. A killing is easier to track in the real world." She paused for a moment. Kaneshiro hadn't been so fortunate, and if Black Mask's group were desperate enough... "Hey, look. I know some people. I'm sure the SID will help keep watch on Okumura until he makes his announcement to the public." And if it came to it, she'd watch over him herself.

Futaba settled her hands behind her back. "So you guys were right, someone really did kill Mom," she said with a frown. "Then... I guess it'll all be over once Okumura confesses. What'll we do then?"

"We keep going as we are," Akira replied. "If there is a big conspiracy, and we take it down, there'll still be a lot of people who need the help that only we can provide. Plus," he pointed down to Morgana. "We still need to find Morgana's memories for him."

"Y-you remembered our deal?" Morgana asked in some shock.

Akira nodded in turn. "Of course I did. We're friends after all, right?" Ryuji opened his mouth to say something snide, only to stop when Shiho shot him a pointed look.

"At any rate, there's not much more we can do but wait for Okumura's confession. I'll get in touch with Satoshi and warn him about a possible threat to Okumura. Bodyguard work isn't the SID's
standard procedure, but the threat of a Stand user attack will draw him in," Sergio explained. A smile graced his features. "And I believe we've earned some rest and relaxation."

"He has a point," Yusuke said. "Completing two targets in such a short timespan has been quite draining. I fear I may collapse if we go into the Metaverse again any time soon."

"Oh, right... and we still got a few days of Summer left to enjoy. An' if those Stand guys are gonna keep Haru's old man safe, then we should be totally free. How about that beach trip we were talking about? We even got a chance at using a fancy rich girl yacht," Ryuji said, grinning at the prospect.

Haru hummed slightly, seeming to be weighing the logistics. "It may take me a few days to get things prepared. Getting the yacht checked and fueled, notifying a captain to sail us. Would everyone be alright with me taking that time to prepare it?"

A chorus of nods answered her. "Truth be told, I could do with some time to prepare. Gotta get a swimsuit picked out," said Ann.

"Me too," Makoto added. "It's really been some time since I've been to the beach, so I need to get my things in order." Shizuka felt her feet turn invisible in her shoes.

Ann and Shiho gave Futaba a quick glance, causing the shorter girl to bristle slightly. "H-hey, what're you two looking at me for?!!"

"I take it you don't have anything to wear for the beach?" Ann asked.

"Well no b-

"Awesome! It's time for a shopping trip!" the blonde said enthusiastically.

Shiho grinned slightly. "Boy, it's been a long time since we've had one of those. I honestly kind of missed them."

Futaba grumbled in annoyance. "I-if it's the social convention, f-fine. But I'll get you guys back for this."

"Looks like we're all set," Shizuka said, smiling broadly. "Dang Haru, you really have us set up. Got any more magic tricks you can pull out of your pocket?" she asked.

Haru tapped her chin, pondering their prospects. A realization hit her, making her bounce briefly on her feet. "Well, Okumura Foods has Destinyland rented out for a party in October. I'm sure we could enjoy the festivities there."

The dark haired girl raised her left eyebrow in confusion. "Destinyland? Uh, don't you mean Dis-"

"Ooooh, I love Destinyland! It's been so long since I was there... wait, your family is seriously rich enough to rent out an entire amusement park?" asked Ann.

"It's just... I'm pretty sure there's a Tokyo Dis-"

Haru interrupted Shizuka, seeming not to realize she had done so. "Oh yes. Though, thinking on all we've just gone through, I imagine the company will soon be wrapped up in a good deal of scandal," she explained.

"We'll help you cross that bridge when we get to it," Akira assured her, smiling faintly. "For now
though... we really should call it a day."

Deeply confused, Shizuka nodded. It had been a long day, and they could all do with a good deal of bedrest. Houdini rolled the captured bullets in her palm as her user went along. Shizuka had her doubts that forensics would find a solid lead on the gun that had fired them, but it couldn't hurt to hang onto the evidence just in case.

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Akechi grit his teeth as he pressed himself into the shadow of the shuttered doorway. Of all the things that could have happened...

He had thought himself lucky, getting there when he did, but the opening to kill Okumura covertly never came. And he hadn't anticipated that American bitch's Persona having the speed needed to catch a bullet. Clearly dealing with Okumura, Kaneshiro, Madarame, and Kamoshida had really helped those rejects get stronger.

He'd missed his opportunity. If a Person developed a Persona, or had their heart changed, then their other self vanished from the Metaverse entirely. Without that, he had no covert way of killing Okumura.

Shido definitely wasn't going to like that.

Okumura was going to die. He had to, if their plan was to have any hope of continuing. He knew too much to be left alive. But dealing with him in the real world was messier and riskier and most importantly left evidence behind. Additionally they couldn't frame the Phantom Thieves with Okumura anymore. It was a fine disruption to everything they had planned out so far.

But it was out of his hands now. He'd simply have to let Shido know, and then he'd entrust the matter to one of those shady criminal circus freaks he associated with.

Once the old man was dead in the ground, they could get things back on track for the election. They'd just have to find a different expendable target to pin on the Phantom Thieves.

Akechi briefly glanced out of the shadows. Still alone, good. He was certain he and the others had emerged at completely different points, and with so many crowds of people milling around the Okumura Foods building, they may well not have thought to even look for their opponent. Even so, it didn't change the fact that they now knew of his existence with absolute certainty. The thought alone infuriated him.

He'd gotten sloppy. But he'd still have his revenge in the long run. He'd put too much time and effort into all this, to let a bunch of high school rejects put a stop to him.

Finally, he drew his phone and quickly dialed Shido's private number. It rang for a few seconds before the man on the other end answered. "I take it you've heard about Okumura and the Thieves?"

"Yes. But I imagine you found out first through your police connections. It's a damn mess, and I don't know how they found out about him... but I take it you've handled the problem?"

Akechi hesitated for a moment. "No. I missed my opportunity."

"What?! What do you mean?!"

"The Phantom Thieves got in my way as I made my move, and now my method of killing isn't
"When did you become so damn incompetent?! Watching over the Arditi was your responsibility, as was making sure nothing could trace back to us. Now, not only did you ignore them long enough for them to somehow find Okumura, but you failed to silence him too?!" Shido snapped.

For a moment, Akechi calmed himself with the mental image of tearing Shido's tongue out, watching him choke on and vomit up spews of his own blood. "I have no idea how they found out, but-"

"Quiet. I'm going to pass Okumura onto one of A's people to clean up your mess. You keep your head down and try not to make things any worse than you already have... and pray that they can silence him covertly."

Shido hung up on him, leaving Akechi staring into the distance. He had to hold his tongue and contain his anger for the time being. If he acted rashly, then it really would mess up everything he had worked toward.

'Keep that condescending attitude while you can, Father,' Akechi thought to himself, slowly pocketing his phone.

Shido had destroyed and abandoned his Mother, sentencing her and Akechi to a life of ignominy that only worsened when his Mother took her own life. That depraved man had shattered her and left her an outcast from life's feast. The only person to give Akechi any unconditional love, dead because of him. Shido had ruined Akechi's life before it even really began and likely would have gotten away with it easily. But fate cut him one break: It gave him a Persona.

And with it he'd build Shido up, make his dreams come true... and then burn it all to ash before his very eyes. If he could not have a good life, then he'd make sure to annihilate Shido's life and all his dreams.

Then, maybe, they'd be even.

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8/23

The bell above Leblanc's door chimed as it opened, heralding Sergio as he slipped inside. Sojiro and Akira were behind the counter, while Ryuji and Yusuke were seated at the far booth. Yusuke was sipping some coffee while Ryuji was idly glancing into a glass of dark cola. Morgana was perched on the center of the table, washing behind his right ear.

"You'll be happy to know that the forecast for the next week is spectacular. Nothing but sunshine," Sergio said as he strode inside. "Granted the beaches are apparently packed, but we'll be avoiding most people... where are the girls?"

Akira pointed upward. "In my room," he said.

"You dog," Sergio teased, earning a mild glare from Akira, Ryuji, Morgana, and Sojiro. Yusuke remained engrossed in unravelling the mysteries of his coffee. "Kidding of course. What are they doing?"

"They're helpin' Futaba try on-" Ryuji winced as a girlish yelp echoed above them. "-Swimsuits. I dunno if it's goin' too well or not," he said. "Either way, we're forbidden from goin' up there."
"Dunno why they had to do it in my room," Akira murmured without glancing up from the coffee cup he was busily drying.

"H-hey, whoa are you serious about this one? It seems k-kinda..." Futaba trailed off.

The boys heard Shiho humming in deep thought. "Yeah I think it's a little uh... flashy. What about that one there? I think the colour will compliment Futaba nicely."

"Huh," Morgana said, casting a brief glance to the ceiling. "Part of me is curious, but the rest of me is too smart and too terrified to risk going up there."

"Geez, Futaba going to the beach with friends... I really never thought I'd see the day. I'm definitely happy for her, but... well I hope she'll be alright," Sojiro said.

"You needn't worry," Yusuke assured him. "We'll keep an eye on her, but I'm sure she's looking forward to trying new things. And you can be sure Akira won't let anything happen to her," he said, his words making Akira's eyes widen just a tad. "Moreover, we should be nice and comfortable on Haru's boat."

Sojiro regarded Akira for a few moments. The kid had certainly done a lot in a short span of time. The old man had to admit, Akira had definitely surpassed any expectations he had when they first met.

Haru made a small noise of surprise from the attic. "Oh, you're right, that colour is perfect for her. But I'm more impressed that Ann got the measurements so accurately."

"Hehe... well, math might not be my strong suit, but I'm an ace when it comes to fashion."

Makoto made a small noise of uncertainty. "You... should really put a little more practice into your math skills. That aside, well done. I think it suits her nicely," the brunette said.

"You... you guys really think so?" Futaba asked.

"Totally!" Shizuka happily replied. "Suits you down to the ground... dang Ann you really have good taste."

"Goodness," Sergio casually said.

A faint buzzing sound filled the room, followed by Sojiro drawing his phone from his pocket. "Hang on, I better go sign for a delivery. Watch the shop 'till I get back," he said before quickly making for the door.

Once he had left, Ryuji turned his attention to Sergio. "So, what's the deal with your SID guys? Are they watching over Okumura?"

Sergio nodded. "Satoshi, Aya, and some of our freelancers are taking turns watching over him while posing as police consultants. He let them in with no problem, but..." Sergio trailed off. "Well, changing his heart has definitely had an effect. Satoshi says he's off his chair, always rambling but never making much sense... Apparently he's trying to organize a press conference for next week," he said.

"Madarame was much the same," Yusuke began. "Suddenly growing a conscience leaves our targets grappling with the nature of their crimes... and I imagine President Okumura has many sins he needs to come to grips with," the bluenette said.
"No doubt," Sergio replied. "I hope Haru's going to be alright... things are bound to be rough for a while. Even if her Dad gives up a lot of big names, he's still going to be looking at jail time. And if the media finds out..."

"She's stronger than she looks," Akira assured him. "But no matter what, we'll be there for her. But, regarding Haru's Father... do you think your boss knows about us?"

Sergio shrugged. "I didn't mention anything to him, I just said I heard chatter that some Stand users might be targeting President Okumura. Though, I imagine Satoshi has some idea given my sporadic presence. And the fact that I'm working with a Joestar," he explained.

The others nodded in understanding. "Right. Shizuka's last name does tend to draw eyes for anyone familiar with the paranormal. But so far we've only been doing good, so your employer has no reason to want to go after us," Morgana explained.

"Too true. I imagine he connected the dots as soon as he heard the first Arditi target was from JoJo-chan's school... but I imagine he's understanding. Whatever the case, we've been more focused on Okumura for the time being. They've been trying to get his information out of him, just in case he has an 'accident', but he's babbling so much that they can't get any coherent info from him," Sergio said.

Akira set the last clean coffee cup in its proper place and focused back on his friends. "He'll even out in a few days, and when that happens I imagine things are gonna get a lot better in Tokyo... though tracking and capturing Black Mask is probably gonna fall to us."

"Bring it on," Ryuji said, grinning.

"I'm with Ryuji. That man, whoever he is, has caused far too much pain and strife to be left unchecked," Yusuke said.

Akira smiled at the two. "Then we're in agreement. Taking care of Black Mask will be a major priority in the future. For now though, let's enjoy a well earned break."
The door to the Velvet Room swung shut behind him with a metal clanging sound, depositing Akira in the alleyway that led to the airsoft shop. He breathed a small sigh, glad to once more be out of the prison of his heart. He hated going in there, but it was a necessity if he was to get stronger. He had spent some time in there, conducting a few fusions and getting rid of some unwanted Personas.

At the rate he was going, he'd soon have a Persona for every arcana present in the Phantom Thieves.

Akira only managed to make it a few steps before a sharp voice reached his ears. "Hey Inmate!" He tensed at the harsh tone.

The dark haired boy turned quickly and found himself staring at Caroline and Justine, both velvet twins standing neatly at the spectral doorway. "Hm? Something up?" It was strange to see both of them out in the real world, and it either meant he was due for something bad or something terrible.

Justine idly flicked her braid over her shoulder. "As wardens, it is our duty to oversee your rehabilitation and ensure you are on a good path. As such we have decided to take today to observe you in your daily life. You will lead us around the city, and show yor society to us."

"Be honoured, Inmate! You should be glad that we're so charitable," Caroline added, harshly pointing her baton at him.

"Uh..." Akira cocked his head slightly. "Are you sure Igor is fine with that?" he asked.

"Our Master has been... distracted, as of late. We have decided to act independently as a result," Justine said. Akira pondered that for a moment. Personally he hadn't noticed anything different with Igor, but then again the old weirdo always seemed strange to him.

Akira swallowed hard. Regardless of how he thought about Igor, he was in a tricky position right now. He didn't want to spend time with his two 'wardens' outside of the Velvet Room, but he definitely didn't want to turn them down and risk Caroline's ire. "Uh... it's just, going around with public with you two would be a little risky. Neither of you are all that inconspicuous," he said.

Caroline raised her left hand up and gave a dismissive wave. "Please. You seriously think we can't alter human perception slightly? Any people who see us is just gonna see two mundane girls. They won't give us a second thought."

"So kindly show us around," Justine added.

Well, there was no getting out of this one. "Alright, well..." Where was he even going to take them? Did they even know anything about the world outside the Velvet Room? "Follow me in that case."

Akira led the way out of the alley, but as soon as they emerged onto the main street his two young companions both froze in place. Caroline sniffed the air, and Justine's good eye widened in surprise.
"Something smells... sweet," Justine gently said, taking in the sugary aroma.

"That?" Akira glanced over to the crepe stand. "Just some fresh crepes being made. You want to try some?"

"Well..." Justine seemed a tad embarrassed to say as much aloud but Caroline's mouth was very nearly watering. Akira got the hint and made his way over to the stand, spending a few minutes waiting on his order while the two waited by the mouth of the alley. Just as Caroline had said, nobody spared either of them a passing glance.

Soon enough he returned, handing two crepes over to his companions. "Wasn't sure what you guys like. So I just went ahead and got three chocolates." Now left with just the third, Akira took a casual bite from the top.

The two wardens quietly inspected their prizes, with Justine sniffing the chocolate interior while Caroline gave the top of the pancake an experimental tug. After the first bite, Caroline's cheeks turned a distinct shade of pink and she quickly glanced away from Akira. Justine's reaction was more subdued, a small humming sound of pleasure.

"This is rather nice," Justine gently said.

"It's... it's okay, I guess," Caroline replied, unconvincingly.

A sly smile graced Akira's face while he continued eating. The twins maintained their own pace, both seeming to enjoy their crepes. It seemed quite clear to Akira that they had never eaten anything particularly sweet before now. He made it a few bites in before a familiar voice reached his ears.

"Whoa, fancy meeting you here Akira. Figured you would've been passed out in bed all day." He turned, watching as Shizuka and Shiho approached from the direction of the book shop. "Hm? Who're your friends?" she asked, glancing toward Caroline and Justine.

"They're super cute," Shiho said, smiling slightly.

Akira wasn't sure what to make of this development. Either it meant some of the pressure was off him, or things were somehow about to get worse. "This is Caroline and Justine," he said, gesturing to each twin in turn.

"Greetings," Justine curtly said.

"Hey," Caroline replied in a gruffer tone.

While Shiho moved to shake their hands, seeming to be stuck on how cute she found the two to be, Shizuka glanced to Akira. "They're a little... young for you, don't you think?"

"That's not what this is," Akira said plainly. "I'm just showing them around town."

"Just yankin' your chain," Shizuka said, smiling wryly.

"Anyway, what're you two doing?" asked Akira.
Shiho rose up, glancing toward the bespectacled boy. "Oh, we were going to go shopping with the other girls, but JoJo and I got here early. So I guess we're kind of just killing time until we hear from them. But we'd be happy to spend a little time with you and your two new friends," she explained.

Shizuka hummed in thought. "Hey, how about we show these two to the arcade? It's probably the funnest spot in Shibuya."

"Arcade? What's that?" Caroline asked.

Shizuka's smile quickly returned. "Oh. You're gonna like this."

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The arcade was, as ever, filled with a chorus of mechanical chimes and human chatter. Most of the machines were populated, and gamers of particular skill had managed to draw some small audiences to watch them play. Caroline and Justine seemed slightly awestruck as they walked in, keeping close to Akira.

"It's rather loud here," Justine remarked. It was definitely a world away from the stagnant silence of the Velvet Room.

Caroline paused, glancing to a cabinet near the door. She peered through the glass curiously, examining an array of toys positioned beneath a looming steel claw. "What is... that thing? It's like a prison for toys," she said.

"It's called a skill crane," Akira began. "You put a coin in and get three turns to grab a prize with the claw." Deciding to demonstrate, he drew a coin from his pocket and quickly set it in the slot. An array of lights inside the glass lit up at once, joined by a jaunty tune that seemed to almost follow the movements of the claw as he directed it with the joystick.

As the claw came down, it settled on the head of a plush pink squirrel with the prongs giving the toy a light squeeze. But as the claw came up, the grip loosened and it pulled back without anything grasped by its prongs.

"But it's not as easy as it sounds," Shiho added, watching as the claw dipped down for another attempt. This time it managed to grip the squirrel by the ear and slowly raised it a few inches before dropping the toy once again. "Between the shape of the toys and the weak nature of the claw, it's incredibly hard to successfully grab a prize. Trust me, Ann and me spent plenty of time at these games in middle school... I know just how rigged they are."

Justine's good eye widened slightly. "So it aims to build frustration, while making people spend more and more money on objects that seem easy to attain... such an insidious instrument of torture." She was sure, with a little effort, they could make some kind of fusion ritual out of it.

On the third attempt however, the claw managed to get a good grip on the pink squirrel and carried it all the way to the exit slot. It dropped the toy quickly, with the plush doll dropping into a chute at the bottom of the cabinet. Akira lifted it easily and handed it to Caroline, who seemed to freeze up as she gripped it. "O-ooh," the silver-haired girl said. "Thanks Inm-" she caught herself mid-sentence. "Thanks... Akira."

"With enough patience, and a good aim, you can beat the machine," Akira said.
"Or you could just reach in," Shizuka said, Houdini's spectral arm floating above her right shoulder. "And nab something that way."

"That's stealing," Akira flatly said.

She shrugged in turn. "I see it more like... karma, with how these machines con people. They rob so many coins that it's not gonna hurt their profits all that much," Shizuka said.

"You know, that sounds a little hollow coming from the girl who could buy the entire arcade," Shiho said.

As the others debated the ethics of stealing from an arcade, Justine reached into her shorts pocket and seemed to produce a shiny coin from the ether. She casually strode to the skill crane and slotted the coin in, immediately getting to work on toying with the joystick. It only took a few seconds on her first attempt, but as the others turned to watch they caught a glimpse of Justine casually dropping a plush blue squirrel through the chute.

She picked it up, smiling gently as she examined it before turning her attention to her sister. "A matching set."

"That's... impressive," Shiho said. "Kind of wish I had those skills back in middle school." She paused, a sudden buzzing noise coming from the pocket of her red hoodie. She pulled her phone from her pocket and gave it a once-over. "Oh, it's a text from Ann. Guess the others just got to the store," she said.

"Guess it's time for us to get going in that case," Shizuka replied. "Be sure to show these two a good time, yeah? I'm sure there's a lot of cool stuff around the city they might like seeing," she added.

"I'm sure," Akira replied, turning his attention to the twins. "Well, I have nothing else going on. And there's plenty of Tokyo we could cover."

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Akira didn't regularly visit the Ueno art museum, it was something that only Yusuke and Makoto had any real interest in. But as he led Justine and Caroline around the exhibits he could see just how intrigued and excited they both were.

Even Justine, who normally seemed impassive to everything, seemed to become engrossed whenever she saw a particularly beautiful painting or sculpture.

One particular painting gave her pause, causing her to come to a halt on the long stretch of wall supporting it.

It was ultimately rather simple in design, a split of black and white taking up different halves of the painting, akin to a yin and yang symbol. However, looking closely at where the swirls of black and white seemed to meet revealed a particular oddity of the image. Both swirls had human faces, the black and white seeming to come together with the human faces almost merging into one.

Justine regarded it closely with her good eye, feeling a strange sensation stir inside her.
It was hard for her to describe why this made her feel so strange, as focusing on the image seemed to make some part of her cognition fuzzy and uncertain. Like there was a block in her brain that became emphasized whenever her attention turned toward it.

All she could tell was that something about her was wrong. But whatever that was continued to evade her.

"Hey Justine!" Caroline called from somewhere up ahead. "Come here, you gotta see this weirdo sculpture!"

"I..." Justine gave the painting a passing glance before turning her attention toward her twin. "R-right. Coming."

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Having shown the twins to a few major landmarks, and with the afternoon sun slowly sinking into the horizon, he decided to round off the day with a little trip to Yongen where the environment was nice and calm. He decided against taking the two to Leblanc, something told Akira that the twins weren't coffee and curry girls.

Fortunately, he had an alternative in mind.

Caroline examined the heavy steel bat in her gloved hands, humming as she tested the weight on her palm. She moved her attention away from that and focused to the far end of the field to look at the pitching machine. "So people pay for these 'batting cage' places? You give money to whack a ball?"

"There is a chance at winning a prize depending on your score," Akira said. He took a seat on the bench behind Caroline. Justine was perched beside him, inspecting the ears of her fluffy prize with keen interest.

"Okay... so what decides score? How many balls I destroy?"

Akira shook his head. He gestured across to the far end of the expansive caged structure, toward a ringed blue, white, and red circle positioned high up the metal wall. "If you hit that target up there, you get a home run. That'll give you a strong score," he explained.

Caroline nodded and planted her feet firmly, her hands gripping both ends of the bat tightly. Her sole eye narrowed sharply as she examined the pitching machine in the distance. A puff of smoke escaped the machine as it fired off the first ball, the ivory orb quickly closing in on her. But to Caroline, it seemed to almost be moving in slow motion.

There was a crack of thunder as her bat met the ball, a plume of smoke erupting at the point of impact. The baseball rapidly shot across the cage and slammed into the target, leaving a deep indent that trapped the ball in place in the center of the target.

"Did I do it? Is that a home run?" she asked, before glancing down to her bat. There was a black scorch in the steel from where the bat and ball met, and seemed to reek of burnt leather. "Huh, I actually kind of like this thing. Might replace my usual baton with it," she said.

"Is it my turn to take a swing?" Justine asked, glancing up at Akira.
The sun had all but set as they returned to the alleyway off Shibuya's main street. Akira had to admit, he had enjoyed this far more than he thought he would have. The two were usually rather stuffy and serious inside the Velvet Room but being able to unwind let him see some new aspects of the wardens.

And by the looks of things, they seemed to have enjoyed themselves too.

"This was a rather nice day," Justine calmly said. "Having had a chance to see aspects of your daily life, I feel safe in saying that your rehabilitation is going quite nicely."

"Even if your friends do seem like criminals... then again, you guys are thieves," Caroline added.

Akira smiled slightly. "Well, I'm glad you two had a good time. We should do this again sometime," he said. Though perhaps not any time soon. "By the way, are you two gonna be alright bringing those into the Velvet Room?" he asked, pointing to the plush squirrels they were both eagerly carrying.

"These? Nah, it's fine." Caroline opened the left pocket of her shorts and positioned the plush near it, at which point it seemed to suddenly shrink as it was abruptly sucked into her pocket. Akira blinked slightly, and seemed just as surprised when Justine mirrored the actions of her sister. "But thanks... Akira. I don't think I've ever gotten a gift before, not even from..." she paused, as if deep in thought, before brushing whatever she was thinking of aside. "W-well, just... thanks. But don't think this changes anything! You're still a prisoner."

"I know, I know," Akira replied. They reached the mouth of the alleyway, Caroline continuing on toward the ghostly blue doorway while Justine paused in place.

The one-eyed girl stared ahead for a few moments before glancing to Akira. "May I speak about something personal to you, Akira? There's something on my mind, and I feel you may be able to help."

"Hm?" Akira glanced down at the shorter figure. "What's wrong?"

Justine hesitated for a moment, staring at a puddle near her feet. She examined her reflection for several quiet seconds in deep scrutiny. "Do you ever feel that something is... fundamentally wrong?" she asked.

"How do you mean?"

"I mean..." Justine trailed off. "Meeting you, and getting to know you, there are times when I began to feel something strange about myself. As if something is... missing. Something that evades me, whenever I try to think on it. It's as if something..." Justine paused, examining the glowing doorway to the prison. "As if something's deeply wrong."

Akira regarded her closely. "You know if... well, I might just be a prisoner, but I'd be happy to talk to you guys about whatever issues you may be having."

She hesitated for a moment, before sighing. "Perhaps my sisters dramatic tendencies are rubbing
off on me... I really should be going. But, before I do," she looked Akira in the eye. "You and your friends may well be in greater danger than you realize. Be careful."

With that she strode off to join her twin, leaving Akira to watch them go. He sighed as the ghostly door shut, leaving him alone. Those girls... he really didn't know what to make of them. But if nothing else, he could think of them as friends. Their boss, on the other hand... Well, there was a sinister mystery wrapped inside an insidious enigma.

He turned to leave, only pausing when a strange chime rang through his ears. "Help... Please..." From the corner of his eye he saw something flutter by: A glowing blue butterfly.

He turned sharply on his heel to look around and saw nothing. Just the empty alleyway, and the enigmatic glowing door.

He felt that he was alone. But deep down, he wondered if that really was the case.
Sunday, Bloody Sunday (I)

They truly had picked a beautiful day for the trip.

Vibrant sunlight glittered along the lapping waves by the dock, the same light that cast the bordering sands in a warm golden shade. In the distance there was a chorus of chatter from the various crowds at the beach, all positioned rather far from view of their modest alcove.

Haru's boat, too, was a thing of beauty. A long white boat with a sharp front, two stories positioned on top of the main deck. It was hitched comfortably to the end of the long dock, bobbing occasionally over the salty waves.

Yusuke raised his hands up, his thumbs meeting the peaks of the opposing index fingers in a makeshift picture frame, and regarded the boat with a keen eye. "Haru's wealth truly is formidable," he said, seeming to be mapping out the scale of the ship through eye alone. "I imagine there are many people who paid less for their houses than this boat. And no doubt the interior is lined with many top-of-the-line additions." The lanky bluenette was dressed about as oddly as one would imagine, wearing dark swimming shorts and a sleek white hoodie that cast a shade over the top of his head.

"I'm not one for business news, but I've heard that Okumura Foods is probably one of the wealthiest distributors in the nation... I do hope everything will be alright for Haru when her Farther's crimes come out," Sergio remarked. The blond was wearing white shorts with a blue wave pattern going down both sides, a pair of dark sunglasses resting in the golden locks atop his head.

Meanwhile, Akira and Ryuji had taken up seats at a white table positioned near the start of the desk. Akira was rolling a chilled can of cola along his neck, sighing in delight, while Ryuji was mulling over the end of a topsicle stick perched in his mouth. The former was dressed in navy shorts while the latter had gone for a red set. Morgana was positioned in the center of the table, purring as he soaked in the sun.

"Geez, the girls really are taking their sweet time getting changed," Ryuji remarked, sighing slightly and checking his watch.

"Well that's girls for you..." Akira replied lazily, stroking the can of soda against his neck at a languid pace. As he did this, he thought back to this morning. Sojiro had been very clear that he was meant to keep watch on Futaba today, particularly in making sure no guys tried to hit on her. Akira didn't imagine guys would swim out to Haru's boat just to hit on Futaba, but he had promised to keep an eye on her all the same. Though, when he stopped to think on it, the image of some creep hitting on Futaba did manage to raise his ire a bit.

Still, it did mean a lot to Akira that Sojiro was willing to trust him to watch out for Futaba.

"Yooo!" Ann's call caused the guys to glance up the sloping sandy path toward the changing tents, giving them a glimpse of the blonde as she made her way down toward them. Akira got a glimpse of the blonde and her floral print bikini, very nearly feeling as if the wind had been kicked out of
his lungs at the sight. Sergio nodded sagely in approval.

"Sorry about the wait, we... had a lil' trouble getting Futaba ready," Ann admitted, shouldering her scarlet beach bag.

Makoto came down the slope next, dressed in a white bikini top and frilly white skirt. Even Yusuke seemed mildly surprised in her change of attire. "Well, we got through it in the end." the brunette remarked. "It actually went rather well, I thought."

Shizuka emerged behind the brunette after a few seconds, trying to be discreet as she inspected Makoto. The gentle breeze on the beach blew at the cuffs of her denim shorts and flapped at her open black-and-orange pattered Hawaiian shirt. It gave a glimpse at the dark bikini top she was wearing. Shizuka adjusted her silver-rimmed sunglasses and smirked slightly. "You guys are gonna love it, trust me."

"Huh." Sergio cocked his head slightly. "You're dressed more conservatively than I would've thought JoJo-chan."

"Well... firstly I'm feeling so good about today that I'm not gonna bust your nose over that stupid nickname. Secondly if I was showing off like that," Shizuka began, pointing briefly to Ann. "Then my Mom's Catholic ghost would rise out of the ground to kick my ass," she added.

Ann shrugged helplessly, though she ultimately seemed pleased with herself.

"Wait, you're Catholic?" Sergio asked.

Shizuka made a small noise of uncertainty. "In the sense of 'have I been baptized'? Yes. In the sense of 'have I set foot in a church in the last fifteen years'? No."

Haru approached next, the breeze ruffling the hem of her white sundress. She reached up, keeping a neat grip on the wide brim of her sun hat. "I will admit that I envy Ann-chan's confidence, but she is a model after all and it certainly shows." Haru was soon joined by Shiho, the dark haired girl wearing a crimson bikini and skirt. A thin red hoodie covered her shoulders, about as slim in design as Yusuke's. Though she at least didn't have hers zipped up to the neck.

Ryuji made a loud coughing noise, very nearly swallowing his topsicle stick as he wobbled on the back feet of his chair. "Down boy," Akira said.

"Heh... truth be told, I was a little uncertain what to wear, but... I guess it worked out pretty well in the end," Shiho said, giving her boyfriend a faint smile. She paused and glanced over her shoulder. "Hey Futaba, you comi-" She stopped mid-sentence and breathed a small sigh.

The others quickly saw why. Futaba's attire was a frilly yellow number with a short ruffled skirt, which did indeed seem to suit her well. The same could not be said for the towel she had wrapped around her face. She strode forward, her hands blindly groping the air in front of her as she walked along.

"You guys were right, this is great!" she said, her words muffled by the thick fabric.

Shiho sighed slightly and approached the redhead. "C'mon, no need to worry. There's nobody here but us and the guys," she remarked. Futaba made a mild grumbling noise, but didn't protest as Shiho untied the towel around her face. Her orange hair fell down her back like a curtain, the sight
earning a few smiles from the boys.

"You look great," Akira assured her, making Futaba's own smile broaden.

"Well, since we're all ready, shall we be off?" Yusuke asked, turning his focus toward the boat. "I've never been sailing before, but I'm certainly excited."

Haru nodded. "Of course. We'll need a few minutes before the boat disembarks, but feel free to board and get comfortable." She gave Futaba a slim smile. "We have wi-fi on the boat, but... well I hope you'll be enjoying our company too."

"Pshaw. I'm all about socializing," Futaba replied.

"Says the gal who had her face all mummy-wrapped. Well, let's get to it. Here's hopin' my sea legs are still good." As the group made their way down the dock, Shizuka turned her attention briefly to Haru. "Hey, you gonna be alright? I don't want to be a downer or anything but... well, your old man and all," Shizuka trailed off.

Her senpai nodded. "Things are... awkward at home. Father is calming down gradually, but still not making much sense. I tried to talk to him but... all he did was apologize to me repeatedly. But Sergio's companions are keeping him safe, so that's quite fine. Right now I'm just hoping to have a nice day out with friends. I really can't recall spending a day like this before now," Haru admitted.

Shizuka grinned and gave her a light pat on the back. "Wellp, here's hoping it's a good one in that case."

As they continued on, Shizuka let her attention go to Makoto. The brunette was just ahead of her, chatting with Ann and Shiho about something. Whatever it was, Shizuka tried to drown the words out and focus on Makoto.

Today she was going to do it, today she was going to speak her heart.

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The bell above Leblanc's door chimed as it opened, the noise quickly drawing Sojiro away from the task of wiping the counter. The man who entered was definitely new, a well dressed and aging foreigner with impressive posture. "Oh, welcome," Sojiro greeted, briefly adjusting his glasses.

"Ah, yes..." the aging man took a step inside, smoothing out the wrinkles of his white shirt as he did so. "This is... Leblanc, correct? The young miss speaks highly of this coffee shop, so I decided to try it for myself."

"Young miss?" Sojiro repeated.

"Ah, Shizuka Joestar. She's my young charge. I'm Simmons, her butler," he replied, making for the counter and taking a seat.

Sojiro smiled slightly. "Oh that's right, I did hear something about her living with a butler. In that case the first one is on the house. She's a good kid, but I can't imagine she's all that easy to live with at times," he remarked.

Simmons nodded. "That's unfortunately true. I love that girl as if she were my own daughter, but...
teenagers," he said, the word alone enough to make Sojiro nod in agreement. "Ah, yes, I'll take a cup of the house blend."

"Comin' right up." As Sojiro went through his assortment of beans he continued talking, all without raising his eyes from his work. "So, with the kids at the beach, I suppose it's a day off for you?" Sojiro asked.

"More of less. There are no outstanding chores in the apartment and I have nothing else to do. So I decided to explore a little... for as much of a tourist as it makes me sound."

"Your Japanese is pretty good. Take it you've been studying?" Sojiro asked. As he continued brewing a fresh cup, an inviting aroma of coffee gradually filled the shop, growing stronger than the scent that had previously been hanging in the air.

Simmons nodded. "The Joestar family does have a few relatives in Japan, so it doesn't hurt to learn a few words. But when the young miss wanted to move out here after her parents passing, I took up learning Japanese as best I could. Fortunately I'm a fast learner... not that it wasn't a challenge. Kanji is a world away from the alphabet I'm used to," he explained.

"Ha, it's not too easy in reverse either. I spent my whole life with Japanese, but getting into coffee means you need to pick up portions of English, French, and Italian. But if you're dedicated enough, anything's possible." He picked out a freshly cleaned cup and started pouring the rich ebony liquid into the deep mug. "Speaking of the kids though, I agree. You love 'em, but they really can give you a headache."

"Ah, you have kids? Oh, the dark-haired boy with glasses. Akira was it?"

Sojiro placed the mug in front of Simmons. "Ah, not quite. It's... well it's complicated, but I'm basically watching out for him while he's doing a school year at Shujin. I do have a daughter though, and she's been through her share of... troubles recently," Sojiro said.

After a few moments of weighing that knowledge, Simmons took a long sip of his coffee and decided not to probe on the specifics. It really wasn't his business. "Well, I'm sorry to hear that. Yes, I believe the Young Miss said something about meeting a new friend who was having some difficulties. Well, I hope things got better for her... this is fantastic coffee by the way."

Sojiro smirked wryly. "It's my specialty after all. But things are really looking up for Futaba now. Akira and his friends, your daughter included, they've really helped turn it around. But I'm not naive enough to think it's all going to be smooth sailing from here on. But it's definitely an improvement," he said.

"If she's high school-aged, then some hurdles are on their way. Just get her through to college and it will all be smooth sailing afterwards," Simmons replied, making both men chuckle slightly.

"I figured as much personally... good thing she's a genius. She'll be set in a few years time. Until then though..." Sojiro seemed to shiver slightly.

Simmons hummed in understanding. He raised his cup and sipped his coffee down to the halfway point, taking in the strong flavour and aroma. "You know, Shizuka... well, I've known her for her whole life, and I know how she used to be. As a child she seemed to have little in the way of friends. But after coming to Tokyo, she's found a great group of friends that she can depend on... and I'm sure your daughter will do splendid with them helping her too."
"You know what? You might just be right," Sojiro replied, leaning into the counter.

"Well..." Simmons raised his mug and gave a small smile. "To our daughters?"

"To our daughters," Sojiro happily replied.

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The waves gently rocked the boat beneath them, the glowing golden sun gradually making a path across the sky toward the horizon. On the boat itself there was a strong smell of freshly cooked meat coming from a rather long table of freshly prepared food organized by Haru's caterers.

There was quite a rather large selection of meat and vegetables, while the sushi was housed inside the boat to help ward off any potential predatory birds. The group had already helped themselves, and more than a few of them were relaxing at the sunloungers positioned near the railed edge of the deck.

From where he stood near the table, Akira was able to glimpse his friends enjoying the day. He watched as Morgana sat down neatly at the tail end of Sergio's lounger, eating the remnants of his sushi while the blond was reclining. His sunglasses fell over his eyes, giving the illusion that he was asleep. But Akira doubted that was the case, it might have all been some kind of elaborate ruse in some kind of prank. Ann was relaxing on another lounger, seeming to be in the same state between sleeping and waking. Fortunately everyone had thought ahead to top up on sunscreen.

His gaze wandered down the railing until he spotted Ryuji and Shiho peering over the edge, a fishing rod clutched comfortably in Shiho's hands. "What you're about to see my friend, is the skill of a master fisher at work."

"Well, not that I don't wanna see that but... we do kinda have fish on the boat," Ryuji replied, flashing her a wry grin.

Shiho stuck her tongue out at him. "It's catch and release! Just wanna see if I still have the skills after that gir- aha, well, it's not important. Also I'm curious if there's even gonna be anything out this way."

"I wouldn't mind seeing this in action," Ryuji replied. "Need anything from me?"

The dark-haired girl pondered this with a long hum, her eyes glancing skyward for a few seconds. Then, smirking, she gave her right cheek a tap with her finger. "Kiss for luck?"

Akira watched this unfold and smiled slightly. He paused, hearing a small noise from behind him, and turned to see Futaba eagerly perusing the assortment of food on the long table. From what he could tell, she was trying hard not to salivate.

"Having fun?" Akira asked, smiling.

"It's pretty great so far. I was worried I'd be seasick, but... this really isn't that hard to adjust too, to be honest," Futaba said. She stood upright and flashed him a wicked smile of her own. "And this food! Haru really went all in on this stuff."

"She sure did. I guess leave it to the heiress of a food empire to have some great chefs on her
payroll,” Akira said, taking up an immaculate chicken wing. He took a quick bite from it and savored the rich salty flavor, before turning his focus back to Futaba. "But.. are you glad you came out here today?"

Futaba nodded. "I am. Helps that we're far from all the people at the beach. But... I probably wouldn't have come out here if it wasn't for you," she stated.

Akira cocked his head slightly to the left. "Hm? How do you mean?" Akira asked.

"I mean... well, the others are my friends of course... I have friends, plural, that's so weird to say." Akira tried not to dwell on how crushingly sad that sounded. "But you... I don't know, I just feel really safe with you nearby. I guess because you're the first person since Sojiro who ever tried to reach me. And when you're not around, I feel kind of... scared. It's like uh, like you're my key item," Futaba hastily explained.

"Key item? Like, in a video game?"

She nodded again. "Yeah, exactly! I can't... make progress without you. I actually wanted to talk to you about that."

That surprised him slightly, but he managed to keep his usual cool air about him. If she needed his help to improve herself, then Akira was on board. "Fire away. I'm happy to help anyway I can," he assured her.

"Okay, then ah... b-back when I was younger, Mom and I had a system called a promise list. At the start of the month I'd make a whole bunch of promises that I had to keep by the end of the month. Basic things like 'I promise to clean my room' or 'get at least two A's this month.' And if I completed everything on the promise list, my Mom would reward me. S-so I think a system like that could be really handy for helping me improve myself... not that there needs to be a time limit or anything. You can just help me do each promise... whenever."

"I see," Akira replied, nodding in understanding. It would certainly be handy to get Futaba fully comfortable with the world outside her bedroom, and he wouldn't be opposed to hanging out with her outside of 'work.' It was just an aspect of being part of his team, he supposed. "Alright, well... did you have something in mind?" asked Akira.

Futaba gave a faint shrug. "Not in any specific detail, I was kind of just winging it until you agreed to go along with the idea. So uh... w-well give me a few days and then I'll have a decent-sized promise list drafted," she explained.

"Sounds like a plan. Just... try to start small and then we can ramp up to bigger things as we go along," he replied.

"Great! Well... in that case, I'm gonna go bug Morgana." Futaba snickered wickedly and made to leave before pausing mid-step. "Hey, Akira, you're... a pretty great guy," she said without turning around before she trotted along the deck, leaving Akira to his own devices for a few moments.

'Sweet girl,' Akira mused to himself. 'Bright, fun, quirky and smart as all hell.' But Akira also knew full well that that Black Mask bastard and the crooked bastards he worked for had left their marks on her. He had helped her this far, and had no intentions to stop any time soon. Still, if Akira ever ran into the Black Mask again... he doubted he'd be able to stop himself against him too. Not after all the harm he had done.
A small voice interrupted Akira's train of thought. "Um, Aki-kun?" He turned his head, catching a glimpse of Haru as she strode up to his side. "I was hoping to ask a favour of you," the strawberry blonde said.

"Feel free to ask. I'm all ears," Akira assured her. He had spent a good deal of time with Futaba, even before they had taken care of her Palace. But now that he thought about it, he and Haru really hadn't spent much time together. He'd have to remedy that.

"Well... as Shizu-chan may have told you, I have a garden on the school roof. Horticulture has been both a hobby and a refuge for me these past few months. But the situation with my Father has made me aware that I may need to become more proactive and self-sufficient in the near future, and it may need to become more than just a hobby," Haru began. If Haru's old man was going to jail, then the company would go to Haru. Akira supposed her concerns made sense.

He nodded slightly, taking up another chicken wing. "I'm happy to help however I can. Anything specific you need from me?"

"I'm given to understand you're a bit of aficionado when it comes to coffee and curry?"

Akira pondered the description for a few quiet moments. "Well... I suppose that's one way to look at it. I basically am Sojiro's apprentice and he does have high standards for anyone serving his customers."

"Well um... I was hoping I could take my vegetables to Leblanc, so that Sakura-san could appraise them and tell me how well they work in food, and how I can improve," Haru said, Akira nodding along with her explanation. "From there, going by his criticisms, I'll try to improve my vegetables however I can. And I'm... hoping you can help me, Aki-kun."

"You should know he's probably gonna be a little harsh in his criticism. He's uh... frank," Akira quickly said. Then again, if there was one thing he had learned about Haru it was that she wasn't as fragile as she looked. And Sojiro was genuine in his criticisms.

"It's alright. I want to become better at this, and his advice will certainly help me improve," Haru said. She paused and glanced away, still smiling. "You've done a good deal to help me, since the day we met. I really hope I can repay you some time," Haru added, a very light rosy shade grazing her pink cheeks.

Akira felt his eyes widening slightly. "Are you... alright?"

"O-oh yes, quite fine. W-well, I should be off. I have to chat about something with the Captain, but I'll be back soon." She gave him a cute bow and went on her way, leaving Akira mildly confused.

'Empress,' he mused to himself. 'Pretty fitting.'

Meanwhile, as Akira was pondering his current predicament, Makoto strode out of the shade and back out onto the deck of the yacht. She slowly stretched her arms over her head and breathed a small sigh. "Haru must have one amazing supplier for sushi," she remarked.

"Yo." Makoto turned to the familiar voice, to see Shizuka quite literally materialize against the archway. "Had some earlier. I guess it figures that Haru would have great food on offer."
"True. Definitely better than what you'd get at the beach... especially with how crowded it is," Makoto replied, pointing over her shoulder toward the distant shape of the shoreline. "Everything alright?" she asked.

Shizuka hesitated for a moment. "Yeah... no... kinda? Uh, it's... w-well there's something important I need to talk to you about. It's pretty personal and... probably something we should talk about in private," she explained.

Makoto tilted her head a bit, some concern in her expression. "Well... alright. Come on, let's head for the bow."

The two girls made their way along the side railing of the yacht, going at a steady rate until they were at the front end of the ship. The gentle lapping of the waves against the underside of the boat had followed them all the way along, but fortunately the seas still seemed to be smooth.

"So uh... here we are," Shizuka replied, coming to a halt and letting her back press against the railing.

Makoto managed a thin smile. "So... what's on your mind? You know you can talk to me about anything," she replied.

"Well this is pretty major you know. I mean I've been chewing on it for some time, and it's only really now that I've decided to say something. Because just sitting back and dwelling on it has felt pretty crappy... and I was kind of hoping to leave discussing it until we had gotten done with those two Palaces. You know, 'cause you had a lot on your mind leading us through Okumura's," Shizuka explained.

Makoto nodded along with her explanation. "It's certainly been a hectic month, and I appreciate you being patient, but we're free now. You can speak your mind." This was definitely a little odd, Makoto knew. Shizuka was probably one of the most brazen people she had ever met, but she seemed quite nervous about whatever was on her mind.

"That's easy for you to say. This is pretty huge to me, a-and I really have no idea how you'll react," she said, mildly adjusting her shades. "But... here goes. Keeping this shit bottled is only gonna make me feel bad in the long run. Makoto, I... I like you."

The statement hung in the air for a few seconds before Makoto seemed to register both what had been said, and what it meant. Her eyes widened considerably. "O-oh," she simply replied. "I-I mean not... not just 'oh', I m-mean this is pretty shocking to hear!"

"Yeah, see, this is why I was so hesitant to say anything," Shizuka replied. "Because I mean... how do you even begin to say something so personal, when you have no idea how the other person feels?" she asked.

"It's... it's definitely shocking. I know th-that you're into girls and all, but I never thought that would have meant you liked me," Makoto replied. "Nobody has ever liked me in that way. No boy or girl. B-but you... this really is a... wow." She moved to the railing beside Shizuka, supporting her weight against it as she weighed the sudden bombshell.


"You know what people at Shujin think of me. I've never been popular, and being student council
president leaves everyone either intimidated by me, or thinking I'm just a suck-up. Neither of those really make me seem too attractive to the other students," Makoto explained. Which made sense. Before becoming a Phantom Thief, Shizuka had been her only real friend.

Silence lingered between the two for some moments, before Shizuka breathed a small sigh. She removed her sunglasses and tucked them neatly into the pocket of her shirt, turning her uncovered eyes to Makoto. "So... what do we do now?" she asked.

Makoto hesitated visibly. "I... I don't know. I really don't know what to make of all this, you know," she replied. "I've never really thought about who I'm attracted to. But I don't think there's anything wrong about same-sex relationships... Sae, when she did date, had the occasional girlfriend that she was a little secretive about."

"Like... when she was in law school?"

"Around then, I suppose," Makoto replied. Silence lingered between the two for a few moments before Makoto gave a small sigh. "I'm not... saying 'no' or anything, but this is a lot to take in on short notice."

"Yeah I ah... I figured it would be a lot to take in. But... it's the kind of thing I couldn't keep to myself any longer. It was driving me nuts and I just... had to say something," Shizuka explained.

Makoto nodded in understanding. "It's alright... it must have been hard to keep that bottled up... But I'll need time to think about this and get my head in order."

"Take as long as you need," Shizuka assured her, smiling slightly. "I know it's sudden and... probably a little awkward too... and I don't doubt that we're gonna be busy after Okumura confesses, but better now than never."

The brunette gave Shizuka a warm smile. "I'm sure I'll figure it out soon... but it's definitely flattering to have someone interested in me..."

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While they had been at this for a few days, Okumura was still an incoherent mess. Whatever had happened to the old bastard had really left him rattled, and he seemed to alternate between staring into space for minutes at a time, or devolving into nonsensical ranting that jumped from topic to topic with no real connection.

Today was no different.

"Okumura-san," Satoshi said, tenting his fingers together under his chin, leaning forward in the dark leather seat of Okumura's couch. "I know you've been through a lot, but we really need you to focus and tell us-"

"You don't understand!" Okumura hastily snapped, continuing to pace in front of his currently empty fireplace. Kunikazu, normally a rather well groomed man, looked to be in an awful state this afternoon. His hair was askew, the buttons on his shirt askew while his dark jacket nearly hung off his left shoulder. A glance at the few borboun stains that dotted the left leg of his trousers made it clear he had been drinking excessively recently. "They'll find out what I've done, th-that I've betrayed them, and when they do..." He grit his teeth, looking set to vomit.
Aya, leaning against the railing at the base of the stairway, gave a small sigh and tugged the collar of her ivory blouse. "Great, this tangent again. Okumura-san, all you have to do is tell us who is threatening you, and then we can-"

Okumura gave a shrill cry and gripped the sides of his head, making Satoshi and Aya jump slightly. "Haru! Oh my dear s-sweet Haru, I was going to marry her off to that... that little bastard! The things he would have... oh god I'm a monster!" He pressed his right hand against the wall to support himself and covered his eyes with his left, his whole body becoming wracked with powerful sobs.

Satoshi let out a small noise of annoyance. The guy was off his chair. Whoever 'they' were, it seemed there was no need for them to come after Okumura. He'd already lost it. But even so they'd have to keep an eye on him until he made his press conference.

If something were to happen, Satoshi knew they could handle it. Aya had been involved in Stand battles since she was fifteen, working alongside her parents as they conducted their freelance Stand-based detective work. She was reliable, he knew that much, had years of experience on her side in the event things got hairy.

They had Yoshio positioned a few blocks away, using his Kashmir to blanket the area for any other Stand users. Outside of the freelancers who had been taking up shifts here, nobody had come anywhere near Okumura's home. Ultimately it seemed that whatever Sergio was worried about wouldn't be coming near the guy.

Still, Satoshi did wish Okumura would just tell them who he was afraid of. At least if they knew that much, they could spread that knowledge around if something happened.

"Okumura-san!" Aya loudly smacked her hands together, the resounding clap echoing through the living room. "You'll have plenty of time to make it up to your daughter, and anyone else you wronged. Trust me! But if you want our help, you'll need to take a deep breath and tell us what you're afraid of."

And Okumura did indeed breathe deep. He took in a few gulps of air like a drowning man breaching through the waves, slowly turning his reddened eyes to the ceiling.

"He'll leave me to die... kill me like all the others. But this insanity has gone on too long, it has to end." Okumura shuffled off, leaving the two alone as he made for the kitchen. No doubt going for a drink again.

"God..." Satoshi sank into the material of the couch, Instant Crush materializing in the right corner of his mouth with a steady stream of smoke rising from the peak. "I'm tempted to grab him by the neck and shake the answers out of him."

Aya made a dismissive tut. "In his state, he probably wouldn't even notice." She strode from the railing of the stairs, casually making for the couch. "At least our shift is nearly over... dunno where Sergio got that info from, but it feels pretty bogus."

Satoshi rolled his Stand from one corner of his mouth to the other. "I have a pretty good idea where. We give it a few more days, he gives his speech and tells the contry whatever he needs to tell them, and then it's done," he replied.

The younger woman regarded him curiously. "You know, I heard a rumor that the Phantom
Thieves are after this guy... but they don't kill people, do they?"

"It's not them we have to worry about, I'm pretty sure on that," Satoshi said. A sudden buzzing sound filled the room, drawing Satoshi's attention to his coat pocket. He quickly drew his phone and answered it. "Yoshio. What's up?"

"Uh... well I'm not sure exactly, but I think a Stand-user might be heading your way," he said, sounding slightly uncertain.

"What? What do you mean?" Satoshi asked.

"It... it was vague but I could swear I felt someone new approaching Okumura's. They might be able to mask the presence of their Stand, and if that's the case then Kashmir can only sense them if they're using their Stand. But I'm sure something was just near your area."

Satoshi and Aya shared a worried glance. "Give me a sec. Big Iron already has some traps set by a few windows, but I should probably go and plant some by the peri-" The doorbell rang, making the duo freeze up. That sense of dread was only heightened when they heard the door opening.

_Okumura_. They both knew he had to pass near the front door on his route, and now that he had...

The two SID members quickly sprang into action, sprinting from the living room and rapidly skidding to a halt in the hallway. It didn't take long to see Okumura by the front door, with the person on the other side being a... deliveryman?

He looked the type, wearing the light green uniform and cap of a popular courier service. He stood in the doorway, looking pleasant, and the two briefly started to think that this had all been a false alarm. Until they saw that Okumura seemed almost paralyzed, his hands twitching at his sides.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl as the duo continued forward.

"Kunikazu Okumura," the 'deliveryman' said, his smile broadening into a wicked grin. An aura of purple light graced his body, his dark hair glowing under the white brim of his cap. "Our eyes are locked and our shadows are touching, so..."

Something suddenly sprouted up from behind him, a long crimson serpent with white spheres dotting down its front and back. It had two scythe-like arms like those of a mantis, while the Stand's head was elongated and hideous, with a fanged lamprey mouth. The veins on Okumura's neck bulged outward, his eyes rolling back in his head while horrible gagging noises erupted from his throat.

Suddenly wisps of white wind flew from Okumura's open mouth, being swiftly sucked into the Stand's horrible maw. "**Your soul belongs to Bloody Sunday!**"
Sunday, Bloody Sunday (II)

A glint of orange shone from down the hallway, followed immediately by an orb of fire being catapulted forward and rapidly closing in on Bloody Sunday. It sailed over Okumura's shoulder and exploded against the serpentine Stand, causing the user to hiss and recoil, clutching his chest as the fiery waves rolled over Bloody Sunday.

Bloody Sunday snapped back, a horrible gargling sound rising from his fanged maw as wisps of white wind were knocked out of him and sent tumbling back into Okumura's still-gaping mouth. The dark haired man wobbled on his feet, his eyes still rolled back in his head, and fell backward until he was suddenly caught by Satoshi.

Aya took a few quick steps forward, her pearl necklace clutched in her right hand while her left was neatly clutching a freshly plucked pearl. Big Iron, peched comfortably on her left shoulder, dipped a wing out and sank a feather into the pearl, causing the orb of white to wobble in Aya's grasp before it abruptly turned pitch black and grew almost thrice its original size. She grunted, throwing the orb out of the open doorway.

As soon as it hit the cobblestone path leading up to Okumura's front door, it exploded out into a blossoming cloud of grey smoke that immediately engulfed the Stand user and left him coughing as he stumbled through the murk.

"Is he alright?" Aya asked, coming to a halt near the doorway.

"Still has a pulse, but..." Satoshi raised two fingers from Okumura's neck, a frown lingering on his face. "Getting your soul attacked is pretty fucked."

He set the injured man down on his back in the main hallway and swiftly rose back up to his feet, his right hand carefully gripping his Stand. To think that an attacker would just waltz up to the front door like this. Aya hadn't set up any traps there because they didn't want one of the freelancers getting injured on the way in. And certainly because they didn't think any assassin would be so brazen.

The deliveryman outfit was a nice touch though. Nobody would even think to look twice at a courier in public. Still, Satoshi had to wonder how he got in with nobody noticing. Even Yoshio hadn't been able to sense anything until this guy used his Stand.

"Try to keep out of his shadow. And don't look him in the eye," Satoshi said, slowly rising to his feet. "These guys... so used to dealing with normal people that they never expect a Stand user to be listening in."

The smoke cleared, revealing the man in question, still coughing from the remnants that had been sucked into his lungs. Satoshi jumped through the front door and landed a few feet to the right of the assassin, the direction of the sun casting his shadow in the opposite direction. Satoshi kept a mental note of this as he raised his own Stand up and took aim.

"SID?! The hell-?!!" The assassin jumped back as a continuous stream of fire blew his way, the billowing orange wave only narrowly missing him and singeing the hem of his light green shirt. Bloody Sunday responded swiftly by swinging his left scythe down and hooking into one of the cobbles of the path. With one hard jerk he launched the cobble from its moorings and flung it at...
Satoshi.

The fist-sized chunk of masonry rapidly closed in on him, and while Satoshi managed to jerk to the side it still clipped his right shoulder and seemed to crack in half down the middle. He snarled through clenched teeth and landed on his side, his left hand reaching up and clapping his shoulder. A powerful throb of pain radiated down his arm. Satoshi could tell already that his clavicle and humerus weren't broken, but his limb still ached. Something might have been cracked.

Regardless, his attacker was still coming at him. "I might not be able to take your soul like this," he continued forward, his Stand poised to leap outward. "But I can still take your life!"

He took a step forward, only for a metal feather to strike the cobble his foot landed on. It rapidly wobbled before shifting its dimensions and composition entirely, morphing into a sharp steel bear trap rapidly snapping toward his leg. "Shit!" Bloody Sunday moved quickly, a spectral arm shooting downward and blocking the blades before they could sink into his user's leg.

The stainless steel rattled around Blood Sunday's intruding limb, while bloodied scars sprouted around the forearm of his user. He gave a sharp hiss before his Stand gave a sudden twist of his arm, shattering the bear trap and sending the shards of metal skidding away from the assassin's feet.

In that time Satoshi had managed to rise to his feet, holding Instant Crush out with his left hand. A stream of choking black smoke erupted from the glowing tip of his stand, closing in on the assassin and leaving him coughing and backing out through the plumes of ash.

"Dunno who you are pal, but you picked the wrong man to target," Satoshi spat. 'Why did that idiot have to answer the front door? Questions bounce the fuck off him, but he hears the doorbell no problem? Must've been some absentminded reflex on Okumura's part.'

Now that she had an opening made, Aya dragged Okumura deeper inside the house and made her way to the front door, closing it over slightly. Big Iron shot a feather at the doorstep, causing the shape to wobble as Big Iron's power triggered a metamorphosis.

In the span of a few seconds the doorstep had transformed into a thin layer of brittle stone, positioned over a pit of sharpened punji sticks. "Boss, you gotta keep away from the door. I'll keep Okumura covered from here," Aya said. She was peering out of the doorway with her Stand resting on her shoulder, his wings unfurled while she scanned the environment for suitable targets.

A slew of fireballs shot from Instant Crush's blazing tip, cutting through the smoke and making for the writhing figure in the darkness. The assassin burst out of the gloom, still coughing. Bloody Sunday whipped both scythe-arms downward, tearing more cobbles out and launching them at Satoshi.

This time he was quicker on his feet, dashing across the grass to dodge the incoming projectiles. As Satoshi went he gave a harsh lash of his hand, Instant Crush firing out a tracking whip of fire that washed over the cobbles and reduced them to molten blobs that slapped into the well-cut grass and rapidly hardened.

At that point the assassin decided to take another approach. He dashed forward, his Stand positioned in front of him like a human shield to block an incoming burst of fire. The flames met his forearms, making him hiss in discomfort. He pressed on regardless, his teeth clenched tightly.
It wasn't hard for Satoshi to see what his opponent was up to, the corner of his eye watching as the assassin's shadow started to draw closer to his own. And that Stand of his would no doubt be strong enough to force Satoshi to look him in the eye.

He couldn't risk that, obviously. More than once he'd had to deal with Stand users who could attack him through his soul, and it wasn't an experience he had any intention of going through again. And if Aya was on her own, it would be much harder for her to keep Okumura safe from this creep.

Satoshi aimed downward and released a powerful burst of smoke at his feet, the tide of darkness wreathing around the duo. He was quick to lift his right arm, burying his mouth and nose into the crook of his elbow to keep his lungs clean. But from the violent, retching coughs he soon heard through the gloom it seemed his opponent was far less fortunate.

With an opening made, Satoshi quickly weaved through the smoke and sprinted back to the path, quickly flicking a wreath of fire behind himself to block any potential pursuit. "Aya, I need some cover!"

"You got it boss!" Aya replied from her covered position at the doorway.

A trio of sharpened feathers were launched swiftly from Big Iron's right wing, aimed toward the rapidly disappearing cloud of smoke on the horizon. The bladed edges sank into the grass, sending a breeze of white light briefly washing over the blades of grass surrounding the smoke cloud. In the span of a few seconds the grass had morphed into a wide ring of nails that protruded from the dirt.

The assassin started to take a step out of the smoke, only to halt entirely once he got a glimpse of the nails blocking his path. "What?! Nails too?! Just what the hell is that bitch's Stand power?!

"Call her a bitch again, and I'll burn your balls off," Satoshi growled.

Satoshi flicked Instant Crush from his hand, the white cigar twirling around as it made for a thin tree growing from the ground. As soon as the side smacked into the tree, his Stand belched out a roaring fireball that lanced toward the assassin while the Stand itself swiftly ricocheted back toward Satoshi. He caught it in a single fluid movement.

His opponent tried to pull back, managing to just barely avoid the brunt of the fireball as it sailed toward the back wall. But for as quick as his reflexes were, he wasn't fast enough to fully avoid the fireball. Stray tongues of flame gliding over his right cheek and left sections of skin darkened and gnarled. He howled in pain, wobbling off balance while his Stand gave a harsh back sweep of his claw.

The sweeping movement tore a large section of nails from the dirt, catapulting them and a cloud of mulch toward Satoshi. He too moved to dodge, hitting the deck just as a trio of nails punched through the sleeve of his coat and sank into the flesh of his left arm. A stray nail managed to hit him in the left hip, digging through his skin and pulling another prolonged hiss from Satoshi before he landed on his back.

Already he could feel dribbles of blood oozing from the fresh cuts, but powered through the sensation and raised his left arm to take aim with Instant Crush. A bullet of fire erupted from the cigar, hitting the assassin in the knee and sending flames coiling around his right calf.

He shrieked, Bloody Sunday swiftly swinging down to clobber at the flames at his twitching leg.
But even as the flames parted and died out, Satoshi could see the furrowed lines of burned flesh his attack had left.

One of Big Iron’s blade-like feathers suddenly shot from the open doorway, sharply closing in on the assassin. The point hit him under the ribs and sank a few inches into his flesh and pulled a harsh snarl of pain from him. A red stain quickly blossomed out from the point of impact, while Big Iron's intruding blade vanished into nothingness.

The assassin wobbled, his balance swaying, and he was left panting for air. A realization seemed to quickly dawn on him that he was in a rather bad position. He couldn't afford to take much more damage, and there was no way he was going to get closer without being blasted again. Bloody Sunday's left scythe blade swung backward, the limb seeming to elongate slightly, as the sharpened point sank into the stone and sent stray nuggets of dislodged stonework tumbling to the ground.

So that was how he had gotten in, Satoshi mused. Bloody Sunday scaled the wall in one motion and dropped him on the other side. That was why Yoshio had only sensed him for a brief moment.

Bloody Sunday pulled the entirety of his weight to the top of the wall, taking his injured user with him. "You shouldn't have gotten in the way! You're just stalling the inevitable!"

A chill ran through Satoshi's body, but he powered through the sudden spike of fear and unleashed a volley of pea-sized fire bullets. They sailed wide as the assassin dropped down to the other side of the road, beating a hasty retreat.

With deliberate care, Satoshi slowly rose to his feet and fought through the stinging pains that the nails had left in him. Aya snapped her fingers, the traps she had created coming undone as the objects she used returned to their base components. Even through the jabs of pain, Satoshi could feel mangles blades of grass falling from the fresh scars.

"Sorry about the nails boss. I was trying to fence him in, but I didn't think he'd do something like that," Aya said, slowly pulling the door open.

"Don't... don't worry about it," Satoshi replied. "He's gone for now, but... he might have some backup on the way. We need to get the old man looked at ASAP." Slowly and steadily he was making for the doorway until he was leaning against the wall outside, his breathing still heavy and raspy. "I really need to quit smoking... Call a wagon for this guy. An attack like that, we'll need to take him to the Athena Clinic."

Aya nodded firmly and drew her phone from her pocket. "Right... better get Sergio on too. He's friends with Okumura's daughter, and... she deserves to know what happened."

Satoshi nodded and kept himself pressed to the wall. None of his injuries were going to be permanent, but they hurt like hell... and his dry cleaning was going be murder too. For now he focused on the task at hand, wondering just who had sent that creep for a hit job.

There were plenty of Stand users in Tokyo, many of them more than capable of quick assassinations. So why this guy? His power would be able to take a pedestrian by surprise, but it was still a little more convoluted than was necessary. The only benefit Satoshi could see was the fact that his power left no hints as to the cause of death. 'Like those uh... what's that thing that's cropped up online? A mental shutdown?'

With how terrified Okumura was, he had clearly managed to piss off some powerful people. But
who? Satoshi felt his eyes widening slowly.

Had he just unwittingly crossed Mr. A?

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The sun was gradually being absorbed into the horizon line, the radiant orange light casting the sea in its radiance. Haru's crew were tending to the freshly docked boat, while the teens finished changing back into their civilian attire by the tents.

"That was pretty great," Ann said, finishing adjusting the hem of her dark tank top. She reached up to adjust her hair, ensuring that her twintails were brought to their usual fluffy magnificence. "It's pretty nice to just get away from everything... I hadn't realized how nuts this month has been until we actually got to take a day off."

"It was really awesome," Ryuji said. His smile faltered slightly. "Sucks that Summer is pretty much over though."

Akira adjusted the bag on his right shoulder, making sure Morgana was comfortably nestled in his favourite haunt. "On the plus side, we have the school trip coming up pretty soon. And since it's Hawaii, it means we've got more sun to look forward too," he said.

"And Kosei will have a trip to Los Angeles in that same time," Yusuke remarked. Shizuka gave a small snort of laughter, earning a curious look from the artist. "Something funny?"

"Nah, just... man I would not envy you. I goddamn hate L.A. Almost as much as I hate California. Or my Dad hated LBJ," Shizuka explained.

"Who?" Ryuji asked, confusion blatant on his face.

"Lyndon Baines Johnson, 36th President of the United States," Makoto explained promptly as she made her way from the tents, fixing the hem of her silky white blouse. Noting the surprised looks she was getting, she shrugged dismissively. "We had a good deal of Cold War history last year. So why did your Dad hate him?"

Shizuka shrugged dismissively. "I unno, my Mom always covered my ears whenever he came up. He was just one of the things that set my Dad off, along with Afghanistan, air travel, George of the Jungle, and Rob Liefeld." She spied the confusion in the group and shrugged again.

"At any rate," Makoto interjected. "It might be for the best that we are out of the country for a little bit. I've heard through the grapevine that the police are going to be probing around Shujin soon after school resumes."

"For real?!" Ryuji asked, nearly falling back in his surprise.

Shiho pondered the new information, idly plucking at the zipper of her fully zipped-up hoodie. "I guess it makes sense. The Phantom Thieves are all over the news these days, and it did start in Shujin. It's bound to turn some heads that way," she explained.

Makoto nodded. "That and I hear Principal Kobayakawa might be under investigation too. Given that he was covering for Kamoshida, I'd imagine he's panicking. He was definitely pretty paranoid when he was asking me to investigate the Phantom Thieves."
"Well... I like the idea of the Principal breaking out in a nervous sweat, but I doubt much will come out of it. I mean, if there's any evidence of wrongdoing at all, he's probably buried or destroyed it." Shiho shrugged. "Oh well. We should just focus on keeping our heads down until the police are gone."

After a few seconds, Sergio downed the last of the soda he had brought with him from Haru's ship, savouring the sugary taste. "Don't worry about it. The police won't find anything anyway... provided nobody starts shouting out that you're in Arditi." A few sideways glances were tossed Ryuji's way, the young man bristling slightly under the scrutiny.

Futaba, looking to be much more comfortable in a dark tank top and baggy grey sweatpants, gently hummed to herself before interjecting fully. "I'll keep an eye on police chatter just to be safe. You know, monitor for any mention of us or the group," she said.

"You can do that?" Ann asked, her eyes wide in shock.

Futaba nodded earnestly. "It's super easy with the right software and a little elbow grease. I'm surprised more people don't eavesdrop on the police."

"Ah Futaba," Shizuka smiled warmly. "Is there anything you can't do?"

"Go into crowded places without feeling incredibly anxious?"

"Well... fair enough," Shizuka added.

The conversation ground to a halt as the sound of a phone buzzing filled the air, quickly being joined by a ringtone set to the tune of 'March of the Toreadors.' Sergio made a curious sound as he drew his phone from his jeans pocket, pressing it to his ear. "Hm? Aya, what's-... H-hold on, what? He's been... h-hang on, you need to slow down here."

The atmosphere around the group seemed to grow much more tense in the span of a few seconds. The others leaned in closely, a mutual sense of worry coming over them. Haru, naturally, looked the most concerned by the sudden shift.

"Yes she... she's here with us. Yes I know where Athena is, b-but... a-alright, I'll be sure to lead them there ASAP." Sergio hung up and turned his attention back to Haru. He seemed crestfallen, and hesitated giving her the bad news. But she needed to know. "Haru, your father has been attacked by a Stand user."

"W-what?!!" Haru squeaked in shock, her eyes going as wide as dinner plates. "B-but he was being guarded!" she added.

Sergio frowned, guilt clear in his expression. Getting the SID to protect Okumura had been his suggestion, but it hadn't done the guy much good. "The attacker had managed to avoid detection... But your Father's still alive, Aya was clear on that part. Just... we need to hurry, come on," Sergio said, pulling ahead of the group.

"Wha- where are we going?" Shizuka asked, her brow quirked.

"First we're hailing a cab. Then we're making for Jinbocho. There's no safer place for Okumura right now."
The Speedwagon Foundation, being as wealthy and resourceful as they were, naturally had clinics and buildings dotted around the globe. They varied in size and function, but ultimately they were all quite visible to the public. Except for the Pendleton-grade clinics, the most advanced structures the Foundation had.

There were only a handful to be found across the globe, and their existence was a rather well guarded secret. The main function of these top-of-the-line structures was to act as personal hospitals for members of the Joestar clan in the event that they needed emergency aid, and a safe shelter to call home. The globe-trotting battle against Dio Brando had made the Foundation well aware that such buildings could be of vital use.

And when not being used for their main purpose, the resources of the Pendleton clinics were being geared toward research. While this naturally included medical research, there was also a greater opportunity to examine extranormal powers and artifacts in these cloak and dagger environments.

With great care, naturally. Anyone studying a recovered stone mask would first undergo the most rigorous psychological evaluation imaginable, for example.

The name, naturally, came from Jonathan Joestar's wife: Erina Pendleton. A woman that the Foundation's founder had a great respect and admiration for, who had suffered the worst loss Speedwagon could have imagined. He had spoken often of one story he was particularly fond of, recounting the aftermath of Jonathan's first battle with Dio. Erina had been the woman who tended to his injuries, working for hours on end without an ounce of rest, until her hands had grown cracked and weathered from the effort. The spirit of her kindness and devotion was meant to be reflected in these clinics, as if Erina was giving the same protection and comfort to her descendants.

The clinic in Tokyo, dubbed Athena by staff, was located in the musty and quiet streets of Jinbocho, a multi-story structure that reached underground. The building directly atop if was a modest rental building, the first floor being a Foundation-owned medical textbook store while the residents of the other floors seemed to vary every few months.

There were a few hidden access points hidden in Jinbocho, away from prying eyes. As it was the quickest one their taxi could reach, Sergio chose the entryway hidden in the back lot of a small stationary store, his card triggering the reader on the concealed hatch. From there a tunnel led the way to the top layer of Athena. There they found a modest reception area, with Satoshi and Aya seated in waiting. Crisp white walls and a blue-tiled floor greeted them.

Satoshi had removed his jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, giving a glimpse at some bandages coming down his upper arms. He rose up as he saw the group approach through the side door. "Okumura-san," he greeted, approaching the young woman. "You have my utmost apologies, this never should have happened."

"Wha..." Haru's eyes were shimmering from barely contained tears. "What did happen? H-how did it happen?" she asked.

"We had taken precautions to secure a few entryways, and had one of our own providing overwatch. But the attacker managed to conceal his Stand until he drew close enough... with your Father's mental state, we didn't expect him to just blindly open the door on his own, at which point
the attacker tried to suck his soul out,” Satoshi explained.

Haru gave a shocked gasp, bringing her hands up to cover her mouth. "Dr. Lifeson arrived not too long ago," Aya interjected, wanting to assuage Haru's worried as best he could. "He's still doing his examination, but he'll do everything he can to make him right as rain," Aya explained.

The young heiress swallowed hard. "What did the Stand user do to him?"

"Like we told the Doc, we think he tried to suck out Okumura's soul... luckily we stopped him pretty much as soon as the process started," Satoshi replied. They had even seen some 'soul' fly back into Okumura's open mouth. Even so he was out like a light, and Lifeson was probably the only guy around who could read his condition with any accuracy. "We fought him, and he got away. Watching Okumura and getting transport out of there was the most important thing."

"Jesus..." Shizuka murmured. Someone who could steal souls, just like the creepy-ass D'Arby brothers her Dad had told her about. He must have made for one dangerous bastard. "He got away, but he's not dead. What did he look like?" she asked.

"Plain looking, dark-haired. Dressed up as a deliveryman so that he could blend in. Nobody gives a deliveryman a second glance on the streets. But Satoshi did manage to burn a portion of his face," Aya explained, seeming a little proud of that last part.

Satoshi remained silent. He'd much rather have killed the bastard outright, but if he had then he wouldn't want to imagine Mr. A's ire. Assuming that he worked for Mr. A, that is.

His attention shifted to Sergio. "Hey, mind if we chat in private about something? This whole situation has me curious."

"Ah... sure thing Boss," Sergio replied, breaking from the group and strolling to the tunnel he and the others had first come through. Satoshi followed close behind.

Once the two had left, the rest of the group only had to wait for a few more minutes until the large double doors at the other end of the reception opened outward. Lifeson emerged through the opening, dabbing his forehead with the latex-covered digits of his right hand.

Haru rushed to him quickly, while the others followed behind at a slower rate. "Y-you're Doctor Lifeson, yes? I've heard about you, a-and that your Stand can cure anything. I-is my Father alright?"

Lifeson's eyes widened slightly, his attention shifting between Haru and the rest of the group. He recognised Shizuka and her friends quickly enough and realized he had just stepped into something much bigger than he originally thought. At first Lifeson simply thought Okumura's wealth and status had landed him a spot at Athena, but clearly that wasn't the case.

"Well, uh..." Lifeson awkwardly scratched the back of his thick neck. "I've had my Stand look him over, and I've done what I can. So far Okumura's condition is stable, but he's unconscious. So we have our instruments monitoring him, and some infused medicine entering his system. All goes well, he'll be fit as a fiddle in no time," he said.

"You-... you really mean that?" Haru asked, visibly trembling in her worried state.

"I'm doing everything I can for him. Trust me," Lifeson said, smiling and giving the young woman
Haru nodded in return and took a deep breath. "Th-thank you... I... I want to see him soon, but..." she took a few shaky steps toward the rows of chairs in the otherwise empty reception area, proceeding to take a seat. She was still trembling, even as Akira took a seat beside her and Ann sat down on her other side, both doing their best to reassure her.

Lifeson glanced to Shizuka, trying his best to keep an impassive expression. "Hey, Shizuka, mind joining me for a sec? I need your input on something," he replied. Shizuka cocked her head curiously, but she followed behind him regardless as the older man made for the double doors he had previously come through.

The doors gently slid closed behind them, leaving them with relative privacy. Lifeson exhaled slowly through his nose and leaned against one crisp white wall, a few inches from the nearest fire extinguisher. "I don't know if Panacea can help Okumura-san."

"Wha-?!" Shizuka caught herself, clamping a hand over her own mouth. She composed herself quickly, looking up at Lifeson. "What do you mean? How can your Stand be having trouble?"

"Panacea is designed to handle physical trauma, and mental trauma to a limited extent. But something as abstract as a soul is the kind of thing that my powers have no handle on." As he said this, he sighed and turned his attention to the ceiling. "The attack did some damage to his nervous system, that was as much as Panacea could sense. Everything else though, I can't even hazard a guess... I supercharged his IV to repair the damage and boost the vitality of his body. But..." Lifeson trailed off.

"But...?" Shizuka inquired, seeming to be dreading the answer. She had no love for Okumura, but he didn't deserve this. More than that, she couldn't bear to think how this would affect Haru.

"But... I have no idea if it'll do anything for him. He could ge better tomorrow. Or next week. Or ten years from today. Or... never. He could die tomorrow, his condition deteriorating out of my control. I genuinely have no way to tell what that Stand did to him, or if it's something a person can recover from. I'll do everything I can for President Okumura, but that might not mean much," Lifeson explained.

Shizuka frowned, furrowing her brow as she let this information sink in. "Geez... kept all that to yourself earlier."

Lifeson sighed. "Your friend knew what my power was. She knows me as 'the man who can cure anything.' Telling her 'I don't know if I can fix this' really isn't gonna do much for her."

"Right... sorry," Shizuka replied.

"For now I'll stick with him and do what I can. Better get some guest cards printed so you and the others can come by here on your own... shoot, you should tell Okumura's daughter to be careful and be discreet when she's coming here. This place is pretty secure, but we don't want to run the risk of anyone tracking him here. Because those guy's aren't gonna stop at just one attempt," Lifeson added. Shizuka had figured as much already.

"What a shitty way for today to go..." Shizuka murmured.

It was a feeling that was spreading over all the members of the group. Okumura might have been
targeted over his ties to some broader conspiracy, rather than Haru's role as a Phantom Thief, this incident had left them all aware of the danger they were walking into. The danger that was looming over all their loved ones.

Ryuji thought of his Mother, the woman who raised him and loved him despite all the trouble he caused. Ann thought of her own parents, still abroad but still much loved by her. Shiho considered her own parents, who loved and supported her after Kamoshida's wicked nature came to light.

Makoto, though her parents were gone, feared briefly for Sae's safety. Akira thought of his own parents, safe and sound in his sleepy hometown. For as callously as they had sent him away, he didn't want them to be hurt. He and Futaba thought of Sojiro and his safety, a thought that gave them both some mild worry.

And while Morgana had no family that he knew of, he didn't want to see anything bad happen to the people he cared about.

It seemed a choice was laid out before them now: Either they continue on as they were, going against some nebulous conspiracy that seemed to loom over the entire country, putting everything they loved at risk. Or they could look away and let those sinister machinations continue on, hooks sinking into the nation.

But deep down they knew that wasn't an option. After all they had been through, none of them were willing to ignore injustice. The true choice they faced was thus:

'O la vittoria o tutti accoppati.'

'We either win, or we all die.'

"Sergio..." Satoshi glared sharply at his subordinate. "What the hell have you gotten us wrapped up in?"

The blond, normally quite confident and carefree, seemed to grow just a touch more nervous as he got a glimpse at his employer's barely suppressed anger. "Boss, I really don't know what you mean, I-" he was cut off quickly.

"Sergio." This time there was a harsher edge to his tone, and he was only barely keeping himself from shouting. "Is this some sort of... Phantom Thief thing?"

Sergio hesitated before nodding. "Yes. We... the entire group you've seen here, we are the Arditi. We got involved in changing Okumura's heart because his daughter, Haru, needed our help. But it turned out that President Okumura had some illegal connections."

Satoshi raised his right brow slightly. "How do you mean?"

"Okumura was apparently making use of an assassin to damage his competitors, the same man who is likely behind the rampage incidents that have totally flummoxed us," Sergio said.

Sergio told Satoshi all he knew, divulging all he knew about this mysterious group Okumura had apparently been working with. Silencing him had apparently reached the top of their agenda. And as Sergio spoke, Satoshi was aware that a sleeping giant may well have been awoken by the
A chill ran over the roof of Satoshi's apartment building, the only source of light coming from the glowing sign positioned over the accessway door, and the smoldering glow coming from the tip of Satoshi's Stand. He sat atop one of the bulky air conditioners, his gaze affixed to the starry night sky overhead.

The roof was ringed by a tall chain link fence for the sake of safety, and through that fence one could clearly examine the Tokyo skyline and rows of neon lights from the bustling city streets. Tokyo rarely seemed to sleep, Satoshi mused. If anything, the night was more vibrant than the daytime.

He heard a train rumble off into the distance, and the joyous chatter of drunks who were glad to be away from their desk jobs. Tokyo was full of people living mundane lives, totally unaware of the kind of chaos lurking around them, Satoshi mused.

And he supposed that was for the best. If the existence of Stands became common knowledge, the crippling paranoia that would immediately wash over the world would be enough to make the world descend into anarchy. Nobody would ever feel safe again, even with the world already being so uncertain.

Satoshi envied having that kind of ignorance.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, sending a wave of dread rolling through him. He had been expecting this call for some time now, no point in trying to delay the inevitable. He raised his phone to his ear. "What do you want?"

"Touchy tonight, aren't we?" Mr. A answered. "Then again, you did manage to cause me a bit of stress."

"So that assassin was one of yours... what the hell did a burger vendor do to piss you off?" asked Satoshi.

"None of your concern. Just know that Okumura got involved with some big players, and his change of heart puts them at risk... All you need to do is tell me where he is now."

"No idea," Satoshi quickly replied.

"Oh? And how's that?"

Satoshi felt his lips being pulled into a thin line. "It's standard procedure. An assassin tried to take his life, so he needed to be moved somewhere secure. The fewer people know where that 'somewhere' is, the more secure it is," he explained.

"Alright... let's say that's the case for now. What's Okumura's condition?" Mr. A asked.

"Last I heard he was catatonic. Your boy didn't manage to suck his soul out, but the attack still fucked Okumura up. Doubt he'll be getting up any time soon." Which was true, he supposed. Even Lifeson with his miracle healing seemed uncertain if he could save President Okumura.
"Bloody Sunday can be quite a harmful experience, I'm told... If it came down to it, I could rely on you to put Okumura down, yes?"

Satoshi thought back to that girl, Okumura's daughter, on the verge of tears as she learned of her Father's condition. He'd already failed to protect him, he couldn't hurt her again. He couldn't be the one to destroy her life... "Right," Satoshi replied, keeping his tone even.

"Things are ramping up, and I have many threats to deal with. If Okumura is indeed comatose, then I can afford to turn my attentions elsewhere for a little while. Of course, if you're lying, I'll be sure to burn you and your entire world to the ground." There was a dangerous edge to A's voice, a harshness that made Satoshi's whole body tense.

"I'm being truthful... we didn't even get any information from the man himself, he was talking nonsense. Even if he does recover, he's probably still gonna be nuts," Satoshi replied.

"Okumura being a gibbering wreck would make my job much easier, but I still can't afford to take that chance. I'll put some resources toward tracking him down, while the others... well, I do have bigger fish to fry." With that he ended the call, leaving Satoshi alone in the dark.

The SID agent rose to his feet to his full imposing height, striding toward the chain link fence. Right now he wanted nothing more than to run down to Club Ravana and burn A's smug face into a puddle of sludge. But it wouldn't work, he knew. A was untouchable.

He took a deep breath. "Toujou... can you see me, wherever you are? If souls exist, there has to be an afterlife. Good God, you must be so ashamed of me... if it had been me who died that night, you wouldn't have backed down. You would have fought him, you would have..." He trailed off, his mouth going dry.

For just a brief moment, a glorious second, he felt the specter of her hand in his own and heard her voice in his ear. Only for a moment, before cold reality set in again. "I failed you that night. And I fail you everyday that that bastard is still alive."

His eyes roamed the illuminated skyline of Tokyo, inspecting the rows of buildings and apartment blocks nearest to his own. In those homes were people and families living mundane lives, able to enjoy the warmth of people they loved without needing to fear the existence of some criminal deity. Lives that he envied greatly.

Satoshi's eyes turned down to the darkness of the streets below. His building was six stories tall, and a fall from here would easily flatten a person. Burning a hole through the chain link fence and drop down into the dark. Satoshi strongly considered it.

But he couldn't, a sense of paralysis overcoming his body. That wouldn't solve anything for anyone else. "I really am a coward," Satoshi murmured as he stepped back from the fence.

A chilly breeze ran over the roof.

He felt that he was alone.

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The Consciousness shifted with the kind of groaning weight that could be expected of such a vast and alien intelligence. Something was wrong, it now realized. Everything it had planned for
Tokyo, for the world, something had plunged a degree of uncertainty into what had once seemed crystal clear to it.

... "I predicted everything that would happen. The arrival of the trickster, the downfall of the sinners of lust, vanity, gluttony, wrath, and greed... but greed came far sooner than anticipated. His death was meant to discredit the Phantom Thieves and drive the Trickster into working with the Other."

... So what had happened? How had they found the sinner of greed in advance? And if he was currently out of the equation, how would things proceed from here?

... "That fool Igor. He wasn't lying when he said the unexpected would follow the Trickster like a shadow. But it doesn't matter. His clash with the Other is predestined, and he will fall against the Other. And if through some fluke the Trickster is victorious, humanity is still sealing their fate. Day by day they wish to be liberated from the perils of free will, throwing their minds to any platform that offers it."

... Still, the Consciousness would admit to feeling some uncertainty welling up in its being. The people would turn on the Phantom Thieves somehow, those in power would not be denied so easily. But if they had defied its expectations so far, then the Consciousness knew it could not afford to be too cavalier.

... "Perhaps it is time for a test. This time I shall add a new factor to the equation. I alone will be the victor of this game."

.... In the depths of Mementos, something began to gestate.
There was a noticeably morose mood hanging over the group of thieves as they made for their hideous, a glum sensation that had been justified by events just two days previously. One of their own had experienced quite a tragedy after all. True President Okumura was still alive, but there was no telling how long that would last. More than that, the incident had left them all aware of the risks they were taking by going down this path. It had hardly been a game before, but now that they were so famous and going up against such a vast and nebulous enemy... well it was hard not to feel the danger that surrounded them.

Haru was not with them today, wanting instead to spend some time at her Father's bedside until school resumed. For all the horrible things he had put her through, and would have further put her through if her marriage to Sugimura had gone ahead, she still loved her father dearly and hated the current situation he was in. As far as Okumura Foods knew, he had simply fallen ill and was recovering at some high-end medical clinic (not entirely a lie) and so it fell to the Board of Directors to keep things going in his absence.

Sergio, likewise, was absent today. SID business would keep him from any Arditi commitments. That left the rest of the team to plan their next move and discuss what had just happened. Though none of them really knew how they would proceed from here.

As they neared their hideout, Shizuka broke the silence with a weary sigh. "Okay guys, I know we're all really bummed about what just happened... this shit with Haru's Dad, it's not fair, when we were so close about learning who he was working with. It's like winning a foot race only to break your leg after crossing the finish line."

"Damn straight," Ryuji remarked. "We were just short of finding out who the Black Mask bastard works for, and then that other effin' asshole swooped in... and Haru man... things have been bad enough for her without this shit," he added.

The others nodded firmly. "It's definitely not fair, but we must do our best to remain positive. Particularly around Haru when she rejoins us. There is still a strong possibility that President Okumura will recover, and it won't do to worry Haru further," Yusuke explained.

"With President Okumura we just need to hope for the best... they tried to kill him twice after all, so he must have some bombshells set to drop," Akira chimed. He paused, glancing to the shorter figure very nearly clinging to his back. Futaba was very consciously keeping in his shadow, while Makoto seemed to shield her back. "You okay?"

"Never been to this part of the city before," Futaba curtly said, glancing up and meeting Akira's gaze.

"Understandable... well, don't worry we'll be at the hideout soon," he assured her. It was strange, Akira noted. Futaba had been practicing summoning her Persona in the real world, same with the rest of them, and had a perfect defense from physical harm. But that knowledge didn't do much to dissuade her anxiety.

The group rounded the corner at the end of the street and started down toward the red doorway of their hideout. However they stopped in unison when they spied two figures waiting outside their...
The girl with the silky blue hair and flat cap they quickly recognised as Naoto, the Persona-using detective. However the redheaded woman in the sleeveless cream blouse and dark riding trousers was a newcomer. Clearly wealthy as hell, the woman seemed to radiate class and opulence.

"Hey, that's Naoto Shirogane the mysterious Detective Prince," Shizuka said, earning a few strange looks from her cohorts. "What? I read her Wikipedia page. Not to brag, but..." Shizuka dusted the knuckles of her right hand against her collarbone. "I've got one too."

"Are you the one who edits it?" Akira flatly asked.

"Nooooo..." Shizuka replied, shifting her eyes from side to side behind the dark lenses of her glasses.

Eventually their leader sighed, well aware that the two women were now looking at them. "Might as well see what they want... This is so not the time to get lectured about what we're doing," Akira said, starting toward the duo.

Naoto stood up fully. "Kurusu. It's good to see that you and your friends are all in good health," she remarked. "I can't imagine you've had an easy month."

"That's understatement of the year," Akira told her. "And we've had a recent bout of hardship these past two days. So... I'd rather you didn't make it worse," he added. He turned to Mitsuru and bowed slightly in greeting, showing some respect to a new face.

"Well, we're not here to try and stop you from doing your work... if anything I feel it might be too late for you all to step back from this Arditi business," Mitsuru said. She smiled slightly at the group. "Ah, allow me to introduce myself. I'm Mitsuru Kirijo, head of the Kirijo Group." Akira's eyes widened slightly.

Ann felt her brows rise a few centimeters. "Not that rich girls spending time with us is a new thing, but... well it seems weird that this is the kind of thing you'd be involved in. You hired her?" asked Ann, gesturing briefly to Naoto.

The elegant redhead nodded. "This must seem rather strange to you, but... I'm more than just the CEO of my family company. I'm also the leader of a Kirijo Group-funded paranormal investigation group: The Shadow Operatives."

"So this junk with Personas and Shadows really is nothing new if there's a whole group for dealing with it," Ryuji remarked.

"Right," Naoto replied. "Mitsuru and I, during our own high school periods, underwent separate adventures involving Personas and Shadows. It was Madarame's very sudden and very public change of heart that led to us looking into the Phantom Thieves. After all, only tampering with a person's inner self could cause such a radical shift."

Pausing, Akira briefly glanced from side to side before pulling a key from his pocket. "Come on in. Whatever you have to talk about, it's something best spoken of in private." Right now there was no way of telling how secure they were. And if Mitsuru or Naoto meant them harm, they would have done it sooner. After all they had apparently been tailing the different members of the team, had powers of their own, but hadn't done anything to harm or hinder them.

Akira led the way inside, the whole group following his lead into the decently decorated interior of the Arditi's hideout. He came to a stop at the head of their long table, planting himself at the main door.
seat. One by one the others took their seats, with Mitsuru and Naoto sitting down at the far end of the table.

"So this is where you operate from?" Mitsuru asked, glancing about them. "I imagine the rent is your doing?" She glanced to Shizuka, who nodded firmly.

"What's spurred on this visit? Something serious must have happened," Yusuke said. But they were certain what had happened to Okumura was unknown to the general public, so this meeting must have been about something else. The prospect of a different source of trouble was unsettling.

Mitsuru nodded curtly. "Shirogane was attacked the other day, by a party curious about our investigation. The attacker had powers, an ability he referred to as a Stand."

As Mitsuru said this, Shizuka made a modest humming sound. "A criminal Stand user keeping close tabs on you and your investigation? Yeah, I figure there's only guy who'd have the interest and resources to handle that: Mr. A."

"And who might that be? Is he related to the Persona-using serial killer you spoke of previously?" Naoto asked.

"Most likely," Makoto interjected. "While they don't seem to work together, they may all be part of the same organization. From the look of things, Mr. A is some kind of mafioso who has a lot of the Tokyo underworld in his grasp... Our last job seemed to connect him and Black Mask. It was only by chance that we ended up looking into Kunikazu Okumura, trying to help a friend. The man in question had a Palace but more than that, it seemed he had been making use of Black Mask to target rival businesses. When we went to change his heart, he was attacked by Black Mask who was trying to silence him."

Shiho nodded and carried on for her. "We drove him off, but the other day... the other day he was attacked again by a Stand user who tried to suck his soul out. He's in the hospital now with his daughter watching over him."

Naoto and Mitsuru digested this new information with clear worry on their faces. "I take it a Palace is a world projected around a person's Shadow?" Mitsuru asked, earning some nods from the others.

"Hm. So this isn't a case of some lone wolf sociopath with powers... this Black Mask may well be part of a larger organization. One of considerable size and influence if a man of President Okumura's status was involved. Mr. A and his Stand users are likely involved too if they were so quick to try and take out the same man," Mitsuru reasoned, trailing off as she continued to ponder the prospect.

"We were thinking along those lines too," Akira said, leaning back in his padded chair. "We don't know specifically who is at the head of all this, but I think... it might go to the very top. Okumura's ambitions were to break into politics, after all."

"So even politicians may be involved..." Naoto murmured. "But to what end... is it just some kind of criminal cartel, or are they looking to take control of the whole nation?"

"It's pretty huge, whatever we're dealing with... Old man Okumura is safe for now, but in a coma. So he won't be talking any time soon," Shizuka remarked. She gave a small gasp of a sudden realization and pulled something from the left pocket of her jeans. A small plastic bag with four bullets rattling around inside. "I caught these bullets when Black Mask tried to kill Okumura's shadow. Doubt you'll trace the owner exactly, but they might be able to tell you guys something."

Shizuka slid the small plastic bag down the table, whereupon Naoto deftly caught it and surveyed
the rounds. "Well... Mitsuru and I both have our own resources to examine these from. You're right, these probably came from some kind of black market weapons. Guns in Japan are rather hard to come by."

"You were carryin' those around?" Ryuji asked.

Shizuka clicked her tongue against her teeth. "Eh, why not? Sometimes it's a good idea to keep random junk in your pockets."

Mitsuru nodded sagely as she examined the bag Naoto was clutching. "If what you've told us about this Mr. A is correct, then he likely has his share of yakuza connections. Getting an unmarked firearm would be trivial. But if we could at least trace the gun to a vendor, then we might be a step closer to identifying who the gun went to." From how she said it, it sounded like a longshot. But with what they were up against, they would take whatever information they could get.

"So you're really going to work with us on this?" Akira asked, mildly surprised. "You'll have to excuse me if I seem skeptical, but at a time like this... well it's pretty hard to trust anyone outside our group," he explained.

"And I'll admit that I was... skeptical of your group at first too. You reminded me a little of another avenging group of Persona users. But I can assure you we're as interested in stopping corruption as you are," Mitsuru said.

"She's legit," Futaba suddenly said, drawing a few eyes to her. She immediately shrank back into Akira's side, making the bespectacled young man tense slightly. "This whole time we've been talking I've been... scanning these two and looking into this Shadow Operative stuff. Sh-she's legit."

At this, Mitsuru glanced down to her legs and felt her eyes widen as she spied a spectral black tentacle floating into her left pocket to where her phone was. Naoto immediately noticed a similar tentacle that had slid to her phone.

"A Persona that was able to hack into my phone?" Mitsuru asked aloud in some shock.

Futaba shrugged. "Necronomicon was like a... well an interface that linked my mind to your phones. It was my brain that did all the hacking. I went through your contacts, emails, scanned every reference to 'Shadow Operatives' I could find... it's no lie." Necronomicon's ability to scan and draw in information from its surroundings was marginally stronger in the Metaverse. But so long as it could directly interface with something in the real world, Futaba could still gather plenty of intel.

"So it's a scanning power. Like Fuuka's and Rise's," Naoto remarked. "Though hers seems even more complex."

"Personal boundaries," Akira said, giving Futaba a modest pat on the back.

The redhead frowned ever so slightly. "S-sorry."

"Wait, did you just say Rise? As in... Risette?" Ann asked, sounding as if she was on the verge of fangirl delight. Naoto nodded casually, making Ann gasp sharply.

"Okay cool your jets fangirl," Ryuji flatly said.

"She was kind of a nut for Risette a few years back... almost died when Risette went on hiatus back in 2011," Shiho chimed.
"Did not!" Ann quickly replied.

Makoto gave a testy sigh and adopted her Student Council President of Doom voice yet again to draw the others attention to her. "Getting back to the matter at hand, we need to consider how we're going to deal with the literal diabolical supervillains looming over us," she said. Mitsuru seemed suitably impressed by Makoto's tone.

Akira nodded at the others. "Right about now we have no leads on who Black Mask or Mr. A are, sorry to say. And since we'll be leaving the country for a school trip soon, we can't get a whole lot of investigation done in the next few days," he explained.

"And it would certainly raise suspicion if your whole group refrained from the trip," Naoto mused. "Well, we can handle some investigation in your absence. It may well be a necessity, I doubt this mysterious group will just sit back silently in the meantime."

It was at this point that Akira's bag wobbled at his feet, followed then by Morgana abruptly springing out and striding along the table in front of Akira. "Well, we won't all be out of the country. Me and Futaba are at least going to be sticking around," Morgana said, much to the surprise of the two newcomers.

"Akihiko wasn't kidding, they really do have a talking cat..." Mitsuru murmured.

"He is rather cute though... you remind me a bit of my friend Teddie," Naoto said.

Morgana cocked his head slightly, his fluffy black tail aiming toward Akira. "I am Morgana. I'm Akira's mentor," he curtly explained, making Ryuji roll his eyes ever so slightly. "Who the heck is Teddie?"

"Well..." Naoto glanced up to the ceiling for a few moments as she tried to find the right words to use. "He started off as a blue-furred bear in a red suit. It turned out he was a Shadow who... grew a human body before he entered our world."

"A Shadow who... became a human?" Makoto asked in awe. "How... how is that even possible?"

Naoto shrugged slightly. "Even to this day we're not entirely sure on the mechanics of it, and Teddie really hasn't been much help in clearing things up. But I suppose it was simply a matter of him strongly desiring a human form."

Morgana's jaw had nearly dropped off, an expression that looked particularly ridiculous on a cat. "He became a human... because he really wanted it?" Morgana incredulously asked. He looked about set to pop a vein in annoyance.

After a brief pause, Ryuji tilted forward in his seat. "Wait, you mean that mascot bear that Junes got a few years back?"

The remainder of the day was spent with Mitsuru and Naoto discussing their own past adventures. Mitsuru spoke of SEES and the enigmatic Dark Hour, culminating in a battle with the physical incarnation of death itself, and the death of their field leader as he sealed Nyx away from mankind's collective desire for death. So long as that seal was in place, the world was safe. It was disquieting news for the young thieves.

Naoto, in turn, told the group about the sleepy town of Inaba and the spate of mysterious murders that drew her and her group of friends in to investigate it, with the adventure leaving them on the trail of a madman with supernatural powers and unchecked desires. It was a story that Shizuka found strangely familiar. But the similarities ended when Naoto described a battle with a Japanese
deity, or at least an entity posing as that same goddess, to save Inaba.

In the end the group had agreed to collaborate with the Shadow Operatives to unravel this conspiracy as best they could. If Futaba couldn't find anything worrying in their digital footprints, then there was no need to be too concerned. While the Arditi were abroad, Mitsuru would direct some resources toward finding the source of Black Mask's firearm. It was the best lead they had, until their shadowy foes made a few fresh moves of their own.

Then, when the students got back from their trips, they'd try to hit the ground running on a full investigation.

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9/1

It had come as some surprise to Akira when Sojiro told him they were going out to lunch: Himself, Sojiro, and Futaba. The old man had sprung it on him out of the blue and Futaba had seemed rather pumped about going to get some sushi.

Morgana, naturally, was crestfallen that he didn't get to come.

Akira had nothing else to do, and spending a little time with the others did sound rather nice. But it did still come as a surprise that Sojiro wanted him to come along. And as it was the same restaurant he and the others had hit before meeting Futaba, he knew to expect some quality.

While Futaba could at times be tense when out in public, she did seem markedly more confident now that she was perched at the counter between Akira and Sojiro. Confident, but with some of the worst table manners Akira had ever seen.

For such a petite lady, Futaba tore through her platter of sushi like some kind of horrifying fish-slaying machine, stuffing her mouth until the volume of prepped fish and rice caused her cheeks to puff out. Akira's glasses had slid partially down the bridge of his nose, while Sojiro watched everything transpire with a casual air. This was apparently nothing new to him.

"So... how is it? Good?" Sojiro asked.

"Delihoush!" Futaba slurred without bothering to swallow.

"You should probably chew some of that," Akira said. "Does she... always eat like this?"

Sojiro slightly adjusted his glasses. "Only when it's something she really likes." He paused, watching as Futaba swallowed and wound up beating at her own chest from the excessive intake. "Alright, alright... better take some tea to wash that down with."

Futaba did as Sojiro suggested, raising the white mug by her platter up and taking a few loud gulps. She set the mug down with a harsh gasp and quickly turned her attention to Sojiro. "Restroom!"

"The restroom? Oh, it's just that way," Sojiro said. No sooner had the words left him that Futaba sprinted from the counter in the direction Sojiro pointed. "Geez, that girl..."

"I know, right?" Akira said, smiling fondly in the direction she had fled. "Smartest person I know... probably the strangest too at times."

"Sounds familiar," Sojiro remarked. He turned his focus to his own tea, looking deep into the
liquid as if expecting some grand cosmic answer to come from it. "Back in the day me, Wakaba, and Futaba came by here pretty often... never thought I'd have another day like that. I don't know how you did it, but you really helped Futaba out of her shell and changed her life."

Akira shrugged listlessly, finishing the last salmon roll on his platter. "Yeah well... I know you didn't want me involved but I couldn't sit back when she needed help. I guess I'm really good at reaching people," he said.

Sojiro lapsed into silence, before speaking up. "Right before Wakaba died, she said something to me that I haven't been able to forget to this day. She said she thought she was going to die..." Akira felt his whole body tense. "She said it in such a cavalier way, and she had joked about similar things in the past, that I didn't think much of it. But, a few days later..." He shook his head.

"I'm... sorry to hear that," Akira replied. Wakaba had known she was at risk? Had people been following her? Someone inside her workplace?

"When we first met, and I talked about the incident that landed you on probation, I said that you shouldn't have gotten involved in other peoples business. But... I was wrong. You did the right thing trying to help that woman. You're the kind of guy who always has to help a person in need. You saw someone in trouble and didn't look away. The world could use more guys like you," Sojiro said.

"Wow... are we actually bonding?" Akira asked, sounding a little awestruck.

"We were. Until you went and ruined it like the smartass you are." Despite his words, Sojiro was still smiling faintly. The barrier that had been between them for some time seemed to lift in that moment.

Before Akira could say another word, Futaba unceremoniously plopped herself back on her seat between the two. "That was close... I thought I was gonna die!" She gave a small huff and settled her eyes back to her platter. "Well, back to business!"

"Eh? You're seriously gonna eat more?" Akira asked, seeming to be just a tad worried at the prospect.

"Nah, I'm throwing in the towel," Futaba casually said.

"Well which is it?" asked Sojiro with a helpless laugh. He rose from his chair and smoothed the wrinkles from his blue jacket. "Well, I'm gonna go pay our tab," Sojiro said, before leaving the duo to their own devices.

Futaba regarded Akira for a few quiet moments before speaking up. "You know, this is pretty nice. I was a little surprised when Sojiro said he wanted to bring you along, but it's nice to see you two getting along," she said.

Akira adjusted his spectacles. "That was his suggestion? Huh," he remarked in mild surprise. Seemed Sojiro was a lot nicer than he liked to let on.

"Hey, so..." Futaba trailed off. "Do you think it's weird that we're being kind of... casual with what happened to Haru's Dad? I mean, social stuff isn't my specialty but..."

"It's sweet of you to be concerned," Akira assured her, his words making Futaba's cheeks pinken a tad. "But right about now it's important that we try to appear normal. And it's not like we can really do anything for Okumura right now... fortunately Haru's tougher than she seems. Shizuka spoke to her the other day, says she's coping well. Well, she's going to Hawaii with us and the other third
years, so hopefully that'll take her mind off things while Lifeson does his work," Akira explained.

Futaba nodded slowly in understanding. "I hope Haru's going to be alright... President Okumura was a grade-A jerk, but I really don't want Haru to go through what I did. That Black Mask, I'll never forgive him," Futaba said, her tone a small growl.

The thought made Akira frown. No matter what they did, even if they caught Black Mask and managed to get him arrested, nothing they did would bring Wakaba back. It stung to think about, but at least they could bring the killer to justice. Hopefully.

"We'll find him, you know," Akira said, settling a hand on Futaba's right shoulder. He gave her a gentle squeeze of reassurance. "One way or another, we'll stop him. I promise."

A strange slew of emotions seemed to come over Futaba at once, with multiple thoughts and sentences trying to rush out at the same time. That was why the first thing that tumbled from Futaba's mouth was: "Your face it sweet." Silence lingered between the two, with Akira curiously raising his right eyebrow. Futaba's mouth hung open, her cheeks gradually turning the same shade as her hair. "I-I mean you're sweet! I mean that's sweet of you to say, I m-mean-"

"What?! It costs how much?!" Sojiro shouted from the counter, drawing the two to glance in his direction. Futaba breathed a sigh of relief, glad for the distraction.

"Guess Morgana won't be getting any leftovers..." Akira said.

9/4

It was dark in the attic, and Akira was trying his best to get settled for the night. Morgana was resting atop his abdomen, the plush duvet between the two. But from how he was positioned, Akira could see that the feline was still awake too.

Out of the blue, Morgana spoke up. His tone was heavy, as if he had a lot on his mind. "So... you're leaving for Hawaii in a few days time, right?" Akira nodded in the dark. "Well I uh... N-nevermind, it's not important."

Akira frowned. "Morgana, you've been acting weird for a few days now... come on, just tell me what's on your mind. Whatever you have to say, it stays between us." Now that he thought about it, Morgana had seemed a little distant ever since Futaba joined.

"Well it's..." the feline hesitated, his ears going flat at the sides of his head. "I've been thinking about our deal. You know, when I agreed to help you take on Kamoshida. I teach you what I know, you help me get my memories back..."

"Oh... I'd pretty much forgotten about that entirely," Akira said, settling his hands behind his head.

Morgana hesitated, glancing away from the young man. "These days it feels like a pretty uneven deal. Futaba's already better as a navigator than I ever was. And I'm not the strongest fighter on the team. Plus you already know everything I could teach you about the Metaverse. A-and... even though we've gone so deep into Mementos, I haven't learned anything about myself. If there's anything to learn in the first place..."

The young man remained silent, his gaze affixed to the ceiling. "You hung up on what Naoto said about that Teddie guy?"
"Yeah," Morgana begrudgingly admitted. "This has been on my mind since before that, but hearing her talk about that guy... it really seems possible that I was never human to begin with, and that's... scary."

Silence lingered between them for a few moments before Akira spoke up. "So you're feeling obsolete with Futaba around, and you're worried you might not have any lost memories... and you think that means our deal is uneven now?" Morgana nodded. "Well... Morgana I'm not helping you because of any deal, or anything like that. I'm helping you because you're my friend. And even if there are no answers to be found, I'll help you look for them anyway."

"You... you really mean that?" Morgana asked.

"Of course I do. And you're still a valued member of the team. A good fighter, the best healer we have... plus none of us can turn into a car, you've cornered the market on that." In the dark, Morgana snorted with laughter. Akira smiled. "And besides, what else would you do? Run off and leave the group in a huff?"

Morgana made a small grumbling sound. "Yeah I... I guess that would be a pretty crummy thing to do," he replied.

"I'll tell you what though. After we deal with Black Mask and Mr. A, and whoever they're working for, then making you a human will be our top priority. We'll find a way, even if it involves another strange friend of Shizuka's."

"You really mean that?" Morgana asked.

"Yep, it's a promise. No matter what, we'll get it done."

Morgana smiled and settled into the duvet, curled into a neat little ball. "Hey, Akira... thanks." Akira made a small noise of confirmation, seeming to settle in for a bit of much needed sleep. Morgana, too, got comfy for the night. But as he drifted off to sleep, he couldn't help but dwell on the story of Teddie. Morgana too longed for a human body, this strong hope and desire sticking with him even in his dreams.

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There was a bit of tension in their Club Ravana meeting room, an air of uncertainty that had been hanging over them ever since this business with Okumura came to their attention. For their ambitions to come to life they needed Shido in power, but that wouldn't happen if his criminal acts and connections became common knowledge.

Okabe, looking a little more grim than usual, made his way from the bar that dominated a portion of the room. In his hand he held a frothy brown mug and took a long sip of the chilled liquid. Savouring it, he tossed a brief glance to A as he sank back into the broad sofa with Miwa nestled into his right side. She seemed particularly content, like a cat lounging in the sun.

"You don't really believe Morihiro, do you?" he asked, before taking another sip of beer.

"Not particularly. I'm sure he's covering up, but we can't risk being too gung-ho. Morihiro might be under our thumb, but the rest of the Foundation isn't. We make too much noise and they'll move Okumura so fast it'll make our heads spin." Mr. A's gloved hand reached down, settling near the heavy steel buckle of his belt. It was ornately carved, resembling the skull of a dog. "So for now we'll bide our time. We do have to deal with the Arditi, after all."

Okabe nodded and made his way toward the ringed sofa, taking up a spot as far from Miwa as he
could manage. He didn't want to earn her ire. "I know it's an inevitability at this point, that we either deal with them or sit back and let them meddle further, but... are you sure about this? If Joestar dies then we'll definitely have to deal with Kujo and Higashikata."

"That would have been an inevitability too. Higashikata is strong and resourceful, but I'm sure my Stand would win out over his in the end. Kujo on the other hand... well, I'm still looking into countermeasures for his time stop. Assuming my Stand doesn't still function in stopped time. You, Okabe, are still my main counter for Kujo. After all, your Stand renders the laws of physics something of a joke," he explained.

Okabe frowned, looking down into his beer. "If it comes to it, I'll fight him. Personally I'd rather have a continent between Kujo and myself."

"A sentiment we both share," Mr. A replied. "But... if something happens to her and her friends while they're abroad, that may well keep our enemies focused on Hawaii for a little while." A sly grin crossed his face. "America's a dangerous place these days, after all... right, Miwa?"

The blonde opened her eyes, glancing up at Mr. A. "I really don't wanna leave you... especially if it's just me and some of our people dealing with some dumb high school brats. But for you, I'll take on the challenge," she boldly said.

"I already sent the tickets and hotel details to our other agents. They'll meet with you in Hawaii, and from there it should be easy to track the Shujin students. Try to keep something of a low profile," Okabe explained in a curt tone.

"Hmph." Miwa turned her nose up sharply, regarding Okabe with some contempt. "With Aoyama on hand, I don't need to worry about collateral. I'll leave Joestar to the brothers while I thin her friends out. It's going to be so..." She reached down, picking up the plush panda doll resting on the couch. A wicked toothy grin broke out across Miwa's face, a ghastly glow of green energy forming under her palms and illuminating the synthetic fur. It bristled at her touch. "... Fun."
There was a clear hustle and bustle in the museum, today's competition having drawn in a rather expansive crowd of onlookers. Regular patrons, art critics, curious Kosei students, wealthy people who had cash to burn... all drawn in by today's competition.

Yusuke had gone all out, Akira noted. While he didn't find anything Yusuke painted to be bad, quite the contrary he was often left wondering why Yusuke had such trouble with his own work, the painting now positioned on the wall before them felt... different. A sizable crowd had gathered nearby, taking it in, and the chatter coming from them was rather positive.

The painting was eye-catching. A circle of white exploding out into a shifting spectrum of various colours, seeming to dispel an encroaching darkness of red and black swirls that dominated the four corners of the canvas. As Akira looked at it, he felt a strange sort of warmth overcoming him. A feeling that he couldn't quite quantify or explain.

"I still have much to learn, but I finally painted something I can be satisfied with. Yes... this is the true heart of humanity," Yusuke remarked.

Akira tilted his head a little as he examined the different swirls of paint. "It's pretty breathtaking... I dunno how to say it, but... I can really feel your passion in this one."

Yusuke smiled warmly. "I called it 'Desire and Hope.' What do you think?" the bluenette asked.

For a moment Akira thought back to Yusuke's previous painting, the crushing black and red vortex drawn from the twisted landscape of Mementos. In retrospect, it did feel rather hopeless. Much like Mementos itself. "Hope was a pretty nice addition," he said.

"Hope has become a much more concrete thing to me in these past few months, thanks in large part to you. This light, it comes from you and the others," Yusuke replied, gesturing to the core of the painting.

It was at that point that an older man moved past Yusuke, a well dressed man in a blue jacket and cream slacks. His grey hair was swept back, a pair of thick dark glasses resting on his nose. Akira recognised him quickly: Kawanabe, the organizer of this whole event. And the same man who's criticisms had brought Yusuke onto his current trajectory.

He inspected Yusuke's work, humming in deep thought while the bluenette glanced his way. "It's a good painting," Kawanabe curtly remarked. "It's not trying to be eccentric for the sake of eccentricity, like your last work. To think that a painting could change so much..." Kawanabe turned to Yusuke, the faintest hint of a smile on his aged face. "'Desire and Hope.' Beauty and ugliness... yes, human beings certainly possess both. It seems you understand that now."

Yusuke raised his left eyebrow curiously. "How do you mean? What are you playing at?"

A realization seemed to dawn on Akira. "So when you last saw Yusuke's work, you tried to provoke this out of him?" Akira asked.

"Mm. Though I should apologize. While I wanted to encourage Kitagawa, the attempt was a tad crude... But it worked in the end, igniting his drive."
Yusuke frowned. "But... why? What's your objective?"

Kawanabe's smile didn't falter. "I wanted to do something for you, as another person who was recently freed from Madarame's chains." Yusuke seemed quite stunned. "Madarame held a grudge against me for supposedly stealing customers from him. He went out of his way to hamper my work any way he could, using all the connections at his disposal to stimy me."

Yusuke glanced away with some shame. "Yes, that... is the sort of thing he would do," he admitted.

"But... he wasn't always like that. We were friends a long, long time ago," Kawanabe remarked.

"Madarame had friends?" Akira asked in genuine shock.

Kawanabe nodded curtly. "We first met years ago, back when we were both what you would call 'starving artists.' We worked as teachers in the same art school, you see. Madarame had talent, and passion, but never seemed to find a chance to get his name out there. But then, when he finally got his chance... I don't know if it was the praise and mounting expectations, the taste of wealth, or the fear of going back into poverty that got to him, but he began to change. He grew selfish, cunning, willing to destroy anyone to maintain his standard of living. A sort of blackness overcame him."

"So you both made it big around the same time, but Madarame didn't want to risk anyone stealing attention from him..." Akira remarked.

"Very much so. But..." Kawanabe examined Yusuke's painting closely. "People can be multifaceted, for as deep as Madarame's depravity became. I was shocked when I heard he took you in... he always disliked children. Before we cut ties I got a call from him. He was panicking because all the nearby clinics were closed, and his boy had a fever... Even if it wasn't enough to overcome his ambition, he did care for you a good deal."

"I... I see," Yusuke replied, sounding genuinely stunned. Even Akira was shocked at the revelation, though he managed to rein himself in for Yusuke's sake.

"If I can help it, I'd like to create a world where are there no losers like myself, or misguided winners like Madarame... that's why I started my foundation. And if you would like Kitagawa, I would be glad to give you my support," Kawanabe offered.

Yusuke, still grappling with this news on his former mentor, spent some time pondering the offer. His gaze ran over 'Desire and Hope', the people admiring it, and every other exhibit in his vicinity. "It's truly a kind offer, and I thank you for your generosity," Yusuke eventually said. "However, I must respectfully decline," he added. Akira looked at him as if he had spontaneously grown a second head.

Kawanabe, on the other hand, seemed more inscrutable in his assessment. "Oh? What makes you say that?"

"I am not Madarame. I won't be stained by desire. After all, I can see hope. If I am lost, they will extend their hands. If I am wrong, they will chastise me. As long as I have my rays of hope to guide me, I will be fine."

A smile graced Kawanabe's wisened features. "Madarame had a good eye after all." He chuckled and strode off, leaving the two boys alone.

"What a strange man," Yusuke remarked, once he had vanished into the crowd.

Akira gave a small scoff of laughter. "You're even stranger Yusuke... why turn down his offer like
that?" he asked.

"I'll admit that it seems a tad wasteful, but I believe it's for the best... I feel contradictory, but that's the human heart, correct?" Yusuke smiled fondly. "... Interesting. That's exactly what I should be painting."

Akira scratched the back of his head with his right hand, the left remaining in his jeans pocket. "I guess it all worked out in the end regardless... you got your passion back and made a work you can be proud of," he said.

"It must have been difficult for you at times, but I knew you wouldn't abandon me. Thank you, Akira," he said, settling a hand on Akira's left shoulder.

A warmth began to fill the world inside Yusuke's heart, a flash of light washing over Goemon. The last few chains restraining his will came undone, washed away in the light of new inspiration and passion. The doubts left behind by Madarame had vanished utterly.

The light engulfed and consumed Goemon, reshaping him into something entirely different. Yusuke's new Persona was a towering blue skinned man, his exposed upper body intricately detailed with a series of tattoos. A golden kabuto adorned his head, framed in front of a furious mane of long white hair. His clothing consisted of a steel skirt worn over dark trousers, a tiger print cloak draped over his broad shoulders. In his right hand he held a crimson sword, composed of a double helix of scarlet metal points.

Goemon was gone, in his place stood Kamu Susano-o.

Yusuke blinked as he noticed this sudden shift inside himself. "Goodness... even my power has changed too. Today has certainly been eventful... well, it's another thing I need to thank you for," the bluenette said, smiling over at Akira.

"Don't even worry about it," Akira replied. "But, hey, that stuff about Madarame... are you gonna be alright?"

Yusuke's smile shifted into a long thin line. "Truthfully? I don't know. Perhaps at the time he felt some great guilt for what he had done to my mother, and had some drive to atonement. I remember... I remember him being kinder when I was a child. And often sad when he was with me. But whatever guilt he felt, it faded over the years."

Akira nodded slowly in understanding. "That was another part of himself though... the part that did genuinely care for you, and did feel guilt for what he did."

"Mm." Yusuke reached up, idly brushing under his left eye. "I don't think I could forgive the man Madarame was. But the man he is now, the penitent and remorseful man with a changed heart..." He sighed softly. "Maybe some day."

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9/3

Shizuka made a small slurping sound as she sucked a slew of ramen noodles from the steaming broth before her, nearly rocking back in her chair as she did so. Akira gave her a sideways glance as she did so, somewhat impressed that she was able to nearly match Ryuji's wolfish pace.

They had decided to meet at Ogikubo, as both were in a ramen mood, and Akira had spent some time recounting yesterday's events with Yusuke. Shizuka swallowed hard and made a small
whistling sound, a spout of steam hissing from her lips.

She adjusted herself, rolling her shoulders. "So now Yusuke's got an upgrade too huh? Damn dude, you're just tearing through it. Maybe I'll get lucky too eh?"

"You think?" Akira asked, before lifting a section from his brothy bowl to his lips. He ate at a slower pace than Shizuka, savoring the different flavors. He had loved Ogikubo ramen ever since Ryuji had introduced him, but he could never be quite as savage at it as his best friend. "Well, there are definitely similarities between Stands and Personas, but I'm still wondering if yours will evolve in the same way..."

"Guess we won't know until we find out," Shizuka replied, shrugging helplessly. "Kinda hoping it'll happen, but I've never heard of a Stand changing in that kind of way... then again Stands are weird, so who knows?" she remarked.

"Well, that's true," Akira replied.

Shizuka sucked in another helping of soaked noodles, swallowing without issue and smacking her lips in the aftermath. "Damn man, this is awesome! Nothin' really beats authentic ramen."

"You couldn't get stuff like this in America?" Akira asked. He leaned back and slipped his glasses off, wiping the steam from his lenses with a quick brush of his shirt collar.

"Well... there were ramen shops and sushi places and junk. New York has that whole 'melting pot' thing going on... oh man have you ever had Ethiopian food? Mnf, hot damn. But uh, back to the point at hand, the stuff you could get in the States is good, but this feels more 'authentic' I guess."

Akira nodded in understanding, raising the bowl to his lips and taking a long sip of the remaining salty broth. Pulling back he was quick to catch a stray droplet on his bottom lip. "Guess we'll get to try authentic American food soon. I've got high hopes."

"Guess I'll have to show you guys where to find a real burger place... Big Bang Burger is alright, but it doesn't quite compare. Ooooh, if we could find a Carl's Jr. out in Hawaii..." Shizuka grinned, staring up at the ceiling. "Well, I guess we'll find out soon. For now though, I had some other news."

"I'm all ears," Akira casually replied.

"Wellp, I got a call the other day from the SID investigator who's looking into my biological parents. He says he might be close to a breakthrough, and that he's on the trail of something good. I mean, with how cold the case must be, it's impressive. And it's probably gonna take a while to get something concrete, but... hey, it's already more than I expected."

Akira found himself listening intently, nodding along to Shizuka's story. "So you're still hung up on finding your biological parents," he remarked. "Are you still... worried about that stuff?"

The question gave her pause, leaving her staring down into her emptied bowl of ramen. "I... it's still on my mind, I'll admit. Maybe it sounds dumb, but... I guess part of me wants to feel like I still have parents out there in some form. It's... scary being without mine."

"That's not dumb at all. If I was in your position, I think I'd be just as concerned. But, lately, I've realized something," Akira said. He gave her a quick smile. "Getting to know Sojiro better, having you and all the others around me, it's helped me learn that... family is more than just sharing blood with someone," he added.
"You mean like... seeing us as family?" Shizuka asked.

"More or less. My own parents weren't... well they were never cruel, but they were never particularly kind either. And for years I just thought that was normal, that parents were just meant to be like that. And when I got slapped with probation, it seems like they just believed I was a criminal with little need for convincing. And all the time that I've been here, I've never gotten any messages from home. But since I met you guys, and with Sojiro welcoming me more into his home... well I've never felt like I belonged more."

Shizuka frowned slightly, but made no move to interrupt. Akira continued. "You guys and Sojiro, you're people I can count on. No matter what happens I know you'll be there. That's... what family is, I guess. You might not share blood with your parents, but they always will be your parents. And I think that if you find the answers on your biological family, you might not... like what you find out." He thought back, briefly, to his and Yusuke's conversation with Doctor Lifeson. And the implication that something very unpleasant had happened to make Shizuka's powers manifest in the way they had.

"Yeah, I'd definitely considered that too," Shizuka replied. "Whatever happened to my biological parents, something shady and weird had to have been involved. But even simply knowing there are answers out there, it's... kinda reassuring. You know, that I didn't just sprout out of the ground like a vegetable one day," she said.

"Knowing you, I wouldn't be too shocked..." The two snickered at the thought, and Akira felt some relief that he'd put a smile on her face. "But no matter what you find, you're always gonna have us and the rest of your relatives to rely on."

"Ah geez... enough of the cheesy stuff man," Shizuka replied, puffing her cheeks out briefly. She settled her arms on the counter, her chin resting atop them. "You're right though, this is pretty nice. You're not so bad. For an infamous delinquent, I mean," she said, flashing him a sly grin.
Their flight, fortunately, was a punctual one. Lucky Land Airlines left on schedule, letting the Shujin students and other assorted passengers settle in for a lengthy flight. They arrived in the late morning, vibrant sunshine illuminating the entirety of the island while rushes of humid air greeted them whenever the group strode outside.

Though, almost as soon as they had landed and gotten through customers, the teachers and third year chaperones had whisked them into coaches for a quick road trip to their hotel. A journey punctuated by Ryuji’s shrieks of touristic delight whenever an attraction appeared in his eye line.

As they disembarked from their bus, bags in hand, Shizuka breathed an annoyed groan. "Christ... flying coach is the worst. No wonder so many people hate air travel..." She moved to the rounded curb in front of the hotels three doorways (Two rotating models, with an expansive double door in the center) and took the time to stretch her legs. "Though, at least I got better luck than my Dad. He was in like, five plane crashes through his life."

"I'd say you're lying, but knowing your family history..." Akira trailed off and adjusted his glasses. "At least you got through customs quickly. Quicker than us at least."

Shizuka poked her tongue out playfully. "The joys of citizenship," she said.

Akira breathed a small huff, taking the time to dab at his brow. "God it's hot out here... and I thought the beach was rough," he remarked.

"I love it," Ann enthusiastically chimed, as she and Shiho approached the doorways. "The tropical air, the sweet scents, it's just so..." Ann sighed dreamily before looking to Shizuka. "By the way, have you ever been to Hawaii before?"

"Uh... well, once. I was like, ten at the time, but it was pretty nice. But if you're expecting me to know the lay of the land, I can't help you. Well, other than reading signs for you guys."

Shiho took a step back, craning her neck so that she could better take in the scale of the hotel. It seemed vaguely crescent shaped, the center block in front of them having two other blocks that protruded diagonally. It was quite tall too, reaching several stories high. The beach, fortunately, wasn't too far. "I've been looking forward to this trip all year. Shame about the room arrangements though," the dark-haired girl said as she inspected the hotel.

"Eh?" The others turned as Ryuji approached, the blond nearly falling off balance as he jogged over with his luggage. "What's this about rooms?"

"You didn't read the letter?" Shiho asked. Silence lingered around the group. "Wait... none of you read the letter?"

"I read about the time of our flight and the number of days in our trip... and after that I stopped checking the form. There was a lot to it, and most of it was filler," Akira explained, a sentiment that Shizuka and Ann nodded to.
Shiho sighed faintly. "It's... Okay we probably should have talked about this last night. The school says you can only room with people from the same class. And that it's not allowed to be co-ed, obviously."

"Aw what?" Ryuji slumped forward slightly. "Lame. So I can't bunk with Akira?"

Ann frowned. "And me and Shiho can't share a room either..."

Shizuka grinned, giving Ann a thumbs up. "Don't sweat it Ann, you can bunk with yours truly. Specially since I'm guessing it's the same rule for the third years too," she said.

Having heard the news, Akira sighed and settled his hands in his trouser pockets. "Easy for you guys to make plans, our whole class is still kind of afraid of me. Except for..." He glanced to the coach, watching as Mishima worked to pull his bag from the storage compartment. He struggled and strained until the bag popped loose, at which point he lost balance and landed on his ass. "Mishima. Great."

It wasn't that Akira particularly disliked Mishima, and he did appreciate the eagerness with which the young man organized and ran the largest Phan-site on the web. But Mishima could be... a lot to take in. Between his eagerness, and the fact that he so rarely seemed to actually listen when Akira spoke, he wasn't against keeping a comfy distance between himself and Mishima for respectable periods of time. But being stuck sharing a hotel room with him...

"Oh, your boyfriend," Shizuka said, before grinning and giving Akira a light nudge with her elbow. "Go easy on him tiger. I bet he's as delicate as a spring flower."

"Aw shut up," Akira replied with an annoyed grimace. "Come on, let's at least get into the lobby. I'm sweating up a storm here."

As Akira led the way inside, Shizuka paused for just a moment to look toward the coach. From where she stood she could clearly see Haru and Makoto both talking with Kawakami, going over some kind of roster with the frizzy-haired teacher. Haru seemed to be in a good mood, or at least was acting in her usual calm and polite fashion, but Shizuka didn't doubt that the incident with her father was still fresh in her mind.

The only people who had any notion about Kunikazu Okumura's condition were the higher-ups in his company, and as far as Shujin Academy knew nothing was going on in Haru's life. Shizuka made a mental note to try and keep Haru's spirits up.

It was a vacation after all. A time to relax and let the troubles back home fade away in your mind.

As she entered the lobby she breathed a sigh of relief as an air conditioned breeze washed over her, causing her to rub the back of her neck to dab away any stray beads of sweat. "Man that's so much better. I dunno how the hell people live in such hot weather," the young Joestar said.

"Eh, better get used to it," Ryuji replied, shrugging his strong shoulders. "We're here for like, three days. But hey, at least we don't got any boring class trips to go on. We can just do whatever while we're here."

"What do you guys wanna do in that case? I mean, first of all," Ann shoulders her bag and made a small grunting sound. "We gotta head to our rooms and put these bags away. I'm already sick of carrying this around."
"Should we hit the beach in that case? We might not have a yacht this time, but it'll be a nice and relaxing way to spend our first afternoon here," Akira suggested. That and he supposed the only way to get used to the heat was to brave it head on.

Shizuka nodded. "Sounds like a plan. I'll shoot a message along to Haru and Makoto. Hopefully Kawakami'll let 'em have some free time."

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It took little over an hour for everyone to get ready. Between Ryuji and Akira having to go through the trouble of getting roommates, there was also time spent getting changed into their beach attire and further time spent waiting on Haru and Makoto to finish wrapping up their duties. It was fortunate that there had been no incidents on the trip to hold the two up.

"You ever been abroad Haru?" Akira asked, glancing over to the strawberry blonde. They all knew the situation she was in, and were all trying to walk the fine line between concern and condescension.

On the one hand they wanted her to have a good time, and to know that they were there for her. But they didn't want to lay it on so thick that Haru could focus on nothing but her troubles. It was a hard balance to keep.

"Not somewhere like this," Haru replied. "It's been some years since I've taken a vacation, but usually I've gone on skiing trips. The French Alps, Verbier in Switzerland... this makes for a very nice change of pace though! I only wish my English was a little sharper."

"Eh, don't sweat it. Me and Ann have that covered," Shizuka replied.

They were making a steady rate along the sands, soaking in the scenery. Occasionally people glanced their way from the distinct 'tourist' vibe that came from some of the group, but ultimately they paid little mind to the students. Shizuka, for her part, was doing a little people watching on the groups they passed by.

"You know," Shizuka remarked "I almost didn't realize how... homogeneous Japan was, but being back in America really makes it stand out."

"Now that you mention it..." Shiho said, trying to be a little more subtle in her own people watching. "It's pretty cool though. Really makes it feel different from home."

After a few more moments of walking, Makoto spoke up. "So what should we do? Personally I'm a little hungry since the airline food was... lacking," Makoto said. And it would certainly help them adjust better from their lengthy flight.

"Yeah... no wonder people hate air travel," Shizuka remarked. She stopped entirely and examined their surroundings with a keen interest. Off to the street at her right were rows of buildings. Stores and restaurants of all sizes. She paid particular focus to a modest burger joint with an assortment of tables positioned outside it. Then, looking to the shoreline at her left, she spotted a wide and squat hut with a thatched roof. Even from afar she could see patrons milling around the wide interior, recognising the logos of different alcoholic brands. "Hm... I wonder..."

"Eh? Something up?" Ryuji asked.
"Well, I'm thinking... that spot over there looks like it has good eats. I mean we're all kinda hungry, so I don't think any of us really wants to spend much time looking for a spot. Besides that though, I'm wonderin' if that spot does non-alcoholic stuff," she said, pointing to the bar. "Cause last time I was in Hawaii I had a mocktail Blue Hawaii."

Ann scratched the back of her head. "Well, I know what a Blue Hawaii is... vaguely. I guess a mocktail is a non-alcoholic cocktail?"

Shizuka nodded firmly. "Yup. I mean I suppose I could try and get a fake ID, but... that seems like a surefire way to fuck up this vacation with all the wacky shenanigans that would come out of it. Anyway! The thing is so fruity, cold, and sweet that it's perfect for a day like today. Anyone else want one?"

"Oh that sounds delightful, I'd love to try one," Haru enthusiastically said.

"Me too," Makoto chimed. "It's definitely a lot hotter today than I'd expected..."

"You got it. Consider 'em on me," Shizuka replied, giving the group a thumbs up as she headed for the bar. The others, in turn, made to check out the burger place.

Makoto watched her go, paying a good deal of attention to Shizuka. Akira was quick to notice, seeming to drag his pace a little so that she unintentionally wound up walking in step with him. "Something on your mind?" he asked after a brief pause. He kept his tone low to keep the others from listening in.

The brunette perked up slightly. "Oh! I was just..." She glanced back to Akira quickly. "Thinking about something."

"Is that 'Something' best known for her sunglasses and crass sense of humor?" Makoto fell silent for a few moments, while Akira kept his gaze on the incoming eatery. "I take it you and her had a heart to heart not too long ago," he mused.

"You knew about that?" Makoto asked, keeping her tone level.

"She saw us on that fake date a while back and got spooked by that. It was a pretty clear indicator on how she felt. But she told me she was sitting on her feelings with how hectic things were, between dealing with Medjed and the spaceport." Akira shrugged. "I saw you two slip off somewhere on the yacht so I figured that was what it was about."

Makoto nodded. "Right. Well we talked about it, and I told her I needed time to think about it. I'm not used to... anyone being interested in me, especially a girl. And I've been thinking about it... constantly. I think about... her."

When she fell silent Akira gave a faint nod in understanding. "Well, she does have a way of sticking in your mind. So do you think you... feel the same?" The rest of the group were still ahead, still chatting about various tourist things that took their fancy. So it seemed, ultimately, they were clear of eavesdroppers.

"I think about her smile. And her laugh. And the way she's been there for me since we met... honestly? I can't remember the last time I felt that before she and I met. But I'm scared I'll do something stupid, because all of this is so new to me. I'm used to being smart and confident on
most subjects, but now I feel like I'm about to jump in the deep end without even knowing how to swim."

Akira smiled slightly. "Yeah. I can imagine it seems rather imposing, but... Well for as brash and cocky is Shizuka is, she's nice at heart. For you, she'd be sure to go at your pace. Besides, I get the feeling she'd be a bit shy about stuff like this too," he explained.

"You may be right... when did you become a matchmaker?"

Akira pointed forward to Ryuji and Shiho, as the two snickered at some dorky joke about coconuts never having money. "I take partial credit for that. I suppose looking out for you guys is my calling in life," he remarked.

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A pair of eyes in the corner of the bar watched Shizuka as she entered, seeming to recognise her almost instantly. Anyone with a Stand and a knowledge of the broader Stand user community had at least some knowledge of the Joestars, and it was often important to have some knowledge of them to save yourself some hurt.

The man watching her, distinct for his flowing mane of grey hair and wide brimmed hat, nursed his beer as he tried to put a name to her face. 'That's the girl Joseph Joestar adopted a few years back... it was all over the papers. Suzy Joestar? Stacy? Hrf. Well the first name doesn't matter, only the last one does.'

Shizuka took a seat at the bar, to the mild surprise of the bartender, and got engrossed in conversation with him for a few moments. They had a brief back and forth, with the bartender nodding a few times. Eventually he moved under the bar to gather a few things while Shizuka got comfy at her seat, evidently pleased with herself.

'She's adopted, so I doubt she's got a dangerous Stand like Jotaro. But does she know who I am? That's the real question... ah it doesn't matter. She's just a high school brat, I bet she doesn't have a strong bone in her body.'

Shizuka turned her head at the bar, her attention affixed to a news program about the Phantom Thieves of Tokyo. She seemed genuinely surprised, adjusting her heart-shaped sunglasses as she took in the show. After dealing with Medjed, their popularity had started spreading across the globe.

With her head turned, the man watching her had a better glimpse of her face. He was quick to pull his phone from the pocket of his baggy black trousers, doing a quick Google search for 'Joestar's daughter.' The first few pictures that greeted him confirmed her identity well enough.

'Yeah, that's her alright... Shizuka Joestar.' The older man reached a hand up, stroking his stubbled jawline with his free hand in deep thought. 'I could make a lot of money here. All I gotta do is threaten her a little with the Emperor, and she'll practically empty her bank account for me! Well it's either that or try the old Hol Horse charm on her. But that's illegal.' That and, though he would not admit it, the old Hol Horse charm had lost a lot of its lustre after he had gotten the spare tire out of the trunk.

The bartender returned to Shizuka with three frosty glasses, each filled with a glossy sky blue liquid. The rim of each glass had a sliced section of pineapple affixed to it. Shizuka produced a
black card from her pocket and quickly set about paying her tab through the small credit card reader beside her.

This was his chance...

Hol Horse slowly rose from his seat, leaving his half finished beer behind him. Even on his third glass, he still had decent balance in his stride. The spurs on his black boots jingled and jangled on each step, while his right hand started to clench and unclench. A coil of sparkling white light washed over his palm, taking the shape of an alien silver pistol with a chunky barrel.

He drew in behind her, his Shadow falling over Shizuka's back and the bar. With great care he started to raise his Stand, aiming to press it to the back of her neck.

The shorter figure twisted on her stool, reaching for the pocket of her cutoffs. The seat swivelled sharply beneath her, causing her to accidentally drive her elbow right into Hol Horse's balls. The older man shrieked like a cat with his tail caught in a door, the Emperor vanishing from his grasp as his knees slammed into the floor.

The noise definitely startled Shizuka to attention, her eyes immediately being drawn to the crumpled heap of man beneath her. "Oh! Oh fuck, sir, I- I am so sorry!" Shizuka said, the shadow of Hol Horse's cowboy hat obscuring the tears in his eyes. "That was totally my bad, I-... A-are you okay?"

Hol Horse made a high-pitched sound akin to a mewling newborn kitten.

"Uh... I uh..." Shizuka could tell that more than a few eyes were on her, and she quickly plucked her wallet back out. She needed to haul ass quickly before the embarrassment really hit her. "H-here," She dumped a few fifty dollar bills in front of Hol Horse before pocketing her wallet again and grabbing her drinks. "Just uh... put some ice on it, and you'll be fine. Sorry!"

With that she quickly scurried on her way, while Hol Horse tried to breath through the pain of his wounded pride and balls. His eyes settled on the money before him, a shaky smile forming on his face. 'Hol Horse you magnificent bastard... you did it again!'

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Everyone was quite full by the time they got through with lunch. American burgers, sides of shrimp and wings, coupled with their drinks proved to be a heavy main course to get through. But, fortunately, it was enough to ward off the foul taste of airline food.

Having had their fill, the group spent the next few hours walking the Hawaiian streets, getting adjusted to the landscape that surrounded their hotel and taking in the nearest oddities. They were in a rather tourist heavy district, as deliberately chosen by Shujin Academy (because, once in a blue moon, the faculty could be trusted to do something for the safety of their students) so there was little risk in their exploration.

Eventually, however, the sun started to set, leaving the streets teeming with a warm orange light that was gradually fading. The humidity was still strong in the air, but it was clear it would be soon time to head back.

The group had settled on a pair of beachside benches, taking up seats and enjoying the sunset. "Man... I dunno about you guys, but I'm already feelin' like hitting the sack," Ryuji said, stretching
"It's only natural," Makoto said, smiling faintly as she looked ahead at the orange light dancing on the waves. "We had to be up early in the morning just to catch our flight, and going through two airports is going to be draining... to say nothing for our flight," she explained.

Shizuka shrugged. "Hey, at least we weren't attacked on our flight."

Ann yawned and slowly stretched her legs in front of her from her seated position, the heels of her sandals pushing into the hot sands before her. "Sucks we couldn't come out here with Futaba though. I feel bad that she and Morgana got left out. At least Yusuke and Sergio have their own school trip," the blonde said.

"I wouldn't worry too much about it," Akira replied, shrugging as he sank back against the wood of the bench. "Can you imagine trying to get Futaba through an airport? A train station is already a challenge. And the girl has the sleep schedule of a crime fighting zombie, I don't think air travel is going to help there. As for Morgana... I would have brought him, but customs would have held him longer than the duration of our trip."

"Yusuke and Sergio are landing in L.A tomorrow, yeah? Probably a good thing Sergio's gonna be with him, Yusuke could do with the help," Ryuji chimed.

"Yeah but still... L.A." Shizuka wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"You really dislike Los Angeles Shizu-chan," Haru remarked, seeming mildly surprised.

Shizuka shrugged. "Well it's just like... okay I dunno if you get a similar thing in Japan with different prefectures or whatever, but I just really hate people from states that-" Shizuka had rolled her head to the right, staring down the beach as she spoke. She quickly saw something that utterly gave her pause. "That... that... holy shit."

The others were quick to glance in the direction Shizuka was facing, and they too seemed quite surprised by what they saw. But for a marginally different reason. "Holy shit is right... that dude's a damn giant!" Ryuji said.

Striding down the sands at a leisurely pace, dressed in some rather unbeachy attire, was a man who could indeed be best described as giant. He was exceptionally tall and broad-shoulder, his upper body dressed in a slate grey longcoat. The lapels of his coat were distinct for the golden dolphin-shaped badges, while the buttons on the right side of his coat had been intricately carved to look like small silver starfishes. His trousers were of a matching shade to his coat, while his sturdy chest was covered by a crisp yellow shirt, the yellow interrupted by a few patches of black. His shoes were polished brown leather and looked rather pricey, even from afar. A black cap rested atop his scowling head, distinct for a badge above the brim that consisted of a silver starfish with a small gold carving of a raised hand affixed to the right points of the starfish. As he drew closer, it became easier to see a long and thin scar that ran up the right side of his face and hooked around the outside of his eye.

"J-J-Jotaro!" Shizuka exclaimed, filled with a mix of shock and glee. The towering man stopped briefly, his expression unreadable as he surveyed the sight.

"Jotaro?!" her friends repeated in unison, swiftly recalling the name from Shizuka's past stories.
"Oh. I thought you looked familiar from afar," he remarked in a cavalier tone. "I didn't know you were going to be in America."

"School trip," Shizuka curtly replied, flashing her 'nephew' a wicked grin. "But I could say the same thing to you. What are you doing out here in Hawaii?"

"I'm finishing research on the Hawaiian monk seals, but I was also taking some time to pay a visit to-"

Jotaro was cut off by a figure pinching Shizuka's cheeks from behind, making the shorter figure yowl in her seat. The others turned and glanced up at the figure looming over Shizuka, a respectably tall and grinning young woman dressed in a purple blouse with a white cobweb pattern on the back and short sleeves, her thighs covered by milk-white shorts. Her hairstyle was rather distinct, a braid of interlocking black and gold hair, the top of her head adorned with two buns of dark hair. "Yo Auntie," she casually greeted.

Jotaro made a small huffing sound at the sight. "Yare yare daze, just like when you two were kids. I was wondering where you'd run off to Jolyne."

Jolyne released her grip on Shizuka's cheeks, making the younger woman huff and rub at her freshly pinkened dimples. "Eh. I saw her before you did, so I decided to sneak up on her."

"Jolyne..." Shiho hummed in thought and looked to the others. "Going by Shizuka's stories, that's Jotaro's daughter." She gave Jolyne a once-over. "She's like a... tall Shizuka." The others shivered slightly at the prospect. It seemed this was where Shizuka had picked up some of her mannerisms from.

Meanwhile Ann seemed particularly awestruck by Jotaro, as if still trying to puzzle through how a human could be so towering.

"Okay, so you came out here for work and to see Jolyne... but what're you doing out here?" Shizuka asked, looking up at her great niece. "By the way, you're getting coal for Christmas over that little stunt."

Jolyne still seemed proud of her handiwork. "Me and some friends are in Hawaii for a lil' bit. We'll probably pick up sticks and hit some spots in South America next. Maybe crush a cartel or two if we find the time," she said, smirking and shrugging.

In the past Jotaro had perhaps not been the most attentive father. A combination of regularly keeping his feelings to himself, and keeping a cool distance from his family for their own safety. He did try, on occasion, to be there for Jolyne. But she fell into delinquency all the same, perhaps to be expected given Jotaro's own 'turbulent' high school years.

After dealing with Pucci, and learning that her father genuinely did care about her (even if he did have the emotional range of a lemon tree) had brought them closer together. It helped of course that Jolyne had a Stand of her own these days, so Jotaro hardly needed to worry about her protection.

The others seemed a little stunned, though Shizuka seemed nonplussed at the bold claim. "Well, at any rate, these are my friends from Shujin," she said, pointing and naming each of her friends in turn.
"Pleased to meet you," Akira curtly said.

"Shizuka speaks the world of her family, and you two definitely seem rather impressive," Makoto added.

"You're... a lot taller than I imagined," Ann said, seeming to be addressing Jotaro and Jolyne.

Jolyne nodded slightly. "Well, it's nice to meet you all. And it's good to know Auntie has some good friends with her." A sly smirk suddenly crossed her face. "But you know, I hear things are pretty nuts in Tokyo these days with all that Arditi stuff going on. Hope you guys are keeping your noses clean." The group tensed a little, but Shizuka remained impartial.

"Gramps cared a lot about your safety you know," Jotaro remarked. His tone was level and his expression cold as ice. It was perhaps his own muted way of saying he cared too, even if he wouldn't say as much aloud.

"Hey, I wouldn't get involved in anything I couldn't handle," Shizuka replied. "And besides, I've got some really dependable friends on my side. We'll be fine."

Jolyne nodded slightly. "Yeah, I can see that," she remarked, her gaze sweeping over Shizuka's friends.

It was a gesture Jotaro seemed to mirror, his hawklike gaze roaming over the gathered Phantom Thieves. Even Makoto seemed to shrink a little under his sharp scrutiny. "You may be right. Still, things are heating up back home by the sound of things. I'll probably be heading back to Tokyo in a few days, if nothing else comes up. If you need me I'll be available," Jotaro said.

"Yeah... and I can't promise to be as ready, but if shit really hits the fan for you, I'll try to be there for ya," Jolyne added, grinning at the shorter woman.

"Aw, you guys..." Shizuka said, a bashful smile resting on her face. She knew Josuke would always have her back of things got particularly rough, but knowing she had two other relatives waiting in the wings did wonders to boost her confidence.

"I need to get going," Jotaro said in his usual flat tone. "It was good seeing you, but I have some things I need to get done on the island."

"Yeah... and I should probably go meet up with my friends. And we were probably gonna go drinking too. I'd invite you guys but that's illegal," Jolyne remarked.

"Pff. Didn't stop you when you were my age," Shizuka said, earning a small shrug from her great niece. "Eh, we were kinda gonna head back to our hotel anyway. Getting here was a little tiring. Unless you guys wanna...?"

Akira shrugged. "I'm kinda tired. And we probably should show our faces around the hotel so Kawakami doesn't start worrying."

"Eh, with any luck we can hang out a lil' in the next day or two. We got time," Ryuji said, before trailing into a long yawn.

As they started to part ways Ann waited until they were out of earshot, and had a clear view of the hotel from where they were on the sands, before speaking up. "So that's Jotaro huh. He seems even
scarier than your stories made him out to be. But he's also... really cool too."

"He does have a sort of 'rogue cowboy/lone samurai' vibe to him. And I'm surprised he looks so young too," Shiho added.

"And really rugged too," Ann said, causing Shiho and Haru to give her sideways glances. Shizuka's eyes widened behind the dark lenses of her glasses.

"Why, Ann Takamaki..." she said in a tone of mock offense. "I certainly hope you don't have a crush on my 47 year old, divorced, father-of-one nephew."

Ann's cheeks turned as red as her Panther catsuit, her eyes going wide. "I'm just saying he's handsome is all!" she indignantly said.

"And old enough to be your dad," Ryuji flatly said.

"Shut up!" Ann fired back.

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They were watched from afar as they reached the entryway of the hotel, observed carefully by two tall and athletically built young men. The structures of their faces were identical, but their hairstyles were distinct. One wore his swept up, spiky and blond. The others brown hair was shorter, his temples shaved. The brunette had a series of silver rings in his right ear while the blond had a pair of studs over his left eye. Both were dressed well in crisp dark business suits, the collars opened out.

"So that's them," the blond remarked, pressing his back against the shutter of the store behind him. "There's more than I expected."

The brunette shrugged. "Well, it doesn't matter much really. Miwa wants us to take on Joestar, and she's gonna go for some of her friends... guess it makes sense. Her Stand is pretty strong, and she could handle multiple targets faster than we can. Aoyama will isolate them for her."

"Still..." the blond trailed off as he inspected the hotel from afar. "We spent some time trying to find the right hotel, and we'll have to do a little convincing to get the room listings from staff."

"You're not above doing a little extra legwork, right?"

The blond huffed. "It's all a bit bothersome really. Travelling to a different country just for a hit... though, all goes well, we'll definitely make it big with A-sama."

"Exactly. You worry too much brother. All we need to do is find a good opportunity to strike at Joestar, and then..." Eight pairs of glowing eyes rose up from his shadow, wreathed in darkness. "Payday."
A good night's rest was exactly what the group needed, with everyone feeling quite refreshed by the time another sterling morning dawned on Hawaii. After having breakfast at the hotel, because it was complimentary and nobody wanted to put the effort in to find anywhere else first thing in the morning, the group gathered in the lobby. It seemed a bit busier this morning, with more people than they had expected hanging around.

"So that's what French toast is," Shiho remarked, settling her right hand on the back of one expansive couch. "I have to admit, it's nicer than I expected."

"For a complimentary breakfast, the food here is rather exquisite," Makoto added, smiling faintly. "At any rate, what should we do today?"

Akira let Makoto's question linger in his mind, resting his back against the same broad sofa. "Well, just going to the beach again sounds kind of boring... we could try hitting a few tourist spots while we're here? See the sights, learn new things, take in the culture... that sort of thing," he suggested.

"I was reading online about a few national parks. The views are supposed to be breathtaking," Ann said, holding up her right index finger with a hint of pride.

"Alright, well we could hit some of them. Sounds like it's gonna be pretty awesome... just sucks that Yusuke won't be there to see 'em, he'd probably love the view," Ryuji remarked. As soon as the blond had said this, as if by magic, the bluenette seemed to walk up behind him. The others looked at him in wide eyed surprise, while Ryuji glanced over his shoulder, nonplussed. "Oh, hey Yusuke." He turned back to the others, holding the same blank expression until surprise steadily dawned on his face.

"Ooooh, Ryuji's finally discovered his Stand power: The ability to summon Yusuke," Shizuka mused. "Or maybe Yusuke's like Beetlejuice, and if you say his name he'll magically appear."

"I don't think that's the case Shizu-chan," Haru sweetly said.

Yusuke cleared his throat. "Apologies for the sudden intrusion. Our flight to Los Angeles had to be redirected due to a rather nasty storm... fortunately Kosei had made alternate plans with the hotel chain we were booked with, and so here we are." He gestured across the room to a pair of cosy armchairs positioned near a small glass table.

Sergio was seated neatly in one of the large brown armchairs, while the other was taken up by a slim and beautiful dark-haired girl in a Kosei uniform. Sergio was glancing between her and a shogi board on the table, as the dark haired girl seemed to explain something to him in great detail.

"Hifumi's here too," Akira remarked. This was all definitely a pleasant surprise, but it would be nice to take in Hawaii as a full group.

Shizuka puffed her cheeks out, her hands resting on her hips. "I dunno, I liked my idea better. Quick Ryuji, this time try to summon Sojiro and Futaba. Oh, and Morgana too. Cats love the sun."
"Wh- I didn't do anything!"

"At any rate," Akira turned his attention to the bluenette. "We had no actual plans for today, but we were thinking of exploring and taking in a few tourist sites. You wanna come along? Could be a nice Shujin-Kosei bonding experience," Akira said.

Yusuke smiled graciously. "I greatly appreciate the offer, and since the change to our trip was so sudden we have no other plans. Truth be told, seeing the landscape of Hawaii may be more beneficial to me than the stifling urban world of Los Angeles."

"Plus there's no people from L.A. here, which is an added bonus," Shizuka said. She managed to catch herself before devolving into a lengthy rant.

"This'll be pretty great. You guys haven't had a chance to meet Hifumi, but she's pretty cool. A little on the shy side, but still nice. And really smart too... I don't think I've ever gotten close to beating her in a shogi match before," Akira explained.

"O-oh, she sounds sweet," Haru said, forcing a smile.

Yusuke turned in the direction of Sergio and the famed shogi princess. "Well, I'll go and get them. I'm quite excited already," he happily said.

They didn't have to wait long as the others were brought over. Sergio smirked faintly as he approached. "Well, isn't this a nice change of plans? It's a good thing Kosei thought ahead, otherwise we would have been stuck back in Japan. I believe you already know Hifumi, Akira?"

The bespectacled boy nodded curtly. "Yep, my own shogi coach. Nice to see you again Hifumi, these are my friends," he replied, naming each member of the group in turn.

The dark haired girl smiled gently, giving a curt bowl to the group. "It's nice to meet you all. I've heard good things about you, and I hope I won't be a burden to any of you," Hifumi politely greeted.

"Eeeeh? Why so formal? We don't bite," Shizuka said, grinning wickedly at the shogi princess

"Well..." Hifumi's pale cheeks turned slightly pink. "Well... I'm not really part of your group of friends, s-so I didn't want to be too forward."

"Don't worry about it," Ann said, smiling brightly. "We're more than happy to welcome you with open arms! And there's no better way to get to know someone than to take in a foreign country with them!"

Hifumi blinked a few times. "I don't know if that's quite a thing, but..." A pretty smile graced her face "I'm certainly happy to try."

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The past few days had been eventful for Akihiko, to put it mildly. Mitsuru had tasked him with tracking down the source of Black Mask's gun, a job that was easier said than done. Just as Naoto had said it was a black market acquisition imported from abroad, nothing that could be accurately tracked through even her resources.
So ultimately it fell to him to track down possible sources in Tokyo that a person could get a gun through. A dangerous and messy task that left him prowling around the city, roughing up a fair few unsavory customers. Informants, drug dealers, street punks... nothing he couldn't handle, and truth be told he did enjoy the exercise.

Slowly but surely he had climbed up the food chain, powered along by new names. At one point he encountered a dealer that also had a Stand, making him feel as if he was definitely on the right track. It was a small fry, nothing Ceaser couldn't handle.

Most importantly that same dealer had given up a name: Hideki Sanshiro.

According to Naoto he had been tied to the yakuza on a number of occasions over the course of thirty years, and everything she could find tied him heavily to drug and arms dealing. But nothing had ever stuck to him. The police could never get any concrete evidence of him doing something illegal and approached anything to do with him with a cautious air. As if he put the fear of God into the Tokyo police department.

Well, Akihiko had stared down an actual deity in the past. He wasn't going to shrink away from some old gangster.

More than Sanshiro's name, he had a location. Or at least, a location for where Sanshiro tended to do business. The grey backstreets leading to the old warehouse were cold and vacant, devoid of even rodents. It was just Akihiko and his shadow making for the isolated building.

He got a good look at the exterior once he reached the mouth of the alley. From afar he could see the chain link fence that bordered the squat grey building, and the well maintained sign over the heavy shutters of the loading bay. 'Takahara Moving Company.' It could almost pass for legitimate, were it not for the deafening silence that surrounded it. And the rat had been very certain to give this location to Akihiko.

The silver haired man shot a text to Aigis, letting her know where he was just in case things went south. She'd no doubt come by in an hour or two if she heard nothing else from him. But for now he wanted to go it alone, to test himself. He hadn't been this excited in a long time...

The gates opened easily for him, and he quietly shut it behind him before continuing on toward the exposed loading bay. For just a moment the ironclad form of his Persona, Caesar, appeared above him with his gladius raised high to cut through any padlock sealing the shutter in place. To his shock however there was nothing keeping the place locked. A vague sense of apprehension gripped Akihiko, but he quickly pushed it aside and raised the shutter with his own two hands.

The interior was dimly lit, with makeshift corridors formed from stacks of crates carrying all manner of furnishings and objects. It all seemed rather official, but it was so quiet inside that one could hear a pin drop. He proceeded inside at a slow and measured pace, the footfalls of his leather shoes coming out silently.

Akihiko was on edge, the silence doing little to instill him with confidence. He felt like a coiled serpent with how on edge he felt, ready to strike back with his Persona at the first sign of trouble.

The winding path of crates led him progressively closer to the center of the warehouse, where the light overhead seemed to be the most intense. If Sanshiro wasn't here, then he would likely be back to square one.
A big wig yakuza being in league with Mr. A. Akihiko supposed it was to be expected if the mysterious crime lord really did have the city in his grasp. You'd have to get the yakuza in your thrall, or crush the various clans entirely to get that high up. More than a few would likely bend the knee out of fear if Mr. A did have some sort of powerful Stand at his disposal.

What kind of power would a person need to have to make the criminal underworld bow to him?

Akihiko supposed he'd have a few answers from Sanshiro in due time. He was mainly looking for the identity of Black Mask, as Sanshiro would likely know the identity of who he gave that gun to. The last rat Akihiko had dealt with had been emphatic in saying as much, and insisted he in turn knew nothing on the shooters identity. But if he could also get information on Mr. A, it would save a lot of trouble for him and the young thieves.

He rounded a corner and found himself walking into a wide open expanse in the warehouse, the stacked crates boxing the area off in a square. There, in the center and seated cross-legged on the floor with his back to Akihiko, was a rather broadly built man. A deep purple jacket with gold pinstripes was draped over his shoulders, his trousers a dark grey shade. From where he stood, Akihiko could see the snake-scale patterns of his irezumi on his upper arms, making it clear that the man with the slick-backed hair was shirtless.

"Hmph. Took your sweet time getting here kid. I was starting to think I'd been stood up."

"Hideki Sanshiro?"

"The one and only... Sanada-san." Akihiko tensed slightly, his fists slowly clenching. "What, you think you got here all on your own? I knew you were looking into my guns as soon as you started putting boots to the bottom feeders. So I looked into you and got curious... heard talk you were a famous boxing champ when you were younger. So I decided to let some of my underlings point you here if you found them. So here we are."

Akihiko narrowed his eyes, remaining wary but otherwise keeping his cool unless Sanshiro moved to attack him. "You let me find you? Why?" he asked.

"I was curious. So I decided to look into you. Found your face on CCTV and looked into you... you're not police, or even a private detective., so what are you poking around in my business for? Well, it wasn't hard to figure you're in league with that detective girl," Sanshiro said.

Akihiko didn't respond directly. "I know you're an arms dealer, but I want to know the details of a specific deal you've done."

"Yeah yeah I know... you're looking into mental shutdowns and rampage incidents and... shit like that. And the one behind it is using one of my weapons. Yeah. I know what you mean." Sanshiro rose up slowly, his coat falling off his back to fully reveal his irezumi. It covered the majority of his broad back, an image of a hulking and monstrous kappa smoking an ornate opium pipe while perched at the side of a flowing river.

Sanshiro was marginally older than Akihiko, years of experience written on his face like letters on a page. Even so he was physically imposing, a mountain carved into a sturdy human shape.

"I could tell you what I know. But what would I get out of that?"

"You'd avoid a hospital trip," Akihiko sternly replied.
Sanshiro smirked, turning to face the slightly shorter man. "Thing is, I'm starting to feel like I'm going soft. When you're at the top, it's rare for people to try and challenge you. And then you come along, Mister Boxing Champ, a tough guy who clearly ain't afraid of causing trouble. So here's what I propose: A one on one bout. No powers, just brawling. Impress me and I'll gladly give you some info."

"Uh huh..." Akihiko reached up for the collar of his pale blue shirt, popping the first two buttons open easily. "And how do I know this isn't some trap? That you won't have some of your pet punks jump out to shoot me as soon as things turn against you?"

"Pfeh. Kid if I wanted you dead, would I really have wasted all this time? Flapping my gums isn't the kind of thing I usually do." Sanshiro rolled his head, a distinct series of cracks echoing through the room as he worked the kinks from his neck. "So what do you say? You're not scared of a challenge, right?"

Akihiko shrugged his dark jacket off and tossed it behind him, the fabric landing neatly atop a low stack of boxes. "More confused than anything. I just don't know what you get out of this."

"Like I said, I'm bored. Rising to the top in my clan and then becoming one of Mr. A's Deadly Aspects... when you're at the apex, nobody wants to challenge you. You get sedentary and bored. It's the sick joke at the end of this lifestyle... you don't want to be at the bottom, stepped on by everyone. So you fight and claw your way to the top, you get the rush of competition and the thrill of a fight. But then it ends," he explained.

Akihiko narrowed his eyes partially. "Deadly Aspects?" he repeated.

"It's the name he gave to his four closest allies. The Stand users with some of the strongest powers, or best connections, that he could plant his trust in. I've held my position for quite some time," Sanshiro said.

Akihiko smirked and tossed his shirt aside, the garment landing atop his jacket. "So you really are close to this A guy. Alright, you got a deal. I'll fight you fair and square for the info I want... Truth be told, I'm a little excited too."

This wasn't ideal, and no doubt Mitsuru would chide him for being reckless, but it had been far too long since he really got to enjoy himself. He'd get the information one way or the other. He had his Persona if things actually got dangerous, and Aigis was no doubt on her way if he took too long at this. He'd be fine.

Sanshiro grinned broadly, seeming to be more than pleased. He lunged forward suddenly, his mountainous frame moving at a shocking speed. Akihiko raised his arms just as fast, his right swinging up and parrying an incoming jab from the looming yakuza.

He recoiled, pushing back on his right heel to avoid a snapping left uppercut from the younger man. Akihiko pressed on, his movements exceptionally swift as he landed several rapid jabs against Sanshiro's upraised forearms. Sanshiro suddenly parried Akihiko's right first away, the smack against his knuckles causing Akihiko to pull backward. Sanshiro pushed his advantage, a quick left hook cracking across Akihiko's face and making his head snap back sharply.

Akihiko staggered, leaving himself wide open as a large hard fist drove into his taut abs. He felt his eyes bulge in his head but held fast, recovering and ducking under another of Sanshiro's swift
sweeping blows. His own right fist shot up and drove firmly into Sanshiro's stomach. He gasped harshly in a sudden flux of pain.

Both men broke apart from each other, dropping back into stances with their arms raised defensively. They watched each other carefully, waiting for the other to make a move.

The silver-haired young man, being younger and slimmer, proved to be quicker on the draw as he pushed himself forward with his right foot. Sanshiro's right fist shot forward in a blow that no doubt would have been crushing if Akihiko hadn't weaved around it. Akihiko's threw two swift left jabs out, his fists slamming into the older man's pectorals and causing him to stagger backward.

"Hghhk..." Sanshiro caught Akihiko's incoming right fist, the clap against his palm echoing throughout the warehouse. Akihiko's eyes widened, leaving him open as Sanshiro's other fist shot forward and clocked him in the cheek, sending the prettyboy skidding back until he slammed against the nearest crate. Sanshiro shot forward, snarling loudly as his left fist rocketed forward.

This time however, Akihiko was quick enough to react and swiftly leapt to the side and leaving Sanshiro's knuckles driving into the wood. It splintered under the sudden and massive pressure, cracks rapidly spreading from the point of impact until the box very nearly buckled.

Sanshiro cackled slightly, pulling his left hand back and giving it a few small shakes. "Damn boy. This is already the most fun I've had all year." He flashed Akihiko a toothy smile as some of the skin on his exposed chest began to gradually turn purple from freshly growing bruises. "You might be a little stringy, but you sure do pack a mean punch. Nice to know you haven't gotten duller over time."

"You're nuts," Akihiko said, abruptly spitting a blob of blood onto the ground beside him.

"Don't act so high and mighty. Admit it, you're pulse is rising too. I can see it in your eyes, you're a man who can appreciate a good bout."

"You might be correct. But for now..." Akihiko raised his fists, his eyes narrowing sharply. "Shut up and fight."

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A rumble ran through the vending machine as a heavy chilled can dropped down through the mechanisms toward the slot at the base of the bulky machine. This corridor of the hotel was quiet, away from the lobby, and the surrounding area seemed rather silent as the evening continued to set in. "So that's what an American burger tastes like... you definitely do like them large over here," Sergio said. He crouched down, fetching his can of Dr. Salt NEO from the machine.

"Dude, you went for a Double-Double. In-N-Out Burger doesn't fuck around," Shizuka replied, leaning against the wall near the machine and slightly swilling her can in her hand. "Still, it was nice though. Ryuji looked like he was in heaven."

"So did Yusuke... He was on the verge of tears as he ate through his," Sergio said, chuckling gently. He cracked the tab on his can and sipped at the sugary root beer in his can.

"I'm glad you guys got to try some bonafide American cuisine that didn't come from a McDonalds. Still, if you guys ever hit up New York I'm gonna have to take you to Shake Shack. That's the real good shit." She smirked brightly. "Oh, we should all head to Italy some time so the guys can try
authentic Italian. My Mom didn't cook all that much, but she was very particular in teaching the chefs how to prep the meals she used to make for my Grandma."

Sergio nodded. "Personally I could just do with some food from home. Oh it's been far too long since I've had good risotto..." He trailed off and sipped his soda again. Smacking his lips he casually said "Anyway, I think Hifumi might have a Stand."

Shizuka nearly coughed up what she swallowed, planting a hand over her mouth as she worked to clear her throat and properly swallow. "Geez..." she said in a harsh, breathless rasp. "Give a girl some warning before you start firing off the wild accusations... what the hell makes you say that?" she asked.

They had spent much of the day exploring Hawaii and taking in some tourist sites, at which point they had tried to get to know Hifumi better. She was quite a shy and sweet girl, hard to get out of her shell. Though every once in a while she and Shiho would lapse into some conversation about anime, which seemed to engross Hifumi a little bit. That aside she seemed remarkably normal, a shogi prodigy who had been engrossed in the game ever since her father introduced it to her as a child.

"Well, the thing is, I don't think she knows she has one. That it's a sort of reflex that just happens," Sergio reasoned. "How should I put this? Whenever I've played shogi with her, it's as if... she reads me like a book and knows exactly what I'm going to do. Like all my moves are laid out before her."

"Like a book huh?" Shizuka smirked. "Oh no, the girl who's been playing shogi since she was a kid is better than a total novice. Better call Jotaro," she sarcastically said.

"It's not just me though. I've seen other people show up at that church in Kanda to challenge her, people who actually know what they're doing. And she's picked 'em apart, one by one," Sergio explained. "More than that, when we get particularly into a match she gets all excited and starts talking about the power of her evil eye and... stuff like that."

Shizuka took a long sip of her cola. "So? That just means she's a closet chuuni, not a Stand user," she replied.

"Oh please, all Stand users are chuunis. The flair for being overly dramatic is hardcoded into our DNA," Sergio quickly retorted.

"And even if Hifumi does have a Stand, so what? It's not like she's doing anything bad with it, even if she doesn't know she has one," Shizuka replied. Okay so she could potentially be cheating, but it wasn't as if she was intentionally doing it.

Sergio frowned. "Well... if she discovers her own Stand, without having any idea of what a Stand even is, it could scare her pretty badly. There have been cases over the years of people who wound up getting sectioned because they kept talking about 'spirits' they could see that nobody else could. Most of the time those were genuine delusions, but other times they were rather unlucky Stand users," he explained.

"Alright... if you're that concerned, just try showing off your Stand and if she sees it then sh-" Shizuka's phone buzzed in the pocket of her shorts, quickly drawing her attention downward. She quickly pulled it free and checked the screen. It seemed she had just gotten a message from Makoto.
M.N: Hey.

M.N: I was thinking we should have a private talk. Are you free?

S.J: sure thing.

S.J: you want to meet up somewhere outside the hotel?

S.J: i guess you don't want anyone being able to listen in, and there'd probably be gossips hanging around the lobby.

M.N: Well, that is true.

M.N: but we might get in trouble if we're caught out after curfew.

S.J: Third years are bound to get more leeway, so you'll be fine.

S.J: and i'm the invisible girl anyway, we won't get caught.

M.N: Fair point. Alright, where should we meet up?

S.J: How about that place a few blocks away? you know, the barber shop we passed on the way back to the hotel? Everything around there's prolly closed up by now.

M.N: Alright, I'll meet you there in a little bit.

Shizuka breathed a small sigh and pocketed her phone. So this was it. She doubted there was anything else Makoto wanted to talk about beyond Shizuka's confession. It must have been on her mind for some time, and the business with Okumura and the trip to Hawaii must have been rather distracting.

"Something's just come up... sorry dude, I'll have to catch up with you later," Shizuka said. "Better not do anything with Hifumi until we get back to Tokyo. Don't need a girl freaking out in a foreign country and drawing a lot of attention... assuming she even has a Stand."

"Very well. I'll see you tomorrow JoJo-chan," Sergio curtly said.

"You're goddamn lucky I have somewhere else to be Esposito!"

As Shizuka turned invisible and slipped covertly out of the hotel lobby, she shot a quick text to Ann letting her know that she was taking care of something and that she wouldn't be back to their room for a little while. She had no idea how long Makoto wanted to talk for, but she hoped this wouldn't be a brutally quick meeting.

Part of her was prepared for disappointment, of course. It was a strong possibility that Makoto didn't feel the same way for her, or just wasn't attracted to girls. And if that was the case, well that would be it. It would hurt, but she could get past it. And hopefully there wouldn't be any lingering awkwardness.
Yeah, hopefully. It was no doubt make things a little strange with their friendship... then again she and Ann were friends, and Shizuka had hardly been subtle in saying she found the blonde attractive.

Of course there was also a strong possibility that Makoto felt the same way. Naturally Shizuka hoped that was the case, but beyond that she didn't know how to proceed if they felt the same way with each other. Makoto was a stranger to dating, and Shizuka just knew she'd become such a dork that it'd be impossible to think straight.

These thoughts followed Shizuka around, clouding her until she reached the faintly lit streets. Just as she had predicted, most of the stores along this street were shuttered for tonight, a few cars parked along the curb. Some of them had been there for so long that they seemed set to grow roots. She hummed slightly to herself as she made for the storefronts. "I can see a hat, I can see a cat, I can see man with a baseball bat. I can see a dog, I can see a frog, I can see a ladder leaning on a log..."

Shizuka sighed, rendering herself visible as she leaned her back against the shutters of the barber shop. This was a whole lot to take in...

The night was still humid, but a chill was settling in now that the sun had fully sunken behind the horizon line. Shizuka adjusted the buttons of her Hawaiian shirt, ensuring that the black and orange fabric was closed up decently. Hopefully Makoto could get here before it really got cold outside.

Shizuka closed her eyes, a chilly breeze rolling over her.

The breeze grew sharper, Houdini flying out of Shizuka's body on a defensive reflex. Her Stand's left hand snapped upward as something suddenly drove into the side of her wrist. Shizuka just barely caught a glimpse of it: A piranha-like fish, formed from some sort of scarlet metal, with rows of jagged knife-teeth!

"An enemy Stand!" Shizuka gasped.

Houdini's left hand snapped to the side, dislodging the attacking creature and causing it to smash into the brickwork of a nearby wall. The creature recoiled, rapidly knifing back in the direction it came from. Shizuka hissed and clutched her left wrist, squeezing hard to stop the bleeding of some freshly formed cuts.

"You are a quick one after all," a voice remarked, addressing her in Japanese. Shizuka looked up sharply, her vision focused toward a corner across the street to see two sharply dressed figures staring down at her. Two men who bordered on their thirties, a brunette and a blond. The pirhana returned to the brunette and started orbiting around him at a leisurely pace.

Shizuka narrowed her eyes. "Let me guess. You two fuckboys work for Mr. A," she curtly said.

"Very astute," the blond replied, managing to sound only vaguely sarcastic. "Yes. This business with Okumura-san has made it clear that you have proven to be quite an inconvenience, and so he'd rather remove you from play. I am Shintaro Itagaki, and this is my brother Kotaro. Though given our propensity to erase threats to Mr. A with the efficiency of an acidic compound, people have taken to calling us the Chemical Brothers."

"Laaaame," Shizuka called across the street. She released her grip on her wrist, maintaining her
harsh glare. "Lemme tell you right now, you don't want any of this. Even if you hurt me... even if you kill me, there's nowhere on earth you'll be safe."

She was alone for now, but Makoto was fast approaching. All she had to do was bide for time and these two jokers would be done for.

"Somehow I doubt that. Mr. A's gonna win in the end, and when he does everyone who follows him will be set for life," Kotaro said, smirking confidently. He raised his right hand and gave a sudden flick of his wrist, and in an instant one orbiting Stand fish instantly transformed into eight that circled him at a rapid rate. " Red Sails!"

"Let's make this quick brother. I was hoping to go drinking tonight," Shintaro casually said, deciding to lean back against the wall and watch events unfold.

Kotaro continued forward as the Red Sails abruptly took up a distinct V-formation in front of him. "Relax. We'll see what this girl is capable of. We'll finish this quickly and then get to Miwa if she's having trouble dealing with the other brats."

Shizuka's eyes narrowed. So there was more than just these two in the country after them, and no doubt the others were in danger too. 'I'll deal with these jokers as quick as I can and then get back to the hotel,' she thought to herself.

When the school of pirhanas rushed her, Shizuka found herself better prepared this time. Houdini shot from her body, golden hands snapping out in rapid flurries to smack away the incoming creatures. Each impact was like a crack of thunder, batting the Stands back several feet before they looped around and shot back her way.

"BAZUBAZUBAZUBAZU!" While Houdini was deftly flicking her attackers away, it was not without consequence for Shizuka. She winced, feeling the occasional scrape of bladed teeth against her hands and forearms. These cuts soon dotted the girl's forearms, thin streaks of red oozing down over her pale skin. She couldn't keep this up indefinitely, she needed an opening.

Houdini's hands shot up, catching a crimson fish in each palm before suddenly and violently clapping her hands together. There was a resounding cracking noise that rattled the ground beneath her, the other Red Sails recoiling sharply from her. Across the street Kotaro suddenly coughed up a thin spout of blood, staggering backward until his right palm met the wall behind him. With this brief distraction made, Houdini tossed the two injured pirhanas away while Shizuka leapt to her side, rapidly turning invisible mid-motion.

'Okay, those little bastards sting! More to the point, it seems attacking Kotaro's Stand directly doesn't do much to him... Never fought a 'swarm' type Stand before now. But I guess the damage isn't a straight exchange for him. I'll have to hit the man himself,' Shizuka thought to herself.

"Oh, there's that invisibility trick of hers," Shintaro remarked. He reached into his coat pocket, taking out a sleek silver cigarette case and sliding out a crisp white cigarette. "You better move quick if you don't want her getting the drop on you."

Kotaro wiped under his chin and smirked sharply. "As if I hadn't considered this." He suddenly pointed to a fire hydrant a few feet from where Shizuka had been standing mere moments ago.

Shizuka, who had slowly walking down the row of parked cars toward the corner, intending to cross the street from that angle, stopped briefly to watch as to of the Stand fish suddenly rocketed
toward the hydrant. The two acting as one proved strong enough to tear the hydrant from its moorings, smashing violent into and denting the red metal on impact. A mournful wail of tearing steel filled the street as the hydrant finally came loose and came to a clattering death in the nearby gutter, a powerful spray of water erupting out of the freshly formed hole in the concrete.

The two fishes moved in unison, the fins of their tails interlocking as they made a beeline for the rushing water. The two suddenly started spinning at an absurd pace like a flying sawblade. The twin fishes met the peak of the spout and broke it into a vast spray of rainwater that swiftly blanketed Shizuka's end of the street. Shizuka winced, raising her right arm up slightly to block some of the water only to come to a worrying realization: The continuous flow was outlining her body.

"Ah, there you are," Kotaro smugly said.

The remaining six fish rushed toward her, forcing Shizuka onto her back heel as Houdini appeared above her. Houdini's right arm smacked away two of the incoming fish as a third weaved under Houdini's left and made a beeline for Shizuka's ribs. She grit her teeth as she felt the blades sink through the fabric of her shirt and into her flesh, drawing blood from several fresh punctures.

Houdini whipped around sharply and managed to pry the Stand from Shizuka's chest, the blades fortunately not having hooked around her skin. With impressive strength she flung the fish at the nearby wall with such force that several bricks shattered from the impact. Kotaro let out a sudden wheeze of pain.

Shintaro chuckled, taking a long drag from his cigarette as his weight rested against the wall. He plucked the cigarette between his digits and let out a long stream of smoke that filled the air around him. "Oh brother. Looks like she's tougher than you were expecting," he said.

Now that she had a bit of breathing room, Shizuka decided to press her advantage. Houdini snatched up several chunks of the shattered masonry while her user vaulted over the bonnet of the nearest car and moved to the road, stopping near a manhole cover. The falling water couldn't reach her as she reached the halfway point in the road, but a steady stream of blood drops was marking her path.

Houdini's right palm raised up while her left hand moved forward. She flicked each chunk of masonry with superhuman force, launching them across the road. They turned invisible mid-flight but, knowing they were coming, Kotaro started weaving to his right. Even so two chunks of broken brick drove into his chest, making him gag as he was driven back against the wall.

'I'm hurting him, that's good... but I'm not feeling so hot myself,' Shizuka thought to herself, breathing harshly as pain stung her ribs. To say nothing for the persistent burning sensation from the cuts on her forearms. 'I gotta get over there quickly, but... then there's the other brother. He's just been standing there... menacingly! The hell kind of Stand power does he have? I better be careful.'

The Red Sails joined back up into a V-formation once again, the flow of water from the broken hydrant rapidly dying down behind her. The swarm rushed toward her, drawn in by the trail of her blood and the water starting to pool at Shizuka's feet. They drew in fast, razor blade teeth gnashing at thin air.

Houdini stomped down on the edge of the manhole cover beside her, launching the heavy metal up until the Stand deftly caught it between her hands and held it forward like a shield. The eight fish
drove into the cover, denting it with their pointed faces and filling the air with a series of resounding dings as they became briefly lodged in place. Shizuka let out a powerful yell as Houdini swung her hands down, slamming the cover into the asphalt and sending the fishes scattering down the road.

Shizuka panted slightly, becoming visible and glaring over at Kotaro. "You done? Your Stand might be fast, and you might outnumber me, but those fish are super weak. Try me again and I'll clobber you into the side of the road."

Meanwhile Kotaro simply smiled. "Ah, that's right. On my own, my Stand isn't particularly powerful. It relies on blitz attacks and speed to take a target out. But your Houdini is even faster, so on my own I don't think I can beat you..." His smile abruptly broadened. "But fortunately, that's what my brother is here for. Together, there hasn't been a person yet who can overcome us."

Shintaro flicked the stub of his cigarette to the pavement and promptly ground it under the heel of his leather shoe. The air shimmered around him. "**Unforgettable.**"

A figure rose from the ether beside Shintaro, marginally larger than the man himself. It was a large sphere of burnished blue steel, with a pair of heavy metal legs capped off by sharp synthetic talons. The body of the sphere was marked by thin lines that seemed to give a glimpse of smaller mechanisms inside the sphere, while the top was marked by a small antenna.

"That's your Stand? What the hell's that thing gonna-" Shizuka halted herself, a great sensation of queasiness overcoming her. She swayed off balance, beads of sweat dotting her forehead as the pain in her stomach grew more intense. A distinct ringing filled her head while her vision grew warped and distant, everything seeming to stretch far away from her. "Wh-... what..."

"That's what my Unforgettable can do," Shintaro casually said.

The Red Sails rushed her again, and even through her groggy vision Shizuka could tell they were fast approaching. Houdini's right arm swung up blindly, smacking three incoming attackers away while a fourth buried itself into Houdini's right shoulder. Shizuka shrieked, stumbling backward as a fifth continued racing toward her. Sharp blades sank into the left side of her neck.
Even with her senses shot, the burning pain in Shizuka's neck gave her enough focus to power through. Houdini launched back to her user, a golden fist wrapping around the intruding Red Sail and tossing it aside. Shizuka's left hand settled on the side of her neck and pressed down tight to stem the bleeding, sticky red rivulets coating her pale palm.

"You... son of a bitch..." Shizuka gasped. She could still breath fully, so it seemed nothing vital had been punctured. All the same, any injury to the neck was usually a bad sign.

Her vision was still swimming, and sounds seemed to be distant and far away. As if her head was submerged in water. Unforgettable was still in effect it seemed, throwing all her senses out of whack. 'What the hell is causing this?! I'm not even looking at the damn thing, and it's still messing with my head!'

"Damn, guess my lil' fella didn't get a deep enough bite in. I was hoping to finish this in one clean hit, movie style." Kotaro sighed and snapped his fingers on his right hand. The eight fishes came rushing toward him, settling into an even ring around Kotaro's waist.

Shintaro sighed and scratched the side of his neck. "Can we hurry this up? I know you love the guts and gore of a good fight but I was hoping to get drunk at some point tonight," he casually said. The looming and rotund bulk of Unforgettable still hovered a few inches to his left, unmoving and yet still causing Shizuka's senses to go haywire.

"Oh fine..." Kotaro rolled his eyes. "Honestly, you need to have fun with this every once in awhile. No sense in being totally miserable at your job."

Shizuka was left lying on her side, her left palm still pressed to the bloody punctures in her neck. She tried to rise, only to find her balance was still shot and her legs refused to do as her brain told them. She was a sitting duck here!

All the same she summoned Houdini in front of her, the golden figure seeming to also sway from side to side in an unfocused haze. 'Am I gonna die here?' Even if she was, she knew she was going to go down swinging... and hoping that her friends would avenge her.

"Well, it's been fun Joestar. But now it's time to say goodbye!" The eight fish lanced forward at once, teeth gnashing and grinding as they drew in close to the disoriented girl. She braced for impact, her eyes widening in a dawning fear. She had been in bad spots before now, but this felt pretty bleak.

She closed her eyes, bracing as best she could. "Come on you fuckers..."

"SHIZUKAAAAAA!"

Her eyes popped open behind the dark lenses of her glasses, drawn in by Makoto's voice. Was she in heaven? No, the damaged Hawaii street still surrounded her, and she was sure she could still feel her own heart beating. Her voice even managed to catch the attention of the Chemical Brothers, with the surprise causing the Red Sails to halt entirely in mid-flight, suspended in contempt of gravity.
There was a roar of a powerful engine in the distance, the powerful noise echoing down the road. It was soon followed by a blinding flash from two powerful headlights, forcing the brothers to raise their arms and shield their eyes. "What the hell?" Shintaro growled.

Another flash came from the end of the road, followed by a beam of light rapidly racing toward the brothers. "Holy-!" Kotaro leapt to dodge first, both brothers throwing themselves to the sidewalk as a flash bomb hit the wall where they had been standing a split second ago. The fireball burst outward, the ensuing shockwave sending the brothers skidding into the gutter. Unforgettable vanished, and Shizuka's senses returned soon after.

"Wha... what just..." Shizuka reached up with her right hand, mutely rubbing her forehead to soothe the lingering pain.

The roaring engine grew louder, followed by a shriek of rubber on asphalt as the light at the far end of the road rocketed toward her. It grew faster, the light dimming as the figure coming toward her came into sharper focus: Makoto, riding on the back of Johanna.

"What the..." She had seen it plenty of times in the Metaverse, but seeing it in the real world was a major shock for Shizuka.

Makoto closed the distance, grabbing the front of Shizuka's shirt in her right fist and hefting her up with a surprising degree of strength. Shizuka yelped, finding herself landing on the back of Johanna once Makoto had pulled her up. Once seated Shizuka ended up reflexively squeezing her arms around Makoto's waist.

Johanna managed to cross four blocks in the span of a few seconds before taking a sharp right and then skidding to a halt near a row of parked cars. Shizuka swayed slightly in her seat before Makoto abruptly lifted her and set the dark-haired girl down against the broad tires of a heavy SUV. "What just... happened?"

"Shizuka! Oh my goodness, are you- Oh god, you're bleeding!" The brunette crouched in front of Shizuka, her pale left hand settling against the wound on Shizuka's neck. Her palm was soon enveloped in a warm white glow as Johanna's healing energy washed over the point of contact. Slowly but surely the bite marks were closing up, but the pain was lingering.

"Oh Makoto... you're my goddamn guardian angel..." Shizuka breathed, flashing her a sly smile. She felt like crying, but managed to settle on just the smile for now. "Those guys, they're assassins sent by Mr. A. They call themselves the Chemical Brothers." They had managed to get some distance, and no doubt they would hear them approaching. It was best to explain the situation sooner rather than later.

Makoto breathed a small sigh and removed her hand from Shizuka's neck. "I had a feeling it was something like that. I heard this loud... bang when I was on the way over." That was the fire hydrant being uprooted, Shizuka reasoned. "And so I started rushing over and heard you scream and..." Her right hand reached up, slender fingers dabbing at the corner of her eye. "Thank goodness I got there when I did."

"We're not out of the woods yet..." Shizuka grunted and moved to stand, her right hand pressed to the bonnet of the SUV behind her. Makoto settled her hands on Shizuka's shoulders, more healing light coming over Shizuka until Makoto was grimacing in exertion. Several of Shizuka's wounds were closing up, but the pain was still fresh and lingering. At least she wasn't bleeding everywhere, but she doubted she could take too many more hits. "The brown-haired brother, his Stand is a few
fishes with nasty razor sharp teeth. The two of us could handle him easily, but..."

"It's the other one that's giving you trouble, right?" Makoto asked. She glanced up over the SUV, just to make sure they were still alone.

Even as Makoto released her grip, Shizuka could still feel her legs trembling slightly in a bid to hold her body weight. The cuts in her arms were still lingering, and the bloodstains in her shirt must have made for quite a sight. Her major wounds had closed but she still felt like shit, stabs of pain rolling through her chest with each breath.

"It does... something, I don't know how. But when he summoned it I basically lost control of my senses. Everything sounded fuzzy, my vision went all tunnel-like and stretchy, and I lost all balance. It basically left me like a sitting duck," Shizuka explained.

"Sounds a bit like vertigo," Makoto murmured. "What are we going to do? Just going straight at them isn't going to work, but I doubt they'll give up just like that."

Shizuka nodded faintly. "There's more. I think there are people heading to the hotel to attack the others," Shizuka said. Makoto nearly jumped out of her skin, but she managed to quickly reel in her shock and focus on the situation at hand.

"We better warn them quickly. After that we can focus on these two." Shizuka watched as Makoto drew her phone out, typing out a quick text to Akira, while she glanced toward the horizon. Through the rows of buildings and the murk of night, she could just about see the strobing neon lights at the coastline and hear the distant thumps of music. There must have been one hell of a party out that way. It at least reduced the chance of some unfortunate normies getting caught in the middle of this.

Shizuka's ears pricked up, suddenly aware of the sound of footsteps drawing in closer. That had to be them. Once Makoto had pocketed her phone, Shizuka gripped Makoto's right hand and led her to the car behind the SUV, a bulky Buick. She crouched down with the brunette, the two promptly turned invisible by Houdini's power.

"I'm going to make an opening," Shizuka whispered. "And when I do, you need to rush the blond and knock him down. If he's distracted then he can't fuck us over with his power."

"Right," Makoto whispered in response.

They didn't have to wait long until Kotaro and Shintaro reached the edge of the corner, with Kotaro panting and glancing sharply from side to side. No sign of either girl that the brothers could see. "Damnit," Kotaro growled. "The hell kind of Stand was that? A bike? They came this way, so..."

Shintaro strode up beside his brother, scratching at his jawline in a lazy manner. "They may have doubled back towards the hotel... Then again if she's a Joestar, I doubt she'd just leave us running loose. How inconvenient."

"Well we can't just let 'em go! If Mr. A finds out... fuck, if Miwa finds out, then we'll be made into goddamn fertilizer!" Kotaro hissed.

"Easy, easy... I get it, I know this is risky, but we'll get through. We always do." Shintaro yawned loudly and scratched under his right eye. "Christ, I'm gonna drink like a sailor when we get done here."
Shizuka listened carefully as their footsteps continued drawing closer, until she could just about see two shadows rolling over her. Houdini appeared inside the car, strong palms pressing against the back door nearest against the curb. She summoned her remaining strength, hinges tearing apart with shrieks of steel. With one powerful shove the door came off and flew into the Chemical Brothers, making the two gasp and stagger back as the length of steel slammed into the duo.

It wasn't hard for Makoto to see this as her signal. She rounded the corner sharply, flickering into visibility as she made a beeline for Shintaro. Makoto had been a fit girl for many years, in great shape for her age. Getting a Persona had made her marginally stronger, even outside the Metaverse, and many afternoons spent running around in the midst of heavy combat had made her quite strong. And that was why, when her right knuckles met Shintaro's jawline, it bowled him over and left his back smacking harshly into the pavement. A spurt of blood oozed along Makoto's right fist, while she shook her hand to ease off the spike of pain she felt.

She managed to glance to her side, seeing Kotaro rapidly shifting to face her. But for as quick as he was, Makoto managed to get a glimpse of something in his ear.

Two Red Sails launched toward her, faster than Makoto could react to, and promptly sank their sharpened fangs into her left forearm. Makoto shrieked and rapidly shook her arm, watching wide eyed as trails of hot red blood swiftly oozed from the new puncture wounds.

"Makoto!" Houdini lunged out of Shizuka's body as she rounded the front of the Buick, throwing out a swift kick toward Kotaro. Houdini's heel met Kotaro's ribs and knocked him into the wall, a loud wheeze leaving him. The two piranhas were dislodged from Makoto's arm, while a third shot down and bit harshly into the outside of Shizuka's right side, making her cry out as her body latched onto the roof of the Buick for support.

From the corner of her eye she could see Shintaro starting to rise, an aura of purple light encompassing his body as Unforgettable's bulk began to take form. "Unforgettable!" Shintaro growled.

Shizuka knew full well that if Unforgettable went into effect again, they'd both be screwed. She needed to buy for time... Her eyes scanned her surroundings rapidly, her focus settling on a row of windows above them. Houdini moved quickly, taking the piranha from her leg and powerfully throwing it at the windows, shattering two of them in a single stroke and leaving a hail of glass raining down on the sidewalk.

Her balance swayed as she managed to grab Makoto by the collar and tried to run off as quickly as she could, the raining glass managing to distract the Chemical Brothers as they fled from the shards. Unforgettable positioned itself over Shintaro, scratches and scars breaking out along his body.

Unforgettable was still distorting their senses, but the two girls managed to power through as Shizuka led on to a broad alleyway across the street, Houdini's power flickering in and out of focus. Even though the brothers were distracted, Unforgettable seemed to have a strong effect without needing to be aimed.

The alley itself was strewn with old bottles and discarded pipes, with the largest objects being a series of heavy dumpsters that lined the right hand wall. Shizuka was already planning which route to take when she heard a series of sharp whistling sounds coming in from behind them.
The Red Sails had taken to the air behind them, each clutching a series of glass shards in their mouths. They whipped their heads sharply and let their makeshift ammo fly, the momentum carrying them forward like a volley of glass bullets. "Move, move!" Shizuka shouted as she and Makoto did their best to break into a full sprint despite the fog in their heads.

Makoto let out a sharp scream as two glass shards met her upper back, driving through her thin blouse and into her skin, drawing two fresh wounds. It hurt a hell of a lot more out here than it did in the Metaverse.

"Makoto! Y-you okay?!" A shard grazed the outside of her right knee, making her grimace in another jolt of pain.

"I-I'm fine, just keep moving!" Makoto breathlessly said.

The two quickly reached the dumpsters and slid into place behind them. There was a modest clatter as the shards of glass fell down Makoto's back and settled behind her. "That..." Shizuka murmured. "Didn't go as good as I hoped."

Already they could see the silhouettes of the Chemical Brothers moving into the mouth of the alley, cutting them off the way they came. The dumpster would give them some cover, but it wouldn't last long. Particularly with how versatile Kotaro's Stand was, their options were rather narrow.

"Johanna's firepower could probably take them out quickly, but..." Makoto grunted and pressed her left palm to her forehead, squinting down the alley in a bid to steady her vision. "I can't aim straight! I can barely..." She paused, watching the impressive bulk of Unforgettable as it passed by one of the windows at the entrance to the alleyway.

She focused on that intensely, as if on a reflex. Makoto's eyes widened as a realization came to her: The glass beside Unforgettable was gently rattling.

"I know how his power works..."

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Akira had never stayed at hotel before, or at least not one that wasn't styled after an old Japanese inn, but he had to admit it made for a nice experience. Primarily he appreciated that it was generally warmer than the attic, and having a full bathroom within easy walking access was a real treat.

However his roommate was a little lacking.

Akira found himself laying back on his beck, idly flicking through the pages of a Pink Dark Boy tankobon that Shiho had let him borrow, and was doing his best to ignore the occasional and muffled sound of vomiting that came from the bathroom. "I told him not to drink the tap water here," Akira murmured without looking up from the intricately detailed pages.

Mishima was rather unlucky. But on the plus side he supposed this spared him the trouble of being bombarded with questions about the Phantom Thieves. Like he had been last night.

A sudden knock on the door gave Akira pause, causing him to look up from the volume in his hand. "Damnit... right when that werewolf was about to get what was coming to him," he
murmured, closing the heavy tome up. Rohan Kishibe knew how to get a man engrossed. He rose quickly off the bed and made for the door, quickly unlocking the door and pulling it open to see who was knocking.

"Yo!" Ryuji enthusiastically said, the sudden volume making Akira wince and take a step back. "I told you this was his room. I totally didn't forget or anything."

"And that's why you nearly knocked on the last two doors we passed," Ann said flatly as she strode in behind Ryuji.

Shiho took up the rear of the group, breathing a small sigh. "Sorry about the intrusion Akira. We kind of got roped into this and-" She paused and looked around. "Wait, where's Yuuki? I thought he was rooming with you?"

"Hm? Who's Yuuki?" Ann asked.

"Mishima," Shiho flatly said, closing the door behind her.

Akira gestured over to the bathroom door. "He-" A sudden retching sound interrupted Akira and caused him to cringe. "Drank some tap water."

"Geez. Even I didn't do that," Ryuji murmured.

"So what brings you guys here? Did your rooms catch fire?" Akira asked.

"Well..." Ann twiddled her thumbs together awkwardly. "Shizuka said she had some business to take care of, so I was kind of alone in my room. And I... got bored and decided to wander around a little," Ann explained.

Shiho nodded. "My own roommate is already asleep, so I got a little restless too and decided to have a little look around. Then I bumped into Ann."

"And I was just hitting the vending machine when I saw these two. I suggested hitting your room, and they were on board with it," Ryuji said, shrugging slightly.

"Even when we're abroad, you guys insist on ganging up in my room," Akira admitted with a sigh. "Well, fine, have a seat. Though there's not much to do here," he said, moving back to his bed and taking a seat on the side of it.

At the very least the room was unlikely to get anymore cramped. Yusuke and Sergio were rooming together, and Haru was no doubt comfy where she was. Akira had to wonder if Shizuka was out with Makoto right now, having 'the talk.' Well, if that was the case he certainly wasn't about to spread any gossip to the others. Particularly if they didn't wind up getting together.

"Hard to believe the trip is almost over already," Shiho said, taking a seat on the small couch. Ryuji took up a spot beside her, smiling warmly. "I was looking forward to this trip most of the year, but... I never stopped to think on how brief it actually is."

"Yeah, but it was still nice. We got to see a lot of new scenery," Ann said, smiling brightly.

"And got off school, which was nice. Ugh, I am so not up for exams in the future," Ryuji murmured, groaning at the thought alone.
Shiho set her right hand on his back in a gentle, reassuring manner. "You'll do fine, don't worry about it," the dark haired girl said.

"I even got some nice souvenirs. Hope Futaba and Sojiro like them... plus the catnip I got Morgana, I'm sure he'll like that," Akira said, adjusting his spectacles.

"We should enjoy it while we can anyway. Cause once we get back to Japan..." Ryuji trailed off and gave a small sigh. "Well when we get back, we told those Shadow Operative guys we'd get into dealing with Mr. A and the Black Mask and whoever the hell they're working for. And we don't even know where the heck to start with that."

"Plus after what happened to President Okumura, those guys clearly won't go easy on us. We're in some really dangerous territory now," Ann remarked.

The others nodded glumly. None of them were fond of Kunikazu Okumura, especially when they knew what he had done to his employees, and what he planned to do to Haru. But they did all feel a great guilt, thinking back on how they were partially to blame for him getting attacked. They had cleared his Palace and yet it still felt like a loss.

"You know what I keep coming back to?" Shiho asked, drawing the attention of the others. "The fact that Black Mask knew to be there when he was. Like... there was nothing on the news about the Phantom Thieves targeting President Okumura, I checked over every news site I could find. And nobody on the streets knows anything about President Okumura being targeted... even Futaba couldn't find anything. But Black Mask knew?" Her words hung in the air.

"Maybe he's been spying on us without any of us knowing? I mean, Naoto and Makoto managed to do that," Ann suggested.

Akira weighed the suggestion for a few moments before shrugging faintly. "It's possible we're being watched, but... well, that doesn't totally answer the question. It's not like we were going around shouting that we were going after Okumura, and Haru was the one who handled the calling card. So unless he was in Haru's home, or has the place bugged, I don't think that's the method."

Eventually, Ryuji scratched the back of his neck. "Uh... well, didn't Haru say her Dad called the police after he got the calling card? If it's all part of some big conspiracy that includes bigshots in Japan, then there are prolly folks on the police force involved too..."

"That's... actually pretty plausible," Akira remarked.

"Whadda ya mean 'actually'?" Ryuji indignantly asked, his body bristling.

The dark-haired boy rolled his eyes. "Nevermind that. There's a strong possibility that there is some police corruption going on there. After all the gun he fired at Okumura wasn't a cognitive weapon like ours, it was a real gun with lasting bullets. It'd be easier for someone involved with the police to get hold of a gun, right?"

The group pondered Akira's suggestion for several seconds. "Well it makes sense. But it's definitely worrying if people in the police ar-" Shiho was cut off by a small shuffling sound coming from the door. All eyes turned to the bottom of the doorway to see a neatly folded piece of paper now resting on the carpet.
"The hell?" Ryuji muttered. "Who's goin' around slipping notes into folks' rooms at this hour?"

Shiho plucked the note up and unfolded it. Her eyes widened gradually as she read what had been written upon it in neat kanji. She read it aloud for the benefit of the others. "'To the Phantom Thieves. We've been keeping an eye on you for some time, and causing trouble for Mr. A has made you too dangerous to be left alive. You have half an hour to leave that room, or my Stand will start killing people in this hotel indiscriminately.'"

Ann, who had been seated at the edge of Mishima's bed, abruptly rose to her feet. "W-what?! That can't possible be real, that... That's gotta be a prank!"

"I don't think anyone on our team would make a prank like that," Akira firmly said. He rose to his feet and slowly stretched his arms above his head. He supposed it was a good thing he still had his day clothes on. "We better get moving. I doubt they're bluffing about that 'indiscriminate killing' thing," he added.

"Yeah but... go where?" Ryuji asked.

"Dunno. But we should try and get a warning out to the rest of the team and then meet up somewhere outside the hotel. We're probably being watched right now, after all." Akira gave a small sigh and made for the door, Arsene's spectral form glowing to life at his side. "We should move on quickly. We don't want Mishima getting caught up in this."

"Right," Ann said, before giving a shaky sigh. "Ugh, this sucks... Couldn't just have a nice normal vacation..." the blonde added under her breath.

Akira's phone buzzed in his pocket. Arsene opened the door for them, while he curtly checked his messages: It was from Makoto. "It's definitely not a prank. Makoto and Shizuka are apparently being attacked by Stand users too."

"Oh shit..." Ryuji murmured.

The four young thieves quickly moved out into the well lit corridor outside of the hotel room, footfalls silent against the plush brown carpet beneath them. It was silent outside, just them and strings of neighbouring doorways. Whoever had sent the note was nowhere in sight.

There was nothing to the right but a dead end. Akira knew that if they were to have any luck they'd need to hang left and take the staircase down. After that he supposed they'd try and get in touch with Makoto and Shizuka to help them out.

He led on down the hall, his gaze continually strobing from side to side as he tried to pick up on any threats. But the only things ahead of them were more doors and a small end table positioned under a wall-mounted mirror.

However, as they reached the mirror, something truly odd began to happen. A blinding white light shone out of the mirror, causing the four to stagger backward. "What th-" Ryuji gasped, before the light grew more focused and intense. A large hand of radiant energy shot from the glass and engulved them, muffling any protests they could generate. The large hand yanked them through the glass, at which point the light vanished and the glass was left rippling like a pool of water, until it grew steady without a trace of anything unnatural going on.

When the group came to their senses again, the hotel was gone. Instead the four found themselves
standing on a long stretch of desolate asphalt. Everything around them was cast in a murky grey hue, with strobes of pulsating golden light occasionally flickering through the air.

"The hell?!" Ryuji sharply rose to his feet and glanced from side to side, his eyes widening as he finally took in the alien scenery around them. The area they were standing on was but one of dozens upon dozens of islands floating through his strange netherspace. Many of these floating land masses, such as the one they were standing on, were asphalt islands with crude imitations of urban trappings.

Others were beach-like, with long stretches of sand occasionally broken up by pools of water that seemed defiant of gravity. Then there the few islands that were just giant floating rocks with no extra detail to them.

There wasn't much of note on their island. A mailbox that looked as if it had been chiseled from stone, and a sidewalk that seemed half-melted into the land itself. "Where the hell are we?" Akira asked.

"This," an unfamiliar voice called to them. "Is a dimension inside a mirror. My friend Aoyama created it with his Stand Paradigm Shift." The group looked up toward a distant island, taking in the image of a woman in a dark sequin dress, the ethereal wind of the mirror dimension blowing at her luxurious blonde hair. She was strikingly beautiful but there was a terrible glint in her eyes. "It's like a... like a tunnel between two mirrors. The one Aoyama's at outside the hotel, and the one outside your room. Pretty spooky eh? Too bad he can only keep this dimension open for a short period of time."

Akira narrowed his eyes at the blonde. "So you're the one who left us that note... Who are you?" he asked.

"Ooooh, you're a gentleman! If I was into high school guys, you might just be my type," the blonde said. For as attractive as she was, her words sent a shudder of dread through Akira's body. "You can call me Miwa. I'm one of Mr. A's Deadly Aspects, one of his elite agents... aaaand his one true love! So naturally he sent me to deal with you brats." Miwa shrugged. "Nothing personal. But you should've known better than to get involved."

"Just wanted a nice, calm vacation, but nooooo..." Ann muttered under her breath. "At least in here we don't need to worry about collateral. She probably stuck us in here to make sure nobody would catch her in the middle of all this."

"Yeah, but we don't know how long this Paradigm Shift world stays open for. We might only have minutes before we're spat back out in the real world again. We should try to get through her quickly," Shiho explained.

Smirking, Miwa reached into a large and over-stuffed box behind her. "Now then..." She turned back toward the group, looking down at them from the distant gulf of their floating islands. In her hands she was clutching a plush panda doll. "Let's get down to business... "Serial Thrilla!"

A ghastly green glow enveloped the teddy as she threw it toward the group, and with each passing second it started to rapidly gain mass. Its fur bristled and elongated alongside ballooning muscle mass, its fuzzy mouth being replaced with a drooling maw filled with rows upon rows of sharp teeth. Its eyes became solid white orbs bulging out of the skull, red veins encroaching around the rims of the eyes. Razor sharp talons erupted from the beasts paws, a mighty roar escaping the newly formed beast as its airborne form made a beeline for the teens.
"Move!" Akira shouted, jumping off to the side. The others followed his lead, the monstrous bear striking the ground where they had been standing and splitting the asphalt under his bulk. The beast threw his head up, letting out a terrible howl that seemed to shake all the islands surrounding them.

"Th-that thing's her Stand?" Ann gasped. The bear glared toward her, and then broke into a sudden sprint that left it charging at her. Ann yelped and summoned Hecate to her side, the looming black witch lashing her chains out and unleashing a powerful burst of flame that slammed into the bear's shoulder. A stink of burnt hair filled the island, but this seemed to do little to slow the creature and his charge.

Ann jumped away as the bear's claw drove into the ground, producing a shockwave that smacked into Ann and sent her skidding along the ground on her side. Seiten Taisei rushed in from the right side of the bear, his cudgel driving into the beasts jaw and snapping his head to the side. It roared in turn, a weighty black and white arm slamming into Seiten Taisei's chest with such force that Ryuji's back slammed into the crude facsimile of a mailbox, the wind knocked out of him.

"Ryuji!" Shiho gasped. She turned her head, glaring up at the blonde who was smugly surveing the situation. She didn't have a mark on her despite Ann and Ryuji's attacks. "The bear isn't her Stand. It's something her power created," Shiho reasoned.

"Ooooh, top of the class. My Serial Thrilla's supermarionation powers allow me to make a monster out of anything I choose. Though it helps if it has a articulate body to start with, like my Fuzzy-Wuzzy down there," Miwa explained.

"So what you're saying is... we don't need to hold back!" Shiho growled. Aradia's ghostly form rose up behind the dark-haired girl, purple flashes enveloping her allies and ramping their durability up even further. She turned to face the rampaging beast and pointed decisively at the mutant monstrosity. Aradia wasted no time in following her summoner's command, pale hands shooting outward and firing a volley of light daggers at the bear. Several of them stabbed through the back of his right hind leg, making the beast roar and twist his injured limb a few times.

It turned sharply and started running at Shiho, only to be stymied as Arsene rushed in from the side and slammed a bladed heel into the bear's jaw, a spew of strange green goo erupting from his flesh as his cheek was sliced open. He staggered off balance as Arsene jerked backward, retreating sharply toward Akira. The bear raked his talons through the asphalt, launching a volley of debris at Akira and forcing him to dodge sideways. But for as nimble as he was a stray chunk still struck his forehead and knocked him flat, blood oozing down along his right eyebrow.

The beast made a charge for Shiho again, causing her to yelp and jump backward with as much force as she could muster to avoid it. But, at the apex of her jump, Shiho found herself suddenly becoming weightless. "H-huh?" She shoved her arms out to the side, her limbs wobbling while her entire orientation suddenly shifted. Shiho gave a sharp cry as her weight was suddenly pulled to the next island, the soles of her sneakers pressing into the sturdy stone that comprised the neighbouring island.

Akira moved to stand, trying his best to wipe away the droplets landing over his eye. "So if we jump high enough, the 'gravity' of the other islands pulls us in," he murmured.

The monstrous panda seemed to make the same realization too, powerful hind legs launching it up with a mighty roar. Shiho yelped, taking aim with Aradia and firing off another volley of blessed light, the beams of energy shaving chunks of the Stand-powered beast but doing little to slow its
"Damnit!" Ryuji rose to his feet, panting for breath. "We gotta get over there, fast!"

"Right... I'll need something stronger for this one... Okuninushi!" Arsene's form glowed a pale blue shade, being swiftly replaced by a looming and pale dark-haired figure, dressed in heavy steel armour. "Ann, that rock up there... I'm sure it's something Hecate can melt. So how about we give that overgrown plush a nice hot bath?" Ann nodded shakily as she rose to her feet.

Shiho found herself skidding backward, chunks of debris flying past and scraping her exposed forearms, leaving bloodied scratches along her pale skin. The panda beast had landed with a powerful impact, the ground splintering under his heavy claws.

However before the monster could make another move, Okuninushi suddenly slammed into his back and drove the creature deeper into the ground with a thunderous boom. Seiten Taisei rushed in closer, only for the slobbering abomination to swing out and graze the monkey's left shoulder with the tips of his claws. Ryuji snarled in pain, gripping his own shoulder and shivering as streams of crimson pumped down from under his palm. "Oh you son of a-!" Seiten Taisei powered forward, slamming all of his weight and strength down until he and Okuninushi had pinned the struggling beast to the ground. But for as strong as the two Personas were, it was clear they wouldn't hold the creature down for long.

Ann landed neatly beside Shiho, breathing a small sigh before summoning Hecate to her side again. "You okay?" Shiho nodded in turn. Hecate stretched her chains outward, a continuous beam of white hot fire surging out between her two familiars and striking the ground beneath the bear. Within seconds it was glowing hot, bubbles of molten stone popping beneath the panda and spreading outward. The superheated stone began to expand, becoming like a liquid as the monster began to sink into it. The beast roared in protest, continuing to struggle as waves of fire rolled up his limbs.

The bear continued to struggle, his head lashing backward with his brow striking Okuninushi's face. Akira staggered back, his head whipping slightly as twin spurts of blood shot from his nostrils. He steadied himself swiftly, planting his feet and reinforcing his Persona's grip on the struggling beast.

Hecate's blaze came to an end, the ground quickly starting to harden and leaving the badly scorched beast rooted in place. He struggled, briefly, before suddenly going still as a statue. The light in his eyes went dim. Akira and Ryuji breathed a simultaneous sigh, their Personas vanishing.

"Is it... dead?" Ryuji hopefully asked.

The island rumbled briefly, before a wave of green light exploded from the stationary monster and slammed into the four teens, knocking all of them flat on their backs. Ann seethed sharply, her right hand clutching her ribs. It felt as if something had been cracked from the hard landing. "Gonna need... Makoto if we get out of here..." She had some healing skills, but they were particularly weak outside of the Metaverse. Especially when compared to Makoto or Morgana.

From the corner of her eye, and it was only for a brief moment, Shiho was sure she saw a thin line of emerald light shoot from the husk of the panda toward Miwa's island. Shiho grunted, moving onto one knee to glare up at the blonde in the distance.

"Aw... I really liked that one," Miwa said, pouting and settling her hands on her hips. "Oh well, I
still have a lot of toys for my supermarionation power to work on!"

Ryuji rose to his feet, still pressing a hand against his left shoulder to stem the bleeding. "Aw like hell!" Seiten Taisei lunged out of Ryuji's body, launching a bolt of lightning across the gulf between their islands. Miwa hopped backward, the bolt striking the underside of the island with a powerful explosion that sent chunks of burnt rock rolling out from the point of impact.

"Tut tut, so impatient," Miwa chided, raising up an intricately carved wooden nutcracker in her right hand, while a pearl of lime green light formed in the palm of her left. "Well, we still have time for plenty of fun."

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A loud crack echoed through the warehouse as Sanchiro and Akihiko struck each other at once, their heads snapping in opposite directions from the immense force behind their blows. Akihiko skidded back a few inches, while Sanshiro staggered a few steps backward.

They had been going at it for some time now, slugging it out until both of them lost track of the minutes. Akihiko's upper body was marked by a series of deep purple bruises, a large swollen lump resting above his right eyebrow. Sanshiro didn't look too good either, much of his chest discoloured purple while twin trails of blood rolled down from his nostrils.

Sanshiro leaned against the nearest crate behind him, slowly panting for breath in between low cackles. "Christ kid... where the hell were you when I was starting out in the yakuza business? If I had a sworn brother like you, we woulda' crushed any clan we wanted."

"I'm not..." Akihiko slumped slightly to his right, his palm pressing into a stack of boxes while he worked to catch his breath. "I'm not a damn criminal like you."

"Don't ruin the moment by getting into 'justice' and 'honor' and dumb shit like that. But that aside... you really are something." He seemed to have brought an end to their bout, as if aware that he couldn't take much more of a slugging.

Akihiko was feeling much the same way. It had been a while since he had pushed so far in a fist fight. "You're not half bad yourself," Akihiko admitted. "I was half expecting you to cheat."

"What would be the fun in that?" Sanshiro asked, giving the younger man a bloodied smile. "You seem like a real free spirit." Akihiko rose up fully and squared his shoulders, seeming to have caught his breath. "I can't imagine you willingly falling in line with Mr. A," Akihiko said.

Sanshiro shrugged his broad shoulders. "Well, it wasn't entirely willingly. Not at first. When he started making waves, I had already had my Stand for a few years. I knew he had powers, and figured I could take him with mine. But... God we musta' fought for hours that night. I went through every weapon I had, and I only managed to scuff the guy and give him a bloody nose. My batteries ran out in the end, and I was defenseless. But he didn't kill me. Said I impressed him, actually. And then he offered me a job." Sanshiro gave a small chuckle, wiping under his nose with his right thumb. "People will talk a lot about honor and pride... fuck that. When it comes to saving your own hide, you take what you can get. I settled into the role eventually, and it helped that I liked his vision."

That didn't sound good. Akihiko felt his eyes narrow slightly. "His vision? What do you mean?" he
"Well, I can't give everything away, but... most everyone who follows A, and the man himself, well we all had to power through hardship. Shitty childhoods spent in the gutter, teen years spent clawing out of that shit. Our society is a cruel one, quick to discard people and look down on them for whatever reason. Often it's just from being born wrong in their eyes. You can't change people. You can't change society..." Sanshiro smirked smugly. "The world is just like that, a big fuckin' thumb pressing down on a section of the people. You can either knuckle under it... or you can be the thumb."

"What? What are you talking about?" Akihiko asked.

"Ah ah ah. Like I said, not giving everything away. Besides, that's not what you came here for. You want to know about those guns. That particular model, I had a few of 'em imported and gave them to some crooked cops. Folks on the payroll who might have to shoot a bitch but want to make it hard for it to be traced to them. So the guy you're looking for, he's got strong ties to the police," Sanshiro explained.

"But you can't give me a name?"

"Eh, I like you kid, but not that much. Gotta keep some secrets between friends, right?" Sanshiro asked.

Akihiko seemed to bristle, an aura of pale blue fire briefly ballooning around his body before Caesar's regal and silver form rose up behind him, his sword raised high in his right hand. "I came here for answers, and you're the one who has them. I was willing to play your game, but I'm not willing to leave it like this."

Sanshiro sighed, raising his right hand slowly. "You're breaking my balls here kid. Why even go against me? Just ditch whatever outfit you're lashed to and join up with us. Tough guy like you? You'd go far," he said.

"You're barking up the wrong tree," Akihiko emphatically said. As if he'd turn his back on Mitsuru like that. And how could he ever look Shinji or Miki in the eye when they met again in the next life if he had willingly joined a man like this? "So I'll ask this outright: Who is Black Mask?"

Sanshiro sighed grimly, a wave of light washing over his right hand. "American II." In an instant his hand was filled with a spectral flintlock, and with one quick flick he fired off a steel ball that rapidly closed in on Akihiko. The silver haired man shoved himself to the right, while Sanshiro jumped over a low crate behind him. While the shot missed Akihiko, it suddenly struck off another crate and bounced back toward him at a much faster pace. It skimmed the left side of Akihiko's chest, making him grimace as a spurt of blood rolled down his ribs.

The bullet bounced again, ricocheting toward him at a greater speed and forcing Akihiko to leap to the side to avoid it. As far as he could tell this thing had some limited homing capability. More than that every time it touched a surface it would rebound with a greater speed and force.

The round grazed Akihiko's back, digging deeper than the first blow and pulling a harsh growl from him. Akihiko popped his left eye open, watching as the bullet raced toward him yet again. He braced and then suddenly called Caesar to action, a powerful bolt of lightning raining over Akihiko's body and striking the incoming bullet down, vaporizing it instantly.
"Oh, not bad. Well, I didn't figure my second weapon would do it for ya... American III!" Sanshiro moved up from behind cover, toting a glowing lever-action rifle in his hands. The crack of a gunshot filled the warehouse, a flaming bullet flying from the rifle and closing in on Akihiko. Suddenly it started to twist and weave through the air, leaving a glowing trail of flame behind it as it rapidly arced and pirouetted away from Caesar's outfolding sparks of lightning.

This time Akihiko was prepared, his motions quick and athletic as he weaved and dodged away from the twisting spectral bullet. "This all you got?" Akihiko asked while waiting for a good opportunity to counterattack.

"Not by a long shot," Sanshiro boasted. He gave the lever a pull, the click resounding through the room. As he did this the bullet abruptly split into four sections, all swirling in different directions and keeping Akihiko second guessing where the next strike would come from. Caesar fired a bolt of lightning at two of the flying segments, only for them to swiftly swerve off in a different direction. The other two segments dove down, one striking Caesar's right shoulder and bouncing off while the other ground against Akihiko's right hip. He settled as black burns formed on his body, driving him down to one knee.

Caesar drove forward, following Sanshiro's movements as he sprinted to another section of cover. A bolt of lightning lanced from the Persona's sword and struck the box he was heading to, the ensuing explosion knocking into the yakuza and leaving him skidding along on the ground on his back, scorches lingering on his chest.

Both men panted, working to stand upright. "Cripes that hurt," Sanshiro grunted. "You really softened me up with them fisticuffs... and this damn old body of mine is crapping out on me. Ain't fighting at my best."

"Feel like... talking now...?" Akihiko said in between gulps of air. He was feeling low too, hampered by exertion and his injuries.

"Not... by a long shot." Sanshiro took aim with his rifle and fired off another round, the flaming bullet closing in rapidly. Akihiko braced himself, his aura spiking as he called in Caesar to protect him.

It was closing in rapidly, yet what happened next seemed to happen in slow motion from what Akihiko could see. A shape blurred in front of him at a terrifying speed, intercepting the bullet and shattering it to pieces on contact. Sanshiro's eyes widened slightly as he got a good look at the form that had blocked his attack: A formidable female figure in a flowing white robe and an ornate golden helmet, a heavy shield orbiting around her waist.

"Akihiko, are you alright?" The female voice caused him to look up, getting a glimpse of Aegis form standing atop a tall stack of crates. A breeze blew at the hem of the long ultramarine coat she was wearing. Akihiko nodded faintly.

That's right, he had sent a text to Aegis before entering here... had he really been fighting Sanshiro for that long?

"Good. Then allow me to fight in your place." Athena's orbiting shield took on a distinct golden glow before a fist of solid light flew from the plate and struck the concrete floor a foot in front of Sanshiro. The shockwave left him yelling and cartwheeling through the air until his bulky body smashed through a crate and kicked up a large cloud of dust through the crushing impact.
Aigis hopped down casually, Athena vanishing in the process. "Aigis, you should be careful, this guy might have a lot of firepower up his sleeve."

"I'm quite bulletproof Akihiko," Aigis curtly answered. She advanced toward the cloud of dust, raising her right hand slowly. A coat of synthetic skin coated her digits, but Akihiko knew from experience that her finger guns were still hidden away there. The design was just a bit more streamlined these days, even if her ammo count wasn't as high.

Aigis' approach was measured and cautious. She had deliberately avoided a direct strike so as to not outright kill an injured man, but she still didn't want to take too many chances with an unknown opponent.

After all, from what she could see, he had given Akihiko a good deal of trouble. He wasn't to be totally underestimated.

As she neared the smoke, a shape became outlined in the gloom. Aigis' pale blue eyes narrowed, her body halting abruptly mid-step. "American... VI."

Something large and dense shot out of the smoke, moving so fast that Aigis just barely got a glimpse of it. Whatever it was it struck her like a freight train, slamming into her upper body and flinging her clean off her feet. Aigis' whole body flew across the warehouse, slamming through several crates until her back met the hard brick wall. A cobweb of cracks broke out from the point of impact, her pale blue eyes rattling in her head as she tried to process the sudden rush.

"What just... happened...?" Aigis asked. She had been taken by surprise, her guard a touch lower than it should have been. But whatever had hit her, it was obscenely strong.

Akihiko stood up fully, watching as the smoke fully cleared. Sanshiro had gotten his opening to flee and taken it, not wanting to push his luck with Aigis. Akihiko grimaced. He had some answers, but not enough. And he doubted Sanshiro would be so easy to find next time.
Unforgettable in Hawaii (IV)

The Chemical Brothers were drawing in fast, and Shizuka knew that once the Red Sails had a good angle she and Makoto were as good as dead. Her vision was swaying, and even while kneeling she felt about ready to double over and vomit. There had to be a way out of this.

But even if they couldn't escape, maybe Shizuka could buy time for Makoto to escape and get to the others. She was all but set to tell Makoto to make a run for it, only to feel a pair of palms press over her ears.

"Huh?" Within seconds Shizuka's vision began to steady out, and the sensation of nausea had left her. Her legs felt solid again all of a sudden, but she could still see the edge of Unforgettable poking out from her position of cover. "What the..."

She managed to glance over her shoulder at Makoto, who was still shivering from the sensory warping power in the area. Even with her ears covered, she could still read Makoto's lips well enough. "It's... sound. The other brother is wearing earplugs and I s-saw his Stand rattling the glass nearby. It's a s-sound that a human ear can't pick up on, but it still has a strong effect."

Shizuka's eyes widened. How had she not noticed that? Had she really been so wrapped up in the fight that she didn't pick up on such simple details?

Now that she thought about it though, it made the Chemical Brothers into a perfectly deadly combination. Red Sails wasn't a particularly strong Stand that relied on speed. But if one could match that, like Shizuka had, then overpowering him was no real challenge. That was where Shintaro came in. Speed meant nothing if you couldn't walk two steps without falling over!

Even though they knew their secret, she couldn't afford to get too cocky. If Makoto got hurt and lost her grip, they'd be back to square one. "Kotaro's wearing earplugs eh...?" Houdini reached down Shizuka's side, plucking a section of steel piping off the dirty ground. "Well... let's help remove them in that case."

The two girls moved in unison, with Shizuka stepping out from behind cover. Kotaro stopped moving entirely, briefly stunned, before seeming to catch himself. He grinned sharply. "You nuts? Showing your faces like this... are you both in a hurry to die?" he asked.

Shizuka smirked. She couldn't hear what Kotaro was saying, of course, but she seemed to register what he meant. He thought they had them.

However an epiphany seemed to quickly dawn on the brunette, his eyes widening as he noticed Shizuka's even balance, and Makoto's hands pressing against her ears. "Sh-shit! Bro, they've figured it ou-"

Houdini took a step forward and sharply whipped the pipe forward in a mighty throw, the length of steel whirling like a boomerang. Three of the Red Sails snapped forward to meet it, only to miss narrowly. Light shimmered around the pipe, rapidly turning it invisible as it closed the distance. The side slammed into the right edge of Kotaro's jawline, abruptly snapping his head to the side while blood sprayed from his lips. From where she stood, Shizuka watched as the earplug popped out of his right ear from the jolting force.
He swayed, immediately trying to reassert his balance only to suddenly gasp while his hands planted against the walls of the alley. "B-bro, I c-can't... you gotta put your Stand away, I can't control mine otherwise!"

"Wh-" For the first time since she'd met him, Shizuka could see worry dawn on Shintaro's expression. His gaze shifted between Kotaro and the two girls at a rapid rate, trying to discern what was more important. Keeping them at bay, or helping his brother.

Shizuka had a feeling that Unforgettable couldn't do much on its own, outside of that brain-rape noise it generated. With such a rotund body, and with those bulky legs, it clearly wasn't built for anything requiring agility or finesse. Shizuka took a step forward, the noise echoing down to Shintaro and causing him to look at her as Houdini plucked a stray brick up off the ground. If he went to try and grab the earplug himself, she'd nail him dead-on.

"Khh... A-alright! Just do it quickly!" Shintaro said, Unforgettable vanishing into the ether.

As soon as Unforgettable was gone, it was like a switch had been flicked in Makoto's hands. With uncanny quickness she moved her hands from Shizuka's ears and skidded out into full view, a neon blue flash illuminating her as Johanna formed beneath her. The eyes of her Persona glowed a bright yellow shade, a flash bomb of condensed head and light racing down the alleyway at a rapid speed.

It exploded a foot in front of Shintaro, the force of the blow sending his screaming and smoking body sailing from the alleyway. His back slammed against the wheel arch of a nearby van before slumping down against the rubber.

"Bro!" Kotaro shouted, staggering back from the lingering shock of the explosion. He glared down the alley, clenching his teeth and flaring his nostrils in blistering anger.

The drainage pipe near their cover rattled violently, before the material abruptly exploded outward from two Red Sails blasting through the pipe. They shot straight at Makoto from the side, forcing her to raise her arms to shield herself. Bladed teeth sank into her forearms, making her scream sharply in pain.

"Last mistake asshole!" Shizuka shouted. Houdini pitched the brick like a baseball, one end striking Kotaro in the gut and knocking all the wind out of him in one go. Through the burning pain in her legs and lungs, Shizuka raced forward to fully close the distance.

Houdini flew from her body like a bat out of hell, both golden fists slamming into Kotaro's head and snapping his head backward. Kotaro stumbled, his Red Sails flailing wildly through the air in a disoriented shock that only grew worse as Houdini's fists rained down upon him.

"BAZUBAZUBAZU!!"

A hard uppercut smacked Kotaro a few feet off the ground, only for him to be immediately caught by Houdini for another flurry of high speed punches that pummelled his chest and face and perpetually juggled him. Shizuka could stomach people attacking her. She was fine with that. In fact part of her had been expecting folks to just attack her like this ever since she started to genuinely understand the weight of her adopted surname. But attacking Makoto, or any of her friends? She couldn't abide that shit.

"BAZUBAZUBAZU!!"
With a final twisting kick, Houdini punted Kotaro like a soccer ball toward Shintaro's prone form. The two slammed together with a loud crack before they both slumped into the sidewalk, out cold. Shizuka panted slowly, standing tall as Houdini vanished into thin air.

But the fatigue and pain struck her all at once, her legs nearly giving out on her until she abruptly fell into Makoto's arms. "You..." Makoto took in a deep breath and helped lead Shizuka to the nearest wall, letting her lean on it for the time being. "You okay?" she asked.

"I've been better," Shizuka admitted. "But I'll live. Didn't get anything vital cut... though I've probably lost more blood than a girl my age reasonably should have."

Makoto breathed a sigh of relief. "That's good. I'm glad you're alright... now, before the adrenaline wears off and I lose my nerve..." Makoto abruptly gripped the collar of Shizuka's blouse, yanking her in close until their lips met. As far as kisses went, it was far from glamorous. Both girls were beyond exhausted from what they had just gone through, and Makoto had clearly never kissed anyone beyond a simple peck on the cheek. But from Shizuka's point of view, it was the best thing she had ever experienced.

When they parted, Shizuka's sunglasses slid down her nose. "Abwhut...?" she slurred, her mind a dull haze in her shock.

"I had hoped we could have had a slower conversation about starting a relationship, but those two interrupted us. What I wanted to say originally was... yes, I'd like to date you," Makoto said, dusting herself off a bit.

"Buh?!!" Shizuka said in disbelief.

"You're talking nonsense."

"Juh?!" She rapidly shook her head to get her head back in order, before dramatically clearing her throat. "I'm definitely on board!" Shizuka emphatically said.

A smile graced Makoto's face. "I'm glad to hear it. Though I definitely didn't expect our first date to be anything like this," she said, gesturing to the unconscious Chemical Brothers. "Speaking of which, they might still be in danger. Akira didn't text me back."

Shizuka nodded, once more returning to the severity of their current situation. "We should try and get to the hotel ASAP. Just gotta take a moment to heal up and catch my breath."

"You and me both," Makoto said, grimacing at the bite marks in her forearms.

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The form the nutcracker took was no less monstrous than the panda bear. It grew huge in scale, looming a little over eight feet tall, while the enlarged wooden teeth of its jaw were left separated by a hinge that seemed to have snapped off in the growth process. Strands of black oil oozed between the teeth, while an eerie purple fog continually hissed out of the nutcracker's gaping maw.

His eyes were solid white, marked by distended bloodshot pupils on the edges, while sections of his painted-on clothing had been distorted by splinters bursting up along his chest and arms. Even the nutcracker's rifle had been enlarged, clutched in both of his hands.
Miwa watched as her pet monster lunged away from her, making a beeline for the Phantom Thieves' floating island. She had to admit, she had been rather lucky with all this. Originally she had just been planning to go after Kurusu, who by all appearances was the leader of this merry band. But Tsukasa, who had been providing overwatch of the area with her Stand, had been quick to inform her of the small group all gathering at his hotel room.

Killing four birds with one stone, it seemed like a good deal to her. She'd cut the head off the Arditi, and prune their numbers significantly. Killing Joestar was also a high priority, but she was sure the Chemical Brothers were finished with her by now. Other than her, the only person of note was Esposito. According to A, he came from a troublemaker family too, and it would be prudent to be rid of him too.

Well, if that was what A wanted, she was hardly going to defy him.

The nutcracker landed on the island with a resounding slam, stone splitting under his heavy feet and rattling the alien landmass from his weight and obscene strength. Akira examined the giant wooden beast, listening to the faint rasping and groaning sounds rising out of his mouth. "That... that is pretty messed up," the dark haired boy said.

Ryuji let out a loud yell as Seiten Taisei shot forward, the nutcracker twisting off to the side to meet his rapid advance. Seiten Taisei's cudgel slammed into the nutcracker's rifle, the impact rattling the island beneath them and splitting the stone even further. The beast gave a gargling snarl and shoved hard, pushing Seiten Taisei backward, making Ryuji grunt as he was nearly knocked off balance.

Okuninishi weaved in toward the deformed nutcracker, his blade skimming the beast's right shoulder as it pushed away from him. A spray of splinters erupted from the point of impact. For as gangly and hulking as it looked, the nutcracker was nimble enough to narrowly avoid the next few sword strokes. The butt of his rifle drove into Okuninushi and pushed him backward, making Akira grimace as he was forced to one knee.

With the two boys forced backward, Ann quickly took aim with Hecate. A bullet of fire shot from her Persona's hands, closing in on the nutcracker and slamming into his gut with a burst of flame. A shimmer of sickly green light coated his wood and, once the smoke had cleared, it became readily apparent that the flames hadn't spread out. Though the nutcracker was now sporting a blackened, splintering 'wound' on his chest.

The monster hissed sharply and started sprinting toward the girls, Ann's eyes widening in shock. While Shiho jumped to her right, landing into a neat roll, Ann moved to jump straight up and allowed the warped gravity to twist her through the air and yank her down toward a nearby beach island. Her feet hit the sands neatly.

"Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap," the blonde quickly said, glancing up to watch as the nutcracker crossed the gulf toward her. Ann jumped across the sands to avoid the impact as his heavy wooden frame slammed into the island and sent a cloud of sand racing up around his feet. He wasted no time in straightening up, lifting his rifle. Even from afar she could see that the 'toy gun' had a heavy steel ball bearing glinting from inside the barrel.

Hecate moved swiftly, sweeping her right hand up with an impressive degree of strength. A dense cloud of sand followed the arc of her arm, followed immediately after by a sweeping trail of superheated flame that engulfed the wave. In an instant it was gone, replaced with a large and freshly formed sheet of steaming glass that seemed about two feet thick.
A flash came from the peak of the nutcracker's rifle, crossing the island in an instant. The dense ball of steel slammed into the makeshift wall, cracks breaking out along the surface as it buried about a foot into the wall. Ann breathed a small sigh of relief, watching through the damaged glass as the hulking beast started toward her. Thinking quickly she directed Hecate to lunge forward, her right chain swinging up and smashing into the glass, breaking it apart from the hard swing.

Large and sharp shards shot cross the sands, a few missing outright while some smaller edges got buried in the nutcracker's chest. A large shard drove into his face, tearing the upper right half of his skull clean off to reveal more wafting waves of purple fog. Another chunk of glass, larger still, hit the beast's left arm and slit his elbow in half, the forearm clattering onto the ground.

Ann got a glimpse of Shiho as she landed a few feet behind the nutcracker. Despite the damage inflicted to his wooden body he powered through and raced toward the blonde. Hecate swung both chains out at once, missing the nutcracker by scant inches. The monster, in turn, swung his remaining arm out and slammed it into Ann with such force that she was knocked off her feet and left sprawled on the sands, out cold.

"Ann!" Shiho cried out. She narrowed her eyes at the nutcracker, anger blistering inside her. "You overgrown piece of shit! I'm going to grind you into toothpicks!"

Aradia appeared above Shiho, swirling waves of blue fire glassing the ground beneath Shiho's feet. The nutcracker turned to face her, loud creaking noises signalling his movements. Before he could take another step, a sharp beam of blessed light shot from Aradia's palm and lit up the skies around her. The peak of the beam punched a hole clean through his burned chest, splinters exploding out from around the rim of the freshly formed injury.

A gag of pain echoed through the alien dimension, causing Shiho to whip her head around to face Miwa's island. The blonde was doubled over slightly, trails of blood oozing down her chin. Had she managed to injure Miwa? How? Shiho quickly focused back on the nutcracker, watching how his remaining limbs jerked and spasmed. She looked to the smoking hole in his chest, catching a glimpse of a glowing green light in his abdomen. From what Shiho could tell, it was like some kind of green marble that had a crack along the top of it.

"That ball-thing... is her Stand?" Shiho asked herself. Ryuji and Akira landed behind her, just in time for a green flash to illuminate the nutcracker. This time Shiho had a better look at her Stand as it zoomed out of the cavity in his chest, zooming across the void toward Miwa's grasp. "So that's the trick..."

Miwa could seemingly only puppeteer one thing at a time, and damaging the toys under her control did nothing to harm her. But the object powering whatever thing she was puppeteering, that was her weakpoint. If they were to win this, Shiho mused that attacking the 'core' of whatever Miwa sent at them next would be their best bet. But how would they manage it? Miwa had recalled it the last two times her Stand had been in direct danger. What they needed was an opening to land one good hard blow.

She scanned their surroundings before making a dash toward Ann, spending some moments to check her over. Her pulse was fine, and she was still breathing, but now she was a sitting duck.

"We need to finish this quickly," Akira said, lifting Ann into his arms as if she were weightless. "No idea how much longer this mirror world will last, but if we can wait it out then we'll have a chance to flee back into the real world."
Shiho continued to examine the neighbouring islands, until her attention settled on two in particular. "We might not have to," she reasoned. The dark haired girl looked at Ann's unconscious form, her fists clenching in anger. "I'm not going to run away and let that bitch off for what she just did. And there's no telling what she might do to the people in the hotel if we don't stop her here and now."

"You got a plan?" Ryuji asked.

"Maybe. Those monsters she creates, they're powered by her Stand. It's that little green marble thing that just flew out of the nutcracker. Attacking that will hurt her, and I might have an idea how to make an opening to attack it. But I'll need to act as bait to get that opening," Shiho explained.

"Wha- That's crazy! W-what if the next freak monster she throws out manages to catch you?" Ryuji asked, his eyes shifting from side to side nervously. By now Miwa had managed to catch her breath and was rapidly sorting through her toybox for another weapon.

"It's a risk we have to take... she's trying to kill us anyway. Besides that, you're both more winded and hurt than I am. I have better odds of outrunning what she sends out." Shiho settled her hands on Ryuji's cheeks, with the blond awkwardly shifting his gaze to the ground. "It's risky, I know, and I appreciate your worry. But we have to do this... I'll be fine, I promise." She leaned in, their lips briefly pressing together. Akira glanced away in a gentlemanly manner.

Once they parted he gave a small sigh. "Alright, alright. I'll follow your lead."

"I'll keep watch over Ann. And try to keep Miwa from calling her Stand back to her," Akira said.

"Guess I'm up then." Shiho took a few steps away from the others, watching as Miwa raised a large plush purple spider from her toybox. If she was to do this, she'd need to fully draw Miwa's attention. And if there was one thing she had learned from Shizuka, pissing someone off was the best way to do that. She took a deep breath and shouted at the top of her lungs: "HEY SKANK!"

Miwa froze up briefly, before her eyes took on a dangerous edge. "The fuck did you just call me?" she hissed.

"Did I stutter, fatass? I've seen rats that fight better than you! Look better too!" Shiho shouted, watching as each word made Miwa nearly froth at the mouth.

"You little bitch! I'm gonna fucking skin you alive!" A vortex of green energy flared around her, before she threw the spider forward with all her might. The same green light coiled around it from all sides, growing more intense as the change began to overtake it. "AND WEAR YOU LIKE A COAT!"

The small plush spider ballooned in size, his eight legs growing longer and sharpening at the edge. The purple fuzz of his coat began to bristle outward, while venomous green pustules started to sprout along the main body of the beast. Soon it was bounding from island to island, bladed legs sinking into the stone on every step it took.

"Well... I can't say I didn't ask for this," Shiho murmured to herself, watching the monster spider as it made his continued rapid approach toward her. She turned on her heel and got to running, soon jumping across the different islands as she tried to reach her destination as quickly as possible.
This was going to be a gamble, no doubt. She had planned a few steps ahead and had a rough outline in her mind of how she wanted all this to play out. But when it came to these kinds of fights, there was no room for certainty with anything.

Ryuji was following after the spider, moving at a slightly slower rate. It was easier to get worn down in the real world, unfortunately.

Shiho bounced off an urban island, launching herself to a specific floating beach. She distinctly heard the spider slam down where she had been a second previously, a terrible shrieking noise echoing through the void as one bladed limb carved through the asphalt and abruptly launched a chunk of debris her way.

She felt it strike between her shoulder blades, the blow jolting her body and making her cry out. But Shiho recovered quickly, powering through the burning pain as she focused on the destination she was fast approaching.

"Right here!" Shiho gasped. Her feet landed atop a huge black rock protruding from the sands of the beach, a boulder that was roughly the size of a compact car. She crouched there, counting to two in her head before diving forward and landing in a neat roll across from the rock, her ears picking up on the sound of the spider's bladed legs sinking into the dense stone as if it were butter.

She definitely couldn't afford to get caught by this thing.

"You're dead! You're goddamn dead you little whore! You hear me?! I'm gonna break every bone in your body and make you drown in your own blood!" Miwa screamed from across the avoid.

A vast shadow continued to drift over Shiho, making her smirk as she flicked her gaze upward. There was another island, an urban one, floating almost perfectly parallel. Shiho braced herself and jumped straight up with a loud grunt of exertion, her smile broadening as she heard the spider leaping up too. Just as she had hoped.

A blue aura flared up around Shiho as she reached the halfway point between the islands, Aradia taking shape beside the large boulder and suddenly jamming her fingers into the underside of it. With one powerful jerk, Aradia tore the stone from its moorings and launched it up after the spider. Once it had climbed high enough, the wonky gravity of the alien dimension did the rest of the work.

There was only a split second between the spider landing, and the entire weight of the rock slamming down onto the spider. It shrieked as it was pinned under it, legs scuttling in every direction in a frantic bid to dig free. Squirts of venom shot from his mandibles, splattering the cold ground.

Seiten Taisei slammed abruptly into the rock from above, his considerable might adding to the pressure and ensuring that the spider was stuck in place. "Shiho!" Ryuji shouted as he landed behind the restrained beast. "You're a goddamn genius!"

Shiho smiled bashfully. "Well... we're not out of the woods yet."

Miwa's eyes widened as she realized just what had happened. That little snake had tricked her, got her seeing red so she wouldn't be acting rationally! "Return to me, Seria-

A powerful explosion rocked the island beneath her, nearly taking Miwa off balance entirely.
Through the smoke Miwa could just about see Akira standing on a neighbouring island, still clutching the unconscious Ann. Arsene was floating a foot above his head, smoke rising from his left palm. "Not so fast," Akira firmly said.

A focused beam of blessed light shot from Aradia's palm, aiming for the midsection of the synthetic spider and burning a hole clean through his torso to reveal a glinting lime light inside. The frantic movements of the monster grew more intense, leaving Seiten Taisei struggling to hold it in place.

Shiho knew she didn't have much time to act. Either that thing would break out, or Miwa would get an opening to call it back to her. And this same trick wouldn't work twice!

Aradia shot forward, weaving around the slashing spider legs as they swung around rapidly. A stray swing grazed Aradia's upper right arm, pulling a sharp gasp from Shiho and leaving her clutching a fresh bleeding cut in her flesh. She ignored the pain, powering through and driving Aradia forward. Aradia's right fist drove into the gaping hole, slamming into it and sending cracks racing along the dense surface.

She could hear Miwa scream in the distance, bloody scars erupting along her arms and legs, with a few marks forming on her face. She swayed off balance, gagging loudly, before her back hit the ground with a loud thud. The spider trembled for a few seconds before collapsing into the hard ground, lifeless.

Shiho slowly caught her breath before glancing Akira's way. "Is she alive?" she shouted to him. She didn't want to kill anyone, even if they had hurt Ann, but this woman had no such qualms. If she had to be killed to be stopped, so be it.

"Still breathing!" Akira called back. "We might be able to get some answers from her. And if we keep her toys from her, she won't pose a threat to us."

Ryuji quickly approached Shiho, going into hug her only to stop when he saw the blood oozing down her arm. "Sh-shit! You alright? We better catch up with Makoto soon," he said, leaning in to get a better look. "Still... that was effin' amazing! How did you think to do that?"

Shiho smiled, her cheeks turning a rosy shade. "O-oh it was nothing really! Volleyball involves having a strong understanding of your surroundings. Where you're standing, the positioning of the enemy team, knowing how to use the environment. So I scanned everything around us and spotted these two islands... and that big rock. I figured it would be effected by the same weird gravity that we were."

"I never woulda' come up with anything like that... We totally owe you," Ryuji said, giving her a thumbs up.

"I'm proud of you too," Akira called. "But for now we should focus on-"

Akira's words were cut off by a powerful quake that shook the entire dimension, rattling the islands and making several of them crumble and fracture apart. A noise, like the sound of slowly cracking ice, spread throughout the pocket universe. All the while, lights started to strobe around the murky grey sky.

Ryuji swallowed hard. "Uh... I think our time here might be u-" Another quake rattled the dimension and knocked his footing out from under him. As his back his the earth he was able to
catch a glimpse of a vibrant white light, a luminous tidal wave, forming at the far end of the dimension and rapidly closing in on them. The whole world was shrinking, contracting inward like balloon slowly losing its air.

The wave washed over them all in an instant, and in a flash they had all been unceremoniously dumped in a side street not too far from the hotel. Akira recognised it quickly enough, having come by here just this afternoon with the others. He was still clutching Ann as he landed on his backside, getting a glimpse of a large mirror that had been affixed to the grimy brick wall with several chunks of a pale blue tack putty.

Akira grunted, moving to stand with his friends following his lead. Miwa was slumped on the ground, blood continuing to ooze from her injuries. "The fuck?!" The unfamiliar voice made Akira tense, all eyes turning to a figure not too far from the mirror.

He was a skinny man, both sides of his head shaved and leaving a short silver mohawk atop his head. His cheeks were partially sunken in, his blue eyes rather large. He was dressed well, in a crisp blue shirt and skinny dark jeans.

"Aoyama, I presume?" Akira asked. It was only now that the fatigue was really settling in for the group, but Akira hoped they had enough in them to take this asshole out if he tried to take them out.

"I don't know how you punks beat Miwa, but," He reached around for the back of his belt, swiftly drawing a black snubnosed pistol. Akira felt his blood run cold at the sight of it.

Ryuji and Shiho were struggling to rise up. The exit from the mirror world had been rougher than Akira had expected, and none of them were really in fighting shape right now. Would Arsene be fast enough to catch a bullet when he was like this? Akira had to hope so.

"You little bastards are going on a one way trip to hell!" Aoyama snarled, taking aim.

Was this really the end? Akira braced himself, plumes of blue fire lancing up his arms as-

"STAR PLATINUM: THE WORLD!"

Akira really didn't know how to process what just happened next. One moment Aoyama was taking aim with his right hand, his thumb pulling the hammer back. The next, in what couldn't even be described as the blink of an eye, it looked as if Aoyama... exploded. More than a dozen invisible blows seemed to strike him from all sides, fist shaped indentations that dug his clothing into his body. A cloud of blood burst out of his thin lips before all that momentum hit at once and sent his body cartwheeling over the downed thieves.

As Aoyama's body hit the ground, Akira glimpsed a mangled lump of steel on the ground where Aoyama had been standing previously. It took a moment for Akira to register that it was the snubnose pistol he had been holding.

A shadow fell over the group, with Shiho and Ryuji going wide eyed in shock. "K-Kujo-san!" Shiho quickly said.

Sure enough, standing just behind where Aoyama had been standing, was Jotaro. Akira could see his Stand floating above his head, a hulking blue skinned man with a gold crown framing his face and a wild mane of black hair. White lines trailed down his eyes and chest, gold light shimmering around him.
"You... you were watching out for us?" Akira asked.

"Actually," Jotaro nonchalantly lifted a plastic grocery bag in his right hand, the outline of a few beer cans pressing into the edge of the bag. "I was just in the area on the way back to my hotel when I heard a commotion. You're lucky I came by when I did."

Ann started to stir in Akira's arms, groaning and slowly sitting up to rub her head. "I really hate nutcrackers," she mumbled. Ann soon became aware of Akira holding her body, giving him a modest nod of thanks before rising to stand with his help.

"So," Jotaro flatly said. "Do you kids mind telling me what you were doing that got you into this situation?" he asked, pointing between Aoyama, Miwa's unconscious bloody body, and Aoyama's crushed handgun.

The rushing sound of footsteps managed to cut Akira off before he could explain. He tensed as two more figures raced around the corner before they promptly skidded to a halt. Akira breathed a sigh of relief when he instantly recognised Shizuka and Makoto.

"Guys, guys! Oh wow, thank god you're alright!" Shizuka breathlessly said. It took her a moment to register Jotaro's bulk. With how still and silent he was, he had a tendency to look like very angry brick wall. "Oh ah... M-my darling nephew! Fancy seeing you here!"

"You two look like shit," Ryuji flatly said. While Makoto had closed up their wounds and soothed a degree of the pain they brought, there was still a fair bit of dried blood on their clothing.

"You're not gonna be winning any prizes right now either Sakamoto," Shizuka said, pointing around the others and the various injuries they were sporting. "Least it looks like you guys managed to beat the punks sent your way too."

Jotaro shot his aunt a pointed look. "What happened to you? And who are you carrying around?"

"Wha... how did you-" Shizuka caught herself and gave a small huff as Houdini became visible behind the two girls, revealing the unconscious Chemical Brothers in the process. They had been tied together with a sturdy length of rope clutched in Houdini's hands. Either Star Platinum's enhanced senses had picked up on something about Houdini's presence, something a human eye couldn't pick up on, or Jotaro really was psychic. She was leaning toward the latter.

"We thought it would be irresponsible to leave them unattended," Makoto said. "As for what happened, w-well... you see back in Japan-"

There was a sudden shifting sound as Miwa abruptly rose to her feet, an aura of green light forming around her body. "You little shits! I'm going to-!" She raised her arms over her head, only to gag loudly as fresh bursts of blood erupted from her wounds and she landed back on the asphalt.

Jotaro watched all this transpire in his usual stoic manner. "Yare yare daze... I know a criminal Stand user when I see one. I'll have some Speedwagon people come over here to look after these four... but you all need to be checked by a specialist too."

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While Makoto closed everyone's wounds through Johanna's power, Jotaro still insisted on making
everyone pay a visit to a nearby clinic. The thieves were too tired (and too afraid of Jotaro) to really defy his will, and so they went along with it. A's people were in Speedwagon custody and under examination, so there was nothing to worry about.

Just as a note of caution, Akira had made a point of texting the others. Yusuke, Sergio, and Haru had fortunately not been attacked by any other Stand users. It seemed Akira had been Miwa's fist stop given his prominence in the group.

The clinic Jotaro led on to, which had seemed to open up at this hour specifically because Jotaro asked, was apparently one he had used in the past. When pressed on the matter he simply answered 'this isn't my first time in Hawaii.' Shizuka recognised the name in the doorway before they entered: Oyama Morihiro.

Well, Satoshi did say he had a son out in Hawaii.

He proved to be a tall man, about three inches shorter than Jotaro, although marginally skinnier too. His dark hair was swept back, his white doctor's coat resting lazily over a yellow Hawaiian shirt and black knee-length shorts. He clearly hadn't been expecting to be interrupted tonight.

While Oyama decided to check them over, one by one, the group relayed their story to Jotaro. He had saved them from a gunman, and by Shizuka's account was one of the most trustworthy people they could confide in. He seemed utterly unsurprised to know that they were the Phantom Thieves (not that this was a rare expression for Jotaro) and seemed more curious to learn about this Mr. A character.

Shizuka was the last people to get checked by Oyama, sliding off the exam table once he had finished with her. "Well, outside of some lingering bruises, you seem remarkably fine. Your friend must have done a good job healing you... just make sure to get some bedrest when you get home, and if you feel any lingering soreness you should check up with Lifeson. I understand he's still working in Japan."

"Thanks Doc," Shizuka said. She grimaced a bit as she moved, still aware of the dried blood on her shirt. Well she wouldn't be wearing this again any time soon. They'd likely have to destroy their bloodied clothes with Hecate's fire, no way customs would let a bunch of bloody clothes go through unnoticed. "So, you're Satoshi's son?"

He nodded firmly. "I had a feeling you'd know my Dad. Jotaro is a magnet for getting into sticky situations too, so it makes sense you'd bump into the SID. How ah... how's he doing?" Oyama asked.

"Not... bad? Honestly it's hard to tell. He's scowly but his coworkers say he's always like that."

"Ah, that's Dad alright. Well I'll be paying a visit to him around the holidays to catch up. It's our usual routine... guess I should call him soon too," Oyama remarked. He sighed and leaned against a blank section of white wall, his shoulders framed by medical posters outlining the importance of hand hygiene, and the germs of public transport. "You may know already, but he and I have been... distant these past few years. After what happened to my Mom."

"Oh... do you know much about what happened there?" Shizuka asked. She was sympathetic, of course, but if he had any information on A it would be handy to pick up on it.

Oyama shook his head. "Dad never talked about it in much detail, and I didn't want to press him on
Oyama sighed grimly and closed his eyes. "I know he can be abrasive, but he's a good man. He deserves better than some criminal boot pressing to his neck."

"Sorry to hear that... you really never heard anything from your Dad about this?" Shizuka asked.

He pondered this for several moments, pushing himself off the wall with a lifting motion of his left foot. "Well, now that you mention it... I'm not sure if it's related, but before her death I remember my Mom and Dad were looking into the followers of some guy called Dio Brando. Dunno who that is, but it might be related. You could try asking him, maybe?"

Shizuka let the information sink in for a moment. "Somehow, I doubt I can." What was that supposed to mean? That they thought Mr. A was a follower of Dio? She supposed it was possible, someone who had laid low all these years and was only now starting to make waves on his own terms.

After all, Enrico Pucci had been dormant for years, and he had practically been Dio's boyfriend. Dio had had no shortage of followers, people who had been controlled with flesh buds, or just disenfranchised people who had been swept up by his charisma and vampiric hypnosis. Okuyasu's Dad had just been a Dio-hired informant living in a sleepy Japanese town, there was no telling how many small time agents he had set up between Egypt and Japan to keep an eye on things.

Maybe it was nothing. Just a coincidence. But... whenever Dio Brando was involved, there was no room for coincidence. It wasn't much to go on, but it was something.

The two left the exam room and into the modest reception area, where everyone with the exception of Jotaro had taken seats across from the empty receptionist counter. Jotaro glanced to Shizuka. "So... you're on the trail of a Stand user mob boss and his criminal syndicate?" he pointedly asked. "You're a little young for that."

Shizuka glared at him briefly. "Don't give me that. I might be the 'baby' of the family, but I'm no younger than you were when you flew halfway around the world to turn a vampire into hamburger meat. Or Josuke, when he went on the hunt for a deranged serial killer. Or Jolyne when she was stuck up against a guy who was gonna throttle the entire universe to turn his Dio fanfics into reality."

Jotaro regarded her coolly while the others remained silent. "I'm not saying you can't handle yourself, but you need to be careful. This A person has already shown just how dangerous his underlings are. And if he can keep them in line, he must be powerful in his own right."

"We're aware of that Kujo-san," Akira respectfully said. "And we don't take the threat lightly. But we're not a bunch of incompetent kids... we've been fighting monsters basically since the school year started."

"Plus," Ann said, briefly lifting the ice bag from her forehead and breathing a small sigh. "He's already decided to go after us, and we can't just uproot our lives from Japan. Taking him on and putting a stop to what he's doing is our only option," she explained.

"And we ain't the type to just let corrupt shitty adults get away with their crimes," Ryuji chimed.
Jotaro made a small humming sound, his face remaining otherwise unreadable. "High school kids having such a strong sense of justice is rare, but..." He thought back to Kakyoin. Then to Josuke, Okuyasu, and Koichi. The vaguest hint of a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "It's definitely not the worst thing."

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Principal Kobayakawa was a man who, likely by complete chance or by word of a close friend, had found himself roped into the machinations of powers far beyond his comprehension. Not unwillingly of course. The chance to be near the top floor when a new ruling party took hold of Japan was one he couldn't turn down.

Ultimately he became a spy for those same powers, an informant on affairs at Shujin. He had gone largely unnoticed from that point until, of course, the appearance of the Phantom Thieves.

Obviously they had started at Shujin, and with each daring heist there came an increasing demand for information on them. But the fat man had little in the realm of info to give, and things only got worse when it became clear that the police would be poking around Shujin again.

Kobayakawa had pleaded for help, fearful of what the investigation would bring. But his handlers had declined. Kobayakawa had been no help with the Phantom Thieves and so it was felt he had lost his usefulness. Kobayakawa had been at this long enough to know what that meant, having seen several other 'loose ends' drop like flies soon after being cut loose by the organization.

Ultimately he settled on the only course of action available to him: Dropping names to the police. They could give some him some protection, surely? He wanted to spite them, to get back at the people leaving him to twist in the wind.

It was all for nought in the end.

As he crossed the road leading to a large police station, Kobayakawa came to an abrupt stop at the halfway point as if stricken with paralysis.

A truck hit him and killed him instantly, crushing him like an insect.

But, in truth, he was dead regardless of whether or not anything happened to him. His mind had been forcibly shut down a few seconds before the impact.
When it came to getting information from Mr. A's assassins, it seemed the Speedwagon Foundation wouldn't get too far. The report Jotaro had gotten, though it was only early into interrogation, didn't give a whole lot away. Aoyama and the Chemical Brothers didn't have any information on Mr. A's real name or even what he looked like.

From how they talked, it seemed he was rather cautious about who he showed his face to, giving that information only to people who would sooner die than talk. It was possible they had even seen him in person without realizing it, such was his anonymity.

And Miwa wasn't talking at all. From all the damage she had taken, her body was in a rather catastrophic state. The doctors didn't give her good odds of living much longer, and even if she did it was likely she'd be comatose. And from what the Phantom Thieves had told him, she described herself as A's 'true love.' No way she'd give anything away if she was in a position to talk.

There was more troubling information. Apparently the four people in custody weren't the only people who had been on A's payroll. CCTV footage from the airport and a few other spots around the island confirmed that a fifth person had been with them. A woman that they were still trying to ID. They even had footage of her boarding a plane to Japan, alone.

If Jotaro were to hazard a guess, he'd assume that the last woman was acting as overwatch. Someone to keep watch of things and report back in the event that things went badly. And badly certainly was an understatement in this case.

As Jotaro leaned into the modest writing desk of his well-furnished hotel room, he began to wonder if it was wise to let those kids to head back to Japan on their own. They had proven themselves capable in a fight, and had no doubt faced their share of threats back home.

He stroked his chin in thought, sharp eyes roaming over the neatly typed report the Foundation had given him. Still... whoever the Arditi were up against, he was starting to escalate against them. And Shizuka's safety was something he was obviously concerned about, even if he couldn't say as much aloud.

A rumble in his trouser pocket caused the looming man to stir. He quickly drew his phone quickly, examining the caller ID, before quickly accepting the call. "Hello?"

"Ah, Jotaro. Sorry for calling you at this late hour, but I need your help." It was easy enough for Jotaro to recognise the voice of the current Speedwagon Foundation CEO, Mister Christo. He had done several odd jobs for the older man over the years, something to be expected with how powerful Star Platinum was.

"What seems to be the problem?" he asked, perhaps sounding a little more gruff than he had intended.

"Well ah... just last week we received reports of a Stone Mask being unearthed in Argentina. As you can imagine it didn't take much longer for reports of drained livestock and people to come in. A coven has sprung up there. Well, we sent a squad of Hamon-trained soldiers out that way to
investigate, but..." he trailed off stiffly.

Jotaro hummed slightly. This tended to happen once in a while from Jotaro's experience. That Kars guy that his Grandfather had dealt with had made plenty of those damn masks, and over the centuries they had managed to spread around and get lost through multiple different methods and causes. Every once in a while one would turn up, and either through bumbling, bad luck or intended malice someone would wind up activating it and being turned.

"The Hamon squad believes that one of the higher-ups in the coven might be a natural Stand-user due to some of the alterations in the environment they've faced on their hunt... I don't like bothering you Jotaro, but letting this coven grow could be really disastrous in the long run," Christo explained.

Jotaro sighed. Well that was true. The longer a coven remained active, the more they could grow and the more likely it was that some of their leader would begin moving through other countries. The Hamon squad sent out were likely quite skilled, but that martial art alone wouldn't be much help against some Stands.

"Alright. Arrange some transport. I'll help take care of it."

As he ended the call, Jotaro reclined in his seat and turned his steely gaze out of the window, looking over the cityscape. Well he was leaving Hawaii rather soon anyway. Helping Shizuka would have to wait a little while.

Not that he was too worried. She might have been young, but the girl was resilient and cunning. She really was the Old Man's daughter.

Worst came to worst, Morioh wasn't too far from Tokyo. He'd have to try getting in touch with Josuke at some point.

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9/13

After a bit of rest and recuperation, in which they both settled back into the daily life and rhythm of Tokyo compared to that of Hawaii and worked to sleep off their injuries, the gang decided to meet up at the Shibuya hideout to discuss all that had happened. And to catch up with Morgana and Futaba over what had happened here in their absence.

"Well, things got a bit sticky for us in that mirror world... those monsters Miwa generated were tough, and attacking them directly did nothing. But Shiho managed to figure out a weakness to her Stand. While I kept her busy, Shiho and Ryuji attacked directly and took care of it." Akira sighed, folding his arms over his chest. "My first time having a battle in the real world... it's rougher than I thought."

"Wasn't much better for us," Shizuka said, propping her chin up on her hands. "Those two Chemical Brothers punks managed to get the drop on me, and one of them had a Stand that totally fucked up my senses. I would've been dead if it wasn't for," she smiled fondly at Makoto, sitting happily beside her.

Makoto carried on from that point. "Even when the numbers were even, those two were still challenging until I figured out how Unforgettable's power worked. But once we had that secret, we
quickly turned the tables on them... Stand battles are tough, but I think we can handle them if we're more cautious out here than we are in the Metaverse."

"And after that, nothing much happened except for ah..." Shizuka grinned at Makoto. "Should we tell 'em?"

"I don't see the harm," Makoto replied. "Shizuka and I are... dating now," she admitted, earning a chorus of shocked gasps from the others. Save for Akira, who seemed quietly pleased at the news.

"Congratulations you two!" Haru cheerily said.

"Called it," Sergio evenly said from his seat near the back end of the long table.

"Is more love set to bloom in our group? I already feel my inspiration starting to stir," Yusuke said, partially to himself.

Shizuka maintained her easy grin. "Yeaaah, it's only days now so we're kinda casual about it. Super chill."

A devilish smile crossed Makoto's face. "Oh, super chill huh?" She reached over with her right hand, her fingers easily interlocking with those of Shizuka's left hand. The slightly shorter girl instantly turned beet red and rendered herself invisible a split second later, making a sound akin to 'hggghk.'

Morgana tilted his head slightly. "Oooh, so she's like a Shizuka mute-button now. That's good to know," the talking cat remarked. "I'm glad you guys are alright. It hasn't exactly been quiet on our end though."

Futaba nodded, looking to Akira beside her. "The Shadow Operatives started looking into the gun Black Mask used in the Metaverse. They didn't get any names, but they did track it to an arms dealer. A scary yakuza guy who works for Mr. A." The others tensed at the news, but allowed the brainy redhead to continue. "And apparently he gave several of those guns to crooked cops. Black Mask has ties to the police."

"We were thinking the same thing too. It doesn't seem like there's any other way he was able to know we were going after President Okumura... I guess this proves what we were worried about," Ann said.

Akira adjusted his glasses slowly. "But no names to go on... well, it's better than nothing. But we know now that the authorities, or at least sections of them, are corrupt. From here on out we'll have to tread with caution and avoid the police until we can change the hearts of a few people high up the food chain. But first we have to take care of Black Mask, otherwise he'll just keep silencing them."

After a moment of thought Haru sighed. "And Father is still in no condition to tell us anything... I only wish we could find this man and stop him. But all we have is a vague idea that he has ties to the police," Haru remarked.

Silence lingered in the room. Then, Futaba abruptly said "Oh, by the way, the principal of Shujin died." The others nearly bolted from their chairs in surprise.

"That's not how we break bad news to people," Morgana pointedly said. "But... yes. News broke
soon after you guys got back to Japan. I'm assuming the school hasn't mentioned anything yet."

While Ann and Ryuji took their phones out, quickly scanning various news sites, Makoto gaze
Shizuka's hand a tight squeeze while her left touched her chin. "My God..." Makoto murmured.
"I... when we got to baggage claim, Kawakami sensei got a call on her phone and suddenly became
very shocked. I assumed it was something private, but..." Akira shifted slightly in discomfort, but
otherwise remained silent.

Ryuji pulled his phone away from his phone. "It's legit... says here he was hit by a truck halfway
across the road."

"Witnesses say he just... stopped halfway and let a truck hit him. Authorities are calling it a suicide
brought upon by the shame of the Kamoshida scandal," Ann murmured.

"I'm not gonna act like I'll miss the guy... in fact he's probably the second biggest bastard I know,
but this happening to Kobayakawa..." Ryuji trailed off.

"It's a fake," Shiho remarked. "I doubt Kobayakawa's ever felt any guilt about what he did. Or
rather, what he allowed to happen, and even if that's the case... it took a long time for that to take
effect. More than that though, his method of suicide was just stopping in front of a moving truck?"

Futaba cleared her throat, drawing the attention back to her. "Well, when I got the news I started
checking every bit of information I could. News stories, camera footage, social media posts... the
fact that it sounded almost exactly like what happened to Mom really drew me in. From the footage
I saw, he just froze up, staring dead ahead. It was a mental shutdown, no doubt."

The others mulled that information over, before Akira sighed. "Okay, but why? Kobayakawa was a
slimeball, no doubt, but what would cause Black Mask to go after him? It's not like there'd be much
to gain from killing a high school principal unless-" Akira bristled sharply. "He... unless he... Was
Kobayakawa involved in this 'conspiracy' too?" he asked.

Their oracle shrugged lazily. "Dunno. I might be able to get a clearer picture if I could access his
phone with Necronomicon, but that's likely locked up in some police evidence locker. And if the
police are corrupt, any useful data has likely been scrubbed by now." Futaba saw the eyes on her
and shrugged again. "It's what I would do."

Makoto shifted slightly. "Now that I think back, Principal Kobayakawa tended to get these strange
phone calls during the day. I never heard them in any great detail, and obviously he didn't hold
them in my presence, but even through the door to his office I could hear him mention Arditi more
than once. Since the Phantom Thieves started at Shujin, maybe he was tasked with keeping an eye
on Phantom Thief activity?" she suggested.

"Strikes me as something that rotten bastard would get involved in, especially if there's money
involved. But why kill him all of a sudden?" asked Ryuji.

"If he's anything like my Father, it's because he became a loose end," Haru said. Despite herself,
she couldn't suppress the flicker of anger that crossed her pretty face.

"Our darling Noir might just be onto something. Kobayakawa's death was really close to a police
station. Like, literally across the road. It's possible he knew he was screwed and wanted to try drop
some names to the cops. But by then, Black Mask was probably blowing through his Palace,"
Futaba explained. It seemed then, the others noted, that there were sections of the police force
detached from this whole conspiracy. Hopefully.

Akira gave a grim sigh. "We should have checked to see if he had a Palace after we got done with Kamoshida... it's obvious he had some distortions if he was covering the abuse up. But then we bumped into Yusuke and had to take down Kaneshiro... I just forgot about Kobayakawa entirely," he said. It left Akira feeling a little guilty. If they had thought to check the principal for a Palace, then there was a chance he would be alive now.

Akira didn't like Kobayakawa. In fact from the moment they met, he knew he had a deep loathing for the man. This was just after Akira arrived in Tokyo, at the lowest point in his whole life, and his first memory of his new school was the Principal lecturing him that he'd be thrown out if he caused any trouble. At the time, Akira really hadn't been in a mood to be lectured over his behaviour.

Not that he wished the man dead over that. The Principal was slime, but he didn't deserve to have his mind obliterated while his body was left to the wolves.

"It's unfortunate, but there's nothing to be done now... nor could we have done anything even if we knew he was in danger, this happened before we even returned to the country," Yusuke said, trying to assuage Akira's worries as best he could.

Silence lingered in the room for several moments. Their opponents were ramping up, and people were already dying as a result of their actions. More than that they still didn't know who Black Mask was.

"Well... what do we do now?" asked Ann, deciding to say what they were all thinking. A few of them looked to Akira for guidance.

Akira considered their options. Having no solid info about Black Mask only made things worse. "For now, we need to go slow and ease back into things. Catch up on some Mementos requests so people don't lose faith in us." He sighed. "If we could find another member of this conspiracy and send a calling card out, we'd bait a nice juicy trap to reel Black Mask in... But we have no idea who may or may not be involved."

"Something'll come up eventually," Morgana said reassuringly. "We don't need to worry just yet. As soon as our enemies trip up, we'll crush 'em!"

"Wow Mona, you're a lot more chipper than you were before we left for Hawaii. It's nice to see you happy again," Ann said, reaching over and stroking behind Morgana's ears. The feline looked as if he could die happy.

"And since you mentioned doing Mementos requests for the people, it reminded me to give these out." Shizuka reached into the bag at her feet, taking out a crisp envelope containing a small stack of checks. The others watched her curiously as she went around the table, handing a check out to everyone. She gave two to Akira. "One of these is for Morgana. Fair's fair."

As Ryuji got his check, he examined the number beyond the yen symbol and felt his eyes widen steadily. "Holy... this is a lot of cash! Where's this comin' from?!"

Shizuka smirked. "Well, a while back I saw all this Phantom Thief merch that stores around Shibuya were selling. And then I found out that same merch was selling in other countries too. And I figured it wasn't right that people were making money off our brand, and we were getting nothing
in return." She handed a check to Yusuke, who looked as it he was about to faint. "I pulled some strings at the fashion company my family owns, got in touch with some connections and told 'em about this hot trend rocking Japan. That's the cut I got so far, and I'm divvying it up for you guys."

Shiho inspected her check with widened eyes. "This is only a fraction of it? How big are we?"

"Well, we're huge in Japan obviously. The Chinese are lapping up anything Arditi-related, though we've had to deal with a lot of bootleg crap there... a lot of legit stuff is getting through though. South Korea freaking loves us, even if they're convinced we're a vigilante boy band..." She trailed off, examining Yusuke, Akira, Sergio, and Ryuji. "Well, they're not totally wrong I guess. A lot of American markets are soaking up Phantom Thief merch. Only place we haven't made waves is Europe, but it's slowly starting to happen," Shizuka explained.

"Making money off of this huh?" Akira said, examining the check. "Well I'd say it's something we shouldn't get into, but barista work isn't as lucrative as you all might think and I could do with more pocket money."

Shizuka shrugged. "People are already making money off our brand, so why not cash in a little? Wouldn't be fair to let them suck up our revenue while we're high and dry."

"Helping people's great, and I sure do love bringing shitty adults to justice. But this," Ryuji lifted his check and grinned broadly. "This is pretty effin' sweet too."

9/15

With everything that had happened in Hawaii being such a wild haze, coupled then with the grave news of their Principal, Shizuka would have forgotten about this Hifumi business entirely if Sergio hadn't reminded her. She still thought he was being overly dramatic and worried over nothing, but she saw no harm in helping him.

It wasn't like she had anything else to do. Makoto had student council junk to do now that Kobayakawa's death was all around Shujin. Akira was helping Haru with some gardening project. Ann had been roped into something for her parents. Really after yesterday, where the gang had cleared a bunch of small fry requests in Mementos, everyone wanted to take it a little easy.

They'd be heading back in soon enough to handle the rest of their backlog. Just because they were out of the country, didn't mean people's problems were just going to be put on hold.

"So this is Kanda huh?" Shizuka said, examining their surroundings with every step. "It's pretty nice. Kinda reminds me of home," she said, paying particular focus to the outline of the Kanda Catholic Church as it came into view. As strange as it was to say, it looked as if the church had been airlifted all the way from Europe. Intricately constructed walls, perfectly angled slopes on the roofes, ornate stained glass windows, sculpted stone crosses on the tops of the roofes. Sergio seemed to be admiring it too.

"I don't come by Kanda much, but it's quiet and peaceful... the church, in particular. It's why Hifumi likes to practice here. Helps of course that the priest is a shogi fan too," the blond explained. Sergio briefly tugged at the collar of his shirt to ease off the head before examining his watch. "Given the time, I believe we're here before her."
The two passed through the heavy gates of the church, with Shizuka examining the figures in the stained glass. "Haven't been to a church since the funeral," she murmured.

"You going to be alright?" Sergio asked with some concern in his tone.

Shizuka nodded. "Yeah, yeah I'll be fine. It's been a while but I guess this just sorta... brought it back," she said. Shizuka recalled the scents of stale incense, mothballs, and old folks that had become infused in every surface in that New York church. She recalled being unable to look up from the tissue in her hands, tearing it again, and again, and again, and again...

Funerals were the worst. She had never felt more low in her whole life.

But they had business here, and Shizuka would be able to focus her attention on that. The two settled by a modest alcove at the church wall, providing a small degree of privacy. Sergio sighed. "I'm not too fond of them either... sounds strange for an Italian Catholic to say, but I've had losses too." Before she could press him on the matter, he seemed to tense as another figure entered through the gates. The 'shogi princess' with her attractive features and flowing raven hair, did tend to stick out. In her hands she was clutching an ornate wooden box, no doubt her shogi board and materials.

"Hey, Hifumi!" Sergio called out, his voice making Hifumi freeze briefly in surprise. Regardless she managed to straighten herself up and approached the duo.

"Oh, Sergio and... Shizuka, yes?" The shades-sporting girl nodded in confirmation. "Are you here for some shogi practice? I don't have any matches scheduled for today," Hifumi said.

"Actually, I was hoping to speak to you about your shogi prowess," Sergio said. This was doubtless going to be an awkward thing to discuss, and he had no idea how he's venture the topic. Particularly if it turned out she didn't have a Stand. "When you're in a game with someone, do you... see their moves before they make them?"

Hifumi pondered the question. "Oh, well... I wouldn't say I see their moves. I just... examine the board, examine them, and I suppose my mind fills in the blanks of the possible moves they could make. I suppose I end up fixating about what the obvious moves might be."

Shizuka and Sergio shared a glance. That really didn't give them much to go on. "Hey, Hifumi... can you see this?" A glow lit up Sergio's tall body, followed by a modest flash as Breakthru's powerful spectre rose up behind him.

Hifumi gasped sharply, her eyes widening in horror. In her shock the wooden box fell from her hands, only to be deftly caught by Houdini. "Y-you have... you have one of those things t-too?! I m-mean, what are those?" Hifumi asked in shock.

"Guess that answers that," Shizuka said, taking the box from Houdini and holding it evenly for the time being. "Hifumi, this thing," she nodded to Houdini. "Is called a Stand. It's a physical manifestation of your fighting spirit, and it usually has several supernatural powers. And if you can see it, you have one too."

"Wh- Sta-... P-powers? Me?" The expression on Hifumi's face seemed to rapidly be shifting between utter shock, and an adolescent glee. "B-but how... how did you two think I'd have powers? I don't even know about them!"
Sergio scratched the back of his neck awkwardly. "Well... you see Hifumi, I started to get a bit suspicious when I was watching you playing other people. You seemed to almost reflexively know what your opponents were going to do, with them never even coming close to beating you."

The shogi princess' eyes widened slightly. "You mean this power of mine... this S-Stand, it... it lets me predict my opponents?"

"Something like that. You've been using this power without knowing it, so the effects have been minimal. But now that you're aware of it, the power is going to start developing and evolving," Shizuka explained. It had been much the same for her. Achtung Baby had been a reflex, something dictated entirely by Shizuka's emotions. Houdini was the Stand evolved into something she could actively direct and control.

Thinking quickly, Shizuka opened the board with some care, while Breakthru moved in and quickly organized all the tiles into place. Houdini kept the board level in the air, their position hiding them from prying eyes. "Let's try it though, and see what happens," Shizuka said, standing aside so Sergio could take up the position opposite Hifumi. She watched them carefully, but there was clearly some horror bubbling up in her expression.

Sergio moved a tile. The effect on Hifumi was instantaneous. An aura of azure light washed over her, before the light seemed to settle in her pupils. Her dark green eyes became marked by glowing white crosshairs. She saw every move Sergio could take, red paths being highlighted along the board with the most obvious actions glowing the brightest.

Tears streamed down Hifumi's face. "I... oh n-no!" The young woman started to tremble, hugging her arms as the flow of tears grew more intense. "A-all this time, I-I've been a f-fraud! A ch-cheater!

Sergio and Shizuka shared a nervous glance. Sergio had been afraid of this happening, well aware of how badly she could have taken this discovery. "Hifumi, no..." the blond said, placing a strong and reassuring hand on Hifumi's left shoulder. 'I've seen you practice at Shogi every day. You've played it since you first learned to read. And when you're not playing it, I've seen your face buried in thick textbooks on the game. You know shogi as well as any pro, and you're more passionate about it than anyone else at Kosei. You're no fraud."

The crosshairs had faded from Hifumi's eyes as Shizuka neatly placed the tiles in their proper compartments. Even so the tears were still flowing. "B-but I... I...

"It's not like you were doing anything intentionally bad," Shizuka said. "And to be honest, if your power wasn't fully manifesting at the time it probably had little actual presence in your matches."

Hifumi looked up at the two, reaching up to dry her eyes. "Do you... do you think so?" she asked. "I..." For a moment it looked as if her whole world was falling apart, but Sergio's reassuring grip seemed to calm her.

"We had to tell you if you had powers. It was better to be told and have some support from people like you, than for it to accidentally spring up one day without you having any idea what's going on," Sergio said. He smiled easily at Hifumi. "And we are going to help you. Give it a few days and we'll teach you control over your Stand. Then you can prove that your shogi skills are genuine."
Hifumi sniffed loudly, drying up the last of her tears. "R-really? W-well I'd like to know more a-about these powers, a-and I wouldn't want to be a fraud," she admitted.

"Don't sweat it! We'll totally help you out, and then you'll be the most badass shogi player who ever lived," Shizuka said. Not that she imagined there being much competition for that title.

Still, helping Hifumi could make for a good side project. She doubted anything dangerous would come of it, and it would be nice to get the girl's self esteem up. More than that though, having a precog in the Phantom Thieves would be really handy. Assuming Hifumi's Stand could be used on anything other than a shogi board, at least.
Shizuka entered the Kanda church at a slow and steady rate, quite careful not to be too loud as she entered. She had a feeling that anyone who went out of their way to be a practicing Catholic in Japan had to take their faith seriously and wouldn't appreciate a loudmouth high school girl making a ruckus.

The scent of incense and the elderly hit her instantly, a musty smell that spoke to the age of both the building and its usual patrons. It wasn't exactly the nicest smell, Shizuka mused, but it carried a sense of importance. Adding to that was the gentle organ music filling the broad structure, echoing off into the vast ceiling.

Only a few people were present as she entered. Old folks were dotted around the various benches, but near the back she managed to catch a glimpse of Sergio and Hifumi. Sergio was seated at the far end of the bench, watching carefully as Hifumi became engrossed in a shogi match against a marginally older bespectacled man. She seemed to be struggling.

Still being as quiet as she could, she approached Sergio from the side. "How's it going?" she whispered.

"Fourth opponent of the day," he murmured in return. "She's beaten the last three, but with a bit of difficulty. She's managed to really reign in her power with a little guidance... fast learner," Sergio said.

"I'd imagine so. She might be a chuuni, but she's the bookish sort too," Shizuka said in return. She settled in to watch the match, resting a hand on the back of the bench while staying on her feet. The aisle was wide enough that there was no risk of her getting in anyone's way by standing here.

Shizuka didn't know how shogi was played, not did she have any interest in learning anything about the game (she didn't even have the patience for checkers) but she knew quite a bit about body language. She couldn't read the moves on the board but she could read the players, and knew at once that they were both tense and continually sizing each other up throughout the match.

A savvy veteran against a famed prodigy, both figures respecting each other deeply with neither daring to underestimate the other. It seemed, ultimately, that neither had a clear advantage over the other.

Most importantly to Shizuka was the fact that she couldn't see any glowing crosshairs in Hifumi's eyes. She was doing this all legitimately.

It was admirable, really. Most people, if they found out they had a power that let them cheat a game so easily, without any risk of ever being caught in the act, would likely abuse that power to the fullest. While Shizuka didn't 'get' shogi, she could at least understand that there was a good bit of money that could be made in it. It would be easy to be tempted by the prospect, but Hifumi clearly wanted to make it on her own skill from here on out.

Eventually however it seemed their match came to an end. Hifumi made a gentle sighing sound and looked up at her opponent. "I concede," she firmly said. Despite this, Hifumi seemed slightly
pleased with the outcome.

"My... have I broken the legendary Hifumi Togo's winning streak?" the older man asked, seeming pleasantly surprised.

Hifumi shrugged faintly, a gentle smile on her face. "It was bound to happen eventually. Your skill truly is formidable sir... I hope we can duel again in the future." For a girl who had just lost, she seemed remarkably at peace.

"I would enjoy that too. I certainly look forward to seeing how age improves upon your natural talents." With that the older man rose and left, leaving the three high schoolers alone in their section of the church.

"You sure you're alright Hifumi? I mean, you lost," Shizuka eventually said.

"Yes," Hifumi smiled brightly. "I lost. As in I can lose. My Stand didn't come out at all during any of those matches, and I feel so... good," Hifumi remarked. "Honest and refreshed. I was afraid I could never play honestly in the future, but Sergio has really helped me rein these abilities in."

There was a hint of pride on Sergio's face, not that it was rare for him to be pleased with himself. "As if I could leave you feeling miserable. And it helps that you adapted quickly to this new situation... more than that, you clearly proved you're skilled at shogi on your own merits. So don't worry so much," he remarked.

"So I see your training has really worked out. Mind giving me a glimpse of what Hifumi can do now?" Shizuka asked.

Once Hifumi had closed her board up, the trio made their way outside of the church and returned to the modest alcove where they had first exposed Hifumi to her own powers. It was an overcast day, somewhat humid, and a silence seemed to linger over the area. It gave them sufficient privacy to work with.

Once they were outside, Shizuka leaned against the wall with her hands on her hips. "Alright Togo, let's see what you got."

A devilish smile crossed Hifumi's face the index and middle fingers of her right hand suddenly pressing against the bridge of her nose. Her pupils glowed, soon being overtaken by the same white crosshairs Shizuka had seen when she first used her powers. "I unseal the vast power of my evil eye, and call upon my Stand... Flaming Telepath!"

The figure that rose up behind Hifumi's glowing body was strong and feminine in appearance, much like Houdini. Much of Flaming Telepath's body was a deep purple in colour, with white accents highlighting her ribs. Her arms were silver and mechanical in appearance, distinct for the heavy bracers on her forearms that had a chessboard pattern on them. The top of her head was distinct for a series of five points protruding upward, like the peaks of a crown. Flaming Telepath's eyes were similar to Hifumi's, solid red orbs that had the same white crosshairs on them. Most interestingly, Hifumi's Stand had no legs. Instead, from the waist down her body was affixed to the base of an upside down black pyramid that had a series of glowing esoteric symbols etched into the material.

"Ooooh, that's really cool," Shizuka murmured, pinching her chin with her left hand. "Nice, nice... you guys been experimenting with her power?"
Sergio nodded. "We've learned a few things. For one, it's no longer limited to shogi. Any move made against her, Hifumi can see it coming."

"That's correct. Whenever a person is moving, I can focus on them and see the possible actions they're going to take. It's presented as a series of glowing red afterimages to my Flaming Telepath. The most likely action glows the brightest," Hifumi curtly explained.

"Like so," Sergio lashed his right hand out sharply, the back of his hand aimed for Hifumi's cheek. As soon as he had started to move time had slowed down from Hifumi's perception, outlining the trajectory his hand was going to take. In an instant she ducked, a casual expression lingering on her face.

Shizuka adjusted her heart-shaped sunglasses. "Speedy. But there's a difference between a mock hit and an actual fight... on the other hand, being able to see your opponents moves is gonna be a great boon regardless of experience."

"Ahh, but that's not all!" Sergio chirped, raising his left index finger. "We've been experimenting with this other ability, and it seems to gradually be getting more defined. With strong focus, and reading the body of her opponents, Hifumi can see the outermost thoughts of the person she's focusing on. And, potentially, see the actions they plan to commit in the near future," the blond explained.

"Oh, is that so?" Shizuka asked, propping her chin on her right hand. "Gimme an example."

Sergio smiled innocently, clasping his hands behind his back and pushing his chest out slightly. His gaze lingered on Hifumi. "Hey Hifumi, tell me what I'm thinking."

Hifumi narrowed her eyes in deep focus, the glow in her pupils glowing more intense. "You're thinking... 'Togo-san is very pre-'", Hifumi stopped herself, her eyes widening as her pale cheeks turned a deep rosy shade. "S-Sergio, t-t-take this seriously!"

"But I am taking this seriously!" Sergio replied pouting faintly. "Still, corretta. That's exactly what was on my mind," he added.

"Hm. That might come in handy..." So she could read people, Shizuka noted. Not with as much depth or accuracy as Rohan could, but there was something to be said about the fact that she could use this ability without knocking someone out like Heavens Door did. It was a more subtle and sneaky power.

"We still need more practice, but... It's going to work out, I feel," Sergio said. He smiled up at Flaming Telepath, seeming to be thinking in the same way Shizuka was.

Shizuka inspected the floating figure for a few moments. "How well is it in a fight?" she asked, making Hifumi blink.

Sergio shrugged. "A bit slower than Houdini, but about as strong physically. Flaming Telepath can act about ten meters away from Hifumi's body. But she can read people from around fifteen," he explained.

"I see," Shizuka said simply.
Houdini suddenly shot from Shizuka's body, making a beeline for Flaming Telepath. Her golden fists shot out in a rapid fire flurry, and Shizuka watched intently as Hifumi seemed to realize what was going on. Flaming Telepath was relatively quick, but as the purple figure ducked and dodged around Houdini's fists Shizuka realized it wasn't speed that was keeping her from being touched.

Indeed, a cursory glance would show a gap in how quickly the two figures moved. Flaming Telepath wasn't outright dodging. She was reading the ghost-image of each move Houdini was making a split second in advance, and angling her body appropriately.

"Ooooh," Shizuka murmured. "Not bad," Shizuka said, even if the effort behind her attacks was rather tame. She hardly wanted to go all out on Hifumi. "Alright, her speed is solid. But what about strength? Hifumi, try and block some of these."

This time Flaming Telepath's arms started rising up to intercept Houdini's swings, the impacts resonating outward with powerful cracking sounds. Shizuka could feel the tension in each impact, the underlying strength in Flaming Telepath's body. Yeah, a hit from this thing wouldn't be too pleasant.

Suddenly Houdini smacked both of Flaming Telepath's hands up, moving at such speed that Hifumi gasped sharply in surprise. She could only watch helplessly as Houdini's right fist rocketing upward at a speed that could only be described as 'face shattering.'

It came to a sudden stop an inch from Flaming Telepath's face, a finger flicking up and casually poking Hifumi's Stand in the forehead. "Tag!"

Hifumi's eyes were as wide as dinner plates. "E-eh?"

"You've got potential Hifumi," Shizuka said, a sly grin resting on her face. "But you're still gonna need to practice." But given enough time, she was certain Hifumi would become quite a potent Stand user.

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"Looks like rain," Akira said, glancing up to the heavy grey clouds marking the skyline. He took in a long look at them just as he vanished into the mouth of the train station. It was just Shiho and himself today, with most everyone else being wrapped up in other matters. "Here's hoping it'll be clear when we get off the train."

"At this time of day?" Shiho asked, settling her hands behind her head. "Well it'll probably be awhile before either of us get on a train anyway, so hopefully."

They descended into the well-lit underground, the vast corridors carrying the echoes of hundreds of conversations and announcements from the PA. Ultimately it was peaceful in the metro stations, and yet...

Well, it was hard not to see the gruesome image of Mementos around every corner. The Metaverse counterpart to here was a horrific parody, the twisted sights reflective of everything that could be found here.

It was silly to think about, Akira knew, but sometimes when they were going through the darkness of the tunnels it was as if something was watching them. Like going into the gut of some horrible monster. Nobody else had mentioned a similar feeling, so he assumed it was just his imagination.
With how intense things were, he was jumping at shadows. In more ways than one.

"Hey Akira," Shiho gently said, causing him to glance her way. "You know, you're usually the guy to talk to when it comes to deep personal stuff. So... do you mind if I talk to you about something that's been on my mind. I spoke to Ryuji about it the other day, but I was hoping to get another opinion."

Akira shrugged. "Fire away. I'm apparently good at handling problems for people," the dark haired boy said.

"Well... lately I've been thinking about the people we've been up against. Not just the people with Palaces, but A's too. I've never really... had a violent bone in my body before that business with Kamoshida. Fighting people and hurting things is all new to me," Shiho began, giving him a sideways glance. "But I was thinking mainly about how we change hearts. Because when we get down to it, that's... basically brainwashing."

Akira didn't answer at first. He had been thinking as much for a while now. He didn't regret what they had done, not for a moment, but there was something sketchy about their methods. For better or worse, taking a treasure was enough to forcibly bend and twist a person into someone better. "Go on," he simply said.

"We basically force a person to do a complete 180, and when that happens they expose their crimes to the world, and their lives are basically forever ruined afterwards if their crimes are big enough. But the thing is..." Shiho looked dead ahead, a frown clear on her face. "In some of these cases, especially Kamoshida's, I don't feel any guilt at all about it. So does that... make me a bad person?"

Akira weighed her words for several quiet moments as they walked along, combing their way through the bustling crowds. "What did Ryuji say when you asked?" Though Akira already had a feeling he knew what the blond would have said.

"He reassured me, of course. You know, boyfriend stuff. And I'm definitely greatful he did, with how sweet he is," Shiho remarked. "He said that the people we went against are bastards, and they wouldn't have felt any remorse for what they did on their own."

Akira nodded firmly. "He's right. Think about Madarame for a second... he was all set to bleed Yusuke of all his talent, and then throw him aside as soon as he could. With no guilt or shame. We saved his life, and gave hope to the other people Madarame discarded. Or Kamoshida, who didn't feel any guilt until we changed his heart. The people we dealt with were bastards. And while they might be changed, that never would have happened without us," he explained.

"I was thinking along those lines too," Shiho replied. They reached the mouth of another staircase, slowly making their way down to a well-lit train platform. "Still, every once in a while, I see comments online that say what we're doing is immoral. And on some level I think they're right... but that I don't feel bad about it."

"Mm. Sometimes... sometimes I think along those lines too, but then I think about all the people who would have been hurt if we stayed back and did nothing. And when I think about that, I know what we're doing is right in the end," Akira remarked.

They came to a stop on the grounds of the platform, with the next train only being a few minutes off. Shiho gave a small laugh, settling her hands on her hips. "When you put it that way, you definitely have a point. It might make me sound like a suck-up, but following your lead hasn't
steered us wrong yet."

"Well. I am pretty great," Akira murmured, glancing up to the ceiling. He smiled faintly. "And really, you of all people don't need to worry about being a good person. You're solid gold as far as I'm concerned," he added, giving Shiho a thumbs up.

"Hehe... Well when you put it that way..." The two shared a smile, with Akira feeling their bond growing stronger in that moment.

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The bell above Leblanc's door rang as Akira entered, and once through the door he scanned over the entirety of the cafe's interior. He froze up briefly as he got a glimpse of Akechi seated at the counter. It wasn't the first time he'd seen Akechi at Leblanc, but these days he couldn't help but be a little unnerved at the sight of him.

Akechi apparently had powers of his own, but was a complete mystery to the group. And he always seemed to conveniently run into Akira out in Tokyo. Really, Akira didn't know what to make of Akechi... but he definitely wasn't as innocent as he liked to seem.

"Honey, I'm home," Akira said sarcastically as he continued inside.

"Ah, Kurusu, so nice to see you again," Akechi pleasantly said. "Oh my, is it that late already? With how calming Leblanc's atmosphere is, time simply flew for me," the brunette remarked, glancing to the small clock mounted near the door.

"It tends to have that effect on people," he asked as he continued on toward the far end of the counter. "Can I get you a refill?"

"No, I really should be on my way. I do have business to attend to. Still, it's a shame to leave here. Given my criticisms of the Phantom Thieves, I'm not exactly a beloved public figure now that they're so popular," Akechi remarked. He watched Akira closely as the dark-haired boy moved behind the counter, giving a nod of greeting to Sojiro as the older man tended to his crossword. "I heard something interesting about you, Kurusu."

Akira quirked his brow, giving Akechi a brief glance over his shoulder. "Oh? And what might that be?" asked Akira.

Akechi's pleasant smile didn't falter. "Well, I was chatting with a Shujin student the other day, and she said that you have a criminal record. Looking at you now though, I find that hard to believe. You don't seem the violent type."

"Oh he's got a record alright," Sojiro said without looking up from the paper in his hands. "But the charges that got slapped on him are a bunch of trumped-up bunk. He didn't actually assault anyone."

Akira nodded. "Long story short I wound up getting in the middle of a pretty nasty fight between a man and a woman... the man in question fell, got hurt, and slapped me with an assault charge," he explained.

"That seems remarkably unfair," Akechi said. "An adult abusing his power and destroying your prospects to save face. A criminal record, particularly in this country, is the kind of strike that most
people are never able to recover from."

"It is what it is," Akira replied.

Akechi curiously observed Akira's casual demeanour, watching as he made for the sink and quickly got to work cleaning some of the mugs resting nearby. "Don't you hate him? The man who charged you, I mean," Akechi said.

Akira nodded again. "Of course I do. But it's not like I can do anything about it... really, I can't even really recall what the guy looks like with how dark it was that night." He shrugged faintly. "Not that hating him changes anything about my situation."

"It's a raw deal, but yeah... not much to be done about it," Sojiro remarked.

"Well, fair enough," Akechi said, smiling warmly as he rose to his feet. "Well, my thanks again. But I really should be on my way." With that he turned and left the cafe, the bell ringing above him in passage.

Once he was outside in the chilly darkness of the evening, Akechi breathed an irritated sigh. He would have expected more from Kurusu. Those other Phantom Thieves he could care less about, but Akechi could see a real potential in him. It was as if they were cut from the same cloth, linked in some way that Akechi couldn't quite understand. There was a glint of power to the dark-haired boy, linked with an intelligence that kept Akechi stimulated.

But he seemed to be lacking the killer drive that Akechi had hoped to see. If he couldn't even bring himself to actively seek Shido out, if he appeared so dispassionate, then they wouldn't be good as partners. It was unfortunate really. The two of them, working together, this whole shitty world would be their oyster, to do with as they pleased.

Akechi continued into Yongen's train station, his hands resting behind his back as he made his way along. A few people watched him as he went, murmuring a few things about his tarnished reputation. He didn't particularly mind what the cattle thought, they'd be changing their tune on the Phantom Thieves soon enough.

His train ride quickly swept him along through several stations, during which Akechi let his thoughts linger on Kurusu and the other members of the Arditi.

'It's unfortunate, really. Together, he and I could have destroyed Shido. He has reason to hate him almost as much as I do,' Akechi mused. But, thinking on it, he supposed it was a good thing he hadn't extended the offer to join. Kurusu just didn't have it in him to go that far. More than that, he probably wouldn't want to leave those idiot friends of his behind. And Akechi certainly didn't want to work with any of them if he could help it.

Worse still, Akechi didn't doubt that they'd come to blows in the near future. Already he had to set events in motion that would lead to Kurusu being separated from his friends. Cutting the head off the organization would leave those idiots flailing around, ideally, and he'd be able to pick them off with ease. But if it came to it, and he had to fight them in the Metaverse, he'd do it without hesitation.

His train rolled to a halt at his platform with Akechi wasting no time to step off once the doors opened. He was soon making his way up a flight of polished tiled stairs, emerging into a walkway between the platform and the city streets. As he went along he got a glimpse of some technicians
fitting some new advertisements to the wall, the sight giving him pause.

The figure on the poster was a bespectacled bald man in a sharp suit, giving off an image of confidence but also an air of approachability. 'Vote Masayoshi Shido... yes the election will be in full swing soon.' Akechi supposed he'd have to tidy this Phantom Thief business up soon. Likely in the next month or two. But first he had business to attend to, things to set up, research to conduct.

He continued on his way, advancing up into the darkened streets and quickly dipping into a modest alleyway in the shadow of a large office building. Once he was sure he was alone, Akechi slipped his phone from his pocket and sorted through his apps until he came upon a tile: a glowing eye in a pulsating sea of red and black.

"Takeo Izumi... Izumi Group HQ... Hospital." His phone chimed in his hand, making Akechi grin. He pressed the button and in an instant vanished into another world.

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9/18

By now the group had managed to explore a rather large portion of Mementos. With every major victory they had, it seemed Mementos expanded and granted them access to the lower fathoms of its vast network of tunnels. The Shadows grew more powerful as they went along, and the scenery managed to become more distorted and unsettling.

They also became increasingly aware of some of the bizarre elements of Mementos. Chiefly, they were almost always catching glimpses of trains moving into distant tunnels, occasionally stopping to pick up 'passengers' that looked like monochromatic humans. Morgana mused that this was simply a warped reflection of the Tokyo subway system and not to be too worried about it.

But Akira would be lying if he said he didn't find it disconcerting. Just where were those ghost trains going?

The cat-bus emerged from a twisted rampway into another floor, marking the deepest they had managed to go in Mementos thus far. A purple fog hung in the air, while chunks of bloodied bone occasionally protruded through the brickwork of the tunnel ahead of them. The ground beneath the train tracks, at times, looked sodden with blood.

"Huh," Futaba abruptly said from the back end of the van. She looked up, glancing around and reading their surroundings with her goggles. "That's... weird."

"What's up?" Ann asked from the seat in front of the redhead.

"Well... I can't sense any Shadows on this floor. Like, not one. It's almost like they all packed up and ran off," Futaba explained.

Akira shrugged, keeping his fingers on Morgana's steering wheel and keeping his attention affixed on the tunnel dead ahead. "Well, that's happened from time to time. It's not that weird, is it?"

Futaba made an uncertain humming noise. "Well... those empty floors are usually safe areas, but this is just a normal floor of Mementos. And before we came down that last ramp, I could swear I sensed life signs in this area. Now there are more below us, but this spot is just vacant."
As they went along, Yusuke stared out of the window at his right hand side. "The atmosphere out here does seem more tense than usual. Which is certainly an accomplishment," the bluenette remarked.

"Well, I've got my headlamps on full, and nothing seems out of the ordinary. If my nose is correct, and it usually is, the next target is just another floor or two below us. We breeze through that and we can head on home," Morgana remarked.

They continued on through the darkened corridors. They may have been alone, but Akira still wanted to be cautious as the van went along. Occasionally the headlamps would cast a particularly vicious looking shadow on a wall in passing, but that was about as exciting as it got.

Even so, there was a clear tension in the Morganamobile. If Futaba's enhanced senses left her feeling worried, then it was likely there was something that warranted some concern. "Hey uh... does anyone else feel chilly?" asked Ann.

As the blonde spoke, Futaba shivered abruptly before glancing sharply from side to side. The goggles over her eyes glowed briefly. "Did something just..." she trailed off, swallowing in discomfort.

"Do you sense something Oracle?" Haru gently asked.

"Well I thought I..." She hesitated again, raising her right hand. Coils of ebony matter oozed around her gloved fingers. "I could swear something moved past us, but it was so quick that Necronomicon barely got anything. So now I'm checking for any vibrations other than Mona." The redhead fell silent, examining her digits with great scrutiny. Nothing.

Their leader let out a faint sigh. "The creepy atmosphere here is probably just playing tricks on y-"

Akira's words were cut off by a powerful explosion a foot in front of the Morganamobile, the wave of pressure slamming into the bus like a brick wall and flinging it off the tracks. The Arditi screamed in unison, latching on tight to their seats as the bus landed on its side and scraped along the ground.

"HOLY SHIT!!" Shizuka shouted at the top of her lungs, seeing the scenery streak by through the tilted window until Morgana's momentum came to a sudden stop.

Their vehicle lingered like this for several seconds before it suddenly vanished in a powerful puff of smoke, leaving the group landing unceremoniously to the ground. Morgana groaned, his eyeballs replaced by a pair of cartoonish swirls.

"Mona! Ohmigosh, are you okay?!" Ann said, quickly settling a hand under the back of Morgana's head to support him.

"Cradle... me..." Morgana croaked.

"He's fine..." Ann flatly said, glancing off to the side.

Akira was the first to rise to his feet, followed soon after by Shizuka and Yusuke. The three glanced to the source of the explosion, an aura of tension rolling through them. "What the hell was that?!" Shizuka asked. "Did we hit a landmine or something?"
"Whatever it was, it took us completely by surprise," Yusuke remarked.

Futaba groaned, shakily rising ro her feet. The ground around her started to bubble and blacken, before a tangled black mass erupted around her like a makeshift cocoon. The darkness twisted and altered itself until it had morphed into Necronomicon's floating bulk. "It was moving underground, moving so quickly that I couldn't see it... then it came to a sudden stop a few feet ahead. It must have gone stone still to ensure that I couldn't sense it."

From the smoke ahead of them, a silhouette began to take shape. It was looming and broad, over seven feet tall from what Akira could see at this distance. "What is that thing? A Shadow?" Shadows weren't exactly strategists. Ambushes and laying traps weren't the kinds of things they were known for.

"I... I don't know," Futaba murmured, staring deep into the smoke. "But that thing... the power it's giving off is incredible!"

The shade in the smoke continued to grow more defined, a pair of sharp wings suddenly rising up from the creature's back. As the smoke parted Akira could tell they were made from some kind of steel or wrought iron, intricately carved. Akira examined the silhouette closely, paying attention to the heavy legs starting to float a few inches off the ground. "Everyone, get ready..." Akira said, watching as the angelic entity fully moved through the fading smoke.
He Who Stands Before God (II)

The smoke and dust finally parted, giving the team a look at their opponent in full. While it was humanoid in shape, with two arms, two legs, and a head, it certainly wasn't human in appearance. At first glance, with how flesh and steel seemed to intersect, Akira mistook it for some kind of cyborg.

The creature was well over seven feet tall, his exposed chest and right arm being made of slate grey flesh. Or at least, something that looked like flesh. A coil of barbed wire wrapped around his beefy right arm, threading through the skin in some places, but the creature seemed not to notice or care about it.

However the rest of his body seemed to be comprised of a sleek opalescent metal that looked almost organic in areas. A sharp band jutted up around his waist, trailing down into two heavy and angular legs that ended in two sharp, pointed feet. His left arm, large chunks of metal biting into where his shoulder should have been, was comprised of that same alien metal, ending in a pair of five razor sharp claws. Heavy metal wings sprouted from his shoulder blades, the knife-like 'feathers' connected by sleek sliders that allowed them to contract and extent outward.

Lastly there was the head, an alien visage that Akira found particularly striking. His head was encased in some manner of rounded helmet formed from the same alien metal, obscuring all details of his face (assuming he had much of one to speak of), save for his eyes. The small rounded holes gave a glimpse of two bloodshot eyes with pitch black sclera and pale blue pupils. It sank into the top of his neck, forming a tight seal.

Akira watched the creature curiously, well aware of the thunderous footfalls slowly advancing upon them. There was still some distance between them and this new creature, but that wouldn't last long.

"Who are you?" Akira asked firmly. This thing was smart enough to lay a trap, maybe it was smart enough to speak too.

"You may refer to me as Camael," he replied. His voice was deep and imposing, carrying a natural reverb that growled in his throat. "I have been created to judge. And today shall be your judgement."

The ground exploded beneath Camael's feet as he launched himself forward at a terrifying speed, leaving Akira scrambling to react and summon his Persona. Okuninushi launched from his body to intercept him, his blade raised up to block the downward swing of Camael's right arm. A powerful tremor resonated from the impact, and even for all Okuninushi's strength he was struggling under the titanic heft of just one of the angelic creature's arm.

The ground continued to rumble under the two, with Okuninushi fighting tooth and nail to halt Camael's advance. "Oracle!" Akira gasped. "What the hell is this thing?!"

Camael gave a sudden hard jerk of his arm, sliding Okuninushi back by his heels. It left the looming Persona wide open as Camael's left leg swung up sharply and struck him in the ribs, knocking Okuninushi away. Akira gave a pained gasp, falling hard to one knee.

Futaba narrowed her eyes behind her goggles as she continued to inspect the looming monster. "I...
I don't know... It's not a Stand, b-but it's different to any of the Shadows we've seen so far! And its power is huge!

As Camael rushed him, Akira found himself rolling to the side to avoid a giant fist striking the ground where he had been standing moments ago. Camael growled, only to grow still as a spray of bullets bounced off his armoured shoulder. He turned slightly, shooting a firm glare to Ann as she lowered her tommy gun.

Just as he started to move, Shiho gave a harsh cry as Aradia fired a volley of blessed daggers that exploded against Camael's body. However they immediately fizzled away on contact without leaving a single mark on the creature.

"Immune to bless," Makoto murmured, making a mental note.

Camael rocketed toward Shiho, the young ninja narrowly dodging as his ironclad fist drove through the wall behind her and sent a cobweb of cracks racing out from the point of impact. However before Shiho could think herself safe, Camael's left wing snapped out and drove into her, hitting her like a brick wall and leaving her crying out as her body scraped along the ground. Her body tore up several boards in passing before she came to a halt, groaning and laying still.

"Nem!" Ryuji snapped as he rose to his full height, azure fire lighting up around his feet.

A wave of superheated flame shot out from Hecate's familiars, the fire wall washing over Camael like an explosive tide that spread over the wall in front of him until that entire region was coated in molten sludge. Even so Camael started moving through the flames, grunting and growling as he turned his hulking body toward Ann.

Camael slammed both of his hands together, unleashing a deafening boom that rattled the tunnel around them. The burst of air split the incoming wave of fire in half and drove into Ann, sweeping her off her feet and leaving her smacking back-first into the opposite wall, gasping harshly in pain.

In an instant Seiten Taisei and Kamu Susano'o closed the gap, bursting through the shockwave of air pressure. Seiten Taisei's cudgel slammed into the side of Camael's head, his feet sinking several inches into the fracturing ground. Kamu Susano'o swung his helix sword down, the sharpened edge colliding powerfully against Camael's upraised right wing and sending a spray of sparks out from the point of contact.

While their two most physically imposing Personae continued their rain of blows, only occasionally managing to break through Camael's guard, Akira stood up and took a moment to assess the situation. "Even Ann's fire attacks only managed to singe him... this thing is pretty damn tough."

Seiten Taisei's staff drove into Camael's face, before the looming monkey let out a powerful shriek. A glowing blaze of lightning lit up his body, followed immediately by a tremendous explosion of lightning that exploded down the cudgel and engulfed Camael's body. He twitched, growling slightly under the powerful current before his right fist drove up in a mighty uppercut. Seiten Taisei was catapulted upward, smashing into the roof with such force that Ryuji cried out in pain, nearly losing his balance from the powerful jolting force.

"Resistant to electricity too," Makoto said, her eyes widening.

"We might just have to stick to physical attacks at this rate," Sergio remarked. He helped Shiho to
stand upright, before diverting all his focus to the looming dark angel.

Kamu Susano'o drove his blade down, his sword glowing a red hot shade with an arc of light following the path of his swing. It slammed into Camael's exposed chest, the rest of the energy arc shooting over his shoulder. His giant slice rattled the ground beneath the two, while the majority of the swing left a thin diagonal scar trailing down his grey chest. Camael took a step back, staggered slightly from the pain of the impact.

Camael recovered quickly, taking a sudden and firm step forward in the blink of an eye. His metallic left arm slammed into Susano'o's chest, and in the distance Yusuke's body was lifted a few inches off the ground from the phantom impact. His eyes bulged out of his head, a breathless, strangled gasp leaving him before he collapsed in a heap on the ground.

"Fox!" Akira gasped. "Sting, Queen, I need you two to tend to him. Skull, catch your breath and let Nemesis amp you up! Noir, Panther, I need you two on me... we're gonna light this bastard up like a Christmas tree!"

The ground cracked under Akira's feet, a powerful flex of his own power causing a gale to stir around him. Okuninushi vanished, swiftly being replaced by Arsene's crimson form. Camael watched closely and flung his beefy right arm out, the length of barbed wire suddenly elongating and rapidly racing out toward Arsene's airborne body. The winged demon cackled, weaving away from the incoming length of woven steel.

"If bless attacks bounce right off him, let's see how this 'angel' likes a little curse!"

Arsene's hands shot downward in unison, a black and red flash surging out and slamming into Camael's wings. The creature screamed as the powerful wave of energy engulfed him, bringing him sharply down to one knee. Just as Akira had thought.

Arsene threw two more explosive bolts of curse energy into the swirling hellstorm below, the quakes rocking the tunnels around them growing progressively more intense. He took a moment to glance over his shoulder, watching as Morgana and Yusuke fully righted themselves. Good, they'd be at full strength again soon.

Something suddenly shot out of the inferno, moving so quickly that Akira barely got a glimpse of it before it coiled around Arsene's left leg. The barbed wire! Before Akira could move to recall his Persona, Camael gave a hard swing that flung Arsene around until he smashed into Hecate. Ann cried out as she struck the wall again, landing roughly on her side and gasping harshly.

Akira grimaced, feeling a tremor of pain roll through the right side of his body. His pain only grew as Camael lashed Arsene into the ceiling, creating a deep crater with his makeshift flail. Before he could even process that sensation, the mysterious Shadow twirled Arsene around and finally released his grip and sent Arsene flying, the winged Persona slamming into Milady. Haru and Akira cried out in unison, powerful shocks of pain rocking both of them.
"You are a powerful adversary indeed, Trickster. Stronger than I had anticipated, but..." Camael marched through the smoke with a series of heavy, ponderous footsteps. The flesh of his body was streaked with several black blisters, while his armour was charred black with smoke and melting in some areas. A beam of blessed light shot from his right palm and slammed into Akira's chest, making him yell in pain as his back struck the hard ground. "You are not as lethal as some want to believe. Still, for every victory you attain, for every Shadow you and your allies slay, you absorb more power. Your potential is high."

Camael raised his arms up, an ethereal white aura wrapping around his body. The fleshy parts of his body started to bulge outward, thick black veins straining under stone grey skin. It grew more intense until three different flashes of light washed over him: One red, one purple, and one green.

Shizuka's eyes widened and she took a shaky step back. "T-that technique! He just boosted all his stats!" she gasped. "Oh my God! And I thought he was overpowered before! We gotta get something in between him and Joker!"

In a flash Camael lunged forward, moving so quickly that he became invisible to mortal eyes. The dark angel rapidly rushed toward Akira's prone form as the dark haired boy was struggling to get back up, fighting against throbs of pain rolling through him. Another beam of light shot from Camael's palms, only barely avoiding Akira's left arm as he deftly rolled along the ground to avoid it.

Even so, this wouldn't give him much cover. He could feel Camael's broad shadow fall over him, could hear the sonic shriek of his rapidly approaching fists. He'd need to act fast before he got turned into a smear on the ground.

Or not, as it turned out. Before Akira could make another move, a massive black bulk flew over him and suddenly drove into Camael's body. Akira only barely got a glimpse of the two figures suddenly driving into a tiled wall, kicking up twin clouds of dust at Camael's sides. It was only when the second figure stopped moving that Akira could tell what it was that had slammed into the hulking Shadow.

It wasn't Seiten Taisei. Or Kamu Susano'o. It wasn't even Breakthru. It was Necronomicon!

Futaba gave a loud cry from inside her cockpit, both her hands driving forward to amplify Necronomicon's thrusting speed. The runes of the flying saucer's body glowed brighter as the wall behind Camael cracked and split further, the circular section of the ship whirring faster like a gigantic sawblade. "I'm not going to let you kill any of my friends! Necronomicon, full steam ahead!"

Camael growled, struggling against the tremendous bulk driving his body into the wall with all the force and speed of a freight train. A few cracks broke out along his legs and metal arm, wrought from the intense pressure crushing down upon him.

There was a sudden boom as Camael's left foot drove into Necronomicon's underside, the immense strength of the blow catapulting the flying saucer into the ceiling. Futaba screamed, feeling her ship carve a trench through the decaying brickwork, before her Persona ricocheted off the ceiling and slammed into the opposite wall. Necronomicon went still, neon lights flickering along the hull.

"So that's what... physical pain feels like," Futaba grunted, struggling so sit upright in the cockpit. She was stuck slightly askew, her vision swimming. "It's a lot more... immediate than... emotional pain..." she noted.
"Oracle!" Queen called out. "We gotta get that thing away from her!" In a flash Johanna had formed under her, with Shizuka and Morgana quickly hopping onto the back of the ivory motorbike. The engine roared as it shot down the tunnel like a bullet, able to fully see Camael's winged bulk closing in on Necronomicon.

Futaba grimaced. Necronomicon was still trying to work up the energy to pull free from the wreckage she had been driven into, and it was doubtful Necronomicon's tentacles could do much against Camael's might.

The redhead swallowed hard, closing her eyes and bracing for the impact. She could only hope her friends would intercept it in time!

Everything went silent around her.

Then, suddenly, she could hear muffled sounds of civilian chatter around her. Futaba popped her left eye open and immediately realized she wasn't seated in Necronomicon in some darkened corner of Mementos. She was standing in some isolated corridor in the Tokyo subway!

"What the..." Futaba raised her arms, inspecting the green sleeves of her fur-lined jacket. So she was even back to her real world clothing, instead of her phantom bodysuit. "What just happened?" Futaba asked herself in a low whisper. She was fortunate that this quiet corridor was positioned away from the crowds, or she'd be even more freaked out right now.

She had been downed, unable to move as Camael closed in on her. Necronomicon couldn't move, but it was designed to reflexively protect Futaba from harm. So unable to move, and not having the strength to beat Camael away, it must have... Futaba gave a gasp of realization.

"Oh you sneaky son of a..." Futaba grimaced as she fully stood up, feeling pangs of soreness resonate through her petite body. Necronomicon, needing to protect her, had called upon its power to shunt her out of the Metaverse and back into the real world for her own protection. "We are not ditching the others Necro! I'm not letting my friends die to that thing!"

She drew her phone from her pocket and quickly brought up the Nav app. With how things were going, Futaba knew they'd likely have to beat a hasty retreat.

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Jun Itsuki found himself going over the array of papers on his desk for about the tenth time that evening, putting the story together in his head. Before him was every detail he had been able to assemble during his investigation of Morioh, specifically trying to piece together the origins of one Shizuka Joestar.

It had certainly not been easy, as one could imagine. He was looking into a cold case from nearly two decades ago, where information about what had transpired was hard to come upon. Even the Foundation's resources were stymied in places.

The balding man slid his half-moon spectacles up his hooked nose, deep green eyes inspecting a small stack of papers in his hands. He had started simple, looking into every missing persons case in Morioh from 1999. It had been a goddamn eventful year, and Yoshikage Kira's handiwork (no pun intended) had left quite a stack of such cases in that year. But of all the reports Jun went through, there was none that pertained to an infant girl.
It stuck out in Jun's mind because, when he tried to think about it, he really couldn't think of anything other than a Stand-user being involved with Shizuka's parents. Yeah there were scumbags in the world, people who would callously abandon their kids, but that didn't mean there wouldn't be records about that child's existence. Shizuka's parents may have abandoned her, but there must have been some records of her birth.

And so Jun got to thinking: What if Shizuka wasn't from Morioh initially? Josuke and Joseph had apparently found her by a roadside on the outskirts of town, and she hardly crawled all that way solely by her own. It drove him to canvas that area, everything in that vicinity from around 1999.

Jun sank into his swivelling chair, joints creaking at his movements. He took just a moment to loosen his scarlet tie, breathing a modest huff. It might have been September, but humidity was still hanging around this town. He tried to ignore it for now and brought up a slightly aged map, outlining Morioh and its neighbouring areas, dated back to 1999. A few areas had been circled with red ink.

Expanding his search out from Morioh to its neighbours brought up seven reports of missing children from that time of year, but only one stuck out to Jun: A case that not only involved but a missing baby, but missing parents too.

Hiroki and Natsuki Sugiura, and their baby daughter Kiyoko.

Hiroki's grandparents had filed the report some time after Shizuka was found by the Joestars, but as the parents didn't live in Morioh the police didn't search there particularly thoroughly. It didn't help that there was no information on Shizuka, not even a picture of what she looked like. Even if there was, her invisibility would make comparisons rather hard.

So Jun had been able to find a potential candidate for Shizuka and her birth parents. But what had happened to them? People vanishing without a trace left one strong suspect in Jun's mind: Yoshikage Kira.

Fortunately he caught a break in that regard. In his investigation Jun had been pointed toward a young crime analyst by the name of Hayato Kawajiri, a man who had gathered meticulous records of everything Yoshikage Kira had done between 1983 and 1999. He had apparently been a victim of Kira and had wanted to keep a record of every heinous act the man had committed.

Though Kira was long dead, and the families wouldn't understand what had happened to their lost loved ones, perhaps Hayato had worked to create these records to provide some sort of closure on Kira's victims.

As it turned out, Kira had been out of Morioh for a brief period roughly around the time Shizuka was found. Business from Kame Yu, in which he had to go from the Morioh branch to the offices in the next town over. No doubt he was displeased at having to leave the town, even briefly, but Kira was a measured and rational nutcase. He wasn't going to defy and murder his boss over something so utterly minor. According to Hayato, it was perhaps one of the only times where Kira had left the town for any length of time, even if the trip was exceptionally minor.

The day before Shizuka was found, Hiroki and Natsuki had rented a room at a modest hotel, spending the night there en route to their hometown. Jun paid particular focus to this circled section of his map, before glancing to a photocopied page Hayato had given him. Kira had made use of the same hotel on his own way back to Morioh.
Then, going through police records, there had been noise complaints from some of the residents in the early hours of the morning. It all painted a grim picture.

Piecing together what he knew so far, this was what Jun came to suspect was what happened to Shizuka's parents: Sometime after midnight, Kira's killer urges got the better of him and drove him toward the nearby room of a young couple.

The husband likely went down first, reduced to atoms by Killer Queen's explosive power. At that point Natsuki, aware that something was very fucking wrong, grabbed her baby girl and ran off into the rising dawn. But Kira wasn't the type to leave loose ends and doubtless would have taken off after her. He probably expected them to be asleep, but something must have woken one of them upon his entry.

It must have been chaotic. Running for her life with only a few pinpricks of sunlight breaking out over the horizon. Even an infant would know something was very wrong, and the panic of her mother whisking her through the dark... well, poor baby Kiyoko probably activated her latent Stand abilities purely on a reflex, desperate for self preservation.

After that, the details Jun had were a bit hazy. But it was safe to say that whatever parent had ran off with the baby was dead. Kira likely couldn't find Kiyoko, didn't know she even existed, or decided there was no need to worry about an infant witness. Whatever the case, the baby had gotten away as the morning started to dawn, and soon after was found by Joseph Joestar. The rest, as they say, was history.

Presumably at least. Jun sank back in his chair, his tired eyes raking over the row of papers before him. Maybe he was way off. Maybe there was some other obscure case that explained everything, and his Kira scenario was way off. A lot of this was based on conjecture and the bits of information that seemed to make sense to him.

Well, nothing else he found pointed to another possible suspect for Shizuka's true name/identity. And with the case so cold, conjecture was really all he had. It wasn't like Kira's ghost was still hanging around to offer his insights on that night.

Still, poor Shizuka. She was an orphan twice over, with no living parents to call her own. He wished he had more positive news to send her way, but Jun wasn't a miracle worker.

He'd have to make copies of the information he had, just in case anything happened to the report he had compiled in transit. Once he had done that, Jun would be set to send this report along in a few days time.

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"BAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZU!"

Houdini's rapidfire blows rained down against the sides of Camael's head at a shocking speed, the impacts echoing noisily out from the points of impact. While the punches weren't strong enough to harm Camael, the noise reverberating powerfully in his ears made Camael snarl and snap his wings outward to drive Houdini away.

The golden Stand moved with impressive quickness, weaving away from the bladed edges and turning invisible. Camael staggered in the aftermath of the assault, leaving him open as an arc of
nuclear energy lanced down the tunnel from Johanna's front wheel. It exploded powerfully against Camael and sent him skidding several inches backward.

Makoto took advantage of the opening, giving Johanna a few powerful revs that echoed around her. Another arc of energy exploded outward from Johanna, closing in on Camael. However this time he managed to swiftly react, waving his bulk off to the side to avoid the surging wave. His right foot slammed into a chunk of debris like a makeshift soccer ball, catapulting it rapidly toward Makoto. Despite her best efforts to avoid it, it still shattered against her right shoulder and knocked her on her back, making Makoto cry out.

Camael took a few swift steps forward and fired a bolt of blessed light from his palms, the energy racing toward the downed brunette. However Houdini quickly scooped the brunette up and vanished in the blink of an eye right after, Camael's attack exploding against a blank patch of gravel-strewn ground.

With how things had been going, Akira didn't see them pulling a win out of this. They had managed to hurt the giant, no doubt, but as his eyes glanced over his friends, he could see fatigue starting to set in on them. They had all taken a crack at Camael, but for all the damage they had inflicted on him he had been swift to return the favour. Even Makoto's healing hadn't done much to help them keep up.

"Guys! Guys!" Futaba's echoing voice caused Akira to glance over his shoulder to watch as Necronomicon's floating form rapidly darted toward the group. "I'm so so sorry! Necronomicon dragged me out to save my butt, even though I didn't wanna go!"

"It's alright," Akira assured her. "Thanks for the save earlier... you really haven't missed out on much though. We might just have to bug out of here."

Meanwhile, Camael suddenly found himself caught in the path of a green whirlwind that stirred up the debris around him. His bloodshot eyes glanced ahead, catching sight of Morgana's diminutive form as lashes of razor-sharp wind lashed into his battle-scarred body. Suddenly the winds grew more intense, stirring up chunks of rock larger than Camael's head.

"Alright you overgrown golem! If you think you can get away with hurting my team, you have another thing coming! Crush him Zorro!" The hulking figure floating above Morgana gave a sudden flourish of his rapier, the cone of wind around Camael suddenly contracting. The looming angel charged forward as a tide of wreckage slammed into his upraised wings, several of the bladed feathers becoming warped under the flux of pressure. He snarled in a mix of pain and anger as he charged toward Morgana several bladed feathers shooting off his wings and making a beeline to the chibi-sized thief.

Morgana barely jumped away from the incoming blades before Camael's silver-coated hand shot up and caught the cat by the neck, making him gag from the flux of pressure. "Mona!" Futaba gasped. Kamu Susano'o raced forward, Yusuke's breathing slightly ragged.

Camael looked at Morgana with what could only be described as contempt. "Hope is a weak and fleeting feeling. It is a lie that humans use when they cannot handle the truth." There was a powerful clash as Kamu Susano'o collided with Camael's wings, the immense pressure sinking the angels feet into the ground. "It is weakness. And soon that weakness shall be expunged, building something stronger. I am born of something far more powerful than hope."

"The hell... are you... talking about..." Morgana wheezed.
Camael's wings snapped backward, launching Kamu Susano'o into the wall behind him, pulling a strangled gasp from Yusuke. Camael raised his free hand, clenching it into a tight fist.

However before he could make another move, something abruptly swept across the ground and drove into Camael's ankles: A beam of warped steel flung forward by a sudden charge of momentum. Breakthru's attack swept Camael's feet beneath him, with Morgana's groaning form promptly being caught by Shiho. The young ninja jumped back just as Camael regained his footing.

Camael wasn't given much time to move before something struck both of his temples, making him snarl from a resounding echo in his brain. He twirled sharply, Houdini deftly ducking under his swinging arm. The golden figure raised up the torn sections of railing in her hands and slammed them into the sides of Camael's head once more, staggering him. Then, just to make sure she had covered her bases, Shizuka took advantage of the opening and delivered a hard blow from the railings into Camael's crotch.

No reaction. So much for that.

Houdini jumped back as Camael lunged at her, his powerful fist driving into the ground with an earth-shaking force. "Can't hit what you can't see!" Shizuka called, Houdini promptly turning invisible. However Camael put his impressive speed to good use, giving a hard sweep of his leg that kicked up a vast cloud of dust where Houdini had been mere moments ago. It outlined the golden Persona for just a second, but in that second Camael shot forward and delivered a crushing right hook to Houdini's stomach.

Shizuka cried out, being flung off her feet until her back slammed into the ground. Her eyes were wide, powerful wheezes escaping her. Makoto and Akira were soon at her sides, trying to help her up. "S-so strong... n-nothing... nothing's ever h-hit me that hard before," Shizuka wheezed. Pain racked her body. She doubted she could send Houdini in again without risking a far more permanent injury.

"It's okay, you're alright," Makoto assured her. She grimaced at the pain in her own shoulder before glancing to Akira. "Joker, I don't think we can win this... We need to pull back."

"I agree," Akira murmured. "But..." With Breakthru and Seiten Taisei holding Camael's attention, he took the time to scan their surroundings. They needed an opportunity to put some distance between themselves and Camael, but how? He let his attention focus on the crumbling ceiling over them, war-torn from having several people bounced into it. "We need to collapse that. But we'll also need to stun him too so we can get a headstart."

"I might... have an idea," Shizuka breathed. "Fox... Nemesis, I need you guys," She called.

Yusuke was grimacing as he came over, the prettyboy bluenette looking a bit banged up. "I should hope you all have a plan. That beast is flossing his teeth with us..." he admitted.

Shiho skidded to a halt next to the group and took a moment to gently set Morgana down. Makoto gave him a modest pat on the head, with Morgana purring in approval. "You need my help? I've been giving out buffs, but that's all I can do against this thing. All Aradia's firepower bounces off him."

"Well yeah if you hit him directly... but for as tough as this guy is, his senses are still vulnerable.
Oi, Fox, how good at you when it comes to sculpting ice mirrors?" she asked.

"You guys work quickly. I'll buy you some time... Come, Rangda!" Akira rose to his full height, his body flashing blue as Arsene vanished, replaced with another figure. This new Persona was slimmer than Arsene, but far more monstrous. Her fanged mask was worn over a pair of glinting bug eyes, a shaggy mane of dark hair flowing down her head like a cape. She had no legs to speak of, sporting a series of strange ornaments from the waist down. Her crimson arms were tipped by a series of worryingly long razor-sharp claws, glowing with black flames of curse energy. "Noir, I need you to help me keep him distracted. Everyone else, pull back here."

Seiten Taisei's cudgel drove into Camael's face, a few small cracks breaking out along the metal coating his forehead. He swung his right fist down in a hard swing, knocking Seiten Taisei away and earning a pained snarl from Ryuji.

Sergio and Breakthru were still working hard to hold his attention, with the large-fisted Stand charging and flinging the chunks of debris at Camael's feet. The large chunks slammed into the looming figure, exploding off him and seeming to disturb his footing, but it wasn't enough to really slow Camael down.

"What does it take to put this bastard down?!" Sergio asked in a mounting frustration. "I must have hit him with fifty tons of concrete by now, and it's only bruising him!"

Camael swept his right hand out, an arc of blessed light flying from his fingertips. It exploded against the ground, blowing Breakthru away and making Sergio grimace as he felt a few warm scars form on his chest.

"It would be foolish to underestimate you, and call you weak. After all, you have managed to injure me," Camael said, metal fingers dragging along the wrinkled surface of his chest, grazing twisted burns and lumps of hardened scar tissue. "But it is clear that you are starting to tire, while I have energy to spare. Thus I shall end this an-" he paused, watching as Rangda's floating form made a beeline toward him. Camael moved aside, raising his left hand and firing off a beam of gleaming holy light.

However the beam seemed to pass right through Rangda, the monstrous figure turning into a flickering afterimage that rapidly vanished. Camael fired another volley of beams at Rangda's encroaching form, only for his attacks to once more miss the mark by mere seconds. It seemed she was a bit swifter than Arsene.

A sudden haze of purple and yellow sparks suddenly clashed around Camael's head, making his whole body grow rigid. His loud snarls echoed down the tunnel, his balance swaying as he fought against the sharp psionic stabs of Milady's mental assault. It left Camael open long enough for Rangda to close the gap.

Sharp claws raked along the small of Camael's back, leaving deep black scorches in passing. Camael stumbled off balance and tried to swing around to strike the beastly witch, but with Milady's power acting on him Camael's momentum was thrown off and his swing went wide. Rangda pressed her assault, more powerful scrapes rushing along Camael's legs and chest, leaving black marks in passing. Even so he stood tall, the various injuries not enough to topple Camael.

"Guys, we're set!" Shizuka called.

As she said this, Camael suddenly flexed his body outward, a flash of blessed energy radiating his
body and forcing Rangda to recoil with smoke hissing from her body. Akira grit his teeth, his balance threatening to give out utterly on him.

Before Camael could make another move, something abruptly became visible a few feet in front of him, a pyramid of ice that was almost as tall as his body. The ice was immaculately clean, the interior filled with many other clear surfaces that all seemed perfectly positioned inside the frosty confines.

"Wha-" Camael's eyes widened slightly.

"Now Aradia!" Shiho yelled.

A golden flash of energy shone from Aradia's palms and raced toward the pyramid, the beam seeming to bounce between several dozen points inside it in under a second. All those surfaces glowing and magnifying the same light many times over, well that pyramid soon wound up like a second sun flashing up in front of Camael and setting the whole tunnel alight. The thieves recoiled to spare their own vision, while Camael screamed as he was briefly blinded by the white hot flash. The pyramid of ice melted very quickly under the flux of heat, but it gave them the opening they needed.

Akira summoned his remaining strength, guiding Rangda to fire a bullet of fire straight up at the crumbling ceiling. The tunnel rumbled a final time as a veritable mountain of warped concrete and steel rained down, forming a dense blockade

By the time Camael's vision evened out, he was aware that the Phantom Thieves had already vanished down the tunnel they previously came through. They were running, and catching up with them before they made a full escape would be a challenge.

Camael glanced down at his wounds and hummed in thought. It was perhaps best not to risk it in his current state anyway. He had spent more power than he had expected, and the young Thieves were stronger than he would have liked. Even so, this little test seemed to put Camael's mind at ease.

If they couldn't best an angel, what hope did they have against almighty God?

The Trickster would no doubt grow stronger in time, possibly even strong enough to best the Other in their fast approaching clash. But it wouldn't be enough to save him if he tried to fight the will of the world.

Still... perhaps it couldn't hurt to stack the deck a little further against the rebels? Camael decided to put these thoughts to bed for the time being, silently making his way into the darkness of Mementos. For now he needed to heal, and he would need the help of the Holy Grail for that.
There was a slightly tense atmosphere in the hideout by the time they all gathered at the long table. The group had been quiet for the past few minutes, nursing their sore bodies and equally wounded pride. Makoto and Morgana had been able to heal up the worst of their injuries, but sore muscles lingered through the group.

Eventually Shizuka moved to speak, leaning forward slightly as she did so. "So... does anyone have any idea on what the fuck that was? I'll be picking pieces of floor out of my teeth for weeks with how hard we were used to mop it."

"I really dunno," Futaba murmured, slowly rubbing her temples. "That thing was a Shadow, but unlike other Shadows this one was... smart. Usually they're only capable of simple speech and basic coordination in groups. But this one was articulate, and was smart enough to lay a trap. More than that, it was like... every other Shadow moved out of the way to avoid him."

"What uh... what was the deal with you vanishing mid-fight?" Ryuji asked, not looking up from the table as he slowly massaged his forehead. Seiten Taisei could take a lot of abuse, but it all piled up in the end.

Futaba shrugged. "I didn't do it on purpose. But I kind of got stuck in a wall, and Necronomicon... well my Persona tries to automatically defend me any way it can. With our options limited, he kind of just 'pushed' us through the barrier of Mementos and the real world. It sapped a bit of power from us, but it worked," the hacker explained.

"I envy you," Yusuke remarked. In his hand he was holding a small plastic bag that had several ice cubes born from his own power resting inside, the chilly material pressing against the side of his face.

After a moment, Akira directed his attention to Morgana. The feline was seated on the table a few inches away from the dark-haired boy, vigorously washing behind his ears. "Hey Morgana, that Camael guy... he seemed to know you. Or at least, he had a fancy speech saved up for you. Any idea what the was about?"

"No idea... I've never seen anything like that in my whole life. Not that my memory goes back too far... And whatever he was talking about, it sounded like total nonsense to me," the feline explained. Still, his expression seemed markedly troubled. The idea that that winged monster knew anything about him was an unsettling one.

"Not like we can go back and ask him," Shiho mused. "He'd probably be more interested in killing us then making smalltalk."

"We'll need to be incredibly cautious if we go back to Mementos all the same. We got very lucky thanks to Shizuka's quick thinking, and I doubt the same trick would work twice," Makoto said. She gave Shizuka a light pat on the back, earning a giddy laugh from the young Joestar.

Akira nodded. "For now we're going to put our last few Mementos targets on hold, but if Futaba's right then we might have some luck detecting Camael if the other Shadows outright avoid him. With any luck, that thing will be exclusive to Mementos..." He sighed gently, reclining in his chair. "We managed to hurt him, but not by enough. We'll get stronger over time, same as ever, but for now we need to be careful."
Silence lingered in the room as the group chewed on their defeat. It could have been worse, but it could have been a whole lot better too.

Haru could see the tension in her friends, skittishly glancing from end to end of the table from her seat near the center-left side. "The important part is that we're all okay. And while we didn't beat that thing, we did well! If he hadn't taken us by surprise, we could have won. Now's not the time to start doubting our abilities," Haru said emphatically. She managed to draw a few eyes to her, quickly reeled in by the passion of her tone. "We're no stranger to hardships, but we've overcome everything put against us before now. We can overcome Camael too."

"Aw Haru... I wanna feel sore and miserable, but you're making that really difficult," Ann said, smiling fondly at the strawberry blonde girl. "You're right though... we did pretty good against that guy, even if we didn't win. If we go up against him again, we'll probably do better," she added.

"Yes, but I'm still in no rush to go for round two," Sergio added. He made a small humming sound, slowly stroking his chin. "Perhaps Shadows are just like that as we go lower into Mementos? I mean... we were rather low in there when we found him."

Futaba shook her head. "If there was more like that... heck, if every Shadow in the depths was anything like that, I would have sensed all that power a while ago. Right now at least, that guy seems one of a kind," the redhead explained.

"And thank God for that!" Ryuji quickly said.

Akira let out a modest laugh. He wasn't exactly thrilled with how today had gone, but he couldn't help but be a little amused at Ryuji. Even without meaning it, the blond managed to cheer Akira up. "Well, we'll leave Mementos for a few days. Fortunately those last requests were rather small in scope," he remarked.

"Plus, we should probably try and get another big target with their own Palaces. I mean I've been checking the Phan-site, but none of the names on there seem really... evil. Criminals sure, but we should probably only look at guys who might be in on this conspiracy."

"Yeah. One of the names I've seen mentioned a few times is uh... Izumi, or somethin'? He's the owner of some drugs company, and folks've been saying he's been overcharging on products," Ryuji remarked. "Scummy, sure, but that doesn't seem like the kinda thing that'd net a guy a Palace," he added.

"What we need to do is find another figure involved in this conspiracy. If it looks like he's been exposed, then Black Mask will come running again. Our job becomes much easier if we can keep him from taking out people who can name names," Akira said.

Haru nodded glumly. "And Father is still comatose... though Doctor Lifeson assures me his condition is rather stable," she explained, trying to put a happy spin on things. Though clearly it was harder than Haru would like to admit.

"Things will work out," Akira assured her, giving the strawberry blonde a warm smile. Haru tensed slightly. "For now we should take the next few days to rest and recover. I'm sure we're all feeling a little drained from that last fight, and we're a bit lacking in leads right now."

A faint smile crossed Makoto's face. "Something will come up. For now we should all try to keep some focus on the news online and on TV, see if any specific names or organizations come up. Someone might stick out that way."
"Right. But we need to be cautious on the street as well. There are forces hunting us here too, after all," Yusuke chimed. Not that any of them had forgotten the risks out here too, it would be rather difficult to when even their foreign vacation had been interrupted by an enemy attack.

Still, at least Camael wasn't in the real world. After everything they had been through, he presented the biggest physical threat so far.

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9/20

Having given the others an opportunity to rest up, Akira had a chance to catch up on social business in the real world too. In addition to being the field leader who guided and directed his friends in combat, and the one who ultimately decided what the Phantom Thieves did, he was also the man who largely dealt with the issues his friends were facing in the real world.

Not that he disliked doing it, or had any issues in getting involved with their problems. If anything it was in Akira's best interest to get involved, with how handling these issues made his allies stronger. And given that most people at Shujin were still afraid to even be near Akira's shadow, he was grateful to anyone who would give him the time of day.

Today Akira found himself working with Haru, the two of them checking the flowerbeds that had been constructed on the school roof and taking notes on the vegetables slowly sprouting up from the soil. The weather was starting to change now that they were on the cusp of October, and they'd soon need to change a few things around in the garden. But for now Haru assured him that everything was fine.

Akira positioned himself near a row of carrots, a notepad resting in his left hand while the right clutched a pen that he used to quickly scribble down notes on their growth. While these homegrown vegetables were still a bit misshapen compared to what one could find in a supermarket, the quality was gradually improving in terms of taste.

Sojiro hadn't exactly sugarcoated his opinions of Haru's vegetables early on (pretty girl or not, he was quite honest when it came to all things coffee and culinary), but she had taken his criticisms in stride and adapted well to them. He found a bit admirable, in truth.

"How are the carrots Aki-kun?" Haru called from the other end of the roof.

"All stable senpai," Akira replied, scribbling down the last of his notes. Really if anyone at Shujin knew that these two were hanging out, they would be beyond shocked. Even more shocked if they knew how Haru adressed her kohai. As it stood, Akira shuddered to think what people would make of the 'evil delinquent' slipping off to the roof with the sweet and innocent Okumura heiress.

Haru rounded the corner with her own notepad in her hands, a few smudges of dirt marking the sleeves of her red Shujin tracksuit. "Oh, good. And the flowers are doing well too. I just had to do a bit of work with the soil," she explained.

"Well, things are going smoothly here at least," Akira mused.

Haru smiled fondly at him as Akira rose to his full height. "We might need the others to help when October gets into full swing, but yes things are going well for now. But I must admit, it's very nice to have your assistance. I never thought I'd be enjoying my hobby with someone else..." Haru's cheeks pinkened slightly. "You've been a great help Aki-kun."

Akira smiled, giving a small shrug of his shoulders. "It's no trouble really, I just like helping. That
said, you're the real green thumb here Haru. The success of this garden is all your doing," he assured her.

His words had Haru positively tickled pink, despite her best efforts to appear calm and collected. "O-oh, that reminds me, I decided to take care of business with Sugimura."

Akira paused, glancing to the fence at the far end of the roof. Haru was perhaps the sweetest person he knew, like a fairy tale princess according to Shizuka, but in battle she did have a bit of a vicious streak to her. All of Milady's guns definitely weren't for show. "You uh... didn't kill him, right?" he asked, wondering what exactly she meant by 'take care.'

"Hm? Oh no, certainly not!" Haru quickly said. "I simply worked with some family lawyers and made it emphatically clear that I have no intention of marrying him, putting an end to our engagement. To tell the truth, after his encounter with Shizuka, I think he might have been a little glad."

"Wow, really? That's pretty daring of you," Akira said. "Why the sudden action?"

The young woman gave a dainty shrug of her shoulders. "I simply decided that I wouldn't be used in such a way. Even if Father goes back to being the man he was, I won't allow him to sell me off for his own gain. It's my choice," Haru said.

"I'm glad to hear that. And I'm proud of you... if you didn't handle that yourself, well Sugimura probably would have been on our target list," Akira said. He was small time, given his age, but no doubt a guy like that had some kind of Palace formed from his twisted thoughts.

"And, to tell the truth, I've been partially looking toward my future," Haru added. She leaned back against the roof access doorway. There was a wistful look on her face. "You see, if Father... ever recovers, he's likely going to confess all the crimes he was complicit in as soon as it seems safe to do so. And when that happens, he'll go to prison for a long time."

A sad frown crossed Akira's face. "It had to be done," he told her. Though he couldn't imagine it was easy for her to set these events in motion.

"I know. And I'm eternally grateful to you and the others for helping," Haru replied, smiling once more. "But that aside, it's left me aware of the future. The company will be in chaos, and I'll be expected to inherit things far sooner than anyone anticipated. Managing a company, trying to restore faith in our brand... it's going to be a lot of work, and I don't need that creep hanging over me like a horrible ghost with so much going on."

"Well, I'm proud of you. You stood up to him on your own and made an executive decision. If you are gonna own that company, well that's some handy initiative to have," Akira said, giving her a quick thumbs up. "That said, that guy... what a dumbass. I know arranged marriages aren't exactly romantic, but I just can't imagine what'd drive someone to try and mistreat you."

"Unfortunately, wealth and status can have that effect on people. Sugimura had that kind of prestige his whole life, and only ever wanted things done 'his way.' And before I met you, I was too afraid to try and defy him."

"It's... hehe... it's rather funny. He's so unused to people defying him, so when I stood up for myself he was left sputtering indignantly. Heh...! But, you do have a point Aki-kun."

Akira cocked his head to the right. "Hm? What do you mean?" he asked.

"About marriage, I mean." Haru pushed off the wall, taking a few steps toward him. She stopped a
few feet at his side, inspecting the beds of soil in front of her. "Maybe it speaks to me being naive, but I like to believe in marriage as being something saved for people in love. Not something to be done for financial or social gain. Ideally, wealth and class wouldn't factor in at all!"

Her leader nodded along slowly in understanding. "Well, that's true. I guess we got pretty lucky with you and Shizuka, eh? Well, mostly in Shizuka's case. She's not a snob, she's just strange," Akira mused. "But, you know, you're still in high school. No need to get too worried about things like marriage... especially since you're free of that arranged BS."

"That's also quite true!" Haru said, beaming a vibrant smile at Akira. This time it was Akira's turn to turn a bit pink around the cheeks. Haru's joy was a little infectious. "If you don't mind me speaking a little more personally, I've never really dated anyone before. And with me getting engaged earlier this year, I didn't have an opportunity to try it."

Akira closed his notebook and gently set it in a small box under a nearby table. "Well, you should try it out now that you have an opening."

"I believe I shall." Her cheeks turned a rosy shade, with the young heiress quickly glancing away from Akira. "To tell the truth, there's someone I have an... an interest in. He's kind and compassionate, but also unbelievably strong. I respect and admire him a good deal, and I owe him much. But... Well, I'm still working up the courage to say anything."

Akira's eyes widened considerably, as he realized something that the rest of his team had likely picked up on some time ago. So this was what it felt like to be Ryuji.

'Oh.'

Haru's phone abruptly chimed inside her track jacket, causing Haru to swiftly take it from her pocket. "Ah, I'm getting a call from some of the house staff... I should take it. With Father still hospitalized, I have to handle a lot of the affairs at home," Haru remarked, raising her phone to her ear and answering curtly.

So a girl on Akira's team had a crush on him. Between this and the giant angel monster, this was just a week of surprises.

But how was he going to proceed from here?

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The prospect of Haru having a crush on him had been weighing on Akira's mind for the rest of the day, following him home and occupying his thoughts as he handled some late evening duties at Leblanc. The sun had set outside, and the last of their regulars had filtered out for the evening, leaving Akira and Sojiro alone to tend to the cafe.

Perhaps Haru hadn't been talking about him? But then, who else would she be interested in? Not Ryuji, Haru wasn't the sort who would go after a guy who was already taken. Not Morgana, by virtue of Morgana being a cat. Sergio? Well, he did have that 'charming foreigner' thing going for him, and even Akira would admit that the blond cut a handsome figure. Yusuke was another possible candidate, he did have his own prettyboy look. On the other hand, would he even be the sort to go for a relationship?

If Haru was attracted to him, then Akira had to wonder how he felt about the strawberry blonde. Akira pondered this as he scooped two empty coffee cups from the far left booth onto a modest tray, which he promptly brought over to the sink to wash them out.

Well, Haru was undeniably pretty. And genuinely one of the sweetest, kindest people Akira knew.
She was rather smart too, with how Makoto talked about her grades (And Makoto certainly kept track of everyone's grades, even Sergio and Yusuke to their eternal confusion). More than that there was a great strength under her sweet demeanor. There was plenty to admire, when he thought about it.

Of course it was entirely possible he was imagining things, and that she was interested in someone else. In which case Akira didn't want to jump to conclusions.

The bell above Leblanc's door chimed loudly, distracting Akira from his work. "Sorry, we're just closing an-" Sojiro's sudden stop caused Akira to glance over his shoulder. He could see the distaste in Sojiro's expression, aimed at the newcomer casually strolling into the cafe.

Akira recognised the man, even if it had been some time since he saw him. Thinking back, it must have been May when he first saw this guy, and Sojiro had been just as displeased to see him then too. Not that Sojiro wanted to explain anything back then.

He was a large man, broadly-built and middle aged with his thinning hair hidden under a grey cap. His flabby face and thick neck trailed into a padded black jacket, while the trousers he wore were shabby and low rent, as were his scuffed boots. If Akira were to hazard a guess, he had the look of a chronic gambler who was no stranger to losing streaks. Cruelty lingered in his eyes. "Sakura-san, long time no see!"

"As I said, sir, we're closing for the evening," Sojiro said, moving out from the booth. He wasn't making much of an attempt to hide the contempt in his tone. Akira watched the situation carefully, slowly dabbing his fingers on his pale apron to dry them.

"So hostile! No wonder you're so thin on customers," the mysterious man remarked. Akira watched him warily. There was something in his eyes, his body language, and his tone that went against the pleasant exterior he put on. He was just like Kamoshida: A cruel creep wearing an inviting, smiling mask. "So, have you been considering my offer?"

Sojiro narrowed his eyes behind his glasses. "I told you before, I'm not giving you a cent! You already got plenty from me, and if you lost it all in the gutters then that's your own damn fault."

Akira remained silent. What was all this about? Akira didn't have the faintest idea, but Sojiro wasn't the sort of guy who would give money to scum like this without a good reason. Slowly but surely, Arsene was creeping behind the bar, set to move in if this stranger got violent.

"Oh? Come on Sakura-san, don't be so difficult. I'd sure hate to cause trouble for you, but I guess I could take you to court if I had to. And family court definitely wouldn't take too kindly to you if they take one look at Futaba's case."

The mention of Futaba made Akira's whole body tense. 'How the hell does he know about her?' Still he remained silent, biting his tongue in case he made things worse.

"She's been living as a shut-in for... what, two years? I hear she's not even enrolled in high school! Poor show Sakura-san, not good signs indeed... and then there's this boy!" He pointed to Akira, who glared at him in turn. "A delinquent with a criminal record? Doesn't seem like a safe idea to have Futaba living anywhere near him!"

Sojiro was trying to keep his cool, but Akira could see the anger bristling under his skin. "And you think the court would look favorably on you, after how you treated her? Like Hell would I let y-"

The bell above the door rang again, and Akira felt a sense of dread wash over him as he saw Futaba
casually stroll in. "Sojiro, I-" Futaba's smile faded as soon as she saw the stranger, her eyes widening. She froze up near the far end of the counter, her lithe body trembling. "I... I..." Even from afar, Akira could hear her voice cracking.

"You see that? Leaving her in your care has clearly been a terrible idea! The girl's a nervous wreck!"

Akira narrowed his eyes, slowly and steadily making his way around the counter. "Futaba," Akira murmured, trying to suppress the urgency in his tone as he moved around the cruel stranger. In one quick flourish he managed to grip Futaba's hand and pulled her over until she was clinging to his back, still trembling as Akira slowly made his way back toward the staircase.

He could feel the strength in Futaba's grip as she held his hand. A normal man probably would have had their fingers snapping under the pressure. Akira silently endured, protectively positioning an arm at his side to make sure Futaba was safe.

"She's acting that way because you scare the crap out of her, you rat bastard! You're lucky I don't knock you out on your ass!" Sojiro snapped. He had been restraining himself well, but seeing Futaba afraid had been enough to shatter that restraint.

"G-..." Akira felt Futaba grip his hand even tighter. "Get out of here, and don't come back!" the redhead abruptly shouted.

Hearing her snap at him seemed to dissolve the stranger's pleasant facade, causing him to glare toward her and Akira. "Oh? Speaking up are we? Come a little closer and say that again you mouthy little-" He had started toward the two, but after making only a few steps forward, Arsene gave him a sudden and hard kick to the shins that knocked his feet out from under him. The stranger hit the ground hard, as if he had simply slipped on the ground.

"Throwing threats out in here? Can't have that. I'm going to have to ask you to leave," Akira said, his tone ice cold.

"You delinquent shit!" the stranger said, grunting as he struggled to rise to his feet. "I don't know how you did it, but you knocked me down! I'm going to sue this place for every last cent!"

"You fell on your own, dumbass!" Akira snapped, narrowing his eyes at the stranger. Arsene was looming a few inches in front of the aggressive stranger, set to smack him down again at the first sign of trouble. "And you're even dumber than you look if you think we don't have security cameras here!" Well, more like spy cameras installed by Futaba, but it still kept Leblanc monitored.

"You... you little!"

"Shut it!" Akira shouted. "Save your threats for someone who gives a crap! Try anything and you'll be laughed out of court!" For a moment a bit of fear streaked across the stranger's face, a shiver running through him under Akira's fierce glare. Akira's anger was a rare sight, but he had plenty of it buried away. He was quick to pull himself off the floor and scampered outside, the bell ringing loudly in his passing. Akira slowly straightened himself, feeling the boiling anger in his body slowly mellow out. "Futaba, are you alright?" he asked, glancing over his shoulder at her.

The trembling young woman nodded rapidly, even though her eyes were still screwed tight.

"Christ kid, didn't think you could raise your voice at all... Guess the quiet ones really are the scariest," Sojiro remarked in some surprise. "Futaba, could you wait upstairs a sec? I need to take care of a few things here, and then I'll take you home."
"O-okay," Futaba replied. With some difficulty she released her grip on Akira, making her way upstairs with quick, silent footsteps.

Once they were alone, Akira shot Sojiro a sideways glance. "Who the hell was that?" he asked, struggling to keep a level tone.

"You have a right to know... this is your home too, after all," Sojiro remarked. He removed his glasses, slowly wiping the lenses with his apron. "That man was... Futaba's uncle. And the person who originally took her in after Wakaba's death."

"I really sensed the familial affection," Akira flatly replied.

Sojiro sighed. "Right. Well as you can imagine, the reading of Wakaba's suicide note generated some... friction in Futaba's family, and none of her relatives wanted to take her in. It fell to Wakaba's brother, but he wasn't exactly a kind man. He mistreated Futaba horribly, barely fed her, let her live in squalor..." He shook his head as he slowly slid his glasses up his thin nose. "I couldn't take it. So, I wound up paying him a considerably sum of money to adopt Futaba away from him. Seems the money has dried up by now though," he explained.

As Sojiro spoke, Akira glanced to the door and fought an impulse to go back after that prick and let Arsene cut loose. Not that that would solve anything in the long run. "Of course, if you start giving him money, then he's just going to keep coming back," Akira mused.

"Right. But for as slimy as he is, he has a point. Futaba being a shut-in would be a pretty big strike against me in family court, that damn Prosecutor said as much in the past. Plus he's a blood relative, which is another strike," Sojiro said.

"You can't just..." Akira dropped his tone to a low grumble. "You can't just let that asshole have his way."

"I don't want to, obviously. But..." Sojiro trailed off and slowly folded his arms over his chest. "Well, I'll think of something. I appreciate you defending Futaba like that, but you should try and keep your cool in the future. Flying off the handle and attacking him, as cathartic as it'd be, won't help..." He could see a flicker of displeasure on Sojiro's face, and Akira couldn't blame him for it. On the one hand he had protected Futaba, but on the other he had nearly flown off the handle at the guy, which could prove problematic in the long run. The former, thankfully, outweighed the latter.

Akira felt his lips pull back into a long, thin frown. "You think he'll be back?" the dark-haired boy asked.

Sojiro nodded slowly. "Most likely. You wounded his pride by scaring him off, and he'll likely stew on that for a while. But eventually his need for money will bubble up, and he'll come back with more threats. Don't worry, I'll think up a solution." He looked to the stairs and then back to Akira. "I'm gonna take a quick look around Yongen, make sure he isn't still hanging around. You mind checking up on Futaba for me?"

Akira nodded slightly, before turning and heading up to his room. Whatever Sojiro planned on doing, Akira doubted it would be a long term solution. Taking him to court, even if they had good odds of winning a case, would still be a heavy drain on money and resources. Even asking Haru or Shizuka for some cash, while it would doubtless be pocket change to them, would only encourage this bullshit and ensure more visits.'

And if this man had hurt Futaba, Akira would see him burn in hell before he'd help hand over a single yen to the bastard.
He found Futaba leaning near the windows at the back wall of his room, her hands clasped behind her back with her gaze turned to her feet. Despite her best efforts to look calm, Akira could still see the occasional shake roll through her slender body. "He's gone now, you're okay," Akira said softly as he approached her.

"I... I just completely froze up. Seeing my Uncle, even after all this time, my mind went right back to that point in time. When I was alone and scared and had nobody to talk to... I thought I was getting better..." Futaba stammered.

Akira frowned, gently setting his hands on her shoulders. She didn't respond. "You are getting better. This was just a... horrible surprise. You were caught off guard, after all."

"But I still..." Futaba clenched her small fists, shaking once again. Futaba took in a deep breath to calm herself, managing then to look Akira in the eye. "He's gonna come back. And I don't think Sojiro has the money to make him go away."

"Paying him won't solve the problem," Akira told her. The look in her eye made it seem as if she had come to the same conclusion. "But there might be a way to handle this."

"M-Mementos... A man like him, if he doesn't have a Palace, then there's bound to be a Shadow like him in Mementos," Futaba reasoned.

Akira smiled. "Right. And I'm sure he'll be a small fry, we can change his heart no problem." Granted he was hoping to have a day or two away from Mementos, after that bout with Camael, but this was an emergency.

"C-can we... not tell the others about this? It's... it's a very personal thing," Futaba murmured.

Akira nodded in understanding. "It's okay, don't worry. I'm sure the two of us can take care of this, no problem," he replied. It might make things a little difficult, but he'd take the risk for her. "I promise, that asshole won't get away with what he's done. And I won't let any harm come to you." Akira owed her that much after all the crap she had been put through.

After a moment, Futaba looked him in the eye before suddenly leaning in and hugging him tight, her face buried in his chest. Akira kept his hands raised in surprise, his eyes wide. After several quiet seconds, he hesitantly reached down and settled his left hand on the back of Futaba's head, while the right gently stopped on her corresponding shoulder.

He held her like this in silence, feeling how Futaba gently calmed down in his embrace. Slowly but surely, a sense of worry snaked through Akira's body, as in that moment he became distinctly aware that his feelings for Futaba had grown beyond simple friendship.
Rows of pills and makeup lined the path to the pharmacy counter, pointless little diversions that Toshi Okabe paid no mind to as he waited on the girl behind the counter to refill his prescription. His hands rested neatly in the pockets of his russet pea coat, the collar partially askew to give a glimpse of his white shirt and crisp black tie. Between those and his dark slacks, he gave off the impression of being a standard office worker rather than the manager of Japan’s largest crime network.

Standing evenly, with a look on his face that suggested he was bored with life itself, it was hard to believe he had any insidious thoughts in his head. He watched patiently as the pretty brunette returned his way, holding a small green paper bag in her hand. There was a small sticker on the seal, keeping it neatly shut. ‘Nice girl. Keeps a respectable amount of chit-chat without inquiring too much. Has been good to me these past two years. I’ll give her a nice bonus tip at Christmas,’ he thought briefly to himself.

"Here you go Okabe-san. Sorry about the wait, but we’ve been slammed lately. With all this talk of mental shutdowns, people have been really concerned with their health," the young woman said. Okabe had noticed a bit of a line on his way in, as with some of the other pharmacies he passed on his way here.

Okabe would have just come back another time, but he needed a refill on his meds. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t be any good at his job.

"It's no trouble Tsuda-san. Winter is fast approaching too, and you know what that tends to do to hyperchondriac-types." Toshi smiled pleasantly, handing over a few large yen notes, with enough left over for a respectable tip. Same as ever. He took his bag and nodded curtly and turned to leave. "See you next month."

"Thank you for choosing Narumi Pharmacy!"

Toshi left quietly, his bag clasped in his left hand as he made steadily toward the door. A chilly breeze greeted him as he stepped out onto the busy street. The sun was starting to set, an inviting orange glow starting to stretch across the skies. ‘Need to get home soon. Need to coordinate with our media connections for the coming days.’

Slowly and steadily he made his way down the street, brushing past people and generally blending into the crowd. To an observer, Okabe looked to be beyond normal. One of the most plain and unremarkable men one could ever see. It was something that worked well to his advantage. Though only a handful of people knew what lurked in Okabe’s head.

His path took him into the wide expanse outside Shibuya station, a noisy area that he simply had to pass if he wanted to reach the calm backstreets leading to his apartment. Okabe quietly ignored the beggars, drowned out Yoshida-san’s political pontificating by the staircase with the white noise in his head, and generally let the human cattle around him blend into an unrecognisable tide of flesh.

Save for two figures that he just barely saw out of the corner of his eye as he went along.

One was a petite girl with obscenely long orange hair, dressed semi-sensibly for the cold with a pair of heavy headphones around her slim neck. The other was dressed in a fluffy red sweater and
dark skirt, her black hair pulled up in a ponytail. Both of them were carrying a heavy tome.

"Oooh... I can't believe you knew where to find this Shiho! I've been scouring the internet for this volume, but I've never been able to find it!"

The taller girl smiled and shrugged faintly. "Well, I have my manga connections in the city. Had to pull a few strings, but I don't mind doing a little work for a fellow manga enthusiast."

'Shiho Suzui and Futaba Sakura,' Toshi mentally noted. Right there in public, utterly oblivious to him. It would have been nice to deal with them now, but they were in far too public a place for him to use his Stand. More than that, Sakura was a total enigma to the group. She hadn't been in Hawaii, and there was no way of knowing what her power was. It was too risky for him to rush in blind.

"I never thought you'd be an otaku Shiho! I would've thought you'd be more of a... you know, a jock," Futaba mused.

Shiho laughed awkwardly, scratching the back of her neck with her free hand. "Oh I dunno if I'd call myself either of those things. I just happen to... like manga is all!" she quickly said. "You know, Ryuji has a pretty respectable collection too. I'm sure he'd gladly give you a loan if you asked nicely."

"Hm... well, Ryuji's dating you, so he has some good taste."

"Er... thanks?" Shiho replied. She very nearly bumped into Toshi, both figures stopping abruptly. "Oh! S-sorry sir, I wasn't paying attention."

"That's quite alright." Toshi smiled pleasantly at the two. "By all means, after you ladies." He watched them go, still smiling, content to let them pass unharmed. No sense in jumping into a fight in the middle of a crowded street.

As they went along, Toshi heard another snippet of their conversation from Shiho. "I better get you home before it gets dark. Boss is cool and all, but he's probably still protective of you." Hearing nothing useful in this, Toshi continued on his way while the two girls vanished into the subway station. They'd be dealt with in due time, once they were cornered. But really the main concerns were Kurusu and Joestar.

Toshi made his way for home, the number of people thinning out progressively. He tended to take the quiet roads when he could help it, the silence easing his active mind. But today, as it had been a while since he'd had his medicine, he was distinctly aware of a throbbing in his temples. Birdsong resonated in his ears, while flickers of light occasionally circled his vision.

It was getting worse with age. His Stand had been with him for as long as he could remember, the source of the distortions in his vision and hearing. As a child, Toshi's parents simply thought he was insane. That these were the hallucinations of a troubled mind. The reality was far more dangerous than anyone realized.

The drugs helped, as they always did, but Toshi wondered if they'd lose potency at some point. For now he knew he'd be sticking with them.

He liked his power, but he liked being able to function in society even more.

The backstreets were deserted as he walked a familiar route back to his building, stray cats
scurrying away from him in passing. Puddles of stale water caught Toshi's reflection as he strode by, while his shadow scraped along graffiti that had been painted into the brickwork longer than Toshi could recall.

The silence was interrupted by a figure emerging from the alley dead ahead, broad-shouldered and marginally more muscular than Toshi. It was a point punctuated by the man's white tank top, exposing his sculpted upper body. His short orange mohawk seemed to reek of 'thug' and immediately struck Toshi with a sense of disgust. While he couldn't recognise this man at all, he had a distinct feeling that this was one of the dregs in Mr. A's forces.

"Okabe Toshi!" the stranger snarled, his large hands resting in the large pockets of his black cargo pants. "I've been trying to get in touch with you for ages now asshole! And your dumbshit assistants kept giving me smokescreens! So now I'm here to talk face to face!"

Okabe narrowed his eyes slightly, remaining casual for as imposing as this stranger looked. "And just who might you be sir?"

"I'm Kaneda, from Shinjuku security detail!"

"We're a good deal away from Shinjuku," Okabe said flatly.

Kaneda's left eye twitched. "I've heard talk that there's an opening in the Deadly Aspects, and I want in! With the power of my Stand, I'm more than qualified!" he boasted.

Okabe slowly exhaled through his nose, gently setting his paper down atop a large and decently clean-looking dumpster. "Kaneda-san, was it? Yes, I recognise your name now. You've been with us for... two months now? Making a jump to a Deadly Aspect is quite a large one from where you are now. Moreover, while we have lost a member, Miwa Suguro was our female member. Mr. A likes to keep a female Aspect for... companionship, shall we say."

"I see, so Mr. A doesn't want his inner circle to be a total sausage-fest. I can respect that. So I guess if I wanna move up the ranks, I gotta exercise my power on someone else." Kaneda raised his left hand, an aura of purple light rising up along his towering body. "That German vampire scares the piss outta me, and no way am I going up against a top-tier yakuza... but a pencil pusher like you? I figure you're due replacin'!"

"Hmph. I can see why you would be more intimidated by my colleagues than myself. But for as imposing as they are... in truth, I'm probably the most powerful of our group." A monochromatic flicker rolled along Okabe's left hand, vanishing almost as quickly as it appeared. "You're not the first person to view me as helpless, and I doubt you'll be the last either. But I'll be polite and give you this opportunity to leave, without anyone else needing to know about this little meeting," he said.

Kaneda snorted and spat loudly on the ground. "Tch, cocky lil' shit. You're just trying to scare me off, aren't you? I'm gonna hit the top, no matter what. "Hard Knock Life!"

A figure rose up from Kaneda's shadow, a strange red oblong that had a series of solid yellow eyes ringing the top of it. There was a small mouth at the bottom, distinct for having a long tongue and sharp steel teeth. Toshi watched it closely, barely reacting as a strange 'seed' was suddenly spat from Hard Knock Life's mouth. It struck the brickwork and suddenly started to balloon out from the point of impact.
In the span of seconds the seed had grown and warped into a man-shaped mass of red brick and cement, a golem that slowly rose up to a full imposing height. It had no face to speak of, and each hand was topped by three thick brick fingers. Kaneda sneered. "My Hard Knock Life is a potent weapon. Any material his seeds touch becomes the main ingredient for the golems it creates! And once they're created, I can control them!"

Toshi blinked passively at the sight. "Oooh... that is a nice ability, Kaneda. It would be a shame to lose that. So I suppose I'll just have to try very hard not to kill you," he casually said.

"The fuck? You mocking me?!"

"Oh no, not at all. It's just..." Toshi's hands reached up, slowly slicking his hair back. It turned glossy and inky black, remaining neatly in place even as he lowered his hands. "It's been a while since I've had my medicine, and so I'm feeling very... lucid. And when I get this way, I just don't know... when... t-t-t-too..."

Spasms and twitches rocked Toshi's body, the veins on his neck pushing out for a few seconds before rapidly receding inward. His eyes bulged outward, while the corners of his lips pulled back into a fierce toothy grin. Kaneda watched in mounting horror, trying his best to stand firm as he saw an inky blackness slowly spreading through the whites of Okabe's eyes, until they were two solid ebony orbs.

"Stop."

And thus Kaneda was left screaming bloody murder, the world in that alleyway twisting and contorting under Okabe's hand. And there wasn't another living soul around to hear him.

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9/22

Shizuka clasped her left hand over her mouth, stifling a loud yawn. She wouldn't class herself as a germaphobe, but being packed like a sardine into a Tokyo train car was the kind of thing that left her a little more cautious about that sort of thing. And October was rolling in fast, the climate already starting to get colder. The last thing she wanted was to start sneezing in the middle of a sneaky infiltration.

The train lurched to a stop at the Aoyama-Itchome platform, the doors rolling out swiftly after. As with every day there was a human tide pouring out of the car. Shizuka felt herself being swept along, rather than stepping out of her own accord, but fortunately this was the Shujin stop and she simply went along with it.

As she strode the stairs to the surface level, she raised her largemouth bass shades and gave her eyes a modest rub with her left hand in a bid to will the sleep away. Houdini was at her back, set to catch her just in case she lost her footing in this stupor. 'Shoulda' gone to sleep sooner last night... better grab a soda before classes start.'

Slews of students were already passing her by as she reached the exit of the station, her current position allowing her to watch people congregating by Shujin's outer wall and heavy metal gate. She was early, at least. Shizuke scanned the area until she spied the modest indent in the wall, where two aged vending machines were waiting. Two girls were gossiping in that alcove, as they did every morning, but fortunately the machines were clear.
Funny. She hadn't really been in that alcove since the day Shiho tried to kill herself. Hard to believe that had all only happened five months ago... this year was pretty nuts.

Shizuka discarded the thought as she made for the machine, rifling in her leather jacket until she fished out a few modest coins. She deposited them in silence, listening to the thunk of the coins while muted gossip reached her ears,

"Did you hear? You know, that guy on the news!"

"Yeah, I hear the police only found him this morning... apparently he was usually so punctual, so when he didn't show up for work they sent some people to his home. He was stone cold when they found him!"

"The site I saw the story on said that the coroner put his time of death a little after midnight, and that they have no known cause of death."

"Spooky... but you know what I heard? There's talk online that Arditi killed him!"

Shizuka felt her whole body going statue-stiff, a chill racing down her spine. 'What? What the fuck?!' She kept her gaze focused on the machine, trying to act casual. But needless to say, that tidbit of news had jolted her awake far better than any soda could.

"Uh huh! His name was on the Phan-site a few times!"

"I know! But... still, that whole thing seems weird. They've never killed anyone before, have they?"

"Not that we know of. But there was a calling card with the body, right?"

"That's what I read. But at the same time, it's still weird. That guy was bad if the stuff about him was true, but Kamoshida and Kaneshiro were worse, and the Phantom Thieves didn't kill them."

"But... didn't Kaneshiro turn up dead in prison?"

"Hey... you're right!"

Shizuka remained motionless as the two girls left, the heavy thunk of a can hitting the bottom of the machine managing to jolt her back to reality. She quickly lifted the pale blue container out of the slot with her left hand, while her right swiftly drew her phone, bringing up the chat app. "Oh shit, oh shit..." She mumbled.

Class or not, they needed to have an emergency meeting ASAP.

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Once lunch rolled around, the group made for the roof one by one. Haru and Makoto both had keys, and both girls had permission to use the roof. Plus with the chaos of Principal Kobayakawa's death, it wasn't like the staff were going to be sparing them much attention.

As it stood, even the students didn't pay much attention to the 'delinquent' second years as they steadily made for the roof. Most were still afraid of Ryuji and Akira, and decided it would be in their own best interest not to look at the duo.
They weren't exactly thrilled to have to meet on the roof after Shiho's history here, but she had told the group it was fine. And given the severity of the current situation, and a lack of other covert areas in school to meet at, it was ultimately a necessity. Particularly since Makoto forbade them to ditch school. Unfortunately Sergio and Yusuke were stuck at Kosei, and Futaba couldn't sneak into Shujin (And Akira seemed worried about her leaving Yongen unescorted by a member of the team, not that he told the others why).

But whatever came up here, they would be sure to spread the info to the others.

Once the door was securely shut, Akira set his bag down and watched quietly as Morgana hopped out. He made for a row of desks that Haru had set a flowerbed on, quickly hopping up onto an unobstructed surface. The feline glanced over the others, his ears flat against the sides of his head. "So is it true? We're getting blamed for murder?"

Makoto nodded. "I asked Futaba to do a little online digging before classes started, and... yes, a man was killed with a 'calling card' found on his possession. Takeo Izumi, the current head of the Izumi Group. They're a... pharmaceutical company," she explained.

"Why kill a guy like that?" Shizuka asked.

Ann let out a sudden gasp of realization "W-wait, Izumu? Ryuji, isn't that the guy you were talking about the other day? The one who appeared on the Phan-site?" Ryuji nodded mutely, his grim gaze affixed to the ground from his leaning position at the accessway wall. Shiho settled a comforting hand on his shoulder, remaining equally quiet for the time being.

"Izumi's shown up on the news a few times too. Supposedly he's been artificially inflating the price of some drugs, the kinds needed to treat particularly terminal illnesses. People online have accused him of only wanting to help patients of a particular economic class," Akira explained. "I assumed they were exaggerated claims, but... if he did get killed through a Palace, then he may well have been a criminal."

"One that Black Mask has apparently been keeping an eye on. The stories I read claimed that there's no known cause of death, and that he was found alone in his home with no signs of forced entry. Stands to reason he was killed the same way Wakaba Isshiki was," Shiho noted.

Akira nodded at the dark-haired girl in agreement. "Plus there was a calling card found on him. If I were to guess, going by all the information we have on this killing, that Black Mask killed that man to set us up and discredit us to the public."

"It's effin' messed up!" Ryuji suddenly shouted, making the others jump a bit in some mild surprise. He could see Morgana and Ann giving him a stern look, and he promptly lowered his tone to a low growl. "That sick bastard kills someone, and people instantly turn on us?!"

"It's unfair, I agree," Haru gently said. "But I decided to look at the forum, and not everyone has turned against us. There are still plenty of people certain that it's some sort of imposter trying to tarnish our reputation, and Yuuki-kun is trying to do damage control," she said, trying her best to ease his worries.

Akira watched him carefully. He knew well enough how Ryuji was, that his emotions could often spike up when something bothered him. The blond wasn't quite able to sit on his feelings as well as the others could. "You alright? This is all pretty distressing, but if you want to get something off
your chest, I'm all ears."

By now Ryuji knew Akira well enough to know there was no condescension in his words. "I..." He folded his arms, glancing away from the bespectacled boy. "Things were supposed to be different, doing what we do. Being normal students, people were quick to look down on us, treat us like crap, and turn on us over nothing." Akira, Ann and Shiho could feel the truth in his words, though they didn't hit Makoto or Haru as hard. "But... as Arditi, we were heroes, and I thought people loved us. People starting to turn on us though, it's like... for a second it felt like nothing changed, like I was right back there on the day Kamoshida broke my leg..." he explained.

Shiho settled her hands on Ryuji's left arm, giving him a slight squeeze. "It's not gonna be like that this time. No matter what people might think of us, this time we have each other. We're a team, and we won't bail on each other."

"Right," Shizuka said. "Look, I can't claim to have been through the terrible crap you guys have, but no matter what I won't turn on any of you. We've been through a lot together, and I know we can get through this too," she firmly said.

A modest smile graced Ann's face. "Things aren't great right now, between that 'angel' in Mementos and now this murder, but... it's still not like the old days. We'll clear our name, all we have to do is catch Black Mask and then we can unravel that whole conspiracy group," Ann said.

"Ann's right. We just need to keep a cool head, and try not to let rumors and hearsay get us down... That said, I'm not quite sure what to do going forward. I suppose firstly we should do a little investigation on Izumi. Given his prospective wealth and social status, it's quite possible he was involved with this conspiracy too," Makoto mused.

"And like Father, they decided he was expendable," Haru added, frowning at the thought.

Morgana surveyed the group, keeping his ears flat against his head. "Things are getting far more serious now. Not only are physical threats becoming more prominent, but people are trying to tarnish our reputation too. And if us being guilty becomes the common perception, the police will really try to up their investigation."

Shizuka shrugged. "Well, they won't be able to get any hard evidence on us. But... yeah, if they start to focus our way, it'll be harder to get our work done," she said.

As the two spoke, Makoto felt a frown cross her face and dwelled on the distinct unease she could feel settling in her stomach. She thought back to Sae, and what she had been talking about not too long ago. Her boss at the SIU was apparently taking this Phantom Thief business more seriously these days and was planning to set up an investigative task force, with Sae marked as a candidate to take a leading role in it.

Going up against Sae was a notion that definitely worried Makoto. And then there was the other thing she had learned about Sae recently that was even more unsettling.

"You okay Makoto?"

Shizuka's words made Makoto blink to attention. She felt bad about keeping secrets, but this... how could she bring herself to talk about something so deeply personal? "Oh, it's... it's nothing, I was just zoning out. I was pondering how best to deal with our current situation. For now I think we should try to gather some information on Izumi. If he was involved in this conspiracy, then we
might be able to get a promising lead by looking into his connections."

"Good idea. I'll ask Futaba to trawl the internet for everything she can find about Izumi. If anyone can find something juicy, it's her," Akira said.

Ryuji punched his right fist into his left palm, grinning broadly. "So that means we can hit back at these guys, right?"

"Potentially," Haru said, a faint smile touching her face. Suddenly she breathed a modest huffing sigh. "If only Father were conscious. We could potentially get to the bottom of all this if we had his knowledge."

As she said this, Shizuka pushed herself away from the air conditioner she had been reclining against. "I've been thinking on it, and maybe... maybe there is a way to learn from President Okumura, even if we can't speak to him directly."

The others leaned in expectantly, ready to hear Shizuka's plan.

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9/24

Once class had finished, they had all agreed to head to the hideout as soon as they could in order to discuss the investigation on Izumi. While they had all looked into the man and his affairs into their own way, the general hope was that Makoto or Futaba would have the good stuff. No new murders came up (or at least, none that could be tied to Izumi or made use of a mental shutdown method) over the past two days, but even so the group had made sure to keep a close eye on the news.

People had been pretty wild on the Arditi after they dealt with Medjed, an act that had seemingly saved the nation from danger. But this incident had been a blow to their popularity, and people seemed far more open to debating the merits of the group, being willing to criticize them too.

They had a lot of support still, but it seemed quite likely that another murder committed in their name would really fracture their popularity. It wasn't as if they could come out in public to defend themselves, something their opponent could take full advantage of. Mishima had set up a new poll on the Phan-site, hoping to generate positive buzz about the group again:

'Are the Phantom Thieves innocent?'

Currently it was sitting around the 68-70% region. Though it seemed to steadily tick down, and there was no shortage of negative comments and threads on the site. Not that that was too strange for an online forum, Shizuka supposed.

She had been held up for a few minutes, having to do a little chore for Kawakami after class. But after that she decided to make for Shibuya as quickly as she could. She hoped they could make some progress on Izumi today, as her plan with Okumura had yet to come to fruition. What they needed, now more than ever, was a chance to catch Black Mask and take him out of play.

This thought was what lingered in Shizuka's mind as she left her train, humming something absentmindedly while she walked. "Time is a tool you can put on the wall, or wear it on your wrist... the past is far behind us. The future doesn't exist..." Well, nobody was paying her any mind, and she did quite like the tune, so she kept at it.
As she left Shibuya station, she came to a sudden stop as a young woman nearly bumped into her. She glanced to her left and felt a sense of pleasant surprise roll through her. "Oh, Hifumi," she greeted. "Didn't expect to see you out here."

The dark haired girl smiled. "Well, I have to leave Kanda from time to time," she joked. "I was just on my way to Kadogawa's Books. There's a strategy guide I reserved that's just come in." Hifumi smoothed the hem of her deep blue Kosei blaser, seeming to pat her phone into place in the pocket.

"Kadogawa's..." Shizuka rolled the name in her head. "Oh, I know that place. Semi-big bookstore with some big stacks out front?" Hifumi nodded. "Yep, that's on the way to where I'm heading. Mind if I walk with you?"

"I'd quite like that," Hifumi replied, before she and Shizuka started walking side-by-side toward the more quiet streets away from the chaos of the station.

She and Sergio had told the group about Hifumi's Stand, mainly because of how useful the power could be. But they hadn't told Hifumi about their role in Arditi, not wanting to rush her into anything until they felt she was ready for it. But her precognition was an immensely useful ability if they could apply it properly. Sergio had been practicing with her, working to refine and improve Hifumi's control of her Stand.

Still... something told her Hifumi had never been in a battle that didn't involve shogi. On the other hand, Shizuka also knew Ann, Haru, and Shiho weren't fighters to start with, and they were damn dangerous now.

"So how're you feeling?" Shizuka asked.

"Oh not bad. I've actually been feeling much better about shogi now that I can control my powers. Though, admittedly..." Hifumi trailed off, causing Shizuka to quirk her right eyebrow.

"Something bugging you?"

A sad smile touched on Hifumi's rosy lips. "For a while now, my Mother has been really trying to get my shogi career into the professional circuits. Being a high school pro, and a girl to boot, has already given me some degree of fame. Like being... well, an idol. And it doesn't help that my Mother has only been adding fuel to the fire, organizing all these interviews and photoshoots."

"Ah..." Shizuka said in a quiet realization, reaching up and settling her hands neatly behind her head. "So she's a stage mom, yeah? We've got plenty of those in America... sounds like she's trying to live vicariously through you," she explained.

The two girls rounded a corner, leading toward a row of quiet storefronts. Several of them were shut up, set to open later in the evening, while others were boarded up for sale. Shizuka let her gaze quickly scan her surroundings with each step, continually looking for anything out of the ordinary.

After getting ambushed by Lynott, Shizuka was a little more cautious when it came to walking to the hideout.

"I got into shogi because it was something my Father and I used to play all the time when I was a child. Even when he fell ill, we still made time for it... my natural talent seemed to crop up quickly,
and Mother wanted to capitalize on it..." Hifumi slowly shook her head. "If I were to become famous for shogi, and I'm not saying I particularly do, I'd want it to be for my talents, not for anything... related to my looks."

Shizuka nodded along to Hifumi's story. "Makes sense. Have you tried to talk to your Mom about how you feel?"

"Mother is rather... intimidating," Hifumi admitted, sounding a little ashamed to say as much.

"Yeeaah, I get that. My Mom could be rather imposing too when she wanted me to do stuff," Shizuka said. It was an impressive accomplishment for such an old woman. "But look, it mightn't be a bad idea to try and get your feelings out there."

Although, if Hifumi's Mother was trying to push her down this path to live vicariously through her, it was likely she had some kind of distortion going on. It was possible the Arditi could handle this matter and save Hifumi a little grief.

Hifumi nodded slightly. "I've been considering that, but the issue I have is-"

"... help... me..."

Both girls stopped dead in their tracks, exchanging surprised glances. "You... you heard that too, right?" Shizuka asked. Hifumi nodded, her eyes wide.

Shizuka turned her gaze to her right, looking to a building that stood out amidst the unassuming structures. A burnt out three story building, the brickwork smeared with smoke and soot that had settled in over time. All the windows had been blown out, leaving the building looking like a gutted shell. "I think someone's hurt in there... might be a homeless guy or something. I gotta go check, you go ahead and get an ambulance on speed dial," Shizuka quickly said, sprinting into the blown-out doorway.

"B-but I forgot to bring my-" Hifumi stopped, realizing that Shizuka wasn't in a position to hear her. The shogi princess let out a defeated sigh.

Whatever kind of fire had hit this place, it had clearly been quite devastating. The walls she passed by were blackened and distorted, and chunks of the ceiling were starting to crumble overhead. Each room she passed by was vacant, the floors marked by blank patches where debris had been moved out.

While this place had been scorched thoroughly, it seemed there was still running water in the building. Shizuka could still tell as much from the burgeoning groans from taxed pipes coming from the walls and ceiling. Must have been some pressure in there.

Eventually Shizuka reached the back wall of the first floor, skidding to a halt. All the rooms were empty, and there weren't any signs of blood. She frowned and looked to the stone staircase to her right. Well... she definitely heard something, right? She could at least check out the second floor, just to put her mind at ease.

Shizuka was careful as she made her way up the stairs. They were some form of stone, or possibly concrete, and so most likely hadn't been too damaged by whatever fire had gutted this place... but Shizuka really didn't want to take too many chances in a place like this.
The first room she checked was empty, distinct only for a few blackened filing cabinets that had been left behind. Seeing nothing else out of the ordinary, she went into the room opposite, on the left side of the corridor.

As she entered the scorched doorway, she immediately noticed something out of the ordinary: Some kind of bundle of clothes at the far wall. Were there homeless squatting here? She thought back to that dismal call for help and frowned. Some unfortunate bastard must have really gotten hurt here, Shizuka mused.

As she made for the rags, a shadow in the roof corner behind her began to stir. Someone untangled themselves from their hiding place and landed almost silently behind her. Almost.

Shizuka turned sharply, getting a glimpse of a tall bespectacled man in a crisp dark suit glaring at her. Some tangled black mass was coiled around his fingers, a pair of alien eyes watching Shizuka from the backs of his hands. In a flash his left hand shot outward, something being rapidly flung from his fingers. Shizuka moved on pure reflex, dodging to the left and getting a glimpse of an origami shuriken embedding itself in the wall behind her.

"Oh fuck..." Shizuka murmured.

Houdini swiftly grabbed one of the rags off the ground, a ragged brown blanket, and threw it ahead of Shizuka as the young Joestar made herself invisible. A flurry of paper daggers hit the blanket, pinning it to the wall while Shizuka made a beeline for the doorway.

The mysterious assassin gave a sudden jerk of his left hand, something flying from the cuff and into his palm: A 2 of clubs playing card. He rapidly flicked it at the doorway, the razor sharp card grazing over Shizuka's right shoulder. It cut through her leather jacket and the skin of her shoulder. A spatter of blood coated the doorframe, while Shizuka gasped sharply from the sudden pain.

Houdini lashed out, still unseen, her left heel slamming squarely into the assassin's chest. It struck hard enough to make him stagger back and grimace, but... Well she had been aiming to break a rib or two, but instead it was like she had just kicked a slab of granite. Just what was this guy?

Shizuka skidded to a halt in the hallway outside, but no sooner had she done this that the stranger burst through the same doorway. He had three playing cards in each hand, throwing his arms out in an arc with the first three embedding themselves along the stairwell while the others made for the hallway itself. The edge of one card clipped her left calf, making her gasp as more blood spurted from this fresh cut.

He seemed to quickly see this, making for where the bloodstain was while his left hand reached into his dark suit jacket. Houdini shot forward, a hard invisible blow striking the stranger across the face and making him skid backward. In the blink of an eye another two punches struck him in the chest, but once more Shizuka felt as if she were punching a brick wall. A throb of pain ran through the knuckles of her right hand.

Suddenly, as Houdini's fist raced toward his head again, it slammed into the assassins right fist, strong fingers clenching her in place with ghastly strength. Those gloves were his Stand, acting as a medium through which he could touch another Stand. Even so, the image of a human catching a Stand was still a jarring one.

His left fist snapped outward, striking Houdini across the jaw. Shizuka felt her whole body being flung backward by the tremendous force, the jolt causing Houdini to vanish while the girl herself...
as rendered visible. She hit the ground hard, a spatter of blood racing down the left side of her mouth and coating her chin.

"Shizuka Joestar." Despite the chaos of the previous few minutes, the dark-haired man spoke in a calm tone. He reached up with his left hand, inky black ropes no thicker than toothpicks slithering from his fingertips until they coiled around his glasses to fix them neatly into place. "I'd like to make this as quick as possible so if you could please stop fighti-

Houdini scooped a handful of debris off the ground and sharply took aim with her right hand, rapidly firing several chunks of sharpened concrete at her attacker. He quickly drew an unfurling napkin from his shirt pocket, four of the shards striking the paper. It cracked on impact, portions flaking off. A fifth shard grazed his forehead and left him hissing and recoiling as blood ran down his right brow.

Houdini lunged at him again, a hard kick striking the stranger in the chest until his spine roughly met the unforgiving wall. But once more he was quick on the draw, flicking his damaged napkin at her downed body. It cut across the back of her right thigh, making her cry out sharply.

"Shizuka!"

The young girl went wide eyed, and even the assassin seemed surprised as Hifumi appeared on the top of the staircase. "Shit, no no..." Shizuka breathed. "Togo, you gotta get outta here!"

Hifumi let out a shocked gasp, automatically ducking as a paper shuriken flew over her and embedded itself in the wall. She moved quickly, following the outlines of the assassin as he threw more origami at her, seeming to know how to dodge the incoming attacks just as he moved to make them.

"Flaming Telepath!" Hifumi's Stand surged forward, once more catching the assassin by surprise. His left fist shot forward in a sweeping jab. However Flaming Telepath immediately ducked under the attack and drove her palm into his right cheek, snapping his body forward. He stabbed forward, only to narrowly miss again as Flaming Telepath weaved away. Both of her fists slammed into the assassin's chest, a weaving gasp leaving him while his bulged in his head. "Wicked fiend! I won't let you harm an innocent!"

However, just as Hifumi started to pull back, he managed to get a tight hold on her right wrist. She let out a pained gasp, struggling at his vicelike grip. Before she could make another move he punched her square in the gut, instantly knocking the wind out of her. Hifumi staggered, off balance, and in that brief opening the stranger sprinted toward her.

"Hifumi!" Shizuka struggled to rise up, only to immediately freeze like a statue as his black glove wrapped around Hifumi's neck. He easily lifted her with the strength of his left hand, fingers sinking into her neck. Enough to hinder her breathing, but not enough to strangle her.

She was wide-eyed in terror, Flaming Telepath having frozen up in her previous position near the wall. Shizuka was equally frozen, looking torn on making a move or not.

"Stop," he firmly said. There was a clear threat to that simple world, and Shizuka complied. The water pipes groaned beneath them.

"Took a little longer than I expected Lars. But you wanted to handle her solo... I suppose you weren't expecting a tag-team." The voice came from a room just behind her, with Shizuka feeling a
sense of unease in her body growing stronger as heavy footsteps reached her ears.

"Apolo... apologies sir," he said, sounding a little winded. His legs were a little shaky from all the blows he had taken, but it was clear he was trying to stand proud. Hifumi remained silent, well aware of the danger wrapped snugly around her neck.

The man that emerged from the scorched doorway was tall and broad-shouldered, clearly quite muscular. That much was evident, even with what he was wearing. His attire of a crisp white dress shirt, and a white suit jacket with scarlet pinstripes, dark slacks and snakeskin shoes gave off a strong air of wealth. Likewise the heavy belt buckle, steel sculpted to resemble a dog skull, was also quite expensive looking. His hands were covered by dark driving gloves.

There was a sort of 'timeless' quality to him, similar to Jotaro, in that it looked as if he stopped aging at some point in his twenties but had clear wisdom in his eyes. Unlike Jotaro however, there was a tiredness in this man's eyes. A look that said something fucking terrible had happened to this man in the past.

His hair was dark and short, styled upward, with a few blond tips scattered through the darkness. His nose was pointed and his jaw was strong and unshaven.

"Hello Shizuka, I believe it's about time we met face to face." He casually passed her by, stopping near Lars. A pleasant smile lingered on his face. "You can call me Mr. A."
Eclipse (II)

Shizuka glared toward the man who had proudly announced himself as Mr. A. For a moment it was easy to think he was lying or posturing, that this was simply another underling who was trying to throw her off. But the respect in Lars' eyes, the way he stood to attention, it made it clear it was no act.

"You know I feel we should have met sooner. I knew you were coming to Japan ever since the passing of your Father. Condolences, by the way. The loss of a parent is one of the hardest losses to bear, and at your age..." He sighed and gave a small shake of his head, while Shizuka maintained her firm glare. "Well, at any rate I knew you were coming to my country. And I had perhaps naively hoped you would live the life of an ordinary student... my fault entirely," he said.

"That person," Shizuka said. "There was a person calling for help," she added.

Mr. A quirked his left brow. "That? Oh, a nice little bit of bait." Wisps of black fog rolled up his legs, until his body was wreathed in that aura of darkness. A specter rose up behind him, taking the form of an imposing Stand that made Shizuka's pulse briefly quicken. She felt her toes flicker in and out of visibility for just a second.

A's Stand was almost as large as the man of himself, his body concealed by a tattered raven cloak that had an assortment of alien symbols etched into the collar of the cloak. His head consisted of a golden pyramid, with two cracks in the left and right sides that showed off a pair of large bloodshot eyes. The arms that protruded from the sides of his cloak were like those of a marionette, formed from a varnished white wood with flexible ball joints for the elbows and knuckles. Whatever else was under that cloak, if there was anything to speak of, was obscured by a perpetual black fog.

"Most Stands don't have a voice, and can't speak under their own power. Mine can't speak on his own, but I've learned to project a voice through him with my thoughts."

As he said this, A's Stand reached up and cupped his fingers in front of his 'face', with wooden creaking sounds following his movements. "Help... me..." Shizuka narrowed her eyes. It had a harsher rasp to it than A's voice, but it could definitely pass for human.

"Now... let's talk, shall we?" A asked. Shizuka glanced between him and Hifumi's restrained form. She needed an opening to get Hifumi out of here, but she also needed time to think. So if she let this guy gab on, she'd hopefully think of something.

"Fine. Let's," Shizuka growled in return.

He smiled faintly. "Now, when this whole 'Phantom Thief' thing started, I could understand why you got involved. A man like Kamoshida, well he deserved to be destroyed. Had I enough hours in the day, I would be quite thorough in dismantling him... even Madarame, I had no issue in you getting involved there because it didn't effect me. But then you went for Kaneshiro, and wound up causing issue for me..." A sighed and shook his head, his gloved hands clasped neatly behind his back. "How did you do it, by the way? Stealing hearts, I mean. It must be some manner of Stand ability, but it seems that you, Kurusu, and Sakamoto don't have that power. Is it Takamaki? Suzui?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," she replied.
"Oh? You might be right. With how many of you there are, it seems to involve far more than simply using a Stand power." A's pacing brought him under a crumbling section of the roof, shafts of light falling over his face. "Regardless, thanks you I'm short one of my best people too. Troubling, very troubling. But again I should have expected your involvement, so I'm partially to blame for all this. Stand users are drawn together in some capacity, I should have anticipated this."

"You know, picking a fight with my family is the worst decision you could possibly make," Shizuka pointedly said.

"Oh believe me I know. This situation is one I wanted to avoid, but events are in motion that are beyond my control. A clash with Jotaro and Josuke is inevitable, regardless, and letting you and your friends run wild is something I can't afford. And I have someone in mind to contend with your nephew," A said. He paused and glanced at her from over his shoulder. "Can I be frank? I don't like you Joestar."

Shizuka forced herself to smile. "You sure? I mean we have just met. I'm sure you'd find me positively delightful if you got to know me," she replied.

He smiled ever so slightly in return. "You see, there's a reason why I never tried to recruit you for all the potential. Beyond the fact that you'd likely refuse the offer, I mean. A rich girl like you, who's lived in luxury since she was in diapers, what could you ever know about struggling? That's what's united so many of my people. We've all had to face the harshness of the world, we've all been outcasts. But when I'm done, they won't need to fear anything in this country. I'll make sure those loyal to me are safe... But you? You couldn't understand what drives people like us."

Shizuka grimaced at the assessment. Her life hadn't been entirely perfect, between the death of her parents, and a friendless childhood... but she knew what he meant. She had never known hunger, or cold, or poverty. She thought back to the glint in his eyes, the realisation that something awful had happened to him in his life. She needed to buy time, and bad guys loved to talk about themselves... "Try me," she said.

"You're interested? Well, I suppose I owe you that much. I have tried to kill you, after all," he casually said. Lars was watching her intently, but occasionally he turned his focus toward Hifumi just to make sure she wasn't trying anything. "I suppose in my case, we should go back to the start. America isn't perfect, I take it even you've experienced some discrimination from time to time?" A asked.

For the time being Shizuka was keeping herself prone on the ground, not wanting to make any sudden moves in case Lars saw that as a sign of aggression. "From time to time," she admitted. Usually from random assholes on the street, most often drunk. And for their trouble, depending on the severity of what they said, they would up taking an invisible fist for their troubles.

A nodded slightly. "Yes, well, for as bad as that sounds... it's quite small compared to what I went through when I was a child. Where and when I grew up, having a Chinese parent was grounds for all manner of abuse. The things people said to me. To this day the word 'mongrel' still makes my blood boil, regardless of context..." A leaned up against the wall, his broad arms folded over his chest. For a brief moment, Shizuka saw a pang of sadness touch Lars' features. The water pipes groaned beneath her.

"Everyone has a destiny. Everyone has a 'role' in life that they are meant to play. And so, given the circumstances, mine was to play the role of a criminal. In my teenage years, few people in my town..."
wanted anything to do with me, but I needed money. The criminals however, well they don't care where you're from so long as you can do good work for them. And as it turned out, I was good at it," he explained.

"Guess you got into this line of work at an early age... And having a Stand probably helped a lot," Shizuka said, wanting to add more time to this story. Houdini's unseen hands groped through the floor beneath her, blindly feeling at her surroundings.

"Oh I didn't have mine when I started out. I was just... normal. But being a criminal, even when there was never enough evidence to arrest me, drew the police toward me. And with my status as a 'mongrel', they had no issue in beating the crap out of me to amuse themselves. Learning how corrupt the police can become, it's one of the harshest lessons a kid can receive. And then..." A trailed into a heavy sigh, glancing off to his right side.

Lars shifted uncomfortably, a distinct frown on his face. "Sir... you don't have to-"

A raised his right hand slightly, a gesture that seemed enough to silence his subordinate. "A person who has natural Stand potential, without being pricked by an arrow, usually has the power manifest when under some kind of duress. In my case it was when, on one faithful day in my early teenage years, one of those corrupt pigs decided he wasn't content with knocking me around. He decided to..." A trailed off. Even now the thought seemed deeply unpleasant to him. "Well... it's fortunate that my Stand materialized in that grave situation. Castrated the bastard before he got too far." A clenched his right fist powerfully, the leather in his glove straining at the movements. "First time I ever killed a man."

Shizuka was watching him carefully. His story might have all been one big lie, something to trick her with. But the conviction in his voice, and the discomfort in his underling (who Shizuka doubted was much of an actor) made it seem legit. "So the world treated you like shit... and you decided to treat it like shit in return?"

"Not entirely," A admitted. "I have a soft spot for people like me, or at least people who have suffered the abuses and injustices of the world. Provided they don't go against me, at least," he explained. Well, that explained why he didn't much care about hurting the thieves.

"Hnf... so you got a Stand, and then started using it to make a name for yourself... I take it you started working for Dio soon after?"

A's right foot landed harshly on her back, nearly driving the wind from Shizuka as she was forced firmly into the ground. She grit her teeth, trying not to cry out. She could feel Houdini growing rigid below her, still unseen, while her short body tremble in pain.

"Sh-Shizuka!" Hifumi shouted.

"Oh... and where did you hear about that? Your family never met me, after all," A remarked, keeping her pinned beneath his heel.

Shizuka grimaced. "Never at all?"

"Does that surprise you? Were you expecting something more... impactful? Like me being your long lost father? Or Dio's bastard son? No, reality isn't often so dramatic. I was an underling, and at the time my power wasn't particularly refined." A faint smile graced his face. "I was a... contingency plan, sent to monitor Holy Joestar, and to take her hostage if I received the order. But,
that never came. Enyaba's death didn't help in that regard, and after that point... well I suppose Dio felt that The World was strong enough to crush any opposition." A shrugged his broad shoulders. "That was Dio's fatal flaw. The man was charismatic and ambitious beyond compare, and he certainly had the power to back up his ambitions. Unfortunately he was too overconfident, and never believed anything could oppose his Stand. The same thing happened when he was a vampire, and he got his body atomized for his trouble."

He had certainly been doing his homework, Shizuka noted. Then again, those creeps in Egypt had likely managed to learn a lot about their master. A carried on speaking. "I only learned about his death when Mariah regained consciousness from her battle with Avdol and your father. But Holy Joestar's sudden recovery was enough of a clue for me... don't misunderstand though, I'm not like Pucci. I have no interest in doing anything for Dio or in his name, he had two chances and failed both times. I'm my own man now..." A reached into the right pocket of his pinstriped coat and pulled out a shiny 500 yen coin. "But again I have to ask... where did you hear about my ties to Dio?"

A flicked the coin upward, the flat circle of metal lazily spinning through the air. His Stand made a subtle motion of his hand, causing the coin to change direction entirely, gaining momentum as it knifed down toward Shizuka. It stabbed into the top of her right hand, biting through the skin and sending a spurt of blood racing up from the fresh wound. Shizuka gagged loudly, trying to remain in place and not reflexively snap back at him. She couldn't, not when Hifumi was in danger. She just needed a little more time.

"Was it Morihiro? Was he acting cute and spilling secrets?" A asked casually. "Maybe I'll have to have a chat with him."

"He didn't say shit to me..." Shizuka hissed. She wanted nothing more than to pull that coin out of her hand and shove it somewhere unpleasant, but she relented for the time being.

"I find that hard to believe. Not too many people managed to make that connection to me, and Morihiro and his wife were among that few... Well, I suppose it doesn't change things in the long run." A's left foot drove hard into her stomach, lifting Shizuka a few inches off the ground and nearly making her barf, her eyes bugging out of her head from the jolting force. She slumped back to the hard ground, left panting and wheezing for a few seconds.

"Sh-Shizuka!" Hifumi cried. Lars gave her a firm glare, making sure she didn't get smart and try to move.

A shuddering sigh escaped Shizuka. "It's okay T-Togo... I'm f-fine..." She could hear A's footsteps moving away from her, giving her the opening she needed. Shiuka felt Houdini's hands clasp firmly around a pipe, holding it steady. She glanced briefly over to Hifumi and saw the glowing crosshairs briefly form over Hifumi's eyes. At once she knew what Shizuka planned on doing and seemed to tense her body slightly in anticipation.

"Togo eh...?" Mr. A said, glancing at her from the corner of his eye. "Well you're clearly a Stand user if you managed to give Lars a little trouble, but I've never seen you around. I suppose you're not a new Phantom Thief? Sorry you got caught up in this, but... that's life."

Hifumi narrowed her eyes, trying her best to look defiant despite how her hands were shaking. "I'm not... not afraid of you!" she quickly said.

"Fibs break Baby Jesus' ribs!" Mr. A replied, smiling politely as he strode past Lars. "In your case,
I'll try to make this quick. Now...

A strong tension rose up through Houdini's arms, the pressure making the pipes creak and the concrete crack beneath her. "You..." Shizuka huffed loudly and glared back toward the two men. "Your next line is: 'Time to die, Joestar.'"

"Time to die, Joestar." Mr. A's eyes widened sharply. "What?!"

The concrete burst behind Shizuka as her Stand roughly wrenched the pipe out of its moorings, a pressurized surge of water exploding from the filthy piping. Hifumi reacted in that brief second, Flaming Telepath's palm flying over her right shoulder and slamming into Lars' face.

His glasses shattered from the strike, his grip loosened and giving Hifumi the opening to drop down to her feet. A series of small bruises lingered on the pale surface of her neck. The water struck Lars like a kick from a mule and knocked him flat on his back, giving Hifumi a chance to run over to where Shizuka was. The young woman rose up shakily to her feet, still panting from the punishment she had taken.

"Man in Black." As the water reached Mr. A, it was as if some kind of unseen cone appeared around him and bent the incoming surge in an arc away from his body. He glanced over his left shoulder at the girls, his Stand's wooden fingers creaking as they aimed outward.

Houdini stood up fully behind her user, clutching a chunk of masonry almost larger than her fist. She threw it forward, pitching it like a baseball as it made a rapid beeline toward Mr. A. Man in Black made a curling motion of his right hand, causing the chunk to stop in the air for a fraction of a second before it arced back toward Shizuka with just as much momentum as before. It slammed into her left shoulder and shattered apart, making Shizuka scream from the intense pain that rocked her arm. Something was fractured, she could tell that much!

Attacking him head on wasn't a good idea, she knew. Not when her body had already taken some hits, but she wanted a chance to see what his power was in greater detail. The coin fell from her hand and clattered loudly to the floor.

Several of the larger chunks from the shattered block started to twist through the air, angling themselves through Man in Black's power, before shooting out toward Shizuka and Hifumi. Houdini shot out reflexively, her right arm destroying several of the shards in quick flourishes. Two however scraped against Shizuka's stomach, making her gasp harshly, while Hifumi screamed from two sharp cuts against her right forearm.

"Hngh..." Shizuka glanced quickly to Hifumi. "Follow my lead!" Shizuka shouted, well aware that Flaming Telepath could predict what Shizuka was aiming to do.

Houdini and Flaming Telepath lunged downward, their fists colliding with the crumbling floor in front of them with all the force the two Stands could muster. Loud cracks echoed through the burned out building, the floor quaking in protest as fissures started to swiftly splinter out from the points of impact.

Mr. A and Lars were forced to jump high as the floor caved beneath them, with the former lifting his right arm up over his head. The ghostly specter of Man in Black's own arm floated above it, wooden digits sinking into the ceiling overhead and supporting his weight easily. Lars, meanwhile, shoved both his hands up and drove his fingers into the ceiling to anchor himself. Water dripped from his jacket and shirt.
"Go, go!" Shizuka said, swiftly rendering herself and Hifumi invisible as they made for the blown out window at the opposite end of the hallway. Even unseen, Mr. A could tell that the two had jumped out of the window, using their Stands to slow their falls. There was a sound of feet hitting pavement, followed soon after by a scuffle on the asphalt. No doubt the two were making a speedy retreat.

Silence filled the air.

"Hmph. She actually ran... I had her pegged as the 'fight to the end' sort," Mr. A remarked. Man in Black released his grip, leaving Mr. A falling down toward the ground floor. However his momentum was massively slowed, as if gravity had become massively weaker around him. "I'm sorry sir, she caught me off guard! I should have-" Lars hastily said, only to be cut short by Mr. A softly clearing his throat.

"I'm at fault too my friend. Come on down, I'll catch you." Lars' Painkiller retracted from the wall, leaving him falling until Man in Black caught his hands. He lowered Lars down until his feet touched the floor a few feet behind Mr. A. Man in Black returned to his master.

Lars sighed and slowly unbuttoned the front of his soaked shirt. "She's clever. That blast of water soaked me through, destroying most of my weapons. And my armour," Lars said. His shirt opened to reveal three lengths of string tied around his abdomen. Each string had a square of folded paper wrapped around it, creating a dense protective layer that had now been reduced to mush. He threw his destroyed gear to the ground and took a moment to fix his shirt up. "You told her quite a lot..."

Mr. A shrugged. "Nothing she can use. No names or locations. And even if she can make a good composite of my face, it won't do her any good." He sighed grimly. "I had hoped to end her here and then leave Jotaro to Okabe when he came out here, but that might have to wait. Shido's own plan is also still in motion."

Lars paused, glancing down Mr. A's body. "S-sir, your leg," he said, pointing to the back of A's right calf.

"Hm?" He glanced down, getting a glimpse of a bloodied hole in his trouser leg. Man in Black reached in, slowly pulling out a sharpened shard of concrete. The initial burst of water must have projected that lump into him before A was fully aware of Shizuka's attack. He winced a bit, but A's reaction was surprisingly tame for a man prying some shrapnel from his soft tissue. "I suppose I'll need to get a new pair of these... ugh, they weren't cheap," he remarked.

"Are you alright?" Lars asked.

He smiled again, remaining calm as Man in Black shattered the masonry to dust between his fingers. "I'll be alright. I suppose now we plan for the future... Once the Boy has dealt with Kurusu, it should be easier to pluck the other Arditi out of the equation." A glanced over his shoulder at Lars, still smiling. "I take it you're still up for helping me?"

For just a moment, Lars eyes seemed to shine. He removed his broken glasses and quickly glanced off to the side. "Akio..." he murmured, before regaining his resolve and looking to his employer with a renewed firmness on his face. "Of course sir. Until my bones are dust."
It fortunately didn't take too long to reach the hideout, with both girls remaining invisible for the entirety of the journey. Neither of them were feeling particularly spry after their mutual beating, and the adrenaline was fast winding down in both of them. They were getting slower as a result.

"Hey, Hifumi," Shizuka said, keeping a grip on the shogi princess' hand with her own good arm. "You alright? He didn't hurt you too bad, right? L-look I... I'm sorry you got caught up in that shit, that wasn't supposed to happen."

"I'm f-fine," Hifumi replied. Her tone was quivering. "W-was what that man said true? Y-you're a Phantom Thief?"

Shizuka hesitated for a moment before sighing softly. "Yes, that's right." Hifumi had gotten hurt because of her, and Hifumi at least had the right to know why. And since they were going to get healed at the 'super secret hideout of the infamous Phantom Thieves', there was no point in trying to be mysterious about it.

"That's... oh..." Hifumi said, seeming to be unsure of how to deal with that information now that it had been so bluntly handed over. "So does that mean that Sergio... and since you and he were hanging around with Kitagawa-kun, and Akira... they're all..."

"Mm," Shizuka casually confirmed. Everyone was likely at the hideout by now, and the only members of the team that Hifumi hadn't met were Futaba and Morgana. Boy, that was going to make this day even weirder for her.

Once they reached the heavy metal door, Shizuka made the two of them visible again. She fished her key from her jacket pocket and quickly unlocked the door, opening the way for the two of them. By now they had had plenty of time to model the hideout into something more presentable, with the white walls and hardwood floor of the interior being quite clean.

The entryway led on to the main room of their hideout, where several long tables had been positioned from end to end with enough swivelling chairs positioned around the tables to accommodate every member of the team, with two spares. A modest mini-fridge was visible in the right hand corner, while the wall behind Akira's chair was covered with one of Yusuke's most recent projects: A greyscale picture of the Tokyo cityscape, with the buildings partially warped. As if being viewed through a fisheye lens.

"Oh hey, guess she got done with what Kawakami asked her to do," Ryuji dropped his magazine on the table in front of him and wheeled around in his chair, only to nearly be bowled over. "Whoa, what the shit?!"

The others were quick to race over, drawn in by Ryuji's shock. Makoto was quick to sweep in under Shizuka, both hands cupping her face. Sergio, meanwhile, helped Hifumi inside and shut the door. Akira reached the front of the modest crowd with a look of shock on his face, adjusting his glasses slowly. "What the hell happened?"

"You're pretty banged up," Makoto said, trying to mask her concern as best she could. But there were tears pricking the corners of her eyes. "Where does it hurt?"

"It's not as bad as it-" Shizuka paused, seeing the firm glare Makoto was giving her. She sighed gently. "My arm is messed up, and I got a deep gash in this hand," she said, motioning to both of her injuries. "As for what happened, well... we ran into Mr. A," Shizuka added.
A wave of shock rolled through the group, the surprise enough to make Makoto halt her healing efforts for just a moment. The brunette swallowed hard and raised her hands up, slowly resuming her efforts as Shizuka and Hifumi’s injuries were knit back together. Hifumi looked down on her body with surprise clear on her face.

"That big crime boss guy?" Morgana asked, trotting past Akira's feet. "Whoa... this is definitely some major news!"

Hifumi blinked slightly. "That... that cat is talking," she murmured, pointing to Morgana.

"Yeah. He's a magic talking cat," Ryuji casually said.

"I'm not a- Agh, nevermind..." Morgana grumbled.

Shizuka took her time to explain everything that happened on her journey to the hideout while Makoto worked to heal their injuries. She spoke of how she bumped into Hifumi near Shibuya station, and the unconventional lure that managed to bait her into that burned out building.

Then she told the group about Lars, the mysterious assassin with the paper weaponry that could carve easily through human flesh. Finally she told them about Mr. A and what little she had managed to learn from the elusive crime boss. Shizuka did what she could to describe A's Stand power, but the best way she could describe it was some sort of long range telekinesis, coupled with the ability to make some kind of force field. It was the best she could gather from how he had redirected the projectiles sent his way.

Shizuka also made sure to describe all the details of Mr. A's face that she could recall, giving Yusuke the time to make a sketch of her description. Fortunately the bluenette was able to keep to the details without venturing into abstract realms. In the end, his sketch seemed to be a perfect representation of what Shizuka recalled, and Hifumi was able to chip in a few extra details.

Once she had finished, Shizuka sank back in her chair. "And that's about everything that happened. Christ... between that thing in Mementos, Black Mask trying to frame us, and now Mr. A coming after us..."

Makoto settled a hand on Shizuka's left shoulder, earning a small smile from the dark-haired girl. "Things are definitely... eventful. But you're okay, that's the important part." She glanced over to Hifumi. "I'm very sorry you got caught in the middle of this, Togo-san. I hope you're not too badly hurt."

"I'm okay," Hifumi replied, smiling. "Especially since you healed me. Though I have to say, that this is all... very unexpected," she added.

Sergio returned from the mini fridge and handed Hifumi a chilled can of cola, taking a seat beside her. "While Mr. A is a mystery, this Lars guy sounds a bit familiar. Yoshio's kind of a huge nerd, and he likes to compile information on particularly prolific Stand users. And a killer who specializes in paper is definitely a rarity, even in our circle."

"Well don't leave us in suspense. What can you tell us about this guy?" Akira asked.

"Not a huge amount," Sergio admitted with a small shrug. "Supposedly he started out as an orphan in Germany, went through to his teenage years without being adopted. Around that time,
presumably, his Stand appeared and he got work for some criminal syndicate. Killed quite a few people in their name, before he started doing freelance work around Europe. By the late nineties and early two-thousands, he was handling tasks around the Middle East. More than a few militia groups took to calling this tall, pale, and mystic stranger 'Iblis.' Satan, to use a term you might be more familiar with."

The others listened carefully as Sergio relayed what he knew. The blond seemed unnaturally tense as he did so. "And eventually he wound up in Japan?" Ann asked.

Sergio nodded. "He blazed a neat little trail through Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and China. This paper-assassin had never stayed with any particular employer for long. But then he met Mr. A some years back, and apparently stuck to him like glue," he explained.

"Perhaps Mr. A simply pays that well?" Yusuke suggested.

Shizuka gave a quick shake of her head. "I don't think it's a thing about money. The way Lars looked at his boss... That kinda loyalty can't be bought. It was like he was in love with the guy," she said.

"It's possible. That blonde woman seemed to be too," Shiho remarked. "What was it you said? That the people working for him were all abused by society in some way?"

"Most of 'em, I imagine. Which... I can believe. Though there are likely still plenty of people in his ranks who are just thugs that joined up when he started making a monopoly on crime," Shizuka said. And if this guy had spent any time with Dio, he might just have picked up on a few tricks for manipulating people, telling them all what they wanted to hear.

Perhaps on some level he was genuine on helping the disenfranchised. After all he had been a victim in his youth. But she doubted his intentions were so clear cut. Mr. A was still a murdering criminal who had been complicit in god knows how many crimes. Shizuka was willing to bet that the only people he really wanted to help were those that were loyal to him, and had abilities he could make use of. She had no idea what Mr. A's end goal was, but whatever the case it wouldn't be good for the nation.

"I'm really sorry you were stuck in the heart of all this, Hifumi. Innocents getting roped into all this is the last thing we want... Thank goodness you have a Stand of your own," Akira remarked. She could have been in much greater danger if she didn't have that tool to defend herself with.

"It's alright, I... Wait, you all know I have a power?" Hifumi asked, genuinely surprised.

Sergio nodded. "I mentioned you have precognitive powers, and that those abilities could potentially be useful to us in the future," the blond explained.

"I... oh," Hifumi said, seeming to be uncertain of how to respond to that news.

"Not that we'd want to force you into joining us, particularly after you wound up getting attacked because of us. But we would ask that you keep this a secret," Akira remarked.

Hifumi was silent for some moments, digesting all that had happened over the past two hours. "In truth, when I first learned that Stands existed, I was curious... the famous Phantom Thieves who have been all over the news, they must have had some kind of supernatural powers like that. And since Shizuka and Sergio had the same power, I had to wonder if they were involved." She took in
a deep breath and sighed gently. "May I... May I help you all?"

The others seemed slightly taken aback by her request. "Even knowing the danger you might be in, you want to get involved?" Makoto asked.

Hifumi let out a shaky breath. "In truth... I may already be in danger. I might not be in the Arditi, but I don't think that'll matter to Mr. A. I was there today, and he might well come after me too in the future." She folded her arms over her chest, her brow knit firmly. "He's an evil man. His sin needs to be exorcised from the world."

"I like her," Futaba said, grinning in her usual mischievous manner while she bounced in her chair.

"I'm not gonna sugarcoat it. Things are going to get a lot more dangerous if you officially side with us. Nobody will judge you if you want to stay on the sidelines," Akira informed her.

Hifumi closed her eyes and nodded. "I'm nervous, o-of course... but at the same time, it would be irresponsible not to use my Stand's potential for some good. And, well... being a mysterious heroine sounds... exciting..."

"You might need a bit more practice with your Stand. But I'd be happy to keep training you in combat," Sergio said, flashing her a curt smile. "That said, if you are going to be in the Arditi, you need a codename."

"And Oracle's already taken," Ann chimed. Futaba raised her left hand slightly.

They had wanted to wait a bit before extending this offer to Hifumi, and she did need a little more time to toughen up and then acclimate to the Metaverse. Still, with the way things were going they needed all the help they could get. And Flaming Telepath was likely going to be quite a powerhouse in the Metaverse.

As she heard this, Hifumi hummed gently in contemplation. "I see... if you were on a secret mission, you wouldn't address each other with your real names." Akira nodded, as she was broadly correct. "Then how about... Zugzwang?"

Ryuji quirked his left brow. "Eh? You sneezin' or something?"

"It's a chess term," Makoto said matter-of-factly. "It refers to an opponent being forced to make a move, even though it would put them at a further disadvantage... which is not inappropriate, given her Stand power, but it's still something of a mouthful," the brunette said.

Hifumi nodded. "Well, in that case... how about Maestro? I'll conduct the bodies and souls of my enemies, and make them dance to my beat!"

"Oho... that's pretty damn cool," Ryuji said, grinning broadly.

"And a little intimidating... I imagine Hifumi-chan could be pretty imposing when she's pissed," Ann mused.

"Then it's settled." Morgana beamed toward their newest recruit. "Welcome to the team Maestro. A power like yours is one we could really do with."

Hifumi gave a slight bow from her seated position. "I can't promise to always be readily available
with my current schedule, but... whenever I need to be a blade of justice against distorted sinners, I'll lend my hand." 

Shizuka gave the shogi princess a quick thumbs up. "Neat! Then I guess now we gotta decide what we're gonna do next," she said.

"Mm. I'll send my sketch of Mr. A along to Detective Shirogane. She or Kirijo-san may have the resources we need to track his face, and if we can at least learn a name from him... well, we may have better odds of tracking him to his doorstep and taking the fight to him," Yusuke explained.

"Good idea," Akira said, nodding curtly at their trusty artist. "For now though... I believe we should teach Hifumi a little bit about the Metaverse."

The danger around them was still growing stronger, but now they had a face to put to one of their opponents. More than that, they had managed to get a new ally out of today's skirmish, one with a rather potent power. But, unknown to any of them, Black Mask already had his eyes set on a new target.
The knock on her door made Shizuka tense slightly. She knew who was visiting, and even so the
dark-haired girl was nervous. On the plus side, Simmons was out running errands and would be
gone for some hours. It meant that nobody else would be around to see her if she managed to make
a fool of herself.

She rose to her feet and took a moment to inspect herself, smoothing out the wrinkles of her 'Dark
Side of the Moon' T-shirt and her blue jeans. They wouldn't be going out, not with the risk of Stand
user attacks hanging overhead like the Sword of Damocles. But she wanted to still look good for
today, and she thought she cut a dashing figure.

Shizuka rose from the couch and quickly made for the door, opening it up quickly. She smiled
warmly as she got a look at Makoto, the chilly breeze ruffling her short brown locks. Her turquoise
turtleneck and dark trousers seemed a decent fit for the chilly weather, the look suiting Makoto
perfectly. Shizuka was trying her best not to stare.

"Hello," Makoto greeted, smiling warmly and trying not to seem embarrassed. "How are you
feeling?"

"All better now. All thanks to you, Miss Nightingale," Shizuka replied, grinning and rolling her
shoulders to prove her point.

"I'm glad. My healing isn't as refined as Lifeson's outside of the Metaverse, but I'm glad that you
and Hifumi are alright. You're not just acting tough, right?" Makoto asked.

Shizuka puffed her cheeks out. "As if I'd do that." She took a quick step back to open up the
doorway fully. "Anyway, wanna come in? I've got the player all warmed up, and I've got plenty of
movies to pick through."

Smiling, Makoto took a step inside and gently shut the door behind her, and spent some moments
slipping off her pale brown boots. She left them in the entryway beside Shizuka's sneakers and
quickly followed her girlfriend to the living area, her hands clasped behind her back.

"Your butler works rather hard to keep this place clean. He's definitely thorough," Makoto mused.
"But I can relate. With how busy Sis is, cleaning the apartment mainly falls to me."

"Speaking of Sae," Shizuka remarked, glancing over her shoulder at Makoto. She tried not make
her dislike of Sae too apparent, but she hadn't forgotten what Makoto had told her before she joined
the Arditi. 'Right now you're useless to me.' Things like that didn't seem particularly healthy to
Shizuka. "Everything okay at home? I mean, she hasn't... said anything bad to you, has she?" she
asked.

"Oh no things are quite alright for me," Makoto replied, perhaps a bit too quickly. "Sis has been
really busy at work lately. I feel a little guilty, since it's partially our fault. The SIU has been pretty
heavily involved in looking into the Phantom Thieves. At any rate, Sis hasn't spent much time at
home."
"Well..." Shizuka scratched the back of her neck slightly. "You know, if you ever want to talk
about serious stuff, feel free to fire away." She paused and gestured to several stacks of DVD and
Blu-ray cases positioned off to the right side of her heavy TV unit. "So, shall we get to picking?"

Makoto smiled and nodded, seeming to be happy to shelve the topic of Sae for the time being.
"Yes, let's. Though I have to admit, I don't know a lot of the titles you seem to have here...
American movies aren't really my area of expertise," the brunette admitted.

Shizuka made her way to the nearest stack, and picked up the first DVD she could grab. She
examined the case with great scrutiny. 'Pearl Harbor... Is that even a movie you'd watch on a
date? I mean it's a romance, but not really. Even the romance isn't very good... looking at Josh
Hartnett and Ben Affleck's mugs for over two hours feels like a prison sentence.'

Slowly but surely Shizuka could feel beads of nervous sweat gathering on her neck, a burning
sensation flushing through her skin. 'Then there's the politics. Showing 'Pearl Harbor' to a
Japanese girl, that's gotta be bad. I mean neither side was clean in that conflict but even so, a
dramatization of history with a dumbass romance dumped on top like a slap of cow shit isn't gonna
be a good ice breaker.'

Shizuka furrowed her brow, her gaze rapidly shifting from side to side. 'Wait, should I be offended
too? I'm American and Japanese, what part of this movie should bug me more? I mean there's
definitely more realistic and flattering portrayals of the- W-wait a minute, why the shit do I even
have a DVD of Pearl Harbor?! I fucking HATE this movie! It's goddamn garbage no matter what
nationality you are! SHOWING IT SHOULD BE CONSIDERED A WAR CRIME! I MEAN, IT'S
SUPPOSED TO BE TITANIC FOR GUYS, BUT IT'S SHIT ON BOTH PARTS 'CAUSE THE
ROMANCE AND THE ACTION ARE BOTH TERRIBLE! ARGO CAN'T ABSOLVE THE SINS
OF THIS AND DAREDEVIL! DAMNIT MOM, YOUR BEN AFFLECK FANGIRLING HAS-'

"Oh, how about this one? It looks interesting."

Makoto's words were enough to snap Shizuka from her inner-tirade, causing her to glance over and
see the case in her grasp. Logan on Blu-ray. 'Oh no I'm gonna cry like a bitch in front of her...'

"Ah, s-sure! That's a great one," Shizuka replied, grinning broadly. She quickly tossed the case in
her hands away, trying her best to ignore its existence entirely. "Have you ever seen an X-Men
movie in the past?" she asked.

"Oh, well... No I can't say I have," Makoto replied.

Still smiling, Shizuka graciously sat down on the couch beside Makoto and got comfortable. "Then
I guess I need to give a little backstory. It's the year 2000. The world is still awestruck by the
Matrix, until another five years when every aspect of it is dated as fuck and the sequels suck ass.
Action movies are riding high, and superhero flicks are starting to make a comeback. And riding
high on that wave is another leather-decked property about a plucky gang of mutants: The X-
Men!"

She spoke with keen interest, and certainly seemed to hold Makoto's interest as she dropped some
backstory. It was a speech Shizuka knew well. After all, it was how her father had introduced the
X-films to her.

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While Futaba's Uncle hadn't made a move since his unfortunate and unwanted appearance at
LeBlanc, Akira knew that he was still bound to show up at some point. He was a gambler, and the
need for money would draw him in like a moth to a flame.

Sojiro was still worried, and so the two teens had to slip out while the cafe was open so he wouldn't get wise. This matter needed to be dealt with, and with things heating up in their Phantom Thief business, Akira wanted it dealt with quickly to make sure it didn't fall out of his mind in the chaos that was to come.

As it turned out, given that he was ultimately a bottom feeder on society, Futaba's Uncle wasn't too deep in Mementos. Even so, as they made their way deeper into the labyrinth, they were both constantly aware of the risk of Camael attacking them.

Their power had grown considerably, and what few Shadows were in these tunnels were quick to hiss and scuttle back into the darkness, working to hide away from the two powerful figures they could feel drawing near. Naturally, as Futaba wanted to keep this as private as possible, even Morgana was at home. Instead they were travelling the tunnels in the 'comfort' of Necronomicon's black hull.

It was slightly slower than Morgana's usual cruising speed. And as Akira stood awkwardly to Futaba's left side, he rather missed the strange and expansive phantom interior that made the Morganamobile so comfortable. Necronomicon was also rather dark inside, with the only sources of light being the screens floating in front of Futaba, and the lines of neon light glowing on her bodysuit.

From where he stood, Akira was paying particular focus to a 3D map of the neighbouring Mementos floors that was being projected in front of Futaba. A red cube was glowing on the edge of one floor: The chamber where Hiroshi Isshiki's Shadow was lurking. They were drawing closer with each second, and every Shadow ahead was making every move possible to avoid getting in the way of the floating saucer.

"You sure you're ready for this?" Akira asked, glancing down to the shorter figure.

Futaba nodded firmly. While her heavy goggles obscured her eyes, there was a worried frown creasing her rosy lips. "He'll never stop coming after Sojiro unless we do something. And if he t-takes us to court, he could r-really cause some trouble for us. And I... I'm tired of running away."

Akira couldn't fault her. For as nervous as she was in all this, she had joined the Phantom Thieves to avenge her Mother, and was working hard to step away from her old shut-in self. Hanging out with the others, having fun in public... that sort of thing was very helpful. But Akira was willing to bet that getting even with the Uncle who abused her would also be quite a beneficial experience for her.

"I'll handle the fighting. I need you to hang back and analyse him, and to keep an eye out for Camael. I'd rather not be ambushed by him again."

Futaba nodded again, "Don't hurt my Uncle too badly."

"I won't," Akira replied. Though it was a tempting prospect, the bastard was still family to Futaba. And if he turned up dead, the police would no doubt cast a suspicious eye to Sojiro, which could cause a good deal of trouble.

Eventually they reached a swirling vortex of black and red, with Futaba focusing on it intensely as she held Necronomicon in place. "W-well... here we are," the nerd admitted, swallowing hard.

"He can't hurt you anymore," Akira assured her, settling a strong hand on Futaba's left shoulder.
She seemed to relax slightly at his comforting touch, nodding in agreement to his statement. They pressed on, with the vortex washing over Necronomicon like a crimson wave.

Necronomicon floated into a large cubic chamber, a concrete tomb that had twisted train tracks sprouting through the walls and floor. Akira recognised Hiroshi’s form easily enough—the black aura swirling around his broad body didn’t make much of a difference as far as Akira could tell.

"... money... money... give me money... don't care how, or where, just need more..."

Futaba sighed as his insane chatter reached the craft. Akira gave her a small pat on the shoulder, and then made his way to the edge of Futabas Persona. A section of the ship opened out in front of him, clearing the way for Akira to hop down to the cold concrete ground. "You hang back. I'll take care of this." Akira's body glowed blue for a fraction of a second as he swapped out Arsene for a new acquisition.

The specter of a beautiful man floated briefly over Akira's body, physically perfect in all respects, his hair flowing free like a sea of gold. Pale pink fabric was tied loosely around his body. Narcissus, as a Persona, seemed about as beautiful as his mythical counterpart.

Slowly and steadily, Akira made his way toward Hiroshi, stopping only a few feet away from him. "Alright pal. You've been causing a lot of trouble for Sojiro Sakura and his daughter, and its time to stop. I'm here to change that filthy heart of yours."

"Sakura... yeah. He's an easy mark, I'll fleece him for everything he's worth! He should sell that stupid shop and give the money to me! It's mine! I deserve it!" the Shadow snapped, continuing to ramble and posture. The ground bubbled beneath his feet.

"I'm not giving you a single yen," Akira remarked.

Narcissus raised his left hand up slowly, flicking his fingers up in one fluid motion that sent a powerful gale of wind exploding out of his palm. It slammed powerfully into the Shadow's belly and swept his girth upward. Girimehkala's body flew backward and drove into the nearest wall, the area collapsing around him as a deep imprint of his body was thoroughly carved into the cement.
He growled again, chunks of masonry crumbling from the point of impact.

Just as Akira thought... he was definitely a small fry.

The Shadow charged forward, swinging his blade down fiercely. Akira was forced to dodge to the side, but the powerful shockwave of steel biting into the floor managed to hit him and knocked him further across the room. Akira landed hard on his side, only to quickly roll onto his feet. He grimaced slightly, Narcissus still lingering at his side.

"Hit me with everything you've got... I'll still run you into the fucking ground and steal your distortions!" Akira snapped.

His Persona shoved his hands forward, a green cyclone of razor wind lashing out of his hands and rapidly booming toward the charging elephant. The arcing waves lashed against his arms and legs, whipping him from all sides and forcing the Shadow to stomp his heavy feet into the ground to fight against the constant push against him. His arms and legs were marked a string of deep scars, but even so he powered through.

Girimehkala lunged forward with a sudden burst of speed, his heavy fist swiping into Akira's chest and sweeping him off his feet. He very nearly struck the wall, only for Narcissus to catch him from behind and plant him back down on his shaky feet.

"J-Joker!" Futaba called out. "Are you okay?"

"Nothing I can't handle." Akira touched his mask, his body glowing blue as he swapped Narcissus for another Persona. Knowing what he knew about this kind of Shadow, going for curse magic or physical power was a bad idea. Fortunately, he had a good deal of magical firepower on hand.

Narcissus vanished behind him, as a truly massive shape rose up behind Akira in his place. It was huge in scale. A mighty blue serpent with seven looming cobra heads. "Ananta!" The snake heads snapped forward, a violent hissing sound reverberating through the chamber as swirls of nuclear light formed in their gaping maws.

"You just hang back and keep your senses peeled for Camael. I'll end this quickly." Though, on some level, Akira wished he could take his time.

The nuclear burst slammed into the coal black elephant, the rage of the explosion drowning out his pained howl. Ananta's blast left a molten crater in the ground, waves of smoke radiating off Girimehkala. The beast struggled to stand and raised his sharpened blade high. With surprising speed for his tremendous girth, he threw a rapidfire volley of slashes toward the tremendous serpent, trails of blue light following the path of each swing.

However, for as large as Ananta was, he managed to be quite swift and flexible. Each wave of light missed just barely, and the few scratches Akira felt forming on his arms and chest did little to dissuade his assault.

Within seconds, the serpents encircled the tremendous elephant man again. A vibrant flash of nuclear light struck him from all sides and shook the chamber, before the intensity died down. Akira called his Persona back from the scorched section of concrete, watching as the smoke steadily cleared ahead.

He watched as the Shadow bubbled and blackened, the excess mass slopping away to reveal Hiroshi's form. He grimaced, struggling to sit up. A sad smile crossed Hiroshi's face. "Wakaba was always smart and competent, and I... I'm just a loser. I guess things would always turn out this way.
Things started going different for me after I won a lot of money through gambling. The people who saw me as worthless were suddenly envious of me."

Akira watched him carefully. He was the lesser sibling compared to Wakaba's genius, but money managed to level the playing field. That explained some things, even if Akira hardly felt any sympathy for the man. "So that's what drove you, and caused all this trouble?"

Hiroshi nodded slightly. "I wanted to keep the high going forever... And the envy I had for my sister, I took it out on the people closest to her. Futaba... what's wrong with me?"

"You're a goddamn addict, that's what," Akira firmly said.

"Ha... you're right. Maybe it's too late, but... Futaba, Wakaba... even you Sakura. Please forgive me..." He looked Akira in the eye, and the young man noticed something in his glowing yellow eyes that hadn't been there before. A kindness and rationality that had been lacking when they first met. "I need to make amends, starting with dropping this extortion business... I doubt we'll see each other again, but... thank you."

A warm white glow enveloped Hiroshi's body, and with a fluttering flash he was gone. Akira stood by silently, before breathing out all the tension that had built in his body. Well, that went better than expected.

Necronomicon vanished around Futaba, causing the young woman to land quietly on the ground. "Aki- Joker, that was amazing! I didn't think you'd solo him like that!"

Akira shrugged. "He was nothing special. More importantly, things should be back to normal for you and your Dad soon," he said.

Futaba smiled impishly, her hands folded behind her back. "Dad, right... boy, this'll be a real relief to him! Kinda sucks that we can't tell him it was us, but satisfaction is its own reward in this case. And... we made a good guy out of my Uncle. I think Mom would be happy knowing that."

"I'd like to think that," Akira replied, a smile on his face. "To think that money twisted him that badly... I'd hate to think how twisted his Shadow would have been if the guy had been given any real power," he explained.

"That's just how some people are. Like that Kaneshiro guy, or Madarame," she said. Futaba hesitated for a moment, and even though her goggles covered a good portion of her face Akira was aware of the pale pink covering her cheeks. "Hey, um... th-thanks for this. You know, for helping me and not telling the others. I owe the others a lot, and they're all awesome guys, but you..."

Akira stiffened slightly. "Ah... Well don't sweat it too much. That guy was a prick, and he could have caused a lot of trouble if we didn't deal with him," Akira reasoned. And, well... he cared a good deal for Futaba and Sojiro.

"Still... thanks." Suddenly she was hugging him, her face buried into his silver shirt while her hands rested on Akira's back.

The dark-haired boy had his hands raised slightly, his own cheeks about as red as Ann's catsuit. Then, watching her for a few quiet moments, Akira relented and settled his right hand on the back of her head, and the other on Futaba's upper back.

'This girl's gonna give me diabetes... Well, I can live with that...'}
Shizuka had practically ambushed Akira that afternoon, urgently ushering him into Leblanc. Sojiro seemed not to notice the two teens scurrying into the attic, and if he did he certainly didn't care. Shizuka was clutching a manilla envelope in her hands, the thickness of which suggested there were quite a few pages stashed away inside.

"Alright alright, quit prodding," Akira said once they rounded the crest of the stairs. He took a few quick steps into the large attic room and came to a stop near his workbench, while Shizuka stood near his souvenir-laden bookshelf. "So, what's up? You seem even more giddy than usual."

"Dunno if giddy is the right word... but in my hands, I hold the investigators report about my birth parents," Shizuka said, managing an awkward smile.

Akira cocked his head slightly, his eyes growing wide in surprise. "I... oh. Well that is big news. Have you read it yet?"

The young woman shook her head slightly and cast her gaze to her feet. "I've been... afraid to," Shizuka admitted. "This package arrived yesterday and I must have spent hours just... staring at it. I didn't even sleep last night because I was just thinking non stop about the envelope. The only thing on my mind were all the what-ifs and stuff. Because the investigator said he had answers, and that this envelope isn't just a big wad of nothing," she said.

"I see," Akira replied, nodding slowly. While he wasn't in the same boat as her, Akira could understand why she was so worried about all this. The answer to the mystery of her origins was resting in Shizuka's hands, definitive proof to what had happened to her. But the certainty of this could definitely be terrifying. If her parents deliberately abandoned her, well there was no way to hide from that truth now.

After a moment, he pushed off the bench and took a casual step toward her. "No matter what, you're still you. And you'll always have us to depend on," he assured her.

A faint smile graced Shizuka's face. With great care she slipped her silver-rimmed sunglasses off, sliding them neatly into her jacket pocket. There was a tiredness in her eyes, and Akira could see moisture glimmering from restrained tears. "I've been thinking a lot about what you said too, you know. That family is more than blood."

"Oh?" Akira replied. Well, that was rather reassuring.

"No matter what happens, no matter what's inside this envelope, Joseph Joestar and Suzi Q Joestar were my Dad and Mom. And even though they're gone, they'll always be my parents and I'll never forget everything I owe them," Shizuka said. "And you guys, the rest of our... group. You're like my family too. My folks might be gone, and I... I gotta' accept that, but I'll have you guys for a long time." Hopefully, at least.

"That's right," Akira assured her. "Now more than ever we need to stick together. But... are you still interested in that info?" Akira asked, gesturing to the envelope she was holding.
Shizuka was silent for several long moments. Then, eventually, she spoke up. "A while back a friend of mine said... he said that sometimes you're better off not knowing some things. And I think I get it. Sometimes there's hope in not knowing. Cause when you know something, that's it. That's the truth you can never look away from. And I'm not stupid, I know there's a good chance there's no happy news in this envelope."

Akira nodded along slowly. He didn't want to say as much aloud, but he had been thinking much the same way. The implications of Shizuka being abandoned as an infant, and her Stand powers manifesting as they did... there probably wouldn't be any heartfelt reunions.

"So what are you going to do?" Akira asked.

"For now... I don't think opening this will do me much good. With everything that's going on, if this is bad news it'll probably fuck up my performance. But I think I'll choose to believe what I want to believe," Shizuka admitted. She clasped the envelope to her chest and closed her eyes. "And I believe that my parents, the people who brought me into this world... I'll believe that they were good people, and that they wanted what was best for me. And that they had a good reason for not being with me... More than that, I'll believe that they're happy that things turned out the way they did, that I'm okay. N-no, more than okay. And that they're happy wherever they are too..."

Shizuka breathed a long sigh. "That's what I choose to believe."

Akira's left hand settled on her shoulder, causing Shizuka's eyes to pop open. "Then that's what I'll think too," he said.

"Thanks dude," Shizuka said, smiling earnestly. "That all said... I might change my mind some day, and decide to read this. And keeping it at home seems... well I'd run the risk of going nuts knowing that the answer is under my roof. So I figure it'd be best to leave it with someone I know I can trust to keep it safe." She held the manilla envelope outward to Akira.

"You'd trust me with something this personal?" Akira asked, slowly taking the padded envelope into his hands. "I'm certainly honoured that you'd trust me this much, and I'll make sure to keep this safe. I'll also make sure not to read it."

"Well, you can but..." Shizuka smiled faintly "No spoilers."

Akira returned her smile. "Of course."

Once he had grasped the envelope and taken it from her hands, Shizuka breathed a happy sigh and dried her eyes. "W-wow... I dunno how to describe it, but... it feels like a huge weight just got lifted off my shoulders," she remarked. Indeed, the young woman seemed to relax a bit more almost instantly.

"I can imagine. You don't need to worry about your heritage in the future, cause no matter what you know where you came from. You've got people to watch out for you and care about you," Akira said, smiling kindly.

"Good to know. Still, I feel kinda... funny. I dunno how to describe it, I just feel really kinda happy right now. As if all my troubles were just lifted off my mind and..." Shizuka trailed into a sudden gasp.

While Stands and Personas were distinct from each other in some respects, they came from a
similar point of origin in the user. Strengthening the heart of a Persona user broke away the last of the shackles on their power, allowing them to reach their potential. And the same was possible for Stands too.

Oftentimes a Stand would evolve on its own, either over time or simply as a reaction to outside stimuli. But it was just as possible, albeit rare, for a change in the users very spirit to strengthen their Stand as a result. The weight being lifted off Shizuka's heart allowed her Stand to blossom.

Akira took a step back as he saw Houdini's specter levitate a few feet above Shizuka, just barely brushing his ceiling. He watched, transfixed, as the golden plates of her body were washed over by a tide of white fire. As the flames passed over he noticed that Houdini's body was now a polished, gleaming obsidian. Save for her joints, each one of which now stood out as a distinct band of burnished gold. A short white scarf fluttered around her neck, while her compound eyes were still a vibrant pink that stood out against the blackness.

Houdini was gone. In her place stood Houdini Eclipse.

Shizuka was left blinking in the aftermath, staring up at her Stand in awestruck silence. "My... My Stand, she... she's changed," she murmured.

"Yeah... I'm a little shocked too." Though the difference in appearance wasn't as dramatic as it had been for the others. "How does it feel?"

"I... I dunno, I didn't exactly expect this," Shizuka replied, her shock still lingering in her tone. She watched Houdini raise her fists up, before both of them started shooting out in rapidfire flurries. Houdini had always been fast, but now her fists were whirring at such speed that they were completely invisible to the naked eye. "Even faster than before, b-but... I think she might even be stronger now too."

"Well don't go testing that part out here," Akira urgently said, pointing to the staircase. He was proud of Shizuka, and quite happy for her, but the last thing they needed was to draw Sojiro up here with some kind of commotion. Plus all Akira's stuff was here.

Shizuka nodded, still seeming to be in a bit of a daze. She slowly made her way to Akira's bed and sat down on it, shafts of light sliding in through the slits of his window. The sun was gradually setting, but it was still high enough to cast a warm glow into the attic.

As she sat there, quietly drinking in all that had transpired, something caught her attention out of the left corner of her eye. Shizuka looked over slowly, her eyes widening as she noticed something truly strange: The light coming in through the window was twisting and contorting at all angles, as if being magnetised to the reflective bands on the finger joints of Houdini's left hand.

Curious, and wanting to test this out, Shizuka directed Houdini to turn around so that it was her right hand in the light. Just as before the light seemed to be drawn into the gold along her fingers and elbow. Now though Shizuka was able to see the bands growing brighter as they steadily sucked in more light.

"The fuck," Shizuka muttered. "Gotta test this out at home to see what this shit is... oh, but before I forget..." The bed beneath her abruptly turned invisible, with Shizuka seeming to be sitting oh thin air. "Phew. I can still do my invisible shtick... Well thank God for that!"

"Too true," Akira replied. "Well this has been... sort of a rollercoaster for you today, huh? Come
on." He set the envelope on his shelf, set to find a better space for it as soon as he could find the
time. "A nice helping of Leblanc coffee and curry should help ease your mind," Akira proudly said.

Minutes later, Shizuka found herself as Leblanc's sole customer. She was seated at one booth, a
half finished plate of curry in front of her while her left hand clutched a near empty mug of coffee.
She seemed a little torn on which she preferred.

"Holy shit," Shizuka murmured, setting her fork down on a streaked section of the plate. "Dude
you have gotten really good at cooking. Like, damn... I have eaten at some of the ritziest places in
New York, and you're standing toe to toe against 'em."

"He oughta be good. He's my apprentice after all," Sojiro said. "If he keeps improving, who
knows? He might even become the second owner of this place."

Akira perked up slightly from his position at the sink. Second owner of Leblanc... he had to admit,
the phrase sounded rather nice when he rolled it around in his head. And he apparently had a bit of
a knack when it came to making coffee and curry. More than that, with his criminal record
damaging his career prospects, this was definitely one of his best options.

Shizuka hummed slightly. "You okay Boss? You seem kinda... chipper today," she said.

The older man shrugged, a modest smile playing in his lips. "I guess you could say a big weight
just got lifted off me. It's made things a lot easier for me."

"Oooh," Shizuka replied, deciding not to pry further. She downed the last of her coffee and sighed
in relief, leaning into her booth with the empty mug clutched comfortably in her palms. "Hey
where's Futaba? I would've figured she'd be hanging out here."

"She's out with Ann today. She wanted to help Futaba expand her wardrobe a little," Akira
remarked. "These days Futaba's been spending a lot more time hanging out with the others, trying
to get by without having to rely on me. It's a bit of a relief, since I can already see her getting more
confident," he explained.

"Eh? Why wasn't I told about this? I wanna do cool shit with Futaba..." Shizuka said. She shrugged
and resumed eating. "Oh well, there's always tomorrow."

Well, if nothing else, things were looking up in their personal lives.

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10/4

Tori Hasumi was, to put it bluntly, a con artist. It was simply how he had made a living from his
high school years, to his current age. But over time his cons had grown in sophistication. Initially
he had made his money through hawking budget, bootleg material to rubes on the street, and now
he was the head of... well it could only really be described as a cult.

Harmonics, the venture Hasumi had been heading for the past five years, promoted itself as a 'path
of good living' designed to 'cleanse the mind, body, and soul of all the harmful vibrations of the
modern world.' This translated to selling rubes thick books that contained little more than nonsense
mantras and practices, empty philosophy that Hasumi had thought up whenever he was on the can.
Oh yes, and selling 'Harmonic Water' too. Which was ultimately just regular water sold at thrice the price of regular bottles.

And the money had certainly been flowing freely ever since he started it. College kids, housewives, depressed salarymen, they all flocked to Harmonics in droves thanks to the promise of a better life. Well, as far as Hasumi was concerned he wasn't doing anyone any harm. If idiots wanted to throw their money at crap, well that was allowed. It was one of the joys of a free market. And it wasn't like anyone had died from Harmonics.

He also quite liked money, and feeling smarter than the idiots he had wrapped around his finger. The money opened a few doors for him, and helped introduce him to a whole new world. A world of corrupt politicians and big wigs, who were all throwing themselves in with an up and coming politician: Masayoshi Shido. Anyone watching the news was aware of his meteoric rise, always telling people exactly what they wanted to hear. There was no doubt that he'd be the next prime minister, and when that happened everyone who was loyal would be rewarded handsomely.

Hasumi had naturally thrown himself at the opportunity, using some Harmonics funding to aid Shido's campaign. He considered himself loyal, but he was unfortunately quite expendable. And corrupt enough to have a Palace.

It was rather modest in scale, Akechi noted. Most of it was a tremendous cathedral, admittedly marginally larger than any that could be found in the real world. The structure was positioned on a large island of cement and asphalt, adrift above a purple vortex that occasionally twisted and melted apart to reveal a warped cityscape of Tokyo below.

Clearing through the Shadows was a simple matter, leaving Hasumi quite vulnerable against Akechi. But given how greedy and corrupt Hasumi was as a person, his Shadow managed to be a big stronger than Akechi had anticipated. It was certainly quite large, but nothing he couldn't handle.

A resounding series of bangs echoed throughout the immensity of the cavernous cathedral, a great bulk striking repeatedly off the organ pipes that dominated the entire back wall of the structure. There were two figures falling down at a worrying speed: One larger than a delivery truck, while the other was a slender human. A shadowy shape occasionally flew from the smaller figure, striking into the giant and driving him into the organ pipes.

There was a tremendous earth-shaking impact as the bulkier figure struck the ground, creating a deep crater. The dust gradually cleared, revealing the details of Hasumi's Shadow.

It was a tremendous purple humanoid dressed in damaged Geneva gown, scorches and scars lining his flabby body. He had three eyes, the third lodged in the center of his forehead. A halo orbited above his flabby bald head, formed by a series of interlocking gold yen symbols.

It was interesting, Akechi noted. In the real world Hasumi was a decently handsome and charismatic man. But this Shadow revealed the leech-like greed that infested his spirit.

Loki's spear drove through his right hand, pinning Hasumi to the floor and making him shriek in pain. Akechi landed on the marble floor a few feet in front of him, the floor splintering under his heels. Inky blackness soon bubbled through those cracks, while throbbing pustules and poisonous mushrooms soon started to sprout through the dark tar.

Hasumi raised his head, growling loudly while a piercing light started to glimmer in his third eye.
But before he could make another move, Loki's impressively hard fists started hammering into his face, snapping his skull in different directions. Each punch was joined by a crack of thunder, streaks of curse energy hissing from his knuckles and scorching the flabby flesh of Hasumi's jowls.

A harsh downward strike drove Hasumi's face into the floor, leaving a distinct impression in the hard ground. He laid still for several moments, while Akechi sighed and parted his cloak. From where he stood, the young man could see a few cuts along the left side of his chest, streaks of blood dirtying up the dark material of his shirt. That aside he could also feel painful bruises throbbing along his back and legs.

For a con-artist, Hasumi was quite strong on the inside.

"Why..." Hasumi grunted, his hulking frame shaking against the shattered ground. "I... I was loyal to Sh-Shido... so why are you..."

"It's not personal, if that's any consolation," Akechi replied casually, checking the sharp talons on his left glove. "We needed to find some people to kill, to frame the Arditi. And if my idea was to work, it had to be people corrupt enough to have a Palace. And your last few donations have been a little..." he shrugged slightly. "Lacking. You and Izumi drew the short straw."

"No... this..." The hulking Shadow tried to move, but the bludgeoning he had received had managed to sap the last of his strength.

"Still, I do have to thank you. Your Palace managed to have a most unique Shadow inside, one that I was happy to recruit." Loki's blade vanished from Hasumi's hand, while the black and white figure was abruptly replaced by a different Persona. A floating crimson cloak, containing a dark miasma and a pair of red skeletal arms. There was a golden tragedy mask at the front of the floating fabric, but there was no head visible to support it.

It was rare for Akechi to find something he found worth recruiting, but he could get some use out of this one. It was the only thing in this Palace, besides Hasumi, that had managed to slow him down.

Hasumi grunted and tried to move, only for his efforts to fail again. "I c-can still be useful... I can still..."

"Sorry. But dealing with the Phantom Thieves is more important than the life of some con artist," Akechi replied. His Persona slowly floated above him, bony fingers splaying open. Crackles of purple and yellow light arced between his digits, a psychic storm flashing to life around him. "Time to die, Hasumi."

A wave of psionic light lashed down against the downed Shadow, engulfing him and washing away every atom of his existence. The Palace rumbled in protest, until it too started to melt away.

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If one was willing to pay off a few lax port workers, it was an easy enough job to smuggle things into Tokyo port under cover of night. It was much the same with the ports of many countries.

Tonight was no different, with a quiet section of the port being busied by a gang of sharply dressed (and shifty looking) Korean gangsters. A lone lamp illuminated the area around the group, while they chatted lazily in the company of a heavy red shipping container. The waves were lapping
gently behind the container, washing against the concrete shore.

Two of the men were smoking idly, seeming to be staring off into darkened sky. "God..." one muttered, brushing a few lumps of ash off the lapels of his dark blazer. "Where the hell is this guy? We've been standing here for almost two hours."

"Dunno. The contact was supposed to be here... should we try and get in touch with the boss back home?" the other asked, taking a moment to adjust the zipper of his padded blue jacket.

"Hm... maybe we should ask Chung to put a call in when he gets back? He's the one with connections."

The other shrugged. "Yeah, maybe. We can't sit around here all night. We gotta offload the merchandise... how long is Chung gonna take? Is he seriously still taking a leak?"

Before the first smoker could respond, there was a sudden and loud crunching sound that rang out through the mostly empty port. It was immediately followed by a series of wet slapping sounds that echoed outward. Almost at once the gathered gangsters were on edge, drawing their guns.

Slowly, steadily, footsteps started coming toward them through the dark. Ever step was punctuated by a series of splatters hitting the concrete, a series of drips that sounded akin to a running faucet. Eventually two shapes emerged from the gloom: Mr. A, and a headless corpse being suspended in Man in Black's left hand.

Stunned silence rolled over the gathered gangsters, their attention shifting between the towering man, and the corpse that seemed to be floating in thin air from their point of view. "O-oi, th-that's Chung!" one of them gasped.

"Oh, is he a friend of yours? I tried having a chat with him, and he just lost his head," A casually said. Man in Black suddenly whipped the corpse to his left, the bloodied body rapidly sailing through the air and slamming into one man with such force that he was immediately flat on his back with the great weight pinning him down.

"Y-you son of a bitch!" one of them snapped.

Mr. A kept his gloved hands clasped neatly behind his back, a chilly breeze ruffling the hem of his black rain jacket. "I'm sure some of you know who I am by reputation alone. I'm the man who rules Tokyo, the unseen hand that pulls the strings of this city. And naturally I don't appreciate anyone trying to go over my head to do illegal business in Tokyo. I know you're not to blame, but I need to send a message to your employers so they'll know to listen and communicate in the future," he explained.

One of the gangsters took a step forward and fired a shot, the crack of gunfire echoing into the night. The bullet arced around the back of Mr. A's neck and shot past his shoulder in a beeline back the way it came. The gunman went wide eyed as a spatter of red coated his face, his attention swiftly being drawn to the man beside him.

He was on the ground, horrible gurgling sounds hissing from his mouth as he clutched his throat. Arcs of crimson were gushing through the gaps in his fingers, while the light steadily died out in his eyes.

"Do you know what a vector is?" Mr. A idly asked, rubbing his fingers against his thumb on his
right hand. "It's essentially a direction. If a bullet travels from point A to point B, then that's the vector of it." He took a few casual steps forward, tucking his hands into his jacket pockets as he went. "And being able to control something like that, well..."

The two smokers he was approaching screamed in unison, both letting off a volley of shots that raced toward A. Man in Black flicked his left hand up dismissively, immediately redirecting the bullets back the way they came.

A trio of shots hit the first man in the chest, tearing holes clean through him and making him scream in agony as he hit the earth. The second died quicker, one bullet blowing the right half of his neck off, while a second punched through his face with an explosive surge of blood. A series of his teeth flew into the air, immediately being redirected by a sweeping motion of Man in Black's left hand.

"I'll put this simply, so that even you monkeys can understand: You're out of your league here," Mr. A flatly remarked.

One of the two remaining men fired off another series of shots, his bullets arcing around Mr. A before promptly clattering to the cold ground. The four teeth made a beeline for his knees and elbows, plowing through flesh and bone before becoming rooted in place. The gunman screamed in white hot pain as Man in Black tenderly cupped his cheeks... only to fiercely yank his head to one side and snap his neck. Sinews of skin and muscle tore from the brief bout of ferocious strength as A just barely kept Man in Black's imposing might from breaking free and tearing the thug's head off.

Mr. A let out a soft sigh. "Is that all? Not a Stand user in the bunch," he casually remarked. "Even mainland mafias are starting to use Stands... are the Koreans that far behind?"

As he was pondering this, another gunshot rang out through the night. A had started to shift to the side on a reflex just as a handgun bullet punched into the back of his right shoulder. Already he could feel blood rendering his undershirt sticky, adhering it to his skin near his shoulder. Yet, surprisingly, he didn't much react to the impact.

"Oh that's right, I didn't kill you," Mr. A said, speaking as if he had forgotten to let the cat into the house. His attention was drawn to the last man of the bunch, pinned beneath Chung's heavy, headless corpse.

"What... what the fuck are you...?" the remaining gangster gasped, remaining wide-eyed as the flattened bullet collapsed out of A's back and hit the ground.

"Me? Well, you wouldn't believe me if I told you," Mr. A lazily told him.

The remaining gangster squeezed the trigger again, the sight making A furrow his brow in deep concentration. For just a brief moment he willed the bullet to remain in place in the chamber, the ensuing explosion blasting the weapon apart and sending the gunman's fingers along for the ride. He shrieked, hitting the ground and writhing hard beneath Chung's weight. Smoke continued to waft from the scorched stump of his hand.

The specter of Man in Black loomed over him, the wooden joints of his fingers creaking loudly as he clenched his fists. His Stand knifed downward, fists flying in a rapidfire flurry that slammed against the gangster's body again and again, bouncing him along the concrete and shattering his bones. Throughout it all, his inhumanly fast punches were punctuated by a drawling cackle from Man in Black. "... ha... haha... ha... hahaha... haha..."
The storm of blows lasted for only a few seconds, but the damage done was catastrophic. Man in Black reeled backward, revealing a corpse that had been twisted and snapped at the limbs like a marionette that had been haphazardly stashed away. His chest had been pulped under the rampant strikes, and his face was an unrecognisable mush.

Mr. A breathed another sigh, wiping the sweat from his brow. It had perhaps been a little while since he had to exert himself, and getting shot certainly didn't help. He glanced to his right shoulder and inspected himself, before rolling his shoulder as if the injury wasn't there at all. "Two hours. Three tops," he mused to himself. "Alright Okabe, you can come out."

A few seconds passed before Okabe's sharply dressed form emerged from the shadows. He stopped, inspecting the carnage around him with a clinical disinterest. "It's been some time since I've seen your handiwork sir, but impressive as ever. I am however surprised that you didn't send Lars to deal with these men."

Mr. A shrugged, continuing on toward the shipping container the Korean gangsters had been guarding. "I gave him the night off. Even arranged a private tour of the Tokyo National Museum for him... he's been working hard lately, and I figured he deserved it," Mr. A explained.

"Well, you may be right. But knowing Lars, he might have preferred working for you above taking a night off," Okabe said, being mindful not to get any blood on his shoes. "At any rate, I've put a call into Watanabe and he'll be here soon to handle the evidence with his Stand."

"Very good. Now then, let's see what our friends were so keen to smuggle into our fair city," A replied.

He stood back comfortably, watching as Man in Black undid the locks and pulled the heavy red doors open. There was a mournful wail of creeking steel as the worn hinges struggled with the sudden movements. A ray of light from one of the overhead lamps shone into the container, illuminating its contents. Mr. A's expression immediately darkened as he surveyed the human cargo in the container.

"I should have taken my time with these bastards," A muttered.

Okabe leaned over slightly, just barely glimpsing a few terrified female faces staring out at him. Most of them were veiled in shadow, or trying their hardest not to look at the men. "Oh. Well I suppose I'll contact Eiichiro. He's got some sailing to do." Okabe knew full well what these women had been smuggled for, and knew that his boss wanted no part in it.

"My thanks. Now then... ugh... my Korean is awful, but I need to get the message across," Mr. A said. He cleared his throat, raising his voice. "You are all from Korea, yes?" There was a general murmur of 'yes' from inside the container. Mr. A nodded. "You will be brought back to the port you came from, at which point you will have to make your own way home. Naturally you will forget everything you have seen tonight, and tell not a soul of these events."

Man in Black closed the doors again, while A heaved a sigh that forced the tension out of his body. Saving them from this boundless cruelty... he was sure that was a fair trade for their silence. But ultimately he couldn't bring himself to really threaten those girls.

"Well, this was a disappointment," A remarked, turning and glancing toward Okabe. He watched his underling draw one of his phones, wasting no time in getting in touch with Eiichiro. They'd need to act quickly on this one.

"You are an odd criminal." The gentle, refined voice caused the two men to tense, only to then
immediately relax as they saw a sharply dressed young man emerge from the dark. He too had little
reaction to the carnage surrounding him.

"Goro Akechi, the famed boy detective," Okabe curtly said. "Were you never taught not to sneak
up on people like that?"

Akechi shrugged, lazily adjusting his black tie as he approached the two men. "I've heard quite a
few stories about you and your cruelty, Mr. A. And that in business, you can be a tad ruthless. It
seems odd that you have principles in matters such as this," Akechi said.

Mr. A narrowed his eyes slightly. "There are some things even I don't abide. More importantly,
what are you doing out here? I thought you had your own business with the Phantom Thieves."

"It's taken care of. Come tomorrow morning, public perception of the Arditi will be in the toilet.
They'll be right where I need them to be," Akechi smiled pleasantly despite their surroundings, and
his current company. "Still, given your principles, I'm surprised you've aligned yourself with our
mutual benefactor. He seems the kind of man who would disgust you deeply," he added.

"He does," A confirmed. "I'm no fan of the man, but he's the only politician able to do what I need
him to do. And I'm already thinking ahead," he added. Though, in truth, Mr. A had his own plans
in mind for Shido-san. Once he had been elected, all they needed was someone who looked like
him and had a similar voice. Easily done with some Stand meddling.

"Still," Okabe chimed. "Your presence is even more confusing, Akechi. The mysterious boy
detective, who became famous after he helped the police solve several violent crimes, out of the
blue decides he's going to make some nobody politician into the future prime minister. It's... odd,
wouldn't you say?" Okabe asked. "After all, Shido only started to rise with your intervention, did he
not? Usually people only go so far for family."

If the statement was meant to bait Akechi, he managed to restrain himself and didn't rise to it. He
maintained the same pleasant air. "We haven't exactly gotten along all that well, you and I,"
Akechi said, gesturing between himself and A. "But I think we should change that. We're not too
different, after all, with the same group of idiots thumbing their noses at us," he explained.

"Oh?" Mr. A replied.

"Specifically, I think we should look to the future..." Akechi cryptically added.
It seemed overnight, the public perception of the Arditi had shifted. Another body had turned up, with no discernible cause of death, with a calling card found on his body. Tori Hasumi, a person who was some sort of cult leader/con artist according to what Akira had found. Someone who likely would have had a Palace, and enough money to make waves if he turned up dead.

While there had been skepticism after Izumi’s death, and a good deal of supporters proclaiming the innocence of the Arditi, that had largely dried up in the face of this new murder. More than that, people were also claiming that they were behind Kobayakawa’s death, with rumors of him getting a calling card circulating online.

The media had gone whole hog on spreading the narrative of the Phantom Thieves being murderous criminals, with most news broadcasts and talkshows talking about it exclusively. That, in turn, filled the rumor mill at school. Every piece of gossip Akira heard was about how evil the Phantom Thieves now seemed.

And, naturally, the popularity poll on the Phan-site had tanked. It was minor in the grand scheme of things, but it still hurt.

It all seemed too convenient, Akira mused. As if this had all been planned in advance, hand-picking targets that would be corrupt enough for a mental shutdown, but not so corrupt that people would be unsympathetic to their deaths. These people were criminals, but people wouldn't actively be calling for their heads. It helped get across the image of the Phantom Thieves jumping off a slippery slope.

Then there was the media springing up almost in unison, with Makoto and Futaba noting that they were using a lot of the same language. And the police jumping at the chance to declare the Arditi enemies of the nation. It all seemed too convenient. But then again, it was possible they were all in cahoots. There was a larger conspiracy at work, after all.

Akira was making his way home at a steady rate, Shibuya's crowded streets cast in a dull orange light from the setting sun. Every time he passed by a group of people, he heard whispers about the Phantom Thieves.

"I can't believe those guys were killers all along..."

"They really went off the deep end. Yeah, those guys were scum, but they shoulda gone to jail."

"What if they stop targetting criminals altogether and start killing regular people?"

"Hey... what if the Phantom Thieves cased the rampage accidents too? I mean, someone with a weird power must have been behind those attacks."

"Shido's right, the current administration has done nothing about the Arditi. I know where my vote is going!"

People were fickle. It was an unfortunate truth Akira had learned as soon as he got his criminal
record, but it was worse here. It seemed that the Arditi were nothing more than a distraction, a passing fad. And now it was 'uncool' to like them.

With the way things were going, they needed information on their adversary now if they were to have any hope of fighting back. He could only hope that Shizuka and Haru's plan was bearing fruit right now, but he'd know soon enough. It didn't help that Naoto hadn't been able to turn up anything on Mr. A's sketch, even using her connections in Japan and interpol. Either he had managed to keep that low a profile, or used something to alter his face. Highly possible through Stand powers, according to Shizuka.

The next turn Akira took brought him onto a quieter street, his route continuing on toward a modest electronics store. He would have ignored it entirely if he didn't catch a familiar face on the fleet of television screens in the window: Goro Akechi.

When the popularity of the Phantom Thieves had skyrocketed his own popularity had plummeted, thanks largely to his early criticism of the Arditi. Akechi hadn't been on TV much at all as of late, and so now that he was getting interviewed on a talk show again... well that was a pretty stark indicator of how much, and how quickly, things had changed.

Akira stopped entirely, watching the show as it went on.

If memory served, this was the same talk show they had been to a live taping of all those months ago. Akira recognised the male and female host quickly enough, watching carefully as the female host leaned in. Evidently he was coming in halfway into the show and had missed the start of the interview.

"With these two murders being the talk of the city, if not the entire country, it seems the Phantom Thieves have changed entirely. And ultimately that means you've been vindicated Akechi," the female host said.

Akechi's pleasant smile was lingering comfortably on his face, and he seemed quite at ease. "I've certainly seen no shortage of apologies placed on the web. Now more than a few people are rooting for me to bring the Arditi into custody," Akechi replied, trailing into a confident chuckle.

Akira narrowed his eyes. Yes, this had worked out well for Akechi. Him and the police now having justification to go after the Phantom Thieves... Akira had to wonder how much Akechi actually knew about their group. He walked a fine line between oblivious, and dangerously convincing, from what Akira could tell.

"And while I'm certainly grateful that people have changed their views on me... well, I feel I should say I don't wholly believe the Phantom Thieves are responsible for these new crimes," Akechi continued. It earned him a general wave of surprise in the studio audience. Even Akira felt a little stunned as the statement reached his ears.

"That's quite a bold claim Akechi-kun," the male host said, adjusting his thick-rimmed glasses. "You believe the Arditi are innocent?"

"Oh no, don't misunderstand. I still believe that the Arditi are criminals. The act of forcibly changing a person's heart, altering the way they think and feel... it's an action I find unconscionable," Akechi replied, sadly shaking his head. "But if they are to be arrested and tried, I would only want it to be for crimes they have actually committed. I can empathize with them going after Kamoshida and Kaneshiro. While I disagree with their methods, their intentions were clearly
noble. Jumping from forcing people to confessing their crimes, to outright murdering criminals... it seems like too large a shift in their modus operandi to be genuine," Akechi explained.

Akira felt his surprise growing stronger. Of all the people to stick up for them... it was Akechi? He had gone through quite a bit of trouble for his opinions, he had said as much during his trips to Leblanc. But he was the one who wanted the Thieves treated fairly? It was definitely a shock.

"Cicero once said 'Let us remember that Justice must be observed, even to the lowest.' While I would like to see the Phantom Thieves punished for their crimes they still deserve fair treatment. So too would I like to see this murderer punished for their own misdeeds," Akechi explained, earning a quick round of applause from the audience.

"You heard it here first folks! The famed detective prince, Goro Akechi, is truly an agent of justice!" the female host enthusiastically said.

"You're as merciful as you are wise Akechi-kun. And we here at the studio would like to wish you the best of luck in getting to the bottom of this mystery," the male host added.

Another pleasant chuckle left Akechi, before he flashed another pretty boy smile to the studio audience. "Why thank you. I'll do everything in my power to make sure justice is done," he said.

"He's so cool," a female voice to Akira's right remarked.

He glanced to his side, catching a glimpse of two Kosei girls chatting as they watched the broadcast from the other end of the window. "I know. I feel so bad for doubting him, he was a good guy all along!" the other remarked, laughing awkwardly as she adjusted her glasses.

"Mm. Still, maybe he's being too nice about the Phantom Thieves? I mean it seems pretty likely that they killed those people."

"Eh... well whatever the case, I'm sure Akechi-kun will get to the bottom of it!"

Akira narrowed his eyes and silently pushed away from the window, continuing his way home. So it seemed they had an unlikely supporter, or at least someone who hadn't immediately branded them as cold blooded murderers. Still, it was unlikely to change things in the long run.

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Her boss' office was always an impressive sight: Expansive, every little detail kept immaculately clean and tidy. His broad desk dominated the far end of the room, with two loaded bookshelves at the back wall and a decorative plate positioned behind his chair. To her left was a large window, with an expansive view of Tokyo's cityscape.

"As you're no doubt aware, the situation has changed quite significantly," the old man admitted, sinking into his plush armchair. He reached into the pocket of his navy jacket, taking out a handkerchief to wipe his exposed forehead. "Investigation into the Phantom Thieves has become far more... publically acceptable."

"Of course, Ariwara-san," Sae replied, nodding at the director. "These recent crimes have caused a large shift in public perception. Though I only wish it had happened sooner."

Arisawa nodded slightly from behind his desk. "Well, now more than ever people want answers."
Even the government has started asking questions, trying to mask the bumbling incompetence of the current administration. After all, this was a situation that festered under their watch."

"How do you want to go from here sir?" Sae asked.

"You've done well on this investigation thus far, and I have a good deal of trust in your competence and abilities. And so, going forward, I'd like you to lead this investigation."

Sae's eyes widened considerably, her shock evident on her face. "S-sir, I..." She really didn't know what to say. An opportunity like this, it would make her career. It would give her the leg up she so desperately craved. She'd had to fight hard to make headway because of her gender, but being the woman to help bring down public enemies like the Phantom Thieves... that would open plenty of doors for her.

"It's a big request, and I don't make it lightly. But I have strong respect in your abilities. Even so..."
He adjusted his glasses slightly, watching Sae in a cool and clinical fashion. "Well, with the way things are going, you might be in a good deal of danger if you take this assignment on. After all, the Phantom Thieves have now displayed a willingness to kill."

Sae nodded firmly, her expression becoming set in stone. "I can take care of myself, sir," Sae assured him. "And I'll do everything I can to get to the bottom of this."

Oh yes, this could well be her golden ticket. If Sae managed to get some culprits in custody, then she'd be the one sitting behind the director's desk in a few years time.

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10/7

Akira slowly made his way down the steps toward the Shibuya platform, quietly moving past the various people disembarking the train that had just passed by. His expression was troubled, as if the world around him was passing by in a monochromatic blur.

Today had been no better than the last two days, with the constant chatter and gossip at school and in the streets reminding him that the Phantom Thieves were now about as popular as polio. Akira hadn't gotten into this for the sake of fame, he started doing this Phantom Thief stuff because... well it was the right thing to do. Ryuji, Ann, Shiho, and every athlete at Shujin had needed help, and he had the only means to manage it. And after that point, well there was just a continuous stream of people who needed help, and he and the others had been happy to oblige.

Even though he hadn't gotten into this for the sake of fame, it still hurt fiercely to think that people hated them, and that the shift had come so suddenly. That Black Mask was a crafty bastard, framing them like this. It wasn't like they could just come out and profess their innocence, not without being caught by the police.

Akira would admit that he felt a little on edge whenever he saw a cop on the streets. He doubted they had any evidence or notion on who the Arditi were, but he still couldn't help but be uncomfortable. He knew better than anyone how easily the police could be corrupted.

Then there was the information that they had received the other day. If things were going the way Akira thought they were, things were likely to get worse before they got better.
When he reached the nearly empty train platform, Akira felt his gaze being drawn to a poster on his right. An advertisement for the upcoming election, for a popular candidate. *Masayoshi Shido... What is it about this guy that seems familiar to me?*

"Ah, just the man who I was hoping to run into." The familiar voice was enough to derail Akira's train of thought, causing him to turn around swiftly. He found himself face to face with Akechi, the detective prince wearing a warm smile on his face.

"Akechi," Akira curtly replied, maintaining a calm exterior. He could feel Arsene's arm floating behind his back as a protective gesture, well aware that Akechi had powers of his own. If he was here to bring Akira in, then the bespectacled boy had every intention of making it difficult for him. "Fancy seeing you here. I see you're not a pariah anymore," he remarked.

Akechi chuckled amiably. "No, certainly not. Admittedly it's unfortunate that my reputation was so poor for a while, but I suppose I've never particularly cared for my fame. Of course, not caring for fame, and not wanting hurtful things said about you by strangers, are two very different things."

"Yeah, I suppose," Akira replied. "You were hoping to run into me?" Akira asked, now registering how Akechi had greeted him.

"Oh, yes!" the brunette replied in a sudden realization. "Apologies, the reason for this meetup almost slipped my mind entirely. Yes, there's something rather important I was hoping to talk to you about. Would you mind following me a bit? I'd rather not have people listening in."

"Alright," Akira replied, not wanting to raise suspicion. All the same, Arsene was clenching his fist in a mounting anticipation, just in case. He really had no idea what to expect from Akechi. "Lead on."

The brunette led the way toward the far end of the platform, devoid of people and partially veiled in shadows. They had several minutes before another train swept by, fortunately.

Akechi slipped his phone from his pocket, a gloved finger sweeping through the photo album he had. "I suppose I'll just get to the point so neither of us waste much time. This is you, correct?" Akechi held his phone up for Akira to examine, showing a picture that instantly filled the young man with some dread: An image of himself and the rest of the group, in the shady alley they usually used for when they infiltrated Mementos.

Akechi flicked through a few more pictures, in which the group seemed to fade out of existence. He'd managed to capture the whole process of the group crossing over into Mementos. Where the hell had he been hiding?

"An interesting little vanishing act you pulled, yes? Of course, no court would ever accept these string of photos as evidence. For as beneficial as modern technology is, the ease of photo manipulation would make this look far too suspect in a court of law," Akechi explained, sliding his phone back into his coat pocket.

Akira remained calm outwardly, but he could feel a knot of worry twisting in his stomach. "Are you going somewhere with this?"

Akechi's smile didn't falter. "No need to be so serious. If I had any intentions of turning you in, I don't think we'd be talking right now. But this little bit of evidence, coupled with some of my own... recent experiences have made me aware of the supernatural aspect of this case. It would
explain the lack of physical evidence, and when I approach things logically I know that your group is the only one with sufficient motive to go after the first two targets."

Silence lingered between the two for a few moments. Akechi seemed to have really figured them out, and had even caught them in the act. "Recent experiences...?" Akira repeated.

"The Metaverse," Akechi clarified. "I've been there too."

Akira tensed slightly, taking a moment to adjust his glasses. "You've certainly been doing your research, Detective. How'd you manage that?"

"In due time," Akechi replied. "Regardless, that experience is what made me aware of an actual killer roaming around that world... and made me certain of your innocence. And so, I'd like to work with you."

"Seriously?" Akira replied, more than a little stunned.

Akechi nodded in return. "While I disagree with your methods, I know they were driven by noble intentions. This killer, however... if he was behind not only these two murders, but a laundry list of unsolved cases and 'mysterious accidents' at the office, then bringing him in is of vital importance."

Well, Akira could understand that much. "And if we work together on this, catch the correct culprit... you'll stop pursuing us?" he asked.

The other boy pondered this for some time. "I don't know if I could aid you, and then allow you to continue to operate outside of the law... but I suppose that's a matter to discuss for another time. I've seen the way your friends flock around you... I assume, you'd be the leader of the group? You certainly have that air about you."

"Your point?" Akira asked.

"Well, I'd like to have this discussion with the rest of your team around. You may be in charge, but I suppose you might want their input before making any decisions. After all, this is a matter that effects all of you," he said. There was a sudden rattling from the dark tunnels, growing louder as a pair of blinding yellow lamps appeared from the dark. Akira casually made his way to the center of the platform, with the detective following after.

"Tomorrow, then," Akira said. "I'll tell the others to clear their schedules."

Akechi smiled kindly as he walked past Akira, making for the stairs. "I look forward to it." Akira stood by silently, watching as Akechi vanished into the crowd.

Only a few moments passed before a sudden rustling bounced at Akira's satchel, with the flap opening up. Morgana popped his head out, sparkling blue eyes wide in shock. "Holy crap!" the feline gasped.

Akira nodded firmly. "I know," he murmured.

"What th... that guy has us figured out?! Are we... Oh man, we are in really hot water now," the feline said.

"Yeah. Yeah we are," Akira replied in a soft tone. He watched in silence as the train came to a halt.
in front of him, the yellow doors sliding open in a low hiss. Akira entered slowly, shouldering his bag to make sure Morgana was secure next to him.

'Yeah, we're in hot water alright... but I'm not gonna let you walk all over us. Something about you seems off Akechi, and I want to know what. Fortunately, I know the right girl for the job.'

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Makoto approached the doorway of her apartment at a languid pace, a bundle of freshly collected mail under her arm. There was usually a large amount left in their box at the foyer, all mostly for Sae, and Makoto saw no issue in being the one to collect it. It was just one of the little chores she could do to make things easier for her sister.

Though, the brunette had to admit that her sister was unlikely to see much of this mail any time soon. She had spent so much time at the SIU office these past few days, wrapped up in a new case. Naturally she hadn't told Makoto the details, but with all the negative press the Phantom Thieves had been having... well, she felt a little queasy just dwelling on those implications.

And it wasn't the only thing she was worried about when it came to Sae.

It hadn't been too long since she discovered Sae had a Palace. In truth, Makoto didn't know what it was that caused her to investigate her sister. A simple matter of her mind running around in circles, as it often did when she was trying to settle down for bed.

Her rambling thoughts had settled on Sae, pondering all the ways she had changed since they were kids. When their Father was alive. Sae wasn't cruel, or at least Makoto didn't think so, but she had lost a lot of the kindness she had when they were younger. She was so driven now, focused almost exclusively on her career. She was almost obsessed with her job now, and on the rare occasions when work was brought up...

... Well, these days Sae spoke more of victory than doing the right thing. It was worrying, whenever Makoto let her thoughts dwell on it. And so, on a whim, she had spoken Sae's name into the Nav. It had pinged at her in return, filling her heart with dread.

So far, Makoto hadn't told anyone about it. Not even Shizuka. How could she mention something so... deeply personal to anyone? It had terrified her just to know this, and on some level Makoto even felt a little ashamed. Someone she loved was corrupted, distorted enough to have a Palace. Knowing that, and thinking on some of the other people who had Palaces... the thought of Sae being in that same group filled her with feelings that even Makoto's ample mind couldn't really quantify.

And then there was the feeling that she was invading Sae's privacy, just knowing that little tidbit. She wanted to do something about the Palace, and likely would whenever she mustered the courage to give the information to the others.

Makoto unlocked the door and slid it open, stepping inside quickly. Once she had shut the door, the brunette casually made her way to the crisp white dinner table they used to eat at every night. Now Makoto couldn't even remember the last time they had spent a meal together.

Makoto casually set the bundle of letters on the table, making a note to sort them later. However, as she turned to leave, she noticed something slip out of the letter stack and land neatly on the floor at her feet. A small red card.
"What the...?" It must have been in their box, so small that it got mixed in with the rest of their mail. She reached down to pick it up, but nearly felt her heart stop as she read the contents of the card.

There, looking up at her, was the Phantom Thieves logo with a tidy caption positioned beneath it.

'SAE NIIJIMA- YOU'LL NEVER SEE IT COMING.'
For the sake of this meeting, Akira had asked everyone to gather at Leblanc's attic near the evening. Sojiro had already left the shop, and with no customers it gave the sizeable group some privacy to speak. And, in truth, Akira had no intention of leading Akechi to their hideout. It was likely he already knew where that was, but Akira didn't want to be the one to hand that information over. Not until he had a better clue of just what Akechi was going for.

With everyone assembled around the attic, Akechi took a moment to survey them all. "Goodness... I knew there were a few of you, but seeing you all gathered like this is still quite a surprise," Akechi mused.

"We're a magnetic bunch," Shizuka replied, trying her best to mask her displeasure at all this. She wasn't doing a very good job.

Akechi hummed slightly, doing a quick headcount of the room. "Akira Kurusu, Ryuji Sakamoto, Ann Takamaki, Shizuka Joestar, Shiho Suzui, Yusuке Kitagawa..." He paused for a moment as he reached Sergio. "Sergio Esposito?" the blond nodded in return. "Ah, good. Makoto Nijima, Futaba Sakura... and you're Haru Okumura, yes? I thought I saw you with this group in public, but it's certainly strange to see you as a Phantom Thief."

"My involvement was an... well it just kind of 'happened' I suppose," the strawberry blonde reasoned.

Akechi nodded. "And that's everyone?"

"Well, not entirely," Morgana piped up from his perch on Akira's workbench.

The brunette's eyes widened considerably. "I uh... I know Akira has a pet cat, but I never would have thought... Akira, your cat is talking." Shizuka bit her tongue.

"Yeah, he does that," Akira said, speaking in a way that suggested he had long since resigned himself to the fact that one of his closest friends was a magical talking cat he met in another dimension. "This is Morgana. He's one of our founding members," he explained.

"A pleasure to meet you," Akechi replied, deciding to simply roll with it. They had a lot to discuss after all. "Akira told me that one of you received a calling card?"

Makoto nodded and took a step forward from the back wall, producing the small red card she had found yesterday. "This was in our mail, mixed in with our bills. It's addressed to... my sister, Sae."

Shizuka reached over, placing a comforting hand on Makoto's left shoulder while the others were still digesting this worrying bit of news. "I already checked, and Sis has a Palace."

"More than that," Futaba said, speaking from her crouched position at the chair near Akira's workbench "News really started circulating around the web yesterday evening about Sae being the head of the SIU's investigation into us. If she's been targeted, that's probably what it's about,"
Futaba reasoned.

Akechi surveyed the card as Makoto held it out to him. "Yes... I'm afraid this matches the cards that were found on Izumi and Hasumi. Though the design is different from the others we've seen on your actual targets," the brunette explained. Makoto tensed further.

"Then our next step should be obvious. We need to infiltrate Sae's Palace and steal her treasure before anything can happen to her," Akira said, earning a fleet of nods from the others.

After a moment, Akechi interjected. "I certainly wish to save Sae-san's life. She's a good friend and colleague of mine, after all... though, admittedly, our relationship has become somewhat strained now that she's become so focused on her own success." Makoto pocketed the card, trying not to clench her fists. "But in addition, we could use this situation to our advantage. We know where the killer will strike next in the Metaverse, after all."

"Uh, 'scuse me," Ryuji abruptly said. "Look I'm just gonna come out and say it... how in the shit do you know anything about the Metaverse? It ain't exactly common knowledge," the blond said.

"I stumbled upon it by complete accident," Akechi returned his focus to Akira. "You see, I had suspected you all as the mysterious Arditi soon after Madarame confessed to his crimes, given your motives and ties to the first two targets. Of course, with no hard evidence there was nothing I could do to really pursue you. At the time I thought it was insane, but... the more time passed, the more it seemed there was something truly supernatural going on. But then my popularity declined, and so my superiors wound up placing me on the tail of Takeo Izumi for embezzlement charges. That case was my first encounter with the Metaverse."

The others leaned in slightly, waiting for Akechi to continue. "Truthfully, I don't quite know how or why it all happened. But one day a strange app simply... appeared on my phone. Some stray words in my surrounding managed to trigger it without my realizing and then... I was in the midst of some horrible, opulent parody of a hospital. His 'Palace' as the staff soon informed me."

"So that was your first encounter with the Metaverse? The app appeared on my phone completely at random too," Akira remarked.

Akechi nodded. "At any rate, I continued to explore that mysterious world in my dazed state. That was when I came upon them: A hulking abomination, locked in battle with a sinister black figure," he said.

The others very nearly jumped as they heard this. "W-wait, really? A guy in black... h-hey, what did he look like?" Shiho asked.

"Unfortunately, I didn't get to see much of him," Akechi admitted, frowning sadly. "His face was covered by a dark visor, and with how chaotic everything was I couldn't see much of him. After he beat that monster into a stupor, he turned his attention to me. And with my life in danger, and fear rising within me... a mask appeared on my face. A power that referred to itself as 'Persona.' But even with my power, his strength was ferocious, and I was forced to flee."

The others digested Akechi's story for several moments. "This individual must be rather dangerous. But I suppose seeing him in action convinced you of our innocence?" Yusuke asked. Akechi nodded in turn.

"Um..." Ann raised her left hand slightly. "This is all interesting stuff, but... what about this calling
The brunette shook his head slightly. "I have access to information that wasn't released to the public. In the last two murders, the targets didn't receive calling cards until roughly ten days before they were attacked. If that man in black sticks to the same pattern, we have over a week to save Sae-san."

"Makes sense," Morgana remarked. "No matter how strong a person is, Palaces can be incredibly huge, and with plenty of obstacles to overcome. Especially if this guy is working alone... so we should try and leap in and explore this Palace ASAP. Either we'll run into Black Mask mid-job and beat him, or we'll steal the treasure and leave him without a target."

"Treasure?" Akechi asked, tilting his head slightly.

"It's the core of a Palace. If it's taken, the Palace crumbles apart, triggering a change of heart inside a person," Makoto interjected.

Akechi hummed softly, tapping his chin as he looked up at the ceiling. "So that's how you do it... if a person could have their mind destroyed through that alien dimension, then changing their personality is possible too."

"Pretty much. We've gotten pretty good at it by now..." Shizuka said. She narrowed her eyes at Akechi through her sunglasses, but he seemed uninterested in looking at the others. "Lemme ask you something... aside from wanting to help Sae-san, why do you wanna work with us? You were kinda the head of the 'Fuck the Phantom Thieves' fanclub when we got our start. That's uh, fuck in the bad sense, not the other way. There's apparently one of those fanclubs too."

"Well I uh... I don't know if that's how I'd phrase it. In truth I still wouldn't say I'm a fan of your group. But I also believe in justice, and you all being framed for crimes you didn't commit... that's far from justice," the brunette curtly said. "I can at least sympathise with you all, and understand why you started this crusade. I would have likely done the same in your position. After all, I have no love for letting corrupt adults get away with their crimes. Dealing with a dangerous murderer would be far more beneficial to society than arresting your group," Akechi explained, glancing to Akira.

"So... what? You'll just look the other way when we take care of the killer?" Futaba asked. There was a note of hope in her voice, one that Akira both loved to hear... but feared what would happen, now that Futaba had her hopes up.

After a moment, Akechi cleared his throat with his eyes closed. "I didn't say that. I'm sympathetic, not messianic. I could turn a blind eye... if the Arditi retire once their names are cleared," he said, laying those cards on the table as firmly as possible.

Ryuji immediately bristled to his full height, and was only stopped by Yusuke planting a firm hand on his shoulder. "The shit?! Who are you to go making demands like that?! And who says we need your help anyway?"

"Ryuji," Sergio primly said, steepling his fingers together. "Let's hear him out."

Akechi seemed undaunted by Ryuji's blustering, regarding him with a cold indifference. "Regardless of your motives, no matter how benevolent you think you are, you're still doing something fundamentally immoral. It's a slippery slope, and left to your own devices I fear you
might go beyond wanting to help people," he explained.

Ann blinked a few times, before moving to speak up. "We wouldn't-

"More than that, you do need my help. How exactly do you plan on dealing with this killer?"
Akechi interrupted. He cast a curious glance toward Akira. "Beat him up and hope for the best?
Confiscate his phone? No. If anyone can handle this, it's me. I, after all, have all the connections to
ensure he is securely contained within the constraints of our legal system."

"Pff. I could do that too," Shizuka said.

"Not that I underestimate your wealth, Joestar-san, but the efforts of a foreigner to move the
mountains of our legal system... well, even one of your wealth would have trouble. And trying to
extradite him just leaves more opportunities to make an escape," Akechi concisely explained. The
certainty of his tone made it hard to doubt him, though Shizuka was still pissed.

Sergio leaned forward slightly, his face unreadable. "While there may be some merit to your
argument, asking us to retire from our Arditi work is a big request. Maybe if we had some time to-

"We can't!" Makoto hastily said. Realizing her own outburst, Makoto primly cleared her throat and
continued on. "...I would normally be all for planning and discussion, but... it's Sis' life on the line
here! I can't just... I can't-

Before Makoto could get more hysterical, Shizuka settled her hands on Makoto's shoulders,
making the brunette sigh gently. "I get it. I dunno if I speak for everyone, but... if our last job
involves saving Makoto's sis, and dealing with this killer... then I guess I can live with that,"
Shizuka said.

Akira took a moment to sweep his gaze over his friends. They, in turn, nodded. "I guess we're in
agreement then. Once this is taken care of, there won't be a need for the Arditi," Akira said. He
turned his attention to Makoto. "Since you know your Sister has a Palace... do you have any idea
what her keywords are?"

"Not... entirely," Makoto admitted, sighing sadly. "I racked my brain all night long trying to find
all the words. I was able to discern the location, the courthouse, but I have no idea what Sis'
distortion is."

"A distortion?" Akechi asked.

"The warped way in which a person percieves the location of their Palace. For example,
Kamoshida saw himself as the 'king of the castle', and Shujin looked like a medieval castle in
Kamoshida's cognitive world as a result," Morgana explained from his perched position.

Akechi digested this information for a few quiet moments, before abruptly snapping his fingers on
his left hand. "I believe I may have an idea for this 'distortion' in that case. Sae-san and I have
worked together for some time, and over the year I've become quite aware of the various words and
terms she has used to describe the courthouse... but we should perhaps wait until tomorrow to put
my theory to the test."

Akira watched him closely. It seemed like a shrewd move on his part, withholding that information
for the time being so the others couldn't go ahead without him. Well, Akira could roll with that.
Especially now that they he needed time to talk with the others. "Fine by me. We'll meet up at the
"Glad to hear it. I'll see you all tomorrow then," Akechi replied, smiling fondly at the group. Slowly and steadily he made his way downstairs, his footsteps fading into the distance until the bell above Leblanc's door rang out to signal his exit.

The group waited for several seconds, in which Shizuka rendered herself invisible and headed for the stairs. She peered down to make sure Akechi was gone, and once she was certain she made her way back toward the others, becoming visible again in the process. "There are septic tanks that aren't so full of shit!" she shouted.

"We're not seriously effin' retiring after this, are we?!" Ryuji said, sounding gruffer and louder.

"Of course not. I just said that to placate Akechi... I don't plan on being genuine with the guy, not when he was lying through his teeth like that," Akira replied, nodding to his best friend.

"That's right. He claims to have only gotten his Persona recently, but he heard me talk all the way back at the TV studio. And he reacted to Shizuka's Stand back when we went to meet Futaba," Morgana explained.

Shiho sighed loudly. "He must really think we're idiots." Then again, they were rather familiar with people underestimating them.

"Still... Akechi having powers for longer than he let on, and then conveniently wanting to get involved with us when our PR is at its lowest point... And his story of how he got his Persona, that's beyond fishy too. But he said a 'Persona' and not a 'Stand.'" Sergio pondered all this for a moment before looking up at the others. "Do you think he might be...?"

"We can't say for sure. We know he's lying, but we don't know if he's that far gone. We need to do a little more research," Akira said.

"Well, there is the matter of his early cases," Makoto said, striding toward Akira's shelves and taking up her satchel. She rummaged for a moment, before pulling out an assortment of neatly stacked papers.

Shizuka grinned. "And while we might not be able to read that doucheanoe's mind, but we know someone who can do the next best thing. Isn't that right-" Shizuka snapped her fingers, a female figure in a Kosei uniform instantly materializing on Akira's bed, with her hands neatly clasped over her lap. "Hifumi Togo?!"

"You don't have to shout. I'm right here," Hifumi curtly said.

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The group spent some time talking about all they knew, and what they were going to do in the immediate future. Saving Sae was a top priority, of course, but if they played their cards right then the Arditi could take one of their greatest adversaries out of the equation.

But Akira wanted to be absolutely certain that Akechi was who they thought he was. Whatever they may have thought about him, an accusation like this... well it was a rather huge one to make, and Akira didn't want them to be in the wrong. Particularly when it could bite them in the ass.
Fortunately, Futaba had a little plan of her own to fully cement their knowledge.

It was late as Makoto and Shizuka walked the streets of Shibuya, a chilly night breeze rolling through the area. A biting wind that could slice a person in half if they weren't careful. They had been walking quietly together since leaving the station, until Makoto suddenly spoke up.

"I... I should apologize," the brunette said, causing Shizuka to quirk her brow. "I've known about Sis having a Palace for at least a few weeks now, b-but I didn't say anything. And maybe if I had brought it up sooner, then-"

"It's okay," Shizuka interrupted, raising her left hand slightly. "Look, I get it... a thing like that, knowing someone you love has a Palace... it's gotta be scary. I dunno if I could say anything either if I was in your position," Shizuka admitted. "And... just cause someone has a Palace, it doesn't mean they're a bad person."

Makoto frowned, looking at her reflection in some neighbouring windows as they went along. "I was scared to say anything, I'll admit. And when it's someone close to you... then using their Palace feels like a massive invasion of privacy," she said.

Shizuka nodded. "Yeah. It's one thing to use the Palace of a criminal, but if it's a relative..."
Shizuka would be lying through her teeth if she said Sae was one of her favourite people, but Makoto loved her dearly, and as such Shizuka didn't want anything bad to happen to her. And it would have been possible to leave this Palace alone if it wasn't for the current situation hanging over them. "Maybe Sae hasn't done anything bad, but if she has a Palace then... then I guess she just lost track of the important stuff, and got wrapped up in her job. She's probably hurting now, and leaving things as they are... well she might just get colder and start hurting more."

"You may be right," Makoto admitted. "The truth is, I've wanted to help Sis for some time now. After Dad died, after she had to start taking care of me... I've seen how she's changed. I know things are hard for her, and I just wish... I just wanted to be able to help her. But since I couldn't, things have festered to this point," Makoto admitted with a hint of shame in her voice.

"Geez..." Shizuka scratched the back of her neck. "Don't get me wrong, it's super cute that you're this compassionate, and it makes me feel kinda crappy by comparison, but... you can't go blaming yourself for these things. This isn't on you, believe me," Shizuka said. "And besides, now you've got a solid gold opening to save Sae. We'll clear her Palace, shove a foot so far up Black Mask's ass that you can wear him like a boot, and then you can do like... sister stuff!"

Makoto smiled awkwardly, before breaking into full on laughter. She wound up leaning back against the wall as she tried to compose herself, her athletic frame trembling in her laughter. Even when she calmed down, Makoto was still smiling. "When you say things with conviction like that, it's hard to doubt you."

The dark-haired girl shrugged. "I guess I'm an optimist."

Before Makoto could reply, a chilly breeze rolled over the two and made Makoto shiver. "Ah... we'll be knee deep in snow before we know it at this rate."

A warm golden light suddenly enveloped the two, making Makoto's eyes widen in surprise. She glanced over to her right to see Houdini's hovering frame, the bands of her arms aglow from a steadily expanding halo of energy. Makoto's eyes widened slightly at the sight. "You like? I told you Houdini's evolved, and I've been experimenting a bit with my new powers. Absorbing and
releasing light is the biggest thing she can do now," Shizuka explained.

"It's certainly impressive," Makoto mused. "Becoming invisible already involves the manipulation of light, but having a greater degree of control over it... the applications are numerous."

"Yep! Though I've only done a little research so far, I think I can do a lot more than just throwing out laser beams... though that is pretty fucking cool. Like... check this out." Houdini raised her right fist up, the bands on her knuckles suddenly releasing a pink burst that washed over Makoto's hairline. In an instant her hair was turned the same vibrant fuschia shade.

The sight alone made Makoto burst out laughing again, covering her mouth with her left hand. "There's the Niijima laugh I like to hear... makes even my jaded ass happy," Shizuka said, smiling fondly. "Hey we could even hit a rave like this, bet you'd be the toughest gal in the place."

The pink faded, returning Makoto to her usual brunette shade. Returning to a calmer state, Makoto pulled Shizuka in by the lapels of her jacket and kissed her lightly. They stayed like this for several moments before Makoto pulled back. "Thanks. With everything that's been going on, I... I really needed to smile," Makoto sweetly said.

"Eh. Don't sweat it," Shizuka said. "We'll tear through that Palace at a record speed, I swear," she added. And if Sae was in trouble, well she did have a plan B.

"I sure hope so. I don't plan on failing here... oh uh..." Makoto trailed off, gesturing over her shoulder at the corner of the street. "My building's just... down this way. So I guess I'll head on my way. See you tomorrow?"

"Right, well uh... g'night. Call me if you're worried about anything, yeah? Bottling that stuff up won't do you any good," Shizuka said. She stood back, watching Makoto as she headed for her building. Satisfied that all was good for the time being, she drew her phone out and made a quick call.

She didn't have to wait long for an answer. If it was a call from a Joestar, Mr. Christo didn't waste time in taking it. "Oh, Shizuka, it's... a little late, actually. Did something happen?"

Shizuka leaned up against the wall, maintaining a casual air about herself. "Ah... well, not exactly. But I need to ask a pretty big favour."

"Well... whatever you need, the Foundation will try to provide it as best we can," Christo curtly replied.

Shizuka took the time to explain her situation in broad strokes, speaking of the danger a 'good friend' had found herself in, and what Shizuka needed to handle the situation. It was a big ask, Shizuka knew, and hopefully it wouldn't come to that... but she wasn't going to sit back and do nothing with such a real threat hanging overhead.

Once she had finished, and made her request, Christo definitely sounded a little stunned from his end of the line. "E-eh?! You want something that serious?!"

"I know it's a big ask, sir. But I wouldn't be making it if this wasn't a serious matter," Shizuka replied, sighing softly.

Christo hesitated for a moment. "Well... we have the object at our Tokyo site, and I'd be open to
"You are a Joestar after all, and your situation does sound rather dangerous. But you need to be careful, and be mindful of the special container used to hold it. Naturally, you shouldn't tell anyone that it's in your possession."

"Don't worry, I'll return it as soon as I can," Shizuka replied. With any luck, she wouldn't have to use it.

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10/9

The area of Kasumigaseki felt like a completely different world when compared to the rest of Tokyo. Quieter than what the group were used to, and with most of the people going by being sharply dressed adults... well the modest gang of teenagers did manage to stick out rather prominently. But even so, the usual residents of the area paid them no mind, continuing their business earnestly.

It was perhaps unsurprising, with how important Kasumigaseki was. Many government offices, including the Diet building, were found in this region. The streets were immaculately tidy, there wasn't a single spray of graffiti to be seen... even litter felt conspicuously absent in this area. Being out here, beneath these looming buildings, it was hard not to feel that the Arditi were walking in the shadows of the Titans.

Most importantly, the courthouse was to be found here.

The group gathered in a steady trickle, until they were all bunched up beneath the shade of the eastern wall outside the courthouse. Once they had all arrived, Akechi surveyed the group and made a gentle humming sound. "Is this everyone?"

"Should be," Akira said, doing a headcount of his own. Satisfied, he turned his attention back to Akechi. "So, you said you had an understanding of Sae's distortion?"

Akechi nodded, pinching his chin with his right hand. "I have a strong understanding of how Sae thinks and acts, particularly how she has grown to perceive her role as a prosecutor. While Sae may have started out with the purest of intentions, the reality of this profession seemed to weigh on her more over time. She and I both saw how unfair the legal system to be, and more than once she referred to it as a 'rigged game.'"

"So... she sees being a lawyer as a game of some kind?" Ryuji asked, seeming mildly uncomfortable at the prospect.

"To an extent. Ultimately she seemed to care less about doing what could broadly be defined as 'the right thing' and became wholly invested in victory. She wanted to win every case she could, regardless of the means or methods she had to employ." As Akechi spoke, Makoto shifted under the weight of these uncomfortable truths. "She became... well, much like many of the prosecutors in the city."

"Wait, what?" Shizuka asked, cocking her head slightly. "Doing that kind of stuff is... normal for you guys?" The young detective nodded. "Well Christ... between that, and what happened to Akira, Japan's legal system is f*cked."

Akechi made a small humming sound. "I'm sure there's plenty of issues with the American legal
"system too," he mused.

"Well, yeah, but lawyers being immoral is the kinda thing that's usually... scandalous," Shizuka replied.

Shiho cleared her throat loudly. "Can we... get back to the matter at hand? So if Sae started to see her profession as a competition of some kind, that means she sees the courthouse as a... what, an arcade? A Colosseum?" the dark-haired girl asked.

"Not quite, going by what I know, I believe her distortion to be-" Akechi slipped his phone from his coat pocket, and was interrupted by Futaba abruptly moving forward and snipping his phone into her hands.

"Ooooh!" Futaba said, awestruck as she giddily examined the screen in her hands. The light shone brightly in the lenses of her glasses. "You have one of these models? Lucky! I've been dying to get one to replace my current phone, it's just not cutting it anymore!"

Ann sighed gently. "Sorry about that. Futaba's a little uh... quirky," the blonde said.

After a moment, Akira drew his phone from his pocket and brought up the Nav. He already had Sae's name and location listed. "Well, let's keep going. We're on a schedule after all. What was the distortion?"

"Oh well, no harm no foul," Akechi said, deciding to play off the sudden bout of strangeness from the Thieves' resident hacker. "I believe the distortion to be a 'Casino.'" As the word left his mouth, a pulse of purple light washed over the gang, making their surroundings shiver in protest. Akira nodded and pressed the button, shunting them through the barrier into the Metaverse.

Once the haze cleared, and the air around them felt distinct from what they were used to in reality, the group examined their surroundings. At first it felt no different from the area they just left, until the sounds of people bustling and loud music reached their ears.

Akira took the lead, pushing on toward the end of the wall and peering around it. Emerging into the light, he realized that his clothing had changed into his Phantom Thief attire. Sae must have already been on guard, aware of the potential danger her life was now in as an investigator. He disregarded it for the time being, casting his gaze around the corner to survey the courthouse. Or rather, what was supposed to be the courthouse.

The building was large in the real world, but in the Metaverse it was a truly humongous structure. Like a monolith to greed. Stark white walls and a fleet of clean windows made up the facade, with the building's exterior being augmented by an assortment of neon lights. The most distinct ones Akira could see here was the vibrant golden 'CASINO' sign positioned on the roof, and the image of some sort of cowgirl coyly clutching the scales of justice. She was perched comfortably above the entrance foyer.

Fleets of people were bustling into the Palace, in far greater number than the people Akira had seen in Kasumigaseki. Even from afar, Akira could tell they were cognitions of normal people as opposed to anything disgusting or dehumanizing. It put Sae above Kaneshiro and Kamoshida, for a start.

"Holy shit," Ryuji murmured once he had taken in the looming sight.
"It's huge..." Yusuke mused, before his face hardened slightly behind his ivory mask. "And gaudy," he added a moment after.

"This is how Sis..." Makoto trailed off, unable to finish the sentence. She knew it was going to be bad, but this was worse than she had expected. The idea that Sae had come to see justice as some sort of game, after everything their father had said and done in life...

Haru frowned slightly. "Don't worry Queen! We'll make sure your sister sees straight again soon," she proudly said.

"Queen?" the sound of Akechi's voice caused all eyes to turn to him, giving the others a chance to take in his thief attire. It was certainly distinct, a stark white military officers uniform, with gold and crimson accents on his cuffs and epaulettes. A scarlet cloak hung down his back. Akechi's mask was certainly bizarre, a deep red in colour with a long 'beak' protruding out where his nose should have been.

Morgana gave him a puzzled glance, paying particular focus to the mask. "Seriously?" he asked under his breath. It was a sentiment the others seemed to be quietly sharing. However he was quick to right himself, returning his focus to the task at hand. "We use codenames in this world."

"That's correct. We're trying to keep a bit of anonymity on this side, and like to avoid using our real names where possible," Sergio chimed. He took the time to point around the group, listing their codenames as they went, before stopping on himself.

Akechi nodded in understanding. "I see. I suppose that is rather appropriate for a thief... well, even if it's only for this one mission, I should follow suit."

"Well for you, you should probably stick to something involving that big beak of yours," Ryuji lazily remarked.

The detective chuckled amiably. "I was actually thinking along those lines too. How does 'Crow' sound?" the brunette asked.

"Fine by me," Akira curtly replied.

Ann cleared her throat. "So... shouldn't we be getting started? We're on a bit of a deadline right now..." She paused, leaning forward to inspect the distant crowds making their way into the casino. "But now that I think about it... how are we gonna get in there?"

"Well going in the front door is off limits. Dressed like this, we'll be drawing in Shadows by the boatload," Shizuka said.

Futaba took the time to examine their surroundings, paying particular focus to the casino before letting Necronomicon inspect the neighbouring structures. "Oh, before I forget," Futaba handed Akechi's phone back to him and settled her hands behind her back. Two black points of eldritch matter retracted back into her thumbs. "Now then, from my understanding of this environment, we can gain access through there."

The redhead gestured to the right wing of the casino, specifically tracing the upward path of an old fire escape. The third rung of that area was about level with the roof of the foyer, and through there they could gain access via a skylight.
"Let's get to it then," Akira said. He led on toward the staircase at a swift pace, the rest of the Arditi quickly following his lead up the fire escape. Once they jumped the gap, getting through the skylight was a trivial matter. Akira landed on a ledge and quickly jumped forward, landing on the crisp glass top of a heavy chandelier. The view below him was rather grand in scale. "Holy crap," he murmured.

It was a casino alright, with stark white walls and an immaculately clean crimson carpet marking the ground. Everywhere Akira's eyes roamed, he saw throngs of 'gamblers' helping themselves to the rows of slot machines, or congregating at the roulette tables.

Seeing this many cognitions in this place... it was actually a little overwhelming to Akira. No other Palace was like this, not even Kaneshiro's. The ATM people of his world were definitely outnumbered here.

Even from up high, Akira could see Shadows roaming through the crowds. They certainly stood out compared to their human peers, hulking ink-black creatures wearing expensive suits that seemed to struggle against the impressive bulk of their musculature. A few of them seemed to be female, or comical parodies of the female form at least: Obsidian cocktail waitresses in Playboy bunny gear, the inky black matter that gave them form occasionally rippling and distorting under the vibrant light of the casino. Though they seemed smaller in number than their male counterparts.

Akira jumped along the different chandeliers slowly and steadily, the rest of his team following suit. Though they were mindful not to all crowd the individual chandeliers, for fear of putting too much weight on them. They seemed to be just as surprised as Akira was, drinking in the surroundings of Sae's vast and intricately detailed Palace. Shadows aside, it would be easy to mistake this place for the real world.

"Geez... this all pretty impressive," Shiho mused. She jumped across the yawning gap, landing on the next chandelier in sequence.

"And more than a little worrying," Sergio said, landing behind her a few seconds after. "Then again, I suppose the courthouse would have huge amounts of people on an average day."

"Indeed. We take in a healthy section of the population every day... our casino is famous around the country, after all."

The group froze up as the sultry female voice reached their ears, drifting through the darkness that surrounded them. Akechi's gaze settled on a set of speakers affixed to the wall not too far from their current position. "That's Sae-san's voice... she can hear us?" he asked.

"And I can see you too. Not to worry though, I don't plan on hurting you for the time being... please, come and meet me in the western wing. I believe we should have a chat."

The group exchanged worried glances. A Palace ruler wanting to chat with them... the prospect was a little worrying. But, since they had been called out, there was no point in not trying to answer. They continued on toward the western wing, keeping to the chandelier's and ledges that overlooked the gamblers.

As they went along, the people became sparser in number until their high path brought them to the far end of the first floor, where the cognitions seemed to have vanished entirely. The area seemed almost sealed off, with the only things in sight being a lounge, and a large elevator. Only three people were visible to the Arditi as they made their way down from the ledge in a steady stream: Two hulking shadows flanking a sleek female figure.
The glowing golden eyes and flowing brown hair made it clear that it was Sae's Shadow, but her attire and body language was a world away from the ice cold prosecutor they knew of. She wore a low cut black dress with matching elbow-length gloves, a wide-brimmed black hat casting some shade over her pale face. Even so, the gold of her eyes illuminated the thick black eyeshadow that bordered her eyes.

Getting closer, the group got a better look at the dark tights that led to her sharp high-heels, and the intricate yellow rose tattoo that adorned her upper arms. Perhaps what was most striking was the spiked black collar curled around her neck.

Shizuka swallowed slightly. 'Oh no she's hot...' She had wanted to stay pissed at Sae, even if they were working to save her, but it was harder to manage it now. Those damn Niijima genetics...

Shizuka was a little awestruck when she tried to think on how Makoto would look in a few years time.

Sae regarded the young group as they approached, a look of cool confidence lingering on her face. "I had a feeling you would come. I suppose my status as an investigator has made me an appealing target to your group... You're here for my treasure, are you not?"

"That's right," Akira replied. "And I suppose now you're gonna make it as hard for us as you can?"

An impish smile crossed Sae's face. "I can tell you where it is, you know. It's on the Manager's Floor, the highest point of this building. I'm telling you as much, because... well, you need to know the specifics if the game if you're going to play."

Makoto regarded the facsimile of her sister. So familiar, and yet so alien. "There has to be more to it than that," the younger Niijima said.

Sae chuckled amiably. "Oh, if you're expecting to simply walk over and take it, I'm afraid you'll be disappointed. I'm simply telling you where you need to be, but the route to get there... well, my casino doesn't open its upper echelons to any trash off the street. If you expect to get anywhere near my treasure, you'd better be prepared to win."

"We need to gamble if we're gonna get to the treasure?" Ann asked.

"Damnit," Ryuji murmured under his breath. "We don't have time to dick around with stuff like that..."

"Oh don't worry. I'm sure you'll find my casino quite fair," Sae replied. There was a sinister edge to her smile, and the sensation of dread she exuded only grew stronger as Sae nonchalantly raised her left hand up. "But even so, I doubt the likes of you will make it very far." She snapped her fingers, a blinding white flash leaving Sae's body.

The Arditi staggered back from the sudden flare of light, briefly disoriented, but they fortunately didn't need to wait long until their vision returned to normal. Shizuka quickly glanced toward the elevator, just barely glimpsing it as it started hauling upward. "Hey, over there!"

The Arditi narrowly caught sight of Sae and her two flunkies going un in the glass tube of the elevator, whisked away to parts unknown. This was definitely all very strange, even compared to what they were used to.

"So... that's Sis' other self," Makoto noted, frowning slightly. Whatever she had expected, a sultry and sinister gambler definitely wasn't it.

"If we're expected to gamble and win to get through here, I suppose we should try and explore as
much of this place as we can," Akechi said.

Akira nodded. "If that's what it takes, then..." A sly smile graced his face, his eyes narrowing behind his ivory mask. "Let the games begin."
The door to the school roof slid open easily, with Akira taking a cautious step out. Makoto had given them the all clear to come up here, and nobody but Haru used this area frequently, but he still wanted to make sure the coast was clear. "No teachers," he remarked. "Alright, the coast is clear."

The dark haired boy strode out onto the roof and watched curiously as Shiho emerged behind him a few seconds after, her gaze drawn to the dark fence that bordered the roof. A gentle, chilly breeze was flowing slowly over the area.

"It's colder than I was expecting," Shiho remarked, clutching the sleeves of her white Shujin sweater.

"You sure about this?" Akira asked.

Shiho nodded in return. "I feel... going forward that this is something that I'm going to have to confront. I've come to terms with the past, and been looking to the future in a lot of ways. But this is the last thing I have to do." She made her way over to the fence, her left hand gripping onto the dark metal as she looked down toward the school courtyard. "Despite everything that happened that day, and everything I was going through, I still remember the exact spot I landed... thinking back, I even remember the moment Houdini caught me. I thought I was going insane when I felt it... ha, I thought I already had."

Akira frowned, his hands resting in his trouser pockets. "You had been through a lot back then. I'm sorry I didn't do more at the time... you were one of the only people who treated me kindly back then," he said.

"Ha... come on Akira, don't go blaming yourself. Besides, you helped take Kamoshida down, and that chance never would have come without you around. You did more than enough," Shiho assured him. She sighed slightly. "At the time, I remember this voice in the back of my head. This horrible, cruel voice... and it was my own. That was my Shadow, right?"

Akira nodded. "It's possible." He wasn't sure if a person could be aware of that side of themselves, but he wouldn't have been shocked in her case.

"And that part of me... I wonder if it ever would have gone away if you guys weren't there to help me..." Shiho laughed bitterly "I wonder if I would have even survived this fall if it wasn't for Shizuka."

As she said this, Akira shifted uncomfortably. Truthfully he didn't have the answers to those, nor did he want to dwell on the questions. "You okay?" he asked.

Shiho nodded slightly in return, eventually managing to turn her gaze away from the courtyard. She reached up and dried her eyes, a tiny smile eventually making its way onto her face. "I'm okay. I've got great friends, a guy who loves me, and Kamoshida's going to be rotting for a long time... but being up here, everything came back at once in this big rush. It's strange to think how much has happened and changed in these past few months."

"Yeah, it's been nuts," Akira replied, leaning against the fence. He regarded Shiho for a moment,
before deciding to continue on. "Hey, not that I'm complaining but... why did you want me to come
up here, instead of Ann or Ryuji?"

"Well... I was talking to Ann about stuff like this not too long ago. And Ryuji... well he's already
pretty upset about us getting framed, and I didn't want to add to that," Shiho admitted. "And you...
well this is going to sound weird no matter how I say it, so I'll just say it clearly. I feel safe with
you. Not in a romantic way, but... well not only are you our leader, but you're always kind of
impartial and honest about everything. You're incredibly dependable, and I know I can trust your
judgement. So... yeah, I thought it'd be good to do this with you Akira. That's how much I trust
you."

A very small smile touched on Akira's face. "Well, I'm glad to hear that. I'm here for all you guys,
no matter what... but you know, Ryuji would've dropped everything if you asked. No matter what's
going on," Akira said.

"Mm. But I still didn't want to cause that kind of trouble for him. And you... well you're kind of a
master of spinning a dozen different plates at once," Shiho replied in turn.

Akira chuckled slightly. "Never heard it described like that, but I suppose you're right. You guys
are a full time job," he said. Not that Akira minded. Having people he could depend on so fully,
knowing they'd be there for him if he needed them, it was a good feeling. And right now, they
needed to stick close together.

"You know, when I started thinking back to that day, I thought back to volleyball. Kamoshida
aside, when I joined the team I felt... good," Shiho admitted. "I liked being on a team, I liked being
sporty... That kind of kinship, it's like what I have with you guys. But if our group ever decides to
'retire', I guess... well, I wouldn't want to lose that feeling."

"Come on, we wouldn't grow apart," Akira assured her.

"Oh I know that. But still, I was thinking for next year at Shujin..." Shiho shrugged slightly. "Well
the volleyball team won't be coming back for a looong time, not with Kamoshida's crimes out in
the open. But I was gonna try out for the girls track team next year." A broad grin broke out across
her face. "So I'll keep going forward. I'll be the top dog of that team, and make a team to be proud
of. Not for the sake of the school, but because... well after everything that happened here, the girls
of Shujin need something they can take some pride in."

Akira smiled kindly. "I'm sure you'll knock every other school right of the park."

"Heh. Well, I guess now that I've got your support Boss, I really need to give it my all." Shiho
breathed a sigh of relief, reclining against the fence in the same way Akira was. "Man... coming up
here, telling you all this... I'm feeling pretty great right now," she said.

And indeed, as she said this the world in Shiho's heart began to change. Aradia flickered, waves of
white light slowly engulfing her until it entirely encased the Persona. In an instant the light
fractured and exploded outward, revealing a completely new figure.

Shiho's new Persona was sleek and feminine, instantly distinct for having metallic silver skin. It
contrasted nicely with the deep red chiton she wore, the edges marked with a golden trim. Her face
was sleek and almost featureless, save for the distinct red eye in the center of her forehead.
Cascading waves of raven hair floated atop her head, as if caught in an unseen gentle breeze. It
matched the color of the feathery wings rising from her shoulder blades. She raised her exposed
arms up, a golden apple orbiting her left index finger as if she were a showboating basketball
player.
Aradia was gone. In her place stood Eris, goddess of discord.

Shiho blinked a few times in the aftermath of the change, glancing down at her hands. "Hah... guess I really have gotten stronger. I really do owe you, Akira," Shiho said.

"Is that so? Then I guess you can repay me by keeping up the pace on our team. It's not third year yet, after all," Akira teased.

"Since you asked so nicely," Shiho replied with just a hint of sarcasm in her tone. "Well... I guess we've hung out up here long enough. It's getting cold, and we still need to hit the Palace," she added.

Akira nodded firmly, pushing himself forward from the fence. "Right. Let's go meet up with the others." They still needed to save Sae, and if all went well then they'd be taking one of their biggest enemies out of play too.

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The elevator came to a quiet stop on the Members Floor, the doors opening outward to reveal a plush carpeted floor and starkly coloured walls. The hallway ahead of them was decently large, the left leading to a heavy doorway, while the way to their right led to a cashier, and two different game rooms.

The group had managed to make it this far yesterday, after the absolute pain they had to go through in order to get their hands on a member card. With how much time that had spent, they hadn't gone much further than here. But ultimately the card was a necessity. Not only did it open doors here, but it also kept record on their wins and losses.

In order to move through the casino, they needed to get their hands on plenty of chips and rise through the ranks. The more money stored on their card, the more status they'd have. But of course, they knew that was easier said than done. Every cognition they had seen here, particularly the ones slouched at the nearby slot machines, were in the grips of despair. None of them had managed to win anything, from what the Arditi had seen.

"I didn't expect to come out to a Palace just to gamble," Yusuke remarked, coldly examining a row of slot machines.

"I really have no idea how these kinds of casino games work. And we only have a small amount of courtesy money to start with," Ann said, looking down to the cashier's desk. "Do you guys have any ideas?"

Shizuka shrugged. "Well, my Dad taught me how to play poker," she replied.

"Oh? So we can trust you to handle this?" Morgana asked, glancing up at the dark-haired girl.

"I said I could play. I never said I was any good..." Shizuka replied, glancing away awkwardly.

As the group discussed their next course of action, Futaba casually strode over to a vacant slot machine, closely inspecting it. The lenses of her goggles glowed brightly, trying to analyse the cognitive makeup of the machinery before her. When a simple glance didn't give her the information she craved, she raised her left hand and let a slimy black tentacle slither out from under her wrist.

The eldritch matter promptly sank into the side of the slot machine, the surfaced melding together as if both were comprised of jelly. The way the two components fused, it looked almost organic.
"It's rigged," she casually said.

"Hm? You can tell that much?" Akechi asked.

Futaba nodded slightly. "My Necronomicon is really good at analysing stuff in the cognitive world. Mainly Shadows, but... well, it can also examine the composition of cognitive objects. So these slot machines, no matter how many rounds you play on them, are designed to never give you a good outcome," she explained.

"Greeeeaaat," Akira sarcastically said. "Well, Sae apparently sees the legal system as a rigged game. Guess the games in her casino reflect that. Oracle, is there anything you can do to alter the games?"

"If it was my Palace, sure. But I can't get that level of control from here, I can only analyse things," Futaba admitted with a bit of annoyance in her voice. "Joker, I think it's a safe bet that any casino game in here is gonna be rigged somehow," she added.

Sergio shrugged. "To be fair, you could say that about most casinos," he mused. The blond took a few casual paces around the area, scanning their surroundings. "On the plus side, our opponent is likely going to be hindered too... We might have a little more time to get through here."

"Let's not get carried away. We should still try to get through here as quickly as possible," Makoto remarked. She wanted to secure Sae's safety as soon as possible, and that meant beating this place in record time.

"Queen's right, we need to get through here and not get bogged down in games. This place is probably just the first hurdle, and there might be more casino games to go through on the other floors," Shiho reasoned. The others nodded along at her explanation. They had gone through several Palaces by now, and knew that things tended to get more convoluted nearer to the treasure.

"Agreed. So how about..." Shizuka trailed off, clicking her tongue against her teeth lazily. "We cheat?"

Akira made a small humming sound, stroking his chin with his left hand. "Well... I suppose if it's a rigged game, there's no harm in outcheating a cheater. I'm hardly gonna feel guilty about it at this point. What did you have in mind?" he asked.

"Depends on the games we gotta deal with. But let's take a look at what's on tap." Shizuka made her way over toward the cashier's desk, before turning and striding to a sign that had been positioned outside of the left doorway. A neon sign, designed to look like a black and red pair of dice, had been placed over the door frame, indicating that the dice games were through there.

Shizuka examined the board for several seconds, making a mental note of the games rules and rewards. On paper it sounded simple. The player had to guess the total number that would appear on three cast dice, with a correct prediction being worth double the initial bet, and three matching dice tripling it. Matching sixes however, that was the real goldmine. Regardless of the initial bet, getting triple sixes was worth five times as much. Most importantly however, it was cheap and cost only twenty-five casino coins for each play.

It sounded simple, but Shizuka was willing to bet Sae had it rigged as fuck.

"Okay, I got it," Shizuka remarked, clapping her hands together. "I might not be good at poker, but I'm damn good at cheating at games."

"Yeah, she is," Ryuji flatly said, recalling their last trip to the arcade.
"Shush," Shizuka replied. "Now then, gather 'round children. My plan is a simple one, but if there are Shadow guards roaming around in there, I might need some cover..."

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Eventually the group had decided to split up, one team surveying the dice room while the other explored the slots room on the opposite end of the corridor. They only had one card to work with, and so while one team gambled the other would be free to explore the slots area to find out how to manipulate the games in their favor.

Ultimately it would be Akira, Morgana, Futaba, Sergio, Ann, and Ryuji exploring the slots area. If there was some way to alter the output of those machines, well they needed to give Futaba some cover so she could work her magic.

Shizuka, meanwhile, found herself strolling into the dice games area with her own retinue of people. Yusuke, Shiho, Haru, Akechi, and Makoto had decided to go along with Shizuka to give her some protection. Already it felt like a necessity. No sooner had they entered that Shizuka spied a few hulking guards prowling through the crowds of humanoid cognitions. She didn't doubt that as soon as they started winning, they'd have to deal with some ornery security.

Shizuka scanned their surroundings as they made their way through the entrance, examining the heavy neon dice decorations that hung from the ceiling, and the strange slogans that had been pasted onto the walls as strips of paper. 'Victory addiction', 'Everyone's enemy', 'Success Success Success', 'Losing is not an option'....

Well, Shizuka would be lying if she said Sae was one of her favourite people, but seeing this kind of stuff in the world of her heart was mildly disconcerting. The death of their dad had been what started driving Sae down this path, according to Makoto. Shizuka could understand that much. Perhaps Sae had never really come to terms with it, and this drive to win was helping her cope? It wasn't healthy, whatever the case. And with any luck they'd resolve the issue for her.

"I'll keep watch from here," Yusuke said, leaning up against a wall near the reception area. Shizuka nodded at him, before she and the others made for a row of doorways positioned ahead of them. Each room had a small window positioned near the door, allowing observers to peer in and see what rooms were currently available.

Undeterred, Shizuka made for the central doorway and made her way inside. Shiho stopped outside the door. "Guess this is my position then... be careful you guys."

The room was modest in size, having only a large wooden island where the game was played, and a few chairs positioned in front of it. A cognition was positioned behind the island, an inky black figure in a sharp shirt, waistcoat, and pair of slacks. He had no face to speak of, just a pair of glaring garnet eyes.

"Welcome to our dice game area. I trust you already know the rules of our game? Are you here to play?" he asked.

Shizuka slowly slotted their card into a holder on the island, keeping quiet for the time being. Houdini's unseen form floated out of her body, making for the ceiling until she was positioned parallel to the island. "I'm here to win," Shizuka curtly replied.

The Dealer laughed amiably. "A good attitude always helps in these games... very well."

"Are you sure about this?" Akechi asked in a low tone. "We don't have many coins to waste."
"Relax Crow, I know what I'm doing," Shizuka replied, a sly smile on her face.

"Now then," the Dealer said, steepling his fingers in front of his featureless face. "Please predict the total of the three dice."

"Aaah... that's a toughie." Shizuka tapped her chin with her left index finger a few times, trying to look contemplative. "I guess... I'll go for... between eleven and eighteen," the dark haired girl said.

There was a rumbling of mechanisms from within the island, followed immediately after by a large slot sliding open in the center of the green counter. A trio of heavy dice, each larger than Shizuka's fist, sprang up from this new opening and landed noisily on the counter.

Shizuka inspected the three shapes as they clattered along the counter, her eyes narrowing at the sight. She nonchalantly reached up, touching her forehead with the first two fingers of her left hand. She felt a miniscule strain roll through her brain just as the dice came to a stop, the sight making the Dealer recoil once he took in the numbers staring up at him.

"T-T-Triple sixes?!"

"Oh, look at that. Guess I won that round..." Shizuka shrugged dismissively. "Beginner's luck, eh? But hey, it's a nice payday."

Makoto smiled slightly. The mechanism that spat the dice up, or the dice themselves, had likely been rigged in some fashion to make sure that a person's guesses were always in the wrong. But no mechanism could account for a Stand.

"But..."

The Dealer was interrupted by Shizuka impatiently drumming her fingers along the island with her left hand. "Hey, bud, we're not here to yack. Rack us up for the next round. Between three and twelve this time!"

As soon as the dice had been slotted back into place, the mechanism in the island started to rumble again. The trio of bright plastic dice were promptly spat back out, with Shizuka giving her brow another stroke. "Oh, looks like I won again."

"Huh?!" The Dealer nearly fainted, having to grip the edge of the island for support once he surveyed the dice. "T-Triple sixes again?! Even getting it once shouldn't be possible, but you just..."

A devilish smile crossed Shizuka's face.

"Send the earnings to my card. And then rack us up for the next round," Shizuka said firmly.

"B-but..." The Dealer hesitated slightly, his garnet eyes wide in panic.

"Rack. It. Up," Shizuka firmly said. Getting to see a Shadow squirm for her, it was something very unique... but god if she didn't love the rush it gave her.

The dice retreated back into the gap in the island, neatly slotting into place. The mechanism churned to life once more, before the trio were spat back out onto the green felt. Just as before, it landed as another trio of sixes. And this was how it went for the next two rounds, with the Dealer looking quite worried by the time that last roll came in.

"Guess we're just rolling in luck... boy, we must have made a lot of moolah from this so far,"
Shizuka said, trying her best to sound casual despite how utterly smug and fulfilled she felt.

Haru leaned in slightly from her position near the doorway. "Oh my... that was incredible Sting! You really are... I-I mean, we are rather lucky!" the strawberry blonde said.

"You... you're cheating, you have to be!" the Dealer hastily said, pointing an accusing finger toward Shizuka. "Nobody can be that lucky! Nobody!"

Shizuka smirked. "Guess I just am. What can I say, dosh loves me," she casually replied.

The Dealer hesitated for a moment before reaching his hand under the island. Shizuka was distinctly aware of the sound of a button being pressed, something that instantly sent tension racing through her body. Well, it seemed they wouldn't be getting any more cash from here. Shizuka popped their membership card from the holder and pocketed it, before she glanced over her shoulder to the open doorway, managing to get a glimpse of Shiho.

From the hallway outside, Yusuke quietly watched as a few hulking Shadows started to gravitate toward Shizuka's room of choice. The various cognitions quietly filed away, not wanting to be anywhere near the looming beasts. Yusuke nodded to Shiho, who in turn nodded to Shizuka.

The young Joestar sighed gently. "Well Christ... you guys are such sore losers."

Houdini suddenly rocketed from the ceiling like a human-sized bullet, her fists outstretched. In that instant the dice began to flicker, their numbers changing entirely. But it was impossible for the Dealer to pick up on that fact for two reasons: Houdini's feet had crushed the island into pulp on impact, and her fists had decapitated the slender Shadow in two hard and swift blows.

The walls behind Shizuka abruptly exploded outward, Shiho quickly diving away from the doorway as one of the Shadows nearly crushed her under the swing of his beefy arms. The three guards started to bubble and tense, before all three suddenly exploded into thick blobs of alien dark matter that reformed into new, more defined shapes.

Two of them took on the form of bipedal horse-men, stomping about on heavy hooves that supported their spindly ebony bodies. Both figures were wearing wide-brimmed red hats and matching cloaks, clutching insidious crescent blades in their hands.

The third Shadow, meanwhile, took on the form of an armoured blonde woman, clutching a sleek steel blade in each hand. She rode atop a powerful red steed, a halo of golden light lingering around both of them.

'He didn't know I was using Houdini to alter the appearance of the dice, but... I guess it was obvious we were cheating, even if he couldn't prove it. Still, summoning security on us like this, talk about excessive,' Shizuka thought to herself.

"Eris, Heat Riser!" Shiho's Persona rose up, firmly gripping her golden apple in her left hand while her right took aim at Shizuka. Mingling waves of red, purple, and green light washed over Shizuka, instantly boosting all her physical stats beyond the norm. With her speed greatly enhanced, she sharply dashed backward and narrowly avoided one of the horse-men. His blade struck where she had been standing mere moments ago, fracturing the ground and shaking the area on impact.

The second horse Shadow made a rapid rush for Akechi, a flurry of slashes aimed his way. The brunette was quickly forced onto the backfoot, weaving away from the rapid strokes of his crescent blade. "Hm... Well, I suppose I could do with a little exercise."

The brunette leapt over the Shadow's swinging arm, his nimble agility launching him up. Akechi's
heels slammed violently into the back of the Shadow's head, the momentum catapulting him forward and away from his momentarily dazed foe. Sparks of blue fire rolled around Akechi's body, before a muscular specter rapidly rose up behind him. "Come forth, Robin Hood!"

The Persona that rose up behind Akechi managed to strike an imposing figure: A muscular white humanoid with blue accents on his broad chest, and a flowing blue cape. In his right hand he was clutching a feathered golden bow that seemed to glow with an unnatural light. Looking at his angular head, his golden eyes and the flat line of his mouth, and the distinct 'R.H' logo on his chest, he definitely had the look of some kind of superhero.

Or a parody of one, at least.

Robin Hood twisted around in the air and took aim, his left hand moving onto the back of the bow and tugging on a glowing golden bowstring of blessed light that seemed to materialize from the ether. A trio of blessed arrows formed in the confines of the bow, rapidly being launched outward as Robin Hood loosed the bowstring.

By this point the Shadow had managed to get his bearings, turning himself toward Akechi. Two of the arrows struck him, one exploding against his chest while the other grazed his right shoulder and left a molten scar in passing. But, undeterred, he twisted away from the third and launched himself at the boy detective. A heavy hoof slammed into Akechi's chest, knocking the wind out of him as his lithe body was smashed into the ground and sent skidding along the unwelcoming earth.

He managed to flip upright mid-skid, summoning Robin Hood as a human shield as the Shadow lunged in close. The Shadow's crescent blade met the face of Robin Hood's bow, the impact fracturing the floor violently. Even so, Akechi did not budge. "Come on, is that all you've got?" he asked, before Robin Hood shoved his arm forward and launched his foe away.

The horse-mounted valkyrie, meanwhile, made a beeline for Yusuke. Heavy hooves pounded the earth, before the steed leapt high and smashed into the floor, the shockwave catching the bluenette as he tried to leap away. It struck him like an unseen brick wall and knocked him across the ground, but Yusuke managed to adjust himself as he rolled along the ground and barely landed on his right knee.

His opponent lunged at him again, but this time he was prepared, quickly summoning Kamu Susanoo to his side. He raised his helix blade up, catching both of the valkyrie's swinging strikes as they clanged noisily against the crimson metal. Yusuke grunted from the sudden strain, still finding himself on the defensive as his foe rained down a flurry of slashes against Susanoo's shifting sword. Sprays of sparks erupted from each clash, lighting up the hallway around them.

With one titanic push, Susanoo launched the Shadow backward and used this opening to shunt his right hand outward, sprays of sharpened icicles erupting from his palm and lancing toward the Shadow. Several sharpened points tore into her armour and the flesh of her steed, sending sprays of black matter erupting from the impacts.

However the Shadow quickly managed to weave away from Yusuke and pressed the assault again, the head of her steed slamming into Yusuke's chest. The bluenette grunted, feeling a great pain roll through his ribs as he was smacked harshly into the wall behind him. The rider leapt from her mount, her blades raised high and poised to come crashing down in a violent twin slash.

A wave of purple psionic energy abruptly slammed into the valkyrie from the side, the explosive surge catapulting the Shadow away and leaving Yusuke safe for the time being. "Noir... you are most certainly a sight for sore eyes," Yusuke said, rising to his full height.
"Are you alright Fox? I wanted to get over here quicker, but this was all... rather chaotic," Haru said, coming to a halt near her teammate.

Yusuke nodded. "I'm quite alright. And I admire your timing," the artist said.

A tiny smile graced Haru's face, before Milady's broad shadow fell over her from behind. "Well, I do like being punctual. And... well for as horrible as this might sound, I do love these battles. Tearing Shadows to shreds... it's actually very fun!"

"Oh no need to explain on my behalf. I find there to be something so... aesthetically pleasing about the splashes of black and red," Yusuke replied. The two exchanged smiles before glancing to the valkyrie as she righted herself. It seemed she had found herself up against a rather lethal duo...

Meanwhile, Shizuka fond herself pressing her assault against the remaining horse-man. Houdini ducked under a sharp swipe of his blade and immediately surged forward, her knuckles glowing white hot from highly focused pools of light in the plates. Several dozen blows rapidly rained down on his face, leaving a mesh of molten scars on his equine face from the cracking blows.

"BAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBU!!"

The final punch snapped the equine man backward, but he managed to alter himself mid-fall and drove his right hoof outward. It crunched into Shizuka's chest, immediately knocking the wind out of her and leaving Shizuka wide open as the same hoof clocked her in the jaw and kicked her into the opposite end of the room. Shizuka hit the wall hard, crumpling to her side.

"Hah... hey Nem... I think... your buff is wearing off," Shizuka breathed. She quickly summoned Houdini again, her Stand raising both hands up and catching the downward swing of the Shadow's blade. She struggled against his colossal strength, a sharp hiss bubbling out through Shizuka's teeth.

Fortunately she wasn't left struggling long. A wave of atomic light shot from Johanna's front tire and drove into the beast, smashing him into the back wall and leaving the Shadow quite vulnerable as Makoto made a beeline for him. The iron plate on her right fist smashed into the side of the Shadow's face, thick teeth cracking from the sudden pressure. "We're here to win, and we're not going to let worthless Shadows like you stop us!"

The Shadow suddenly stomped the ground, a burst of curse energy exploding out of his body and striking Shizuka and Makoto simultaneously. They were flung through the hole in the wall, both girls landing hard on their backs. "I think... he disagrees," Shizuka grumbled, rising up onto one knee as she tried to catch her breath.

Curse attacks were the worst. Like getting punched in the stomach, the brain, and the soul all at once.

The Shadow was quick to take aim with his free hand, swirls of black and red matter dancing down his sharp fingertips as he charged up another attack. Shizuka gripped Makoto's right shoulder, both girls turning invisible and weaving off to the right to avoid him.

Before he could fire off his attack, a sharp beam of blessed light shot into his left elbow, a violent explosion ringing out from the impact. The Shadow shrieked, glancing down to the smoking stump of his arm, the shock causing him to stagger back blindly.

Shiho rose up fully, smirking as an array of blessed orbs started to float around Eris. Her foe was quick to glare at her, a steaming hiss leaving his fanged mouth. This mistake proved fatal.
An unseen burst of atomic light hit him like a crushing tidal wave, washing over the Shadow's shrieking body and sending him skidding backward. His ebony flesh smoldered and blistered in the aftermath of the attack. As he staggered backward, Houdini lunged into his side, her leg materializing just as it connected with the Shadow's neck. The crushing blow met his damaged flesh, knocking his head clean off. His blackened body bubbled into sludge that vanished entirely mere moments after.

Shizuka breathed a sigh of relief in the aftermath, glancing over her shoulder to watch her companions finishing off their 'dance partners' too. However, no sooner had the last Shadow dropped that she saw the ceiling at the far end of the room start to bubble violently.

"More Shadows," Shiho noted grimly.

"And we don't exactly have the time or energy to do this all night long," Shizuka murmured. "Guys, group up! We gotta blow this popsicle stand!"

"I beg your pardon?" Akechi asked.

Shizuka sighed. "It's a saying, it means... Just... Just run for the fucking door, alright?"

Akechi was quick to join up with the three girls as the next batch of guards materialized fully, the foursome racing toward Haru and Yusuke at the entryway. As they reached the door, Haru was quick to summon Milady, using her vast firepower to unleash an explosive salvo to beat the incoming Shadows back for a few precious seconds.

Before they could recover, Yusuke quickly gripped Haru's wrist and made a beeline out the door with her. As soon as the group was out of the dice games room, Yusuke quickly summoned Kamu Susanoo. His Persona held his hands outward, an arctic breeze violently exploding from his palms in a continuous stream of ice. Within seconds he had generated an eight foot thick barrier, cool wisps rising off the miniature iceberg as the frozen edges crept around the doorframe.

"Well... I'd be lying if I said I was fond of gambling," Akechi mused.

"I dunno. It beats watching poker on TV," Shiho replied.

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10/11

After another bountiful day of exploration through the casino, the group had parted ways for the evening and returned to their homes. They had been raking in chips like nobody's business, and were quite close to the treasure. For as much as they wanted to get through this quickly, there was still the matter of Black Mask.

Once she had gotten home, Futaba had settled comfortably into her room with her jet back laptop perched on her bed. The glow of the screen, and the neon lime green light coming from under the keyboard, reflected neatly off her glasses and illuminated her features.

The display on the screen was split between two windows. On the left side was an imageboard that Futaba liked to frequent, resting on a thread which was now quite stuffed with shitposts. On the other was a piece of software that linked into her audio bugs. Futaba was paying particular focus to that app, watching the gentle soundwaves dance along her screen.

"Hm?" Futaba reached up to her headphones, adjusting them to make sure she had the best audio possible. She leaned in slowly, examining the soundwaves with a scrutinious gaze. "Well now, isn't
that interesting."

While the contents of what she was listening into were certainly disturbing, it was the kind of hard evidence the group had been looking for.

Futaba smiled impishly, letting out a melodious hum of satisfaction. "Mwahahaha... oh my. I knew this would work for us. Guess it's time for a late night emergency team meeting." Her grin broadened considerably. "We got 'em."
The basement of Sae's casino was as expansive and labyrinthine as the structure positioned above it, a network of dull grey corridors and small rooms that seemed to spread out as far as the eye could see. There didn't seem to be anything down there of particular importance or value, but that didn't seem to stop the Arditi from exploring it at present.

Akechi scanned their surroundings, specifically the slogans that were plastered along the grey walls surrounding them. "Why are we down here? I thought we were close to Sae-san's office," he remarked.

"We are, but Oracle detected something weird down here earlier. We should check it out before going any further," Ann said.

"She is a horrendous cheater after all, stacking the deck against us from the very beginning. If we don't check this out now, it could leave her with a nasty ace up her sleeve," Sergio chimed. It made sense, given how quickly Sae's Shadow could twist and distort the rules to benefit her.

Akechi hummed slightly. "Is that so? That's certainly worrisome. Then again, I know Sae-san quite well. She does like to have a secret weapon or two stashed away, just in case a court case starts to swing against her."

Makoto frowned. She wanted to object, but Akechi had a point. "If we're going to get through this, we need to make sure there'll be no cheap tricks waiting for us when we go for the treasure," Makoto said.

"Right. The closer to a treasure you get, the more elaborate a Shadow's defenses become, and given what we've seen from Sae so far..." Akira trailed off, tucking his hands into the pockets of his coat.

The group continued on in silence, moving through the expansive basement at a leisurely pace. Akira occasionally glanced to Futaba at his side, the smaller redhead remaining silent for the time being. Despite everyone's best efforts to remain calm, there was an undeniable tension moving through the team. Last nights meeting had been a rather important and eventful one, after all.

Eventually, Futaba came to an abrupt stop and looked up at Akira, nodding firmly. They were in the center of the basement, just as the group had settled on last night. A nice starting point for what was to come.

The group suddenly broke away from Akechi, leaving the detective abruptly isolated as the four corridors that surrounded him were abruptly blocked off. Akira, Futaba, Ann, and Shizuka took up the northern exit. Yusuke and Sergio covered the west, Makoto and Shiho covered the east. Then, blocking off the southern corridor, was Morgana, Haru, and Ryuji.

"Crow," Akira curtly said, his tone ice cold. "We need to talk."

The detective tensed slightly, but he tried to keep his usual calm and charming expression on his face. "Oh? What about Joker? I must say, this sudden shift is a little unnerving."
"We know you've been lying to us about your Persona. You've been dishonest since the moment we met, as it turns out," Akira curtly said.

"What... what are you talking about?" Akechi replied. He chuckled faintly. "If this is some manner of prank, I really don't understand your odd sense of humor."

"You claim that you got your Persona only last month, investigating one of the recent murder victims used to frame us. But in actuality..." Morgana grinned and settled his ivory paws on his rounded hips. "You've had powers for far longer. When we first met back in June, you overheard me and some of the others talking about where to go. And I said I wanted to go to a 'big pancake-looking place.'"

"And you came over to talk to us, and you said 'Oh, I thought I heard someone say something about delicious pancakes.' Except nobody but Mona said anything like that," Shiho explained, folding her arms over her chest.

Akechi shifted slightly, but didn't move to respond. Makoto filled the silence. "Only people who have the power of a Stand or a Persona can hear Mona speak. Which means you had your abilities at least that far back, despite your claims," the brunette icily said.

"That's quite a claim. Unfortunately you have no evidence to back it up. How exactly are you expected to have a perfect memory of something innocuous from four months ago?" Akechi asked, maintaining a level tone.

"Alright bud, let's say we believe that. We'll take the 'pancakes' thing off the table. That's not the only reason we have to doubt you," Shizuka said, settling her hands on her hips. "You ran into our team back in July, when Medjed started ramping up their threats. Even back then I thought there was something off about you, and we were all on edge. So I remember that day with crystal clarity!"

Akechi arched his left brow partially. "Is this going somewhere Sting? If you have a point, you're taking quite a long time to get to it," he said.

A wry smile crossed Shizuka's face. "Well, let me get to the point then. When you were walking away, I decided to test my hypothesis! I summoned my Stand in front of you for a fraction of a second... and you flinched." Akechi's eyes widened by a tiny margin, as if now realizing just what he had seen that day.

"You have such an overactive imagination Sting. I simply lost my footing on the way out of the station. If you'll recall, the station was rather busy that night. And between those crowds of people, and all the litter that was lying around, stumbling was just natural," Akechi explained. "It's not as if you could see the world through my eyes. Your mind was simply playing tricks on you, your bias dictating what you saw!"

"Soundin' awfully defensive and hot under the collar for a guy who's claiming to be truthful," Ryuji said.

"I don't appreciate absurd, asinine accusations," Akechi replied, shooting the blond a quick glare.

Akira sighed and scratched the back of his head. "True, we can't see through your eyes. But we can read your mind," Akira casually said, making Akechi bristle slightly. "You see, there's another
A member of our team. One you've never seen before. A member has a very intriguing power."

Akechi swallowed slightly. "What... what do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, let me take you back to the night of our meeting in Leblanc, after you left the cafe..." Akira trailed off, taking a moment to set the scene.

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10/8

"You got a good look at him throughout the whole meeting Hifumi. What do you make of him? Is he genuine?" Ann asked, watching the shogi princess closely.

Hifumi crossed her left leg over her right knee, her fingers tented neatly over her skirt. "Definitely not. The longer I watched him, the more defined Flaming Telepath's understanding of Akechi became. He... it's like there's this malevolent aura hanging around him, this inner dark spirit that completely contrasts with the pleasant exterior he puts out."

"I knew it," Ryuji said, driving his right fist into his left palm resoundingly. "Ever since we ran into that guy, I knew there was something skeevy about him."

"Uh... you only disliked him because he said disparaging things about the Phantom Thieves," Makoto replied.

"Yeah well uh..." Ryuji stiffly scratched the back of his neck. "That didn't help."

Akira sighed loudly. "That's neither here nor there right now. Hifumi, what can you tell us about this 'aura' he gave off? You can read his body language and microexpressions in excruciating detail... what can you tell us?"

Hifumi drummed her fingertips together for a few moments, trying to properly organize her thoughts. "Firstly, almost all his attention was focused on Akira. As if the rest of you weren't even there. When you did manage to draw Akechi's attention, it was only for fleeting moments, and he seemed to begrudge having to focus on any of you. And the vibe he gave off toward Akira... it was filled with a murderous intent," Hifumi explained, letting those last few words hang in the air.

Silence lingered in Akira's attic, with the group digesting this information. Things were far more serious than any of them had feared.

"So let's recap. Akechi lied about when he got his abilities. He lied about his intentions. And now he wants to kill Akira?" Shizuka said. She clenched her right fist, her nails dancing along the flesh at the base of her palm. "That piece of... Ooooh when I get my hands on him, he's gonna get the Yuya Fungami Special."

Hifumi sighed. "Akechi views Akira as a threat, I could tell that much readily. As I said before, he's kind of ignored the rest of you, but Akira... well he has a lot of envy and aggression aimed at Akira, while also seeming to be cautious of him too. The rest of you didn't seem to register to him."

"Tch... egotistical jackass," Ryuji muttered, before adding something to the effect of 'I'll show him who's a non-threat' under his breath.
"So this whole thing with wanting to help us with Sae, it's all some sort of con. At least, that's certainly what it looks like right now," Akira said. "It definitely goes against the public face Akechi likes to wear... speaking of which, a while back I asked you to look into Akechi's past cases. If we look there, we might be able to learn more about the guy himself. Especially if he's had a Persona for longer than he lets on."

"Right," Makoto said, glancing to the stack of papers clutched neatly in her hands. "Futaba and I did a lot of digging. It was ultimately rather difficult, even with all the connections and skills Futaba has. After all, the early cases he was involved with didn't get much attention on the mainstream media," Makoto explained.

"Buuuuut there's nothing I can't find on the internet! And we managed to get a lead on his starting case. Apparently the first case Akechi ever cracked was from two years ago. It involved the manager of the apartment building he was living in. Supposedly he went nuts one day and murdered a tenant, with Akechi providing the police with some evidence and insights that helped them get their guy," Futaba said. She was beaming with pride, clearly quite proud of herself.

Ann made a gentle humming sound. "That's... awfully convenient."

"Soon after that, he ended up helping the police with another murder. In that case, the owner of a small bar apparently killed a female patron in a blind rage. Once more, there was Akechi helping to point out evidence and giving the insights the police needed for their case. It was around that point that he essentially became a member of staff for the justice department," Makoto explained, holding up another printed article for the team to survey.

"Those cases..." Yusuke murmured. "Does anyone else think they sound familiar? Not necessarily the specifics, but the nature of the crimes."


Shizuka frowned. "Yeah well... not that I wanna be the one to jump to Akechi's defense, but 'normal' people going nuts one day and killing a person isn't exactly a supernatural phenomenon. Hell, most serial killers get by acting totally normal and unassuming. So those cases, there's a chance they were genuine," the dark haired girl said.

After a moment, Ann spoke up. "Still, two years ago... isn't that when the first rampage accident happened? It was uh... a taxi driver, plowing into that reporter, right?"

"And two years ago was when the first recorded 'mental shutdown' incidents started to pop up. Low ranking politicians and corporate figures," Sergio noted.

"Two years ago was when Mom died," Futaba murmured. Akira settled a strong hand on Futaba's shoulder, giving her a reassuring squeeze.

"Alright, so Akechi has lied about how long he's had powers. Two years ago he started making a name for himself as a teenage detective, and a few months later the first mental shutdown incidents started cropping up... So, it's entirely possible that Akechi is the mysterious Black Mask."

Ryuji's eyes widened. "For real?!"
"That's a very serious accusation to level at someone. We need to make absolutely sure before we make any moves against him," Morgana firmly said.

"So we need a little information huh? Well fortunately for you, I have just the thing we need," Futaba said, smiling cockily.

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"This member, Maestro, examined you with their power, hidden from sight thanks to Sting's invisibility," Akira curtly said. Despite the 'muderous intent' Hifumi had sensed from him, the dark-haired boy was managing to keep calm and polite. "That power was enough to divine your intention."

Akechi frowned, his fists clenched at his sides. "That's... absurd. You can't seriously believe-"

"I'd trust Maestro's predictions over a single word out of your mouth," Sergio quickly said. The blond was maintaining a calm composure, but he was set to summon Breakthru at a moments notice.

"You know, speaking of bad guys, there's something I wanna ask about too," Shizuka said, tapping her chin as she turned her gaze to the ceiling. "Hey Crow, what can you tell us about Masayoshi Shido?"

Despite his best efforts not to be rattled, Akechi's body tensed by just a tiny margin. "The political candidate? What about him?" he asked.

Shizuka smirked. "See, none of us are famous junior detectives, but we like to do our homework, and we have connections of our own. And so we were able to hear his name from an interesting source: Kunikazu Okumura." Akechi made a small choking noise, despite his best efforts to suppress it. "I know what you're thinking. 'President Okumura is either dead or otherwise indisposed, how did he tell anyone anything?' Well, truth is, when Stands are involved you really don't need to get intel through talking."

Haru took a decisive step forward. "That's right! With Sting's help, we were able to find out who was at the head of all this!"

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10/5

"Thanks for coming out here Rohan-sensei. I owe you big time," Shizuka said as she led the way down the expansive tunnel leading into the Athena clinic. She was flanking Rohan's right side, while Haru was at his left, trying her best not to make her appraisal of the strange mangaka too obvious.

"Yes well..." Rohan reached up, adjusting the gold-trimmed collar of his sleeveless purple top. "Fortunately for you, I had a gap in my schedule. And with nothing else to do, I decided to humor you," Rohan curtly explained.

Shizuka smiled faintly, giving a modest roll of her eyes. "Yeah, I'm sure you didn't deliberately make an opening for me at all."
“Do you still want my help?” Rohan pointedly asked.

The doors to the lobby opened up to reveal the usually empty space inside. Athena didn't see much use for anything medical, but there was still a well-dressed receptionist at the main desk. He nodded to Shizuka and Haru in passing, having seen them here more than once, and raised no objection to Rohan's presence.

It was a quick trip down the hall and one flight of stairs to reach the hospital rooms, with Kunikazu being situated in room six. The ice white door slid open to reveal a sterile white room, well lit by a heavy rounded lamp affixed to the ceiling. A steady beep from an electrocardiogram filled the room, while Okumura's shallow breathing came through the clean respirator on the left side of his bed.

Whatever one might say about Okumura, and there were many negative qualities one could bring up, he had always managed to carry himself with a good deal of strength and dignity. But the figure lying in the bed seemed almost a shadow of his former self, frailer and weak. The Foundation were doing what they could to maintain his muscle mass, and had managed to slow the process, but even they could only do so much.

Haru frowned at the sight of him, casting her gaze away. Even Shizuka, feeling the way she did about the man, felt a pang of guilt at the sorry display. But Rohan, as ever, regarded the situation with a cool indifference.

“This is it?” Rohan asked, earning a nod from the two high school girls.

“This is my Father,” Haru admitted, managing to look down at Kunikazu's unconscious form. “Doctor Lifeson has told me that he's gradually been improving, and there's been a marked increase in brain activity, but... he still hasn't woken up,” she said.

Rohan nodded. “My apologies. Now then, you said you wanted some information from him?”

“Right. He got involved with some shady characters, but he ended up in this state before he could actually tell us anything. So, I was thinking, that your Heaven's Door would be able to seek the information we're looking for,” Shizuka explained.

“Child's play,” Rohan dismissively replied.

A wave of purple light washed over Rohan's body, followed immediately by a spectral figure taking shape in front of him. A small ghostly white humanoid dressed in a dapper white long coat and trousers a spiffy golden bow tie around his neck. The top of his head was adorned by a wide-brimmed had, shade being cast over his eyes. The trim of Heaven's Door's attire was a regal gold, matching the distinct golden lines that rimmed his eyes and rode down his cheeks.

Heaven's Door nonchalantly floated over to Kunikazu's unconscious form, his left index finger tapping the old man's forehead. A seam suddenly formed from his hairline down to the tip of his nose, before the skin abruptly parted like the cover of a book. Haru gasped loudly at the sight, peering into the opening in Kunikuzu's head. Instead of flesh and blood, she was looking at paper and ink. Rows of words, placed in neat and tidy kanji.

“I'm being attacked,” Rohan murmured, leaning in close to examine the text laid out before him. “That was his last conscious thought. Though he didn't seem to describe what attacked him... everything before that point is complete rambling nonsense. As if he had a total mental
breakdown,” Rohan mused.

Shizuka shifted awkwardly. “He... kinda did.” Spontaneously growing a conscience, and being hit with the weight of all the crimes they had committed, it was a lot for a person to take in. It had been the case with Kamoshida and Madarame, and Okumura had no shortage of sins on his side. While he had to be taken down, it was hard not to feel responsible for this current situation.

Rohan slowly and steadily combed through the pages before him, cycling through the nonsense until the record of Kunikazu's thoughts gradually returned to sanity. "I see your Father wasn't exactly a morally upstanding man," Rohan casually said.

"N-no, not exactly...” Haru admitted. Shizuka shot him a quick glare, but remained silent. She supposed it was a rather tame observation from Rohan.

Rohan lapsed back into silence for several more pages, before coming to a halt. "Hm." Shizuka leaned over his shoulder as Rohan's gaze settled on a large block of text. "Is this what you're looking for?"

"Huh? What does it say?" Shizuka asked.

The mangaka cleared his throat, reading aloud what was before him. "'I was introduced to a most interesting man today. Someone who can help kickstart my political career if I contribute to him. Masayoshi Shido has access to an assassin the police will never catch. He will give mental shutdowns to my enemies for a price. I'll make Okumura Foods insurmountable before moving onto brighter horizons.'" Rohan tapped his chin in thought. "Masayoshi Shido... that sounds vaguely familiar."

"He's running for prime minister," Shizuka mumbled, the words leaving her at a slow rate as she handled the implications of that statement. A man running to be the head of the nation, who was leading in the polls last time Shizuka checked, was the one controlling Black Mask?

It was like having a murder-happy Superman on speed dial, for as untouchable as Black Mask was through conventional means.

"Oh, that's right. I must have heard that name on the radio about a dozen times... Hm, I suppose I never really concern myself with politics," Rohan mused.

"This time... I think you should," Shizuka admitted. So at the head of all this was Masayoshi Shido? He was either pulling the strings of this Black Mask, or was secretly Black Mask himself. Either way, if he was gunning for the highest office in Japan, it was doubtful there was anyone above him.

"Of course, after we got through with that meeting, I decided to do a little more homework. While I didn't research in great detail, I checked Shido's name into the Nav. And sure enough he has a Palace... and if he has a Palace, he can't have a Persona or a Stand," Shizuka explained.

"And Masayoshi Shido was just a low-ranking politician until two years ago, until he suddenly started rising through the ranks. Two years ago. Soon after you became a junior detective. Soon after the mental shutdowns started breaking out," Yusuke icily said.

"So you're saying that I'm a serial killer, have been so for the past two years while working for the
police, and all at the behest of a politician? Do you realize how absurd that sounds?” Akechi retorted,

Sergio scoffed loudly, folding his arms over his chest. "Still planning on denying it? Fine. Then explain your way out of this."

As the blond spoke, Futaba removed her phone from a pouch on her belt. The short hacker fiddled with it for a few moments, until the file she was looking for came up. She quickly pressed play, a damning string of audio starting to play out. Akechi’s voice was plain as day.

"After that, well I'll have brought a large SAT contingent into the Metaverse by that point. They'll corner the leader and, with nowhere else to go, take him into custody. A few detectives can tenderize him if they wish. It's not like the public will care if a violent murderous criminal like him gets a few bruises."

"..."

"He's the main threat. The leader that they all congregate around... I've gotten to see how much they depend on him, and if he's out of the picture we'll be free to pick off the rest at our leisure. Though I'm sure your towering mafioso will want to handle that side of things."

"..."

"Dealing with him? I'll handle that. We could say he stole the guard's gun and committed suicide during his imprisonment. How about that? It would be an easy matter with the underground interrogation room. Just like that the criminal mastermind who's been terrorizing Tokyo from the shadows, the architect behind all the mental shutdowns, will end his own life. I suppose I'll have to stock up on ammunition soon."

"Smile," Shizuka said, tapping her left temple. "You're on Candid Camera."

"You..." Akechi narrowed his eyes at Futaba. "You hacked my phone?"

Futaba shrugged. "Among other things," she casually replied.

The young detective chuckled faintly. "I knew there was something strange about you grabbing my phone. So, you're the Phantom Thieves' hacker..."

"You don't deny that that's you, then," Makoto accusingly said.

Akira sighed loudly, folding his hands into his coat pockets. "You know, part of me wanted to believe that we were on the wrong track. That you really were a noble crusader, and that if you were lying you still had a good reason behind it. But this new evidence, it's irrefutable."

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10/11

Silence hung in Akira's attic as Futaba's recording came to an end, fear and dread hanging over the group like a dark cloud. Makoto, Ann, Shiho, Haru, and Yusuke seemed horrified by what they had just heard. Meanwhile Ryuji, Morgana, and Shizuka looked far more furious than shocked. Akira and the others were still digesting all this, their expressions unreadable.
Eventually, Ryuji spoke up first. "That slimy son of a bitch! He's talking about... he's seriously thinking of killing Akira, just like that?! Like it's no big deal?!"

"If he's who we think he is, then murder shouldn't be difficult for him," Akira replied. He thought back to his arrival in Tokyo, when a random train driver all of a sudden decided to plow the train full speed ahead onto a crowded platform. How many had died that day?

"You're taking this rather well," Morgana mused.

Akira shrugged. "By now, I'm not exactly a stranger to people and monsters trying to kill me... the fact that I just heard that from my own mouth has really, perfectly framed how messed up my life has become," Akira murmured. "So it wasn't just a vibe Hifumi got. He really does want to kill me. And the rest of you, when I'm out of the picture."

"This all sounds very worrying... I'm new to all this, I have no idea how you can be so calm about a person wanting to murder you," Hifumi said. Akira visually pondered this for several seconds, before ultimately shrugging when he couldn't think of a pithy retort.

Morgana sighed. "Well there's no question about it. Goro Akechi is our enemy, and may even be the Black Mask we've been looking for."

"Actually, I've been wondering about that. We all saw Black Mask in President Okumura's Palace, and his phantom clothes were totally different to what Akechi wears," Ann chimed.

"A fair point Lady Ann. But if Akechi has been doing this for two years, then he might have some tricks on his side that even we don't know about. Altering his attire might be as easy to him, as changing into a car is for me," Morgana explained.

Hifumi tilted her head partially. "Beg pardon?"

Shizuka waved her off. "We'll get into that later. More importantly, we need to decide how we're going to proceed from here. We're kind of on a tight deadline with Sae, and she's still in danger. If we go forward with stealing her treasure, he's gonna body block us with a police firing squad, before killing Akira when he gets him alone."

"Well... while we may be onto him, that phone call makes it seem as if he's not onto us. So how about we betray our traitor?" Sergio suggested. "Ambush him and beat him into the ground like a stake, and take one of our biggest threats out of the equation."

"Fighting him directly while he's still unassuming... it could well work, given our superior numbers. And if we don't act soon, either Sae-san will be in danger, or we'll complete our mission but lose Akira. To make matters worse, we're still on a stringent time limit... Akechi would doubtless get suspicious and act preemptively if we begin dragging our heels," Yusuke mused.

"Maybe we could try leading him somewhere else to fight? Like Mementos?" Futaba suggested.

Akira shook his head. "No good. Akechi knows how seriously we're taking the threat on Sae's life, and if we suddenly decided to go to Mementos he'll definitely know something's up," he pointed out. Akira slowly scratched his chin, his left hand resting on his corresponding hip. "To make matters worse, it's entirely possible he can summon Robin Hood in the real world, which could make things beyond troubling if we try something outside the Metaverse. And if he were to get away and get
some police help, we'd really be up a creek."

"So if we're going to fight him, it has to be..." Makoto's eyes widened as she realized the option that was left to them. "No! No way! We can't fight inside Sis' Palace!" she quickly said.

"I'm afraid we might have to... It's the only place we can do this without him getting suspicious and figuring us out," Morgana said. "Still... I know why you're worried. If we make sure to keep him away from Sae's Shadow, I think we might be safe."

The group thought on this for some time, contemplating their options. Futa piped up first. "Why don't we lead him to the casino basement?" she suggested. The others looked at her quizzically. "Yeah, there's a basement. It's linked to that back room where we got the member's card. I didn't bring it up before, since Necronomicon didn't sense anything there. But it's pretty huge, and if Makoto's Sis is on the manager's floor then she's at the polar opposite end of the Palace! It's perfect!" she proudly said.

"She has a point. Sae's Shadow has basically been playing keep away with us, and if there's a healthy distance between us and her, Akechi can't do anything to her," Ann noted.

A few nods broke out through the crowd, most of the team seeming happy with this suggestion. Makoto still seemed on edge but, with no counter suggestions of her own, she remained silent.

Eventually, Ryuji chipped in a thought of his own. "You know... I'm all for punching Asketchy's face out through his ass, but the other day he raised a good point. What're we gonna do wth him when we beat him? Can't exactly hand him over to the cops... for a bunch of reasons."

"I'm sure the Foundation can find a nice spot for him. We take his phone off him to make sure he doesn't flee with the Nav, and if he can summon his Persona in the real world... well, I'm sure they have some strong Stand users to keep watch over him," Shizuka suggested.

But, while she didn't say as much aloud, she and Sergio had a similar thought at around the same time: If it came to it, if they had no other choice, they wouldn't hesitate to put Akechi in the ground.

The situation had grown more worrying than any of them had expected. Of course, the group had expected powerful people to be at the head of all this, but the prospective future prime minister? That was a sobering thought.

"Who is this Shido guy anyway?" Akira eventually asked.

"You dunno? Sheesh Akira, even I've been keeping up with that," Futaba said, bringing her phone up. She quickly fiddled around, until she had managed to bring up a display for Niconico. Akira leaned in a bit, getting a good look at Shido in motion as he addressed a rather expansive crowd in Shibuya. As soon as he heard the bald man's voice, he abruptly recoiled.

"Huh?" Ann regarded him curiously. "What's up?"

"That voice..." Akira murmured. He examined Shido closely, that rasping voice fresh in his mind, and swallowed hard. That was why he looked so familiar in those posters. He looked more respectable in a touched up photo, but something malignant in his eyes gave him away. "He's the one who landed me on probation."
"I'll admit, there was a time when I didn't suspect you at all. Going on that talk show and saying you thought we were innocent, that was a stroke of genius on your part. Our biggest public detractor, coming to our defence when the people turned against us... it was definitely unexpected," Akira explained.

Shizuka grinned, settling her fists on her hips. "Probably would've worked too, if you hadn't gotten tripped up when you first met us. All that plotting and planning, undone by something as silly as 'pancakes.' Ain't that a kick in the head...?"

"Based on the evidence we have, it seems clear that you're the killer we've been looking for," Shiho firmly said. "So... do you have anything to say in your defense?"

Silence lingered in the expansive basement, occasionally punctuated by a ghostly breeze whistling through the corridors. Eventually, Akechi chuckled. "Wow, I'm actually impressed. To think you were onto me for so long... all this time, and I never even noticed that slip of my tongue."

"So you don't deny it then?" Makoto firmly asked.

"Oh I can hardly refute the sound of my own voice," Akechi replied, chuckling faintly.

"You can drop the folksy 'aw shucks' bullshit now!" Ryuji shouted, raising his right fist. An aura of blue light was cascading along his body, but he was holding himself in check for the time being.

Akira sighed and clenched his fists. "Then we'll have to stop you here and now. And when you're out of play, taking down your boss will be a whole lot easier."

"So you really are the killer... you killed my Mom!" Futaba shouted, pointing an accusatory finger at him.

Akechi hummed, tapping his chin with his left index finger as he looked up at the ceiling. "Did I? Hm... Oh yes, Wakaba Isshiki, right? Goodness, was that really two years ago? It feels so much longer. There have been so many, that the targets all seem to blur together when I try to think about them," he said. Futaba's modest body bristled in barely contained fury.

"You tried to kill Father too... do you really care that little about the lives you've taken?!" Haru asked, a rare flash of anger forming in her tone.

"Of course I don't, you fluffy-haired dope," Akechi replied. By now his voice had taken on a hitherto unheard edge, glaring toward Haru with great intensity. "Everything I've done, it's to meet my own goals. And no matter how many bodies I have to use as stepping stones to reach them, I'll keep going until I have what I need."

Akira sighed softly. "Guess there's nothing left to talk about then. Let's knock him out quickly," he said.

"With pleasure!" Ryuji shouted.

Seiten Taisei launched forward from the blond, arcs of lightning cascading around the towering Persona and his spiked cudgel. He swung down with a great deal of might, only for the edge of his staff to be blocked by an upraised spectral arm materializing over Akechi's left shoulder, while his right hand was on his mask. The ground shook with a violent tremor, the concrete splintering under
Akechi's heels. Robin Hood slowly took form around him, his aura shifting from a vibrant blue to a malicious purple.

Futaba's goggled lit up, a gasp leaving the short redhead. "This... this energy!"

"Ah yes, Skull. 'The muscle.' I've seen your strength in action before," Akechi noted, his voice partially strained as Seiten Taisei and Robin Hood struggled against each other. "It's certainly impressive... but nothing I can't handle!"

Before Akechi could take another step forward, an unseen fist clocked him in the jaw and sent him skidding backward. Soon a flurry of invisible blows were raining down on his superhuman body, the brunette being forced to raise his arms to block against the storm of blows. Even so he could feel the flashes of pain resonating through his bones.

"BAZUBAZUBAZUBAZU!!"

Robin Hood's bow suddenly swung upward, crashing into Houdini's body, driving her up into the ceiling with such force that an imprint of her body was left dented into place. "I anticipated that you'd try to attack me unseen Sting," Akechi said, spitting a blob of blood onto the floor. A red streak trailed down from the left corner of his mouth.

With impressive quickness, Robin Hood caught Houdini by the ankles and roughly whipped her around, smashing the partially visible figure into Zorro and Milady behind him. With the three users blocking the southern corridor briefly dazed, Akechi leapt over them and unleashed a burst of blessed light that sent the trio skidding away from him.

A ball of curse energy exploded into Akechi's back, flinging him down the corridor until the brunette landed neatly on his feet several feet away. He panted slowly, catching a glimpse of Arsene as the crimson figure moved back toward Akira.

"I'll admit, taking out Joker and picking the rest of you off at my leisure was the option I greatly preferred. But if you think I'm not prepared to face you directly..." A flash of purple light erupted around him, shattering the dense floor beneath his feet. "Then you're dead wrong."
The Day Breakers (II)

Time seemed to grind to a halt, the gathered Arditi staring down the corridor at their previously unknown nemesis. Goro Akechi, the Black Mask. He stared them down in silence, nobody making a move for the time being. They just wanted to see who would blink first.

"G-guys, be careful... the energy he's giving off is higher than what he was putting out before," Futaba warned them, inspecting their foe through her goggles.

"I've had two more years at this than the rest of you. The extra experience has paid off..." Akechi grinned faintly. "Additionally, I've had to handle every threat and foe on my own. I didn't have idiot teammates to slow me down, Kurusu."

Akira narrowed his eyes. "Keep talking big. You're still outnumbered eleven to one... We'll see how good flying solo has been for you then." He nodded subtly at Haru.

Milady's ghostly form abruptly appeared above Haru, the looming pink figure flashing her fan before unleashing a glowing purple pulse of psionic energy. It hit Akechi like a kick from a mule, making the brunette skid back a few feet. A few more flashes flew from Milady's outstretched right hand, but this time Akechi was prepared and promptly started backstepping to avoid the bursts that exploded into the floor.

Just as he reached the corner, Ann took a step forward with Hecate's shadow falling over her. A highly focused stream of fire lanced out of her familiars, crossing the corridor in an instant. Akechi rounded the corner to avoid it, the blazing beam hitting the wall and making it glow a crackling orange for several seconds.

He wasn't given long to enjoy the peace before Yusuke and Sergio quickly rounded the corner opposite him, cutting him off from that direction. Akechi scoffed in annoyance, his eyes narrowing as Kamu Susanoo suddenly surged his way with his helix blade raised high.

As the next clash resounded through the basement like a crack of thunder, Akechi took advantage of this split second opening and drove Robin Hood's free hand up. Ivory knuckles drove into Susanoo's face, the impact causing the swordsman to crash into the wall behind him. Yusuke gasped sharply, nearly being knocked off balance entirely.

Akechi wasn't given much room to breathe before a volley of concrete shards was catapulted his way at almost a hundred miles an hour. They hit home like a salvo of bullets, several penetrating Robin Hood's flesh and sending small spurts of blood erupting out along Akechi's shoulders and forearms. He grit his teeth, hissing in pain. Even through the haze he could see Breakthru quickly moving toward him.

For as hulking as Breakthru was, he was deceptively fast. His large knuckles rushed Robin Hood, the ivory archer quickly weaving around to block what he could. Several blows still broke through his guards, the impacts making Akechi grit his teeth as pain resonated through him.
"You think you're the only one with experience?" Sergio asked, watching Akechi with disdain.

Breakthru suddenly ducked under a swing of Robin Hood's bow, also avoiding a bursting arrow of blessed light that drove through the ceiling above them. Both of Breakthru's fists shot forward, enlarged knuckles smashing into Robin Hood's chest. Akechi skidded back, his eyes bulging out as the wind was nearly knocked out of him.

"You're not the first superpowered psychopath I've fought, and you won't be the last either!" the blond boldly proclaimed.

Another titanic punch came hurtling toward Robin Hood, before his left hand snapped up abruptly to parry the incoming strike at the wrist. In that brief opening, Robin Hood's right hand rushed out. A trio of punches struck Breakthru in the chest in a split second. Sergio gasped harshly, feeling a crushing pressure on his ribs, a spurt of blood spraying from his lips. Something definitely cracked there...

"Don't get cocky! You've never dealt with anyone like me you horse's ass!" Akechi growled.

Robin Hood whipped around, striking Breakthru in the chest. His considerable bulk was driven back into the nearest wall with such force that he smashed through it. But, in passing, Breakthru's enlarged knuckles brushed through over a dozen chunks of sharp concrete debris. They rocketed down toward Akechi, something he realized all too late as he tried to reel backward.

A few sharpened points drove into Robin Hood's shoulders and chest, causing a few red spurts to pop along the crisp white surface of Akechi's coat. He grit his teeth and reeled away, trying to break in a sprint in the opposite direction of the dazed artist.

Akechi didn't doubt his own raw power, but he was also aware of how outnumbered he was. Keeping on his feet, avoiding getting boxed in, that was his key to victory here. But unfortunately for him, his adversaries weren't about to let him have his way.

Morgana skidded to a halt at the corner behind Akechi, with Zorro's dark form immediately rising up above him. The giant flicked his rapier out a few times, these flourishes unleashing focused blades of wind that knifed through the air at terrifying speeds. But Akechi was no slouch, moving with his own bursts of quickness to weave through the oncoming attacks.

While nothing hit him dead on, more than a few of Zorro's flourishes managed to graze Akechi's arms and legs, causing bloodied cuts in passing. He pressed through the pain, his heel meeting Morgana's forehead in a ferocious kick that sent him hurtling down the hall like a football. When Morgana skidded to a halt his head was spinning, a weak groan leaving him as he tried to focus through the sudden shock of pain.

The brunette turned, immediately calling Robin Hood as a human shield when he spied Akira and Arsene only a few feet away from him. The crimson Persona shoved his left hand forward, volleys of gleaming silver needles racing toward Akechi. They drove into Robin Hood like a hulking pin cushion, the brunette hissing from the repeated sharp trauma racing up his left arm.

He readily understood Akira's tactic. Dream needles didn't hurt much, but if he soaked up too many of these things then he'd be out cold... he couldn't let that happen, of course.

Robin Hood fired off a gleaming arrow of blessed light, his energy exploding against the floor in
front of Akira. The wave sent him skidding back, stray arcs of energy burning Arsene's arms and making Akira hiss slightly from the pain. He was forced to call off his assault, reeling back and bracing as Robin Hood nocked another glowing arrow.

The bolt was swiftly loosed but, before it could get near its intended target, it was swiftly intercepted by Eris. As it met her stomach, rather than causing pain for Shiho, the blessed energy merely rippled against Eris' body like a stone hitting water. Such was the case for the next two shots, harmlessly bouncing into Eris' floating body.

"It's over Crow," Shiho firmly said. "Robin Hood only has bless attacks, and that element is harmless against Eris. If I can block all your attacks, good look hurting anyone here."

Akechi smirked slightly. "Oh no. You've beaten me," he sarcastically said, placing his left hand on his mask.

"Huh?" Futaba examined him closely, her eyes widening under her goggles. "W-wait a sec, this reading... it's changed!"

"Now... Red Death!" The figure that appeared above Akechi was drastically different to Robin Hood. A scarlet skeleton in a shabby robe and horrid mask, a perpetual fog lurking around him from the neck down. A malignant aura radiated around him, far more worrying than the vaguely heroic vibe that Robin Hood gave off.

Haru swallowed hard, her eyes wide in shock. "He... he can summon multiple Personas too?!" she asked in shock.

"Just like me..." Akira muttered. It wasn't impossible, he knew, for others to have his rare talent. Naoto and Mitsuru both admitted that their former team leaders could do it. But to think that an ability like that was in the hands of this nutcase...

The crimson skeleton let out a blood-curdling shriek and shoved his bony hands outward, telekinetic pulses slamming into Akira and Shiho. They were flung backward into their allies, giving Akechi the opening to turn on his heel and sprint in the opposite direction.

Akira grimaced, sitting upright. He quickly noticed a few tears along the right shoulder of his jacket, and could feel a bruise slowly forming under his right eye. "Oracle... Where's he heading?"

"Uh..." Futaba cupped her temples, surveying the area around her. "He's moving in the opposite direction of the exit."

Akira nodded, gesturing first to Makoto and Shizuka, and then to Ann and Ryuji. He quickly made arcing motions with his right and left index fingers, with the teams nodding and heading off in those directions in a pincer maneuver. The basement was almost a little maze like in structure, nearly a dozen boxy rooms bordered by a grid of small corridors. Hooking around him would be easy enough.

As they broke rightward, Shizuka clenched her left fist to make Makoto and herself invisible. But, as they went along, she spoke up. "Hey Pancakes!" she called out. "Since we're laying all the cards out on the table, lemme ask you this: How come you're helping Shido?"

"Oh? You really want to know?" Akechi asked from somewhere ahead of them.
"Might as well, since we're doing this. So why Shido? Two years ago he was some nobody, probably the bottom rung of his party... and now he's poised to take over the country. That was your doing, but I can't for the life of me figure out why," Shizuka said. She and Makoto stopped at one corner and peered around, seeing no sign of their foe.

"But he's not just a nobody to you, is he?" Makoto asked. "Going by Shido's career two years ago, I doubt he would have had the money to pay for an assassin... so the only reason I can fathom for why you'd go so far for a person is because they're family."

A small chuckle filled the basement, seeming to reverberate around them. "My, you really are Sae-san's sister. Astute and to the point. Yes... Masayoshi Shido is my father. But there's a slight error in your logic... I'm not helping Shido out of any paternal love or filial piety. I'm helping him, setting him up for the biggest fall imaginable, all for revenge."

"What? You're making him prime minister to get back at him?! That doesn't make any damn sense!" Ryuji shouted.

Akira pondered Akechi’s statement for a few moments. While he had no reason to believe a word Akechi had ever told him before now, he supposed, Akira couldn't help but think back to a conversation they had had in the past. Akechi's Mother, a woman he spoke of with great fondness, had apparently killed herself some time after being abandoned by his father. A man he described as being a lout and a thug. Going by what Akira had seen the night he got slapped with probation, that descriptor did fit Shido accurately...

If there was any truth to that, Akechi's Mother killing herself over Shido, well he could understand why he wanted revenge. But his methods so far seemed nothing short of batshit insane.

"I imagine many things don't make sense to you," Akechi flatly said, earning a prolonged growl from Ryuji. "I know what Shido's ambitions are, I know he's built his whole life on a desire to become Prime Minister... and I'll take him there, let him taste that success... and once he has, I'll tell him who I am, and pluck him apart piece by piece."

"He's off his chair..." Morgana murmured, glancing over to Futaba. The squat feline was rubbing a distinct purple bruise that was forming between his eyes, his balance still partially shot in his dazed state.

"Sounds like you're making things a lot tougher for yourself than it needs to be. I mean, you found out you have a Persona, and you learn about the Metaverse... so instead of just capping your old man and being done with it, you spent two years on this crazy scheme?" Shizuka asked. A sly smirk slowly crossed her face. "Ah... but that's not it, is it?"

She pressed her back into the nearby wall, listening for Akechi's voice and trying to pinpoint the location. "What are you blathering on about...?"

"You talk a big game about revenge, but this is probably the stupidest revenge plan I've ever heard. I'm gonna waste two years of my life and murder like a million people, while making my enemy's dream come true.' But it's not about revenge... Truth is, you want his love, don't you?" Shizuka asked.

"WHAT?!" Akechi shouted. Hearing this, Shizuka and Makoto quietly rounded the left corner.

"Well... if revenge is the name of the game, you're going about it in the dumbest way I could ever
imagine. Instead, you're so desperately lonely and you just want Daddykins to accept you. Hey, I can sympathize, I wanna make my old man proud too. Except my Dad is a philanthropist who saved the world twice, and your dad is a scumbag pervert, but-" Before Shizuka could say another word, a sweeping wave of pulsing purple energy blew apart the wall to her right, sending tremors throughout the basement.

The smoke quickly cleared, revealing Akechi's location through two destroyed segments of wall. "Shut your mouth! You don't know anything, you rich bitch!"

Shizuka smirked slightly. That was what she wanted to see. 'Heh. If you think I'm a bitch now, you're gonna hate me in a few seconds time...'

Something flickered past Akechi's field of view, causing him to turn sharply to face the wall behind him. There he saw Houdini Eclipse's form looming over him, her right fist cocked back and poised to strike. He struck out on a reflex, Red Death's skeletal hand driving into the wall and shattering it like a pane of glass. It was only then that he noticed Houdini's image was fractured in the same way, and flatter than a sheet of paper.

"Wh-"

"BAZU!!"

A harsh right hook clocked Akechi in the jaw, his head snapping to the side. His eyes trailed along to his side, just barely catching a glimpse of Houdini's translucent form. Houdini ducked under a swing from Red Death, pummeling his stomach with a volley if super-fast punches.

'You might call yourself a detective, but you couldn't pick up on that image behind you being a projection? Heh, not that I'm complaining. Man, I love these new powers,' Shizuka thought to herself.

Houdini deftly avoided the sharp swings of Red Death's clawed hands, putting her superior speed to good use. With each weaving dodge, she drove back in and peppered Akechi with a few more hard blows. But he stood firm, enduring those attacks with a gradually mounting anger.

Suddenly, Red Death drove his right fist into his left palm, the contact triggering an explosive burst of psionic energy that abruptly knocked Houdini back and killed her rhythm. With that brief opening established, Red Death hit her with a sudden uppercut that drove her into the ceiling, making Shizuka gasp from a sudden wave of pain rolling through her whole body. Red Death drove both his hands down, a telekinetic pulse hitting Houdini in the back and smashing her into the floor. Shizuka cried out, her body being forced to her knees from the continuing ripples of pain in her lithe physique.

Red Death pulled his hands up, arcs of energy dancing between his skeletal fingers as he charged up another attack. But before he could make a move, a wave of nuclear energy collided with Red Death's right shoulder. Akechi hissed, skidding backward to avoid another burst of energy as it burned through the wall where he had been standing. Makoto had positioned Shizuka behind Johanna as she tried to catch her breath, narrowing her eyes at Akechi.

"This guy... what does it take to tire him out?" Makoto asked.

The brunette weaved slightly, trying to avoid an incoming telekinetic burst. It still clipped the edge of Johanna, launching Makoto and Shizuka into the wall behind them.
"Hey Jackass!" Akechi turned toward the boisterous taunt, only to let out a pained gasp as a bolt of lightning flew down the corridor toward him. It struck the center of Red Death's floating body, burning pain immediately cascading through Akechi's body, enough to make his muscles and joints lock up in him for a few seconds. It was at this point that he could see Ann and Ryuji racing toward him, crackles of electricity still orbiting Seiten Taisei.

He could see that the monkey Persona was raising his cudgel to strike and, unable to move his arms to block, Akechi knew a direct hit from that could really slow him down. Fortunately for Akechi, Red Death didn't need his arms for some attacks.

A malignant purple light cascaded around the spectral figure, his eyes narrowing sharply behind his warped mask. Red Death looked Seiten Teisei dead in the eye, a horrid shriek filling the basement as the purple light flew from him and into Seiten Taisei. Ryuji froze up, stricken with a sudden and irrational fear that permeated throughout his very being. Ann skidded to a halt beside him.

"S-Skull?! What's wrong?" she asked, glancing to her shivering companion.

In those few brief seconds of freedom, Akechi managed to regain control of his body and fought through the tremors of electricity afflicting him. Red Death launched his hands forward, a psionic burst exploding against Ann and Ryuji, slamming both figures into the ground and sending them skidding backward. A few cuts scraped up along the arms of her catsuit, while a crack formed on the plate of Ryuji's mask.

Akechi wasn't given much time to celebrate, before a rushing sound caused him to turn around sharply. Arsene slammed powerfully against Red Death, the two ghostly figures meeting with such violence that a booming shockwave rocked the floors above them and sent a cobweb of cracks splintering into the ceiling, walls, and floor that surrounded them.

"Mona!" Akira called out. "Help get Skull's head on straight, I'll keep Crow busy!"

Arsene and Red Death were soon slugging it out at an inhuman speed, the blurs of their arms invisible to the naked eye. Each impact rocked the ground, and it seemed both figures were blocking and tanking an even number of strikes.

However, Akira suddenly pressed his palm firmly against his mask. "Thor!" Arsene's form morphed mid-swing, being replaced by a hulking mountain of a man in golden scale armour and a white cape, matching the ivory gloves and boots that adorned him. His face was obscured by a gleaming steel helmet that covered his entire head, while his upward swinging right hand was clutching a truly formidable steel hammer.

Red Death couldn't reel back in time, the explosive force of Thor's swinging hammer catching him right in the chest. Akechi howled as he was flung off his feet, his body being catapulted into the wall of one room. His body smashed through the wall, before he skidded to a halt amidst the broken down slot machines housed in the room. A bolt of lightning promptly chased after him, exploding against Red Death's back and making Akechi cry out again.

"You've had your fun. Ruined god knows how many lives as part of this sick and twisted game of yours. But it ends here. No matter how strong you are, I'm stopping you," Akira said firmly, coming to a stop a few feet behind Akechi. Thor lunged forward, his mighty hammer raised high overhead.
"Robin Hood!" Akechi whirled around, his first Persona whirling around sharply. His bow collided with Thor's hammer, a boom of thunder exploding out into the basement. Robin Hood's already imposing bulk seemed to tense further, thick veins protruding along his muscles as his strength briefly surged. The abrupt increase shoved Thor back a few inches, leaving him wide open for a cracking blow to his left shoulder.

Akira yelled in pain, the fabric of his sleeve exploding to reveal a deep purple bruise that trailed down his upper arm. "Son of a-" Akira reeled Thor backward, only barely avoiding a hard blow from Robin Hood that shattered the ground violently.

"You think I'll lose to the likes of you?! You idiots have hit me with your best, and I'm barely even winded!" Robin Hood nocked a series of glowing golden arrows into his bow and swiftly fired them off.

Akira grit his teeth, rapidly touching his mask to summon Thor again. The beefy figure raised his arms in an x-shape, blocking the explosive volleys of blessed light. He didn't have the chance to summon Medjed with how quickly the projectiles were coming in, but Thor was still resistant to blessed attacks. He could hear Haru and Sergio stopping behind him, forced to stop entirely due to the explosive volley lighting up the corridor.

Akechi ended his assault, taking the opening to dash to his left and crossing two more rooms in the blink of an eye. He rounded right, only to suddenly skid to a halt as a hulking blue figure lunged toward him. Kamu Susanoo swung his helix sword down, only for it to be stopped entirely as it clashed against the limb of Robin Hood's bow.

"Khh... you again?!" Akechi growled, glaring at Yusuke at the other end of the hallway. "Still think you can handle me? Your Persona isn't strong enough to handle mine!"

A violent flash of golden light erupted from Robin Hood's bow, burning rays of light striking Kamu Susanoo's chest. Yusuke grit his teeth but held firm against the incoming attack, even as the wave of energy caused a few tears to open up along the sleeves of his suit.

"I don't... need to overpower you..." Yusuke said through quick, huffing breaths. "I just need... to hold you in place."

"What are yo-" Akechi's eyes widened suddenly. In the heat of the moment he hadn't noticed the biting cold that was now surrounding him from all sides. He glanced down, aware now of a creeping wave of ice that was rapidly crawling up his arms and legs, as well as the limbs of his Persona.

While Kamu Susanoo's physical strength was perhaps his greatest trait, his control of ice was not to be underestimated. In an instant he had chilled the air around them dramatically, and the creeping ice was still gaining ground on his body.

Akechi grit his teeth. "Y-you think I can't break out of this ice?!"

"I don't doubt that you can... but I only need a second of free movement!" Yusuke bellowed.

Susanoo reeled back and shot back forward with ferocious force, crashing into Robin Hood. The blow shattered the ice off both figures and catapulted Akechi backward. Grey scenery flickered past his field of vision in a blur, and he was distinctly aware of another figure moving at the far end
Ryuji, now free of that crippling fear that had been forcibly implanted in his brain, went up to bat. "Oh I'll show you something scary," he muttered, loudly cracking his fists as Seiten Taisei shot out of his body, his cudgel aglow with lightning. It smashed into Akechi's airborne body with tremendous force, batting him away.

However he couldn't make it too far before something once more struck his body, coming from the corridor perpendicular to where Ryuji and Yusuke were standing. Haru narrowed her eyes, her left hand tightly pressed to her mask as Milady called upon a great telekinetic pressure to pin Akechi to the wall. He growled and writhed, struggling against Haru's telekinetic assault. Haru was soon sweating, fighting hard to keep him in place.

As Haru worked away, Shiho and Ann took up a position at Haru's right side. "You ready Panther?" Shiho asked, summoning Eris.

Ann nodded with a clear resolve. "Ordinarily I don't like hurting humans, but thinking on everything this guy's done..." A wave of blue fire washed over Ann as Hecate appeared in front of her. Her Persona raised her familiars up, a pulsating ball of fire forming between the two. "I'm getting over my hangups pretty quickly."

"You and me both," Shiho murmured. She clenched her fist, Eris sending a spiraling wave of red, green, and purple light into Ann's body. The glow of her body increased as Eris rapidly amped her power up.

Hecate's fireball rocketed forward like an artillery shell, crossing the distance in the corridor in an instant. It drove into Akechi's pinned body, the ensuing explosion obliterating the wall and sending thick plumes of smoke cascading outward. The tremors from the blast lingered for several seconds, and all present could feel a distinct ringing in their ears. Once the smoke cleared enough, Ann could see a large hole in the wall, but no sign of Akechi.

Akira narrowed his eyes. "Oracle? What can you sense?" he asked.

"Um..." Futaba adjusted her goggles, focusing intensely. "Well he's still alive, but... w-wait, what's..." Futaba gasped sharply. "E-everyone, back away from the blast site! Now!"

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Another long night.

Sae returned to her desk, doing her best to stifle a yawn by raising her left hand to her mouth. In her right she was clutching a crisp white cup, a stark contrast to the steaming black coffee housed within. When she had first started working here, she could stomach the coffee. But Leblanc had spoiled pretty much all other coffee for Sae these days.

Not that she felt she would be particularly welcome there, she supposed. While it had been some months since she levelled threats of a custody battle at Sojiro Sakura, something that serious wasn't something he would forget easily. So for now she had to settle for the bitter (and somewhat stale) coffee provided by her employers.

Taking a long sip, Sae sat down and began examining the newest assortment of paper work that had been sent her way. All the details they had on Izumi and Hasumi, coupled with the intel they
had gathered on the Arditi's previous targets.

Phantom Thieves made for an appropriate monicker alright. There seemed to be no physical evidence, beyond the enigmatic calling cards, that pointed to the existence of these criminals. Yet their actions were all too real, there was a group out there somehow causing these people to confess their crimes. Not through coercion or blackmail, Sae could tell that much.

After all, she had made a point of speaking to Kamoshida and Madarame from prison. They made it emphatically clear that nobody had threatened, but could not say why they had suddenly had a change of heart. They simply woke one morning, consumed with a guilt they had been ignoring for ages previously. If even the victims had no information to give, then she was hitting another brick wall.

Sae leaned back in her chair, idly sipping her coffee. She kept her mind focused on work to better ignore the taste. Akechi had once joked that perhaps they were dealing with literal phantoms. Sae hadn't been amused.

Well, she would need to come up with some suspects soon, or she'd be in a good deal of trouble. Her career was riding on this case. And if it came to it, if she had no other choice, she wouldn't be opposed to trumping up some...

Sae's train of thought was abruptly derailed as her eyes scanned her desk, moving over the assorted papers until they settled on a small framed picture on the edge of her desk. One that had been there pretty much since she started out in this office.

It was an old family photo from years ago, depicting three figures. To the right was herself, or at least a teenage version of herself. Sae smiled faintly, briefly amused by her old long braid hairstyle, and the peace sign her younger self was flashing to the camera. To the left was Makoto, looking marginally younger, smaller, and much more carefree. There was an innocence in those sparkling doe eyes that, sadly, Sae noticed had dimmed progressively this past year.

Then, between the two girls, was a large man in a crisp police uniform. The hair on his temples was greying, while the top of his head maintained a deep brown colour. He was grinning vibrantly, cheery as ever. No matter how bad things were, their Father always managed to keep a cheery disposition.

Staring at that picture, Sae thought back to everything her Father had ever said to them. His strong sense of justice, the way he always encouraged his daughters to do the right thing... and for a moment, Sae also thought back to some of the crueler things she had said about him after his passing. That sense of justice... what good was it when it got him killed?

Sae narrowed her eyes slightly. Even so... now she was seriously thinking about trumping up charges, with charging someone at random just to placate the people? The thought alone made her stomach churn. And for a moment, she had to ask herself a simple question:

'What would that girl in the picture think of you now?'

Sae knew the answer to that question alright, causing her to briefly glance away from the picture in shame. Sae exhaled through her nose and decided to focus back on her work, shelving her thoughts as best she could.

But, while Sae was left grappling with her own morality, a far more literal conflict was playing out
inside her heart.

A surge of black and crimson light raced through the smoking hole in the wall, the explosive ball colliding with the ground near Ann. The blast flung her, Shiho, and Haru across the corridor, before all three landed in a heap on the hard ground. They were struggling to keep conscious from the explosion, stunned.

The smoke parted slowly, revealing Akechi's injured form. He was panting for breath, wisps of smoke rippling off his body. Now though his clothing had changed. No longer dressed in crisp white, his attire was a deep black shade with patches of plum purple, a tattered cloak rolling down to his waist. His mask had been replaced with a jet black winged helmet, a crimson visor covering his eyes. Just like the figure they had seen in Okumura's Palace.

There, floating at his side, was a Persona that looked vastly different to Robin Hood and Red Death. A slender, faceless figure with angular limbs and joints, coloured in zig-zagging black and white stripes. A large blade floated at his side, the air around it rippling with malicious energy.

"So... you finally show your true colors," Akira muttered.

"You guys, be careful... his power is even higher now," Futaba warned.

A grin crossed Akechi's bruised face. "You're right, brat. This is Loki, my initial Persona. And my strongest," he said. "But actions speak louder than words."

Loki raced forward, a monochromatic blur that quickly closed in on Akira. Thor appeared in front of him as a living shield, raising Mjolnir high and catching Loki's sword dead on. The two metals meeting produced a shockwave of red energy that sent cobwebs of black matter racing up the walls around them. The shockwave knocked Loki back a few feet, while Akira was flung off his feet, his body clattering across the corridor while pained grunts escaped him with each rolling impact.

The maleficent Persona turned slightly, catching sight of Futaba at the corner. The redhead gasped as he knifed toward her, his blade stabbing downward. A shell of glowing black matter suddenly formed around Futaba, the sword bouncing off the dense material. Soon his sword was raining strikes down on Necronomicon's hull, inky black tentacles sprouting outward to block the slashes. But each impact left a glowing red scar in passing, the matter gradually healing afterward.

"You think that just having a bad childhood is an excuse for what you've done? It's not! Every one of us have had to face hardship, some of it because of you, you creep! But here we are, trying to help people! I won't let you get away with what you've done! And I won't let you use a shitty excuse like having a crappy childhood!" Futaba shouted.

All of Necronomicon's tentacles shot up as a solid black mass, slamming Loki into the ceiling and nearly punching him through it, making Akechi grit his teeth from another wave of pain. For all the raw power he had, his previous injuries were piling up and weighing him down. It was about now that he started to realize he needed an extra edge to win this.

Just as Necronomicon pulled back, a gale of wind from Zorro's rapier slammed into Loki and smashed him through another wall. "Oracle, pull back!" Morgana called out. "I'll keep him busy!" Futaba nodded, quickly working to put some distance in as Loki burst out of the hole in the wall.
He and Akechi joined together again, just as another powerful burst of wind drove into Loki.

The cyclone quickly enveloped him, blades of wind nicking and cutting Akechi’s limbs. But with his anger rising, the brunette powered through and sent his Persona lunging toward the short feline. "You little freak of nature... I don't know what you are, but if my plans were derailed because of you, then I'll take great pleasure in dissecting you."

Morgana leapt sideways, avoiding Loki's fist as it plowed through the dense material of the floor. Pulsating black muck bubbled up from the point of impact, a general decay creeping a few inches out from those cracks. Morgana didn't make it far before a sweeping sideways kick from Loki caught him in the chest and sent the screaming feline into the far wall with a loud smashing sound. Flakes of wall crumbled away from Morgana's body as he slumped down to the floor.

"Bastard..." Akira growled, rising up to his feet. He was panting slowly, gradually catching his breath. The bruise on his exposed arm, and the soot on his face, definitely gave him a battle weary look. But he wasn't going to give in. "You're a strong little bastard, but I can see it in your eyes... you're tiring out."

Akira's body glowed a vibrant blue shade, a massive Persona rising up behind him. A hulking blue serpent with several leering cobra heads. "Blast him apart, Ananta!" The snake heads snapped forward, their fanged maws wide open, each one firing out a continuous beam of ruinous nuclear energy. Akechi's eyes widened, Loki swiftly moving in front of him and encasing the two in a bubble of pulsating black and red energy.

The immense force came crashing down on Akechi like a tidal wave, making the brunette grit his teeth as he was forced several inches backward, until he was stuck in the crossroads of another set of corridors. The basement was rumbling around them, the lights overhead flickering.

Another surge of nuclear light slammed into the side of Akechi's shield, and from the corner of his panicked eye he could see Makoto's slightly injured form atop Johanna, firing a continuous beam at the detective. Cracks began to break out along his shield, growing in volume with each passing second. "You piece of shit... bringing us here, putting a threat against my sister... I won't forgive you!" she shouted.

"Sae-san?" Akechi muttered to himself. "Yes... yes, that's just what I need..."

Akechi tried to leap to his side as his shield finally buckled, but the shockwave still kicked him with ferocious power, his smoking form spiraling away from the point of impact. He landed in a heap at another crossroads, grunting once he hit the floor.

He wasn't given much time to catch his breath when a shadow fell over him. "Wh-" Akechi turned sharply, only to find himself mere inches from Houdini’s outstretched fists. The glittering plates in her knuckles suddenly started to hum, the sound akin to a glass harp.

Shizuka glared at him from her unseen position. "Beware the light."

In that instant most of the light Houdini had been sucking in over the course of this battle, from the lamps overhead to all the technicolour flashes that had been tearing the basement asunder, came out in one blinding white flash from Houdini's knuckles. Akechi howled, reeling back and covering his visor with his right hand, briefly blinded. Houdini swung her left leg out in a crushing kick, catching Akechi in the cheek and flinging him away.
But, even as he was thrown aside, he still had the means to fling a blind blast away with Loki's right hand. The exploding shell erupted near where she had been, making Shizuka scream as she was roughly driven to the ground, a chunk of the back of her jacket being burned away by a stray arc of curse energy.

Akechi skidded to a halt, his body carving a modest trench in the concrete. He was still blinded, but he could hear footsteps quickly moving toward him. His vision was gradually returning to him, but even so he knew he couldn't fight off the entire group in this state. No, he needed to turn the tables. And he needed to do it now.

"Alright... I'm sick to death of this asshole! Let's end this now!" Ryuji shouted

"Yes... with the racket we've made down here, I shudder to think of the effect it's had on the Palace above us." Akechi could make out Haru's sweet voice as plain as day.

"Then let's end this. One clean hit might just knock him out cold..." Akira said.

"Am I really... going to lose here?" Akechi asked himself as much as his vision gradually became more defined, able to make out three human shaped blobs just across from him. He assumed it was the same three people he had just heard, and between the three of them they had enough energy to knock him unconscious. It not kill him outright. 'No... NO! Not when I'm this close! I'll beat these bastards and then kill Shido... and Sae-san's going to help me do it!'

His whole body glowed with a blinding flash of crimson, Loki's angular shape immediately forming above him. A violent shriek left Loki, echoing throughout the basement, before an omnidirectional explosion of curse energy erupted from his body, waves of choking black smoke rushing through the corridors and sending the three thieves skidding backward.

The smoke parted quickly, thanks largely due to the sudden existence of a large hole in the ceiling. Akira narrowed his eyes, examining the shafts of light coming from above them. "He's gotten to the upper floors... we gotta move fast."

"Everyone, group up!" Makoto quickly said, the entire squad of the Arditi gathering near the newly created hole above them. Makoto called upon her power, a warm wave of blue light washing over Makoto and her friends, healing their injuries as best she could. A lot of the pain in their bodies subsided, but they were still feeling some fatigue from all they had been through so far.

"Thanks Queen... alright everyone, on me. We need to get this bastard." Akira leapt high with a burst of unnatural agility, emerging through the hole in the ceiling. Once he landed on the casino floor, he took several steps forward to give room for his teammates to join him. With all the chaos that had been going on below, it seemed most of the casino patrons had sprinted away from this area. "Oracle, can you get a bead on him?" Akira asked.

"Um..." Now standing a few feet behind Akira, Futaba scanned her surroundings at a slow and steady pace. "I know he's still in the Palace, but I can't tell exactly where. Something about that power of his, I think it might be scrambling my sensor at this range."

Akira nodded, quickly glancing around them. Their path took them to the rows of slot machines, still filling the air with mechanical chimes and high-pitched noises, promising victory and wealth to anyone who had the guts to try them. Akechi wasn't going to run away, Akira was sure of that. With all the shit he had been talking, and how smug he sounded. His ego meant that he wouldn't just flee, not without taking some of his enemies down.
Still, that left a worrying question at the front of Akira's mind: Just what was Akechi planning?

"That son of a bitch..." Ryuji muttered, reaching up and rubbing the cracked surface of his mask. "Next time I get a shot at him, I'm gonna reaarange that stupid prettyboy face of his..."

"He's definitely slippery... but don't underestimate him," Shiho said, glancing over to her boyfriend. "He was looking a little scuffed up, and he's probably spent a lot of energy so far. But we can't ri-

"YOU!"

The familiar voice sent a wave of dread through the group. Makoto, in particular, nearly felt her heart stop in fear. The brunette turned sharply to the area behind them, catching sight of Sae's Shadow. Her expression was furious, her glowing golden eyes narrowed intensely.

"S-Sis! You gotta get out of here, now!" Makoto quickly said.

But despite the urgency in her tone, the tall Shadow seemed to ignore Makoto's words entirety. "I gave you punks a simple task! A challenge! Win the games and reach the Manager's Floor! And yet instead, you decided to trigger a goddamn earthquake under my casino?! Are you out of your minds?! What possessed you idiots into doing this?!" she snarled.

Akira felt a chill roll down his spine. They had hoped to end this quickly, and assumed that being in the basement meant that Sae would be nowhere near them. But with all the quakes and tremors their battle had kicked up, of course she would come down to investigate...

"Sae," Akira quickly said. "Please listen to me, you need to-

Before he could utter another word, a shadow suddenly swooped down from on high and landed right behind Sae. There was a horrible slicing sound as the talons on Akechi's right hand sank into Sae's shoulder, the gesture making Sae freeze up entirely. A silent, choking wheeze left the darkly-dressed gambler.

"Sae-san, do me a favor..." Akechi quietly purred. Jet black veins started to form along Sae's skin, extending out from where the claws were sinking into her flesh. Her muscles pulsed and tensed, while her eyes were slowly enveloped in a dreadful blood red shade. The Palace itself seemed to tremble around them, the cognitive people becoming statue still while every noise in the casino ground to a halt. The Arditi could only look on in horror as the power of Sae's Shadow began to skyrocket.

"... And murder your boss."
Sae raised her coffee to her lips, inspecting the papers before her in silence. Jumping from a Shujin Academy gym teacher, to a famous artist, to a Yakuza controlling Shibuya from the shadows... what was the connection there? How did they even learn about these people?

Kamoshida and Madarame's corruption was a closely guarded secret, with everyone victimized by the two of them staying silent. And people had covered Kaneshiro's tracks so well that even the police didn't have much to go on. Yet the Phantom Thieves not only found out, but rewrote their minds to make them confess to those misdeeds. The more Sae thought about it, the more confusing it became.

She took a long sip, thinking back to what Akechi had said soon after Madarame's case. He was convinced that the Arditi were a gang of juveniles, which she couldn't entirely refute. Some of the staff at Shujin seemed complicit in covering for Kamoshida, and his athletes had either been too afraid, or too engrossed in the idea of being successful, to speak out against him. Then there was the calling cards, which struck Sae as the kind of immature anime nonsense that only a high schooler would get involved in.

Well, perhaps she could ask Makoto if she had seen-

Sae paused, her eyes widening by a modest fraction. 'Makoto...' Makoto had become quite interested in the Phantom Thieves since they made their debut, and seemed to almost support them morally. More than that, whenever they were home together, Makoto would casually try to ask Sae about her investigation into the Arditi. But surely... surely she wasn't actually involved?

Thinking back, she recalled Makoto wondering if Dad would have supported them. Now on her own, Sae found herself genuinely pondering that question. Well they were operating outside the law, but dealing with the likes of Kamoshida and Kaneshiro was something th-

"HGGGHK!"

Sae slumped forward abruptly, a sharp pain searing through her brain like a hot knife. Her muscles went rigid, trembling from hard spasms that rocked her with such force that her coffee fell from her hand. The cup shattered on the floor, an expanding pool of black liquid rolling out from under the remains.

"W-wha..." Sae felt the air being pushed out of her lungs, the burning pain in her frontal lobe growing more intense. Her eyes twitched rapidly, veins bulging up along her neck. "What's... happening..." The words came out as a hoarse gag, before being drowned out by a slew of horrible choking noises rising in her throat. Her eyes rolled back in her head, leaving her staring out at the world with solid white orbs. A steady trickle of a strange oil-like substance started to ooze from the corners of her eyes, and the left corner of her mouth.

All of Sae's writhing and twitching ceased in an instant, with the prosecutor suddenly sitting bolt-upright, completely immobile for several long seconds. Even her breathing was silent.

'Kill him.'
'Gut the bastard.'
'Force feed him his own teeth.'
In an eerie silence, Sae's hand moved across her desk to a small black box positioned ahead of the papers. She flipped it open easily, revealing the glinting metal of her letter opener. Sae clutched it easily into her left hand, the air around her newly acquired weapon seeming to shimmer with an unnatural heat.

Arisawa-san, yes. He needed to die. Every neuron in her brain, every cell in her body, every fiber of her being was telling Sae it had to be this way. And so, offering no resistance, her body slowly rose from her chair like a marionette being raised by its strings. Sae slowly shuffled from her office, her knuckles turning white from the grip she had on her blade.

"You... you wouldn't..." Akira said softly, looking wide eyes at the sharp claws digging into Sae's shoulder. With each passing second, a dark scarlet aura seemed to linger around Sae, growing progressively more powerful with each passing second.

"Oh? Are you sure? This seems rather small compared to what I've done already," Akechi casually said, side-eyeing the leader of the Arditi. "All truth told though, I didn't quite want things to go this way. I quite like Sae as a person. Her beauty and intelligence make for such an intoxicating combination... but when it comes to fulfilling my dream, I'll take any measures I have to. Besides," He shrugged listlessly. "The SIU Director's outlived his usefulness. I'm killing two birds with one big bloody stone this way!"

Akechi withdrew his hand, Sae's Shadow staggering forward. A noise rose in her throat, the crimson glow in her eyes growing more intense. She threw her head back with a sudden scream, the ground fracturing beneath her. The fissures spread outward rapidly, forcing the thieves to jump away from them. Meanwhile, the cognitive humans became steadily enveloped in black tar, warping their bodies beyond recognition as they steadily transmogrified into Shadows.

"He really is the one behind the psychotic breakdowns..." Futaba softly said, forced to crane her neck to look up at Sae as a churning black cloud overcame her transforming body. "It's a power unique to him. He gets his hands on a person's Shadow self, infects them with a blind rage and tells them what to do... winding them up like a toy soldier."

The slot machines flanking the group started to rumble, before burning upward and elongating obscenely, growing thicker until they had become rows of tremendous, neon-lit pillars. With Sae's Shadow having gone berserk, it seemed the entire Palace was being warped and twisted, losing the logic and consistency that had previously ordered it.

Akechi smirked and leapt high, latching his clawed fingers onto one rapidly rising slot machine. "What will you do now Kurusu?! Kill Sae-san to stop her, or let her get caught committing a violent crime?! 'Oh she was so sick of that misogynist pig passing her up for promotion, she just went hysterical and murdered him!' Ha, the media will have a field day!" Akechi flipped up to the roof of the machine, continuing to shout down at Akira. "Or do you think you can stop me in time?! Against Sae-san's Shadow too, I doubt it!"

"You son of a bitch! I'm going to rip your head off!" Makoto screamed.

As she said this, the dark cocoon that had enveloped Sae's Shadow exploded outward, revealing her
monstrous transformed state. She was like a living sculpture of sharp, black iron, almost ten feet tall in how she loomed over the group. Her head was concealed by a heavy brass helmet, glowing red eyes leering down at the Arditi while a continuous dark fog hissed out of her bevor. A tangled mane of wild grey hair was coming from the back of her head, blowing in an unseen wind.

Most worrying about Sae's transformed state were her arms. From the elbow down, they were consumed by briars of heavy ordnance. Her right arm was marked by a heavy missile pod, and several weighty gatling guns. Meanwhile, in her left, she was holding an obscenely long sword with an array of spikes protruding from the guard on the hilt. Futaba examined this human shaped mass of twisted metal and anger, and as much as she wanted to tell Makoto that this abomination was Akechi's creation... this really was what was lurking inside Sae's heart. Akechi had just managed to wake it up.

Sae threw her head back, unleashing a dreadful shriek that was almost deafening to listen to. The Shadows at the opposite end of the makeshift corridor began to stir to life, a near formless tide of dark matter that continued to split apart and join together, twisted limbs occasionally breaking through the malformed chaos. Whatever he had done to the Shadows here, they could barely form anything remotely cohesive.

"This is bad... we need to go after Akechi, but some of us need to hang back to keep Sae's Shadow from interfering," Akira quickly said.

"More than that, we gotta stop Sae's body in the real world too," Shizuka added. "Even if she doesn't kill the guy, there's gonna be people seeing her... hopped up and crazy!" Sae took a sudden step forward, the floor briefly rumbling under her heavy iron heel. Shizuka quickly looked to Akira. "Time for Plan B?"

Futaba let out a small humming noise. "If Necronomicon's calculations are correct, if we trigger that kind of transformation in her, we'd have maybe... two minutes to beat a speedy escape," she explained.

Akira pondered this for a moment. "We might have to, but... I didn't think we'd be doing it like this. Alright, you and Maestro meet up in the real world, get into the SIU building and stop Sae before she does something we can't undo! Skull, Mona, you're with me. We're going after Asketchy. Queen, I need you to direct the others and keep Sae's Shadow busy."

Sae took another ponderous step forward, the ground bubbling beneath her. Up above, more twisted masses of floating scenery were forming an expansive territory in the seemingly infinite ceiling of the warping casino. "Can do," Queen said, a quick flash illuminating her before she mounted Johanna. "Sis... please forgive me. I never wanted any of this to happen to you..."

With another bloody shriek, Sae catapulted herself forward and swung her huge blade forward. It seemed to suddenly catch on thin air, purple strobes of lighting illuminating the blade as Haru formed a dense telekinetic barrier. The strawberry blonde gasped harshly at the unexpected strain, but still pressed on even as Sae started breaking through it.

Now that they had an opening, Akira swiftly started scaling the nearest mountainous slot machine with quick flashes of inhuman agility. Morgana and Ryuji were quick to follow after him, aiming to catch up with Akechi. Shizuka bolted for the nearest window, Houdini flew from her body and shattered the glass with a single hard kick. Shizuka leapt through and landed neatly on the bubbling asphalt, just in time to see the rest of Sae's cognitive world warp and distort.
A sickly green full moon hung high in the sky, almost abnormally large, while the neighboring buildings were abruptly constituted with bricks of flesh and mortar of bone. Fog began to fill the crowded streets.

Shizuka decided not to dwell on this, quickly hurrying on her way. If she and Hifumi didn't handle this quickly, then Sae would definitely be in hot water.

Sae's blade struck the ground with a thunderous shockwave, the blast sending Haru skidding backward and gasping in shock. With an opening made, Sae raised her array of guns and let loose with an echoing volley of shots, only for the bullets to be caught up in the face of a thick wall of ice that sprouted from the ground. Yusuke grunted, using Kamu Susanoo to support the weight of his makeshift barrier as Sae's rain of fire gradually cracked it.

"Are you alright?" Yusuke quickly asked.

Haru nodded slightly. "Yes, I... I just wasn't expecting her to be so strong," she said.

"She's probably pretty strong to start with, but Akechi's power... it's probably boosted her even higher," Futaba noted. "And, to make matters worse... she's not alone." The redhead turned slightly, watching the shambling mass of malformed Shadows steadily making their way toward the Arditi.

"Tch... We might be overrun if those get too close... I can try to fend them off, but I need help," Sergio said. Haru quickly moved to his side.

"I'll leave it to you two and Oracle to watch our flank. The rest of us will need to focus on Sis," Makoto said, giving Johanna a rev. "I'll get behind her. When I do, I want Nemesis and Panther to hit her with all the force they can. Looking at her now... I think she could take that and then some."

Yusuke's glacial barrier shattered under the spray of bullets, and in that instant Makoto rocketed forward like a bat out of hell. She ducked low, avoiding a swing of Sae's red hot blade, and promptly turned on a dime, skidding to a halt behind the twisted Shadow of her sister. As soon as her bike levelled out, Makoto gave Johanna a hard rev that had the eyes of the head sculpture flashing a golden hue. A powerful fireball exploded against Sae's back, the force knocking the creature forward.

With the Shadow knocked briefly off balance, Ann and Shiho quickly took advantage of this, firing off a blinding wave of fire and blessed light from their Personas that struck Sae in the chest. The intense force drove the ironclad Shadow backward, her bulk slamming into one hulking slot machine and leaving a deep indent of her body pressed into the material.

But, just as Makoto had predicted, this did little to slow the towering Shadow. She unleashed another violent shriek, shoving her right arm forward and unleashing a volley of missiles that surged out through the open air.

Shiho jumped back, only barely avoiding several of the missiles as they whizzed by. But Ann was a little less fortunate, an explosion striking the ground near her feet, the ensuing blasts clipping her and launching her body into a nearby slot machine. She gasped harshly from the blow.

Sae wasn't given much time to prepare another counterattack before Kamu Susanoo lunged at her, swinging his helix blade down. Their swords clashes repeatedly, each impact unleashing a shower of sparks and cracking the floor. The debris, however, seemed to float straight up into the sky in direct defiance of gravity.
After a few more hard clashes, Sae shunted Susanoo backward with enough force to make Yusuke grimace. However the artist wasn't one to give in easily, even after the grueling battle he had been through prior to now. Susanoo ducked under the next swing of Sae's blade and shoved his free hand outward. A gale of icy wind surged from his palm, coupled with a volley of sharp, dense icicles. The sharpened points came down like a hail of arrows, exploding powerfully against Sae's armoured hull.

While the assault was potent enough for Sae to feel it, her irritated snarling being a testament to that, she was still able to power through in short order. She stomped the ground harshly, the tremor from the blow knocking Yusuke off balance just long enough for the Shadow to swing a hard kick into Susanoo's gut. Yusuke gagged loudly, being lifted off his feet before he started rolling along the hard ground, fighting to halt his momentum.

"Sis!" Makoto shouted, giving Johanna a hard rev to fire up the engine. Sae turned sharply, firing another spray of hot lead toward thr brunette, who swiftly shot off to the side to avoid Sae's bullets. Once she skidded to a halt, a focused burst of nuclear energy shot from Johanna's front tire and slammed into Sae's chest, making her shriek loudly as the heat crept along her armour. "So help me... I'LL PUMMEL YOU INTO THE GROUND UNTIL YOUR HEAD IS ON STRAIGHT AGAIN!"

Meanwhile, the three other members of the Arditi watching their flank found themselves face to face with a fast approaching tide of writhing limbs and glaring eyes. With impressive quickness, Sergio used Breakthru to punch a large swath of material from the machine at his right, creating a cloud of large metal chunks that drifted in front of him.

Breakthru's enlarged fists moved with quick flourishes to supercharge each segment in turn, the cloud of shrapnel shooting outward at supersonic speeds. They tore through the living tide of Shadows, blasting chunks through their incoming enemies. Even so, this did little to stem the encroaching abominations.

"It feels like I'm stabbing a bowl of soup here... barely slowing them down," Sergio noted. Breakthru recoiled as a trio of scythe-like arms suddenly shot from the pulsing black mass, whipping toward him. He responded in kind, delivering a series of crushing blows to his attackers that left several deep holes in the Shadowy tide. However he was not entirely unscathed, several slices cutting along Breakthru's arms, making Sergio hiss as they broke the skin and left his forearms marked by crimson trails. "Ghh... but they seem to have no issues in harming me. That's problematic."

Haru was positioned at his side, Milady's shadow falling over the two of them. The armoured skirt of her Persona was parted, revealing her own heavy ordnance. Milady's guns were ablaze, a chorus of explosions streaking through the Shadows, blasting black chunks into the air. "Just hang back Diabolik, and we'll be okay," Haru quickly said, her intense gaze scanning the explosive carnage before them. "We just need to buy time... I just hope Shizu-chan is quick on her feet."

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As soon as Shizuka was back in the real world, in the darkened streets near the courthouse where they always entered from, she fired a text along to Hifumi and told her to get over ASAP. As they had chosen tonight for confronting Akechi, they had wanted Hifumi to be on standby somewhere close to the courthouse, just in case Akechi broke loose and escaped into the real world.
And, in truth, Shizuka would have probably preferred that. She had wanted Sae out of harms way for all this, but they had gotten careless and wound up bringing her Shadow right into Akechi's claws. If they didn't act quickly, then Sae would be plunged straight into a nightmare she'd have no hope of escaping from.

If she killed her boss, how would they even begin to explain things like the Metaverse, and psychotic breakdowns? Would they have any hope in proving Sae wasn't herself?

Well... hopefully it wouldn't come to that.

Still sore from their fight with Akechi, Shizuka quickly directed Houdini to fly to a nearby tree in front of her. Her Stand quickly retrieved a large black rucksack that had been concealed in the leaves. Houdini tossed it to her user, who promptly unzipped it to retrieve the sole item housed inside: A long steel case with a four-digit numerical lock. Shizuka quickly dialled the code in: 1-9-3-8. The lid popped open quickly, revealing an item Shizuka had hoped she wouldn't have to use.

A long wooden arrow, with an ornate golden arrowhead, the sharp edges a clear silver in colour. The Stand arrow, one of the few still intact ones on the planet. The Tokyo branch of the Speedwagon Foundation had just this one in storage, but thank goodness they did.

When the group became aware of the threat to Sae's life, they had also discussed the possibility of the SIU itself being corrupt. There was the risk that she was in a den of vipers, and that people other than Black Mask who could to her harm. And so Shizuka had suggested using the Stand arrow on her. In one fell swoop Sae would have abilities to defend herself in the real world, and have no more Palace that Akechi could exploit. Now though she was going to have to use it to wipe her Shadow out, and stop her mid-rampage.

"Shizuka!" Hifumi quickly said, jogging to a halt near the young Joestar. She could see at once from Shizuka's stance, and the few scuffs visible on her face and legs that she had been through the wringer. "Are yo-

"I'm fine, don't worry about me. Helping Sae is the main thing right now. Akechi, he... he made her go berserk," Shizuka quickly said.

"Berserk? L-like those rampage stories on the news?" Hifumi asked.

Shizuka nodded. She reached over and took Hifumi's hand in her own, both girls quickly turning invisible. Clutching the arrow in her right hand, she swiftly turned and started leading for the SIU building once she had placed the case back in the branches. She'd retrieve it once they were done here.

As they went along, Shizuka decided to quickly explain the rest of the situation to the team's newest member. "Akechi really was the guy we're looking for, and right now the others are taking him on. But we... we need to stop Sae's body in the real world before she does something terrible to her boss. And if we can nick her with this Stand arrow, then it'll be enough to stop her rampage. Get it?"

"R-right," Hifumi replied. "Because if she has a Stand, then she won't have a Palace, and so things that happened in the latter can't affect her physical body... oh, that's a rather good idea. Although something tells me it won't be as easy as we're hoping."

The two girls, still invisible, entered the large office building and briefly came to a halt in the
expansive lobby. At this hour the building was largely empty, with office hours winding down.
Shizuka surveyed the smooth marble floor, the expensive decorations and furnishings that flanked
her left and right. The reception desk was dead ahead, and beyond that was a path that started
leading to the offices.

Once things had started kicking off, Futaba had taken the time to 'acquire' the floor plans of this
building, and had gone to great pains to give the detailed layout to the others. Makoto, who had
been there on fleeting occasions, had also explained the route to Sae's office. They wanted to know
the layout, just in case someone tried something in the real world too.

Shizuka quickly led on toward the reception desk, still holding Hifumi's hand to guide her, and
made for the door off to the right behind the desk. It opened out into a long hallway with a smooth
white floor and grey brick walls. The lamp overhead illuminated the area well enough, and
Shizuka quickly scanned above for any signs of a camera. Nothing, good.

With the hallway still empty, Shizuka continued on with Hifumi, holding the arrow ahead of her. It
didn't take long for their trip through the clean corridors to be interrupted by the sound of a door
slowly squeaking open ahead of them. She paused, glancing around the corner to see a wooden
door opening. The area beyond was distinct for having a plush blue carpeted floor and smooth
white wall, matching the description of the office area that Makoto had given her in the past.

A figure slowly moved through this door at a shambling pace, dressed in an expensive black suit.
The way her limbs moved, as if each was being directed independent of her brain, made for a
grotesque sight. Shizuka examined her closely, watching as this woman raised her head to reveal
two solid white eyes. "Sae Niijima," Shizuka muttered. She quickly glanced to the letter opener in
her right hand. No blood, good. It seemed she hadn't gotten near her boss.

Shizuka raised the arrow and aimed it toward her, and as she held it outward she could feel the
shaft start to pitch in her grasp. The ornate golden arrowhead was starting to shake, as if aiming
itself toward Sae through some kind of magnetic attraction. Just as Shizuka had hoped, it seemed to
be sensing some kind of Stand potential in Sae. Perhaps to be expected that someone with such an
ornate and vast Palace had some kind of fighting spirit to fuel the existence of a Stand.

"Alright... let's make this quick," Shizuka said, pulling her arrow hand back and taking aim at the
figure shambling towards them. Specifically, she was focusing on Sae's left shoulder. If the arrow
managed to hit anywhere, then it would have an effect. Of course it was best to aim somewhere
non-vital... giving someone superpowers wouldn't do them much good if you gouged their throat
out in the process.

She pitched it forward like a spear, the arrow becoming steadily more visible in the fleeting
seconds of its flight. However, with an almost inhuman speed, Sae's knife-hand lashed upward, the
blade clanging loudly against the arrowhead. It pirouetted back through the air until it was deftly
captured by Houdini.

Hifumi blinked, watching as Sae rose to her full imposing height. A horrible gagging noise
rumbled in her throat, followed by a spurt of black tar leaking out from the corners of her mouth.
"She... is a lot faster than she looks."

"You're tellin' me," Shizuka replied, equally awestruck. "It was like she did that on a reflex.
Maybe... with her cognition warped, it's made all her senses sharper as a result?"

"I don't know if that's how it works Shizuka," Hifumi curtly replied. She tensed visibly,
watching as Sae resumed her shuffling pace, steadily making for the corner the two girls were using for cover.

Still, something was definitely up with Sae on a physical level. Watching her closely, Shizuka could see a rippling aura that vaguely surrounded Sae and the letter opener she was carrying. Was it possible that just a bit of strength from the Metaverse was bleeding into the real world?

Narrowing her eyes, she threw Houdini back out at Sae, her Stand shoving the arrow out as a makeshift dagger. However, once again, Sae moved with impressive quickness. A shower of sparks lit up the hall as the two blades met, striking again and again. Sae was blocking each incoming blow, her low growls increasing in both volume and intensity.

It didn't help that Shizuka had to hold back, watching her own aim with great care. She couldn't just stab Sae willy-nilly. Moreover, the strain of the earlier battle was already slowing her down more than Shizuka wanted to admit.

Sae stabbed up blindly, her motions following the general path of the arrow. The tip of her knife cut into the flesh of Shizuka's left forearm, forming a long scar that left Shizuka snarling and recoiling, pulling Houdini back in the process. "Holy BALLS that's sharp!" she shouted, clutching her new wound while Hifumi gasped in shock.

How the hell did a letter opener cut her that badly? Even looking at it from afar, it didn't look as if it could carve through skin so easily. Was it that aura she was seeing?

Shizuka continued to reel Houdini backward, but Sae was still growling and following the path of the arrow as it floated backward. She swung her right arm upward, the tip of the letter opener meeting the white brickwork and leaving a long trailing scar in the material that marked her passage. With her arm raising and lowering, it left a deep wave-like wound in the brickwork.

Houdini dropped low, stabbing the arrow up at Sae's right wrist. However she was quick to twist her arm down, the edge of the blade scraping along the slope of the arrowhead. Shizuka grunted, feeling the impressive strength in Saes arm as the two blades clashed together. She had a feeling Sae was naturally strong, given how statuesque she was, but this strength was definitely unreal.

With her upper body remaining unnaturally rigid, Sae's left leg snapped upward. The aura around her body intensified as her foot collided with Houdini's gut, the strike rattling Shizuka's whole body, her eyes bulging out of her head. "GHHK!" Shizuka doubled over, her forehead touching the cold floor as she tried her best to pull Houdini backward.

Yeah, that was some superhuman strength alright. Shizuka felt she was about to puke, her vision swimming as she looked down on the floor.

"Shizuka!" Hifumi gasped. She quickly summoned Flaming Telepath, her crimson Stand shooting out toward Sae as she raised her letter opener high. She seemed to sense Flaming Telepath's approach, ignoring the arrow for now and blindly slashing off to her left side.

But Hifumi saw that coming a mile away, her Stand deftly ducking under the abnormally sharp dagger. With Sae in this berserk state, even with her sharpened senses picking up on Flaming Telepath's incoming movements, her movements were so obvious that Hifumi barely needed to use her precognition. Flaming Telepath weaved off to the side to dodge the downward slash, and then shifted to the other side to avoid the following upswing.
"Please forgive me for this, Nijim-san, but I need to purge this evil from you at all costs!" Hifumi quickly said. Both of Flaming Telepath's fists rocketed outward, crimson knuckles crashing into Sae's stomach. It flung Sae backward, the tall woman gagging as her back crashed harshly into the unwelcoming floor.

Now given an opening to catch her breath, Shizuka stood up while still clutching her stomach. "It's really hard to not want to go all out on her right now... oof, I am gonna be sore tomorrow," Shizuka muttered. She watched Sae rolling onto her hands and knees, rising up once more onto her shaking legs.

"In this state, she might be lacking a lot of her mental faculties... but she has the strength and senses of a ravenous demon," Hifumi said, her eyes shimmering slightly.

"Uh... yeah," Shizuka awkwardly replied. "Well, I don't want to waste too much time on this... and she might get lucky and score a critical hit while I'm tired out like this. You got any ideas? All I need is one good poke on her to end this."

Hifumi smiled wickedly. "As a matter of fact I do. Not my most elegant stratagem, but it should suffice when it comes to saving Nijim-san's life."

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Akechi was moving at a rapid sprint, leaping from slot machine to slot machine without once breaking stride. He was well aware that there were three Phantom Thieves hot on his tail and was refusing to slow down. The scenery around him was still morphing, creating a bridge of massive slot machines, twisted chandeliers, mountainous poker chips, and lumps of masonry. And what was once the ceiling had extended for miles into the air, leaving him with no end in sight.

"Quit runnin' asshole!" Ryuji shouted at the top of his lungs. "Just take your beating like a man! You're dealing with a former track star, so I know I'll run you into the effin' ground!"

The blond touched his mask, Seiten Taisei launching ahead while Ryuji was maintaining his swift pace beside his two allies. The looming ape-like Persona swung his cudgel out with impressive speed, a blinding gold beam of lightning moving toward Akechi. The brunette was quick on the draw, Loki's monochromatic body moving in to block the blast, the blaze of energy striking his shoulder. He grunted, but still maintained his pace.

Morgana jumped across another gap, summoning Zorro mid-leap. His Persona flicked his rapier up, unleashing a current of wind that boosted Morgana high into the air. With added room to move, he drew his slingshot and quickly fired off a trio of heavy steel balls, his projectiles crossing the air faster than the human eye could see. Loki weaved around, his floating blade cleaving two in half, while the third whizzed past the Persona and slammed into Akechi's cheek. The detective snarled, nearly knocked off balance while a purple bruise formed on the right side of his face.

Akechi was quick to regain his footing, leaping across the gap of the final slot machine, Loki twisting behind the young man and firing off a fist sized bullet of curse energy at Morgana. The feline grunted, trying to avoid it as best he could in mid-air. But a few stray arcs managed to graze the fuzz on his tummy, wisps of smoke rising off Morgana's squat body.

"Kkkh... this guy!" Morgana growled. "I might hate his guts, but... I really have to admire that crazy tenacity of his."
Akechi's next leap carried him from the last slot machine, to a floating poker chip that had been enlarged to be as wide as a house. However, he only made it a few steps before a highly focused cyclone of wind cut off his path ahead of him, carving a path into the dense material of the chip. Akechi grit his teeth, turning to face Seiten Taisei as the looming Persona raced toward him. His cudgel met Loki's sword, creating a deafening boom that fractured the ground beneath him.

Akira, Morgana, and Ryuji landed neatly on the floating platform, glaring intensely at their youthful opponent. "This has gone on long enough," Akira said. "Just give up, you ca-"

"Shut up!" Akechi snapped. "Do you seriously think I'm afraid of fighting you idiots? I just wanted to make sure there was some distance between us and the rest of your team! Tch, those dumbasses..." Loki shoved Seiten Taisei away, leaving him unobstructed as he glared toward Akira. "I thought you had potential Kurusu. Having the same power as me, that intelligent vibe of yours... well, you're a cut above the others. And yet you palled around with those idiots. A stupid thug like Sakamoto, the fuzzy abomination to your right... a dumb blonde slut, an American dipshit, two suicidal morons," Ryuji visibly tensed, lightning crackling around him. "A neurotic class president, two braindead 'artists', a spoiled rich skank... you surrounded yourself with trash, and it dragged you into the gutter."

Akira remained silent for several long moments, breathing in deep as he processed the spew of bile Akechi had just dispensed on his closest friends. "Akechi... I'm going to break your fucking jaw."

Medjed suddenly appeared in front of Akira, his sharp eyes glowing golden as a volley of blessed blasts rocketed toward Akechi. Each burst exploded against Loki's body, making the detective snarl as he was pushed a few inches backward. Seiten Taisei lunged the black and white figure from the left while he was struggling, his sword blocking the downward strike of his cudgel. But Ryuji's Persona was quick to adapt, swiftly jabbing the lower half upward and smashing it into Loki's stomach. Akechi grit his teeth, his heels skidding back from the hard push.

Zorro rushed along the rim of the poker chip, quick flourishes of his rapier launching narrow cyclones of highly focused air that rushed Akechi. The brunette dodged and weaved as best he could, but the knife like edges still managed to cut along his ribs and left elbow. Akechi responded quickly, his right palm pressing into his mask. "Red Death!" As he screamed this, a telekinetic pulse smashed into Zorro's chest, making Morgana yowl in pain as he was sent skidding back to the edge of the platform, his paws digging in fiercely as he fought for balance.

"Is that your best?" Akechi hissed. He jumped away as Seiten Taisei lunged at him, watching as the Persona's staff punched a hole into the ground where he had been standing mere moments previously. Akechi soon saw Akira rushing toward him and promptly summoned Red Death again, three telekinetic pulses slamming into Akira in quick succession. The dark haired boy howled, his already damaged coat being shredded off his body, leaving his upper body covered by a torn silver shirt. He hit the ground hard, grimacing and then managing to rise back onto his right knee.

Before the battle could go further, the floating platform began to rock as a living tide of dark matter rose up from the edge behind Morgana. "Holy-!" the feline leaped away from a tangled briar of writhing, misshapen limbs, and landed just in time to see several living abominations creeping up the edge of the poker chip. They were being surrounded! Worse still, seeing this distraction, Akechi grinned and leapt across the opposite end of the chip, and landed on an equally large blue poker chip just a few feet away.

"Damnit... we can't afford to get held up with these bastards!" Ryuji grunted. "Joker, you gotta go on ahead! Me and Mona will hold the Shadows off!"

"Just..." Akira glanced between the encroaching Shadows, and Akechi's sprinting form. He couldn't
afford to let the detective get away. Turning quickly, Akira sprinted for the edge and leapt away from it, following Akechi across the bridge of suspended poker chips. "Just be careful you two!"

Once Akira had jumped across, Morgana promptly turned his attention to two fast-approaching flesh-piles, scuttling toward him on briars of twisted legs and arms. Zorro appeared before the feline, giving a powerful swing that unleashed a gale strong enough to blast the two beasts right over the edge.

Ryuji, meanwhile, sent Seiten Taisei to the other edge of the poker chip. His Persona swung his staff around, his inhuman strength obliterating a giant leech comprised of screaming eyes and mouths. But before he could recoil, an inky black scythe lashed at Seiten Taisei and caught his chest, making Ryuji grunt and skid backward, the front of his jacket being sliced open from the attack.

"Damnit!" Ryuji grunted through clenched teeth. He took a moment to survey the incoming Shadows, their twisted, pulsating forms hauling up over the edge of the platform. There were more than he was expecting. "Hey, Mona?"

"Huh?" Morgana glanced briefly to the blond. "I dunno if this is the best time for a chat."

"It's just..." Ryuji tensed, lighting crackling around him as the shambling creatures fully hoisted themselves onto the platform. "If we're not gonna make it out of here... then I just wanted to say, for all the crap I've given you, I'm sorry. You've done a lot for the team and if you hadn't been with us since Kamoshida, I don't want to think about how bad things would be. That's all. I didn't wanna leave any bad blood behind."

Morgana laughed nervously, warily watching their incoming enemies. "B-being a little overdramatic, aren't you? W-we'll be fine. Because... well I know I've badmouthed you a lot in the past. And you're kinda dumb, and loud, and bullheaded an-

"There better be a 'but' coming up!" Ryuji growled.

"But... you're also determined, and strong... and probably the most loyal and dependable guy I know," Morgana said. "And that's why, fighting beside you... I know we're gonna be fine."

Ryuji smiled faintly. "Yeah? In that case... let's show these effin' slimeballs who's boss!" Auras of light flashed around the two Phantom Thieves, their Personas rushing at the crawling chaos with a renewed vigor.

After just a bit more running, Akechi and Akira reached the last platform suspended in the air: A truly massive roulette table that proved larger than anything else in the makeshift bridge. Akechi landed neatly on the felt floor, amidst the neatly ordered rows of numbered squares. Akira landed a few feet behind him, but wasn't given much time to get his bearings before Akechi was attacking him again.

Akira caught a glimpse of Red Death's skeletal frame floating overhead, raising his hands high before shoving them forward. The dark-haired thief was forced into a quick sprint, barely avoiding a string of purple explosions that tracked along the path of his feet and left a deep, rubble-strewn trench in the face of the table.

Seeing an opening, Akira leapt high and summoned Arsene, his original Persona cackling and firing off an orb of curse energy that exploded against Red Death and forced him backward. Akechi grimaced, stumbling slightly.
The brunette righted himself quickly, flashing Akira an unhinged grin, his left eye dilating further than his right. "We might have the same power Kurusu, but you're not like me. You can't win, especially not on your own!"

Akira narrowed his eyes slightly. He allowed himself to think back on everything Akechi had done. He'd murdered Futaba's mother, been the architect of her misery, and would have done the same to Haru too. Every psychotic breakdown and mental shutdown, and the people indirectly hurt through those, were his doing. Every crime that Shido had committed and gotten away with thanks to his current stature, including the ruination of Akira's life and prospects, was tied to Akechi too.

How many lives had this literal bastard ended or destroyed? Too many, Akira felt. One way or another, it ended here.

"Thor!"

The mountainous Persona rocketed toward Red Death, giving a few rapid swings of his hammer. Each blow struck against Red Death's slender frame, being punctuated with a burst of lightning. Akechi skidded backward, growling from the flashes of pain he felt. But he righted himself quickly and touched his mask. Red Death vanished in a flash of light, immediately being replaced by Loki who fired off a destructive burst of curse from his right palm.

"Rangda!"

Thor changed form mid-flight, morphing into the demonic long-haired witch. Her curse-hued claws cleaved through Loki's attacks and rapidly shot toward the black-and-white figure. A glancing blow from his sword cut along her right hip, but Akira grit his teeth and pressed on until Rangda was right next to Loki.

"Medjed!"

The figure at Loki's side rapidly transformed into the floating bedsheet ghost, his eyes aglow with a vibrant light. A focused beam of blessed power exploded against Loki's ribs, making Akechi howl and recoil. However, in falling back, he managed to direct Loki. The angular figure swung out a powerful kick that drove Medjed backwards through the air. "Robin Hood!" Loki transformed into the beefy white-and-blue figure, who roughly cracked the top of Medjed's brow with the limb of his bow. Akira grimaced, briefly being driven to his left knee from the force behind the strike.

"Khh... I won't go down... so easily! Narcissus!"

A powerful gale erupted from Akira's Persona as it transformed, sweeping Akechi off his feet and smashing him violently into the far wall of the roulette table. Now that he had an opening, Akira called the beautiful golden-haired figure back to him. Narcissus dismissively aimed his left hand at Akira, a warm wave of healing light briefly washing over the dark-haired body and relieving some of the strain on his body. Akira stood upright, touching his mask again as he did so.

"Ananta!"

The beautiful male figure vanished in a flourish of azure fire, immediately being replaced by the monstrous multi-headed serpent. The massive figure surged forward, his cobra-heads snapping forward with several waves of nuclear fire carving across the dense floor. Akechi rolled to the side, trying to avoid the blasts as best he could. But one wave winged him and scorched off his right sleeve, making him snarl. But he landed in a neat roll by the edge of the roulette, Robin Hood firing off a volley of blessed arrows. Ananta was strong, but also rather slow, the arrows managing to scrape along the main body of the snake. Akira hissed and pulled him back, catching sight of
Akechi swapping Robin Hood back for Loki.

"Okuninushi!"

Loki's blade was caught mid-swing, colliding against one of an equal size being clutched in Okuninushi's strong ivory hands. The two swords whirled against each other in a series of echoing clangs, each scrape unleashing a spray of red hot sparks. Okuninushi managed to break through the deadlock, his sword scraping Loki's left shoulder, making Akechi howl in pain. Loki's knee smashed into Okinushi's chest hard enough to force him backward. Akira fought the urge to vomit, steadied his balance and summoned another Persona.

"Scathach!"

The next Persona that appeared was a beautiful woman with ivory skin, adorned in a black body suit, wide-brimmed hat, and flowing dark cloak. She shoved her palms to the ground, summoning a powerful fireball that exploded against the ground and flung Loki upward. With the monochromatic figure knocked high, she cackled mirthfully and swung her left leg outward, pummeling him with a volley of focused kicks that eventually launched Loki violently against the wall of the table. Akechi grit his teeth, falling to his knees from the jolts of pain rolling through his body.

"Titania!"

Akira's Persona changed shape again, becoming a beautiful blonde fairy in a flowing green ball gown. She examined Loki, holding her left hand to her mouth and tittering elegantly. Her pupils were suddenly glittering with twinkles of alien light, followed by a sudden burst of wind exploding from her right palm and smashing Loki even further into the wall, the wood shattering apart around him from the pressure. Akechi gasped harshly, wobbling on his feet as he fought to stand back up.

"You... you... you..." Akechi trembled, gritting his teeth and very nearly frothing at the mouth from a white hot fury. "You piece of shit! I'll tear you to shreds!" There was a violent boom as Loki raced toward Akira's panting form, the young man watching closely while keeping his left palm tight to his mask.

"Koumokuten."

Loki's blade was abruptly blocked by a crimson forearm appearing from the ether, attached to a hulking oni-like figure in ornate black armor. The wind blew at the white frills on his gear. Slowly, Koumokuten raised his eyes and glared fiercely at Loki. There wasn't even a mark on the crimson flesh of his arm.

Koumokuten's left fist shot up, catching Loki's face with a crushing uppercut that catapulted him skyward. A spray of blood burst from Akechi's lips, and as he fell backward he caught a glimpse of Koumokuten leaping high to catch up to the airborne figure.

Akira touched his mask again, watching Akechi closely. "I'm nothing like you," he emphatically said. Akira thought back on everyone Akechi had hurt, on all the people who had their lives ruined because of him. That anger fuelled him, boiled through his veins like molten mercury until his rage overtook his exhaustion. "Now... Arsene!"

A wave of blue fire washed over Koumokuten, instantly replacing him with Arsene's winged form. The crimson figure roared with laughter and slammed his fists downward, smashing them into Loki's chest. Loki rocketed downward and struck the roulette table with a thunderous boom, forming deep fissures in the ground on impact. Akechi howled again, landing harshly on his back.
He laid there for several moments, trembling and panting. He tried his best to sit upright, but his body refused to move. It seemed, ultimately, the last of his energy had given out. "Alright, alright you wi-"

Akechi was cut off by Akira suddenly pouncing atop him, pinning the detective in place. A loud crack rang out through the area as Akira's right hook clocked Akechi in the jaw. "You son of a bitch!" Akira snarled, hitting his downed foe with a matching left hook that snapped Akechi's head in the other direction.

Akechi had called on all his anger toward Akechi to drive him forward, to overcome the fatigue and pain lingering in his body. And while that had allowed him to overcome Akechi, now all he could do was see red. After all, the knowledge of all Akechi's crimes were right in the front of his mind. He just couldn't stop thinking of all the people Black Mask had hurt.

His fists rained down on Akechi's face again and again, the loud cracking sounds resonating across the roulette table. "You ruined my life! Took my future from me! You tried to ruin Haru's too! You murdered Futaba's mother and destroyed her will! How many more lives have you ruined?! How many?! HOW MANY?!

Akira snarled, punctuating each word with a powerful punch. A particularly hard blow shattered the visor of Akechi's mask. But even with several shards slicing into his knuckles, Akira didn't stop his assault. The anger and hatred he'd been storing up, ever since he first learned of Black Mask's existence, was surging up like a volcanic eruption.

'This murderous piece of garbage isn't going to stop. He'll never stop. If he gets loose again, he'll go right back to this. All for his stupid revenge... and if I let him, he'll try to kill my friends again. So why don't I do the world a favour...' Akira's hands stabbed downward, getting a tight grip on Akechi's neck, his thumbs pressing fiercely on his throat. 'And put a stop to him here and now?!

While bloodied and bruised, Akechi still had the strength left to resist this, reaching up and clutching Akira's hands with such force that the talons of his gloves started piercing Akira's skin. Even so this didn't hinder Akira, who merely growled and maintained the same tight grip on Akechi's throat.

He felt Akechi's frantic pulse, watching as the brunette's eyes slowly rolled back in the head. And with each passing second, Akechi's struggled grew weaker. He was even starting to turn a little blue.

"Joker!"

'Kill him. Make him pay for all the harm he's done. He'll never stop unless you-'

"AKIRA!"

Hearing his own name seemed to snap Akira back to reality, his eyes widening as he realized just what he was doing. He pulled his hands away from Akechi's neck, watching him carefully. The brunette was out cold, but still breathing. It would probably take a lot to strangle someone to death in the Metaverse. But even so, Akira felt he had come quite close to that line.

"I... I was..." Akira looked over his shoulder, watching as Ryuujin and Morgana approached him. They were both looking a bit banged up, but they had seemingly gotten through their opponents in the end. "I..."

Ryuji glanced to Akira, ad then to Akechi's unconscious body. He glared briefly before turning his attention back to Akira. "It's okay, I didn't see nothing." He was lying outright, but the meaning
behind his words was clear. He wouldn't tell the others about Akira's near murder. "Come on," he said, holding a hand out to his best friend.

"We better get back to the others. Pancakes here might be out cold, but that doesn't seem to have stopped the effect of his power... so we either need to knock Sae's Shadow out quickly, or hope Sting gets the job done quickly," Morgana said.

"R-right," Akira replied. He couldn't dwell on his own anger for now, not when he had a job to do. Once he had taken Akechi's phone from his pocket, the group made their way back along the floating platforms, Seiten Taisei clutching Akechi underarm like a sack of potatoes. There was still work to be done.
Shizuka continued to watch Sae closely, observing the shambling and twitching movements of her body. From afar she looked almost like a Romero-era zombie, twitching and lumbering. But, once she got moving, there was a ferocious speed and strength lingering in her muscles, allowing her to lash out as soon as she was threatened. This is what a psychotic breakdown did to a person?

For a moment, Shizuka thought back on the people who had been murdered by people undergoing this sort of breakdown. How ungodly terrifying that must have been...

Houdini was only over a foot away from the tall woman, continually moving backward at a slow rate, while tapping the wall at her side with the arrow to make sure she had Sae's attention. And, slowly but surely, she was following the path the arrow was talking. She was growling like a cornered mountain lion, the veins around her eyes pulsing from a barely contained white hot anger.

Shizuka continued moving backward until she reached the corner, and then guided Houdini to her position. Her Stand gave the wall two quick taps, the noise making Sae snap her head in the direction of the disturbance. Growling, she made her way after the arrow at the same shambling rate.

"Hey uh, Hifumi...?" Shizuka asked, keeping her tone low. "You nearly ready? She's starting to look a little more uh... frenzied right now."

Indeed, Sae's muscles were starting to twitch with more frequency, while her growls started to become even louder. She was gaining speed, glowering up toward the arrow and making a few small stabs at thin air with her letter opener. It was clear that she wanted to deal with whatever was obstructing her quickly, so she could move her attention back to her boss.

"Just... about... there! Alright JoJo, bring her over," Hifumi said.

Shizuka subtly glanced over her shoulder, to the next corner behind her, and smirked at what she saw. "You know Hifumi, for a soft-spoken good girl... I think we'll make a dashing thief out of you yet," Shizuka proudly said.

Her Stand lunged at Sae abruptly, the arrowhead and knife clashing repeatedly in a few quick flourishes. Shizuka was continuing to move backward all the while. Houdini's attacks were half-hearted, making no serious attempt to stab the brunette. All she was doing was baiting Sae, the snarling berserker gaining speed and slashing after Houdini's ghostly form.

Backward they went, continuing to gain speed, until they reached the edge of the modest corridor. Shizuka hopped backward, while directing Houdini to give another flurry of slashes that enraged Sae further. She snarled in anger, throwing the weight of her body forward. Something suddenly snagged her ankles, and she went tumbling forward.

Shizuka glimpsed to what had knocked Sae over: A wall mounted fire hose that Hifumi had unfurled, a quarter of it tying neatly around a large square-shaped plug socket. The rubbery length was taut, raised a few inches above the ground.

As she hit the ground, Sae started slashing wildly around her, her right arm upraised. She managed to nick Flaming Telepath twice in passing, the malevolent blade cutting into the pyramid of her
lower half. Hifumi hissed and pressed her palm tight to her right hip. She fought through the pain, ignoring the sensation of her blouse sticking to her skin, and let her Stand grab the other end of the hose.

Before Sae could make another move, Houdini's foot snapped downward and kicked her right wrist with an impressive degree of force. Sae hissed, the dagger being flung from her grasp until it skidded to a halt at the opposite end of the hall. The malevolent aura left it as soon as it was free from Sae's grasp.

While Sae reeled her right hand back, Hifumi saw her opening and took it. Flaming Telepath shot back around, clutching the head of the hose in her hands. Her Stand worked quickly, tying the tip around Sae's wrists in a tight knot. But, even so, the thrashing berserker was soon writhing hard against her restraints. "JoJo!" Hifumi urgently said, watching as the dense rubber started to strain and whiten under Sae's augmented strength. "Do it now!"

"Right!" Shizuka quickly replied. Houdini pulled her arm back, promptly taking aim at Sae's right shoulder. "Sorry Miss Niijima, but as the bishop said to the actress, you might feel a little prick!"

The arrow was loosed from Houdini's grasp, making a beeline toward Sae's shoulder. Mid-flight it even seemed to angle itself to better hit the mark, being magnetically drawn to the downed prosecutor. The sharpened edge sliced through the material of her coat and blouse, sinking into her flesh with a modest spurt of blood bursting up against the clear silver edge of the arrowhead. Sae threw her head back, a drawn out shrill gasp leaving her as her eyes rapidly swivelled back to their normal position in her head.

Sae's muscles convulsed as the change overcame her, the rush of getting a Stand, and the exertion of undergoing a psychotic breakdown, hit her body at once. Finally she slumped forward on the ground, out cold.

"Holy shit..." Shizuka murmured, letting Houdini pluck the arrow from the top of Sae's shoulder. Her left hand reached down, pressing down tight on the long scar, until she had managed to stem the bleeding. "I didn't think going berserk would make her that dangerous. Also didn't think Akechi would do this to a person he worked beside... that's pretty low."

Hifumi approached Shizuka, while Flaming Telepath swiftly wound the hose back into place. "That's how a normal human gets a Stand, huh? Hey... is that scar going to be permanent thing?"

"Uhhh... maybe? I hear the wound doesn't fully close if it's not exposed to a healer. Like in Morioh, there was one kid who got stuck in the cheek, and he was stuck with a hole in his mouth... doesn't seem like it bothered him, though it was kinda gross to look at. Oh well. Guess we can just have Makoto or Morgana patch it up," Shizuka explained.

"That... sounds rather grotesque. And drinking must be a nightmare for him," Hifumi said, cringing a little at the mental image. Shizuka took a moment to retrieve the letter opener, before returning to Hifumi and Sae. "Guess we should get going, before we get caught out," Hifumi mused.

Houdini lifted Sae up, carrying her bridal style. If she wasn't so exhausted, Shizuka would probably be a blushing mess at the thought of this alone. But for now, she desperately needed to get back to the others.
Breakthru moved with lightning quickness for as bulky as he was, avoiding the savage swings of Sae's arm-blade. The hulking Shadow had taken some damage from her attackers, scuffs and scorches lining her armoured bulk, but even so it seemed she hadn't slowed down much from the damage she had taken.

The booming blows against Sae's armour resonated through the battle-scarred hellscape (it didn't feel accurate to call the twisted nightmare around them a casino anymore), added flourishes of momentum exploding into Sae and sending her skidding back into large blocks of uprooted debris. "Will you..." Sergio huffed, glaring at Sae through one open eye. "Just fall down already?!!"

Both of Breakthru's fists slammed into Sae's helmet, driving the hulking Shadow through a large block of debris that shattered under her weight. But, even in falling, she managed to snap her leg up. The powerful kick caught Breakthru in the chest with a great deal of force, sending Sergio skidding backward. He stumbled on his heels, before falling over heavily and landing on his back. Out cold.

"Hah... hah..." Ann slowly pushed herself up onto her right knee, the torn top of her mask revealing several beads of sweat cooling on her forehead. "Even if... we hadn't had to deal with Akechi earlier... I don't know if we could handle Sae's Shadow too easily."

Sae was soon stomping over to Sergio's unconscious form, raising her sword up high. She was just set to strike when a figure suddenly bolted over the shattered remnants of a slot machine to her right. Even with scorches and tears dotting Makoto's suit, even with her breath coming out in ragged gasps, adrenaline and pure determination was driving the Arditi's Queen onward.

Her ironclad fist drove violently into Sae's jaw, the force enough to make the Shadow stagger backward. Makoto landed neatly, springing herself off to her right as Sae's sword stabbed into the ground where she had been a scant second ago.

With Sae's attention briefly diverted, Futaba took advantage of the opening. One of Necronomicon's tentacles lashed out and coiled around Sergio's body, reeling him close to the protective shadow of Necronomicon's hull. Haru was nearby, looking equally out of sorts as she tried to catch her breath.

"Sis, I don't want to fight you, but... I can't let you hurt my friends either," Makoto firmly said, narrowing her eyes as Sae raised her bouquet of heavy weapons toward Makoto.

"Seems like she doesn't have those qualms," Shiho muttered. She stood up, her right hand awkwardly and stiffly rubbing the bruises of her left shoulder. "Then again, never backing down from a challenge... she wouldn't be much good as a prosecutor if that wasn't part of her."

Makoto leapt backward, using quick bursts of speed to avoid the general path of Sae's minigun spray. Chunks of masonry were dislodged from the ground, the sharpened points pelting Makoto and opening some fresh cuts on her arms. A dagger of light from Eris exploded against Sae's weapon, knocking it off to the side and hindering Sae's balance. Makoto skidded to a halt, still panting for breath.

"Anyone got any ideas?" asked Ann as she shakily stood up. "Is running away an option?"

"Much as I would like that, I do not believe so," Yusuke replied, leaning up against a dense wall of ice Kamu Susanoo had erected. While they had succeeded in thinning out the waves of Shadows coming at them, Yusuke had ultimately settled on sealing off the battlefield so they could throw
themselves at Sae as a whole group.

It hadn't worked, but it was a nice idea at the time.

Sae glared at Yusuke, shoving her head forward while a violent shriek left her. The entirety of the Palace seemed to tremble around them, flakes of debris being lifted around Sae from the roar of her power. The sonic shockwave hit Yusuke like a kick from a mule, making him grimace and grit his teeth as his body was pinned against the ice.

With the bluenette stunned, Sae raised her guns again, only for a red blur to rush at her side. Two bladed feet slammed into the side of her head, making Sae snarl as her bulk was sent skidding sideways. All eyes turned to the raised platform above them, catching a glimpse of Akira, Ryuji, and Morgana. Akechi's unconscious form was in Seiten Taisei's grasp.

"Well... maybe throwing a few extra bodies at the problem will solve it?" Akira asked, managing a sluggish smile. "Sorry we're late. Akechi and I had to... resolve our disagreement before I could get back to you guys."

"Akira..." Futaba softly said, a joyful smile lingering on her face, relief overcoming the small nerd as she learned that Akira was okay. Granted he looked as if he had been through a war, but he was okay.

Right about now Sae looked like some sort of cornered jungle predator, guttural growls leaving the ironclad figure as she glowered at her various attackers. She kept her weapons raised, a dark aura radiating around her armour. Even though she was outnumbered, even though she had the mind of a savage beast, there was an undeniable confidence to her. Being outnumbered was no concern to her.

"Looks like we might need to buy Sting a little more time. But when we do-" Akira was cut off, the entire world seeming to lurch around them. Like an elevator coming to a sudden halt. Even Sae froze up.

"Uhhh..." Ann awkwardly shifted her gaze from side to side. "Isn't this the part where the Shadow usually lunges at us?"

Futaba reached her hands up to the sides of her goggles, her lenses lighting up with the information that Necronomicon was syphoning from their surroundings. "It's... the berserk effect is wearing off. But I don't think it was on a time limit or anyth-"

Sae's armoured form went rigid, the Shadow throwing her head back as a beastly scream left her. It was like a chorus howling from a singular being, the entire Palace shaking once again. Until, at last, the sky above them began to crack. Those same cracks raced along the walls and floor, tremendous quakes rocking the area while a warm white light enveloped Sae.

"Th-this is..." Ryuji trailed off, watching as the sky quite literally started crashing down around them. "The whole place is coming apart!"

"Which means Sting got the job done... which means we need to get out of here too!" Morgana added, hopping down from their vantage point.

"Right... time to make like a banana and split! Everyone, to me!" Futaba quickly said. The thieves quickly rushed toward Futaba as the young hacker slipped into the comfortable shell of
Necronomicon. One by one her tentacles reached out, furling around her allies as a protective layer. Even Akechi was brought under her protection.

Ann squirmed, closing her eyes as the blackness coiled around her. "Gross gross gross ew ew ew why is it moist why is it moist..."

Makoto looked to her sister's Shadow, watching as the warm white light fully engulfed her sister. Then her Shadow vanished, just as it had been with the various Shadow-selves they had bested in the past. "Sis..." Makoto softly said. "I hope... this is the start of you becoming a stronger person." Necronomicon coiled around her, before the team was shunted back to reality. The Casino of Envy was closed.

In an instant the group were spontaneously dumped out on the cold streets of Kasumigaseki, the lamppost overhead illuminating the heap that they had landed in. A few groans left the group, each individual struggling to move under the weight of their friends. Then, eventually, they managed to roll away from each other.

"Wow..." Shiho murmured. "Thank goodness you were on hand Futaba... your Persona really saved our butts."

Akira moved to stand, leaning on a nearby wall for support. The others slowly rose up around them, until the gathered group were looking down at Akechi's unconscious form. Particularly the dark purple bruises that dominated the right half of his face. Akira breathed a small sigh before handing Akechi's phone to Futaba. "Thanks for the save. For as tough as this fight was, it was worth it."

"Yeah. This bastard's not gonna be killing anyone anytime soon," Ryuji said. He took a moment to glare down at Akechi, before sighing and looking away. "When we first met him, I hated him because he was badmouthing us for trying to do the right thing. But at least then, I thought... he was at least a guy interested in doing good. But that was all a lie. I really dunno what to think of that."

"He tricked a lot of people... but without his phone, he won't be hurting people through the Metaverse anymore. Still... what are we going to do with him?" Shiho asked, reaching up and stroking her chin with her left hand.

"We're not killing him, right?" Shizuka's incoming voice caused the group to turn, catching a glimpse of her and Hifumi making their way over from the end of the quiet street. Houdini was clutching Sae's unconscious form, holding her as if she were weightless.

Akira breathed a happy sigh. "Thank goodness you're all alright. I was a little worried, there was a long gap between you leaving the Metaverse, and Sae's Shadow disappearing."

Shizuka stuck her tongue out for a moment. "Turns out that giving someone a psychotic breakdown makes them freakishly strong. Sae nearly shoved her foot in m- you know what, that part's not important. What is important is that we got her. One nick of the Stand arrow, and it worked it's magic. I wonder what kind she'll get?" Shizuka asked herself.

Makoto made her way to her sister, inspecting the long scar visible through the tear in her suit. She gave a soft sigh and pressed a hand to Sae's injury, drawing on some of her lingering strength to close up the wound. In its place lingered a thin, pale scar. "Thank you," she said, smiling sweetly at Shizuka. The young Joestar felt an awkward smile cross her blushing face, and she was quick to
"Ah... y-yeah w-well... it was nothing, ya know? Just um... w-well I wanted to save Sae, so I did," Shizuka explained. 'Damnit... why's she gotta give me those cute doe eyes? I mean I love 'em but they make all... stupid and goofy when I see 'em.'

By now Sergio was slowly stirring, groaning in pain. "Santa merda... if she had kicked a little lower, I wouldn't be having any kids..." he muttered. He graciously took Yusuke's hand as it was offered to him, and once standing upright, Sergio took the time to take in their surroundings. "The real world? Good... and there's our darling detective douchebag in one piece too."

"Guess we better do our healing tomorrow. I don't think any of us are in a position to do that right now," Shiho mused. "But... for now. Yeah, we need to figure out what to do with Akechi... and take Niijima-san here home."

As Shiho spoke, Houdini moved to the nearby tree, retrieving her rucksack and steel case. The Stand slotted the arrow back inside easily enough, while Shizuka surveyed her friends. "Well... there is that Speedwagon clinic. The one with the secure rooms. Keep him away from a smart phone, and have a Stand user monitoring him, and he won't be causing trouble any time soon," she explained.

"It's either that, or we kill him... people will probably start asking questions if he's missing for too long, but... well we'll cross that bridge when we get to it," Akira said. He gave Akechi a final disdainful look and sighed heavily. "Come on, let's get this done. As soon as he's in custody, we can deal with Sae."

Tonight had been rough, but the Arditi had won out in the end. Their path ahead wasn't clear, but they had managed to beat one of their biggest enemies tonight. After the destruction of their reputation, this was the kind of good news he had been hoping for.

The Niijima apartment made for a rather nice home, immaculately clean thanks to the combined passion for cleanliness. The furnishings in the living area were modern and pricey, a long black leather sofa positioned perfectly across from a large flatscreen television. The shelves of the encompassing unit were laden with all manner of books and DVDs. Shizuka quickly noticed a... large collection of gangster movies dominating one shelf. Makoto's, no doubt.

Once they had positioned Sae on the couch, the team took a moment to inspect their surroundings. Yusuke was paying particular focus to the small sculptures and wall-mounted paintings in Sae's possession, while Ryuji was fighting the urge to go rummaging in the Niijima fridge. After this evening, he was damn hungry.

"Nice place you've got here," Shizuka said, scratching the back of her neck as she surveyed the area.

"You've never been here?" Ann asked, tapping her chin with her left index finger.

Shizuka shrugged. "She usually comes by my place."

"Ooooh la la," Sergio dryly, flashing a sly smile to the two girls.
"Ahaha... hey, remember when you were unconscious on the ground?" Shizuka asked, loudly cracking her knuckles. She was grinning broadly, but her heart-shaped sunglasses were concealing the annoyance in her eyes. "How would you like a repeat of that?"

Before things could escalate further, Sae let out a loud gasping sound. She sat bolt upright on the couch, the sudden motion making her wince and clutch the thin scar on her shoulder. "Where ah... what is... what..."

"S-Sis!" Makoto quickly said, making her way to Sae and sitting down beside her. She set a comforting hand on Sae's back. "A-are you okay?"

"Makoto?" Sae asked, sounding more than a little hoarse. To be expected, with how much growling and hissing she had done while berserk. "Wait, am I... at home? But the last thing I remember I was at the office, and I got a sudden migraine... and just what is this?!" Sae asked, glancing now to the scar on her shoulder.

Akira felt a twinge of guilt, hearing the notes of panic rising in Sae's voice. They had hoped to keep Sae out of harm's way, but that clearly hadn't entirely worked. "Niijima-san, I... I know this is a lot to take in, but try to stay calm. We'll try to explain everything to you," he said. They were gonna be here for a while.

Hearing his voice, Sae started glancing around. "Kurusu?" she asked in surprise. In doing so, Sae became aware of the small army of high school students hanging around her apartment. And a small black cat, who seemed to perfectly blend in with the weirdness of tonight. "Who are... all of you? And... why do you all look so exhausted? Were you assaulted?"

"Well, that is... not incorrect, I suppose," Haru sheepishly said. They had been the ones to start the fight, after all.

"We're high school students, Niijima-san. Friends of Makoto," Ann quickly said, wanting to smooth things out quickly. "As for why you're home, and that scar in your shoulder... it's uh... it's a long story."

Sae gave the blonde a scrutinious gaze, immediately sending a chill through Ann's body. So that was what it felt like to be in the witness box against Sae. "So tell me everything," she pointedly said. Waking up in a completely different location, with strangers in her apartment and a wound on her body had clearly not left Sae in the best mood.

And so the group did their best to explain everything, starting with the matter that underpinned everything: The Metaverse. They told Sae of the world born from people's hearts, the way distorted desires could reshape that cognitive landscape to form Palaces.

This, then, meant Makoto had to admit to her sister that she was a Phantom Thief. And that her friends (feline included) were also part of the Arditi. And that the people who had had a sudden, otherwise inexplicable, change of heart were a result of the Arditi tampering with their Palaces in the Metaverse.

Having explained this, the topic moved onto Akechi. They spoke of his past, what they knew of it at least, and told Sae that for at least the past two years he had been involved in clandestine killings, with the Metaverse being used as his murder weapon. Every sudden mental shutdown, every ultraviolent psychotic breakdown, they had stemmed from Akechi's power as he worked alongside his father and prime minister candidate: Masayoshi Shido. Shido, and a cabal of wealthy,
influential figures in the upper echelons of Tokyo society, were looking to plant themselves at the top of the food chain, and were more than happy to use Akechi's powers to aid that goal.

After explaining Akechi's powers, with Futaba mentioning her mother's 'suicide' as an example of his crimes, the path of the story moved toward the events of tonight. Makoto had taken the time to show Sae the forged calling card that had been left in their mail, alerting them to the threat on Sae's life. It was around this time that Akechi approached the group, offering to help them clear their name and save Sae's life, in exchange for the Arditi retiring after the heist. A ruse, of course. They told Sae how their suspicions of Akechi left them unable to wholly trust them, culminating in the team investigating and piecing together the story of Akechi's past. To save Sae, and themselves, they needed to best Akechi. Which they had managed to do, albeit after he had used his powers to drive Sae into a psychotic breakdown. The 'migraine' she had felt before blacking out.

Using a Stand arrow, the source of Sae's new scar, they had managed to seal away Sae's Palace, putting a halt to her rampage before she could kill her boss.

Sae had remained surprisingly quiet throughout the story, glancing to each speaker whenever they addressed her. Occasionally she would ask a simple question, or ask the group to elaborate on a certain phrase, but beyond that she didn't seem too perturbed by what she was hearing. She was icily cool.

Finally, she tented her fingers in front of her face and sighed loudly. "That story... is completely insane. A candidate for prime minister has been secretly manipulating the country for the past two years, using the power to manipulate people's hearts, with said power belonging to a high school student?"

"Hearing the whole story recapped like that, it does sound pretty nuts," Futaba mused, looking up at the ceiling. "Like the storyline to an RPG or something."

"I know it all must seem crazy to an outsider, but it's true. All of it," Akira said. His body glowed briefly, leaving Sae aghast as she watched a crimson figure materialize at Akira's left side. Arsene floated elegantly in the air, his ever-present grin giving him an air of menace. "This is a Persona, one of the powers we've been telling you about."

Sae swallowed hard, her eyes wide in surprise. "I... I don't..."

Shizuka took a step forward. "Yeah this uh... this must be weird, huh? But it's legit. This is a Stand," Shizuka added, Houdini's own visage appearing at her side. "They might look alike, but there's some differences. A Persona's more about... brute force, I guess? Big explosions and bigger punches. A Stand can hit hard too, but they're usually more oriented towards trickery and stuff. And now you've got one yourself."

"You mean... because of that arrow thing?" Sae asked. She would have ordinarily dismissed this entire story, but it was a lot harder to be skeptical when she was looking at literal ghosts floating in her home.

"Right. If you have a Stand or Persona, then you can't have a Palace. We... had to stop you while you were going berserk, and that was the best way we had," Ann explained from her position near the kitchen.

"And the reason I went through that was because of Goro Akechi..." Sae trailed off. "We've worked together for over a year, and he's always been so kind and polite. I just can't believe that"
he'd do something like that... a-although, thinking back, there was a strange incident. When I told Akechi that Kunikazu Okumura got a calling card, he became very rattled and agitated. And Okumura seemed to vanish from the public eye soon after," she explained, leaning forward on the couch.

"Yes. I was there when Father made his report to the police, and news of this didn't touch the media at all. We encountered Akechi in my Father's Palace, and only narrowly stopped Akechi from killing him... but another assassin attacked Father later, leaving him in a coma," Haru sadly explained.

"But if this isn't enough, we've got some ah... spooky phone calls that Akechi's made. I'll be sure to email you the audio files," Futaba chimed.

Sae pondered this information in silence. It was a lot to take in, even if she wasn't physically exhausted. It felt as if her whole world had been flipped upside down in the span of a few seconds. Her sister was in the Arditi, one of her few friends was a killer who tried to force her to commit murder, and the man set to become prime minister was some kind of supervillain? She wanted to faint.

Sae looked down at her hands, only to gasp at what she saw around her wrists. A pair of studded leather wristbands that concealed her wrists entirely, sheathed in a strange crystalline aura. She could feel the material against her skin, but they were almost weightless. "This is my...?"

"Yeeep, that's a Stand alright. Wristbands huh? I wonder what kinda power will come from those," Shizuka mused.

In the back of her mind, spoken in a voice that was not quite her own, a name reached out to Sae. She heard it and spoke it softly. "Luck Be A Lady."

"That's so damn cool," Futaba whispered.

"In your current condition, I doubt you'll be able to use those things quite yet. But the power will manifest in due time," Sergio explained. He pushed himself off the wall, idly circling around toward the exit.

Sae exhaled slowly through her nose. "I don't know what to think of any of this. It seems insane, and yet... I'm looking at some proof, right here," Sae said, silently inspecting her new wristbands. They faded from sight, causing her to sigh.

After a moment, Makoto leaned a little closer to Sae. "Sis... I want you to know that those two murders, the ones blames on us, we-"

"I know you're not responsible for those," Sae interrupted curtly. "No matter what's going on, no matter what group you're a part of... I know you wouldn't be complicit in any sort of murder," she said. Makoto smiled ever so slightly. "Although I'll admit... you putting your own life in danger is more than a little worrying."

"Ahh, you just haven't seen Makoto in action. She's tough as heck!" Shizuka proudly said.

Sae paused, examining the bespectacled young woman for a few moments. "You're... Shizuka Joestar, right?"
Shizuka paused, watching as Sae's gaze flicked between herself and Makoto. In seconds she seemed to piece their relationship together, sending a wave of existential dread through Shizuka. "Y-yeah, that's right," she replied awkwardly.

"Well, Makoto speaks highly of you too," said Sae. She turned her attention to Futaba, who was idly examining Akechi's phone. "And you must be Wakaba Isshiki's daughter. I'm... I'm deeply sorry for what happened over the summer. I didn't mean to scare you, but I was desperate for information an-"

"Eh, don't sweat it. Ancient history," Futaba quickly replied. Knowing Futaba, Akira mused, she had probably forgotten about that custody stuff some time ago.

Sae stood up slightly, with Makoto moving up alongside her in case her balance gave out. "Still, to think that I was so driven... if what you've told me about these 'Palaces' is to be believed... did I really get so far out of touch? What does that say about me?" she asked herself.

"Having a Palace doesn't mean you're evil. It just means... that you got wrapped up in winning above all else. It's a distortion that could happen to anyone," Morgana said.

Sae paused, looking at Morgana with an unreadable look on her pretty face. "The cat's talking. Why is the cat talking? Is this... normal for all of you?"

"Pretty much," Akira said, shrugging. Morgana made a small huffing noise, his ears going flat against the sides of his head. "I know this is a lot to take in, but give it time and I'm sure you'll have a handle on things soon. For now just take it easy and... I guess act normal for the time being."

"I can hardly continue my Phantom Thieves investigation... you all saved my life by the look of things, and... I wouldn't be a very good legal guardian if I sent Makoto to prison," Sae said, making Makoto glance around awkwardly. "Oh and... Makoto?"

The younger brunette swallowed hard. "A-ah... yeah Sis?" Makoto asked.

"I think... I think Dad would be proud of you," she eventually said. Makoto smiled fondly at her sister, a faint blush forming on her face. It seemed this was exactly what Makoto had wanted to hear.

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It was dark and chilly by the time they got back to Yongen, the streets mostly deserted at this hour. By now the only people in view were loitering drunks, alleycats, and mothers grabbing a quick smoke outside their homes. The lampposts overhead lit the way toward Leblanc, illuminating the neighboring buildings.

Akira sighed loudly, rubbing the back of his neck with his right hand. He glanced to Futaba and Morgana at his right, examining them briefly. "After today, I doubt I'll enjoy waking up tomorrow."

"You and me both," Morgana said as he diligently padded alongside the two teens. "I sure hope I can go my whole life without being stuck in another psychotic Palace."

"Well, with Akechi locked up, there's nobody else who can do that," Futaba said. She adjusted her
spectacles and grinned brightly at Akira. "Thanks to you, by the way. Boy, you whalloped him good!" she said eagerly.

"Aha... yeah. Not so loud with that," Akira replied. While Futaba seemed pleased with him, Akira still felt more than a little ashamed at what had transpired. Futaba could see the uncertainty in his expression, the mild flicker of shame in his eyes.

Morgana yawned loudly, catching the attention of the duo. "Wellp..." He hopped up on a nearby wall and continued to stretch his legs as he went along. "I'm heading up to the window. Don't leave me waiting long," Morgana said, continuing along to the back of Leblanc.

Now alone, Akira sighed slightly. "Tonight was nuts, but I'm glad we made it out okay." Akira drew the key from his jacket pocket as they neared Leblanc's door. "Well, night Futaba. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Uh... just a sec," Futaba said, a look of concern on her face. "Are you... okay? You seem kinda upset," she added.

"Well... the truth is..." Akira sighed loudly, closing his eyes. Ryuji hadn't said anything to the others, presumably leaving it to Akira's discretion if he wanted to tell anyone. "When I fought Akechi, I managed to get the upper hand and beat him down. But... even when he was on the ground, I just... I just kept hitting him, and hitting him, and... before I even knew it, my hands were on his neck, squeezing the life out of him. I was just seeing red, and I... I nearly killed him there," he somberly explained.

Futaba silently watched him for a few seconds, before reaching up and settling a hand on his right shoulder. "Well... with everything we learned, everything you've been through, I... your emotions were running high and... i-it's understandable to get wrapped up in the heat of the moment."

"I told myself that much Futaba, but in that moment... I didn't feel quite like myself. Like I was outside my own body, watching someone else choke the life out of Akechi... and I was egging them on," Akira said. He sighed, pressing his forehead to the cool glass of the door. "Killing someone, even someone like Akechi... that's something that can't be undone. If I nearly lost my head once, then... who's to say it won't happen against Shido too? And if that happens, we'll really be up a creek... I think... I think is the first time I've ever been scared of myself."

Futaba listened carefully to Akira's story, never leaving his side throughout. Nor was there any judgement in her gaze. "It won't come to that... you've got all of us looking out for you. With everything going on, I can't exactly blame you for seeing red. T-truth be told, if I was in the same position... I don't know what I would have done to Akechi."

Well, he had killed Futaba's mother after all. And, intentionally or otherwise, had been the architect of Futaba's misery. Would Futaba go that far? Akira didn't want to find out.

"I guess we gotta look out for each other, in that case. I just know I don't want to ever feel that way again," Akira said. He glanced over to Futaba, smiling at the shorter figure. "Thanks Futaba. You make for a pretty good listener."

Futaba snickered, briefly hugging Akira. The bespectacled boy gasped slightly at the gesture, remaining still as he felt a surprising strength to Futaba's squeeze. "Guess I'm just a girl with plenty of talents... Guess I better get home before Sojiro starts worrying. Aaaand I gotta go and make sure the SIU's CCTV system has a sudden 'glitch' to make sure there's no trace of Sae acting weird. Boy,
"True. But we definitely appreciate all you do," Akira said, smiling at the redhead as she passed by. She gave him a wave as she reached the corner, before casually making for home. Alone for now, Akira sighed and resumed unlocking the door.

That girl... she always managed to make Akira feel better.

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10/14

Taro Fujioka lived what could broadly be described as a hollow existence. Day by day, week by week, month by month, he seemed comfortably wrapped up in a cyclical lifestyle that left no room for surprises. Wake up, dress in a clean suit, go to work for eight hours, go home. Day in, and day out. He had settled into this routine since he turned twenty, and in the past few years he had quietly accepted that this was likely the way the rest of his life was going to play out.

He had a few relatives left alive, and occasionally would make time for family functions, or holiday celebrations. The occasional wedding or funeral would pop up on his calendar, provide a brief distraction from the cycle, and then things would even out again soon after.

Sometimes and his friends would kill a night by drinking, like they did when they felt young and free, but time was ruining that too. He couldn't bounce from that like he used to, and so he had to be more conservative.

Most nights, however, were spent thusly: With Taro Fujioka idly surfing the web, posting on imageboards, or checking his email. He sighed, sinking back in his comfy chair while the light of his monitor illuminated his face, and the general gloom of his plain bedroom.

While glancing to his inbox, tearing his eyes from the discussion of some upcoming RPG, he noticed something odd. A new email with no listed sender. The subject simply read 'The Key to Eternal Happiness.'

Anyone who had spent more than five minutes using the internet could probably tell it was some kind of scam, or a malicious virus hiding behind the facade of a chipper email. Taro certainly thought as much as he surveyed it. And yet... and yet... Something about it drew him in, and without realising it he was guiding his cursor toward the email. It was as if something was magnetizing him to it, overriding his common sense utterly.

He clicked on it.

In an instant he understood it all, his senses assailed with knowledge of the Holy Grail, the path to happiness. The futility and peril of free will, the weakness of the human mind. If he was ever to enjoy existence, then the only thing to do was abandon all freedom, and enter willful subjugation to the Grail's magnificence. The Grail would protect and guide him.

After all, it had specifically reached out to him, sensing the weakness of his heart through the Metaverse. It understood Taro Fujioka quite well. He was but a bit player. And as his pupils turned grey, and a vacant smile crossed his face, he did his duty and forwarded the email along.

But there was something else in that email, a simple message that became engraved in his mind.
The message contained only three words, but they were the most powerful three words Taro had ever been exposed to.

A message that informed him of the insignificant scale of his existence, being a mere mote of dust in an expansive eternity. A message that told him of life's crushing futility, that each day merely fed into the next, that triumphs were fleeting and that hardship always won out in the end. A message that made Taro aware of the perils of free will, and that subjugation to a higher power was the only way to have any enjoyment out of his minuscule, transient existence.

Free will and choice were perilous and destructive, and the path of his life had not been a happy one. At the rate he was going, the message made him understand that he was either due fifty+ years of misery akin to a boot stamping on his face forever, or an eventual suicide just to free himself from this cyclical life. But if he were to abandon freedom, live in a blissful ignorance under a watchful eye, then he did not need to think of such things. He did not need to think of anything. Ever.

It was a simple message.
From the position of his Velvet Room prison cell, Akira could see Justine putting the finishing touches on the newest ritual. She idly examined her clipboard and turned her attention to the four guillotines that had been set up in a circle in front of her. Secured to each guillotine was a figure wrapped in a thick velvet tarp, chains lining it to keep the material pressed tight in place.

"This is probably the strongest thing we can make with Aeon," Caroline said, leaning against the wall outside his cell. The normally aggressive warden gave him a casual side-eye. "You wanna go through with this?"

Akira nodded firmly. "After that fight with Akechi, I could do with a little extra power. And this guy seems like a step in the right direction."

Caroline shrugged and pushed herself off the wall. "Well, I guess he's a step up from some of the Personas you've used. You've actually grown pretty strong... color me shocked."

"Heh. You can act aloof all you want, but I know you're proud," Akira said, grinning smugly at the smaller figure.

"Tch-" Caroline bristled, keeping remaining face-forward so he couldn't see the crimson that had worked itself onto her cheeks. "Sh-shut it Inmate! Don't forget where you are!" she snapped. Her attention shifted to Justine, who was casually making for a switch. "Come on Justine, let's deal with this quickly."

"Of course. I was waiting on you," Justine casually said.

Soon the ritual began in earnest, the sharpened blades raising high, the chains suspending them jerking a few times as they were hauled upward. The four blades fell suddenly in unison, and Akira looked away as they tore through the bound Personas. Fusion always was a grisly process.

However, instead of blood exploding out from the point of impact, the bound figures instead exploded into sprays of white light, their forms destroyed utterly on contact with the blade. Four beams of white light flew up in unison, coalescing into a singular glowing orb suspended near the ceiling of the Velvet Room.

Slowly but surely the light began to warp and bend, shaping itself into a new form entirely. From those four sacrificed entities, something new was being born, fueled by Akira's own power, and the bond he had forged with Shizuka. The strongest thing that the twins could fashion from the Aeon arcana.

At first the creature appeared to be a long white serpent, but as Akira's eyes roamed upward, he saw that around the waist it began to change into a more robust humanoid chest, with a pair of beefy arms tipped with strange stone gauntlets. The snow-white skin colour remained consistent throughout. The head was large and pointed forward, like a sneering snake head with rows of sharp teeth. A pair of pointed antlers protruded from his temples, white in shade like the rest of him.

The Personas eyes were solid sapphire orbs, the blue glow matching the colour of the string of
runes that ran from his hips down toward the tip of his tail. He threw his head back, sniffing the air a few times before his gaze shifted and settled on Akira. The figure casually slithered toward the jail cell.

'Ah. So you are the one who has summoned me?' The creature's sneering jaw remained clenched, the words instead coming as a whisper in Akira's mind. 'Then you have good taste. I am Crom Cruach, and I take care of those who pay me my dues. I'm sure we'll get along famously.'

A warm light enveloped Crom Cruach, before his form vanished entirely and the light was absorbed into Akira. The dark haired boy sighed slightly.

"Geez... what a cuddly guy," he muttered sarcastically to himself.

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Yesterday, Makoto and Shizuka had spent some time talking to Akechi from the confines of his cell. Well, they tried talking with him at least. Makoto spent about an hour asking him questions, receiving no answers in return. Even Shizuka needling and prodding him with insults hadn't been enough to bear fruit. He was tight-lipped, and seemed to have relished the frustration he brewed in the two.

Eventually, however, he said one thing to them: 'I have no interest in talking to bit players.'

The implication was clear. If Akechi had anything to say, he'd only say it to Akira. While Akira loathed the guy, he had information none of them had access to, and if they were going to go after Shido, it was possible he knew Shido's keywords. They had already checked the Nav and knew he had a Palace, but they had no knowledge yet of how to access it.

The Speedwagon clinic made for an unassuming grey-bricked building, nestled comfortably on a large block near Roppongi. A modest wall surrounded the squat, three-story structure, with a heavy black iron gate monitoring those who came and left. The Foundation, being largely aware of the situation, knew to let Akira and his friends come and go as they pleased, while keeping a close eye on the mysterious 'guest' they had taken in.

The lobby was quite clean, the white floor gleaming slightly from the lights overhead. A strange, almost sickly medicinal smell wafted through the air, while very tame elevator music played through the speakers affixed to the corners of the ceiling. It felt strange, Akira quickly noted. Even the hospitals he had been to in the past didn't feel quite like this.

He quietly passed by the receptionist and janitors, the workers giving him a quick glance before returning to their duties. He was following Makoto's directions by memory, going through the door to the right of the reception desk, entering a narrow corridor that had a few doors lining the way down. From what he could see as he went by, the rooms were decently large, each having a comfy bed, a barred window, a bookshelf with a few books on it, and a small bathroom.

The few other residents he saw, usually people trying to kick an addictive habit, or being incarcerated for their own good, were silent and ignored Akira outright. He made for a door at the end of the hallway, that had a single figure in a crisp navy suit waiting outside the doorway. His grey hair was smoothed back, and the stern look in his eyes seemed to hint at his years of experience. The man glanced up at Akira as he approached.

"You're one of Joestar's friends, yeah?" he asked.
Akira nodded. "Yeah, that's right Mister...?"

"Nishikiyama. I'm getting a little too old for beat work, but guard jobs are easy," he replied casually. "But... this kid, the one from the news... you sure he needs guarding? He's just been sitting there reading in all the time I've seen him."

"Trust me, he's dangerous," Akira replied. As far as he could tell, Akechi didn't know how to summon his in the real world. Presumably he'd been working for so long on his own that he never considered the possibility, or nobody had told him about it.

Nishikiyama shrugged his broad shoulders. "Well, I'll keep that in mind... Go on through." A spectral figure appeared on his left shoulder, an azure-coloured horn beetle with golden highlights, larger than Nishikiyama's hand. "Random Access Memories." 📚

As Nishikiyama said this, a zig-zagging layer of glowing blue lines appeared in front of the door to Akechi's cell. They folded outward to leave the door fully exposed. Akira nodded graciously at Nishikiyama, moving past the older man and entering Akechi's cell. He closed the door behind him.

Just as Nishikiyama had said, Akechi was seated casually on his bed, dressed in a set of pale green hospital pyjamas and matching slippers. He had a medical textbook in his hands and was leafing through it at a steady rate. A few purple bruises still lined the sides of his face, but he seemed not to care.

"Well finally. I was worried I'd be kept waiting..." Akechi smiled slightly up at Akira. "But then again, you always are punctual."

"Trying to act casual after everything that's happened? You really are shameless," Akira flatly said. "After everything if you've been through, I would have thought you'd learn a little humility."

Akechi smirked faintly. "Do you honestly I think I've learned anything from all this? I've had my share of hardship, Kurusu. Adversity that I've had to overcome. This is just another setback that I'll have to grit my teeth and ride out..."

Akira narrowed his eyes behind his glasses. "You're something else," Akira said. "But I didn't come here to make small talk."

Before Akira could get to the meat of things, Akechi suddenly spoke up and interrupted him. "You can summon your Persona in the real world, yes? Was it something to do with that arrow you used before? Or just the fruits of some special training?" Akechi asked. He could read the surprise on Akira's face, a sly smile lingering on his face. "I wasn't totally unconscious when you brought me out of Sae-san's Palace, so I managed to eavesdrop a little."

"If you expect me to teach you anything like that, you're even crazier than I thought," Akira replied. Which really was quite an accomplishment.

Akechi chuckled. "Oh I wouldn't be so presumptuous. I'm merely trying to sate my curiosity, it's a bad habit of mine. But I do know it's possible... after all, Shizuka managed to trick me with hers in the real world."

"I'm not here to make chit chat. I'm here to learn about Shido, and I know you have the kind of
information I want. Given your endgoal, there's no way you haven't at least tried to access his Palace," Akira casually said. He doubted Akechi would wholly comply, but he at least had to try before the group was forced to wing it.

Akechi hummed in return, his analytical gaze returning to the textbook in his hands. "I'm sure you're itching to get back at Shido. After all, he's the reason you're on probation right now," he said.

"Thanks in part to you," Akira muttered. Shido didn't get his obscene influence by complete luck, after all.

"But... well, that group has plenty of powerful people in it. Some of the wealthiest, most influential people in Japan. Ha... the list of people I've worked for. If you saw half the names, you'd probably get sick... my point is, just taking out Shido probably won't be enough to totally dismantle this conspiracy. Say you make him have a change of heart, his inner circle will make sure he doesn't start confessing. And ah... you can't just kill him. Not when you want to clear your reputation."

Akira frowned. Much as he didn't want to admit it, Akechi had a point. A man of Shido having a change of heart, there was no way to do that covertly when they needed to give him a calling card. And if he had Wakaba Isshiki's research, then he likely had some understanding of the cognitive world, and the danger his own Palace posed to him. There was a chance that just going after him wouldn't be enough.

"That reminds me... why did you send Sae to kill the SIU director? You said he outlived his usefulness, so... does that mean he's working for Shido too?" Akira asked.

Akechi smiled. "Well done."

But Sae herself wasn't. And most likely she was totally unaware of her boss' allegiance. "So... as soon as he became inconvenient, you were going to get rid of him."

"You make it sound so sordid... Originally, if things had gone to plan, I would have killed him soon after you 'committed suicide' in police custody. But since you were accelerating things, I decided to return the favor. Truth is, the old man knows a lot of dangerous secrets. Knowledge that would cause a lot of trouble if it ever left him," Akechi explained.

"And that's why..." Akira mused. Yes, if he wanted to he could have had Sae just go on a blind rampage and get her in trouble that way. But he specifically chose the SIU director, picking a target and turning the Palace into a warzone. He made a mental note of this to bring up to the group, while he turned his back to Akechi and inspected the blank wall ahead of him. "Even so, I want to know Shido's keywords."

The detective smirked without looking up. "Certainly not... I'm not going to hand Shido over for some 'change of heart', not when my plans are more conclusive."

Akira remained silent for several seconds, before slowly glancing at Akechi from over his shoulder. "You. Owe. Me," he sharply said.

"Beg pardon?" Akechi asked, looking up now.

"You heard me, you owe me. Not just for this probation that Shido stuck me with. I had your life in my hands, my fingers crushing the life out of your throat... and I let you live. So every breath you're
taking now, you owe them to me," Akira explained. He still wasn't proud of what had happened, but Akira wanted to remind Akechi of how close he'd come to death.

"Tch... you should have just finished the job. I have no intention of changing, nor do I plan on giving up," Akechi replied.

Akira paused for a few moments, deciding to change his approach a little. "I don't know if there's any truth to anything you told me in the past... The story about your mother, I mean. But if it's true, then I'm sorry... but that doesn't justify or excuse anything you've done." Akechi fell silent, now looking to his barred window. "What you've been doing... it's gone way too far. I'll stop you again if I have to, but it doesn't need to be that way. Just... stop."

A long silence lingered between the two for several long moments. "My Mother was the only person to ever love me unconditionally. Things were... not easy for us. But she did her best for me, until reality weighed too heavily on her. And when she left, I... I wanted to kill the person who caused it all. To give him the worst fall and death I could possibly give. And when I gained my Persona, when I found the Nav, I knew I had the key I needed," the brunette explained. It seemed that part of his past was legitimate, at least.

"And you think that's what she would have wanted?" Akira asked.

"It doesn't particularly matter, if she's not here anymore," Akechi replied.

Silence once more lingered. Akira really didn't know how to reach this guy. Threats didn't work, and camaraderie probably wouldn't work on a guy who was so warped and had a weird outlook on the world.

Still, he had perhaps naively hoped that there was some chance for Akechi to see reason and change his course slightly. Primarily to make things easier for when Shido was dealt with. Akechi willingly confessing his crimes and paying his penance was one thing, but if he refused, what were they going to do with him? They could hardly keep him in this clinic forever, especially if there was a risk of him learning to use his Persona in the real world.

For now, Akira put those thoughts to the back of his mind. They needed to actually deal with Shido first... and that would possibly entail taking care of the SIU director beforehand.

Eventually, Akira moved to speak. "So, you're not going to tell me Shido's keywords?" Akira asked, once more glancing to Akechi.

It took a few moments for the brunette to respond. He exhaled and raised his book back up to his face. "As if I'd make things so easy for you, buddy. Besides, it's not like there's much point in going after Shido right now... even if you bested his Palace, which is already rather doubtful with the obscene corruption that powers his Shadow, Arisawa-san can still direct the conspiracy in his stead. You have more enemies than just me, Kurusu."

Akira slowly exhaled slowly through his nose, turning and making for the door. "Think about what you've done. Think about the future... and for God's sake, think about doing the right thing for once."

As Akira left, and Nishikiyama sealed the way once again, he thought about the future. Their next course of action. Akechi may have had a point, going straight for Shido could backfire if Shido and his other allies were aware. At least they could do some damage to the organization if they went...
for someone not being watched closely, and had them leak the illicit information. With the conspiracy damaged, Shido would be a softer target.

For his part, Akechi had a plan of his own. All he had to do was figure out how to summon Loki in the real world, and once he did that he could break free and start getting things back on track. He had nothing but time, he could manage it. Particularly if things went as he hoped, if he successfully piqued Akira's interest in Arisawa.

By now, as he hadn't been in contact with Mr. A for a few days, the older man was starting on their contingency plan. Akechi hadn't expected it to come to this, but Mr. A seemed to have a person in mind when Akechi told him about the cognitive world.

His guys would keep watch to see who the Thieves went for, and proceed from there.

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10/16

"Holy crud!" Futaba said, lowering her bowl to the counter, only a few stray beads of ramen juices and dismembered noodle bits marking the white interior. "This place is great! Way better than instant stuff!" the redhead excitedly remarked.

"Mm. You said as much on your first bowl... I take it you're gonna go for the third?" Shizuka asked, seated comfortably beside Futaba. "I... really dunno where you're putting them away. But hey, it's none of my business."

Futaba grinned eagerly. "My metabolism is unbeatable!" she boasted.

"Yes. Clearly you have the guts of a demon queen. I'm actually a little jealous," Hifumi said, managing a gentle chuckle. She was seated to Futaba's right, with Haru behind her, while Shiho was seated behind Shizuka.

"I'm really glad that Ryuji told me about this place... there are some good ramen spots in Shibuya, sure, but Ogikubo is on another level entirely," Shiho said. She slipped her chopsticks into the bowl before her, effortlessly twirling a coil of slick noodles onto the edges of them.

"Kinda bummed we couldn't have a meeting today though... I'm pretty pumped to go for the next target," Futaba said. She set some yen on the counter, graciously being taken by the chef who wasted no time in preparing a third bowl for the petite redhead with a seemingly bottomless stomach.

"Well what can you do? No point in holding a meeting if several of our guys aren't able to make it... Makoto's got student council crap today," Shizuka said. Things had apparently been a little awkward at home, not that that was too surprising. Sae had been tasked with catching the Arditi, and not only was her little sister a member, but so was the high school student she had been teaching legal matters too. It was definitely unexpected on Sae's end.

But, things were gradually getting better as Sae adjusted to this knowledge. What was more worrying was that her Stand had yet to manifest its powers to her. Shizuka would be lying if she said she wasn't curious to see how that turned out.

Shiho sighed slightly. "Yeah. Ryuji's helping his mom with something, and Ann has a photoshoot,"
she explained.

Hifumi polished off her bowl, sighing slightly. "And Yusuke is finishing a project off. Sergio and I
finished ours last week, but Yusuke... oh it's not that he procrastinates, quite the contrary. He
works on something almost right until the deadline if he can help it, just to ensure perfection. It's
actually a little admirable, seeing the determined wolf-spirit of his artistry bear its fangs more and
more."

"I agree, I have to admire his passion," Haru said sweetly. "Oh, that reminds me... does this
restaurant do takeout?"

"Uh... yeah they got cartons over there," Shizuka said. "Why? You want your cooks to learn the
recipe?"

Haru laughed slightly. "Oh, no no, nothing like that. I'm just thinking that Yusuke-kun. You know
how engrossed in his work he can get, I just thought it would be nice to deliver some food to him."
After all he didn't have any relatives looking out for him, and was unlikely to be paying much
attention to his own stomach. Even if he did have a little spending money these days.

Shizuka grinned. "Ohoho, is that mighty Okumura-sama? Got a soft spot for our loopy artist?"
she playfully asked.

"N-no, it's not like that!" Haru quickly said, while her cheeks turned as pink as her sweater.

Deciding to save Haru a little embarrassment, Shiho sighed lightly and moved to change the topic a
bit. "Well... even if it's partially accidental, I'm actually a little glad we've got today off. With how
crazy the last two months have been, it's been a while since we got to just... hang out."

"I can't recall having moments like this in the past... I don't think I've ever really had a group of
friends until recently," Hifumi said.

"Hey, me too!" Futaba cheerily said.

"Oh, and me," Haru said.

Shizuka regarded the trio and sighed slightly. "My friends, ladies and gentlemen... not that I'm
much different. Still, you shouldn't sound that eager about being friendless in the past."

The redhead smirked slightly. "Eh, I don't mind talking about that stuff. It makes me feel pretty
happy in comparison, knowing how good things are now!" Futaba said.

"That's a pretty good outlook Futaba... things haven't been perfect with all this Shido stuff, but life's
definitely on the upswing these days," Shiho said, smiling fondly at their hacker. "I'm pretty glad.
When this year started, I didn't imagine I'd have friends like you guys."

"Me too," Hifumi added. "Admittedly, learning about my Stand was pretty scary, but now... I'm
very excited to help you guys. And fight depraved demons for real. It'll be a challenge worthy of
my abilities. Sun Tzu once said 'Victorious warriors win first and then go to war.' I'd like to keep
such thoughts in mind on the cusp of what's to come." She earned some nods from the others,
pleased by her enthusiasm.

The group resumed eating, and by the pace they were setting it seemed this was to be their last
batch for the evening. Eventually, Shiho spoke up. "By the way, on the way over her I saw something weird," she began. "It's probably nothing, but... well I was near Shibuya station, and I saw a guy standing near a wall who looked... dead to the world. There was this creepy smile on his face, and his pupils were strangely dull. Like... Like the lights were on, but nobody was home."

"Oh my," Haru softly murmured. "That sounds rather worrying... like a person just closed off from the world. And the image of a person smiling while looking that way, it gives me chills."

Futaba weighed this information in her mind for a few seconds, contemplating the description before she spoke up. "That sounds a little like a mental shutdown... except for the creepy smiling part, I guess." Futaba would be something of an expert, having seen one take place right before her eyes.

"Huh..." Shizuka softly said, tapping her chopsticks against the edge of her bowl in thought.

"Something up?" Shiho asked.

"Well it's just..." Shizuka trailed off, trying to put the unease she was feeling into words. A person turning off in such a creepy way was already bad enough, but Shizuka felt there was something worse to all this. "Maybe it's just coincidence, but I was in Harujuku earlier today and I... I swear I saw a woman who looked like that too."
"Shohei Arisawa." Akira spoke the name firmly from his position at the head of the table, his friends leaning in closely from their usual seats. "The head of the Special Investigations Unit for the past ten years, who has been involved in law enforcement for a further thirty years. And, according to Akechi, a big player in this conspiracy group trying to take control of the country."

"I knew the police were corrupt, but someone that high up being involved in all this..." Ann trailed off. "It's honestly pretty scary to think of... and he's just one guy working with Shido."

Akira nodded at the blonde. "Still, we can do a lot of good if we change his heart and make him leak some illicit information. According to Akechi he has a lot of dangerous knowledge of other big figures in the conspiracy, knowledge that could destabilize the conspiracy once he makes it public. As such, we're going to make him our next target."

"Uh, question?" Ryuji asked, raising his left hand. "How come we're going after some geezer when we know Shido is the guy at the head of all this? I mean, I don't have a problem with outing scumbags, but cutting this off at the head would prolly be more efficient."

"Well, I don't entirely disagree with that option, but... going straight for Shido runs the risk of his organization closing around him before he can confess to the public. If we can strike a blow by nabbing Arisawa, we could save ourselves some trouble," Akira said, smiling slightly at his best friend. "But, ideally... we can beat him quickly, and use his Palace as an opportunity to get a little stronger. If corruption dictates the power of a Palace owner, then Shido is likely to be the strongest opponent we've ever faced."

The group digested that news for several moments. Their fight against Akechi and the rage-enhanced Sae had not been the most enjoyable experience for them. And if Shido's Shadow was going to potentially be stronger than either of those, then they could use an extra round of training.

"I certainly wouldn't mind getting some more strength... I'm not exactly proud of my showing in the casino," Sergio admitted, sighing slightly. "And, all going well, it would be a strong blow against our shadowy enemies."

"Not that I'd have any issues with exposing a criminal old buzzard, but are we sure this Arisawa guy's dirty? I mean... it is Akechi's information we're talking about. He's done nothing but lie for the last two years of his life," Shizuka said.

Futaba was quick to pipe up. "While Akechi is a lying murderous jerkface, he's being pretty truthful when it comes to Arisawa. He's had contact with a few criminal figures from what I can dig up. And there are a few published photos of him palling around with Shido," she explained. The latter alone was rather damning.

Ryuji let out a low grumble. "Great. So I guess everyone who's ever hung around Shido is probably some kinda corrupt shithead?" the blond asked.

"Most likely," Morgana curtly said. "Akira managed to see the 'real' Shido that night, and knows how rotten the guy is when the cameras are off... I doubt anyone hangs around him for his sterling
"Buuumuuut if that's not enough, me, Mona, and Akira did a little research at Leblanc before coming out here. Nav says Arisawa has a Palace, and we've got two keywords already. Yeah having a Palace doesn't make a person evil or anything, just ask yours truly, but it's definitely worrying," Futaba explained.

After some thought, her right hand stroking slowly at her chin, Makoto spoke up. "It does make sense. If Shido wants to support of the most influential people in Japan, then the director of the SIU would hold some interest to him... I really don't want to think about how much of the police force is in Shido's pocket," she said.

None of them really did. By now the Arditi were intimately aware of how corrupt people could become, and it was worrying to think that that same corruption was festering through the upper echelons of their country. That that corruption was poised to become the legitimate ruling power of the nation.

"Well... I wouldn't see any issue in dealing with this Arisawa if we can do it quickly. We're fast approaching the election, and it would be prudent to deal with Shido before people start casting their votes," said Yusuke.

Akira took his seat and nodded toward the blue-haired artist. "Correct. Changing Shido's heart might not mean much if he's legally the prime minister, and whoever he has as his right hand is likely just as corrupt."

"Plus," Shizuka interjected "From what I can remember, it sounds like Mr. A is helping Shido to use his influence to let his guys do whatever they like... basically, that fucker would have the police totally under his thumb if Shido and his cronies get legitimate power."

The thought sent a wave of dread through the group. Mr. A had been exercising some restraint in his war with the Arditi, but that wouldn't be needed at all if he could make the system look away entirely.

Akira glanced over to their newest member, seated at the farthest chair from him. "Hifumi, you're something of a strategist. What do you think we should do?"

"Well..." Hifumi trailed off, tapping her chin as she pondered their prospects. "I can certainly see the appeal in going straight for the enemy leadership, but this is a very unusual kind of war, one fought on two different planes of existence. But, given the overwhelming reach that Shido seems to have, I'd personally advise taking Arisawa out of play to strike a blow against that reach." Hifumi shrugged her dainty shoulders. "But, either way, I'm excited to properly see this fabled Metaverse and do battle with fierce abominations of manifested nightmares."

"Yeah, that's a decent description for most of them," Akira said. He looked over the group before sighing slightly. "Well, whatever the case, this team is still a democracy, so we'll go with whatever everyone is happy with. You guys fine with going after Arisawa first?" he asked.

The group nodded toward Akira one by one, with Makoto speaking up first. "Truthfully, and this might sound a little selfish of me, I'd feel better dealing with Arisawa first. If Sis' boss is a corrupt criminal, I really wouldn't feel safe until he's had a change of heart."

"I can see that... especially if Sae's Stand hasn't started acting up yet," Shiho said. "Not to mention,
the public still thing we're a gang of murderers and the police have a warrant out for us. We could kill some of the heat surrounding us if the SIU was suddenly thrown into chaos."

"We still only know a few people involved in the conspiracy. But if Arisawa is outed, then a lot of names are going to make it to the public," Sergio chimed.

"If he and Father were to confess to the public, it would certainly be a blow against our enemies," Haru added. Though, as of yet, Kunikazu had yet to regain consciousness.

Futaba snickered. "And they definitely won't expect it. Right now they probably think Akechi is still trying to deal with us... and they probably think we're totally in the dark about Shido. Doing this will totally blindside those creeps."

Morgana let out a tiny sigh. "On the one hand, people underestimating us has let us get pretty far... on the other hand, I'm kinda bummed that people still do it."

"Hehe..." Ann gave the feline a wry grin. "I think they'll be taking us pretty seriously after we make Arisawa have a change of heart. Don't sweat it Mona. We'll save the day and totally make it big again," the blonde boasted. Morgana smiled, glancing shyly away from the radiance of Ann's smile.

Once more Akira scanned over his allies, reading their expressions. "I take it that we're all in agreement. So, with that being said, let's get going... on the plus side, Arisawa's Palace isn't too far from the courthouse where Sae's was, so we know the lay of the land. Let's get going."

"Hm... Hey Mona-chan," Haru said, glancing to the feline as the group started rising from their chairs. "I know Sae-san's Palace is gone, but I'm curious... would there be any danger to two people with Palaces being close together? Would they overlap?"

Morgana walked along the table, stretching his hind legs behind him as he went. "Nah, they'd probably be two distinct locations unless the individuals were pretty intimate. Still, someone overriding another person's Palace... I would've thought it was impossible until we saw Akechi in action."

"Let's get going. Sooner we get a handle on Arisawa's Palace, the sooner we can use him as a stepping stone to hit Shido," Akira said. He made for the door to the hideout and led the way outside.

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Sae regarded the paperwork on her desk in a stony silence, her brow furrowed in an attempt to make it look as if she were in deep concentration. Truthfully, however, it was all an act on her part. She had no real interest in actually completing this investigation, but she at least had to give the illusion that she was invested.

She wanted a promotion, of course. The idea of being the director still held some appeal to the brunette. But she wouldn't do it at the cost of her sisters freedom, or the futures of her friends. She wasn't about to go that far.

Sae exhaled through her nose, raising a pen into her left hand and scribbling down a few notes on the paper before her. Talking points for her next meeting with the police.
As she did this, she had to admit that she felt rather at peace with herself. Perhaps it was a side effect of no longer having a 'Palace' attached to her mind like a malignant tumor, or simply a result of being proud of Makoto, but there was no longer this needling force in the back of her mind. A constant agitation forcing her to be better, more prestigious.

Well, if she thought about it logically (or as much logic that Sae could apply to something so utterly insane as a world inside a person's heart) she supposed it made sense. She had had a 'Shadow' inside her, born from all her malformed desire. Her obsession with victory, the cruelty that had seeped into her after the death of her father, it had all congealed into that 'other self' Akira and his friends had spoken of.

With that gone, well that part of her had largely been chopped off. She was feeling quite good about herself now, even if knowing that she had such a part of herself was rather humbling.

Then there was the business with Akechi. She had thought of him as a friend, but it seemed that she had been naive in that assessment. She'd need to confront him at some point, for her own peace of mind. Even if she wouldn't like what he had to say for himself.

Sae's train of thought was derailed when she spotted a light from the corner of her eye, her gaze shifting toward the pen nestled in her left hand. Or rather, what had been a pen. Now clutched between her fingers was a sharp switchblade, the handle the same purple color as her pen. "What... what the..." Sae murmured, only now becoming aware of the aura circulating around the newly formed blade. A light linked to the studded wristband that had materialized under that hand.

"This is... my power?" She asked herself under her breath.

As soon as Sae said this, the switchblade changed its dimensions, the main blade elongating while two shorter edges sprouted from the peak of the handle, forming a rather wicked looking sai. The prosecutor swallowed hard at the sight. She hadn't felt any increase in weight at all, as if she was still handling a pen.

Sae continued to inspect it for several long moments, and then felt her eyes widening as the blade expanded yet further, until she was clutching a broadsword, a malignant purple aura shimmering around the edges. Once again she felt no change in weight.

That was enough to make Sae fully jolt in surprise, dropping the blade from her grasp. It only made it a few inches from Sae's hand before the aura faded, and it returned to being a normal pen, clattering harmlessly to the floor and rolling under her desk. The brunette blinked a few times at the pen, stunned silence filling her office.

So... that was her power. The ability to transform mundane objects into weapons, with those same weapons 'evolving' over time.

"I'll need to get that under control soon," Sae murmured. "So I don't accidentally shank someone with this."

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The sun was already starting to descend as the group gathered behind the SIU building, the shadow of the high wall behind Akira fully engulfing them. He took his phone from his pocket and activated the Nav app, staring into the enigmatic interface.
"So far we have 'Shohei Arisawa', and 'SIU Headquarters' listed as keywords. All we need now is to figure out what Arisawa sees this place as in his mind," Akira explained, glancing up at the group. "Any suggestions?"

Shiho stroked her chin slowly. "Well... this guy's been involved in law enforcement for most of his life, right? Legal stuff probably dominates his worldview," she reasoned.

"So like... a police station?" Ryuji suggested. The Nav quickly voiced disapproval.

"It's probably going to be harder than we think. Other than his allegiance, we really don't know much about Arisawa," Morgana mused. "But... we still gotta keep going. And we've got plenty of time to make suggestions."

Ann looked up at the SIU building, craning her neck in the process. "Something to do with the law... maybe a prison?" she suggested. Akira felt a bit of tension fill him. However, the Nav rejected this too.

"Maybe uuuuh... some kinda asylum?" Shizuka said. Another rejection.

Throughout this brief discussion, Yusuke had been making a few ponderous humming sounds as he tried to fathom their prospects. It was possible they were on the wrong track with Arisawa, but he did have one suggestion in mind.

"Shido's endgoal appears to be having control over the country, to be able to do as he pleases, and those who side with him must want a portion of that power for themselves. If we take this mindset into account, and consider how it applies to the rule of law, I can think of one location where a person can legally dictate the fates of others." The bluenette paused, as if intentionally drumming up dramatic effect. "A court."

"Candidate found!" the Nav chimed.

Akira slowly blinked. "Wow Yusuke, you were right on the money. You can be pretty sharp when you wanna be," the dark-haired boy said.

"Hm? What?" Yusuke glanced around.

Makoto sighed, her shoulders slumping slightly. "I think the moment has passed. Oh well..."

A soft smile graced Haru's face. "It was very impressive all the same. Should we get going?" She watched as Akira raised his phone slightly and gave the Nav another press. The air turned crisp and crackled around them with a resounding hiss of static, before their surroundings melted away in a purple haze.

The world around them was now very different. Dour and grim, grimy in some regards, and certainly far more insidious than how Kasumigaseki normally looked. The streets were cobbledstoned, the lampposts replaced with long iron poles capped with crackling oil lanterns. The nearby buildings all looked older too, like traditional Japanese houses with faded white walls, and sloped scarlet roofs in disrepair. The sky overhead was a deep orange shade, the drifting clouds black and imposing. Their clothes had already changed in transit. It seemed Arisawa viewed most people as a threat.

Looking around, Akira couldn't help but feel like they'd just been thrown back in time. The world
of the past, viewed through a cracked, filthy lens.

"Geez... this is fuckin' depressing," Shizuka murmured, raising her Ray-Ban's off. "I mean, Palaces are usually fucked up, but they're at least opulent. This is even more grim than Kaneshiro's weird money-world."

"Feels like this place just went through the war," Sergio murmured, examining their surroundings, the rundown houses around them covered in a thin layer of grime. "Say... you don't think Arisawa was around during World War 2, right?"

Makoto shook her head. "I doubt it... while this location does look as if it's been firebombed, Arisawa would be well past retirement age if he had been born at that time... but if he was raised some time after the war, his parents could have filled his head with imagery like this," Makoto explained.

"If the surroundings look so depressing, I'm worried to see what the actual Palace will look like..." Haru said. Regardless, she slowly looked up toward the SIU Building behind them. What had once been a normal-sized office building had been replaced with an opulent black brick structure, with a red tiled roof. At each corner of the roof, in place of gargoyles, stood a solid gold statue of a male figure in ceremonial judge robes and wig. In his outstretched right hand he held a heavy scales, while his left was clutching a heavy sword.

"Definitely looks bigger than the regular building," Morgana mused. "And those statues give off a pretty bad vibe. Like this guy has a 'judge, jury, and executioner' complex," the feline added.

Akira inspected the looming black structure for several moments. Even with a wall obscuring it, there was an imposing vibe to it. "Well, there's no sense in waiting around. Let's head around front and start checking inside."

"So this is the Metaverse... it really does feel like another world. Even the air tastes different here, and walking around has an almost dreamlike quality to it." Hearing Hifumi speak, the others turned to inspect the shogi princess and her new phantom attire.

Her mask was a white crescent that fell over the right half of her face and enveloped her nose, the ghostly material having an almost unnatural cleanliness to it. Hifumi's outfit, meanwhile, was quite elegant and refined. A flowing red longcoat worn over a white shirt with a distinct ruffle under her neck, her dark trousers leading toward a pair of knee high brown boots. A steel rapier was sheathed at her right hip, the handle ornate and gilded with bands of gold. A sniper rifle rested on her back, a sleek black modern number with a glowing red scope.

Sergio inspected her for a moment. "Well, the Phantom of the Opera was the original chuuni," he murmured under his breath. "You look magnificent Maestro. A dashing Phantom Thief if ever there was one."

Hifumi grinned proudly. "I feel pretty dashing right now... Oh this is so cool," Hifumi said, inspecting herself and clearly admiring every inch of her new attire. "You all look pretty great. I know you said that clothing changes here, but I didn't expect the change to be quite so... stylish! And you Mona, you look adorable!"

"Thanks...?" Morgana awkwardly replied.

Akira moved from the wall and started making his way around at a quick pace, his friends falling
in behind him. While the cobblestone streets seemed deserted, they didn't want to be too hasty in their movements. They were cautious, scanning their surroundings as they went. But aside from the crackling of the oil lamps, the distant cawing of crows and other such carrion birds, there was an eerie silence around them. As if they were the only people left on earth.

The heavy iron gates at the front wall were open when the group arrived, allowing them a clear passage into the vast tiled courtyard. The sight awaiting them sent a few chills through the group.

A long wooden gallows was set up along the right edge of the courtyard, with four nooses and platforms setup along it. Two of the ropes had been dyed red from an excess of blood. Off to the left edge of the courtyard were a pair of freshly sharpened guillotines, the wooden frames varnished to perfection. A few feet away from those two was a large breaking wheel, several sections of the wood being stained red.

"Jesus Christ," Shizuka breathed. "This guy is something else already... I know having a Palace doesn't make you evil, but all this execution and torture stuff... this guy must have some sorta screw loose."

"I see he's an... Old Testament sort of man," Sergio mused.

Akira scowled at the sight, before pressing on and making for the large archway of the front door. "Better be on guard when we get in there. Stick close everyone," he instructed. Akira reached the door and examined it for several long seconds. For the sake of caution, he touched his mask with his left hand and promptly summoned Crom Cruach.

The hulking white serpent slithered toward the doors, slamming his palms into the dense wood. They proved quite heavy, creaking noisily while sprays of dust started surging up from under the doors. Slowly but surely they opened out to the foyer. Compared to the grisly courtyard, the white marble floor and walls were immaculately clean.

"All clear. Okay guys, let's get moving," Akira said, making his way deeper inside.

One by one, his allies followed his lead, making steadily for the courthouse interior. However, being the last in line, Shizuka paused as she reached the doors. A strange chill ran through her, and she couldn't help but feel like she was being watched.

Shizuka turned briefly, only just catching a glimpse of something small flickering around the edge of the gate before vanishing entirely. Like a small length of string floating around the corner. "A balloon?" Shizuka murmured to herself. She sighed and decided to brush it off. No way something like that would be in a creep factory like this. It was just her mind playing tricks on her...

Continuing inside, the small entryway opened out into an expansive courtroom, with rows of benches leading up toward the judges podium and witness stand. A pair of box offices loomed near the ceiling, giving another vantage for spectators. The room was marginally bigger than what one would expect in a normal courtroom. It was totally vacant, aside from the Arditi strolling inside.

"Something tells me this isn't the only courtroom in here," Makoto mused, examining their surroundings until her eyes settled on the doors at the far end of the room. "Oracle?"

Futaba nodded slightly, an inky black tendril materialising in her right hand and slithering down until it sank into the floor, melding into the tiles. The redhead was silent for several moments, before speaking up. "There are about five floors above us, and one below."
"Any idea where the treasure is?" Ryuji asked.

"Top floor," Futaba concisely said. "But... well there's a good deal to this floor, and we have to walk for a bit before we even get to the stairs."

Ann sighed loudly, glancing off to her side. "Greeeeaaaat... They can never just have the treasure at the front door, can they?"

"Heh. Where's the fun in that?" Akira asked wryly. "In all seriousness, we should get to stepping. I want to make some headway here as quickly as possible."

"Oh, is that so?"

The mysterious voice caused the group to tense, none of them knowing just where it was coming from. Suddenly a shadowy shape began to form behind the bench, swiftly taking on a humanoid shape. In an instant it gained mass and detail, becoming a human figure to match the golden statues they had seen outside: A wrinkled old man in refined court dress, a puffy white wig resting atop his balding head. The yellow glow from his eyes radiated off the wrinkles of his jowels. Just like the statues, he was clutching a sword in one hand and a scales in the other.

"Ill-bred rabble like you inside my courthouse? Disgraceful. I would have thought dogs would know better than to intrude," he haughtily said.

Ryuji's eyes narrowed. "Wh- you got some nerve you creepy old bastard! You Shohei Arisawa?!

Arisawa sneered down at him. "So, the yankee thug knows how to speak. Congratulations, you're slightly smarter than a pig... yes, I am Judge Arisawa. Your superior. You may genuflect."

Silence lingered between the Arditi for several moments, only broken when Shizuka asked "What the hell does genuflect mean?"

"Kneeling out of respect," Sergio murmured. "Like... a knight to a king. Or a worshiper to god," he explained.

"Oh. Of course," Shizuka sarcastically murmured. "Yeah, blow it out your ass. All we're here for is your treasure!"

Her words earned a contemptible growl from Arisawa. "Human garbage going where they aren't meant to be, solely to steal from their betters. What a surprise," he sarcastically said. "Fortunately, I have ways to deal with the likes of you."

As he said this, Arisawa raised his sword high. A pillar of darkness suddenly exploded from the floor in front of the Arditi, causing the teens to reflexively jump back as the twisting dark matter rapidly formed into a solid figure. It soon took the shape of a lanky crimson figure with unnaturally long limbs and flapping bat wings, clutching a dark trident in his right hand. For as draconic as his body looked, the dark-haired humanoid head he was sporting made him look particularly unpleasant.

"Belial," Arisawa curtly said, strolling to the door behind the bench. "I leave these ill-bred urchins to you. Teach them to respect my rule."
Arisawa's Shadow vanished, leaving the group alone with the looming demon. He examined the
gang of thieves, a guttural growl leaving him. Belial's tail lashed out, sweeping away the nearby
benches and shattering them against the walls.

Akira backed up slightly, gesturing for the others to fan away from him. "Spread out. We don't
want to be in one convenient pile for this guy." Thank goodness this courtroom was so large in
size. The group complied, moving away from Akira. Only Ann, Futaba, and Sergio stayed close,
while two other groups gathered to his left and right. "Oracle, what're we up against?"

"He's... pretty strong," Futaba said, blinking behind her goggles. "Already I can tell he's got a lot of
fire magic on his side. But he's freakin' tough in a physical sense too."

"Guess he's our gatekeeper than. Let's thrash him and hurry on forward," Akira said.

"Joker, duck!" Akira acted on a reflex as soon as he heard Hifumi's voice, only narrowly avoiding a
sharp swing of Belial's trident. "Jump back!" Belial's trident struck the floor harshly, the ensuing
explosion shattering the tiles and sending the four Arditi skidding backward.

Before Belial could take another step, Kamu Susanoo suddenly rushed at his right side, his sword
clashing with Belial's trident with a resounding boom, shattering the floor beneath the two titanic
figures. Belial snarled, his tail lashing into Susanoo's stomach, the blow winding Yusuke and
making him recoil. But he promptly bought enough time for Sergio to move to some of the
remaining benches, with Breakthru tapping several of them in quick succession.

The benches rushed forward like wooden missiles, supercharged with an abundance of kinetic
energy, and swiftly closed the gap toward Belial. All four slammed into the looming demon,
exploding into clouds of splinters against his scaly hide. The impacts managed to jolt Belial and
sent him staggering backward. Not enough to significantly harm him, but it did leave an opening
for the Arditi to adjust their positioning.

"Alright, he's a big demon guy, so... bless should work, hopefully," Shiho murmured as she
stopped near the left hand wall, Eris' form appearing in front of her. Her Persona shoved both of
her hands forward, a focused beam of light shooting out toward the crimson demon.

However, Belial managed to recover quickly, weaving his snakelike body away from the beam. A
section of it grazed his right shoulder, scorching the scales in passing and making the beast hiss.
The demon puffed his cheeks out and suddenly fired out a bullet of fire, striking the wall beside
Shiho as she tried to jump away. The shockwave of the explosion still slammed into her side and
made her cry out, tongues of fire scorching along her left arm as she hit the ground.

Seiten Taisei lunged at Belial, his cudgel and Belial's trident slamming together in a series of
thunderous clashes that shook the courtroom violently. Each strike made the figures recoil away
from each other, before redoubling their efforts and striking back with twice the force as before.
All the while Hifumi was shouting directions to Ryuji, with the blond angling his Persona
accordingly.

He couldn't think quickly when it came to class, but it was a whole different game when it came to
fighting.

Seiten Teisei recoiled, Belial's next swing going wide and leaving the looming demon disoriented
and spinning slightly. The monkey shoved his staff forward, a tremendous bolt of lightning
exploding against the demon and scorching his chest, pulling a long hiss from him. He managed to
power through the pain, his left leg snapping up in a kick that drove into Ryuji's chest and caused
the blond to smack painfully against the wall behind him, grunting.
Now that he had a little breathing room, Belial lashed his left hand outward, unleashing a volley of fireballs that surged across the courtroom, the ensuing explosive bursts slamming into the ground and walls. The group scattered, trying to avoid the explosions, while Ann held Hecate in front of her to shield Shiho as her best friend rose to her feet.

While Belial was unleashing his rain of fire, a few explosions managing to do some damage as they erupted near the fleeing Arditi, Shizuka had turned herself invisible and took the time to inspect their surroundings. They needed to daze this guy to get some good licks in, but how would they manage that?

Examining where Belial was standing, and the area surrounding him, an idea promptly came to her mind.

"Hey, Noir, Mona," Shizuka quickly said. "I got an idea. Think you could keep tall, red, and ugly in place for a few seconds?"

"I'll do what I can Sting," Haru earnestly said.

"This creep?" Morgana asked, swiftly bouncing away from another explosion. The feline landed neatly, grinning confidently. "No problem at all." As Morgana said this, he quickly summoned Zorro. The broad-shouldered figure gave a quick flourish of his sword, whipping up a small cyclone that gathered up a large swathe of debris, which he then rapidly cast toward the crimson demon.

The razor sharp winds lashed into Belial, opening fresh cuts along his body, while the repeated blows from the debris kept him disoriented and unable to strike back, his head regularly flinching away from the exploding chunks. While this was going on, Haru focused on the snakelike creature and summoned Milady.

The armoured figure chuckled haughtily, waving her fan forward as she summoned a powerful surge of psionic energy. The crackling halo of purple and yellow energy dropped down onto Belial like a great weight, the sudden slam making the beast snarl as his feet sank abruptly into the cracked ground. He struggled and strained against the invisible force pinning him in place and hindering his arms. But it was clear from Haru's furrowed brow, and her slowly rising breathing that she couldn't keep this up for too long.

While this was going on, Houdini's unseen form shot up toward a box office positioned above Belial, immediately carving through the supports keeping it in place with quick cleaves of her limbs. There was a loud creaking sound as the balcony began to buckle without any proper support. With the underside damaged, Houdini moved behind the balcony and started forcing her heels against it to fully pry the construct from its moorings.

Belial let out a resounding roar, the sudden flex of his power abruptly shattering the psionic field pressing down on him. Haru gasped harshly, sliding down to her knees from a powerful spike of pain that resonated through her. Now that he had an opening, Belial swung his trident at the floor and loosed a sweep of debris that surged toward Morgana, several heavy rocks pelting the feline and knocking him harshly to the ground. The others were still steadying themselves from the barrage of fireballs, scuffed and soot-stained.

The balcony came loose with one hard push from Houdini's feet, the heavy frame dropping down and smashing into the top of Belial's head, shattering to pieces on impact. He snarled, recoiling in a daze and staggering on his cloven feet from the disorienting blow.

"Crom Cruach!"
Akira's newest Persona slithered forward, a throaty laugh leaving the antlered serpent as he shoved his hands outward. A swirling wave of purple, black, and white almighty energy shot outward and closed the gap. The peak of the beam exploded against Belial's right side, the chamber shaking violently from the ensuing explosion as it pumped out enough energy to blast Belial's right arm off entirely.

The demon reeled back, set to counter, only for the crack of a gunshot to distract him. A round from Hifumi's sniper exploded near his eye, making him hiss and pull back, only for another to hit him in the same spot a split second later.

Hifumi had taken up a comfortable position near the back of the courtroom, firing off round after round at Belial's face. While they didn't have enough firepower to seriously harm him, the near-blinding shots were keeping him off his toes. And with Flaming Telepath at her side, she was able to perfectly predict exactly where to shoot.

"Guys," Hifumi said. "I can't keep this up forever, and I think I'm just making him mad... this vile brimstone beast is charging something big! His ultimate technique!" she exclaimed.

"I'll make an opening," Makoto said, a glow engulfing her as she abruptly mounted Johanna. The spectral bike's eyes flashed powerfully, the air beneath Belial catching fire in a sudden explosion that launched him a foot in the air.

The beast writhed, thin bat wings flapping madly as he tried to right himself. But in the process, the beast was wide open. Crom Cruach leapt high, his broad shadow falling over Belial's body.

His left hand stabbed downward like an ivory knife, long claws shredding through the crimson flesh of his neck. With a powerful flex, Crom Cruach severed Belial's head from his shoulders, his entire body rapidly dissolving into shadowy goo as the two parts separated. Just like that, the Shadow was gone.

With the dust settling, the group were quick to gather again. Shizuka surveyed the wreckage of the courtroom, the shattered floor and the piles of destroyed benches. They had done a real number on this place in only a few short minutes. "Okay... so the gatekeeper was pretty tough, but we took care of him... Oracle, what do you make of this place so far? Threat level, I mean."

"Not much different than Sae's Palace... that demon guy was about as strong as the Shadows we were facing there, maybe a little tougher than average. I figure we can take this place pretty easy if we pace ourselves," Futaba said.

Akira nodded to their redheaded genius, turning his attention toward the bench. "In that case... let's hit the trail, shall we?"

Their work in this depraved courthouse was only just starting.
The group were trying their hardest to get through Arisawa's Palace at a quick rate, but it proved to be easier said than done. As was perhaps to be expected of a high-ranking bureaucrat, the path of getting to him was regularly obstructed with red tape and obtuse barriers, manifesting in the form of locked doorways that they needed to hunt down keys for throughout his courthouse.

While also contending with Shadows, of course. The meat shields of Arisawa's Palace were rather sturdy, and certainly numerous, providing enough challenge to hinder them further. But, slowly and steadily, they were making their way toward the peak of the courthouse.

The Arditi came to a stop at a heavy steel door, exceptionally broad and tall in size. It was distinct for having four golden skulls embedded in the face of it, each grinning head having a visible keyhole in the mouth. Akira made his way around, slotting each key into place one by one.

"Okay, I'm just gonna say it," Ryuji remarked, as Akira worked on the locks. "I seriously, seriously hate this guy. Bad enough that he's an elitist dickbag, but his Palace has been a pain in the ass too. I woulda' thought an old geezer would be easier to get by."

"Arisawa has been at this for a long time. You don't stay in the legal field for that long if you don't have a strong will," Makoto replied. She shook her left hand, casting off some Shadow goo that had become affixed to the iron knuckles in their last battle. "Sis doesn't talk too much about work, but she has mentioned her boss once or twice... She said he's pretty bullheaded, and vicious when he gets into a crusading mood."

"Still... he has a very worrying view of justice. I wonder how he came to be so disdainful of the world?" Haru asked.

Shizuka lazily rolled her shoulders. "Who knows, and who cares? He's a crazy old bastard either way. Guess he just thinks that the law is too soft." And by working with Shido, presumably, Arisawa would be able to better mold the law to suit his worldview.

The last key was clicked into place, all four skulls lighting up as the mechanisms in the doorframe rumbled to life. A split suddenly formed at the middle of the door, pushing outward slowly. Akira backed away from it, giving them the room to open fully. All that waited ahead of them was a rather dark hallway.

Ann groaned, slumping forward slightly. "Seriously? We gotta grope around in the dark now?"

"Can you get a reading up ahead Oracle?" Akira asked.

"Mm. It's a narrow corridor that leads into a big oval chamber. I guess it might be another courtroom?" the redhead reasoned. She paused, her brow furrowing "Hm?"

Sergio gave her a sideways glance. "Something wrong?"

"No it's... I guess it was nothing," Futaba replied. For a moment though, she vaguely thought here was another presence nearby. Probably just Arisawa's Shadow, upon reflection. Or it was just a
glitch on Necronomicon's end, since she wasn't picking up anything else now.

The group pressed on into the darkened corridor, moving at a steady pace. For safety's sake they decided to go in single file, as the corridor proved itself to be rather narrow. A wailing breeze rolled toward them, the chilly air striking through the group. It didn't take long for the end of the tunnel to come into view, a thin shaft of light radiating toward them through the split in a set of double doors.

As they walked, Hifumi spoke up while keeping her tone soft and quiet. "I don't think you'd see a tunnel like this in a regular courthouse."

"You wouldn't see deformed shadowy monsters either," Yusuke replied. "But this is far from the strangest thing we've seen in a Palace so far... and wait until you see Mementos for yourself."

Upon reaching the doors ahead, Akira and Ryuji took a door each and started pushing them outward. The heavy iron hinges protested noisely to the movements, and as the doors opened out a near-blinding spray of light cut through the darkness that surrounded the teens.

The group recoiled slightly, eyes adjusting to the light until their vision settled and they were able to better take in the scenery. Just as Futaba had predicted, the room before them was a large oval. But it certainly wasn't a courtroom in any conventional sense.

Instead, the group found themselves striding into a large colosseum, bordered by a tall grey wall that had rows of vacant seats behind it. Large iron torches had been set up around the edges of the colosseum, crackling with vibrant orange flames that lit up the sandy grounds. A few weapons were buried in the sands.

Finally, at the opposite end of the large room, was a large stone stand that had a throne resting atop it. Arisawa's Shadow promptly materialized in it, his gnarled old hands pressed to the firm golden armrests. Just as this happens, the heavy doors slammed shut behind the team, blocking off the way they came.

"Well, this whole ordeal has been an... unpleasant surprise to me," Arisawa coldly said, regarding the team from his lofty position. "Not only has a gang of street thugs forced their way into my courthouse, but somehow you scum have also managed to get past all the barriers I've set up in here. This system is meant to be mine to control, designed to leave rats like you where you belong: Under. My. Thumb."

"The legal system isn't just some toy you can play with at your leisure!" Makoto barked. There was genuine anger in her eyes, azure light flickering around the brunette's body.

"And what gives you the right to decide such things anyway?" Shizuka asked. "This ain't a dictatorship. One guy isn't supposed to be able to decide the law, and it sure as hell shouldn't be a violent old nutter like you."

Arisawa sneered slightly. "Hnf... I can tell already that you're a foreigner. You speak Japanese with some fluency, but you still have a rough edge or two... but yes, you are correct, one man cannot decide the law. Not yet, at least." He adjusted himself in his throne, a sly grin on his face. "Once Shido's in power though, he'll let me do as I like. I can make a legal system devoid of any mercy for the scum of the earth, while the weak and useless are steadily purged from our nation. I know you think that sounds impossible, but..."
The old man trailed into a chuckle, the thieves watching him carefully. "Well... How should I put this? The unwashed masses won't care what the future government does. With cognitive science on our side, manipulating them through all aspects of society. So long as the general populace are placated, kept in dull ignorance, the ruling body can shape the nation as they see fit... we'll regain the honor of our nation, and make it stronger than it ever was before!" he boasted.

Silence lingered in the colosseum for several moments, before Akira finally replied. "You're completely out of your mind..."

Futaba bristled. "You plan on using cognitive science as a weapon?!" she shouted, clenching her fists. They had long suspected that Wakaba was targeted because of her research, and Arisawa's statements were confirmation enough. Not only was Wakaba killed for her research, but that same research was being twisted by the greatest enemy the group had. Futaba was practically shaking with her own anger. "You... you... I'll never forgive you! So help me, I... I'll tear your group to shreds, and take that research out of your hands!"

Arisawa snorted. "Spare me your indignation."

"But... why? What could drive you to be so cruel and callous?" Haru asked, a small quiver in her soft voice.

The old man regarded her for a moment, before sighing in vague disinterest. "I suppose you urchins are but children, you haven't seen what I've seen over the decades. The steady decline of our nation. The rise of criminality and degeneracy, the cancer consuming our country... khh. My own parents spoke of the former strength and dignity of the nation, before the war shattered it. And the years that followed pissed on the remnants. But no more."

"Or you could try getting over it like a normal person. The rest of the country is getting along fine," Sergio flatly said. "You stupid bastard..." he muttered, glancing off to his side.

"Your objections have been noted. Now..." The insidious judge raised his right hand, a gavel suddenly materializing in his grasp. "Die."

He gave the small hammer a resounding bang against his armrest, the gesture sending tremors through the colosseum. Futaba gasped as the sands started to stir, the lenses of her goggles glowing a bright red. "Guys! Two enemies coming in hot, both pretty strong! Crush 'em, and then we can stomp this old creep into the mud!"

The first figure burst out of the ground with a flash of holy light, his looming visage floating above the group. A mysterious man in a dark hooded robe, a large wooden wheel positioned at his back. Arcs of flame coiled around the bottom of the wheel, radiating with a malicious power. A Throne, Akira recognised his like quickly enough.

The second appeared in a flash of dark fire, the sands turning to glass near his feet. He was slightly larger than the Throne, a blue skinned humanoid with a rotund belly. A tiger-skin robe adorned him, gold bangles dancing around his wrists and ankles. In the Shadow's right hand he clutched a staff sculpted from a human spine, the top half of a skull resting atop it. "You have summoned Baal Zebul to handle trifling brats such as these? Very well. I shall make it painful," the towering Shadow said.

Futaba inspected the duo for a few moments, scanning them intimately. Makoto, likewise, was closely watching both Shadows. "Guess we need to get through these guys to clear the colosseum..."
Big Blue's definitely got an evil aura going on, but I can also sense a chill near that staff of his," Futaba said, taking a step back as Baal Zebul took a weighty step forward. "And his silent friend, well there's no point in using bless on him, and that flaming wheel means fire is probably no good."

Akira soaked this information in, rapidly formulating a plan of attack. "Fox, Diabolik, Mona, Noir, you're with me. Nemesis, Skull, Panther, Queen, Sting, you go after Baal. Maestro, hang back with Oracle and offer covering fire. We gotta try and keep these two apart," he quickly said.

"Right," Makoto replied. "In that case, give me a sec and I'll put some distance between them... Hey, ugly!" she shouted, suddenly getting Baal's attention. He turned, only to be immediately struck by a nuclear burst from Johanna that sent him skidding a few inches backward. With the demon stunned, Makoto rocketed past him on her bike and made for the far end of the oval.

Baal Zebul snarled and started charging after her, giving a sharp whip of his staff. Twinkles of light flashed in the formerly vacant eye sockets, followed immediately after by sharp spikes of ice exploding out of the ground, rapidly closing in on Makoto's mobile form. A spike erupted under Johanna's front wheel, the sudden burst catapulting Makoto off her vanishing Persona. Her body smashed roughly into the dense wall, letting out a pained gasp from the collision.

A fresh volley of icicles flew from his staff, aiming to pummel Makoto while she was trying to rise up. However they didn't make it too far before a twisting arc of flame lashed across the air and intercepted them, melting Baal's attack instantly. He turned to face Ann and let out an annoyed snarl. He was able to weave away with impressive speed, trying to avoid another burst of flame that grazed and blackened his right shoulder.

The demon countered quickly, his left hand shooting upward. Lightning crackled between his gnarled fingers, followed immediately by a bolt of it surging toward Ann. Unable to dodge she promptly summoned Hecate, her Persona blocking the incoming blast as best she could. Ann cried out, being promptly driven to one knee from the lingering aftershock.

Baal turned as a shadow fell over him, his staff swinging around and catching Seiten Taisei's cudgel on the downswing. Soon the duo were exchanging a flurry of fast blows, each managing to strike and parry each other at a steady rate, a few purple whelts forming on Baal's exposed skin. For every hit Ryuji took however, he managed to grit his teeth and endure. He had the strength to buy time for the girls.

While this exchange of blows was going on, Shizuka scanned her surroundings, paying specific attention to the weapons in the sand near her. She suddenly plucked a half-buried scutum from the ground, handling its awkward weight and size easily enough. It seemed to be some kind of steel replica of one.

"Hm..." Shizuka examined it closely, an idea forming in her head. She quickly jogged to Ann, handing the shield over to Houdini by the time she reached the blonde. "Hey, Panther," she quickly said, helping Ann rise to her feet with a pull of her hands. "I think I have a nasty little idea to halt this guy."

A hard blow to the shoulder drove Ryuji to his knees, the athlete crying out in pain. But, as he went down, he drew upon his power and directed Seiten Taisei to swing up. The butt of his cudgel slammed into Baal's chin, causing him to skid backward and into a volley of light arrows from Eris. Shiho's attack caused a streak of scorches along his broad back and earned a snarl from the demon, but he managed to endure quite easily.
Baal Zebul turned on his heel and thrust his staff forward. A hailstorm of sharpened ice came racing toward Shiho, who took to dodging as best she could. Hifumi was calling out directions to her, which Shiho promptly followed. Even so, a few points still managed to cut along the outside of her arms and legs, drawing blood in passing.

A sudden blow of nuclear energy exploded against Baal's side, the eruption staggering the demon and halting his barrage before it could fully hit Shiho. Makoto breathed a small sigh of relief, but remained set to move in case Baal turned his focus to her.

A volley of icicles forced Makoto into a swift charge rightward, his attack shredding the wall where she had been standing mere seconds ago. With the brunette briefly driven away, Baal Zebul was quick to bolster his defense, summoning a dense hemispherical wall of ice at his flank to block off Seiten Taisei. He managed this just in time, Ryuji's Persona firmly striking the barrier and sending a cobweb of cracks through the material.

He wasn't given much time to celebrate his own quick thinking before Houdini leapt down on him, clutching the sides of the scutum firmly. There was an echoing clang as the underside slammed into Baal's face, with Houdini holding the shield firmly over his head as the beast thrashed and writhed. He was trying to swing his arms back around to elbow the Stand behind him, but Houdini's slim and agile frame was doing a capable job of avoiding his rough movements.

"Panther! Now!" Shizuka shouted.

Hecate abruptly appeared in the air above Baal, throwing her chains forward in a single arc. A focused burst of hellfire erupted from her familiars and struck the shield, instantly turning it red hot, with the molten sludge rapidly falling across Baal's screaming head.

Houdini jumped back and promptly swung both arms forward, her forearms twisting like a pair of ebony cyclones. The cooling wind from her rapid movements were enough to drain the heat from the metal, with it hardening and leaving Baal Zebul's head encased in a gruesome prison. Shizuka would probably feel guilty if he wasn't a Shadow who's name sounded weirdly like Beelzebub.

With the Shadow briefly blinded, Houdini rushed forward and pummeled his stomach with flurries of punches and kicks. "BAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZU!" Soon her rapidfire assault had left Baal Zebul's torso dyed purple, and the demon was starting to stumble.

He swung blindly, forcing the Stand to yank herself backward. Seiten Taisei surged into Baal from behind, delivering a crushing blow to the back of his head. The fat Shadow was catapulted off his feet and smashed violently into the sands, kicking up a flurry on both sides of him. "You like that fat boy?!" Ryuji shouted. "Got more where that came from! Get your ass up so I can knock it the eff back down again!"

Baal Zebul let out a muffled roar and raised his staff high, a sudden pressurized burst of icy wind exploding out from around him. It kicked with enough force to send the teens skidding back across the sands, and they were soon force to flee as the demon started firing out bursts of icicles in all directions.

Shizuka took to sprinting leftward, Houdini moving in front of her and rapidly punching through the swarm of ice raining down on her. But, for as fast as Houdini's fists were, two sharpened points still passed her and punched into Shizuka's left shoulder. She gasped in pain, very nearly losing her footing from the jolt of freezing pain surging through the left half of her body. Ryuji, meanwhile,
was struck in the ribs by a heavy chunk of ice that knocked him flat and left him in a clear daze. With a blizzard continuing to churn around him, Baal Zebul was quick to start prying the metal off his face through brute force.

On the other end of the arena, the rest of the team were busily dodging a volley of fireballs from the airborne Throne, a radiant aura hanging around the robed figure that made it hard to look directly at him. The explosions from his attacks rocked the arena, leaving smoldering patches of glass wherever they struck.

Yusuke was avoiding the volley with quick bursts of superhuman quickness, almost invisible to the naked eye. He had already managed to score some hits against the shadowy figure, and his control of ice marked him as a clear threat to the floating Shadow.

Skidding off to the side, Yusuke used his Persona to rapidly erect a wall of ice that blocked several blazing explosions. The wall very nearly buckled, cracks spreading across the frosty surface. With a buffer between him and his foe, he was quick to direct Susanoo upward, his Persona unleashing a focused wave of frozen wind loaded with heavy ice chunks. Throne weaved away from the attacks, the aura around him flaring up to melt the projectiles that got too close.

A sniper round suddenly exploded against Throne's right temple, the flash making his head snap to one side. It didn't massively hurt the floating figure, but it did distract him and gave Akira the opening he needed.

"Rangda!" The masked Persona rushed toward Throne from behind, her claws gleaming with malignant curse energy. She swung her hands in swift, deep flourishes, her infused claws slashing along Throne's chest and leaving deep gashes where they passed. The Shadow twisted, writhing under Rangda's bladed assault. Throne twisted toward the Persona and slammed the wheel into Rangda, the hard blow smashing Akira onto his back, a spurt of blood leaving his mouth.

The slightly injured Shadow threw his left hand forward, a wave of blessed light racing out from his palm. Zorro dove in front of the beam, causing it to explode against his back. Morgana gasped harshly, struggling to stay upright. But he managed to power through the pain, his Persona rapidly twirling his rapier and kicking up a powerful gale over the sands. Soon he kicked up enough to generate a strong smoke screen, obscuring himself and Akira from sight.

"G-geez," Morgana breathed, moving in closer to their leader. The two were soon working to dodge Throne's blind fire as he shot bursts of blessed light through the sand cloud. "That guy might be skinny, but he hits like a truck!"

"Appreciate the save," Akira replied, rubbing his mouth dry. "But be careful. You're not a tank."

"I know I know..." Morgana murmured, glancing off to the side. "But I'm not just gonna stand by to let you get hit."

Haru moved quickly, wanting to give the two an opening to ensure their safety. Milady floated above the strawberry blonde, her armoured dress opening out to reveal her usual assortment of heavy weapons. Flashes of muzzle fire erupted around the elegant Persona, a spray of bullets and shells surging toward Throne like a tide of molten lead.

Several rounds struck the flying figure directly, forcing him to recoil from the explosive bursts that tore into his body. Sergio, meanwhile, skidded to a halt on the opposite side of their foe, his Stand rapidly pummeling the stack of weapons buries in the sand in front of him.
A bouquet of swords and spears erupted out of the sands and shot up toward Throne, only two of them going wide while the others punched into Throne's body and became lodged inside him, turning him into a floating pin cushion. He let out a tremendous growl, his beady eyes glowing a violent red shade as his aura intensified around him.

Bursts of fire shot from both of Throne's hand, the first exploding near Sergio and knocking him off his feet, the blond letting out a pained shout as tongues of flame scorches his forearms. Milady blocked the blast as it neared Haru, the ensuing explosion making the heiress cry out as she was promptly driven to one knee. She panted harshly for breath, beads of sweat rolling down her brow. She couldn't afford to take too many hits like that.

Kamu Susanoo leapt toward the floating figure, the edge of his blade swinging downward and colliding with Throne's wheel as he swung it toward the ghostly samurai. The two figures struggled against each other before Throne shunted Susanoo backward, his heel driving into Susanoo's stomach and knocking the wind out of Yusuke.

But, that brief bout of distraction gave Akira the chance he needed. Rangda burst through the cloud of dust, racing into Throne from behind. Her claws stabbed straight through the Shadow's torso, a breathless gagging noise leaving the Shadow. Rangda cackled and gave a sudden upswing of her claws, shredding through Throne's skull entirely, the robed figure falling apart like shredded cheese, before dissolving utterly.

Having dealt with one Shadow, Akira turned to see the closing stages of the battle with Baal Zebul too.

A powerful bolt of lightning exploded from the Shadow's palm, exploding against Eris and driving Shiho backward, the dark haired girl gasping in pain as she was left jittering from the shock. For as big as he was, and while being marked by welts and burns from his head down to his waist, Baal was quick enough to leap away from an incoming swing from Seiten Taisei.

The tip of his club smashed into the ground, unleashing a series of tremors on impact. Baal Zebul responded quickly, glaring through the twisted knots of melted flesh around his eyes. He raised his skull staff high and unleashed a volley of icicles that pelted Seiten Taisei, making Ryuji grunt as a series of thin scars opened up along his chest and shoulders.

A sniper round exploded in Baal's left eye, making the beast shriek as his eye exploded in a spray of dark matter. He jerked back, ending his attack abruptly. It left him wide open as Makoto zoomed in from the side, the eyes of her Persona aglow as she pummeled Baal with a volley of explosions.

Unable to defend himself, Houdini lunged at Baal from behind and kicked him fiercely in the backs of his knees. Baal stumbled off balance, a burst of lightning surging from his body and forcing Makoto and Shizuka backward. But even doing this couldn't save Baal Zebul. All he managed to do was make himself an easier target by pushing his opponents away from him.

Ann took aim, her eyes narrowing fiercely as a roaring orb of fire formed between Hecate's familiar's. An aura of pale blue light was crackling around Ann's body, with the blonde focusing her power to amplify her next attack. The strain was considerable, but she endured. The blast raced forward as a white hot column of flame that seemed to instantly close in on Baal, engulfing him in a roaring explosion that drowned out his dying shrieks. The ensuing blast was near blinding, forcing the Arditi to glance away until the earth-shuddering force of it subsided.
Once Ann's blast had finished, and the smoke had cleared, the team saw that there was nothing left of Baal but a steaming plate of glass to mark his ashes.

"This..." Arisawa clenched his fists, his eyes bulging out of his head. "This cannot be! How am I having so much trouble disposing of trash like you?!!"

One by one the group started to rise up. They all seemed a little fatigued in their own way, their attire marked by scuffs, scratches, and scorches. But they were enduring. "You're not going to have your way," Akira said firmly. "I won't let you, or Shido, or anyone else use the country like a playground... I've had enough of corrupt bullshit!"

"Kkkh!" Arisawa rose from his throne, gritting his teeth as angry veins popped up along his forehead. "We'll win in the end! We'll build a strong country, and purge the louts and degenerates infesting us! Starting with you wretched Phantom Thieves!" he snarled.

"Bring it on... We've beaten every cheap trick in here, and we're gonna rob you blind," Ryuji growled.

Arisawa gave the teens another harsh glare and snapped his bony fingers, a whirlwind of darkness engulfing him before he vanished once again.

Once he was gone, Akira sighed softly in relief. "Everyone alright?" he asked.

"I know what electricity tastes like now," Shiho murmured, rubbing the scorch that had formed on her stomach.

"We'll need to take a breather and heal up," Makoto replied. She grimaced, rolling her shoulders to work through some of the pain she felt resonating through her body. "But that aside, I think we're making good progress. Should we end our exploration for today?"

"I want to explore just a little more, and then we'll call it," Akira replied. A rumble at the far end of the arena drew his attention, and he found himself watching the previously closed door slowly being pulled upward by a rumbling mechanism. "Still, to think that there are people like Arisawa... they're willing to screw over everyone in the country on some insane plan to make things the way they want it to be."

Futaba frowned. "And using Mom's research to do it... I didn't want to believe it, but I think I knew it was something like that as soon as you guys recruited me. It still hurts, knowing she died because of corrupt creeps like him," she muttered.

"Yeah well... we'll show 'em the error of their ways soon enough. Don't worry, that research will be in your hands soon enough," Shizuka assured her.

The group made for the newly opened exit, intent on exploring a little more of the Palace. They were certain they were close to the treasure, and once they had that they could strike a big blow against Shido. Just a little more time, that was all they needed. Now more than ever they understood the threat posed by Shido and his ilk. They weren't just evil, they were batshit insane.

A lonesome red balloon drifted through the now empty arena. The walls flickered and twisted in its passing.

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There was a noticeable chill in the air as they crept closer to November, and Yukari couldn't help but note the usual gloom that seemed to dawn alongside winter. She walked through Shibuya, her hands tucked nearly into her fur-trimmed pink jacket, and still felt the breeze ruffling against her coat and jeans.

"Jeez..." the brunette murmured, glancing off to the side. "This really sucks... feels even worse with all the weird stuff going on in the city."

As it stood, the group hadn't made much headway when it came to investigating Mr. A. They had been keeping some contact with the Phantom Thieves, partially to make sure they hadn't gotten in over their heads, and partially to see whatever their younger counterparts had learned. They were the ones with access to this Metaverse place after all, and proved to be quite smart and resourceful for as young as they were.

To think that Goro Akechi was behind all that... it unnerved Yukari just a bit. But then again, she knew full well that people who looked amiable could carry a serious dark side to them. Like Ikutski.

It was hard to know who to trust sometimes.

The brunette rounded a corner and continued down the narrow street, making for a sushi restaurant to meet up with Aigis. She hoped that some good food, a few hard drinks, and good company would take her mind off her worries. But, as she was going down the street, something from a nearby alley caught her eye.

Three people, two men and a woman, leaning up against a wall. Their eyes were vacant, the light having gone out of them, while eerie smiles lingered on their faces. Yukari tensed slightly at the sight of them. She had seen a few of these 'vacant people' over the last few days, and had heard reports of them in other countries. It definitely reminded her of apathy syndrome, especially toward the end of that fateful year where entire crowds of zombified people littered the streets of Iwatodai.

And naturally, the sightings of these people had Mitsuru on edge. Something bigger than Akechi or Mr. A was at work here, but what? Yukari was a little afraid to know the answer to that.

As she neared the alleyway, Yukari noticed a few posters that had been affixed to the wall behind them. She examined them with great scrutiny, paying particular focus to the lines of text on the top and bottom of the posters, and the image of a golden goblet positioned between them.

'*Find eternal happiness. Embrace the Holy Grail. *

Yukari narrowed her eyes. "What the hell?" she asked herself in a low mutter. Yeah, something insidious was definitely going on here.

First Nyx, then Izanami, and now whatever the hell was behind this 'Holy Grail' stuff. It felt as if every day there was some new existential threat out there, feeding on human minds and fears.

Yukari wanted to believe in the world that Minato gave his life for. To protect that world. She wanted to believe that his passing would mean something, and that his sacrifice would lead to a brighter future... but it was hard to believe in such things when it seemed like the world itself wanted to die.
More than anything however, she wished Minato was here. It always felt like he could handle any situation, and she always felt safe from his mere presence. But he had been gone for a long time now, and they would need to solve this situation without him.

She sighed heavily and continued on her way. They'd resolve this soon enough.

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10/20

A call from Masayoshi Shido was rarely an enjoyable experience. Actually, it was never an enjoyable experience.

Even having worked with him for the past two years, Arisawa would struggle to say anything nice about the man beyond his charisma and acting talent. Behind the scenes, when the cameras were off, he was the most unpleasant man Arisawa had ever known. But they shared a vision, and he was willing to help Arisawa achieve his dreams. That was good enough in his book.

"And you still haven't heard back from Akechi yet?"

"No Sir. I've called his phone a few times now, and it went to voicemail each time. I didn't leave any messages, as per procedure. And for whatever reason, we cannot track his phone either," Arisawa explained, reclining into the chair behind his desk.

"How hard can it possibly be to find one high school punk?! You have the entire police force under your control, use those resources!"

Arisawa sighed slightly. "Sir I don't have the entire-" His protests were quickly cut short.

"Shut. Up. You have your orders, I want Akechi found... that boy is of vital importance, particularly when we have requests piling up. I have promises to keep, and he's my best asset for handling them. Our other asset has been... harder to reach these days. But I'll have to start making promises to him if I want him to deal with these requests discreetly."

"Of course sir." Arisawa had never met Mr. A, but he knew more than enough about him and what he could accomplish. "I'll do all I can to find him, but... we must prepare for the possibility that the Phantom Thieves have dealt with him."

"Yes, I'm aware of that. I had hoped Akechi would be smart enough to deal with him, but..."

There was a brief pause. "Sir?" Arisawa asked.

"Well, he's given me an understanding of their methods. This 'calling card' business they have to go through. And if it comes to that, if they challenge me directly, I have measures in place to counter them. With any luck, it won't come to that."

"Of course sir. I'll keep searching for Akechi in the meanwhile," Arisawa replied.

"See to it that you find him. With the election coming up, I'm in no mood for failure." Shido promptly hung up on him, and Arisawa breathed a loud sigh as he pocketed his phone.

Getting a call from Shido was a quick way to get himself a migraine, and Arisawa did indeed feel a
headache coming on. That man could be such a pain in the ass, and right about now Arisawa wanted nothing more than to get stone drunk. But, as he sat there, he felt something strange running through his body, something that went beyond an ordinary anger-induced headache. The pain in his head was growing stronger, a continuous pounding that reverberated heavily between his temples.

His chest was feeling tighter and tighter, and the old man felt a warm sweat break out along his brow. Arisawa huffed loudly and sank back in his chair. What on earth was happening to him? He felt like hell.

With some effort, trying to distract himself by focusing on work, Arisawa slumped into his desk slightly. His breathing was slowly becoming more laboured while his mouth ran dry. Arisawa knew that there was something wrong with him, but he had no way to know how wrong things actually were.

He'd be fine, he told himself. All he had to do was get his mind focused back on his work.

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One by one the group gathered under the shadow of the SIU building, convening at their usual spot by the wall. They hadn't done much more exploration beyond the colosseum, but Futaba and Morgana were convinced that the treasure wasn't too far beyond that point.

With any luck, the group could clear the last few obstacles in their way and secure a clean infiltration route. By the end of the week Arisawa would have his change of heart, and the country would know every dirty secret he had been holding onto.

Once everyone had gathered, Akira looked over the modest crowd that comprised his team. "Well then... it looks like this might be our penultimate trip to Arisawa's courthouse. We've explored most of the area and taken on some of his stongest Shadows, so there shouldn't be much more between us and his treasure."

Futaba nodded. "That colosseum was the final obstacle on the second-last floor, and the treasure should be dead ahead. Assuming he doesn't have any more dumb blockades."

"Don't be too surprised if there are a few nasty surprises waiting on us. Arisawa is a bureaucrat after all, and they're masters of last second obstacles," Makoto said, letting out a faint sigh.

"Even with that risk, we're all rested and healed from our last excursion. We should be able to handle anything in our path," Yusuke said.

"Then let's get to it. I wanna stop this crazy old weirdo before he causes anymore damage," Ann said, clenching her fists with a firm resolve.

Ryuji grinned. "And after that, I figure we're due some sorta' celebration. You know, between dealing with a Palace, and getting past exams recently." School life, unfortunately, did not go on hold just because of their Phantom Thief work. For the past four days the shujin students had exams sprung on them, and with how serious the threat now seemed, the incoming election, and everything that had happened with Sae and Akechi... well, they couldn't wholly postpone Arditi work either.

So long as they could get passing grades (not that Makoto was in any danger there) then it would
be fine. Devoting a little time to Arisawa's Palace, and a little time for revision, would hopefully even things out there.

"Alright then... let's get to it," Akira said, activating the Nav. A hum of purple light enveloped the group, before the walls of reality melted away. Within seconds they had been pushed through the looking glass and into Mementos.

But their surroundings were entirely different.

Shizuka opened her eyes slowly, first catching a glimpse of the sky above. No longer a burning orange with swirling black clouds, instead it was a mishmash of neon green and blue that was almost painful to look at. The historical ruins had been wiped away, and even the courthouse had vanished entirely.

Arisawa's cognitive world had changed entirely, replaced with some kind of... creepy amusement park, complete with a menagerie of rides, bunting linking the street lamps, and clouters of stuffed animals littering the grounds. Somewhere in the distance she could hear distorted, droning carnival music.

She looked to her left, catching sight of a teacups ride and a vacant cafe with pastel pink furniture. Then to her right, when she got a glimpse of another teacups ride, with a looming red ferris wheel positioned a few dozen feet away from it. Just up ahead was a hall of mirrors, the entryway marked by a large wooden clown mouth, a pair of swirling eyes marking the top of the clown's head. For as unsettling as all this was, at least they had changed into their phantom thief attire. That much hadn't changed.

"Okay uh... what the fuck?" Shiuka eventually asked. "Joker you... didn't do anything to the Nav, did you?"

"No... not at all..." Akira murmued in return as he looked around wide-eyed, silently surveying the warped amusement park surrounding them. "I used the same destination as before, I... this doesn't make any sense."

A few eyes turned toward Morgana, as he was the closest thing to an 'expert' on the Metaverse that they had. The feline seemed just as dumbfounded as the others at this abrupt transformation. "I... I really don't know. Maybe... Maybe Arisawa did something to his own cognition? This might be the effect of some kind of hallucinogen?"

Ryuji cocked his left eyebrow. "Uh... you mean the old timer got high?"

"I... I dunno! I've never heard of anything like this happening before!" Morgana quickly said.

Akira turned his attention to Futaba, the short redhead touching her hands to the temples of her goggles. "You got any readings on... this?"

The corners of Futaba's mouth pulled back into a thin frown. "This is Arisawa's Palace, there's no denying that. But it's like it's been... I don't know, corrupted? Overtaken by something else? There's another presence here, and it's spread across the entirety of the Palace."

"Like a cancer," Makoto murmured.

Shizuka narrowed her eyes. If there was another presence here, then it meant that someone else had
managed to hijack control of Arisawa's cognitive world. She thought back to the strange readings Futaba had gotten in the past, and the strange thing she had gotten just a glimpse of in their first trip to this Palace. She hadn't been imagining things someone, or something had indeed been with them.

Her eyes widened behind the pink lenses of her mask. "E-enemy Stand!" she suddenly shouted.

As soon as Shizuka said this, there was a shriek of static through the PA system constructed throughout the park, followed immediately by a repugnant, high-pitched voice addressing the group.

"LALI HOOOOO PHANTOM THIEVES! LET'S PLAY A GAME!"
Death and Justice (IV)

There was a sudden whir and hum as electricity, or some cognitive equivalent, began to flow through the park. The rides were soon powered up and moving, the teacups spinning at a leisurely pace while the ferris wheel began to rotate in a clockwise fashion. A droning, horrible laugh, repeating on a continuous loop, began to come from the clown-mouth of the funhouse.

The Arditi glanced around sharply, examining the warped landscape as they promptly tried to figure out just what had happened. "Okay, so apparently some guy who knows about us has managed to take over Arisawa's Palace. Most likely with some kind of Stand ability. Greeeeaaaat," Shizuka murmured.

Akira looked to Sergio. "Is something like that possible? Are there really Stands that can do things like this?"

"There are Stands that can turn air into fish, or project rainbows that turn people into snails. Of course there's a Stand that can do something like this..." Sergio grimaced, looking skyward as a swirling black cloud slowly formed in the air above them. "But... I have heard talk, rumors of a Stand that murders people when they sleep. There was one SID squad in Pakistan, where one of the team awoke to find all his allies all murdered, and that his body had strange wounds on it that he couldn't account for. And he described having a very bad dream before he woke."

"Uuuh... what're you getting at?" Shiho asked.

"I mean he killed them in their sleep through the power of his Stand... like uh... Freddy Krueger," Sergio added.

Futaba's eyes widened partially behind her goggles. "Oh shit..." she whispered under her breath. "If there's a Stand user who can control dreams, then that means he can already exert control over a form of a cognitive world. S-so if he found out about the Metaverse, he could use that power over a Palace."

Suddenly a figure began to descend from the swirling cloud above, a chilly breeze ruffling the dark cloak that adorned him. From down below Shizuka could see that he had a glassy steel chest and shoulders, a single black stripe running along both arms. A seam ran down the center of his chest, marked by interlocking sharp fangs. From the waist down however his body consisted of a tangled briar of black vines, encrusted in thorns. Lastly there was his head, some kind of worrisome clown mask, a pair of ram horns protruding from his temples. He leered down at the group with a vacant smile, a sense of hatred radiating from his empty eye sockets.

Lastly, and most worrying, there was the scythe clutched in the Stand's right hand. The air seemed to ripple around wherever the blade passed.

"Lali ho! Right on the money Red!" he gleefully said, continuing to float down toward the group. "You can call me Death 13. Ordinarily I target people in their dreams, but when Mr. A hired me and told me about this 'cognitive world', I just knew I had to check it out... overtaking the will of this old geezer was child's play!"

"Mr. A... figures," Shizuka mumbled. "And now he knows about the Metaverse too. We'll get to that when we're done here, I guess. For now though... what's with the creepy carnival?"
Death 13 chuckled lightly, scanning their surroundings. "Nice, isn't it? I suppose you could think of this as the 'default state' of my dream world. With enough time and effort I could fashion it into any kind of ironic hell... but attuning my consciousness to this place was already a bit of a challenge. And really, why bother putting the extra effort in? This will already suffice," the Stand explained.

Akira narrowed his eyes at Death 13, remaining tense as he reflexively summoned Arsene behind him. "So since you're here, and in control of this place... what about Arisawa?" Akira asked.

"That old fuck? Oh don't worry about him, he's fine... granted the version of him I found here was a pain in the ass, I decided not to kill him. I figured that would make this whole place fall apart," Death 13 said. "Besides, I'm not here to kill him. Yet. I'm here to kill you!"

"Well we figured that much already," Makoto murmured dryly, clenching her fists.

Death 13 suddenly raised his scythe high, a gleeful high-pitched laugh leaving the demonic jester. His movements caused the Palace to stir like a lumbering colossus, a sleeping giant rising to life. "Let the games begin!" he excitedly shouted, as the teacups started to rumble and shake, spinning around at a speed that could only be described as unsafe.

Several long stalks suddenly erupted from the undersides of the cups, drawing them high up from their original moorings. Soon the thieves had six sets of cups on either side of them, whirling around like a giant set of flails.

The group leapt away from the incoming lashes, scattering as the heavy masses crashed into the asphalt, shattering the ground with each blow. Akira jumped away from one swinging cup, Arsene moving in front of him like a living shield. The scarlet figure struck against the overgrown cup, the two slamming away from each other. Akira grimaced in pain, feeling some tremors rolling through his forearms.

As the spinning masses gained speed, they also seemed to grow more deliberate in their movements as they lashed out at the nearest thieves. Ryuji jumped back to avoid one crushing strike, only to come to an abrupt halt as another cup crashed into the ground behind him. He summoned Seiten Taisei, his Persona delivering a hard blow to the cup behind him to launch it away. The material cracked slightly from the attack.

Sergio quickly summoned Breakthru, his Stand springing forward to slam his knuckles into a cup heading his way. On contact he managed to syphon all the momentum from the heavy mass, leaving it frozen in place long enough for a second cup to smash into it. The two exploded into fragments on contact, but the ensuing shockwave slammed into Ryuji and nearly knocked the wind out of him.

"Ohoho!" Death 13 chuckled, a glassy sparkle shimmering from the dark void of his eyes. "So that's the deadly Breakthru in action! Truthfully this would be easier for me if you couldn't use your Stands, but... I suppose it can't be helped in this new method."

While Death 13 surveyed the destruction being caused by his machinations, particularly whenever one of his flails managed to strike against a thief, Ann quickly moved toward him from behind. She took a deep breath to steady her nerves, azure flames rising around her feet as she summoned Hecate.
A surge of fire exploded behind Death 13, the blast knocking him a few feet through the air, smoke rising from his scorched cape. The gruesome Stand chuckled, wheeling though the air as another string of explosions erupted near him. A few managed to get close, singing his arms, but now that he was aware of Ann he was actively moving to avoid them.

"Attacking me head on?! You're getting ahead of the script blondie!" Death 13 shouted. "So, I think you need a time out!"

He lashed his scythe outward in a flurry of slashes, the air warping and smoldering on each swing. The air pressure from his slashes flew forward with enough force to carve into the asphalt below, and Ann was forced to rapidly sprint and dodge away from them. Death 13 was in hot pursuit, laughing and swinging.

But, as Ann ran, the ground started to warp and shift around her. The asphalt bubbled as small spikes and studs started to pop up around her, lashing toward the blonde and limiting her movement, with Ann yelping and leaping away to make sure her legs didn't get skewered. "Crap crap crap," she rapidly breathed.

She turned, only to immediately be struck by a clothesline from Death 13 that swiftly swept her off her feet. And, while in the air, something flew from the mouth of the fun house and closed in on Ann's neck: A steel collar attached to a long chain. It snapped into place around her neck, leaving Ann gasping and clutching the metal as she tried in vain to break it off.

"Panther!" Akira shouted. In an instant Arsene appeared before him, firing off a powerful blast of curse energy that destroyed one of the incoming makeshift wrecking balls. "You son of a bitch, let her g-"

"Lali ho!" The chain gave a sudden hard tug, and Ann let out a loud scream as her body was abruptly reeled into the shadow of the funhouse. "Sorry, but your friend was very rude. So now she's going to have a nice time out with the old geezer!"

A sudden gale smashed into Death 13 from the side, the impact sending him skidding back a few feet. Some of the wind managed to lash against him with particular force, opening some cuts along his torso. The leering Stand wasn't given much time to brace as Zorro rushed him, the Persona's rapier rapidly clashing against the blade of Death 13's scythe.

"You better bring Panther back, before I REALLY make you regret it!" Morgana shouted, punctuating every few stabs of Zorro's blade with a slice of wind. A few of Zorro's attacks managed to break through Death 13's guard, forming some cuts along his torso, but the dream demon was quite capable of powering through pain.

Death 13 caught Zorro with an abrupt headbutt, the blow making Morgana yowl and recoil. Now that he had an opening, Death 13's left arm suddenly elongated like a length of rubber, his hand disappearing into the ground. The asphalt rippled at his passing, like a stone hitting the water.

"Oh so the ugly cat monster wants to be a hero? In that case I'll gladly unite you with the blonde hourglass!" His hand burst through the ground, catching Morgana by his feet and swinging him around. With the rest of the team trying to blow through the remaining teacups, they couldn't reach Morgana as Death 13 slammed the feline into the ground again and again, Morgana crying out at each impact as they left a series of scuffs and purple bruises along his face.

A final hard blow bounced Morgana off the ground, at which point Death 13 released his grip and
left him tumbling through the air. "Mona-chan!" Haru gasped, cupping her hands in front of her face. As the strawberry started to sprint forward, trying to intercept the barely-conscious feline, another hand attached to a stretching spring suddenly shot out of the mouth of the funhouse with a cartoonish zooming sound. It caught Morgana by the bandana and abruptly yanked him into the funhouse.

"Lali ho!" Death 13 excitedly squealed, flying into the gaping clown mouth. Soon after, the last of the teacups were destroyed by a powerful nuclear burst from Makoto vaporizing two of them, and a momentum-infused punch from Breakthru shattering the last.

With the incoming attacks halted, silence settled throughout the creepy carnival. Akira slowly caught his breath and let his harsh glare settle on the entrance of the funhouse. "Simply leaving isn't an option... we need to go through there to get Panther and Mona back."

Shizuka nodded at their leader as she slowly rubbed a bruise on her left shoulder that had formed during the chaos. "I wanna go after 'em too, but that funhouse has 'trap' written all over it."

"That much is obvious," Yusuke breathed, brushing some of the dust from his shirt. "But if Death 13 has control of this landscape, then that is most likely the only route we can take. He won't let us go anywhere else... right Oracle?"

The group glanced to their navigator, who was now inspecting their surroundings in as much detail as she could. "Right. That fencing around this neck of the park, it's probably almost indestructible. And with how he's messed up the landscape so far, I don't want to think about what he'd do if we tried to scale it," Futaba explained.

"Then the funhouse is the only path we can take... all we can hope is that Death 13 sticks to using them as live bait, regardless of whatever twisted game is awaiting us through there. Otherwise..." Makoto trailed off. She didn't need to explain to the others the kind of risk that was now hanging over Ann and Morgana.

Akira nodded and started moving forward, heading for the garish clown head in front of them. "Let's get to it then. Stick close, and be on guard," he said. They were walking into a lion's den, but they had no choice. They were playing Death 13's game for the sake of their friends.

Rangda appeared at Akira's side, her right hand raised to hold a large plume of fire to light their way. But as the group entered the funhouse, the entry corridor lined with warped, distorted mirrors, the darkness seemed to hold an unnatural gloom that fought against the glow of the flame.

Ryuji glanced around the area. "This guy... how the heck did he know about this place? It's not like we were broadcastin' where we were going. We didn't even give the old timer a calling card."

"I'll give you a hint. Starts with 'A', rhymes with 'sketchy','" Shizuka muttered.

Akira clenched his fists at his sides a flash of anger briefly welling up inside him. "That's right," he murmured. "He's the one who got me thinking about going after Arisawa, and he must have been the one to tell Mr. A about the Metaverse. This... was some kind of contingency plan. If the sting at the casino failed, then he wanted us to come here for another trap. And we fell for it... that fucker."

"We can deal with that later, right now we..." Shiho swallowed slightly, trying to suppress her own nerves. Ann being in danger, it was something she couldn't stomach. "We really need to save those
two. And Arisawa, before anything happens to him in the real world."

"To think there could be a Stand user with such a terrifying power..." Hifumi murmured. "Can we beat a demon of his caliber?"

Sergio grinned. "The game may have changed, but we're still the greatest players in the world. Don't worry Maestro, we'll win," he confidently said.

The group continued through the corridor of mirrors, and only became aware of a sudden rushing in the shadows overhead when it became too late. Death 13's rubbery arms stretched down from above, smashing two squads of the group away and leaving Futaba on her own. The redhead gave a startled gasp, Necronomicon's shadowy mass reflexively forming around her as the clown's leering visage slithered from the gloom.

The floor suddenly gave out from under Futaba's feet before Necronomicon could fully form, falling into a long shaft. The thieves scrambled to action, a few bursts of lightning and blessed light smashing into Death 13 and driving him back. "Oracle!" Akira shouted, trying to rush toward the freshly sprung trap.

However he was cut short when a huge weight suddenly fell from above and down the shaft, smashing into Necronomicon's hull and driving the UFO down to the bottom of the pit. A humongous chasm with a thick, flat floor, filled with boiling water. Futaba's Persona crashed into the pool, pinned beneath the car-sized mass of steel.

"Ghh!" Futaba trembled from the impact, and only just barely got a glimpse of the trapdoor shutting above her. She took in a few shaky breaths, her eyes wide from the shock of all that had transpired in only a few seconds.

"Oracle! Oracle can you hear me?!" Akira shouted, quickly summoning Rangda again. She tried to drive her claws into the trap door, but it seemed to have vanished as soon as it appeared.

"I... I'm fine guys! Necronomicon has an oxygen supply, and it'll take a long time before the heat gets to me!" Futaba called out, her voice sounding out in their heads. "I can find my own way out of here. You need to get to the others!"

"That son of a bitch!" Ryuji snarled, clenching both of his fists.

Makoto exhaled through her nose. "Taking away two of our members, and cutting us off from Oracle... he must have seen what Necronomicon can do..."

"Lali ho!" The voice in the darkness made the group bristle, but they could not see where exactly Death 13 was speaking from. "Correct, get that girl a prize! I couldn't have her cheating and spoiling the whole funhouse with that mapping ability of hers. Although, I was expecting either the water, or the weight, to kill her... oh well! She'll just have to stew for a while until I'm ready to deal with her!"

Haru's eyes were wide in horror. "You... you're a monster!"

"Ooooh, I'm a monster! Like I haven't had that screamed at me a hundred times. This year."

"Oracle..." Akira said, trying to ignore Death 13's distant taunts. "Are you sure about this? Do you think you can hold out there?" He wanted to help her, more than anything, but... if they couldn't
open the way down, then they would just be wasting time. And he didn't want to think on what would happen to Ann and Morgana if Death 13 got bored.

"Y-yeah. I can last for a while like this, don't worry. Just get to the others, I'll meet up with you soon." Futaba let out another shaky breath, closing her eyes as she felt the presence of her friends being drawn deeper into the funhouse. They were moving slowly, reluctant to leave her, but she wasn't their only friend in danger right now. "I hope..." she added under her breath.

"Be safe Oracle! We'll be quick!" Haru called out as they left.

"I don't want to do this, but... keep Necronomicon up at all times. I promise we'll solve this ASAP," Akira added.

Well this was nothing, Futaba told herself. She was no stranger to being cooped up in a small, dark room for hours, or days, at a time. She could tough this out. Though now there was a niggling voice in her brain reminding her that her bedroom had great AC, and the boiling water surrounding her would start to heat Necronomicon up. How long could she stick that? How hot would it get?

She could try simply jumping back into the real world, but something told Futaba that this wasn't a good idea. There was no telling how strong Death 13's control was. She could potentially not be able to leave... or not get back in if she did leave.

A worrying prospect.

There was the possibility of moving the weight off of Necronomicon, but it was rather heavy. To say nothing for all the water surrounding its prism-shaped mass, making that possibility even harder. Necronomicon was strong in a physical sense, but there were limits.

"But what if I... drain the water?" she murmured under her breath. A nervous bead of sweat rolled down the left side of Futaba's face as she guided a specific holographic display in front of her.

She moved with great care, guiding one of Necronomicon's tentacles along the hard floor. One of the inky black tips reached a seam in the plates, slowly worming against it until the pointed edge started to widen the seam.

"You want to play a game Death 13? Well you picked the wrong nerd to challenge," Futaba murmured. While she was trying to remain confident, she knew she had to act fast. There was no telling what her friends could run into up ahead.

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By now the Holy Grail had managed to slither into the minds of several humans across the globe. A minuscule number in the grand scheme of things, only enough to barely be noticed by people, but it would suffice for the time being. With the options they had to hand, the Grail had specifically tapped into the weakest minds it could find in the Metaverse. Those that could be easily indoctrinated.

And with each mind it swallowed, with every consciousness assimilated, they were able to establish a greater foothold in the real world. That was why, even if it would only be for a tiny window of time, Camael would be able to breach the boundaries that separated the worlds. And he had a very specific destination in mind.
The air seemed to crack like a panel of glass, a cobweb of alien energy splintering outward and letting a faint crimson glow into the otherwise darkened bedroom. Slowly, the seams opened outward until a vortex of scarlet and ruby light had sliced open inside the room, followed soon after by Camael's hulking mass forcing through the opening.

He kept his wings folded into his back, but even in doing this he was able to suspend himself in the air until his heavy feet touched the ground in silence. Camael stood in place for several moments, breathing in the atmosphere.

'So this is reality?' he thought to himself. It felt... wrong, on some fundamental level that the angel couldn't readily describe. The air made his exposed skin itch, and there was a strange sharpness to the UV light of this universe. He was somewhat glad he could only manifest here for a tiny amount of time. Already he was feeling nauseous.

Camael scanned his surroundings, his gaze drifting past a small circular rack that had an assortment of sunglasses on it, then to a desk that was loaded with various textbooks. Most subjects were represented in some capacity, but there seemed to be a large volume of business studies tomes positioned upon it. He ignored these, not catching sight of what he wanted. She must have placed it out of sight.

A smart move. She perhaps didn't expect anyone to come looking for this, least of all if it involved coming in through another dimension to find it, but her efforts would be in vain.

Moving steadily, Camael made for the bed at the far end of the room. His heavy metal fingers gripped the underside of the frame, lifting the entire mass at a slow pace until the bottom legs of the bedframe were suspended a foot off the ground. Camael soon saw what he was looking for: A long steel case with a four digit numerical lock.

The length of barbed wire extended from his body and coiled around the case, slowly pulling it over. Camael lowered the bed gently and surveyed the case, while his extending barbed wire slithered into the lock. It took only a few second to maneuver the mechanisms into place, at which point the lid popped open. "Ah... the arrow that the Other saw. Still in possession of the girl." With things being as they were, Camael assumed she hadn't found the time to return this artifact to where she found it.

All the better for him. He was curious to see what it could do, with the effect it had apparently had on the Sinner of Envy.

The arrow suddenly moved on its own, much to Camael's shock, shivers racing down the shaft as the arrowhead made a beeline for the exposed right side of his body. The silver-lined head pierced him under his ribs, at which point a briar of veins started to pulse up under his skin from the point of entry.

Camael softly exhaled, feeling a strange alien sensation resonating through his whole body.

"Fascinating."

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"Mona! H-hey, Mona!"

Ann's panicked voice managed to reach Morgana through the gloom in his head, her words fuzzy
and distant. Morgana let out a pained groan as he struggled to sit upright, doing his best to ignore the ache in his head. That clown-creep had really roughed him up.

"P-Panther?" Morgana asked in a pained croak, slowly sitting upright. The ground beneath him was cold and hard. Some kind of metal, he quickly guessed. As his vision came into focus, Morgana steadily realized how correct he was when he saw that he was bordered on all sides by prison bars.

There was enough of a gap between them to stick his paws through, but his overgrown head wasn't going to make that squeeze. There was a gentle sway beneath him, and which point Morgana realized that this cell was suspended in mid-air.

"Panther... are you okay?" Morgana asked, glancing to the source of her voice.

By now he noticed that she was in a separate cell, positioned beside his. The blonde was leaning near the edge of her cell, reaching across to settle a hand on his back. "Me? Ha... what about you? He really did a number on you..."

"Yeah, he sure did..." Morgana murmured. His ears flattened against the sides of his head, and he shyly looked away from Ann. "I'm... I'm sorry Panther. When he grabbed you, I was the only person nearby. A-and I wanted to help you but... I wasn't strong enough."

"H-hey, don't be so hard on yourself," Ann quickly replied.

Still looking away from her, Morgana took the time to examine their surroundings. It was a huge cross-shaped room with a high ceiling. Stained glass windows lined the walls, the mosaics depicting Death 13 in a variety of cartoonish poses. Picking his nose, using his scythe as a chin-up bar, making lewd gestures with his fingers, among other things. Several bladed weapons hung from the ceiling around them.

And, in the distance and shouting impotently at the two thieves, was Judge Arisawa. He too was confined to a dangling cage, and was far more infuriated by his predicament. Well, Death 13 hadn't been lying about him being alright.

Morgana touched his temples, immediately trying to summon Zorro to no avail. He scowled intensely. "I can't use my powers either... is it something about this cage?"

"That was my guess too... we're stuck like this for the moment," Ann replied. "But, on the plus side, that freakshow isn't nearby... If I had to guess, even if he can control the landscape, the actual Stand can only be in one place at once. Although that means the others are in trouble too. Not exactly how I wanted this fight to go."

"I'm sorry Lady Ann," Morgana sadly said. "I'm just... not good enough. I've seen all you guys grow stronger and improve yourselves. Almost all of you have become stronger people, your different Personas are proof of that. But me... I still don't know anything about myself, and I'm stuck in a rut. I'm just... falling behind all of you. I'm useless..."

The hand reaching over gave Morgana's back a comforting stroke. "Hey, come on... Mona, you've been a part of this team since the start. You're vital to us. Even if you don't have raw power, your heart and determination are second to none. You belong on this team because you drive us forward. Your determination is... infectious!" she said.
"Lady Ann..." Morgana softly said.

In that moment he wanted to tell the blonde exactly how he felt about her. The deep admiration he had for her. Not just for Ann's beauty, but for her kind heart, her own heroic determination, and her willingness to do the right thing. Her strength was tempered by her sweetness, making for a combination Morgana found breathtaking.

He wanted to tell her all this, since their future past this point was uncertain, but even with this in mind... Morgana couldn't bring himself to say anything. What would be the point? Ann wouldn't reciprocate any sort of feelings, if there were any to speak of (and Morgana was scared enough in that regard already), while he was a fluffy chibi.

So he'd keep those affections to himself for now.

"Thanks," he said, managing a tired smile toward the blonde. "You always know just what to say. But still... what're we going to do now? Just wait on the guys?"

"Well..." Ann glanced to the weapons dangling above them. The hooks suspending some of them did seem a little short. Ann stood up and gripped the bars of her cell, giving a sudden jerk of her body to push her cell to the side. It bright the corner of her cell close to one hook. "I might have an idea in mind."

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The group had continued deeper into the funhouse (which was fast proving to be a very inappropriate name), until the corridor of mirrors came to an end. That corridor led into a broad circular chamber, caught in the same black gloom as the area that preceded it.

As they entered, Shizuka glanced to the end of the chamber to get a better look at what was ahead of them. There were five doorways on the other end of the room, each leading into darkness. There were no distinct marks to the doorways, and there was no way to tell what was ahead without Futaba.

"Shit," Shiho muttered. "There's some kind of maze ahead, isn't there?"

"So it would seem," Yusuke said. "Our foe has enjoyed splitting us up so far, and this is likely another attempt at that. There are likely death traps ahead, and we have no way of knowing which path will unite us with the others."

"Lali ho!" once more Death 13 called out to them from the darkness, putting the gathered group on edge. "So close, and yet so WRONG! There are indeed traps up ahead, and the goal is to split you up... BUT! All the paths lead to the same place: The exit of the funhouse! And beyond that, the den where I'm housing your precious friends."

Akira furrowed his brow. If he was telling the truth, then their task was now potentially a little easier. "So all these paths lead to the exit? Then we can all just take the same route," Akira said.

There was a sudden cartoonish buzzing noise in the chamber, so loud as to be almost deafening. The group recoiled from the harsh sound. "As if I'd allow that, dumbass! This is my game, and you do as I say! And I say your team splits up!"

A powerful pulse hit the chamber, shaking the floor as it suddenly divided into five distinct plates.
They began to raise and lower rapidly, the harsh punches of the floor knocking the thieves off their feet and bouncing them around like an assortment of pinballs. Their screams filled the chamber, but with how fast they were moving none of them could find an opening to summon their powers to counter him.

Once Death 13 had them in a configuration to his liking, a series of heavy steel shutters slammed down from on high to divide the circular chamber. The way back was blocked off, and the thieves couldn't bypass the barriers to reach any doorway other than the one in front of them.

Once the rumbling stopped, Shizuka blinked and looked around. She was alone on her end. Great. "H-hey guys, can you hear me?!" she called out.

"Y-yes. I'm here with Fox and Skull," Haru softly said, her voice a little shaky.

"I'm on my own," Akira said, sounding a little annoyed at this realization.

"Agh..." Makoto let out a small grunting sound, the sound of her footsteps following soon after. "I'm with Nemesis," she said once she got her bearings.

"And I'm with Maestro... are you alone too Sting?" Sergio asked.

Shizuka grimaced and let an irritated grunt. "Yeah. Just me in this hallway. I'm pretty sure he did this on purpose..."

There was a sudden boom as Seiten Taisei struck one wall with all the force he could muster. And while the metal rattled to Shizuka's side, even his considerable strength wasn't enough to breach the barrier. "Damnit!" Ryuji hissed.

"Then we have no choice but to keep moving forward..." Akira murmured. "Good luck, everyone. Be careful, and don't trust anything ahead. We don't know what this creep has planned for us."

"Hey Queen... Good luck. I'll see you on the other side," Shizuka said.

"You... you be safe now," Makoto softly replied.

Shizuka grinned slightly. "Hey, don't sweat it. When aren't I?"

She pressed on into the darkness, the shadows enveloping her. As she went along, Shizuka tried her best to make out some of the details of this tunnel. But all she could tell was that it was just that, a brickwork tunnel. At some point, as she ventured deeper inside, the way behind seemed vanish entirely.

After some time, she summoned Houdini to her side. Her Stand raised her right arm up, the plates in Houdini's knuckles and elbow releasing a modest glow to help better illuminate her path. But even she couldn't cut too deep into the murk, and Shizuka couldn't seem to make out more than the brickwork of the walls and floor.

Even so Shizuka was cautious, keeping a close eye on the floor for any stones that seemed more elevated than the others, or any sort of glimmering tripwire. There was no telling what Death 13 would leave here.

Then, as she went along, Death 13 spoke to her. An insidious whisper that seemed to fill her head
as much as it filled her ears.

"You know, I was hoping you and I could have a little bit of a private chat. Those other high school brats, they don't interest me half as much as you do Joestar," he said. The insidious jolliness of his tone was gone, replaced instead with a bitter iciness. "I've been hoping to redeem myself after my last failure against your family."

"The fuck are you talking about?" Shizuka called into the darkness.

"Ah of course you wouldn't know. Only that fucker Kakyoin would remember that encounter, thanks to my power... I would have done far worse to that bastard than what Lord Dio would have done," Death 13 replied. "I was an obstacle on their way to Egypt, but I failed my mission. Now I can redeem myself just a little by killing another Joestar."

Shizuka rolled her eyes slightly. 'Of course it'd be a revenge thing... still, this guy has a bug up his butt about Kakyoin? Might help to keep that in mind.' She thought back to some of the pictures her dad had shown her from that trip to Egypt, recalling the lanky redhead in the green school uniform. Jotaro's best friend who had died all too young.

"Saaaay... I hear Joseph Joestar liked 'em young and Asian. You think he adopted you bec-"

Shizuka clenched her fists tightly. "You finish that sentence, and I swear to God I'll snap your neck like a fucking pencil!"

"Ooooh, scary scary! You're like a pint-sized Jotaro when you use that tone," Death 13 mocked. "But... speaking of scary, do you know what a primordial fear is?" Shizuka remained quiet, continuing to glare ahead. The walls ahead of her, at a rate so steady that Shizuka didn't even notice, began to part wider.

"Then I'll explain it to you. A primordial fear, to my knowledge, is something that follows you around since your childhood. Something that scares you beyond description, but you don't entirely know why. It scared you so badly that the root cause was repressed utterly. But it's still there, waiting to be dug up." Soon the darkness was entirely constricting around Shizuka, and Houdini's glow was doing little to illuminate the area. Shizuka's breathing grew slightly uneven.

"What are you getting at?" Shizuka eventually asked.

"I'm already spread a little thin keeping a hold on this old fuck's mind, so I can't invade your mind. But..." Death 13 trailed off into a raspy chuckle, a laugh that simultaneously sounded as if it were right in Shizuka's ear, and a hundred miles away from her. "I can at least peer inside, and see what just bubbled up inside your brain."

There was a sudden and powerful rumble, making Shizuka leap up as a humongous black mask started to erupt from the ground ahead of her. It was large in scale, more than twice as tall as Shizuka and broad-shouldered. Even in the dark she could see a silhouette of silver outlining his inky black limbs. Dangling from his neck, or what should have been his neck, was a vertical string that had four gaping skulls linked together.

But the eyes were what struck Shizuka the most. A pair of purple feline eyes with piercing black slits, that seemed to penetrate into Shizuka's soul. A sense of inexplicable dread ran through Shizuka at the sight of them, her blood running cold. And in that moment she felt as helpless as an infant. Something about looking right at him... Death 13 was doing something to her body, making
her feel heavy and sluggish.

The figure raised his left hand slowly, purple flames wreathed around his fingers. He spoke three words, his voice sounding like a hundred tongues speaking in unsison, drenched in crackling static.

"S..." A black diamond erupted from the top of his hand, wreathed in the same purple light, and immediately made its way toward Shizuka at a terrible speed. In her frozen state, Houdini plunged in front of her on reflex, arms upraised to block the black diamond. The edge struck against her, the impact sending Shizuka skidding backward.

The strange projectile continued to lunge toward her, a purple trail of light marking its path. By now Shizuka was slowly adjusting to her own fear, doing everything she could to not stare at the inky giant that put the fear of God into her.

But, even actively trying to dodge, the black diamond was faster. It continued to strike against Houdini, making Shizuka gasp harshly at each shuddering strike. Houdini shot her right hand up in a powerful uppercut, striking against the projectile upward. But, in doing so, she felt a rush of pain over her knuckles. She'd managed to cut them by punching against such a dense object.

"What... what the..." Shizuka took a staggering step backward, her gaze shakily shifting between the dark diamond circling overhead, and the strange giant. Just looking at him hurt her head and made her want to vomit. 'I... I don't know w-why I'm so scared of that thing... what the fuck is he?!' she thought to herself.

"Truthfully, I don't know either," Death 13 idly replied from the darkness. "It's just the first thing that floated to the top of your head. But ya know... it's not the only thing you're afraid of."

Shizuka took in a deep breath and leapt away, narrowly avoiding the glowing diamond as it slammed into the floor. However, rather than rebound toward her, it suddenly started to rapidly rotate and drill into the floor. Great fissures suddenly exploded around her, before the ground collapsed beneath her. Shizuka acted on a reflex, her left arm swinging up toward the crumbling edge of the floor. Houdini's arm extended out ahead of her own, dark fingers digging into the material to keep her anchored while she became submerged up to her waist in a cool liquid.

Some sort of pool under the stone floor? Shizuka sniffed the air, and once more felt her stomach churn when she took in the scent. Oil. She was in a lake of oil.

"Drowning in the dark. Such a human fear," Death 13 idly said.

"No!" Shizuka gasped, panic rising in her voice. "You motherfucker don't you da-!" She was cut short by two tendrils knifing through the water, gripping tight around her ankles and snapping taut. The two tendrils started to tug against her, a few fearful grunts leaving Shizuka as Houdini fought to maintain her grip.

As she fought against the pulling force, a smoldering black fog suddenly materialized in front of her. It quickly grew more defined, quickly shaping into the ghostly visage of Death 13. He leered down at Shizuka. "Lali ho... you seem to be having a little difficulty keeping afloat. You should probably just give up. It's not like your friends will get through my traps anyway."

"Ghh... hh..." Shizuka gave a few huffing breaths, nervous beads of sweat rapidly sliding down her
face as she felt Houdini's handhold start to crack and crumble. "You're... gonna fucking pay for this! So help me God!"

Death 13 chuckled haughtily, twirling his scythe in his right hand. "That's the spirit, I like to see that kind of fire in a victim. It's more interesting than when they just scream and cry... Well, anyway, I'd like to just speed things up and get to your friends. So do me a favour..." He slowly leaned in closer to the struggling girl, the dark void of his eyes starting to glowing scarlet. "DIE."

A spew of slithering scarlet centipedes and anomalous green goo flew from Death 13's mouth in a vomiting blast, the sharp mawed insects immediately latching onto Shizuka's neck and face. The struggling girl screamed as they tore into her skin, streaks of red running down her cheeks and neck.

Houdini's right hand pulled back immediately, fingers immediately tearing through the biting insects and blowing them clean off Shizuka's now-bloodied flesh. But, by that point, her handhold crumbled entirely. And once it broke apart, the tugging tentacles immediately yanked her into the chilly oil. Shizuka just managed to take in one deep gulping breath before the darkness engulfed her entirely.

'No... no no no...' Shizuka quickly thought to herself, closing her eyes tight.

"Yes yes yes!" Death 13 hissed in her mind. Each word from him caused a harsh pain in her head, as if she was getting pricked with acupuncture needles with every syllable.

'I can't fight this... there's something wrong with my head, I... I can't...' She tried tugging her legs against the restraints, to no avail. Something about this was wrong. It wasn't just that she was scared, she certainly was, but these images and sensations were making her mind and body freeze up.

There was another chuckle from Death 13 resonating in her mind. "Come on, just give in and die. It'll be easier."

Her lungs were burning, and Shizuka could feel a similar pain pulsing through her muscles. She wouldn't last much longer, and she knew it. *There has to be something I can do... he said he was reading the surface of my mind... He made me think about what I was afraid, right? And then he... must have started feeding off those fears to make them real."

"Hm?" There was a faint hint of worry in Death 13's tone. "Hey... just what the hell do you think you're doing?!"

'So if I drown him out... then maybe this pressure on my mind and body will leave too?' Shizuka grit her teeth inside her mouth, her body adrift in the oil, immediately jumping to the first bit of white noise that could block Death 13 away from her thoughts, humming it at max volume in her head. *Frère Jacques, Frère Jacques, Dormez-vous? Dormez-vous?*

She could hear an agitated growl from Death 13, but Shizuka pressed on in her mental humming to drown him out, to make the surface layer of her thoughts harmless. "What are you doing you little idiot?! Do you think that stupid rhyme can help you?!"

Despite the mocking fury in her head, Shizuka actually did feel the pressure lessen on her mind and body. She kept the humming going, while trying to ignore the burning pain in her lungs. All the while Death 13 was continuing to jeer her.
"You think you can lock me out? You idiot!"

"Stop that damn humming! You keep that up and I'll make this far worse for you, you hear me?!!"

"So help me, I'll murder all your friends and make you wa-***"

At last Death 13's voice was fully drowned out of her head, shoved aside by the nursery rhyme her mother had been so fond of. Shizuka clenched her fists, a few vigor filling her body with Death 13's poisonous influence blocked from her.

Houdini's hands immediately shot down, slicing through the tentacles gripping her ankles as if they were made from wet tissue paper. With her body free, Houdini moved up to catch Shizuka's wrists. A powerful pull threw her up from the oil, catapulting her body from the inky depths, with the young woman landing harshly on the ground beyond the pool. She took in a powerful breath of sweet, precious oxygen, and immediately started to scramble to her feet.

As she rose up, one arm rapidly scraped the oil from her body, before the rest of her body gave a few powerful shakes to knock large swathes of black matter off her body. All the while she kept her humming going, slowly glancing up toward the distant giant. Without Death 13 feeding on her mind, actively amplifying the fear she felt, the figure had grown fuzzy and undefined.

She didn't know what the fuck it was, but she wasn't about to roll over and die.

The dark-haired girl started sprinting forward as fast as she could, powered by her own anger and adrenaline. The figure raised his left hand, once more firing a glowing black diamond toward her. But now she was ready for it, her mind clearer thanks to the melody playing in her mind.

Houdini shot forward, pummeling the diamond with a salvo of high-speed blows. She felt scratches and splits form along her own fists, blood oozing from her knuckles, and did her best to ignore it. This time the diamond shattered under Houdini's strength, black shards littering the ground.

Now free of it, Shizuka and Houdini turned invisible and continued sprinting toward the giant, maintaining her humming. Already she could feel Death 13 needling at her, trying to regain entry to the surface level of her mind. Shizuka grit her teeth and closed her eyes, powering forward and trying to ignore the pain in her mind and body.

She could hear the lumbering movements of the giant, a powerful blow of his enlarged palm striking the earth. The shock of the impact jolted against Shizuka's back and knocked her forward, debris pelting her back. Shizuka grit her teeth and glanced to her side, now aware of the broad ankle at his side. Houdini lashed at the giant's side, twin fists striking the ankle with immense force, shattering it like glass. It too had grown weaker without Shizuka's fear to fuel it.

Her foe fell forward, off balance, and struck the ground with an earth-shuddering thud.

And there, a few feet behind it, was Death 13 himself. He tensed at the sight of his giant falling, gripping his scythe firmly. "How... how the hell did she...?! This has never happened before... am I really straining this much to keep hold of this place?! Or is she really that str-

"BAZU!"

A hard blow slammed into Death 13's face with an obscene level of force, Death 13's face twisting
around the invisible fist. "You son of a bitch," Shizuka growled, letting out a few powerful huffs of breath. "I'm going to enjoy... every nanosecond of this!"

Both of Houdini's fists surged forward, pummeling Death 13's scuffed and scarred body with all the force she could muster, her knuckles glowing white hot to amplify her strikes even further. "BAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZU!" The thunderous impacts echoed throughout the chamber, her strikes cracking Death 13's body further. A particularly vicious hook shattered his left horn off and sent cracks splintering along Death 13's face.

Another punch knocked him back against a wall, the surface rippling and distorting on contact. A few ripples of static strobed along the walls and floor, melting the darkness away. "W-what?! M-my control's being disrupted?!

"How does it feel... when you're the one who's scared shitless?!" Shizuka spat.

Death 13 felt the air twist as Houdini's invisible form dove toward her, and in a blind panic he lashed out. The teeth in his chest split apart, revealing a cavernous maw in his torso containing a briar of shiny black tentacles. They lashed out wildly, forcing Houdini to raise her arms up to shield herself.

Even so the multiple blows hammered against the Stand, lashing Shizuka's arms, legs, and stomach and making her cry out. Houdini was flung away, fresh bruises forming along Shizuka's body. She very nearly lost her footing.

With that brief opening made, Death 13 melted into the wall behind him, and vanished entirely. The shadows surrounding Shizuka undulated and melted away in his absence, the room changing entirely.

Shizuka took in a few deep panting breaths, trying to steady herself. "You... fucking... coward..." She collapsed to her left knee, grimacing in a mix of pain and tiredness. She needed to get to Makoto and get patched up, otherwise she'd be no good to the others.

Now alone, she scanned her surroundings. She was no longer in a darkened corridor. Instead she was in a long library, humongous bookshelves lining both walls at her sides, each shelf laden with tomes thicker than her head. She recognised this place... it was one of the rooms they had passed in their early exploration of Arisawa's Palace.

From the look of things, Death 13's control had faltered, and this room had reverted to normal. Or as close to normal as a Palace got.

Letting out a pained grunt, Shizuka forced herself to stand and slowly staggered toward the door ahead of her. Houdini materialized at her side, her strength working to support Shizuka and maintain her balance.

Even if she couldn't see herself, Shizuka knew she looked a state. She could feel the scratches and tears in her phantom attire, the drying stains of oil and blood on her body. Right about now, the only thing powering her to that door was her own anger.

There was no exaggeration or hyperbole in Shizuka's thoughts. She knew that if she found Death 13's user, she was going to murder him.
Shizuka reached the exit door of the library, having to hang back a bit so Houdini could open the door for her. Now that the path was clear she continued to shuffle along until she was through the doorway. The landscape through here was back to the looming and oppressive dark atmosphere of the funhouse.

Just as before, her path was in the center, with the other doorways bordering hers. Only one of them was open right now.

Looking ahead, Shizuka was quick to glimpse Shiho and Makoto only a few feet in front of her. Both girls gasped at the sight of her, with Makoto quickly rushing toward her girlfriend. As the brunette approached, Shizuka could see the bloodied slices that had been cut into their uniforms, along the arms and chest. Death 13 had a 'game' for them too it seemed.

"Shiz-" Makoto quickly corrected herself as she reached her. "Sting! A-are you-"

Shizuka cut her off by quickly embracing her in a near-crushing hug, her arms wrapped around her shoulders. Shizuka had buried her face into Makoto's shoulder, staying there in silence for several long moments. "I'm fine," she lied. She was far from it, but she wasn't about to get bogged down while the others were in trouble.

Makoto let out a tiny sigh. "It's okay... you're safe now." She didn't pry. Whatever Death 13 had done in there, whatever twisted deathtrap he had assembled in that corridor, she could talk about it when she was ready.

The brunette touched her mask, healing waves of warm white light washing over Shizuka's body. Her physical pain was subsiding, and some of the fatigue managed to leave her sore muscles. She didn't feel in top shape, but she could at least move freely and run again.

Their quiet moment was interrupted by the door on the far left very nearly exploding off its hinges, crackles of electricity lingering on the metal. Yusuke and Ryuji quickly sprinted through the now open doorway, streaks of smoke flowing off the two soot-stained boys. Shizuka glimpsed Yusuke holding something as he left the doorway, and quickly realized he was leading Haru out by the hand. The strawberry blonde was wiping her eyes with her sleeve, continuing to cough up from the smoke.

"I m-must apologise," she squeakily said. "Th-the smoke got in my eyes."

"It's quite alright, you were just unlucky," Yusuke replied, releasing his grip on Haru's hand. He turned to examine the others, while Haru rubbed at her eyes to clear them. He scanned the group. "I see we're not the first ones out."

Shiho approached Ryuji, breathing a sigh of relief as she did so. "You okay? You look a little dirtier than usual."

Despite himself, Ryuji smirked. " Eh, nothin' I couldn't handle..." His expression grew a little more serious. "That bastard fitted that corridor with flamethrowers. We were lucky to get through it... pretty sure I'm gonna be smellin' of burnt skin for a while."
"I'll live with it," Shiho replied.

The next door burst open, followed quickly by Akira quickly making his way through. He was clutching his left shoulder carefully, a few streaks of blood oozing down his sleeve. "I hate Death 13 so much," he muttered. "He filled that room with plenty of these... gun things that fired out steel ball bearings. I got hit more than a few times."

Makoto approached their leader, and wasted no time in healing his injuries as best she could. "Well you're in one piece, and that's the important part," Makoto said.

Akira shrugged his shoulders. "Well one of those damn things nearly broke my left hand... but yeah, I'll make it." He took a moment to survey the others, doing a mental headcount of who he had present. "Aside from our captured teammates... we're still waiting on Diabolik and Maestro."

"Knowing Diabolik, he's probably taking the time to show off a bit," Shizuka remarked, slowly rolling her shoulders. "I just hope they pick up the pace. I wanna smash this bastard quickly."

"Yeah. Plus we gotta go and rescue the others... hope Oracle's doing okay," Ryuji remarked.

Yusuke nodded. "From what I've seen, Necronomicon is obscenely durable. She should be able to last in that trap for quite some time... though knowing Oracle, she may well have already devised a way to escape on her own."

"Yeah, that's true. That girl's scary smart," Akira said, smiling faintly at the thought.

There was a sudden rushing sound as the last door opened, with Hifumi and Sergio throwing themselves through the open doorway. This was followed several seconds after by a powerful crunching sound, tremors shaking the chamber around them.

Shizuka blinked in surprise and took a few steps toward the door to peer inside. The corridor the two had come through was blocked off entirely now, the doorway sealed by two interlocking masses of concrete.

"That son of a bitch... tried to... squish us," Sergio said in between quick huffs of breath.

"Yeah... from the look of things, you were almost a Diabolik Sandwich," Shizuka flatly said. "Seems he set up some static traps in those other corridors. For me though... well he attacked me personally, and made my deepest darkest fears come to life."

"Oh my goodness!" Haru said, letting out a small gasp of shock. "Sting, I'm so sorry to hear that! A-are you okay?" she sweetly asked.

Shizuka nodded, "I'll be fine... even if he dug up some shit that was probably repressed for a damn good reason," she said. "But, that's not the point. Point is, I managed to get the upper hand and attacked him directly. He's a bit more banged up, and more importantly he can be hurt here."

A faint smirk graced Akira's face. "Ah, is that so? Well, in that case, our job might be a little easier now. If we can believe anything he's told us so far, then Panther and Mona should be just past the funhouse. And the exit," he pointed to the corridor ahead of them, a few shafts of light peaking through the doorframe. "Seems to be through there," he added.

"We should get moving then," Shiho replied, nodding at the others. "There's no way to know what
other things this creep can set up if we don't hurry," the athlete explained.

"Mm. Well if everyone's patched up and ready, let's go," Akira said.

Once the group was set, the gang quickly started racing toward the door at the far end of the chamber. Akira led the charge and rammed his shoulder into the door, launching it open. Sure enough, the area outside was sunny and filled with fresh air. They'd reached the end of the funhouse, fortunately.

What lay ahead was a vast courtyard with a dark brown brickwork path. The path wound toward a large castle structure, the towers flying flags that depicted Death 13’s face. There was no other structure visible beyond that point, and it seemed they had nowhere else to go.

Still, Akira felt a sense of unease roll through him as he looked toward the castle. There was no cover between the funhouse and the castle, and Death 13 would easily see them coming. But if this was the only way forward, they had no choice but to charge through.

"Stick together everyone. We'll need to cross through here as quickly as we can," Akira informed them.

"Right... and we should keep our eyes peeled for that damn clown," Makoto added.

Soon the group were making a beeline across the expansive courtyard, moving as swiftly as they could manage. But, as they went along, the sky above started to darken. Akira managed to cast his gaze up, seeing a moving fleet of black clouds moving into position in the air above them. Death 13's doing, no doubt.

Soon they heard his voice calling out to them, shrieking through some hidden speakers scattered through the courtyard. "Lali ho! If you little bastards think you're getting in here untouched, you're sorely mistaken! I'll make you all feel a little of the pain Joestar visited on me!"

"What a little bitch..." Shizuka muttered under her breath.

"Wait, the clouds," Haru said, looking skyward. "What's going on with them?!!"

As Haru said this, the dark clouds grew even blacker, the transition punctuated by a loud crackling sound as strobos of pink lightning bounced between the rolling curves. In the span of seconds the clouds grew solid and pitched forward in the air, before gravity caught them and started yanking them toward the ground.

Death 13 had turned the clouds into concrete.

One small cloud smashed into the earth several dozen feet away from the group, but even at a distance the impact hit with an earth-shuddering force, nearly knocking the thieves off balance. They pressed on regardless, but several of them were already working on counters to this current predicament.

Breakthru lunged forward ahead of Sergio, using several bursts of superhuman quickness to cover a good deal of ground throughout the courtyard. His fists struck every brick in the ground they came across, sending a fleet of them racing upward to form a 'ceiling' ahead of the team. It wouldn't do much to hinder the heavy clouds.
Meanwhile, Shiho and Haru had summoned their Personas and taken aim toward the bulbous concrete meteors falling quickly toward them. Sprays of heavy fire flew from Milady's guns, while Eris unleashed a hail of blessed arrows outward.

And, while they could ultimately crack the concrete clouds, and break them apart... well they were so dense and vast that there were still huge chunks of debris falling out from the clouds they managed to break.

"Move, move!" Akira quickly said, short of breath.

More heavy impacts rocked the ground, volleys of concrete clouds smashing into the floor and becoming embedded. As they reached castle, more heavy shadows quickly closing in on the ground, Akira could make out the entrance of the castle in greater detail. A set of heavy doors blocked their path, and there was no telling if they were locked or not. But, even if they weren't, they couldn't afford to waste time struggling to push them open.

By now Yusuke had directed his Persona outward, with Kamu Susano swinging his heavy blade around and unleashing broad currents of freezing cold air. The added resistance partially slowed the incoming projectiles ahead of them, buying a few more precious seconds for the group. "Keep it up, you're doing great," Akira assured him.

The dark-haired leader reached up with his right hand, touching his mask to quickly summon Crom Cruach. The serpent slithered ahead of him at a terrifying speed, a throaty chuckle rising in his maw. He rapidly approached the doors and shoved his hands outward once he was several feet away from it.

A focused wave of light erupted from his palms, forged from intertwining waves of white, purple, and black energy. The almighty wave struck the door with a thunderous boom, swiftly blasting a wide hole in the wood. The teens raced through the freshly formed cloud of smoke, more booming impacts following behind them.

The last mass of concrete struck just a few feet behind them as they reached the door, the shockwave sweeping the thieves off their feet and leaving them sprawled across the entryway. A few muted groans filled the small entrance chamber, only growing stronger as members of the group struggled to stand.

"Is everyone... okay?" Makoto breathed as she rose up on wobbling legs. She found herself leaning against a red brick wall at her side for support, shaky breaths leaving her.

"I think my heart stopped..." Sergio murmured as he too made to stand.

"This guy," Shizuka muttered. She sat up on the hard floor, gradually catching her breath. All that sprinting hadn't done her sore body much good. "When we catch him, he's getting the walloping of a lifetime."

And already she was formulating a plan to better manage that.

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There was the sound of murmuring outside of his cell, causing Akechi to look up from the philosophy textbook in his hands. He recognised his jailer's rough-edged voice quickly enough, but it didn't take long for him to notice that he was speaking with a woman.
And then, after a few seconds spent listening, Akechi’s eyes widened as he realized that it was Sae’s voice.

The door to his room opened, and sure enough the tall prosecutor was standing in the doorway. She was dressed as formally as ever, keeping a cool and dispassionate look on her face as she regarded the disgraced junior detective. In her left hand she was holding a pen.

"Akechi," she curtly greeted.

"Sae-san," Akechi replied in much the same tone. "I'm surprised you know about this place."

"It wasn't particularly difficult. I'm aware that Makoto came to this facility not too long ago, and that the Speedwagon Foundation has very close ties to her girlfriend's family. And having explained my relationship to Makoto, the guard was willing to let me through." She frowned toward Akechi. "Ordinarily I'm staunchly against unlawful imprisonment. But given your apparent abilities, it seems a necessity."

Akechi chuckled slightly, despite himself. "Oh you're not wrong. Considering my abilities, the ties I have, and my good publicity... well I suppose it was either this, or they kill me. I rather prefer this," the brunette admitted.

"Presumably they also feel you'll give valuable evidence against Shido. That remains to be seen. Hmph... those bruises on your face might be fading, but you still look like you've seen better days." Sae tensed vaguely as the door closed behind her. "I imagine you know why I'm here?" she asked.

"Mm, I can guess. You want to discuss me giving you a psychotic breakdown," Akechi replied.

Sae nodded. "It's been on my mind, yes. But... more than that, I want to talk to you about this situation in general." She made her way to the wall opposite him, leaning against the smooth white surface. "Are you... really the one behind all this? The psychotic breakdowns, the mental shutdowns? Are you really the person I've been pursuing all this time?"

"I know you must feel cheated Sae-san. And truth be told, of all people I took no joy in deceiving you. You're a woman I have a good deal of respect for," he replied.

"You have an odd way of showing it," Sae muttered.

Akechi frowned slightly, but continued speaking regardless. "Yes, I am the one behind those acts. Many of them were done by request, all to aid Shido-san's allies and to gain their support." He shrugged slightly. "Well, not in your case. I originally used you as a lure because of your connection to Makoto. Ideally my plan would have gone off without a hitch, with you never realizing about the world inside your heart. And, of course, you would have been out of harm's way entirely."

"And yet, that's exactly what happened. I very nearly became a murderer because of you," Sae said, her tone icy. "And this was to save your own hide."

"Granted, but it was an act of desperation. I had underestimated the Arditi, and didn't think they had evidence against me. Like I said, I'm not happy that it came to that, but I'm willing to do what it takes to reach my goals,"
Sae nodded slightly, following along. "Yes, the ultimate desire to kill Masayoshi Shido. You've certainly taken a roundabout path to those goals. From what I've gathered, I can't exactly fault you for wanting him dead. I only know him by reputation now, and I already hate his guts... but even so, I can't excuse some of the actions you've taken. The people you've hurt."

"I don't expect you to. Or anyone, for that matter. What I've done is for my own gain..." Akechi maintained a firm frown on his face, reclining on his bed until his back touched the wall. "I'll freely admit to performing terrible crimes, solely so you know I'm being truthful when I say I respect and admire you a good deal, Sae-san. You're perhaps the only person to ever show me unconditional friendship, and I greatly appreciate that fact. To say nothing for the intelligence you have shown off... Yes, you're one of the few individuals I have a strong admiration for," he explained.

He let out a tiny sigh. "Truth be told, there was a time when I even considered informing you about this conspiracy, and giving you membership. But, deep down, I knew you would have refused."

"And if I did, you would have had to kill me. Right," Sae finished. "Even so, even if much of your 'junior detective' act was just a front, I've been close to you for this past year. You helped me deal with cases completely unrelated to this conspiracy, and together we've put more than a few criminals behind bars."

"What are you getting at?" Akechi asked,

Sae slowly exhaled through her nose. "I'm saying this because... I want to believe that there's good in you. Despite everything you've done, I want to think you can start doing the right thing and make amends for your crimes," she explained.

Akechi blinked a few times in surprise. "That's... certainly not what I expected to hear from you, Sae-san. Given your usual attitude in matters such as these. Have you had your own change of heart?"

"In a manner of speaking," Sae admitted, crossing her arms over her chest. "Learning about my own 'Palace', the flaws of my being that had grown so massive... I've decided I want to change my ways. And part of that is believing that you can start to change too. I want to believe in the good of people. And that includes you." She trailed off slowly. "More than that however, I believe you can make for a useful asset. I'm not so naive as to think that Shido having a change of heart will stop his group. There are many big players in that group, and they can try and work around Shido having a mental shift. To say nothing of the fact that evidence of Shido's crimes may be in short supply."

Akechi shifted uncomfortably, but otherwise he remained silent. Internally he was still trying to process the idea of Sae seeing the 'good' inside of him. This definitely wasn't what he had expected to come up from this meeting.

"But you... I know you well enough, secret double life as a magical hitman aside. And I know you meticulous you are in taking notes and recording things. Would I be right in assuming you have a good deal of evidence on Shido and his friends?" Akechi didn't answer her. "I take it by your silence that I'm right."

"Astute as ever," Akechi curtly replied. "I may have been keeping tabs on things, just in case I had to destroy some of Shido's allies." He shrugged. "And yes, much of it would be quite interesting to the police."
Sae nodded in understanding. Seeming to be satisfied by this, she pushed herself away from the wall and made for the door of Akechi's cell. She paused, her back to him. "I doubt you can ever fully be forgiven for what you've done, and you'll have to do time regardless of what happens from here on out... But if you want to be a part of society, you have to abide by its rules. That's just how it is. And I'd like to think you can understand that, because the alternative route your life can take from here... is far less pleasant. I don't know if you're going to consider any of this, but please at least try to. I'd like the conviction of Shido and his allies to be assured."

She left him alone in his room, with his jailer sealing the door up once again. Just him and his thoughts.

He had worked with Sae long enough to know what the brunette was lying. She had a brilliant poker face, and was always unflappable in the courtroom. But, much like everyone, she had her tells. And Akechi knew that Sae had been genuine.

That was what was really tripping Akechi up. She knew the truth about him, and she still believed he had some good in him. The detective really didn't know what to make of that.

He smiled bitterly. 'Ah, Sae-san... It really does hurt me to be on a different side to you. Few things are worse than the thoughts of hurting you. I really wish we could be allies.'

It wouldn't matter in the long run. By now whatever nasty surprise Mr. A had sent out to Arisawa's Palace was likely in effect, and the Ariditi would be back on the defensive against this unknown force. What were the odds that they'd survive that?

Still... on some level he was giving Sae's words some thought. Assuming the Arditi survived, where would he go from here? If he didn't break out of here, the only paths laying before him were imprisonment or death, and he would admit to deserving either of those.

But, so long as Shido was dead first... well he'd be fine with that.

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The Arditi slowly made their way into a vast hallway inside the castle, surveying it as they went. There seemed to be almost no furnishing on the ground level, with much of the detail being up above him. There was the imagery of Death 13 on the stain glass windows, the balconies dotted around the upper reaches of the chamber, and the assortment of bladed instruments dangling from hooks from the ceiling.

It didn't take long to see the cages dangling above them, and some relief washed over the group. At least they were still okay. Looking toward the far end of the ceiling, they could also see Arisawa's cage. The judge was still shouting profanities at the group, but was fortunately too far away to be heard.

"Guys!" Ann called out from on high. "Be careful! I think he's around here somewhere!" she said.

"Panther, just hang tight!" Akira called back. "We'll be up there as soon as was can." Still, he knew the blonde was right. That bastard wasn't just going tp let them waltz in and take their friends back, and there was nowhere left for him to hide.

And, sure enough, his voice soon filled the large chamber. "Lali ho! I'm sure you little bastards are
all feeling proud of yourselves. Savor it, it's the last good sensation you're ever going to have!" A
dark miasma materialised in the air above them, swiftly forming into a churning void from which
Death 13's body slowly floated down from. "I had hoped the traps would be enough to get you, but
now I'll have to do this myself... not that I exactly mind."

He lashed his scythe out in a fluffy of rapid swings, the air pressure of his slashes cleaving down
toward the group. The thieves scattered as the bladed air sliced into the stone floor, leaving deep
fissures in passing.

Akira landed, quickly trying to summon Crom Cruach. However, as soon as the serpent appeared,
the ground beneath him bubbled and boiled. Large articulate arms of stone burst of of the ground,
striking against Crom Cruach and sending Akira stumbling backward. A third arm formed behind
him and struck his back, launching Akira violently into the nearest wall.

Meanwhile, Haru had taken to dodging away from more aerial slashes, her breathing heavy as she
only barely avoided the bladed strikes cleaving through solid stone. As she ran she managed to
summon Milady, her Persona aiming high and unleashing a volley of gunfire that surged up toward
Death 13. However, the demonic Stand was quick to react to the incoming assault.

With his right hand clutching his scythe, his left hand was free. He shoved it outward, the
dimensions warping and elongating until it had morphed into an overgrown kite shield, sparks
erupting from the metal as Haru's attacks lashed against it.

Shizuka narrowed her eyes as she looked up at the floating figure, as he weaved and danced away
from attacks launched by Haru and Makoto. Her attention shifted the a balcony positioned nearby,
a modest smirk forming on her face.

"Hey, Fox," she quickly said.

"I take it you have a plan?" Yusuke asked, taking his left hand away from his mask.

"Yeah, but I need your help for it. First things first though," Shizuka trailed off as she swiftly made
herself and Yusuke invisible. "We need to get up to that balcony."

Meanwhile, up above, Ann watched the battle unfold with some mounting concern. Now that
Death 13 was occupied, she reached behind herself and took up a machete she had managed to
pluck from a nearby hook, and immediately set to work sawing against three of the bars at her right
side.

Even if her Persona was sealed away by this cage, her strength was still marginally superhuman.
And soon enough the bladed edge was starting to sink into the metal of the bars. And once she had
a neat gap to work with, Hecate could handle the rest.

"We better work quickly," Morgana said. "I don't like the thought of not being able to help the
others against this creep."

"You and me both," Ann quickly replied. "I'm working as fast as I can here, but metal is still...
tough, you know?"

"You wretched thieves!" Arisawa shouted from his cell. "Hurry up and deal with this jumped up
home invader! And then line up for your own executions!"
Down below, Death 13 braced as Seiten Taisei raced toward him. His cudgel slammed into the pole of the Stand's scythe, the ground flaking apart around them. Crackles of electricity raced around Seiten Taisei's body, a few scorches spreading around Death 13.

"Hehe... you're a toughie, aren't you? But in my world, so am I!" He shoved his scythe upward, the blow striking Seiten Taisei backward. Ryuji's head snapped off to the side, gritting his teeth from a brief flash of pain. But he was quick to plant his feet, with his Persona and Crom Cruach racing toward the scythe-toting demon.

With his right hand his blade was lashing against Seiten Taisei's cudgel, while his left hand had morphed into a shield to block Crom Cruach's hulking fists. "I was holding back before, but I won't lose! I have a lot running on this job!" Death 13 shouted.

A hard blow smashed Crom Cruach into a nearby wall, rattling Akira's body. With one quick flourish, Death 13 generated a powerful gale that blew Ryuji's Persona away, with the blond landing hard on his back.

There was a sudden crack of gunfire, and Death 13 craned his neck at an alien angle to avoid the sniper bullet that whizzed past his left cheek. It left a thin scar on his mask-like visage in passing. Suddenly his neck snapped around a full 180 degrees, empty eyes glaring toward Hifumi at the entryway. Almost at once she felt an unnatural dread fill her.

"Lali hoooooo~,"

His open mouth bent and warped in shape, turning into a crooked vortex that had a strange dark miasma fogging through it. A beefy ebony arm suddenly erupted from his throat, elongating obscenely as it made a beeline for Hifumi. Its large hard fist was coiled tight, weighty veins pulsing around the strange, alien flesh.

Hifumi was fast, particularly in the Metaverse, and was able to leap away from the initial blow that plowed through the brickwork behind her. But it twisted and surged around with inhuman speed and flexibility, making a beeline for Hifumi. Flaming Telepath floated in front of her, outlining the incoming flurry of movements. But, even dodging as fast as she could, and with her Stand striking against the strange arm, she wasn't fast enough.

One strike broke through her defense and rammed into her chest, Hifumi's eyes bulging out of her head. She landed harshly on her side, gasping for air as she clutched her stomach.

The arm reeled upward, long talons snapping out from the tips of its grotesque fingers. The others were working to get up, with Makoto taking in a few quick breaths as Johanna formed beneath her. A heavy brick suddenly shot through the air and slammed into the elbow of the arm, the impressive speed causing it to cleave through the oily flesh and split the strange limb in half at the middle.

"Hnn?" Death 13 suddenly slurped the broken limb back into his mouth like a horrible noodle, his mouth returning to the correct shape once it had fully vanished. He turned, looking toward Sergio. An assortment of bricks were orbiting around him, with the blond glaring intensely at their foe. By now the others were recovering, with Hifumi catching her breath while still clutching her stomach.

"My my... such a hardy bunch," Death 13 said.

"I see you're still up to your old tricks." The refined and deep voice caused Death 13 to pause, his
attention swiftly being drawn upward to a balcony above him. In an instant the expression of his mask-like visage shifted as he floated upward, the corners of his mouth drooping into an exaggerated frown.

The figure staring him down was tall and slender, dressed in a dark green school uniform with a coat that stopped above his knees. His hair was fluffy and red, a long curl tapering down the right side of his face. A pair of earrings dangled from his earlobes, and looked distinctly cherry shaped.

"I-it can't be!" Death 13 gasped. "N-Noriaki Kakyoin?"

Kakyoin smirked slightly. "Surprised to see me, Death 13? I heard you were causing trouble again, so I decided to pay you a visit."

"Y-you can't be here! Dio-sama killed you!" the floating figure screeched.

Kakyoin's smile didn't falter, and he gave Death 13 a disdainful look. "This is a world where reality is irrelevant, and anything can happen. Nightmares can bubble into existence," he pointed decisively at Death 13. "Including yours!"

Death 13 shrank away, the walls of the castle starting to bubble and melt as a flash of fear and anger gripped him. "Y-you... you stay away! Th-this can't be r-real, I'm the one in control of this world! Y-you shouldn't-"

"I'm afraid that's not the case. You've run wild for far too long now," Kakyoin interrupted, a terrifying intensity coming from his glare. He suddenly clenched his right fist, the corresponding foot sliding forward to the edge of the balcony. "And so now... it's time for you to be punished for your sins!"

A sudden burst of fire exploded into his back, flames engulfing Death 13 as he was catapulted downward. Time started to slow down from his point of view, in which time he managed to see Ann and Morgana standing on the balcony across from Kakyoin, flames protruding from Hecate's familiars.

Houdini shot ahead of Kakyoin, making a beeline for Death 13 as his burning frame tumbled downward. Once she was far enough away from Kakyoin, his entire form seemed to flicker. Waves of light washed off him, and in an instant 'Kakyoin' had vanished, replaced with Yusuke's equally lanky frame. He seemed quite pleased with himself.

With impressive quickness, Houdini snatched Death 13's scythe from his weakened grasp, her heels slamming into the Stand's chest. He surged downward at a rapid speed, his back colliding with the floor and splitting it open with his body.

"Holy crap," Akira murmured. He glanced over to Shizuka as she materialized beside Yusuke on the balcony. "Well, it looks like Panther and Mona freed themselves. But, that aside... Sting what the heck just happened?"

Shizuka grinned as Houdini returned to her side, casually twirling the scythe in her left hand. "Well, our lil' friend here apparently attacked Jotaro in the others back in the 80s, and Kakyoin had some sorta' effect on him. I took a gamble and decided to use Houdini's light powers to make a fake Kakyoin." She shrugged. "I mean, I never knew the guy, I've only seen him in pictures and from what Dad told me. I remember him apparently being refined and with a deep voice... and Fox was the best model I had for that."
"Huh... well whatever that Kakyoin guy did, he really lit a fire under this dude's butt," Ryuji casually remarked.

A powerful pulse exploded from Death 13's crater, the sudden shockwave pushing away the thieves nearest to him. "You little bitch!" Death 13 shouted. He shot upward, ripples of darkness radiating around him as the walls began to blacken and distort from his anger. "I'm going to drown you myself! I'll crush your neck like a dry twig, and make you look me in the eyes as you die!"

A series of gale force winds lashed into him from all sides, forming from Zorro's rapier, causing the dream demon to snarl as the powerful winds blew him away from the balcony and cut into his body. Shizuka and Yusuke turned invisible, jumping quickly from their vantage point.

Just as Morgana's assault ended, a psychic wave lashed into Death 13's back, making him cry out as the crushing force slammed violently around his back and shoulders. "I will not allow you to hurt my friends any more!" There was a dangerous edge to Haru's glare, looking out of place on her normally kind visage. "I'll make you pay," she growled.

"Yeah, you tell 'em Noir!" Ann enthusiastically shouted from above.

Growling, Death 13 turned and started a rapid rush toward Haru, weaving and dodging away from incoming attacks launched by Makoto and Shiho. His fist rammed into the ground a foot in front of Haru as she tried to jump away, only for a bouquet of concrete to shoot out of the ground in front of him. Milady moved to intercept them, the impact against her armoured hull echoing loudly. Haru let out a pained cry, skidding backward.

Death 13 leered up at her, his mask-like face warped with anger. "So, you want to go first?" he asked as Haru worked to keep her footing.

By now the entire castle was rumbling, stone tentacles erupting from the walls and floor and lashing out at the various other Phantom Thieves. It was enough to make them scatter, putting a buffer between them and Death 13.

Haru grit her teeth, looking at Death 13 with firm resolve. Once more Milady floated above her, a crackling purple glow illuminating Haru and her Persona. An unseen psychic wave crashed against Death 13, carving fissures in the floor around him. It was like being caught in a mighty cyclone, but even so Death 13 was powering through the constant pressure weighing down on him. Cracks spread along his body.

"Then... I'll gladly oblige you."

Both of Death 13's fists broke through the psychic force, smashing into Milady's armoured frame. Haru cried out in pain from the strike, swiftly being flung off her feet until she landed harshly on the ground, panting for breath. She grit her teeth, struggling to rise up as Death 13 slowly moved closer to her.

"Oh... done already?" Death 13 asked, sounding a little short of breath. The mouth in his chest rumbled, the teeth starting to part. "Then I guess I'll finish you off and then get to your fucking friends!"

Another rumble rocked the castle, making Death 13 pause for just a second. He quickly discarded his concerns, thinking it was just a tremor caused his lashing tentacles, and turned his attention
back to Haru. But before he could make a move, another tremor rocked the ground, the floor splitting in a clear path toward him. "What the-?!" Death 13 was cut off a black mass exploding out of the ground and striking Death 13 harshly, smashing him clean into the wall.

The dust cleared slowly, and Death 13 could see that he was pinned in place by a long black tentacle with a myriad of runes etched into the inky matter. It trailed down toward a large flying saucer that had burst out of the ground, the shattered floor revealing an underground chamber below.

"Death 13," Futaba said, putting on the toughest voice she could muster. "I'm back from Hell."

"Y-you?! How the hell did you get out of the water pit?!" Death 13 asked. Looking off to his side he could see Ann, Yusuke, and Makoto rapidly plowing through several of the stone tendrils he had summoned.

"Draining that pit was a pain in the butt... took way longer than I thought it would. After that, well I just had to plow through Arisawa's underground layer of the Palace. A spot you didn't touch," Futaba said, sounding more than a little pleased with herself.

A volley of tentacles erupted from Death 13's chest, striking at Necronomicon's extended limb and plowing through it, shredding his enemies tentacle on contact. Necronomicon reeled back, while Death 13 trembled in his anger.

"It doesn't matter! All you're doing now is speeding things up on my end!" A powerful pulse raced through the vast chamber, punctuated with a resounding cracking noise as the various stained-glass windows began to shatter violently and in unison. He shoved himself forcefully away from the wall, as the windows exploded, their shards surging into the chamber.

Sergio dove at Hifumi and Yusuke, tackling the two away from a surging tide of glass shards. Several pieces of shrapnel cut into his back, making the blond cry out in pain, but he held his position as a living shield regardless. Yusuke swiftly summoned Kamu Susanoo, the spectral samurai swiftly erecting a dense dome of foggy ice around them. But for as thick as it was, it was soon cracking under the impacting glass.

Meanwhile Akira, Shiho, Ryuji, and Ann fell in close to Morgana as the feline summoned Zorro. His Persona stirred up a powerful cyclone around him, the rippling winds enough to ward off the incoming glass.

Death 13 let out an inarticulate growl, raising both of his arms high. The castle around them began to quake and shudder, as a violent thunderstorm raged outside. His anger was rising, the castle starting to buckle under the crushing weight of Death 13's rage.

And then, all at once, it came to a sudden stop.

There was a distinct slicing sound that echoed through the vast chamber, the air warping in the wake of the unseen blade. It cleaved through Death 13's left arm at the elbow, slicing it clean off. The sudden shock seemed to make the entire Palace freeze, and Death 13 went rigid. His mask-like face warped in shock, as he Shakily looked toward the bleeding stump of his left arm.

"W-wha... WHAAAAAAAT?!" he shrieked.

Houdini suddenly appeared behind Death 13, idly twirling his scythe yet again. "'Sup bitch?"
Shizuka spat. "Hope you didn't think I was done with you. That shit you pulled on me, the things you dug out of my brain... I'm not letting you off for that!"

With Death 13 gripped with immense shock, his control over the Palace rapidly began to falter. The colour drained from his cartoonish creations, his mental constructs hardening and crumbling. In the span of seconds, the chamber had become a sepia-toned ruin.

With their foe stunned, the others were quick to close in on the demonic Stand. He slumped to the ground, clutching the stump with his right hand. "Looks like you're down for the count Death 13," Yusuke curtly said.

"Thank goodness for that," Morgana murmured. "I really need a nap."

"My back looks like a chopping block, shut up," Sergio replied.

A few agitated growls rolled out of Death 13's mouth, his form flickering as he struggled to keep himself anchored to the Palace. "If I lose..." He let out a sudden snarl and drove his right hand into the ground, using the last of his powers to generate a portal in the floor. "THEN YOU LOSE TOO!"

All eyes turned toward Arisawa's cage, a mutual sensation of horror overcoming the thieves as they realized what was coming. A violent shriek left Arisawa as Death 13's fist exploded out of his chest, a spray of blood drenching the bars of his cage.

Akira and Shizuka's eyes widened, unable to look away from the cannonball sized hole that had just been punched through Arisawa. They could see daylight through his dripping wound.

The entire Palace trembled.

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Despite the strange discomfort he was feeling, Arisawa had resolved to do his job to the best of his abilities. But as he sorted through a fresh stack of paperwork, he couldn't do much to halt the sweat on his brow, or even out his breathing.

He just felt so... sweaty and sluggish. As if he was feeling the worst fever of his life.

"What on earth is happening to me?" Arisawa muttered.

He raised another file up to examine it, but as he raised it he felt a sudden stabbing sensation race through his brain. "Ghh!" Arisawa froze up, his teeth chattering while the veins of his forehead pulsed up under his skin.

A shallow, choking breath left him, immediately being drowned out by a horrible black bile rising in his throat and dribbling out of the corners of his mouth.

"W-what..." he gagged. "M-me... me t-too, Sh-Shido-san?"

A final horrible wheeze left him, his eyes rolling back in his head, before his forehead slammed into the desk and everything went black.

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Akira opened his eyes, aware that their surroundings had shifted. Once again they were in the quiet, sterile streets of Kasumigaseki. The group took a few steps away from Futaba, having once again used her for a hasty escape. With all that had happened, the redhead seemed to be swaying slightly on her feet.

"Easy there girl," Akira said, a strong arm settling around her shoulders. "You did great today. I'm proud of you."

"Yeah, she really did," Shizuka said, smiling over at the redhead. However, Shizuka's expression soon turned grim. "But... even so, after everything, we still..."

Ryuji nodded, trying his best to keep his anger in check. "That son of a bitch. Even after getting his arm sliced, he still managed to do that..."

"I know we're all in shock from what just happened, but we need to move out of here quickly," Makoto said, taking in a few heavy breaths to even herself out. "It won't be long until someone finds his body, and we don't want to be in the area when the building gets locked down," she explained.

Ann looked around nervously. "But... what about Death 13's user? He has to be nearby, right?" she asked. Before anyone could answer, a sudden pained scream filled the air, coming to the west of where the thieves were gathered.

Shizuka and Sergio immediately sprang into action at the sound, immediately sprinting away from their teammates despite their protests. The rest of the team were still catching their breath, but Shizuka and Sergio had enough stamina and adrenaline to push them onward.

"It came from this way," Sergio said as they continued on, having quickly moved through a tangled web of alleys not too far from their usual gathering space. He was wincing with every few steps, still feeling a pain in his back. But even so he wasn't about to let Death 13 get away.

Shizuka too could feel waves of pain rolling through her muscles, but was doing her best to ignore her own discomfort. Not when things were this serious.

The two skidded to a halt at the mouth of another alley, catching a glimpse of pool of blood at a nearby trashcan. And, a few feet beyond that, was a tall man. He was staggering away at a steady speed, clutching a bloody limb in his right hand.

"Hey!" Shizuka shouted. "Where the fuck do you think you're going?!

The figure froze up, turning sharply. He looked about ten years older than Shizuka, his hair a wavy, wild mane of black hair. The coffee hue to his skin implied he was of some South Asian descent. And with that abruptly missing arm, there was no doubt that he was Death 13's user.

"A guy like him, with a power like that... how the hell are we gonna keep him from killing again, even if he's locked up?" Sergio muttered. Now that he knew about the Metaverse, he was even more dangerous. How many people had been put into a lethal nightmare because of this bastard?

"Since Mr. A hired you... where does he operate out of?" Shizuka asked. "Better answer quickly, or your other arm is going the way of the dodo."
"I met him through his assistant, Okabe. Never the man himself, and the airport bar we met at wasn't exactly a secret lair," he replied, a few steaming huffs leaving his mouth. Even at this distance, Shizuka could see his abnormally long and sharp incisors.

Sergio's eyes narrowed just a bit. "Okabe..." he repeated under his breath.

"I'm sure you know more than that. So... how about we loosen those lips a bit?" Shizuka growled. Houdini abruptly shot ahead of her, delivering a hard blow to the older man's stomach. He gagged, skidding backward on his heels, and seemed to be wide open as Houdini moved to strike him in the face.

However, in a flash, Death 13's visage appeared above him. His scythe abruptly materialized in his remaining hand, the pole striking Houdini in the jaw. Shizuka skidded backward, a spray of blood flying past her lips.

"Now... die you little bitch!"

Death 13 raised his scythe high overhead, stray sunbeams glittering along the curved blade. "**LALI HO!**"

But, before the blade could meet Shizuka's neck, glimmering light rapidly closed the distance to Death 13's user and plowed into his throat, unleashing a violent spray of blood on impact. It was a shard of glass, propelled off the hard ground by Breakthru.

Sergio quickly helped Shizuka to her feet, and both could only watch as Death 13's user let out his last gurgling breaths, writhing weakly for just a few seconds longer.

They had won the battle, but... between losing Arisawa (which the Arditi would doubtless be blamed for), and not learning anything new about Mr. A, it felt like they were still a long way from winning the war.
Interlude 6

10/22

Having spent two days recovering from all that had just happened, as Death 13 had put the team through the wringer, Akira was getting set to pick up where they left off. The election was looming on the horizon, and all signs pointed to Shido winning in a landslide. It was something they couldn't let happen.

With Arisawa's sudden and unexplained demise, public opinion of the Arditi had once again worsened. There was no calling card on or near the body, but given Arisawa's station many people simply assumed that he had been their newest target.

It was certainly irritating, but by now Akira was somewhat used to people making these assumptions about his team. He would dwell on it if there weren't more important matters going on, and for now he'd rather focus on Shido and his organization.

After the demise of Death 13's user, they didn't have much more to go on, beyond him mentioning a man called 'Okabe.' That had managed to strike Sergio's interest, and so Akira had asked him to do a little digging. If it was something Stand-related, then he had some of the best resources to research it.

That afternoon he got a text from Sergio, saying that he had a little information. Both had agreed that it would perhaps be safer to talk in public, with Sergio agreeing to meet Akira at Leblanc.

Sergio had gotten comfortable at the seat by Akira's workbench, idly sipping an espresso. He savored the taste, making a few small humming sounds before swallowing. "You know," the blond said "Boss really is a talented man. This is just as good as what I can get back home," he noted.

"He's definitely educated on the subject," Morgana said, perched on the end of Akira's bed. "But, that aside, what've you got for us?"

"Not a whole lot, I'm sorry to say. But if Futaba could get into our messages, I wouldn't want to run the risk of anyone else doing it," Sergio replied. "But I decided to do a little digging when Okabe's name was brought up. It's one I've heard in the past, and the case on him is an... interesting one."

Akira leaned on the wall near his shelves, watching Sergio closely. "Yeah, you did seem pretty curious after we caught up with you. Well, even if it's not much, it's still better than nothing. What'd you manage to find out?" he asked.

"Toshi Okabe has been a... person of interest to the SID for some time now. It started about... sixteen years ago, when he was nearly finished with high school," Sergio began. "Okabe is what could be described as a natural born genius, highly proficient in math, literature, and science. More than that he seemed to have some uncanny ability to multitask, never being overwhelmed. But, intelligence and difference can breed contempt."

For a moment Akira thought back to what Futaba had told him about her middle school and elementary school years. Yes, Sergio had the right of it. Being the smart kid could be tough going.

"Right... and I take it he had bullies?"
"Mhm," Sergio replied, nodding curtly. "In addition to his intellect, Okabe was noted to experience... hallucinations from a young age. Seeing and hearing things that weren't actually there, and described them as being akin to the scenes of nature from Disney's Bambi and Snow White. We believe these 'hallucinations' were the result of his Stand, but we have no proof of that. Regardless, it was another thing that made him a target. And we believe it led to a violent tragedy."

Akira and Morgana leaned in slightly, deeply curious. "I take it that he killed his bullies with his Stand?" Akira asked.

Sergio hummed faintly. "So the theory goes." He took another sip of espresso before continuing. "There was an... incident out by Shinjuku, where Okabe's bullies were found. Four of them were dead, utterly brutalized according to the police report. There was one bully who survived... and Okabe himself, who had a few injuries of his own. The surviving bully, well he was hysterical. Absolutely insane and unintelligible from whatever he had seen. And Okabe, well he seemed more than a little shaken too. And the police didn't have anything to go on, or any evidence to describe just what had happened to those boys," he explained.

"I see. So you think that Okabe's Stand appeared at the time, and... whatever its power was, he took his revenge on his bullies?" asked Morgana.

"It's possible," Sergio admitted. "As you can imagine this was well before my time, back when the SID was in its infancy. There wasn't much in the realm of investigation, beyond a quick interrogation. But, the lead investigator showed off his Stand and didn't get a reaction from Okabe."

Morgana tilted his head in a curious fashion. "Wait, so he couldn't see it?"

"That's one possibility, but... if Okabe is a genius, he might be a rather good actor. His power fully manifests, he gets revenge on his tormentors, and he figures... 'I can get away with this, and continue to use these powers. I just need to keep looking like a scared victim'," Akira reasoned.

Sergio finished his espresso and set it aside. "My my, you might have a career in the SID when we're done here," he said, grinning over at Akira. "Yes, I and the investigator at the time thought that that was the case. But his file had to go on the backburner and fade into relative obscurity due to the continuous onslaught of other incidents," he said.

Akira and Morgana thought on all they had learned, digesting this information. It wasn't much to go on, but it did give them a little more insight into A's organization. "From what we know about Mr. A, he has a liking for recruiting downtrodden people who can be of use to him. Some ostracized genius who has a destructive Stand at his disposal would be up his alley," the feline mused.

"Right. But we still have no idea what kind of power that might be. But if it could drive someone crazy, there must be some weird shit to it," Akira chimed.

"Not that we have any way of knowing right now," Sergio admitted, sighing. He sank back against the bench, his elbows resting on the wood. "We've tried keeping tabs on Okabe in the past, but he's... slippery. He apparently has several homes dotted through Tokyo, which definitely isn't cheap."

The leader nodded in understanding. "Well, from the look of things, he might be Mr. A's... assistant, I guess. Probably another one of those Deadly Aspects. But whatever the case, we'll be
coming yp against him soon enough. For now I wanna deal with Shido before people start casting their votes," Akira explained.

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From his position on the couch in Club Ravana's private room, Mr. A let out an annoyed sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose. "So you mean to tell me that Mannish Boy is dead?" he asked in an annoyed grumble.

Toshi, standing a few feet across from his employer, nodded curtly. "It took a little while for the information to reach me, but yes. In his last report to me, he claimed to have gained access to this 'Metaverse' through Death 13. It seems the Thieves managed to beat him, and then someone killed him either out of self-defence, or because he was too big a threat to be left alive," he explained.

Mr. A gave an annoyed groan and tipped his head back, massaging his temples slowly. "Would someone tell me why we're having so much trouble killing a single high school girl? Mannish was supposed to be one of the best assassins in the world, and even he couldn't beat the Arditi."

Over by the bar, Sanshiro shrugged his broad shoulders. "She mightn't be a Joestar by blood, but she's prolly learned a lot from 'em. I'd say she's one crafty bitch. And her friends probably have plenty of firepower too," he said, raising his heavy glass of brandy to his lips and taking a long sip of the cool brown liquid.

"No doubt. And with Mannish Boy gone, then we don't have any more Stand users who can access the cognitive world Akechi told us about," Mr. A said. The towering man eventually adjusted his posture, leaning forward with his fingers tented in front of his face.

"The only gain we have from this fiasco is the fact that Arisawa was killed before he could have a change of heart. But I'm willing to bet the Thieves won't risk wasting more time and are going to go for Shido directly," Lars suggested. The foreigner was leaning near the door, continuing to idly fold a sheet of paper until he had created an ornate origami kangaroo.

"So what're we gonna do if it comes to that? If that nightmare creep is gone, and we still can't get in touch with the kid, then we don't have any way to keep track of Imaginationland or whatever the fuck it's called," Sanshiro said.

Mr. A silently pondered this for several moments. "By my reckoning, it's still gonna be some time before our body double finishes learning all Shido's mannerisms. Right?" Toshi nodded in confirmation. "Mm. And that's not taking into account the time that Suchong would need to alter his face, and for the changes to take effect. So without our replacement, we can't just off Shido."

"Unfortunate," Lars remarked. "And we still have no idea where Akechi is. If he's still alive, then he's likely being housed at some Speedwagon facility, and it's possible he's been moved out of the country entirely."

"Fuckin' great... well what're we gonna do about Shido in that case?" Sanshiro asked. "If those kids go after him next, we don't have any way to attack them in that other world."

After some moments of silent though, Mr. A rose to his feet with his hands clasped neatly together behind his back. "I haven't forgotten what Akechi told us. They can't steal someone's heart without sending a calling card, right? Well, obviously we'll know when that happens, and it'll take some time to get to that stage. Okabe, I want you to get in touch with our inside men. As soon as Shido
gets a calling card, we need to know. And, even if they change his heart, his inner circle just need to keep him from making any public statements. In time we'll have our double ready to replace him," he explained.

"I'll get right on it," Okabe replied. He turned on his heel and made for the door, with Lars inching away from the frame to give him better access.

"Yeah, you do that," Sanshiro said. Once the door had closed he took another long sip of brandy and turned back into the bar. "Ya goddamn nutcase..."

"As for the real world, we'll need to consider keeping an eye around the Diet Building. I don't really get this whole 'Palace' thing, but if that's where Shido's is, then the Arditi might start stalking around that area," Mr. A said.

Having finished his work, Lars set his neatly formed paper kangaroo on a nearby coffee table. "We could always try threatening their loved ones. It might be enough to cow them into submission," the assassin mused, speaking in a casual tone as if he were describing the weather.

"Doesn't work on kids," Mr. A matter-of-factly said. "You can hinder adults with threats like that, since they're cautious and think ahead. But kids are dumb, impulsive, and angry. You threaten or harm their loved ones, well they get revenge on the brain. But, speaking of which, I guess I could lean on Morihiro for a bit, see if he knows anything. I doubt it, since those kids seem to be acting independently of him, but it can't hurt to try."

Sanshiro swallowed the last of his brandy, coughing into his right fist after downing the last of it. "What a pain," he grumbled. "Back in my day, kids didn't do any of this 'fight the system' shit. 'Course these kids would come outta' the woodwork right when we're near the finish line."

"It's a lot more of a challenge than I was expecting. Mannish Boy is dead, same with Miwa... and we've already lost some other agents through all this." Mr. A forced a grim smile. "Damn it Joestar... I actually respect you. You're making this fun..."

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10/23

After a little bit of discussion, Akira and Makoto had agreed to meet up at the cafe on Shibuya's main street. The two tried to make time to hang out in a semi-regular basis, as was the case with all Akira's friends, and for now he was still trying to destress after all that had just transpired.

Death 13 had been a horrible experience for the team, and they all wanted a chance to catch their breath after dealing with the nightmare weaver. Tomorrow Akira would go to Akechi for some answers, but today he just wanted to have a nice and quiet afternoon.

The two sat across from each other in a quiet booth, making idle chatter as they went through their coffee and treats. Akira preferred Leblanc, of course, but he didn't want to hang out there all the time.

"So ah," Akira eventually asked. "How's JoJo doing?"

Makoto frowned slightly, her ivory cup inches from her lips. While they had all had their own horrible experiences with Death 13, the demon had gone after her personally, and seemed to dig up
something that she wanted to remain buried. "She... still doesn't really want to talk about it. I think she'd feel better if she did, but I don't want to force the issue."

"Right," Akira replied, nodding. He raised a daifuku to his lips and bit it in half, chewing on what he snatched up for several seconds before swallowing. "Well, whatever it was she saw, it was pretty nasty. If I had to guess, it was something from when she was really young." He still had the files Shizuka had given him, but hadn't actually read them. Akira didn't think it was any of his business.

"Most likely. She did tell me that Death 13 uprooted some sort of 'primordial fear' from her mind, and something like that is probably the result of some childhood trauma." Makoto sighed heavily. "But then again, depending on how far back that was, she might not even know why she's afraid of something, or what that specific fear is. But... she's tough, I know she can get through this. And I'll help however I can."

"Well, good. I figure that all you can do is support her until she's ready to talk about it... but, speaking of, you think she'll be ready to help when we get back down to business?" Akira asked.

Makoto took another sip of coffee before nodding firmly. "Most definitely. She's still a hundred percent on board with our... after school project. Especially with how short our current timeframe is... geez. With Death 13 springing up, Arisawa just felt like one big diversion."

"Most likely the case. I only went after him because Akechi made a compelling argument for hunting him down... I never should have listened to him," Akira muttered. Akechi would get his sooner or later.

Makoto smiled slightly. "You can't blame yourself for that Akira. We never could have predicted a Stand like Death 13 getting mixed up in our work. And Akechi is definitely a manipulative guy. Don't worry, we won't be tricked by him again."

"Heh. Well, that does make me feel a little bit better... You know when we first met, I never would've thought you'd be the kind of person giving me emotional and moral support," he explained. "No offense."

"None taken. I wasn't... exactly the nicest person when we met," Makoto said, laughing awkwardly and glancing away from the 'infamous delinquent.'

Akira shrugged his strong shoulders. "Oh well, I can't exactly blame you. Everyone kind of made up their minds when they first heard about me, and I guess a guy like me would be kryptonite to a famed honor student... Crap, I think Shizuka is rubbing off on me..." he trailed off into a mutter. "But hey, it was nice to have my own stalker."

"H-hey, I was not a 'stalker', I was just... concerned!" Makoto said, her cheeks turning a rosy shade in her embarrassment.

"Heh. Well, I'm glad you changed. All your firepower, and that big brain of yours, you've been a big asset to the team. You really have changed a lot," Akira said.

"You're not wrong. The me from the start of this year wouldn't recognise me as of now... not that that's a bad thing. I've broadened my horizons, experienced so many new things, made some great friends... this year hasn't been all fun and games, but it really has made me a better person," Makoto said, smiling warmly.
Akira nodded in understanding. "Yeah, you really are something. Never thought the prying student council president would secretly be a total badass."

"Well I don't know if I'd go that far..." Makoto murmured, glancing away briefly. "But I still owe you a lot. You and the others took me in, made me your friend, and showed me things I never experienced before now. Even if we're looking at the biggest threat we've ever faced, I'm still optimistic for the future. I've even been thinking ahead, to what I want to do."

Akira tilted his head and sank back into the padded material of the booth. "Oh yeah? Well do tell," he said.

"Nothing's set in stone yet, of course, but I think I want to follow in my Dad's footsteps. To enter the police force and try to clean things up as best I can. If there's one thing I've learned from this business with Arisawa, Akechi, and Shido, is that there's no shortage of corruption there. Dad believed in the law with all his heart, and other people should have that same kind of trust," Makoto explained. She smiled fondly, as if recalling some pleasant memories.

Akira returned the smile with one of his own. Officer Niijima, or even Commissioner Niijima... now that was a scary thought. But she definitely would do her best to clean out the corrupt elements. And really who was going to intimidate a police commissioner with her own Persona? "I'm really happy to hear that Makoto."

Makoto let out a tiny laugh, once more becoming a little sheepish. "Ehehe... you know, you're the first person I've said any of this to. I don't even know how Sis will react. But it's my life, and my future, so I'll set that path as I see fit. And I owe you guys for helping me understand that."

And, inside Makoto's heart, this revelation triggered a shift in the core of her spirit.

White flames washed over Johanna's hull, parting swiftly to revealed newly polished plates of armor on an equally sleek and imposing motorbike frame. However, with the flames parting, the change in her Persona quickly became obvious as the plates and mechanisms of the front and back wheels began to shift and unfold, morphing into a pair of armoured arms and legs respectively. Bladed silver plates protruded from her mechanical forearms.

The main body of the bike twisted around, becoming a chest to support the newly formed limbs while the two tires shifted up her back. Johanna's faceplate had been replaced with a sculpted crimson head, sharp golden horns protruding from her temples. A general sense of power radiated from the mecha, before she casually transformed back into a sleek armoured motorbike, the red faceplate aiming forward.

Johanna was gone. In her place stood Anat.

Feeling this shift inside her, Makoto breathed a content sigh and settled a hand on her chest. "Now more than ever," the brunette began "I'm ready to see this through to the end. We're all counting on you, leader."

"I'll do my best," Akira said, grinning.

Not that they had an easy road ahead of them. Shido and Mr. A were looming like a pair of titans on the horizon line. And for the future of the country, and everyone in it, the Arditi needed to put a stop to them.
Samael Shido (I)

Ryuji sank back into his couch, crossing his left foot over his right knee and slouching disinterestedly. Even in his own home, he had spent so long mastering his 'delinquent slouch' after the Kamoshida incident that he wasn't going to let that training go to waste.

Their's was a modest apartment, perhaps the best that Ryuji's mother could afford on her salary, but he found it cozy enough. The living area was a modest rectangle, the plush leather couch positioned opposite a low table with a large armchair at the southern end of the table. Across from him, nestled near the corner of the room, was a modest TV positioned in a polished oak cabinet. There wasn't much in the realm of decorations, just a few small paintings on the wall opposite the couch.

It was rare for them to have any sort of visitors, so these modest furnishings suited their needs nicely.

He could smell some spices coming from the kitchen door near the back of the room, a strong ramen scent that was soon filling the small room around him. It was rare for the two to share dinner together, and it was usually rather modest too, but Ryuji didn't mind. It tasted good, and it made his mother happy. That was the important part.

However Ryuji's own happiness took a dip as his channel surfing brought him to one of the news channels, the current footage showing a recent speech Shido had made in public. "Ugh..." Ryuji wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Seriously, this guy... bad enough I gotta see this Q-ball in posters all over the city, but now he's ruining TV too!"

But, despite himself, Ryuji found himself watching the footage. Shido was standing in front a large crowd outside Inokashira Park, striding a large stage in a pinstriped navy suit. Naturally his PR people had set up the stage in a shaded region so he wouldn't blind everyone with his chrome dome.

"This most recent felony is perhaps the greatest sign of the decay currently gripping our nation! Shohei Arisawa, a noble man who dedicated the majority of his life to aiding the rule of law, was viciously cut down by the cowardly Arditi!"

"Gonna make you eat those words you bald bastard..." Ryuji muttered. Everytime someone badmouthed the team these days, Ryuji had to bite his tongue. It was damn hard, and it didn't seem to be getting any easier.

"And yet the current administration have made no moves against these criminals! How can the people be expected to sleep at night when these animals are operating out of sight? Who is to say who their next victim will be? Well I for one say that enough is enough!" Shido stopped at the head of the stage, earning a powerful round of applause from his gathered supporters.

Ryuji grit his teeth. "How goddamn blind can these people be?!"

"A vote for me, Masayoshi Shido, will be a vote for a brighter tomorrow! I won't sit idly by like the current administration, who have seen to the rise of these criminals, and a spate of catastrophic industrial accidents! New leadership is needed to create a future that the youth of this nation can believe in!"
"Oh come on... I bet you couldn't give less of a shit about 'the youth', you goddamn liar..." Ryuji muttered, rolling his eyes.

The kitchen door opened, causing Ryuji to quickly sit upright as his mother entered with two heavy bowls of steaming ramen. She was still wearing her blue blouse and dark skirt from work, her dark hair a little loose. Yumi breathed a small sigh, setting one bowl in front of Ryuji while she set the other on the end facing the armchair.

"I completely forgot to do any shopping today... Any chance you could pick up a few groceries on your way home tomorrow?" she asked, glancing over to her son.

"Ah... sure, no prob," Ryuji replied. Well Akira was going to be grilling Akechi tomorrow, so it wasn't like he had any plans. "I'll make a detour on the way home."

"Thanks honey," Yumi said, smiling sweetly as she pulled her brown bowl into her hands. As she did so however, her attention shifted to Shido on TV, and the speech he was making. "Oh... him."

Ryuji frowned and nodded. "Yeah... seems Shido's everywhere you look, right?"

Yumi watched the news for several quiet seconds, before sighing and dipping her chopsticks into her bowl. "I don't like him," she casually said. After everything she had been through in marriage, she knew an abusive creep when she saw one. And no amount of acting could hide that side of Shido from her.

"Yeah... me either," Ryuji replied. But, with any luck, they wouldn't have to worry about him for much longer.

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10/24

Nishikiyama said nothing as he saw Akira approach, already being aware of who the young man was. He pushed himself off the wall and snapped his fingers, undoing the seal that his Stand had generated around Akechi's cell.

"Thanks," Akira said curtly. "I need to have a chat with him. And I might end up getting a little loud, just so you know."

"Yeah well not too loud. Folks are trying to sleep here," Nishikiyama said, leaning back up against the wall. "And as for me, I gotta finish my crossword." He pulled a small book from his pocket, leafing through the cheap magazine paper.

Akira quietly entered the room, his eyes immediately settling on the detective. Akechi was lazing on his back on the bed, his fingers knotted together behind his head. However, upon seeing Akira, his eyes widened faintly. "Oh, you... K-Kurusu, you're-"

Arsene's fist lashed out violent, a powerful right hook catching Akechi across the face. He let out a pained gasp at the strike, a spray of blood flying past his lips and spattering along the wall of his cell. Akira maintained a cool glare, Arsene's hand pulling back toward him as Akechi seemed to right himself, wiping his lip with the back of his left hand.
"Yeah. I'm alive," Akira plainly said. He had gotten his anger out for the time being. "I'm sure that's a surprise for you, right? Were you expecting that trap in Arisawa's Palace to end us?"

"Everything okay in there?" Nishikiyama asked from outside.

"Perfectly. Don't worry about it," Akira replied without looking back over his shoulder.

Akechi finished cleaning his mouth off on his hand and glanced over to Akira. "Hm. I certainly am surprised... Mr. A did say he had someone powerful in mind when I told him about the Metaverse, but he didn't mention any specifics," Akechi explained, seeing no point in lying right now.

With his Persona vanishing for the time being, Akira sighed and braced his back against the opposite wall. "You know, on some level I wanted to give you a chance. And you took that chance as an opening to stab us in the back... I guess I'm still a little naive."

"Well, in my defence, there's no harm in having a contingency plan. Of course I hadn't anticipated things going south for me in Sae-san's Palace, but if we had to change destinations I was going to use Arisawa as the next environment for a trap."

"Yeah, well things went south for Mr. A's next assassin too. He's dead... and so is Arisawa," Akira replied.

Once more Akechi seemed surprised, raising his eyebrows slightly. "Well now... I suppose Mr. A would know how dangerous Arisawa's knowledge is, and wouldn't leave him alive. Not that I'll be shedding tears, he was hardly a nice man. Though I am surprised that the assassin is dead... did you really cross that boundary?" he asked, a wicked glimmer twinkling in his eyes.

"Sergio did it out of self defence," Akira clarified, seeming to disappoint Akechi. "And ultimately he's no stranger to killing major threats. But that's not the point. I take it you're one of Mr. A's underlings?"

"Oh I wouldn't go that far," Akechi replied. He moved off his bed and slowly made for the modest bathroom at the opposite end of his cell, quickly using the sink to wash the red streak off the back of his hand. Akira watched him closely all the while. "We have some similar interests, and with all of us approaching endgame, I decided to align myself a little closer to him."

Akira narrowed his eyes slightly. "That doesn't make any sense. You want to kill Shido, A wants him in power so they can abuse the system. Why would one want to help the other?"

"Timing is the key factor there," Akechi replied, smiling innocently as he emerged from the bathroom. "If you know Mr. A, you know that Shido is the kind of man he loathes. Of course, Shido is the kind of man most everyone would loathe. But once he's in power, A has a plan to maintain that seat, even if Shido won't be alive to enjoy it."

Akira quirked his left brow. "What's that supposed to mean?" he asked.

Akechi shrugged. "Well, we haven't shared all the details with each other. I assume he has some sort of 'Stand' ability in mind to help in that regard. Some sort of illusion, perhaps? Oh well, not that it matters. Shido's death is the important part," the detective explained.

So that was it... Akira supposed it made sense on some level. Mr. A and all those closest of him, well they had all likely been wronged by someone like Shido in the past, and likely didn't want to
see him totally in power. But even if Shido was going to be offed, the Arditi still couldn't risk him (and Mr. A by extension) coming into power.

"Doesn't matter. We're going to make sure Shido confesses his crimes, and lives with the guilt. Just killing him would be a disservice," Akira replied firmly.

His opponent sighed and rolled his eyes. "What's the point? Have you really not grasped how pointless, how... fictional the idea of justice is? Arisawa's just a glimpse into how corrupt the system is. You can't stop it, or change things. Even before I got involved, that world was a den of vipers."

"I don't care!" Akira snapped in return. "I know things can change. I don't care how long it takes, or how dangerous it is... but with this power we can change the world, we can change the hearts of every rotten criminal lurking above us," he stated.

Akechi narrowed his eyes slightly. He made his way back toward his bed and sat down upon it, tenting his fingers above his lap. "You can't change the world. Any good you do is fleeting, and something terrible is always waiting around the corner. Stopping Shido, and everyone allied with him... it won't mean much in the long run. Someone worse will get even further than he did."

"You gave up on the world a long time ago." Probably the day Akechi's mother died, if not even further back. "Maybe you were right to from whatever you went through. But I'm not throwing in the towel so easily. None of my team will."

Akechi laughed bitterly, looking down at the floor. "I really don't understand you Kurusu. You're exceptionally smart, and rather brave... but you seem so deeply naive. You've seen plenty of corruption... you know how bad things can get," Akechi remarked.

"Yeah. Yeah, I do," Akira replied, neatly tucking his hands into his jacket pockets. "Like you, for example. You found out you had this amazing power, one that could be used to help all sorts of people, to root out corruption and help suffering people... and instead you used it to murder people, and inflict more pain. The first whiff of power you got, and you abused it. Congrats, you really are Shido's son."

That statement seemed to hit Akechi harder than any physical blow could muster, his eyes widening extensively as he stared down at the floor. He remained silent for several long seconds, in which time Akira made his way to the door.

"But... perhaps it's because I'm still hopeful of human potential, I wanted... I wanted to ask you one more time: What are the keywords for Shido's Palace?" Akira glanced over to Akechi from over his shoulder. "I know you must have been there in the past, you wouldn't leave somewhere like that unexplored. So... what do we need to get in there?"

Akechi didn't answer him, seeming to still be dwelling on what Akira had just said to him. The prospect, it seemed, had never come to Akechi's mind. Akira sighed and turned toward the door. "I figured you wouldn't tell me... fine, I-

"Masayoshi Shido. Diet Building. Ship." Akechi's statement made Akira pause entirely. Now Akechi was glaring at him, a glimmer of challenge in his expression. "If you think you can change the world, then prove it. Because the twisted corruption of Shido's heart is unlike anything you've faced before now. You might win. But you'll most likely get ground into paste."
Akira turned back toward the door. "We'll see." With that he quietly left Akechi in his cell, with Nishikiyama sealing the way soon after.

Now alone, Akechi glanced to the barred-window of his cell and stared through as best he could. Was he really helping Kurusu and his friends? Not entirely, he supposed. After all, he doubted Akira and his friends could best Shido's Shadow.

Akechi had indeed explored Shido's Palace, as best he could at least. As his political status, and thus his ambitions, grew, it had an effect on his Palace. It had grown and broadened, with Shido's other self becoming infested with increasing quantities of malignant energy. It made Akechi's father perhaps the strongest entity he had ever encountered in the Metaverse, marginally stronger than even Akechi himself.

It was why Akchi had no intention of fighting Shido's Shadow-self head on. Ideally, when the time came to end Shido's life, he would prefer to either do it in reality, or to backstab Shido's other self before he could fully power up. Fighting him directly, well that was more suicidal than taking on the gathered Arditi.

Yes, the thoughts of them beating Shido's Palace seemed rather slim. But, then again, those punks were pretty good when it came to doing impossible things.

Well, even if Shido's Palace was gone, he could still deal with him in the real world.

Akechi raised his right hand, inspecting it closely. With a great deal of focus and willpower, a second spectral hand floated above his own. A black and white set of talons that glimmered with sparks of scarlet lightning. Loki's claws, growing ever closer to fully manifesting in the real world.

He exhaled slowly, with Loki's hand fading out of existence soon after. Slowly, and by degrees, he was learning to push his Persona into reality. It was something that required a lot of willpower, enforcing his thoughts onto reality. And with each session, he seemed to be able to manifest just a little bit more. He stil had to go slow and take his time, lest he get too hasty and alert his guard.

Eventually he'd be free, and he could pull Shido apart like plasticine.

After that? Well, he hardly cared. He doubted his life would have much meaning past his revenge, and didn't really care if he lived or died after that point. Taking Shido's life, that was the important part.

...

Akechi sat in silence, looking toward freedom through the bars on his window. With nothing else to do, he quietly dwelled on what Sae had said to him.

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10/26

When the time came to get started the group gathered at Chiyoda in the late afternoon, the city streets bathed in a warm orange light from the quickly setting sun. Not wanting to stand out too much, the students had dipped into a small shady alcove across the street from the Diet Building. There was an alleyway just behind them, somewhere to quickly enter and exit the Metaverse through.
Akira leaned against the wall of the alcove, looking over his shoulder at the Diet itself. Even from afar he couldn't help but feel a strange mix of awe and dread fill him. It was a large structure, the central building being a decently tall white tower that had Grecian columns on the three tiers of it, leading toward a steadily narrowing peak of layered bricks. The left and right wings stretched out far, and looked to be about three stories tall from afar.

True there were much bigger buildings in Tokyo, but scale wasn't what made the Diet so important. No, the political power held inside the Diet made it more vital than most anywhere else in the nation. It was here that the House of Representatives and House of Councillors worked to decide the future of the nation... and if they didn't act quickly, that power would be in the palm of Shido's hand.

"I've never seen it in person before," Akira murmured. "And I kinda wish I was seeing it under better circumstances."

"To think, he views the very National Diet as his own personal Palace..." Yusuke trailed off, narrowing his eyes as he inspected the distant structure. Security staff patrolled the exterior wall, the heavy iron gates shutting out any unwelcome patronage. "It speaks to a kind of ego beyond anything we've encountered so far. Even Madarame was more humble."

Shizuka settled her left hand over her brow for a little shade, focusing ahead intensely. "So that's like... the Senate of Japan, right? I guess if you wanted to take over, this'd be the place to go. But I kinda feel like a tourist hanging around out here," she remarked.

"Leave it to Shido to think he owns a place like this... We should still be careful. Akechi might be a liar, but I think he was being truthful when he said Shido's other self was obscenely powerful," Morgana explained. Given just how twisted and corrupt he was in the real world, and the vast scale of his ambition, it made sense.

Ryuji frowned. "You sure this is legit? The keywords, I mean. We got 'em from Asketchy after all. You know, the guy who told us to go after a Palace that had a trap in it,"

Well, Akira couldn't fault him for being wary. Regardless, Akira nodded. "I checked the keywords in the Nav already, and they're correct. We really don't have any other options with the election so close. So no matter what dangers are ahead, we have to beat him, and beat him fast," Akira explained. His allies nodded in understanding.

"It's been a while since I've been so nervous about a mission," Ann remarked. "But it's gotta be done. So... let's go. Let's clean his clock!"

"'Clean his clock'?" Shiho repeated, arching her left eyebrow.

"I'm sure this is going to be our biggest challenge yet. But as a team, there's no challenge we can't overcome," Haru assured the others.

Sergio smirked. "Yes well... we are pretty great."

After a moment, Akira led on into the alley until the group were concealed by the shadows. Out of sight from the general population. "Okay. You guys set to go?" As nobody raised any objections, he activated the Nav.
The world melted away in a blurring haze of twisting colours, the scenery of their surroundings shifting rapidly in the span of only a few seconds, their attire morphing in the process. Just like that they were standing in front of the Diet Building, the ivory structure looking... remarkably unchanged.

Akira inspected it for a few quiet moments, before his attention shifted to the ground at their feet. "Wait, what?" Instead of asphalt or concrete pavement, they were standing on a hard steel floor, as if on some sort of armoured hull.

"Okay that's pretty strange on its own, but it's actually tame by Palace standards," Shiho said. She started to turn from the Diet Building, intent on inspecting the surrounding area. "But I still don't see... oh."

She, and the others, all grew quite silent as they inspected the horizon. The Diet Building was behind them, but ahead was the long tapering peak of a battleship, waves of fog crashing against the steel. They, and the parliament building, were situated atop a tremendous boat, currently gliding along a calm sea.

But, in looking around, the group could quickly see that this wasn't just empty ocean. The tips of once mighty skyscrapers were just barely poking out above the cresting waves, familiar structures that had been drowned out in this strange flood.

A stray tower struck off the side of the ship in passing, with the armoured edge cleaving through glass and concrete without remotely breaking stride. Within seconds the collapsing wreckage fell into the sea, while the ark had no damage on its hull to speak of.

"Oh my god..." Makoto softly said. The devastation was shocking enough on its own, but it was made even worse with the knowledge that this was all an allegory for what Shido would do to the country. "He's willing to let the whole country sink... just so long as he's fine."

"I know the keyword was 'ship', but this..." Sergio swallowed slightly. "This is worse than I had expected it to be."

"This is the man who's going to take over the country? P-people are seriously going to vote for him?" Hifumi asked, her eyes wide in shock. They had already come in expecting Shido to be a dangerous and selfish man, but this was far worse than what they thought he'd be like. The reality of their situation had just grown darker.

Akira glanced to Futaba, the sea breeze blowing at her orange locks while the desolate scenery was reflected in the lenses of her goggles. "Oracle?" he asked. "Think you can do a preliminary scan of the area?"

Futaba snapped to attention. "O-oh... r-right, sorry," the young hacker said, looking back toward the Diet Building. As she did so, swarming masses of ebony matter coiled around her hands and abruptly sank into the floor. As she did this, her lenses began to glow. "Okay, w-wow this place is... even bigger than it looks. Even the Diet Building itself is longer in this world. I can't make out minute details, but there are plenty of chambers and corridors below deck too."

As Futaba scanned the area, Morgana tilted his head back and sniffed the area around them. "Mm... she's not wrong. I can't even get a clear reading on the treasure's general location. This
place is already feeling a little different to what we're used to," the feline said.

"Right... we better start heading inside. The sooner we get to exploring, the sooner we can zero in on the treasure." Akira turned, his flowing coat flapping behind him, and quickly made for the main entrance of the Diet Building. The doors opened easily.

However the interior quickly became much different to what Akira, or any of the team, had expected. The entryway led into a sprawling ballroom-styled chamber, with large spiral staircases leading up toward two floors above them. Confetti rained down from the sky, while speakers affixed to the columns supporting the ceiling spouted speeches and slogans in Shido's booming voice.

Even at a cursory glance, the thieves could see gathered crowds of cognitive people, men and women in formal dress, all wearing masks as if they were in a masquerade ball. Directly across from the front door was a large golden statue of a lion, while sculptures of Shido flanked the east and west edges of the room.

Opulence bled from every orifice of the room, radiating from the diamond chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. It was a sharp contrast to the ruin outside. "These people... they must be cognitions of Shido's allies," Makoto reasoned.

"I see... so he is willing to let the entire country crash and burn, while keeping his supporters safe and in luxury," Haru murmured. "And Father... sided with this man."

"I don't think even President Okumura realized the sheer depth of Shido's madness," Yusuke assured her. "But this is indeed worrying."

Akira nodded and pressed forward, slowly making for the nearest staircase. It seemed that despite their youth, their attire allowed them to blend in well enough with the cognitive people. That or their heads were so far up their own asses that they couldn't see beyond their own bubbles. The latter certainly wouldn't surprise Akira.

As they continued upward, Shido's pre-recorded statements grew louder, and each syllable of his harsh voice made Akira's anger rise a little higher. He didn't want to think of this as entirely personal, but Shido was the one who had tried to destroy Akira's future out of spite, over one brief encounter.

"A vote for Masayoshi Shido is a vote for a brighter future!"

"Join me to save yourself and the nation!"

"There is no future but my future!"

Ryuji grit his teeth for a moment, slowly cracking the knuckles of his left hand. "God I hate this guy."

They didn't make it far on the second floor before a sudden shout caught their attention, with the Arditi turning sharply toward a hulking Shadow making his way toward them, his bulky ink-colored mass in an armored SWAT uniform. "You! Halt!"

Makoto swallowed slightly, clenching her fists as she craned her neck to look the being in his
"Y-yes? Can I help you?" she asked, no doubt hoping for some kind of peaceful resolution no matter how slim the chances were.

"I know every passenger on this boat, so I know an outsider when I see one! And we don't allow riff raff on this ark!" the Shadow firmly said, the glow of his eyes intensifying as he looked down at the teens.

Akira sighed. "Any chance you can just let this go? We've got a lot of work to do, and I'd rather not get bogged down in fighting every single Shadow."

"Not a chance. Shido-sama didn't go through all this trouble just to let any outcasts onto his ship. So now I'll offer a choice to you," the Shadow growled. "Leave or die."

"That's our line shitsack!" Ryuji snapped.

The Shadow before them started to bubble and boil, his entire form undulating as his armour became consumed in a moving mass of darkness. In an instant the Shadow exploded and split into two figures, the pulsating black mass shaping into two distinct beings.

The first was a hulking white lion with an armoured tail, his golden eyes glimmering with a barely restrained power. Even standing on four legs, he was taller than Akira. The second was much less imposing, but still carried a sinister air about him. He was a pale fae man, held aloft by luminescent butterfly wings. He was dressed in some scarlet regal attire and white stockings, a gold crown resting upon his head. In his right hand he held a silver rapier, the air seeming to shimmer and warp around it.

The partygoers seemed completely unaware of all this. They were blissful in their ignorance, chattering and chortling among themselves.

"Son of a..." Akira trailed off, exasperated. "Oracle, hang back and analyse. Maestro, Noir, I need you two to watch the stairs above us. Warn us if there are any guards coming down to get involved, and give us some covering fire."

There was a powerful boom as the lion slammed his paws into the ground, the ensuing shockwave hitting like a brick wall and driving the Arditi back across the floor. They recovered quickly, scrambling to regain their footing, while the lion and fairy leered toward them.

"I can tell already that those guys are tough. The fairy is a fast one though, you'll need someone who can try and slow his movements a bit," Futaba quickly said.

Akira nodded. "Fox, Nemesis, Mona, Diabolik, I need you guys to focus on the fairy. Slow him and beat him into the ground like a stake. The rest of you, with me," Akira promptly said.

"Right," Yusuke replied, as he and his team promptly broke away from the others. The fairy chortled and flew backward, avoiding a slew of icicles from Yusuke's Persona, while releasing sharp explosive bursts of lightning from his blade to hinder their pursuit.

Makoto was the first to make a move against the lion bounding their way, swiftly mounting Anat. Her engine roared with a newfound power, nuclear flames sparking up under the tires. A sly smile graced Makoto's face.

"Hm? Hey, Johanna looks a little diff-" Shizuka was cut off as her girlfriend surged forward,
Anat's frame rocketing forward like a white bullet. As she neared the rushing lion, Makoto suddenly flipped off her Persona and watched as Anat's frame began to transform into its bipedal shape with a rapid sound of gears grinding and shifting punctuating the transformation. Anat's hands slammed into the beast's face, abruptly using his momentum against him by turning the beast and driving him into the floor with an earth shuddering force. "HOLY SHIT! IT'S AN AUTOBOT!" Shizuka exclaimed.

"I've had a bit of an evolution of my own," Makoto said, smiling confidently. She watched as the lion twisted back around and lashed toward Anat, his beefy paw striking Anat's armoured forearms. Makoto grimaced, stumbling backward and quickly calling her Persona back.

The beast turned toward the group, smoke emerging through his fanged jaws as he leered at them. He seemed to focus on Akira, unleashing a powerful spray of fire from his maw. Akira moved quickly, Crom Cruach's serpentine body raising his arms up to block the blast.

It hit with enough force behind it to make Akira skid back on his heels, grimacing as he felt the rushing, scorching heat strain against his Persona's forearms. "Holy-!" He grit his teeth, set to lash out with Crom Cruach. But fortunately Ann came to his aid, with Hecate moving in front of the flamethrower, seeming oblivious to the searing heat.

"Okay, so... really strong and fireproof... I don't think I can do much against him," the blonde remarked, watching as the flame wave sputtered out of the lion's mouth.

Across the floor they could see the battle unfolding opposite the fairy Shadow, the edge of his rapier colliding violently against Susanoo's sword. Each clash released a powerful shockwave that cracked the floor around them, but it was clear that Susanoo was the one pushing him backward. The fairy gave a powerful flap of his wings, propelling his lithe body away from Susanoo, and unleashed a powerful bolt of lightning from his palm that exploded against the incoming Persona. Yusuke cried out, staggering backward and clenching his teeth.

The fairy raised his blade up, taking aim at Susanoo's throat while Yusuke was still staggering and struggling to regain his composure. Seeing this, Sergio quickly skidded behind the spectral figure with Breakthru forming at his side.

Breakthru's armoured fists tore thick chunks from the floor, catapulting them upward and infusing them with a powerful surge of momentum in passing. Both chunks rocketed forward and crashed into the fairy's back, making the Shadow gasp as several pieces of debris became lodged in his back, sprays of black matter erupting from the fresh wounds.

Meanwhile, the rest of the team were still duking it out with their more beastly foe. His heavy front paws swung up with immense force, sweeping Hecate and Seiten Taisei aside with his immense strength. Ann and Ryuji cried out as they were driven fiercely into the ground, and before they could recover the beast spun around and lashed the spectral figures further across the ground with his armoured tail.

Anat dove down toward him, plumes of green nuclear fire crackling from the plates in her knuckles. Makoto was watching closely, directing her Persona to weave away from a lash of his tail. Her fists rained down on him with inhuman surges of strength, each blow like a boom of thunder. And, while she certainly had enough strength to harm him with brute force, the nuclear flourishes seemed to strobe harmlessly off his armor-like hide.
A hard jab caught the Shadow in his snarling feet, sending him skidding back with his claws carving a path in the hard floor. But this time the Shadow snapped back quickly, a phosphorus flash of flame erupting from his maw and exploding against Anat's armoured forearms. Makoto grunted, feeling another flash of pain roll through her body as her Persona was slammed into a pillar hard enough to make the hard stone crack and crumble under the pressure.

Crom Cruach dove toward the ivory lion before he could fully take advantage of Makoto's vulnerability. His sharp talons smashed into the Shadow's shoulders, sprays of black matter splashing up onto his forearms, while the crushing pressure of the attack nearly made the floor collapse beneath him.

"Joker, you gotta just hold him for a few second more!" Shizuka called out, still unseen to her allies.

With a powerful flex of his back, the lion managed to dislodge Crom Cruach's claws. Now that he had an opening he lashed his head upward, sharp fangs driving into Crom Cruach's left wrist, making Akira cry out as blood erupted along his arm. Crom Cruach's right fist drove powerfully into the lion's face, hitting hard enough to dislodge the grip of his jaws and driving him backward.

There was a loud cracking sound as something broke overhead, followed immediately after by a chandelier dropping from aloft and slamming heavily into the Shadow. Diamonds and twisted metal became lodged in his white frame, making him snarl violently. It was only intensified when Houdini's invisible frame dropped down heavily onto its back, the crushing blow driving the diamonds deeper into the Shadow's flesh.

With a powerful roar their foe unleashed a white hot burst of heat around his body, the blast hitting into Crom Cruach and Houdini. Akira and Shizuka cried out as they were violently flung to the unwelcoming floor, smoke radiating off their injured bodies. The Shadow was quickly scrambling to his feet, as best he could with bloodied chunks torn out of his legs.

But he didn't make it too far before Seiten Taisei rushed toward him, electricity crackling around the spiked ends of his cudgel. He delivered a strong blow, powered with all his physical might, crushing the lion's head into a jet black cloud on impact. The rest of his body soon followed suit, melting into a sludge that seeped through the shattered floor.

As the Shadow melted away, Akira groaned and rose into a seated position on the floor. He was able to catch a glimpse of the rest of the team finishing off the fairy as he did so, smiling faintly at the sight.

Morgana had managed to catch the Shadow in a rippling green cyclone, swirling him around and around until the howling fairy was visibly dizzy and disoriented, his crown flying from his head. The current vanished abruptly, giving Shiho an opening to leap in, letting out a loud cry as she violently swung her naginata down with all the force her superhuman body could muster. The edge drove into his right collarbone, sawing through his flesh like butter and cleaving the fairy's arm off entirely, an explosion of dark matter erupting from the stump. The Shadow shrieked and recoiled, clutching the fresh wound with his eyes wide in shock.

He raised his remaining hand high, lightning arcing between his gloved fingers, before a sniper round exploded against his wrist and tore a hole in it. The Shadow howled, dropping to his knees, where he was summarily crushed by a final mighty blow from Susanoo.
Through it all, the crowds of partygoers paid them no mind.

The Arditi gathered back near the top of the stairs, each member needing a few moments to catch their breath from what had just transpired. It wasn't the worst fight they had ever had, but it was still a challenge.

"I guess that's the welcoming committee out of the way... I can't sense any more hostiles in this room," Futaba said.

"Well thank God," Ann murmured, rubbing a sore spot on her left elbow. "So I guess the cognitive people don't notice us, but the Shadows can recognize us right away?"

Akira nodded. "Looks like. We should try to be stealthy where possible, I'd rather not get bogged down in too much combat."

"Well... minor injuries aside, we all did quite well," Hifumi remarked, smiling fondly. "And we have gotten a taste for the kinds of defenses Shido has in this place. We just need to be on our toes going forward," the shogi princess reasoned.

"Right. Then let's get to it," Akira said.

He led on deeper into the ship, his stride determined and his expression set in stone. All they had done before now, every battle they had faced, it had all been leading to this Palace. They had little time to act before the election got underway, and they couldn't afford to be distracted by any other challenges.

They'd either stop Shido, or die trying.
From their original expedition into the monstrous cruise ship, the Phantom Thieves had found that Shido's treasure room actually wasn't too far from the entry point. All it took was a quick journey from the outside of the ship, through the first room with the chandeliers, and their path would take them into a long hallway that led toward a heavy, locked chamber. Through there, Morgana and Futaba were certain, was Shido's treasure.

The key issue was actually gaining access through that room. Brute force wouldn't work, and Necronomicon couldn't alter the mechanisms that held it shut. As it turned out, according to the cognitive people dwelling on the ship, a person could only access that room through four letters of recommendation through high ranking people in the conspiracy.

These included a former nobleman, a TV station president, an IT company president, and a high-ranking politician. The last one they had gotten relatively quickly, due to how close he was to the locked treasure room, but over their most recent visits the Arditi had been trying to nail down the locations of the others while also mapping out the expansive ship.

None of them were particularly pleased with this, having wanted to deal with Shido's Palace as quickly as possible, but by now they were a little used to fetch quests. Palaces could be a pain in the ass.

Still, having explored expansively, they had managed to find the former noble.

The doors parted to allow the thieves entrance, with the group striding along a plush red carpet toward a row of windows at the opposite end of the square chamber. They all looked a little banged up, marked with scuff marks and scorches, having had to fight through an assortment of Shadows in the previous corridors. But they were all set to finish this.

"That politician, Ooe," Yusuke curtly said as he neared the glass. "When we confronted him, he transformed into a Shadow that we had to fight through. I imagine this may be the case with the nobleman too."

"Most likely. Shido's Palace has a few nasty tricks in it so far... And I don't think I've ever seen a Palace where cognitions could do... that," Morgana remarked, his hands on his rounded hips.

Futaba stroked her chin in thought. "Being totally honest, I dunno if they're just cognitions. I dunno, looking at Ooe earlier, he felt... well, really present, in a way that I've never seen before."

"What? You mean that was his Shadow in here?" Ryuji asked, scratching the back of his neck.

"Maybe," she replied, shrugging her dainty shoulders. "I mean... multiple Shadow's can occupy Mementos, right? And Shido's Palace is bigger and more powerful than any other we've been to," she said.

Akira moved to the central window, peering through it with his hands tucked into his coat pockets. "Well, we can get to that later. Whatever the case we can't afford to let our guard down, so be vigilant whenever we get to these guys."
Through the window he could see the expansive deck of the cruise ship pool, an expansive hardwood floor circling around an Olympic-sized pool filled with clear blue water. From on high Akira was able to see more crowds of cognitive people milling around, and a duo of Shadow guards standing at the double doors at the far end of the deck.

"Maybe that's him there?" Ann said, pointing off to her right at a specific part of the pool deck.

All eyes followed the path of her fingers toward a portly bald man on the deck, the light overhead illuminating his pale, flabby skin. A feathered mask covered the top half of his face, while a large glass of some alcoholic beverage rested in his right hand. What made him stand out was the two men in crisp black suits flanking his sides, seeming to be constantly monitoring the surrounding area.

Akira inspected them closely, before gesturing for the others to follow him. "So he has bodyguards... yeah, none of the other cognitions have that, so he's definitely unique. Can you sense anything off him Oracle?"

Futaba slowly reached for the left temple of her goggles, silently adjusting the dial as she surveyed the reclining figure. All the while the group were following Akira down a flight of steel stairs that led toward the pool deck. "Mm... yeah he does look a little uh... distinct from what I can see. He might just be the noble we're looking for."

Now down on the deck, the group settled near the bar. "Okay well how're we gonna snatch the form from him? It'd be nice if we can just do it quickly, but..." she trailed off, not needing to finish that sentence. Things rarely went quickly.

"Well... we might need something that could catch his attention. Some sort of ruse to get him interested in talking. And once his guard is down we could just take the sheet from him," Shiho reasoned.

Sergio let out a small humming sound and leaned back against the counter. "Well, if we're going to get the attention of a noble, we need someone who can speak his language. Someone from high society... looks like you're up Noir."

"Huh? M-me?" Haru squeaked, blinking a few times behind her mask.

"Wh- Hey! I'm high society too, why can't I do it?!!" Shizuka huffed, shooting Sergio a quick glare. She got a few awkward looks for her troubles, before several members of her team glanced away sharply.

"I think you know why," Sergio flatly replied.

"Oh, so you're trying to get his attention?" The voice addressing the group was unfamiliar and instantly put the team on edge. They only slightly relaxed as Akira turned to the source of the voice, finding himself looking at a Shadow behind the bar. An inky mass in a human-shape, stuffed into the crisp white shirt, dark slacks and red waistcoat of a barman. His face was featureless, save for two garnet eyes.

Ryuji regarded the Shadow carefully, still wary of the figure due to his nature. "Yeah? And so what if we are?"
"Ahaha... no need to be so hostile. Truth is, I'm a little sick of seeing that guy lounging on this deck. So goddamn arrogant and up his own ass... seeing him get taken down a peg, well it would really make my shift. And something tells me that's what you kids are up to," the shadowy barman said.

Akira hummed slightly. "What do you propose?" He wasn't sure if this would be worth listening too, but he'd hear any idea out at least once.

"Well..." The Shadow leaned into the bar, his inky black palms pressed neatly to the smooth wood. "Working at a bar is a good way to learn about people on a most intimate level. A barman is, at best, an alcohol-dispensing robot, or at worst outright invisible to the patrons. So people rarely bother to guard themselves near me, and I can learn about them in... great detail," the Shadow explained.

"Riiiight? Well... what are you getting at?" Ann asked, folding her arms over her chest.

The Shadow chuckled and raised a glass from under the bar, diligently wiping the inside with a soft white cloth. "What I'm getting at is that I know everything about that butterball. And I know he happens to have a thing for young ladies... so give him some eyecandy and you'll probably hold his attention like a cat with a string... well, rich eye candy. He's a perv, but he's a classist perv."

Shizuka wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Dude we're all pretty underage... aaaand I just realized he probably wouldn't give a crap... ugh."

"You're not wrong," the bartender remarked, settling the glass down back under the bar. "Look he's gross, but he's probably just gonna ignore you outright if you try anything else. I've seen plenty of pretty young things catch his eye. Hell, there's a pretty good reason why he's a 'former' noble, for all the scandals that fat perv was caught up in, and the allegations made against him. But even so- hey where are you going?" he asked, his glowing eyes widening as Shiho abruptly started striding toward the reclining figure and his bodyguards.

"Uh oh," Ryuji said, whatever plan he had in mind quickly evaporating. "Uh... buddy I know you didn't plan for this, but you might've just pushed a lot of buttons you shouldn't have pushed."

"Should... should we go over there with her?" Hifumi asked, awkwardly glancing around the group.

Shizuka examined the scene closely, feeling just a tad tense as Shiho reached the sun lounger. "Let's just see where she's going with this." Shiho's distaste for perverts was hardly a secret, and from the sound of things this nobleman had been far from noble in how he conducted himself. It wouldn't be too surprising if this guy was a depraved criminal of some shade, if Shido trusted him so readily.

From afar they couldn't make out the conversation between the two, but Shiho had her hands raised and a semi-pleasant smile on her face as she spoke to the nobleman. He raised his right hand and gave a dismissive wave of it, while his guards tensed a bit.

Shiho smiled as best she could with her teeth clenched. Her fingers slowly curled into fists, but she was trying her best to appear calm and polite as she spoke to him a little more forcefully.

This time however, her insistence seemed to really get under the nobleman's skin. "Shut up! As if I'd hand one of those forms out to some guttertrash trollop! Get out of my sight!" he shouted.
Ryuji clenched his teeth, electricity crackling around his body in speedy flashes. Ann was looking equally furious, plumes of smoke rising from her palms. "Oof... bad move tubs," Shizuka muttered.

A wave of shock suddenly rolled through the Arditi as Shiho suddenly lifted the nobleman overhead, screaming at the top of her lungs before she violently smashed him face first in the wood hard enough to make it crack and splinter beneath his considerable weight. Shizuka was sure she even felt the floorboards rock a little under her.

The Arditi had to cringe slightly, watching as Shiho's left foot became a rapid flurry of kicks and stomps, pummeling the former noble as his body flickered and warped, trying to transform. Even the bartender seemed slightly shaken by what was going on.

They watched as Eris flared up behind Shiho, her Persona's hands lashing toward the noble's bodyguards as they too tried to transform. There was a luminous flash of blessed light, the blinding explosion lashing both Shadows and catapulting them clean over the edge of the deck from the force behind it. The Arditi recoiled a bit from the flash.

"Boy... I haven't seen her this mad in a while..." Ann murmured.

"I uh... I mean I get it, but this situation... I'm not sure if we should get involved or not," Akira remarked.

"I think she's fine for now," Ryuji remarked, wincing again at the sight of violence before them.

The show went on for just a little bit more before Shiho returned to the group, leaving the bruised, half-transformed Shadow in an unconscious heap on the ground. In her hands she was clutching a recommendation form, and was staggering a bit on her left foot from how vigorously she had been using it as a weapon.

The noble had tried transforming as Shiho rather relentlessly shitstomped him, and in the process several black tendrils had lashed against her body. The former volleyball star was sporting several fresh cuts along her body, the material of her suit torn and bloody in places. But she wasn't doing as poorly as Shido's underling.

"You... you feeling okay?" Ryuji asked, settling a hand on her back.

Shiho smiled pleasantly. "I'm feeling pretty good right now actually. Well, admittedly... I'm more than a little sore, but I think it was worth it for this," she said, her smile broadening as she handed the form over to Akira.

"And I thought I got fired up when I'm mad..." Makoto murmured. But she supposed she wasn't too surprised if the nobleman was taking pages from Kamoshida's book. "Still, that was really impressive Nemesis."

Shiho shrugged. "I was kinda lucky to be honest... I was hoping I could clobber him into the ground before he transformed, and I guess taking him by surprise gave me the opening to do that... but I doubt we'll get that lucky every time."

"Still..." Akira smiled and raised the form up in his right hand. "Two down, two to go."

The bartender quietly skulked away, not wanting to be anywhere nearby when the guards started investigating.
Having gotten two letters on their journey, the Arditi were determined to get the remaining two as quickly as they could. The TV station president was the next on their list, and they had managed to narrow down his location to the casino deck of the ship. Apparently he only appeared there on alternating days of the week, and so today was their best bet to catch him.

The group were quickly gripped with flashbacks to Sae's casino as they entered the expansive entertainment hall, their entryway opening out on the second floor of the chamber. The floor at their feet was covered in a plush carpet of interlocking black and purple diamonds, while the columns supporting the ceiling looked to be made of solid gold. The walls were lined with large slot machines, more than a few of them surrounded by modest crowds of cognitive people.

The ceiling itself was marked by stainglass panels that had been shaped to resemble flower petals, cast in radiant shades of white, rose, and pale blue.

"I dunno why people would be gambling here," Ann remarked, looking to the throngs of people off to her left congregating at the slots. "I mean... if the world outside is destroyed, is money gonna have any value?"

"To people like this, money is the only thing with any value," Yusuke casually said.

"There are an awful lot of people up here," Morgana remarked, keeping close to Akira so he didn't end up getting split up from the group. "I dunno how we're gonna find this TV station guy... well, maybe he has bodyguards too?"

Futaba shrugged. "Probably. If these guys are meant to be the top of the food chain, then those guards must be some kind of necessity."

The Arditi made for a balcony overlooking the first floor of the entertainment hall, with Akira gripping the gold railing as he peered down. From this angle he could see a circular bar that had a few cognitive people gathered around it, the Shadow bartenders diligently serving up expensive cocktails to grease the wheels of gambling.

More tables had been set up on the floor below, each loaded with slot machines of their own. Akira silently examined these different tables, until he spotted one that had only three figures situated at it. A man in a crisp blue suit and slicked back grey hair, his face concealed with a feathered mask. Two men in black suits flanked his sides, carefully surveying their surroundings.

"I think this might be our man," Akira remarked, stroking his chin carefully.

"Looks like," Morgana mused. "He definitely gives off a different vibe from the other cognitive people here."

Ryuji nodded firmly. "So how're we gonna get to him? I dunno how the hell to talk to TV people... can't believe I'm even thinking this, but this is something Akechi would be handy for."

"TV is a business, so maybe someone who could appeal to him on that front would be able to get his attention?" Akira suggested. He stroked his chin again, gliding his left index finger and thumb
against his skin. "But... who would be able to handle that?"

"Well, not me. I barely look at the television," Yusuke murmured.

"And I only watch anime and sentai shows. I don't know anything about the business side of things," Futaba remarked. "Doesn't help that I pirate most of that stuff off the internet anyway..."

"Oracle!" Makoto said, slightly aghast.

Shizuka shrugged. "It's not like she's the only one..."

Hifumi pondered their predicament, before suddenly snapping her fingers on her left hand. "Ah. I've actually had a few dealings with TV people, mainly from individuals recording shogi matches and making documentaries on the game. I wouldn't say I'm an expert but if you could appeal to him by giving his network some financial support and advertising, he might hear you out," she explained.

"Uh... slight problem with that: We're all high school students. And a talking cat," Akira casually said. However an idea soon hit him and he found himself looking over at Haru. "Although... one of us happens to be the future owner of one of the largest food companies in Japan," he mused.

"M-me again?" Haru squeaked.

"This time, yeah, it kinda has to be. My family company isn't exactly big in Japan because Dad was... well he used to be not wild about the Japanese, and so our presence here is kinda small. Shogi is prolly too niche for a bigshot TV guy, and so... yeah, you can handle it," Shizuka explained.

Yusuke smiled down at the strawberry blonde. "Don't worry Noir, you'll do perfectly fine. And if anything happens, we'll be right behind you."

Their leader gave Haru an encouraging nod. "For now we should try and get through things peacefully, but I'm sure that'll be no trouble for you."

Haru's cheeks turned redder than Ann's catsuit, positioned between the two considerate young men, and finally worked up the nerve to glance toward the TV president. "A-alright. I'll do my best," she said, her tone filling with a firm resolve.

After taking in a few deep calming breaths Haru started making for the well-dressed man. His two guards tensed visibly at her approach, but otherwise made no move to stop her or dissuade her approach.

"E-excuse me sir?" Haru asked.

The sharply dressed man turned slightly. "Hm? And who might you be?" he casually asked. Already he seemed more mannerly than the noble had been.

"My name is Haru Okumura. I'm the future owner of Okumura Foods," she politely replied. In the past that title may well have gone to her former fiance, but fortunately there was nobody else to take the mantle from Haru so long as she wanted it. "Actually I um... well I heard about you from the other guests on this cruise, and I was wondering if you would be open to a deal of sorts?"
"Oh? Kunikazu's daughter? Yes I believe I may have seen you once or twice... your father, after all, managed to make more than a few headlines after making it big," the president replied, keeping up an amicable tone. "Even so, are you really in a position to start making deals? I thought Kunikazu was still alive," he added.

Haru hesitated for a moment. "Father is... well you may well be aware that he has been absent from the public eye for some time now. A bout of illness has left him bedridden and... well now I need to start planning the future of the company for when he passes."

"My my... I didn't expect a girl of your age to be so forward-thinking. Perhaps there are a few good eggs in your generation after all," the TV company president remarked.

A pleasant smile touched on Haru's face, as she desperately tried to make it look convincing. "I suppose coming from a good family helps. But, more to the point, I was hoping that you and I could work together. You know, with your network helping to promote Okumura Foods and our brands... in exchange for a healthy boost to your funding too. And, if I could also get a letter of recommendation for Shido-san, I would be quite grateful."

"Well now, I have to admit that that does sound rather nice. After all your family company does hold a good deal of sway into the market... Still I must admit that I didn't expect someone of your age to throw their hat in with Shido-san," the TV president replied.

Haru maintained her pleasant smile. "There's nothing wrong with wanting to be on the winning team, is there?" She resisted the urge to vomit.

"No no, certainly not! Well then Okumura-san, I'm sure this is the beginning of a magnificent partnership." He casually reached into his blue suit jacket, sliding a folded sheet of paper from his interior pocket.

"Oh most certainly." Haru moved to stand, breathing a tiny sigh of relief. Well she lost a little self-respect but that aside this process was rather painless.

However, as she pocketed the letter and turned to leave, the executive let out a small chuckle. "You know, I perhaps should have sought you out in advance! After all Kunikazu's death was pre-ordained."

Haru paused, her gaze set dead ahead with her back to the TV company president. "I beg your pardon?" she softly asked.

From the distance Akira's eyes widened, and he proceeded to push himself off the wall that he and the rest of the team were watching from. "Uh oh," Akira quickly said.

"Hm? Oh, well, I'm sure you're no doubt aware of your father's political ambitions, and the lengths he was willing to go to in order to achieve them. But the truth in he never had a shot of getting in. As if Shido-san would give political status to some burger-slinger," he explained, before trailing into a modest chuckle.

Haru slowly felt her fingers curling into tight fists. "Is that a fact?"

"Well of course it is. Kunikazu really shouldn't have tried to grow beyond his status. Just having money isn't enough to make you worthy of such a high position in society after all," he explained. "I can't help but laugh... he was so convinced that he actually had a place here, can you even
believe that? A grown man being so utterly naive and stup-

"That's enough!" Haru suddenly shouted, turning and glaring toward the silver-haired man. His eyes widened in surprise, his guards tensing once again. "How dare you mock my father! He may have fallen in with your nonsense, but he only did so to follow his ambitions! And even if those ambitions were wrong, he was loyal and dutiful to you all... far more than you were for him!"

"Hmph. There's no sense in getting snippy with me girl, that's just the truth of the matter," the TV station president replied, idly brushing some dust off his shoulder. "I can't be blamed for your father being an idiot."

Haru let out a sudden growl, her right hand meeting her mask with a potent purple flash illuminating her body. Milady's psionic power lashed out like a ton of bricks, striking the president and his two bodyguards and slamming them into the wall behind them. "I won't allow Father's name to be dragged through the mud by criminals like you!" she shouted.

"Alright, looks like now we're getting involved," Akira said, quickly jogging toward the commotion.

"Oh boy angry Haru!" Shizuka quickly said.

Black mass suddenly erupted from the TV station president's body, rapidly engulfing him and his guards as their forms started to twist and merge. The inky matter began to balloon outward, expanding rapidly until the newly formed Shadow towered over Haru, making the strawberry blonde's eyes widen in shock. Now she was looking up at a towering monkey-man in a golden helmet and ceremonial armor, clutching a scimitar in his right hand. And her certainly didn't seem pleased to see her.

His blade lashed downward with impressive force, striking into Milady and sending Haru skidding back. The rich girl let out a shocked squeal at the sudden flash of pain, wincing visibly before she caught her footing. "O-oh... I don't think I thought this through..."

"It's alright," Akira said. "Can't fault you for getting pissed off at this bastard. Still... a Hanuman... this might be a problem," he added, watching as the chimp took a few heavy steps forward.

He raised his blade high, before his arms vanished in a blur of motion, a storm of barely visible slashes raining out at the group and forcing them to rapidly jump away. They scattered from Hanuman's raging assault, while the edge of his scimitar carved several deep fissures in the earth.

Shiho and Yusuke wound up skidding to a halt at Hanuman's right, their Personas flaring up around them. Eris and Susanoo moved in unison, arrows of ice and blessed light surging out as a bladed hailstorm and striking the monkey's side, forming a series of scars along his furry muscles on impact. The Shadow shrieked, hopping violently onto his left foot as streaks of darkness oozed down his right arm.

Hanuman spun around abruptly, his right leg crashing into both teens abruptly and launching Shiho and Yusuke off their feet. They were promptly driven straight through the wall behind him, taken out of the fight for the time being.

The Shadow didn't have much time to celebrate before a whirling green cyclone struck him, blades of wind from Zorro's rapier sending his heels skidding back into the floor. The monkey shrieked in protest, struggling against the impressive force. "Sorry pal, but that's a big no-no!" Morgana firmly
"Oh I'm gonna use your face like a welcome matt," Ryuji growled. Seiten Taisei lunged toward Hanuman. But, even as he struggled against Zorro's cyclone, he had the strength to raise his blade and deflect several blows from his fellow monkey's staff. Each blow cracked the ground beneath them.

Seiten Taisei managed to strike the Shadow twice, crackles of lightning scorching Hanuman's chest on both impacts. But, having an opening, Hanuman used a furious burst of strength to uppercut his foe into the ceiling, sending a cobweb of cracks erupting from the point of impact. Ryuji gagged loudly, his balance wobbling as he was nearly driven to one knee.

Now having room to breathe, Hanuman leapt back from Zorro's attack, his flesh covered with thin bleeding scars from the blades of wind. He lunged at Zorro and caught him in the face with a powerful kick, making Morgana yowl as he was catapulted backward, his body smashing to a halt inside a slot machine.

Morgana groaned loudly, his eyes swirling as a spray of coins rained down from beneath him.

"Mona-chan!" Haru gasped.

"He'll be fine," Futaba quickly said. "What we need to do is focus on this guy and deal with him quickly."

"Right. Well in that case..." Akira trailed off and pressed his right hand to his mask. "I'd better bust out some heavy artillery. Odin!"

An aura of fire erupted around Akira's body as a ghostly entity formed behind him. A tall purple-skinned man, his body concealed by a flowing white cape. A golden horned helmet adorned his head, a metal patch covering his left eye. In his hands he held a steel spear, the tip glowing with some ruinous power.

"I'll make an opening for you!" Shizuka quickly said. "Jump in after me and give monkey boy hell!"

Houdini rocketed forward, leaping from point to point and flickering in and out of visibility. She closed in on Hanuman, well over a dozen focused blows striking him in an instant and making the Shadow stagger backward. Houdini raised her right fist, her entire hand aglow as a focused laser of condensed light shot outward. The immense heat of the focused beam struck Hanuman in the face, making him shriek loudly as the right half of it was rendered charred and crispy.

Hanuman shrieked and shoved his left foot out in a mighty kick, catching Houdini in the gut. Shizuka's eyes bulged out a bit as she was abruptly driven to her knees. "J-Joker... go for it!" she shouted, recalling Houdini in between deep gasps of air.

Odin closed in on the monkey beast, hitting in in the stomach with a colossal punch that made the Shadow double over. With the Shadow stunned, Odin raised his spear high with a primal roar, a tremendous flash of lightning illuminating them. The nearby slots were vaporized in the blast, while the ground beneath them became scorched and molten, a wafer thin layer of floor keeping them separated from the deck below.

The smoke cleared, revealing Hanuman's smoking, blackened body, the monkey letting out a few
gagging coughs in the aftermath. Despite his immense injuries he still managed to lunge forward, hitting Odin with a powerful headbutt that knocked him back, followed by a sweeping kick that made Akira grimace and stumble backward.

Before Hanuman could take advantage of Akira's stunned nature, Flaming Telepath lunged toward the monkey and struck him in the face with a trio of palm strikes. While these didn't hurt much, they had enough force to make the charred Shadow stumble back through the edge of the crater and onto the soot-stained floor. He countered quickly, quick swings of his blade rushing toward Hifumi's Stand. But, as ever, she had the reactions and foresight to dodge around his powerful slashes.

Flaming Telepath's right hand drove upward with keen precision, the pointed fingertips jabbing vigorously into Hanuman's wrist and knocking his blade from his hand. "Yes! Got it!" Hifumi enthusiastically said, before letting out a pained shout as Hanuman caught Flaming Telepath with a powerful jab. Hifumi was swept backward, smacking into Haru and bowling both of them over.

"Queen, let's finish him!" Ann quickly said, earning a nod from Makoto.

The blonde quickly dashed around behind the damaged Shadow, a flash of blue flame illuminating her once she summoned Hecate. Her Persona pushed her hands forward, followed by a potent fireball exploding beneath Hanuman's feet and catapulting him up in the air.

Anat lunged up to intercept him, gears grinding as she lifted her steel fists overhead. She swung them down with inhuman force. The Shadow slammed into the ground with immense force, shaking the entire entertainment deck around them. And, as ever, the cognitions did not bother to look toward the commotion.

Makoto breathed a small sigh of relief and looked down into the second crater, watching as the Shadow slowly morphed back to his normal form. He groaned weakly from the crater. Alive, but in no condition to cause more trouble.

"Looks like that one is taken care of," Makoto remarked. "I better go and do some healing."

"Good call," Akira said, nodding to Makoto as she passed him. He stroked his stomach a few times, still grimacing mildly. "Well, that's three forms. All we need now is to nab the last one from the IT company president."

Haru swallowed slightly as she stood up, taking just a moment to help Hifumi up. "I... I'm sorry everyone. I let my anger get the best of me when I was so close to a clean getaway. I suppose I still have some hang-ups when it comes to Father," she explained.

"Ah, don't sweat it Haru. This guy was an asshole anyway. And I figure he's learned some manners by now." Shizuka cupped her hands around her mouth and suddenly shouted into the crater. "Isn't that right asshole?!" she shouted. The Shadow groaned weakly in return.

"Yeah, I'd say he's learned," Akira said, smirking.

Futaba grinned, pumping her fists high overhead as the group made for the hole Shiho and Yusuke had been blasted through. "Today we've scored a great victory against the tyranny of TV, for the glory of free internet entertainment!"

"Alright let's not get crazy here," Ann flatly said.
The sun was setting in Yongen as Akira and Futaba walked the backstreets. Futaba sighed happily, clutching a large bag of recently procured Akihabara swag to her chest, clearly content with her haul. They had had to rest up a bit, even though they were on the verge of getting the last letter.

As they were taking a break, Futaba had asked Akira to tag along for a little shopping trip, that had turned into a few hours of strolling by electronics stores, game shops and gashapon machines. Not that Akira minded, he had picked up a few things for himself and stowed them in his satchel now that he didn't have Morgana in his bag.

"This was nice," Futaba cheerily said. "I mean with all this crazy stuff going on, it's good to do normal stuff so our heads don't totally melt."

Akira nodded, smiling fondly while looking ahead. "Yeah. I know things are dangerous right now, but... I guess rushing in all the time isn't good for us. I take it you got everything you wanted?" he asked.

"Eeeeh... not everything. The capsule machine still hasn't coughed up the last Pink Dark Boy figurine I need, but I have a good feeling about my next run!" she explained.

"You know, Shizuka is friends with Rohan Kishibe. If you want, I'm sure he could get it for you if you asked Shizuka," Akira replied.

Futaba let out a small tutting sound. "Akira you're a smart boy, but you just can't appreciate the rush of a gashapon! It's no fun to just get what you want! You need the thrill of the chase, the anticipation of each capsule, the rush of finally getting what you need! Even Sojiro understands that."

"Ehe... right," Akira replied, glancing off to his side. They passed they alley leading to the bathhouse, promptly arriving at the door to Leblanc. "Well, this is my stop. Still, I could give you some hot chocolate for the walk to your place," he offered.

Futaba grinned. "Sure! Don't tell anyone I said this, but you're kind of a maestro when it comes to hot chocolate. I guess Sojiro's taught you well." Akira unlocked the door, but as he did this an idea popped into Futaba's head. "Hey er, Akira, you mind if I ask you something?"

"Fire away," Akira curtly replied.

"Well um... I don't wanna make things weird or whatever, but... I've been wondering about something. See, everyone on the team is happy to hang out with me, but you... I er, I dunno, it seems to me that you're... even happier about it than they are," Futaba said, a faint pinkness dawning on her cheeks. "W-what I mean is, do you um... enjoy hanging out with me more than the others."

Akira swallowed hard. He had considered coming clean with his feelings by now, but had wanted to hold off until Shido was dealt with. "W-well you see, uh-" Akira pushed the door open, only to pause when he saw Sojiro seated at one of the booths. Saved by the Dad. "Oh! Sakura-san!" Akira quickly said.
"Hi Sojiro," Futaba said, deciding to shelve her thoughts for now as she followed Akira into Leblanc. As ever she was quite casual with the man who was essentially her father.

But Sojiro, on the other hand, seemed a little more tense than usual. "Have a seat. Both of you," he said, his tone carrying a serious edge Akira had never heard from him in the past. Akira felt a chill roll down his spine.

So, both feeling exceedingly awkward, the teens took a seat opposite the bespectacle older man. He reached into his apron and suddenly produced a crimson card that he promptly planted on the table in front of them. Akira recognised it in an instant: It was the calling card they had given to Futaba to steal her treasure. "I found this while cleaning your room." Futaba gulped loudly. "This is one of those 'calling cards', right? The kind the Phantom Thieves use?"

"That-" Akira tried to protest, but Sojiro's cold glare made it seem like that was a poor idea. What could he even say? That it was just some replica bought online? There was no way Sojiro wouldn't be keeping an eye on anything bought online.

"You- You went into my room without permission?!" Futaba asked, trying to turn the tables on the conversation to no avail.

"I'll apologize for that later. But first, I want to know about this card," Sojiro said, the tip of his finger tapping on it repeatedly. "Why do you of all people have one of these?" He cast another gaze toward Akira, already seeing some kind of connection between him and the card.

Futaba swallowed again, a sense of panic rising visibly through her as she shakily glanced between Akira and Sojiro. "I... I..." All at once it seemed her confidence had crumbled, replaced with the fear that used to dominate her very being. Her tone dropped to a soft whisper. "I... I k-kept it as a memento..."

Akira frowned. This whole situation sucked. He didn't like lying to Sojiro, but he hated seeing Futaba upset even more. What to do?

"Explain," Sojiro firmly said.

"E-explain," Futaba repeated, her voice a tiny squeak. She looked on the verge of tears, and Akira felt a lump catch in his throat. He clenched his fists tightly.

So, finally, he spoke up. "I gave it to her," Akira firmly said. There was no point in lying, not when they were cornered like this, and if anything happened in Shido's Palace... well Sojiro deserved the truth. "I gave it to her because she wanted someone to change her heart. And I was able to do that because... I'm a Phantom Thief."

"What?!" Sojiro blurted, his eyes wide in shock. Even Futaba seemed taken aback by his sudden declaration.

But, soon enough, Futaba decided to follow his lead. "I... a-after what h-happened with M-Mom, I was... I was s-so scared, and so... sad all th time. I was a-afraid to live m-my life, a-and I couldn't even l-l-leave my room. And if I didn't do something d-drastic I was gonna... w-was gonna..."

Sojiro frowned. "Alright, alright... I get it. I know how bad things were for you. But I didn't think you'd do something like that. Or that you'd be involved in something like this," he said, shifting his
gaze to Akira.

"And after Akira and the others s-saved me, and changed my heart, I stayed with them as a member of their team," Futaba added, much to Sojiro's surprise.

"You- you're a part of this too?!" Sojiro asked, stunned.

Akira nodded. "But those stories you've been hearing, about the Phantom Thieves killing people... that wasn't us. That was someone trying to frame u-"

"I figured that much out already," Sojiro interrupted, crossing his arms. "You might have a criminal record, but I know you're not a murderer. And I can tell that much about your friends too... besides, nobody who brews coffee as well as you do could have a psycho heart."

"Oh... er, thanks?" Akira replied awkwardly. He let out a small sigh, reclining into his seat. "Well I've already told you this much, so we should probably just go ahead and explain everything to you. This is gonna be a long story, so you might wanna settle in," he said.

And so, from that point on, Akira started to explain everything to Sojiro with Futaba occasionally chiming in. He spoke of the Metaverse and how it functioned, and also told Sojiro of the Nav that spontaneously appeared on his phone to allow access to that dimension. Sojiro listened along, sometimes asking questions of his own but otherwise remaining quiet.

Akira moved on to describing the Kamoshida incident, and how the discovery of his Palace and Kamoshida's subsequent defeat was the catalyst that led to the creation of the Arditi. From that point on the team went from strength to strength, besting increasingly powerful foes, and adding new teammates along the way. But Akira also spoke of the major threats constantly looming over the team. Akechi, Mr. A, and the enigmatic Camael.

Eventually his story moved toward current events, emphasizing the threat now posed to the nation by Masayoshi's Shido's ambition.

When he finished, Sojiro removed his glasses and slowly rubbed the bridge of his nose with his right hand. "That story is... totally insane," he finally said.

"Yeah. I'm not gonna deny that," Akira admitted. "But it's definitely true. See?" He pointed over to the counter, causing Sojiro's eyes to widen as he saw a floating coffee cup steadily being filled with a steaming black liquid from one of the dispensers. "That's my Persona, Arsene. You can't see him of course, but you can see the effect he has on the physical world."

"I... yeah, I see that," Sojiro admitted, a little dumbstruck. "This is a whole lot to take in. Especially the fact that the cat is apparently in on it too."

"The cat's a loudmouth," Futaba admitted. "But he means well!"

Sojiro smiled despite himself. "Well, I guess I'll keep that in mind the next time he's bugging me for food. But all that aside, this is definitely a shock... Masayoshi Shido. That's a name I haven't heard of in a long time, but I guess I'm not surprised to hear that he's causing all this trouble," he remarked.

Arsene brought the coffee over and settled it in front of Akira. Sojiro adjusted his glasses and focused intensely, as if trying to see the invisible hands that had brought it over. "You know
"Shido?" he asked.

"Yeah. Back when I worked for the government, I had some dealings with Shido. Even then, before he became a shoe-in for prime minister, he had a kind of ruthless and bottomless ambition. Held grudges over the most minor things, was short with anyone who wasn't directly above him... In general, not a nice guy," Sojiro explained.

As he said this, Futaba let out a tiny gasp. "S-so if you worked near him, then does that mean Shido... knew about Mom's research?"

Truthfully, that was one mystery Akira had been pondering for a while now. He could understand Wakaba being targeted for her research, but he had never totally figured out how people knew about her research. It wasn't something the media would readily know about, and Akechi was just some dumb punk kid at the time. But Shido, well he had the means to figure it out.

"It's possible... The Agency stresses secrecy in projects like that, but I wouldn't put it past Shido to bribe that information out of someone." Sojiro stroked his goatee a few times. "So all this time, Wakaba really didn't... I always knew something was off about that whole story, but I never could've imagined something so crazy."

"It's the truth. They went after Mom for her research, and they..." Futaba balled her fists at her knees, seeming to tremble with a cauldron of emotions until Akira settled a comforting hand on her back.

Sojiro sighed. "I can't say I'm happy knowing that you're putting yourselves in danger like this. Both of you," he added, turning his gaze to Akira, much to the teen's surprise. "But from the sound of things... you're the only ones who can stop Shido, especially when the whole country loves him and the lies he's selling. And if he gets into office, things are gonna get real bad, real fast."

"Don't worry. We're gonna make Shido confess his crimes to the world, expose all his allies, and then clear our names. We're not gonna let him have his way," Akira said.

And after that, for the safety of them and everyone they loved, Mr. A was next on their list.
The main issue with getting the last letter was the fact that the IT company president apparently never left his room on the ship. The first issue was figuring out exactly which room he was staying in (something accomplished through interrogating a few members of the cruise ship staff) but then there was the matter of figuring out just how to get to his room.

Navigating the interior of the vessel was not an easy task, with many areas being restricted by passes held solely by Shadow employees. And the corridors linking from point to point were mazes littered with enemies. While that was dangerous enough, it was made worse by the presence of strange statues of Shido that could turn anyone in their presence into a literal mouse. Those nasty traps had managed to stimy them from time to time.

But eventually, with some mapping from Futaba, the team managed to find a route that led out to the border of the stern and port side deck. From there, they hoped, they could use the balconies to quickly reach the outside of the IT company president's room.

The double doors opened out onto the deck, an ample breeze blowing out at Akira, accompanied with a distinct whistling sound that made for uncomfortable listening. The leader stared toward the horizon, the crumbling buildings being steadily dragged into the choppy seas that surrounded them.

He really hated this goddamn Palace...

"So where to from here?" Shizuka asked as she inspected their surroundings. She paused, glancing down at herself and giving her legs a few quick stretches. "I guess if we're doing some climbing, I'd better limber up."

"Yeah, no doubt. And that breeze too, it feels like it's trying to cut me in two," Ryuji remarked. "Better be careful of that if we're jumpin' from point to point."

"And there's no telling what's waiting for us ahead, so... just be cautious of any Shadow attacks," Akira said, glancing over to his team.

Futaba strode past their leader, making for the railing overlooking the sea and the lower decks. "Don't worry, I've got the map. I can guide you from here." Futaba suddenly vaulted the railing, her allies reflexively tensing at the sight before she suddenly started floating in thin air. In an instant Necronomicon's ebony hull coiled around her, fully forming into a protective flying saucer. "But you're out of your minds if you think I'm gonna do parkour too..."

Ann shrugged her slim shoulders. "Can't say I'm shocked to hear that. Oh well, I guess we better get to it."

Akira led on toward the end of the railing, stopping near a steam vent that had the hem of his longcoat flapping in the warm breeze. He hopped the railing, Odin's floating body appearing in front of him once he guided his free hand to his mask. With great care Akira started making his way along the edge, his Persona acting like a safety net.
One by one the members of his team started to follow after, keeping a respectable distance as they did so. Soon enough Akira reached an upward sloping wall, and above that were an assortment of different balconies. Their mark was through one of those.

He leapt high, catching the top of his wall with his right hand and hoisting himself up with a hard pull. Necronomicon was floating just a few feet away from him, and soon started feeding him directions, pointing out which balcony he needed to head to.

Akira jumped again, catching the edge of the nearest balcony, and pulled himself over. He moved quickly and leapt to the next platform across from him, and used that point to climb to the balcony directly above him. The rest of the Arditi were keeping close to him, moving up one by one as Akira steadily made his way from point to point through Futaba's directions.

Eventually he came to a stop on one particularly large balcony, the glass double doors leading to the rooms interior partially ajar. The heavy curtains in the frame acted as nice coverage for him, and then shielded the others from view as they gathered nearby on the platform.

"So," Shiho began in a low tone. "What's the plan here?"

"Ideally I'd like to get through this without a fight... but I know that's not guaranteed," Akira remarked. "Main issue is trying to figure out a way to appeal to this guy, give him something to catch his interest. But what?" he added.

"Leave that to me!" Necronomicon vanished as Futaba approached the balcony, with the diminutive redhead landing silently in front of Akira.

Ryuji tilted his head slightly. "Eh? You mean... you wanna go in and talk to the guy?"

"Well if you want a shot at this going peacefully, yeah. I'm the only one here who knows anything about IT beyond web browsing and memes," Futaba explained.

Shizuka shrugged. "I apologize for nothing," she casually replied.

"Granted you're more of an expert than the rest of us, but... confronting a person solo? That's a little risky," Akira said. Granted her Persona was a pretty potent defense, but Futaba's shyness could be an issue if it cropped up here.

"I know. But if I'm talking shop, then I can talk to anyone. All I need to do is crack my fingers, show my stuff, and this IT dude will be throwing that letter my way," she confidently said.

Well if they were trying to get this guy's attention, Futaba was the only one who knew anything about his industry. And he was hoping they could get through this nice and quickly. So eventually he let out a small sigh. "Alright, well... we'll leave it to you. We'll be right out here, and we'll jump in if things start looking bad," Akira assured her.

Futaba grinned and gave a salute to the others. "No sweat. I'll have that letter in my hands in no time flat."

The redhead casually strode through the open doors, her hands clasped neatly behind her back as she entered. The room was large and lavish, well furnished with an expansive table and plush chairs situated around it. The company president, a young man with feathery black hair, dressed in an expensive dark suit, was seated in one of the central chairs with an even more expensive laptop
open in front of him.

Two young women, dressed in nice suits of their own, flanked his sides. At a glance they seemed to be secretaries, as opposed to the bodyguards the previous Shadows had been accompanied with.

The company president looked up in surprise as Futaba approached, his eyes wide behind his domino mask. "What th-?! Who're you?!!" he asked in shock.

"S-sorry about the sudden intrusion!" Futaba quickly said, her hands raised as a sign of peace.

"You... why did you come in from the window?" he asked, still looking surprised.

Futaba glanced nervously from side to side. Shoot, she should have expected a question like that to be sent her way. "W-well your door's locked, and you weren't answering any calls, s-so how else was I gonna get in? But hey, not that I can fault you, I totes know how good it feels to relax in your own room. I actually wanted to see you, because I heard of your company aaaand... well we're kindred spirits."

The company president arched a brow. He was still surprised by Futaba's intrusion, but with her cute stature it was hard to see her as a threat off the bat. "Just who are you anyway?" he asked.

Futaba smiled and raised her left hand, drawing her sleek black laptop from Necronomicon's storage space. It looked as if it simply materialized in her grasp, much to the shock of the trio in front of her. "Allow me to show you my credentials."

Futaba took a seat at the head of the table, smiling confidently as she turned her machine on and set about setting up some programs. Whatever nervousness she felt seemed to melt away as she stared into the comfort of her laptop screen, the light reflected in the lenses of her goggles. The IT company president made his way over, his eyes widening in surprise. "This... this machine."

"Hehe... you like? I made this baby myself," Futaba proudly said. "Granted he's not as powerful as my rig back home, but he's a lot more capable than most store-bought laptops. Buuuut talk is cheap. So how about I go ahead and show you just what this lil' guy can do!" Futaba boasted.

From outside, Ann blinked a few times. "Wow, she's... actually pulling it off," she softly said. "I didn't think she'd sound so confident, but she really is in her element."

Shizuka listened in to some of the techobabble being thrown about by the two nerds, her brow furrowing. "Christ... are they talking about computers, or power armor? Hey Queen, you got any idea what they're even talking about?" she asked in a hushed whisper.

"Not a clue," Makoto replied, seeming dissatisfied to be in the dark on a subject for a change. "But it really doesn't matter. She has that guy on the hook, that's the important part."

A faint smile touched on Akira's face. "She's pretty incredible," he admitted.

Once Futaba was finished showing off, she smirked with a boundless confidence. When it came to technology, Futaba was an apex predator of sorts. "This is... incredible. You really did all this yourself? It's hard to believe a girl your age is so capable," the company president said.

"Well, I've had a looooot of time to practice my craft," Futaba admitted, idly dusting the knuckles of her left hand against her collarbone. "And nothing but that. I'm pretty eager to put my raw talent
to good use."

The company president nodded earnestly. "Well we'd be more than happy to have someone like you on our payroll! And with your skills I'm sure-

"Ah! Before we get into money and junk like that, I'm interested in one thing in particular from you," she interrupted. A coy smile lingered on her face. "I've heard you're one of the people to see about getting a letter of recommendation, and that's why I went through a buttload of trouble to find you. So, yeah, that's one thing I really want," she said.

"Ah, is that so? Well for someone like you, that should be no trouble. I'm sure Shido-san would be quite happy to have a mind like yours on hand in the coming months," the company president replied, smiling.

He gave a quick nod to the secretary at his right, who in turn produced the final letter they needed. She handed it to Futaba who gave it the once over, examining it intensely to make sure it was the genuine article. Satisfied, she slid it into one of the pouches at her right hip.

"If you don't mind me asking... where did you acquire your skills? An affinity for coding like yours, it's... incredible!"

Futaba shrugged. "I've been a shut-in for a little while, and had plenty of time to hone my skills. It might interest you to know that I'm the original Medjed."

"Y-you are? Then... then you were the one who took out our Medjed site?" the company president asked in surprise.

Futaba's eyes widened behind her goggles. "You mean... the Medjed team making threats over the Summer... that was you guys? Why?" she asked.

"Hm? Oh, well... Shido-san wanted to build up the Arditi in the eyes of the public, so that when we orchestrated their fall from grace, it would have an even stronger impact. And the stronger that impact, the better Shido would look when he spoke out against them," he explained. Akira listened in from outside, nodding slowly to himself. He had been pondering the Medjed incident in the past, noting just how... out of place it seemed in retrospect.

Catching the attention of a group like Medjed was already strange, and it was even weirder that they had apparently wanted to destroy the Phantom Thieves. And that, in the aftermath of their defeat, Medjed had fallen silent. So even back then, Shido had been manipulating the team.

What else was he responsible for? It was a worrying prospect.

"Hmph, w-well... I can't exactly stomach people using the Medjed name without my permission, you know," Futaba quickly said, not wanting to outright state her true allegiance.

"There was no actual threat, we were just going to have the site... vanish when the deadline showed up. So you taking it down really surprised us," the IT company president admitted, laughing slightly. "I'm sure the Phantom Thieves loved their moment in the sun, before everything came crashing down on them! Still, it's not like there's anything wrong with manipulating information-illiterate fools through the internet. But you should know what that's like, being the original Medjed and all. We're a bit alike in that way."
Futaba narrowed her eyes at him. "Tch... I was wondering why that site's coding looked like a lot of cheap crap. Third-rate work coming from a third-rate person. Don't go comparing me to the likes of you! I want to change society, not manipulate it!"

"Don't be stupid. You seriously destroyed that website for some kind of 'social reform'?" the company president asked, now sounding more than a little annoyed. "I'll let you in on a secret: When Shido's in power, there won't be room for any sort of reform. Not when we have cognitive psience on our side, the perfect tool for controlling the drooling masses. You'd be wise to fall in line."

The redhead grit her teeth, the mention of Wakaba's research seeming to push a button in her head. "I won't let you..." The room trembled around them, her goggles glowing brightly. "Abuse my Mom's research!" Necronomicon's tentacle lashed against the company president, smashing him violently into the wall. His secretaries jumped back in surprise.

Futaba quickly seemed to realise what she had just done, blinking a few times behind her goggles. "Oh... uh-oh..." She had let her own anger get the best of her, and it seemed Necronomicon had acted in response to the fury she felt in that instant. The smoke cleared away from the badly damaged wall, and once it had parted enough Futaba could see a darkness enveloping the IT company president.

Soon that same miasma of energy had drifted toward the secretaries, engulfing the duo and steadily merging the into a singular being. Futaba could sense the energy rising rapidly within the two Shadows, making her swallow hard. "Not my uh... not my best idea. Hey guys, I could use a hand!"

The Arditi quickly burst into the room, filling the entryway as two Shadows fully formed ahead of them. "Well, you almost had it," Ryuji remarked,

Futaba huffed, swiftly generating Necronomicon's protective layer around her body. "Well I'm sorry! It's just... knowing everything Shido and his cronies have done, I just couldn't stomach being compared to them! And the thought of them using Mom's research as a weapon... that's just a sore spot."

The IT company president quickly morphed into a Shadow similar to the fairy king they had encountered on their first visit to the cruise ship, albeit taller in scale. His secretaries, meanwhile, had morphed into an elegant fairy woman in a refined green dress, her golden hair flowing in an unseen breeze while moonlight glimmered in the membranes of her wings. She examined the Arditi, tittering slightly at the sight.

The male Shadow smirked and examined the young thieves for a few silent seconds. "So, you little humans have decided to scurry into the realm of Oberon? That is a crime I cannot abide. What do you propose we do Titania?" he asked.

Titania tittered again. "Why, destroy them of course. There's no sin in the destruction of mortal vermin, particularly if they are in defiance of Shido!"

Shizuka groaned slightly. "Aw man... I'm getting Shakespeare flashbacks," she muttered to herself.

"Why yes my wonderful wife, I believe that's an appropriate punishment," Oberon gleefully replied, before flicking his blade out toward the group. A powerful explosive wave struck the ground ahead of the Arditi, the shock forcing several of them back toward the balcony. The floor remained scuffed and cracked from the blast, the table having been obliterated entirely.
Morgana, Ann, and Akira quickly broke off to the right, making a sharp lunge toward the fairy king. A powerful gale was launched forth by Zorro, the cyclone colliding with Obron's blade and making him grunt, and he was quick to jump back to avoid a powerful spear strike from Odin that cracked the wall behind him.

Titania, meanwhile, was swiftly dodging away from hails of ice and lightning launched from Susanoo and Milady. She was gripping the edges of her dress, pirouetting away from the attacks that left a trail of destruction in the walls. She moved as if she were in a pleasant waltz, her movements leaving a glittering trail of moonlight in her wake.

Suddenly a ball of glittering light flew from her hands and hit Yusuke in the face, making the bluenette gasp and recoil. In an instant his body became heavy and groggy, and he seemed to fall asleep while standing up. It gave the fairy queen a nice opening, the blonde laughing loudly as she caught Yusuke in a powerful roundhouse kick that slammed him into the wall hard enough to knock him through to the corridor outside.

"Damnit... gotta watch out for that! Don't let her get too close!" Makoto warned.

Houdini's invisible fist suddenly rammed into Titania's gut, the blonde's eyes bulging out of her head from the ferocious strength of the attack. Houdini's fists rained against her in a powerful flurry, and with the invisible Stand keeping her busy it provided an opening for Flaming Telepath and Anat to try and close in and attack.

But, the slightly injured fairy managed to pull back toward the crater in the wall with a beat of her wings. She clapped her hands together, followed by a blinding nuclear flash exploding out from her hands. Houdini and Flaming Telepath were immediately catapulted into the far wall, both users crying out in pain, while Anat endured the tide of energy with no real discomfort.

"You dare to strike me you wretched mo-" Anat suddenly burst through the wave of light, the back of her steel-plated hand catching Titania's face and driving her upward into the ceiling with enough force to make the room shudder in protest.

"We're not called 'the daring ones' for nothing," Makoto confidently said.

With Titania briefly stunned, Shiho smirked and took aim. Eris appeared at her side and aimed both of her fists forward, a coil of green light suddenly enveloping Titania and sapping her speed significantly. "Let's see you zoom around now!" she mocked.

While Titania was having troubles, things weren't going much nicer for Oberon. A flurry of alcoholic bottles, launched by Breakthru's power, collided against his body and shattered apart. Splashes of alchohol doused him, while intruding shards of glass sliced through his ivory skin and left black spurts erupting on his body.

"Impudent little-" Oberon growled. Sergio had to jump back as a burst of lightning shot from Oberon's saber, the explosion striking the floor where he had been standing. While he dodged the main bolt, the aftershock still hit him like a brick wall and smashed Sergio into a low table.

Odin lunged at Oberon again, his spear colliding with Oberon's sword with enough force to send a cobweb of cracks erupting along the walls around them. Both figures struggled against each other, growling loudly.
"I wouldn't have thought a literal fairy would be so strong," Akira murmured under his breath.

Oberon weaved around Odin, a hard kick striking the purple-skinned Persona in his right arm. Akira grit his teeth and recoiled, feeling as if the bones in his arm were about to snap from the massive pressure.

Zorro swooped in, his blade catching Oberon's before it could land a fatal strike against Odin's body. The two were soon striking back and forth, flurries of steel colliding with sprays of sparks. "Yeah, he's a tough one alright," Morgana remarked, before giving a sharp hiss as the tip of Oberon's blade sliced along Zorro's right shoulder. The figures struck each other fiercely, both being blown backward and grunting from the force. "But..." Morgana panted. "Let's see if he's fireproof!"

Oberon's eyes widened as Hecate appeared at his side, before a focused flare of mystic fire erupted against his body. The alcohol soaking his body caught fire instantly, the blast making the Shadow scream loudly in pain, with the blaze soon engulfing him entirely.

Despite the inferno eroding his body, he found the strength to spin around and catch Hecate with a mighty punch, spiriting her into the ceiling with such force that it nearly buckled entirely under the pressure. Ann cried out, being driven to her left knee as a flash of pain hit her.

Oberon spun around, a bolt of lightning arcing out of his blade and slamming into Morgana's stubby body. The feline yowled loudly, his smoking frame being driven along the ground toward the balcony, letting out a few pained groans as he came to a stop.

Before the burning Shadow could make another move, half a broken table rocketed into his face, sped along by an infused burst of momentum. The mass of wood exploded into splinters on contact, knocking Oberon backward and leaving him briefly dazed and thrashing about.

Unable to move quickly, he was defenseless as Odin speared him from behind and raised him high overhead. The purple-skinned Persona let out a powerful cry and slammed the Shadow into the floor, scraping him along and then flinging his unconscious mass into the corridor outside.

Titania unleashed twin bursts of radiant light from her palms, launching Flaming Telepath and Seiten Taisei away from her and knocking them into the outside corridor too. For as potent as her attacks still were, the fairy queen had her share of injuries and scuffs on her body.

She wasn't given much room to breathe before a slew of gunfire from Milady's arsenal rained down upon her, tearing blackened strips of tar from her ghostly body. A beam of light rushed from Titania's palm and exploded against the armoured hull of Haru's Persona. It certainly hurt, making the rich girl grimace and gasp loudly. But Haru was tougher than she looked, holding her footing against the nuclear flash. Pain rocked Haru from end to end, but she needed to hold out for just a little longer.

It left Titania open as Anat's armoured hull arced around to her side, steel hard fists driving into her face and knocking Titania toward the opposite wall. Makoto let out a loud yell and lunged forward, her own armoured fist and Houdini's knuckles striking her simultaneously, hitting hard enough to drive the fairy queen into the floor and knock her unconscious.

As the chaos came to an end, Akira surveyed the bombed-out wreckage of the room, and then examined the state of his allies. They had a few scuffs, but it was nothing they couldn't handle. "Well... I think that's the last of the letters."
Makoto had landed hard on her knees after her leaping punch, and found herself being helped to her feet by Shizuka. "Yeah... I didn't expect him to be that tough. Or to have backup," Makoto mused.

"Well we got through it in the end. And I suppose I can't fault Oracle for getting pissed off," Sergio said, dusting himself off. "I'd be pretty miffed if I was compared to anyone in Shido's stable. Bastardi, all of them."

"I was close to a clean getaway too," Futaba admitted, sighing softly. She bristled as Akira set a comforting hand on her back, her cheeks going almost as red as her hair.

"You did great. Don't sweat it," Akira assured her.

Ryuji stretched his arms over his head, a grin breaking out across his face. "Shit, so does that mean we've got everything we need to get to the treasure room?" Akira and Makoto nodded. "Sweet! Then that means we can send a calling card to Shido and get ready to end it!"

An appealing prospect, Shizuka noted. "Yeah. Time to show his Lex Luthor-lookin' ass who's boss!" the young Joestar said eagerly.

"That all said, this may be our last mission. If not that, it will certainly be our biggest. Taking down the potential future prime minister, little could top that. As such it would be a shame to waste this calling card as a mere letter," Yusuke reasoned.

A grin broke out across Ryuji's face. "Ya know Fox, I was thinkin' about that too. And I might know just the thing to really stick it to Shido." He beckoned Futaba over, and once the hacker was near enough he started murmuring his idea into her ear.

Futaba nodded along with his plan, making the occasional humming sound. When he was finished, she shrugged her slim shoulders. "Yeah, I can do that no prob. I mean, I ain't no amateur... main issue is getting the footage. But I guess we could film in Mementos. And I've got some good video editing software on my rig."

Akira cocked his left eyebrow curiously. "Aaand... what do you mean by that? What exactly have you got planned Skull?" he asked.

Ryuji and Futaba shared a cheshire cat smile. "You'll see Joker. But I think I just thought up the biggest middle finger we can give that shithead," the blond proudly said.

11/7

Shizuka would freely admit to being more than a little nervous. Tonight was going to be the biggest night of their lives, a mission that would shape the entire future of the country. After tonight they were going to air a lot of dirty laundry for all of Japan, and if Mr. A knew about the Metaverse, then he knew this was the night that they'd make a move against his biggest ally.

Even if they beat Shido, he was unlikely to take that lying down. Depending on how things went tonight, they'd be jumping from one slobberknocker to the next. Things were going to get very dangerous, very quickly.
Seated on the couch, she was quietly examining a news story about the incoming holidays, while Simmons finished making some tea for himself. This was not an uncommon sight for the early evening, but for as familiar as it all felt Shizuka couldn't put her worries aside.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket, and she quickly raised it up to examine it. A text message from Futaba, to the entire group.

'Got everything set up on my end. Get to the Diet ASAP.'

Shizuka sighed loudly and stood up. "Hey uh, Simmons," she said, quickly catching the attention of her butler. "I gotta go out and run an errand. So uh... w-well I might not be back for a little while."

There was a look in her eye that spoke of how serious this all was. This wasn't just a high school girl looking to goof off for the night. Simmons swallowed hard at the sight, and knew there was no point in trying to stop her. "Y-yes well..." His hands were trembling around the teacup in his wrinkled hands. "It's... going to be cold tonight. So... don't forget to bring a scarf! A-and gloves! And... and a hat, and... p-please just... be safe."

"Right," Shizuka said, nodding firmly. She made for the coat hooks in the entryway, lifting up a red parka off the hook and quickly slipping it on. Shizuka paused at the doorway. "Hey, Simmons," she said without looking over her shoulder. "Tonight might get... dangerous. You should consider going to a Speedwagon safehouse for the night."

The Joestar family, and many SID members, lived a dangerous life, often assailed by enemies. It was not uncommon for them to need a safe spot to hunker down for a night or two, and there were a few dotted around Japan. And with the arrow back in Speedwagon care, Simmons couldn't protect himself that way.

"O-of course," he replied, nodding to himself. "Young Miss... please, be careful."

"I always am." Shizuka left without another word, quietly closing the door behind her. She didn't want to leave him hanging like this, but she had to. Things would be fine, she told herself.

Now alone, Simmons breathed a tiny sigh and set his cup down on the kitchen table. He couldn't do anything personally to help Shizuka. No, whatever world she was venturing into was far away from anything a mere mortal could be involved in. But if he couldn't do anything, he knew someone who could.

It was still early in the evening... hopefully he could get to Tokyo quickly.

Simmons reached for his phone and quickly scrolled through his contacts until he settled on a name. The phone dialled a few times, before a person on the other end of the line answered him.

"Hello, Josuke? It's Simmons. I believe the Young Miss might be in trouble..."

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As ever the streets of Tokyo were busy, littered with throngs of people going about their business. Men, women, and children of all shapes and stripes. Salarymen heading home from a hard day of work (or going to get drunk with colleagues to take the edge off), students making for home, people preparing for Christmas in advance...
And, of course, there was the growing number of mind-wiped people on the streets. People with blank eyes and vacant smiles, their minds ensnared by a deity that had showed them 'true happiness.'

What was perhaps most worrying was the fact that people seemed to pay these folks no mind. Almost as if they were invisible.

The crowds of people went about their business at a rapid pace, scurrying too and fro, and seemed to pay no mind to anything around them. Until all the television screens in Shibuya and beyond suddenly became engulfed in static, all transmissions being cut off abruptly.

Slowly, the people on the streets came to a halt and turned their attention to the screens. Muttering broke out through the crowds, curiosity overtaking them. And, just as abruptly, an image took form on the screens, manifesting above the static: The sharp eye of the Phantom Thieves logo.

"Hey, that's-
"Oh wow, I haven't seen that image in ages..."
"Wait, seriously?! Oh shit, who're they gonna kill this time?!"

"Yo what is UP everybody?!" Ryuji's heavily altered voice called out, further catching the attention of the people on the streets.

Soon every screen in the city was broadcasting the same message, Yusuke's strong voice (altered through a few different filters to make it sound deeper still, and adding a strange echo to his tone) reaching out to the city streets. "People of Tokyo, this is a message from the Arditi. You have been cheated and lied too. The people you have put your faith in, the man you wish to lead you, are all rotten to the core!"

Ann's voice broke in, equally altered. "We never killed anyone, that was all a lie! Orchestrated by Masayoshi Shido to crush us, and to make him look good when he spoke out against us!"

Then Makoto chimed in. "While it's disappointing that people were quick to turn their backs on us, we won't turn our backs on you. Now more than ever, the nation needs our help... before it's lost forever."

The image on the screens shifted abruptly, presenting a picture of Shido himself... with a crude MS Paint-drawn set of devil horns scribbled onto the sides of his bald head. In a small scrolling box of text to his right was a laundry list of his crimes, coupled with names of his known co-conspirators.

"All the mental shutdowns and psychotic breakdowns? Yeah, that's this guy's doing. All to give himself a nice comfy political platform to work from, and to crush anyone he doesn't like. What a crummy bastard, am I right?" Ann asked.

Then Akira's voice joined the transmission. "Eventually, we became a threat to him, and so he moved to destroy us. But we only target criminals, and we'd never take a person's life. That's why we're going after him, to put an end to all this."

Shizuka snickered, and then swiftly tried to calm herself. "So let this be a message to Masayoshi Shido, and anybody who follows him: Ladies. Gentlemen. You have eaten well. You have eaten Tokyo's wealth. Its spirit. Your feast is nearly over. From this moment on, none of you are safe." Well, she could hope that that quote had worked its way into Japan's pop culture.
The image on the screen shifted again, producing an entire lineup of the Arditi. Their forms were silhouettes, bathed in shadow, and no doubt Morgana's short frame on the far left was producing a few questions on the street below.

"No matter what, we cannot allow things to progress further down this path," Haru said.

Akira took a step forward, the camera angle switching to a close-up of his eyes and ivory domino mask. "Masayoshi Shido, the demon king of pride... We will steal your distorted desires without fail, and change your heart. We'll make you confess your crimes to the world through your own mouth." His eyes narrowed slightly. "That's a promise. Let the games begin..."

The message ended, the TV screens quickly returning to their usual displays, leaving the people on the streets with plenty of questions.

From the comfort of her loft, Mitsuru examined her television with a faint smile on her ruby lips. "Those kids," she remarked to herself. "They're either the most daring people I know, or the craziest."

Meanwhile, in his office overlooking the city, Shido was less amused. The well dressed man was seated behind his desk, a tablet in his hands showing an image of Akira's eyes. Near the doorway, his aides were shifting nervously, clearly worried by the anger they saw rising in his face.

"Very well... I'll crush them beneath my heel." Shido turned his harsh gaze to his employees. "Don't just stand there you idiots, get the poison ready!" If things went bad for him, he wanted them to go even worse for the Phantom Thieves.

Once his employees left, he breathed an agitated sigh and sank back in his chair. That damn Akechi, running off and vanishing when Shido genuinely needed him. It seemed he'd have to handle this one alone.

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The group met at their usual spot near the Diet, hiding in the mouth of a darkened alleyway. From their position they had a good view of the structure, and a large crowd of people that had gathered near the gates.

Some of them were diehards, trying to deny all that had just transpired, while others were citizens who were more than a little concerned by the Arditi's accusations. The police and security staff at the gates were doing a good job of keeping order, and it seemed things wouldn't escalate from this point.

"Looks like folks are finally openin' their eyes," Ryuji mused, keeping his tone low.

"Looks like," Morgana repeated, idly washing behind his ear. "But we can't get cocky. We still need to do this, or Shido and his people will just manipulate folks back into compliance."

Shiho narrowed her eyes, peering through the dark toward the gates of the Diet. "Hey, wait... is that..." Shiho leaned forward a bit. "Yuuki?"

Akira leaned forward, trying to follow the path of Shiho's eyes through the darkness. Sure enough, he quickly spotted Mishima in the crowd. And, in examining that crowd, he saw more familiar
faces. Iwai, Dr. Takemi, Kawakami, Chihaya, Yoshida, Ohya, Sae... and Satoshi Morihiro. All people Akira had gotten to know over the course of the year, people who knew the truth of the Phantom Thieves.

A smile broke out across his face. "Well I'll be," he murmured, before righting himself and drawing his phone. "Okay, let's get to it. This isn't just for us, it's for all of them too."

The others nodded firmly and stood to attention, remaining silent as Akira activated the Nav. The world vanished in a flourish, replaced with the luxurious corridor leading toward Shido's treasure room.

The air aboard the cruise ship was electric, a general wave of agitation bristling through every atom. The walls rippled and pulsed, and the cognitive people they passed had seemingly gone statue still. Yes, it was fair to say that their public declaration of war had been effective.

"Geez, we really got under his skin," Ann murmured.

"We did just call him a terrible lying fiend in front of the entire country," Hifumi mused, looking ahead to the golden double doors of the treasure room.

Shiho smiled. "It was a pretty great plan. Nice job you two," the athlete said, before standing on her toes and giving Ryuji a quick peck on the cheek. The blond grinned in delight.

The group continued on toward the door, with Akira coming to a stop just outside. He took in a deep breath before slowly slipping the four letters into place, a loud click resounding for every insertion. Once all were in place, a series of loud bangs echoed down the corridor as the bolts came undone, swiftly joined with the noise of gears grinding as the doors rolled apart.

Beyond those golden doors, the team quickly saw, was what looked to be an abnormally large parliamentary chamber. Tiers of seats steadily leading down toward an expansive stage. The back wall of the stage was dominated by a cartoonishly huge visage of a Daruma. And there, standing at an abnormally large podium at the front of the stage, was Shido himself.

They hadn't encountered Shido's Shadow in their entire time in the Palace, but already he cut an imposing figure. Tall and broad shouldered, dressed in a crisp black military officer's uniform with golden epaulettes on his shoulders. A spiked steel helmet covered his bald head, rims of metal concealing his eyes and the bridge of his nose. A malignant aura lingered around him.

"Okay, so... less Lex Luthor, and more Dr. Doom," Shizuka mused. She wasn't sure if that was better or worse.

"So, you're finally here, the infamous Arditi. I'll admit, you certainly have a flare for the dramatic," Shido replied. As he did this he adopted the famous pose of 'Emperor Napoleon in His Study', his right hand tucked neatly into the front of his coat.

Ryuji grit his teeth. "Ah shut it! We didn't come here for a speech, we came here for your treasure! So save us the trouble and hand it over!"

Shido sneered loudly. "You should know enough about me by now to know that I won't simply give up. I'm on the cusp of greatness, and the only thing left in my way is you brats! I had hoped Akechi would have been able to end you with whatever plan he had in mind, but now I have to pick up the slack."
"This isn't something to take lightly you bastard! This is the future of the entire country you're manipulating! People's lives are at risk because of you!" Ann shouted.

"Their lives are fleeting and mediocre. It's a simple face that the unwashed masses are idiots, and those human cattle can't be trusted with anything of real importance," Shido began, an eerie smile cracking along his face. "But they can be useful for one thing: Granting a legitimate ruling power to a chosen leader. And in this case, that power is being granted to me, the man who deserves it! The man who will lead and control this country properly, and take good care of those who have aided me. And the rest of the louts in this country... they should be thankful just to be alive in my shadow. I'll manipulate 'the power of the people', to see that leadership goes to the right place."

Futaba grit her teeth. "You stole Mom's research and took her life! She never hurt anyone, but you destroyed her for your own stupid objectives! You don't get to lecture anyone on who should live and die! She was a better person than you'll ever be!"

"Tch... Sacrifices are inevitable in the path to reform. I only require that the foolish entrust themselves to their superiors, so that I may guide them," Shido said, continuing to leer at the teens from his podium.

"The fuck gives you the right to decide all that?!!" Shizuka shouted. "You're just one man, you've got no right to manipulate everything to put yourself on top!"

"Simply put? Because it's clearly God's will," Shido matter-of-factly said. "Do you really think it was just complete chance that my estranged son was given such an immense power, one that was perfect for manipulating things in my favor? No. Some kind of... unseen hand was at the head of all this. One that aligned all the dominos in my favour. And if the universe itself wishes for me to be on top... then why fight it?" he mocked.

So, he knew about Akechi this whole time, Akira noted. It seemed the brunette's plan for revenge may well have been doomed from the start. "So you're not just evil, you're batshit fucking insane too," Akira pointedly said.

"You have no right to speak of destiny, or being a rightful ruler! Not when you had to lie and cheat every step of the way to get even close to victory!" Yusuke shouted.

Makoto took a firm step forward. "Someone like you has no right to lead the country! And with all the corruption that's spread thanks to you... there'll be damage to the system for years to come. You're nothing but a criminal who rose above others by climbing a staircase of sin!"

Hifumi nodded along to all Makoto had said. "It's troubling to think that a man like you really exists... but we all believe in changing the world! We'll stop you, as the first step in making this country a better place!" she stated.

Unmoved, Shido let out a faintly agitated sigh. "You've all had a chance to say your piece, but spare me the theatrics. We're all running low on time, so I will grant you clemency. By all appearances you've destroyed Akechi, and so I could do with a replacement. Join me and all your transgressions will be forgotten. You'll have a front row seat in my new nation, free to do as you please. What do you say?"

"As if we'd ever side with you!" Morgana shouted, managing to look rather intense despite his squat appearance.

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"As if we'd ever side with you!" Morgana shouted, managing to look rather intense despite his squat appearance.
"And no matter how many times you ask, the answer isn't going to change!" Ann added.

Sergio smirked. "Better just dispense with the small talk Shido. We're here for the treasure, and if we have to beat you down to get it... then so be it. Of course you could just surrender, but after all the crap you've pulled," Sergio rolled his neck, working out some of the kinks he found. "I really hope you don't."

Shido shook his head slightly. "And I thought you all smarter than this." A powerful tremor rolled through the room as the walls and ceiling started to expand outward, the room broadening even further than it already had. Even the stage beneath Shido's feet began to expand. Anything was possible in a Palace, after all.

"I have no choice but to eliminate all of you. A small leak will sink a great ship... great nations have fallen to such lenience." Shido suddenly raised his right fist and clenched it tight, the merest gesture making the room shake further. "I will not make such incautious mistakes!"

As he said this, every seat in the surrounding tiers was suddenly filled by a Shadow in a sharp suit, a fleet of yes men applauding along to all of Shido's words. The Arditi recoiled slightly in surprise, the applause almost deafening.

"What on earth?" Yusuke murmured to himself.

"This is... even more bizarre than what we were already dealing with," Haru added, quickly glancing from side to side.

In an instant the Shadow-men dissolved, becoming a dark cloud that was swiftly sucked in toward Shido, making the chamber shake further. Shido began to rise, standing atop the moving tide of darkness as something began to take shape beneath him.

"Guys, be careful!" Futaba called out, audible through the roar of the rapidly forming mass that Shido had started to mount like a steed. The Napoleon comparisons became even more defined, the wind striking Shido's cape and making it flap at his side. "He was powerful already, but those Shadows... they're forming into some kind of weapon!"

Akira smirked. "Good. I want him to make this a challenge... it'll make it feel even better when we beat him."
The Shadows beneath Shido quickly took shape, a brief explosion of darkness around him signalling the end of the transformation. The Arditi steadied themselves, now able to see the mount that Shido had chosen for himself: A large lion that looked as if it had been carved from solid gold, a matching throne supporting Shido's weight.

But, upon closer inspection, something about this creature was definitely unsettling. It had been formed by an assortment of golden human bodies linking together, moaning heads and twisting arms visible in the tangled briar of flesh. A crude sculpture formed from twisted human wretches.

"Fuck this..." Shizuka whispered, turning invisible. Ann gave her a sudden elbow in the ribs, enough to snap her back to reality. "No, that thing is... seriously just look at it! It's beyond fucked up!" she said, pointing to the twitching figures that comprised the beefy torso of the creature.

"This is the Beast of Human Sacrifice. The power of my supporters, given a physical form in this plane. All these people investing their hopes and dreams into me," Shido casually said, reclining into his throne.

Akira narrowed his eyes. "If those same people knew even one thing about you, they wouldn't even give you the time of day. Panther, Noir, Skull, make us an opening!"

The trio moved off to the right edge of the room with a burst of superhuman quickness, their Personas rising quickly behind them. A wave of psychic energy from Milady lashed violently against the Beast, striking hard enough to make the floor quake and crack underfoot. But it held firm, and was barely pushed back as surges of lightning and fire exploded against his golden hide.

Meanwhile Akira, Yusuke, and Morgana had taken this opportunity to make a quick rush for the stage. Yusuke took the lead, letting out a powerful shout as Kamu Susanoo was loosed from his body. The spectral samurai lunged at the Beast, his helix sword colliding against one upraised golden paw. But for as strong as Susanoo was, his sword bounced back from the strike and left him open to a powerful headbutt that knocked Yusuke off his feet.

"Rangda!" Akira's Persona changed shape, quickly taking on Rangda's ghastly visage. The witch Persona zipped around, avoiding sharp bursts of purple light being fired from some of the human sacrifices that gave the Beast form. Having dodged a flurry of almighty beams, she threw her claws forward and unleashed a column of cursed energy that exploded against the Beast's side and sent him skidding back several inches.

All the while, Futaba was continuing to examine Shido and his pet monster from her position at the back of the vast chamber. She hummed slightly. "This thing... it's a separate entity from Shido, but it's pretty powerful in its own right. A Palace making something this powerful... this creep really is something else."

"Well... we're gonna have to get through Shido's summon if we want to have a clear shot at the man himself," Hifumi admitted, watching the battle unfold through her scope. "But if Shido is even stronger than his creature, we definitely have an uphill battle ahead of us. Joker, jump high!" she called out.

He was quick to follow Hifumi's directions, leaping up as the Shadow's golden paw struck the
floorboards hard enough to crush right through it. The shockwave of the blow, coupled with a flurry of wooden debris, hit Akira rather firmly and sent him skidding toward the far end of the stage.

The Beast leapt high, the ground quivering in protest from the immense press of his legs, and started to make a beeline for Akira as the dark-haired boy struggled to rise. However he didn't make it too far before Anat and Seiten Taisei rushed his side, both figures slamming violently into the golden lion. His twisted frame was driven into the looming visage of the Daruma. Cracks splintered out from the point of impact.

A powerful beam of atomic light lanced out of Anat's palms, striking the creature with enough pressure to keep it temporarily pinned. This was quickly joined with flurries of blessed light from Eris, scorching and scuffing segments of golden flesh. Through it all Houdini was remaining hidden, absorbing lightrays from every beam and explosion filling the chamber.

With how obscenely tanky this thing seemed to be, the usual 'bazubazu' tactic probably wouldn't work too well against him. So instead Shizyka was aiming to stock up on light, waiting for a good opportunity to strike.

Zorro took to the air above Shido's seated position, throwing his rapier forward and unleashing a flurry of intense gales that raced down toward the dictator. He idly raised his right arm up, seeming oblivious to the blades of wind slicing through the fabric of his sleeve and deawing blood from the flesh below.

Shido's right hand shot forward blindly, a wave of crackling crimson curse energy exploding outward and mashing into Zorro's broad chest. Morgana yowled, swiftly being cast aside by the force of the attack, rolling into a heap on the ground at the opposite end of the platform.

The Beast of Human Sacrifice let out a powerful roar, his fanged maw glowing with a worrisome crimson light, that seemed to cleave through Makoto and Shiho's attacks to give him some breathing room. He lunged forward, his right paw swiping to the side and striking the two Personas ahead of him, the strike making both girls cry out and recall them for safety's sake.

"Son of a bitch..." Akira muttered. From where he stood, under the shadow of Shido's podium, he could see a few scorches and glowing wounds along his body, but he didn't seem to have slowed down much. And attacking Shido directly hadn't accomplished much either. "Guess I need to make an opening for some harder hits. Fox, Skull, follow my lead!"

Rangda shot forward, making a beeline for the looming Shadow. His eyes flashes with twin rays of purple light that suddenly shot outward, only for the shots to go wide as Rangda swiftly dodged to the side. The beam obliterated the top of the podium, forcing Akira to duck further, but he continued to press his assault.

Rangda deftly dodged and weaved away from more incoming blasts, the almighty surges tearing chunks from the walls and ceiling while Rangda managed to avoid harm. The witch managed to lunge in close, her curse infused claws driving forward with all the might she could muster. The golden amalgamated surface of the Shadow's face buckled under the pressure, eight crimson wounds opening up. She fought with all her might as the lion-beast started thrashing his head around, the continuing flow of curse energy sending blackened veins racing along its golden skin.

The two figures struggled against each other, the Beast roaring violently from the intense pain wrought from Rangda's claws. Shido sneered in distaste. "Shake her off already you worthless
"abomination!" he snapped, raising his right hand up.

Before Shido could do the deed himself, he was suddenly and violently rocked in his throne as powerful forces struck the Beast from both sides. His eyes widened in shock, watching as Seiten Taisei and Kamu Susanoo pummelled the lion from the left and right side respectively. With each strike from Seiten Taisei, a burst of lightning exploded along his hide, while Susanoo unleashed a stabbing flurry of icicles on each slash.

The lion let out a mighty roar, crimson pulses of energy rippling along his body and setting the chamber briefly alight. A wave of power exploded around him, shunting the three Personas away and giving him the breathing room he needed. He swung his right paw forward, driving Rangda harshly into the ground and pulling a loud cry from Akira. And, with the leader briefly down, the Beast could turn his attention to the other two powerhouses.

It made a lunge at Seiten Taisei, golden paws moving as a flurry of blows that rapidly struck against the looming monkey. Ryuji howled, staggering backward as bloodied slashes were cut up along the dark leather of his jacket.

Ann watched this transpired, clenching her teeth. "Damnit... we really need to do something big to stop that overgrown lion," Ann said. She winced as the Beast smacked Seiten Taisei away, able to see Ryuji hit the ground from the corner of her eye. "And I might be able to handle it..."

"Oh yeah?" Sergio gave the blonde a sideways glance. "I'm all ears. What do you have in mind?"

"I already have some of the strongest firepower on the team, and I can charge my attacks up even more. But I need time to fully charge my abilities, and I'm... a little defenseless in the meantime," Ann explained. "So I need you to help keep him busy so I can fully charge up."

A sly smile graced Sergio's face. "Not a problem. I'll give that bastardo a good trouncing." He quickly dashed off to the side, putting some space between himself and Ann, and came to a stop behind a row of heavy wooden benches.

"Nemesis," Ann quickly said, a wave of blue fire engulfing her body and quickly growing more intense. "I need a little extra help. Think you can charge me up even more?"

"R-right," Shiho replied between quick breaths, quickly rushing to her best friends side.

Down below, Yusuke was temporarily stuck alone against the imposing Beast of Human Sacrifice. He quickly erected a dense barrier of ice in front of him, wincing as a golden paw slammed into the frosty surface. His barrier endured the first strike, cracks racing along the exterior, but a second strike broke right through and launched Yusuke into the wall behind him and pinned him in place. The bluenette gasped harshly from the pain, a few new tears on his suit.

Before the Shadow could move in for a finishing blow, a stray bench rocketed into his bloodied face and exploded in a shower of splinters. Enough to make his head snap partially to the side, but not enough to do real harm. He turned, finding himself glaring toward Sergio and Breakthru who were surrounded by an orbiting ring of similar benches.

"You know, I consider myself a cat person. I have a strong admiration for their independent drives, their intelligence and, of course, their fluffy ears. But you my friend, you are too much of a freaky abomination to get my affection," Sergio proudly proclaimed.
"So cool..." Hifumi whispered.

"Uh... yeah..." Futaba said in a non-committal manner, seeming to shrink a bit into Necronomicon's cockpit.

The benches came flying forward in a rapid volley, each one encased in a glowing red halo of light, and struck against the Beast from all sides. However, rather than explode, they adhered to his body on contact, remaining fixed in place and glowing against them as Sergio abruptly set their momentum to zero.

The Beast tried to struggle against them, but these unmoving weights were pressing against his limbs and the sides of his broad chest, and their glow magnified whenever the Beast tried to break free. He let out a series of roars, putting his immense strength to the test. But right now he was struggling against fixed points in space, something locked into place by Breakthru's power.

Yusuke dislodged himself, landing on his knees and breathing heavily. "My thanks... Diabolik," he quickly breathed. From the corner of his eye he managed to glimpse Ann, and could very nearly taste the power welling up inside her. He seemed to register their plan rather quickly, summoning up his strength to leap away from the soot-stained stage.

Sergio was struggling, breathing heavily as sweat dripped down his face. His arms were outstretched, twitching and trembling as he struggled hard to keep Breakthru's power active. He had rarely practiced with this trick, removing the momentum of something in his sway to keep it locked in place, and now he was busting it out against one of the strongest Shadows they had fought thus far... not his brightest move, in retrospect.

Cracks and splinters popped along the straining wood, the Beast's wrath progressively overcoming Breakthru's waning power. "Ghh... how are these brats causing you so much trouble?" Shido muttered in disdain.

With another strong roar, the Beast blew threw his makeshift prison. Sergio gasped harshly, promptly being driven to his knees with beads of sweat dripping heavily off his face. "Agh.. hah..." he grit his teeth, struggling as he tried to rise.

Shizuka, still unseen, glanced between Sergio and Ann. The crimson-clad blonde was still charging up, the ground cracking and blistering under her feet, and it seemed she needed just another few precious seconds. Makoto was dishing out some healing to the others, and Haru was rushing to Sergio for the sake of supporting him. And with Futaba and Hifumi on overwatch, she needed to be the one to buy a little more time.

Shizuka raced down the tiered seats at an impressive speed, watching the Beast right himself, snapping and snarling at the air. He looked to Sergio, and then slowly felt his gaze being drawn to Ann.

"Hm?" Even Shido seemed mildly surprised. "That blonde girl... what the hell is she doing? Stop her, now!" he snapped.

The Beast took a single mighty step forward, only to be halted by a broad blur shooting up in front of him. A great scarlet dragon with a wide leathery wingspan, his fanged maw spread wide, was lunging straight toward Shido and his pet monster. It was almost thrice the size of the golden lion, the sight making both figures cringe away from it.
In an instant however, Shido seemed to realize something was off. But by then it was too late. Houdini burst through her own illusion, the dragon disappearing swiftly, and delivered a rapidfire volley of kicks to Shido's face, each blow snapping his head in different directions.

For as strong as Houdini was in her Eclipse state, her kicks weren't able to do any serious harm to Shido. But she still had him on the backfoot, keeping him from countering. A hard upward kick knocking his steely helm clean off his chrome dome, leaving it clattering to the ground off to the side of the podium.

"Sting!" Ann shouted. "Pull back, now!"

Shizuka didn't need to be told twice, sprinting away from the stage and recalling Houdini while Shido was still trying to reorient himself. In his current, slightly dazed, state he couldn't snap to attention fast enough to react to the two foot thick column of flame surging toward him and the Beast.

As soon as Ann's attack connected, it rapidly expanded into a white hot dome of blinding light that consumed the stage, the Durama being coated in a film of soot and smoke. The entire chamber shook for several seconds, and for a brief moment Akira wondered if the room was about to collapse. It didn't help that the unfolding force was hitting hard enough to send cracks racing along the walls.

The blast faded after several seconds, the entire stage being consumed in a choking cloud of black smoke. Makoto took a step away from her allies, with the three boys at her side being partially healed. She stared wide eyed into the smoke, covering her mouth with her right hand. "Goodness Panther," she murmured in surprise.

"She sure is something," Morgana eagerly said, landing beside the brunette. "Still... Oracle, can you scan the smoke? Any sign o-"

A focused beam of purple light suddenly shot through the smoke, striking the ground a few inches in front of Ann and Shiho. The girls were launched by the powerful blasts, their bodies plowing through several benches before they both came to a halt in a large pile of broken wood, knocked out cold by the repeating impacts.

"Panther! Nemesis!" Akira gasped, rising back to his feet. "You're not getting away with that Shido!" The air around Akira seemed to catch fire, Crom Cruach's serpentine mass rising up slowly behind him.

Another burst of almighty energy lanced through the smoke. This time however Necronomicon made a beeline toward Ann and Shiho's prone forms, the black hull of the UFO catching alight. Futaba cried out in pain, her seat shaking as she struggled against the immense pressure of the beam.

The smoke parted enough to reveal Shido's pet, his form having shifted dramatically. The human figures that shaped him had morphed into a golden pyramid of twisted flesh, much of it charred and blackened from Ann's attack. A large tank gun was extending from the face of it, the barrel glowing purple. Shido was no doubt safely sealed inside it.

"I'm gonna blow him to pieces!" Ryuji growled. The hull did seem rather damaged now, but they needed a good clean shot to fully break through it.
"Group up!" Akira called out. "Skull, me and you are gonna try and pin it down from the front. Queen, you and Sting need to strike from behind. Noir, get your Persona in the air and push it into the stage with all the psychic power you have. And when we've got it held down... Fox and Mona, you try and blast it open with one hard hit."

"Right. Let's do it then," Makoto curtly replied.

Akira and Ryuji rushed toward the blackened stage, making their move as another strobing purple blast grazed Necronomicon. Crom Cruach and Seiten Taisei lunged toward the charred pyramid, the hulking figures catching the front corners and slamming the front end into the stage with enough force to rattle the room. Their attack was punctuated with flourishes of almighty energy and lightning strikes.

Houdini and Anat arced around in a pincer movement, the former rushing to the left while the other banked right around the stage. They met at the back corners of the charred pyramid, driving into it with all the strength they could muster and forcing it fully into the warped ground.

The four of them together were doing well enough at keeping the writhing structure in place, the tank gun on the facade snapping around wildly. And, whatever resistance it could front, was cut off when Milady appeared above him. The pink spectre let out a haughty ojou laugh, the back of her right hand pressed to her mask, before driving her right palm forward and unleashing a powerful pulse of psychic pressure that further pinned the Shadow to the ground. A chorus of shrieks rang out from the blow.

With the blackened pyramid pinned in place for now, it gave Morgana and Yusuke the opening they needed. Zorro and Susanoo rocketed toward Shido's summon, their blades raised high with energy circulating around the duo. Both swords struck powerfully into the facade of the pyramid, more horrid shrieks echoing out from the interlocked human forms as the Personas tore through them.

The entire pyramid trembled, human figures writhing and breaking apart as a vibrant white light roared from the interior of the golden structure. A powerful explosion illuminated it, forcing the Persona users away, with the frontliners quickly taking cover under the edge of the stage.

Now that the pressure was off her, Futaba lowered her Persona enough for Hifumi to disembark. The dark haired-girl was soon joined by Sergio, the duo quickly rushing toward Ann and Shiho to help rouse them.

The light on the stage died down swiftly, and by now most of the floor had entirely collapsed. The Arditi peered over the scorched edge of the stage, now able to see that the Beast of Human Sacrifice had been reduced to a sprawling blanket of twisted human forms. Some of them were still twitching.

Shido stood upright, glancing over his shoulder at his creature. He was largely untouched, still radiating power from his mere presence. "How pathetic... Useless ignorant masses," he muttered, looking away as the remnants of the Beast melted away into a black vapor.

Makoto narrowed her eyes slightly. "That thing was supposed to represent his supporters... and he still threw them away like trash."

"Are you really surprised at this point?" Shizuka asked.
"You about ready to give up?!" Ryuji shouted, hauling himself up onto the stage. "We beat the shit out of that monster, and we'll do the same to you too!"

Shido scoffed slightly, his steely gaze watching as the rest of the team made their way onto the stage. By now Ann and Shiho were being led to Makoto, who did her best to heal their injuries. "Perhaps I underestimated you, but don't go getting cocky." His focus shifted toward Akira. "You were the one giving out orders during that battle. You're the leader I take it?"

"Bet you didn't expect to see him again, right? Talk about irony," Shiho pointedly said, glaring up toward the stage.

"Yeah. Real bad luck on your end Shido," Morgana added.

Shido's eyes narrowed. "What on earth are you blathering on about?" If there was one thing he hated, it was being out of the loop. He focused intensely on Akira. "You're more than just some kid, aren't you?"

"Long time no see," Akira casually said. He reached up, removing his ivory domino mask to fully expose his face. "It's been a while, but I think you'd remember the kid who bloodied that fat head of yours."

For all his intents to look impassive, Shido tensed just a bit in a sudden realization. "You... you're that brat from that night, with the woman," he said, a touch of shock in his tone.

Akira slid his mask into place, smiling confidently. "Got it in one. Congrats. It's funny, really... if you had gone one night, just one night, without being an asshole... well you'd be a shoe-in for prime minister, and nobody would be any the wiser. Guess the deck isn't as stacked in your favor as you thought."

And shido, despite himself... laughed. A faint, wry chuckle that brought a tiny smile to his face. "Hmhm... I see. What an interesting turn of fate."

Yes, interesting. In the back of his mind Akira knew something felt... off about this entire situation. Akechi, who got his power out of the blue, and used it to push Shido into this current position. And Akira, who Shido decided to destroy on a whim, and who later gained his own power to oppose him.

It felt as if there was indeed some unseen hand guiding all this. But, such thoughts could wait for later.

"Well... I'll certainly commend your efforts. You've earned that much, at least. Unfortunately those efforts will all be worthless in the end," Shido casually replied.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hifumi asked.

"Small sacrifices are inescapable for those wishing to be powerful, competent leaders. How would you ever reach your destination if you stopped to count every ant you crushed on the road?" He sneered, slowly raising his hands. "I'll destroy you as I've destroyed every other obstacle. Being weak and inefficient, rolling over for every adversary... that was my father's weakness. And I have no intention of following those same mistakes."

Shizuka furrowed her brow. "See, things like that are what gives us a bad vibe about you," she
replied. "I don't care who you think you are, you don't have the right to put yourself on a pedestal above everyone else. And we're gonna beat on you until we get that message through to you!"

"If I must prove my superiority, then I will..." A crimson aura suddenly bubbled around him, the entire chamber shaking violently as Shido's power rose higher and higher. With a single titanic flex, his shirt, cape, and jacket were blasted apart by his power to reveal burgeoning, misshapen muscles. Shido's upper body had quickly bulked up in a grotesque fashion, his skin turning scarlet while thick veins popped up under the surface. "By crushing the Arditi and fully claiming the nation as my own!"

'This is like if Akira Toriyama made Metal Gear,' Shizuka briefly thought in the back of her mind.

As soon as he transformed, Haru and Morgana made a move. A booming gale of wind crashed into the hulking man, coupled with a psychic surge that lashed against Shido's mind and body. He grunted, a few thin scars opening up along his scarlet flesh. But he held his footing, easily enduring it.

His hands lashed forward and clapped together with a deafening boom, the shockwave striking Haru, Morgana, and Sergio, blowing them into the stands from the force. "Ha! Is that the best you kids can do?!"

"Why don't you find out jackass?!" Ryuji shouted. His Persona rocketed forward, lightning trailing behind him, and delivered two mighty swings from his cudgel. The spiked ends slammed into his chest and face, knocking Shido back a step and leaving scorched bruises on his face. He grinned and lunged forth, his own blow just barely missing Seiten Taisei as the monkey weaved backward.

He stumbled forward, swiftly being engulfed in a wave of fire launched by Hecate. It was enough to make Shido hiss loudly, raising his beefy forearms and ignoring the pain as his flesh became charred. He burst through the wall of flame, striking Hecate with a downward blow that drove Ann onto her back and made her scream in pain.

Shiho moved quickly, summoning Eris to her side. The apple-toting Persona shoved her palms forward, a focused beam of blessed light lancing toward him. Shido turned toward it, growling and flaring up his malevolent aura of cursed energy. Shiho's beam struck off the crackling crimson aura and was suddenly blown back, knocking Shiho off the stage and onto her back.

Now his attention settled on Akira, a malicious grin spreading across his face. Akira tensed and leapt off the stage, only barely avoiding the hulking brute as fist drove through the burnt floor where he had previously been standing. Shido quickly turned and leapt after Akira, while his allies who weren't reorienting themselves seemed to catch on to what was happening.

Anat and Houdini lunged at Shido from his sides, striking the charging juggernaut with rapidfire flurries of punches that struck off his broad torso. And while they formed some fresh purple bruises along his chest, it wasn't enough to significantly slow Shido. He snarled loudly and lashed his beefy arms out, striking both figures away and knocking Makoto and Shizuka off their feet. He turned and resumed charging up the stands toward Akira.

Now it fell to Yusuke to intercept the rampaging politician, his blade raised high as he sharply dashed at Shido. It was too late to call in Susanoo at this range, and thus it fell to Yusuke to use his own blade. "I won't let you harm him!" Yusuke shouted, delivering a powerful swing to Shido's neck. The sharpened edge collided with his scarlet flesh, sinking several centimeters in and forming a bloody gash in his thick neck... before the katana shattered, steel shards clattering along
"Get lost!" Shido spat, catching Yusuke by the collar and slamming him into the ground hard enough to knock him out, leaving him in a heap on the floor.

Akira grit his teeth at the sight, his right hand meeting his mask. Crom Cruach collided with Shido, a volley of powerful punches colliding with his chest. Shido felt them already, gritting his teeth as he felt two of his ribs crack under the pressure. But he powered through, a mighty punch striking the serpent in the gut and knocked the wind out of Akira's body.

Hifumi seemed to see what was coming with crystal clarity, her eyes widening in shock. "A-Akira, jump away!" she frantically screamed, firing off a volley of sniper rounds that grazed off Shido's skull and left a few scratches in his flesh. By now the rest of the Arditi were righting themselves, trying to scramble into action.

Despite Hifumi's warning, Akira wasn't fast enough to fully jump away. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as Shido's large digits coiled around Akira's left hand, before tearing it clean off Akira's wrist with a single mighty yank. A crimson arc of spurting blood followed the path of Akira's stump as he fell backward, an echoing scream of white hot agony filling the room. The members of the Arditi froze up, wide-eyed in shock at what had just happened. As if in disbelief that it had really just happened.

"This time, I'll make sure to destroy you..." Shido growled, crushing Akira's hand in his own with the severed fingers arcing off in different directions. "Piece. By. Piece."
Samael Shido (V)

Akira's screams filled the vast chamber, echoing off the walls at an almost deafening volume. The dark haired boy was rolling around on his back, clutching at the severed stump where his left hand had once been. The Arditi stood by in stunned silence at what had just happened, while Shido seemed quite pleased with his handiwork.

"How's that?" the bald titan asked, a malicious grin on his face. "Are you starting to regret your foolish act of defiance, you cocky little sh-"

Shido was cut off by Breakthru and Seiten Taisei slamming into him simultaneously, knocking him off his feet with a powerful boom of pressurized air. The two ghostly figures carried Shido high up into the tiers, obliterating several rows of previously untouched benches on impact.

With the Shadow briefly downed and stunned, the members of the Arditi could catch a quick glimpse of Breakthru and Seiten raining down a hail of blows on Shido. A cloud of smoke soon blossomed around the trio, blocking the specifics of what was going on, but the tremors of the impact could be felt all around.

"You son of a bitch!" Ryuji snarled. "Enjoy that while you can, cause I'm gonna do far worse to you!"

With Shido off him for the time being, Shizuka was able to make her way over to Akira and picked him up, the two of them quickly turning invisible. "Come on boss, come on..." she said in a hushed tone. "It's gonna be okay..."

The chorus of explosions seemed to punctuate her steps, growing more intense as Shido was now actively fighting back against Ryuji and Sergio. She quickly made for Necronomicon and set Akira down under the flying saucer's shadow, the two becoming visible again right after.

Akira was breathing heavily, his face slick with sweat. Tears had pricked the corners of his eyes, and he was fighting hard to keep from crying out again. "Joker," the front of Necronomicon opened up in a flourish of unwinding tentacles, revealing Futaba. "O-oh my god..." the redhead whispered.

"It's... it's not as bad... as it looked..." he tried to assure her, his body trembling.

Makoto quickly joined them, crouching in front of Akira and summoning Anat to her side. The mechanical Persona extended her steely hands toward Akira's bloodied stump, warm waves of white light seeming to numb the pain significantly. "I need to dress this wound to stem the bleeding," Makoto quickly said. "And our options are a little limited... to think he'd do something like this."

"My sleeve..." Akira breathlessly said, nodding his head toward his right arm. "It's the best we have in the Metaverse... we'll need something else... back in the real world..."

Shizuka nodded silently, tearing Akira's sleeve at the elbow and guiding the darkened fabric down and then moving to put pressure on the wound as best she could. Akira grit his teeth, but stayed silent. "We need to end this quickly. Our window just got a whole lot smaller."

"But how are we going to do that?" Hifumi asked, hopping up on the rim of Necronomicon's
scorched hull. "He's... already he's so powerful!" She gasped as she heard Sergio cry out, looking over her shoulder to see Breakthru being blown out of the smoking crater they had launched Shido into.

"And I need to hang back for his sake," Makoto said, keeping her energies focused on Akira's covered wound.

"No, that's not-" Akira tried to protest.

But Futaba was quick to cut him off. "That wasn't a request mister!" she said, trying to put on a brave face for as shocked as she was.

Shizuka nodded at the group. "I'll go on ahead. Doubt I can hurt this prick dead on, but I have a trick or two up my sleeve. All I need is a good opening," she said, before vanishing into the ether.

Seiten Taisei delivered a final mighty blow against Shido's broad chest, the entire chamber briefly being set alight in a glowing white-hot flourish of lightning. But the red-skinned juggernaut powered through, a mighty blow hitting Seiten Taisei in the stomach and launching him away. Ryuji gagged loudly, his legs giving way under him as the wind was knocked from his lungs.

Slowly, Shido stomped from the crater, the dust parting around his ruinous energy aura. The prolonged beating had left him with a trail of purple welts on his face and body, but he still seemed set to fight. "You kids..." Shido growled, loudly cracking his neck. "Are really starting to piss me off!"

"We're just getting started!" Shiho shouted. The Shadow had just a moment to react, and leapt backwards as a blinding beam of light crested from Eris' palms and carved into the ground he had been standing on. More blasts chased after Shido, stray arcs managing to graze him and opening fresh wounds on his malformed torso.

Soon another array of projectiles joined in on the fun, with Milady taking to the air above Shido and raining hell from the arsenal in her dress. The bouquet of guns were ablaze with constant cracks of gunfire, a hail of bullets striking off Shido and leaving modest cuts and bruises upon impact.

Shido backed away from another of Eris' blasts, promptly throwing his right fist skyward as his heels hit the shattered ground. A sphere of curse energy suddenly surged from his outstretched hand, cleaving through the sky and slamming into Milady. Haru screamed, promptly being bowled over and landing amidst some destroyed benches. She shivered, struggling to rise back up, and was soon panting heavily.

But she had succeeded in moving Shido into a very poor position. As soon as the blast left him, a column of fire slammed into him and maintained a continuous pressure, making the Shadow snarl in pain as he raised his arms up to block as best he could.

Now however he was wide open from the back, a wave of blessed light striking into his spine. Shido let out a pained howl, struggling between the dueling waves of energy that had him penned in, burning along his torso and back. Ann and Shiho were struggling too, pouring out a good deal of energy to keep Shido pinned in place under the continuous waves.

"You're not getting away with anything else!" Shiho shouted, barely audible above the roar of Eris' blast.
"Hurting Joker was the last straw! We're going to stop you here and now!" Ann added, the flames in Hecate's hands growing hotter still.

By now Yusuke was stirring, letting out heavy pained groans as he fought to stand. His body was aching, and when he looked toward Necronomicon he couldn't help but feel an immense guilt overcome him. He felt that he had failed Akira, unable to stop that monster from maiming him.

But, right now, such matters were irrelevant. He had a monster to fight.

Shido let out a powerful roar, the swirling vortex of energy that was his aura abruptly trebling in size. The sudden surge was enough to blow away the attacks hitting him, lashing the two Personas away. Their users were flung onto their backs, dazed and disoriented as they skidded along the coarse ground.

Ann grunted, landing on her side. She struggled to move onto her hands and knees. Her limbs were shaking, a few small portions of her mask crumbling off.

"You," Shido firmly said, continuing his steady approach toward Ann. "You're the girl who destroyed the Beast of Human Sacrifice, aren't you?"

Ann let out a small huff, glaring defiantly toward the crispy-skinned Shadow. "So what if I am?" she spat in return.

"I suppose I'll have to deal with you next, with how potent your power seems to be. A shame to kill a beauty like you... But I'll get over it," Shido remarked, raising his right fist up. Veins pulsed up under the skin, radiating energies making his muscles tremble and shake.

He roared loudly and lunged forward, Ann flinching and closing her eyes tight, bracing for a blow that never came. Zorro's rapier speared through Shido's bicep, a spray of dark matter exploding from the wound. The Shadow halted entirely, his obscured eyes widening. "What?!" he gasped.

"Panther, move!" Morgana shouted. The blonde wasted no time in complying, scrambling to her feet and darting away. "I won't just sit by and let you hurt her!" the feline added, his Persona reeling back and unleashing a rapid flurry of stabs that continually punctured the dense surface of his muscles.

"You... annoying freak!" Shido spat. He yanked his bleeding arm in a swift jerking motion, the blade of the rapier snapping like a twig. Shido's undamaged arm swung around, catching Zorro with a powerful blow that made Morgana's eyes bulge in his head, pain racking him from end to end.

"Hgh... hah..." Morgana staggered backward, clutching his stomach as pain continued to rock him. Shido sneered at the sight. "So, you want to be a hero? Hah... don't tell me a misshapen creature like you has feelings for that girl?" he mocked.

"I... I..." Morgana stammered, wincing through his one open left eye. "That's not... Sh-shut up!"

"Oh my... that is hilarious," Shido mocked. "Allow me to inject some much needed reality into that football-shaped head of yours. Nobody would ever love a creature like you." In an instant Shido had crossed the distance, a mighty uppercut hitting Morgana and making him scream bloody
murder, leaving his injured body balancing on the peak of Shido's knuckles.

"Ever," Shido coldly repeated. A sudden surge of energy rolled through him, sparks of black lightning scorching Morgana's body and making his screams grow louder and louder. Before Shido could deliver another blow however, a lance of white hot light arced across his chest like a blade, leaving a diagonal jet black line across his chest.

Shido grunted, taking a staggering step back and dropping Morgana's blackened body to the floor. His eyes were solid white orbs, wisps of smoke rising off him. "I wish... I was... s-stronger," Morgana croaked.

A chain flew out, one of Hecate's floating familiars, which coiled around Morgana and reeled him toward Ann. The blonde caught him, clutching the injured feline close to her chest. "M-Mona? Oh no, oh no..." She breathed, before quickly sprinting toward Necronomicon.

Before Shido could go after the two, the source of the previous attack materialized several feet in front of him: Houdini and Shizuka. He grunted, regarding the young Joestar with some disdain. "You again... was that your best effort? If it was, then you really are out of your league."

Shizuka smirked slightly. "Yeah, I'll admit that raw firepower isn't my main thing. Not gonna lie, I'm a little disappointed that that didn't hurt you more, especially after you hurt our Mona... But even if I'm not a powerhouse like Panther, or a tank like Skull, I got one little trick that you can't brute force your way through!"

Meanwhile, Ann skidded to a halt next to Makoto and Akira. The duo looked at Morgana's damaged body in shock, and Futaba once more popped out of her cockpit to examine the situation. What little poker face she had was quickly crumbling away. "M-Mona, he..." Futaba trailed off and breathed a tiny sigh. "He's still alive!" the redhead added.

"But he definitely needs help too," Makoto murmured, glancing between Morgana and Akira.

Akira nodded firmly. "Go ahead. Do what you can for him."

"It's... it's my fault," Ann said with a tiny sigh, her eyes watering. "He... he got hurt protecting me."

"The only person to blame in all of this... is that bald bastard over there," Akira said, trying to sound as firm as he could with his breathing so laboured. "We'll save him, don't worry. But for now, you need to get to Fox... and then you two can..."

Futaba blinked a few times. "W-wait, Mona's body! S-something's happening!" Their eyes quickly turned toward the feline in Ann's grasp, their eyes widening as dark tendrils of inky matter suddenly and rapidly coiled around his squat body. They formed around him rapidly, until they had formed into a shiny black cocoon.

It was largely featureless, save for the small veins that were dotted around the outermost layer. And it seemed to gently breathe in Ann's grasp. "W-what the hell? I-is Mona still-?!"

Futaba focused intensely, but she seemed just as lost as the others. "Whatever that thing around him is... M-Mona's still alive inside."

"There's a lot we don't know about Morgana, and he's definitely not human," Makoto said. "We've never seen him so injured before, so maybe... maybe this is some sort of survival mechanism of
his?” the brunette reasoned.

Whatever the case, their team was now short another member.

Houdini shot ahead of Shizuka, darting from point to point and randomly flickering out of visibility, keeping Shido constantly glancing around. He shoved his right hand out, more bursts of strange malignant energy surging from his palm. With her immense speed however, Houdini was able to dodge the attacks by scant inches.

She closed in toward him at a speedy rate, vaulting over a blind swing of his arms, closing in toward Shido's glaring expression. Her left hand shot outward, slender fingers gliding over the air in front of his eyes. The air flickered, and with a tiny flourish of light Shido's eyes vanished, replaced with two jet black orbs.

He screamed in shock, blindly flailing around and clipping Houdini's gut as she tried to pull back. Shizuka let out a pained grunt, being swiftly driven to her right knee and gasping a few times in the aftermath. "What did you do to me?!" Shido shouted, continuing his blind assault at thin air.

"Like I said, it's... it's a trick you can't brute force through," Shizuka said, rising and clutching her stomach. "Everything you see comes from a refraction of light in your eyes. But if someone, like a dashing invisible girl, manages to block that light... well it leaves a person as blind as a bat!"

"You...!" Shido growled through clenched teeth. "In that case... I'll just destroy everything here!" he snarled, throwing his hands up over his head. Coils of energy raced up his arms at a rapid speed, an orb of dark matter crackling between his palms.

But, before Shido could do anything else, a powerful arctic wind suddenly slammed into him, Shido's eyes widening in shock. The powerful white cyclone engulfed him, pushing his heels along the hard floor as clumps of ice began to build up around his body. He grit his teeth, struggling in vain as everything but his face was coated in a dense layer of ice.

Yusuke strode to a stop beside Shizuka. "I'm sure you can feel that, you fiend," Yusuke grimly said. "The unnatural chill, the expanding ice poking its sharp bladed edges into your open wounds... but this is just the start!"

As Yusuke said this, a bullet of fire sailed through the air and exploded against him, knocking Shido onto his back and melting the makeshift prison Yusuke had given him. Shido snarled, rising in the recently made puddle of water, and swung out blindly with his arc of energy hitting nothing. Water glistened along his crispy skin.

Ann glared toward him. "All you've done is hurt people, and after what you've done tonight... I sorely wish we could hurt you worse. But doing that won't clear our names. At the very least... this is really gonna sting!"

With Ann's exclamation filling the chamber, Seiten Taisei rose up high above Ryuji, firing off a blinding strike of lightning that knifed toward Shido. It struck his waterlogged body, the ensuing roar of energy drowning out his screams as a blinding light shone out through the chamber.

But despite the pain he was in, and the power being poured into the attack, Shido was still stomping forward. Until a second arc of lightning cleaved through the air and slammed into Shido's body, the glow of energy intensifying significantly and making the ship tremble in protest around them.
Akira was standing upright, his right hand planted on his mask while his left arm hung at his side with a makeshift covering tied around the wrist. Odin was floating above him, the second wave of lightning surging from the spear in his gnarled grasp.

The two blasts faded out slowly, the glow vanishing soon after. And as the smoke cleared, the Arditi could see that it was over.

Shido, now back to human proportions and dressed in his usual suit, staggered through the smoke. He landed on his knees, panting slowly as a warm white glow began to sparkle around his body.

"I... I lost?" Shido asked himself in a small muttering tone. "What... what am I supposed to do now?" he asked, looking at his hands.

"The right thing. For once in your goddamn miserable life," Akira firmly said. He was still panting for breath, that last stunt having drained what little strength he had, and standing upright felt like a Herculian feat right now. "You're going to come clean to the country."

Makoto nodded, moving toward Akira and helping to support his weight. "You've hurt plenty of people, both by abusing the power of the Metaverse, and using your political sway to ruin the lives of others. No more."

Shido exhaled slowly through his nose. "Very well... since I have lost, I'll live by your rules now instead of my own." He looked Akira in the eye. "I... I will do what I can to make amends. I will clear your name... Kurusu, was it?" He asked, finally putting a name to the familiar face. "And I'll ensure that the world knows that the crimes that have been levelled at the Arditi... were my crimes."

"It's a start,"Ryuji spat. "Now tell us where the treasure is so we can get the hell out of here."

Nodding, Shido pointed toward the ceiling. Something slowly floated down toward the group, wreathed in a pulsating ethereal light. Ryuji reached up and caught it in his right hand: The steering wheel of a ship.

"Something to steer the country with," Makoto noted.

"You gotta be shittin' me..." Ryuji muttered, looking set to break the wheel over his knee in his anger. The blond spared a glance to Akira, clenching his teeth in frustration.

With that, Shido's Shadow vanished entirely, and the team were left alone in the wrecked parliamentary chamber.

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Shido was seated on the dark couch in his office, his steely gaze affixed to the low glass coffee table before him. Resting upon it was a small glass vial filled with a dark liquid, the white label on the bottle marked with multiple paragraphs of text written in tiny script. An orange skull and crossbones logo in a small triangle was positioned on the back end of the label.

A pair of doctors stood to attention in the doorway, while two members of Shido's security team paced the room and one of his closest political allies paced about the room. Nobody seemed particularly pleased with this situation.
The seconds were ticking by, waiting to see if any change would come over Shido. And if it did, they needed to be ready for it.

Shido let out a sudden gasp, feeling as if someone had just driven a red hot spike through his forehead and right into his brain. His teeth chattered, veins tensing up around his eyes, before he sharply rose to his feet. "N-no! S-Something's... something's changing! The poison, give it to me!"

Despite the sudden panic in the room, one of the doctors quickly snatched up the bottle, filling the large white cap with a small amount of the dark liquid inside. The doctor handed it over, with Shido immediately snatching the cup and downing its contents.

It burned on the way down his throat, all the muscles in his body growing rigid in an instant. His heart stopped, followed immediately by Shido's body collapsing back onto the couch.

The two doctors now got to work tending to Shido, working to resuscitate him as quickly as they could. The poison was designed to trigger a death-like state in any who consumed it, leaving them clinically dead for a short period. Of course if the subject remained untended for too long, 'death-like' would very quickly change to just plain 'death,'

The hope was that the sudden loss of life would cause Shido's Palace to collapse. If that could trigger a 'reset' of sort and undo the change of heart, that would be quite welcome. But if it killed the Arditi outright, that would be another ideal outcome.

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A powerful quake suddenly rocked the entire cruise ship, punctuated by a series of explosions racing through the corridors and punching holes in the dense hull of the ship. The Arditi were very nearly bowled over outright, the ship already starting to sink into the turbulent waters.

"What the... It shouldn't be coming down this quickly!" Futaba exclaimed, quickly hopping back into the safety of Necronomicon's hull, taking the Morgana cocoon along with her.

"Did something happen to Shido in the real world?!" Hifumi asked, before squealing in shock as another tremor rocked the room around them, sending a cobweb of fissures surging up along the walls.

The roof started to crack and buckle, only hindered when Ryuji launched his Persona skyward, the lightning-covered figure catching the crumbling ceiling and using all his might to support the weight as best he could. Ryuji grimaced, beads of sweat running down the sides of his face.

Yusuke summoned Susanoo, his Persona shoving his hands outward and unleashing twin surges of icy wind that raced along the walls, coating them in a dense layer of sturdy ice that was fighting against the continuous collapse. Despite his effort however, chunks were steadily being blown through the walls and floor, followed immediately by spouts of water rushing through the newly formed wounds in the hull.

"His allies may well have killed him in the real world for the threat he poses!" Yusuke shouted, his body trembling from the mounting strain. "Regardless, we can't reach the exit point if the ship is collapsing this quickly!"

"And I'm running on fumes here!" Ryuji called out.
Futaba pressed her palms to the sides of her head. "I don't wanna die! I don't even know how to swim!"

"The flames will probably get to us before the water does," Shizuka murmured, getting an elbow in the ribs from Ann for her troubles.

Makoto glanced around sharply, before turning her attention toward Futaba. "You have to get us out of here! Use Necronomicon!" the brunette quickly said.

"Right!" Futaba replied, as if only now realizing that she could do that. With how intense things had gotten, her mind had gone a little blank.

Necronomicon sealed up around her and Morgana, followed immediately after by a series of inky tendrils coiling around her allies. She did a headcount as quickly as she could, and once certain she had everyone she suddenly pushed the entire team through the barrier back into the real world, letting out a pained cry from the exertion.

The entire chamber imploded in a wave of fire as soon as they left, followed by the rest of the collapsing boat being sucked into the sea. The cruise liner of pride was sunken, utterly destroyed.

The Arditi were unceremoniously spat out in the alleyway they had originally entered from. Almost as soon as they had landed, the group scrambled to guide Akira into the shade of the alley, now that the bloodied stump of his left hand was exposed again. Ryuji quickly shed his Shujin jacket, tearing a sleeve clean off.

With Makoto once more tending to hs wound with healing magic, Ryuji leaned in to dress the wound. "Deep breath man, come on... you're gonna be okay," Ryuji murmured.

"It's not... as bad as it looks..." Akira lied. Now that they were in the real world, the pain was hitting him even harder, his whole body shivering as he fought to contain himself.

"I'll go get some transport. Just sit tight," Shizuka hastily said, jogging away from the others. A regular hospital was too risky, there'd be too many questions asked, and the police would definitely be drawn in. But the Speedwagon Foundation would handle this discreetly, and give Akira the best replacement money could buy. Her own money, if need be.

Futaba was standing off to the side, clutching the Morgana cocoon in her hands as she watched all this transpire. Her eyes were glistening with tears, despite her attempts to put on a brave face.

"This shouldn't have happened... things shouldn't have gotten this bad..." Shiho murmured. They had just won, bested one of their greatest enemies. But right about now, it didn't feel a whole lot like a victory.

Ryuji and Yusuke remained silent, both sitting on their own emotions for the time being. Both of them felt some guilt rise inside them, blaming themselves for what had happened to the leader they cared for. But right now there was no point in beating themselves up.

With the group tending to Akira, Shizuka moved near the mouth of the alley. She quickly pulled her phone out, cycling through her contacts until she found the number for the Athena clinic. She was answered almost immediately. "H-hey, it's Shizuka Joestar! I'm gonna need an ambulance ASAP!" she hastily said, the words tumbling from her mouth and nearly collapsing upon each
"A-ah, Joestar-san?!" the voice on the other end of the line called, sounding quite shocked. "I- of course, anything for you Miss! W-where can we find you?"

"Near the main gates of the Diet Building," Shizuka breathlessly said. "There's... there's a few of us, so we'll need another transport too. I'll be standing in an alleyway signalling for you guys, just... be quick! Please!"

Once she hung up, Shizuka let out a shaky sigh and glanced over her shoulder at her shivering leader. "Akira... J-just hang on..." she murmured to herself.

And so, several minutes later, a Speedwagon-marked ambulance silently pulled up near the alleyway the Arditi had been using. The teens quickly filed into the large back end of the ambulance, as many as they could fit at least.

The paramedics were quick to tend to Akira, sedating him as they laid the young man on a gurney. Shizuka, Ann, Futaba (with the Morgana cocoon), and Ryuji filed into the back, with the others waiting for another vehicle to come up.

But, as the Arditi made their escape into the night, they did not go entirely unnoticed. From the shadows, a towering man with a white bandage over his missing right ear. Kaneda, from Mr. A's Shinjuku security detail.

Almost as soon as the Arditi's broadcast got out, Mr. A had dispatched his men across the city, scanning the streets for any sign of the team's known members. And it was only by chance that Kaneda had spotted a short young woman, wearing a pair of heart-shaped sunglasses in the dark of the night, boarding an ambulance that had the logo of the Joestar clan's biggest allies on it.

It was something he couldn't help but notice.

"Hard Knock Life," Kaneda curtly said, the crimson oblong shape of his Stand rising above his right shoulder. It spat out a single seed that became silently lodged in the front wheel arch. Now he could sense and follow it, his own personal tracking device.

Kaneda raised his phone to his left ear, a subtle grin on his face as he dialed the number Mr. A had given him. He didn't have to wait long until his call was answered, and once he heard Mr. A's voice Kaneda spoke quickly in response. "Boss, I think I've found 'em..."

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Shido opened his eyes slowly, his vision swimming in a sea of blurred shapes and unfocused light. He squinted a bit until his eyesight evened out, revealing the two doctors standing above him. But even as his vision cleared, there was a strong lingering pain that burned down the length of his esophagus and the entirety of his stomach.

"Shido-san?" One of the doctors asked, adjusting his glasses. "Can you hear me? Are you alright?"

Was he alright? No, far from it. Shido was now painfully aware of every criminal act he had ever enabled or been personally involved in. For the first time in his life he was feeling guilt for his misdeeds, and much of his mind was immediately filled with thoughts of all those crimes.
Yes, penance would need to be paid. Shido knew he would have to tell the country everything, and move to clear the names of the people who had crossed him.

But under that remorseful layer, there was still a shrewd man who knew he couldn't act too suspicious. If he suddenly started weeping and acting like a guilty wretch, he might as well paint a giant neon target on his back. He needed to at least try and buy some time.

"I... I'm alright," Shido breathlessly said, reaching up and rubbing his eyes with his right hand. "I just... need a moment to catch my breath. The poison had a rather strong effect, after all," he remarked.

"O-of course sir," the doctor hovering over him replied.

"Could you all... give me a moment? This has been rather draining for me," Shido murmured.

A few uncertain glances were shared throughout the room. Was Shido really alright? It was a little hard to tell, particularly with how strange this situation was to start with. But if the Arditi had succeeded, they would all be in hot water.

Unless they continued to use cognitive psience as a weapon...

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Mr. A brought his heavy mug of beer to his lips, taking a long sip and taking in the strong taste as it rolled down his throat. His brow was knit in mild annoyance, but the towering man was keeping a calm front despite all that had transpired.

The only other person in Club Ravana's private room was Lars, the the quiet assassin reclining near the doorway and examining his employer carefully. "So, now you know the situation," Mr. A remarked. "Kaneda got pretty lucky stumbling on them like that... and we got lucky that Okabe didn't kill him outright over his previous transgression."

Lars nodded. "Yes, we're fortunate in that regard. And you say Kaneda was able to find out where they were headed?" he asked.

"Right. He tailed them to Jinbocho, book town, and toward some unassuming Foundation-owned building. They used some underground garage passage, and so if I had to guess the Foundation has some hidden structure there," Mr. A explained. "One of them must have been injured if the team was using an ambulance."

"I take it you want them dealt with fully now?" Lars asked.

His employer took a long gulp of his drink and sighed in the aftermath. "Right. We don't know if Shido's been compromised or not, but that's not the issue. Not when we still have our replacement plan... but they must have become pretty powerful, and we can't subcontract the work anymore. So I'll trust you, and a small contingent of Stand-users, to deal with this."

Lars pushed himself off the wall and nodded sagely to his boss, silently adjusting the lapels of his black pinstriped jacket. "Of course A-sama. I'll do everything in my power to deal with them."

"Ah... No need to be so formal when it's just us. You can use my real name," he replied, smiling faintly at the slender foreigner.
"I... of course, Akio," he replied, his posture stiffening a bit. "If it's to see your dream come true, then I'll do this, no matter the cost."

A warm smile lingered on Mr. A's face, before he quietly set his mug down on the counter behind him. "I know Lars, I have faith in your abilities. You have my permission to go all out against them." He trailed off into a tiny sigh. "I've bested yakuza, triads, police squads, Stand users... and my most persistent enemies are a bunch of high school students. What a strange world we live in..."

"Yes... it is an interesting turn of events. If you'll excuse me, I should go meet with the others," Lars remarked, turning on his heel toward the door. He had long since accepted the fact that the Arditi were far from ordinary kids, but still wouldn't back down against them.

And tonight, Lars was in no mood to taste failure again. No matter what, this would be his last bout against Joestar and her friend.

He would either win, or he would die.
The Relentless Painkiller (I)

After everyone had gathered at Athena, the various members of the Arditi had headed off in different directions. Akira had been rushed into surgery, with Ryuji, Shizuka, Shiho, Futaba, and Makoto hanging around the reception area as they waited on any news. Morgana's strange cocoon had been wheeled off by two doctors for observation, with Ann following after to make sure someone was keeping an eye on him.

Haru was using this opportunity to check in on her dad, having been unable to do so these past few days with how hectic things were. Yusuke had headed off in that same general direction, morose. Meanwhile Hifumi and Sergio had gone off to the vending machines, with Hifumi needing to make a quick call to her parents. She had some excuse cooked up for them, about doing an important shogi match with a visiting pro.

Makoto had gone around working her healing magic to aid the others, and for the past hour and a half they had been resting and recovering as best they could.

"Are you sure it was a good idea to tell Boss?" Shiho asked, leaning forward in the chair beside Ryuji's. "I agree that this is a serious matter, but... telling him about all this is a pretty major thing."

"He already knows that we're the Phantom Thieves, and since Akira got so injured..." Makoto bit her bottom lip for just a moment. "He... He is Akira's guardian, so he needed to know. The only issue is that he didn't answer when I called. It's late, I suppose he's just asleep."

Shizuka nodded firmly. "Right. This is a lot more serious than just getting banged up... Dunno if he's actually gonna come out here," she mused. "We went through so much trouble for this Palace, and even though it had to be done..." She paced between the chairs, her hands tucked into the pockets of her parka. "Hey uh... not that it really matters, but... what the hell was Shido's treasure?"

Ryuji dug into the pockets of his slacks and quickly pulled out a small pin. An official one from the Diet. Shiho regarded it with great curiosity. "I see... When he got this from the Diet, it must have been the start point of all his insane ambitions."

"My best friend lost a hand... for a stupid goddamn pin," Ryji growled. He clenched it tight in his right hand before suddenly throwing it across the room, the metal clattering against the floor.

"It was more than that Ryuji. If we didn't stop Shido, then... there's no telling how bad things would get," Makoto quickly said. She cast her gaze to the floor. "But still, Akira and Morgana... that fight was worse than any we've had before. Shido's more of a monster than any of us thought."

Ryuji sighed loudly, his head drooping. "Look I... I know how big this all was. But Akira... When I first met Akira I had basically just given up. Kamoshida was in charge, nobody at Shujin gave a shit about me, and I figured that was just the way things were always gonna be. But then this guy shows up, the guy who doesn't judge me or write me off, who opened up this... whole new world. A little after Kamoshida's change of heart, I knew that Akira was something special. He was someone who could make a difference. An' I told myself that I was gonna stick by this dude no matter what, and do everything I could to help him. But I failed. And that creep maimed him."

"Ryuji..." Shiho softly said. "You can't... you can't blame yourself for any of this. The only person you should blame is Shido himself, he's the cause of all this. And I know Akira wouldn't want you
"Knowing Akira? He'd probably smack you upside the head if he heard you blaming yourself," Shizuka mused.

The barest hint of a sad smile touched on Ryuji's face. "Yeah... you're not wrong," the blond replied.

The doors at the side of the reception desk opened quickly, with Doctor Lifeson quickly stepping through. He was busily smoothing out his ivory coat, doing so as he made for the Arditi. "I know you're all very concerned, but... I'd also strongly suggest getting some sleep," he said.

"Forget all that, we're fine," Shizuka said. Well, fine was an exaggeration. But it was unlikely that any of them could sleep easily until at least Akira was fine. "How is he doc?"

Lifeson nodded slightly. "Doing fine. No major amount of blood loss, and we disinfected the wound. Just as a precaution I gave him a restorative infusion with my Stand. I also have some prepared for the rest of you too, a little pick-me-up."

"What about Akira's... hand?" Ryuji asked, seeming to regret even saying the word. Futaba remained silent in her seat, her knees tucked up under her nose, with her eyes trained to the floor. Her headphones were resting on her ears, and for now she seemed cut off from the rest of the world.

"We've got a specialist surgeon working on it, grafting on a replacement. A fully articulate robotic hand that'll function just as good as the old one... Shizuka's old man had a similar model. And with a synthetic skin covering, it'll blend in perfectly," Lifeson said, adopting a reassuring smile for the group. "It's a bit of a lengthy process. Installing the slot, carefully aligning the connector pins... But it'll work like a charm."

Shiho breathed a tiny sigh of relief. "That's pretty reassuring to hear, Doc. You really are a lifesaver," she happily said.

The doctor chuckled a bit in return. "Ha, no need to thank me of all people. For once, I'm actually not that involved in the proceedings. Surgery isn't my wheelhouse after all" he explained, shrugging his strong shoulders.

"Still, technology like that... it's a little hard to believe you guys have access to that sci-fi stuff," Shiho mused. "How come you've been keeping it a secret?"

"Cost, mainly," Lifeson curtly replied. He breathed a small sigh. "For as good as those prosthesis are, they're quite expensive to produce. And the Foundation wouldn't want to introduce something so revolutionary if only a tiny percentage of the population could afford them. People who likely wouldn't be in a position to need artificial limbs to start with. We've been rather keenly interested in 3D printing however, and if all works out well on that front... robot limbs for everyone," he said, smiling awkwardly.

"And... what about Morgana?" Makoto asked, wanting to quickly change the subject to something more pertinent.

"The... cocoon you brought in?" the doctor asked in return. Makoto nodded. "Well we've set it up in a monitoring station, the kind usually reserved for strange artifacts. But that aside we really don't
know what we're dealing with... near as we can tell there's some sort of heartbeat coming from
inside it, but we really have no idea how to examine something like that. We'll keep a close eye,
but we don't know what to expect from something so alien."

Ryuji glanced off to his side, clearly annoyed. "Damnit..." he muttered. Despite their shock at what
had happened, the Arditi knew on some level that their leader would be okay. Losing a hand was
not a fatal injury if the bleeding was stemmed.

But Morgana...

Shiho rubbed the bridge of her nose with her left hand. "We've all spent so long with Morgana that
we've forgotten how strange he is. All this time and there's very little we actually know about him.
But he's strong. I just know he can pull through."

"Optimism is a good trait to have at a time like this. We'll do everything we can for both of your
friends... actually, it is a rather interesting opportunity for the Foundation. It marks our second
encounter with a truly alien lifeform," Lifeson explained, smiling.

"Wait what?" Makoto flatly asked.

Shizuka rolled her shoulders. "Don't worry about it, he's a cool guy."

Makoto blinked a few times, regarding her girlfriend with great scrutiny. "Wha-

The doors behind the group opened swiftly, followed soon after by Sojiro coming through the
door. He looked uncharacteristically dishevelled, a few beads of sweat congregating on his brow. A
man in a dark suit flanked his side, nodding curtly to Sojiro before making his way back through
the doors.

Sojiro caught his breath slowly. "I got held up... some of Shido's goons grabbed me from the
shop..." he breathed, a few shocked gasps escaping the group. "Only got your message when Shido
himself let me go a little while back... And then..." He took in another gulp of air. "That guy led me
in here... so what the hell just happened?!"

Lifeson blinked in faint surprise. "Ah... Sir are you a relative of Kurusu-san?"

"He's my kid," Sojiro hastily answered as he made his way to the doctor. "Niijima-san told me he
got hurt and that they were at a clinic in Jinbocho but... W-well look, I just want to know what
happened!" Sojiro took in a breath, catching sight of Futaba in her huddled seating. "Futaba, are
you okay?" Futaba nodded without looking up. Sojiro was definitely flustered, a rare sight to be
sure, but Lifeson seemed quite used to dealing with panicking parents.

"I'll explain the situation as best I can sir, just follow me." Lifeson turned his attention briefly to
the members of the Arditi. "I've left my tonics just outside. Feel free to grab them at your leisure,"
he explained, before leading Sojiro out of the reception area through to the corridor outside.

Once the adults had left, Makoto sighed and moved to stand. "Guess we should freshen up with
those. It's gonna be a long night by the look of things."

While Ryuji and Shiho were rising to their feet, Shizuka cast a brief glance to Futaba. "You uh...
you three go on ahead, I'll catch up in a sec." She and Makoto shared a nod, before Shizuka moved
to sit down beside the hacker. "Hell of a day, huh?" Shizuka asked. "You uh... wanna talk about
"Not really," Futaba sadly admitted, giving her knees a tight hug. "But standing there, being helpless while Akira and Mona got hurt... it was just like when I was a kid."

Shizuka nodded, staring off into the distance. Futaba didn't need to elaborate, she already knew the details of Wakaba's death. With how hard Wakaba's death had hit Futaba. And with how close Akira was to her... well Shizuka didn't want to think how Futaba would have reacted if Akira had died. She would have shut herself off all over again.

"It's not fair," Futaba finally said. "Akira does so much for people, putting himself on the line like this... and now he's gonna have that kind of injury following him around. And despite everything he did, people are still gonna... think of him as a criminal. And even after beating Shido, is that going to be enough?" She sighed loudly, throwing her hood over her head and sinking deeper into her knee-fort. "And I hate thinking like that after seeing what just happened to Akira and Mona..."

"Yeah... it's not all sunshine and rainbows right now," Shizuka replied. "But we're close to winning. With Shido out of the way, one of the biggest threats is gone. Anyone else, and we'll take 'em down one by one until there are no snakes left in the garden. Trust me." She settled a strong arm over Futaba's shoulders. "As for Akira's rep... yeah, maybe things won't change much there. Even if Shido's confession gets his record expunged, some people will still look down on him. But even so, I don't think impressing people was ever part of this for Akira. I doubt he's cared what people think of him for a while now... all he wants is to do the right thing."

Futaba finally turned her head toward Shizuka. "Well... maybe. But it's still not right. He's such a great guy, but he deserves more than getting maimed for doing good," Futaba murmured.

The young Joestar nodded quietly. "Yeah. No argument from me... Well, take it from my family. Sometimes good people suffer the most. But things have a way of working out in the end." The two lapsed into silence for a few moments before Shizuka idly asked "You like Akira, don't you?"

"H-huh?" the hacker tensed a bit, casting her gaze to her boots. "W-why are you asking that?" she asked.

Shizuka shrugged. "Just a vibe I got... can't say I really blame you either. But I guess you were afraid you wouldn't get a shot to express your feelings?" Futaba didn't respond, but that seemed to answer enough for Shizuka. "Look, keeping stuff like that bottled up isn't good. I should know. So when you get a chance to talk to him, maybe just let him know?"

"I... I dunno..." Futaba murmured.

"Trust me, I get the sense that those feelings are mutual." Akira certainly seemed to hang on every word from her. "After everything that's happened, it'll make both of you feel a whole lot better." They could both do with something nice.

Futaba managed a tiny smile before flicking her hood back down. She was quick to hop from her chair and adjusted her headphones until they were once more around her neck. "Well, c'mon. We might as well freshen up with those tonics."
Haru left her father's room, sighing gently as she did so. She had been told that her father's vitals were on the upswing, and that his brain activity was rising too, but he was still out cold.

She supposed, with everything they had just been through it was nice to know that things hadn't gotten any worse with her father. It was a small comfort to Haru.

The strawberry blonde came to a stop soon after leaving the room, catching sight of Yusuke from the corner of her left eye. The tall artist was leaning back against a wall, a pensive look on his face as he cast his gaze toward the ceiling. He seemed lost in his own little world (not that that was different for Yusuke), a glimmer of sadness in his eyes.

"Yusuke-kun?" Haru politely asked. "Are you alright?"

Yusuke blinked himself back to reality. "Oh, Haru... apologies, I didn't realize this was where your father's room was. I suppose I just wandered here without noticing. I could leave, if that's an issue."

"N-no no, not at all!" Haru hastily replied, raising her hands slightly. She didn't want to come across as rude, after all. "This isn't my hospital, a-after all! And... I do quite like your company."

"My thanks," Yusuke curtly replied, seeming to not read much into Haru's compliments. "But truth be told, I don't feel I'd make for good company at the moment."

Haru swallowed hard. "A-are you alright? You seem... rather upset. More than the rest of us." Then again Yusuke always did seem moody. Haru chalked it up as an artist trait of his.

Yusuke pondered his answer for several long seconds before exhaling slowly through his nose. "I can't stop thinking about what happened in that last battle... I was the last line of defense between Shido and Akira, and I... failed utterly. Despite my best efforts, I could barely phase that abomination, and as a result..." he trailed off. Well, the result was well known to the team by now.

"You can't blame yourself for what happened!" Haru quickly said, approaching the bluenette and settling her slim fingers on his shoulders. "We all did what we could, and placing blame won't do any good! M-more than that, Aki-kun wouldn't want anyone blaming themselves over this!"

"I know," Yusuke calmly replied. "But even so I can't help but feel guilt for this. I owe the original members of the Arditi a great debt. Akira, Shizuka, Ann, Morgana, Shiho, Ryuji... if it weren't for them, I would never have seen the depths of Madarame's depravity. But I feel I owe something to Akira in particular... he reignited my passion in art, destroying the ennui that had gripped me. Without Akira, I may well have abandoned my passion entirely. And when the time came to repay that debt... I failed."

Haru frowned. "You know very well that Akira doesn't think you owe him anything. He helped you because he wanted to, not because he expected anything in return," Haru assured him.

Yusuke didn't reply for a few seconds, eventually turning his gaze down toward the strawberry blonde heiress. "I'm aware, but that still doesn't change the fact that I feel I owe him. I had faith in my own abilities, but against Shido, it wasn't enough."

"Shido caught all of us by surprise. And none of us can be held accountable for Shido being a monster." Haru reached over, taking Yusuke's right hand in both of hers. The artist seemed mildly surprised at the contact, but didn't pull away. "We did all we could, and unfortunately things don't always go perfectly... but I'm sure Akira and Mona will be back with us in no time!"
Eventually, a small smile touched on Yusuke's face. "Your optimism is quite admirable. And I suppose, as we have just won a great victory, it would be better to focus on the positives."

"Exactly," Haru sweetly said, giving his hand a reassuring squeeze.

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11/8

Midnight rolled in, and it seemed that Akira's surgery was about done from what the doctors had told the Arditi. But none of them were yet willing to leave Athena, not until they had at least one of their unconscious allies awake and talking. Even Sojiro was still here, hanging around outside Akira's room.

At the moment there was only Shizuka, Ryuji, and Shiho in the reception area, idly chatting about their current situation. "So now that we've gotten Shido... should we just sit back and watch things unfold?" Shizuka asked.

Shiho reclined in her seat, not lifting her gaze from her phone. "You mean with the rest of this conspiracy still around? I'm not sure. It depends on if the rest of his allies are aware of his change of heart... I guess we could wait for things to cool off a bit and then talk to Shido, get some names from him."

"Yeah well it ain't just Shido we gotta worry about. That A creep is still out there, probably waiting for a good opportunity to get us," Ryuji said.

Shizuka nodded in agreement. "Yeah, he's gotta go down soon. He's a part of all this, and probably as vital to the whole conspiracy as Shido himself. Christ, taking on the future prime minister and fighting off a criminal Stand user syndicate... definitely didn't expect this when I moved to Japan."

"Not to be rude, buuut... trouble like that kinda seems to follow your family around," Ryuji noted.

"Meh. You're not wrong," Shizuka answered with a small shrug. "But anyway, it's gotta be done. Otherwise he'll just find a way to get the conspiracy's plan through without Shido."

"We're going to have to wait a little while," Shiho mused. "Maybe a few days or so until Akira's fighting fit... and hopefully by then Morgana will-"

Shiho was cut off by the distant boom of an explosion, followed several seconds later by a powerful tremor that rocked the floor beneath them. The three teens looked up in shock, exchanging uncertain glances as the lighting overhead suddenly took on a distinct crimson hue that dyed them red.

"What the hell?!" Ryuji said, hastily rising to his feet.

Soon the alarm was joined by a warning being belted through the PA system by a synthetic voice. "Intruder alert. Intruder alert. Intruder alert. All staff are advised to evacuate immediately."

"That ain't good..." Shizuka murmured, her sunglasses sliding slowly down the bridge of her nose. If there was anyone in Japan who would have any knowledge of the Speedwagon Foundation's less public affairs, it was Mr. A. Had he tracked them there?
More booms rang out in the distance, followed by a loud bang at the entryway they came through. The double doors flew open, swiftly revealing three figures who proceeded to stride into the reception area. Lars, the paper-wielding assassin Shizuka had met in the past, flanked by two new figures.

To his right was a skinny young man with a spiked black mohawk atop an otherwise shaved head, his brows marked by a series of steel studs. He was clad in a sleeveless white shirt and heavy black cargo trousers that trailed into thick-soled leather boots. A ghostly figure floated over his right shoulder, a bird-sized Stand with unfurled purple metal wings and a head that looked like a beak-shaped subwoofer.

To Lars' left was a young woman with dyed purple hair, wearing a sleek white hoodie and a flowing high school skirt. The air seemed to distort around her right hand as she raised it up, and despite her unassuming stature there was a sense of menace to her.

"Shizuka Joestar," Lars curtly greeted, raising his left hand up. The pulsating dark matter of his Stand already covered it entirely. "Seems my allies already jumped the gun at the other entrance. But I suppose in the long run, that's not entirely relevant."

The young woman accompanying Lars swept the index and middle fingers of her right hand upward, a purple aura forming around her body. Her Stand shimmered into existence at her side, forming into a sculpted gold cube with a toothy mouth on each face of it. "\textit{Mudhoney}. Let's get this over with, I'm already bored." A tube of shimmering air flew from one mouth of her stand, cresting up the seam of the double doors. The air caught fire as it passed by, the flames fading swiftly after to reveal that the focused blaze had welded the door shut.

"Of course, of course." Lars focused intensely on Shizuka, idly sliding his glasses up the thin bridge of his nose. "I'd like you to meet two members of this little strike team. Seems only mannerly to do so. This is Masao, and this is Akane," he said, gesturing to the boy and then to the girl.

"Nice to fuckin' meet ya!" Masao said, grinning sharply at the trio. "Now let's get this shit done! \textit{Bathory}!" He suddenly lifted his smartphone into his left hand, the screen displaying a music-player app. His avian Stand shoved forward, his head vibrating, before a solid wall of sound rushed forward, as if the teens were suddenly caught in a wind tunnel.

Seats and tiles were torn from their moorings, and Ryuji was quick to summon Seiten Taisei, his Persona blocking the brunt of the incoming sound wave. The trio were sent skidding a few inches back, a few pained grunts leaving the group. Through the chaos, Shizuka was certain she could hear a highly accelerated version of 'Dream On' playing all around them.

Seiten Taisei lunged forward, an arc of lightning flowing from his cudgel. It exploded off the ground, forcing Masao and Akane away from Lars. The monkey made a beeline for Lars, his heavy staff slamming into Lars' chest and driving him back into the sealed doors, the assassin hissing through clenched teeth. But for as strong as Seiten Taisei was, Lars immediately shoved himself back off the wall, his right hand shoving forward to launch a duo of cards at his foe, the edges slicing against his right shoulder. Ryuji grimaced, recoiling suddenly.

Akane's cube knifed forward, spinning swiftly and firing jets of focused flame from all sides as it moved toward the group. Shizuka and Shiho leapt away, the blazing arcs slicing into the floor and leaving a molten trail in passing.
Shiho grimaced, still feeling the heat as it arced near her legs. Eris abruptly materialized at her side, a flurry of blessed daggers shooting out of her palms and exploding against the golden surface of Mudhoney's hull. It proved quite sturdy, with Akane only grunting lightly and calling her Stand back.

"Damnit... of all the times for this shit..." Shizuka muttered under her breath, glancing from side to side. She was able to see Lars reaching into his coat, and Masao was raising his phone again. They were on the backfoot now, and they needed an opening to change their positioning.

And even with a bit of healing from Makoto and Lifeson, none of them were feeling in tip-top shape. Going head to head like this wasn't a good idea, they needed some more room to maneuver. And the corridors behind them might just do the trick.

"Guys, pull back!" Shizuka shouted. Houdini suddenly appeared in front of her, fists outstretched, before a blinding flash of light shone from the plates on her knuckles. The three assailants recoiled from the flash, Masao and Akane crying out, while Shizuka abruptly kicked open the door behind her. The Arditi sprinted through the opening, making it through just as A's assassins regained their sight.

Lars' eyes narrowed. "Akane, split Joestar from her allies. I want to fight her solo while you go for her two friends," he ordered, earning a nod from his ally in turn.

Mudhoney plowed into the door at an impressive speed, knocking them open, and managed to catch the thieves in the corridor by surprise. A tube of air lanced from one toothy mouth, catching fire a split second after, with the beam moving between Shizuka and her two allies. Shiho and Ryuji jumping back to the mouth of the hallway behind them just as Shizuka was driven to another entryway.

Before she could move to rejoin them, Lars burst through the doors and sprinted down the hall, immediately throwing a hail of folded paper triangles toward Shizuka. She gasped, recoiling and doing her best to weave off to the side. But despite her efforts three of them managed to graze her left hip, leaving bloodied clawmarks in passing. She hissed sharply, pressing Houdini's left hand to the injury to stem the bleeding.

He was soon joined by Masao and Akane, the duo rushing to intercept Ryuji and Shiho. Shizuka could just about see dueling flashes of lightning and blessed energy, trading off against surges of sound and focused waves of heat. The four figures rounded a corner out of sight, but the flashes and booms didn't entirely leave her.

Shizuka glared at Lars, standing fully upright. "Motherfucker I am in no mood for this shit right now," she firmly said.

"Unfortunately that's not a matter for you to decide," Lars replied, producing a paper airplane from the inside of his coat. "I'm sure Mr. A wanted to hold off on this for as long as he could, but making a move on Shido is something that can't be ignored. And if one of your allies was injured, this seems like an ideal time to strike."

"So that's how it is huh? You son of a bitch..." It seemed that conflict with Mr. A was going to come sooner than she had wanted. Akira wasn't alone, as far as she could recall, so they had that going for them at least. Small comfort when she was faced with a lethal assassin. "Shoulda figured you'd come for us at our weakest."
Lars adjusted his tie with his left hand. "I would have gone after you at any point if Mr. A asked, so don't go getting the wrong idea about me. I owe him everything, and my own life is only of worth if it goes toward trying to fulfill his dreams," he replied.

He was a true believer alright. Shizuka didn't know if she felt bad for him, or terrified by that kind of loyalty. Lars suddenly flicked his right hand forward, launching the paper airplane toward Shizuka. She was quick to shove herself off the wall, only narrowly avoiding the puncturing spearhead. The bladed wing carved a series of hot sparks from the wall as it passed through the dense material.

She started to turn invisible, watching as Lars leapt high toward her and threw out a pair of neatly folded paper shuriken toward her. Houdini's arms moved ahead of Shizuka's body with impressive speed, catching both blades and launching them into the wall until they became embedded in place.

As soon as Lars landed Houdini set upon him, a flurry of blows striking vigorously against his forearms, the strain making Lars grunt and grimace. Two blows swung lower and drove into his abdomen, knocking him back a step, but Shizuka had to draw her right hand back as a dull throb resonated through her knuckles.

He was wearing some kind of armor, she could recall that much, but it seemed even tougher than what she had struck the last time she fought him. Like striking a brick wall with a peach.

Shizuka turned invisible and dropped low, barely avoiding an arcing spray of playing cards that sailed overhead. Fighting head on wouldn't work, she quickly noted. He was exceptionally tough, and he could catch Houdini pretty easily. While she couldn't hurt Lars easily, he likely had a bouquet of lethal weapons up each sleeve.

She needed a little breathing room, some time to think up a plan, and to do that she needed an opening to run. From the corner of her eye she could see a doorway several feet behind her, with a plastic stairwell sign positioned above it. Well, it was a start.

Still unseen, Houdini suddenly and rapidly uprooted over a dozen tiles from the floor and violently threw them toward Lars in quick succession, the dark blue tiles whistling through the air. They turned invisible almost as soon as they left her, with Lars sharply raking his hands down and blindly shattering three of them through Painkiller's strength.

Two however managed hit him, one shattering against his left shoulder while the other opened a bloody gash along his forehead. Lars hissed and recoiled, digging into his left trouser pocket and suddenly throwing out a cloud of confetti that dispersed around him. The small flakes of paper turned harder than steel in the air, a drifting barrier that intercepted the remaining invisible tiles. The air was filled with the noise of cracking masonry, the broken tiles and pieces of confetti falling to the floor.

"Clever, very clever," Lars muttered to himself. "These Phantom Thieves really do have potential. Shame we couldn't have met in better circumstances..."

Lars focused intensely down the corridor, noticing the door to the stairwell opening. His left hand snapped forward, his fingers curling toward his sleeve to catch and flick a small folded triangle of paper toward it. Shizuka felt the bladed tip driving into her right forearm, a pained cry leaving her while a spray of blood rushed from her arm to coat a section of the doorframe. A marker of her path.
Regardless she pushed forward, panting hotly, and slammed the door behind her as she made for the guard rails. Peering down she could see two flights of stairs for the two floors below her current one.

Her best bet was finding some way to destroy that equipment of his. Even with his Stand acting on it, paper was still paper. Water and fire would be like kryptonite to this guy. After all, a bloodhound like him wouldn't have just given up pursuing her and Hifumi so easily after their first encounter... unless that blast of water from before had destroyed his weapons and armour.

The others were likely contending with their own attackers by now, and Akira was still vulnerable. And with how dangerous and relentless this guy was, Shizuka couldn't afford to let him get through her unharmed. Even if she fell, she was going to make Lars sorely regret it.

She glanced to the doorway before her, Houdini's invisible hands curling around the steel pipe of the guard rail. The metal started to crumple under her firm grip.

"Alright..." Shizuka breathed, pushing her shades up her nose. "Let's see what you've got."
Lars hastily made his way to the side of the stairwell door, his back pressing to the wall as he eyed it carefully. There was a strong chance that the girl was waiting to jump him as soon as he went through the door. The thought made him hum softly.

His left hand reached over in a swift motion, violently shoving the door open while he remained in place at the wall. "BAZU!" An unseen blur slammed violently into the door, the top half of it shattering apart on impact. Lars lunged through the open door, flicking a few cards straight up to where he presumed Houdini's invisible body to be.

However he was quick to notice two things that were odd in all this. Firstly there was no blood, when his attack was guaranteed to hit at least some part of Houdini's body. Secondly, the guard rail ahead of him had vanished entirely.

Something became visible before his very eyes: A length of steel pipe that was embedded in the concrete wall, shards of the door lodged in the steel. Lars' eyes widened in a sudden realization, but before he could move to dodge something rushed into him from behind.

"BAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZU!!" A flurry of kicks pummelled along Lars' body, Houdini's heels driving against his chest and shoulders as he started turning toward the unseen attacker.

Many of the blows struck against the armour that adorned him, the protective layers soaking up a good deal of the kinetic force. But the assassin couldn't stand to endure too much of an assault like this. Already he could feel some bruises form along his chest. A particularly hard downswing of Houdini's left foot landed violently against Lars' left shoulder, making him hiss through clenched teeth as he felt his humerus crack slightly under the pressure.

Lars hopped back to the side, the next flurry missing him as he dashed back toward the wall. He was able to leap up easily and, in one quick motion, shoved his whole body away from the wall and in the general direction of Houdini's invisible body. His ebony fist collided with Houdini, making Shizuka cry out as she was knocked off her feet, falling hard on her stomach at the top of the stairs.

The dark-haired girl flickered back to visibility, grimacing and pushing herself off the hard concrete beneath her, mindful of the downward flight of stairs to her left. She watched as Lars landed in a neat crouch, with the assassin slowly pulling a folded dagger of paper out of his jacket. An origami blade that was just slightly shorter than Shizuka's forearm, which he gripped neatly in his right hand.

He lunged forward with a sudden shout, causing Shizuka to yelp as she scrambled onto her feet. She jumped down several steps and came to a sudden halt thanks to Houdini embedding her fingers into the wall at her side, while Lars' blade drove into the floor where she had been a split second ago.

Houdini moved swiftly, tearing another section of guard rail from its foundations, and swinging it up to intercept a slash from Lars' dagger. The assassin continued advancing down the steps, with Shizuka awkwardly stepping back, the bladed edge of his paper dagger carving into the steel in passing.
Each impact rang out through the stairwell, sparks flying from Shizuka's makeshift weapon as it struck off Lars' blade. She met his next downswing with all the force she could muster, knocking his arm back from the impact, and leaving him open to a series of jabs against his chest, the blows from the pipe making Lars stumble and stagger backward.

A hard swing deliberately drove into Lars' left shoulder, making the foreigner snarl through clenched teeth as the damage there only worsened. But he suddenly powered through the pain, side stepping another swing and shoving his right fist forward until the bottom of it crashed into Houdini's stomach.

Shizuka gasped harshly, finding herself being lifted off her feet and thrown down three steps until her body crashed to a stop at the base of the steps. She groaned, flopped on her back, with another downward flight of steps to her right.

She doubted she'd be doing much better if she was fresh to the fight, but doing this so soon after the cruise ship really wasn't helping. Shizuka sat up as best she could, burning pain rolling through her lithe body.

Lars was standing above her, his left arm looking a little heavy at his side. "Are you about ready to give up? I don't particularly enjoy hurting kids, and I'd like to make this quick."

"So why the fuck... are you doing this? If it's not about money... or some sick sadistic fetish... then why are you loyal to him?" Shizuka breathed. He called his own life worthless, and that the only reason for his existence was aiding Mr. A. How do you get loyalty like that? Shizuka grimaced, calling Houdini back, with her Stand still clutching a sliced up section of railing.

"I don't know if you could fully understand why," Lars said, idly flipping and catching his dagger in his right hand. The dark matter of his gloves swam and shuddered over his skin, both bulging eyes watching her intensely. "But then again, in one respect we are quite alike. I'm an orphan too, abandoned as an infant. But unlike you, there was no kindly old billionaire in my life."

Instead I had to grow up in an orphanage, alone and unwanted. Until I found my power," he remarked, stiffly raising his left hand and clenching his covered fingers a few times. "The local gangs, even if they didn't understand where my killing and cutting potential came from, were quick to make use of them. I was paid well until I outgrew them, and they grew fearful of my potential. So I started to travel across Europe, never lingering for too long in one place. Truthfully, I've lost track of the number of employers I've had," Lars calmly explained.

"I figured that much... Someone finding they have a Stand and immediately becoming some kind of hitman isn't exactly a novelty," Shizuka replied. The amount of criminal Stand users seemed just a tad larger than the number of heroic or neutral users.

"No argument from me. That's simply how it is for some people... regardless, a pattern quickly developed as I moved through Europe and then the Middle East. Every time I thought I found a place to belong, and every time I would have to move on. I was merely a tool for those who hired me. Circumstances caused me to go to Japan sooner than I expected, and that was when I met Mr. A," he said.
Shizuka smirked a bit. "Love at first sight?" She flippantly asked.

Lars didn't rise to the bait. "I needed to kill time while I was here, and found myself drafted to his service. And he... welcomed me with open arms. Saw my potential and did all he could to bring me into the fold." A tiny smile touched his face as his left hand came to a stop on his sternum. "More than that... he gave me my life. And gave me hope. A place to belong..."

Shizuka remained silent, but there was a curious look on her face. Gave him his life? What did he mean by that?

"I owe him everything. And I'll do all I can to maintain that sense of belonging," Lars said, his expression once more becoming cold and stony. "Between you and me, I don't know if I believe in Mr. A's endgoal. Or if he's entirely sincere in his intentions... but ultimately that doesn't matter. If that's his dream, then I exist to make sure that dream comes true. That's my role in life: At his side, walking with him to the top." He fell silent and aimed his blade down toward Shizuka. "And to make it there... I need to get through you."

Houdini suddenly threw her right hand forward, launching the rail from her hand. She caught the assassin by surprise, the carved edge of the pole driving into his stomach. The material of his shirt was swiftly torn from the impact, and it managed to sink several centimeters into his armor before coming to a halt.

Now that she had an opening, Shizuka quickly turned invisible and sprinted down the stairs, passing by the door to the second underground floor, and continuing down the next flight of stairs toward the third and final underground floor. She was moving quickly, her footsteps disturbing small clouds of dust, giving Lars enough to track.

He was quick to throw the railing away, the warped pole missing Shizuka by scant inches. He was quick to race down the stairs and, once directly across from the second floor doorway, he cleared the gap in a strong leap, landing into a neat roll and then quickly racing after Shizuka toward the bottom floor.

'This guy... is really fucking determined!' Shizuka thought to herself, her breaths coming out in heavy huffs. She could hear Lars gaining on her, knowing that she had to act fast or risk getting a neck full of paper!

Houdini materialized behind her, shoving her right fist forward and venting the remaining absorbed light she had from her knuckles. This time however she condensed the light into four focused beams of heat, moving so quickly that Lars couldn't react before they struck him in an arc along his right pectoral and shoulder.

Four blackened holes were quick to form along his body, smoking rising from his clothing, forcing him to jump back with a low grunt of pain. He snapped his left hand forward, blindly throwing a pair of paper triangles down the stairs. The edges lashed into the back of Shizuka's right thigh as she reached the bottom of the stairs, a strangled gasp leaving her as she was very nearly knocked off balance entirely.

But she managed to power through the pain, staggering forward while Houdini tore a long section of the guard rail from its moorings in passing. "You won't..." Lars breathed, throwing another card from his left hand. "Get away!" It sailed through the air and slashed Shizuka's left shoulder, shredding through the material of her coat and the flesh beneath in a fluid motion. Shizuka cried out, feeling a hot splash of blood hit her face.
Shizuka reached the door and quickly pulled it open, slamming it shut behind her as soon as she made it through. Houdini moved to the looping handle of the door and violently shoved the railing through it as a makeshift barricade to keep it from being pulled open.

Given the strength she had seen from his Stand, it would only buy her a few extra seconds. But that could make all the difference.

Panting for breath, Shizuka grimaced and used her Stand to pluck the two paper blades from her thigh. Houdini tossed them to her left, twin arcs of blood following after them as the two points hit the floor. With any luck this would mislead Lars and fool him into heading left, while Shizuka turned and made her way right as quickly as she could. Unfortunately, in her current state, running was a bit out of the question. Limping would have to suffice.

She only made it a few feet before she heard the door rattling behind her, with Lars trying to force it open. This was soon joined by a series of violent banging sounds as he repeatedly struck against it, with the dense wood in the frame soon cracking and splintering.

'Leave it to me to get stuck alone against the super-assassin with all the sharp pointy shit...' She didn't have time to get in touch with the others. Using a phone would just risk giving her position away quicker. Moreover the others were likely testing their luck against the other enemy Stand users.

She could only hope that Akira and Morgana were safe in all this.

Shizuka rounded a corner and made her way up the next corridor at a steady rate, her breathing heavy and her balance swaying. If she hadn't had a pick-me-up from Lifeson, she likely would have been pulverised to dust in the span of a few seconds. As it stood she had managed to hurt Lars, but if he closed the distance again... that was it, game over.

The dark-haired girl came to a stop at one door, giving it a once over as she saw the word 'Storage' written on the face of it in neat white kanji. Maybe there was something she could use in there?

She tried the door, rolling her eyes when she found it to be locked, and had Houdini shatter the lock clean off in a single fluid punch. The metal clattered around in the dark of the closet, while she easily and silently opened the door. Automatic lighting clicked on as she entered, illuminating a few rows of shelves that were laden with all manner of objects.

It was at this point that she heard a mournful shriek of tearing steel, no doubt the sound of her barricade being blown asunder by Lars. Shizuka grit her teeth and glanced over her shoulder nervously. Just as she suspected.

Regardless she tried to focus on examining the storage closet, examining each shelf and making a mental checklist of the potentially useful objects she could see. A heavy white bottle of kerosene, an old mop, three tanks of propane...

As she noted these items, Shizuka thought back on the battle that had transpired, and all the details she had noted from Lars. An idea slowly formed in her mind.

She stopped near the bottle of kerosene, examining it closely. "I'm nowhere near as good as Dad when it comes to this Bugs Bunny shit, but..." A grin slowly formed on her pretty face. "This just might work."
Sergio and Hifumi had been on the second floor, idly chatting, when the break in started. The chaos had quickly roused them to action, with Sergio firing off a few texts to try and get in touch with the others. So far there had been no response, but he and Hifumi had yet to encounter anyone.

Even so, Sergio immediately recognised the gravity of the situation. The Athena was a well guarded secret, and while it was possible that they had been tracked from the Diet Building, it seemed there was only one group that would benefit from attacking here head-on: Mr. A

Poor timing for the Arditi, but this night was a great opportunity for Mr. A. Going after Shido must have been like kicking a hornet's nest.

They could hear distant signs of combat, booms and crashes coming from above them and echoing throughout the second floor. He and Hifumi were carefully combing their way through the corridors, checking each corner they came upon. Sergio came to a stop at one corner and raised his phone to his right ear, Hifumi stopping beside him and shivering nervously.

"Who... who are you calling?" the shogi princess asked.

"Backup," Sergio curtly replied. "Something this big, my colleagues are really going to want to know about this." And he was willing to bet that none of the team were up for a fight with everything they had just been through. A little extra support would go a long way.

He didn't have to wait too long before he heard an answer on the other end of the line. "Sergio? A little late to be calling here." Satoshi's gruff voice was quite recognizable, and it sounded as if he had just been roused from slumber.

"Boss, there's... there's been an incident. Two of my friends got hurt, and we brought 'em to Athena but... but enemy Stand users are attacking the place!" He hesitated for a moment, unsure if he should mention Mr. A or not. By now Sergio had an understanding of what had happened between Satoshi and A in the past. Even so, withholding that information would just be bad in the long run. "It's A's people! They're the ones attacking the clinic!"

There was a long pause between the two, before Satoshi heaved an agitated sigh from his end of the line. "Alright... hang tight. I'm gonna get Aya and Yoshio, and we'll get to Jinbocho as quick as we can!"

With that he hung up, leaving Sergio and Hifumi alone for the time being. Sergio sighed slightly. "I really hope so..." Eventually he turned his attention to Hifumi. "We need to try and find the others. We're sitting ducks right now."

"R-right," Hifumi replied, nodding slightly. "I hope someone's with Akira right now. Morgana probably won't draw any attention if these craven assassins don't know anything about him."

Sergio felt the corners of his mouth being pulled into a thin frown. "If we're lucky... Come on, let's-

He was cut off by a sudden scream echoing from somewhere nearby, followed by two powerful squelching sounds that resembled the noise of meat being tenderized. A chill ran down Sergio's spine, and Hifumi went wide eyed in mild terror.
Sergio crouched slightly and motioned for Hifumi to stick close, before rounding the corner and heading toward the source of the scream. He was mindful of his pace, Breakthru hovering just above him in case they walked smack dab into trouble.

As they went along he soon heard heavy, ponderous footsteps from just up ahead. They sounded like metal meeting metal, a hammer striking an anvil, and faint tremors rolled under Sergio's feet. Something huge was just up ahead.

Sergio stopped just at the corner and peered around, stunned by what he saw. Doctor Lifeson, slumped against one wall with two fist-sized holes in his chest, letting out a few terrified shuddering breaths. A few feet ahead of the downed doctor, Sergio could see a hulking faceless golem comprised of the same blue steel as the walls, plodding away from Lifeson. Droplets of crimson blood were oozing from the sharpened tip of his right arm.

"Oh my god..." Hifumi whispered, pressing her hands to her mouth as her eyes became as small as pinpricks.

Sergio rushed to Lifeson's side, his hands raised as he tried desperately to think of some way to save Lifeson's life. His first aid training was basic at best, and even if he was a doctor he had nothing to work with. "D-Doc, just... just hang on!"

"T-tried to stop him..." Lifeson breathlessly whispered, his eyes wide and staring at nothing. "It's cold... s-so cold... S-Sarah..."

"Doc please, just-!" He tried to get a hand near one gaping wound, his palm immediately becoming slick with blood. "You'll see your sister again, I just need you to... need you to..."

It was too late. A few fading, shuddering breaths left Lifeson. Then he slumped further and fell still, lifeless eyes staring toward the wall opposite.

"Oh no, oh no..." Hifumi whispered, unable to look away. The dark-haired girl was trembling, gripped with an immense terror. This was, after all, her first time seeing a human die in front of her.

The golem came to a sudden stop, lumbering back around to face Sergio and Hifumi. Sergio rose to his full height, clenching his bloodsoaked hand into a sturdy fist. "I don't care if you're a Stand, or some kind of abomination born from one... No matter what..." The ground cracked under Sergio's feet, a sparkling golden aura flaring around his body as Breakthru appeared at his side. "I'll tear you to shreds and do the same to your user!"

Breakthru rocketed toward the end of the hall, a series of quick jabs slamming into the golem's hull with enough force to leave imprints of his enlarged knuckles in the steel. The golem staggered back, lumbering groans rising from some unseen mouth, and swung his right arm up with impressive speed. Hifumi snapped back to reality, calling out a direction for Sergio to dodge in. Breakthru reeled back, taking only a faint scratch to the collarbone in passing. Sergio barely reacted.

"VATTENE!!" A burst of momentum erupted from both of Breakthru's fists, the force colliding against the golem's torso and forming a deep hemispherical dent in his hull. It staggered back, the ground cracking underfoot, but it seemed to barely slow down.

The golem lunged back toward him, his sharpened arms swinging at Breakthru with surges of
impressive speed. Breakthru was put on the defensive, with Sergio paying attention to the
directions Hifumi called out and dodging accordingly.

This thing, this monster, it had killed Lifeson simply for getting in the way. Sergio couldn't abide
that. He was a good man who dedicated his whole life to helping others, with an ability of such
immense healing power. And now that life had been snuffed out by a callous, faceless monster.

Sergio wasn't going to abide that.

Breakthru sidestepped another blow and lanced forward, both enlarged fists hammering against the
golem with impressive quickness. Each strike echoed down the halls, metal warping and tearing as
he tore through his foe bit by bit. A crime like this required a swift and brutal response.

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Haru and Yusuke had been on their way back to Kunikazu's room, after getting their tonics from
Lifeson, when the alarm rang out. Amidst the chaos one of the panicking doctors told the duo that a
gang of Stand users had gotten through the Foundation security detail, and had proceeded to break
into Athena through the two entrances of the underground building.

Naturally this had only motivated Haru to pick up the pace as she rapidly made her way back
toward her father's hospital room, with Yusuke following quickly behind her. For now they needed
to secure President Okumura's safety before trying to meet up with the others.

It was as they were rounding the corner toward Okumura's room that they saw him: A willowy
man in a dark brown suit and white shirt, a section of his face marked by tangled knots of burnt
skin. He seemed agitated, on edge, and the anger in his mannerisms only grew as he found himself
walking to the same room as the two high school students.

"You..." He examined Haru closely, before grinning sharply. "Yeah, I've seen you on the news.
You're Okumura's daughter, yeah?!!"

Haru froze up for just a second, while Yusuke tensed at her side. The strawberry blonde was
focusing intensely on the scars on the right side of his face. A burned man making a beeline for her
father's hospital room...

Haru swallowed slightly and clenched her fists. "You're the assassin, Bloody Sunday, right?" she
pointedly asked.

"The one an' only. Or you can just call me Touta," the well-dressed man said, grinning in a wicked
manner. "Heard talk that Lars was gonna hit some kinda secret Speedwagon hospital, and I figured
I'd tag along and finish my business with Okumura. Specially since he never resurfaced, and there
was never any talk of his death. Had to 'convince' a doctor to point me to here, but it worked out in
the end..."

Yusuke continued to watch him intensely, while Haru cast her gaze away from his eyes. The light
overhead was striking their shadows in different directions, but she didn't want to be too cavalier
against his power. "So you're the fiend who attacked Okumura at his weakest," Yusuke said.

"Father still hasn't recovered from your attack on him. I suppose having your soul damaged is a
difficult thing to overcome," Haru said, sounding strangely polite. "Tell me, the bit of Father's soul
that you managed to take... does your Stand still have it?"
Touta sneered, adjusting his sleek red tie. "And what if I do?"

"If you do..." A sudden pulse rolled out from Haru's body, cracking the tiles beneath her feet. Yusuke took a surprised step back, watching as Milady appeared above the strawberry blonde. "I'm going to make you cough it back up!"

"Tch. Don't get cocky kid... What's a frilly rich girl gonna do to me?" Touta asked.

A faint smile appeared on Haru's face, and she seemed quite at ease. "These past few months... you don't even have the barest idea the kind of threats I've gone up against. So some cretin like you doesn't scare me in the slightest!" Haru shouted.

Touta let out an annoyed snarl and threw his Stand forward, the crimson serpentine shape racing forward with his scythe-shaped hands outstretched. Milady moved in front of her user, her right arm extending upward and blocking the incoming slashes. There was a good deal of strength behind Bloody Sunday's body, Milady's frame rattling against the impact.

More slashes struck against Milady's forearm, the pink figure swinging her limb around to take on the incoming strikes. Haru grimaced, shivers rolling through her legs as she fought for balance.

For as sturdy as Milady was, even outside of the Metaverse, Bloody Sunday's blades were quite sharp. A few crimson marks formed along Haru's forearm, a shaky breath leaving the younger woman. "So that's what you can do... without your main power."

Yusuke swallowed, looking set to step in. He had held back a bit with how deeply personal this was to the heiress, but if she was in danger then he wouldn't hold back. "Haru, you must."

"It's okay Yusuke-kun, I'm just testing the waters." She smirked and raised her bloodied right hand, a few huffs of breath escaping her. "If he can't steal my soul, then he's no threat."

Touta's eyes bulged slightly, and he looked set to blow steam from his nose. "You stuck up little! We'll see how much of a threat I am-" His Stand recoiled and then dove back toward Haru, his blades aimed toward Milady's eyes. "When I gouge the eyes from your pretty little head!"

An unseen psychic pulse, like a wall of air, suddenly slammed into Bloody Sunday and launched him straight up into the roof, the reinforced material cracking on impact. Touta let out a loud gasp, his whole body shuddering from the sudden feedback.

"Your Stand is rather dangerous, don't get me wrong. But Morihiro-san took the time to tell me exactly what happened to Father, so I know exactly how your power works. And without your best weapon... your Stand is nothing more than an ugly earthworm." Haru raised her right hand up and clenched it into a tight fist, dribbles of blood oozing from the fresh scars in her flesh.

Touta swallowed hard, summoning Bloody Sunday back to his side. Before he could make another move, another pulse slammed into the duo and sent Touta skidding backward, a pained gasp leaving him. It was as if a cranky mule had just nailed him in the gut.

"Not that I'm claiming to be particularly powerful. Especially in my current state... but All I have to do is keep you at arm's reach..." More unseen blows struck Touta, hard strikes nailing him in the legs and driving him to his knees, before another psychic strike left him sprawled flat on his back with blood oozing from his nostrils. "Then you're quite harmless."
Touta took in a few shaky breaths, trying to sit upright. "N-now, let's just... talk about..."

Milady's shadow fell over him, and Touta looked up to see an array of guns aimed toward him. "The only thing to talk about is how fast you can return my Father's soul. And I'm not much in a mood to be kept waiting."

Yusuke swallowed hard, watching all this transpire in wide-eyed shock. Now he had some new feelings to evaluate, a strange flutter in his chest.

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Ryuji was quick to duck around a corner, narrowly avoiding a blade of sound that carved a trench into the tiles in passing. From his current position Ryuji could just barely hear the sped-up lyrics of 'Guillotine' flying from the shimmering path of Bathroy's attack.

Shiho leaned into the wall at his side, letting out a few heavy breaths. A few bloody cuts marked along her left shoulder, while the hem of her sweater was stained with black soot. "These two are nuts..." 

"Especially the guy... he makes me look like Yusuke," Ryuji murmured.

"I HEARD THAT YA FUCKIN' PIECE OF SHIT!" Masao shouted from the other end of the corridor.

"Getting near them is pretty hard. Mudhoney's... uh, lasers I guess? They friggin hurt. And Bathory... I don't know how to describe it, but every time he changes the song on his phone, it's like the power of his Stand changes," Shiho noted. "But I might have an idea."

Ryuji firmly nodded without turning his attention from the corner, keeping a sharp eye out for any incoming shadows. "Well it's a hell of a lot more than I have right now. Fire away."

Shiho leaned in, hastily whispering her plan to Ryuji. He nodded occasionally, raising no real objection until Shiho finished explaining things. It was risky, but they had to do something. If not, Mudhoney was going to slice them apart like a birthday cake.

"Alright... just be as quick as you can about it. I don't want-" Ryuji was cut off by Shiho giving him a light peck on the lips. He blinked at her a few times in surprise.

"I'll be fine," she assured him, a tiny smile on her face. "You're the one doing the heavy lifting... personally I'm more worried about that. But it's either this or wait for them to come to us, and we're running out of room to run."

Neither of them were looking too hot right now, each of them having a few scratches and scuffs on their body. Another good hit from Bathory or Mudhoney, and they'd be as good as dead.

Eris suddenly shot ahead of Shiho, making her way around the corner and shoving her hands forward. A brilliant blinding explosion of blessed light surged from her palms, the sudden flash making the two enemy Stand users cry out and recoil.

"Again with this shit?!" Masao shouted.
"So that's why that one girl was wearing sunglasses indoors," Akane murmured.

With the distraction made, Seiten Taisei lunged from behind cover and shoved his cudgel outward, an arc of lightning exploding from the peak of the staff. But Masao was quick to act, rapidly scrolling through several songs on his phone and coming to a sudden stop on one. The lyrics of 'Wonderwall' blared through the hallway as a swirling bubble of solid sound formed around himself and Akane.

The two forces collided against each other, electrical arcs dancing along the hull of the shield. Masao grunted and grimaced, his eyes bulging out of his head while Akane surveyed their surroundings with mild concern.

The two forces exploded apart, the enemy Stand users being knocked flat as a slew of smoke washed over them. Seiten Taisei's lightning bolt had left a few molten scars in the floor. The smoke soon cleared to reveal Akane and Masao, both figures rising shakily to their feet. They were marked by a few scuffs and scars, sharpened edges of shrapnel embedded in their limbs.

"Oh you fuckers are dead! DEAD! Ya hear me?!!" Masao snarled.

"You're too damn loud," Akane lazily muttered, Mudhoney popping into existence above her right shoulder. "But yeah. Now I'm positively blistering with anger," she added in a dour tone.

Masao changed the song on his phone again, the head of his Stand buzzing before unleashing another shimmering wave of compressed sound. This time the lyrics of 'T.N.T' were echoing throughout it, almost invisible pulses erupting within the confines of the wave.

Another bolt of lightning flew from Seiten Taisei's cudgel, the two attacks passing in the corridor and striking against their respective targets. The lightning erupted against Masao's body, launching him off his feet and slamming him harshly into the ground. He writhed and jittered, his body shuddering from the sudden shock.

Meanwhile the concussive wave of sound clipped off Seiten Taisei's ribs, the impact making Ryuji howl as he was suddenly flipped off his feet. He landed harshly on the ground, grimacing and shivering. His right arm was draped heavily along the floor, something definitely broken in one of his arm bones. And with how much it hurt to breathe, Ryuji was sure his ribs had been cracked.

"Ryuji!" Shiho gasped, reaching over and working to haul him closer behind cover. She had known there was a strong risk of Ryuji getting hurt, but this was far worse than what she had feared.

"That... really packs a punch," Ryuji wheezed. He clenched his teeth, struggling to stand and placing his left arm around Shiho's shoulders for a little extra support.

"We need to move, try and find the others..." Shiho said, hastily glancing from side to side.

Ryuji grunted and shut his right eye tight. "Don't think I'm gonna be going too far like this. You go on ahead and I'll buy some time-"

"No!" Shiho hastily replied, giving him an urgent look. She wouldn't abandon any of her allies, especially not him.

Meanwhile Akane was giving Masao a dismissive glance, watching as he shakily struggled to his feet. "You are such a tool... fine, I guess I'll be the one to finish this." She pointed forward,
Mudhoney drifting ahead of her and taking aim with one toothy mouth.

Shiho let out a sharp gasp, ducking low with Ryuji as a flurry of fiery tubes plowed through the material of the corner. Chunks of masonry went flying, and the short controlled burst of Mudhoney's firepower was swiftly eroding through the wall.

"Son of a bitch..." Shiho whispered, pulling Ryuji off to the side as quick as she could. Akira was off on the opposite end of the first floor, so at least he wasn't at risk of a stray shot from here. But Shiho knew if they didn't think of something soon, then there wouldn't be much to stop these two from getting to their downed leader.

"It's been fun kids," Akane said in a flat tone. "But we should wrap this up. Mr. A expects results, after all. I'll shred the flesh from your bones."

Mudhoney's beam came to a halt, the front-facing mouth now starting to tremble as a large bubble of gas materialized at the opening. It swiftly grew larger and larger, and a shot like that would do more than just blow some chips from the corner. Shiho grit her teeth and continued moving, summoning Eris to brace for the impact.

"DORA!"

There was a sound like the crack of gunfire echoing off the walls, reaching Shiho's ears. A white spectral fist shot through the air and clocked Akane on the back of the head, knocking her out in one fluid blow that left the young woman sprawled on the floor in a heap.

Masao turned sharply, finding himself staring up at a tall and strongly built young man. He was dressed in a dark brown leather jacket that had a golden peace sign button on the collar and golden studs on the sleeves, his legs covered by dark trousers that led to a pair of heavy boots. Most distinguishing about him was his exceptionally well-maintained pompadour.

His Stand floated at his side, a towering and muscular humanoid with pink skin, sections of his body layered under dense pale blue plates of armour. Most distinct were the heart-shaped pieces on his shoulders, abdomen, and chin. A cubic helm adorned his head, dark tubes rolling from his neck into his back.

Josuke scratched the back of his neck, glancing down at Akane. "You know, I don't normally like hitting girls, but... talking about blasting people's skin off is pretty messed up. So you're definitely not one of my Sister's friends."

Now Shiho found the nerve to move back toward the damaged corner and peered around, her eyes widening slightly at what she saw. "That..." Shiho examined the newcomer for a moment, paying particular attention to his distinct hairstyle. "That's Josuke! Shizuka's brother!" she said.

A faint smile touched on Ryuji's face. "That so? Looks like the cavalry just arrived..."

Bathory fired off an attack on reflex, this one coming out as a shrieking burst of sound with no content powering it further. "Crazy Diamond!" Josuke exclaimed, his Stand instantaneously intercepting the burst with his arms crossed as a makeshift shield.

Josuke grimaced from the impact, his heels skidding a few inches back along the tiled ground. Some tears and scratches formed along his jacket, but Crazy Diamond was able to block a lot of the potential damage.
"Dunno who the fuck you are pal," Masao grumbled. "But you aint on the hit list... so now's your one chance to get the fuck outta' here!"

"Yeah... that's not gonna happen," Josuke replied in a casual tone, letting his right hand rest on his hip. "I'm here to find my Sister, and if anyone's planning on hurting her..." A dangerous edge formed in his glare, an aura of menace shimmering around him. "Then they're gonna have a real bad night."

Masao grit his teeth in annoyance. "Yeah, that's nice... last warning pal. Clear outta' here before I tear you to shreds. Starting with scalping that stupid hairdo off your head!"

Shiho felt a nervous chill run down her spine. She had learned enough about Josuke to know that Masao had just awoken a slumbering dragon.

"What..." Angry veins suddenly formed along the edges of Josuke's forehead, Crazy Diamond's glimmering aura intensifying around him. His right eye was positively twitching right now. "The FUCK did you just say about my hair?!"

What happened next happened so quickly that Shiho could barely register. Crazy Diamond snapped forward like a speeding bullet, his arms a pair of unseen blurs that hammered against Masao's body at a relentless pace. A golden aura engulfed Masao's body as his frame was snapped and jerked around under Crazy Diamond's fist. And through it all there was a thunderous roar from Crazy Diamond: "DORARARARARA!!"

A hard blow shattered his phone like a pane of glass, the golden aura sucking the shards and Masao's headphones toward his chest. Crazy Diamond pulled back and clenched his fist, the golden aura dispersing around his body.

Masao was left covered in bruises, panting and shaking as he cast his gaze down toward his chest. His headphones were planted in his ears, the wires trailing down toward his sternum. The screen of his phone was glowing through his skin, the frame outlined in his chest. "What... what the fu-"

Masao was cut off by Crazy Diamond smacking him in the chest, kickstarting some music on his phone at max volume. Even at this distance Shiho could hear it rather clearly, before Masao's screams drowned it out. His whole body shuddered before he was knocked out by another hard punch, deafened by the blaring scream of music. Josuke breathed an annoyed sigh and pulled Masao's phone from his chest, the wound closing back up in passing.

Now Josuke turned his attention toward Shiho. "Hey, you're a... Shujin student, right? I'm trying to find my sister, and... I figure you're friends with her, right?"

Just like that Josuke had snapped back to a calm demeanour. It was honestly a little worrying. "Uh... y-yeah, that's right..." Shiho said. "Um, you're a healer right? We could... maybe use a hand here?"

"N-no rush or anything," Ryuji said, ignoring the pain in his body. He'd rather suffer the broken bones than risk the same treatment that Masao just got.

"Ah, no problem," Josuke said, making his way to the two Shujin students. "Shizuka's butler called and said that she might be in trouble, so I raced to Tokyo as quick as I could... problem is Tokyo's a big place, and I had no idea where to even look. Until I called the Foundation, and they told me she
came in here with some friends."

"We got separated," Shiho admitted, frowning and glancing away. "Two of our friends got hurt, and we brought them here but... w-well then these guys, and a few others, ambushed us."

"Enemies huh..." Josuke trailed off as he continued his approach to Ryuji. Crazy Diamond held his hands out, a golden aura glimmering over his wounds and mending his broken bones at a rapid pace. "Looks like I've got more work to do..."

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Lars was making his way steadily through the corridor, regularly glancing around for any sign of his quarry. She was a slippery one, as to be expected of any target who could turn invisible at will. But she was injured and tired, she couldn't make it too far in her current state.

He had even made sure to do a little damage to the stairwell door, just to make sure she couldn't easily backtrack through there. Any movement on the door and the shriek of the hinges would alert in right away.

"Shizuka Joestar... the infamous invisible girl..." Lars murmured to himself. He had perhaps expected this day to come ever since he found out about a Joestar moving to Tokyo. But he definitely hadn't expected the scenario to be quite so... hectic.

Lars came to a sudden stop, a strange scent hitting his nose. Smoke? There was something burning nearby, but what... The assassin stopped in his tracks and glanced to the ceiling, spying a few sprinklers built into the area above him.

"Trying to activate the sprinklers, Joestar?" Lars asked aloud, tightening his grip on the dagger in his right hand. "I'll commend your ingenuity, but that won't work. I took the time to don a waterproof suit today, just in case you wanted to use that against me," he remarked, stalking steadily closer to the source of the scent.

Lars rounded a corner near the stairwell entrance and came upon quite a sight. Shizuka Joestar, panting for breath and leaning for support with her back against one sturdy wall. In her hand she was holding a mop handle, the top having been snapped off. The brush of the mop was in the middle of the floor ahead of her, smoldering with a thin layer of fire. Modest coils of smoke were rising from it.

"Heh... worth a shot," Shizuka said, smiling bitterly. "Guess it doesn't matter, the smoke isn't reaching high enough to hit the detector. Just my luck."

"I take it you're done running?" Lars asked, slowly sliding a folded shuriken from the inside of his coat. "In that case, I'll make this quick. I'm not one to prolong suffering if I can help it."

"Take your best shot," Shizuka spat, tightening her grip on the broken mop in her hands. "Even if I die, you and your boss are still f*cked. I'm just one name you need to worry about."

Lars neared the wall, taking aim with his left hand. With her leaning against the wall like this, he'd just need to arc it off the wall. It wouldn't lose much momentum from just a tiny scrape. "I'll keep that in mind," Lars curtly replied. He flicked the bladed weapon from his hand, the edge arcing near the wall and scraping into the metal and kicking up a few sparks in passing.
A sudden eruption of fire, like the roar of a dragon, exploded off the wall. Lars eyes widened, a shocked gasp leaving him as the surge of flame lashed onto his right arm and coiled around his sleeve. "WHAT?!" he spat, jumping back as the fire continued to spread along his jacket.

"Kerosene," Shizuka pointedly said. "I saw all the sparks your attacks kicked up in the past, figured that fire would be a pretty good tool against you. And the burning mop, well that was a good way to try and mask any scent and drawn you in." She had even taken the time to coat the other walls near her position, just in case Lars came from the other corner.

Lars growled, his right hand gripping a section of his jacket and undershirt. He tore it clean off in a single rush of superhuman strength, the burning fabric landing in a heap at his feet. A few knots of burnt flesh were now spread along his left arm and chest. Now that he was shirtless, Shizuka could see the open phonebooks that he had tied to his back and chest. Small wonder he was so durable with all those pages being reinforced by his Stand.

With the flames spreading over the book on his chest, he reached over with his left hand and tore a smoldering chunk off and tossed it aside to leave him safe. "If you think that will stop me..." Lars growled.

Panting for breath and swaying slightly on her feet, Shizuka handed the broken broom handle to Houdini. She scraped the tip against the burning section of wall until the peak was wreathed in crackling flame.

"I didn't think that would be enough... but this will be," Shizuka firmly said. Houdini threw the makeshift flaming spear with her remaining might, the burning wood making a beeline for Lars. However, even slightly distracted, he managed to dodge off to the side to avoid the incoming spear.

It sailed past him, but that was what Shizuka had wanted. She wasn't aiming at Lars, after all.

She was aiming behind him.

There was a resounding clanging sound that echoed through the corridor as the burning mop punched a hole through something unseen. It came to a halt a few feet behind Lars, the burning peak of the spear now embedded in an invisible propane tank.

A powerful explosion rocked the area around them, flinging Shizuka off her feet as the deafening roar sent tremors through the entire bottom floor.
The Relentless Painkiller (III)

Makoto, Ann, and Futaba had been away from Akira's room when the chaos began, and naturally they had tried to make a beeline to his room. It didn't take much to figure that he was the most endangered by this current intruder alert.

"Oh man... oh man... running outside the Metaverse... is terrible!" Futaba huffed, her face having gone even redder than the crimson lights overhead. She was trailing behind the two older girls, and with the corridors being as narrow as they were she couldn't summon Necronomicon for speedy travel.

"Just stick close!" Makoto quickly told her, sparing the occasional glance over her shoulder in case anyone came at them from behind. They had been hearing more than a little violence throughout this whole ordeal, as if a war was going on in other parts of the building.

Ann swallowed hard. "I hope Morgana's... cocoon thing is okay. But we can't risk going all the way down to the bottom floor. Not until we know Akira's safe." She had been keeping an eye on the feline's observation room when they got here, waiting to see any sort of change in his condition. He had gotten hurt protecting her, after all. The least she could do was thank him when he came too.

They skidded around one corner, leaving only one long corridor between themselves and Akira's room. But already they could see trouble ahead. Sojiro was just outside Akira's room, standing to attention opposite a towering man in thuggish attire, a bandage covering over his right ear. To his left was a hulking golem formed from some kind of clean blue steel.

"Oh no... Sojiro!" Futaba gasped, quickly gaining a second wind as the girls started racing down the corridor.

"Last warning old man, get outta the way. I had to get a little 'gruff' with some of the staff here to find this room, and I'd hate to have that effort go t' waste," Kaneda said, sneering down at Sojiro. "Since you're just standin' there like a tree, I'm guessin' you don't got a Stand of your own. So I don't need to kill you. But I'm pretty short on mercy when people get in my way."

Sojiro narrowed his eyes behind his glasses. "You're right, I don't know much when it comes to any of that... weird supernatural junk. It's all well above my paygrade. But that kid in there is like a son to me, and I'm not about to let an ape like you get to him without a fight."

"Tch... real touching," he sarcastically replied. "I'm hoping to make this quick. I sent one of my golems off to pick through the rest of those kids, and I'm hoping to get back to him soon," Kaneda said. He stopped, a strange sensation suddenly washing through him. Wait, the golem he sent off, it just... vanished?

Sojiro suddenly lunged forward, his left fist shooting forward with impressive speed as he clocked Kaneda in the jaw. He staggered backward, caught off guard, and was left open for a right hook that caught him in the gut.

Kaneda snarled and stomped forward, throwing out a swift right punch of his own that Sojiro deftly ducked under. The older man had his fists raised, adrenaline now quickly coursing through his
veins.

It had been a long time since he'd been in a real fight. It brought back memories of his old job, or his time as a street punk in his foolish teenage years. Some skills never left a man, even after many years.

Sojiro sidestepped a quick punch from the beefier guy, and then weaved away from Kaneda's next punch. His golem was standing silently behind Kaneda, and it seemed the thug saw this as some manner of pride. He'd take Sojiro down with his bare hands.

Another hard blow met Kaneda's ribs, but this time the towering man was barely slowed by it. It felt like punching a slab of granite... Either he was just that tough, or Sojiro's age was catching up on him faster than he wanted to admit. Regardless he managed to weave away from another strike from Kaneda and responded in kind, hitting him in the face with a hard blow to the nose that sent a splash of blood across Sojiro's right fist.

Kaneda suddenly caught Sojiro by his right wrist, his left knee shooting up and nailing him in the gut, knocking the wind from Sojiro's body. The older man wheezed, swaying on his feet, until a strong cross clocked Sojiro in the face and knocked him to the floor, his glasses skidding away from him.

Sojiro grimaced, his palms pressed to the floor as he struggled to rise back up. "I warned you old man," Kaneda said flatly, rubbing under his nose with the back of his right hand.

"As if I'm just gonna... roll over and let you hurt that kid..." After taking in Futaba, he had told himself he wouldn't get mixed up in other people's business. Only trouble came from doing that. But it seemed Akira was just a bad influence and had really rubbed off on Sojiro.

He could feel the ground shake as the golem lumbered toward him, the heavy footsteps echoing down the hall. "Yeah? Well now you're gonna die for him."

Before the golem could get any closer however, a sudden neon flash of green exploded against the golem's back and tore a chunk from his armoured left shoulder. Kaneda recoiled in shock, his eyes widening. "The hell?!" he shouted, snapping his head around and catching sight of the three Arditi girls racing toward him. "Tch... Hard Knock Life!"

Kaneda's Stand appeared in a flourish of glittering golden light, swiftly spitting out another seed that stuck into a nearby wall. It quickly ballooned outward and took on the form of another blue steel golem, rising to its full imposing height.

The new golem surged forward, swinging his right arm up sharply and catching both of Anat's incoming fists. The blow rocked the hallway, the metal of the golem's arm warping inward from the impact.

Anat traded a few swift blows with her ironclad foe before a strong uppercut slammed into her Persona and slammed it into the ceiling, tearing a chunk out of it in passing. Makoto grunted, a strong pain resonating through her back, but she was quick to hold her ground.

Sojiro blinked a few times, only barely catching a glimpse of something unseen rapidly striking against the golem, each strike denting his armour. Whatever Niijima's younger sister was doing, it was pretty destructive. "I really am getting too old for this..." Sojiro muttered to himself.
The first golem rushed at Anat, but this time Ann took the lead. The blonde stepped forward, the air around her shimmering with potent heatwaves as Hecate formed in front of her. A focused beam of heat lanced outward and struck the golem's stumpy feet. The strong surge of fire turned his legs red hot, with the limbs quickly melting into sludge that sent the golem crashing noisily to the ground.

"You little..." Kaneda muttered. He took a surprised step back, watching as Anat slammed her fists into the second golem, a flash of superhuman power vaporizing the top half of his summoned beast. The remnants fizzled and suddenly converted into a rapidly dispersing cloud of pale smoke. "Think I can't make more? You're sorely mistak-"

A dark whip suddenly lashed out of Futaba's left hand, the dense mass clocking Kaneda across the face. His face snapped off to one side, his back loudly colliding with the hard floor, and just like that he was out cold.

"You're not going to get away with hurting my Dad," Futaba firmly said, letting out a small huff of annoyance.

"So this is what you kids get up to," Sojiro remarked. He plucked his glasses off the ground, letting out an annoyed scoff as he saw a crack along the right lens. "Son of a... Serves me right for getting into a fistfight."

"Sorry sir," Makoto said, giving him an apologetic bow. Makoto stood to attention and glanced to her knuckles, seeing a few bloody scratches on them. "Not that things were a whole lot better on my end."

Ann glanced to Akira's room and breathed a tiny sigh of relief. "Well, at least that guy didn't get in there. And Akira's likely been unconscious through all this."

Sojiro nodded. "One of his doctor's is in there monitoring him. So I guess the kid's gonna be fine after all," he mused.

"Yeah, but we better check just to be sure. And then-" Futaba was cut off by a distant bang, a thunderous explosion resounding from below them. The redhead's eyes widened, and she felt herself glancing from side to side quickly.

"W-what the heck?!" Ann gasped.

Makoto's eyes narrowed, some concern clear in her expression. "I don't know why, but... I think that was Shizuka. You guys stay here, I'm gonna go find her!" With that the brunette turned and started sprinting from Akira's room.

Something dangerous and explosive... it definitely sounded like something Shizuka would do.

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Even at a distance, the explosion had hit harder than Shizuka had expected. The young woman was sprawled on her back, her vision swimming while a constant hum rang through her ears. With a good deal of effort, Shizuka moved to sit upright and tried to ignore the repeating stabs of pain she felt in her body.

Houdini had moved in front of her as soon as the blast went off, soaking up some of the shrapnel so
it couldn't hit her directly. But even so she could feel the burn in her arms, legs, and stomach.

Shizuka tried to stand, only to end up flopping onto her stomach. She grimaced and tried to wriggle her toes, breathing a small sigh of relief as she felt them curl in her shoes. Seems nothing was broken, but she just couldn't find the strength to stand up at the moment. "Jesus Christ..." she said, coughing a few times.

A few seconds passed, before the fire alarm rang out with a constant drilling noise. The sprinklers overhead flared to life, thin sprays of water shooting out from the sprinklers overhead. Any flames left behind by the kerosene and exploded propane tank were steadily washed away, while the burning stench lingered in the humid air.

Eventually Shizuka's vision focused enough so that she could see Lars, the older man sprawled out on the floor just a few feet from her. His chest was rising and falling at a slow rate, so he was still alive. The armour adorning him had soaked up a lot of the damage from the blast. But not enough.

As her sight adjusted, Shizuka could see that his left arm was twisted at an uncomfortable angle, broken in some fashion. His right leg was heavy and limp on the ground, several bloodied shards of the propane tank lodged into the flesh of his leg.

Yet despite all this, there was a strange serenity in his expression. His glasses had been lost in the chaos, a few soot stains marking his angular features. "So... I guess that's it?" he asked in a soft tone.

"Yeah... looks like..." Shizuka panted, maintaining a steady distance. Even with two broken limbs, his right hand was still a lethal weapon. "I don't like hurting people either... but I had to do it."

"I understand," Lars curtly admitted. A tiny smile graced his face, while he kept his gaze focused on the ceiling. "I'm actually rather impressed. Even injured and exhausted as you are, you still turned the tables on me... you really are a Joestar."

Shizuka smiled despite herself. "Yeah, well you weren't such a bad guy yourself. Got a bit of a noble streak in you, huh?" she mused.

Lars fell silent for a few moments, looking straight up at the ceiling. "I came to Japan to die," he plainly said. "Originally, at least."

"What... what do you mean?" Shizuka asked in a slightly worried tone.

"Outside of my work as a criminal assassin, I had no vices. I lived my life at a reasonable pace, being mindful of what I ate and drank, and never even touched a cigarette. And then one day, while some odd jobs in Afghanistan, I started coughing blood. I had tumors in my lungs, a cancer that just... appeared. Some people are just unlucky like that. A final parting genetic curse from my loving parents," He casually explained, idly brushing his right hand over the scorched phonebook on his chest.

"I knew my time was short, and so I decided I would spend my twilight years somewhere that interested me. I had become infatuated with Japan after reading a history book in the orphanage, and... well, that part isn't important... I decided to gather all the blood money I had earned, and would try and live out a few quiet years as the cancer claimed me."

Shizuka nodded slightly. "But that didn't work out, I take it? And then you ended up meeting Mr.
"A?" she asked.

Lars nodded without looking her way. "Retirement turned out to be boring, and I decided to do a job or two while I had the time... and he was hiring. There was a kindness to him I found in no other employer, where he seemed... well, interested in what I had to say. He wanted to know all about me, and seemed to embrace me wholeheartedly once he knew my life story. I don't know why, but, I felt comfortable talking as soon as we met."

A nostalgic smile touched on his face, curling his right fist gently over his sternum. "I did my first job for him, and soon after he seemed to notice the severity of my cough... and without asking for anything in return he directed me to his doctor, who used his Stand to casually pluck the cancerous cells from my body. In one instant Mr. A had given me my life back."

"Just because he's done some good things to his loyalists, doesn't mean he's a good person," Shizuka curtly said. But it definitely did go a good way to explaining why Lars was so loyal to him.

"You may be right, but that doesn't matter much to me... because that was the first selfless act anyone had ever done for me," he explained with a small huff of breath. The assassin winced slightly, the pain in his body slowly starting to overcome his resistance. "I don't know what will come next... But you kids really are something special. It's a shame we couldn't have met under better circumstances... working alongside you would have been spectacular."

"Guess there's no chance of you switching sides?" Shizuka asked. She had to admit, the guy was noble in his own way. And she felt she could understand him well enough. After all, if her Dad hadn't found her... maybe she would have ended up like him? It was a sobering thought.

Lars softly shook his head. "Never," he answered in a prim tone. He managed to angle his head until he was looking at Shizuka. "I want... no, I need you to understand something. With Mr. A, I... I deeply, truly, loved him..." There was pleading in his expression, a flicker of genuine emotion that seemed almost alien to him.

Shizuka's face set in stone, and she gave him a modest nod. "Yeah. I understand... don't worry, I won't get the wrong idea," she replied.

"Good..." Lars replied, turning his focus back to the ceiling. "But having said this, I've failed him. I'll be imprisoned, and your SID will somehow pull the information I have from my mind. And as such... I don't deserve to be at his side. I don't deserve..." He raised his right hand, grimacing at the effort, and the breathed a sharp hiss as the tips of his fingers abruptly sharpened into a set of ebony claws. "... Anything."

Shizuka's eyes widened considerably. "W-wait, what are yo-" She lunged forward, trying to stop him, only to trail into a sharp gasp as Lars' claws smashed into his own throat, powerful sprays of crimson gushing from his neck. A long gargling sound left him, his eyes rolling back in his head. "No! No no no! Stop!" Shizuka shouted.

She summoned up her remaining strength to close the distance, Houdini fishing Lars' hand from his throat, while her own hands struggled to cover the gushing wound. Her palms were soon dyed crimson, and despite her best efforts, and becoming more frantic by the second, she couldn't stem the bleeding.

"No no... come on! You can't just... you can't just-" There were tears pricking the corners of her
eyes, unknown to her conscious mind. But deep down she knew she didn't want him to die. Not when she saw how easily she could have turned out like him.

The world wasn't fair, something she had grown quite aware of since coming to Tokyo. And Lars' life had been guided by such tragedy. And on some level Shizuka wished she could have changed that.

In his final moments, Lars dreamed of a perfect world.

The life faded from him and he grew still under Shizuka's hands, her eyes wide as she slowly raised her palms from the wound. "Oh... oh g-god..." she fell back into a seated position, tears trailing from the corners of her eyes.

She lost track of how long she was sitting there, and was only roused to some sort of attention by some kind of metal shrieking sound, like worn door hinges being opened. Rapid footsteps were moving through the area, seeming to draw in toward her.

Well if it was another enemy Stand user, they'd have an easy job of it. Shizuka knew she didn't have it in her to fight any more, and even turning invisible would be a test at this point. She remained seated, only turning her head as the footsteps drew closer to her.

A figure rounded the corner, the familiar silhouette of his body making Shizuka's eyes widen. A tall and strong young man with a distinct pompadour hairstyle. "J-Josuke?" she asked, clearly confused. Was her mind playing tricks on her?

"Shizuka!" Josuke quickly exclaimed, sprinting toward the dark haired girl. He let his gaze shift between her and the corpse beside her, his worry only growing more intense. But he didn't let that stop him as he dropped down beside his sister, hugging her tight to his chest. "Come on, deep breaths... you okay?" he quickly asked.

Shizuka didn't answer him, instead she gripped him tight and buried her face into his shoulder to try and dry her eyes. She was shivering, her mind and body an exhausted mess that seemed set to crash any second now.

She didn't know why Josuke was here, or how he knew to be here, but right now that didn't matter to the young woman. Shizuka settled against him as Crazy Diamond's healing golden warmth enveloped her, healing her wounds. It didn't do much for her stamina, but it was at least making her feel a little better.

"You're gonna be okay," Josuke assured her.

There was another shriek of the hinges, followed by a few frantic footsteps racing through the bottom floor. It didn't take Makoto long to skid to a halt around the corner, coming upon the sight of Shizuka embracing someone. With a hairstyle like that, she was quick to recognise him from Shizuka's stories.

"You're okay..." she said, breathing a tiny sigh of relief. Josuke glanced to the young brunette, and then watched as Shizuka reached up and took Makoto's right hand in her own for a reassuring squeeze.

"Yeah... I'm okay..." she eventually said. Physically, at least. Mentally and emotionally, this whole night had been a mad rush.
By the time the SID arrived with a few reserves, everything had been wrapped up. The enemy Stand users were taken into custody (Once Haru had what she wanted from Bloody Sunday, of course), and the SID team took the time to survey the damage done to Athena.

In total three members of staff had been killed by Mr. A's people, collateral damage in their pursuit of the Phantom Thieves. A few other staff members had been injured, but they would recover in time.

Fortunately the patients in the clinic had gone unharmed. That was a small victory to take away from all this.

When Satoshi entered the waiting room of the clinic, he was greeted with the sight of the exhausted Phantom Thieves, and Josuke Higashikata, taking up seats and trying to recover from all that had transpired. He only got a glimpse of Lifeson's body, concealed in a dense black body bag, being wheeled out by a pair of ambulance workers.

He quickly recognised one of the girls in the Arditi, one Shiho Suzui, sobbing into her hands as the body was wheeled through the exit. The others all seemed quite morose, having heard the news of his death, and she seemed to be taking it the hardest. If memory served, Lifeson had helped her recover from some pretty serious shit earlier in the year.

Sergio approached Satoshi from the side, while the older man seemed to be standing by in a stunned silence. "We're still trying to figure out how they tracked us," Sergio said. "We... believe one of the Stand users had some sort of tracking ability on his Stand, but we won't know that until we do some interrogating. One of A's people was killed during all this."

"Lars?" Satoshi asked, seeming to come to attention at last.

Sergio nodded. "Shizuka said he killed himself after he'd been beaten... fanatical loyalty," he grimly said.

Satoshi let out a small humming sound without looking Sergio's way. Mr. A wasn't going to take that news well. "That's one word for it," he finally said.

Lifeson was dead. A good man who had dedicated the entirety of his life to helping others and saving lives, destroyed as an afterthought by these bastards. Satoshi had spent some time trying not to dwell on how much harm Mr. A had been doing over the years, turning a blind eye to the death and destruction.

But now it was being shoved in his face, and Satoshi couldn't look away. He slid his hands into the pockets of his dark coat and clenched them tight, while his expression remained stony and unreadable.

These kids... They had gone up against Mr. A's forces, even exhausted as they were, and won. And if his understanding of events was correct, then this business with Shido involved them going head-to-head against a conspiracy that had shrouded the entire nation. And they were apparently coming out on top.

Maybe they could actually beat Mr. A? If they were that good at doing the impossible, then even
toppling him could be done. All Satoshi needed to do was give them an opening...

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11/10

Once Akira had recovered enough, he was greeted by the sights of a comfortable hospital room, and a chorus of his friends. Thanks to Josuke, healing their wounds had been a trivial matter, though they still needed to get a good deal of rest in order to recover from all they had just gone through.

Kawakami, as she was a good friend to Akira and understood his situation quite well, had been covering for him. As far as Shujin knew, not that too many people were asking around about the world's most mannerly delinquent, he had been called back to his hometown as part of some kind of family emergency.

Once Akira had taken in some food and water, the Arditi took the time to explain all that had transpired, and made a point of introducing him to Josuke. Once Makoto had finished recapping events, the bedraggled young man smoothed out the front of his pale green hospital gown and then held his right hand out to shake.

"Shizuka's brother huh? Heard a lot about you, but it's nice to meet you in person," Akira said, his voice sounding a little hoarse. "Shame we couldn't meet under nicer circumstances, but I definitely owe you. I hear you really saved some bacon."

The taller male smiled fondly. "Ah, it was nothing... as soon as I heard Shizuka was in trouble, well... yeah, I had to run out here as quick as I could. And I figure the shop can stand to be closed for a few days without me." If anything, when Koichi told some of Josuke's prospective customers that he had run off to help his imouto... well that just convinced many of the young women of Morioh that he was even more magnificent, and they had since resolved to make his business even more lucrative when he returned.

"You sure you wanna stick around?" Shizuka asked, glancing up at her brother.

"Of course... I know you well enough to know you're not gonna give up. And if this 'Mr. A' stuff you guys told me about is true, then it's something that's gotta be dealt with. Might as well lend a helping hand while I'm around, right?" Josuke said. He could hardly stop Shizuka, and the current threat was too big to just ignore. "Still, you being one of those 'Phantom Thieves'... Okuyasu actually guessed that before me. Guess he's smarter than me in that respect." Shizuka shivered slightly.

Josuke continued speaking. "Anyway, I can't say that I'm happy you're doing something so dangerous... kinda promised myself I'd protect you when Dad passed. But I can't fault you when you're working for a good cause. And you guys have been doing a lot of good for people."

A faint smirk crossed Shizuka's face. "Yeah? Well, I appreciate the vote of confidence. And with you around, there's no way we can lose... Guess we should get in touch with Mitsuru too, see if we can get a little extra support on our side."

"Not a bad idea. When we narrow down A's location, we could do with the extra help... no telling what else he has up his sleeve," Akira remarked. He breathed a heavy sigh. "Still... Lifeson's dead. That's something we can't let slide..."
"He was killed as an afterthought... being in the wrong place and the wrong time, as cliche as that sounds," Shiho bitterly said. "So help me... I'm going to make sure that son of a bitch pays for what he's done," she added.

Yusuke nodded with a firm resolve. "I had a great deal of respect for that man and his selfless nature. And not putting a stop to Mr. A would be a great disservice to his name," the bluenette explained.

"Well... I sure don't envy the position you kids are in," Sojiro said, scratching the back of his neck. "Just don't overdo it, yeah? You might need a little time to fully recover and adjust to the new... limb," Sojiro said, glancing to Akira's left hand.

The artificial limb had been perfectly grafted onto Akira's stump, and was currently covered with a layer of synthetic skin that looked just like the real deal. But whenever he moved his new digits in any fashion, a keen ear could perhaps hear the faint whirring of the various mechanisms therein.

Akira nodded slightly at the older man. "Yeah, don't sweat it. Give me an extra day or two and I'll be good as new."

Sojiro sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "This kid... loses a hand and he treats it like a broken nail. Didn't think things would get this weird when I agreed to take you in..." Sojiro shrugged slightly. "Well, if I had a chance at a do over, I wouldn't change anything."

"Heh. Personally I'm just glad this big bastard is up and about," Ryuji said, grinning broadly. "Makes me feel better with him around. Plus now he's gonna be around to see Shido confess his crimes to the whole country."

"Hell yeah," Akira confidently replied, smiling fondly and reaching up with his right hand to give the blond a quick high five.

"Well, we should probably let you get your strength back for now. And we need to tell Higashikata-san a few more details about the current situation," Makoto explained, glancing to the pompadour-toting young man.

Shizuka paused for a brief moment in thought, before giving Futaba a gentle nudge with her elbow. The redhead bristled slightly, giving the dark-haired girl a sideways glance. Shizuka nodded faintly at her. This was perhaps the best shot Futaba was gonna get.

Futaba gently cleared her throat. "You guys go on ahead, I've got something super important to talk to Akira about," she said.

"Alright. Guess we're gonna head to Leblanc, so you can meet up with us there," Ryuji said, nodding to the short hacker.

"Actually, I will need to take a brief detour too. Father apparently opened his eyes last night, and I'm hoping that I can speak to him today. If we can get him and Shido-san to confess at the same time, then the legal system will have a much easier time doing some prosecution," Haru explained.

And so, one by one, the large group filtered out of Akira's hospital room until he was alone with the hacker. "Whoof... it's been a pretty wild few days. Sorry I slept through all the chaos," he remarked. "Speaking of... how's Morgana? Has there ben any change with him?" he asked.
Futaba shrugged daintily. "No real change... apparently there are still vital signs coming from the cocoon, and it's definitely grown a bit. But I haven't been able to reach Mona through Necronomicon... With any luck he'll be up soon."

"Yeah," Akira said, smiling sadly. He had spent much of the year living with Morgana, and yet there was still so much they didn't know about him. Whatever he was going through now, they had no way of understanding it. And it was likely that Morgana didn't understand it much either.

"Well... that cat is tough. He'd probably laugh at us for worrying about him. Anyway, what's on your mind?" he asked.

The young woman hesitated for a moment, looking at the dark-haired boy with just a faint hint of worry in her eyes. "It's... okay I kinda lied, it's not 'super important' compared to everything that's going on, but it's really personal. I wanted to say something to you when I saw you got hurt... b-but I couldn't bring myself to talk."

"Well, we have time now," Akira assured her. "By all means, speak your mind."

"Easy for you to say. I kinda stink when it comes to talking to people and dealing with emotions," Futaba replied. She was improving at a steady rate, but speaking about something so personal was a big leap for her. But it had to be done. Sighing heavily, Futaba reached over and settled her hand over Akira's new prosthetic. It felt oddly warm to the touch. "But I'll try. Over this past while, we've been hanging out a lot, and you've been super nice to me. But I was wondering if um... if I'm the only one you spend this much time with? I mean... uh..."

She seemed to quickly get tonguetied, and Akira soon assuaged her worried by rotating his hand and giving Futaba's a very gentle squeeze. "It's okay. Truth be told, with how hairy things got with Shido, there was something I wanted to talk to you about too... Futaba I... I care about you a whole lot. I care about all my friends, obviously, but you're different. I've really come to admire your intelligence, your kindness, your... unique sense of humor. And most of all, seeing you get braver and more confident by the day, has been really great to see."

She really had come a good way out of her shell. Sure Futaba could still idle a lot of time as a lazy hacker otaku, but this time it was by choice. No longer did she need to cling to Akira's shadow like she had when she first started leaving her room, and with the way things were going she'd definitely be set to resume school next year.

"What um... what are you getting at, Akira?" Futaba asked.

"What I'm getting at is..." Akira trailed off, trying to piece together the right words. This was a sensitive matter, after all. "Is that I've had my feelings change over the course of knowing you. And that I'd like to be more than just friends with you."

Futaba fell silent, staring at Akira in wide eyed shock. With how silent she had just become, it was as if her brain needed to be rebooted from the shock.

"Futaba?" Akira asked, reaching over with his right and giving her shoulder a light jostle. "You... you there?"

Once the OS of her brain had rebooted, Futaba blinked a few times. She simply mustered a plain 'Ah' of response at first. "You want... me?" she asked in modest shock.
Akira smiled faintly. "Of course. I'd be pretty honoured, actually," Akira said. "Being with one of the smartest and bravest girls in Japan? Of course that's what I want."

"H-hey, no need to go overboard with the flattery," Futaba replied, laughing awkwardly and glancing away from him. By now her cheeks were as red as a tomato. "Well... I gguuuueesss I could go for that. Not that I've been thinking about this for any length of time... B-Boyfriend."

Akira's smile broadened a bit. "Well, it's true. From now on, we're in this together. I'll have your back and you have mine, in the Metaverse and the real world."

Futaba nodded firmly. "Can't promise I'll be as good at real world stuff, but... yeah, I unerstand. I'll do everything I can to help you, and everyone else." Her smile returned as she settled both her hands on Akira's own. "It's weird, you know. Having people that I can rely on... that are also relying on me. In the past, I could only really rely on Mom and Sojiro. I'll admit that it's a little nervewracking but also... really good too. I like being support for all of you."

"You've grown a lot," Akira assured her. "I'm pretty sure you can take on the world on your own two feet now... but don't forget you've got plenty of folks in your corner now," he added.

She grinned excitedly, a glint of light overgead catching the lenses of her glasses and making them glow a vibrant white. "Well, I'm probably a little overlevelled thanks to you... but I do feel a whole heck of a lot stronger now."

And, inside Futaba's heart, a change overtook her.

A warm white light engulfed the entirety of Necronomicon's hull, the energy warping around the flying saucer and rapidly warping its dimensions. In the span of a few seconds, the ship had changed into a vast and perfectly smooth sphere of some alien ebony matter.

Strange pulsating veins marked the exterior of the new craft. The color radiating from these markings shifted in hue at a slow and steady pace, encompassing all the colours of the rainbow.

Necronomicon was gone. In its place stood Prometheus.

Futaba's eyes widened slightly, her mind racing as she took in the sensation of a new power radiating in her heart. Her attention shifted to Akira, and her smile returned while a rosy hue lingered on her cheeks. "Okay, well... now that my power's grown, I guess I really am OP. But if I have to carry a team... I'm glad that it's our team," she said.

Akira guided Futaba close, their lips meeting for a brief and chaste moment. Things had not gone perfectly, but they had won in the end. And for what they had lost, it only made Akira more determined to see this through.

All they had to do now was figure out how to reach Mr. A, and once he was out of the way his whole operation would hopefully fall apart like a house of cards.
Tomorrow was set to be the day they made their first trip into Shido's Palace, and so they wanted to enjoy today as best they could and use it as a chance to relax and unwind. And, as luck would have it, the school festival was on.

It wasn't anything too wild, but it was a casual affair where they could enjoy themselves and forget about their job for just a little while.

The Arditi entered Shujin's lobby at a leisurely pace, the entryway marked by strings of bunting, assorted decorations lining the walls while arrows pointed out the various activities that had been set up through the school. Akira surveyed their surroundings, watching as two third year girls handed out maps that detailed the floor plan.

"It seems the school festival has been quite a success," Yusuke idly mused as he examined the crowded hallways ahead.

"Indeed," Hifumi mused. "Kosei's was rather large too, but this feels more... personal? Well, perhaps that's not the right word, but with how artistic Kosei is, things felt a little more... sterile there, I suppose."

"Great ramen though," Sergio said, grinning excitedly.

Ryuji let out a low sigh and shrugged his shoulders. "Figures there'd be more people here this year with how infamous the school has been. This year's been nuts..."

All the while, Futaba adjusted her glasses and examined the area. This wasn't her first trip to Shujin. She had asked Akira to show her around, and he and Makoto had done a good job outlining the structure to her. It had dug up a few memories of how much she hated elementary and middle school, but that was besides the point.

It was definitely a lot more busy now than swinging by the school after class. But it was nothing she couldn't handle. "Well... no point in worrying about stuff like that, right? We came out here to relax a lil'," Futaba said.

Ann nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, Futaba's right! Let's not think about our 'you know what' business. Today's all about having a good time."

"Don't go overboard. With how infamous Shujin has been, an event like this... it's possible there are plainclothes officers here," Makoto warned, keeping her tone low for the time being.

"Right," Akira said with a nod. "So have fun, but not too much fun. We wanna try and keep something of a low profile."

"We're not exactly a crowd that's great at blending in... We have three infamous delinquents," Shizuka said, gesturing to Akira, Ryuji, and Ann. "Three Kosei students," then to Yusuke, Hifumi, and Sergio. "Student council president and the heiress to Okumura Foods," then to Makoto and Haru. "And of course, yours truly: The Alice Roosevelt-grade socialite of the group."
"Alice who's-a-what?" Ryuji asked, scratching the top of his head.

Morgana poked his head from the opening of Akira's bag. "I dunno who that is, but she sounds important. So... I guess a famous rich girl from America?"

Shizuka grinned. "She was the daughter of the greatest president to ever live: Theodore Roosevelt!"

While Shizuka went into a lengthy spiel detailing the many adventures of the 26th POTUS, including injecting her own theory that he was some breed of Stand user, Haru made her way to the two girls handing out printed maps. She took a few of them graciously, bowing politely to the girls, and then made her way back to the others.

The strawberry blonde was quick to start handing them out, one by one throughout the group. "And then after taking Panama he- Oh, thank you Haru," Shizuka said, derailing her own train of thought as she took up one of the maps and started peering at the contents.

"Oh thank God..." Sergio murmured as he took his own up.

"What's this one here?" Ryuji asked, pointing to one of the rooms listed on the second floor.

"'Group Date Cafe'? The hell is that?"

Makoto wrinkled her nose a bit. "Sounds bad... I imagine that class only picked something like this because it wouldn't require too much effort on their part. Let's avoid that one."

"Agreed," Shiho said. "But look here, on the third floor: Shooting range. I think I saw them setting that up earlier today. They have some target shooting with those little um... Nerf gun things. And some of those games where you hit a stack of bottles with a baseball."

Shizuka clicked her tongue against her teeth. "Might be rigged... but nuts to it, let's go for it!"

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Akira held the fake gun forward in his right hand, assuming a rather formal stance as he examined the target that had been tacked onto the far wall. It was a standard dartboard target, with the player given three shots to use. The closer a shot hit to the bullseye, the more points that was worth. And the more points a person got, the better the prize they could earn from the game.

"Alright," he murmured, the air seeming to shimmer around him from an intense heat. "Let the games begin."

Akira squeezed the trigger firmly, the first felt dart sailing through the air with a somewhat impressive speed. It launched forward and hit a few notches above the bullseye, bouncing off right after. "Tch..."

The heat around Akira seemed to intensify, his eyes narrowing and his aim growing level as he focused back on the distant target. The second shot sailed from the cartoonish plastic pistol, crossing the distance in a swift arc before the felt tip hit the board. This time it struck just along the rim of the bullseye.

"Dude," Ryuji murmured, leaning in close to the bespectacled boy. "Dial it back a notch. You're
the one that said we gotta blend in."

"No way. I'm winning that inkling statue, no matter what," Akira replied. "Besides, I'm hearing this from you? The guy that blitzed the baseball game?"

Ryuji glanced over his shoulder toward Shiho and Ann, the former clutching a small Jack Frost plush in her hands. The blond shrugged slightly. "I'm happy with the end result there," he said.

Shizuka, standing a few feet to Akira's left, glanced over to the rows of prizes that had been set up on desks lining the right side of the room. They were marked into distinct row, the front of which outlined how many points a person needed to be eligible for one of those prizes. The inkling statue Akira had his eyes on was worth a fair few points.

The young Joestar paid particular focus to it, the cartoonish figure being a short girl with a wicked grin, a head of orange... tentacles? And a set of heavy dark rims around her eyes. She certainly looked familiar. "Gee, I wonder why he wants that one so badly," Shizuka said in a flat tone.

"Quiet you," Akira replied quickly. He took aim for his third and final shot, his aim growing level as he took in a calming breath.

He squeezed the plastic trigger once again, the dart sailing through the air and striking the bullseye dead on. A sly grin crossed Akira's face as he set the fake pistol on the table beside him. "Crushed it," he said confidently.

The mousy brunette overseeing the game swallowed hard. "Y-you... you seem quite good with a weapon, Kurusu-san," she squeaked.

"Yeah, I guess I am," Akira confidently replied. Well, soon the rumor mill would start flying about him being some kind of Yakuza triggerman, when the reality was much stranger. Nobody would believe he got a damn good aim from fighting cognitive demons, and regularly playing a lightgun game with a loudmouth kid at the arcade.

Oh well. He got the prize, and that was what mattered.

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Their next trip brought them to a classroom filled with history related displays, each diorama relating to some aspect of Japanese history from the past thousand years or so. There were over a dozen displays littered throughout the room, with small groups of wandering students moving from desk to desk to take in the sights.

Shizuka and Makoto came to a stop by a detailed recreation of Edo Castle, the small wooden structure sporting white walls, sloping dark brown plastic tiles, and a heavy stone base. A few printed cards on the table listed important informaton about the structure, and as much history as the model maker could find.

"That's pretty damn cool... Must've taken ages to make this," Shizuka noted.

"Yeah, no doubt... I was actually the one to help write these little fact cards," Makoto said, smiling with a clear pride. "I got to see the model being built, and would've helped out more if it wasn't for... well, other matters."
Shizuka nodded slightly. "Yeah. Student council stuff, right?" She gave her girlfriend a wink. "Still, your class did great work on this stuff... Kinda strange seeing a real Palace after... well, everything from this year."

"Mm. It actually looks a lot more humble, scale aside," Makoto noted. "Although, in researching Edo Castle... I do have to envy that kind of dignified opulence," she noted.

A grin spread across Shizuka's face as she gave Makoto's shoulders a squeeze. "Aha! Well if that's how you want it, I'll get you a castle of your own! I'm sure I can afford one," she remarked, beaming with pride.

Makoto laughed slightly, squeezing Shizuka's shoulders in turn. "No need to go that far on my behalf... but it is nice to know you would."

"Hehe. Think nothing of it," Shizuka replied. "Well, let's go catch up with the others... Haru really wants to get some of the Takoyaki they're selling here."

"Russian Takokayki?" Akira read aloud, his gaze affixed to a paper menu that had been pinned to the wall outside classroom. Most of the other forms of takoyaki listed on the menu had been crossed off, leaving the Russian option the most visible. "I have... no idea what that is."

"Who cares? If it's Takoyaki, I bet it'll taste great," Morgana said from the confines of Akira's bag. Hifumi let out a tiny humming sound. "Russian... maybe it has vodka in it?" she offered.

"Absolutely not," Makoto primly replied. Nothing like that was gonna fly under Makoto's watch, that was for sure.

Sergio shrugged and made for one of the tables that had been set up: A series of desks pressed together with a large white cloth draped over the surfaces. "Maybe it's communist takoyaki and we're about to be served several empty bowls."

Haru smiled. "Let's stay positive everyone. I'm sure it'll be great!" she cheerily stated.

Shrugging, Akira made his way to the maid-dressed girl operating the proceedings, ordering a few portions for the group. When asked about specifically what Russian takoyaki was, she seemed quite coy. All she said was that one of the balls would have a surprise in it.

And really, that could mean anything.

Regardless Akira had gone ahead and paid, and soon approached the table with a few cardboard dishes in his hands, each one filled with steaming spheres of battered octopus drizzled in a thin layer of soy sauce.

Shizuka sniffed the air, examining the portion nearest to her. "What's the gag? They look and smell just like the regular kind," she remarked.

"The girl serving them told me there's some kind of surprise in them, but..." Akira trailed off, now looking a little uncertain about the whole thing.
"It's like Russian roulette," Futaba abruptly said, her gaze locked to the screen of her phone. "According to this site, most of the takoyaki in those bowls is normal. But each serving has one ball loaded with wasabi. Like how Russian roulette is played with a gun with one bullet in it," she explained.

"Oh, how fun!" Haru said enthusiastically.

"You have a pretty dangerous definition of fun," Ann replied, keeping a calm tone.

Eventually Sergio reached over with a toothpick, plucking one of the steaming balls up on the tip. "As long as it's edible, I'm going for it." He brought it to his lips and bit it clean in half, seeming to take it without issue. Swallowing, Sergio breathed a small sigh of relief. "A normal one. Lucky me."

"A ball laced with wasabi... Sounds almost poisonous," Shiho said, focusing intensely on the bowls ahead. "I... don't think I'll take that risk."

"Meh, don't worry about it. I'll take the hit," Ryuji said, reaching over with a toothpick of his own.

Right about now, Akira was starting to wonder if he should have invited Caroline and Justine to the festival. No doubt they would have enjoyed it, especially this part. Then again there were enough weird rumors circulating around him without him bringing two terrifying super-kids with him to school.

Ryuji plucked one of the takoyaki spheres up in a fluid motion and bit it in half. Instant regret crossed his face, his face going a vibrant red as he clamped his right hand over his mouth. Ann snickered at the sight.

"Too spicy for ya?" the blonde teased.

Tears were pricking the corners of Ryuji's eyes as he spat the wasabi-laced death sphere into a tissue in his hand, a few quick coughs leaving him. "The hell man?! Shit like this should be illegal! Like... against the Geneva Convention or somethin'!


"Some people just can't handle their spices," Shizuka noted. The young Joestar reached forward, scooping up a takoyaki sphere of her own and popping half of it into her mouth. Her cheeks hollowed slightly, a muffled squeaking noise coming from her mouth as her head (save for her silver-rimmed sunglasses) abruptly turned invisible.

A few quick panicked gasps left the group, with Makoto hastily throwing Shizuka's hood over her head in a bid to conceal her brief bout of superpowered incontinence. "Oh for-! Spit it out, quickly," Makoto hastily said, holding a tissue under where she assumed Shizuka's mouth to be. It was soon followed by a spitting sound that made Makoto wince a bit.

"That's... new," Hifumi noted. "Have you ever uh... flickered like that before?"

Shizuka coughed a few times as she rapidly returned to visibility, her face still looking a little scarlet. "Agh... usually... usually when I was just a kid... that was just a real nasty shock."

"Two down," Futaba noted, reaching into the bowl Shizuka had eaten from. She took up one of the
untainted spheres and downed it in one go, purring as a few puffs of steam left her pink lips. "Oho! My mashter plan ish workinh like a sharm!" she proudly said through a mouthful of octopus and batter. Swallowing hard, the redhead grinned. "Let everyone else take the bullets so I can have the real deal."

Haru let out a long humming noise, examining the remaining balls intensely as she tried to suss out which one had the wasabi in it. She plucked up a ball from one of the untouched dishes and sniffed it intensely. "Aha!" The strawberry blonde abruptly said. "This one smells distinct alright..."

The teens leaned in slightly as Haru brought the insidious takoyaki sphere close to her mouth, and then recoiled in shock as she casually popped the whole thing in her mouth. "M-my goodness!" Yusuke gasped. "B-be careful with that!"

However, Haru showed little reaction to the spice she just ingested, casually swallowing while her cheeks turned just a bit pink. "Oh... is that the spicy one? Really?" Haru asked herself, smacking her lips briefly. "How utterly disappointing..."

"Haru Okumura..." Ryuji murmured. "... You are one scary girl."
Futaba left Akira's room, happier now than she had been in a while.

For as bad as things had been recently, between Akira's injury, Mona being put into some sort of coma, and those Stand users attacking Athena, she did feel pretty good right now. Her heart really had gotten stronger now, Prometheus' existence clear proof of that fact that she had changed.

And, more than that, she was Akira's... even thinking the word felt so strange to her, but she really was Akira's girlfriend. It was pretty exciting! But she knew she couldn't afford to get too wrapped up in that excitement.

Their work was far from done, after all. Mr. A was still out there, and she was sure the team would need her help to narrow down his location.

She didn't make it too far from Akira's hospital room when a gruff voice suddenly reached her, causing the young woman to halt in her tracks. "Hey, you." The redhead turned slightly, watching as a figure approached from around the corner. A tall and beefy man in a dark suit, clutching a white spectral cigar in his right hand.

"Oh, you're..." Futaba quickly put a name to the face. "Morihiro, right? The SID guy?"

"Yeah, that's right. And you're Futaba Sakura. I hear you're something of a tech wiz?" Satoshi asked, trying his best to sound casual.

Futaba pondered the label for a moment, tapping her chin in thought. "Well... I guess that's one way of putting it." Computers and phones were her area of expertise, but given the nature of her brain she could come to understand any sort of technology with enough time to research.

As she said this, Futaba gave Satoshi the once-over. Shizuka and Sergio seemed to trust him a good deal, and he was mainly interested in dealing with criminals. So she supposed he was cool. On the other hand it was a little hard to trust any adult with any sort of authority after everything she and the rest of the team had been through.

"Er... the thing is, I might need your help. I wasn't sure about approaching you directly, but I figured I'd take a shot. I know you kids are gonna go after Mr. A, and while I can't say that's a particularly bright idea... I also know nothing I say would dissuade you. So I guess I should give you a little assistance," Satoshi said.

"Oooookaaaay," Futaba replied, a little curious about all this. All the same, if it made her job of finding A easier, she'd be willing to give it a shot. "What do you have in mind? And uh... why do you need my help for it?"

Satoshi leaned up against the wall and planted his Stand against his lips, looking akin to a gunslinger from a western. "Dunno if Joestar told you already, but... I've fought Mr. A in the past. And had an extensive investigation going on the guy before... well, that doesn't matter. Important thing is, outside of that little circle of friends of his, I'm the person in Japan with the most knowledge of the guy," he explained.

Futaba nodded along with his explanation. "So, you're saying you know where he hangs out? You
"Something like that... things might've changed over the years, but I have a few ideas where he might be calling home. And after losing Lars, things might be frantic enough for me to do a little investigating." He removed his Stand from his lips, blowing a long strand of pale smoke outward. "This is where you come in... how good are you when it comes to cameras?"

11/12

With Akira mostly recovered, the group had agreed to hold this meeting at a cafe not too far from Jinbocho. A simple, yet pricy, teashop that had a strong traditional atmosphere. The decorations were plain and classical, the wooden walls and floors looking as if they had been lifted from an earlier century.

Even the girls working as staff were dressed traditionally, wearing sleek white yukata with red sashes. Mitsuru had suggested the place. Given the reverence the staff showed to her, Shizuka was willing to bet Mitsuru owned the place.

The Arditi were led into a large room with an expansive, low table. Mitsuru made her way to the head of the table, flanked on one side by Naoto, and on the other by a tall blue-eyed blonde in a dark longcoat. Mitsuru took a seat at the head of the table, smoothing her grey Chanel jacket once she did so. Naoto moved to her right, adopting a standard cross-legged position, her hands resting above the folding hem of her ultramarine coat.

One by one the rest of the team made their way around the table, taking their own seats until everyone was present. The only members of the team not present were Hifumi (who had been called away in an urgent bit of family business), and Morgana (still lodged in an expanding dark cocoon). Josuke was currently getting settled at Shizuka's apartment, setting his things down for the time being. Once everyone was seated, the crisp white shoji was closed behind them.

"Dang..." Ryuji murmured under his breath, examining the old ink-wash paintings that lined the wall opposite him. "Feels like we're about to start talkin' about important yakuza shit or somethin'..."

"I guess it's a good spot for a meeting, but it's... definitely intimidating," Ann noted. She was starting to feel like they were in trouble for something.

"I'm glad you could make it today. I would have my entire team present, but... well I asked two of my own people, Yukari and Akihiko, to follow a lead regarding the Vacant People, so they won't be joining us today," Mitsuru began, speaking in a curt and formal tone.

"Vacant People?" Akira repeated.

Shizuka glanced to Akira at her left. "Yeah, you know, those people on the streets that look like they've been mindwiped. Empty eyes, creepy smiles... They've been growing in number while you've been in the hospital," Shizuka said. Or it certainly felt that way. But most people on the street paid them no mind, as if they were invisible. Even the creepy posters and pamphlets they put up went largely ignored.

Akira nodded in a sudden realization. "Ah, those. Well there's definitely something supernatural going on there... like a light mental shutdown by the look of things. And Akechi is still locked up?"
"Last I checked. Yesterday," Shizuka said, nodding his way. "They're keeping a close eye on him for us, and there's been no reports of him disappearing or reappearing. It's not him behind those incidents."

Mitsuru cleared her throat faintly, the simple gesture enough to get all eyes on her. "We're not entirely sure of the cause of those incidents, but if I were to hazard a guess it's nothing human. Most likely some insidious force attacking through that Metaverse you've all been using," the redhead explained. The name 'Camael' crossed the minds of the various Arditi present.

"And we can deal with that issue when we're finished with the current problem. It sounds like you've had an eventful few weeks... Masayoshi Shido being the head of some insidious conspiracy to take over Japan, the 'successor detective prince' being a murderous monster... it's a lot to take in. And Mr. A is still out there..." Naoto turned her gaze to Akira briefly. "Apologies about your hand, by the way, Kurusu."

"I'll adjust," Akira replied, smiling faintly. "It's gonna take some time to get used to it, but this fake hand is actually pretty good so far," he added, flexing the fake digits a few times.

Mitsuru raised her hand, gesturing over to Aigis. "Before we go further, I'd like to introduce you to Aigis. She was a member of the original SEES team, and is..." she paused for a moment searching for the right words. "Well if you see her in action, it may come as a shock to you if you don't understand something: She's not physically human."

"Correct," the blonde said, raising her right hand. The group stared in surprise as Aigis lifted the skin at her right wrist, peeling it upward like a glove to reveal a layer of steel that covered her palm. "I am an anti-Shadow weapon, originally created by the Kirijo group. Though I have come to regard myself to totally human."

"That..." Shizuka and Futaba rose up in unison, seeming to speak as one. "Is so rad!"

"Oh. Why thank you for saying so," Aigis politely replied, a smile lingering on her face.

Ann scratched the back of her head for a moment, before letting out a resigned sigh. "I know a combat robot shouldn't be too shocking after everything we've been through... I'm mostly just sad that weird stuff is normal to me now."

Ann's resignation earned a small snicker from Shiho. "It's a cool kind of weird, at least."

With that bit of business settled, Mitsuru got down to the task at hand. "If what you've said is true, dealing with Shido won't be enough to end the threat to the country. Mr. A has to be taken down... but, unfortunately, having a Stand means that he doesn't have one of those 'Palaces' that you can exploit," the redhead remarked.

"Right... it makes things harder in the long run, but... I'd rather that than run the risk of having a Palace of my own that someone could attack," Akira said, managing a thin smile.

It would have made Akechi's job a whole lot easier, that was for sure.

"Right now we're trying to figure out where he's hiding out. But as you can guess, a guy like him isn't exactly easy to track. Even to a girl of my amazing talents," Futaba said, her shoulders slouching in a brief sigh. "Still haven't gotten anything back from Satoshi."
"And of course, the Stand users we managed to capture are in no hurry to talk. Whatever we can do to them, it's apparently chump change to what he could do to them. And there's the possibility that they don't know his location... you know, so that a psychic Stand can't pry the information out of them," Sergio explained. He did so loathe being left in the dark.

Mitsuru nodded. "It's troubling, but I want you all to know that you have my full support in bringing an end to this man," Mitsuru said. "We three want to be on hand to help when you go after him. I can't help but feel partially responsible if so much was going on under the Shadow Operatives notice."

"Can't blame yourself for that. The man was damn good at covering his tracks it seems," Sergio said. He turned to Akira. "So, what do you say Leader? Up for adding a little extra help to the roster."

As if he'd turn down two veteran Persona users and a literal combat android. "I'd be more than happy for your help, Kirijo-san," Akira said, earning a pleased smile from the elegant older woman.

The door opened behind them once more, followed soon after by two young women qirtly making their way into the room with trays in their hands. Resting on each tray was a heavy teapot, a series of cups bordering each pot. One by one they moved around the table, setting a cup down for each person present, and filling them up before moving to the next person in sequence.

"I ain't much of a tea guy, but... I ain't gonna turn down something free. Thanks," Ryuji said, easily plucking up his steaming cup.

With the group supping at the calming herbal remedy, they seemed to steadily push their worries to the backs of their minds. Mr. A was set to be a major hurdle to cross, and there was likely something bigger still hanging over them all... but it was hard not to feel a little better about their odds when they had more help on their side.

Settling her cup down, Mitsuru breathed a small sigh. "I'll dedicate the resources I have towards finding him. No man is untrackable, and with the details you've given me already... well maybe we can get lucky."

"I'll be doing what I can too. Someone has to try and restore a little honor to the title of 'Detective Prince'," Naoto said. "After that though... I think I'll be taking a long stint of time off in Inaba." It hadn't been too long since she last visited the town, but this business in Tokyo was never far from her mind.

"That's reassuring to hear," Akira replied, setting his empty cup down. "Considering the last detective we worked with was secretly trying to kill us, anything would be an improvement." A few members of the team snickered.

Naoto smiled faintly. "You shouldn't feel bad about being deceived. I've been in a similar boat... The worst predators are very good at adopting a pleasant, personable front."

Before the conversation could progress further, Akira's phone suddenly buzzed in his jacket pocket. He curiously slid it into view, his brows raising slightly as he checked the caller ID. "It's from the Athena clinic," he remarked.
"Well... answer it!" Futaba quickly said. "It's probably about Mona!"

Akira nodded and quickly placed the phone against his ear. "Hello? Ah, yes doctor we're... Well, no, we're rather close to the clinic. Maybe a five minute walk?... Eh? Really? Well that's... Ah! Seriously?! Okay, we'll be there as quickly as we can!" The others had leaned in a bit, curious as to what had just happened. "It's Morgana's cocoon... thing. The doctor said it's starting to... to pulse! Like it might hatch soon!"

Ryuji rose up sharply. "We gotta get over there! He's gonna chew us out if we're not around when he wakes up."

"Indeed. And I've truly grown to miss the sound of his voice," Yusuke noted.

"I just want to pet those fluffy ears again," Sergio said with a wistful smile.

Mitsuru smiled faintly. "Go on ahead and see your friend. I know you must have been worried about him... we three won't be too far from here, and you have my number."

"Best of luck!" Aigis quickly said.

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Satoshi's apartment was almost worryingly clean. The living room, laid out like most any standard Japanese apartment, didn't have any clutter to speak of. Nothing but a low table, a clean leather couch, and a large television on the opposite side of the table. He had no paintings to speak of, or any decorations of note.

Even dust was a scarcity around his apartment. Satoshi didn't appreciate being alone with his thoughts, and tried his best to occupy his mind and body on those occasions.

Today, however, he had something more substantial to occupy him than simple dusting.

He was seated at the low table, a sheet of paper in front of him, and a pen resting comfortably in his right hand. His plan was beyond dangerous, and Satoshi knew full well that it would likely be the death of him. And if that were the case, he'd need to leave a letter behind for his son.

Satoshi exhaled slowly through his nose, the words already aligned in his head. "Alright, you can do this... Deep breath," he murmured, before leading the pen toward the paper.

'Oyama.

If you're reading this letter, than the worst has happened. And I'm deeply sorry for that. So close to Christmas too, and I was really looking forward to seeing you again. You've grown so much, and I'm beyond proud of you. You're a better man than me, I'll freely admit.

The truth is, I'm at least partially to blame for the situation in Tokyo. Your mother died against that Mr. A bastard and I was too afraid to move against him. I couldn't do anything after seeing how futile our last effort was. And I think I never really recovered after your mother died. It hung over me like a perpetual shadow.

But, as naive as it likely sounds, I think I've found hope. Those kids, the Phantom Thieves, they really are something else. And from all the stories I've heard, doing the impossible is something of
a specialty of theirs. Even if I fall, I'll go out happy knowing I helped clear the path for them.

I wish I could have told you this in person, or even over the phone but I know hearing your voice would have made me lose my nerve. I'm a coward, after all. Whatever you may think of me, know that I love you utterly. Hurting you is the worst thing I could imagine. And if you're reading this now... then first round's on me. Live your life, be happy, don't make the same mistake I did and wallow in misery and defeat.

You may hate me, and I can't totally blame you if that's the case. Just know that I tried to do the right thing in the end, for whatever that may be worth.

Goodbye, my son. And good luck.

-Satoshi

Putting his pen down, Satoshi closed his eyes and took in a few calming breaths to level himself out again. His palms were trembling above his thighs for a few moments before he regained his nerve and grew still.

Satoshi raised the letter up and neatly folded it, sliding the paper into the soft white envelope on the other end of the table. After sealing the envelope he was quick to write Oyama's name on the face of it.

He settled the envelope down on the table and turned his attention to a small black box Futaba had given him, no larger than a ring box. He flipped the lid open to reveal a small trio of pins, the top of each pin being marked by a tiny lens.

According to the short hacker, these were some of the best hidden cameras she could get her hands on. Great video quality despite their size, strong audio capture, and GPS tracking too. Satoshi had originally told Futaba he planned on setting these up to stake out a few locations that he believed Mr. A to be operating out of. But that wasn't entirely the truth.

In actuality Satoshi knew exactly where to look, and had known for some time. And while he hadn't been actively pursuing A these past few years, he had been keeping tabs on Club Ravana through a close friend just in case A stopped frequenting there. Sure enough, the crime lord was a creature of habit, and seemed most comfortable in those opulent confines. All he had to do was head there and clear the way for the others.

His own life wasn't worth much, but if he could bust through Mr. A's security detail for the Arditi then it would all be worth it.

Tomorrow he'd make his move on the club, and power through until he was face to face with Mr. A again. And then... well he'd spit in the bastard's eye before the last breath left Satoshi's body.

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The Speedwagon Foundation had taken Morgana's cocoon into a special observation room on the bottom floor of the underground structure. It was a decently large room with a broad table on the far end of the room, one observation window on the side wall allowing continuous monitoring of the strange egg.

Once the metal door slid open, the Arditi found that the room was just big enough to fit their
numbers and the doctor who had been tasked with monitoring Morgana's condition. And, as Akira had described, the outermost layer of the inky black mass was starting to pulse and undulate.

"Oh my goodness," Haru murmured, examining the cocoon with widening eyes. "Is... Is Mona-chan okay?" the strawberry blonde asked.

"Well we're still picking up on vital signs from within, but they're at an accelerated pace," the doctor stated, managing a small nod. "We've been trying our best to analyse the structure without being invasive, but... well your friend is definitely an enigma to us."

"It's a whole lot bigger than it was the last time we saw it," Makoto murmured. It was more than twice the size it had been when Morgana first went into his mysterious hybernation.

A few dark bubbles blistered along the outer layer of the cocoon, while strange pores opened up along the dark surface and started hissing long strands of steam. Akira narrowed his eyes in a growing concern. "Come on Morgana... come back to us," he said under his breath, trying to suppress his worry as best he could.

"L-Look!" Yusuke exclaimed, suddenly pointing to the center of the pulsing dark mass. "It's starting to open!" Sure enough, as he said this, a long vertical seam started to split open along the face of the cocoon, a powerful gush of steam surging out of the rapidly expanding opening.

The doctor swallowed hard at the sight. "I... I would advise we all keep our distance for the time being!" he said.

The rush of steam seemed to totally obscure the opening of the cocoon, but the team could still hear the noise of the outer layer splitting open. Like meat being pulled apart, a visceral crunching sound that sent shivers through the group.

It was soon followed by a loud fit of coughing coming from somewhere in the steam, a few gagging sounds punctuating the noise. "Agh! Ah... ah geez! What th... what just happened?!" The Arditi let out a shared gasp as they heard the voice ahead of them. That soft voice was unmistakably Morgana's.

"Mona!" Futaba gasped, letting out a sigh of relief. Her eyes shimmered for a moment, and she realized just how much she missed Morgana's voice.

But as the cloud of steam began to clean, and a silhouette became outlined in the pale mist, the group quickly understood that something was very different. The steam parted steadily to reveal a slender and pale human body, only about an inch or two taller than Futaba. The upper portion of the steam vanished to show off the head of his new figure, revealing a prettyboy face and a shaggy head of dark hair. Two tufts of black hair were sticking up from his temples, vaguely reminiscent of cat ears. His eyes were Morgana's unmistakable crystal blue orbs.

"Oww... why am I sore all over?" Morgana whined, reaching up and touching his forehead. "And why do I stink of sweat? I never sweat..."

"M-Mona?! What the shit?!" Ryuji exclaimed, reaching up and gripping the sides of his head. "Oh shit, this is so weird... even by Morgana standards!"

As the last remnants of the steam parted from Morgana's legs, the Arditi yelped and swiftly glanced away. More than a few faces had just turned bright red at what they'd just seen. Except for
Yusuke, who was looking on in faint fascination. "Oh shit he's naked!" Ann yelped.

"And rather anatomically correct now," Yusuke noted, speaking in a calm objective tone.

"And definitely a boy." Shizuka had planted her hands over her lens-covered eyes, but found herself opening a small gap in the fingers of her right hand. She let out a faint whistling sound and immediately closed them back up again.

"What the heck are you guys... talking..." Morgana trailed off, glancing down at himself. At once a flurry of different emotions rolled through his face. Shock at the sight of his new body, joy at the realization that his biggest wish had just been granted, and embarrassment that he was now very much exposed to the whole team. And with the cocoon rapidly dissolving behind him, there wasn't much on hand to cover himself with.

The doctor coughed into his fist and turned his attention to the door. "I just saw a human being birthed from a cocoon... definitely a new one for the list. Give me a second and I'll go get a gown for your friend to wear." With that he quickly made for the door, while the rest of the Arditi turned their attention ceiling ward. Yusuke followed suit after Sergio gave him a firm nudge in the ribs.

Morgana swallowed hard and raised his hands up, squeezing his newly grown fingers. "This is so strange. The last thing I remember is attacking Shido and then everything... everything got red hot for a second, and then I blacked out. And now I'm... human?"

"You better believe it neko-boy," Shizuka remarked. "Shido hurt you pretty badly, and you went into some kinda... cocoon thing. You were like that for a few days now. But man, it's really good to know you're okay."

"You ended up getting hurt to protect me. So... I want to thank you, from the bottom of my heart," Ann said without averting her gaze from the ceiling. "And... I'm sorry, that you got hurt because of me," the blonde added.

Morgana smiled faintly, his cheeks turning a rosy pink. "Think nothing of it Lady Ann. Fighting to protect you, it felt... pretty good. Even if the end result was a little nuts. I have no idea how this happened though."

"Not that it's a bad thing! Now you can go around Tokyo without lurking in Akira's bag," Futaba said, grinning to herself.

"Probably for the best... I was getting a little tired of picking cat hair off my books," Akira stated.

They didn't have to wait long before the doctor returned, the door sliding open to herald his arrival. He was quick to hand the pale green gown over to Morgana, with the dark-haired boy quickly donning the loose garment. Once the doctor tied the back and made his way over to the door again, Morgana spoke up, "Okay, you guys can look now. It's weird to be wearing something other than a belt and neckerchief."

"Yes well it's against the law for humans to dress that way," Makoto said, breathing a sigh of relief as she turned her focus back to their newly transformed friend. "Oh well... guess there's no harm in buying you some new clothes. The main issue is figuring out where he's going to live now."

Futaba waved the concerns off. "I'm sure Sojiro's gonna let him stay in the attic. He's short, not gonna take up much space," the redhead quickly stated.
"Okay but he's gonna be sleeping on the couch. It'd be weird if he used my bed now," Akira said, earning a quick chuckle from their newly transformed friend.

Sergio sighed, his shoulders going slightly slack in mild disappointment. "I suppose I'm the only one who'll miss the kitty fuzz? Fine... I suppose I'll just have to get my own cat now," the blond remarked.

Morgana suddenly gasped. "W-wait, I remember now! When we were fighting Shido, Akira got hurt," he cast a quick glance to Akira's hands, his expression quickly growing puzzled. "Huh? You have... both hands? What gives?"

"Robot hand," Akira curtly remarked, raising his left hand and wriggling his digits. The joints bent at unnatural angles, a strange clicking sound filling the room. A few of the others cringed a little at the sight. "It's... an experience, but I'll adjust. I was more worried about you because we had no idea what happened to you... seems like it all worked out in the end though, you got what you've wanted all this time."

"Hey yeah, that's right... you started goin' into Palaces cause you thought you could get your memories back and become human that way, right?" asked Ryuji. "So... you've got that now... you gonna still stick with us?"

Morgana could feel all eyes on him, and once more grew a little self conscious. "Well uh..." He glanced to Akira, and then to Ann, and then settled his gaze on his hands. "We're not done, are we? Beating Shido was just one step after all, and I'm not the kind of guy to leave a job half done. Besides, without me? Ha... you guys would be clueless. Bet you've been running around like headless chickens while I was out cold," Morgana said, laughing awkwardly.

"Well you might have a human body, but you've still got the mind of a prideful weirdo... it's good to have you back Morgana," Shiho said, smiling warmly.

"Yes. Just having you around again is making me feel better about all this," Haru said, reaching over and lightly tussling his dark fluffy locks. Morgana grumbled a bit, but didn't protest the contact.

Shizuka idly scratched at her right cheek, a realization steadily dawning on her. "Ya know... we might need to pull some strings to get you paperwork and that. But I suppose Kirijo-san or the Speedwagon Foundation could handle things on that end."

Having a stray cat was one thing, no paperwork required there. But a stray person with nothing to his name, that would raise questions at some point in the future.

"Something to worry about a lil' down the line I guess. Right now I'm just... so happy..." Morgana smiled awkwardly, a faint blush on his cheeks. "This is everything I wanted, and... even if it happened in a painful way, it was worth it. I owe you guys a lot." His attention shifted to Akira in particular. "And you... well you're a hell of a guy. I think I owe you the most."

"Nah... don't think anything of it. I promised you I'd help you, and sticking with you this long... well, it all worked out," Akira said, a smile forming on his face.

"Still, you're a pretty incredible guy. Gathering a team like this, leading us through thick and thin... if I hadn't stuck with you, who knows where I'd be now? Nowhere good," Morgana mused,
shrugging slightly. "I... owe you a lot, Akira." He reached over, and soon Morgana and Akira were sharing a quick hug.

And, as this was going on, a shift was going on inside Morgana's heart. A warm light washed over Zorro's body, the white hot wave of energy engulfing him and warping the dimensions of his hulking frame.

In the span of seconds Zorro's broad body was changed into something tall and slender, a violet-coloured figure with skinny limbs, plates of gold covering his feet, wrists, and shoulders. Large feathery wings protruded from his ankles, while his eyes were obscured by a scarlet mask shaped to resemble a pair of butterfly wings. In his right hand he held an oenate golden scepter, the tip marked by a set of sharp wings.

Zorro was gone. In his place stood **Mercurius**.

Morgana breathed a happy sigh and opened his eyes, feeling his heart level out as the change took place. "A new body, and a new power... this has been a pretty great day."

"Hehe." Ann gave him a thumbs up. "And it's a new body that definitely suits you," she complimented.

Morgana's face turned a distinct scarlet shade, and he blinked a few times in surprise. "W-well... thanks," he awkwardly replied.

"Now then, since the band's back together in full... there's nothing to stop us going after Mr. A in full," Akira said, grinning eagerly.
The doctors needed a few hours to do a check up on Morgana, during which time the group decided to grab some clothes for the newly humanized Morgana. By the time they returned, the doctors had concluded their work.

As near as they could tell, their friend was healthy and seemed a prime specimen for a guy in his (presumed) age range. But their tests were not without issues. For one thing doing an X-ray on Morgana seemed impossible, any reading they tried to take coming out as a grainy blur.

They chalked it up to him not being entirely human (while he might have looked the part now, *humans were not supposed to sprout from cocoons*) and felt that, given how positive his other test results were, there was nothing to worry about. There was no sense in keeping him locked up.

They had given him a dark shirt and a pair of jeans to wear, his feet covered by a pair of dark running shoes with white soles. Given how cold it was, they had picked out a black hoodie with a yellow lining inside the hood. Ann had gone a step further and picked out a yellow neckerchief for him to wear, figuring Morgana just wouldn't be the same without that particular garment.

Once Morgana was dressed for respectable company, they decided to head out for the evening for a little bit of a celebration. Things weren't entirely safe, with Mr. A still being out there, but this was too monumentous to not celebrate.

There was a clear chill in the air as the team settled on a long table outside a bulky food stand, clouds of steam wafting from the various disposable cups, bowls, and plates they had picked up. The food was nothing glamorous, but it would serve their needs quite well for tonight.

"To Morgana," Akira said, raising his can of soda up. "Went from a loudmouth housecat, to a loudmouth human boy. We always knew you had it in you."

Morgana blushed slightly, an impish smile on his face as the gang raised their cans in a quick toast in his name. "Heh... you guys..." he bashfully said, scratching the back of his head. "It means a lot to hear your praise. I'm still so surprised that things went this way, but I'm definitely not gonna complain."

"Yeah no kiddin'... You comin' out of that cocoon is definitely one of the weirdest things I've seen, an' that's really saying something," Ryuji remarked. "You're still a shorty though."

"Sh-shut up!" Morgana quickly yelped.

Shizuka took a long sip of her soda, glancing between Morgana and Futaba. Ryuji had the right of it, the catboy was easily the second-shortest member of the whole team. "Wonder what you'll turn into in the Metaverse," she mused. "We'll be kinda up a creek without the Morganamobile."

Yusuke pondered that potential predicament, his chopsticks roaming the sea of broth in his ramen bowl. "Perhaps we could hitch a ride in Futaba's Persona?"

"Wha- no way! Even one extra person would be pretty cramped," Futaba hastily said.
"Ah, is that so?" Akira teased leaning forward a bit. Futaba's pale cheeks turned just a little bit pinker.

Morgana shrugged at the prospect. "I still know the trick to do it, so I guess that shouldn't be a problem. And if the doctors are right, then I'm not 100% human on the inside. Oh well, it's the outside that matters to me."

Makoto plucked one of her dumplings up and ate it easily, savoring the warmth that served to ward off some of the surrounding chill in the air. "If it comes down to that, we'll adapt and overcome. We'll have to go into Mementos again at some point anyway. Camael's still there," she stated.

A bit of tension filled the group, while Hifumi turned her focus to the steaming plate of chicken katsu in front of her. "You told me about this Camael creature in the past... Is he really that dangerous?"

"Exceedingly so," Yusuke replied. "Perhaps the strongest thing we ever fought, so much so that we had to outright retreat against him."

"He and Shido are probably comparable in power... assuming Camael was showing his full strength at the time," Futaba added, her lips forming into a thin frown. "We've all grown a lot stronger since then, but... I'm not in any hurry to go up against that thing again."

"We might not have a choice. If Mitsuru's right, then all this stuff with the Vacant People... there's something big at work here, and Mementos may well be at the heart of it all. We'll have to deal with him... and anything else like him," Akira explained.

Ryuji took a long slurp of his ramen, savoring the taste in a bid to distract himself from thoughts of the monstrous angel. But eventually he couldn't hide from those thoughts. "There's a lot we don't know about Mementos, especially that guy. But yeah, there's definitely some shit going on there," he said.

His statement earned a modest nod from Shiho. "Right. Remember the stories we got from Mitsuru and Naoto in the past? Their teams both went up against huge, terrifying monsters... and there might be something like that in Mementos, just like there was in that 'TV world' place."

It was definitely a worrying prospect. They had just gotten done with the strongest human opponent they were likely going to face, but the thought of something worse hiding outside the boundaries of conventional reality... Something feeding on human minds like a swooping carrion bird. If they had fight something like that, they'd go at it with everything they had.

"H-hey, come on," Ann said, laughing awkwardly. "Tonight's supposed to be about celebrating Mona's return. No need to worry about any serious stuff."

Shizuka noted the distinct blush on Morgana's face, nodding sagely to herself. Well, perhaps his crush wasn't totally hopeless now...

"Exactly. We have nothing to worry about." Sergio's right arm suddenly wrapped around Hifumi's shoulders, the gesture making the young woman bristle slightly as her whole face abruptly turned crimson. "And besides, we have our little ace in the hole here. With her on our side, there's no way he can best us," Sergio boasted.
"Th-thanks, Sergio," Hifumi quickly said in a high pitched squeak.

Makoto downed another dumpling, a tiny smile breaking out across her face. "Sorry for putting a damper on the mood. I guess I have a habit of thinking of the worst possible outcome."

Haru smiled fondly. "Don't be hard on yourself Mako-chan. That mind of yours has been a major asset to us," Haru assured her, before raising her can of lemon ice tea to her lips and taking a long sip.

"And it doesn't hurt to have a little extra perspective on your mind," Shizuka mused. "Shit's good for now, but... yeah we got problems to deal with."

There was a sudden heavy buzzing sound, causing all eyes to be drawn to Futaba. The petite redhead gave a heavy sigh and fished her phone from her pocket. "It's not a text, but-" Futaba paused, focusing on the screen intensely. "Huh? That's... odd."

"What's up?" Akira asked, leaning into his girlfriend's side to peer at the screen of her phone.

"It's a notification from one of my apps... I told you guys that Satoshi wanted some of my special hidden cameras, but he didn't activate any of them until now. Maybe he's found a good recon spot?" Futaba asked.

Sergio hummed faintly, tapping at his chin. "Is that so? Well he didn't mention anything to us at the SID office, but... well Satoshi is known for being a quiet sort. I suppose if he found something, he's been keeping it to himself."

"We should probably see what this camera feed has for us... although I was rather enjoying my food," Yusuke mused.

"Probably because you're not the one who paid for it," Sergio jabbed, a teasing smile on his face.

Shrugging, Futaba raised her phone again and tapped the tile of the app. Her expression shifted again, her left brow arcing slightly. "Wait, this is weird," the redhead murmured. "The camera's... moving?"

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Ito Kirino had been an informant of Satoshi's for several years now, a man that Satoshi placed a good deal of trust into. He had fallen into homelessness a long time ago, but soon after his fall he wound up discovering the power of his Stand. Satoshi met him after Ito discovered his abilities, using them to kill a gang of homeless hunters who had been targeting a few of his friends.

Satoshi could hardly fault him for his actions, and those closest to him had hailed him as a hero. Even so, he couldn't leave the older man totally unchecked. A deal was struck, that Ito would use his Stand to gather information at Satoshi's request, in return for a decent amount of money.

Over the last two months, his task had involved staking out Club Ravana. Just in case anything happened in the wake of this Phantom Thief business, and Satoshi couldn't sit on the sidelines anymore.

The two men met in an alleyway behind the club, shadows enveloping the duo. Ito was dressed as shabbily as one would expect, wearing a beer-stained green jacket over an assortment of shirts,
while his shabby jeans had a few lengths of fabric wrapped around any tears. His face was hard and
tanned, a coarse black beard obscuring the lower half of his face.

"I'll tell you one thing, he seems pissed," Ito remarked, leaning up against the wall. "My eyes and
ears could pick up on a lot of the chatter in there, and that A guy... ooof, he's been swearing up a
storm. Take it he lost an ally?"

Satoshi nodded firmly. "Yeah, one of his closest allies. Figured there was something going on
between those two, but... well that's not important right now. I assumed A would be pissed, but
what's the security situation like?" he asked.

"Heavy, by the look o' things," Ito replied, snorting loudly. "Some Stand users, an' regular grunts
with guns. The old yakuza bastard, and the shadowy guy... they're there too."

Satoshi nodded again. "Figured that'd be the case." If he could take out Hideki before he got to the
final two stages of his Stand, he'd have a chance. But Okabe... Satoshi's understanding of his Stand
was minimal, but if reality conformed to his will it meant he'd really be up a creek.

Then again, Mr. A had an ego at the end of the day. And he'd probably want to deal with Satoshi
being an 'upstart' personally.

"You got them sketches I drew, yeah?" Ito asked.

"Yeah, I got 'em. The picture quality your Stand gets must be pretty good... I know where I gotta
go, don't worry." Satoshi pulled an envelope from his dark overcoat and handed it to Ito, who
graciously took it.

Opening the envelope, Ito's rheumy eyes widened considerably. "Hot damn... this is a lot more
than you usually pay me."

"Yeah, well it's worth a lot more to me than anything else," Satoshi replied. "Take care of yourself,
Ito. And if you want my advice, you and any friends you have near this block... you might wanna
give this area a wide berth for a little while."

Ito seemed to quickly understand the gravity of the situation. And whatever Satoshi had planned, it
was likely to be fatal. The old man's face set in stone, and he gave Satoshi a grave nod. "You take
care o' yourself, yeah?" Ito said.

"I always do," Satoshi replied.

He stood in silence as Ito walked away, counting the money in his hands before covertly pocketing
the envelope inside his coat. " 『Delirious.』 " The air shimmered behind Ito, his Stand quickly
taking shape in a cloud of glittering matter. He was an ivory humanoid, covered in criss-crossing
black lines. The top of his head was obscured by a dense golden helmet, the mouth beneath etched
into a faint grin.

Bubbles of dark matter swirled around his hands, with the spectral figure flicking his right hand
outward and launching one of the bubbles outward. It stuck to the wall and quickly grew still.

This was one of the 'eyes and ears' Ito had referred to, a sphere that could pick up on audio and
video in the surrounding area. Given the impressive range of Delirious, it was easy for the spectral
Stand to slither through the floors of Club Ravana, planting an assortment of his eyes and ears to
develop a full map of the structure.

"If ya need me, just holler." With that Ito continued on his ways, and melted into the shadows.

Satoshi watched him go in silence, before sighing and turning back toward the looming structure of Club Ravana. "Sorry pal, but this is something I'm doing solo..." He reached into his pocket, taking out one of Futaba's pin-sized cameras. He slid it nearly into the knot of his tie, turning the device on with a quick stroke of his thumb.

Satoshi strode forward, moving from the shadowy alley toward the back entrance of the club. It was vacant, save for one well dressed man grabbing a smoke near the door. The warm orange light at the end of his cigarette illuminated the area around his face.

The balding man grimaced, glancing over as Satoshi approached. "Hey, who the fuck are you? No entrance allowed, head around front." Satoshi continued approaching, Instant Crush forming in his right hand. No reaction from the guard, he must have just been a normal human. "Hey, you deaf? I told you to fuck off!"

The guard reached into his coat, and Satoshi quickly spied the glinting steel of a concealed pistol. With superior quickness he flicked his Stand upward, an invisible flash of fire exploding against the balding man. He shrieked, recoiling as his flesh became singed, and was promptly knocked out by a crushing blow to the face from Satoshi.

"Nah I heard ya. I just don't care." Satoshi remarked, before giving his downed foe a harsh kick to the ribs.

He continued on toward the heavy steel door, examining it for several seconds before aiming Instant Crush in his right hand. A focused stream of superheated gas shot out of the peak, carving through the lock in the span of a few seconds while the ensuing spray of sparks illuminated the area around him.

Once it had cooled enough, he opened the door and made his way into the darkened corridor beyond. "Hope you kids are paying attention. I'm only gonna get one shot at this," Satoshi murmured.

He rounded a corner, following Ito's paths from memory, while the distant thumps of pounding techno music echoed through the crisp ivory hallways. He was going to go for the main stairwell and clear out a few guards per floor, wanting to make entrance that much easier fo the Phantom Thieves. Particularly if there were Stand users beyond the remaining Deadly Aspects in the building.

Footsteps reached him, and as Satoshi reached a turn that would lead to the stairwell he caught sight of two more well dressed men heading his way. The duo quickly realized that Satoshi didn't belong, some kind of vibe he gave off. Whatever it was, they were quick to draw their handguns and open fire. The crashes of gunfire were dulled by the distant roaring music.

Satoshi moved back into cover as quick as he could, but he wasn't spry as he used to be. A bullet scraped over his right shoulder, his flesh burning as his skin and the material of his suit were torn in passing. He grit his teeth, slamming his back into the wall and trying to ignore the pain in his shoulder as more rounds ricocheted off the wall to his side.

He quickly snapped his left hand outward, throwing Instant Crush from his grasp and letting the
spectral cigar smack into the wall. A mighty blast of fire exploded from the tip, rattling the floor beneath Satoshi and making the two men shriek as the rolling tidal wave of fire washed over them. Satoshi called his Stand back to his grasp and turned the corner, advancing across the soot-stained floor.

"You started it," Satoshi flatly said, stepping over the two scorched men as the life faded from their bodies. He could hear shouting somewhere else on the first floor, punctuated by heavy and echoing footsteps that were gradually drawing in closer.

Satoshi made for the next corner, the door to the stairwell now facing in front of him. He peered over his left shoulder, catching sight of three more men racing toward him. One was clutching a handgun, while the second was clutching a submachine gun. The third, a lanky man in leather attire with a shaved head, seemed unarmed. Satoshi quickly pegged him as a Stand user of some sort.

He was forced deeper into cover as a salvo of gunfire struck off the corner, sparks and metal shavings flying his way. A few scorched slices grazed his cheek, opening thin scars along his jawline. "Hrr... Not gonna be getting through the door with these asshole here."

But turning the corner, even for a split second, wasn't exactly a viable tactic if he wanted to make it to the top floor. And with the distance between them, his boomerang trick wasn't likely to work. Satoshi scanned the surrounding area, trying to ignore the echoing impacts of gunfire. Then, looking directly above himself, he spied a vent.

"Better than nothing," he murmured to himself, raising Instant Crush toward the vent with his right hand. A powerful burst of smoke exploded from his Stand, pumping through the vents at an impressive speed and moving throughout the entire system.

Satoshi held his breath and narrowed his eyes, able to see waves of smoke wafting around the corner. It was soon joined by a chorus of coughs, the two gunmen dropping their weapons and falling to their knees as the smoke washed over them. Instant Crush's fire and smoke could only be seen by other Stand users, but it would effect a normal person just as well as the real deal. Satoshi killed the flow, briefly dropping to his right knee to breathe in some air nearer to the ground.

His attention was caught to a sudden shrieking sound as something burst through the wall at his right, a ghostly Stand phasing toward him. It was an unreasonably tall humanoid with slate grey skin, two solid purple eyes glaring down at Satoshi while his mouth was concealed behind a black muzzle. His forearms were unnaturally large, his fists replaced with two heavy hammers.

"# No Leaf Clover... Crush him!" the user said, through a series of heavy coughs. The spindly Stand lanced toward him, his arms elongating like rubber as he slammed both hammers into the floor. Satoshi rolled away, but the jolt hitting the floor nearly knocked him off balance entirely as he came to a halt.

Satoshi twisted off to the side, barely avoiding one of the elongating hammers as it plowed through the wall behind him. However he wasn't able to avoid the second, No Leaf Clover's right hammer catching him the ribs and launching Satoshi off his feet.

He let out a pained cry, his back meeting the wall hard enough to crack it, and he was certain something in his ribs was cracked too. His feet his the floor, swaying and struggling to keep upright. He raised Instant Crush in his right hand, focused bursts of fire slamming into the spindly Stand and forcing him backward, the outer layer of his skin becoming blackened and crisp.
No Leaf Clover rebounded quickly, pushing through the pain, and swung his rubbery arms forward. Satoshi ducked low, avoiding the strikes as they plowed through the wall and kicked up a dense cloud of dust. He tried his best to ignore the burning pain in his ribs and flicked his Stand forward with his right hand.

The burning tip met No Leaf Clover's stomach with a powerful surge of fire, the ensuing explosion drowning out the user's pained shriek. Satoshi narrowed his eyes, focusing through the blaze as he saw that the force behind his attack had blown a wide hole through No Leaf Clover's chest. The spectral figure flickered for a few seconds, before decaying utterly and fading into nothingness.

Satoshi breathed a heavy sigh and rose up to his feet, twinges of pain lingering in his joints. "Come on you old bastard... don't give out now," he murmured. Time had taken more of a toll on him than he wanted to admit, each blow feeling like a dozen, and it seemed that it was only his willpower keeping him going.

He turned and made his way back toward the stairwell entrance. He couldn't afford to waste time, he needed to start making progress.

"What the hell, what the hell..." Sergio murmured, pacing from side to side behind the group as they continued to watch the feed from Satoshi's camera. "What the hell is he doing?! He didn't tell us anything about... any of this!"

"He's flying solo because people would try to stop him if they knew he was doing something so dangerous," Shizuka murmured, stroking her chin. Her eyes narrowed behind the lenses of her silver-rimmed sunglasses. "Question is... what exactly is he doing? And where is he?" she asked.

Makoto watched intensely, trying to maintain a composed stance while flickers of worry ran through her expression. "He's going after Mr. A, that's all it could be... and he's using that camera to show us the way. And to clear out his security, by the look of things."

The prospect made Sergio clench his teeth. "That... lunatic! Why's he being so reckless? He's smarter than this, he doesn't operate alone against dangerous enemies!"

Shizuka thought back on her meetings with the older man, and what she knew of his past. Satoshi had been living in fear of Mr. A for years now, ever since the loss of his wife. But now it seemed that he couldn't bring himself to live in fear anymore.

"I think he knows exactly what he's doing now... and he doesn't care about the danger." Shizuka clenched her fists inside her jacket. "Crazy bastard... Futaba, is there any way to tell where he is?"

"I'm checking now, there's GPS tracking on those cameras," Futaba hastily said, her left index finger rapidly tapping through buttons on her phone. "Grr! The wifi out here is freakin' terrible!"

Ryuji turned his attention to Akira. "So what's the plan? We're heading after him, yeah?"

"We don't have much choice. I want to get to Morihiro-san and save him before it's too late." But, by the look of things so far, that seemed unlikely. For as optimistic as Akira wanted to be, things were likely going to get grim real fast at the current rate.
"And if Makoto's hunch is correct, he may well lead us right to Mr. A in the process. Tonight may well be our final battle with him," Yusuke noted.

A worrying prospect, but it had to be done. Usually they preferred these battles on their own terms, but they weren't going to be so fortunate tonight.

Ann nodded to Akira. "I'm going to get in touch with Mitsuru, see if she's available for backup," the blonde hastily said.

"I'll get in touch with the SID. The others need to know about this," Sergio added, taking his phone from his pocket.

"And I'll call Josuke," Shizuka said. On a night like tonight, they could really do with Crazy Diamond on their side. "Futaba, any luck?" Shizuka asked as she slid her phone from her pocket.

Futaba inspected the screen of her phone for several long seconds. "Just about..." She pulled back, grinning as her brows raised. "Aha! Here! The camera feed is coming from Club Ravana, here in Shibuya!"

The name made Ryuji hum in thought, scratching idly at his chin. "Club Ravana... yeah, I think I've heard that name a few times, even passed the place on occasion... even if we hoof it, it's not exactly close."

"Guess we better get moving in that case," Akira replied, his gaze shifting to Futaba. "Keep the feed going, we need to know if anything happens," he added.

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"Huff... huff..." His progress through the past few floors hadn't exactly been easy, Satoshi's suit now marked by a series of bloody tears and holes. He hadn't been hit by anything directly, not by a bullet at least. But every cut he got, and every opponent he took down, it was like having an extra pound of weight added to his shoulders.

Satoshi gripped the railing at his side, standing in place for a few seconds as he worked to catch his breath. A trail of blood oozed from the gash above his right eye, dripping noisily onto the hard concrete of the steps.

It would all be worth it, Satoshi told himself. After all, he had just blown through over a dozen men, and three other Stand users. Small fry, in the grand scheme of things, but they would have helped trip the Arditi up against Mr. A. At least they were out of the way now.

Satoshi peered over the railing, able to see a series of bodies strewn along the stairwell, arcs and spatters of blood and scorched segments of concrete marking his passage. They were either dead, or mostly dead. Yeah, they wouldn't be causing any trouble.

"Come on you old bastard... we're almost at the top floor," Satoshi told himself, taking another step. His footing nearly gave out from under him, a pair of fresh scars along the back of his right thigh flaring up. The older man hissed through his clenched teeth and powered through the pain, making his way up the net few steps at a steady pace.

He reached the heavy blue door leading to the top floor and reached out toward it. To his shock, it was unlocked. Satoshi steeled himself and pushed it open, stepping through to the plush carpeted
floor of the lavish private lounge. He scanned the expansive area, quickly catching sight of Hideki at
the bar.

The old yakuza glanced over his shoulder at Satoshi, the pistol shape of American II resting on the
bar in front of him. "Ugh, this guy... security teams said it was you, but I almost didn't believe 'em,"
Hideki remarked.

Satoshi hissed through his teeth. "I'm not here to see you... where the fuck is your boss?" he spat.

Hideki barely reacted, downing the shot in front of him before smoothing out the crisp white
material of his shirt. "Takin' a leak, I guess. You picked a bad time to stir shit up you know, he's in
a pretty foul mood now that Lars is gone."

"I don't care," Satoshi retorted. "After the crap you assholes pulled at Athena... I'm not able to turn
a blind eye."

"Ah. That so?" Sanshiro replied, humming and turning around in his stool. "You know how this is
gonna go down, yeah? Either I gun you down here, or we wait for A to show up and then... either
way, you're dead. Why bother?" he asked.

Satoshi's eyes narrowed. "It ain't about winning. I know I can't do much on my own, but those
kids... I know they'll see this through to the end."

Hideki sighed heavily. "Christ... putting your faith, your life, in the hands of a bunch of high
schoolers... you really are nuts," the yakuza pointedly said.

"You're not looking too hot from where I'm standing. You're down two Deadly Aspects, after all,"
Satoshi remarked. "And they've smacked down every other attempt you've made against them.
Lynott, the Chemical Brothers, even Death 13... if anyone can pull if off, it's them."

"Hmph. Yeah well that's sweet of you to say b-" Sanshiro was cut off by the door on the other end
of the room opening, drawing his eyes toward Mr. A as he strode inside. He smoothed the hem of
his pinstriped white jacket, turning his sharp gaze toward Satoshi.

"You must really have a death wish," Mr. A flatly said, his eyes narrowing.

"Akio Akateni," Satoshi firmly replied, marching toward the younger man. Hideki turned back
toward the bar and poured himself another shot. "Been a while since we met in person. As for me
having a death wish... well, thing is, I'm pretty sure I died the night you killed my wife. Just took
my body a long time to catch up... I always was slow on the uptake."

Mr. A stood neatly in front of the ringed sofa, the shadow of Man in Black rising up behind him in
silence. "Touching. Of all the times for you to go and grow a damned spine, you decide to do it
while I'm grieving... You really are a pain in the ass."

Satoshi suddenly shoved his right hand forward, the tip of Instant Crush glowing like a miniature
sun as a mighty jet of flame exploded out toward the younger man. It suddenly stopped a few feet
in front of him, stopped by an unseen sloping barrier that cast the flames upward the beams in
the ceiling. Man in Black stared forward, his right hand raised up to keep the trajectory of the
flames arcing away from A.

"Come on... this is seriously your best shot?" Akio asked in an annoyed grunt.
Man in Black lunged forward abruptly, forcing Satoshi to leap backward as his right fist struck the ground hard enough to drive right through it. But Man in Black was on him again before Satoshi's feet could even hit the ground, the swipe slamming into his ribs and making him cry out. He was knocked aside, sent sailing through the air until his back met one of the reinforced window hard enough to make a cobweb of cracks splinter along the glass.

"If anyone was gonna try some hot-blooded lone wolf bullshit, I was expecting it to be Joestar. Or Esposito. After all, terrible decision making seems hereditary in his family," Mr. A said, plucking a piece of lint from his left shoulder. Satoshi glowered up at him, forcing himself to rise up. "What, didn't think I'd find that one out? It's not hard for a man of my resources to do a little genealogy research. Even when his grandmother changed her maiden name through marriage... it wasn't enough to change the fate of a Zeppeli being tied to the fate of a Joestar. I'll get around to them in time."

"You're not... gonna win!" A powerful surge of smoke exploded from Instant Crush, blanketing the area around Mr. A. However he simply raised his right hand, a sudden gale of wind kicking up around him. The smoke surged toward the ceiling, allowing Akio to glare at Satoshi as the older man skid to a halt toward his side.

Satoshi raised Instant Crush, bullets of fire rapidly shooting from the tip of his Stand. Man in Black lunged forward, his right hand an unseen blur that proved fast enough to swat each incoming fireball out of the sky. The shadowy Stand knifed toward Satoshi, a strong palm strike slamming into the older man's sternum and easily knocking him off his feet.

Satoshi let out a loud cry as he was knocked back toward the bar, Instant Crush flying from his hand and landing atop one of the beams in the ceiling. He lay still, shivering with each breath he took. With that wide-eyed look on his face, it looked as if something had definitely broke from the impact.

"I warned ya," Hideki nonchalantly said, not bothering to turn away from the bar.

Akio sighed loudly, folding his hands into his pocket. "You coulda' just left it alone. I had no interest in you... But no. You decide that now of all times that you're gonna grow a pair." Satoshi coughed a few times and tried to sit up, but found his body unwilling to listen to him.

"Fuck... you!" Satoshi spat, his body trembling with boiling venom.

"Yeah. We're done here," Akio flatly said, continuing toward Satoshi's downed form. Man in Black floated ahead of him, his shadowy eyes glowering at Satoshi. "I would've left you alone... so now, you have nobody to blame for this but yourself."

Satoshi grit his teeth, flicking his right index finger and calling Instant Crush back toward him. The spectral cigar fell silently thriygh the air, the burning tip drawing near the side of Mr. A's head. A sudden surge of fire exploded outward near his face, making him cry out and recoil as the sudden flash of heat formed charred coils of knotted flesh along the right side of his face.

Even Hideki seemed surprised, turning sharply in his seat as his hissing boss staggered to the side. Akio clutched his burnt face, hissing loudly through clenched teeth. "I got you, you son of a bitch! I got you!" Satoshi spat.

Akio grit his teeth, his Stand knifing down toward Satoshi with his right hand outstretched. Satoshi
closed his eyes.

'Toujou. I'm sorry... I hope I'll see you soon.'

The top of his skull shattered like an egg hitting the kitchen floor, Man in Black's wooden digits plowing through flesh and bone with terrifying ease. His fingers struck through the floor, the top half of Satoshi's head exploding into a pink cloud. His legs snapped up from the jolting force and then hit the floor, the final motions of his body.

"That fucking little bastard," Mr. A spat, his gloved right hand reaching upward to cup the burnt half of his face. Despite his initial shock, he was enduring the pain quite well now.

"You okay?" Hideki asked, heedless of the carnage he had just seen.

"I'll be fine, don't worry about that! I need you to clear the club out," Akio quickly said. Seeing the confusion on his subordinate's face, he breathed an annoyed sigh. "For as stupid as he was to come at me, Satoshi wouldn't have just come up here for no reason. Those fucking Phantom Thieves are probably on their way... he must've come here to lead the way, and to take out my guards..."

"Not a bad plan," Hideki muttered, rising to his feet and taking his Stand as he went. "I'll see who we've got left in the building, and then... Guess I'll be there to meet 'em out front."

"Right," Akio replied, clenching his left fist. "I'll get Okabe ready and tell him to prep the Bonfires. We don't want emergency services getting in the way here," he added, marching off toward the door he had come through.

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The abrupt end to the feed had been enough to make the Arditi come to a halt, a wave of shock rolling through them. They had expected things to end this way as soon as Man in Black's first blow had landed, but the nastiness had been worse than any of them had anticipated.

The team were still a few blocks from Club Ravana, and were now halted in a broad alleyway filled with stains of filth. "Oh my god," Futaba whispered, holding her phone away from herself and looking away. Akira settled a comforting arm around her shoulders, a scowl on his face.

"He actually went and did it," Akira muttered, trying his best to stay composed.

Shizuka grit her teeth, the bottom of her right fist smacking into the brickwork of the wall beside her. "Of all the stunts to pull... all to make an opening for us..." Someone dying for her, for the benefit of her friends, it was a terrifying thing to experience.

For a moment she thought back to Will and Caesar Zeppeli, who gave their lives to aid members of her family. Someone dying for a cause, for the benefit of her team, Shizuka had never experienced it like this before. Her attention shifted to Sergio, the blond standing off to the side and trembling with a barely contained anger.

Was he likely to meet a similar fate?

"This is all... all so surreal... s-so much to take in," Hifumi breathed, placing her right hand over her mouth. The dark haired girl trembled, trying her hardest not to cry.
"I didn't know him all that well but... he didn't deserve to die," Ann softly said, looking toward the darkened sky. "But it's more like... like he wanted to die. I can't even imagine what it must be like to see the world that way..."

"I don't think you want to," Shiho grimly said. She let out a heavy sigh, her shoulders slumping slightly. "I know we're all in shock right now, but... we can't afford to stop. He made an opening for us, but if we stop now... then it'll go to waste."

Morgana nodded. "She's right," he said, taking a step toward the exit of the alleyway. "We can take time to grieve later, but... if we don't act now, then Morihiro will have died for nothing. And I can't abide that."

"Neither can I," Akira curtly added.

"Yes... the best thing we can do now is follow through and put an end to things. It must be what Morihiro-san wanted," Yusuke said, his tone firm.

Shizuka nodded and pushed herself off the wall. "Yeah, let's get to it... I plan on putting that fucker in the dirt for what he just did. No, not just that... for everything he's done! And everybody he's hurt!"

"Yeah, well get in line. After that little stunt, I want to be the one to finish him," Sergio said, glancing over his shoulder at the others.

Akira nodded and started forward, keeping a strong arm around Futaba as the hacker gradually regained her composure. "Let's get to it then... this all ends tonight," Akira firmly stated.
Having gathered their resolve, the Arditi made for Club Ravana as quickly as they could. The path they took guided the teens through dark, quiet streets, while the bustle of Shibuya followed them from a distance. Their pace was swift, none of them being deterred by the danger they knew awaited them.

Rounding one corner, the group hastily sprinted through a broad trash-littered alley and made a beeline through to the other side. However, the group skidded to a halt as they exited the alley, halted by the sight of an older man in an expensive suit hanging around outside Club Ravana's opulent golden entryway.

They had seen this man in Satoshi's camera feed, one of Mr. A's closest allies for how casually he had been idling in Mr. A's presence. There was a cigarette perched between his chapped lips, a continuous stream of smoke trailing into the darkened sky. "Well I'll be, you actually came. Looks like I'm gonna have an eventful night... you can call me Hideki Sanshiro. Or just Sanshiro, I'm not picky."

"You're one of those super-elite guys, yeah?" Shizuka asked, watching him warily.

"I guess that's one way of putting it... I was hoping Sanada would be with you so we could have round two, but I guess you kids will suffice," Sanshiro said, slipping his cigarette from his lips and tapping it until the ash gave way.

"Get outta' the way or get knocked flat! We ain't interested in your old ass, all we want is Mr. A!" Ryuji shouted, clenching his fists.

Sanshiro rolled his eyes slightly. "Christ... don't tell me you're that worked up over Morihiro. You can't even fully blame A for that one. Morihiro went into the club knowing exactly what would happen to him if he did. If you taunt a mountain lion, don't act indignant when he bites your hand off."

"You... you son of a bitch!" Shiho spat, her slim shoulders trembling from a budding anger.

"Besides, I can't just let you all go past. But... I'm sure I could entertain myself with a few of you, and let the rest go through to the club. A's bound to be somewhere in there," Hideki explained. He casually dropped the butt of his cigarette to the ground and crushed it under his heel.

Akira's eyes narrowed. "And what's to stop us to just steamrolling over you as one big group?" he asked.

"Well, not much but-" Hideki was cut off by a deafening bang in the distance, causing the Arditi to glance eastward. The night was filled with screams, with the teenagers able to see a large stack of smoke coiling into the distance. This was soon joined by another distant explosion, even further away to the north, that soon had a second wave of smoke rolling into the air, illuminated by Tokyo's urban lights.

"What did you just do?!" Makoto snapped, her eyes wide in shock, unable to look away from the twin trails of smoke ballooning upward.
Sanshiro shrugged his broad shoulders. "Me? Not much. This was just a contingency in case Mr. A ever had to get involved in anything... big. Some nice controlled explosions to draw the attention of the emergency services away from here. Oh don't worry, the bomb-guys are pros, it's unlikely anyone was near enough to get hurt. But..." Sanshiro's brow furrowed, becoming set in stone. "If you decide you don't wanna' play ball, there's no telling where the next blast might come from. A club, a stuffed office building... a hospital."

"He... He's gotta be bluffing," Shizuka murmured, her eyes widening behind the dark lenses of her glasses.

"We can't take that chance," Akira replied. He was trying his best to ignore the screams and sirens in the distance. Well, there was unlikely to be anyone caught up in this if civilians were going to start dispersing.

Sergio silently inspected Sanshiro for a moment, before glancing to Akira. "He's not alone. Toshi Okabe is probably inside the club, ready to meet whoever goes past Sanshiro. A mentioned him in the video, after all..."

Akira nodded. "So we gotta go through the remaining elite if we want to get to the big man himself... and we still have no idea what that Okabe guy's power is. Even you don't know."

After a brief paused, Sergio sighed and took a heavy step forward. "I'll hang back and help deal with this guy. With any luck, I'll still get a shot at A afterward."

Ryuji grimaced, glaring toward the older man. Whatever his Stand was, it had to be something dangerous for him to be standing by so casually in front of a huge group of empowered people. "Yeah, I'll stick back with you too," Ryuji said.

"And me," Ann added, nodding firmly.

"Me too. I'll help however I can," Hifumi said.

Morgana also took a step forward, nodding firmly. "And you can count me in too. I want to take Mercurius for a spin."

Hideki silently surveyed the four teens that stood aside from the rest of the team, before raising his right hand up. A shimmer rolled across his fingers, before the ghostly form of American II's flintlock frame appeared in his grasp. "The five of you against me huh? Yeah, that sounds pretty fun."

Shizuka gave Sergio an uncertain glance. "You sure about this?"

"I know what you're thinking. Yes, I'm a Zeppeli. In part at least. And yes, my family and tragedy tend to intermingle well. But even if I were destined to die here, I wouldn't falter. Not after everything that just happened to Satoshi," Sergio emphatically stated.

Akira nodded faintly. Well there was no point in arguing with the blond over it, with how determined he was. "Just be careful... and that goes for the rest of you, too." It was either split up, or run the risk of a bomb blast going off somewhere populated.

Akira turned toward Club Ravana and started sprinting, the rest of the team following his lead and giving Hideki a wide berth. One by one they filed into the vacated club, leaving Sergio, Morgana,
Ryuji, Hifumi, and Ann standing opposite him.

"You know, when I was a kid in middle school, we had this little club. We called ourselves the 'Allies of Justice' or some shit. Went around targetting bullies... so in a way, I get the thrill you little shits must have gotten from playing hero. But..." Hideki grinned and raised the flintlock suddenly. "Sooner or later everyone's gotta grow up!"

There was a crack of thunder as the spectral bullet shot from his Stand, forcing the group to scatter as it rocketed to the pavement. It ricocheted off a slab of pavement and bounced back off a wall toward Ryuji at a constantly rising velocity.

Seiten Taisei appeared in front of him, raising his cudgel to block. But he missed by a scant inch, the steel ball sailing forward and slamming into Ryuji's shoulder. The blond cried out as he was knocked flat on his back, blood spurting off his shoulder while the projectile raced off to bounce against another surface.

But before it could get any further a sudden blade of focused wind shot through the air, slicing through the steel ball and disintegrating it. Hideki grit his teeth and leapt back, avoiding a few distant slashes from Mercurius that left fissures in the asphalt in passing.

"Speedy bastard," Hideki grunted, barely reacting to a slice of wind cutting through his left sleeve. "American III!"

The pistol morphed suddenly into a lever action rifle, another crack of gunfire echoing into the night. Hideki gave the lever a pull, the flaming bullet suddenly splitting into four super-fast shots that arced off in different directions.

One made a beeline for Hifumi, continuing to gain speed. But she was quick on her feet, her eyes glowing as she predicted each swing toward her. Hifumi dodged several swings, only to let out a sharp gasp as the burning bullet gained speed and scraped along her right hip, leaving a burnt scar in passing. However, with it close enough, Flaming Telepath's red digits were able to swing in. She caught the round and shattered it like a marble, grimacing slightly as she felt a burn along her fingertips.

Ryuji and Sergio were left dodging the remaining projectiles, cuts and scars opening along their flesh whenever they failed to avoid a swoop. Meanwhile Morgana and Ann took cover behind the cars parked on their end of the streets, their Personas floating ahead of them and unleashing volleys of projectiles toward their foes.

Hideki leapt back, barely avoiding an exploding fireball as it scorched into the asphalt where he had been standing. He landed heavily on the roof of a small hatchback car, his heavy soles denting the metal on impact, and jumped away to avoid a flurry of wind fired by Mercurius.

But, for as surprisingly spry as the older man was, he couldn't totally avoid Mercurius' attack. A blade of wind sliced aling the small of his back, cutting through his coat and shirt, leaving a bloodied scar against his flesh. He grit his teeth and hissed loudly as he fell into cover behind a car, while a few fireballs from Ann burnt into the wall behind him.

He turned as Mercurius' shadow fell over him, promptly raising his rifle and firing off another shot. He was quick to crack the lever, the burning foursome of bullets surging around Mercurius. But, while he seemed to be standing still, American III's bullets simply passed through him. Sanshiro narrowed his eyes, able to just about see the superhumanly fast flickers of Mercurius'
body. As if he was moving so fast that he was becoming intangible.

With a simple swing of his staff, a flurry of wind swirled around Mercurius and instantly sliced the encircling bullets apart. "Hmhm... Speedy bastard eh? Fine, guess I'll need to bust out something faster too. American IV!"

In an instant the lever action rifle morphed into a cobalt-plated Tommy Gun with a heavy drum magazine. "Eat Trench Sweeper ya' speedy little fuck!" Sanshiro spat, squeezing the trigger and unleashing a hailstorm of burning bullets that rocketed toward Mercurius.

Once more the spindly Persona started dashing and weaving away from the gunfire. But for as speedy as he was, several burning rounds managed to graze along his right arm, making Morgana yowl loudly as he promptly recalled his Persona. The young man clutched his upper right arm, grimacing as he felt blood oozing down his arm. "Owwww! Is this what bleeding feels like?! That's horrible!"

Sanshiro peered around the end of the hatchback, squeezing the trigger to unleash another volley across the road. But, to his shock, Hecate abruptly moved in and started swiftly dashing from side to side. Every burning bullet seemed to hit the ebony Persona, but did no damage at all. The flames simply sank into the dark material of her body, vanishing entirely.

"Firepower isn't gonna work on me pal!" Ann shouted. As she said this, Breakthru moved toward the road and started vigorously pummeling the asphalt, launching finger-sized chunks toward Sanshiro's cover as a form of suppressing fire. The asphalt pummelled against the car, each impact denting and scraping the metal.

With Sergio making an opening, Hecate was able to cross the distance in a flash. Her shadow fell over Sanshiro, who quickly leapt back to try and avoid a burst of flame launched by the dark witch. The brunt missed him, but several tongues of fire lashed against his legs and made him hiss loudly.

Undeterred, he suddenly raised his Stand and took aim. "Freeze." Once more Sanshiro pulled the trigger, another slew of bullets erupting from the barrel. This time however, the bullets were wreathed in clouds of pale mist, like plumes of liquid nitrogen. Hecate tried to pull back, only for a few rounds to strike along her clavical. They turned into expanding masses of ice on impact, shattering right after.

Ann gasped sharply, landing hard on her back and clutching her chest. The blonde quickly recalled Hecate, the witch forming at her side and using her limited healing ability to mend the fresh scars along her clavicle.

"Son of a bitch... every time he upgrades that gun of his, it gets stronger and more complex... how many more does he have?" Ryuji asked, concern rising in his tone.

"No idea. I've heard talk of him having a sixth weapon, but... nothing concrete," Sergio replied. "Not that I'm keen to find out... Listen up Sanshiro! You've had your fun, but you're outnumbered. There's no way you can win alone!"

Hifumi moved up from the car she had been using for cover, her brow furrowing slightly. "Wait a minute..." she murmured, seeing something strange through Flaming Telepath's eyes.

Sanshiro grinned from behind covers. Despite the injuries dotting his aged body, he was going strong. "Ah? Who says I'm totally alone?"
A shadow swooped over the road, a winged figure that drew Ann's gaze skyward. For just a moment she got a glimpse of something definitely unnatural: Some sort of bat, formed from armoured segments of pink metal. The dark leathery surface of his wings was jet black in colour, almost blending into the night sky overhead.

Something fell from aloft, dropped by the strange bat-Stand. As it hurtled to the ground its shape became more defined, and Ann could see that it was some sort of neon pink egg falling toward them.

Hifumi let out a sharp gasp, realization dawning on her through her precognition. "Everyone, get down!" Hifumi shouted.

Mere seconds after saying this, the glowing egg struck the asphalt and shattered open, a blinding and deafening flashbang lighting up the streets and forcing the young heroes to recoil. Sanshiro definitely wasn't flying solo right now.

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Deep purple walls and floors, coupled with golden doorframes and floor moldings, gave a general air of wealth and opulence to Club Ravana's interiors. The booths and chairs they passed were plush and padded, wine red in color, and seemed quite expensive too.

Yet there was something mildly eerie in entering a nightclub that was abandoned. A modern hotspot, well lit and furnished, but utterly empty on the inside.

"Any idea where we're gonna find A? I want to clear this place quickly so we can get back to the others," Shiho quickly said.

"They'll be fine," Akira replied, having a good deal of faith in the others. "But for now, we might need to check this club floor by floor. I doubt he's the kind to hide, but... well there's a chance he could be somewhere above us.

Hearing this, Futaba came to an abrupt stop. "In that case, maybe I should stick back here? You guys go ahead to the dance floor, I'll use Prometheus to scan the upper floors."

"You sure?" Akira asked, coming to a halt a foot ahead of his girlfriend. Futaba nodded.

"In that case, I might hang back here too, just to be safe. There's no telling who might try to jump Futaba while she's working," Shiho said, leaning against a wall near Futaba.

That would leave Akira, Shizuka, Yusuke, Makoto, and Haru to check the rest of the first floor. For a short time, at least. "Alright... We'll be just up ahead, call us if you need us. Or... We'll call you if we need your help," Akira said, nodding firmly at Futaba. "Stay safe."

A tiny smile formed on Futaba's lips. "I always do. Try not to lose anymore parts, yeah?"

Akira adjusted the left sleeve of his blazer, flexing his synthetic digits a few times. "Well..." He smiled wryly. "I can certainly try."

With that the group turned and resumed their sprint down the long corridor, toward the golden archway that led to the expansive dance floor. Futaba closed her eyes, swirls of dark matter coiling
up her slim legs. Matching inky blackness, lined by radiant glowing marks, engulfed her arms and fed into the walls at her sides.

Shiho leaned against the wall, watching comfortably as Futaba put her new powers to use. "So that's Prometheus," she murmured to herself. At a glance, from what little of it was visible at the moment, didn't seem too different to Necronomicon. But the presence it held in the room, it seemed to weigh slightly on Shiho's mind.

As the group made for the dance floor, the silence of the building was broken up by distant and soft singing. A deep and refined voice, using pitch perfect French. "La mer... qu'on voit danser... le long des golfs clairs... a des reflets d'argent, la mer..."

"Oh boy, soft singing... that's never a good sign," Shizuka mused.

They burst through the doorway, standing on an elevated ring marked by plush booths on all sides, bordering the main body of the dance floor. And there, in the center of the floor, was a youngish man with his back to them. He was well dressed in a crisp dark suit, his hair slicked back. From afar it looked as if it was coated in oil.

"Ah, the Arditi. Named for the Italian army's special forces circa World War I. I'm a fan of the classics too," he nonchalantly said, barely glancing toward the newcomers.

Makoto watched him warily, sparks of blue fire coiling around her hand. She was set to strike, as soon as any danger appeared. "Toshi Okabe?" she curiously asked.

"Yes, that's me," he casually answered. "But you're not here for me, are you? A-sama is your goal for this visit... But unfortunately, I'm here to be a roadblock for you, and I doubt you'll be getting past me."

Shizuka narrowed her eyes. "Yeah I'll bet... just save us the trouble and get out of the way asshole!" she spat.

Okabe silently cracked his neck, barely noticing her insult. Houdini suddenly grabbed a lamp from one of the booths and flung it sharply toward the older man. In a flash he turned sideways, the back of his left fist shattering the dense gold-coated material like a piece of glass. Okabe grinned sharply without looking up, his right hand trembling.

"My Stand is rather... chaotic. I have to take special medicine to keep it suppressed. My family thought I was insane... but I've been off the medicine for a few hours now... and I'm feeling very lucid."

A powerful tremble resonated through the vast room, the air itself starting to flicker. The colour drained from the room, everything becoming stark and monochromatic. Yusuke blinked a few times, his eyes wide as he stared at his hands. "What... what on earth is this?!" A strange scratchy film grain became overlaid on reality itself, everything starting to look less focused. And, from the ether, uptempo jazz music started to play around the Arditi.

"It's... it's reality! He's altering reality!" Shizuka shouted.

A wheezing chuckle left Okabe, growing louder as he raised his head to reveal his eyes. They had morphed into a pair of cartoonish orbs with solid black pupils, the rest of his face starting to shift and contour until his whole body was morphed into a bouncing rubberhose cartoon character in a
"Kekekeke... now you get it. I'm a fan of the classics after all! "Sing You Sinners!" At Okabe's shout, a powerful explosion of air erupted around him, the entire room warping and twisting, until everything around them looked as if it had been drawn by hand. Crisp, watercolor backgrounds in contrast to the bouncing cartoon characters. Even the Arditi weren't immune, their bodies twisting and bending until they suddenly reformed into short and skinny rubberhose humans.

Shizuka's eyes bulged out of her head on elongating eyestalks, her sunglasses twirling around in the air and then being sucked back into place as Shizuka's eyes were reeled back into her head. "HOLY SUGAR!" She blinked a few times. "Wait... I can't swear now?! Ah fudge!"

"Correct!" Okabe said, suddenly rising up beside Shizuka, making her yelp in shock. He raised his right hand into his pocket, suddenly pulling out a mallet that seemed far too large for any kind of garment to hold. "This world runs on cartoon logic! Profanity isn't allowed, but violence-" he swung the hammer down, crashing it heavily into the top of Shizuka's head. The Minnie Mouse-proportioned girl was suddenly driven into the ground like a stake, a heavy fleshy bump suddenly rising from the top of her head. "... is heavily encouraged!"

Akira grit his teeth slightly, trying to will his body to stop bouncing in tune with the background music. "Well, we'll just see about that buddy! Crom Cruach!" A puff of smoke erupted at Akira's right side, culminating in the white serpent forming near his user. Though now he looked more plump and cuddly than muscular and monstrous. A cute derpy hat rested atop his scaly head.

Crom Cruach's right fist shot forward, extending to obscene lengths as his forearm abruptly morphed into an uncoiling spring. It collided with Okabe's face, causing him to bounce along the ground, hopping from head to foot until he came to a teetering stop on his rocking heels.

"Oh my stars and garters, this is all so surreal..." Haru breathed, pulling a handkerchief from her pocket and wiping away some bullet-sized sweatdrops from her forehead. "But I'm not about to let you best us. Milady!"

Milady appeared in a puff of smoke, looking even more fluffy and feminine that normal. The Persona raised her skirt, a chorus of wolf whistles coming from parts unknown at the gesture. A bouquet of shotgun barrels protruded from the shadow of her skirt, each seeming to swing independent of the other, before they all took aim at Okabe and unleashed a hail of gunfire that soon swallowed Okabe's body in a dense cloud of smoke.

The smoke cloud parted, revealing that Okabe's body had become completely coated in soot. He opened both eyes and blinked repeatedly, each motion punctuated by a sharp stab of piano keys. He abruptly shook his entire body, the soot shaking off to reveal his unharmed body. "Of course you realize, this means war!"

Okabe's right leg stretched forward, elongating to more than twice it's original size, and once his foot met the floor his leg reeled in and catapulted him forward. His right hand morphed into an anvil, the top clocking Haru in the chest and launching her clean off her feet. The strawberry blonde sailed through the air with a loud whistling sound, until she reached the edges of the room.

But, as she went along, Haru noticed a distinct flicker in the air that grew more intense as she neared the edge. Like television static... Suddenly her body burst through the edge of Sing You Sinner's area of effect, her body abruptly morphing back to normal as she was shunted into the real
world.

Haru let out a loud cry as he body collided with the wall, slumping down and clutching her right shoulder. Her body trembled a few times, processing the sudden shock of pain rolling through her.

"You can't hurt a cartoon," Okabe curtly said, raising his right hand and giving it a rapid shake until it morphed back into its usual white glove-clad shape. "But believe me sweetheart, as you just saw... a cartoon can hurt you no problem!"

Shizuka clenched her fists tightly. "Brute forcing this isn't gonna work," she murmured to herself. "But what if..." She raised her right hand, deciding to put Houdini's power to the test in this strange world. While the 'ink' of her clothes and flesh became transparent, her body was marked by a strong white outline. She grimaced. Seemed a sneak attack was out of the question too.

An idea came into her head, followed by a lightbulb materializing directly above her and clicking to life. "But if the world operates on cartoon logic... I just need to Bugs Bunny his Elmer Fudd ass!"

Well, she was assuming as much. She still needed time to formulate what exactly she was going to do, and was going to need a bit of time to experiment and see what she could do in the confines of this strange warped world.

"When this power of mine first appeared, it only effected me, warping me into a toon in the real world. But over the years, and ever time I use this power, the area of effect widens even further." Okabe snickered, flashing a toothy grin that caused his dimples to grow larger. "I wonder just how much this will grow this time..."

He turned with inhuman quickness, his body a whirlwind, and suddenly lunged for Shizuka. He pulled a long blade from his trouser pocket as he went, Shizuka's eyes bulging straight out of her head yet again. She acted quickly, reaching into her right coat pocket to test a theory, and suddenly pulled a large kite shield from within.

There was a loud clash as the two metals collided, Shizuka's body wobbling like jelly for a few seconds. "Cripes! Cool your jets Judge Doom!" She shouted, being pushed back by the continuing strikes from his blade.

Makoto grit her teeth and suddenly hopped up. "Anat!" Her Persona appeared in another flourish of smoke, taking the form of... a large bicycle with a cheery human face on the front. Makoto landed neatly on the seat, inspecting her Persona in silence for several seconds. She turned to the camera, without realizing it, and flatly said "This stinks."

A rubbery arm grew from Anat's side, slithering toward her opening mouth and pulling out a large Fat Man bomb that she promptly spun on her finger. Anat took aim, squinting her right eye, and threw the freshly procured bomb like a football. It spiraled through the air at a swift pace, closing in on Okabe. Shizuka leapt high to avoid it, springs shooting from the soles of her shoes to catapult her further.

The bomb struck Okabe with a powerful blinding flash, the plumes of smoke rushing through the air and then rapidly dispersing. Okabe's body bounced up and down, crumpled like an accordion. He even sounded like one, each bounce of his body echoing through the room.

"Ooooh... now that's one dirty bomb!" Okabe gripped the top of his head, lifting his entire body up until it snapped back to normal. Well as normal as one could be when stuck as a toon. "Guess I'll
have to hit back!"

His right arm swung forward, elongating and suddenly catching Makoto by her collar. He lifted the girl in a single movement, twirling her overhead until her body was turned into a cyclone with a pair of eyes poking through the whirlwind. He threw her aside, Makoto's body sailing through the air and right through the edge of Sing You Sinner's area of effect.

Her back slammed hard into the bar, wood cracking and splintering from the sudden blow. Makoto let out a loud cry, sliding down and gritting her teeth. A dribble of blood oozed down the fresh cut in her forehead. "Agh... feels like... diving into a pool and landing the wrong way..." she muttered. It was the closest thing she could use to describe the sharp transition between toon physics and the harshness of reality.

Okabe snickered again, rocking on his heels and rubbing under his nose with his right index finger. "Ooooehehehe... Well I hope you're not tired out yet kiddo, 'cause we're just getting started! " A malicious grin suddenly spread across his face, his pupils morphing into twin plumes of fire. "I'm gonna show you one hell of a time!"

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Outside the club, the battle between Satoshi and the other members of the Phantom Thieves was continuing to escalate. The body of Hideki's stand blocked a powerful swing from Seiten Taisei, the blow making him skid back on his heels. "That Stand overhead is called Ride Easy... a little buddy being controlled by a friend of mine. Not much for direct conflict, but he's been keeping you on your toes."

Sanshiro jumped back, barely avoiding another strike as the tip of Seiten Taisei's cudgel shattered a concrete slab on impact. The older man had a few cuts and bruises along his body, but he was still going strong.

He took aim, another volley of burning bullets erupting from his Stand. Two of them scraped the floating monkey's right shoulder before Ryuji called him back, hissing through his teeth and clutching his own shoulder. "I'm gonna be stuck kicking him at this rate," Ryuji growled.

The rest of the team were crouched behind the parked van to Ryuji's right. Morgana was holding his hands near to the sides of Sergio's head, focusing as he used his own healing abilities to mend some damage done to the blond's eyes and ears. Hifumi was glancing skyward, keeping a sharp eye for any more incoming flashbangs.

"Take a breath," Ann said as she moved up a bit from cover. "I'll take a swing at him this time."

Hecate flew from her user's body, the ebony witch swinging her arms high overhead. The night sky became briefly illuminated by coils of fire rolling along her forearms, which she promptly threw forward into twin jets of flame. Hideki saw themse coming in fast, his eyes widening.

"Freeze!" He squeezed the trigger, another slew of icy bullets exploding from the barrel of his Tommy Gun. They exploded in midair, swiftly forming into a large wall of ice that exploded violently against the incoming surge of flame. The shock of the blast still nearly knocked him straight off balance, the older man letting out a loud growl as he struggled to regain his footing.

Now that she had a brief opening, Hecate shoved her hands forward and unleashed another burst of fire. It exploded near Sanshiro's body, tongues of fire lashing at his limbs as he was entirely
knocked off his feet. His back crashed violently into the wall, bricks cracking from the sudden pressure.

He landed hard on his right knee, his sturdy body trembling. He could feel Hecate's shadow fall over him, a wreath of fire illuminating him. "How about that? You're pretty tough, but that old geezer body of yours is at its limit!" Ann shouted.

"Heh, a geezer am I? Yeah, maybe I am blondie. But this old man... still has a trick or two up his sleeve!" Sanshiro boasted.

Hifumi gasped suddenly. "Everyone duck! Ride Easy is coming in for another run!"

No sooner had she said this that another neon egg fell from aloft, the Arditi quickly ducking behind cover and clasping their hands over their ears. The flashbang lit up the nearby area, giving the yakuza the opening he needed.

"American V!" His Tommy Gun vanished in a flourish of glittering light, the energy spreading and coiling around his strong body. It grew brighter and brighter, the field of energy expanding into a vast shape that was soon shoving the nearby cars out of the way.

"Agh..." Sergio opened his eyes and started to rise to his feet. "Everyone alright?!" the blond asked in a shout, the strength returning to his legs.

"Y-yeah, I'm okay. Anyone need healing?" Morgana quickly asked.

Hifumi lowered her hand from her ears and breathed a tiny sigh. "I-I'm okay... good thing I saw it coming that time."

Ryuji nodded a bit. "Yeah, I'm good too... how about you Ann?" he asked, glancing to the blonde. She nodded in return, breathing a tiny sigh. "Alright, we're all good... but what about the old guy?"

Sergio peered up from behind cover, letting out a shocked gasp at what he saw. Breakthru flew from his body on a reflex, heavy fists hammering a few sections of the road and uprooting nearly a dozen chunks of asphalt that rose up and merged into a single hemispherical shape. As soon as this happened there was a thunderous boom, followed immediately after by a powerful explosion slamming into the asphalt-shield and rocking the streets around them.

Sergio was sent skidding back on his heels from the potent shockwave, the roar of the blast drowning out the shocked screams of his allies. "W-what the heck is that?!" Ann screamed.

The smoke cleared, fully revealing the entirety of American V's frame: A sleek blue-plated Sherman tank, a smoking kappa spraypainted along the right side. A beam of moonlight illuminated the main gun, while a small silver flamethrower near the hatch whirred from side to side.

Sergio swallowed hard. "His second strongest form... is a fucking tank," he murmured to himself, his Stand hovering at his side. "Then what the hell... is the next phase?!"
Sae had been steadily making her way home, sticking closer to the usual business hours of her profession these days instead of burning the candle at both ends. Her office was apparently beyond corrupt, and she was more than a little ashamed with her past self, so she couldn't muster the resolve to be as invested as she used to. She really needed a new career...

However, it was while making her way home that her path became a little more chaotic. First there were the distant explosions, plumes of smoke spiralling skyward. Those had made her wary of the route she was going to take, and also made her uncertain of taking the train. So, for now, she was mindful of each step.

But eventually she felt a fresh tremor under her feet, making the brunette come to a halt. That one felt closer alright, Sae's eyes narrowing as the twin wristbands of her Stand materialized on her person. She adjusted the shoulder-strap of her purse and, against her better judgement, silently stalked closer toward the source of the boom.

As she reached the corner, she silently pressed against the brickwork and peered around the edge. Sae was greeted by quite a sight: A few of Makoto's friend (and a blue-eyed, dark-haired boy that she didn't recognise) standing on one side of the road opposite... a tank?!

Sae's eyes widened considerably at the sight, but in that moment she also noticed the faint spectral aura that lingered around the armoured plating. It was a Stand? More importantly, where was Makoto and the rest of her friends? A sense of unease filled Sae, and she quietly slipped behind cover as the sounds of combat hit her ears.

Something huge was going on here, something decisive. Was it related to that Mr. A character they had chosen to go after? The ground rumbled again, filling Sae with apprehension. She wasn't much of a fighter, she knew. A battle on the streets was an entirely different world to a courtroom. And while she had been practicing with Luck Be a Lady since getting it, she had yet to actually fight with it.

Even so Makoto's friends, possibly even Makoto herself, were in danger. And after all they had done for her, could she really just stand back?

Sighing, she reached into her purse and took out a small meat mallet she had concealed in the bottom of her purse. An aura of purple light extended from her right wristband, enveloping her hand and the modest hammer, which caused the head and handle to grow larger, more spikes dotting from the face of it.

This on its own wouldn't do much against a tank, but she didn't plan on using it here. She had passed by a toyshop on the way here, and if there was a toy gun in there then she could potentially put it to good use. Not that Sae was thrilled with the prospect of breaking and entering, she couldn't sit back now that she knew what was going on. And Futaba Sakura could hopefully cover her tracks.

"You saved me before. So now I'll try and return the favor."

Meanwhile, the Arditi were hastily scattering to avoid giving Sanshiro a clear shot, the heavy tank gun whirring around as it tried to track them. "Hifumi!" Sergio shouted. Breakthru flew from his
body, his right fist touching a nearby car and catapulting it across the street. The makeshift missile slammed into the Sherman's hull, metal crumpling like a paper bag and glass exploding outward. The tank rocked back a bit. "You need to take out the airborne Stand! If another flahbang stops us, it's all over!"

"R-right!" Hifumi nervously said, keeping cover behind one of the cars. She turned her gaze skyward, catching a glimpse of the pink winged figure as it crested above them. It was getting ready for another run, and she had to be ready for it.

Seiten Taisei lunged at the armoured mass, his cudgel striking the side with a flurry of powerful blows, each strike punctuated by a crackling flourish of lightning. But for as strong as he was, even outside the Metaverse, his blows could only form dents in the sturdy armour.

The main gun twirled around with shocking speed, reinforced metal striking Seiten and slamming the Persona into Club Ravana's wall hard enough to send cracks racing along the facade. Ryuji gasped harshly, the wind being knocked out of him.

"You're out of your league! Nothing you got is gonna crack this hull!" Sanshiro shouted. There was a vague strain in his voice, his breathing a little heavier than normal. Partially from the earlier battle, and the injuries he sustained, and partially because maintaining American V was not an easy task.

The mini flamethrower took aim at Ryuji's Persona, a focused wave of orange fire erupting from the nozzle. But before it could make contact Hecate swiftly intercepted it, the heat being sucked into her body. Ann breathed a small sigh of relief, watching from afar as Ryuji called his Persona back.

"It doesn't matter how strong you are... we don't back down!" Ann shouted. Hecate shoved her hands forward, a column of fire erupting from her and slamming violently into the Sherman's hull, the sustained fire causing a section of armor to glow red hot.

Hecate recoiled as the gun swung again, scraping a few chunks of heavy debris up in the process. Several shards struck the Persona's arms, making Ann gasp and hiss as she felt blood ooze down her forearms.

She moved to recall her Persona, while Mercurius rushed in for a frontal attack. The slim Persona was still inhumanly fast, darting at such speeds that he was invisible to the naked eye. The edge of his staff struck against the Sherman's plating repeatedly, each strike leaving an inch-deep slash in the armor.

Throughout it all the flamethrower nozzle was darting too and fro, working to keep track of him as best it could. A sudden flash lit up the air around the tank, followed by a red hot surge of fire knifing through the air. It intercepted Mercurius, forcing the speedster to recoil as tongues of fire lashed at his limbs. Morgana yelped in pain, ducking deeper into cover.

"Not bad. That speed of yours is something else... not gonna lie, I'm more excited now than I've been in a while. Not everyday I have to bust out the big guns for a fight," Sanshiro said, the main gun reeling around and taking aim toward the edge of the street. Ryuji was trying to guide Ann into cover, with Morgana serving as a distraction for them. But it seemed Morgana hadn't held his focus long enough.

"Son of a bitch," Ryuji murmured, his Persona moving in front of him as a living shield. "Keep
back, I think Seiten Taisei can tank one of those shells."

Ann glared ahead toward the tank, a frown on her face. "I don't think you can handle damage like that outside of the Metaverse," the blonde quickly said. Not that they had many options when in his crosshairs.

A surge of smoke blossomed from the main gun, another shell exploding out and rapidly racing toward the two teens. However something rushed past it at an even greater speed: A manhole cover, propelled by Breakthru's power. It arced slightly, intercepting the incoming shell several feet from Ann and Ryuji. It exploded against the dense mass of iron, and despite soaking up a lot of the damage the two teens were soon bowled over by the ensuing shockwave.

Ann and Ryuji skidded to a halt on the pavement, knocked out by the hard and sudden blow. But, beyond that, they were thankfully unharmed by the blast.

The main gun started to turn again, the street being filled with echoing dings as a flurry of asphalt bombarded the tank's hull. More and more projectiles were launched by Breakthru's power, but they seemed incapable of inflicting much damage to the Sherman.

"Sergio Esposito... I can appreciate the determination, but it seems you're not gonna make much progress against me," Sanshiro said, only faintly aware of the dents being knocked into the plating.

"I don't particularly care," Sergio firmly said. "No matter what it takes, I will get through you. And then I'll go for your boss. It's a promise."

"Tch... Don't get cocky. Even if by some miracle you manage to beat me, you've got a power that can't do anything against Man in Black. You're out of your league!" Sanshiro shouted, another shell exploding from his tank gun.

Meanwhile, Hifumi continued to comb the skies, trying to focus solely on catching Ride Easy, trying to ignore the state of the others. She kept her gaze aimed upward, her eyes widening a tad as the neon pink bat once more swooped around.

"Come on... Come on..." Hifumi whispered to herself, Flaming Telepath materializing at her side. Hifumi held her breath, watching as the outline of the flashbang's trajectory started to glow in her field of vision. "Just a little more."

The airborne figure drew in closer, with Hifumi clenching her fists. If she messed this up, if that blinding flash distracted Morgana and Sergio, they were as good as dead.

"There!" Flaming Telepath shot upward at a rapid rate as Ride Easy dropped his payload, the floating Stand moving in to intercept. In one fluid motion she caught the glowing oblong and pitched it back toward Ride Easy like a baseball, the wind whistling loudly as it cleaved up toward the bat.

Another white flash lit up the night sky, the erupting grenade blasting the flying Stand. Through the deafening burst, Hifumi could hear a pained cry from behind her, causing her to spin around to see a figure in a violet hoodie crouched on a nearby fire escape. A young man who seemed only a few years older than Hifumi herself.

"So that's Ride Easy's user... this'll be quick," she noted, directing her Stand toward the dazed man. Flaming Telepath knocked him out cold in a single hard jab, taking the bomber out of the equation.
"Ride Easy is down!" she shouted.

A grin spread across Sergio's face from his current position, standing behind a smoking barricade of uplifted asphalt and concrete. "Looks like you're all alone now," he casually said.

Hideki let out an annoyed snorting sound from the confines of his Stand. "Like it makes a difference at this stage. Two of your friends are still out cold-" Morgana let out an annoyed grimace as he finished pulling Ann and Ryuji around the corner. "And the rest of you can't get through my armor. You're screwed."

"Then perhaps he needs some extra help?" a female voice asked.

A flurry of gunfire filled the air, bullets striking off the armoured hull like rain on a tin roof. A split second after, a blonde-haired figure landed heavily on the canopy with enough force to sink the Sherman a few centimeters into the ground. The air ruffled the hem of Aigis' longcoat, while coils of smoke wafted from the gun-tipped edges of her fingers.

"You?!" Sanshiro asked in shock.

"Me," she confirmed, smiling politely.

Aigis flipped back with impressive speed, avoiding a spray of fire launched her way by American V's flamethrower. As soon as her feet his the ground, a warm blue glow illuminating her body as her Persona rose up at her side. A female figure in a flowing white robe anf an ornate golden helmet, her body protected by an orbiting ring of steel that had a heavy shield at the front of it, while a sharp spear jutted from her body. "Athena!"

Aigis' Persona rocketed forward with an impressive surge of speed, closing in on the Sherman. The bladed tip clashed with the hull, scraping open a long gash with a spray of sparks surging from the point of contact.

The Persona pulled back, followed by another burst of smoke erupting from the main gun as Hideki fired off another shell. It exploded violently against Athena's shield with a violent flash of fire. Aigis was sent skidding back a few inches, grunting loudly as a few tears opened up along her dark overcoat. It gave a glimpse of the inner workings of her artificial frame.

"What the hell are you?!!" Hideki asked in shock.

Aigis smile didn't falter. "I am... unique," she coyly answered.

The Phantom Thieves stood back to watch in awe, stunned at the speed and strength she could output. "It's nice to know the cavalry's here, but are you alone?" Morgana asked.

"Mitsuru and Naoto are investigating the explosions. For now, it is just me," Aigis quickly replied.

She dashed to the right of the Sherman, Athena hanging left in a swift pincer movement. And with how speedy the two figures were, the slow moving tank gun couldn't keep track of either. There was a resounding, earthshaking boom as they slammed into the sides of Hideki's weapon, dense plating crumbling from the impact. Sanshiro let out a loud gagging sound from inside the tank.

Another spray of fire lanced out of his flame thrower, the edge catching Aigis' right shoulder and making her recoil as it burnt through her clothing and into a layer of synthetic skin on her neck.
Aigis leapt away, her palm pressed over the burning flesh to try and smother the heat.

"In that case... even if it kills me... I'm gonna go all out and hit you with everything I got!" Hideki shouted. A wave of rippling light washed over the tank, booming gales of wind erupting from the glowing frame. Hifumi yelped in surprise, ducking behind cover to avoid several propelled shards of debris.

"D-damnit... I can't even get close to that thing now..." Sergio muttered, his left arm pressed to his forehead as a makeshift shield, more shards of debris chipping against his barrier. Even Aigis seemed thrown off balance by the unseen force wave.

"American... VI." The light settled, the wind dying down, as a figure stood in the fractured ground where the Sherman had previously been. A heavy suit of cobalt-plated armor, roughly half a foot taller than Sanshiro normally was. The plates were smooth and slightly rounded, save for the sharper pauldrons, while a bullet-shaped helmet encased his head. The faceplate had two glowing white eyes. A smoking kappa was spraypainted on the back plate, while the chassis had a glowing diamond shape in the center.

Even from afar Sergio could see the guns grafted into the suit's heavy gauntlets. Twin barrels protruded from the right, while the left had a nozzle reminiscent of the Sherman's flamethrower.

"The strain of this form is immense... last time I had to fight seriously with it was against A-sama. But... it'll all be worth it. Best way to die, is to die in the fight of your life," Sanshiro said, his voice carrying a heavy echo to it now.

Aigis' pale blue eyes narrowed slightly, the sensors in her eyes scanning the armor. "That's the form you used against me, isn't it?"

"I needed a speedy escape," Sanshiro said, raising his right fist and clenching it a few times. A whirring sound punctuated each flex. "Still, that's why it was such a shock seeing you. Taking a hit from this isn't exactly an easy task."

In an instant he closed the distance between himself and Aigis, the asphalt cracking underneath him. Aigis' eyes widened again, raising her arms up and blocking a downward strike from Hideki's right arm. The blow rattled her whole body, a shocked gasp escaping Aigis. Cracks splintered along the asphalt beneath her, her whole body sinking into the ground.

Hifumi's eyes widened considerably. "His... his speed. It was so fast even Flaming Telepath couldn't predict it."

Aigis and American VI struck off each other again and again, each swing of their arms punctuated by a tremor that shook the street around them. Aigis leapt high, avoiding a sharp jab from the armored suit, while a spray of gunfire exploded from her fingers. But now the rounds just pinged harmlessly off his chassis.

He raised his right hand up, the barrels of his own gun erupting with twin sprays of automatic fire. The blonde twisted to the side, trying to avoid the bullets as best she could. But two still struck along the side of her stomach, synthetic skin tearing with faint flourishes of electricity. Aigis grunted, awkwardly landing on her left knee.

Sanshiro was set to close in again, before a hurricane of sharpened air slammed into him. He was nudged to the side as the wind tried to consume him, unseen blades slashing at him from all sides.
Mercurius was floating overhead, pouring more energy into the attack. But even Mercurius couldn't do much against American VI's dense hull, only forming a few cuts and nicks along the metal.

"If Jojo-chan were here... I'm sure we'd be getting an unabridged history of Iron Man right now," Sergio murmured. He glanced to the cracked asphalt at his sides, a plan quickly forming in his mind. Breakthru started dashing around, uprooting chunks of the road and several slabs of concrete, stacking them at his sides and them breaking them into chunks.

Sanshiro glanced up slowly, glaring toward Mercurius. "You again? You oughta' fuckin' learn when to quit!" He raised his left arm high, a laser-like burst of hot plasma shooting from the nozzle. Mercurius adjusted the movement of his staff, generating a powerful cone of wind directly in front of him as a barrier of sorts that dispersed the incoming flames partially. But the heat against built higher and higher, until the former feline yowled in mounting pain and called his Persona back.

But he had given Aigis enough time to right herself. "If you're escalating, then it seems I will have to follow suit." The crimson circles in Aigis' strange headband suddenly started to spin, until both discs were glowing red hot with trails of smoke hissing out of the edges. Her whole body stood to attention, her eyes glowing slightly. "Orgia Mode... Let's end this quickly!"

Athena lunged at Sanshiro from above, the shield slamming into his head with a mighty boom of force that made the ground crack violently. He grimaced as the weight pressed heavily atop him, but the older man was still able to intercept Aigis as she lunged his way.

Her right foot slammed into Sanshiro's right forearm, the impressive force sending him skidding a few inches back. The blonde ducked under a powerful spray of plasma, closing in and hitting his chestplate with a flurry of punches that dented the cobalt metal and earned another loud grunt from him.

Sanshiro's right fist slammed heavily into Aigis' right shoulder, metal denting and warping under his immense strength. But the blonde was quick to power through the pain, both of her fists striking his hull and launching Sanshiro off his feet. His back slammed into the wall behind him, brickwork shattering and collapsing behind him.

He took a sudden step forward, catching both of Aigis fists in his hands. The two figures struggled against each other, tremors rumbling beneath their feet wth a rising intensity. All the while, the whirring in Aigis' temples didn't slow or falter.

"You are... quite strong..." Aigis admitted, her tone a tad strained. The ground continued to split beneath the two of them. She could see the dents her attacks had managed to form, but he was still going strong.

"Yeah... you too..." Sanshiro said, sounding even more out of breath. "I had been hoping to get another crack at Sanada, but you... you're the real deal. If you'd showed up a little sooner, I'd have the stamina to really cut loose. But unfortunately, time is a luxury I don't really have in this state..."

His faceplate slammed into Aigis' forehead, the disorienting headbutt knocking her back a step. It left the blonde wide open, his right foot shooting forward and catching Aigis' left knee. There was a shriek of steel being torn asunder, cracks of electricity racing around Aigis' severed limb.

The blonde's eyes widened considerably, the whirring of her temples coming to an abrupt halt. "I
guess I just gotta' do this quickly," Sanshiro added, catapulting Aigis to the other end of the street with another hard blow.

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There was a general sense of chaos as Okabe pinballed around the room, his body a blur of motion that darted from point to point with no pattern in mind. Akira and Haru were watching him carefully, while Makoto hopped from foot to foot, set to move if he came nearby. They had hit him more than a few times, but all the damage had been negligible at best.

"We've already seen it. Hittin' that big lug don't do nothin'," Shizuka mused, perched behind a convenient Shizuka-shaped boulder.

"Why are you talking like that?" Yusuke asked, glancing lazily toward the dark-haired girl. The abnormally lanky young man was standing atop a small wooden box, peering at the sapient cartoon through the picture frame formed by his hands.

"It's something about this goshdarn world! It's makin' me more New York by the second!" she shoted, before sighing heavily and glaring up at Okabe. In an instant he morphed into a living tornado, the cyclone of his body batting away a volley of bullets launched his way by Milady. "We can slow him, but that's about it. An' this sleezeball is gonna get bored of playing with us eventually."

Yusuke nodded quietly. "Then what do you propose we do? He seems quite invulnerable in this state, and he has no visible Stand that we can attack. I know that look in your eyes though... you have a plan in mind."

"Yeah, I got somethin'. The most powerful weapon in all of cartoons... all I need is an opening so I can run off and get it. And to make that escape, I'll need a little help from you..." Shizuka's hands suddenly stretched into Yusuke's trouser pocket, the taller boy's eyes popping out of his head slightly in surprise while she rummaged about.

"Do you mind?!" he indignantly said.

In a flash Shizuka pulled out a large wooden paint pallet complete with a few distinct splodges on the pale wood, and an accompanying paintbrush. Yusuke blinked a few times, still looking stunned as Shizuka slotted her haul into his hands. "There ya go! The tools of the artiste!"

"I... didn't have these in my pocket," Yusuke said, his eyes sinking back into place.

"It's a cartoon. You can have anything in your pocket ya ding-dong. Now listen up pally, I've got a plan in mind." She pulled Yusuke in close, whispering her idea into his ear. And while her words sounded akin to rushing water to the outside, he heard everything clearly.

Meanwhile, Okabe silently landed on the ground, tittering to himself. For a moment he seemed cool and composed, his hands nestled neatly behind his back. "You know, I've had some fun experimenting with my powers in the past..." He smiled sweetly toward Akira and Haru, their legs literally shaking. "What do you suppose would happen if I chopped you to pieces?" He hummed and sloooowly pulled a long knife from the inside of his coat, a slide whistle sound following the path of his weapon. Two sharpened devil horns sprouted from his temples.

"It... wouldn't hurt us. Not in this world," Akira warily answered, keeping Crom Cruach at his side.
as a sign of caution.

"Oh of course! But..." He grinned from ear to ear, his pupils morphing into a pair of floating nooses. "What if I were to take those diced up chunks... and drop them outside of my toon world?"

He suddenly closed in on Haru, the young woman yelping as he swished his blade in a series of violent flurries, Haru's body slimming and weaving quickly, her body like rubber as she warped around him. Crom Cruach swept in sharply, striking Okabe with a clothesline that sent him skidding back to a small rug in the center of the floor. Unharmed, as usual.

"That's not gonna happen," Akira firmly stated, glaring toward Okabe.

"Hmph. Rude," Okabe curtly replied, dusting his chest off. He suddenly grabbed the rug in his right hand and yanked it aside to reveal a convenient trapdoor. He flicked it open easily, with a trio of ambulatory skeletons hopping from the darkness and landing neatly on their feet. "Show 'em what we do to wise guys, boys!"

The skeletons sprinted forward, bones jangling with each step, before suddenly leaping toward Akira and Haru. In an instant the five figures were sucked into a rolling ball of dust and violence, fists and feet flying through the miasma as an angry tumbleweed rolled too and fro.

By this point Shiho and Futaba came sprinting into the dance floor. "Guys, guys, I fou-" Futaba yelped and skidded to a halt just at the edge of the rippling monochromatic field generated by Sing You Sinners, the spectral wall inching slowly forward. "Whoa, w-what the heck?!"

"Keep out!" Akira shouted from the confines of the rolling dust cloud. "This is Okabe's Stand! It warps the world into a cartoon! Attacks from the inside won't work!" He let out a sudden yell as he was catapulted from the cloud, his body flying through the wall with his right shoulder colliding with the doorframe beside Futaba and Shiho. He clutched his limb, grimacing and sliding down. "And getting knocked out of that... really hurts."

Futaba crouched at his sides, her hands trembling as she helped move Akira onto his back. "A-are you okay?" she quickly asked.

"A little banged up, but I'll live... I can get healed up when this is done. Assuming we can find a way past that damn invulnerability of his, I mean. It's not like we can knock him out of it... the field tracks his movements," Akira said.

Shiho let out a small humming noise. "If attacks from the inside won't work, then... what about the outside?" Eris appeared beside her in a glowing azure flourish. She swiftly fired a dagger of holy energy from her hands, the sharpened end aimed toward the grinning Okabe.

But as it passed through the field, the light began to bend and warped until it transformed into a small glowing pixie girl, fairy dust following the path of gleaming butterfly wings as she flew to Okabe. She stopped a few inches in front of him before letting out a small huff and slapping him across the face hard enough to make his head rotate several times, his neck coiling repeatedly before it unwound and snapped back to normal.

"YOWZA! What a gal!" Okabe shouted, his devilish grin broadening, before he casually crushed the pixie with a hard clap of his hands. "But, trying to hurt me is pointless. I, on the other hand..."

A hatchet appeared in his right hand in a puff of smoke, which he promptly threw at Shiho. It arced
through the air at an impressive speed, Shiho's eyes widening as it drew close. Eris appeared at her side, rushing to intercept and smash the incoming axe away as the blade burst through the border of the field. But for as quick as Eris was, the blow still managed to skim the edge of Shiho's left shoulder, making her cry out as a stain of red began to blossom along the white sleeve of her sweater.

By now the skeletons had burst away from Haru, revealing that they had tied the strawberry blonde to a wooden pole, stacks of firewood bordering her on all sides. "O-oh dear..." Haru said, shuffling in her binds as bullets of sweat bucketed from her.

Futaba dashed forward, passing through the barrier of Okabe's Stand and emerging as a noodle-limbed cartoon too. She watched as one skeleton struck a match along his right arm, causing her to stretch forward to blow it out in one quick puff. She darted to the second skeleton as he repeated the motion, blowing his match out too.

It gave enough of an opening for Makoto and Yusuke to take action. With one quick throw Makoto launched Anat at two skeletons while Susanoo, transformed into a squat and heavily armoured samurai with an obscenely angry expression, drove into the last one. The three skeletons were shattered in a single stroke, their bones rolling across the room and rapidly assembling into a bony rendition of the Eiffel Tower. A faint hum of the French national anthem played in the distance.

"Oooh..." Okabe said in awe, giving the group a quick round of applause as Makoto worked to unbind Haru.

A finger suddenly tapped Okabe on the shoulder. He turned to see Shizuka, who had (somehow) managed to change into a vintage film director when he wasn't looking. Puffy pants, knee high boots, a formal waistcoat and shirt, complete with a neat black beret. "What are ya doin' standin' around for?! We gotta get shootin', and you're not even changed yet!"

Before Okabe could protest, Shizuka reached into her trousers and pulled out a set of unnaturally large false teeth, swiftly jamming them into the Stand users mouth, keeping his lips pried wide apart. With just as much quickness she pulled a wig of golden curls (Well, white in the current monochromatic state of the world) and plaed them neatly atop his head, much to his shock. Shizuka pulled out a floral sundress and pulled it over Okabe's head, the ill-fitting material contouring awkwardly over his suit.

"Now it's missing just one thing... aha! Of course!" Shizuka promptly wedged a cigar between the false teeth and lit up the tip, recoiling immediately as the tip caught fire. A resounding bang echoed through the altered dimension as the fake cigar exploded, the world flickering for a fraction of a second, with the smoke revealing how Shizuka's additions had been blown away by the blast. His face was coated in soot, with only his large blinking eyeballs visible. "Now that's what I call art!"

Shizuka dashed off, with Okabe swiftly shaking the soot from his face. His legs morphed into a figure-eight whirlwind as he sprinted after the shorter figure. The dark haired girl was making a beeline toward something painted on the far wall: A dark semi circle Yusuke had placed there, looking akin to a winding road disappearing into a tunnel.

"There's no way her plan is going to work..." Yusuke murmured.

Futaba snorted, her hands rested on her hips. "Figures you wouldn't know anything about retro cartoons..."
"I don't understand, she's just running into the wall," Makoto said. Then again, given the insanity of this world, anything was probably possible.

"Juuust watch. This girl's a natural," Futaba boasted, aware of where things were headed already.

And, for as impossible as it looked to the outside, Shizuka casually ran into the painting, sprinting along the winding tunnel until her body became a dark blip that vanished entirely. Okabe, meanwhile, slammed face first into the wall with such force that the air around them stuttered again, like a television screen getting a hard jolt.

Yusuke blinked in surprise, before shrugging. "Well... why not?" With everything he had seen since joining the Phantom Thieves, he supposed there was no point in questioning anything nonsensical.

"So... does she have a plan or is she just trying to mess with him?" Akira asked.

The group watched in mounting apprehension as Okabe pried himself from the wall, his right eye twitching in anger. "Ooooh... This is the first time anyone's ever fought back like this. So few people have any idea how these toons work... so helpless and weak. But I won't go down easily..."

Yusuke took a slight step backward. "She said she had a plan, and that she needed an opening to go out and get something. Shizuka didn't specify what, but... I trust her."

"Then..." Shiho huffed and rubbed the injury on her shoulder. "I guess it falls to us to keep him busy."

Okabe darted forward, his eyes morphing into a pair of manic swirls. He tossed his right glove away, revealing a gleaming iron anvil in place of his fist. Makoto could feel him homing in on her, summoning Anat quickly. She gripped the frame of the anthropomorphic bicycle and swung her like a club, the front wheel colliding with Okabe's face hard enough to dent it in. But that was mere cosmetic damage.

He powered forward, throwing a fierce punch with his anvil hand. Makoto raised Anat as a makeshift shield, her Persona taking the brunt of the attack. But all the same she was launched straight off her feet, flung aside and straight out of the boundaries of Sing You Sinners. She landed harshly, caught by Shiho who nearly fell over entirely, out cold.

"Ah hell..." Akira muttered. "Then let's give it our best shot..."

Shizuka, meanwhile, popped out through the other side of the wall and landed neatly on her feet in one of Club Ravana's hallways. "Oh wow, it worked," she breathed, panting slowly and glancing from side to side.

She hadn't been sure of how that old Road Runner trick would work, but she had gotten lucky by getting a speedy escape out of Sing You Sinner's area of effect.

Shizuka took in a deep breath, before suddenly shouting at the top of her lungs. "FUCKSHITDAMNASSHELL! Ahahaha! Feels so good to be able to swear again! Never knew how much I'd fucking miss it!"

She collected herself with another sigh, turning invisible. "Okay, gotta move fast. I'll take the side exit so I can avoid the fight out front and then... then I just gotta find a grocery store. And once I
get what I need..." Shizuka grinned to herself. "Light's out for you, Okabe..."
Okabe let his feet whirl along the ground in a speedy figure eight, darting forward to Yusuke. Kamu Susanoo appeared before the lanky artist, sucking in air until his cheeks ballooned out, which he promptly screamed out as a jet of white wind. It struck Okabe directly, encasing him in an exceptionally large ice cube.

A few cracks ran along the frozen surface, Okabe's body jittering in the confines of his imprisonment. "This... clearly won't hold for long," Yusuke murmured, taking a few nervous steps back.

"Damnit... Thor!" Akira growled. Crom Cruach vanished in a puff of pale smoke, replaced instantly by an absurdly muscular man in stereotypical viking attire, holding a stone hammer with a weight larger than his head on the end of it. "We need to buy a little more time... Shiho, how's Makoto?"

"Still out cold," Shiho said, examining the brunette now laying on the hard floor. The brunette let out a slight groan, but aside from that Makoto didn't move. The edge of Sing You Sinners' border started to spread a few centimeters outward, compelling Shiho to pull Makoto further away.

The block of ice exploded with a resounding boom, the shockwave throwing Yusuke off his feet and to the far end of the room. He flew through the barrier, his left side hitting the floor and scraping along it, earning a pained grunt from the bluenette.

"Honestly, you kids..." Okabe's grin returned, his right hand sliding into his trouser pocket and pulling out a heavy hatchet. "Are making this pretty fun!"

A shadow suddenly fell over Okabe as Thor drew in close, swinging his hammer down with immense force. The blunt end slammed into the top of his head, driving Okabe waist deep into the ground like a stake. A large bruise blossomed from the top of his head. Okabe blinked a few times.

Before he could make another move Thor raised his hammer overhead, a heavenly choir humming from on high. A lightning bolt raced down from above, the crackling end bouncing off the hammer and striking Okabe, the white hot flash striking him. The wild strobe of energy faded, leaving Okabe charred once more, coils of smoke hissing into the air.

"Just have to keep hitting him... I just hope Shizuka found what she needed," Akira murmured to himself.

Okabe sharply sidestepped a hard swing of Thor's hammer, immediately swinging his right hand up and smacking the giant away, the blow making Akira's body wobble in protest. With the young man staggering, Okabe glanced toward Shiho and Makoto outside his area of effect.

"Hehe... how about a little fire, Scarecrow?" he asked, snickering slightly.

From the seemingly infinite arsenal housed in his trouser pockets, Okabe pulled out a large jug that had three big X's drawn along the label. He popped the cork off and took a lengthy swig, downing more and more until his cheeks had swelled to be about as large as his head. His right hand procured a lighter and flicked it up, and Shiho seemed to quickly deduce what he was going to do.

"Oh hell..." Shiho murmured to herself. She moved further in front of Makoto's downed body,
promptly sending Eris to snatch one of the tables from a nearby booth.

Okabe shoved his lips forward, the satanic alcohol flying from his mouth in a powerful spray. It passed through the flame of his lighter, morphing into an incoming spray of flame that was rapidly knifing through the air. Eris angled the table in front of her, the powerful burst of fire slamming into the varnished wood. Shiho grunted loudly, struggling to keep pace as the fire sought to overwhelm her makeshift shield. Bit by bit, the material began to blacken and burn.

"Shiho, hang on!" Yusuke called out, a few exclamation marks floating above his head. Susanoo threw his hands forward, a volley of heavy ice cubes flying from his grasp and sailing forward, emerging through the barrier of Sing You Sinners' effect range as an arctic gale filled with lumps of ice.

Yusuke's attack seemed to briefly increase the strain on Eris, but in the span of seconds it had managed to douse Okabe's flamethrower, allowing Eris to drop her shield. Shiho breathed a small sigh of relief, examining the slight scorches on her palms and fingers. "Thanks for the assist Yusuke," she quickly said.

The artist nodded and turned his focus back to Okabe, who was busy chortling and slapping his own knee. Clearly he was having a whale of a time. "It should go without saying that I know very little about western cartoons. I'm classically trained, with what little exposure I have being from old Disney cartoons... Madarame did not have much in the realm of television access," Yusuke explained. "Is anyone besides Shizuka an expert?"

Futaba shrugged. "I know a little... I got quite a few episodes of Looney Tunes downloaded. But unfortunately, I don't have Acme's phone number," Futaba said.

"And I'm not much for cartoons in general," Akira murmured. "Well, some anime, but I don't know how to exploit the 'logic' his Stand works on."

Before the conversation could progress further, Okabe lunged at Futaba, who yelped and quickly summoned Prometheus to defend her. Though, in this state, he was more like a giant bubble of oil than the usual starship. Okabe raised his hand overhead, clutching a hatchet in his right hand, and immediately brought it down in a flurry of blows that bounced along Prometheus' rubbery hull.

Futaba let out a few pained cries from the confines of the bubble, quickly earning Akira's ire. "Back up jerkwad!" he shouted, quickly sprinting to Okabe as he spiralled around Prometheus' hull. However, in one quick motion, Okabe tossed out a bannana peel on the ground that managed to catch Akira's heel mid-step. He gave a shocked gasp, his balance giving out from under him and sending him skidding across the room. He was launched from the edge of the barrier and into one of the booths, a table shattering under his back on impact.

"I don't have any of my usual systems in here!" Futaba shouted. "There's just a... just a horse on a treadmill in here! Even I don't get it!"

"Perhaps the horse is used as some manner of locomotive power source?" Yusuke suggested. He quickly summoned Susanoo, the squat samurai racing toward the enemy Stand user.

"That information isn't exactly helpful right now!" Futaba shouted in return.

Okabe hummed and offhandedly swung his axe backward, the sharpened edge blocking the rapid flurries of Susanoo's sword. "Goodness, this is a tough nut to crack," Okabe mused, driving the butt
of his hatchet backward and slamming it into Susanoo's gut, making Yusuke double over briefly. "Aha, I know just what I need! The ultimate weapon in my arsenal..."

His left hand dipped into his pocket and abruptly shot back out, now clutching a sharpened sewing needle in his hand. The point drove forward, poking through the dark material of the Prometheus bubble. It flew off her, gusts of wind flying from the burst end of it, a long farting sound following Prometheus around as it then casually landed beside a blinking and stunned Futaba.

"Ah..." Okabe's grin broadened to an unnatural degree, the corners of his mouth now literally touching the sides of his eyes. "There you are."

He raised his hatchet up high, a scared squeak leaving Futaba. And she found herself incapable of moving in her fear. But before the edge of the hatchet could meet her, a burly hand suddenly caught Okabe's right wrist. He grimaced, before his eyes widened in surprise.

Thor was glowering down at Okabe, keeping a tight grip on Okabe's wrist. Akira took a few steps toward Okabe, his toon body looking slightly haggard. "As long as I'm still standing... the brainiac is off limits!" Akira shouted.

A strong blow clocked Okabe in the stomach, sending him skidding back toward the center of the floor. At that moment Milady raised her skirt again, her assortment of shotguns extending out from the shadowy underbelly. Another series of bullets spewed out of the barrels, while Okabe twirled his hatchet in his hands, the blade morphing into a dark umbrella that blocked the incoming salvo.

Haru knew already that they couldn't majorly hurt Okabe, but they could stall for time at least.

"What a charming display of friendship," Okabe said, his eyes sparkling. "Or perhaps it's more than that? Ooooh, I'd love to hear all the juicy details!"

Akira grit his teeth, plumes of smoke blossoming out of his ears. "I'm really getting sick and tired of this schtick..."

"You and me both..." Futaba said, breathing a sigh of relief that seemed to make the redhead melt slightly.

A small groan came from the entryway to the dance floor, Makoto rising slowly and sluggishly into a seated position on the ground. "Agh... that was... ow..." the brunette whined, reaching up and rubbing her forehead.

"Thank goodness... you okay?" Shiho asked, glancing over her shoulder toward her senpai.

"I'll be alright... but it looks like this fight isn't over yet," Makoto mused, grunting and slowly rising to her feet on shaky legs.

"Oh yes..." Okabe smiled and gave a sudden swing of his umbrella, striking a salvo of bullets back toward Haru. The young woman squeaked and ducked low, narrowly avoiding the incoming shots. "I'm not done... but I guess it's about time I wrapped things up. If I don't take my medicine soon... I might never want to leave this state..."

In an instant Okabe's umbrella morphed again, turning into a gleaming longsword. He turned his focus to Haru and aimed the sword her way, still grinning.
But before he could make another move, the wall behind him exploded outward. The dust parted quickly, Shizuka's silhouette becoming more defined... and then rubbery as she strode into Sing You Sinners' range. "Unhand her Dan Backslide!" Shizuka barked.

"Oh, you again," Okabe said in a curt, dismissive tone. "I almost forgot about you entirely... so where did you slink off to? You should have stayed gone, instead of crawling back here to die."

Smirking, Shizuka reached into her coat pocket. "Naw, nothing like that... I realized there was something I needed to beat you. The most powerful weapon in all cartoons, that can trump anything else," she said.

Okabe's eyes narrowed a bit. "What are you talking about? There's no such thing."

"Hehe... you've had a good run. Bet you've gone up against plenty of people who know next to nothing about old cartoons, totally helpless against your Stand. But me? I'm a nerd, buddy. And every Saturday and Sunday morning for the first eleven years of my life was dominated by cartoons!" Shizuka's hand shot up from her pocket, now raised high overhead to reveal her secret weapon: A tin can of... spinach?

Yusuke frowned. "Is this... is that what she was meant to bring back?" he asked.

"Oh daaaaang," Futaba whispered, holding her hands to her lips in a sudden realization. Even Okabe seemed a little wary now.

Shizuka crushed the bottom of the can, the lid flying off and a large wad of monochromatic moss erupting from the top of the can. It landed neatly in Shizuka's mouth, a sting of 'Stars and Stripes Forever' playing in the background, which she swallowed with gusto.

Twin bursts of steam flew from Shizuka's ears, her eyes bulging from her head as her arms and legs began to pulsate. She landed hard on her feet, raising her arms up. Both limbs tripled in size for a few brief moments, her biceps becoming illuminated with the imagery of naval artillery opening fire, before shrinking back to normal. Shizuka was squinting the left half of her face, glaring furiously toward Okabe. "Egegegegeg, gotta go saves me crew, egegegeg," she quickly said.

"I think I hit my head harder than I thought..." Makoto murmured, blinking a few times.

"Yeah I'm... really lost too," Shiho said. "Spinach did... that to her? How is spinach a weapon?"

"Then allow me to explain," Futaba said, unwilling to look away as she saw Shizuka rolling her sleeves up to her elbows. "In the world of retro cartoons, there's one character who stands head and shoulders above all others: Popeye the Sailor Man. As soon as he eats spinach, his strength becomes limitless. Whatever the plot needs, whatever adversary is there, once he eats spinach he can overcome it. It's basically like turning god mode on."

Yusuke watched as Shizuka marched toward Okabe, who was now slowly and stiffly backing away. "Then... why not just pull a can from her pockets? She seemed capable of doing that to other objects."

Futaba rolled her eyes. "Come on. There wouldn't be much of a story if Popeye could just pull spinach from his pockets all willy-nilly!"

Okabe raised his hands slightly, swallowing so hard that his Adam's apple seemed to vanish into
his stomach. "N-now let's all take a step back here and-

He was cut off by a crushing uppercut from Shizuka, the impact of her fist punctuated by an outward explosion of fireworks. Okabe's head shot upward, his neck elongating alongside his entire body, until he had seemingly tripled in length. His feet left the floor, his body shooting upward as he punched through floor after floor.

It didn't take long for Sing You Sinners' area of effect to be lifted away from the Phantom Thieves, returning them to their normal states. Shizuka craned her neck, watching as Okabe's body punched through floor after floor, continuing to gain height until he burst through the roof of Club Ravana and continued sailing away. Even in the distance, Shizuka could see flickers of black and white orbiting around him. Was his power flickering on and off?

"Whoa... guess that's that... for now, anyway," Shizuka murmured. She suddenly gagged, sticking her tongue out. "Aw gross! Is that what spinach tastes like?! That's goddamn nasty!" she shouted.

Makoto suddenly caught Shizuka in a strong hug, pulling her in close and rendering the young woman silent. "That was... incredible! I'm amazed you knew something that would work so well!"

"Y-yeah well uh... y-you know... I watched a whole lot of cartoons and I just figured... you know... spinach would work. 'Cause spinach always works..." Shizuka murmured, her face growing quite pink. "That said... I definitely looked weird, being a high school girl sprinting into a convenience store to buy one can of spinach in the dead of night."

"Well, it worked in the end," Akira said, breathing a happy sigh. "If you weren't such a nerd for cartoons like those... I don't know what we would have done. I owe you." Akira turned his attention to Futaba, clearing his throat. "You okay?"

Futaba nodded, smiling warmly. "Yep yep! Not a scratch! But..." She rocked on her heels a bit. "That knight in shining armor routine... that was pretty cool."

"You think?" Akira asked, smiling and scratching the back of his neck.

"I'm glad everyone is alright. And since Okabe is... airborne, perhaps you could give out some healing Mako-chan?" Haru suggested.

Makoto nodded, pulling away from Shizuka. The shorter figure whined like a sad puppy. "Right. Let's get to it then, everyone line up," Makoto suggested, watching as her allies moved in front of her. "By the way," Makoto glanced briefly to Futaba. "Any update on Mr. A?"

The younger woman blinked a few times. "Oh! Right! That thing we came in here to talk about! Yeah, I detected a Stand not too far from the back entrance of the club. With how strong it felt, and the malevolent aura I picked up on, I'd be shocked if it was anyone else."

Shiho nodded firmly. "We better meet up with the others then. How are they doing?"

"Well..." Futaba trailed off, Prometheus' dark mass partially forming around the nerdy hacker. "Hey, I think they won, I don't sense the old guy's Stand. But... w-whoa, there are some new faces there too! W-wait, what's... Th-that's not right!" Futaba exclaimed, her eyes gradually widening in shock and horror.

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While Shizuka was preparing for her dramatic entrance, things weren't going too well for the rest of the team. Aigis was grunting, struggling to push herself up by her hands. Sparks of electricity danced around her damaged leg, smoke hissing from her joints. "That was... more than I anticipated..." Aigis murmured.

"Sorry 'bout that. Believe me I hate doing dirty shit like that if I can help it, and if I could spend more time fighting you... well by god I'd fight ya all night if I could. But this old body o' mine has a limit," Sanshiro said. He slowly raised his right arm, his weapon aimed toward the damaged android. "Well... I better finish this up quickly."

"I may be missing a leg, but I won't submit easily." Aigis said firmly, her body glowing with a power azure light radiating from the core of her being.

Sanshiro let out a low chuckle, his voice reverberating through the confines of his helmet. "Man, what a treat you are... too bad you didn't get here sooner. But with you out of the way, everyone here is as good as dead."

"Not yet!" Sergio shouted, his own body glowing brightly, the earth rumbling beneath his feet as Breakthru rose up at his side. Twin mountains of shattered concrete and asphalt lingered behind him.

"You again? You can wait your damn turn!" Sanshiro shouted.

Aigis grunted, struggling to move forward. Orgia Mode was still more taxing than she wanted to admit. "Keep... keep back!" she quickly said.

"Sergio!" Hifumi exclaimed, her eyes shimmering.

Before anyone could protest further, Breakthru's heavy fists shot forward in a speedy flourish, striking almost a dozen shards of asphalt and rocketing them toward Sanshiro. Despite the immense momentum of the projectiles, they struck off his armour without leaving much of a mark. The various shards, however, did seem to become partially embedded in Sanshiro's breastplate.

"Ugh..." Sanshiro clenched his right fist a few times, a full body sigh heaving out of him. A spray of concrete battered along his right arm, forming a pattern of studs from his shoulder down toward his wrist. "Fine. Guess I'll teach you a lesson first."

Hifumi tensed, her eyes continuing to shimmer as she saw Sanshiro march steadily toward the blond. He seemed heedless of Sergio's assault, even as a spray of concrete shards hammered against the hull on his legs. But Hifumi couldn't bring herself to act, not when she knew Flaming Telepath would be useless against American VI. The armor was too dense, and he moved so fast that even she couldn't predict his movements. What could she do?

At the far end of the street, Morgana let out an agitated grunt. He too wasn't feeling much better about the current situation, knowing that Mercurius couldn't get through that armor. But he could maybe stall for time? If that form was taxing for Sanshiro, then every second would be crucial. Even so, one good shot would be enough to end Morgana's brief tenure as a human. He glanced over his shoulder back toward Ann and Ryuji, both figures propped up against a nearby car. He was going to have to go on without them for the time being.

"I don't care what it takes. I'll be there to see A go down... I'll give everything I have to make sure
he loses! I owe Satoshi that much!" Sergio shouted. Breakthru's assault didn't falter, the spray of concrete and asphalt hitting Sanshiro's legs like hail on a tin roof. As with his other attacks, Sanshiro's armor became lined with shards of debris.

"You've got gumption, I'll give you that. Unfortunately, your attacks can't accomplish anything. And if you couldn't hurt American V, you sure as shit won't manage it on American VI," he said. He was closing in fast, even with Sergio backing away down the road.

Aigis was crawling forward slightly, trying to get in close enough range to get a clean hit with Athena, while Mercurius was swooping in from above. They had to buy time, or Sergio was done for!

But, before Mercurius could close the gap, something slammed into the back of Sanshiro's head, unleashing a fist-sized explosion that knocked him forward a step. "Wh-" Another flurry of explosions struck into his back, making him growl loudly and turn halfway with his arms upraised as a makeshift shield.

Morgana's eyes widened as he saw the figure standing at the corner opposite him: Sae Niijima. Toting a big fuck-off gun too! It looked as if, at one point, it had been a Nerf gun that had since been horribly mutated into something out of a sci-fi manga. A heavy metallic purple rifle with a large drum magazine, the black barrel being rather large in size to enable it to fire out its enlarged explosive bullets.

The brunette was breathing heavily as she took aim, firing off another round that exploded against American VI's brow, earning a loud shout from Sanshiro.

"N-Niijima-san?" Morgana bleated in shock, his eyes looking set to pop from his head.

"That's right... whoever you are," Sae said, not looking away from her target. "I spotted Makoto's friends in trouble and I... well I decided to get involved. First order of business was finding the right item to use my power on."

"I'm Morgana," the former feline stated.

"The cat?!" Sae asked, her jaw nearly dropping.

Sanshiro turned fully, his back to Sergio, and fired off a salvo of powerful slugs toward Sae. The lawyer, already well outside her comfort zone, let out a shocked cry and tried to duck in behind cover. Several rounds struck off the masonry, shards of broken brick shooting outward and cutting deep into Sae's right shoulder.

"There!" Sergio said to himself. Breakthru's fists moved with twin rapidfire flurries, more shards accelerating toward the back plates of Sanshiro's armor. They hammered along American VI's hull, until every plate of his armor had several studs of asphalt and concrete sticking out.

Sergio let out an annoyed snarl, spinning around and firing off another round from his gauntlet. Sergio tried jerking off to the side to avoid the slug, but it still clipped his right shoulder and tore a bloody chunk from it. Sergio grit his teeth, his eyes bulging slightly.

"Sergio!" Hifumi screamed, rising swiftly from behind cover.

Sergio's feet slammed into the ground as he fought to retain his balance, powering through the
"That's it kid..." Sanshiro growled. "You're finished!"

"No... I don't think so," Sergio firmly replied, clenching his fists tight. Breakthru mimicked his motion, crimson air shimmering around his enlarged knuckles. And, as he did this, the same aura permeated around the shards of debris lodged in Sanshiro's armor.

Sanshiro's movements ground to a halt, frozen in place with his body halfway turned toward Sergio. "W-what?!" the gangster growled, his armoured shell vibrating as he struggled in vain. "What the hell is this?"

"This..." Sergio said with a loud huff of breath. "Is my secret weapon. The greatest application of Breakthru's power!" The various points started to press inward, the glowing aura seeming to render them immune to damage. Sergio was huffing loudly, bullets of sweat dripping down his brow. "I can infuse objects with momentum, or stop them entirely. And if I freeze something, it becomes a... a fixed point in space! Something... even your power... can't overcome! Not against so many of them!"

Sanshiro snarled, the nozzle of his flamethrower flaring up with another focused burst of plasma fire surging out into thin air. Despite his best efforts, and the immense strength of American VI, he couldn't overcome Sergio's aura.

Not that things were getting any easier for younger man, his breath coming out in steamy huffs as more sweat poured from him. Breakthru lunged ahead of his user, his right arm cocked back and glowing a vibrant crimson. "VATTENE!"

The heavy knuckles slammed into Sanshiro's breastplate, the impact sending ripples through the pieces of matter lodged in his armour. Several powerful dents popped along the armour, a loud yell leaving Sanshiro as American VI rippled around him in protest.

There was a violent flash as American VI blinked away in a spray of azure sparks, revealing Sanshiro himself. The bombardment of his armour left his body covered in scars and bruises, his right eye partially swollen. Sanshiro staggered back, the last vestiges of Breakthru's power fading away.

Sergio breathed a loud huff. "You're... finished!" Sergio growled.

"Not... quite... yet!" Sanshiro said, suddenly swinging his right hand forward. "American... I!" He summoned the remnants of his power, his Stand materialising in his hand and then flying from his grasp: A glowing red hot knife that rapidly crossed the distance toward Sergio. The blond didn't have the strength left to dodge, letting out a shrill grasp as the blade punched into his stomach.

"Hnn... GHGG!" Sergio's eyes bulged out of his head, with Breakthru snapping forward on a reflex. The heavy knuckles of his right fist slammed into Sanshiro's face, knocking him out in a single mighty punch that left him sprawled out on the asphalt.

The knife faded out of existence, with the blond clutching the bloodied scorched stab wound in his gut. Time seemed to crawl to a halt as his footing gave way, all sights and sounds growing dull and distant. Even the pain seemed to fade out,

'So... that's it, huh? I wonder... if the other Zepelli's felt this way, in the end...?'

He heard Hifumi scream his name, and the scrambled shock of Morgana and Sae as they raced
toward him. But it felt as if they were millions of miles away.

'I don't think I can be there to beat A... that's a damn shame... but I took out one of the Deadly Aspects. Not a bad result, I suppose... I feel... colder, than I thought I would...'

But, as Sergio's back hit the asphalt, he could swear he heard footsteps racing his way from behind. Footsteps that were almost alien to him. Certainly, they sounded different to what he was used to from the Arditi...

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With much of the city being in a panic over the sudden and powerful explosions, the moonlit path of Odaiba was abandoned, with chilly night winds rocking the lapping waves at the shore. Nobody was around to see the small pinprick of light that appeared in the sky, growing larger as it drew closer and closer to the ground.

Nobody was around to hear the noise it made. A distinct whistling sound, like a mortar shell plummeting to the ground. And as it neared the ground, the monochromatic flickers surrounding it seemed to get more intense.

Toshi Okabe struck the path like a comet, the ground near the bridge rumbling for several seconds after the hard impact. It left a distinct man-shaped crater in the concrete, an image of a man with his arms and legs spread wide open.

Slowly, steadily, Okabe clawed his way out of the ground. As he pulled himself from the crater it soon became clear that his now-human form was now littered with wounds, his suit torn in several key places. His body had turned back to normal at an inopportune moment when he struck the ground, and now he was stuck dealing with his crippling injuries.

A slick red trail followed Okabe's body as he crawled forward, his slender body trembling. A shuddering gasp left him, his last breath being choked out.

"That's not... funny..."

Just like that, another of Mr. A's Deadly Aspects was out of business. All that was left now was the man himself.
The Indestructible Man in Black (I)

In truth, Akio had been a little uncertain about handing this job to a foreigner he knew so little about. Sure, Lars' reputation preceded him, but it was hard to gauge that when it came to a Stand user. It wasn't like there was a whole lot of evidence to back up his work experience.

But, there was something about Lars that Akio instantly recognised. A glimmer in his eyes, a sadness that lingered in his soul. A sense of kinship from another man who had climbed out of the dark. That alone vouched for Lars in Akio's eyes.

But this went beyond what Akio had expected.

The trouble was coming from Kabukicho way, a small and mobile cabal of ex-Yakuza who were running trafficking and prostitution under his nose. And while his own agents had dug and dug, trying to pin them down and dig them out proved to be far harder than expected. It seemed they had some Stand users on their side, people who could pick up on the movements of his people, and uproot quickly to move to another secure location.

Most troubling was that one enemy Stand (apparently dubbed 'Deaf Forever') acted as a kind of failsafe for the higher-ranking members of this cabal. The few that A's people had caught out, when they tried to interrogate them, they spontaneously died as soon as they started talking. Troubling.

Well, as Akio felt a kinship to Lars (and having nothing to lose), he decided to give the so-called wolf the chance to track them. He hadn't expected much to come of it, maybe an assassination or two. Nothing to really disrupt that eyesore of an operation.

In the span of five days, Lars had wiped out the upper echelons of that operation. And without leadership, the whole outfit dissolved soon after.

Every day, over the span of four days, Lars approached Akio with a few different severed heads. Important figures involved in different parts of the trafficking outfit. Then, on the fifth day, Lars brought in only one. The ringleader of the whole thing, and the owner of Deaf Forever. Akio had sat quietly through these little meetings, doing his best to remain casual and composed, and then arranged a quiet meeting with Lars a few hours after that final delivery. It gave his accounts team the time to sort out his payment. Not that Lars had seemed wildly interested in making money.

The two men met in a quiet office, now seated across from each other at a heavy oak desk. A bottle of sake had been set up at the right end of the desk, two small cups positioned beside it. Akio smoothed out his white suit jacket, working to straighten it in his seated position. "By all means," Akio began. "Have a drink. You've more than earned it."

"That's quite alright. I'm not much for alcohol," Lars politely replied, tenting his slim fingers together above the dark material of his suit jacket.

"I had heard you were skilled and experienced, but this... has certainly bested all my expectations. How did you manage to track them all down? My people never had any luck, and even catching some of those bastards didn't help thanks to Deaf Forever... how did you track any of them?" Akio asked, sinking into the plush leather of his chair.

"I'm rather capable when it comes to stealth. Getting the drop on one of the high ranking members
was easy enough... but, after that first catch, I decided to test to see how Deaf Forever functioned. As it turns out, getting people to give information without actually saying anything worked wonders," Lars explained.

He didn't explain specifically how he got them to give that information up. Akio could imagine it well enough. "I take it you fed them some yes-no questions and the like?" Lars nodded. "My, that is something. A lateral thinker, and quite capable in a fight to boot... I saw the photos of your handiwork, and I'm... certainly impressed. Who would imagine paper could be so deadly?"

Lars shrugged. "I've spent a lot of time honing my craft. Even fighting other Stand users isn't alien to me," he admitted. He straightened slightly, his shoulders stiffening a bit. "At any rate, your traffickers are dealt with, so my job is complete. I take it you won't have any further use f-

A sudden ripple went through his body, Lars touching his right hand to his chest. His eyes bulged out slightly, and he glared down to chest as if cursing the weakness of his whole body. His left hand pressed to his mouth, trying to hold in the strong coughs rocking through his chest while he reached into his pocket with his right hand.

Akio watched silently as Lars pressed a tissue to his mouth and retched vigorously into it. In an instant the image of a stone-hearted killing machine shattered, revealing the reality: A man, racked with an illness that was steadily eating him alive.

Once again Akio felt a sort of kinship to the man, an understanding he rarely felt toward others with such intensity. He was an outcast from life's feast like many of Akio's followers, likely from a young age. And all those years he had perhaps been an outsider looking in, wanting so desperately to belong... but never finding the right chance.

Lars pulled the tissue from his mouth and looked at the dark matter on the material with contempt. "Cancer?" Akio casually asked, earning a tiny amount of surprise from the foreigner. "I have a Stand user who can handle any sort of physical ailment. I insist you go to him, free of charge of course, to have that ailment sorted out."

As Akio spoke, Lars' eyes widened by a tiny fraction from his surprise. A small amount of charity was enough to utterly disarm him. "I ah... w-well my thanks. I er... I didn't know a Stand such as that was possible, but it... well, it might be worth a visit. Anything to get past this perpetual coughing."

"More than that, it would be a shame to lose out on a man of your power and skill," Akio said. "I'm sure you're used to employers dismissing you, but I would very much like to keep you around. I think you and I can go really far together."

Lars blinked a few times, as if his brain was rebooting. "I... that..." He hesitated for a moment, as if anticipating a punchlike. "I would... greatly appreciate that A-sama."

Akio smiled fondly and held his left hand out. "Ahh, no need to be so formal. Play your cards right, and I might even tell you my real name. For now, just call me Mr. A."

"Of course... Mr. A." Lars shook his hand and never looked back.

Akio opened his eyes slowly, moving from the world of memory back to reality. Lars was dead, and yet he couldn't stop thinking about that meeting. He was on the cusp of his greatest battle, against the people who cost Lars his life. And he was going to make sure to avenge him.

The enigmatic Mr. A was standing on the roof of a squat building behind the back end of Ckub...
Ravana, the chilly breeze blowing at the hem of his dark coat and snipping the material of his trousers. He had decided to take a step back, moving into a position to overlook the club while he left Okabe and Sanshiro to test the waters.

Even from this distance he had heard plenty of chaos from the club, and was well aware that Sanshiro had been raising hell. The bonfires were keeping emergency services busy in the distance, but at the rate they were going it seemed that those distractions wouldn't last for long.

Another bang quickly caught his attention, making Akio glance off to his side to watch as something exploded through the roof of the club and rapidly surged up to the skies. It moved so quickly that the only way for Akio to recognise what he was looking at was to focus on the monochromatic halo that was flickering vigorously around the projectile. His eyes widened significantly.

"Even Okabe?" Akio asked himself, his mouth growing a little dry. "What the hell are those kids?"

Even A had been wary at the prospect of ever fighting against Okabe, and had always been thankful that the brainiac had zero ambition or interest to be a leader. Overcoming Sing You Sinners and the insanity that surrounded it seemed impossible, and yet...

Akio clenched his fists tight. It didn't matter, he wasn't about to roll over. Man in Black had enough raw power to handle it. Even so, he'd need to get his last line of defense up and running.

"They'll be out here any minute... I better tell Hachiro to get his pets ready," A remarked to himself, looking down into the alley below him. "Lars... Wish me luck."

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Sergio's eyes shot open, a loud and strangled gasp leaving him as he bolted upright. He was left seated on the pavement, panting heavily. It had only been for a brief, fleeting moment, but he felt it alright: The cold blackness of death, intent on sucking him in.

He looked beyond the veil, but... for the life of him he couldn't recall what he had seen. It was liking waking up from a bad dream.

"Where... where am I? I thought I was..." Sergio glanced down at himself. The holes in his shirt along his shoulder and chest were present, but that was all. The skin beneath wasn't even grazed.

"Yeah, you almost were."

"Sergio!". Hifumi's squeal startled him a bit, and before the blond knew it the shogi pro was crushing herself to his chest, her arms getting a vicelike grip around his chest. The blond winced, glancing toward his right shoulder. It was healed, but it still felt sore. Must have been from how much got torn out of it. "I-I'm sorry! I wanted to help you b-but I was too scared to move, a-and I knew my Stand couldn't handle something that strong!"

By now the blond's vision had settled enough that he could make out their surroundings. The whole team was here, seeming to breathe a collective sigh of relief now that Sergio was okay. He was able to see Crazy Diamond at work, floating in the center of the street as a warm golden glow
washed over every bit of battle damage in the area. Gradually and by degrees the damage came undone, as if time itself was being rewound. Even Aigis was soon rising back to her full height, taking a moment to experimentally flex her left knee a few times.

"That is a rather impressive power," Aigis complimented.

"Thanks. I've had plenty of practice... can't do much for you guys' stamina, but it'll heal your injuries in a flash." As Josuke said this, Aigis produced a set of handcuffs from her coat and made for Sanshiro's unconscious body. Josuke had partially healed him. Enough to keep the old timer alive, but he definitely wouldn't be moving quickly in that state. The blonde snapped the cuffs on, with a strange halo of blue light forming around his fingers that forced them into tightly balled fists.

"Whoa... what're those?" Shizuka asked, pointing to the glow surrounding Sanshiro's hands.

"Experimental Kirijo group technology, designed to restrain a suspects hands entirely. We have been working with the Speedwagon team to developing power suppressing drugs, but that is still in testing. These will suffice for now," Aigis assured her.

Sergio breathed a tiny sigh, settling his right hand on Hifumi's back to comfort her. "Hey, calm down, there's nothing to be ashamed of. You getting hurt on my behalf wouldn't have changed anything, and I don't blame you for being scared. It happens sometimes," he assured her.

"But... b-but..." Hifumi whimpered.

He chuckled a bit. "You did great. Took out the bomber singlehandedly. We'd all be toast if you hadn't done that," he added.

"You... you mean that?" Hifumi asked.

"Hell yeah," Ryuji replied. "We wouldn't have any shot against the old timer if you hadn't taken out his backup. Don't sweat it, you did good."

"So, no more self loathing, alright? We still have a job to do. So no more worrying, alright?" Sergio said.

A tiny smile graced Hifumi's face, before she rached up and dabbed her eyes with her wrist. "R-right. Th-thank you, Sergio."

After a moment, someone cleared their throat behind Sergio. He turned slightly, only now noticing Aya and Yoshio. He mustn't have noticed them among everything else that was going on. "Is it true Sergio? About... about Satoshi?" Aya asked, trying her best to keep a firm face and expression.

Sergio's expression grew grim, before he nodded at his two colleagues. "Yes. We saw it happen, and there was no sign of him in the chaos..."

"Oh man..." Yoshio whispered, suddenly leaning up against the wall and pressing his palm to his forehead. He looked nervous at the best of times, but now the nerdy scanner looked set to shake apart. "What... what should we do?" he quickly asked.

Aya swallowed, shutting her eyes tight. She spent a few quiet moments squeezing her pearl necklace, until veins popped up along her hand. Aya exhaled and looked at Sergio intensely. "We can... deal with looking for his body later. For now, if Mr. A is out here... then this is the best chance we're going to get to put an end to this. It's what the boss would have wanted."
Akira nodded at the trap master. "Then it looks like we're in luck. Futaba confirmed the presence of another Stand user through the back end of Club Ravana. And with the presence being so strong, it's likely going to be him."

Eventually Yoshio let out a deep calming sigh. "I'll double check quickly," he said, pushing himself off the wall. Something undulated at the right side of his neck, with that section of his neck soon covered by the glowing reptilian-shape of his Stand. He glanced toward Club Ravana and focused intensely, nodding briefly to himself. "Yeah, there's definitely the presence of something strong that way. But also..." he trailed off, his mouth furrowing into an uncertain frown.

"What is it?" Sergio asked as he rose up to his feet.

"I'm... not entirely sure," Yoshio admitted. "It's... it's difficult to say. It feels like a Stand but... muted, I guess? I've never sensed anything quite like it before now."

"I guess we'll see what that is soon enough. We can't afford to get sidetracked or discouraged now. So, is everyone set to go through?" Akira asked.

He was greeted by a chorus of quick nods, except for Sae who glanced to Makoto at her side. She regarded the younger Niijima with just a touch of uncertainty, and then briefly to the faded wound on her shoulder. "You're going to put yourself in more danger?"

Makoto nodded to her sister. "We have to. If we leave this guy unchecked... well it would be a horrible thing to do in the first place, but it would put us all at an even greater risk. I know it's dangerous, but it can't be helped," the brunette admitted.

Sae nodded grimly in some understanding. Learning about this 'Phantom Thief' business had made her all too aware that this was a problem that no ordinary person could solve. These strange powers were a necessity.

"We might need someone to hang back and keep an eye on that guy. Even injured, I don't like the thought of just leaving him. He could make a run for it before a pick up team gets here," Yoshio said, jerking a thumb toward Sanshiro.

A guy like him was bound to be resourceful, and unwilling to stay down just because his body was injured.

"I can help keep tabs on him, I suppose," Sae reasoned, gesturing to the modified airsoft gun in her hands. "But for how long?"

"Oh ah... not too long. I'll put a call in to the Foundation, they'll take him off our hands," Yoshio replied. He slipped his phone from his pocket, rapidly scrolling through his contacts. "Doubt I'd be much help against Mr. A, but I can at least help lock this guy up."

Ann nodded, rubbing her forehead with her right hand. "Well... you guys should still be careful. He might be injured and exhausted, but he was super dangerous when we fought him. So... yeah. Not fun," the blonde remarked.

"Oh yeah, and don't worry. I'll erase any trace of your lil' B and E, Sae-san. Make sure that shop's cameras suffer a little unfortunate glitch," Futaba said, grinning cheekily.

Sae gave the redhead a warm smile. "My thanks," she politely replied.

"Then... let's get to it," Akira said. "Stick close everyone. We have no idea what to expect from here on out."

The dark haired boy lead on at a quick sprint with the others falling in behind him. Josuke stuck close to Shizuka's side, keeping a close eye on the younger Joestar. The group, as a whole, were not in tip-top shape. While Crazy Diamond could heal injuries, stamina was still a concern of the team.

They moved through the main body of Club Ravana, past the dance floor (With a few of their members pausing briefly to survey some of the damage that had been inflicted on the interior), until their path took them to the back corridors of the building. Akira was the first through the back door, emerging into the foul-smelling darkness of the alleyway.

The group steadily filled the alley, spacing out partially so as not to make one large target for any potential attacker. Shizuka continued forward, scanning their surroundings in silence. But, save for the occasional rat scurrying in the dark, she couldn't see a soul.

Makoto moved alongside her girlfriend, stopping at a junction in the alley. There were paths to the left and right, and one that continued on dead ahead. Looking to the side alleys, Makoto spotted something odd.

Strange graffiti figures, painted onto the walls in interlocking triangles of blue and red. Some of the figures were gaunt and lanky humanoids, nearly eight feet tall, while others were designed to vaguely resemble animals. Makoto readily recognised one designed to look like a bull, and one meant to resemble a scorpion.

"This is really strange," Makoto murmured. "I've never seen graffiti like this around Tokyo." And something about it hurt her eyes, beyond the garish color scheme.

"Well it's awfully gaudy," Yusuke murmured.

"Is now really the time?" asked Sergio.

"There's always time for art," Yusuke flatly replied.

Akira reached up with his right hand, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Can you not? Now's not the time to dwell on art. Futaba, any sign of him?"

Futaba glanced around slowly. "Well uh... I know the presence is close by, but-"

"I'm up here you goons." The coarse voice came from above, causing the group to quickly glance to a low rooftop to their right. Mr. A stood under the glow of the moon, a chilly breeze blowing the hem of his dark coat. "So here we are. 'The final battle.' I'm sure you all feel so proud of yourselves, working to destroy everything I've done. To block all the good I-"

"Can the Robin Hood crap!" Shizuka shouted, taking a decisive step forward. "You and I both know you don't give a front-flipping fuck about the disenfranchised, or outsiders! Only if they can lick your taint and give you something you need in the process!"

"Hmph. MOUTHY little thing," Akio said, taking a step further. The light fell on his face more clearly, revealing the network of burns on the right side of his face. Perhaps it was just because of the distance, but Shizuka could swear that the scars looked faded for as recent as they were.

"Maybe I do focus on the people loyal to me, it's true. But why not? They've paid their dues, they deserve better."

"You might think the world can't be changed, but that's not the case. No matter what, we're going to fix the rotten parts of society!" Ryuji exclaimed.

Akio sneered a bit. "You're young. Give it a few years and all that enthusiasm will dry up, and the
grinding monotony of reality will wear you down. The world doesn't change. All you can do is climb the ladder to the top," he flatly said.

"Whatever you went through as a kid... I'm sorry. Yeah it was terrible, and things would've been different if the world had been kinder to you at first, but it doesn't give you an excuse to be a criminal asshole!" Shizuka said. "You've hurt way too many people, and I know you plan on hurting a whole lot more. Even if Shido's taken care of, this conspiracy shit won't be over until you're done for too!"

"Frankly, I don't care what he's gone through in the past. Killing Satoshi puts him right at the top of my hit list. You might as well give up now, your whole empire is breaking apart," Sergio said.

Akio snorted, settling his hands in his coat pockets. "Do you really think I can't recover from this? You punks have hit me pretty hard, I'll grant you that, but this is nothing. I crawled out of the dirt before, and I'll do it again and again until I'm standing at the top. And if I have to kill all of you to get there, then so be it," the older man stated.

"Guess he's not the kind of guy who wants a quiet life," Josuke murmured to himself, before glancing quickly to Akira. "So what's the plan here? He's on his own, but that doesn't really mean much," he remarked.

"First thing is to get him off that roof. Giving him the high ground doesn't seem like a good idea," Akira replied. A blue glow enveloped him as he said this, followed swiftly by Arsene materializing at his side with his scarlet wings aflutter.

Ryuji nodded firmly at his best friend. "In that case, let's get to it. Soon as this asshole's down and out, sooner things start to get better!"

"I like that enthusiasm. Shame you're fighting on the wrong team. One more thing, Higashikata Josuke... I'm not entirely on my own." As Mr. A said this, a figure strode into view at his side. A spindly college-aged young man in a scarlet hoodie and jeans, his face partially obscured by a white bandana wrapped around his nose. "I'd like you to meet Hachiro, an associate of mine."

"Heh. How's it goin?" the young man asked in a dull tone.

"Another goon to get through?" Shiho asked, sighing heavily.

"At least it's just one more," Haru hopefully said, trying to look at the positives.

Hachiro scratched the back of his neck a few times. "Yeah well ya see... that's not quite the way it is. See my Stand isn't a 'one on one' kinda thing. Seems a shame to do this to my magnum opus, but I knew this day would come as soon as I installed the security system." He shrugged and snapped his fingers on his right hand, something materializing above his right shoulder.

It was a small Stand, a floating garnet beehive comprised of a gem-like material. It had a set of arms and legs, looking like the spindly legs of a crow, and no face to speak of. The Stand lifted his clawed digits up, a red and blue aura forming around his hands that was soon matched by a similar aura radiating from the graffiti figures.

"Street Spirit... Let's show 'em what you can do!" Hachiro shouted.

In an instant the graffiti creatures sprang to life, sprouting from the walls and abruptly becoming three dimensional, heavy footsteps striking the dirty concrete ground of the alleyway. The lumbering humanoids and the animal shapes spent a few moments adjusting themselves and getting used to the sensation of being alive, before solemnly turning their attention to the Arditi.
Looking at them made for a deeply strange sensation. It was almost as if they flickered between being two and three dimensional, with the proportions of their bodies warping at different angles. It was mildly headache inducing.

"Well, have fun kids. Here's hoping the art project was worth the money," Mr. A curtly replied, turning on his heel and casually striding forward. Hachiro sank back into the shadows, his creations lurching forward.

"Hey! Get the fuck back here!" Shizuka shouted, suddenly sprinting forward. Houdini shot from her body, striking the nearest graffiti monster with all the force she could muster. It hit hard enough to stagger the monster back a bit, but not enough to leave any damage on the red and blue surface.

"Wh- Shizuka!" Josuke shouted, hurrying after his sister with Crazy Diamond floating above him.

Akira sighed heavily. "Great... Makoto, Morgana, I want you two to follow me! We're going after Shizuka and her brother. You guys think you can handle these creeps without us?"

A sly smirk formed on Ryuji's face. "A bunch of puffed up drawings? C'mon, gimme a challenge here man."

"They're more like puffed up paintings than drawings," Yusuke corrected.

Makoto watched her girlfriend sprint ahead, just barely visible through the throng of marauding creatures. "Then... let's get to it. I won't let her fight alone."

"Allow me to help clear the way in that case," Aigis said, smiling slightly. Her eyes glowed a fraction brighter, Athena's armoured form flying from her body. The shield of her body slammed powerfully against the horns of the charging bull, both powerful figures struggling against each other until the concrete underfoot began to crack vigorously.

Seiten Taisei lunged toward the nearest humanoid, his cudgel swinging forward and lashing against the swinging arms of the gaunt creature. The blow rocked the alley around them, with neither figure making headway. Crackles of electricity rolled down the body of Seiten's Taisei's staff.

With this all going on, Haru took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Her body glowed as Milady formed in front of her, the pink figure giving a dismissive flick of her left hand, a psychic 'shout' surging from her body and slamming against the graffiti monsters like a kick from a mule.

It gave Akira and his contingent the opening they needed, racing through the newly formed gap after Shizuka and Josuke. They were making a beeline for the exit of the alley, and as they reached that point Akira could see Mr. A leaping off the last roof ahead of him.

Man in Black's ghastly shadow drifted over Mr. A, slowing his descent dramatically until he landed silently on his feet. He halted in the center of the street and turned around quietly, smirking toward Shizuka and the incoming Arditi.

"Splitting up like I hoped. This'll make my job just a tad easier..." Akio murmured. The air around him rippled as he and Man in Black glared at the thieves, the earth cracking beneath his feet.

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The barrier surrounding his cell was a sturdy little thing, Akechi had found out. It encompassed the entire area around him, seeming to be fused into the walls, floor, and ceiling. He hadn't tampered
too extensively with it, not wanting to draw the focus of his guard, but the spectral matter was quite dense and sturdy.

Could Loki brute force through it? Potentially. But if he messed up then it could make matters more than a little awkward for him. He'd draw more attention to himself, and end up making security even tighter,

But, while he couldn't risk just tearing through the barrier, he could manipulate things beyond its confines. It took a good deal of focus, the brunette found, to project Loki through the barrier. But by all appearances, as he had tested it a few times since first learning to summon his Persona in the real world, his guard was unaware of those movements.

Well, if it functioned, then there was no sense in waiting here any longer. He had business to conduct, and desperately needed an opening to research all that had happened since his incarceration.

Despite all that had happened recently, Akechi hadn't forgotten his plans related to his father. And he'd need to deal with him before the Phantom Thieves caught up with him.

He sat cross-legged on his bed, the only source of illumination coming from the shafts of moonlight drifting in through his window. Akechi was vaguely aware of some explosive commotion in the distance, but as it hadn't been enough to distract his guard, Akechi paid it no mind. As far as he was concerned the whole world, in this moment, was empty save for Akechi and said guard. This cell was the only place in the world right now.

Akechi closed his eyes and exhaled slowly through his nose, tenting his fingers above his lap. He could feel Loki drift from his body, the spectral form drifting down and materializing in the floor, under the boundary of his guard's Stand. Already Akechi could feel a slight pressure on his mind and body, growing steadily more intense as he guided Loki forward.

In his head he was quietly calculating the distance Loki was travelling under the floor, his Persona's clawed digits coiled around a section of pipe. It was Akechi's guiding line, allowing him to mentally map the area around him.

Bit by bit he crept along, until he was certain of Loki's position: Just two feet ahead of his jailer, still concealed under the tiles of the floor. Loki's sharpened fingers gripped the water pipe beneath him tightly, the metal furrowing at his touch.

With each passing second Akechi could feel the strain growing more intense, as if the barrier surrounding the cell was actively working to suck Loki back in. Akechi grit his teeth and furrowed his brow, struggling against the pressure weighing down his body and mind. With one hard pull Loki yanked on the water pipe, the impressive flex tearing it open and blasting a hole through the wall.

The guard gave a harsh gasp as the spray slammed into him, the door rattling beside Akechi as his back met it. Nishikiyama's Stand was great for keeping people penned in, but it didn't give him much in the realm of self defense.

He was stunned enough that Loki cold lunge toward the guard, a hard blow striking Nishikiyama in the face. He slumped into the wall, out cold, with the effect of his Stand flickering out of existence.

Akechi let out a long sigh of relief and opened his eyes, feeling an immense pressure being lifted off his shoulders. "Finally," he icily murmured, rising off the bed at a steady rate. Loki and Akechi approached the door at the same time, with the monochrome figure casually tearing the door off its
hinges for his master.

"I should get home quickly. There's a lot to do, and not much time to do it..." Akechi remarked to himself, folding his hands silently behind his back. Akechi stalked into the night, all too aware that he didn't have much time to waste. The Arditi would be on his trail in no time, and he wasn't about to spend another moment incarcerated.
The Indestructible Man in Black (II)

A tense silence filled the streets, where even the sounds of combat against the graffiti creatures behind them fell into a sort of white noise. As far as Shizuka and her present allies were concerned, there was nobody around them but the enigmatic Mr. A. Man In Black's dark shadow hovered at his side, the air shimmering at his presence.

"Well then..." Akio curtly said. "Shall we get to it?"

Arsene shot ahead of his user, a scarlet burst of energy rushing from his palms. It stopped two feet ahead of the smirking criminal, weaving off into an arc that exploded into the pavement behind him. Makoto skidded to a halt a few feet from Mr. A's side, Anat's mechanical frame racing out of her and toward him.

Anat's glowing fists shot out in a pair of rapid flurries, with Man in Black rushing to intercept her. Their knuckles struck each other again and again, but Man in Black swiftly overwhelmed Anat with superior speed, a series of strong blows catching her in the chest and flinging her back, earning a pained shout from the brunette.

Akio sighed heavily, his Stand flicking more projectiles from Arsene away. "Is this the best you guys can do? It's all a wasted effort against Man in Black."

"Cocky bastard huh?" Josuke took a confident step forward, Crazy Diamond glittering into existence at his right. "Fine. Then I don't mind giving you the ass kicking you deserve," he added, Shizuka fading out of visibility while Josuke held his attention.

"Ah, Higashikata Josuke... A chance to test your power in person. I'm not usually much of a fan for direct combat, but... I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious to test myself against a man of your pedigree," Mr. A replied. Akira and Makoto quickly stepped back, giving Josuke the clearance he needed.

The two Stands rushed at each other at a blinding speed, a living shadow and a trail of glittering gemstones. Their fists collided in a powerful sonic boom, the entire street rattling around them. Akio and Josuke grit their teeth and braced against the powerful shockwave, even as the asphalt between them suddenly blistered and fractured.

Crazy Diamond and Man in Black broke away from each other from just a fraction of a second before launching right back into it, their fists unseen as they rapidly pummeled each other. The impacts rattled the street, with the members of the Arditi trying to brace themselves against the strong tremors.

"That speed and ferocity," Morgana murmured, just a little awestruck. "It's incredible... So this is Shizuka's older brother..."

"DORARARARARARARA!!"

"Ha... haha... hahaha... ha.."

Crazy Diamond weaved to the right while Man in Black weaved leftward at the same time. The former clocked Man in Black in the ribs with a trio of rapid punches, just as Man in Black landed
two hard blows against Crazy Diamond's stomach.

Josuke grit his teeth, being driven harshly to his right knee for just a fraction of a second. Akio, on the other hand, let out a sudden grunt and took a staggering step backward, enduring the damage far better than his foe. Josuke managed to take note of that fact as he rose firmly back to his feet.

Something suddenly rushed at Akio from behind, a focused beam of light lancing out and striking into the small of his back. He hissed and weaved away in an instant, smoke ripping off his back, and directed his Stand to the pavement, an unseen explosion striking the pavement. Shizuka yelled loudly, her invisible body striking the wall.

However she managed to right herself, ignoring the dull throb in her back. Houdini snatched several concrete shards off the ground, rendering them invisible in the process, before suddenly throwing her projectiles out in a superhumanly strong pitch.

Most of them sailed wide, but two of the unseen projectiles managed to hit accurately, the invisible shards of concrete punching into Akio's ribs. He grit his teeth and staggered backward, blood dribbling from the fresh wounds. But even getting stabbed wasn't enough to earn much of a reaction from him.

Arsene and Anat rushed toward Akio's sides in a pincer move, both spectral figures stopping about ten feet from the man himself. "I don't care how tough you are... there's no way I'm going to let a corrupt creep like you continue on like this!" Makoto shouted, clenching both of her fists while her Persona glowed with a vibrant white light.

"We're not exactly known for giving up," Akira firmly said. "Especially not after all the trouble you've given us!"

Shizuka managed to scurry away unseen, fighting against the soreness in her muscles, while focused nuclear bursts and waves of curse energy raced toward Akio. The sharply dressed man sighed softly and closed his eyes, Man in Black's specter rising up behind him and extending both his hands out to his sides.

The incoming waves of energy clashed violently against an unseen bubble, twisting and warping around Mr. A while the asphalt at his sides began to bubble and boil. Mr. A let out a powerful shout, powering through the pressure bearing down on him from all sides, his Stand shoving his arms outward with a powerful explosive surge. The wave struck off Anat and Arsene, driving both of their users off their feet.

Akio's respite was short lived, with Crazy Diamond immediately rushing the older man before he could catch his breath. Man in Black swooped in to intercept a crushing uppercut, Crazy Diamond's dense knuckles driving firmly into the shadowy figure's forearms with such force that Mr. A was knocked off his feet, sent sailing almost a dozen feet away as he swiftly called upon his power to slow his momentum, giving him a neat landing on his heels.

In an instant Mercurius was above him, shooting his right hand toward the crime lord and unleashing a flurry of wind at him. Akio was quick to turn and take off running while the unseen blades struck into the pavement and carved deep wounds into the concrete.

A stray edge of wind clipped his right shoulder, the dark material of his coat being split open while a spray of crimson erupted out from the impact. Yet he barely seemed to react to this. Shizuka's eyes narrowed slightly at the sight.
Man in Black twisted away from his user and roughly drove his right fist into a slab of concrete, shattering it easily and sending a dozen chunks of debris into the air. Their trajectory shifted on a dime, each piece rapidly knifing up toward Mercurius at an impressive speed. The persona reeled back and fired off a strong burst of wind to launch the projectiles away, only for them to twist through the air again and rapidly surge back toward the floating figure.

Morgana let out a shrill cry, shutting his eyes and trembling as the sharpened edges drove into Mercurius' shoulders. Blood oozed down his sleeves, the young feline quickly recalling his Persona.

However it gave Josuke enough of an opening to start closing the distance, moving forward while Crazy Diamond swept ahead of him on the road. "DORARARARARA!!" His fists pummelled the asphalt, uprooting large chunks that coiled around his knuckles and shaped into a pair of makeshift asphalt boxing gloves that extended almost a foot out from him. A warm golden glow lingered around the material.

"That's right..." Mr. A murmured, crossing his arms across his broad chest. "Come at me. I wanna see what you can do..."

Despite the added weight to his fists, Crazy Diamond hadn't lost any of his speed as he closed in and started swinging punches. Man in Black lifted his arms to defend, his own limbs matching his foe's swing for swing. But against the new weapons adorning Crazy Diamond, the sleeves of his coat were soon being marked by distinct cuts that revealed lightly purpling flesh beneath.

Man in Black delivered a hard backhand that struck against Crazy Diamond's right arm, breaking a few chunks off his makeshift gauntlet. A few asphalt shards bounced toward Crazy Diamond, stabbing deep into his right thigh.

Josuke grit his teeth and stood firm, very nearly falling flat. But he powered through long enough to deliver a firm right hook to Man in Black's chest, his gauntlet shattering apart as the hard strike sent Akio skidding backward, growling through clenched teeth. He gained his balance quickly, panting.

There was a distinct whirring sound to Akio's right side, with Man in Black snapping toward the sound on a reflex, his right hand swinging up and banging loudly into something unseen. Houdini's enchantment came undone, revealing a warped manhole cover currently coiled around his fist. A few dribbles of blood oozed from Akio's right hand.

"Alright... time out. Time right the hell out," Shizuka said, abruptly becoming visible a few feet away from the crime boss. She glared firmly toward him. "What the hell are you? I've seen you in sunlight, so I know you're not a vampire. But there's no way a human, even a Stand user, could shrug off the blows you've taken."

A warm smile graced Akio's face. "Noticed, have you? I was going to be disappointed if you didn't say something soon. You're right, my durability is a cut above even that of a Stand user. Man in Black has an extra power on his side."

Akira felt his stomach sink slightly. "I don't like the sound of this already," the dark haired boy murmured.

"A second power I've taken to calling Walk The Line. An extra layer of defense on top of
what I already have." There was a flicker in the air around Akio, which suddenly materialized into a grid of neon white lines that framed his body. A few sections were sporting a scarlet glow, chiefly across his chest, right hand, and the burnt side of his face.

Makoto inspected him from afar, her eyes narrowing a bit. "Like an unseen layer of armour surrounding his whole body."

"Top of the class, Miss Student Council President..." Man in Black said in a low rasp. Shizuka clenched her fists tightly at the sound, reflexively inching over until she was between Mr. A and Makoto. "Any damage that gets through, any pain, a portion of it gets shunted off into another dimension. It allows the body to endure far beyond normal human limits. And brush off pain that would incapacitate most people."

Shizuka grunted in annoyance. "So even if you get hit, that still isn't gonna do much against you. Great..." she remarked.

"Are you starting to see how futile your efforts against me are? Survival was the driving force of my whole life... I'll take everything you can throw my way. I'll heal in time, faster than a normal man too."

"But not as fast as a vampire," Shizuka quickly thought to herself. She could work with that, at least.

Makoto suddenly started making for Josuke, Anat rising up behind her with both metal hands outstretched to start healing his injuries. She already knew of Crazy Diamond's biggest weakness.

However, with the same uncanny quickness as before, Man in Black abruptly shoved his palms forward. Unseen waves of air pressure shot forward and quickly closed the gap, striking the ground between Makoto and Josuke hard enough to shatter it. Makoto yelped and jumped away, watching as a few more tears were carved into the asphalt before her.

"Now now," Akio chided. "I'm not going to make it that easy for you kids..."

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There was general chaos at the intersection of the alleyway, the majority of the team putting up a united front against the shambling beasts that had been animated against them. Despite being paintings, the graffiti creatures were inhumanly tough and strong.

The ground shook as the bladed tip of the scorpion collided with Susanoo's sword, cracks spreading across the wall beside them. The blue skinned figure moved with deft speed and precision, batting away each stab of the tail and punctuating with a stabbing flourish that carved along the red-blue carapace of his foe.

But, for as strong as Susanoo was, the armoured hull held fast against his stabs and strikes. Yusuke clenched his teeth tightly. "Sturdy creatures, despite being so gaudy..."

"Tell me about it," Shiho remarked in turn. She took a hard step back, grimacing as one of the lanky creatures swept his arm sideways and slammed Eris violently into a wall. The witch raised her hands, still pinned in place, and unleashed a radiant burst of celestial light that scorched into her foe's chest.
While Eris was reasonably powerful, even outside of the Metaverse, her full force attack wasn't enough to break his grasp.

Seiten Taisei raced to the lanky figure at an impressive speed, his cudgel slamming violently into the lanky graffiti monster and sending him skidding across the filth-encrusted ground. "Paws off!" Ryuji shouted, skidding to a halt beside his girlfriend.

"Hah... thanks for the assist. That was... a rough one," Shiho murmured, letting her left hand rest on top of her sternum.

"Like hell am I gonna sit back and let an art project hurt you," Ryuji remarked.

But, as he said this, his foe lurched forward with a shocking stab of speed. His forearm collided against Seiten Taisei's right shoulder, making Ryuji cry out as he was nearly swept entirely off his feet.

Meanwhile, Aigis was keeping her focus trained on the thunderous form of the graffiti bull. His horns were caught in Aigis' mechanical hands, a loud whirring noise rising from her synthetic joints as she fought the incoming pressure. The ground crackled and buckled beneath her, but Aigis planted her feet and held firm, grunting loudly.

With Aigis holding her target in place, Athena was able to easily rise from the blonde's side and shove her spear forth in a flurry of stabs. The spearhead repeatedly exploded against the dense hull of the beast, each explosion knocking some chips off the painted hide.

The bull gave a hard jerk of his head that flung Aigis off her feet, her mechanical body striking the brickwork hard enough to make it buckle under her. But she held firm, barely reacting to the strong impact.

Aigis drove her hands forward, her mechanical fingers flashing with a salvo of gunfire that rattled violently against the red and blue beast. "Right about now," she told herself. "I wish that lawyer was present with her own firepower." As it stood, her six-shooters were only scuffing the creature.

A tiny smirk crossed Aigis' face. "Oh well. I can appreciate a solo challenge. It's been a while since I had a night like tonight."

Street Spirit's conjurations were certainly sturdy and durable, able to shrug off powerful blows. But, bit by bit, the Arditi were making progress against them.

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Houdini and Crazy Diamond surged at Man in Black in unison, both figures moving with an equal level of speed. They closed in on him in a pincer move, Crazy Diamond shooting from the left while Houdini rushed his right side.

"BAZUBAZUBAZUBAZU!!"

"DORARARARARARA!!"

Simultaneously flurries came at Man in Black from both side, with the dark specter rapidly moving his arms to block and parry the strikes as best he could. But several strikes broke through and struck the shadowy figure directly, making Akio's body jerk and grunt under each hard impact.
Man in Black weaved away from one of Houdini's kicks and delivered a hard palm strike to her chest, driving Shizuka to her knees with a hard cry of pain. She clutched her ribs on her right side, trembling for a few moments. "Shizuka!" Josuke shouted from afar.

"Don't get DISTRACTED!" Man in Black hissed. A crushing right hook flew forward from the imposing Stand. Crazy Diamond raised his arms to block, the noise of the impact echoing down the street as Crazy Diamond skidded backward. Josuke grit his teeth, his right hand gripping his left forearm through the sleeve of his leather jacket.

"Ooooh..." Akio reached up and touched a fresh purple bruise on the left side of his jaw. "is that a fracture? It sure felt like one. Your Stand has a really impressive power Josuke, but... I know you can't heal yourself. And even if those kids could fix your injuries, they can't do anything for your stamina. You're all starting to slow down."

He scanned his opponents, positioned away from each other at different parts of the street. Akira and Makoto seemed to be doing well enough, but the other three seemed more than a little tired.

"You're not the first guy I thrashed who thought he was invincible," Josuke firmly replied.

"I think you'll find I'm a cut above some fetishistic serial killer," Akio said.

A sly grin crossed Josuke's slightly bruised face. "Yeah? Well you're not immune to the same tricks I used on him." Crazy Diamond clenched his left fist tight, a golden glow radiating from his digits and some debris at Akio's feet. Chunks of asphalt that had been broken and uprooted in their earlier clash.

Those same shards shot upward with impressive speed, a trio of them punching into the flesh of Mr. A's right calf and ankle, earning a sharp gasp from him as he staggered back. It nearly knocked him off balance entirely.

It gave Akira a nice opening, directing Arsene forward with a powerful shout. The scarlet figure surged forward and unleashed a powerful wave of energy, with Man in Black moving in front of his master to block. The great weight behind the attack still carried him backward, Akio's back striking the wall hard enough to send cracks splintering along the brickwork. A long grunt left him, his Stand struggling against the burning energy.

Morgana started scrambling toward Josuke, Mercurius floating at his side. He was set to heal the older boy, at least as best he could, and even through the crushing wave of crimson light Akio could make that much out.

"Oh... no... you... don't!" With a powerful flex of his power, an unseen wave of pressure shot from Mr. A's body and slammed violently into Arsene, knocking Akira onto his back. Wisps of smoke radiated from Mr. A's lightly scorched body.

Man in Black shoved his right hand forward, a wave of air pressure surging out of his palm and swiftly making for Morgana. The former feline gasped, trying to pull back. But, as he did, Anat moved in front of him with her arms crossed over her chest. The wave slammed into the ironclad figure like a bomb, and while she managed to endure most of it a strong shockwave still hit Morgana. The young man was flung off his feet, rolling into an unconscious heap on the side of the road.
Josuke struggled forward as Mr. A started to round the corner, with their Stands clashing once again. The booming shockwaves of fists hitting fists resounded across the area, with Mr. A gritting his teeth as the pain in his body started to rise.

Their fists struck simultaneously and rolled off to the side, with Crazy Diamond's knuckles plowing into the roof of a nearby car and tearing it to shreds in a single fluid movement. Man in Black and Crazy Diamond both aimed their hands toward the wreckage, each seeking to gain control of the debris, with clashing auras of red and gold warping around the metal.

Both Stands audibly struggled against each other's influence, the ground shaking around the wreckage as the clashing auras grew more and more intense.

Then, ultimately, the glowing metals exploded from an overload of energy that blasted both Stands away. The blast drove Akio to his knees, a pained shout flying from his lips from the sudden surge of pain in his body. Josuke, meanwhile was knocked out, draped on the asphalt by the time Crazy Diamond faded from sight.

"Josuke!" Shizuka quickly shouted, rising from cover beside a filth-encrusted car.

Makoto grit her teeth and rose up onto lightly shaking legs. She inspected Morgana and Josuke from afar, paying particular focus to their breathing. "Looks like they're just unconscious!" she shouted to Shizuka. "But... now we're down two people. That Stand of his... its made his endurance positively terrifying."

Shizuka nodded to her girlfriend before turning her attention back toward Mr. A. The older man was rising to his feet, drops of blood rolling down his sleeves and then impacting the pavement. His breathing was noticeably heavier now. "We need to keep at it. Keep wearing him down, and buy time for the others. If he gets away..."

Well, that didn't bear thinking about. Mr. A was hardly going to surrender or give up, even after all this. He had climbed up from the dirt once before and would do it again. Maybe even use his doctor to change his face and become unrecognisable.

He'd get new allies, stronger allies, and he would bide his time. Mr. A wouldn't underestimate them a second time, or pussyfoot around. He'd strike with lethal precision and unleash a terrible vengeance, and wouldn't stop until they were all dead. He wouldn't let another threat dethrone him after all this.

And that meant he'd hurt Shizuka's friends. And her family. Makoto and Josuke... Shizuka balled her fists tight, coming to a conclusion in her own mind. Whatever happened to her, she felt, would be irrelevant. All that mattered was securing the safety and security of the others, and ensuring this bastard would never hurt anyone again.

Houdini ducked into an alley behind her, swiftly prying the lid off a nearby trash can and turning it invisible. Her stand shot forward and gave the steel discus a hard throw, Captain America style, with the projectile whirring through the air and clanging off Mr. A's chest, a sudden huffing sound surging up in his throat as he was sent staggering backward, his weight resting against a nearby car.

"You little shit," Akio growled as he rose to his full posture. "You're a persistent one alright... Adopted or not, you're a Joestar at heart."
Shizuka smiled a little. Well, he had some decency to him at least. "So maybe now you're the one who's realizing how outmatched he is?"

"Don't get too cocky. It's just a compliment," the criminal retorted.

Once more Man in Black shoved his hands out at Shizuka, with the young girl leaping back on a reflex. An unseen wave of air collided with the asphalt in a powerful boom, the shockwave striking Shizuka mid-flight. She landed hard on her back, grimacing at the harsh and sudden pain she felt.

Shizuka tried to rise to her feet, only to wince at a powerful and painful throb in her right ankle. She must have landed on it awkwardly, it definitely felt sprained.

In that brief moment of distraction, Man in Black had nabbed a car from the side of the street and suddenly threw it toward Shizuka, the young girl's eyes widening as the vast shadow fell over her. Houdini shot above her user and raised her arms high, catching the immense weight with enough strength to make the roof buckle under her. Shizuka grit her teeth from the sudden pressure, all too aware that Man in Black was pressing down on it from above.

"Shizuka!" Makoto shouted, struggling through the pain hampering her muscles. She and Akira took off toward their incapacitated friend, while an unseen force pried the lid off the fuel tank.

"It's been fun kiddo, but..." Mr. A lazily reached into the right pocket of his jacket.

'\textit{Sh-shit! He's gonna blow me to pieces! And I can't get out from under this in time! Even if I start running, there's no way I can clear a safe distance! Unless... unless...}' The primordial soup of an idea began to bubble in Shizuka's brain, with the dark haired girl hastily reaching into her left pocket.

"I think I'll put an end to you now. You've caused me enough grief." He hastily raised his right hand up high, revealing a titanium-plated lighter that he hastily flicked open. Shizuka's thumb was moving through the apps on her phone through muscle memory, her breathing growing heavier.

'\textit{Come on, come on, faster... If I don't get this quickly, then...}' Time seemed to slow to a crawl, with Shizuka only being dimly aware of the approach of her two allies. They wouldn't reach her in time.

Mr. A removed his rag from his right pocket, before throwing both it and the lighter toward the open gas tank. Man in Black caught both projectiles on an accelerated curve, spiriting both toward the gas tank.

In one quick instant a wave of fire spread down the rag and into the tank. It was gonna blow any second!

'\textit{There!}' Shizuka swiftly thought to herself, giving the button of her phone a hard press. The air around her flickered purple for a fraction of a second, before a mighty fireball tore through the restrained car.
The Indestructible Man in Black (III)

The exploding car lit up the street like the blossoming of a new sun, unleashing a wave of heat and force that nearly bowled Akira and Makoto over. Both teens held firm, struggling under the constant bombardment of the blast, while trying not to stare into the blinding flash triggered by it.

The street shook for a few seconds more before it died down, leaving a smoking wreckage in its place. Makoto panted a few times and steadied herself, looking forward so she could peer through the smoke. There was no trace of Shizuka to be found.

"You..." the brunette grit her teeth, balling her fists so tight that her nails nearly cut into the skin of her palms. "You killed her!"

Akio stood upright fully, idly brushing some dust from his right shoulder with his left hand. "And what if I did? You kids brought this on your-"

He was cut off by Anat violently speeding toward him, with Man in Black swooping to intercept and catching an incoming right hook from the mechanical Persona. The ground rattled against the two, and Man in Black was suddenly shoved backward with a hard jerk of Anat's right arm.

Makoto's rage was a powerful force, an energy that drove her past the pain and fatigue that had previously been weighing her body down. Anat's speed and strength were ferocious now, with Akio repeatedly jumping back as ironclad knuckles collided against Man in Black. A few of her attacks were parried away, but this barely seemed to slow Makoto's angry charge.

"Makoto, wait!" Akira shouted. His words fell on deaf ears, with the brunette moving further toward the end of the street so she could keep in range. "And she's the responsible one..." he murmured to himself.

Akira spared a glance to where Shizuka had been: A scorched and shattered section of asphalt that was littered with twisted chunks of metal. But there was no trace of the invisible girl herself. An explosion like that, Akira reasoned, would definitely be enough to kill a person. But it would still leave traces of a persons body behind. And there was nothing like that there.

So where had Shizuka gone? Akira's brow furrowed a bit in thought, thinking deeply on the last few seconds. She had been doing something, clearly, but...

He heaved an annoyed sigh and followed after Makoto, not wanting to leave Makoto to fight alone. He felt a little bad about leaving Josuke and Morgana behind, but Akira had his hopes that the others would be along quickly to help them up.

Anat shoved her armoured fists forward, a focused flash of nuclear light rushing from her fists with a near-blinding intensity. Man in Black took the blast against his right shoulder, a muted hissing sound rolling out of his mouth as he fought against the scorching heat of the blast that left the asphalt bubbling around the shadowy Stand.

Man in Black's left hand snapped forward, unleashing a focused burst of air that slammed against Anat's chest. It hit hard enough to knock Makoto on her back, a length gasp leaving her. The blow seemed strong enough to rattle her resolve, burning through the anger that had previously been powering her.
"You're a strong one, I'll grant you that. And if there's one thing I can admire, it's love," Akio said. He stood to attention and glanced to his right shoulder, a torn section of his jacket revealing a stripe of burned flesh. "Unfortunately, anger isn't enough."

"Then I guess I'll just have to lend a hand too," Akira flatly said. As he spoke, Arsene lunged from his body and kicked the pavement fiercely. The impact dislodged several chunks, each larger than his hand, which were promptly catapulted toward the injured criminal.

He narrowed his eyes at the incoming projectiles, which proceeded to abruptly bend off their original trajectory until they were orbiting around him at a steady pace. Mr. A stood in silence, idly examining the chunks of broken concrete floating around him. "Your big plan was... throwing rocks at me? I have to say I'm a little disappointed. Have you not been paying attention?"

Akira grit his teeth slightly. "Not exactly smartass... All I'm trying to do is distract you and buy time for Shizuka. She's far too much of a stubborn loon to just die from something like that, and knowing her... she's planning something big."

Makoto was rising to her feet, and was pulled up fully by Akira. "That son of a bitch, he...] he killed her..." Makoto breathed, her tone wavering between blistering anger and boundless sorrow.

Akira reached over, settling a strong hand on Makoto's right shoulder for support. He didn't know if it would be a good idea to voice his suspicions just yet. By all appearances Akio thought Shizuka was dead, and if that was the case then she could potentially get the drop on him. "We'll deal with him. Don't worry Makoto, there's plenty of time to make him pay for everything he's done."

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Shizuka took in a deep gasp of breath, bolting into an upright position now that there wasn't an unseen weight pressing down on her from above. She glanced sharply from side to side, finding herself once more on the darkened streets of Tokyo.

Only now there were no signs of battle damage on the street around her, and her allies were absent too. Even Mr. A was gone.

"Well hot damn..." Shizuka grit her teeth as she forced herself to stand upright, feeling an immense pain in her legs. As she regained her balance she pulled her phone from her pocket, inspecting the familiar layout of the Meta Nav. "It actually worked... guess I was close enough to Mementos."

The world around her felt vacant and cold. A facsimile of the real world completely devoid of human touch. The surface of Mementos, at least. Shizuke already knew that a seemingly boundless hive of Shadows were lurking below her feet. And Camael... last thing she needed was to deal with any of that right now.

A shaky sigh left her as she plodded forward, inspecting the silent recreation of Tokyo that surrounded her. The lights were on but nobody was home.

'Okay I'm still alive. Awesome. So what the hell am I gonna do now? If it's just Makoto and Akira against him, I can't waste much time or come up with anything too complicated. Time's ripe to get the drop on him, but I need to make it count,' she thought to herself, investigating each store front she passed.
The young woman knew she had to act fast, but Mr. A was so goddamn tough... if she was going to go for a surprise attack, she had to really make it hurt. But what could accomplish that against a man like him?

"His body is insanely tough, way more than any of us... if this guy was in the Metaverse, he'd probably be like the Juggernaut. But he's not as invincible as he wants us to think he is. He was slowing down, the pain was starting to catch up to him. So maybe... a few hits on some joints and vitals will do the trick? Shizuka thought to herself.

She rounded a corner and found herself on a street lined with stores that were likely older than she herself. Inwardly she had a feeling that she couldn't bring any items from the Metaverse back into the real world, outside of treasure, but she could at least use this as a guide to show her where to find some useful tools.

Shizuka's path eventually took her to an old hardware store, the sight making her stop in her tracks entirely. She peered through the front window for several seconds, before casually pushing the lock-free door open. The hinges didn't make a single sound, as if they were brand new and utterly untouched by the effects of time.

"I don't consider myself a cruel person, but..." Shizuka trailed off and continued on inside the store, lifting her phone up in her left hand. "Well, I just hope Mom'll forgive me for what I'm gonna do..." Her Dad would probably snicker and applaud her.

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There came a powerful boom as Anat and Arsene struck against Man in Black in unison, but their efforts fast proved futile. His left hand caught Anat's incoming right fist and held it tight, while the right was clutching Arsene's ankle with just as much pressure. And try as they might, they couldn't pull free.

Despite the injuries marking his body, Akio soon rose to his full height and exhaled through his nose, as if the pain wasn't effecting him at all now. "Alright," he primly said. "I think I've seen all I need to see."

Man in Black suddenly swung the captured Persona's together, banging them off each other like a child playing with action figures, with the hard blow stunning Makoto and Akira. His Stand sharply threw both figures away, smashing them into a nearby wall with such force that the two teens were left skidding along the asphalt on their backs.

Akira grit his teeth and struggled to sit upright, but found his body was unwilling to totally comply with his demands. "D-damnit... this guy... his stamina is insane..."

Makoto rolled onto her stomach, pressing her palms to the ground so she could push herself up on her trembling arms. "This can't be the end..." she whispered to herself.

"Oh I'm afraid it is," Akio said in a lazy tone. "If it's any consolation, you kids are above and beyond anything I've ever fought before. Really wish I'd had a chance to recruit you, but... I know you would've been too proud and stubborn to accept that offer."

"If you think we're gonna grovel and beg now, you're dead wrong!" Akira defiantly declared, glaring fiercely toward the approaching criminal.
"I'm aware. And whatever you may think of me, I'm not cruel enough to rub that in." Mr. A came to a stop a few feet away from the two downed teens, Man in Black lurking at his side. With an almost deliberate slowness, the strange Stand lifted his left hand and took aim toward them. "Goodbye."

"Not yet shit-heel!"

Ryuji's shout was punctuated by a flash of lightning arcing toward Akio from the corner of the street. Man in Black swept toward Akio like a living shadow, easily grabbing the criminal and pulling him out of danger. The blast struck the asphalt, burning a deep chunk out of the surface.

Ryuji raced fully around the corner toward his injured allies, being followed soon after by Ann and Yusuke. Akira regarded the trio with wide-eyed shock. Was this really happening, or was this some fantasy concocted by his dying brain in his closing moments of life? Well, the pain he was feeling was definitely still there and very pressing.

"What... what're you guys doing here?" asked Akira. "I thought you had those monsters to deal with?"

"We beat two of them! Then Futaba said she sensed something bad had happened to you guys," Ann said, sounding just a little short of breath. "So that Aya woman made some traps to clear an opening for us, and we broke off from the others... Morgana is coming to, thankfully, and he's gonna go for Josuke when he gets his head on straight."

Akira smiled despite himself. "Heh... looks like it's not over yet, Mr. A," he remarked.

Mr. A's brow furrowed, and he looked as annoyed as a man who just found something unpleasant on the underside of his shoe. "Congratulations. You bought yourselves a few extra seconds of life."

"Seems we arrived just in time," Yusuke said, giving a small sigh of relief as he idly inspected their surroundings. After a moment, however, the artist noticed something strange about all this. "Where is Shizuka?"

The two injured thieves fell silent. Makoto was trembling, and a sudden realization dawned on the three newcomers. Ann held her hands to her mouth, wide eyed in shock. Seeing this, Ryuji slowly clenched his fists as a boundless anger bubbled up inside his body. "For real?" he asked in a grim tone.

Ryuji was no stranger to anger. Anyone who knew him for any length of time knew that he could be quick to snap or get frustrated. He had gotten a lot better thanks to his close network of friends, but it was still a part of him. This, however, was much different. Ryuji's anger was usually an immature frustration. This was a barely contained hatred that was nearly making his blood boil.

"You son of a bitch!" Ryuji snapped, glaring toward Mr. A. The air around the blond crackled with strobes of electricity, with Mr. A looking on impassively. "So help me, I'm gonna make you pay!"

Twin bolts of lightning lanced from Seiten Taisei, spurring Man in Black into action. With his user standing still, the shadowy figure deftly tore two chunks of asphalt from their moorings, flinging them in the path of the incoming blasts. They exploded apart in violent flashes, absorbing the entirety of the blasts.
"Get as angry as you want," Mr. A firmly said. "It won't make a difference in the end."

Growling deeply, Ryuji sent his Persona forward with a loud shout. Seiten Taisei rocketed forward with impressive speed, the asphalt beneath him cracking below in passing. The air around the monkey was crackling with electricity, the energy growing more intense as Man in Black raced forward to meet him head on.

With a sudden flash of inhuman speed, so fast that Ryuji didn't even pick up on it, his right fist snapped forward and slammed violently into Seiten Taisei's chest. The impact rattled the entire street, making the towering monkey halt in his tracks, with Ryuji's eyes bulging out of his head from the shuddering blow.

Seiten Taisei faded from view, with Ryuji being sent skidding back across the asphalt until he landed on his side, trembling and clutching his stomach. The other Phantom Thieves looked on in shock, while Mr. A curiously inspected his right hand. "Huh. That power of yours really is something... I was planning on putting Man in Black's fist right through your sternum, but he took it dead on."

Well, Ryuji had survived the blow, but something was definitely broken. He laid there, shuddering and gasping, and knew he wouldn't be getting back up any time soon.

"R-Ryuji!" Akira gasped.

"Oh well," Man in Black said in a low rasp. "It still only took one punch."

Yusuke took a sharp step forward, Susanoo moving forward with him. Given that he and Seiten Taisei were about even in physical power, Yusuke thought it best not to try a direct physical attack. It hadn't worked out so hot for Ryuji.

He gave a hard swing of his blade, the sweep unleashing a mighty blizzard of icicles and arctic wind that surged toward Mr. A at an impressive speed. Man in Black gave a quick flick of his left hand, the jetstream bending off course entirely and making a beeline for Ann.

The blonde yelped in shock, Hecate appearing at her side on a reflex. Soon Ann's body was aglow in an orange shell of heat, the radiant aura vaporizing the incoming ice and mist and leaving her untouched. It was enough to give Man in Black an opening, the dark figure lunging forth and moving to strike her. Ann yelped and jumped back as his wood-like knuckles struck the asphalt, the ensuing shockwave hitting her like a brick wall and knocking the blonde onto her back.

A hard blow struck off Man in Black's spine, the tip of his blade erupting with a burst of ice that exploded against him. Akio grunted, his Stand turning and moving his arms to block a few more slashes from the ghostly samurai. Each impact was punctuated by another explosion of ice, opening some fresh cuts along his arms.

Ann managed to sit upright, panting a few times and trying to process what she had just experienced. Man in Black's speed was ferocious, even in the real world. And a direct hit like that... Ann shuddered to think how that would have turned out for her.

A powerful blow rocked the street around the Arditi, a potent strike catching Susanoo in his right shoulder. It threw Yusuke off balance, the lanky artist grunting loudly as his body hit the gutter, struggling to rise again as strong throbs of pain rolled through his body. "This... strength..." Yusuke murmured.
A flickering wave of gas shot through the air, making a beeline toward Man in Black at an impressive pace. It caught fire a split second after, powered by Hecate's will, with the cloud of gas blossoming out in a burst of fire that coiled around Man in Black's left arm. Mr. A grit his teeth, skidding a few inches off to the right as the exposed sections of his arm began to bubble and blister.

"Oh you little..." Mr. A trailed off into a heated growl, his nostrils flaring a bit as he surveyed the burns.

Once more Ann moved to dodge, seeming to know instinctively that something big was heading her way. A focused current of air raced from Man in Black's left hand as he snapped it in her direction. While the majority of it missed, instead obliterating the concrete she had been standing on, part of it managed to clip her and drive the blonde into a nearby wall with a sickening crunch.

Ann screamed bloody murder, her face scrunched in pain as she clutched at her left arm. Something was definitely broken there, the sharp shock of pain leaving her trembling as she slid down the wall and came to a stop on her backside.

"Ann!" Makoto exclaimed, her eyes watering a bit. Feeling helpless like this, the brunette had almost forgotten how that felt.

"I... I'm alright," Ann lied in between shaky breaths. She desperately wanted to rise back up and fight again, but her body was telling her that that wasn't entirely possible right now.

A panicked, animal part of her brain was screaming at Ann to cut and run, to make a break for it before any other part of her were badly damaged. A far more rational part of her mind told her she wouldn't make it too far if she tried to run.

"You fiend," Yusuke growled, trying his best to ignore the dull throbs of pain that were rolling down the right side of his body as he glared at Mr. A. "You truly are shameless."

"Don't get high and mighty with me Kitagawa. You kids are the only ones to blame for this turn of events... If you had just stayed with your normal lives, or stayed with your little Robin Hood adventures. But you all had to keep probing and poking, pulling at strings well beyond your station. What choice did I have but to retaliate?" Mr. A replied, letting out an annoyed huff.

Akira's eyes narrowed, with the young man glaring toward Mr. A from his prone position on the ground. "You've definitely been keeping tabs on us... so you should know we're not the kinds of people who give up. And we're not the kinds of people who let corrupt bastards like you do what they want."

"Touching. It really does my heart good to see that kids these days are still hopelessly naive... stopping corruption is impossible. 'Making the world better' is nonsense too... you're too young to realize that nothing can ever be changed. All you can do is climb to the top to avoid the shit," Akio flatly said.

Makoto and Ann shared a glance as he spoke, with the two girls seeming to share a brief mental conversation. They were both injured and running on empty. Going through Sanshiro and Okabe had left them both running on fumes by now.

Yet they both had just enough stamina left to hit back with something immense. If they spent all
their remaining power in a combined burst, then not even Mr. A could stand up to that. Hopefully, at least.

Well, it wasn't as if they had anything left to lose at this point.

Anat and Hecate sprung into action in unison, moving quickly enough to make Mr. A stagger back in stunned surprise. The two Persona users shouted in unison, their summons aiming forward and unleashing an entwining blast of nuclear energy and intense heat. Man in Black swept in front of his user, his arms extending out at his sides.

The intense blast struck an unseen wall of air about two feet in front of Mr. A, the white hot burst blanking him from sight. The street rattled from the powerful blast, the shockwave causing cracks to splinter off the various windows dotting the street.

It lasted for several seconds, the churning wave leaving Yusuke staggering backward and panting heavily. He was trying to catch his breath, but it seemed quite impossible with the sudden flash seeming to suck up all the air around him.

Once the wave died down, sputtering away as Anat and Hecate used up the final vestiges of their power, there was a billowing black cloud lingering at the ground where Mr. A had been standing. Bit by bit the smoke began to fade and part, a silhouette becoming progressively more defined.

"There's..." Ann swallowed hard. "There's no way..."

Makoto was usually a rather rational young woman. Even now that she lived in a world filled with supernatural powers and alternate dimensions, she wanted to try and look at things logically where possible. But now the impossible was staring her in the face once again.

Mr. A was standing in the heart of the smoke, the asphalt around him glowing in a progressively fading orange light. The top half of his clothing had been blown away, revealing a tangled mesh of scorched skin that was still faintly bubbling. And his expression was one of immense rage, matching the smoldering heat that surrounded him.

"That all?" he muttered.

"His Stand blocked it... s-some of the damage got through his defense, b-but not enough," Makoto whispered, trying to break down what she saw. But she could scarcely believe it... so long as he could react to an attack, it seemed unlikely that anything could significantly harm him.

Susanoo dashed toward the injured crime lord, the smoke parting around him as he raised his blade high. But with his blade coming in hot, Man in Black was swift to intercept him. A hard parrying swing knocked the sword backward, a fresh cut forming on Mr. A's left wrist. Man in Black's right fist delivered a hard jab to Susanoo's stomach, causing Yusuke to cry out as he was flung off his feet and dumped in a heap on the pavement, gasping harshly.

The bluenette struggled to rise back up, shuddering gasps leaving him as he tried to process the pain he was feeling. Whatever was damaged in his chest, it was preventing Yusuke from easily getting back upright.

"Hmph..." Mr. A snorted and settled his hands on his hips, silently surveying his fallen foes. "Six Phantom Thieves, down and out. I must be better at this than I thought." He let out a shuddering breath, steam seeming to rise off his gnarled, burned skin.
Akira examined this closely, his frown growing larger. 'Maybe his stamina is faltering... must've been some time since he was in a serious fight... not that that's worth a whole lot to us right now.'

A smoldering shadow rolled around Akio's body, a malevolent aura that grew more potent as Man in Black started to float above his user. The pyramid-headed figure raised his hands high overhead, the air twisting and distorting around his fingertips.

A sudden whistling sound filled the air, followed a split second after by a sudden eruption of blood in the right side of Mr. A's neck. A disgusting gargling noise erupted from his mouth, Akio's eyes going as wide as saucers. It was immediately followed by two more explosions of blood bursting from his spine, Akio's body bristling violently.

More whizzing sounds were filling the street, but this time Man in Black moved behind his user, creating a barrier to hinder the unseen projectiles. The air around Mr. A's bloodied neck and spine began to flicker, the shimmer of light gradually revealing what was lodged in these vital areas: Screwdrivers.

"Wh... What?!" Mr. A snapped, blood oozing from the corners of his mouth. A trio of screwdrivers materialized in front of Man in Black, frozen in the air through his powers. Each one looked pristine, as if freshly bought from a store.

Makoto's eyes grew as wide as dinner plates, joyous tears shimmering in her eyes. The rest of her downed allies seemed just as shocked... save for Akira, who was smiling knowingly. "Just in time," he murmured.

"Sh-Shizuka Joestar?!" Akio shouted, glaring around fiercely. "How the hell is this possible?! I blew you to kingdom fucking come!"

Silence greeted him. A deafening silence that seemed to encompass everything around him. The invisible girl, naturally, was nowhere in sight.

But, eventually, she answered him. "Sorry about the delay. Had to take a little detour into another dimension," she called out, her voice echoing from somewhere. Akio couldn't pin down where he was hearing her from.

His Stand plucked the screwdrivers from his body and tossed them to the gutter, a quick gasp leaving Akio. A normal man likely would have been killed outright, or at least paralysed from the blows to the vertebrae. As it stood Mr. A was definitely swaying on his feet, more hurt by that than he'd want to admit.

"The Metaverse," Makoto murmured to herself in a sudden realization. Before the car exploded, she had jumped into the Metaverse, likely somewhere near the entryway to Mementos. She smiled brilliantly, a few happy tears falling down her face. Her other allies seemed quite relieved.

"You had better show yourself now, before I take my anger out on your friends," Mr. A warned.

Houdini, still unseen, darted toward Mr. A with a length of rope in her right hand and an assortment of nails in her left. She threw the invisible rope to the ground, the top sliding past Mr. A's spread ankles. A nail was launched from her hand as she rounded his right side, sinking into his flesh and earning a sharp snarl from him. Mr. A turned, his stand blowing a chunk of the street where the projectile had originally come from.
It gave Houdini enough of an opening to loop around behind Akio, gripping the end of the rope and coiling it around his left ankle. With impressive speed she managed to tie it into a knot and made a dash for the main body of the rope, gripping it tight and giving it a hard yank.

She pulled Mr. A right off his feet, carrying him several feet from the downed Arditi in the blink of an eye. Shizuka heard herself yelling, felt a burning strain in her arms as Houdini gave a hard swing of the rope and launched Mr. A to a nearby alley. By now he had the energy he needed to call his Stand in, Man in Black easily snapping the ropes open and catching his user, depositing him off his feet on the dirty ground. He wobbled off balance, panting heavily.

There was a flicker from above, causing Mr. A to look up at a roof directly above him. Shizuka stood at the edge, bruised and bloodied but still standing in defiance of him. "If you want them, you gotta finish me first... and I didn't hear no fucking bell."

"You're out of your mind... you think you can beat me on your own?" Akio said, glaring her way. "I know you're brave, but I didn't think you'd be so stupid."

"The way I see it," Shizuka mused. "I have decent odds. Not great, but... well that damage to your neck and spine, and all those other injuries, they're adding up. You can be beaten, no matter what you tell yourself."

"Stupid it is," Mr. A murmured to himself. "This time, you won't get away."

"I won't need to," Shizuka answered in return, vanishing from sight. "Let's end this."
An unseen wave of air pressure lanced to where Shizuka had been standing, blasting a large chunk from the area. It missed the young Joestar, but a few shards of debris managed to shoot off and drive into her back, bloody spurts racing from the fresh wounds. Shizuka grit her teeth, powering forward and trying not to cry out.

If she gave her position away, she was doomed! More waves of air slammed into the roof, each missing Shizuka by a scant few inches, as she made a beeline for something she had been setting up while Ann and Makoto made their last ditch effort against Mr. A.

Houdini moved forward to a large diesel-powered generator she had plucked from the hardware store (Shizuka would definitely give them a healthy investment if she survived this), lifting and throwing over three hundred pounds of weight over the edge toward Mr. A.

He saw it coming plain as day, his Stand harshly shoving his left hand forward and adjusting the vector to bounce it back further than where it came from. There was a noise of a rope snapping taut, causing his eyes to widen as something on the opposite roof was suddenly pulled over the edge and launched toward him.

Shizuka had really gone to town in that hardware store, picking up an assortment of things she felt could be useful. The screwdrivers and rope were the most plentiful, but when she spied the generator and a huge box of roofing tiles she felt they could easily be put to good use.

The invisible rope bound to the generator pulled the box of tiles from its foundations, with the heavy box plummeting to earth in the blink of an eye. Man in Black moved to intercept, layering himself over Akio as the box of tiles exploded violently off his right shoulder. There was a sickening crunch, the bones of his arm cracking under the sudden and immense pressure.

"You little bitch!" Akio snarled, Man in Black launching the crushed box away. Man in Black lashed his hands toward the roof where the generator had been thrown from, with the focused wave of air slamming into the edge of the roof.

While it didn't hit Shizuka directly, a portion of the blast still slammed into Houdini. The dark haired girl was swept off her feet, screaming loudly as she was launched backward. Her back struck the roof loudly, the young woman gritting her teeth from a flux of pain rolling through her body.

It gave Mr. A the opening he needed to close the distance, his Stand leaping toward the wall and sinking his fingers of his left hand into the brickwork. Man in Black threw his user up to the roof, with the injured man landing on the roof. He wobbled on his feet, shuddering gasps leaving him as the injuries in his spine flared up. His power was trying to compensate, but it was struggling against all the damage he had taken.

Shizuka grit her teeth as she sat upright, panting a few times as Houdini pulled back toward her size. "My bad... I was aiming for your head..." she muttered.

"Funny. Real funny," Akio retorted. He spared a glance to his right arm and gave his fingers a few uncertain squeezes. It certainly looked heavier than it should have, the sight making him grimace a bit. His attention returned to Shizuka who was working to stand upright. "But if that was your
"Master plan, it really didn't work out so hot for you."

"Tch... you think that was my only plan? You really don't know anything about by old man if you think I haven't planned ahead," Shizuka confidently answered.

'That said, what the hell am I gonna do next?! I have no idea where to find an active volcano in the middle of Tokyo!'

Man in Black lunged toward Shizuka, the young girl scrambling backward on her palms and heels. His fist was raised high, the air shimmering around his sturdy knuckles before he rocketed down toward her. Houdini shot her left fist forward, her knuckles flashing with a blinding burst of light that made Akio cry out and stagger away.

The brief bout of blindness managed to throw Man in Black's aim off by a fraction, but that was more than enough for Shizuka. His fist met the roof with a resounding bang, fissures erupting out of the point of impact before much of the roof suddenly caved in entirely.

Shizuka found herself falling through the air, her Stand swiftly batting away any large chunks of debris that were falling too close to her, and landed neatly on her feet in a darkened room now only faintly illuminated by shafts of moonlight shining in from the destroyed roof. It was dusty and large storage room, filled with rows of shelves that were struggling under the weight of various dusty old boxes.

"BAZUBAZUBAZUBAZU!!" Houdini shot up toward Man in Black, a flurry of kicks slamming into his chest before she bounced away, barely avoiding a sharp sideways swing from the shadowy figure.

'Hit and run, hit and run... bounce toward him and then bounce off... one good hit and I might just be fucked,' Shizuka thought to herself. 'A dope on the ropes, just like Ali woulda' done in his Stand battles.'

She turned invisible just as Akio landed in the hole, Man in Black rising up at his side like a sentient shadow. He shot his right fist forward, a jet of compressed air slamming into one of the shelves and obliterating several of the heavy boxes on impact.

"You're only making this worse for yourself!" Akio shouted. Shizuka ducked low as a current of air flew over her, striking the back wall and plowing a fist-sized chunk into the brickwork. "You can't hurt me! Not by enough!"

'You're the one swaying on his feet...' Shizuka thought to herself. She kept low, crawling to her right while Houdini sneakily started moving to the left side of the large storage chamber.

So how the hell was she gonna get out of this room? She hadn't exactly planned on getting stuck in here Going for the door behind her was no good, he'd see that coming easily. And she didn't know if she could just jump back up the hole she fell through originally, not without getting caught at least.

More and more waves of force shot through the room, the air pressure carving chunks out of the brickwork. A stray shot drilled a hole the size of a bowling ball in the floor, but judging by the lack of noise down below it seemed to Shizuka they were in the building alone.

If nothing else, Shizuka mused, she didn't need to worry too much about collateral damage here.
Houdini made for a shelf near Mr. A, her invisible fingers curling around a dusty tin of paint that she proceeded to render invisible too. Houdini whipped it fiercely toward the door, the edge of the lid slamming into the door with a loud bang. Mr. A snapped to attention, attacking on a reflex and unleashing a shockwave that blasted the door into a cloud of splinters. Shizuka curled closer to the ground, her ears ringing a bit.

Houdini gave the shelf a hard shove, all its heavy contents and the sturdy steel frame falling swiftly toward Akio. His Stand's wooden digits slammed into the frame, holding the weight up, while an invisible field of energy left the dusty boxes and containers frozen in place. Spurts of blood erupted from several of Akio's wounds, a pained hiss leaving him.

With an opening made, Shizuka quickly made a break for the damaged doorway, finding herself turning and sprinting down the staircase that led to the second floor below. Mr. A picked up on this quickly enough, grunting in frustration as his Stand launched the contents in his grasp toward the far side of the room.

"Trying to run? By all means!" Man in Black shoved his fists toward the damaged floor, punching a larger crater in the surface and catapulting a large slab of debris toward the still invisible Shizuka.

She gasped, Houdini shooting forward on a reflex and punching the slab apart in a single fluid blow. A sharp cry escaped her, with the dark haired girl feeling a sharp stab of pain in her knuckles. For as much as Mr. A was slowing down, Shizuka's own stamina was far from its peak.

So much for the nails Shizuka had left on the steps behind her. Fortunately she did have a few of those left over.

Man in Black and Akio leapt down together, making for the semi-visible girl. Shizuka gave a harsh pitch with her right hand, launching a trio of nails toward Akio's face which swiftly turned invisible mid-flight. He raised his hands to block them mid-fall, two driving into his right palm and making him hiss distinctly. The third, however, managed to fly through a gap in his fingers and punched into his forehead, making Akio howl as his feet hit the floor.

Man in Black caught Houdini with a powerful right hook, his knuckles meeting Houdini's crossed arms and slamming the slender figure into a nearby wall hard enough to punch her straight through the drywall. Shizuka gagged loudly, the wind pushed out of her lungs from the harsh compression on her back.

Both Stand users staggered back from each other, glaring defiantly. Mr. A plucked the nail from his forehead and flicked it to the ground, ignoring the thin red dribble rolling down to his right eyebrow. "My greatest enemy is a high school girl... how about that?"

"Not just any high school girl..." she retorted, trying her best to keep her footing even. But she was nervous, and tired, and so there was a modest sway to Shizuka's posture. "But I think you've picked up on that much by now."

"Oh yes. Believe me, I'm kicking myself for not acting sooner. You and your friends truly are impressive... I suppose I grew complacent... it has been a while since anyone genuinely threatened me." Akio smiled, despite himself. He respected Shizuka far more than he would have expected for an enemy. "But I want to take a moment to correct you on something."

"Oh yeah?" Houdini drifted back to Shizuka's side, the young Joestar remaining poised to move at
"Earlier, you said I didn't care for people who don't serve me. And to an extent that's perhaps true. I'm not as benevolent as I might want to appear... but the people who were loyal to me, I did genuinely care for them. I know what it's like to be alone, with nobody on your side... and I didn't want them to go through that same shit. I wanted to be the man that those people could depend on," he firmly said.

Shizuka remained silent, wanting to hear him out. Lars certainly seemed to think he was the genuine article. Seeing that she wasn't interrupting, Akio carried on. "Miwa had been betrayed and abused by every man in her life before she got her Stand, desperately seeking someone she could love and trust. And I became the one man she could depend on. Okabe, without me, never would have had a guiding hand to help him reach his potential. He either would have become an insane wretch, or an unfettered serial killer. Sanshiro was a relic of a bygone era of the yakuza, and his clan would have found a way to rule him out even with his Stand present. I gave him a seat of power, a means to keep going. And Lars... well I'm sure he told you about himself already."

The young woman nodded firmly. "Yeah. Yeah he did," she admitted. And Shizuka doubted she would ever forget that moment.

"Point is, the people who were loyal to me, my troops... I genuinely wanted to make the world better for 'em. They deserved it," Mr. A firmly told her.

Shizuka nodded again. "Yeah. Yeah, I believe you," Shizuka honestly replied. "But that doesn't justify the things you've done. The people you've hurt and killed, or all the crimes you've been profiting from. Drugs, guns, protection rackets... all that shit. Nothing justifies that."

"You may well be right," Akio replied with a dismissive roll of his scorched shoulders. "That said... Even if you beat me, Shizuka, those things won't just magically go away. Crime statistics would stutter for a bit, sure, but eventually... someone else would pick up where I left off. Another criminal, someone without my reservations. You can't change things in the long run."

Shizuka held firm. "You're wrong. You might've given up a long time ago, but my friends and never will. We have made a difference! If it wasn't for us then Shujin would still be Kamoshida's hunting ground, Madarame would still be a bloodsucking leech on every artist who came his way, Akechi would still be murdering folks left and right, and Shido... well I don't even want to think about what a Shido-run Japan would be like."

He smiled grimly. "What I would have given to have friends like yours when I was your age. Must be nice to have faith in the future... But I couldn't afford that. I just wanted to try and create a space where nobody else would have to feel like a... mongrel."

For a brief moment, a flicker of sadness formed on Shizuka's bruised face. She nodded to him in understanding. "Yeah. Yeah I hear ya."

Man in Black snapped forward, with Houdini moving just as fast. The ebony female plowed through the damaged section of wall, taking Shizuka along for the ride, and just barely avoided a powerful current of compressed air that plowed into the wall behind her. The building rumbled around them in protest.
A powerful psychic surge launched out of Milady's body, a wave of purple light that slammed against the cracked side of the graffiti bull with an earth-shaking amount of force. It slithered deep into the cracks in the beast's hide, warping through every damaged component of his being, and blasted it apart in one final motion.

Several multicoloured chunks slapped wetly into the ground, rapidly melting away into clouds of steam that filtered up into the air. Haru breathed a gentle sigh of relief, leaning up against the wall behind her and dabbing her brow clean of sweat with the rosy pink sleeve of her right arm.

"This has been... a very long night," the heiress admitted in a soft tone.

"Tell me about it. I almost died," Sergio replied, spitting a gob of blood onto the filth-strewn street. Breakthru moved ahead of his user, a loud grunt rising in Sergio's throat as Breakthru caught the incoming fists of a damaged paint golem. The ground rattled in protest.

Hifumi sighed gently, Flaming Telepath weaving around Breakthru to strike at the foe he was holding in place. "Please don't joke about that Sergio. It was very horrible."

Flaming Telepath's fists moved with impressive speed, the focused flurries impacting vigorously against the cracks and fissures adorning the monster's body. A particularly hard punch plowed right through his chest, the fissures in his body expanding outward before the entire top half of his body exploded in a red/blue spray of paint.

And then there was one.

Aigis was presently struggling against the battle damaged scorpion, sections of her clothing marked by distinct cuts. Her arms were pressed against the chitin of his claws, mechanical arms twitching and trembling as she fought to hold the beast in place. Undeterred, the scorpion maintained swift stabbing motions of his tail, aimed at Aigis' head. Even struggling in this way, she was still agile enough to weave her head away from the incoming stabs.

The tip grazed her right cheek, opening a thin line along her face and making the blonde grimace a bit. "I need your help!" she swiftly shouted to anyone in earshot.

"Over here!" Aya shouted from a few feet behind Aigis. On the ground before the silver-haired woman were an assortment of small black lumps that seemed almost fused to the pavement. Small landmines conjured by Big Iron. "Throw it this way!"

"Got it!" Aigis shouted in return. She summoned her lingering strength, the red discs in her headband whirring red hot once again, and planted her feet firmly in the ground. With a loud shout Aigis suddenly lifted and threw the scorpion backward in a fluid suplex motion, throwing the weight of the paint golem toward Aya's mini-minefield.

There was a potent explosion as the beast met Aya's traps, his chitinous hide absorbing most of the power behind the chorus of explosions. Even so, both Aigis and Aya were sent skidding back from the sudden flash of force.

Once the explosion died down, it became clear there was little left of the scorpion beyond a series of fast vanishing paint lumps. A thin column of smoke rose from the scorched pavement, while strands of darkness dyed the walls black.

Aya breathed a small sigh of relief, glancing around the battle damaged alleyway. "Been a while
since I had to do legwork like this... not gonna lie, I did not miss it," the silver haired woman murmured.

"Well, you did quite admirably all the same," Aigis said, smiling and giving her a quick thumbs up.

"Heh. Thanks... feels weird getting complimented by a robot, but... well, you're pretty cool," Aya admitted, laughing faintly.

Shiho sighed softly, her weight sinking slightly until her palms landed on her knees. "Well... I think that's the last of 'em you guys. We better get going, we still haven't heard anything back from the rest of the crew."

Futaba nodded urgently, swiftly running toward the mouth of the alley. "We need to get going quickly! The others are hurt, b-but still alive! B-but Shizuka... Shizuka's fighting Mr. A alone!" the redhead said in a panicked tone.

"What?!" Shiho snapped to attention at once, bolting upright and doing her best to ignore the flashes of pain in her joints. "We gotta get going, now!"

Aigis nodded, her expression once more growing serious. "Yes, let's. Sakura-san, please lead the way," she told the cute hacker.

"We need to hurry," Haru said hastily, her doe-like features marked with a clear worry. "Shizuka-chan... please, just hold out a little bit longer."

Getting out of the building hadn't been much of a smooth process, with Shizuka having to quickly dart from point to point in the branching corridors. She had maintained her previous hit and run tactics, managing to score more blows against Akio, but ultimately she hadn't been able to deal much lasting damage against his sturdy body.

And she, for her part, had not got away unscathed. Shizuka made her way through the back door of the building at an awkward pace, the footfalls of her right foot coming out with a stiff awkwardness, trails of blood oozing down her calf. There were a few tears in the back of her jacket, marked by bloody wounds that were serving to slow her down further.

Shizuka was leaning up against the wall for support as she went along, her breath leaving her in ragged gasps. It was basically just willpower and desperation powering her body at this point, as she felt set to collapse any moment now.

The alleyway ahead of her was an expansive trash-strewn square that had the back entrances for several other buildings bordering it. A large dumpster and several trash cans were set up to her far right, but the area seemed sparse beyond that.

Shizuka made it a few feet forward before coming to a stop against the wall, more shaky breaths leaving the young Joestar. "Jesus Christ..." she whispered under her breath. She could feel something heavy inside her right sleeve, the last weapon she had procured from the hardware store.

"There you are," Mr. A growled. Shizuka glanced to him from over her shoulder, noting that he too seemed to be swaying on his feet. Akio was breathing heavily, his eyes half lidded. He looked as if a stiff breeze would knock him flat at this stage. "Trying to run?"
"Nah... just getting some fresh air," Shizuka murmured. She couldn't run away, even if she had an opening to. If Akio managed to slip away then there was no telling when he would strike again. But when that time came, he wouldn't make any mistakes. It had to end here, and right now she was the only person in his path.

Man in Black raced forward, his left hand plowing through the brick wall at his side, carving a chunk out of it in passing. Shizuka rolled away, narrowly avoiding the harsh swipe. Her body flickered in and out of visibility as she made a beeline for an assortment of broken glass littering the hard ground.

Houdini swept up several shards and immediately catapulted them to Akio. He grit his teeth, glaring at the projectiles and instantly redirecting them toward the ground.

Once more Man in Black took aim toward the flickering young woman, with Houdini immediately grabbing the edge of the dumpster behind her. She swung the heavy container around sharply, the face of the dumpster compacting inward from an unseen crushing force. It soaked up the majority of the damage, but Shizuka was still knocked flat, her silver-rimmed sunglasses skidding off her face and landing heavily at her side. The right lens shattered apart, dark glass littering the ground.

"You... son of a bitch... now you've... done it!" Shizuka spat. "I'm gonna rip your head off and shit down your neck!" She tried to rise up, only to gasp at a sudden stabbing pain in her left arm. She halted, trembling, and glanced to the limb. Something was clearly badly damaged there.

Man in Black lunged toward Houdini, swinging powerful punches her way. But by now it seemed he too was slowing down, his punches sluggish and heavy. Houdini was just barely dodging all the same, the air rippling in the path of his fists.

Houdini twisted around and unleashed a swift storm of kicks from her right foot, while Shizuka herself scrambled to move away from the warring Stands. At his peak, she knew, she would have no hope in taking down Man in Black in a straight battle. Thank goodness the others had done so much at softening him up.

"BAZUBAZUBAZUBAZU!" A volley of high powered kicks struck Man in Black's body in an instant, the combined force enough to send him skidding a few feet backward. Akio grunted loudly, spurts of blood flying from the wounds adorning his torso.

"You like that you motherfucker?!” Shizuka spat. "I ain't giving up... not by a long shot!"

"Neither am I!" Akio roared, the two meeting in a fierce glare.

Man in Black raised his hands high and then suddenly slammed them to the ground, unleashing a shockwave that punched into the ground behind Shizuka as she tried to run away. Houdini moved behind her user, her right fist punching away a few dislodged rocks fired her way by Man in Black. But one broke through, slamming into Shizuka's right thigh, a sharp cry leaving her as she hit the hard ground.

She wanted to get back up, her mind screaming at her to move, but Shizuka's body wouldn't comply. All the injuries had caught up with her, and Shizuka knew she had probably lost way too much blood at this point. All her muscles were burning, and the world around her seemed to swim wildly.
There was a sudden pressure around her neck, Shizuka's eyes widening as she was abruptly lifted by her throat. Mr. A held her firmly by the neck, his coarse and burnt fingers squeezing tightly around her pale skin, a loud gagging noise gargling around in her throat.

She could feel the digits of his right hand pressing around her throat, blocking the air from entering her windpipe entirely. He glared up at her, while Shizuka's eyelashes began to flutter. "How's that? Are you starting to see how terrible your life choices have been?" Akio spat.

Her left arm hung useless at her side, and her legs refused to move either. Shizuka gagged wretchedly, a burning sensation steadily filling her lungs. Having now experienced both strangulation and drowning, Shizuka would admit to perhaps finding the former to be slightly worse. There was a marked difference in a person deliberately wringing the life from your lungs, and an impassive body of ocean watching it filter out of you.

She couldn't move her left arm, or her legs, but... Shizuka still had a right arm handy. The dark haired girl gave a rapid shake of her hand, a heavy weight falling down her sleeve until she managed to catch the weight before it fell too far. In her right hand, clutching with her remaining strength, she was holding a screwdriver with a rather long blade.

There was a sudden squelching sound, punctuated with a splash of blood across Shizuka's knuckles. Akio's whole body tensed, a harsh hiss spitting through his teeth. He managed to glance down, catching sight of the screwdriver now lodged in his heart. "You... y-you..." Akio spat, a thick trail of blood rolling down his chin. "If I... die... you die... first!"

His grip didn't abate, and Shizuka could feel her vision turning red while her face began to purple. She gave her right hand a few more hard jerks, stabbing Akio's heart twice more, crimson sprays darting along her hand. Yet, for all her efforts, she could feel the strength of his grip fading too slowly for her liking.

A void of blackness was creeping in the edges of her eyes, and she felt the strength fade in her arm. 'This can't be it...' But, eventually, the screwdriver seemed to slide from her right hand.

Only for it to suddenly be snatched by Houdini's right hand, with the only visible part of Houdini's body being that semi-transparent limb. The life being squeezed from Shizuka was causing Houdini to fade fast too, but she had enough presence left to pull off one last feat of strength.

The spectral arm shot upward, driven by a reflexive need to preserve the life of her user, and promptly rammed the pointed edge into his right temple. With one hard shove, the blade punched right through to the other side of his head, a splatter of gore flying from the left side of his head.

In an instant the strength left Akio's grasp, the older man gargling as his body staggered backward, his legs giving way. The two figures fell away from each other, gravity dragging both of them toward the concrete. Akio was already dead, while the life was dribbling out of Shizuka like water from a punctured bottle.

'Serves you right...' Shizuka thought to herself, managing to take in a single strangled gasp of air. It felt good, but she knew deep down that it wasn't enough.

Her body was shutting down on her, and Shizuka knew her mind wasn't far behind. The world around her was falling in slow motion.

'Makoto... I'm sorry. Another person leaving your life after what happened to your dad... it's not
fair, I know. I let you down... but... you'll do great without me. Probably better, heh. You are pretty freakin' amazing after all... I love you so much...

... Akira, you lanky bastard... I know you're destined for great shit, even if you're gonna be happy just running Leblanc and making coffee... I hope you and Futaba keep safe.

Josuke... the best big bro I could have ever ask for... you didn't do anything wrong, I was just... stupid and impulsive... and I didn't want to risk that bastard being able to come at you ever again...

Guys, the rest of you... we won. So don't ever forget that!

... Mom, Dad, I...

She hit the ground hard, darkness coiling around her consciousness.

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Shizuka's eyes popped open, and she found herself beneath a cloudy blue sky. There was a great warmth around her, though she couldn't quite see the sun from her current angle. Some manner of tree behind her, the thin leaves and branches offering her a touch of shade.

She became distinctly aware that she was surrounded by grass, a sensation that was vaguely alien to the devout urban girl. When was the last time she had been camping with her old man? Three years ago?

A chubby bumblebee buzzed overhead, sailing to a small colony of sunflowers growing to her right.

Shizuka moved to sit up in the grass, grimacing and clutching her pale neck with her hands. It ached something fierce, as if the sensation of Mr. A's fingers hadn't left her. Where the hell was she?

Shizuka took the time to inspect her local surroundings, and found herself seated in an expansive field that stretched out to the distant horizon lines. The rolling hills were marked by a thin dirt road that seemed to go nowhere. She could spy a few rustic cottages, but something about them felt vaguely fake. As if they had merely been painted into the landscape, and that if Shizuka drew close enough to them she would find herself walking into flat illustrations.

That aside, Shizuka felt this place was oddly tranquil. An idyllic slice of English countryside. Blake or Woodsworth would've written hymns about it.

"Where the heck am I?" Shizuka mumbled to herself.

There was a sudden loud flurry of barks, quickly causing Shizuka to look to her left. Before she could react, she was once more flat on her back as a heavy shape fell atop her. Through rapid licks to her face, Shizuka quickly deduced it was some kind of big, happy dog. She managed to glimpse dark splotches on white fur, quickly pegging him to be some kind of dalmation from what little she could make out.

"Whoa there! Slow down Danny!" a voice called. Refined, but decently deep too.

At his masters word, Danny took a few quick steps backward. Shizuka sighed in relief, wiping her
face in her left sleeve while her right hand stroked the dog behind the ears. "Jeez. Thank goodness I kept my mouth closed..."

"Sorry about him! Danny is always excited to meet new people... all things considered." Shizuka blinked and craned her neck, finding herself staring up at a man who seemed about as gigantic as Jotaro. A tall and broad-shouldered man with feathery navy hair, dressed in a crisp white shirt and dark riding trousers that trailed into a set of heavy boots.

"Nice to finally meet you," the giant said, his warm smile instantly putting her at ease. "I was hoping we could have a little chat."
Shizuka blinked at the walking mountain in some surprise. Something about him was deeply familiar, and his presence was somehow instantly comforting. But her mind was hazy, and she couldn't fit the jigsaw pieces of his strange familiarity together in her head.

He reached down and helped her to rise up, with the young woman wincing a few times from pains in her joints. "Apologies. You might be feeling a bit of discomfort while you're here, and as things are... I'm afraid I can't do much for that," he said sadly.

Now standing fully (and a little annoyed that she was still only a speck in size compared to this man) she breathed a small sigh. "Don't worry about it, I'll be okay. But... where is 'here', exactly? It's definitely not Tokyo." Going by the buildings and plantlife, it didn't seem like she was in Japan at all right now.

"We are... Betwixt," the giant cryptically answered. Shizuka groaned in annoyance in her own head. "Oh, apologies, I never gave you my name. I'm Jonathan Joestar." Despite the great clout carried by that name, he stated it as a plain fact rather than a boast.

At once a lot of things about this strange situation seemed to make a worrying amount of sense, with Shizuka swallowing hard. "O-oh," she replied, caught in a mix of awe and growing terror. "S-so am I... i-if I'm meeting you in this weird place... a-are you dead?"

She recalled her most recent memories to the best of her abilities, her mind still vaguely fuzzy and unfocused. She had been in a fight with Mr. A, a rather brutal one at that. She had lost a good deal of blood, was injured all over, and he had been choking the life out of her. A difficult thing to survive.

"Not entirely," Jonathan replied.

"That's not very reassuring!" she shouted in return.

Jonathan smiled sadly. "Come on, let's take a walk," he said in a polite tone, turning and walking down the left side of the hill. Danny bounded after him, eternally excited. With an uncertain sigh, Shizuka fell in behind the spirit of her great grandfather, that even her old man had never met in life.

'This is insane, there's no way this is for real... I'm... not 'entirely' dead? So what, I'm in a coma or something? Is that good or bad?!' She pawed through the fog weighing on her mind, reaching for a vaguely familiar memory. 'This happened to Okuyasu, right? He told me he died, but his older brother guided him back to life... so that's gonna happen to me, right?' Well right about now she really hoped so!

Shizuka wasn't sure when it happened, but the scenery abruptly shifted. One moment they were walking down a hill, the next they were walking to the bank of a river that had previously not been there before. A crystal clear spring, straight from a Monet.

"You got hurt rather badly, with your life hanging by a string. When people end up in that state, their mind seems to... go between the two worlds. I suppose you could think of it as a little like purgatory, but without the burning of sins," Jonathan said, taking a seat at the bank.

"Uh... I'm still in a lot of pain here great grandpa!" she quickly said, plonking herself down at his
side. Danny moved toward her, his short tail swishing vigorously. Shizuka settled an arm around him, just for a bit of comfort.

Jonathan nodded knowingly. "Yes. A restless spirit can often feel the wounds they carried with them in life," he said. "I would use hamon to soothe your injuries but... well I have no idea if it would even work here. Or if healing your spirit but not your body would only make things worse."

Not the best news she'd had today. But Shizuka supposed she could make do. "Yeah... well don't worry about it."

Danny was nudging her now, seeming to expect something from the young girl. She sighed and plucked a stray branch from the grass beside her, deftly tossing it away. Danny bounded toward it with impressive speed, grass parting around his large paws. The stick only made it halfway across its original trajectory before Danny overtook it, leapt high, and easily caught it in his jaws.

It was not easy for a dog to look smug, but Danny pulled it off with aplomb.

He trotted back to Shizuka and plopped it down beside her. "Oh, wise guy eh? Alright, let's see how quick you can get one thrown by Houd-" She stopped suddenly. Houdini wasn't coming out. And now that she was trying to summon her, Shizuka was distinctly aware that she couldn't feel Houdini's presence at all.

Houdini, even when she was a formless entity known as Achtung Baby, had always been with Shizuka from as soon as she learned how to crawl. She had never found herself in a position where Houdini simply wasn't there. It was like waking up one morning to find that one of your legs had mysteriously vanished.

"Ahaha... s-so my Stand isn't there anymore! Th-that's not totally fucking terrifying or anything!" she said, her tone more than a little panicked and manic. Jonathan settled a large hand on the back of her head. Despite having strength that could crack her skull like an eggshell, there was a warmth to his touch that put her at ease.

"Things will work out. Don't worry," he politely told her. Once Shizuka took in a calming breath, he sighed a little. "You have... quite a tongue on you."

"I'm American," she flatly replied.

In life, all of Jonathan's knowledge came from books and the occasional newspaper article. To him America was a land of rugged mountain men, gun-toting prospectors, and the occasional tycoon who definitely wouldn't fit the image of a gentleman by most British metrics. "Ah," he replied simply. Americans being foulmouthed seemed to make a good deal of sense to him.

The two lapsed into silence, with Shizuka continually stroking behind Danny's ears for some comfort. When she had been a child, and afraid of interacting with most kids due to superpower incontinence, the closest friend she'd had was Messina, her parents' doberman. They'd had the loyal hound a few years before Shizuka was adopted, but he took to the girl well enough. This came naturally to Shizuka.

"Did you... want to die? You were rather reckless," Jonathan said.

"What? No!" Shizuka replied, mildly offended. "I just... My friends, they were... they were in danger and couldn't defend themselves. So... so I had to do something. I couldn't just sit back. I didn't go in there wanting to die. I just wanted to make sure they didn't." She closed her eyes, her body deflating slightly with a strong exhale.
"Truth be told..." Shizuka trailed off. "I wanted to at least make it to eighty. You know, be one of those cool grandma's who teaches her grandkids how to shoot and ride a motorbike. And then my kids would say 'Okasan! Don't be so reckless with the kids!'" She wagged her left index finger slightly for emphasis. "You know, cause I always wanted to grow up to be a lil' like Hunter S. Thompson. But without the suicide. And anyway, whenever the kids would be done giving out to me, Makoto would." She clamped her hand over her mouth on a reflex. Jonathan Joestar was undoubtedly noble and undoubtedly a hero, but Shizuka reminded herself that he was a man from 19th century England.

But Jonathan laughed slightly, seeming to already be aware of what she was referring to. "Now now... I already know who you're referring to. When you're dead, a lot of things start to seem trivial. And who another person loves, well it doesn't matter if both people are happy," he explained. "Your parents have seen the young woman in question... they seem quite fond of her. A nice level head to keep you on the straight and narrow."

Shizuka laughed awkwardly, halfway between relief and mild horror. So her folks liked Makoto... well that did make things quite nice. "G-glad to hear it."

"That said... perhaps you're thinking a little too far ahead in the future? It's good to think ahead, but nothing can be set in stone. Believe me." His own plans for the future had been chopped down more than once.

Shizuka nodded. "Yeah, I know. I'm not saying things are gonna go exactly like that or anything, but... well with how dangerous things have been, dealing with Shido and Mr. A and all that junk... well the world felt pretty shitty. So I sometimes occupy my mind thinking of an ideal future, to get my mind off the spooky shit."

A tiny smile graced Jonathan's face, with the looming man reaching over to give Danny's ears an affectionate scratch. Danny looked beyond content. "Ah. Not a bad policy to have," he mused.

"Hey, so... are my parents here? You... mentioned them earlier," Shizuka replied.

"Not here specifically, but... yes, the two of them are rather happy up here. And they're beyond proud of you and your friends... your birth parents are up here too, and they're just as proud. And happy knowing that you've had a good upbringing," Jonathan explained. His words nearly floored her.

"M-my..." she trailed off. She had quietly accepted the likelihood that her biological parents were dead, but knowing it was now a clear fact... it was a little strange. But, they were happy for her. So that was good. And they hadn't just abandoned her, which was nice too. "Geez great grandpa... you know how to dump big stuff on top of people."

Jonathan nodded. "Well, I felt it would be important to give you some insider information while we have this time together. Making it out to here is a bit of a challenge, and so me and Danny currently alone with you... Do you mind if we walk for a bit? There is something important I wanted to talk to you about."

Sighing, Shizuka rose to her feet and tried to ignore the pain in her limbs. "That doesn't sound good at all, but... I guess if we're on a time limit, then we should get down to business quickly."

Information on her parents was less pressing.

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11/14
Mitsuru breathed a tiny sigh, continuing to leaf through the stack of papers before her. Some of these had been retrieved from Club Ravana in the aftermath of the expansive battle, while others had been taken from a hidden compartment in the home of Toshi Okabe. Notes and paperwork about their business, much of which wasn't worth a whole lot. The main room of Mitsuru's temporary apartment was quite heavily dominated by all the papers.

But Naoto was convinced there was something in here of use. There was a strong chance that information about this 'Shido impersonator' could be found in these documents. Once they had dealt with that, it would be safe to say that this conspiracy had been fully defanged.

Naoto searched through her own stack of books, seeming to occasionally scribble a note in the little black book beside her. "This Toshi Okabe was quite fastidious in his bookkeeping. However some of these notes he has written here... it's odd, but it seems he's written them in a sort of coded language. Nothing unbreakable, I'm sure, but it'll slow my progress a little," the bluenette said.

Mitsuru nodded at her companion without looking up. "Well, the vote is still some time away. We can afford to be thorough in checking these... and it falls to us to handle this matter for the time being. Those kids are going through a lot right now."

"Right," Naoto concurred, her lips forming into a thin frown. "It certainly was an... eventful night."

"Yes. All that blood... it was like walking in on the set of a horror movie." Shizuka and Mr. A had nearly torn each other to shreds, and that girl... well she was hanging by a thread it seemed. Her brother, a potent healer by all accounts, was also out cold from the injuries he sustained.

"Speaking of that battle, something's been bothering me," Naoto mused without looking up from her work. "I know you and the Speedwagon Foundation have been working hard to suppress information about the battle, but... don't you think the public have been rather... tame about all this? Nobody seems to be even vaguely curious about any of this."

Mitsuru had indeed noticed. It was hard not to. She had expected this to be a PR nightmare, with people poking and prodding at all levels. But the cover story of faulty gas lines had been casually absorbed by the public, and those cordoned off blocks had been subsequently ignored by the people afterward.

Even the explosions caused by Mr. A's people had been ignored almost as soon as the damage had been dealt with. The Japanese were definitely a 'keep calm and carry on' type of people, but this was beyond abnormal.

"I'm aware," Mitsuru calmly said. "It's as if a sort of... fog has started to settle over the people of Tokyo. An indifference to everything. Between that and all the Vacant People cropping up, something very dangerous is at work here."

She thought back to 2009, when Apathy Syndrome and Takaya's cult washed through Iwatodai like a plague. It was a similar story here too. Only with the people praying for end of the world being replaced with people who couldn't care at all about anything around them. With each passing day, the problem seemed to worsen.

People were content so long as the trains ran on time.

"Then I suppose it's safe to say things are far from over," Naoto remarked. "The human threats might be out of the way, but we're currently in the palm of something far bigger."

Mitsuru pondered this, a memory rising up from the sea of her consciousness. "You know..."
Arisato told me something, toward the end. Before we fought Nyx. He said that there are things out there that we can't even begin to comprehend, and are so numerous that they could almost rival the stars in the sky..." She sighed gently. "After he met with Ryoji, when we decided to spare his life... Minato seemed to know a lot more than any of us."

And before he passed on, Mitsuru shuddered to think how much knowledge he held in his head.

"Well it certainly feels that way," Naoto said, sliding a few papers off to he vacant left edge of her desk. "And whatever this current threat is, it feels like he's getting ready to fully show his hand."

Not that that was the only thing they had to worry about. After the dust had settled, news had reached the group of Akechi's escape. It seemed unrelated to this Mr. A business, but was still unsettling.

Even if he was massively outnumbered, Naoto wasn't willing to underestimate her 'successor' quite yet. Anyone with a power like Yu's, and a mind like Adachi's, was a truly lethal individual in Naoto's mind.

"Hey, great grandpa," Shizuka began, following behind Jonathan. They were walking the crest of another hill, toward a lone tree that dominated the top. It was old and gnarled, the thick trunk even broader than Jonathan's shoulder span. It seemed about as old as the countryside itself. "Can I ask you something?"

"By all means," Jonathan politely replied, sparing a glance toward her. Danny was following vaguely behind them, but seemed to trail off whenever a stray ladybug flew past his field of view.

"Well I was just thinking... maybe my friends have taken me to a hospital or an ambulance or something like that? They must've found me by now," she said.

Jonathan let out a small hum of thought. "Well... yes and no. I'm sure you've received medical attention by now, but it's mainly because time seems to flow differently in this state. A short while in here can be quite a while out there," Jonathan explained. For a brief moment, Shizuka thought of giant men with spiky hair training to fight an evil bug monster. "W-wow, really? That's..." She wasn't sure if that was good or bad, in truth.

Just how long had she been in here? And where was her body in the real world? So far all that talk of comatose people being aware of their surroundings was coming across as a load of bunkum. 'Bunkum? Oh great, his Britishness is rubbing off on me already.'

Once they were near enough to the tree, Shizuka was able to make out the details of something engraved in the bark, likely some kind of pen knife. A love heart, with the names of Jonathan and Erina engraved into it. Shizuka was nearly floored, her cheeks taking on a pinkish hue.

"I often come here to think. I don't have many places in my life with good memories," Jonathan admitted without looking away from the tree. Which made a good deal of sense to Shizuka. His life had been a tragically, unfairly short one, and much of his youth had been spent in a sort of shadow war with young Dio Brando. Maintaining a false friendship, while both were constantly wary of each other and watching their backs. Must've been rough.

"Well... from what I hear, you two made each other really happy," Shizuka said, smiling faintly. "So uh... you said you wanted to tell me something?"
Jonathan nodded, turning halfway toward his great granddaughter. "I'm glad you bested that A character. And with him gone, perhaps the last vestiges of Dio's influence have been purged from the earth... but I don't think you're finished yet."

"S-seriously?" Shizuka asked, her shoulders sagging. Mitsuru had said something to that effect, hadn't she? That there was something else behind all this?

"Unfortunately, yes... I can't go into much detail in how I know this, but I've been in contact with a reputable source. And he's distinctly aware of a menacing, insidious force starting to permeate through the minds of humans. This new threat may well be the greatest danger the world has ever faced," Jonathan said, his tone grim.

'Permeating human minds? Like... the Vacant People?' And when Shizuka thought of that, she thought of Camael. He was unlike anything else the team had fought, and hadn't just materialized in a vacuum. "So... someone told you? How could they know? And... why tell you, and not just tell us?"

"He's a resident of this side, and reaching out to the material world is not exactly an easy thing to accomplish. His contact was rather recent, with the two of us chatting for some time. I doubt he was expecting this meeting between us to occur," Jonathan said. The more he spoke, the more uncertain Shizuka felt.

Shizuka frowned, settling her hands on her hips. "And did he have any specifics for us?"

"Not much that I could wrap my head around, I'm afraid. Even he seemed uncertain on what we're dealing with... But he described it as a miasma that lurks through a sort of er... a collective unconscious," Jonathan curtly explained.

She let out a small sigh. So something was indeed lurking in the Metaverse, looking down his nose at the world. And someone in the afterlife was aware of it too. How strange. Shizuka pawed through her hazy memories for several languid seconds. Something like this had happened to Naoto's friends. A so-called goddess, lurking in the TV world.

Jonathan carried on. "And we don't know how long you have to act, or the totality of what this entity has planned. But from my understanding, things are fast accelerating. But it's never too late, no matter how dire a situation may seem."

Shizuka frowned. "Well... much as I appreciate the vote of confidence, what can we do? From the sound of things, this is something a whole lot bigger than some psycho politician... how can we beat something that's overtaking the planet?" she asked.

Jonathan was silent for a few moments. Then, seeming to wander to a different subject entirely, he shifted his focus to Danny and scratched behind his ears. "Do you know of your grandmother's holiday home?"

"Uh... y-yeah, she had it built out by Okinawa in the... sixties? Me an' my folks vacationed there once, but I was pretty young at the time," she admitted. "What's that gotta do with... anything?" she asked in a slightly worried tone.

"There is something rather important there. Something that was recovered from the sea some years ago, and stored safely there according to your father. It might come in handy for what's to come," Jonathan began. "A very special gemstone, that went missing after the defeat of Kars, the Pillar Man."
Shizuka rolled the information in her head, weighing it until she could find a match for what Jonathan described. "You mean... the Red Stone of Aja?" Jonathan nodded. Shizuka couldn't use hamon, she had learned as much at an early age. But if the Aja could conduct and amplify light, it would fit Houdini like a glove. All she had to do was find the time to visit Lisa Lisa's holiday home.

"It might prove useful. But beyond that, I can think of one other bit of useful information... if people are the cause of this, if the human mind is birthing this evil... then perhaps humans can be the solution too," Jonathan said.

"I don't get what you mean," Shizuka replied. She could believe that the Metaverse was the root cause of it, particularly with how human thoughts shaped that dimension, but... "But people are goddamn stupid," Shizuka finally said. "How can they help us?"

"Seems that much hasn't changed in the intervening decades," Jonathan mused. He didn't sound wholly surprised as he said this. "What I mean is, if you could make people aware of the threat against them, then perhaps... perhaps they would start to unite against it?" he suggested.

Before Shizuka could press further, a strange golden light washed over her. It was coupled with a familiar noise, like mechanisms and hydraulics springing to life. It was a sound Shizuka was quite familiar with: the sound of Crazy Diamond's healing powers.

"I... I think..." Shizuka swallowed hard. "I think our time here might be up, great grandpa," she said. Danny whined, his ears flattening against the sides of his head.

"Seems like... it's for the best though. I wish you a long and happy life, Shizuka Joestar." A sad smile graced Jonathan's face, before he knelt and hugged the young woman close. She returned the gesture, welcoming the familial comfort for a few seconds, before pulling away. "Look after yourself. There are people on this side who love you a lot... but there are quite a few on the other side who care for you too, and I'm sure they'd want to keep you around for years to come."

Shizuka nodded firmly, still smiling. "Yeah. Don't worry, I won't go down without a fight... and I think you'll find that I'm a pretty scrappy gal."

There was a ripple in the air off to her right, a slice of vibrant blue light that tore a hole in the air. It formed into a large portal of rippling white and blue waves, and try as she might she couldn't resist the gravitational pull that was now marching her toward the land of the living.

"Good luck. I believe in you," Jonathan assured her, smiling fondly at his descendant.

"Coming from you? That means the world to me," Shizuka replied, giving him a quick thumbs up.

The light washed over Shizuka, each step dragging her to the realm of the living like a stone being brought to the ground by gravity. The vibrant countryside vanished behind her, and all she could see was the swirling vortex.

That was, until, two figures materialized at her sides. Shizuka's eyes widened like dinner plates as another giant of a man crouched down beside her. A brown haired young man in the prime of his youth, dressed in a dark tank top and blue jeans. A scarf fluttered around his neck.

At Shizuka's left side was a young woman, a beautiful blonde in a sleek red dress, a neat white hairband taming her golden locks. "Tesoro... my sweet little Shizuka... you've grown so much," Suzi Q said in a sugary sweet tone, cupping Shizuka's left cheek. The poor girl nearly collapsed on the spot, her eyes watering.
"Hehe." Joseph grinned broadly, his large hand settling atop Shizuka's right shoulder. "Yeah, Suzi's got the right of it there. You might be a half-pint, but... you've got the heart of a lion kiddo. And we'll be with you every step of the way."

"M-mom... D-Dad?" Shizuka felt she should have expected this on some level, but now being faced with her parents again... tears were rolling down her cheeks, her grin fast becoming infectious. "I... it's r-really you guys..."

"Tesoro, please don't cry," Suzi said, her tone tinged with sadness as she wiped her thumb under Shizuka's eye. "We... we can't go with you. I wish we could, but... but please, just know that no matter what, we'll always be proud of you. Please know that we will always believe in you," Suzi explained.

"And you have a great team backing you up. There's nothing you guys can't handle," Joseph assured her, a sly grin on his face.

It was at this point that two more figures materialized at her sides. One, a tall and skinny man with a well groomed hairline, dressed in a neat blue suit. And at Shizuka's other side was a short and slim woman, her dark locks held in a neat bun.

They were strangers to Shizuka, and yet she recognised them on some hardwired animal instinct. "You... you guys are my parents too, r-right?"

"Our little Kiyoko... you've grown so much. I only wish we could have known you longer," her father said, giving Shizuka's right shoulder a squeeze.

"That monster might have split us apart from you, but... we're more proud of you than words can describe," her mother added in a soothing tone.

The tears were running freely down Shizuka's face, and she wholly welcomed the four-way embrace that encapsulated her. "I promise you..." she said in a soft whisper. "I won't ever forget you guys..."

And just like that she was gone, her soul spirited back to where it belonged.

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Now alone with Danny, Jonathan heaved a tiny sigh and let his weight rest against the bark of the tree behind him. "Well, she's aware of the danger now... I hope you're right about all this. The situation sounds quite dire."

The wind whistled through the leaves overhead. And soon Jonathan heard a voice being carried by the breeze. 'It's beyond dangerous, but they had to be told the truth. And they might now have a shot.'

"So..." Jonathan reached down and idly patted the top of Danny's head, while his oldest friend chewed a stolen twig into mush. "Do you think they truly can win now?"

'The only certainty in life is death. Everything beyond that is just luck,' the unseen voice answered. 'But... I'm starting to like their odds.'

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11/15
Two young men, sharply dressed and swiftly rising through the totem pole of their company, stared through the thin barricade of police tape that blocked away the street of Club Ravana. A series of men in dark suits, their eyes concealed behind equally dark shades, stood along the outside as a silent deterrent to anyone wanting to cross. And, looking beyond those, one could easily see more men in baggy white jumpsuit inspecting the destruction of the ruined street.

"Ah man... Ravana is closed? Just my goddamn luck on the night I set aside for booze," the first gentleman, a brunette, glumly said.

"Yeah. Gas leak or something... toldja it wouldn't be ready yet," the second, a taller dark-haired man, replied. He sighed, tucking his hands into his coat pocket. "Well, c'mon. Gotta go find somewhere else."

If their faculties weren't vaguely clouded, the two men likely could have seen the distant stains that looked suspiciously like dried blood. Or the bullet holes in the ground and walls. Or the fact that the 'gas leak' had been strangely specific in where it exploded.

"Oh yeah? Like where?" the first man turned, falling in line beside his coworker, both of them padding along the pavement until they were once more surrounded by the perpetual crowds of Tokyo's streets.

The second man shrugged. "Eh... maybe the snooker hall? Can grab a drink, some smokes, maybe enjoy a game or two?" he suggested.

"Pff, the snooker hall? Christ. The girls there are sevens at best... if I'm gonna drink, I want the girls to at least be eights," the first replied, letting his shoulders sag.

"What's it matter to you? You won't get any either way," the second man replied without glancing away.

From the alley just up ahead, a figure suddenly staggered into view. A homeless man, dressed in crudely stitched rags. His eyes were glazed, the corners of his mouth pulled into a perpetual rictus. The weathered old man swayed on his feet for a few seconds, and then suddenly landed face-first on the pavement, stone dead. A black bile oozed from his mouth, drying into the concrete.

And yet, nobody seemed to pay this any mind. People would either step over him, or walk vaguely around the fresh corpse.

"Someone really should call an ambulance," one young woman remarked in passing. And then proceeded not to.

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Shizuka's eyes popped open, a harsh gasp fogging up the mask that had been planted over her mouth. She tried to sit up, but in doing so she became distinctly aware of the bandages wrapped around her torso and limbs. It made her movements a little stiff, and her vision was still a little blurry.

But Shizuka could hear well enough, and the shared sigh of relief from her friends managed to put her mind at ease. She could feel the room around her come into focus, and realized she was in a large and well lit hospital room, the surrounding walls and tiles of the floor a crisp and immaculately clean white. The steady beeping of the ECG hooked up to her served as fine background noise to all this.

"Shizuka!" Makoto's arms wrapped tight around Shizuka's shoulders, nearly yanking her right out
of bed as she was pulled into a crushing hug. Shizuka winced, glancing to the brunette squeezing her tight. "Y-you're okay! Oh thank goodness!"

"Ahh... y-yeah I'm... I'm okay," Shizuka said, sounding just a little hoarse. She managed to remove the mask covering her face, breathing a little easier. She could see a bit of redness around Makoto's eyes, and instantly felt a great deal of guilt weighing down on her.

Josuke was just beside Makoto, also looking a little banged up and dressed in some light hospital attire. "Aiya... Jeez Shizuka, you really had me worried... soon as the doctors got me up and active, I raced over to your room." Makoto pulled back just a bit, with Josuke instantly taking her place and hugging the younger girl tight.

"H-hey! N-not so tight, I'm still all stiff!" Shizuka hastily said. But, regardless, the tired young woman settled her toned arms around the duo. "But... jeez, am I glad you showed up here Josuke. I musta' been in pretty bad shape."

"That's putting it mildly." Shizuka glanced to her right, past the relieved faces of Simmons and her friends, to see a young female doctor examining a clipboard in her hands. Speedwagon staff, from the symbol on her coat, with the tips of her bangs dyed a deep red. "You were... a little braindead," she admitted.

Shizuka's eyes widened, and there was a noticeable spike in the ECG. "D-don't just blurt somethin' like that out doc! And not in such a casual way either!"

Ann breathed a tiny sigh of relief. "We really were lucky. If Morgana hadn't gotten to you when he did..."

Morgana nodded earnestly. "Y-yeah... I saw you hit the ground, and the two of you weren't moving. Only, you didn't have a screwdriver lodged in your head... I didn't have the energy to fully heal you, but I kept you stable long enough for the Speedwagon guys to handle the rest."

"S-so... Mr. A is really...?" she trailed off, as if afraid that he had somehow survived getting his brain speared. With all Shizuka had seen, she wouldn't be too shocked if he could.

"Yep. Dead as a doornail. Saw a colleague do the autopsy myself," the doctor said, smiling slightly. "Congrats on that. Well, I better get going. Got other patients to see to, and that Stand seems to have you in tip top shape." And, casual as a summers day, the doctor strode off.

Simmons took a step forward. "Young Miss... you have no idea how happy I am to see that you're okay," he said. "When I heard you were in the hospital, I..."

"I'm glad that you're okay too Simmons," she said, smiling warmly. And with Mr. A gone, he would be safe for the time being too. She looked to the faces of her dearest friends, and felt a great warmth come over her. But, for reasons her mind couldn't comprehend at the moment, Shizuka also felt a strong sense of longing.

Her mind and spirit were steadily attuning again, having been briefly estranged. As such she couldn't readily recall her experiences in the afterlife, with those memories steadily slotting into her mind.

But, she could indeed tell that something had happened while she was out cold. That was why there were tears rolling down her cheeks, her smile not fading.

"You're really damn reckless, you know... doing that superhero shit all by yourself. But... God damn if it wasn't impressive in the end," Josuke said. "Oh... and speaking of fixing things..." he
right and reached up, depositing a pair of freshly repaired sunglasses into Shizuka's hands. "Pretty sure you dropped these back there."

"Josuke... th-thank you," Shizuka said, embracing her brother once again.

One by one her friends all got a shot at embracing her, each of them glad that she had made it through in one piece. "Looks like we're both bucking tradition, eh?" Sergio remarked, grinning eagerly.

"Heh... looks like," Shizuka concurred.

In the back of her mind, a strange thought drifted through her brain. 'Kiyoko... that's a pretty nice name. If I ever have a daughter, I think I'll call her Kiyoko...'
The building had, at one point, been a knicknack shop. Changing times and a drifting clientel had it fall on hard times, until it became a derelict property at the back end of a barely visible city block. But, eventually, this derelict property had been acquired by one of Toshi Okabe's pseudonyms. This was for two reasons. First was the aforementioned isolation. People passed by this street, but it was the kind of area people paid no mind to. Second, the previous owner had a rather expansive cellar. An underground floor for housing additional junk.

As it happened, the space made for a fine space for Doctor Suchong's labors.

Futaba and Hifumi had teamed up to inspect the squat grey structure, getting a good understanding of it. Now that Mr. A's whole organization had been thoroughly decapitated, there was no security to speak of. But it was quite likely that Suchong was still hanging around here, and the threat of a 'fake Shido' still had to be dealt with.

Josuke had gone back to Morioh just two days previously, certain that all was well with his sister. And the consensus, for now, was that dealing with Suchong would be the last loose end they had to deal with. Well, him and Akechi. But they could take Akechi.

The team knew they would need to be cautious, but they were certainly confident in their abilities without Crazy Diamond's divine healing potential.

It was a dull night as the small party cased the outside of the building. Akira and Yusuke led on, walking silently on the filthy pavement with Shizuka, Makoto, and Ryuji following just behind. All was silent around them, with the distant noises of traffic and urban life serving as white noise.

The buildings were boarded up, and had been for some time. While Mr. A owned the building, he hadn't done much in the realm of upkeep. The general sense of disrepair helped to divert prying eyes from the structure.

Akira strode down the side alley, toward a series of dirty stone steps that led to a heavy red door. The area overhead was unlit, but even in the dark Akira could tell that the lock on the door was rather heavy. It seemed that the door was the only relatively new things visible on the facade.

"Alright," Akira said in a low murmur. "Get ready guys. Here... we... go. Hecatonchires."

There was a brief flash as a dark blue mass of arms flew from his being, propelled by beefy legs that were broader than Akira's shoulder span. The head was equally imposing. Or heads, rather. As from the shoulders on up, the giant seemed to have a bouquet of leering mouth and glassy eyes.

The door, sturdy as it was, folded faster than Superman on laundry day, collapsing into a pile of shattered wood in the dusty doorframe. Akira strode through the doorway with his allies falling in behind him.

The basement was a rather expansive area alright, the entryway marked by two long tables that were laden with first aid kits and miscellaneous medical equipment. Suchong was something of a mob doctor, after all.
Through the doorway just ahead they could quickly see the man himself, who looked quite stricken as he scrambled toward a row of cabinets. He was a small man, only a few inches taller than Futaba, his hair dark and frizzy. The bridge of his thin nose was dominated by a heavy pair of square-rim glasses. His clothing consisted of a black shirt over some white trousers marked by some worrying red stains.

And there, perched in a barbers chair in the center of the room, sat a mirror image of Masayoshi Shido. Exact same height and build, and same cue ball head. However his clothing, a dull grey hoodie and casual black sweat pants, were a far cry from Shido's power suits. And the blatant shock in his eyes was rather different than the contempt or false kindness usually projected from Shido's eyes.

"So here we are," Shizuka said, flicking her heart-shaped sunglasses up the bridge of her nose "Gotta admit, that is some impressive face work. Put him in a nice suit and have him spout bullshit about helping the youth of Japan, and he'd fool everyone."

"Y-you... You're the Phantom Thieves, yes?" Suchong nervously asked.

"That is correct," Yusuke replied with a nod. "But don't worry, we're not here to kill you. We have come tonight to tell you about the future."

Suchong regarded them warily behind his glasses, while Shidoppelganger was wise enough to remain silent throughout all this. "It's hard to believe your claim when Mr. A has already turned up dead."

As he said this, Shizuka felt just a tiny bit of guilt rise up inside her. For all his criminality, and as dangerous as she was, she couldn't take any joy in killing a person. But it had to be done. "If you knew Mr. A, you know full well that he wasn't the kind of guy to go peacefully. And you know he would never surrender... I'm hoping you're a little more rational, doc," Shizuka plainly told him.

"The fact of the matter is, it's unlikely we have the means to arrest you through the means of conventional law. And, from what we understand, the worst you've done is this little... project," Makoto gestured to Shido's double, who flinched a little. "And so, we are willing... to let you go. Provided that you put an end to this, here and now. If you try and introduce your double to the world, we'll know immediately. And we won't be so kind the next time we meet."

"All this shit with Shido becoming Prime Minister? It's done. Dead and buried," Ryuji warned, pointing firmly to the cowering doctor. They might have been high schoolers, but they had gone up against the Deadly Aspects and won. Suchong knew when to fold.

Suchong nodded fiercely, and at such speed that his neck could have snapped. "O-of course, of course. N-no need to threaten me! I'm just Simple Suchong! A doctor who wouldn't hurt a fly! M-Matter of fact, I've basically been working against my will these past few years!"

The doppelganger paused his own trembling long enough to roll his eyes.

"You want my advice? Get out of Tokyo. Find a legit line of work with your powers," Shizuka informed him. "I'm sure there are plenty of dumb California bitches that would shower you in clean money. Point is, if you're using your powers for benign shit, we won't have an issue."

"We're being lenient because, as far as we can tell, you haven't done anything massively horrible.
But we still need to stop this scheme of yours. Understand?" Akira asked in a firm tone. Suchong nodded once more.

Ryuji wasn't entirely thrilled, but their options were a little limited. And with their recent victory, he was willing to grant a little clemency. "But don't think we won't be keeping an eye out. Do anything we don't like, and we'll beat you into the ground like a stake!" the blond warned.

The group turned and started to leave, until Suchong called out. "Y-you, young lady." Shizuka turned a bit to see that he was referring to her. "You... You killed A, right? Then... then you could take over that whole operation. You could rein everyone in, I'm sure of it."

"You're not the first criminal to suggest it," Shizuka replied. She thought briefly of Akio Akateni, the doomed boy who had been hated and spurned by the world for how he was born. Who had been twisted by those experiences, reborn into someone with no faith or hope in the world. Becoming a criminal was his only path, it seemed, and coming into contact with Dio... well, as with all things involving Dio, it only made matters worse. Despite it all, Shizuka pitied him.

"There is no more Mr. A," Shizka emphatically told him. "Let it die." With that the Arditi marched out into the night, leaving Suchong with his crystal clear warning.

Suchong was already mentally looking at nice parts of California to move to.

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11/20

The experience of coming back from the dead had been an interesting one. It was like a reverse dream to Shizuka. When someone has a particularly vivid dream, and then wakes up, the memory is usually gone after a few seconds. But the memory of being in the afterlife with her family was instead gradually filling her consciousness like sand in an hourglass. She didn't yet remember everything, but had the outline of events in her head.

That was why, even though she felt marginally more confident in herself now, there was a sense of dread hanging over her. She couldn't fathom why, still unaware of the threat Jonathan had mentioned, but it was leaving her unnerved.

For now she was trying her best to push those worries aside. It was a time of celebration, a chance to breathe easy now that their two biggest opponents were down and out.

The background noise of Shibuya's arcade was filled with the chatter of patrons, and the electronic chimes of the various games housed within. Akira had suggested a little fun outing for some of them, while some of the team were busy with other obligations. The final roster for this escapade was Akira, Futaba, Morgana, Shizuka, and Ryuji.

With a little effort, Ryuji and Futaba had cleared the way to a two player light gun game, with the two teens teaming up to clear through the rows of pixelated gunmen and assassins shifting across their shared screen. While the two were certainly quite different in terms of GPA, the duo had seemingly found a fine rhythm together as they deftly racked up points.

If it was a video game, then Ryuji could be quite adept.

Akira was toying around with the crane game, watching with keen interest as the steel prongs of
the claw drifted over prizes that clearly weren't the amount of coins the average person would sink into the machine. Shizuka was leaning against the side, peering through the glass, while Morgana watched from Akira's right side.

"So... what's the living situation for you two these days? Still mooching at Leblanc?" Shizuka asked, sparing a glance over to Morgana.

"Chief's been pretty understanding of all this, so he's letting me stay in the attic... but I gotta sleep on the couch," Morgana replied. He shrugged his slim shoulders.

"I told you, we're not sharing a bed. It's goddamn weird when you're not a cat," Akira retorted without looking up from the machine. His claw dipped down slowly, with great care, toward an orange squirrel plush wearing Kamina glasses and a leather jacket.

"Yeah, and plus Mitsuru is still pulling strings on getting you some official paperwork... Looks like you'll be heading to Shujin next year. You and Futaba are gonna do fine," Shizuka said.

Futaba let out a small huffing sound. "Yeah, cause I really wanna' hear about school while we're at the arcade," Futaba said, her light gun swiftly bouncing from target to target with great accuracy.

"You and me both sister," Ryuji replied. "Ugh... count yourself lucky. We still got exams to go through," he added, his tone immediately sounding more glum.

Morgana glanced from the two groups of his friends and let out a small sigh. "So... can I talk to you guys about something? Something super important that you can't mention outside of this group, no matter what?" he asked.

"Fire away," Shizuka said.

Akira nodded. "I'm all ears," he replied, quietly depositing the squirrel through the prize chute. Ryuji and Futaba let out small grunts of approval without looking away from the chaos on their screen.

"Well I..." Morgana trailed off, fiddling awkwardly with his hands and closing his crystal blue eyes tight. "I want to... Now that I'm human, I want to... to... to ask Lady Ann on a date!"

"Sounds cool," Ryuji casually said.

"D-don't make fun of me Sakamato, I... huh?" Morgana looked up. "Did you just say that's... cool?"

Ryuji nodded, his attention affixed to the screen. It was now dominated by a hulking metal monstrosity, its giant limbs floating across the screen with glowing red weak points flashing on the armoured hull. "Yeah, why not? It'd make you happy, prolly make Ann happy. Takamaki can be a pain in the ass sometimes, but I'd like to see her happy."

Akira smirked, fishing his hard earned prize from the chute. "Yeah and Shiho would probably be pretty pleased if you helped her best friend find a good relationship," he mused.

The blond shrugged faintly. "Well yeah. That'd be a nice bonus too... anyway, just go for it. You're both single, and I'm pretty sure Ann is into guys."

"Pretty sure," Shizuka chimed.
Akira gave her a sideways glance. "You can't just look at a person and know that," he pointedly said.

"C'mon. If goldilocks was into girls, you think she'd be able to resist my onslaught of charm?" Shizuka asked, grinning and glancing to Akira from over her sunglasses.

"I don't think you'd like my answer to that," Akira plainly said.

"Dick."

There was a chorus of explosions on screen, as the final boss went down in a whirlwind of fire. And for their troubles, Ryuji and Futaba were greeted by an unsatisfying ending, and a high score screen that they promptly filled. The top scores, for the foreseeable future, would be held by POO and ASS. "Bonus post credits boss, done and dusted. Give me a challenge!" Futaba boasted.

"And here's your prize!" Akira graciously handed his girlfriend the plush squirrel, causing her to gasp as she appraised it.

Futaba grinned broadly, mentally picking out a spot on her shelf for the little guy. "Hehe! And it's not even Christmas yet." She hesitated for a moment, scanning from side to side, before quickly leaning up and pecking Akira on the cheek.

He smiled fondly, slipping Futaba's right hand into his left. Sojiro had said they'd be visiting Wakaba's grave soon, so he wanted to do all he could to appear supportive and make Futaba happy. Making Futaba happy ranked pretty high in his list of priorities.

"But..." Morgana stroked his chin, tapping his left foot a few times. "Well for a girl as amazing like Lady Ann, I can't just... ask her out! It's too plain!"

"No, it really isn't," Akira plainly said.

"Yeah, seriously. Ann doesn't need you to do anything crazy... probably doesn't want that either," Shizuka said.

Morgana scratched his chin slowly. "But... she's such an incredible girl and-

Ryuji sighed and settled his hands on his hips. "God... Don't get all inside your own head! You're only gonna psyche yourself out," he warned.

"He's right. Seriously, just... find a good time, and then ask her. Simple as that. Maybe not tomorrow though," Akira said.

Futaba tilted her head a bit. "Tomorrow...? Oh shoot! Yeah, the thing is scheduled for tomorrow, right?"

Akira nodded. "Yeah. So Mitsuru told me anyway... I'll admit, I'm a little worried. But she and Mr. Christo are certain that security will be top notch, with some of the best Stand users they have to hand on security detail. And they had more than enough money to get the air time they wanted. I hope Haru will be okay..."

"She made her peace with what was gonna happen by now, I'm sure. It's a big ask, but Haru's a
tough cookie. She can hack it," Shizuka assured him.

After tomorrow, Shizuka knew, Japan would be forever altered. They were on the home stretch now, and they couldn't afford to falter now.

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As it turned out, Satoshi didn't keep many personal effects in his office. Aya and Yoshio had decided to clear out what little he had left, wanting the office clear for whoever the Foundation chose to replace him.

Neither of them were particularly happy to be doing this. It felt vaguely distasteful to do this to a dead man they both respected, but it had to be done.

Aya slid the last drawer open, idly picking up the few items housed within. A notebook with Satoshi's name on it, and an old silver necklace. As Aya surveyed them, depositing them in a small plastic bag on the desk, Yoshio spoke up.

"Hey, Aya... do you think Satoshi was happy? In... In the end, I mean?"

Aya pondered the question, looking toward the scrawny young man. "Maybe... I don't think Satoshi was happy for... quite some time. He wasn't exactly subtle in that respect. But since he went out fighting Mr. A... I think he might have been."

Yoshio smiled slightly. "Yeah, I'd like to think so too... but I just wish we could've been there for him."

She shook her head in return, sliding the last drawer shut. "That's not what he would have wanted, you know. People getting hurt on his behalf... he would have lost his mind over that. Guy was stubborn like that," Aya said.

"Well... you're not wrong about that. But he was still good... a guy you could depend on. Things shouldn't have ended the way they did," Yoshio glumly said. He lifted the small plastic bag off the desk, and made for the door.

Sighing, Aya followed after him. "The world is pretty cruel and unfair, Yoshio. But if you believe in an afterlife... then I believe he's somewhere pretty great right now." Aya shut the door behind her, leaving the former office of Satoshi Morihiro in the dark.

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11/21

They had decided to gather at Leblanc for what was to come, with the members of the Arditi taking up seats around the cafe. Even Sae had found the time to come along, well aware of how serious today was.

After all, the press conference had been advertised rather heavily yesterday, and it seemed many people would be tuning in for it. A message from Kunikazu Okumura and Masayoshi Shido to the people of Japan... it certainly sounded like heavy stuff.
Okumura's presence came as a bit of a surprise to many. He had seemingly dropped off the face of the earth a few months back. A leave of absences due to illness, according to the company. It was not exactly incorrect.

Sojiro and Akira were behind the counter, quickly preparing drinks for everyone present, while everything on camera was being set up. Shido and Okumura were both seated behind a broad table, a fleet of microphones set up before them. Okumura looked gaunt, a little shrunken, but there was pride in how he carried himself. He seemed pleased that he was finally going to be able to tell the truth.

Sojiro sighed as he settled a house blend in front of Sae, who took it with a smile and a grateful nod. "First time I've ever had so many people, and I'm giving them out for free... I really must've lost it," Sojiro remarked, scratching his neck.

"Don't worry Boss. We'll find a way to pay you back for all the stuff you've done for us," Shiho cheerily told him.

"I guess taking Shido off the streets is good enough for now... I ever tell you kids that I knew him?" Sojiro asked. The others, even Sae (who tried to act cool about it), leaned in a little. "Not in any great detail... we were hardly friends. But when I worked for the government, I knew Shido when he was just an up and comer in the party. Too hardheaded and selfish to really rise through the ranks... but he was definitely vindictive, got a chip on his shoulder over the smallest things and would always try to destroy the people who slighted him. Him being prime minister would have been pretty dire."

"Yeah. That bastard Akechi nearly made that a reality," Ryuji said, his tone venomous.

Sae frowned slightly. "Akechi... I really wish I could have seen the signs sooner. If I knew what his true motives were... maybe I could have talked him down?"

"Don't be so hard on yourself Sis. The truth is... I don't think anything could have talked Akechi down or changed his mind," Makoto said.

Certainly, he had been far from penitent from the interactions Akira had had with him. He was a lot like Mr. A, twisted from a young age. But he wasn't an adult yet. "You may be right. But I can't help but wonder," Sae curtly replied.

Akira lifted his own coffee mug to his nose and took a quick sniff, analysing the beans with a keen mind. "So Shido was always like that, huh?" Akira asked, sparing a glance to his employer/landlord/surrogate father. "Some people are just that way, I guess... Whatever happened to him, it clearly left a mark."

"Whatever happened to him, it doesn't justify a thing," Yusuke said, taking a quick sip from his own mug.

Shizuka scanned the room, setting his sights on Haru on the edge of the bar. She was the closest to the television, her expression unreadable. "Big day, huh?" Shizuka asked as she approached the strawberry blonde. "It'll be alright."

Haru nodded absentmindedly. "It has to be this way. Father hurt a lot of people, and he needs to serve time for that. It's strange... we drifted apart in recent years. And for the foreseeable future, the only interactions we'll have will be through prison glass. And the future of the company will be so
uncertain now... between losing father, and all the negative publicity... I don't know if the business will survive."

"These things have a way of working out Haru. Don't get too wound up yet..." Shizuka said, giving her shoulder a comforting squeeze. "And your old man will do fine in prison. The Foundation will see to that." Granted protecting convicts wasn't in their usual wheelhouse, but it had been a special request from Shizuka. So, while Okumura would definitely serve out his sentence, a Stand would ensure no physical harm came to him.

Shizuka had no love for the guy but she hardly wanted him to die, or worse, behind bars. Especially for how such a thing would impact Haru.

"There is an old story Madarame once told me, that may come in handy. Despite everything that happened with us, I still feel it is sound advice," Yusuke began, sparing a glance toward Haru. "A prince once asked a wise man to invent a sentence that would always be truthful, that the prince could always look upon for guidance. The sentence was as follows: 'This too shall pass.' The world is ever changing. The good may become bad, but the bad can equally turn to good. This too shall pass."

Haru smiled fondly toward him. "You are quite wise Yusuke... I actually do feel a bit better now. 'This too shall pass'... it's quite a nice outlook on life."

Futaba abruptly popped up in her seat, focused intently on the screen. "Oh! Oh! I think it's starting!" she excitedly said.

All had gone silent at the press conference, with Kunikazu leaning in a bit toward the microphones. He cleared his throat softly, and then set his sights on the camera directly in front of him.

"I... would like to apologise. If there were enough hours in the day, I would express apologies to every single person that I've wronged. But that... that isn't possible. So instead I will state broadly that I would like to apologise to my employees, my peers, my investors, my competitors... and to my daughter.

My conduct as CEO of Okumura Foods has, frankly, been shameful. And my actions will doubtless sully the name of the brand once this conference is over. But it must be done. And I simply cannot stand back and leave this story untold. You, the people, deserve to know everything.

Since the start of this year, I have... fallen in with a rather unpleasant crowd. My ambition blinded me to the harm I was causing to those I should have been caring for, as all I cared for were my own political aims. I decided to work with Masayoshi Shido, funding his campaign in exchange for a chance at political power... and to use his assassin as a means to sabotage my competitors."

There was a flourish of camera flashes, in which Okumura breathed deeply through his nose. Shido, just visible at the right edge of the screen, stood by stoic and silent. He didn't object to anything Okumura had to say.

"For... some time now, a conspiracy has been at work in Japan with Masayoshi Shido at the head of it. I, unfortunately, was swept up in it. I willingly went along, and requested... mental shutdowns on some of my enemies. I am... deeply ashamed for all I have done, and cannot possible make amends.

But, as I stand here today to confess my crimes, and know full well that I will see prison time as a
result... I am not the only person involved in this. And I plan on fully exposing the other parties who were involved in this... conspiracy. The people allied with Shido, who were willing to do anything it took to get him into office. I... cannot apologise enough. And no amount of penance will ever undo the damage I have caused... but I hope I can stop if from spreading further."

The reporters managed to hold their breaths as Okumura sat down, planting his palms patiently on the hard wood. As he did this, Shido moved closer to some of the microphones positioned in front of him.

The broadcasting camera panned toward Shido, who kept a stony expression. His eyes had lost the omnidirectional malice and contempt they previously held.

"Everything President Okumura just said is true," Shido calmly said. "I have been... involved in a truly sordid campaign of sabotage and murder these past two years, in a bid to undermine the current administration, and aid with my overtaking of the country. I planned to win the election through dishonest means, regardless of who I had to hurt in the process."

He let out a tiny exhale, sliding his glasses off the thin bridge of his nose. "The exact means of this, I perhaps can't get into here and now. Just know that, by pure luck, I came upon an ability that the police could not detect or counter. And I was all too happy to use it for my own benefit, killing many people over these past two years. Every mental shutdown and psychotic breakdown... can be attributed to me. I plan to atone for all I have done... but I also want to ensure that my co-conspirators do not escape either."

"This... sordid affair needs to come to an end. Furthermore, as you may already have expected, I am officially withdrawing from the election. Japan deserves better than me, and I was too foolish to not see that. But, in the end... I'm glad that I was able to come clean. And I owe it all to the Phantom Thieves. Thanks to the Arditi, the very nation may well have been saved... and I hope that the people don't forget that."

As the press conference turned into a swarm of questions from the reporters, with the black-suited guards moving closer for the sake of security, the Arditi looked at each other with a keen interest.

Shiho broke the silence. "S-so... so that's it? We... won?" she asked.

"Looks like," Ann said, sounding just a little dumbstruck. They had actually done it, they had got to see Okumura and Shido confess to the world. There was no way to take things back now.

"My my... part of me was afraid that Shido's change of heart wouldn't have gone through at all. A man that twisted up inside... it felt like even he could avoid it," Sergio mused.

"While this is a rather major step, we can't afford to celebrate too soon. There's still the matter of prosecution, which may prove difficult. Even discounting police corruption, this 'Metaverse' story is the kind of thing that requires some degree of evidence. Shido and Okumura testifying is a good start, but some additional testimony might be needed," Sae explained.

For a second, a fraction of a second, her eyes met Akira's. Nobody else seemed to pick up on it, but Akira noticed it well enough. Did she want him to testify too?

Akira had been hoping that Shido's testimony could lead to his criminal record being revoked, but if he were to announce that he was the leader of the Arditi to provide additional testimony... well he'd need to get used to the grey walls of juvie.
"Well, we'll work it out. Once we take care of Akechi, and this time stick him somewhere a little more secure, that'll be the last of them," Shizuka said, taking up her own coffee mug and giving it a long sip.

"So... does that mean we're done? Being Phantom Thieves, I mean... It... it would be kind of a shame to stop now," Hifumi said.

Ryuji let out a small snorting noise. "Nah. There's no point in just stopping now. People still need us, ya know. Only downside is we'll never have a target bigger than Shido... meh. Still bound to be a lot of scumbags in Mementos to deal with."

As Ryuji said this, Shizuka seemed to recall some more memories from her encounter with her great grandfather. "Actually... I think we might be far from done." The others watched her curiously. "When I fought Mr. A, I kinda... died for a little bit. And while I was dead, I met my great grandfather: Jonathan Joestar."

Ann quirked a brow. "Are you sure this actually... happened? I don't mean to sound rude, but that's kind of a crazy thing to mention. The kind of thing that your brain would probably make up when your body is really messed up."

"I know it sounds crazy, but I know what I experienced. I know a dream when I see one, and that felt... way too real to just be a dream. And with all the craziness we've been through... give me the benefit of the doubt for a little bit, yeah?" she requested.

"Well... you're not wrong," Ann replied.

"So, anyway, he and I had a long talk. And he started to tell me that there's something... bigger than Shido out there. Something malevolent that's infecting people's hearts and minds. And at the rate it's going, it's trying to take over the world," Shizuka explained, looking over the faces of her friends. They were growing steadily more worried. "He didn't have any sort of name for it, but... I'm inclined to believe him. Thinking back on Camael, and the Vacant People you can see on the streets... there's definitely something at work here."

Sojiro scratched the back of his head. "Camael?" he asked aloud.

Akira nodded to his boss. "Giant evil angel that we met underground. Don't worry about it," he replied.

Sojiro cocked his left eyebrow. "That... sounds like something I should be worried about."

"Well... those creepy Vacant People have gotta be coming from somewhere. And a lot of 'em were cropping up while Akechi was in custody, so... it couldn't have been him doing it," Ryuji said. Not that he would have put it past the disgraced detective.

"There's a lot about that world we don't know. But something corrupting people there, that would be devastating. Like a... like a computer virus for the human race," Shiho mused. She shivered a little at the thought.

The only people who didn't have a 'presence' in the Metaverse were Persona users, Stand users, and people who had undergone a change of heart. With 99% of the population at risk, an attack through the Metaverse of a large enough scale could destroy human society utterly.
A few heads turned toward Morgana, as he was the closest thing they had to an expert. The ex-kitty stroked his chin with his right hand, his mouth forming into a thin frown. "I'll need some time to think on this. Depending on how bad the problem is, our options might be a little limited..." Something had to be causing this outbreak of Vacant People, and the solution to the problem... well Morgana had a feeling it would drastically impact their ability to be Phantom Thieves.

"Man... of all the times for heavy stuff to come up," Ryuji murmured, slowly rising from his chair. "I'm gonna go and grab some fresh air. Feelin' kinda hot and bothered with all the coffee in the air."

The blonde stretched his arms overhead in passing as he steadily made for the door, stepping out into the streets of Yongen. Night was settling in outside, the street lamps fighting against the growing darkness.

Ryuji breathed a tiny sigh, settling his hands on his hips as he watched people bustling through the backstreets. A few of them were chattering about the press conference, and Ryuji couldn't help but listen in to the passing words from the various civilians.

"So Shido's out now? Man that's kind of a bummer. Yeah he was corrupt, but they're all corrupt, so why worry about it, ya know?"

"Yeah, I hear you. There's no point in being picky on politicians. It's all gonna be the same crap at the end of the day."

"So what was up with Shido talking about the uh... what'd he say? The Phantom Thieves?"

"Yeah, I think I remember them. They were like a... like a... what, a movie or something? They had that publicity stunt where they were on all the screens... right?"

"That's the one. It was like a sentai show, or something."

"Huh... I think there was more to it than that, but... well, I guess it really doesn't matter."

Ryuji listened to these passing conversations with gradually widening eyes, his attention shifting through the passing crowd. Had he just heard that correctly? The Arditi had been on everyone's minds for months, and now people were just... forgetting about them?

Ryuji swallowed hard, clenching his fists on a reflex. "What the hell..."
The elevator came to a lurching stop, heavy steel doors rolling apart to reveal the interior of a rather costly apartment. Clean grey walls, hardwood floors, plush leather furniture in the living area. Directly across from the elevator, at quite a distance away, was a row of windows and a set of glass double doors that led out to a large balcony that gave a great view of Tokyo.

Certainly a pricy place. But money was no object for either of them.

Rise stepped out first, letting out small noises of awe as she inspected the area. Her hair was down for now, silky red tresses falling past her shoulders. For the chilly weather of the day, she was dressed relatively well: A dark grey sweater and black trousers, trailing down to a pair of brown boots.

"Wow, you weren't kidding, this place is amazing Yu!" she cheerily said. They would only be renting the place for a short stint, living here while they followed up on a few details for the upcoming wedding.

Truthfully most things were all set up now, all they needed was to get a good venue. Ultimately Yu knew they'd settle on Inaba, and Yukiko had been none too subtle in suggesting that the Amagi Inn had plenty of available space for the ceremony and reception, but Rise wanted to be thorough and check out all their options. And when Kanami, one of Rise's closest friends, had told the redhead about a great spot in Tokyo... well, that basically booked a trip for the two of them.

Well, Yu hardly minded. He had been content to let Rise follow her passions over the course of this planning. Occasionally he would inject his own bit of sagely wisdom, but the nitty gritty of the wedding didn't matter much to him. He'd be happy so long as it went through.

And, most importantly, his family had welcomed Rise into the fold. That was the only thing that had worried him, really. His grandfather, the Narukami family patriarch, was too old to know (or care) about the idol scene. But he looked at Rise and saw a kindhearted, headstrong young woman that his grandson was quite taken with. And that, fortunately, had sufficed for him.

Yu stepped out of the elevator, following Rise's lead. He was dressed in a grey peacoat and dark trousers, his dark brown shoes gleaming slightly in the light overhead. A fluffy red scarf was coiled around his neck to ward off the cold.

"It is pretty nice," Yu admitted, his expression placid. "But we shouldn't get too used to this apartment. We just want to see the place Kanami was talking about, after all." Not that he would want to rent anywhere cheap. He felt good knowing there was some security to keep an eye out for weirdos.

"Oh?" Rise smiled coyly, suddenly hugging herself to the taller man's right arm. "Getting antsy to walk down the aisle with your blushing bride?"

"Maybe a little," he replied, maintaining his usual calm front. He had fought a goddess (or at least, some fucked up thing that thought it was a goddess) and a psychotic murderer, but he had a feeling he'd be more nervous waiting to see his bride come down the aisle. "I'm excited is all."
Rise stood on her toes, lightly pecking him on the cheek. "We'll get there, don't worry. I just want to be sure it's as good as can be." The most important thing that Yu could think of was ensuring that security was good enough to keep any fanboys from gatecrashing.

Lord have mercy on any fool caught by Chie trying that crap.

The two began exploring the apartment in full, but as they went there was a strange niggling in Yu's mind. Yu Narukami was rarely bothered by anything, but for as calm as he always outwardly appeared he was quite sharp. And when something was off, well he could pick up on that quickly enough. "Hey, Rise... did anything seem strange about the people in Tokyo?"

"The people in Tokyo are always strange," Rise replied with a dismissive shrug.

"Not in that way. It's like... well usually when we walk around together, I can feel people watching. You're... you after all. But this time there was nobody. Like we genuinely blended in." He would say this was a good thing, but something about it just struck Yu as off. And Naoto had said there were strange goings on in Tokyo these days.

"Well I do have my hair down. You wouldn't believe how fixated some guys are on the pigtails," Rise replied.

"I've read some of your fan mail. I know exactly how fixated some of them are," he replied in a flat tone.

Rise decided to ignore that. She was more used to the creeps than Yu was. "But, now that you mention it, Kouzeon does seem on edge. Like there's something in the air she doesn't like." She had practiced hard to summon her Persona in the real world, to the point where she could even passively use Kouzeon's sensory ability. There hadn't been any major crisis to warrant it, but now... well, now there may well have been something going on.

Yu nodded slightly. "All those people on the streets, looking as if the world around them didn't exist. Well, city life does tend to make people more insular for the most part, but this... this feels a lot stronger than that."

"Guess we need to be careful in that case," Rise mused. "Well, Naoto's nearby. I'm sure we can get in touch soon."

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In the aftermath of Shido's press conference, Akira had been made distinctly aware of the strange miasma falling over the people of Tokyo. For reasons unknown to the Arditi, it seemed that the general public had either forgotten about the Phantom Thieves, or treated them as some kind of work of fiction.

Mishima was a panicking mess, and had even gone so far to set up a poll on the Phan-site, asking a simple question to the people of the internet:

'Do the Phantom Thieves exist?'

The number of people who believed was worryingly low.
Akira had taken the time to examine the people closest to him, wanting to see how far reaching the problem was. His confidants, such as Sojiro, Kawakami and Iwai, still knew that the Arditi existed, and seemed to be quite concerned by the unnatural ignorance entombing the minds of the general populace.

People were stupid, but not that stupid. And after that stunt they had pulled with Shido's calling card, was the kind of thing that should have been remembered for years. But the few people who did recall the event seemed to treat it like a publicity stunt for some kind of movie or anime.

Something was definitely happening to the general populace, and Morgana was currently pondering the options they had to hand. Akira, in the meantime, was trying to make some time for his friends.

In particularly he was a little worried about Haru. Her father was set to go to jail regardless of what happened, and that would be quite hard for her.

As was common for the two, Akira was helping the strawberry blonde tend to her garden on the school roof. There wasn't much growing to speak of in the winter, but Haru still liked to keep an eye on her precious plants. Akira let out a small huff as he examined the flowerbed before him. "You can really feel the breeze up here. Like it's trying to slice you in half."

Haru nodded gently. "Yes. The winter seems like it's going to be harder than normal this year," she mused. After a moment she spared a glance his way. "Aki-kun... I know you're worried about me, and I greatly appreciate that... but I'll be okay. I've made my peace with that will happen with Father. And so long as he's safe inside, that's all that matters."

"I know. But... just know you don't have to go it alone. This is gonna be a hard time, when people go back to normal at least, and... well, we'll be here for you," Akira assured her.

After a moment, she smiled at him. "I know. You don't need to worry about that... I'm exceptionally glad to have met all of you. If I hadn't, well... well I'd rather not think on how my life would be right now."

It was definitely an unpleasant prospect. There was a strong chance the Arditi would have heard about Okumura on the Phan-site, but would they have been in time to help Haru in that case? Before that asshole fiance really sank his claws into her?

Well, there was no point in dwelling on such unpleasantness. Haru was safe and happy, and that was the important part.

"It's been a hell of a year," he admitted with a small laugh. That was the understatement of the year. "And I'm glad you're okay. But we'll be on hand for anything you need... it's gonna be a big adjustment when you have to take over the company."

"That won't be for a while. For the time being, the board is going to take charge. It'll be hard, finding people I can trust there. I imagine my father had enemies, even at that level," the young woman admitted. "But... I'll be alright."

"Oh yeah?" Akira asked, tilting his head a little.

Haru's smile grew a little wider. "I've grown a lot over this past year, thanks to all of you. I know who I can trust, I know good people when I see them... and bad people too. Before meeting all of
you, I was meek and went along with... whatever anyone wanted from me. But now I know that I
don't have to live that way. That there's nothing wrong with both helping people, and doing what is
best for me. It's rather liberating."

"Yeah, that's true. You've definitely grown stronger Haru... and I sure as shit wouldn't want to be
on your bad side these days," Akira mused, leaning against the wall of the roof access.

"Oh come now. I'm not that scary when I'm mad," Haru replied, puffing her cheeks out a bit.

Akira raised his left hand a bit, making a light shaking motion with his hand. "Yeeeah you kinda
are. But... that's not important. What is important is that you've definitely grown a whole lot since
we met. And you've become pretty strong and resilient."

As he said this, she giggled slightly and settled her left hand near her mouth. "I must admit though,
I feel a little guilty about that. I was meant to be your senpai, and guide you all, but... well it seems
that I was the one who needed all the help I could get. Even Mako-chan was more of a senpai than
I was."

"Ah... don't be like that Haru. You're the kind of girl we can always rely on. The one who works
hard to keep our spirits up, and with how grim things got at points... well that means a lot," Akira
assured her.

The two stood in silence for a few moments, while a chilly breeze rolled in waves across the
expansive roof of the school. The sun was already setting, and it was set to get colder. He
supposed it would be time to start heading home.

"It's nice to hear you say that Akira. Coming from a man as confident and capable as you... it really
does mean a lot," Haru said. "From now on, I think I'll keep my head held high. Things may be
hard, but hardship is not entirely a bad thing. It makes us stronger, and with how much the rest of
the team have managed to overcome... then I can handle the challenges of my father's business
too."

As she said this, her resolve firm, a change began to take place inside Haru's heart.

A warm white light engulfed Milady, warping her dimensions and gradually shaping into
something new. The light began to fade, revealing a tremendous pink skull that had floral patterns
painted along the armoured hull. A large spike protruded from the underside, with a pair of golden
rings orbiting low around the skull. At the top was a female form, ebon-skinned with a flowing
cloak of raven hair. Gold marked her bust and wrists, while a strange gold crescent seemed bolted
in place over her eyes.

The jaws opened wide, revealing an assortment of miniguns and missile pods, glowing ominously
from the dark cavern of the maw.

Milady was gone. In her place stood Astarte.

Haru breathed a tiny gasp of shock, the sensation of change slamming into her like a brick wall. It
was a kind of change that couldn't go unnoticed, a shift in her heart that resonated through Haru
from head to heel.

"Oh my," Haru remarked, once the shock had managed to wear off. "This is what the others have
experienced, yes? It's... quite a rush. I really have grown a fair bit in that case."
"No doubt," Akira assured her, a fond smile on his face. "That's more than enough proof. And I'm already curious to see what you can do in a scrap now." He fell silent then, glancing across the horizon visible from their vantage point.

Haru tilted her head a bit, her expression growing mildly concerned. "Is everything alright? You seem a little troubled." While Akira was good at wearing a stony face, Haru was good at reading people.

"Just thinking about what's coming... well, we have no idea what's coming, but that's what has me worried. It's apparently bigger than anything we've faced before, and it's got a presence across the whole world... it's hard not to be a little worried about it. Fear of the unknown is a powerful thing," he mused.

Listening intently, Haru nodded along with his story. "I'm worried too. Even dealing with Black Mask and Mr. A... at least we knew we were dealing with humans. But whatever is twisting people's minds in this way... we have no way of knowing." A tiny smile tugged the corner's of her mouth. "But... it'll be okay, in the end. We're a great team, and no matter how bad things seemed we've always managed to win in the end. We'll find a way to pull through Aki-kun," she proudly said.

"For the sake of everyone, we'll have to," Akira replied. It was a strange feeling, knowing you were dealing with a threat to the whole world. It wasn't too long ago that Akira's main concern was dealing with a perverted scumbag gym teacher, and now here they were. Standing above a defeated crime lord, and corrupt politician, staring toward... God knows what.

They'd be facing Camael soon, Akira knew that much already. They had all grown stronger since they last fought that monster, but would it be enough? That abomination had very nearly destroyed them, and had clearly not been putting his back into it.

Well, whatever the case, they'd need to go full bore against him if he showed his non-existent face again.

"We got a meeting at the hideout tomorrow," Akira informed her, looking back toward the young woman. As she was setting up coverage for her flowerbeds, he followed suit and set up some coverage for the plants near the door. "I think Morgana might have a plan for what we can do next... I hope so. The people of Tokyo acting the way they are... it's more than a little unnerving," he said.

"I agree. People can be strange, but not this strange... but I'm sure Mona will have something for us." Haru certainly hoped so, at least.

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11/23

The atmosphere in the hideout was more than a little tense, the various Phantom Thieves looking mildly worried. Morgana had gone to the head of the table, beside Akira, and looked mildly worried to be the center of attention. But, it had to be done.

Yusuke moved to speak. "Given our current situation, I take it we're all here to discuss the state of Tokyo's citizens... have you thought up a solution for our problem?"
"Maybe. But I don't think you guys are gonna like it," Morgana said. "From the look of things, people all over the world are being effected in the same way. Vacant People and people who seem almost blind to the world around them... If I had to guess, I'd say that it's an attack being spread across the globe through the Metaverse."

Ryuji quirked his right brow. "The Metaverse goes around the whole world?" he asked.

"More or less. Anywhere there's a large gathering of humans, a world like that can exist. A shared psyche that goes totally unseen by the world. Something that can reach through to those networks around the globe... it must be really strong. But since the Vacant People first appeared here, and the problem was decently large before it started to spread out through China and Korea, and then further beyond there... it's safe to assume the problem is right here in our own Metaverse," Morgana explained.

"Makes sense," Ann mused. "So the root cause is in our backyard... but where exactly?"

"Mementos," Morgana said, to the mild surprise of the group. "A long time ago, I told you that Mementos is everyone's Palace. Only really corrupt people can generate a full Palace from their twisted desires, but most everyone else has their own kind of distortion. So most of the population shares their corruption through there.... anything trying to attack the whole population like this, it'd have to come from there."

Makoto slowly stroked her chin in thought. "That does make sense. We have no idea how deep Mementos goes, but we've seen plenty of cognitive people down in those tunnels. And by all appearances, Camael came from there."

A few nods broke out across the table. "Okay, so we can safely guess that the problem is coming from down there... but Mementos is humongous. Even Futaba has trouble examining the entire structure... My point is, if what we're looking for is down there, how are we going to find it? It could be anywhere!" Shiho quickly said.

"That's true. But we don't need to go looking for that. We just need to find one particular thing in Mementos to have a chance at stopping what's happening to the public," Morgana stated.

Shizuka leaned across the table. "Eh? Well what is it? Come on, don't keep us in suspense Fuzzy!"

Morgana and Akira shared a glance. Morgana had discussed things with Akira before the meeting started, but the taller boy hadn't made his feelings known. All he had said was that he wanted to hear the input of the team.

Heaving a tiny sigh, Morgana spoke up. "We need to steal the treasure in Mementos."

A wave of surprise rolled through the group, the bold statement coming across as a bit of a shock. "Mementos has a treasure?" Shizuka asked, scratching the back of her head. "But... how does that work? A treasure is supposed to be something that twisted a person in the first place."

"That's true. But all Palaces have a treasure as their core, and Mementos is no different. I don't know what exactly caused humans as a whole to start getting twisted, but... whatever it is, it's down there. In the deepest depths of the place," Morgana explained.

Futaba reclined in her seat (or as best she could, when sitting squat in her usual way), humming to
herself. "That place has to be getting powered by something. I can feel it in the walls and the
ground, same as any other Palace. Guess I never stopped to think about the idea of Mementos
having a treasure... stands to reason."

Ryuji had been processing this when a realization came into his head. "Wait, but if we manage to
take whatever treasure is down there... does that mean Mementos will vanish? If the whole
Metaverse disappears, then... then we can't change people's hearts anymore. We'd have to give up
on being Phantom Thieves," he said.

Their spirits dipped as they heard this. All fell silent, trying to imagine a world where the Arditi
didn't, or could not, exist. For many of them, it felt like relinquishing freedom. Being Phantom
Thieves seemed to destroy the shackles that held them down, but now they'd have to give that up.
The prospect was disheartening, even if it was all going to be for a good cause.

There would be no point in the Arditi existing, if it meant everyone on earth was going to be going
around like zombies.

"If the problem is coming from the Metaverse... then we don't have a choice," Ann eventually said.
"It sucks giving this up, but... it'll be a lot worse if we do nothing," the blonde said.

"I agree with Ann," Haru said with a firm nod. "I've enjoyed being a Phantom Thief very much,
but the safety of the world is worth more than that."

Sergio sighed, tipping his chair back a bit. "Fine fine... we'll still have some power in the real world
all the same... it's not like we'll be reduced to," the blond shuddered a bit. "...Humans."

Shiho reached over and settled her left hand atop Ryuji's right, looking into his eyes. There was
compassion in her expression, but also a firm resolve. "I know giving this up is going to be hard. I
know I don't want to stop being a Phantom Thief either, but... it has to be done."

Her boyfriend heaved a tiny sigh. "Yeah, yeah I know. And at least doing this... I guess we go out
on a high note," said Ryuji. It was really hard to argue with Shiho when she got that look in her eye.
And the others were right, they had to take this shot.

A few eyes turned toward Akira for his input. He was their leader, after all. Seeing this, Akira
settled his hands on his hips and closed his eyes.

"I love being in the Arditi. The freedom, the power, the adrenaline... it's all more than a little
addictive," Akira admitted. "And despite everything, even the bad times, it's hard to imagine giving
it up." He lifted his left and and gave it a few squeezes, motors in his knuckles whirring at each
flex. "But I like helping people even more. That's what started all this. And I know I'd never
forgive myself if I didn't try here. If this is our best bet at rooting out whatever's attacking people,
then I say we take it."

The others nodded along with this, and Akira waited for the murmuring to die down before he
continued. "So, I take it we're all in agreement on this?" Akira asked.

The other members of the team raised their hands, until everyone had their hands held high."

"Alright then," Akira nodded at the sight. "Let's get ready to save the world."
With how serious things were, Akira wanted to make sure he had no unfinished business left to handle. If things ended badly when they made their voyage into Mementos, well... he didn't want to have any regrets.

There was a distinct chill in the Kanda church, whistling through the cruciform structure. With Christmas on the horizon, he noticed a few more people were hanging around the pews these days.

He, Futaba, and Sojiro had just gotten back from the graveyard, with Futaba taking a moment to quietly inspect the paintings positioned behind the altar. Akira smiled faintly at the sight. She seemed to be holding up well, even after visiting Wakaba's grave.

Sojiro, near the door to the church, finished chatting with the priest and slowly made his way along the aisle toward Akira. "Nice guy. Bit of a blowhard though," Sojiro remarked.

"Well... he is a priest. That's probably as good as they come in all honesty," Akira replied.

Sojiro cracked a slight smile at that. He sighed, removing his glasses and wiping away some smudges on the hem of his shirt. "You know, I always think about Wakaba on the anniversary of her death. But it's been a while since I visited. What with the shop, and all..."

Akira quietly regarded him, tucking his hands into his coat pockets. "But that's not the real reason, is it?"

"Right... smartass," despite his words, Sojiro gave Akira a tiny smile. "In truth, guilt kept me away. I was afraid of what Wakaba would think of me. But with Futaba out of her shell, able to come out here... I was able to visit with my head held high. It felt... good, telling Wakaba how much Futaba's grown lately," Sojiro explained.

Akira nodded along to all this. "You know you can't blame yourself for what Futaba was going through. You did everything you could, and considering Futaba's uncle... that was more than enough," he said.

"If you ever have kids, you'll be blaming yourself for plenty of things Kurusu. Even if they're well outside your control," Sojiro curtly remarked. Regardless, he continued on. "I owe you a lot, you know. I dunno what it is about you, but it seems like you're a natural born problem solver." A warm smile touched his face. Genuine, without a hint of the sarcasm that often underpinned Sojiro's mannerisms.

Futaba glanced their way, casually sauntering over with her hands clasped behind her back. "Sojiro? What're you smirking for?" she asked.

"This is what my real smile looks like," Sojiro told her.

The young hacker tilted her head to the side a bit. "Huh. I approve." With that, she turned on her heel and made for the far end of the church, inspecting the figures in the stained glass windows.
Watching her, Sojiro's smile remained. "Heh, look at her. I wonder if there'll be a day where she comes to this church as somebody's bride. I'm sure she'll make a fine lady either way. After all, she's Wakaba's daughter."

Despite himself, Akira was smiling at the prospect. "Yeah. That'd be one lucky guy... even if she can be a handful." If there was going to be a wedding, Akira was thinking purely along hypothetical lines of course, then it'd have to be a small family and close friends affair. Futaba was still a little on the shy side. And would probably stubbornly refuse any attempts to lift her veil. But in the end she would go along with it, smiling and blushing, looking more beautiful than she already did.

The mental image was... well, just a little exciting. It lifted Akira's spirits, his heartbeat quickening.

"Man... does every father feel so anxious at the thought?" Sojiro asked himself. He returned his attention to Akira. "You know, I really just wanted you to help around the store. Instead you went ahead and changed my life... awful inconsiderate of you, but I suppose I'm fine with the end result. You made things so much better for me and Futaba... but I want to protect you too, you know. I might not always be reliable, but feel free to come to me whenever you need. I'll be there for you... as family."

Just like that, their bond reached an apex. Akira smiled, giving the older man a faint grin. "It means a lot, hearing that from you. Hard to believe though, considering how chilly things were when we first met," Akira said.

"Oh uh, one more thing," Sojiro said, his expression growing a little more grim. "Could you not uh... you know... 'get with' Futaba?"

Akira's body went statue still, his grin frozen in place while his eyes went a little glassy. It was as if he had just been frozen in time by that humble request. Akira screamed internally.

"Can't imagine you calling me 'father.' Although maybe it wouldn't be so bad," Sojiro mused.

Once more Futaba approached them, regarding her father curiously. "What're you two talking about?" she asked.

"Oh uh, nothing!" Sojiro hastily replied.

"I hunger!" Futaba abruptly said. "Curry time!"

"Yeah yeah," Sojiro replied, stifling a chuckle. He gave Akira a slight nudge with his elbow, moving to follow Futaba to the exit of the church. "Well, c'mon you two. Let's head home."

Akira remained frozen in place, his glassy eyes affixed to a blank wall of the church. Though he wished for death, he was unable to die. Eventually, Akira stopped thinking.

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11/28

While the hideout was decently big, all things considered, it didn't have the size needed to house a meeting like this. After all the building was already struggling to fit the full roster of the Arditi, and today they would also be dealing with a visit from Mitsuru and some of their team.
Mitsuru had been happy to suggest a place, inviting the group to a renovated building she had bought near Shibuya's train station. It hadn't been furnished, or really decorated on the inside, leaving the team in a large room with faded white walls, and some leftover chunks of wood left propped against the far right wall.

"What you're suggesting is exceedingly dangerous," Mitsuru remarked, settling her hands in the pockets of her sleek white peacoat. "But by now I know there's no point in trying to dissuade you from this path. You're rebellious teenagers after all... me trying to discourage you would only redouble your resolve."

"Well, you're not wrong there," Ryuji said with a lazy roll of his shoulders.

Yukari, positioned at the back wall, examined the teenagers carefully. "Still... from what you're telling us, this Mementos place sounds huge. Like... an underground version of Tartarus. How are you going to know what you're looking for?"

"I have a sense for these kinds of things, don't worry. I'll know a treasure when I see one... and besides, there's only one place it can be. The heart of the place, at the unexplored depths," Morgana explained.

"And I can sense those things too, so it's no biggie," Futaba replied, managing a cocky grin.

"We felt it best to let you know what we have planned. We've spent the past few days preparing, making sure we're all rested up and good on supplies. But given the possible severity of the situation... well you deserved to be told," Akira explained. Though by now Mitsuru was likely aware of how things were getting.

Mitsuru nodded slowly. "Yes... and it might ultimately be for the best if your team goes through on this. After all you're quite seasoned with this Mementos location. And, hard as it is to admit... well we have experience over your team, Kurusu, but we've all grown a little rusty over the years. It's been too long since we saw a major fight, and we're not at our peak anymore." It was definitely painful to admit, but it was the truth. These days the anomalies the Shadow Operatives dealt with were rather small scale, only a handful reaching the levels of the Full Moon Shadows her team fought in the past.

Naoto moved away from the dusty pile of wood by the wall, settling her hands on her hips. "Even so, I'd feel guilty sending them in with no extra support. Perhaps I should head in with them? And the rest of you can monitor events in the real world?"

"I wouldn't be opposed to an extra hand down there." If they were going to meet Camael, Akira reasoned, they'd need a little extra assistance. "And it mightn't be a bad idea to have some Persona users topside in case something does happen," Akira added.

There was something in the air, something that was vaguely unpleasant. The miasma of ennui gripping the public had only gotten thicker since Shido's press conference, and people barely seemed to see past their own noses until you forced yourself into their field of view. It was beyond worrying.

"We would be eternally grateful for any assitance, Kirijo-san," Haru said, bowing slightly toward the older woman. She seemed to make her tone a little more formal and dignified opposite the Kirijo ruler. "We have no idea what we're facing, but... the threat certainly seems imposing."
"Indeed," Mitsuru replied. "Well if Naoto wants to go along, I won't hold her back. She's competent and confident and her Persona is rather strong. And fortunately, I've thought ahead for Monitoring events in Tokyo."

As Mitsuru said this, a slim young woman emerged from the vacant doorway behind her. Yukari could barely suppress a smile as the teal-haired girl entered the room. She was dressed in a fluffy white cardigan and dark skirt, her feet covered by plain dark shoes. She was a little shorter than Yukari, and had a sort of warm and comforting air to her. She smiled kindly toward the gathered Arditi, trying to suppress her nerves. "H-hello everyone. It's very nice to meet you all," she greeted.

"Likewise," Yusuke politely replied, without bothering to ask who this newcomer even was. Ann shot him a sideways glance and tried not to sigh.

Mitsuru gestured to the newcomer with her right hand. "This is Fuuka Yamagishi, the navigator my team had back in our SEES days," she began. "She's semi-retired from this work these days, but... well when a tough situation arises, I like to have her third eye on hand."

Fuuka laughed nervously, raising her hands a bit. "I-it's no trouble. I'm always happy to lend senpai a hand when she needs it," she sweetly aid.

"Ooooh, so she's your Futaba," Shizuka remarked. Although, while their powers were similar, it was instantly clear how different the two girls were in terms of personality. Yeah Futaba was a bit of a wallflower around strangers, but she was brazen and outspoken with those she trusted. This girl, however, seemed a lot like Haru. Sans the sadistic streak.

"Persona users with their kind of sensory power is a bit of a rarity. In the past I had some extranormal senses, but it was never to Fuuka's level... if anything major happens in Tokyo, we'll know," Mitsuru confidently explained. Fuuka fidgeted bashfully under her praises.

After a moment of thought, Akira nodded at the older women. "Then it looks like we're set to get moving. We were hoping to hit Mementos today, before it gets too late in the day. But when we're down there... well, we won't be able to converse with you guys on this side. So... well we'll try to get to the root of Mementos as quick as we can, just in case anything does happen."

Despite her attempts at stoicism, a tiny smile touched Mitsuru's lips. "And I appreciate that. I'll need to get in touch with Akihiko and Aigis to let them know the situation."

"I... believe Yu and Rise are in Tokyo too," Naoto said.

Mitsuru blinked. "Pardon? Narukami and Kujikawa are here... and you only thought to tell me now?" she asked.

Naoto sighed and scratched the back of her head awkwardly. She wasn't used to being on the backfoot. "Well... I was hoping we could get through this incident without interrupting Rise's wedding plans. She can be... intense when she's mad," Naoto sheepishly admitted.

"Yes... Yes I can see that," Mitsuru said, sparing a nanosecond's glance toward Yukari.

The brunette bristled a bit, picking up on the gesture despite Mitsuru's attempts at discretion. "H-hey! W-what's with that look?!"
Ignoring this, Mitsuru shifted her attention to Akira and the rest of his team. "Good luck. We'll be rooting for you."

"We'll win. I'm sure of it," Akira assured her.

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Materializing in the underground lobby of Mementos, a few eyes drifted to Morgana out of curiosity. It had been a while since they visited the mysterious underworld, and they were curious to see how Morgana would look after his transformation into a human.

Well, he was back to being the shortest person in the room.

"Wh-" Morgana examined his stubby paws, moaning in annoyance now that he was once more in his squat chibi form. "Aw no fair! I worked hard to get that human body!"

"At least you can still transform into a van. Right?" Ryuji hopefully suggested.

"Pardon?" Naoto's query, no doubt stunned at the phrase 'transform into a van' being dropped so casually, caused the teens to glance her way. Sure enough, her attire was different now too. A jet black peacoat, trousers and scarlet boots. Her flat black cap had a sort of visor attached to it, black rims wrapped around scarlet lenses that totally concealed her eyes.

Akira tilted his head a bit, examining the young woman closely. "So that's your inner rebel huh? That's pretty cool," he mused.

Shiho felt a small hum rising in her throat, clearly curious about something. "That costume seems a little... familiar to me," she noted idly.

"W-what do you mean?" Naoto nervously asked, her tone rising an octave higher than the usual masculine edge she tried to speak with.

"It's a dead ringer for the costume worn by Judge Omega, a tokusatsu show from the early 90s," Futaba quickly said, speaking as if reading from an encyclopedia. Naoto's face went grey. "It was a show about a police detective who got tired of a corrupt justice system, and so he donned a mask and got a super awesome custom motorcycle that he used to fight criminals and monsters an-"

"O-okay, th-that's enough about that!" Naoto quickly squeaked.

Ryuji was trying his hardest not to snort with laughter, his back to the detective. His shoulders were visibly trembling from the attempt. "Guess we'll just use Omega as your codename then," he remarked, once he had calmed down enough to speak without his voice cracking.

Shizuka took a few steps past the turnstiles, her hands behind her head. "Well, that aside, we should get a move on. You wanna get to it, Mona?"

"Alright alright... but I'm not happy about being stubby again," Morgana said, waltzing to the open area beyond the turnstiles. He hopped into the air, his body quickly being engulfed in a burst of cartoonish smoke, before he landed with a clatter on the tiles in his van form.

"I don't see why you're complaining. I quite liked your cat body," Sergio idly remarked.
"You wouldn't like it so much if you had to be carted around in a schoolbag!" Morgana barked in return.

Sighing, Akira approached the van and quickly climbed into the drivers seat. Naoto raised her left hand, as if considering protesting this, but decided to just go along with whatever the Phantom Thieves were used to. "Come on, let's get to it. We have a lot of ground to cover today."

And yet, despite their leader's worries, their journey was surprisingly smooth.

For the first few floors, the Arditi thought that the Shadows had vanished entirely. It wasn't until the twentieth underground level that they were able to see the truth of the matter: The Shadows were dormant. Sleeping, as giant pustules of darkness adhering to the walls of the twisted train tunnels.

Even as Morgana drove close to those same dark masses, they did not stir or awaken. Naoto was fascinated, having never seen Shadows so... docile before. While it made their journey easier, it was also distinctly worrying.

After all, nothing like this had happened before. And if every Shadow was slumbering, something unnatural was definitely going on.

All the while, Futaba was straining Prometheus' sensory powers as far as she could, scanning multiple floors above and below the team. Camael had gotten the drop on the Arditi in the past, and she didn't want to run the risk of that happening again. Either Camael was gone, or he was exceptionally good at masking his presence.

"This place is... twisted," Naoto murmured to herself, peering out the window as they passed through the grim, bloodstained train tunnel.

"You never really get used to it," Yusuke admitted. The dense atmosphere tended to weigh heavily, the longer one spent in Mementos.

While the labyrinth was truly huge, it was surprisingly easy to cross vast distances when there were no obstacles to speak of. With every Shadow seemingly asleep, there were no little diversions. And Futaba could point out the downward slopes well in advance.

Down they went, further into the dark, seeming toward the center of the earth itself.

Eventually, the scenery shifted around them, until the final downward ramp led through to an expansive blue-hued room with a vaulted ceiling held in place by humongous ribs. Great gulfs surrounded the left and right edges of the platform Morgana emerged onto, and beyond those gulfs.

"Are those... train platforms?" Ann asked, pressing her face to the nearest window. Her gaze became focused, her uncertainty rising as she inspected the throngs of people on the other end of the gulch. However deep that was, they couldn't see the bottom.

Akira glanced to the opposite ravine, watching as a large subway train with glowing red windows pulled in. Its wheels came to a shrieking halt, sparks spraying under the steel. "So that's where all the trains have been going to," Akira noted.

"Trains?" Naoto remarked.
Akira nodded. "Ever since we started coming here, we've gotten glimpses of moving subway trains in the distance. I thought they were just part of the scenery, but... it seems they were all heading to the depths of the labyrinth."

"And look at the people." Shizuka said, pointing through her own window. Long lines of civilians, men and women of varying age and class, were getting off the trains and moving through large glowing doorways at the end of the platforms. "Man... seeing huge crowds getting off satanic trains... that's got 'bad vibe' written all over it."

Whatever was going on, the people seemed not to protest it. They just marched forward in single file, like cattle. Looking higher up, the team could see more platforms with more trains resting by the concrete. There was no telling how many had gone through her by now.

Futaba inspected the platforms with a keen interest, her jaw starting to go slack. "G-guys, the people over there aren't cognitions. They're... they're all Shadows!"

Akira swallowed. "So that's what's happening to people in the real world. Their Shadows are getting mindfucked by this place. That's why they're... zombified. Okay, so I guess taking the treasure from here really is the solution."

"A treasure in a place like this... I wonder what it'll be..." Ryuji murmured.

Morgana came to a stop in front of a vast obsidian wall that seemed to entirely block the path ahead. Crimson veins sprouted along the metal, the same pulsating scarlet matter that seemed to grow throughout Mementos like a fungus.

Hifumi blinked a few times at the hulking barricade, swallowing hard at the imposing sight. "What... th-that's quite a door," she said. "How are we going to get through there?"

As soon as she said this, the door began to quake and rumble, until several seams split open along the obsidian surface with loud hisses of steam. Large chunks began to pull inward, until there was an opening mor than big enough for Morgana to drive through. A distinct scarlet glow was illuminating the area beyond the freshly sculpted archway.

"I... suppose that's how," Makoto replied, her own eyes looking wide and startled.-

Akira stepped on the gas, the van steadily moving through the fresh opening. Once on the other side he killed the engine, with the doors opening to allow the team to exit. The spiraling path leading down from here, toward a glowing crimson abyss, would be too narrow for Morgana to drive down, and there were several jumps involved. They would have to continue on foot for the time being.

Shizuka made her way to the edge, Houdini floating along behind her as a security measure, while she peered down. She could see suspended prison cells below, with the Shadow-people within looking rather... complacent with their lot in life. On some of the platforms below, Shizuka could also see a few hulking Shadows marching about.

They were sharply dressed, with crisp black prison officer uniforms covering their broad bodies, their faces concealed behind ornate steel masks.

A logo was imprinted on their backs, in neat white cursive. 'Libertas Ignorantia.'
"Well the Shadows down here sure as shit aren't asleep," Shizuka murmured. "Guess a smooth ride was too good to be true."

"So all this is at the bottom of Mementos. It's... huge," Yusuke murmured, inspecting the scenery from on high. "How far does it extend Oracle?"

Futaba reached up, focusing the lenses of her goggles slightly. "There are a few floors, some of them... pretty big. But for the first time, I think I can sense the bottom of Mementos. And there is... a really huge energy down there," the redhead murmured.

"That's a good sign," Akira flatly said. "Okay guys, let's get to it. Stick close, and keep your eyes peeled. We have no idea what the Shadows down here are capable of."

With that he turned and led on toward the winding path, the others falling in line behind him. Regardless of what was ahead, they couldn't afford to stop here.

But, back in the real world, things were already starting to change.

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After their brief meeting with the Phantom Thieves, Mitsuru had decided to move herself and her allies toward her apartment to monitor the situation in some comfort and privacy. Of course an apartment for Mitsuru could double as a house by most normal metrics.

Yukari and Aigis stood near one of the windows, with Yukari examining the throngs of people walking the street while Aigis inspected the clouds. The blonde android tilted her head a bit.

"Looks like rain," she remarked, her pale blue gaze watching a fleet of dark clouds rake slowly along the sky. "Odd. There was nothing forecast."

"Agh... please don't say stuff like that Aigis... I'm freaked out enough already," Yukari said, sparing a sideways glance to her friend. "Geez. Look at them go down there... Meteor's could fall from the sky, and they probably wouldn't even notice."

Akihiko emerged from the kitchen, clutching a glass of something that was very likely a block of protein. "Yeah. You can feel it in the air now... this sort of tension. Everything just looks and feels sort of... wrong these days," Akihiko said, grappling for the right words to describe his unease.

Mitsuru took a seat in one of her plush armchairs, with Fuuka seated patiently in the chair beside her. "Keep in mind that the source of this threat seems to be here in Tokyo. If something happens in the real world, it'll fall to us to try and deal with it. I've already sent a message to Narukami."

"Some extra support will be nice," Fuuka politely said. "As it stands we don't know how bad things... th-things..."

Fuuka froze up, her eyes growing wide. Even without summoning Juno, she could feel something huge was now in the heart of Tokyo. It was a sharp spike of white hot heat, not too far from their current location, that suddenly barged into Fuuka's senses.

She fainted, slumping into her chair in shock.

"Y-Yamagishi!" Akihiko set his glass down and raced toward her, quickly checking her pulse and
breathing.

"Oh god! W-what just happened?!” Yukari exclaimed, turning and racing to the teal-haired woman with Aigis in tow.

The skies outside darkened further.

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A figure strode along the peak of the Tokyo Skytree, drawing on the minds of humans across the globe to impose his existence upon reality. Enough of the human cattle were in the sway of the Grail to make this possible. It was His will that the earth be converted, and Camael lived to serve.

The dark angel, half flesh and half metal, stomped toward the edge of the tower with his steely wings folded into his back. His gaze raked over Tokyo, and despite the distance he could feel the presence of every human mind walking the streets. Like blood cells pulsing through veins.

"You ignorant creatures," Camael murmured to himself. "You don't deserve His blessing. But... this is what he wishes. Consider yourselves beyond fortunate."

As it stood, He could not emerge entirely in this world. Not yet. And so it would fall to Camael to complete the merging. To push the Metaverse and real world together, a process empowered by the ensnared human minds they had lured in across the globe.

But once he had done it, that was it. Game over. All he would need to do was deal with the Trickster and his allies. And the Other, too, if he refused His mercy.

Camael stroked the tangled briar of veins that were pulsing up from above his right hip. Even if raw power wasn't enough anymore, he had his ace in the hole on his side. He'd neutralize those children one way or another.

He began to raise his right hand toward the sky, clenching it into a large hard fist, until it was aimed vertically toward the swirl of black storm clouds that had accumulated above him. He lifted his index finger, pointing toward the heavens. That simple gesture carried a vast cosmic power behind it, fuelled by the warped dreams of millions of ensnared minds.

In an instant a miasma of red tore through the sky, like a blood bag exploding in a formerly clear blue sea, with the wave of crimson washing through the atmosphere. In seconds, the sky was a deep red across the globe. Only a tiny percentage of the global population noticed this. The ground began to rumble, the plates of the earth splitting open as humongous structures of bone began to sprout upward. Humongous rib cages and spinal columns that coiled around the largest buildings in Tokyo.

All over the world, the scene was the same. The dark red sky engulfed the world, while the underground began to spew up to the surface world. The sun itself began to blacken, until it was a sphere of obsidian with only a crimson ring of light glowing around the circumference.

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The bell above Leblanc's door rang as Sojiro stepped outside, clutching a broom in his left hand. "I usually have a kid to handle this menial crap," he murmured to himself, putting the bristles down toward the entryway.
He began to sweep decisively, pushing the dust and stray trash steadily to the right edge of the entryway. From the corner of his eye, Sojiro was quick to make out Doctor Takemi's distinct outline as she walked along the alley toward his shop.

The ground suddenly rumbled beneath his feet, causing Sojiro and Takemi to look up in unison toward the transformed sky.

Takemi, normally unfazed by everything the world had to offer, was unable to keep her jaw from dropping slightly at the sight of the morphing ominous sky. "That... that's new..." she murmured faintly. It was all her normally keen mind could think to say.

"You... You're telling me," Sojiro replied, feeling his grip on the broom grow tighter until his knuckles went white.

'Futaba... Akira... Please be okay.'

It began to rain blood.

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And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood; And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind.

And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places.

And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb:

For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?
While Mementos on the whole was meant to be a warped, imposing reflection of the Tokyo subway, the depths seemed to be something new entirely. From the dress of the Shadows stalking along the halls, to the various suspended cages populated by Shadow people, to the simple fact that the corridors seemed far more orderly than the tangled bramble of chaos above them...

Akira had put forth a simple notion, that seemed to make more sense the further in the Arditi went. The depths of Mementos was meant to be a prison. A twisted Palace that had taken the shape of something recognizable from the real world.

But this raised more than a few questions. Why? Who shaped the Palace in this way? Was it the people of Tokyo as a whole?

Not that they had much time to ponder this. Not with the Shadows in their way becoming more frequent.

A violent roar shook the chamber around the Arditi, coming from the expansive maw of a hulking green abomination that looked larger than a garbage truck. It looked like a flabby green blob of sapient slimy snot, his light green eyes unfocused, and his screaming mouth filled with imposing rows of large white teeth.

Akira grunted, Koumokuten standing in front of his user to block out the forceful wave trying to bowl him and some of the others over. Naoto and Morgana had taken up positions behind an overturned slab of debris, while Yusuke was anchored in place by Susanoo's inhuman strength. Prometheus floated several feet behind the group, long black tendrils anchoring the ebony sphere in place.

"He's got some lungs on him!" Morgana shouted, barely audible over the sonic roar booming from the beast before them. "And some nasty halitosis!"

The roar died down, seemingly when the hulking green beast had run out of air in his expansive lungs. The floor directly ahead of him was marked by a cobweb of cracks, while flakes of dislodged matter floated down from the ceiling.

Koumokuten shot ahead of his user, moving with quick bursts of superhuman speed as he vanished from point to point. The Shadow's glassy eyes watched him intensely, a strange warm glow starting to blossom inside his expansive mouth.

Koumokuten was perhaps one of the most physically powerful Persona's Akira had in his possession, who could plow through entire city blocks if he was so inclined. But when he closed the distance, and swung a mighty palm strike into the side of the beastly Shadow, it seemed that strength was suddenly insignificant. The rolls of flab strained and stretch, the mighty crimson fist punching in deep... until the flesh rebounded like rubber, a fat green wall smashing into Koumokuten like a runaway truck.

Akira let out a harsh gasp as his Persona was smashed away, with the young man being swept off his feet until he landed hard on his back. He felt as if he'd just been kicked by a particularly angry mule.
"Joker!" Morgana gasped, quickly rising onto his stubby feet and summoning Mercurius to his feet.

It seemed, however, that Naoto was a step ahead of him. Yamato Sumeragi surged ahead of the bluenette, moving at an even greater speed than Koumokuten could manage. She vanished from sight entirely, her glowing blade leaving a long trail of light in her wake. The Shadow couldn't even keep up with the fairy Persona's movements, the tiny figure quickly closing in on him.

With a rapid flourish of her saber, a volley of light shot forward and sliced along the demon's turgid green flesh, sprays of black matter exploding from the fresh cuts and filling the air. The beast snarled, recoiling from the sudden pain, while Yamato Sumeragi darted around to his opposite side.

With their foe distracted for the time being, Yusuke used Susanoo to pull Akira behind the cover of a slightly elevated platform. Whatever the floors of this place were made from, some kind of shining black marble Yusuke supposed, it was rather sturdy.

"Are you alright?" the artist quickly asked.

"Just... peachy..." Akira muttered, reaching up and clutching his ribs with his right hand. "Physical attacks aren't gonna work, but... when Koumokuten touched him, I sensed an immense heat inside his body. So, maybe ice is the answer," he said, glancing to Yusuke.

His companion nodded in return. "Then I'll do my best... I just need a good opening to get a strike in," Yusuke remarked.

As he said this, Naoto's Persona had already whipped into the air above the humongous Shadow. She unleashed another volley of light strikes, the sharpened edges of blessed light smashing into his left eyeball. The murky sphere exploded in a violent black spray, the beast shrieking in turn and roughly sweeping a surge of black marble into the air with his hulking right hand.

The fairy-like Persona deftly knifed between several incoming lumps of debris. However, one managed to sail forward and strike Yamato Sumeragi dead on, with the impressive force bowling Naoto over with a pained cry. She grit her teeth, rolling onto her stomach and pressing her palms to the floor.

"Rustier than I thought," Naoto breathed, feeling a few beads of sweat forming under her mask.

"Hang back, I'll cover you!" Morgana called out. As he said this, Mercurius darted toward the bleeding Shadow. The winged figure speedily side-stepped an incoming tide of debris and flung his arm forward, a powerful tornado flying from his grasp and arcing around. The cyclone slammed into the Shadow's side, rolls of flab twisting and churning until the entirety of the Shadow was overturned. He slammed violently into the floor, shattering the marble he landed on.

Morgana breathed a small sigh of relief, feeling a small strain linger in his arms. That thing weighed a ton, and even Mercurius' power was having trouble contending with so much excess mass.

Mercurius swiftly knifed upward, unleashing several sharp whips of wind that slammed repeatedly into the downed abomination. The focused bursts managed to slice deep into the green flesh, more black sprays exploding out wherever Morgana's attacks struck.

The Shadow suddenly snapped his head toward Mecurius, a violent flash exploding out of his
mouth and striking against the airborne Persona. Morgana yowled, caught off guard, his Persona being blown across the room.

The violent roar echoed through the vast chamber, the various prisoners paying it no mind, while Mercurius was driven harshly into a nearby wall. The dark marble cracked from the powerful impact.

Morgana wobbled on his stubby feet, grunting and grimacing as he struggled against the pressure forcing down on his Persona. "Hnn... gh!" Morgana grit his teeth, trying to force Mercurius against the powerful wave. But, for as potent a Mercurius’ magic was, his physical strength was rather more lacking.

A sudden surge of white wind cut through the gloom, a perpetual blizzard that washed over the hulking green Shadow. Within seconds patches of ice were spreading across his body, blossoming out at an alarming rate until the creature was entirely encased in a dense white layer. His remaining eye scanned frantically around, a thick clog of ice wedged in his mouth to silence him.

The Shadow was stuck frozen in place, his remaining eye catching a glimpse of Susanoo as the figure bombed down toward him at an incredible speed. Susanoo's blade struck the outer layer of ice, cracks exploding out around the frozen mass. Then, in one violent instant, the whole thing exploded in a splurge of dark matter that plastered the ground. The dark stain fizzled through the remnants of shattered ice, before dissolving away entirely.

Yusuke breathed a small sigh of relief. "What a sturdy abomination... freezing something through like that is more than a little taxing..." He lifted his fox mask slightly, his gloved fingers wiping away some remnants of sweat.

"That was very impressive Fox," Naoto said, smiling a little. She moved to stand up fully, dusting off her jacket as she did this. "Now then... what about the rest of the team?"

Akira finished catching his breath and swiftly glanced over his shoulders. When the guards had attacked, the team had been split into two groups. Akira’s smaller team had taken on the biggest threat, while the remainder were left fighting two smaller purple humanoids in ornate, horned armor.

From what Akira had seen, the creatures were quite powerful too.

There was a powerful explosion in the distance, an expanding mushroom cloud filled with lightning and hellfire surging up to the expansive roof. Akira urgently glanced to Prometheus, hoping for a little insight.

"Looks like that's that," Futaba remarked from the comfy confines of her shell. "The others are all alive. A little banged up, but it seems they plowed through those pesky Shadows... Hey guys, get over here!"

They didn't need to wait long for the rest of the team to arrive. Just as Futaba had said they were marked with their own scuffs and bruises, tears open along the surface of their attire. Makoto led the way toward Akira, rubbing at a bloody scar on her right shoulder. "At least the biggest one is taken care of... but those other Shadows were rather tough too."

"Like you wouldn't believe... Ryuji plowed one into the ground, and the fucker just got back up," Shizuka said, fixing her mask back into place.
"And I'm already sore all over," Shiho said with a small sigh. "Well, that aside... looks like you guys didn't have a whole lot of fun either."

Akira nodded slightly. "We need to keep going. We're still not to the heart of this place... come on."

Their leader turned and started down the narrow path ahead, toward an opening that led into a large circular chamber. Even from afar he could hear the chatter of people inside, something that instantly put Akira on edge. He clenched his fists, ready to move at the first sign of trouble. Prometheus vanished from around Futaba, with the redhead following along on foot.

Things grew more worrying as they entered the chamber proper. While they had a clear route out on the other end of the room, the area that bordered them quickly caught Akira's attention. Prison bars lined the area, housing a large assortment of Shadow people... and as Akira scanned the crowd, he quickly noticed a few familiar faces. His allies followed suit quickly enough.

"Kamoshida?!" Ryuji barked, taking a shocked step back as he spied the despondent gym teacher.

Yusuke tensed, spying a dignified old man standing in the crowd. "Sen-" he stopped himself, mentally backspacing. "Madarame?"

Haru's attention settled on a man who was unmistakable. "Father," she primly said. "It seems our former opponents are here," she noted.

"They're not Shadows though... we took care of their Shadows when we cleared their Palaces. These are just... echoes of their Shadows," Futaba explained, adjusting her goggles.

Sergio scanned the distinct figures for a few moments, before glancing toward Futaba. "Okay... so why are they here? It's... a little unnerving." Although Sergio wasn't entirely sure why this made him so uncomfortable. Perhaps it was the fact that their enemies, who had previously stood high above them, were now caged like animals under the thumb of... whatever was in charge of this place.

"You two're lookin' amazin' as ever," Kamoshida's remnant remarked, his attention affixed to Shiho and Ann. It took a good deal of restraint not to blast him apart then and there.

"You wanna try something asshole?! I'll stomp you into the dirt where you belong!" Shiho shouted, clenching her fists tight.

"Disgusting son of a bitch," Ann growled.

"I'm joking. I don't want any more trouble," Kamoshida said in a morose tone. "I finally get to live without thinking for myself now."

"Still the blade of grass bending against the wind, I see," Madarame calmly said, his attention focused to Yusuke. "It's a dangerous way to live. I've seen the truth, Yusuke. I've been such a fool, wanting too much in life."

"Madarame..." Yusuke murmured. The truth was, his feelings toward his former sensei were beyond conflicted. He had no idea what he wanted to make of the old man right now.

Eventually, Akira spoke up. "No sign of Kaneshiro or Arisawa in the crowd..." he noted.
"No, they wouldn't be here. Even this place can't raise the dead." The faceless crowd parted a bit to reveal Masayoshi Shido, the sharply dressed politician seated neatly on a chair.

Akira spared a glance to his synthetic hand, before approaching the bars that separated him from his former enemy. "Figures you'd be here though... And you seem to have more of your faculties than the others. So what exactly is this place?" he asked.

"I've heard the guards refer to it as the 'Prison of Regression'," Shido said, rising slowly from his chair. "Although, prison is not the term I would use. No... the utmost freedom is available to those who live here. The freedom to not make decisions. The release from having to think for yourself." Suddenly he was smiling, mildly unnerving the gathered Phantom Thieves. "It's far more marvelous than the country I wished to create."

"Freedom in slavery huh..." Shizuka murmured, settling her hands on her hips. "This place is already beyond fucked up..."

"But what's causing it? A place such as this couldn't just... exist on its own, right? Something has to be directing things," Hifumi said.

"Most likely," Naoto remarked. "Speaking from experience, the general populace being manipulated in this way... something is gaining from this. Something that really likes the concept of control."

Akira kept his attention trained on Shido while the rest of his team chattered away. "Alright, stuff the sales pitch. It didn't work on your campaign trail, and it won't work here. What's the deal with this place?"

Shido smiled slightly. "I really do owe you a debt of gratitude. I and the others here were fugitives once, fools who fled to our own Palaces... but now, thanks to you changing our hearts, we're back to this wonderful paradise."

As he spoke, Morgana started to scan the surrounding area. His pale blue eyes were glittering, and a strange look of recognition began to dawn on his face. A rather unpleasant sort of nostalgia was welling up inside him.

Ryuji awkwardly scratched the back of his head. "We... sent 'em back here? What does that mean?" More importantly, were they in some way at fault for all this?

"Too late to ask that now. We have a job to do," Akira promptly replied.

After a brief pause, Makoto glared up at Shido. "Having the 'freedom' to not make your own decisions just means that someone else is controlling you! So... who is it? Who is pulling the strings here?"

"That should be obvious: Every member of the general public," Shido said, his words causing the dread to rise in the team. "Haven't you kids learned anything in school? The collective ruler of a democratic country is its people. The guards here aren't working to keep us penned in... they're working to keep outsiders from tampering with our bliss."

Ryuji grit his teeth. "Forget this! This guy's just talking shit, and it doesn't matter what he has to say! We're cleaning this place out, one way or another! Hey Mona, we're near the treasure by now,
"right?" he asked, turning sharply toward the squat feline.

Morgana remained silent, his gaze drifting across the bars. "This room... I think I remember it," Morgana murmured, earning a few startled looks from his friends. I saw some of the people in the cell, and realized I looked different to them for some reason... And seeing the people... that's when I realized I wanted to become a human!"

"And that's your earliest memory?" Akira asked. The feline nodded slowly. "So that's why you thought you'd find the truth at the heart of this place. You may well have been born here Mona," Akira noted.

"I see... he's more like Teddie than I originally thought," Naoto murmured, stroking her chin. "It's possible that, like Teddie, his existence as some kind of sapient Shadow might be a random anomaly. Or, there may well be something else at work with Mona too."

"If that's the case, I still have no idea about any of it," Morgana replied.

Akira passed by Morgana and gave him a light pat on the back in passing. "Don't worry. If the answers are here, I'm sure we'll find 'em soon enough... for now, let's keep going. I imagine we still have ground to cover."

The Arditi pressed on, deeper into the earth. Along the way they found more Shadows working to halt their path, and were stuck fighting against foes stronger than any most others they had found through the entirety of Mementos.

It wasn't just that they were stronger, they seemed just a tad more focused than their kin. Ordinarily Shadows were berserkers who often tried to charge forward, occasionally with smaller Shadows hanging back for artillery support.

These ones were more nimble and attentive, and seemed to actively avoid opponents if they knew they possessed an element they were weak to. And more than once, they had been jumped by a surprise attack. It all served as a reminder that this 'Prison of Regression' was a world away from what they were used to in Mementos above.

Eventually, however, the group came to a sudden stop as they were walking along an expansive platform of dark marble. The ground shuddered violently around them, flakes of dark matter falling from the ceiling. The tremors grew more violent by the second, with the entire chamber shaking until the Arditi were nearly bowled over entirely.

"W-what the hell?!" Ryuji shouted, his eyes darting from side to side.

Thinking quickly, Haru pressed her right hand to her mask and focused intensely as Astarte rose high above her. The divine beauty lifted her hands overhead, a halo of purple psionic light engulfing the gathered members of the Arditi. It anchored them in place, allowing them to ride out the storm as it intensely shook the earth.

"Good thinking Noir! Keep it up!" Akira called, his gaze scanning their surroundings now that he could see clearly. As far as he could tell, there were no Shadows nearby causing this. "Oracle, I need a little insight... what the hell is going on up there?"

Futaba looked upward, the lenses of her goggles glowing brightly as she surveyed the ceiling with great intensity. But, after a few seconds, she groaned in impotent frustration. "Agh! No good! I
know something big is happening above us, b-but... we're so deep in the earth that I can't make out any details!" The area ahead of them, a long stretch of similar platforms, was trembling violently too. It seemed a miracle that nothing had collapsed yet.

Haru was straining just a bit, her breathing heavier than before, but the tremors soon subsided. Once several quiet seconds had passed, the halo of psionic light vanished around the team. "Goodness... whatever just happened, it must have been tremendous," the heiress remarked.

"Yeah, no doubt," Shizuka replied, glancing from point to point across the ceiling. "Shit... you think more Shadows are coming our way?"

Futaba fell silent once more, the others leaning in a little toward their trusty navigator. Futaba gasped abruptly, her teammates recoiling. "H-hey! D-don't just suddenly gasp in the middle of an intense situation, it makes things... m-more intense!" Ann said.

Ignoring this, Futaba voiced what was presently worrying her. "Th-the Shadows... the inmates, I mean... th-they're all gone! Vanished!"

"What?!" Sergio took a shocked step back. "Then... then what does that mean? Are all those people... dead?"

Morgana shook his head a bit. "I doubt it. If whatever is causing all this wanted people dead, it wouldn't be wasting time herding them and collecting them. It clearly has other plans, but I still don't know what those could be."

"Then we just gotta keep going... I'm worried too, but if the treasure is still down there..." Ryuji trailed off and glanced to Futaba and Morgana, who nodded in turn. "Then we gotta get down there. That's what we came for, right?" Ryuji asked.

"Right," Akira confirmed with a crisp nod of his head. "We'll have answers soon." Akira certainly hoped so, at least.

"Still trying? You humans truly do baffle me." The ominous voice came from somewhere above the team, making them freeze in place. The ceiling was so high above them that it seemed to be almost totally encased in darkness. Only now the darkness was moving. It shifted and swirled above them, until a blob of obsidian was drooping down toward them,

In an instant the strange bubble shattered apart, blown away by unfurling wing of steel. The gathered Arditi gasped in shock as Camael elegantly swung down through the air, flying toward the ground until he abruptly flipped at the halfway point. His ironclad feet met the floor, the impact sending a cobweb of cracks exploding out around his heels.

Shizuka glared at the looming figure, dropping low at the sight of him. "Had a feeling your ass would show up.... you took your sweet time."

Camael let out something that could vaguely pass as a chuckle. "I was held up with official business. Suffice to say... game over. You children have fought well, but you've lost. There's no point in continuing this little charade."

"That shaking above us... that was you, wasn't it?" asked Akira. The dark angel nodded slightly. "What the hell did you just do?!"
Seeing no point in being coy, and feeling there was nothing these foolish humans could accomplish at this point, Camael raised his hands up slightly. "As we speak, earth and the Metaverse are merging into a singular plane. All those corrupted human minds... they've been the power source that allowed me to cross over to the other side. There are a few stragglers left, but they'll be dealt with soon enough... after I've dealt with you all."

The others shared uncertain glances, tense and worried. Was that for real? If the two worlds merged... then what did that mean for the world? The civilians were already acting strange, and if they were now merging with their Shadows... did that mean this change would be permanent?

"You... you're talking out the ass! There's no way that's possible!" Ryuji shouted.

"I don't lie. That's such a... human invention," Camael curtly replied.

"Even if that's the case... we can still stop if if we take out Mementos' treasure. No treasure, no Metaverse to merge with," Akira said.

The angel lowered himself a bit, his heels scraping along the dense matter of the floor. "Possible. But that prospect is ultimately irrelevant. You can't beat me, after all... You may have grown stronger and more numerous, but this time... I'm not playing around."

"Koumokuten!" Akira's Persona rocketed forward at his shout, crossing the distance in a split second with his fist colliding violently with Camael's upraised right arm. The chamber shook violently, with the angel shoving back fiercely and launching the armored figure back from him.

Susanoo and Seiten Taisei rushed toward Camael in a pincer move, their own weapons swinging out and being caught in Camael's large palms. He grunted, his heels digging firmly into the ground as he was carried several feet back from the momentum of the impact. The air swirled around the weapons in his grasp, twin explosions of ice and lightning washing over both halves of his being.

Camael's body flexed outward, a vibrant flash of blessed light blasting Susanoo and Seiten Taisei into the ground. Both Persona users cried out, prone just long enough for Camael to smash them into the ground again with his beefy fists.

He was all set to strike again, with a powerful spiral updraft suddenly coiled around his body and catapulted Camael a few feet from the downed Personae. Mercurius sprinted around the edges of his cyclone, unseen blades scything through the breeze and repeatedly cutting into Camael's flesh and armour. They weren't deep cuts, but they were fast and sharp enough to leave a mark.

The raging whirlwind slammed violently into another platform, only to be suddenly blasted apart with a sharp swing of Camael's wings. He rose from the rubble and deftly sidestepped another whipping blade of wind from Mercurius.

Camael's right fist snapped forward, faster than the human eye could track, with the air pressure of his punch colliding with Mercurius and forcing him backward. "Stubborn creature, aren't you? The folly of hope is not knowing when you're beaten!"

The bladed feathers of his wings unfurled, creating a protective shield that blocked an incoming burst of psionic energy that shattered the platform beneath his heavy feet. Camael grunted against the pressure, nearly being knocked off balance entirely. He hadn't expected Astarte to hit quite so hard.
With Camael's back occupied, Koumokuten was able to dart toward Camael's front. His right palm collided violently against Camael's abdomen, carrying a kinetic payload that could shatter city blocks into dust. Camael was flung off his feet and launched skyward, his wings snapping out yet again to hold him skyward in contempt of gravity.

The Arditi pressed their assault, sprays of ice and fire exploding up toward the winged monster. But he was deft and swift, avoiding the incoming blasts by scant inches.

Camael snapped around to his right, a salvo of bladed feathers flying from his right wing and closing in on Hecate. The blonde let out a sharp cry of pain, recoiling on her feet as the bladed edges cut into her forearms.

With Ann's firepower briefly out of the picture, he turned his attention toward Haru. In the split second after he threw his right hand forward, a flash of blessed light exploding out of his palm, Flaming Telepath appeared behind Haru and worked to yank her backward. The brunt of the blast missed the strawberry blonde, but a portion still managed to hit her. It pulled a pained shout from her, fresh tears opening on her sleeves and leggings.

"I don't care who you are... I don't care how powerful you think you are..." Akira glared up at the imperial angel, the air around Akira's body glowing a vibrant azure shade. "We're getting through you! Futsunushi!"

A new figure emerged above Akira, a wisened old man with gnarled grey skin. His hair was a deep blue shade and flowed past his shoulders. The stoic figure sat cross legged in the air, over a dozen longswords orbiting around his looming frame.

"Let's go! Together!" Makoto called out.

"I'll help too!" Naoto quickly said, her fairy like Persona flitting past her.

Futsunushi and Anat shot forward in unison, quickly closing in on Camael as he turned to glare at the incoming attackers. In an instant the three figures were locked in a storm of blows, furious impacts echoing throughout the vast chamber, making the surrounding the area tremble violently.

Several of Futsunushi's swords were clashing against Camael's unfurled wings, working to keep them busy. But even without access to those bladed weapons, Camael was quite capable of keeping up with his two foes.

Makoto and Akira scored several clean hits against Camael's broad body, forming fresh scars and bruises along his exposed flesh. But even so he endured, powering through the pain as a distinct purple glow began to flicker along his armor.

Throughout it all, Yamato Sumeragi was darting around Camael's body, with her glowing blade slicing along his joints and exposed flesh. Each stroke of her blade opened a fresh wound, a spray of dark matter exploding out along Camael's body. But the shadowy angel endured, seeming only faintly aware of the new injuries on his body.

A sudden explosion of almighty light burst from Camael's body, the great surge of his power blasting the three Personas away from him. Makoto and Akira cried out, promptly being driven into the unwelcoming floor. Akira grimaced from a sharp pain in his chest. Was something cracked?
Naoto, meanwhile, was bowled off her feet and sent skidding along until her back collided harshly with the side of a partially elevated platform. She gasped loudly from the pain, the blow knocking the wind right out of her.

The smoke cleared around the looming angel, revealing Camael's partially injured form. He floated in place, his posture perfect, glowering down at the Arditi.

"Is that all you've got?" Camael growled.

It was all about location, Akechi knew.

Even if he could no longer access Shido's Palace, if he could get relatively close to the prison housing his dear father, then Loki could get in close enough to finish the job. He really did owe the Arditi, he never would have considered using his power in the real world if it weren't for them.

Truth be told he would have preferred still having the Palace as an option. Killing through the Metaverse was quick and efficient, leaving no real evidence behind. He'd be putting himself at risk again if he went for Shido while he was behind bars.

But, so long as Shido was dead, Akechi didn't care what else happened to himself.

Given the resources he had accrued over the past two years, Akechi had thought it best to get himself a second apartment. A location unknown to his 'employers' that he could use if things ever became particularly unpleasant. He hadn't considered using it, but with things being the way they were now... well he didn't like the idea of the Phantom Thieves tracking him down.

It was not a particularly large or glamorous apartment, comprised of three boxy rooms with only one having a decent amount of legroom. But Akechi didn't need much to get by, as his lacking childhood had taught him. And he had chosen this place to house a rather important flash drive, so he had some faith in this place despite its rather plain appearance.

The wall he was currently staring at was marked by an assortment of pages stuck to it, the largest of which was a full blueprint for the prison Shido was housed in. He had been expecting it to be a challenge to steal, but... that really hadn't been the case. Something strange was going on with the people out there, and when it came to stealing these plans... nobody had seemed to even really notice him in motion.

Even Akechi, who thought little of people to begin with, knew that something odd was going on. Not that it wholly mattered to him. If it made this process easier, he was hardly going to complain.

Akechi was in the process of examining one of the entryways depicted in the image, when the ground abruptly began to quake. He was nearly knocked off his feet, a shocked grunt leaving him. "What the hell?!

Red Death appeared behind him in an instant, strong skeletal hands grabbing his shoulders and holding him steady as the world trembled. Akechi grit his teeth and glanced toward the nearest window. Even from here he was able to see the tide of red explode across the sky, until everything above Tokyo was crimson.

The deep red in the sky was only the first thing he noticed. The tremors grew more intense, and
from afar Akechi could get fleeting glimpses of huge structures of bone breaking through the asphalt. Streaks of bloody rain began to pelt the glass of his window.

His eyes widened considerably, and the normally astute Akechi found himself at a loss for words.

What the hell was going on out there?!
It was like hell on earth out here.

Josuke stood startled on Morioh's main street, the familiar fountain looming behind him, with his wide-eyed gaze turned to the scarlet skies. The bloody rain was falling with greater intensity, and he could only stare in disbelief at all this transpiring.

"Josuke! Hey, Josuke!" Okuyasu jogged toward him from the left, The Hand floating above him. His Stand had his muscular blue and white arms lifted over his head, acting as a makeshift umbrella, while his flat yellow eyes stared dead ahead. Droplets bounced off the conical surface of his skull. "What's going on?! I figured you'd have a good idea!"

"Search me," Josuke murmured awkwardly, unable to look away from the twisted sky above them. "I was just walking to the station and then..." Well whatever this was, he couldn't help but think that Shizuka was somehow tied into all this.

Okuyasu came to a stop beside Josuke, panting slightly. "You think... you think this is that global warming thing? You know, things got so hot that it made the sky turn red?"

This distracted Josuke enough to make him glare at his close friend. "That's not... that's not how anything works."

"While it's true that the earth's atmospheric conditions have changed in increments over the years, it would take something truly dramatic to cause a shift like this." The words came from a figure who seemed to simply... materialize at Josuke's left. Josuke and Okuyasu quickly turned, both startled, to examine a rather tall young man with vaguely yellow skin. His hair was platinum blonde and flowed past his shoulders, his ears vaguely pointed and his eyes sparkling like jewels. A thin chain hung from the left side of his nose and disappeared behind his head.

In all the years they had known Mikitaka, he physically hadn't changed a bit. Even his modified uniform was the same.

"Hey, Mikitaka," Okuyasu quickly said. "You know anything about all this weird stuff?"

"I'm afraid not Okuyasu. I'm as surprised as this as the two of you... yet it seems we are in the minority. Look." The blond pointed across the road to a small gathering of high school students, chatting amiably and ignorant of the puddles of crimson rain starting to fill the gutters. "The sky above looks distinctly Martian. Perhaps this is there handiwork?"

"I should consider finding new friends..." Josuke murmured under his breath.

After a few moments of silence, the illegitimate Joestar turned his focus to Okuyasu. He was staring intently at the dark sky, his right hand cupped to his brow to focus his vision. "Hey, Josuke..." Okuyasu trailed off. "Are those... birds? There's an awful lot of them."

Josuke turned his attention to the dark figures swarming in the air. If those were birds, they were the biggest damn birds he'd ever seen! And they were growing larger still, winged figures drawing closer and closer toward the formerly sleepy town. And as they pulled in closer and grew more defined, Josuke could see the light was gleaming along their silvery bodies, and the bladed tips of
their metal wings.

"Those do not look like any sort of bird that could be found on earth... nor do they look like military drones. This is... rather fascinating," Mikitaka mused, idly stroking his chin in thought.

There was a glint in the sky as something suddenly came whistling toward Mikitaka. The alien's head turned into a sort of clear blue jelly, splitting in half to avoid the path of a bladed feather that soared through the gap and became embedded in the pavement behind him. Mikitaka's head merged back together, and he resumed stroking his chin. "Rather fascinating indeed."

"They're coming right for us!" Okuyasu shouted, a slight amount of panic rising in his voice.

Now that they were close enough, Josuke could make out the details of the flock. They were all identical - a gathering of silver skinned humanoids with featureless, angular heads. The tips of their arms and legs were as bladed as their wings. To Josuke they looked like a fleet of robotic angels.

Crazy Diamond moved with the same impeccable speed, lifting an assortment of bricks from the ground and into his arms.

"DORARARARARARARA!!"

With machine gun-like speed, Crazy Diamond began propelling his ammunition toward the nearest angel. His Stand was strong, but Josuke was surprised by just how much force Crazy Diamond was outputting now.

The volley of bricks struck off the nearest angel, the repeating impacts knocking it backward and punching dents into the hull. The fragments that broke apart were wreathed in a golden light, with those shards rocketing toward other nearby angels and striking violently against them.

The Hand reached skyward and gave a sharp sweeping motion of his right palm, the air rippling with a sickly green light at the passage of his fingers. The air between him and a nearby angel was abruptly folded in half, dragging the winged figure toward him. The angel snapped in place, disoriented and glancing from side to side. His foe disoriented, The Hand gripped his ironclad skull with his left palm and smashed the angel into the ground, hard enough to leave a deep indent in the asphalt.

"Gyaha! I got him!" Okuyasu shouted, pumping his right fist into the air. "Hey, Josuke, did you se-
"

Okuyasu was cut short by the angel snapping his wings upward, a beam of metal slamming into Okuyasu's ribs. He was flung off his feet, bouncing against the asphalt and then skidding to a halt.

"Okuyasu!" Josuke shouted. Grunting, he was soon forced to start leaping backward as the incoming angels began hurling lightning bolts his way. Mikitaka turned into a puddle of deep blue liquid, slithering away from the incoming attacks. For as impressive as his powers were, they were not particularly built for direct conflict. Nor did Mikitaka have much of a heart for violence.

"Son of a bitch, there are so many of these things! What even are they?!!" Josuke shouted. Two drew in close, with both swiftly being plowed into the ground with hard strikes from Crazy Diamond's fists. A third flashed by, a bladed heel grazing Crazy Diamond's left shoulder. Josuke grunted, staggering back from the sudden sharp pain in his arm.
Another tried to rush Josuke's way, only to grind to a halt as dark tendrils rapidly coiled around its arms and legs. It struggled in vain as more and more loops of dark matter wrapped around it, before the angel was abruptly swung around and smashed harshly into the asphalt, the ground exploding out from the point of impact.

Josuke's eyes widened a bit as he realized just what was wrapped around the injured angel: Hair. Long strands of silky ebony hair, wreathed in a deep purple aura.

His gaze travelled along the raven tresses toward their source. Yukako Yamagishi stood at the opposite end of the road, her right hand resting lazily on her hip as she regarded the downed angel with a cool contempt. The breeze blew lightly at her blouse and dark skirt. As ever, she looked as if she had just stepped right off of a Vogue cover and into the real world.

"Hmph. I might have known, Josuke. Something strange happens, and I find you at the heart of it," Yukako remarked in a calm tone.

"This isn't me, I swear!" Josuke shouted in return. Crazy Diamond flew ahead of his user, plowing his fist into the angel's skull with enough force to shatter it apart. The entirety of the creature evaporated into a dark mist that quickly dispersed.

By now Okuyasu was back on his feet, grimacing as he saw another of the winged monsters divebombing toward him. The Hand scraped his palm forward as the angel drew close enough, the creature's head vanishing in an instant. The remainder of his body exploded into a cloud of dark matter, fading into the ether.

A bolt of lightning exploded against Crazy Diamond's forearms, a pained shout leaving the young man as he was suddenly knocked onto his back from the force. He looked up sharply, a little disoriented from the shock, and found himself looking up at the remaining two angels. Yukako was trying to whip her hair around again, but the duo were charging up again and it seemed all too likely that they'd fire off before she could do anything.

The two angels suddenly stiffened, their bodies growing rigid. Then they were both aruptly slammed into the pavement and pinned in place, the unseen weight on their bodies sinking them into the asphalt. Josuke glanced over to Yukako, seeing a new figure standing beside the elegant young woman.

Koichi breathed a small sigh of relief, his hands pressed to the knees of his jeans, while a small figure floated ahead of him. Koichi's Stand was shorter than the man himself, an ivory-skinned humanoid with golden eyes and strange green nodes along his limbs and the front of his face.

"Motherfuckers are down Master!" Echoes curtly said, pressing his palms forward and keeping both figures pinned in place. His arms were starting to tremble, the angels progressively growing stronger.

Crazy Diamond and The Hand swept forward quickly enough, delivering a flurry of finishing blows to blast the remaining abominations apart. As with the others, they both turned into clouds of mist, fast fading into nothingness.

Josuke breathed a small sigh of relief, rubbing some fresh burns on his forearms, while Okuyasu awkwardly rubbed a large bloody bruise on his forehead. "The hell... we've gone through some weird crap, but this is something else entirely," Okuyasu grumbled.
"Are you guys okay? Me and Yukako were just walking along when the sky... changed, and then all of a sudden we heard you guys fighting," Koichi said, his Stand disappearing from view.

"A few cuts and bruises, but I think we'll be fine," Josuke said, smiling slightly. "More importantly, we should try and get somewhere a little less... open. I get the feeling there'll be more of those things."

There was a flourish of water near the group, accumulating into a large blue pool that then slowly rose upward and formed into a humanoid shape. Color and shape returned to the liquid, taking the shape that could only be described as 'Mikitaka' once more.

The blond, as ever, looked nonplussed by all that had just transpired. "It is odd. We just had a large brawl in the center of town, and yet-" Mikitaka gestured to the street around them, where people were going about their business as if nothing had happened at all.

"Man... that's pretty weird," Okuyasu remarked in a small murmur.

Josuke nodded grimly. "I get the feeling that whatever this is... Shizuka might be mixed up in it," Josuke said.

"Your little sister?" Yukako asked, a small flicker of surprise rolling across her expression.

"Yeah. That Phantom Thief stuff... can't help but think that her and her friends keep finding ways to land in more and more trouble. They could probably do with some extra help," Josuke explained.

"And there's strength in numbers... we got lucky getting the drop on those 'angel' things, but if more come at us..." Koichi trailed off into a small sigh, scratching at the back of his neck. "Man... life just keeps getting stranger..."

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Eris raised her hands high, mimicking Shiho's motions, and causing twin swirls of scarlet energy to blossom around Ann and Haru. The two girls took aim, their Personae shooting forward, followed by an entwining blast of focused white hot flame and psionic light blasting up to the grey-skinned angel.

Camael turned toward the incoming flash, folding his wings together as a makeshift shield and taking the blast head on, grunting loudly as the tide of energy crashed down upon him. He became wreathed in the tide of energy, grunting and pushing forward, like Moses parting the Red Sea.

"My faith... is my armor..." Camael growled, as the bladed feathers of his wings began to blacken and melt. "And it... does not... falter!" The force pushing him back was colossal and seemed to shake the entire chamber, but he endured.

With impressive speed his fist slammed into the ground between Haru and Ann, the ensuing shockwave shattering the platform and catapulting Ann, Shiho, and Haru away. Smoke was rising in plumes off the plates of his armor, and the exposed segments of his skin were sizzling loudly.

His left hand snapped toward Ann's airborne body, followed by a blinding wave of blessed light shooting from his palm. Eris quickly intercepted it, absorbing the holy light before it could reach the injured blonde.
Sergio watched from afar, slowly stroking a gash that had been opened up on the left side of his chest. "Alright... I'm starting to formulate a plan..."

Shizuka rose up beside him, panting for breath. She had a few fresh cuts along her jacket, splashes of red dotting the material. She was sure at least some of the dried blood wasn't her own. "Well, I'm willing to hear anything. We're kinda getting ponded like a gang of Taiwanese hookers right now..."

"Gross," Sergio replied, wrinkling his nose a bit behind his mask. Still, she had a point. They had been throwing themselves at Camael for some time now, and while they had left a few mark and injuries along his hull, he had managed to hurt the team far more. Everyone was sporting an assortment of wounds, and fatigue was steadily setting in. "The thing is, for as strong as this so-called angel is, he's not invulnerable. And I think if I can get a big enough projectile, and charge it with as much kinetic energy as Breakthru can put out... a blow like that might disorient him enough for a beatdown."

"Your plan boils down to 'hit him with a big rock'?" Shizuka asked incredulously.

"I prefer my description, personally... but with the energy I can put out, it would probably be more like hitting him with an asteroid," Sergio explained.

In the distance she could see Anat and Seiten Taisei attacking their looming foe. The flying monkey landed several hard blows with his staff, while Anat unleashed a focused rain of nuclear energy down upon them. Camael parried an incoming strike away, proceeding to catch and throw Seiten Taisei into Anat with such force that the chamber rattled again.

Shizuka grit her teeth at the sight. "Fuck it, we don't have much else to lose at this rate..."

"Good... hey, Fox, mind giving me a hand? And Maestro," Sergio turned slightly, a sweet smile lingering on his face. Hifumi stiffened just a little, her cheeks turning a little pinker. "Would you mind helping to guide my aim?"

"O-of course," Hifumi replied, managing a pleased smile.

Yusuke landed beside Sergio, just as Breakthru started to uproot a dark platform that was taller and broader than Camael, and nearly two meters thick. "What do you need?" Yusuke asked.

"For now? I'd like you to coat this in the densest ice your Persona can create. The more mass I can slap on this bad boy, the better," Sergio said, smiling wryly.

Across the vast chamber, Naoto was quickly leaping away from incoming tendrils of barbed wire that were punching into the platform. Her Persona was darting around, landing more slashes to the grey surface of his skin.

A coil of the wire managed to loop around Naoto's left ankle, making the bluenette yelp as she was lifted off her feet and slammed violently into the unwelcoming earth. The world rattled around her, a loud ringing coming through her ears. Mercurius darted forward and sliced the barbed wire apart before he could throw Naoto again. She lay on the ground, groaning as her sore muscles forbade her from rising again.

A powerful gale slammed into Camael's stomach, his heels carving twin trenches in the ground as he was forced several feet backward. He grunted, quickly regaining his balance and glaring at
Morgana and his floating Persona. "Hope is a delusion. A human weakness that is so easily shattered... I'll shatter you, you insignificant creature."

"I have no idea what the heck you're talking about... but I know that you're full of it!" Morgana shouted in return.

Camael raised his burnt wings, the metal blocking several more blades of wind as they slammed violently against him. He was quickly aware of another figure rushing at his right, causing him to turn and dodge a flurry of stabs from Futsunishi. A few edges grazed his armor, carving into the steel.

A bolt of lightning exploded against his spine, followed by a sharp swing from Seiten Teisei plowing Camael into the earth. He twisted and rolled, raising his right arm to block an incoming swing from the floating monkey. Both of Camael's eyes flashed golden, followed by a spike of blessed light exploding from his eyes.

Ryuji let out a pained shout, being bowled onto his back and clutching his stomach. His sturdy body trembled, trying to process the pain. It was getting harder and harder to get back up.

By now Yusuke had finished coating the platform, giving it an extra meter of mass, while Breakthru was pressing his right fist to the frozen mass. It was rotating slowly, with a scarlet miasma of untapped kinetic energy forming around it. Sergio's right arm was trembling, beads of sweat falling down his face.

"Hoo boy... this is... really... a lot more intense than I thought it'd be... feels like my arm is gonna explode," Sergio murmured.

Hifumi was standing about a foot in front of Sergio, forming a frame with her fingers in front of her eyes. Her pupils were aglow, her Stand busily trying to find the ideal trajectory toward the angel. "Just hold it steady Diabolik... I think the others are planning something too," she said.

A long slice ran up the exposed surface of Camael's chest, a spray of tar coating the edge of Futsunishi's sword. Camael growled, being forced back onto his right foot, but he was quick to snap forward and smash his ironclad brow into Futsunishi's face. Akira gasped in pain, twin spurts of blood flying from his nose as he landed harshly near Naoto and Ryuji.

Before Camael could make another move, an invisible heel slammed into the side of his face with enough force to make him stumble backward. "BAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZUBAZU!!" A flurry of kicks thundered against Camael's chest and face, Houdini's blows enough to stagger him but not majorly damage him.

Houdini shoved away from Camael, lunging toward the ground and only barely avoiding upward slashes of Camael's wings. Her right fist snapped toward Camael, her knuckles glowing and unleashing a focused wave of ultraviolet light his face. The flash struck Camael's right eye, leaving a long black scorch along the side of his helmet and earning a pained snarl from the looming monster.

However, in doing this, Shizuka gave her Stand's position away. Camael's heel met Houdini's stomach, a sharp wheeze leaving Shizuka a the wind was knocked immediately out of her. The young Joestar was knocked flat as Camael's knuckles struck across Houdini's face. The world swam in Shizuka's vision.
A cyclone lashed toward Camael's left side, while Ann took aim from Camael's right and unleashed a firestorm from Hecate's hands. The white hot wave slammed over Camael's armored hull, while the whirlwind on the other side of his body started to scar and slice into his flesh, with each slash leaving a mark in his body.

A sudden shout from Camael unleashed a sonic wall that carved through the incoming attacks, striking Ann and Morgana in unison. The two Persona users cried out, their bodies slamming into the platform with such force that the ground cracked beneath them.

Camael shot skyward, crackles of black and purple lightning dancing along his body. Half of his body was marked with a hatchwork of scars, while the other half was dyed black from deep burns. Sections of his armor were partially melted, a fact that was emphasized as the glow of Camael's body grew more intense. Soon his entire body was wreathed in an ebony aura, while vortexes of purple light danced along his forearms.

"You annoying chattel... I've humored you long enough!" Camael raised his arms above his head, the pulsating energy in his hands starting to form a churning sphere between his palms.

Futaba gasped in shock, her eyes wide. "Th-that energy... it's humongous!"

Akra struggled to stand, his other downed allies similarly dazed. Dodging seemed impossible, and blocking likely wouldn't help much. Many of them were running low on energy, while Camael clearly had power to spare. "Nemesis... you need to use this opening..." Akira breathed.

"Now... I'll finish the final embers of your resistance! I'll smash you flat!" With a powerful roar, Camael threw the bullet of almighty energy toward the downed Arditi. Though he had condensed it to the size of a football, the blast would be enough to wipe out several floors of the Prison in one fell swoop if the energy wasn't contained.

In an instant Prometheus moved in front of the downed thieves, the ground beneath them starting to glow with the light of several strange runes that formed a circle of protection around them. "O-Oracle!" Akira shouted in shock.

"Don't worry," Futaba murmured, turning two holographic dials from the darkened confines of her cockpit. The lights along Prometheus' ebony hull began to glow brighter, and the air several feet around the ship suddenly hardened at her command. An unseen barrier that was spread wide like an open umbrella. "I can take it."

Unstoppable force met immovable object, the impact shaking the entire chamber, and several floors of the dungeon above. The light was blinding, and Futaba screwed her eyes shut as Prometheus struggled and strained to keep the barrier projected. The white hot flash of almighty energy fought to tunnel through.

Akira grit his teeth, forcing himself to one knee. Even under the layer of her shield, he could feel the pressure overhead. They would have been wiped out instantly by a blast like that.

"She can take it," Ann said, looking up at the glowing sphere. "She's pretty damn tough after all."

"Yeah..." Akira murmured. "She sure is." And he didn't doubt that for a moment. But he still couldn't help but worry.

The roar of the explosion lasted for several more seconds, a long series of cracks splintering along
the barrier Futaba had projected. The downed thieves held their collective breaths, and then breathed a simultaneous sigh of relief as the last dregs of Camael's attack died down. The lights along Prometheus' hull flickered, Futaba's barrier fading entirely.

"I think... I'm only good... for one of those..." Futaba said, her tone strained from exertion.

"Is that so?" Camael called from above. "Then allow me to test that theory!"

"Tag!" The dark angel tensed suddenly, a hand brushing along the back of his skull. He turned, all too late, as waves of red, purple, and green light washed over his heavy body. Camael groaned, feeling his strength and speed being sapped. He watched as Eris pulled back further, while Shiho grinned with pride. "Needed a good opening to try that." All she could hope now was that it would weaken him enough.

Anat rushed the angel, driving her right fist into his gut with all the force she could muster. The boom echoed through the chamber, while Camael grunted and doubled over. Another flash exploded from his eyes, knocking the mechanical Persona away. Makoto grimaced, staggering back a few steps, but quickly regained her footing.

"Now! Do it!" she shouted, looking over to Sergio.

The blond nodded, letting Hifumi adjust his aim a little bit more. Then, with a mighty roar of "VATTENE!", Breakthru launched the ice-coated meteor at the dazed dark angel.

It crossed the chamber in a split second, a tremendous and deafening sonic boom resounding through the entire chamber. It and Camael were launched straight to the far end of the room, toward a dense wall of vein-encrusted black stone. It shattered like glass on impact, the burning meteor hurtling into the chamber beyond.

The ensuing explosion shook the ground beneath the Arditi for several seconds, a vibrant flash of fire glowing through the freshly formed hole in the wall. Ryuji grimaced, rising to his feet and only managing to stand in a hunched position. "Did that... did that do it?" he asked, glancing toward Prometheus.

The dark shell surrounding Futaba faded away, with the redhead landing on her feet and wobbling briefly off balance. "I can still sense him," Futaba remarked, her tone grim. "He's been weakened and hurt, but... so have we."

"Right..." Akira murmured. If Camael was the guardian of Mementos' treasure, and if the worlds were being merged together, then they had to get through him. "Follow my lead."

Akira was nearly staggering as he walked the path of platforms toward the shattered wall. An entryway was ahead of them, a few feet across, and thick plumes of smoke were rising through this opening. The others following his lead were looking haggard too, as if a stiff breeze would be enough to bowl them over.

They had spent a deal of stamina hitting Camael with the best they had, and gotten more than a little tenderized for their troubles. Everyone was sporting their share of cuts and bruises, and their footsteps were punctuated with the sounds of heavy breathing.

They entered the large chamber, with Akira taking the lead. Futaba and Morgana took up the rear, the duo walking close together.
As the smoke was clearing, Camael's silhouette grew more defined. He was standing partially hunched, the edges of his wings burnt and frayed. Scaps of grey skin had been peeled off of his body, revealing sinews of inky muscle tissue beneath. A chunk of his helmet had been broken off the top, revealing gnarled grey skin.

"Is that... all?" Camael asked in a low hissing growl, clenching his fists slowly.

"You may act confident, but you're clearly wounded. You're not standing as proud as you used to," Yusuke remarked.

"Yeah, but that's not gonna be enough to stop a guy like him," Shizuka said.

Camael huffed slightly. "I'll admit that you're all stronger than I was expecting, but it's still not enough to overpower me," he said in a firm tone.

Akira narrowed his eyes, silently contemplating their options. In Camael's current state, if the whole team rushed him, they could beat him down for good. But if they messed up even slightly, and Camael took even one of them out, then he'd start building momentum and smash the team one by one until nothing remained.

He silently inspected the chamber Camael had crash landed in. It was largely featureless, save for one thing: A large brass coloured door with a wheel handle, like something out of a navy ship. It was completely untouched by the earlier explosion... what on earth made it so sturdy? And more importantly, what was behind it?

"Hrm..." Camael's left hand stroked over the knotwork over his abdomen, his sharp gaze affixed to the gathered individuals before him. "Fortunately, I still have my ace in the hole."

Naoto took a cautious step backward, watching him carefully. "Ace in the hole? What do you mean?!!"

Camael's gaze became affixed to Shizuka, and he seemed to almost be laughing. "You know... I really have you to thank, young lady. I never would have known how a person gains a 'Stand' if it weren't for you. And that little arrow you had really did the trick for me," he said in a low growl.

"You... you don't mean..." Shizuka's eyes widened, and she felt her stomach form into an ice cold pit of dread. "You used... my Stand arrow?"

"Oh yes. In my first ever trip into the real world... I could only manifest for a few minutes, but it gave me enough time to do what I needed to. And if that creature could have such a power..." His gaze settled on Morgana for a fleeting second. "Then why couldn't I do the same? I suppose now is a good a time as any to give this power a true test..."

"Bullshit! We're takin' you down here and now asshole, Stand or no Stand!" Ryuji shouted, suddenly charging forward.

"Skull, you idiot!" Ann shouted, following his lead, with some of the others falling in behind her.

Though most of his face was still concealed, Akira could feel Camael smiling.

"Dies Irae." Camael's whole body flashed with a brilliant white light, the ethereal glow
freezing the gathered Phantom Thieves in place. They all felt a chill of ice in their veins, and knew at once that this was no ordinary Stand.

It was formless. That brilliant light that became a holy hymn, flowing through their optic nerves and caressing through their ears, slithering like an unholy serpent into their brains. The light that became a sound murmured against their souls and coiled around their hearts, all while the blessed chant of alien tongues reached into their brains.

That beautiful soul music, the light and sound listening to the innermost desires and fantasies of the Arditi that had been ground down by the cruelties of reality. The light that became a sound heard all these desires and fantasies, and instantaneously began constructing worlds around them.

While Futaba was frozen in place, transfixed as the others were by the soul music, Prometheus was able to act whenever the redhead was in danger. And right now she and the others were in a whole lot of it. The dark shell coiled around her, yanking Morgana in too due to his proximity, and then suddenly shunted itself to safety: Outside of the confines of this seemingly doomed universe.

And, one by one, the other members of the Arditi winked out of existence too.

The light faded, and Camael slumped forward a bit, breathing heavily. "Hah... let's see you escape from that... ignorant creatures..."

Even if their addled minds could break through Dies Irae's illusory power, Camael doubted he'd have to deal with the Arditi again. After all, what human could bring themselves to leave their heart's desires?

Still, things had been closer than Camael was willing to admit. Now he understood the reason for his creation all too clearly. The Phantom Thieves, with their vast potential, could well have prevented the creation of the paradise above if things weren't aligned against them.

He'd need to get healing, and to catch his breath. But as Camael cast his gaze to the bronze-colored door, he knew there was one last loose end his master wanted taken care of.

The sentencing of Akira Kurusu.
The World Under Hell (IV)

The world was ending, but being stuck with a chatty taxi driver was still the worst thing about today.

"... and my son, he just never shuts up about it. Obsessed he it, goes on and on about what a travesty it is that Risette is getting married. Can you believe it? Honestly, I shoulda nipped that idol obsession in the bud when I had the chance. And anyway the girl he's obsessed with isn't even real. It's just an act, so why bother getting upset about it?"

Jotaro wasn't even half listening, the voice of his driver a barely recognisable white noise that he would occasionally grunt in response to. It was worrying how the driver wasn't reacting in any capacity to the crimson skies overhead, but that was apparently the norm.

It had all started soon after his plane touched down at Haneda, when the scarlet rain began to lash along the runway. He seemed to be the only person who had seen it, the shock enough to mildly distort Jotaro's usually stony expression.

As soon as he got into the airport proper, he put a call into Jolyne. It seemed she and her friends were seeing the chaos too, but since they were stuck in Brazil (another gang had earned their ire), it seemed she wouldn't be able to make any trips soon. Then he called Josuke, who also confirmed what he was seeing. More than that, he and his friends in Morioh had apparently been attacked by what Josuke had called 'metal angels.'

He seemed convinced that Shizuka and her friends were somehow bound up in this. Jotaro would have dismissed the claims as Josuke just being worried about his sister, but when he tried calling Shizuka there had been no answer. That was rather worrying.

And, according to some of Jotaro's Speedwagon contacts, there was a large gathering of those 'angels' congregating near Naples. He knew full well why, and doubted he'd be able to get help from that neck of the woods.

All he could do was head for Tokyo. If the root of the problem was there, he was hoping he could come upon it quickly.

The rain suddenly grew more intense, crimson bullets striking the windows and leaving transparent streaks in passing. Tokyo was drawing near. It was ringed with colossal structures of bone, as if in the belly of a tremendous corpse. "Whoa!" The taxi driver jolted a bit in surprise. "Those're some heavy drops. Looks like a storm's brewing."

"Yeah," Jotaro curtly remarked. His gaze was focused outside his window, toward the dark clouds that dotted the sky. A series of black silhouettes floated in place against them, suspended in place but silently tracking his taxi. "Looks like."

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Akira awoke with a pained grunt, opening his eyes to a blurry world of velvet blue. Chains clinked around his wrists and ankles as he fought to sit up, but pain was stabbing at his joints. Once his vision cleared enough, he could see that he had no wounds from his earlier battle. But he was still feeling lingering pain from them.
His Joker attire was gone, replaced with the usual prisoners black and white he wore whenever he came to the Velvet Room. "Ugh..." his head throbbed, and he slumped forward on the bench he'd awoken on. "What happened?"

"In the end, your rehabilitation was not carried through." Igor's deep, imposing voice cut through the air like a knife. Akira snapped to attention, glaring toward the bars of his cell. Caroline and Justine flanked it, as ever, but both girls looked particularly morose today. "It appears I have underestimated you..."

Akira grunted, rising to his feet. "What happened? Where are my friends?" He recalled the fight with Camael, and the strange white light he produced. The beautiful soul music that coiled around his brain and spoke so sweetly to him... before he was abruptly yanked away from it. And now here he was again, with no memory of making a trip through the spectral prison door.

Igor chuckled darkly in return, bearing the same manic grin as ever.

"You... you..." Caroline suddenly glared up at him, her face a mix of sadness and frustration. "You incompetent prisoner!"

"All the assistance we provided was for naught," Justine said, her eye cast to the floor.

"Humans are more apathetic, and more foolish than I had thought them to be. The world will soon see its ruin..." he trailed off, his smile never faltering.

Eventually, Akira managed to ask the most pressing question on his mind. "Am I dead?"

"You have lost the game. You were meant to bring change to mankind as the Trickster, but it seems that was too much for you. The foolish masses turned on you in a heartbeat, and forgot about you just as quickly. In accordance to the game's rules, the defeated must pay a price. Your life is forfeit." Akira bristled, and the twin wardens nearly jumped out of their skin in shock. "I sentence you to be executed."

"E-executed?" Caroline asked. The firebrand barely spoke above a whisper, her lone golden eye wide in horror.

Igor's large, bloodshot eyes drifted over the two wardens. "God's decree if absolute. My experiment has come to naught. Everything is over." Igor's white gloved digits drummed along his desk, his grin becoming more shark-like as he spoke. "Grant that man a swift death."

"You can't be serious..." Akira murmured, dumbstruck.

"If..." Caroline swallowed hard, gripping her baton so tight that the handle looked set to crack. "If that's what our master wishes..."

"You can't be serious!" Akira shouted. This was all wrong. Igor, that bastard, he was enjoying this. He wanted this. Why?! There was something in those bloodshot eyes, something utterly inhuman.

Caroline swallowed hard. "It... It just means you weren't an upstanding prisoner!" she shouted, her tone wavering a bit.

Justine hesitated, looking between Caroline and Akira. "Sister..."
Igor leaned forward in his desk. "What are you two doing? Carry out his sentence at once."

Justine looked her sister in the eye. "Are we... really going to kill him?" She sounded on the verge of tears.

"D-don't falter now! We have a duty to perform!" Caroline shouted, trying her hardest to gather resolve.

Igor's desk vanished, with the well dressed ghoul standing to his full imposing height. He was built like a capital T, abnormally wide shoulders trailing down into a thin set of legs. Igor glided backwards, while two large blue guillotine's rose up from the rippling white-tiled floor.

Akira's cell door was flung open, an unseen force pushing him forward. Akira grunted, struggling and failing to stop himself, as the wardens approached the two execution machines. "You know this is wrong!" Akira exclaimed.

"We... we have a duty to perform, as wardens," Justine replied. She didn't sound too certain.

Things couldn't end like this, not when they were so close! They must have been just outside the treasure room when Camael attacked. And if they really had failed, then the world... was the world doomed?

"We just need to... use the guillotine. No problem, we've... done this plenty of times..." Caroline murmured, glancing to the nearest blade. She swallowed hard.

'My friends... what happened to them? I can't just abandon them... I'm their leader, and they put their faith in me... I can't just lay down and die...' Akira's anger was rising, and he clenched his fists tight at his sides. The same unseen force drove him to his knees, a great weight pressing into his back.

"Please... don't make this any harder than it already is," Justine said, turning her gaze to Akira.

'I can't let them down... not while there's still a chance! I won't just roll over and die!' The air around Akira began to flicker, a rising surge of power in his body causing the twins to take a surprised step backward. The ball and chain on his right ankle glowed white hot and then exploded apart utterly, while his prison attire was wreathed in a warm white light.

"I won't... let him win!"

A violent flash of blue fire washed over Akira, his shabby prison attire being replaced with his familiar dark longcoat. The flames washed over his face, rapidly shaping into the white domino mask he had grown accustomed to.

A blue butterfly flickered past the corner of his vision.

Caroline looked uneasy, but soon spread her legs as if squaring up for a fight. A menacing energy loomed over the silver-haired girl, which was soon matched by Justine. "Still showing off a rebellious spirit after your failure?"

"Our Master orders your death, this cannot be helped..." Justine said.
Akira watched the two closely, power still rippling around him. He didn't want to hurt these girls, they were his friends. But, more pressing, Akira had his doubts he could really hurt them at all if they wanted his head. Both of them radiated an intense power, and fighting both of them at once...

"You know this is wrong. Something about... this! All of it! It's totally twisted!" Akira shouted.

Justine was visibly hesitating, but Caroline managed to take a step forward. "Stop resisting inmate! Just... just accept your punishment!"

"One's final moments should be spent in good grace," Justine remarked.

Justine's eye glowed brighter, an aura of azure light rising around her lithe body. In an instant a searing beam of heat lanced Akira's way, with the young man gripping his mask. Koumokuten rose up in front of him with his arms crossed.

The blast struck hard, Akira's heels skidding closer toward his cell as he tried to endure the burning heat that coiled around him. Caroline took a sharp step forward, flourishing her baton Akira's way. She took a glowing bright azure shade, with an unseen figure darting from her body and smashing into Koumokuten's guarding body. The Velvet Room quivered, with Akira swiftly being driven to one knee.

Grimacing, he looked up at the twins. "You expressed your doubts... didn't you? About him?" He glared toward Igor, still sneering like a jungle predator.

"That's..." Caroline gripped her baton tight. "That doesn't..."

"We... we cannot falter..." Justine remarked, though her heart wasn't in it.

Another unseen force came rushing Akira's way, with Caroline glowing brightly. It slammed into Koumokuten's upraised arms, Akira grunting again from the sudden pressure, but he managed to endure it better. She didn't hit as hard this time.

Catching his breath, Akira moved to stand. "If I fail here... then I don't think there's any way to save the world... do you really want that? To forsake the world? And all the innocent people out there? You've been to the human world, you've enjoyed it... do you just want to sit back and watch it die?"

"Don't... don't try to pin this on us!" Caroline snapped in return. But it was quite clear she didn't want to throw it all away.

"More than that... you're wardens... you told me you were all about my rehabilitation... so where the hell does execution fit into any of that?!" Akira asked.

Both girls froze up, and then looked at each other. They looked as if someone had just dumped a bucket of ice water over their heads. Indeed, now that they thought about it, something about 'execute the prisoner' just sounded so fundamentally wrong, like asking a doctor under the Hippocratic Oath to commit cold blooded torture.

Igor regarded them silently from where he stood. "What are you two doing? I believe I ordered you to execute this man."

Caroline and Justine shared a glance, with each passing second seeming to unravel a string that had
been coiled around their brains. This, all of it, did indeed feel wrong on some level that the girls hadn't been able to discern until now. "Master... have you forsaken humanity?" Caroline asked, glaring at the balding figure. It sounded like something Igor would never do, and yet...

"We are wardens. Are duty is to rehabilitate prisoners. Something speaks to me... killing goes against our very nature and role." Justine stood firm, while Igor continued to glower at them. His grin had yet to falter.

The blue butterfly flickered past Akira's vision once more, a phantom that rang out through his mind. "Help... Please... help..." The ghostly voice, young and feminine, filled his head. So familiar, and yet...

"What should I do?" Akira asked under his breath.

"What should I do? Our desire is for you to complete your true rehabilitation..." The spectral butterfly flew past Akira's shoulders, moving between the twins. It seemed only Akira could see it.

"We're not executioners... and we will not forsake humanity!" Caroline shouted, glaring toward Igor.

"Heh..." Akira managed to stand awkwardly, trying to ignore the lingering throbs of pain in his body. "Knew I could get you on my side."

Caroline bristled, her face turning a little pinker. "W-we're doing this for our sake Inmate! D-don't get any weird ideas!"

The butterfly popped with a sudden white flash, disappearing entirely. Caroline and Justine gasped gently, staggering backward in surprise. They both slumped to one knee in unison, before slowly looking up at each other.

Realization dawned on Caroline's face, as if noticing something that she had never suspected before now. "Your right eye, and my left..." Caroline murmured. "It's as if they're the same, yet mirrored." For just a fraction of a second, the specter of a third girl appeared between the twins, so fast that Akira could barely perceive her silhouette.

"Ah, now is the time for our wish to be realized..."

Caroline and Justine nodded to each other, before the former rose slowly to her feet. "I finally remember... How we were torn apart."

"Torn apart?" Akira repeated in surprise.

"Yes," Justine confirmed, nodding to Akira as she stood upright. "We were originally one, but were torn in half by a malevolent will!"

The trio turned together, all eyes glaring toward Igor. His expression hadn't changed, but the air around him was now radiating a deep malice. He chuckled to himself.

"So, we were captives, just like you... heh, to think we'd learn the truth from a prisoner," Caroline said, smiling wryly.

Justine turned her focus to her... sister? Other half? "Let us reclaim our true form," Justine said,
well aware of how pressing the matter now was.

Caroline nodded in turn. "Hey, prisoner, consider this your last job! Justine and I need to fuse!"
Caroline said, giving the blue metal of the guillotine's frame a smack with her baton. The blades reeled upward automatically. "And we can't risk any interruptions!"

"Oh, is that so? Well I think I have you covered," Akira said, grinning slightly.

Koumokuten suddenly shot from Akira's body, his left palm smashing violently into Igor's left cheek. There was a sickening snapping sound as Igor's head abruptly spun around 180 degrees, his feet staggering backward.

The balding figure held his footing, gloved hands curiously reaching around and poking at the twisted flesh of his neck. "Come on you lying fuck..." Akira growled, clenching his left fist tight. The servos in his knuckles whirred loudly. "I've got some 'rehabilitation' in mind for you too..."

As he spoke, Caroline and Justine moved into the two guillotines. They stared at each other, with Caroline reaching over and taking Justine's hand in her own. The more gentle twin smiled kindly, giving Caroline a reassuring squeeze. This was for the best.

"Do you really think you can best me, Trickster? Human arrogance truly knows no bounds." More horrible snapping and crunching sounds filled the Velvet Room as Igor twisted his head back into place. A large chunk of skin had been torn off his face by Koumokuten's strike, the edges of torn skin reduced to black tar, revealing a layer of glittering metal where bone should have been.

The malevolent aura around him grew more intense, a swirling cloud of blackness that grew in volume as he started to float upward. Igor's eyes morphed into two solid white orbs, his remaining skin blackening. Akira held his ground.

"No. I'm far more than him. But we are indeed linked..."

The guillotine blades fell in unison, striking Caroline and Justine simultaneously. Both girls exploded into twin clouds of blue butterflies on impact, with the spectral insects rapidly weaving together. A bright white glow blossomed in the heart of the Velvet Room, the light rapidly shaping into the form of a small girl. The glow faded, revealing her figure in detail. She was only a hair's breadth taller than Caroline and Justine, her silver hair flowing past her waist. She was dressed in an elegant blue dress and dark shorts. Black gloves trailed to her elbows.

Akira quickly noticed the distinct hairband she was wearing, marked by silvery butterfly wings on each end. Under her right arm she was carrying a leatherbound tome, thicker than her torso, and clearly held it without issue. Her golden eyes looked up at Akira, a tiny smile on her face.

"My name is Lavenza..." she curtly greeted. "I was torn apart by a vile will, and took the form of those twins. I tried to seek aid as a disembodied consciousness, a lonely aspect without a body... but you were the only person I could reach, Trickster. I knew I could rely on you."

Akira smiled faintly, taking a slight step backward to put himself between Lavenza and the marauding ghoul. He didn't doubt she was obscenely powerful too, but there was an instinctive thing about wanting to protect things smaller than yourself. "Glad to know you're okay... always knew there was something a little strange about you two, but I never could have expected this..."
"My thanks, trickster. But as for this... scoundrel who has stolen my master's name and visage..."
Her glare grew sharp as she focused on the imposter. "Your lies shall work no longer now that my sight is restored!"

"It's not over yet," Igor remarked, his tone growing deeper and developing a worrisome echo. "Whether the human world is left as is, or destroyed and rebuilt, it is all sport to me!"

Akira narrowed his eyes, inspecting the figure floating above him. "What... are you?"

Igor closed his eyes, his smile growing smug. "If I were to put it into words that your narrow human mind can comprehend, I am the Holy Grail that grants wishes..."

Holy Grail... why did that sound so familiar? Akira rooted through his memories, recalling the graffiti and flyers he had seen around Tokyo. Those had been referencing a 'holy grail' too, hadn't they?

Regardless, the black spectre carried on. "No... it may be more accurate to say that I am a god who responds to desire, and holds dominion over man. I hoped that seeing a righteous thief vanquish evil would spur mankind to change their own indolent hearts... Instead the masses turned on you, and forgot about you. The game, ultimately, was lost for you. Because of this, I will give humans what they deserve: Ruin."

"A game..." Akira trailed off, as a few things began to make more sense in his mind. He and Akechi, all of a sudden, for seemingly no reason, both gained the Metaverse Navigator and the power of a Persona. One of them helped to sculpt the conspiracy that made this all possible, while the other started to fight against it two years later. Was it all staged?

If Akechi hadn't been working for Shido, then the events that led to Akira coming to Tokyo never could have transpired. It was all too convenient to be a simple coincidence.

Then there was the matter of the Vacant People, and the haze of ignorance that wrapped around the people of the world. That wasn't something that had happened naturally, that was a force acting through the Metaverse on a global scale. And if this thing was above Camael, then did that put him at the head of all this?

None of this had happened naturally. This creature had set all the pieces in place... and cheated his ass off to get the result he wanted!

"You son of a bitch... you rigged this whole thing!" Akira spat.

"Whatever I may or may not have done is irrelevant. This outcome was inevitable," the floating creature replied. "But I am not without some mercy, Trickster, and you've managed to gain some measure of respect from me... After all, a mere human such as you has managed to come this far, and see through my disguise. No normal man could ever surprise me like this... Though you may have frustrated me, you certainly never bored me. And I may yet derive amusement in watching you longer. Perhaps you would like to make a deal?"

Akira watched the floating figure intensely. "A deal? What the hell are you talking about?" he asked warily.

A strange flicker rolled across Igor's grinning mouth. "Should you wish it, I shall return the world
to its prior state- one rampant with distorted masses. I will even return your allies to you."

Lavenza gave Akira a sideways glance. "Be careful. You know full well that this creature cannot be trusted..."

"I can easily remake the world. I can make a world where the Arditi are showered in praise and fame, and the ruin currently covering the planet will be undone. What say you?"

The chance to save the world... Akira would be ashamed to admit it, but that in itself sounded nice. But even so, this creature shaping the whole world on a whim... after all this, he wasn't just going to disappear.

It was just going to be one big lie, wasn't it? An illusory world, a stage play of reality with an insane director behind the curtains. If Akira agreed, there was a chance that they could never fix the damage done. And the others... if they found out, they'd never forgive him.

"You really don't know me if you think fame is gonna win me over," Akira remarked, glaring toward the floating ghoul. "But more importantly... I have no interest in accepting any offer that comes out of your lying mouth!"

"Such irredeemable foolishness..." Igor shook his head slowly. "You willingly choose death? Very well. I have no need of you... Your allies are lost to you. And soon you, and every other deviant mind I cannot control, will be purged from the earth." A swirl of dark and red matter coiled around him, before he vanished from the Velvet Room entirely.

Akira breathed a tiny sigh of relief. Things were far from ideal right now, but they could have been a whole lot worse.

His relief was short lived, flourishes of blue and black light washing past his shoulders and rapidly merging to form a sphere of velvet light in the center of the room. The guillotines slid back into the ground, Igor's desk rising back up in front of the strange sphere. It flashed brightly, and in an instant another Igor was seated behind the desk.

Akira tensed, watching as the slumped figure groaned and rose up into a steady sitting position. "Master!" Lavenza gasped.

"This one's the real deal?" Akira asked. The young girl nodded earnestly.

"Ngh... Oh my... it's been quite a while since I last set foot in this place..." His voice was softer, lighter than that of the imposter. And while he still looked creepy, Akira didn't get any negative vibes from this guy. His eyes settled on Akira. "Welcome to the Velvet Room. My name is Igor. I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

"He is the true master of the Velvet Room, and your true aid on this journey," Lavenza explained.

"How unfortunate that we now only meet toward the end of your journey... nevertheless, I still aim to do all I can to aid you," Igor remarked.

Akira nodded stiffly. "Okay... cool..." Akira replied. It had been a hell of a day, and he was on the verge of collapsing. "In that case, first thing's first... we need to get my team back."
Prometheus shook violently, thrown about by cosmic winds that lashed against it. The world beyond the small dark sphere was a multicoloured stream of mashing lights, occasionally interrupted by planet-sized spheres of a glass-like substance.

"W-what's happening?!" Morgana shouted, trying in vain to get a grip on some segment of the floor, desperate to anchor himself even slightly.

"I-it's Prometheus! He always acts to protect me, and when Camael used his Stand he tried to get me somewhere safe! But if earth and the Metaverse have merged, then there's nowhere 'safe' on our world!" Futaba shouted, her fingers digging into the holographic dials at her hands to try and gain some control over the craft. Gravity was catching it, dragging her ship along.

"S-so what does that mean?!" Morgana called out.

"If there's nowhere safe on our world... then he's sending us to a different one!" Futaba exclaimed. It already had the strength to weave through dimensions as Necronomicon, and his power had only grown in scale since evolving. "Stop you overgrown hunk of junk! Stop! We can't ditch the others like this!"

Bit by bit Prometheus was being dragged through the sea of rainbow light, the unnatural space warping in appearance with each passing second. Prometheus met the expansive surface of the sphere, a strange popping sound ringing out around the ship as they pushed through the glassy material.

The scenery shifted instantly, and soon the dark ship was falling through clear blue skies at an alarming speed. The air around Prometheus screamed in protest, intense flames washing over the dark hull. Futaba's HUD lit up, providing her a camera feed of the rapidly approaching ground: An expansive forest that stretched on for many miles. At least they weren't going to crush any people.

Futaba struggled against the 'g's pressing down on her slim body, the controls in front of her shifting into a single lever. She gripped it tight with both hands and shoved it forth with all her might, holding it in place as best she could. Her slim body was jostling and bouncing, the speed of the falling ship decreasing as she tried to thrust against gravity.

"You stupid piece of junk! How is this safe?!" Futaba growled.

"I'm too young and pretty to die!" Morgana shouted. "Now that I've got a hot human body waiting for me in the real world!"

The craft shook violently as it struck the ground, the tremors persisting for several long seconds before slowing down. Futaba grunted, continuing to press the throttle until Prometheus ground to a halt. Through it all she could hear the sound of crunching earth, and snapping wood.

When the craft grew still, Morgana and Futaba held their breath for several seconds. The redhead eventually reached forward, hisses of steam rising from the exterior of Prometheus' hull. A seam opened ahead of the two, slowly opening like a blossoming flower, as a few black plates spread wide.

The sphere had carved a long and deep trench in the ground, and over a dozen trees that had doubtless stood undisturbed for centuries had been uprooted and smashed flat under Prometheus' bulk. "Well... it looks like we're on earth..." Futaba murmured.
"Looks like?" Morgana repeated uncertainly. "Still, if we're both stuck in our thief gear... there must be something a little unnatural about this place."

Futaba breathed a tiny sigh of relief. "We're alive, that's the important part... I need a moment to catch my breath, and then I can... try and get back to the others." How the hell was she gonna manage that? The shifting scenery of the space between worlds, she had barely gotten a good look at it. How could she find their own reality?

"Then... I guess we could try and find some local people to help us out?" Morgana suggested.

There was a sudden rustling from above, two jet black figures darting from point to point across the branches. Futaba tensed, her goggles glowing as she tried to track the movements of both figures.

"Aw man..." Morgana murmured. "And we only just got here... please don't be violent and crazy..."

The two figures came to a stop on a branch overlooking Prometheus, looking down at the crashed ship in silence. The first figure was a simple black cat with gleaming green eyes that held an intelligence above that of a standard feline.

At his side stood a young man who was perhaps a year or two older than Futaba, dressed in clothing that looked halfway between a high school uniform and an officer's attire, a short black cloak draped over his shoulders and concealing portions of his charcoal-coloured uniform. A flat black cap rested atop his head, his pale face framed by pointed sideburns. A saber and pistol were holstered on his crisp white belt. He had a pair of white holsters were positioned by his armpits, each one holding three glowing green tubes.

"Well lookie here Raidou... ya don't see that every day," the black cat said.
"So... walk me through all this..." Akira said, taking a seat on a modest chair across from Igor. Lavenza walked beside her master and came to a calm stop, clutching her expansive tome with ease. "This... Holy Grail. Where did it even come from?"

"His existence was an anomaly. Something that arose from pure chance, from the amalgamation of human thoughts in this Metaverse. It happens, from time to time. But once it came to exist, and became self-aware, it grew in strength quite rapidly," Igor explained, all smiles.

Akira nodded slightly. "Figured out that much when his underling was busy fighting my whole team at the same time... but this game he was mentioning, what's he talking about? Was this all some kind of... wager?"

"Of a sort," Lavenza remarked. "When the Holy Grail became aware of his own existence, it would have been easy for him to set about his mission without anyone being aware of what was going on. In order to give humanity a chance to fight back, he proposed this 'game' to the creature. Each would choose a champion- one of hope, and one of ruin, destined to come into conflict. The winner would be what decided the fate of your world."

"And that was Akechi and myself... Huh." He hardly felt much more sympathy toward the Black Mask bastard, but he was a pawn in all this too. How much of their lives had been shaped by this little game?

Igor slowly tented his white gloved fingers under his chin. "Of course, the Holy Grail imprisoning me and taking my identity was not part of the arrangement."

Lavenza nodded. "Perhaps on some tiny level, the Grail wanted to see human potential in action. That was why he agreed to this arrangement in the first place, I suppose. But it is incredibly clear he had no intention of ever losing, throwing things in his favor at every turn," the white-haired girl said.

Akira sank into his chair, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "Yeah, that much is obvious now... God's a cheating dick, I couldn't have seen that coming. But even if it's all rigged, I don't plan on giving up."

"I know. Your determination makes you so admirable, Trickster," Lavenza said, smiling fondly at him. Her cheeks seemed just a little bit pinker as she said this. Reaching into one pocket on her dress, she suddenly pulled something into view.

It took him a moment to recognise the plush squirrel doll she was holding. It was split evenly in half, one part being blue while the other was pink. Akira recalled his trip to the arcade with Caroline and Justine, where both girls had gotten a plush squirrel that they were equally smitten with. It seemed the dolls had merged when the girls themselves did.

"I owe you much, Trickster. And I plan on helping you through this journey to the very end," Lavenza said.

"I'm glad to hear that, and I'm eager to get back to work but... I don't know where to go from here. I don't even know where that creep sent my friends," Akira replied. It had been a Stand at work, he
remembered that much, but a Stand could theoretically do anything. How was he going to figure out where the hell his friends had been sent.

"Yes, that is a problem. Your bonds are a cornerstone of your power," Igor mused, maintaining his eerie grin all the while.

As Igor spoke, Lavenza seemed to stare off into the distance. Her sharp feline eyes shifted for a moment, before she adjusted her attention toward the tome under her arm. "I know where to reach one of your friends, at least. I should perhaps go and retrieve your oracle before she gets lost entirely."

"Oracle? Futaba?!" Akira sprang sharply to his feet, his eyes wide.

Lavenza nodded. "She and Morgana avoided the insidious power that Camael drew upon, through the power of her Persona... the issue is that she is currently outside our universe."

"W-what?!" Akira said, gawking.

"Oh yes. Her Persona is quite capable of self-preservation, but it perhaps went too far on this occasion. It dragged her into another universe, finding the current one too dangerous... I can guide her back to here. Retrieving Morgana will also be important for what is to come," Lavenza explained.

Akira let out a small exhale, deflating just a bit. He didn't know if he was relieved, or more worried. But, with any luck, Morgana and Futaba were somewhere safe for the time being.

"Well... not that I don't love the guy, but why's Morgana so important?" Akira asked.

"He was our creation," Igor stated matter-of-factly.

Akira blinked a few times. "You... you guys?" Akira trailed off. He knew that Morgana had memories of Mementos, but he hadn't mentioned Igor or the Velvet Room at all during their trip through the prison.

Lavenza gave him a curt nod. "Yes. Morgana was born from fragments of human hope, a countering force to the apathy that forged the Grail's own creation. He was to guide and aid you, being the one to help you understand Palaces and how they functioned. But the world requires hope, now more than ever."

"And... why does he look like a cat?" Akira asked.

Lavenza regarded him in silence for a few moments. "Because cats are cute," she replied, speaking with the concerned tone of a schoolteacher who had just been asked a painfully obvious question.

Deciding to ignore this and move on, Akira asked the next question on his mind. "What about the others?"

"You may require your oracle's aid to reach them. If anything could tunnel into the worlds Camael has created, it is her. But... we still need people to keep watch on things here. The Holy Grail plans on killing those that he cannot control, the people possessing Personas and Stands. And the humans who have their hearts close to your own," Lavenza stated.
For just a moment, Akira thought of some of his confidants. Sojiro, Sae, Tae, Iwai, Kawakami... were they aware of what was going on with the world? There was a chance they were all in great danger right about now.

Much as he wanted to help retrieving Futaba and Morgana, Tokyo itself still needed defending. Mitsuru and her own allies were still in the city, but there was strength in numbers.

Akira rose from his chair and turned toward the rows of cells. The gap between them led to a long path that halted at a large brass-colored door. Akira examined it for a few moments, swallowing slightly. "Wait, that door... wasn't that the one in Mementos?"

"Indeed. I was trapped in the Prison of Regression too," Igor remarked, smiling in his usual strange fashion. "But, for the time being, I've returned the exit of the Velvet Room to the surface."

Nodding, Akira turned his attention back toward the others. "Then I'll head that way and try to meet up with the other Persona users. Lavenza... best of luck."

Lavenza smiled and gave Akira a brief curtsy. "I will be quite fine, Trickster. It may take a little longer than you think, but I can find her."

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"H-hey... We don't want any trouble. This crash was just... an accident." While the man looming over her seemed to still be in high school, there was a general vibe of strength to him. Futaba really didn't want to risk a fight right now.

"One hell of an accident," the black cat remarked, turning his head toward the boy he had addressed as Raidou. "Like a one girl earthquake."

"It was an accident! I swear!" Futaba firmly said.

The feline's ears pricked up a bit, with his emerald eyes turning quickly toward the redhead. "So you can hear me huh? I should've figured as much. What about your... weird looking friend?"

"Hey!" Morgana replied indignantly. "If you must know, I used to be a talking cat too... at the moment, I'm kinda stuck in this form... Kinda sucks after I tried so hard to become a human."

Despite himself, the small black cat was smiling faintly. "A cat who became a human huh? Man, talk about irony..." he murmured under his breath. "Heh. Call me Gouto."

"I'm Futaba Sakura, and this is Morgana," the redhead replied, hoping to keep things as civil as she could.

The young man hopped down from the branch, landing silently despite the distance he fell, with the dust only barely rising around the soles of his shoes. His sharp gaze drifted over Prometheus' hull, examining it closely.

Futaba recalled the stories she had heard of Jotaro, and the pictures she had seen of him. She had a feeling that, if he and Akira somehow fused together, someone a lot like Raidou would be the end result.

"I can believe that you don't have any malicious intentions," Raidou remarked, casting his steely
gaze toward Futaba. "That said, people falling from the skies isn't exactly normal. How did you get here?"

"I don't think you'd believe me if I told you," Futaba awkwardly replied.

"Girl, you're talking to a kid detective and a talking cat. Trust me when I say we're no strangers to freaky spooky stuff... like that time with the time traveller. Or the time with the giant bugs... or that business with that creep with all the tattoos," Gouto remarked.

Raidou nodded. "The supernatural is our specialty. I don't think there's much you could say that would surprise us."

Futaba sighed heavily. "The short version is... an evil god created by human cognition is currently enslaving all the minds on my earth, warping the planet into a twisted freakshow that he has total control over! My friends and I were trying to take the problem out at the source, but we got seperated and my Persona-" she gave Prometheus' scratched hull a quick slap "-Decided to spirit me out of my universe for my own protection!"

"And we got spat out of the sky there... wasn't a whole lot safer if you ask me," Morgana remarked.

Despite the fantastical nature of the story, Raidou remained stone faced and nodded along like a policeman taking in a standard eyewitness account. "I see. Yes, evil gods can be problematic like that," he remarked, his tone dead serious. He had a knack for discerning lies.

"Yeah, no doubt. Sounds like you've been given a chance to collect your thoughts and strike back... and I'm sure your pals are gonna be just fine too!" Gouto assured her. He gave Prometheus a curious glance, humming a little to himself. A 'Persona'... interesting.

"You two seem pretty confident... we were hoping to get back to our world ASAP, but... maybe you guys would like to tag along and help?" Morgana suggested.

Raidou adjusted the brim of his cap, giving a modest shake of his head. "Would that we could, but we're on a job. A four thousand year old obsidian city rose out of the sea off the east coast of Japan. We kind of have to investigate it."

"Yeah. That's the job we signed up for... And with the way things are looking there, we'll probably have our own 'evil god' to deal with soon," Gouto casually explained.

Futaba sighed slightly. "Yeah... yeah, I get it." If their world was in danger too, it wouldn't be fair to ask them to leave it behind. Even so she couldn't help but be a little disappointed. "Well... as you can probably imagine, I'm kinda exhausted from everything that's been going on. I need a moment to catch my breath." She hopped out of Prometheus, landing silently on the devastated ground.

"I can help you with that much, at least," Raidou replied, reaching into a small white pouch on his belt. Pulling it back out, he was balancing a small pot with a strange liquid inside on his palm. "This should help restore your energy. I'm assuming that sphere is powered by you, after all."

"Y-yeah, that's right," Futaba replied. Raidou was a sharp one, it seemed. Her gaze lingered on the tubes holstered near his underarms, able to sense an impressive amount of energy inside each one. Seemed he had some powers of his own hidden away.

Futaba gently took the pot offered to her, letting her gaze linger on it for a few seconds. She
scanned it, and found her concerns fading just a tad. There was nothing harmful inside, nothing that the human body would react adversely to, but it was still a strange substance.

"So," Gouto gave Morgana's chibi body a once over. "They all like you where you're from?"

Morgana sighed, settling his paws on his hips. "No, I'm... well it's complicated. Even I don't have all the answers there."

"Meh, fair enough. I'm pretty unique too. Don't sweat the small stuff," Gouto remarked.

Futaba downed the contents of the small jar quickly, a distinct citrus tang rolling down her throat, before she set the jar down on the ground. Her whole body shuddered abruptly, her eyes widening as she became filled with a renewed vigor. "W-whoa!" she gasped, glancing down to her now-shaking hands.

Raidou nodded curtly. "Yes. That kind of pot is quite handy for replenishing spiritual and mental energy. I think that should be enough to help power your craft."

"W-well uh... thanks Raidou. I'm ah... sorry about the mess. Didn't exactly plan on any of this to happen," Futaba awkwardly replied.

"Nobody got hurt. That's the important part," Raidou told her. Although the government would have a hard time trying to explain this away... oh well, that wasn't Raidou's business.

As she took her seat again, Futaba sighed and sank her fingers into a pair of holographic dials. She turned them in unison, hoping to jumpstart Prometheus and get out of the crater she was stuck in. The sphere didn't budge. She tried again. Nothing.

"Oh come on..." She muttered under her breath, her brow knitting tight in frustration.

"Something wrong?" Morgana asked, a hint of concern in his voice.

"I... I don't know, Prometheus isn't..." Futaba gave an annoyed growl, an uncharacteristic flicker of anger rolling across her face. "Listen to me you stupid piece of junk! I don't care how dangerous it is, I'm not going to sit here and leave the others behind!"

"W-whoa, kid," Gouto murmured, his black ears pricking up a bit. He certainly hadn't expected that much anger from such an unassuming girl.

Futaba seemed not to hear him. Her attention was aimed solely on the holographic controls before her, the frustration building inside her. "They risked their lives for me! So... so stop being so stubborn! I'm not sitting back and letting our world get wrecked!"

Again, there was no response. The sphere was dead silent.

Futaba was trembling in a mounting mix of frustration and sorrow, until a few tears began to roll down from under the lenses of her goggles.

Raidou sighed gently and approached Futaba from her right side, a strong hand settling on her back. "Calm down. Deep breaths," Raidou assured her in a strong, calm tone. "It's going to be alright, we're going to help you."
"I... I just don't want... to lose them..." Futaba finally said, her voice sounding a little ragged.

Gouto and Raidou shared a look. Nothing was worse than a crying dame, they both agreed. "This... bubble. It's a part of you, yeah?" Gouto asked. Futaba nodded. "Then... maybe you're holding yourself back?"

"W-what do you mean?" Futaba asked. She raised her goggles with her left hand, her right reaching up to dab and dry her eyes.

"It's not a physical object in the normal sense," Raidou said. "It's projected by your own soul, I take it. And if that's the case, maybe some kind of emotional turmoil is holding you back," the detective noted.

Morgana nodded along with all this, his attention settling on the young hacker. "Futaba... it's okay to be afraid. I'm scared of going back too. But I know things'll work out. I know we can win," Morgana replied.

"Mona..." Futaba replied.

Gouto smiled as best a cat could. "From the sound of things, you've got some bleak stuff going on back at your world. Me an' this guy have had a few hairy situations of our own, but we always pull through."

The tiniest hint of a smile formed on Raidou's face. "He's right, you know. Things have often appeared hopeless against some of our enemies, but nothing's impossible. And even if something looks all powerful..." He smile broadened just a bit, carrying the same easy confidence Akira often had. "You'll often find that they're not."

Despite her worries, Futaba found her own smile returning. "You gotta have confidence. You go back to your own world, and you start kickin' some major butt," Gouto told her.

"R-right!" Futaba replied. As she said this, the lights along Prometheus' hull began to flicker back to life. She felt the strength return to her, Prometheus' bulk humming with renewed energy. "Yeah! We're gonna crush Camael, and anything else in our way!"

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2/12

For the sake of safety, Akira had suggested using the Athena clinic as a temporary base of operations until the crisis was resolved. Those angels filled the skies, and were actively seeking out anyone their master viewed as a deviant mind. But, being underground was a different matter entirely. And they had a few concealed entries and exits they could use for the sake of getting around the city.

At first it was just Akira and a few members of SEES. Jotaro had arrived soon after, having been directed this way by one of his Speedwagon contacts. Josuke and Okuyasu had arrived only yesterday, many of their friends staying in Morioh to maintain some security there. All the while, Akira had been working to gather his closest confidants.

Things were a little cramped in the clinic, but it was better than being hunted down.
The Persona and Stand users had gathered in one of the clinics meeting rooms, most of the chairs being filled. Mitsuru had taken up the head of the table, a manilla envelope clasped neatly in her hands.

All were silent, watching her carefully.

"So? What are we waiting for?" Jotaro asked, his beefy arms folded across his broad chest. As per usual, his cap left his eyes shrouded in shade. "If we're going to stop the bullshit on the surface, then let's get to discussing."

"We're still waiting on one more arrival. I just got word from Aigis a few moments ago about some newcomers," Mitsuru said, matching Jotaro's crisp tone with one of her own.

"Then, while we're waiting..." Josuke trailed off, turning his attention to Akira at the far end of the room. "Still nothing on my sister?"

Akira shook his head. "No, not yet... Lavenza hasn't come back yet, but I have faith in her." Going into another dimension, there was no telling how that would work. But he'd be surprised if anything could get the better of the pint-sized attendant.

"Glad you have faith, but I can't exactly rest easy. Keeping Shizuka safe is one of the things that I've sworn to do," Josuke replied, grimacing a bit.

He could hardly blame Josuke for being worried, he certainly was too, but he had faith that he'd be reunited with the others soon. And, for the time being, the Holy Grail seemed content to keep them imprisoned. Perhaps he was trying to prove some kind of point? That or once Dies Irae was active on someone, even he couldn't interfere?

The door slid open, Aigis striding quickly into the room. "Apologies for the delay. We encountered a little resistance," Aigis said. She slowly raised her right hand, idly shaking some dark tar off her metal knuckles.

Two new figures entered behind the blonde android: A silver haired young man in a crisp dark suit, and a familiar redhead in a fluffy red winter coat. "Uwah... it's like that creepy version of Inaba all over again out there," Rise said, groaning and rubbing her temples.

"Ooooh?!" Okuyasu leaned forward in his seat a bit. "J-Josuke," he said in an urgent whisper, giving the pompadour punk a nudge with his elbow. "Isn't that Risette?!"

"Focus, man. We've got important issues to deal with here," Josuke firmly told his friend.

Yu looked up, his eyes meeting Akira's. There seemed to be an instant sense of understanding between the two, recognising something fundamentally similar about their spirits. Akira had already heard about Yu from Naoto, and she in turn had likely spoken to her former leader about the Phantom Thieves.

"You're the new guy?" Yu asked, reaching across the table.

Akira took his hand and shook it firmly. "Guess so. We seem to have the same backer."

Yu shrugged his shoulders a bit, maintaining his placid expression. "Maybe. But it's been years since I was in that room," he noted, earning a faint smile from Akira.
"Now that we're all here, I can begin," Mitsuru said, adopting a firm and respectable tone of voice that instantly sucked attention toward her. "Yesterday, Yamagishi and I took to investigating the city," Mitsuru said, nodding to the teal-haired woman beside her. "And we managed to get a good look at the object that grew out of Shibuya."

Mitsuru opened the envelope and set it on the desk, revealing a series of photographs that had been taken from different angles. All of them were centered on an expansive, rather tall tower that had grown near Shibuya soon after this apocalypse began. The nearby city blocks had simply been... pushed away from it, the landmass expanding with nothing nearby being damaged by the sudden growth.

It was forged from a sandy coloured stone, a large bridge of bone and stretched flesh winding up toward the upper levels of the tower. Strange veins, the kinds of which had been seen across Tokyo, seemed to congregate and feed into the roof of the tower.

"The power I sensed inside there was absolutely huge. If that 'Holy Grail' is anywhere on earth, it has to be in there," Fuuka remarked.

"You sensed that too, huh?" Rise asked. "I scanned the tower too, because... well I could hardly ignore it. But there's definitely something massive in there."

"You're a scanner too?" Akira asked.

Rise beamed with pride, clearly a little pleased with herself. "Well, I'm not as good as Fuuka, but I have my talents," she proudly stated.

"Okay, so... we attack the tower, destroy the grail, and things will be back to normal?" Yukari suggested hopefully. She had a feeling it wouldn't be quite so simple.

"It's not that easy. This 'grail' was born out of human thoughts and desires, and has created a world where those same thoughts and desires have even more power. And with people all over the world feeding into it... attacking it directly might be futile," Mitsuru explained, her lips slightly pursed from her own annoyance.

Akira nodded slowly. "It's a dangerous loop. People feed their belief into the Holy Grail, and he uses that power to keep them trapped in an illusion that leads to their belief being sustained... if we could find a way to break them out of the Grail's illusions, then we'd weaken his power."

"Easier said than done," Akihiko said in a low grunt. He removed his hands from the pockets of his grey coat, settling them on the table. "How the hell are we going to break the brainwashing of people across the globe?"

"I believe I might be of assistance."

The voice was foreign to more than a few people in the room, but the SEES members stood to attention in shock. The door hadn't made a sound or moved in the slightest, and the young man now standing there seemed to have simply... materialized.

He wasn't particularly tall, shorter than Akira by a few inches. But there was a wisdom and maturity in his exposed left eye. The right was covered by the ultramarine blue bangs of his silky hair. It was a similar shade to the double-breasted navy jacket he was wearing, his slim legs
covered by a pair of dark trousers. The shoes on his feet looked pricey too, a polished black leather.

"W-w-what..." Yukari trailed off, her mouth hanging open in shock.

Aigis' synthetic pupils widened, and it looked like she needed to reboot her system. She was processing this the same way a calculator processes dividing by zero.

"You... there's no way, it..." The non-SEES members looked at Akihiko in confusion, while the silver-haired man turned his focus to Fuuka. "H-hey, Fuuka, is this seriously...?"

Fuuka nodded dumbly, her mouth hanging slightly open. "Y-yes, that's... it's really him..."

Minato Arisato, his face languid as ever, casually reached up with his right hand and waved to the group.
Minato was not standing fully upright for long, when a pink blur suddenly landed against his right side. Yukari squeezed him tight, her face buried into his shoulder. Aigis was quick to take his left side, squeezing him with a greater force and casing a quick wheeze to be forced out of his mouth.

"I'd... appreciate... not being suffocated... just yet..." he wheezed.

"I'm officially lost," Josuke admitted, having a good understanding of how it felt to be Okuyasu. He turned toward Yu, hoping he'd have some information to work with.

The silver-haired man seemed just as surprised by all this. "I think... that's Minato Arisato was the old leader of SEES. He gave up his life sealing away a death god, but... I guess he changed his mind."

Akira blinked a few times. "Well I uh... didn't expect this..." he admitted. He wasn't going to complain, not with how powerful this guy doubtless was.

Yukari and Aigis seemed to step back in unison, Minato taking in a deep breath of delicious oxygen. The brunette dried her eyes, smiling teary-eyed at the young man. "You... you jerk. Surprising us like this... that's pretty nasty..." she admitted. But, for old time's sake, she leaned in until their lips met.

Minato blinked in surprise as Yukari pulled back but, not wanting to be outdone, Aigis quickly repeated the gesture, doubling the surprise of the young messiah. "I can't believe it..." Mitsuru murmured. "It's really him..."

Jotaro didn't seem wholly convinced. "The skies are red, it's raining blood, and the dead are rising out of the ground... it really is the end of the world," he flatly said. "Don't you think this is all a little convenient?"

Minato cleared his throat, wanting to try and appear formal despite his embarrassment. His attention settled on Jotaro for a moment, examining the giant. "You're... Jotaro Kujo, right? I heard you were a bit of skeptic... Kakyoin said it's not your fault."

Those words seem to make Jotaro... sag slightly, imperceptibly. He sank into his chair, his eyes staring dead ahead. Despite his shock, there was a sense of relief in his expression. As if an ages-old weight had just been lifted off him.

Mitsuru looked torn: Wanting to maintain her cool front as a levelheaded commander, and wanting so desperately to mirror Aigis and Yukari's actions. For now, with other people around, she settled on the former. "How... how are you here? I thought your soul was stuck as a seal against Nyx."

Minato nodded. "A portion of it still technically is... but the Holy Grail shot himself in the foot." His attention shifted to the others in the room, those who hadn't been part of SEES. "A few years back, an entity called Nyx was being drawn toward the earth. If she reached the planet, all life would have been wiped out. But Nyx, like death, isn't malicious. She was being pulled in by something a lot more malevolent..."

"Erebus," Yukari finished, her tone laced with annoyance. "That thing was created by humanity's will to die. Even a subconscious desire was enough to power it..." her eyes widened suddenly. "Wait... so since that Holy Grail thing is controlling the minds of everyone on earth... is Erebus
dead?"

"Not entirely... but he's near catatonic and emaciated right about now... and at the moment I'm doing what I can to ensure distance between the two of them." Fractal dimensions within fractal dimensions, galaxies of space keeping Erebus from reaching what he sought. "The seal wasn't the ideal solution to the Fall... but it was my only option with how close Nyx was to the earth," Minato explained.

Akihiko managed to smile. "So since you're here to save the day again... any chance you could snap your fingers and make the Grail disappear?" he asked.

"If it were that easy, I would have done it by now. You know how an iceberg can go on for miles under the water, but only a tiny percentage of it is visible? Well, right now, you're looking at the tip of the iceberg. I'm doing all I can to make sure Erebus can never threaten the world again. But I also wanted to take the time to help stop the Holy Grail," Minato explained.

Fuuka cleared her throat gently. "It's wonderful to see you again Arisato, but... how do you know about all this?"

"She's got a point. If you were dead, I don't think you'd be able to see a whole lot," Josuke remarked.

Minato pondered the question for a few quiet seconds. "Well... I happened to be there when this mess started..."

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The dark space around the seal was dormant for now. A sea of stars as silent as the void of space. The dark wall seemed to stretch on for countless miles, until it grew so distant that it was impossible to see the end. And, at the center of it all, was a crucified stone figure that resembled a young man with bangs covering his right eye.

The malevolent beast was away for now, but would return in due time. For the time being, the only individual watching the seal was a peculiar bald man in a crisp dark suit, his nose stretching outward like the fin of a shark.

'What are you looking at?'

The voice seemed to come from thin air, a deep and imposing growl of something that straddled a border between human and inhuman. The Consciousness, formless and nameless, seemed to coil around the empty space, unseen to all.

"I'm admiring the monument to a most fascinating young man. A savior who gave his life to save all of humanity," Igor remarked without diverting his gaze.

'For what purpose?' The Consciousness asked, his tone flat.

"Perhaps he saw the potential of humanity? That there would come a day where this sacrifice is no longer needed," Igor mused.

'Human potential? Foolishness. I understand the inner machinations of humans with great clarity. They are selfish and weak willed, all of them afraid of possessing freedom. There is no potential to such beings.'

"I can't help but think your perception is skewed. After all, you were born from a rather negative
part of the human psyche," Igor told the Consciousness, maintaining his easy grin. "Perhaps a wager will help change your mind," Igor added.

The Consciousness pondered this in silence for several seconds, before venturing his answer. 'What do you propose?'

"That's basically what happened... but I couldn't really do anything about it. In that state, I couldn't interact with living beings. A portion of my mind could communicate with different spiritual worlds, but that's about it," Minato explained.

Akira nodded along slowly. "Must've been hard... but you're here now, and any extra help is welcome. I'm-

"Kurusu Akira, I know." Minato smiled by just a tiny degree. "I've been watching everything going on... your team is pretty cool," he said.

"So you know we're short a few people, then. I'm trying to get my people back, but it might take a little longer," Akira replied.

Jotaro, seeming to have recovered a bit, looked Minato in the eye. "You said you could help us deal with that fucking magic cup... so what's your plan? I want this dealt with quickly," he stated.

Minato nodded. "Fighting the Grail head on might not be enough to beat it, not with so many minds giving it power. But if we could send a signal throughout the world, and give them something else to believe in, then we could create something strong enough to overcome him." His attention returned to Akira. "That would need to be you, and the rest of the Phantom Thieves. You're the only group with enough global presence and fame to reach around the world, and shake people out of the illusion," he explained.

"I see... but that thing made the world forget about us. Would that really work?" Akira asked. Anything was worth a shot, with how bad things were, but risking everything on something that was unlikely to work...

"All those memories are there, buried under the falsehoods the Grail created. All we need to do is dig them back up... but we'll need the rest of your team here before we can really get started," Minato explained.

After a brief pause, Yu spoke up from his seat. "You said you've been watching things from the start... so what exactly is the Grail planning? I feel that there's more to this than just merging earth and the Metaverse."

Minato shrugged. "Who can say? I don't think even he knows what to do now. But... we should still try to act soon. There might come a time where he decides to expand to other worlds, and if that happens... then we'll all be in a pretty bad way."

"Thanks for your help you guys," Futaba said, smiling at Raidou and his feline companion. "I wish I could help you guys with this uh... Obsidian city stuff, but I need to get back to my world," she explained.

Morgana hopped quickly into Prometheus' opened cockpit, giving his stubby arms a final stretch above his head. "Yeah, we owe ya... sorry about the damage, but uh... give it a hundred years or so,
and you won't even notice the damage!"

"Don't worry about it. I know just the demon to patch this place up," Raidou replied.

"Ah... ahaha... r-right..." Morgana replied awkwardly.

"Stay safe Fuzzball. Not enough of us talking cats in the multiverse, and I won't stand for us dropping like flies," Gouto said, smiling just a tad.

The two Persona users gave a final wave before Prometheus' hull closed up, the lines adorning it glowing with waves of rippling rainbow light. The ground rattled as the sphere pushed upward suddenly, but Raidou and his companion stood firm in the face of the imposing force.

Raidou stood to attention, watching as the sphere climbed higher and higher, shrinking as it grew further away. Eventually, it grew so far away that it vanished from view entirely.

"Interesting people," Raidou remarked.

"Yeah. Girl looked like some kinda space alien for a second there... still, feels good to give a helping hand every once in a while," Gouto replied.

Raidou nodded curtly. "Well, I suppose we should get back to business. That city isn't going to investigate itself... Nagi isn't going to believe me when I tell her about all this," he said.

Gouto rolled his eyes a bit. "Tch... Raidou you could read the phonebook to that girl, and she'd be hanging on your every word."

"Hm? Oh, I don't think I'm that interesting."

Gouto stared wide-eyed as Raidou casually started walking off, before sighing and shaking his head. 'Ace detective, and a brilliant summoner... but thick as a board when it comes to dames.' Oh well. Things would find a way to work out there.

Meanwhile, high above the clouds, there was a distinct flicker as a section of the air was briefly torn asunder. The nebulous sea of rainbow light beyond sucked Prometheus through the hole, and then sealed shut behind the ship.

A screen materialized in front of Futaba, a camera feed of the alien space ahead of them. The redhead narrowed her eyes, focusing on the multitude of glass spheres ahead of them.

"So uh..." Morgana stood up as much as he could, examining the floating screen closely. "How do we... which one of those is our home?"

"I don't know," Futaba replied without glancing his way. They all looked identical from here, each one marked by strange strobes of light that had distorted images wafting through.

Morgana swallowed hard. "You... even you don't know?"

"Mona, we were blown out of the universe... I wasn't exactly in a position to take pictures," she replied, a little testiness in her tone. "I guess... we're just gonna have to start checking them one by one."

Morgana pondered the idea, a sense of dread rising up inside him. "But... there's so many of them. There's no way of telling how long that'll take."

Futaba nodded. "I'm aware. But we don't have too many options here," Futaba replied.
She supposed it would be easy to recognise their world when they found it. If the real world and the Metaverse had merged into one singular plane, then the landscape would likely be some kind of twisted nightmare. Like a heavy metal album cover brought to life.

Before Futaba could ponder this further, there was a sudden and heavy thumping overhead.

Futaba blinked and looked slowly up to the domed ceiling of her craft. Morgana followed her gaze, his tail going bushy. "Uh... should... should anything be out there?" Morgana asked, his tone quivering a little.

"From the readings I'm getting? No way..." Futaba replied, looking dumbstruck. The gravity spasms and intense winds would have shredded anything outside a craft like Prometheus, and yet...

Futaba reached her left hand up slowly, and then swept it sideways. The area above her moving palm turned transparent, revealing a small girl in a tidy velvet blue dress, her long silvery locks flowing behind her. It looked as if Alice had gotten a little lost on the way down to Wonderland.

"Hello," she curtly greeted. Morgana and Futaba stared up at her in wide-eyed, silent surprise. Morgana in particular felt a strange familiarity to the young girl.

Eventually, Futaba managed to speak up. "H-hey," she stiffly greeted.

"You are friends of Akira Kurusu, yes?" she asked. The two nodded silently, still staring wide eyed up at the mysterious girl. "Excellent. I need to guide you back to your home universe... please, follow my directions carefully. If we tarry too long, the time difference may grow quite large.

She pointed northeast, toward a particular sphere, and Futaba found herself flying toward it on a reflex. She was still too gobsmacked to say anything of how crazy this all was.

As they flew a sea of images seemed to fly from each sphere they passed by. The nearest sphere filled her head with the image of two fancily dressed men on horseback, one distinct for the gold covering his teeth, thundering across the arid landscape of the wild west. Passing another world, Futaba glimpsed a nuclear wasteland, where a tribe of people in strange grey jumpsuits abruptly transformed into a small squadron of fanged monsters. Another world passed by Prometheus, revealing a towering azure-skinned man with a red gem in his forehead, displaying obscene strength and speed in his motions.

There was a sphere rapidly drawing closer to Prometheus, giving off a sense of familiarity as the ship drew in closer. A powerful azure glow began to encompass the girl's body, her slim hands pressing firmly onto Prometheus' dense hull.

"I'm going to handle landing," she stated, the azure glow spreading across the entirety of the ship. "I'd rather not risk our arrival drawing unwanted attention."

"S-sure," Futaba stiffly replied. Whatever this girl's deal was, Futaba knew it wouldn't be the best idea to try and go against her.

There was a sudden flash of light as Prometheus was forced through the border of dimensions, being spat out in a dark tomb lined with dirty concrete. The world around Futaba swam and swayed, and it took her a few moments to get her bearings.

The area was definitely underground, exceptionally dark save for the sporadic lights dangling from the ceiling. In the gloom, Futaba recognised a few cars parked on either side of Prometheus.

"A parking lot?" Futaba asked aloud.
"Oh, is that what this room is called? Fascinating!" the silver-haired girl said.

Once she hopped off, Futaba sighed and recalled her Persona to leave herself and Morgana standing in the darkness of the parking lot. "We're underground, I know that much... but where exactly are we?"

"This is a building that the Trickster and his allies are currently meeting in. Given it's underground nature, the many eyes of the Holy Grail haven't been able to find them," the silver haired girl said. "Ah, where are my manners? My name is Lavenza. I too am a friend of Akira Kurusu." She smiled at Morgana. "I also helped to create you."

"H-huh?!" Morgana nearly fell over in surprise. "S-seriously?"

"Mhm. You were created from fragments of human hope, to be an agent that would guide the Trickster on his journey... apologies for leaving you without memories, but we did not have much time to work with," Lavenza explained.

Morgana slowly scratched the side of his head. "So I guess I wasn't human to start with... but I guess it all worked out in the end..."

There was a sudden dinging sound off to the left side of the chamber, causing the trio to glance toward the large steel doors of an elevator. The doors rolled apart, revealing Mitsuru, Fuuka, Akira, and Jotaro.

"It's as I thought. I knew I sensed something in the lowest level," Fuuka said. The parking lot was not particularly big, and there were only two tunnels leading out from it, so a sudden appearance here would not have gone unnoticed.

"Futaba..." Akira breathed a sigh of relief, rushing toward the redhead and wrapping his arms around her, hugging the slender figure tight.

Futaba let out a sudden huffing sound, feeling some of the air leave her lungs, before she found her own slender arms curling around Akira's bag. "Geez... C-come on Akira, I wasn't gone for that long..."

"Actually you were gone for a few days. The time difference from travelling between worlds can be... something to keep in mind. It's fortunate I found you when I did, or you could have been gone for much longer," Lavenza explained. Futaba swallowed hard at the prospect.

"So this is the girl you were talking about?" Jotaro asked, glancing down at the petite hacker. "I guess you have what you need to get your friends?"

Hearing this, Futaba looked up at Akira. "The others... Camael's Stand did something to them, didn't it? Where are they?"

"Some kind of illusory prison. The only person who can reach into those other universes is you and Prometheus," Akira explained. "And if we're gonna have any hope of fixing the world, we need to free the other Phantom Thieves."

"And that's apparently something that can only be done with your power," Mitsuru stated, examining both her and Lavenza carefully.

Futaba slowly nodded and turned her attention to the ceiling. She fell silent for a moment, before then glancing back to Akira. "The others... I can sense them. It's like they're nearby, and yet... really far away at the same time. I might need a little help reaching them."
"That so?" Akira asked. "Well, I want to help any way I can. What do you need?"

Futaba pondered their options, her keen mind fast at work trying to devise the quickest route toward their friends. "Well... it might sound silly, but... maybe if I had items that are important to them, I might be able to track them better? You know, items that would have a sort of psionic link to the people who owned them. It'd give Prometheus more to work with."

A tiny smile formed on Akira's face. "Well... I think I might be able to help there. Better get set Futaba, 'cause we're getting the band back together."
"My goodness..." Lavenza couldn't suppress the childlike grin on her face as she saw Akira, Minato, and Yu enter the storage room together. "To think that I would get to see the Trickster, the Savior, and the Seeker together like this... it's quite an honor."

"Seeker?" Akira asked, glancing Yu's way.

The silver-haired man shrugged his broad shoulders. "Seeker of truth. It's a long story," he plainly said.

"Yeah, I can imagine..." Akira replied.

Minato made his way to Lavenza, a tiny smile on his face. "You must be Lavenza... Eliabeth told me a lot about you," he said, extending a hand out for the small girl to shake. She did so with gusto, beaming.

"How many of them do you suppose there are?" Yu asked Akira, glancing from him to Lavenza. "The attendants, I mean."

"Who can say? Sounds like a big family though," he replied. If they had any parents to speak of, and he was certain Igor didn't fit that bill, he'd be quite scared to meet them. Akira removed the backpack he was carrying and set it on the floor.

Sneaking back to Leblanc had been a bit of a challenge, but it was necessary. He had important mementos from most of his closest friends (and had done quick detours to Hifumi and Sergio's homes to do the same for them) back there, and Futaba needed them if they were to track their friends.

"Hey, Futaba? Morgana? You guys ready to go?" Akira called out.

The door to the expansive storage room slid open again, revealing the duo in question. Futaba had a cocky grin on her face, her eyes hidden behind her large goggles. "I was born ready!" she enthusiastically shouted.

"Yeah, let's get to it! The faster we start, the faster we can put an end to all this!" Morgana added, sounding just as eager.

Minato turned slightly to the trio of Phantom Thieves. "Good luck you guys, and be careful. You're really venturing into unknown territory here," the bluenette said.

"Oh, one more thing. You'll need a little trinket to home in on Naoto. And fortunately, I do have a little something on hand..." Yu trailed off, reaching into the pocket of his dark slacks. He pulled out a small leather notebook, which he promptly slid into Akira's hands. "It was a gift she gave to me, and she was pretty proud of it... I hope it'll be enough."

Futaba leaned forward a bit to inspect the material through her advanced senses, before nodding. "Yep. That'll do nicely!" Futaba said.

Nodding, Akira slipped it into the bag overflowing with mementos and gifts, sorting randomly until
he pulled something into view: A manilla envelope. "Looks like Shizuka's up first... this is the envelope she was given, with information about her birth parents. She gave it to me for safekeeping."

"Alright, I can work with that. Let's get to it." A swirl of dark matter rose up around Futaba's ankles, stretching and expanding until it formed into the familiar sphere that Akira had grown accustomed to.

Akira and Morgana hopped into the open cockpit, with Akira taking the bag in behind him. "We'll try to be as quick as we can... Just... stay underground for now, and try to monitor the situation up top."

"Can do. There haven't been any drastic changes, but... I'd rather not leave the world in this state for much longer," Yu said, his frown broadening at the thought.

Prometheus sealed shut, leaving the trio faintly illuminated by the various neon lights housed within. "Okay..." Futaba slowly exhaled through her nose, letting her gloved digits settle on some of the holographic controls of her ship. "Three's about as many people as I can fit in this ship at once... but for everything else, there's tentacle power." Futaba set her sights on the envelope, a neon green glow coating it.

In a flash, they were gone.

The very next second, they burst into existence in a dingy alleyway, a thin shaft of golden light shining into the upper reaches of the concrete towers bordering them. They could see throngs of people walking the streets just outside the mouth of the alley, neon signs lining several windows.

"This isn't Tokyo, it looks a little like..." This was Shizuka's world, and there was only one thing that came to mind for this location: New York. Akira sighed loudly. "Hope my tiny amount of English is good enough for this... let's see if we can find her."

"Uuuuh..." Morgana trailed off, geturing to the two of them, and then himself. "You sure that's a good idea? We tend to stick out in these clothes."

"We don't have time to start being modest. Besides, we're in some weird... parallel universe thing. It really doesn't matter what we're wearing," Akira replied.

Prometheus melted away, with the three Phantom Thieves landing neatly on the concrete. Akira pushed on ahead into the crowded streets. Surprisingly, none of the pedestrians spared them a passing glance. Morgana stuck close to Akira's leg, hoping to avoid getting swept away in the crowd.

"Guess that's one problem down... question is, how're we gonna find Shizuka in a place this big?"

Futaba reached over, taking Akira's left hand in her right. She took a calming breath, trying to tune out the crowd that surrounded them, and focused her gaze dead ahead. "I can find her. Just... follow my lead."

With that the petite redhead pushed onward, Akira and Morgana falling in step with her as she led on through the busy concrete jungle.

Their path took them across a few city blocks, a smell of hot asphalt and nearby hotdog carts seeming to line every step of their journey. Soon enough they stopped just across the road from a large tower, each window on its obscenely high facade gleaming in the sunlight. A sharply dress
man with a rounded red cap tended to the trio of revolving doors, well dressed men and women hurrying in and out of the building.

And, soon enough, a familiar figure burst through the central revolving door. Shizuka skidded onto the pavement, dressed in a silky silver hoodie, a dark T-shirt, denim shorts, and black canvas sole shoes. Heart-shaped sunglasses rested on her face, as was common. But what stood out to Akira was the strange red jewel dangling around her neck from the silver chain of a necklace. It was housed in some kind of silver mould, the interior marked by a glowing cruciform shape.

"The heck is that?" Morgana asked, hopping up and down urgently.

"No idea... must be important to her though," Akira murmured in return.

"Hehe! Beat ya today Walt! Looks like you weren't fast enough to get the door for yours truly," Shizuka boasted, grinning at the doorman.

The older man shrugged listlessly. "Nah, I just felt bad for ya and gave you one win for the week kid. Don't go getting a big head like your old man. He already makes life hard for me."

Akira leaned forward a bit. "Wait... are they speaking Japanese?" he asked, surprised that he could understand the duo with such clarity.

"Either that or the world is translating things for us... guess there's no point in worrying about it," Futaba said.

After exchanging a few more pleasantries with the doorman, Shizuka turned and made her way down the road. It didn't take long for her to reach some familiar figures. Akira's eyes widened as he saw the spitting image of himself, albeit casually dressed, standing near the tower. Joined at his right was a perfect replica of Ann, while a copy of Makoto stood at the left of his doppelganger.

"Holy crud," Futaba murmured, glancing between Akira and his clone across the road. Akira seemed just a little weirded out.

"So Shizuka's world is New York... but with us?" Morgana suggested.

Akira watched as Shizuka gave the recreation of Makoto a light peck on the lips in greeting, before sighing gently. "Well, come on, we better go and get her... I don't feel good about spoiling this illusion, but it has to be done."

However, soon after they crossed the street, the previously impassive crowd suddenly locked up ahead of them. Shoulder to shoulder they became like a wall of flesh, blocking the approach of the three thieves.

"W-what the?!" Morgana grunted, struggling to fit through the throng of people that suddenly obscured their path. Only now did Akira notice that the crowd had grown faceless, like walking masses of clay in human clothing.

"Out of the way!" Akira shouted, swinging his right fist into the nearest figure. It jerked back a bit, but managed to hold firm against the impressive blow. "Shizuka!"

She seemed not to hear him, or notice the growing commotion behind her.

"These things aren't people," Futaba urgently said. "So I think... we have the all clear to cut loose here!"
Akira nodded, bringing his right hand to his mask as the crowd started pushing into the trio. There was a flash of azure fire around them, followed by a sudden boom of force as Arsene's unfurling wings slammed into several figures and swept them aside.

Only now did Shizuka turn, drawn by the sounds of violence. Her eyes widened slightly, confusion flickering across her face. "A-Akira? There are... two of you?" she asked with rising concern in her tone. "What the hell? Is this some enemy Stand user bullshit?!"

The other Akira glared at the original, raising his left hand slightly. "Shizuka," the clone said warily. "I don't know what this is, but it's clearly some kind of trick."

"He's lying," Akira said, keeping a calm stance. "You know something about this is off, and you know you're not supposed to be here. You're a Phantom Thief at heart."

"A Phantom Thi-" Shizuka froze up a bit, her eyes continuing to widen as she surveyed Akira's attire, and the mask on his face. She then set her sights on Futaba, and lastly to Morgana. A sense of recognition was dawning on her, but it was an uphill battle to push through the ignorance imposed on her mind.

The sky was starting to darken.

"I don't know what this is, but it's obviously some kind of trick... must be another nest of vampires trying to cause trouble for us," the fake Ann said, glaring toward the three thieves. "I mean, just look at their ridiculous outfits! And that weird... monster cat thing standing beside them!"

Morgana's ears went flat. "Aw man... I know that's a fake Ann, but it still really hurts to hear her say that..." he murmured.

Shizuka swayed slightly on her feet, her left hand pressing into the wall to support herself. "Phantom Thief... that sounds... familiar..."

"I know this is hard to accept, but this... none of it is real. You live in Tokyo, and your parents... your parents are dead," Akira said, frowning as he said this.

The news was like a kick to the gut, making Shizuka double over a bit. The world was swimming in her eyes, everything feeling dull and distant. The copy of Akira reached over, roughly gripping Shizuka by her right shoulder. "We need to go. NOW!"

"The fuck are you doing?!" Shizuka snapped, turning to glare his way. The clone's cheekbones suddenly grew sharp, his skin turning slate grey while the whites of his eyes were swallowed by inky blackness. He opened his maw, revealing sharpened incisors inside his mouth, unleashing a violent hiss.

"Th-the fuck?!" Shizuka gasped, watching as a similar transformation overcame the other doppelgangers. "Hamon-!" Shizuka raised her left hand, a chiming noise reverberating through her body while an aura of crackling golden lightning lit her up. However it suddenly faded, the chiming sound fading into silence. "I can't... use Hamon?"

The vampire violently threw Shizuka against the nearest car, her body striking the door hard enough to imprint her body upon it. Arsene lunged forward, delivering a crushing kick to the vamp's face that sent him skidding backward. A sound of ripping flesh echoed through the streets, Fake Akira's jaw now severed on the right side and hanging on by a few stringy lengths of crimson tissue. He gripped it and pushed it back into place, the flesh mending and weaving back together.

"Oh gross..." Akira murmured to himself.
The sky above had turned dark. A jet black void, utterly devoid of clouds or distant stars.

The vampiric copy of Ann dashed forward, moving with such speed that the concrete shattered under her foot. Akira raised his arms to block, only to be bowled over from the immense pressure that struck against him.

The blonde vampiress hissed and lunged at Futaba, swinging a powerful punch that abruptly collided with one of Prometheus' walls. Futaba yelped, skidding backward, while the bones of Ann's forearm burst up through her shredded grey skin.

Mercurius' left foot swiftly collided with the vampire's gut, the impact knocking the fake Ann away. Her body struck the stationary crowd of people, their bodies exploding into dust as she swept through them.

"Sorry Lady Ann," Morgana murmured to himself.

The feline yelped, recalling Mercurius to his side as the vampiric Makoto effortlessly tore two slabs of concrete from the street and flung them his way. Mercurius destroyed both projectiles with focused bursts of wind, but Morgana was still wide open as the vampiress shot forward and kicked him clean in the gut, smashing Morgana into the pavement.

Off to the edge of the street, Akira was left struggling and dodging his clone as his sharpened claws swept Akira's way. Arsene punched him hard in the gut, several ribs shattering violently under his skin, only to mend back together in an instant.

The Ann clone threw her arms out to her sides, her grey-skinned forearms bulging outward until the skin exploded off, revealing the bones of her fingers. The edges sharpened and elongated, until it looked as if she had a rake on each wrist. Shrinking horribly, she shot toward Futaba, unleashing violent swings of her new talons that generated sprays of sparks whenever they met the hull of Prometheus.

From her position on the ground, Shizuka watched the displays of savagery with a growing knot in her stomach. "That's right..." Shizuka murmured to herself, reaching up and clutching the facsimile of the Red Stone of Aja in her right hand. "None of this is real."

She seemed to recall it all in the span of a few seconds. The passing of her father, Kamoshida's Palace, the formation of the Phantom Thieves, meeting the SID, Makoto in Hawaii, taking on Death 13, besting Shido and Mr. A, and finally their recent battle with Camael in Mementos.

For better or worse, for all the ups and downs the team had gone through, that was reality.

Shizuka accepted this with a small sigh, closing her eyes tight. "Houdini... Eclipse."

Her Stand appeared at her side, light glittering around her dark armored plates, as she quickly took aim at the three attacking vampires with her right fist. A focused burst of UV light shone from Houdini's knuckles, the wave of light washing over the trio. Their shrieks filled the air, their skin cracking and unleashing patches of molten flesh. The vampires exploded apart, an unseen wind blowing the molten dust to the ether.

Akira panted slowly, struggling to his feet. "Okay... just saw a copy of myself blow up... Gonna need to do something to clear my head of that..." Akira murmured, brushing some vampire dust off his shoulder.

Futaba let out a small sigh of relief, dropping her defenses for now. A deafening silence filled the air, the fake humans standing frozen in time.
"Shizuka... are you okay?" Akira asked, approaching the young woman.

Shizuka gripped the hood of the nearest car and pushed herself to stand. "No. I'm definitely not okay," she said in a grim tone. A wave of blue fire washed over her, her clothing burning away and instantly being replaced with her Phantom Thief attire. "I'd accepted that my parents were dead... now it feels like being slapped in the face with that all over again. That bastard... he dug around in my head and made this world from the things I wanted most in life."

"I know this is hard for you Shizuka, but... we can't hang around here. The world is still in danger, and the others." Morgana was cut off by a powerful tremor rocking the facsimile of New York, cracks exploding around the asphalt and racing up the facades of the nearby buildings.

The tremors grew louder and more violent, causing Futaba to quickly form Prometheus around herself. "This place... it's collapsing! We have to get moving, now!"

"I'm ready to go," Shizuka firmly said, marching toward the sphere. "I'm gonna track that angel bastard down, and shove those wings right up his ass!"

Akira was quick to hop inside the cockpit, while two ebony tendrils coiled around Shizuka and Morgana. Massive slabs of concrete and brickwork rained from above, slamming into the pavement and shattering the ground like glass.

Akira reached into his bag and quickly tossed a glossy magazine toward Futaba. It was a recent publication, one that Ann had been quite pleased about when it was published. It did, after all, have some rather exquisite pictures of herself in one of the main articles, as clear a sign as any that her modelling career was on the upswing.

Futaba nodded firmly, the information quickly being loaded into Prometheus. The sphere winked out of existence, just as the cognitive plane was rent asunder entirely, absorbed into the blackness of an infinite void.

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The ebony sphered flashed into existence on a largely empty street, immediately landing on the asphalt with a hard thud. As Prometheus unwound his tentacles, and opened his hull again, the gathered Phantom Thieves got a glimpse of the surrounding area. The street was instantly recognisable as a Japanese one, and the shadow of Shujin falling over them was unmistakable too.

Akira hopped out of the sphere and quietly inspected their surroundings. "This is Ann's world... doesn't look all that different so far." He spared a glance to Shizuka, the young woman inspecting the high school in stony silence. "Look I... I know that couldn't have been easy-"

"It really wasn't," Shizuka admitted without turning her head. "I had... a lot of things there that I liked. Being in New York, my parents being alive, being a Hamon user... and... more than that, I'm fucking... pissed off at myself. Because there was a tiny part of me that didn't want to give it up... even knowing that things were going bad in the real world."

Futaba frowned. She reached over and settled a hand on Shizuka's left shoulder, with the young Joestar making no protest to the contact. "This is Ann's world... doesn't look all that different so far." He spared a glance to Shizuka, the young woman inspecting the high school in stony silence. "Look I... I know that couldn't have been easy."

"It really wasn't," Shizuka admitted without turning her head. "I had... a lot of things there that I liked. Being in New York, my parents being alive, being a Hamon user... and... more than that, I'm fucking... pissed off at myself. Because there was a tiny part of me that didn't want to give it up... even knowing that things were going bad in the real world."

Futaba frowned. She reached over and settled a hand on Shizuka's left shoulder, with the young Joestar making no protest to the contact. "You can't blame yourself for feeling that way. If I had my ideal world, with Mom back... I don't know if I could walk away from it," she sadly admitted.

"It's a pretty nasty trick, turning your fantasies against you. He probably didn't think you could pull through, but... you did. You're pretty damn strong," Morgana assured her, giving Shizuka a light pat on the left knee.
Despite herself, Shizuka smiled just a little bit. "Come on... let's go find Ann."

Shujin was laid out just as it was in the real world, and more than a few students the group passed managed to look familiar. As with the facsimile of New York, they seemed to pay no attention to the Arditi as they navigated through the structure.

They reached the second floor, coming across a rather surprising sight: Ann herself, casually chatting and laughing with a few other girls from her class. It was the kind of thing Akira hadn't seen in the real world.

Smiling, the blonde waved the girls off. She took a few steps from them, only to pause when her phone buzzed loudly in her pockets. She reached in quickly, answering it.

"Hello? Oh, hey Mom," Ann cheerily said. She listened for a few seconds, nodding along. "Well Akira said there was a new blend he wanted us to try, so I was gonna swing by Leblanc after school... mhm... yeah... well I can pick some up from Yongen before I head home? Sure, sure. Okay, I'll see you tonight."

Morgana's ears pricked up a bit. "This is Lady Ann's world? I don't understand, it seems really... mundane."

Akira nodded slowly. While the differences weren't too apparent to the naked eye, Akira knew Ann well enough to see how this world was different from the norm.

After Kamoshida's change of heart, there had been more than a handful of apologies from the people who had thought ill of her. Those who had thought of her as some kind of slut under Kamoshida's thumb. But, soon after that, not much had changed. Ann still stood out against the rest of the student body, and had little in the way of friends outside of the Arditi.

Now though? Well people saw beyond Ann's looks, treated her like more of a person.

Then there was the matter of Ann's parents. They weren't particularly abusive, from what Akira knew of the situation, but they were definitely absent from her life. Akira hadn't even met them, and Akira had gotten the impression that Ann missed their presence more than she would care to admit.

He didn't know if it was a relief, or saddening, that Ann's deepest desires were so simple.

Akira took a few steps forward, Arsene floating behind him as a sign of caution. "Ann," he called out. "You need to know... none of this is real."

The blonde turned slightly, curiosity playing across her face. "Akira? What are you...?" The blonde grimaced, clutching her forehead with her right hand as familiar memories tried to tunnel up through a layer of imposed ignorance.

The masks, the outfits, Morgana's alien form... they awoke something in her mind that had previously been tuned out.

The school shook powerfully around them, the sky outside turning pitch black. The other students in the hall became frozen in time, the illusion grinding to a halt.

"I don't... I don't understand..." Ann said, taking in a few quick breaths.

"Think back," Shizuka told her. "Do you remember Mementos? Or Camael?"
Ann knit her brow, before her eyes shot wide open. "That... that's right... Something was going on in the city, and we..." she let out a startled gasp. "W-wait, what happened to Shiho? A-and the others?!

"Right now they are. They're stuck in illusion worlds, just like this one. But we need to get to them, quickly," Morgana hastily said. Another tremor rocked the school, cobwebs of cracks splintering along the walls. Morgana was nearly bowled over entirely.

"Looks like this one's already coming down," Futaba murmured. She swung her right hand toward the nearest wall, a black tendril flying from her palm and flattening a nearby wall. It gave her all the room she needed to summon the entirety of Prometheus' hull.

A wave of azure fire washed over Ann, with the blonde rising to her full height. She examined the arms of her crimson catsuit, the final blue embers dying out. "That son of a bitch, tricking me like this... I'm gonna enjoy making him pay," Ann growled, quickly jogging toward Futaba's Persona.

Akira quickly joined his girlfriend, reaching into his bag for another useful item. He quickly took out a clean plastic folder, housing an intricate black and red painting of Arsene. "Yusuke painted this for me not too long ago. Said it was a gift to me," he explained quickly. And Yusuke had certainly been pleased with his work.

Nodding, Futaba let an energy field fall over the detailed painting. Prometheus' tendrils coiled around the other members of the Arditi, sucking them through a hole in space just as the floor of the school began to cave in.

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The air flickered with tongues of blue lightning, unseen waves of heat illuminating a section of space before a hole was suddenly shredded into existence. Prometheus was spat out onto a large Japanese street, striking the asphalt of the road hard enough to crack it.

The Persona faded out of existence quickly enough, revealing their surroundings in greater details. The rows of modestly-sized houses, each capped with a scarlet-tiled roof, quickly revealed it to be some kind of suburb. Tokyo's tall towers loomed on the horizon line.

"This is Yusuke's," Futaba murmured. "Weird... I always took him for a bumpkin at heart."

"Well he'd be able to eat off the land in that case, I suppose," Akira replied. He scanned their surroundings in silence, but the street seemed devoid of activity.

Ann reached up, scratching the back of her head slowly. "So... where is he?" Ann asked aloud, a hint of concern in her tone.

Silence lingered between the group. This place was still standing, so clearly nothing had happened to the scatterbrained artist, but it was worrying that there was no sign of him yet.

The silence was eventually broken by a few feminine grunts coming from just a few feet ahead of the team. Akira took a few cautious steps toward the noise, passing a few immaculate front gardens, until he reached a low wall that seemed to be housing the noise. Peering over, he quickly spied a woman tending to a tidy flowerbed.

She looked to be near Sojiro's age, near as he could tell, thin lines under her eyes. Her dark violet hair flowed beyond her shoulders, stopping only a few inches above her waist. She was dressed in a scarlet shirt, dark trousers, and a slightly dirty white apron.
Something about her was exceptionally familiar, but Akira couldn't put his finger on it just yet.

"Should we... ask this lady? Do the people in these worlds even notice us?" Shizuka asked, letting her right hand rest on the wall as she peered over the edge.

"I don't think so... the people in your world only reacted to us when we tried to take you away," Akira replied, glancing down at the long-haired woman. She hadn't stirred in the slightest at the conversation happening right beside her.

The front door to the house slid open abruptly, causing the gathered Arditi to recoil a bit at the aged, familiar figure that strode into view. The warm breeze blew at his shabby grey robe, with the man bringing his sleeves together and intertwining his fingers beneath the fabric.

Ichiryusai Madarame turned his focus to the woman, a fond smile on his face. "Ah, there you are Reina. You simply must come and see this, your boy's had a breakthrough! I have no doubts he'll be the star of my next exhibition," Madarame proudly said.

The woman smiled slightly, letting out a tiny grunt as she started to rise to her feet. "Oh, is that so?" the dark haired woman wiped her hands off in her apron, following Madarame to the front door. "Well then, I can't wait to see what the apple of my eye has accomplished this time."

Akira felt his eyes widen. For a moment he recalled the Sayuri hanging on the wall in Leblanc, and the kind, patient female form painted to the canvas. "Oh..."

"Oh shit..." Shizuka finished, the realization dawning on her too.

This was going to be a rough one...
Wordlessly, the team followed after the recreation of Yusuke's mother. Houdini's hand reached out, spectral digits catching the material of the door before Reina could close it entirely, sliding it open again once she and Madarame had made it deeper inside.

There was something vaguely warm and nostalgic about the house as the team made their way through it. Polished hardwood floors and crisp white walls. More than a few paintings lined the walls, each looking handmade.

"That's really her, isn't it? Yusuke's mother?" Ann asked, a look of discomfort on her face.

"Or some kind of approximation of her, at least," Akira began. "And Madarame's here too... guess I can't blame Yusuke for having extremely mixed feelings about the guy. Guess there's a part of him that still wishes Madarame was a good man at heart."

"This is gonna be pretty hard," Futaba noted with a small sigh. "Something like this... it's pretty deep and personal."

Morgana nodded slightly. "It still has to be done... I know this is gonna hurt, but we can't leave Yusuke standing around in this... illusion. It wouldn't be right to have him living a lie like this," the feline said.

Shizuka gave a slow nod of understanding. She certainly felt bad for Yusuke in this case. At least she and Futaba had some memories of their parents before death took them, but Yusuke didn't even have that. He must have been a toddler at most when Madarame let his mother die. So young that he couldn't even put two and two together about the Sayuri.

Their path kept them on the heels of the two adults, who eventually walked into a rather large room filled with blank canvases and paint supplies. From the doorway, the gathered Arditi were able to get a glimpse of the artist himself, busily tending to his canvas.

The image was an interesting one that did not go unnoticed by the Ardit. On the bottom was a neat recreation of Tokyo's cityscape, grey in color, while the top of the canvas has an all black shadowy reflection of the city upon it.

Futaba and Akira shared a glance. Did he remember Mementos? If only on a subconscious level?

"Oh my," Reina softly said, approaching Yusuke's left side. "It's magnificent! You just keep getting more amazing whenever I look away."

A faint smile tugged at the corners of Yusuke's mouth. "Well... I do have two wonderful mentors to thank for my growth. Though I still feel this one is far from done," Yusuke remarked.

"Always striving for perfection, eh?" Madarame teased, before lapsing into a low chuckle.

Shizuka sighed softly. Letting this go on would only make it harder for Yusuke to pull away, and they really needed him on their side. She took a step forward into the room, clearing her throat as she did so. "Yusuke... you gotta know something."
The bluenette turned slightly, his eyes widening just a tad. "Shizuka? What are you doi-" 

He froze up at the sight of the team, his eyes darting over the gathered thieves. His attention lingered on Morgana, and some part of his mind seemed to recognise how fundamentally off this whole situation was.

"Yusuke, this... I'm sorry, but this isn't real. The world is in danger, and we still really need your help," Ann said, offering a hand toward him.

Madarame turned a bit, the corners of his mouth shifting into an eerie grin that threatened to shred his facial muscles. "Now then children... I know you're Yusuke's friends, but he's quite busy at the moment. Perhaps you should leave him to his work...?"

Shizuka glared at the old man. They had beaten the Shadow of the real deal, but there was no telling what this illusory world had done to Madarame. They'd need to be cautious, he was bound to attack if they tried to move Yusuke from here.

"Sensei?" Yusuke asked. He paused, briefly. Something about that title tasted wrong in his mouth. His attention turned to Reina, who had grown statue still, as if frozen in time. The memory pulsed in his brain.

'One day, you see, she had a seizure right before my eyes. If I didn't call for help, and simply let nature run its course, I could own her prized painting with no strings attached...'

"Madarame, you... what did you do to my Mother...?!" Yusuke rose from the stool he was seated on, his long legs shaking. As he rose, he let out a sharp gasp as the visage of his mother started to crumble to dust.

The left half of her face slid low, becoming like particles of sand in the wind. "Yusuke, it's alright..." Reina said in a distant whisper. Her voice was a hiss on the sandy dunes of an ancient painting. "Just sit down and relax, I'm sure it'll all be fine..."

Yusuke hesitated for a moment, before moving slightly forward again. The entirety of Reina's body collapsed into dust, the shock enough to make even the gathered Arditi recoil a bit.

"No... No!" Yusuke snapped before glaring toward Madarame's clone. "Give her back! I don't know what madness this is, but give her back!"

"I'd be happy to oblige," Madarame replied, his eerie expression unchanging. "All you need to do is get back to work, and forget all this, while I educate your little friends."

"Don't listen to him. Don't believe a word that comes out of his mouth," Akira said in a firm tone. "I'm sorry Yusuke, but this isn't real. That woman, your mother... she died a long time ago. You already know this... and know that this world is just a sculpted illusion. You haven't forgotten about Camael, have you?"

Yusuke hesitated again. "I... I..."

Madarame turned to the team and took a step their way, his skin starting to blacken and bubble. "And so what if it is all an illusion Yusuke? Do you know how many people would kill to be in your position? It's your ideal world, you should embrace it," he said in a hissing tone.
Madarame threw his arms forward, his hands morphing into twin tendrils of inky blackness. They smashed into the gathered thieves, striking them into the wall outside Yusuke's studio with such force that it shattered like glass against their bodies.

Grunting, Akira rose to his feet first and watched as blackness enveloped the entirety of Madarame's body. The living Shadow began to morph and warp his dimensions, growing larger by the second.

"Move, move! We need to get out in the open!" Akira shouted. Arsene flew from his body, a burst of chaotic energy lashing into Madarame's morphing body to knock him back a bit. It gave the Arditi an opening to race through the front door again. The walls of the house began to crack and shatter, a powerful burst of smoke catapulting the roof off toward the horizon.

The smoke quickly cleared as the Arditi came to a stop on the street outside, a series of floating figures emerging into the air. Four floating paintings that blurred the line of two and three dimensions: Two eyeballs, a nose, and a mouth.

"Madarame's Shadow?" Ann asked aloud, surprised at the sight.

"Looks a little bigger than I remember..." Morgana admitted.

Arsene shot skyward, swinging his bladed left foot outward as he tried to strike one floating eyeball. The mouth moved in swiftly to intercept, the bladed heel striking against diamond-like teeth. The ground below shook violently, all the kinetic energy being rapidly redirected at Arsene as the winged figure was catapulted into the asphalt hard enough to punch a large crater into the ground. Akira let out a loud gasp, a spurt of blood flying from his mouth.

A quick jet of wind flew from Mercurius' staff, the gale catching the floating mouth by one corner and whipping it harshly to the ground. It skidded along the debris, before flipping back skyward.

"This thing... the energy it's giving off is impressive," Futaba noted from her position on the ground, a distinct frown on her face.

"No doubt it's a lot stronger than the real Madarame's Shadow," Akira said, wiping his mouth off on the back of his gloved hand. "Seems to function the same way though... don't use physical attacks on the mouth, try and focus those attacks on the other paintings," Akira said.

Houdini's invisible body darted around the damaged streets and leapt skyward. The figure rushed one of the eyeballs, her right leg launching a rapidfire flurry of kicks that impacted the frame repeatedly. "BAZUBAZUBAZUBAZU!" The impacts echoed off into the distance, while the eyeball was driven harshly into the asphalt below.

The second floating eye looked vaguely in the direction of the unseen attacker, a purple glint flickering across his painted pupil. The air around him exploded with a surge of almighty energy, the blast slamming into Houdini and launching her away. Shizuka cried out, being lifted clean off her feet from the blow.

The mouth, meanwhile, lunged toward Akira and Ann with the floating nose close behind. Arsene appeared in front of his user, kicking a large slab of debris toward the incoming figure. It slowed the mouth's momentum just enough for Ann to take aim, her eyes glowing from the power building in her Persona.
A powerful plume of fire shot from Hecate's palms and exploded against the clenched teeth of the flying portrait, the flash lighting up the surrounding street and burning away an entire corner of the floating figure. It hissed violently, while the nose flew through the smoke and smashed into Ann, the impact knocking her onto the sidewalk. She cried out in pain, blood oozing from the fresh wounds that formed along her right arm as it scraped the pavement.

Some of the debris in the house stirred, with Yusuke grunting as he pushed a few dislodged pieces of masonry off his legs. He hadn't been totally unscathed by Madarame's transformation, but the limited nature of damage to his body... that was more than a little surprising to the dust-caked bluenette.

With each passing moment he could feel new memories taking root in his brain, recording all the incidents that had taken place over this eventful year. Learning the truth about his mentor, doing battle with all manner of Shadows and villains, Akira helping him regain his passion for art... it was a stark contrast to this whitewashed existence.

Yusuke loved and missed his mother a great deal, and deep down he wished so dearly that they could have had more time together... but not like this. He couldn't just sit down in this simulation while the world was in danger.

Wisps of blue flame began to coil around Yusuke's hands and feet, before slowly travelling up his limbs. Wherever they passed, his pedestrian attire changed into his Phantom Thief gear.

There was a powerful explosion across the street, with Madarame's mouth striking into Akira and Morgana simultaneously. The duo hit the pavement hard, rolling and bouncing to an unpleasant stop against the wall of a nearby house.

A focused streak of light shot across the air, fired from Houdini's knuckles, and grazed the front of the floating mouth. The searing heat burned a chunk of matter away, making the lumbering portrait growl loudly. It turned toward Shizuka, and suddenly spat out a thick glob of steaming inky blackness that sailed toward the young Joestar.

She remembered enough to know that that goo was bad news, Shizuka moving to pull back. Houdini quickly tore a chunk of nearby wall from its moorings and flung it with impressive force at the incoming acid.

The impact gave her a brief window to start sprinting backward, the masonry halting the dark matter just enough for her to make a run for it, with the molten blackness splattering the asphalt and melting a deep hole in it.

"You worthless interloping brats," Madarame's mouth growled, recalling the other portraits toward the mouth. "You think you're doing Yusuke any kind of favor with this? All you're doing is destroying his heaven!"

"It's not heaven!" Ann shouted as she rose from the ground, rubbing at her bloodied arm. "All this is... is a sick joke!"

"Your own selfishness will be your undoing, dragging Yusuke from this paradise. He'll never see his mother again, he'll never know happiness!"

Madarame was cut off by a mighty blizzard blowing over the floating mouth, the icy wind fully engulfing the sapient portrait. The swirls of snow and ice coiled around the damaged structure,
with crackles of ice rapidly growing along the frame until it was entirely encased in ice.

"Enough," Yusuke firmly said. "You have no right... to speak of her."

Susanoo floated up toward the entombed mouth and gave the ice a dismissive flick. A cobweb of cracks spread along the outer layer, before the mass of ice exploded into chunks, destroying the floating painting entirely.

Akira forced himself back to his feet, taking in a few heavy breaths. "Yusuke..." Akira murmured in surprise.

"This has all gone on long enough... let's finish this relic, shall we?" Yusuke offered.

Smiling slightly, Akira gave him a firm nod. "Thor!"

There was a burst of lightning around the dark-haired boy, with the golden-helmed viking surging skyward from where Akira was standing. Electricity danced around the muscular giant, coiling around the formidable hammer gripped tightly in his right hand.

With Yusuke actively defying the illusion, the remaining paintings seemed to shrink slightly. The power they exuded was far weaker now, one of the eyeballs trying to pull back as Thor drew in close.

The hammer blow met the left eye with enough force to send a powerful shockwave rippling through the air, splattering it like a sack of ink on impact. The other turned slightly, glowing purple again, and released a powerful burst of almighty energy that slammed into Thor and sent the giant sailing back across the darkening sky.

The nose swept around, slamming into Mercurius and knocking the speedy figure back as he tried to draw in close. But he was unable to do much as Susanoo lunged at him from behind, a mighty impact splattering dark matter across the street as the painting was destroyed utterly.

Turning, the spectral samurai raced toward the final painting. Two bursts of almighty energy exploded against Susanoo's broad chest, the blasts earning a sharp grunt from the artist. But he powered through regardless, with Susanoo's blade soon slicing the floating eyeball clean in half. The dark splatter painted the streets below, and then fizzled out into nothingness.

Yusuke exhaled slowly through his nose, examining the carnage that surrounded them. "To think that I was really fooled by all this."

"You gonna be okay?" Akira asked. The group were slowly convening in the middle of the street, trying to ignore their own bruises and injuries.

Yusuke thought back on all the fake memories he had been given here, the life he could have had. The life he, on some level, wished he had. "I never knew my mother... and loathe as I am to admit it, a part of me still has an angstrom of love for Madarame... being able to have both in my life, it made me happy. But if the choice is living in reality, and living in a pleasant lie... the choice should be obvious."

Ann settled a comforting hand on Yusuke's back, while Akira nodded firmly toward him. "When this is all said and done, we can talk things through... for now though, we still need to rescue the others. I'm glad to have you back."
"Well... I am glad to be back. I did promise to stick with you all, after all," the artist replied in turn.

A few tremors were already rolling across the ground, with the damaged houses of the street already starting to shake apart further. Akira made his way toward Futaba, reaching into the bag he had left in her care. He pulled out the notebook Yu had given him, handing it neatly to the brainy redhead.

Futaba nodded, Prometheus' dark coils rose from the ground at her feet, circling the gathered Arditi, while the main body began to construct itself around her. The air around the ship shimmered a bit, and in an instant they were gone again.

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Rather than exit out onto another urban landscape, this time Prometheus landed heavily on a verdant lawn of clean green grass that was crushed flat under the bulky sphere. From what she could see on her HUD, Futaba could tell that the lawn stretched on for some distance, eventually being bordered by a tall brick wall that was more than twice Futaba's height.

"Where are we? Some kind of country estate?" Futaba asked herself.

Well, it was possible. From what she knew of Naoto and her time, they were countryside types. And, Futaba assumed, Naoto was from some kind of wealthy family.

Prometheus unwound his tendrils from the team, the black bubble fizzling out around Futaba. "Well, here we are," Futaba remarked aloud. "I was kinda expecting stuff to be... you know, monochromatic around here."

"Like an old detective movie? Yeah, I could see that... definitely wasn't expecting idyllic countryside," Shizuka admitted.

"Focus you two," Akira plainly said. "We need to find Naoto quickly an-"

"Oh, there you are."

Naoto's casual words nearly made the young thieves jump from their skin, with the team spinning around sharply. There, seated in a comfortable lawn chair several feet behind them, was the blue-haired detective herself. She folded the newspaper neatly in her hands as she stood up, leaving it on the chair.

Yusuke blinked a few times. "You... you're not under the spell of this place?"

"I'm no stranger to illusions," Naoto admitted. "It did nearly have me for a little while, but I still saw through it... but, I thought it best to play along until you all showed up. As I knew you would," she added.

The sky overhead turned into a black void, the previously verdant grass turning grey and lifeless. "That's pretty impressive," Akira admitted.

"Well... I am quite content with my life as it is now. A world where my parents and grandfather are still alive... it sounds nice, I'll admit, but I made my peace with the reality some time ago anyway," Naoto explained.
Ann nodded slightly. "That... is pretty cool."

Akira made his way back toward Futaba, who gave him a thumbs up. "She's the real deal alright," Futaba told him.

A few light tremors rolled across the grounds, heading toward the center of the estate: A large, multi-story home that looked quite aged and refined. Must have been some kind of family estate, Akira noted as he reached into his bag again.

This time he pulled out a small pencil case, pink in colour with a cute fuzzy mascot on the side. Handing it to Futaba, he cleared his throat a bit. "It's Makoto's," he stated plainly.

"Really?!" Futaba asked, her tone shocked. "Wow, I didn't think Queen was a Buchiko fan... we've got a lot to talk about!"

With the world shaking apart, Prometheus once more got to work.

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This time the dark sphere burst into existence in a modest parking lot, positioned outside an upscale apartment building. When Prometheus fizzled away, the team were once more greeted with the familiar cityscape of Tokyo surrounding them.

"That's her building," Shizuka murmured, glancing to the tall structure to her side.

"You want to take the lead on this?" Akira asked, concern in his expression.

"Guess I should," Shizuka replied, though she didn't sound wholly certain of herself. She already had a good idea of what Makoto's heaven was going to be, from what she knew so far, and taking Makoto away from it... it was going to break her heart.

But the brunette wouldn't appreciate being left in the lie.

Shizuka took the lead with Akira and Morgana following behind. Given how cramped it was likely to be, the rest hung back in the parking lot until such time as they were needed. If things went sour, they were going to need extra assistance.

They reached the door to Makoto's apartment, and from outside the team could hear muffled chatter from within. Makoto's voice was easy enough to recognize, but the strong male voice that occasionally joined her was foreign to the team. Even so, Shizuka already had a good idea of who she was talking to.

She gripped the door, took in a slow breath, and then pushed it open. It was easy enough to see Makoto at the dining table, her back to the front door, and Sae at the far end of the table (a recreation of her at least) did seem a familiar sight too.

But, just across from Makoto, was a new figure. A strong, broad-shouldered man with a clean shaven jaw and short auburn hair. He was dressed in a police officer's uniform, his cap resting on a hook near the door.

Makoto's Father, just as Shizuka had expected. When he died, something just... broke inside Sae.
and Makoto. They were getting better these days, but Shizuka had no doubts that a chance at being with her father again was going to rank high on Makoto's wishlist.

Morgana and Akira exchanged a worried glance. This was going to be hard, no doubt.

Shizuka took a step into the apartment. "Makoto..." she softly said. Her girlfriend's shoulders tensed a bit. "Sweetheart, I... I don't know how to say this... but... this is all just an illusion."

Makoto turned slightly, revealing the tears that were flowing liberally down her face. "I know..." she admitted, her expression a sharp mix of sadness and joy. "I think I saw through this illusion as soon as I got here... b-but I... I didn't want it... to be an illusion..."

The recreation of Sae froze up, like an android suffering a fatal system error. The recreation of their father, however, was watching Makoto and Shizuka closely.

"I know it's hard, believe me I do... but we still need you. The world still needs you..." Shizuka held a hand out to the crying brunette, who reached over with a shaking hand until they clasped together.

"Makoto..." The brunette turned to the facsimile of her father, the sight making Makoto's reddened eyes widen slightly. His skin was turning grey, becoming gaunt around his face. He was rotting alive before their very eyes...

"F-Father..."

Shizuka grit her teeth. The pain on Makoto's face broke Shizuka's heart about as much as having her primordial fears dredged up did. She was going to pound on Camael's head until it popped like an egg on the edge of a bowl.

"Don't leave... I need you..." The decaying man held a hand out to her, as if her acceptance would be enough to save him.

Black matter began to roll down the corners of his mouth, the whites of his eyes turning into a fetid green shade. It was trying to scare her into staying, rather than forcing her as some of the others had.

Makoto seemed to genuinely consider it for several quiet moments. But, eventually, she screwed her eyes shut tight and turned her back to the phantasm. Makoto rose to her feet, gripping Shizuka's hand in her own. "Goodbye... Dad..."

"Ma-... Ko-... To..." His body fell apart, black bile oozing onto the floor while his flesh blew away like dust into the wind.

The team made it just outside the apartment before Makoto collapsed into Shizuka's grasp, burying her face in her girlfriend's shoulder. Shizuka remained silent, a comforting hand settled on Makoto's back while she cast her gaze to the pitch black sky.

Forlorn, Akira and Morgana made for the stairs. They could have a few quiet moments to collect themselves before the illusion started to eat itself alive. And it seemed that Makoto would need that time.

The others didn't ask what had happened. They could tell from Akira's expression that it had been
unpleasant and that he likely didn't want to talk about it.

He quietly strode to his bag and reached in, seeking out the next item they would use.

He pulled a pair of wristbands into view, red with a black stripe in the center. It seemed it was Ryuji's turn next.
The familiar shape of Shujin loomed over Prometheus as the team arrived, the structure of the school already seeming to beckon the group in. "Wow," Ann remarked as they strode through the front entrance. "I would've thought Ryuji's fantasy would involve being as far from a school as possible."

"You and me both," Akira replied, scanning the halls. They seemed completely empty, causing him to furrow his brow. What was going on here?

"Well come on... we better go find that lout as quick as we can... but we don't have much to go on," Morgana said. The stout feline paused, his fuzzy black ears twitching as they picked up on a muffled sound coming from the southern edge of the schoolgrounds.

Makoto and Shizuka were near the back of the group, with the former trying to maintain a determined scowl on her face. Her iron visor did help a good deal, giving her expression a hardened edge.

But Shizuka could see that the past experience in her personal world hadn't left her. Maybe it never really would. She reached over and took Makoto's hand in her own, with the brunette welcoming the contact.

"Hang on... I think I hear something," Morgana said, his fuzzy ears twitching again. "Like a lot of... cheering?"

Akira pondered this, thinking on their surroundings and what he knew of Ryuji. "Well... all things considered... maybe he's at the track?" Akira asked, glancing over his shoulder at the others.

"It's possible. He was pretty keen on track team before... well, you know," Ann remarked.

"The business with the gym teacher?" Naoto asked. Ann nodded in return.

Akira led the way through Shujin's corridors, past the courtyard in the center of the structure, until their path took them to the back door of the building. Beyond there was a large fenced off plain that had a well maintained running track hewn into the grass.

A large crowd of students surrounded it, every seat in the stands packed, with the density of people making it hard to get a good look at the track. Akira nodded at the sight, folding his hands in the pockets of his longcoat. Despite everything that had happened, the track team still meant a lot to Ryuji. He so deeply wanted that back, it seemed.

They made their way closer to the track, gradually getting a sharper picture of the race that was going on. The Shujin team were easy enough to recognise, but Akira had no idea who the students from the rival school were.

Examining the stands, Akira got a look at a section of the crowd that was also quite familiar: The team, in it's entirety, cheering Ryuji on. The shadowy recreations of the Arditi were focused solely on the track, and seemed to pay no notice to the real deal as they reached the edge of the track.

And no Kamoshida in sight. Well, Akira had predicted that much.
He was quick to catch sight of the blond on the track, sprinting with impressive speed past the competitor from the rival school. Ryuji was making a beeline for the finish line, clouds of dust kicking up behind his heels with each step. The cheers of the crowd swelled, the elation in the air growing by the second. Ryuji pulled ahead of his rival and cleared the finish line neatly, skidding to a halt straight after.

With the cheers still going strong, the Arditi nearly being deafened, Akira watched their mirror counterparts rush toward Ryuji. The recreation of Shiho hugged him tight, their lips pressing together in an excited exchange.

"I see," Makoto murmured. "Ryuji is quite happy to have all of us as friends... but a part of him wishes he could have that and the track team back."

Akira nodded slightly. In the end Ryuji had chosen the responsibilities of being a Phantom Thief over rejoining the track team. But part of him still wished to have both, and if the Arditi didn't have so much on their plate... well, he could potentially have had both.

Then again, fantasy world or not, the illusion was probably designed to blot out all thought of the Arditi.

Akira took a step forward, summoning Thor to his side as he did so. Ryuji was his best friend, and liberating his mind fell to Akira. The giant raised his hammer high, a mighty crack of thunder rolling across the skies overhead. Ryuji stiffened a bit, turning until he spied the distinct forms of the Phantom Thieves in front of the stands.

He froze up, confusion playing across his face. "Ryuji," Akira calmly said, keeping a wary eye on their doppelgangers. "We still need your help... and I know you don't want to rest on your laurels while the world is still in trouble. Helping people... it means a lot to you."

Ryuji grimaced, clutching at the right side of his head. "Agh..." Both of his legs wobbled a bit, as if he'd just been stricken with the worst migraine of his life. The blond started to breathe heavily, struggling to keep fully upright. "The Hell...? Why... why're there copies of you guys...? And those clothes..."

"You remember, don't you?" Ann asked hopefully. The people in the stands had grown rigid, as if frozen in time. Even their own recreations were frozen. "You were one of the biggest believers in the Phantom Thieves. You have to remember... like, when we took down Kamoshida."

The name made Ryuji bristle, with the young man gasping and suddenly falling to one knee as the memories boiled in his brain. Layers of imposed ignorance were breaking like thin sheets of ice, a blackness breaking out across the sky.

There was a strong breeze as the cognitive humans blew away like dust in the wind, while powerful tremors pulsed outward from the school building behind them. Futaba gasped sharply, her goggles lighting up. "Y-you guys... I'm sensing something pretty big here!"

"The illusion is fighting back against us," Naoto warned, glancing toward Shujin. Cracks broke out across the walls of the structure, every window shattering apart in sequence. "Sakamoto, you need to remember! This world is just a lie designed to keep you complacent!"

"I know it's tough Ryuji, but reality still needs y-" Akira was cut off by a powerful boom from
behind, the entirety of Shujin being torn free from its moorings. The high school collapsed apart, debris sailing into the sky, as a massive figure was birthed from the ground. A giant silhouette stirred behind the dust, raising his beefy clawed arms overhead. A smell of blood and gin filled the air.

"Ryuujiiii... You were the biggest fucking mistake of my life!" the giant snarled, his voice an impossibly deep and guttural male growl. Ryuji froze up, his eyes popping wide open as his knees hit the ground again.

"What on earth is that?!" Yusuke gasped.

The dust parted to reveal the giant in full, his building sized stature crimson skinned, sporting arms and legs that looked worryingly muscular. His exposed stomach was slightly portly and marked by a coiling serpent tattoo, while much of his head was concealed behind a mop of black hair. The bangs parted in two places, revealing his glinting golden eyes. Sharp bull-like horns sprouted from his temples.

"HOLY SHIT!" Shizuka exclaimed, staggering backward as the vast shadow fell over the team.

The giant staggered forward, each step making the ground tremble violently underfoot. Ann and Yusuke quickly sprang into action, a mighty fireball flying from Hecate's palms and exploding against the incoming beast's stomach. Despite the broad scale of the explosion, the creature trampled through the smoke with only a few scuffs on his gut for his troubles.

His right hand swung downward, attempting to squash the two Persona users. Both figures leapt away, but the shockwave still slammed into Ann from behind and swept the blonde away, leaving her crying out as her body plowed into the stands.

Yusuke rolled onto his feet, hastily summoning Susanoo as he landed. The samurai surged toward his foe, his helix blade striking the crimson flesh of the giant's arm repeatedly and leaving a thin scar with each strike. Yet the demon seemed not to notice. His wrist snapped around, the back of his hand batting Susanoo away and pulling a pained grunt from Yusuke.

"I... I have no idea what on earth that thing is!" Makoto gasped in shock. Bad enough they were up against an unknown entity, but it already seemed obscenely powerful.

"I do," Akira admitted, recalling all he knew about his best friend. The looming abrasive giant, the alcoholic stench that hung around his bulk... his identity was clear to Akira. "It's Ryuji's father."

"You little fucking prick... I'm going to crush the life out of you, and these chickenshit friends of yours!"

There was a flourish as he lunged toward Yusuke, his golden eyes glowing brightly. Twin bursts of lightning exploded from his pupils, with Yusuke reacting quickly. Susanoo slammed his palms into the ground, forming a dense wall of ice that suddenly blocked the incoming explosion and shattered apart straight over.

He leapt away, only for another shockwave to slam into Yusuke's and send him right into the nearest fence. Makoto summoned her Persona, Anat's whole body glowing before a powerful nuclear blast collided with the giant's torso. It hit hard enough to send him staggering off to the side, smoke rising from his skin.
"This energy... it's really something..." Futaba remarked in a worried tone. "It's a cognition, and Ryuji's fear... is making it really tough!"

Akira nodded and glanced to his best friend, kneeling and trembling, afraid to look up at the earth-shaking monster. In that moment he had been reduced to a scared child, his primordial fears dredged up from the deepest levels of his mind.

"So we gotta keep him busy so Ryuji can get his head on straight. No problem," Shizuka curtly said.

Houdini lunged toward him with inhuman speed, so fast that the human eye could not follow her motions. Her whole body lit up with a blinding flash, making the horned giant snarl and recoil, with his right hand falling over his eyes.

Houdini closed in quickly, taking advantage of his disorientation, and started to pummel the demon's exposed throat with rapidfire punches and kicks. Anat attacked from a lower angle, more flashes of energy exploding into his broad body.

Despite taking some damage, the demon abruptly pulsed his body outward. There was a loud impact, Shizuka crying out loudly as her Stand was catapulted away. A stomp from the beast raised several chunks of earth, one loudly exploding against Anat's body and driving the mechanical Persona back.

Mercurius swept upward, throwing both hands forward and unleashing a turbulent cyclone of bladed wind from his palms. Ith lashed across the demon's body, briefly making him stagger, as the bladed edges of the currents formed fresh slices and scars along his musculature.

But, as with the others, it did little to the beast in the grand scheme of things. He turned his head sharply, both eyes glowing brightly, until lightning burst from his golden pupils. Two shots missed and went wide, with the spindly Persona deftly dodging. But the third abruptly exploded against Mercurius' body, making Morgana yowl from the powerful tremors of electricity rolling through his body.

A firestorm swept over the demon's back, the explosion knocking him forward a step and singing his skin. "AGH! You fucking little shits! You're just making this worse for yourselves! I'll grind you fucking bastards to dust!"

He stomped around, glaring toward Ann, Yusuke, and Naoto. Susanoo and Yamato Sumeragi sprang from their users, swinging their blades forth in unison. A hailstorm of ice daggers and blessed shards soared through the air, impacting against the entirety of the demon's upper body and sinking a few inches into his skin. The beast snarled, stomping heavily against the earth. Trails of black goo oozed from his fresh wounds, marking his crimson skin.

"This is what Ryuji's father was like..." Yusuke murmured, recalling his encounter with Ryuji's mother in the past. "What an abomination... to think a woman as kind as his mother was married to such a fiend."

"It's more common than you want to think," Naoto sadly stated. The beast surged forward, more blades punching into his broad body. The trio leaped away as his fist plowed into the ground they had previously been standing on. While the blow itself missed, the trio were subsequently bowled over by large slabs of debris.
Gritting his teeth, Akira turned sharply and gave Ryuji a hard smack across the face with his right hand. The previously panicking blond blinked a few times, until he was looking up at the dark haired boy.

"Damnit Ryuji... You're stronger than him! You've always been stronger than him! So why are you letting fear of that drunken bastard dictate your life?!" he snapped.

Ryuji blinked a few times, looking from Akira to the stomping monster currently batting away blasts from Makoto and Ann. "I... I..." Ryuji grit his teeth. "I couldn't stick up to that bastard when I was a kid.. and he's..."

"A drunken, wife-beating lout! A man who picked on a sweet woman, and his own little kid, because he was too much of a weak fucking sissy to make it in the world!" Akira said in a firm tone. "You're a Phantom Thief! A real hero! And if you were strong enough to overcome Kamoshida, Kaneshiro, Shido... and every other piece of shit that got in our way, then I know you're strong enough to overcome your dad!"

"A Phantom Thief..." Ryuji looked to the ground, slowly clenching his fists tight. He remembered the rush of being in the Arditi, the thrill of taking down corrupt bastards. They'd taken down much bigger fish than his bastard of a father. "That son of a bitch... treated me and Mom like dirt... tried to destroy her. I shouldn't be afraid of that bastard..."

A wave of blue fire violently exploded over Ryuji, his sports attire instantly being replaced with the black leathers of his Skull gear. The ground cracked beneath him, electricity dancing along him from head to heel. "That bastard should be afraid of ME!"

There was a ferocious sonic boom as Seiten Taisei exploded out of Ryuji's subconsciousness, racing toward the looming demon. His cudgel cracked him across the jaw, the shockwave spilling out across the entire city.

The demon lost his footing, smashing harshly onto his side. "Wha... what the fuck?! You little prick! How dare you hit me!" the demon snarled, the glow in his eyes glowing more intense.

A flash of lightning stabbed across the sky from his eyes and exploded against Seiten Taisei's body. He didn't move an inch, smoke rolling across his body.

Thor shot across the air and gave the giant a savage strike with his hammer, the earth shaking again under Akira's power. The demon's right horn broke in half, a large chunk sailing off toward the horizon line.

"I'm not afraid of you anymore, you son of a bitch. So get out of my life..." Ryuji clenched his fists, dark storm clouds gathering over Thor and Seiten Taisei until both figures were aglow with electric blue auras. "And stay out!"

A truly massive bolt of lightning surged from the two, striking the downed demon like the fist of a vengeful god. The prison dimension trembled violently from the shock, the surge of lightning glowing white hot.

The blast went on for several long seconds, before the glow slowly rumbled out of existence. Once it parted entirely, the only thing left of the looming demon was an expansive crater of smoking, smooth glass.
Morgana examined the crater from afar, swallowing hard. "Whoa... I don't think I've ever seen Skull get that angry..."

"Well... it was with a good reason," Ann mused, looking over her shoulder at the blond.

The former trackster inhaled slowly through his nose, steadying himself, and then slowly exhaled. "That... felt really effin' good..." Ryuji admitted.

Akira smiled and settled a strong hand on Ryuji's right shoulder. "It's good to have you back man. How're you feeling?"

"Kinda bummed that I didn't just win that race... but other than that, not bad," Ryuji said, smiling wryly at Akira. "Oh yeah, but don't go smacking me in the face. That ain't cool."

"Noted."

Futaba cleared her throat loudly. "You know, as nice a the whole 'bromance' thing is... we kind of need to get going," the redhead stated.

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Haru's world did not come as much of a surprise to the team when they arrived, the flash of thunder from Prometheus depositing them in the expansive flowerbed of some large, well-tended garden. The verdant grass, well maintained plant sculptures of human and animal figures, and the veritable seas of flowers, gave the impression that they had just teleported onto the pages of some old shojo manga.

The Arditi stuck to the designated path of the garden, a trail of gravel that bordered the various plant exhibits. For as soft as this world looked, it did belong to Haru after all. No telling what she could have lurking around.

"Ugh... I feel if we're here too long, I'll get diabetes..." Futaba murmured.

"You and me both... this isn't even Haru's home in the real world. Must be some kind of country estate," Shizuka replied.

The team were following Futaba's lead, letting the redhead guide them toward Haru's signature. As was the case with the other worlds they had visited, the dimension seemed to pay them no mind for the time being.

"Well, we should endeavour to find her quickly. We still need to retrieve Sergio, Hifumi, and Shiho. And the longer we take, the more I fear for the world," Yusuke murmured.

The garden path brought them closer and closer to a large three story manor that seemed to cast no shadow around the rosy garden. And, eventually, the noise of gentle, cheerful chatter between two women.

Akira came to a stop by an archway formed from a sculpted green bush, peering around until he got a glimpse of Haru in her usual casual attire. She was kneeling by a large bed of roses beside a slightly taller woman dressed in a white sundress, her own strawberry blonde locks tied into a bun.

"Must be Haru's mom..." Ryuji murmured, peering around the other side of the archway.

Akira nodded silently. They knew very little about Haru's mother. The Okumura heiress hadn't ever brought her up, and everyone else felt too awkward to ask. But, given the situation with Haru's
father, they had all safely assumed she was out of the picture in some fashion.

"Is there anyone on the team who doesn't have parent issues?" Shizuka thought briefly to herself.

"We should hang back and watch for a bit... see if that cognition moves away," Ann said. "If there's nothing around, then maybe we won't have to fight through any monsters."

Akira nodded, continuing to lean against the verdant greenery. And, eventually, the beautiful and kindly figure rose to her feet. From afar, reading her lips, Akira noticed some mention of 'tea', before she started making for the back door of the manor.

Akira took a few steps forward, continually scanning their surroundings for any trace of more cognitive beings who could stop them. Once he was close enough, the rest of the team flanking him, he cleared his throat. "Haru..."

The young woman froze a bit, something in Akira's voice catching her off guard. She turned a bit, looking toward the group. Haru was silent, but there was a strange flicker in her eyes as she registered how strange this situation was.

"I... I don't understand..."

"You remember, don't you?" Makoto asked, approaching the strawberry blonde and helping her to her feet. "The Phantom Thieves... your ex-fiancé, everything that happened with your dad... we still need you Haru."

"Hell yeah we do," Shizuka said, smiling at the sweethearted girl.

Haru paused, glancing toward the direction the shade of her mother had walked down. "It's been so long since I saw her, and I... I missed her so much. But I know Mother wouldn't want me playing around in the garden while the world is in trouble." Sighing heavily, Haru closed her eyes and let a wave of blue fire wash over her body, passing by to reveal her Noir attire.

The sky above turned jet black, the flowers of the garden rapidly wilting. "This means a lot Haru. It really does," Akira said, giving her a reassuring smile.

The team went to gather back near Futaba so they could make the next jump. Haru, taking up the flank, glanced at Yusuke and Akira from behind. The wealthy girl's cheeks turned scarlet, as she rapidly worked to suppress memories of a more romantic aspect of this illusory world.

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As had been the case for Ryuji and Ann, their journey into Shiho's world began with Prometheus' ebony mass and the tangles of his tendrils spacing into existence outside the gates of Shujin. And, as with Ryuji, the team wasted no time venturing into the familiar school building.

Things were empty, at first, until the muffled sounds of cheering and sneakers squeaking on a polished hardwood floor led the team toward Shujin's gymnasium like a siren song. Ann and Ryuji took the lead this time, with Ann looking mildly uncertain as they reached the door to the gym.

"Here, of all places?" Ryuji asked in a slightly annoyed tone. "I'm kinda worried... woulda' thought Shiho would never wanna come here again."

"She did genuinely love volleyball when she started out," Ann said, scratching at the back of her neck. "And I guess part of her wishes she could have it back, without the baggage."
"Must be rough... but we still need to try and get her out of here..." Akira said, watching the double doors of the gym closely.

Shizuka let out a small humming sound, idly stroking her chin with her left hand. "Well... I really want to help Shiho too, but... how're we gonna go about it? I mean, that place is probably packed with cognitions, and if we just barge in there... well things might get hairy if we are dogpiled."

Makoto nodded, her gaze shifting to her girlfriend. "Then... perhaps we could do a little smash and grab?" she suggested. Shizuka found herself grinning.

After a few seconds spent outlining what she had planned, Houdini suddenly burst into the hall of the gymnasium. She sailed toward the roof of the gym, just as Shiho spiked the ball over the net to the raucous applause of the filled stands.

Shiho just barely glimpsed the Stand from the corner of her eye.

Houdini shoved her fists downward, the silvery plates of her finger joints glowing a vibrant gold before a blinding flash lit up the gym. The cognitive people screamed and recoiled, while Shiho cried out and shielded her face with her forearms. Houdini shot downward and grabbed Shiho by her collar, yanking the dark haired girl along until they burst into the hallway outside the gym.

Houdini dropped Shiho around the corner, with the Arditi quickly gathering around her. "Agh..." Shiho rubbed at her eyes slowly with her right hand. "What the hell..." she murmured, before opening her eyes and blinking rapidly to try and even out her vision.

Suddenly she found herself staring up at the familiar forms of the Phantom Thieves, growing quite silent. Finally, she ventured to speak. "Oh."

"Yeah," Ann replied simply, managing a sad smile. "It's really nice to see you safe and sound Shiho."

Shiho sighed gently, closing her eyes. "I missed volleyball more than I thought... It really did mean a lot to me in the past. But we've got something important to do... Camael is still out there, right?"

"Yeah. And it's up to us to kick his ass... think you're up for helping?" Ryuji grinned, extending his right hand out toward her.

A faint smile graced Shiho's face. She took Ryuji's hand in her own, accepting his aid to pull her to her feet. Their lips met briefly, her smile only broadening as she parted. "You know it."

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The air flickered and shimmered, before a hole was suddenly torn in space itself. Prometheus forced through this freshly formed gap, a brier of ebony tentacles following the hulking sphere. They settled on the warm grass below, while the mass of Prometheus landed on the slope of a large hill.

The dark ship fizzled out of existence, with Futaba slumping forward a bit and settling her hands on her knees. "Agh... geez... this is starting to take a toll..." she admitted with a quick exhale.

Akira smiled and settled a hand on Futaba's back. "Now now... we're almost done. You're doing great," he assured her, before looking up to examine the horizon.

"This... definitely isn't Japan," Shizuka remarked in a surprised tone, surveying their surroundings.
Warm sunlight washed over the landscape, casting a golden hue over the sea of grass ahead of the hilly landscape. Up ahead she could see a small, nostalgic looking town, filled with small red-roofed buildings, with much of the area marked off by small cobblestone walls.

The largest building in that modest town was a church, distinct for the tall tower positioned near the back of it. The large golden bell inside the tower was ringing loudly, the noise spreading across the landscape.

"Italy," Yusuke remarked. "I suppose it makes sense for Sergio to have this as his world. And the countryside would be ideal scenery for an artist like him."

"Does that mean there are gonna be Italian versions of us here?" Ann asked.

"Man, I really hope not..." Ryuji murmured as the group started to walk along, hoping to find Sergio as quickly as possible.

Morgana seemed particularly awestruck by all the new sights and sounds, his large blue eyes quickly scanning all about. "Man... this heat is great!" Morgana enthusiastically said, stretching his stubby arms overhead.

Haru reached up, grabbing the brim of her black cap and adjusting it to add more shade over her face. "Actually, having spent so much time in my paradise world... I'm a little tired of the heat by now," she admitted.

Following after Futaba, they soon came across one home that stuck out from the others. A small cottage with an expansive wall bordering it, with well maintained rows of flowers residing on the interior of the wall.

A few cats were resting on the lawn, sleeping and stretching out in the vibrant sunlight.

There, seated in the shade of the cottage's veranda, was a silver haired old woman in a dark dress, her olive skin well marked with rows of wrinkles. If one were to look up 'Italian grandmother', she would perhaps be among the first pictures to come up. She raised a glass of wine to her lips and supped on the crimson liquid within, pushing it slowly from cheek to cheek.

There was a sudden chiming sound around her as the old woman inhaled through her nose, sparks of electricity dancing over her chapped lips. She abruptly spat into a spitoon at her side, the wine shooting out like a 'hardened' sphere of glistening liquid, crackling with electricity. It struck the inside of the spitoon with a resounding clanging sound, forming a rounded dent on the material.

"Whoa..." Shizuka blinked a few times in surprise. "Hamon granny... guess this is the place."

Just as she said this, Sergio's familiar form emerged through the front door. He was dressed well in a sleeveless blue vest, a white shirt that had the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, dark trousers and polished white shoes. "Again, grandmother?" Sergio casually asked.

"Hm?" the old woman gave him a sideways glance.

"We'll run out of spittoons at the rate you're going," Sergio said.

The old woman shrugged, setting her glass down on the small table beside her. "If the wine was good, I wouldn't need the spitoon."

"No wine is good to you..." Sergio said with a helpless smile.
From their vantage on the hill, Akira gave a small sigh. "Well we're nearly done. Come on, let's go get him, and then Hifumi."
"Alright, I'll be the one to say it: I do not want to end up fighting that old lady... for several reasons," Ann said, drawing the attention of her group. "I mean... if she could do that with her spit, I really don't want to see what she can do if she turns all monstery. Secondly we don't have time to waste getting into more fights, and thirdly... she's an old lady! It'd be awkward fighting a grandmother."

"Yeah, she has a point," Shiho curtly replied. "Fighting a grandmother is the kind of thing you'd feel bad about, even if the grandmother turns into a fifty foot high dragon, or whatever."

"We still need to get to Sergio... let's watch for now, he may move away from the house," Yusuke reasoned.

Akira nodded, taking in these suggestions as they observed the blond chat with his grandmother. "Now that I think about it, I really don't know a lot of Sergio's life before Tokyo... Well, I assumed family meant a lot to him, considering we used a family photograph to get here," he admitted.

"Even I don't know much," Yusuke said, a slight frown creasing onto his face. "I assumed something bad had happened here, but... well you know how vibrant Sergio usually is. Bringing up home in the past has made him more cold and withdrawn."

The team exchanged uncertain glances, mildly concerned about the implications. The thought of angering the illusion suddenly became more worrying.

After a few more moments, Sergio strode away from the shade of his grandmother and made his way beyond the wall. He paused only briefly to pet some of the cats in passing, before continuing along his way.

His path took him along the verdant landscape, with the Arditi now quietly following after him. Futaba was regularly sweeping the horizon, keeping a sharp eye out for any other cognitive people who could give them trouble.

Eventually Sergio came to a stop at the peak of a slope that overlooked his hometown, his hands folded neatly into the pockets of his dark trousers. Slowly, the team approached him, with Yusuke being the one to speak up. "Sergio? We need to talk."

Sergio folded his hands neatly behind his back, but didn't turn to face them. "I had a feeling it wasn't real, you know," he admitted.

Akira and Ryuji gave each other a slightly worried look. "This is... you knew about this? That this is an illusion."

Sergio nodded slightly. "Something about all this... when I awoke here, there was a nagging sensation in my head that something about it was fundamentally wrong. And bit by bit, as I explored my childhood stomping grounds, I came to remember the truth. That my childhood home... doesn't really exist anymore."

"What... what do you mean?" Makoto asked in a slightly worried fashion.
"A while ago... maybe four years ago, or something like that, something... happened. A vampire attack. To this day the Foundation doesn't know where they came from, about three in total, who... attacked by night." Sergio exhaled slowly through his nose. "Vampires are speedy bastards... a few people were already dead by the time anyone knew what was going on."

Akira felt his frown deepen. "And those vampires... they went for you?"

Sergio nodded slightly. "My grandmother, as you can imagine, was something of an expert there. She ordered the family into her home, and we bolted the door and windows... but of course, they still burst in. To this day I don't know if they knew about grandma, or if it was just by chance. Regardless, I was closest to the creatures when they burst in. And one attacked me first," he explained.

Sergio reached down and gripped the hem of his shirt and vest, raising both garments up to reveal a segment of his abdomen. The blond grimaced, the illusion weakening as five rounded scars suddenly formed into existence in the exposed section of his chest. The circles of darkened scar tissue were neatly spaced, and seemed to move in a slight arc.

"Oh my gosh!" Ann gasped, pressing her hands to her mouth in her shock.

"They... stabbed you?" Haru asked, swallowing hard.

As the strawberry blonde said this, Shizuka gave a slight shake of her head. "That's how vampires feed. They drink through their fingers," she explained in a grim tone.

Sergio nodded. "The wounds were healed by a Stand user, though in a sense they never really left me. But, I suppose I was lucky that I was hit first. After all, your Stand can quickly manifest for the first time when your life is in danger. And while I couldn't use Hamon... Breakthru was more than capable of tearing vampires asunder, operating on reflex and survival instinct. And keeping their chunks frozen in place until the sun rose was also easy enough. Got them all before they hurt my family..."

"But the other people in your town... they weren't so lucky, were they?" Shiho asked.

The blond felt a sad smile form on his face. "A few people were not so fortunate. Some of my childhood friends, their parents... a section of the town, wiped out by those monsters. The guilt lingered with me for some time... wondering if they could have been saved, if I had Breakthru sooner..."

"Wh- you can't seriously feel that way! What happened there... shit like that ain't your fault!" Ryuji exclaimed.

"I know that now... but when I was younger, I was foolish. Several of my friends were dead, and I could only think of myself being at fault. As for the rest of the town, something just... broke after that. The survivors weren't the same, becoming like zombies as they tried to move beyond all they had seen. And the government worked to cover things up, treating it as an act of violence by some biker gang."

"Yeah well... the existence of vampires is a pretty crazy thing to try and explain to people," Shizuka noted, folding her arms across her chest.

A grim silence fell across Sergio, his hands clasped behind his back while he returned his focus
toward the town. "They'll never get any older... but I'm still here. And I have no idea how to process that, even now... though it was only for a brief while, this place let me see the world the way I wish it had been. But it's not real, is it? It's just a perversion, built from my heart..."

Akira hesitated for a moment, his left hand raised a bit, before he glanced to Yusuke. Perhaps the gesture would mean more from the bluenette... Seeing this, Yusuke reached over and let his right hand rest reassuringly on Sergio's right shoulder. "The world can be a violent and random place... the fate of your hometown was a tragedy, but... you can still make a difference for the real world," Yusuke explained.

"It's all an illusion, yes? I have to admit, it's a convincing one. And staying here... bad as it may sound to say it is rather tempting to stay in this world," Sergio said. He heaved a sad sigh and let his hands rest on his hips. "But... you're right. The world still needs us... I haven't forgotten about that monster, and I know the world will only get worse if we don't try and put a stop to it."

There was a distinct flicker in the skies overhead, pinpricks of blackness puncturing the clear blue sky. They spread outward rapidly, forming a jet black shroud that devoured the clouds and blotted out the sun.

"That's it, hm?" Sergio asked himself. A few of the buildings in the distance began to crumble, before falling to the ground in dense heaps of debris. "Just like it was back then... it has certainly been some time."

He made his way toward Futaba, a few comforting pats on the back following the blond along. Blue flames washed along his body as he walked, replacing his clothing with his formal Diabolik gear. Futaba adjusted her goggles with her left hand, covertly trying to dab her eyes with her right sleeve. "W-well... w-we still need to get Hifumi," Futaba murmured, her voice cracking a bit.

"Damn man... I didn't know you went through stuff like that..." Shizuka said as she approached the blond. "You... got snapped up by the SID soon after?"

"More or less... Grandma put the call in, and they wanted to keep tabs on me... and I did soon start to like the power Breakthru had. And with my artistic talent, they pulled some strings to get me into Kosei." Sergio shrugged. "The rest, as they say, is history."

Makoto smiled a bit. "Well... no matter what happens... we'll still be on your side. We're a team, in this to the end," the brunette said.

"Of that, I'm quite sure," Sergio said, a smile spreading across his jawline. "Well, let's get to it. I'd rather not leave Hifumi stuck in an illusion of her own."

With that the darkness of Prometheus began to rise up once more, as cracks and fissures opened in the earth and began to swallow the memories of what had been Sergio's childhood.

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It didn't take long for shock and confusion to set in, soon after Prometheus emerged in what was to be Hifumi's illusory world. The sphere parted around Akira and Futaba, with Akira nearly losing his grip on the closed shogi board they had used to get here, slack-jawed silence overcoming the duo as a vast shadow fell over them.

With Prometheus' tentacles unwinding and vanishing, the rest of the team soon felt the same sense
of surprise overcome them. One by one they looked up, to see themselves staring at the rampart of an expansive medieval castle. The pale stone bricks loomed high, shadowy armoured figures patrolling silently above.

Akira stole a glance to his right, able to see the cityscape of Tokyo in the distance. So there was some semblance of the real world here, but Hifumi herself had manifested this castle as her own.

"Oh. Okay," Morgana flatly said.

"I suppose this makes sense... Hifumi is a pretty big nerd for fantasy things. This sort of world forming for her, Hifumi having her own castle... makes sense to me," Sergio remarked, managing a slight smile at the thought.

"Well it already looks like this place is going to be tough. I get the feeling that those knights aren't just for show," Shiho said, observing the motions of the armoured figures on the walls.

Akira nodded in agreement. "Well, even so, we can't afford to go slow here... This has already taken a lot of time, after all. Fox, think you can get us over that wall?" he asked.

Yusuke pondered this, examining the architecture for a few quiet moments. "Yes, I believe that's quite doable. Hang on everybody."

Susanoo suddenly appeared at his side, driving both of his palms toward the grassy ground. There was a distinct rumble from below, followed immediately by an upward surge of ice under their feet. The ice rose higher and higher, carrying the shocked Arditi along for the ride, until it came to an abrupt stop just a few inches above the edge of the wall.

"W-whoa..." Ann wobbled a bit on her feet, before steadying herself and jumping across the narrow gap. "J-Jeez Fox... not so fast next time, yeah?"

The others followed after the blonde, until the whole team were gathered on the stony surface of the rampart. The main body of the castle was still some distance away, across an expansive section of greenery.

Susanoo moved forward again, swirls of arctic wind rising along his forearms, and unleashed another surge of ice that began to form a bridge from the inner wall. Thick segments sloped down and sank into the grass. It was slow going, inches of the bridge being grown in the span of seconds.

There was a heavy rush of clattering metal off to Akira's side, causing him to turn as a heavily armoured knight sprinted his way. The creature's faceplate was missing, revealing a twisting void of darkness where a head should have been.

Arsene quickly appeared in front of Akira, parrying away a sword swing from the knight and delivering a powerful kick to his torso in return. The knight skidded backward, a primal growling sound rising from within the armor, before his kite shield smashed into Arsene's chest, earning a painted grunt from Akira as the dark-haired boy was sent staggering backward.

Hecate moved in front of their leader, a surge of hellfire launching from her palms and sweeping away the armoured figure back toward the small tower he had emerged from. He melted down into armored sludge, just as a new trio of knights emerged from the same tower.

Another wave of fire shot from Hecate's palms, but the knights raised their shields and braced
against the explosive impact. They shuffled back from the force, but immediately charged through the smoke. The witch moved to recoil, a sharp slash cutting along her right shoulder. Ann grimaced, gripping the fresh wound on her arm and stumbling back a bit.

"This place is already hitting back at us?!!" Ryuji barked.

"Whatever's in that castle, Hifumi really doesn't want the illusion being shattered!" Shizuka shouted. She turned, watching as two more knights emerged from the tower on the other side. Her invisible Stand lunged outward, swinging rapid kicks to blow the armored figures backward.

Morgana yelped as he looked upward, catching a glimpse of a hail of arrows being launched from the castle itself. Mercurius formed above the squat feline, the slim figure swinging his staff outward and unleashing a gale of wind that smashed the incoming arrows apart.

Susanoo was building the bridge bit by bit, and once it was far enough along a few of the team jumped onto the dense frozen material. Seiten Taisei delivered a crushing blow to one knight, sweeping him into the air with the force of his attack, the armored figure colliding with one of the towers with such force that the entire thing collapsed, blocking off incoming reinforcements.

One of the knights on the rampart, however, managed to close in and swing his sword. Seiten Taisei started to pull back, but the peak of the sword still sliced across his torso, making Ryuji grimace and clutch his chest, a few trembles rising through his body.

"S-Skull!" Shiho gasped. Eris lunged forth, a blast of blessed energy obliterating the offending knight, while his two kinsmen raised their shields to block the blast. "A-are you okay?" she quickly asked.

"Y-yeah, but... it's just a scratch, don't sweat it," Ryuji said, giving his chest a squeeze through the leathers of his jacket.

The rest of the team jumped onto Susanoo's freshly built bridge, moving along the frosty material while Ann and Haru guarded the flank, using projectiles to ward off the knights that tried to follow them from the rampart. All the while, Morgana was still working to beat away the incoming hails of arrows with his Persona.

Once the bridge was close enough to the main body of the fortress, Akira and Ryuji took to returning fire. Swirls of cursed energy and arcs of lightning flew from the makeshift bridge, exploding against the walls of the castle and launching the armored archers from their hiding spots.

The bridge managed to reach one of the tiered walls of the castle, each thief quickly leaping over. Once everyone was across, Breakthru swung around and drove both of his fists into the ice. A healthy chunk of the bridge cracked under the impact, before half of it shattered apart onto the grass below.

"Oracle, you need to lead us," Akira said, giving his girlfriend a quick glance.

The redhead nodded firmly, a tentacle of dark matter forming in the air beside her. It swung forward, smashing into the wall directly ahead and shattering a huge chunk apart. It gave them a clear path into a long corridor, a series of rapidly closing doorways falling into view ahead. A few knights had gathered inside, their glowing garnet eyes affixed to the intruders.

"Just ahead! We need to get through these punks first!" Futaba said.
"With pleasure!" Sergio shouted in return. Breakthru lunged forward ahead of his user, punching a few sections of flooring in passing, with those sections suddenly dislodging from the ground and rocketing forward. A few knights were bowled over by the debris, one of them dodging and slashing his halberd at Sergio. The blade grazed his forearm, making Sergio grunt and grip the new bloody wound.

Susanoo struck the knight with immense force, huge chunks of his body dissolving instantaneously, while the bulk of his torso slammed into the first door and shattered it apart. "Keep moving!" Yusuke shouted.

"There are still more closing in from behind!" Naoto called out, before grunting and sidestepping a halberd swipe.

The team charged forward, flashes of energy and superhuman strength punctuating the movements of their spectral guards. More and more knights closed in, only to be beaten back. However, for every two knights that fell, at least one managed to close in and land a slash.

It seemed everyone on the team had at least one bloody wound to speak of now, trails of crimson marking the white tiled floors of the castle.

Haru gave a grunt, staggering a bit as a scar opened along the small of her back. The offending attacker was flattened by a hard punch from Anat, but the strawberry blonde was still fuming from it.

"Oh that is it..." Haru murmured under her breath, her left hand touching her mask. The tiles cracked under Haru's feet as Astarte spawned into existence. A wave of purple light pulsed out of the floating skull, sweeping away several of the knights ahead, and blowing apart the next two doors barring their path.

A general trail of destruction followed the path of Astarte's psychic wave, cobwebs of cracks trailing along the walls, ceiling, and floors. More than a few knights had been crushed, as if knocked under a tide. "W-whoa," Makoto said in a shocked tone. "You certainly can cut loose when you want to," she added, pressing her left hand to a wound on her hip.

"Yeah, but look!" Shizuka exclaimed, pointing through the newly opened doors. "I can see Hifumi from here!"

Sure enough, the dark haired girl was in view, and seemed oblivious to the battle going on in the corridor. She was dressed somewhat casually in a cream sweater and dark skirt, her gaze affixed to the shogi board on the small table in front of her. Just across from her was a somewhat sickly looking older man with glasses and short dark hair, dressed in a nice suit.

"Hifumi!" Sergio shouted. She didn't budge from the game in front of her. "Damnit," he muttered, before sprinting forward. Flourishes of explosions lit up the corridor behind, Ann and Makoto working in tandem to ward off knights attacking their flank.

A large contingent of them surged around the final doorway, forming an armored column that was joined shoulder and shoulder. Their armor rippled and shimmered, merging and melting together to form a solid wall of steel, glowering at the thieves.

Inky black tendrils flew through the gaps on their armour, lashing at the air. One caught Ann and
slammed her into a wall, the blonde crying out from the knockout blow. Yusuke ducked under another swing, only for the same tendril to whip around and grab his ankles, driving him face first into the tiles.

Arsene shoved his hands forward, twin blasts of chaos energy erupting out of his palms and obliterating two incoming tentacles. A third, however, burst through the smoke and whipped around Akira's shoulders, making him gag loudly. It hoisted him off his feet and drove his body into a nearby wall, making Akira cry out in pain as he was nearly punted through the brickwork entirely.

Sergio continued sprinting ahead, dodging the incoming tendrils with bursts of superhuman speed. "Hifumi... I'm not giving up on you... no matter how hard this world fights to keep us out!" he growled.

Breakthru flew ahead of his user with an echoing boom of speed, his right fist clashing violently against the living wall of steel. Both figures struggled against each other, the entire floor starting to rumble in protest. Yet neither could push the other away. Eventually the rising energy left Breakthru's body trembling, until a vibrant scarlet glow enveloped the entirety of his beefy frame.

More and more charged momentum flowed through Breakthru, pumping into the living wall, until at last it buckled. There was a violent boom that shook the fortress, the blast vaporizing the fused knights apart. Sergio let out a pained howl, slumping to his side a bit as spurts of blood burst up through sections of his right fist.

Sergio was left panting, his whole body shaking, and he cast his gaze promptly to his right hand. Broken. His fingers were partially twisted, and refused to respond to his commands. Seemed he'd put more into that attack than he had expected.

"Ignore it... can get healed later," Sergio growled to himself. He made his way through the smoke, while the rest of the team worked to pick themselves up after being thrown about by the tendrils.

Sergio staggered into the room, clutching at his right wrist, as his gaze settled on Hifumi and her ongoing shogi game. It seemed dead even, from what he could see. "Hifumi," the blond softly said.

Hifumi blinked a few times, slowly turning until she was looking toward Sergio. Everything but the Phantom Thieves seemed to grind to a halt, as if the castle had become frozen in time. "S-Sergio? What are... what are you doing here?"

"I think... you already know why," Sergio said. Hifumi glanced to his bloodied hand, and then to the mask he was wearing. She swallowed a bit at the sight. Sergio, in turn, glanced to the frozen figure on the other side of the shogi board.

Hifumi sagged back into her seat, pressing her right hand to her face, grunting as she felt a strange burning sensation in her mind. Her memory pulsed and quivered, layers of ignorance being powerwashed away. "This... this is all..."

"An illusion, yes," Akira said as he entered the broken dooway. "I'm sorry Hifumi... I know this world must be nice for you, but... it's not real. Camael did this to you... just like he did for the rest of us," he said.

Hifumi took in a few breaths to steady herself, removing her hand so she could look up at the team. "This is all fake... th-then this isn't..." she glanced over to the frozen man at her side. "... My dad."
"Shogi with your dad..." Shizuka remarked, examining the board. "That's what got you so into the game, right?"

Hifumi nodded sadly. "When my dad was sick, he couldn't do much physically. But he was able to dictate a lot of time to shogi... it was how we spent all our time together. It was simple and fun, and it... made me happy. But then I got good, and my mom... she wanted it to be my ticket to fame." Hifumi sighed heavily and closed her eyes. "I... I never wanted that. I just wanted to enjoy shogi with my dad. But it doesn't seem like things can ever be so simple..."

Sergio reached over with his left hand, comfortingly settling it on Hifumi's shoulder. She stirred a bit, looking at Sergio's reassuring smile. "You'll have times like that again. I promise. But, for now... the world's still in danger. And we need every hand we can get on this. Think you can help us?"

Hifumi paused in thought, her attention settling briefly on the shogi board. "And I was so close to winning this round too... oh well, there's no time for that. Right now... you're right. It'd be selfish of me to just sit around here."

With that she reached up, firmly taking Sergio's left hand in her own.

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4/12

A crimson sky hung over Okinawa, the alien light dying the lapping waves of the shore a deep obsidian shade. Angelic figures flitted around in the distance, seeming to be constantly hunting for those who were not under the sway of the Holy Grail.

An expansive estate had been built near the coast, a two story white structure with a sloping scarlet roof. A large pool had been built in the back of the estate, with the entire area bordered by a tall white wall.

A section of air near the backdoor of the estate began to ripple and shimmer, followed by a shriek of energy as a hole was suddenly torn in space. Crackles of static rolled through the air, growing more intense as Prometheus formed through the fresh scar in reality. The sphere landed heavily on the patio, the rip in the air closing shut behind it.

The sphere quickly vanished, with it's two occupants landing neatly on the poolside tiles. Shizuka rose to her feet, slowly stretching her arms overhead and grunting vaguely. "Cripes... it's pretty cramped in there Futaba..."

The redhead shrugged vaguely. "You're just not used to squatting around like I do. I could probably get comfy in an envelope if I had to."

There was a brief pause as Shizuka made for the back door, standing by silently as Houdini moved from her body and phased her hands into the door. Her Stand wasted no time manipulating the tumblers of the lock into place.

"Uh... are you sure we have time for this? We're supposed to meet with the others in a few minutes... it's the final push," Futaba remarked as she approached Shizuka's side.
"I know," the dark haired girl replied in turn. "This'll be quick. Besides, if this really is it... then it makes sense to get the best resources we can."

Futaba nodded a bit. "So... what is this place anyway?" the hacker asked.

"This? It's my grandma's vacation home. She had it built in the later years of her life, and I've come out here... eh, once or twice when I was a kid. Honestly I'd almost forgotten about this place, entirely, except for one thing..." Shizuka trailed off as Houdini's unseen hand turned the door handle, with the heavy white door rolling open toward the two girls.

Shizuka strode inside, making a note to wipe her feet along the mat as she entered. Shizuka led the way in through the vaulted entryway, which immediately led into a large and well furnished dining room.

Futaba peered around the corner, letting her eyes wander from end to end of the long dining table until they were resting on the far wall of the room. An impressive fresco had been laid out on the wall, depicting the canals of Venice in fine detail. The waterfront scenery was sunlit, streaks of gold lining the gentle waves.

However the sun in the fresco quickly caught Futaba's eye. Positioned in the center of the painted golden sun was a distinct red gemstone in a silver casing, a distinct cross shape outlined in the ruby material. "What the heck is that?"

"That, my dear Oracle, is why we're here," Shizuka said, grinning broadly. She'd almost forgotten about it entirely, only for her little trip to fantasy land to remind her of it entirely.

Houdini floated toward the gemstone and gently popped it from its moorings. It seemed to hum in the Stand's grasp, glowing gently as it met the luminous plates in Houdini's fingers.

"This is the Red Stone of Aja... and it's going to help us blast that Holy Grail straight to hell!"
The Show Must Go On (I)

Things had not gone entirely to plan, Akechi would freely admit. He had hoped, ultimately, that despite all his setbacks he could have simply killed Shido and be done with it. But of course the Phantom Thieves had gotten in his way, and then he had been incarcerated for a bit... oh yes and now the world was ending.

He had found that pill a bit harder to swallow, and he still had no notion of what the hell was going on. Even if he wanted to ask the Arditi about this (he didn't), it seemed as if they had vanished entirely.

Things being as they were, he had taken to investigating the city in small bursts, not wanting to be out in the open for too long. Those metal creatures drifting through the sky were rather ominous, and they seemed to radiate a bit more power than the average Shadow.

Currently he was moving through Shibuya's narrow side streets, a deliberate slowness in his pace, as he kept his attention affixed to the structure that now loomed high in the Tokyo skyline. The tower looked as if it was built from some kind of sandstone, with rows of glowing windows winding around the jagged exterior. The large structures of bone that had sprouted from the earth seemed to vaguely frame the tower's location, with a large bridge of bone and twisted flesh feeding out from the halfway point toward street level.

Whatever was going on, Akechi was sure that had to be at the heart of it. If he could get just a quick look, it might help him get some understanding of what was going on.

But, as Akechi exited the alley onto the vacant street outside, a broad shadow fell over him. The fallen detective turned sharply, finding himself staring up at a beefy humanoid figure, much of his body coated in steel, while revealing segments of gnarled grey flesh were exposed on his chest and right arm. The scarlet sky cast an ominous glow on the pearlescent surface of his encased head.

"There you are," the creature remarked in a low voice, staying afloat a few feet above the ground. His bladed wings were spread wide, catching the light. "I've been looking everywhere for you."

Akechi narrowed his eyes, holding his ground for the time being. "And just who the hell are you?" he warily asked.

"You may call me Camael. I am the right hand of the god who has taken rightful control of this..."

"Sinful and warped world."

Akechi narrowed his eyes, holding his ground for the time being. "And just who the hell are you?"

"You may call me Camael. I am the right hand of the god who has taken rightful control of this..."

"And what exactly does that have to do with me?" Akechi asked. The brunette had knocked down bigger Shadows, he knew that much, but something about this thing... it radiated an abundant, absolute strength. Attacking him would be a risky venture.

"Simply put, my creator wishes to thank you. This entire situation... you were quite important in making it come to fruition." Akechi's eyes widened just a bit. "And given your disdain for the world... you can help see it end."

Well, he was a step closer to understanding this insane situation. "What do you mean? How did I have a hand in any of this?"
"That power you use, your Persona... did you really think it just came from the ether? It was a gift from Him. This whole sordid business, you and the Phantom Thieves, it was all part of something much larger. Something beyond your comprehension. And you were quite useful in setting the stage for Him," Camael explained, his large right arm gesturing to the distant form of the alien tower.

Akechi felt his right hand curl into a fist, but managed to keep a calm expression. He had sometimes wondered where his power had come from, Loki wasn't the talkative sort, and this business with the Metaverse... it had simply happened one day, with no real warning. Much as it had for Kurusu, as he understood it.

It had been strange to him of course. Two people who never would have met without Shido's involvement, being bound together by this most unique power. It had always seemed too convenient to be a mere coincidence, but he'd never had the time or tools to investigate further.

But now the situation was becoming clear. This, all of it, was part of some damn game. Akechi's frown deepened.

"So, what say you?" Camael asked, extending his right hand out toward Akechi.

It was all a lie. How much of his existence had been dictated by this creature? His whole quest to get back at his dad, it was all playing into the machinations of some jumped-up Shadow? If he threw his hat in with this abomination, even if it prolonged his life, it was just playing further into his hands.

Akechi smiled suddenly. "I think you know my answer."

A sudden surge of cursed energy slammed into Camael and washed over him like a tide, sweeping him up and then powering him into the asphalt with such force that it split under his weight. Camael swung his wings upward, waves of smoke and debris blasting up around him.

"You dare strike me?!" Camael snarled.

The blast hadn't done much. A few blackened smudges marked the steely plates of his left arm, but that was all. But, then again, Akechi hadn't been trying too hard.

Swirls of scarlet fire coiled around his hands and feet, before suddenly sweeping along the entirety of Akechi's body until the garnet blaze engulfed him entirely. "Listen up, you overgrown monster... I don't care who you are, or what 'god' you serve..." The flames vanished, leaving him in the black and purple thief attire he was so accustomed to. He grinned broadly, the ruby lenses of his mask glowing brightly. "I don't have any intention of willingly working with a self-absorbed Shadow."

"Hmph." Camael rose to his full height, a sudden and invisible pulse of power radiating from his body. Akechi grunted, holding his footing as the unseen wave struck him. "Truth all told? I was hoping you would refuse. You humans are ultimately all alike, and a chance to kill any of you... I'll gladly accept the opportunity," he said.

"Oh? I think you'll find me a little more challenging than some trash on the street," Akechi remarked. The air around him rippled, Loki's black and white body forming into existence behind him. The angular figure clutched his sword in his right hand, decisively aiming it at the dark angel.
Camael chuckled. "I've taken on the Phantom Thieves twice, and come out the victor on both
occasions. What can you do on your own?"

"I think you'll find I've done plenty on my own," Akechi boasted, grinning sharply.

Loki and Camael lunged at each other in unison, the ground shattering beneath both figures.

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Once everyone had gathered in the meeting room, Minato quickly got down to business. "The Holy
Grail has control across the globe, infesting the minds of almost everyone who doesn't have a
power like us. With such a huge part of the planet giving him strength, attacking the thing head on
might not accomplish much."

Mitsuru nodded slightly from her seat. "We faced a similar problem with Nyx's avatar. For as
strong as we were, the world wishing for the Fall meant we couldn't do much in the long run."

"Wait, so... we can't beat that thing?" Ryuji asked uncertainly. "We went through all this, and we
can't even win?" Annoyance rose in his tone, only calming when Shiho settled a hand on his right
shoulder.

"I didn't say that," Minato replied, folding his arms across his chest. "We'll just need to take a
different approach than a head on one. First thing's first, we need to shatter the illusion that's
overcome the world and I just so happen to have an idea how. We need to broadcast a signal, one
that contains the truth of things," he explained.

Aigis tilted her head a bit. "Not that I doubt you, but... how would we accomplish this?"

"In creating this world, the Grail had to keep most things functioning to make sure people didn't
have the illusion broken on them. Electricity, public transport, the internet... everything like that is
still fully functional. And with the internet, and the satellites of the world still functioning, we have
the tools we need to broadcast to the world. That's where you three come in," Minato said,
gesturing toward Fuuka, Rise, and Futaba.

"Oh yeah?" Rise felt herself grinning a bit. "Sounds exciting. Where do we come into this?"

"It'll fall to Futaba to hack into the satellites. After which, you and Fuuka will have to broadcast
and maintain that message across the globe. Every television set, every radiowave, every internet
page... you need to shout that message out of every possible avenue," Minato told the redhead. Rise
nodded firmly, clearly excited.

Akira stroked his chin slowly in thought. "But, to do something like that... I don't think we could
pull it off underground."

Minato nodded. "That's a problem, yes. We'll need to go to a tall building for the sake of
broadcasting that signal, which will leave a chunk of the team exposed. And... the team will end up
splitting up when we get to that point. The way I see it, while most of us will be protecting Fuuka
and Rise, the Phantom Thieves will launch a direct attack on the Grail."

"Splitting up? That sounds kinda... dangerous, you know. If we're going against a god, it might be a
good idea to go all in," Shizuka suggested.
"I don't entirely disagree, but... Well if we're going to wake people up, and get them on our side, they need something they believe in. And right now, the Arditi are the only group who have any sort of global reach," Minato explained. He leaned back against the wall, sliding his hands into his trouser pockets. "If the people have something they can believe in, it'll help pull them out of the illusion. And seeing you guys going up against the grail, with that belief powering you-"

"Ooooh!" Futaba visibly brightened, a manic grin forming on her face. "I get it! So we'll turn the Grail's own weapons against him! Belief empowers it, but with the world being like this... the same belief can empower us too!" She excitedly said.

Ryuji's eyes widened, and he immediately perked up in his seat. "For real?! Oh shit, we have gotta do that then!"

"Don't go getting cocky... this is probably one of the strongest entities the planet has seen in a while," Yukari warned.

Jotaro rose from his seat, like a statue suddenly coming to life. "We've spent enough time waiting around. Let's go and deal with this before that thing does anything worse to the world," he stated.

Makoto nodded firmly. "Agreed. Er, Arisato-san... did you have any suggestions on where we could do this?"

The bluenette turned his steely gaze toward Mitsuru, who blinked a few times in surprise. "I believe you have a tower we can use?"

"Well, yes..." Mitsuru admitted. "It's an office near Shibuya, but it usually handles the more mundane aspects of the Kirijo Group. You... certainly have thought this through."

Minato shrugged dismissively. "I'm very clever. But, more than that, I've been chained to a giant space wall for a long time. Thinking is about all I could do most of the time," he explained.

"Man, this is all way outside my wheelhouse..." Josuke admitted, scratching the back of his neck. "But if the whole world is in danger... then I'll do what I can to help."

"Glad to hear it." A very tiny smile graced Minato's face. "We'll need all the help we can get on this. Especially when we start our little broadcast, when the tower is no doubt going to become a major target."

Sighing, Yu rose to his feet and smoothed out the creases in his trousers. "Let's get going then. We have all we need, and we're all rested up. This is the big one, for the sake of the world," he stated.

As the rest of the group rose up, Akira slowly stretched his arms in front of him. "In that case, I'll go and talk to Sae before we go. See if she wants in on this."

"E-eh? S-sis?" Makoto asked in a worried tone.

"Well yeah. We do need as much help as we can get on this, and Sae's Stand is pretty damn powerful," Akira explained.

The gathered team moved to leave, with Akira being among the last to walk out of the room. However, as he passed the doorway, he spied Lavenza leaning back against the wall. She brightened a bit as she saw him, pushing up into a full standing height.
"Trickster... I wanted to wish you luck. You're taking part in a very dangerous mission for the fate of the entire world... I don't envy you, but I know you can win," the silver haird girl proudly proclaimed.

Akira smiled a bit. "It's good to know you believe in us... right about now, belief is all we have. I take it you won't be joining us?"

Lavenza sadly shook her head. "Would that I could, but... I've already stepped outside of my boundaries so far. There are, well... rules to follow." She sighed and stared to the weighty compendium in her hands.

"Say no more," Akira replied, smiling fondly and giving the short girl a soft pat on the head. "You just cheer us on, and I'll make sure to make that creep pay for what he did to you and Igor. I'll see you again... Promise."

As Akira strode off, Lavenza watched his back closely. "Stay safe, my Trickster," she said under her breath.

Once more she cast her gaze down to the compendium and heaved a tiny sigh.

She had one more ritual up her sleeve, but she couldn't do it without a little help from the human race. Hopefully this plan would work out.

Well, if anyone could pull this off, it would be the Phantom Thieves

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Given the sheer size of their group, moving stealthily wasn't much of an option. Instead they opted to move quickly, sprinting through narrow side streets as Minato and Mitsuru led them along toward the tower.

"Stick close, and keep an eye on the sky," Yu said as the group sprinted along. "Those things will probably sniff us out in no time."

"Oh boy," Okuyasu sarcastically said, his breathing a little heavy as he sprinted forward.

There was a sudden rumble up ahead, nearly knocking a few members of the team off their feet. Ann slowed her pace, glancing around frantically. "Okay... so it wasn't just me who felt that..."

"Yeah... just what the heck was that?" Shizuka asked, frowning deeply.

"Nothing good," Sae replied in a grim tone.

Fuuka paused entirely, scanning ahead and letting out a gentle gasp. "There's... there's definitely something going on a few blocks ahead. I can sense two really big powers clashing against each other."

Rise furrowed her brow, staring ahead. "Now that you mention it... yeah, I can sense it too. One's a bit smaller than the other though, and definitely on the defensive..."

As the two other guides spoke, Futaba glared in the same direction. Blue flames swept over her,
replacing her civilian gear with her Phantom Thief attire. As she scanned the horizon, she let out a surprised gasp. "H-hey, I recognise this energy. It's Akechi and Camael! They're duking it out!"

"Those two? Together?!" Sergio said in a shocked tone. He steadied himself and cleared his throat. "Well... perhaps we should let them sort each other out?"

"You and I both know that wouldn't be right," Yusuke replied. "I have no fondness for Akechi, but... I don't want to see him die. Especially before he pays for his crimes," the bluenette added.

A grin broke out across Akihiko's face. "So we'll finally get to see this Camael thing up close... I've been waiting for this!"

By now, Makoto's expression had grown steely. "Don't get too excited. If anyone's gonna put that thing down, it's going to be me," she firmly stated.

"Well uh... we might wanna hurry. Cause Akechi definitely isn't winning," Futaba warned.

Minato nodded firmly at her and took off running once more, leading the team in the direction of the earth shaking booms. They grew louder and more frequent as the team drew in, until plumes of smoke fell into view, stretching over the nearby rooftops.

The group burst out of an alleyway, emerging onto a filthy sidewalk. They were quickly able to see a scene of destruction dominating the road around them, fissures and craters punched into the asphalt, while several cars had been overturned and flattened in the chaos.

Shards of glass were strewn about the street, many of the nearby windows shattered utterly. A few slabs on the sidewalk had been cracked, only adding to the war torn look of their surroundings.

There was a pained cry off to their right, causing the team to turn and watch as Akechi's body was launched across the air. He landed on one of the undamaged cars, crushing the roof and sending sprays of glass exploding out of the windows on impact. The brunette grunted, struggling to rise up into a sitting position.

"Is that... all you've got?" he growled. A chunk of Akechi's mask had been blown off, revealing the right half of his face. There were a few slashes and tears along the surface of his chest, while portions of his uniform were now singed.

"Hrmph. You truly are a stubborn one... I can see why He chose you as an agent," Camael remarked in a low tone. He wasn't entirely spotless either, sections of his armor now burnt and warped, while a deep black scar rose along the exposed skin on his chest. But he was still standing tall, undaunted.

"You!" Shizuka shouted, glaring toward the dark angel.

Camael turned his head slightly, his confident posture unchanging. "You truly are a stubborn one... I can see why He chose you as an agent," Camael remarked in a low tone. He wasn't entirely spotless either, sections of his armor now burnt and warped, while a deep black scar rose along the exposed skin on his chest. But he was still standing tall, undaunted.

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"You!" Shizuka shouted, glaring toward the dark angel.

Camael turned his head slightly, his confident posture unchanging. "Oh, you all... I had a feeling Dies Irae lost its grip on you, but... well once the illusion is created, I have no sway on it," he remarked.

"Do you have any idea what you did to us?!" Makoto growled, clenching her fists tight. The pavement cracked further beneath her feet.

"I gave you all heaven. Paradise worlds that fed into your deepest desires... And you ignorant apes
decided to leave those Edens. Your anger should be with yourselves, not with me. Hmph... it must have been like cutting off a limb, pulling away from those worlds..." Camael mocked.

"You didn't give us paradise... you gave us a pack of lies to keep us complacent, while you ran roughshod over the world!" Yusuke firmly replied.

"And if you can't understand people on something like that... then you're definitely not in a position to judge the world," Akira added.

Camael regarded the power aligned against them, the sheer numbers surpassing what he was used to. And he was injured, that harmed his odds too. "Do you truly think you ignorant apes can change the world? Then... take your best shot." There was a sudden sonic boom as he flapped his wings, launching himself skyward. He turned elegantly in the air, and shot off toward the alien tower in the heart of Shibuya.

"You son of a bitch!" Makoto shouted, taking a firm step forward. "Get back here and fight! I'm going to tear you apart! You hear me?!"

Sae hesitated, before reaching over and settling her hand on her younger sister's right shoulder. "Makoto," Sae firmly said. "I know what he put you through must have been horrible... but you can't get lost in anger. Not when so much is on the line."

Makoto relaxed just a little bit. "You don't know what it was like..."

"You're right, I don't. But, if I had been in your position... I don't know if I could have left that world. You're a lot stronger than that creature thinks you are," Sae assured her.

Akira moved away from the group, making for the still downed Akechi. The brunette struggled to sit up, grimacing from the pain in his chest. "Fancy seeing you here," Akira dryly said.

"And here I was, thinking you were dead..." Akechi remarked. "But... with the world ending, I suppose I just had to go and have a look. I take it that creature already told you about the 'game' it was playing with us?"

"You didn't know?" Akira asked.

"Of course not. Everything I did was for myself... I have no interest in helping a Shadow with delusions of grandeur," Akechi replied. Grunting, he moved off the broken car and landed o shaky feet. "And I plan on sending it a personal letter of resignation."

Akira narrowed his eyes a bit. Well, with how banged up he was, that definitely hadn't been a staged fight. But that didn't mean he should trust Akechi, or that the former detective had changed his ways.

Then again, what could they do? They weren't murderers, and imprisoning him again wasn't much of an option with the world being in the shape it was. And just knocking him out on the streets would leave him a sitting duck for the angels, which was just murder by proxy.

"You're coming with us," Akira firmly said.

"Oh?" asked Akechi.
Shizuka blinked a few times in shock. "Eh?! Bringing that guy along? You take a bump to the head recently?" Shizuka asked in shock.

"Someone needs to keep an eye on him. And, like I said, we need all the help we can get," Akira said. But, from his tone, he was clearly unhappy about it. "Or, if you want to refuse, I suppose Prometheus can keep you coiled up until we're finished."

"Wow... you really are desperate," Akechi said with a soft chuckle. "Fine. I don't care so long as I get a crack at the creature that manipulated us."

The Arditi shared uncertain glances, while the others seemed less concerned with all this. "I hope you understand that if you try to betray us in any way, things will most certainly not end well for you," Mitsuru warned in an icy tone.

"I wouldn't dream of it," Akechi said, speaking with a false pleasance that was almost believable. He made for an impressive actor, it had to be said. "But first, I think I need to be mended."

Josuke glanced at Shizuka, who sighed and nodded. The pompadour wearing young man aimed his right hand forward, the air at his side glittering as Crazy Diamond formed into existence. A golden light formed in his palms, a noise of whirring gears filling the air as his Stand power mended Akechi's body and clothing.

"You seem remarkably cavalier about all this," Sae said.

Akechi's expression grew a little more serious as he regarded his former colleague. "Sae-san... it's been some time."

"Yes. Since you tried to turn me into a murderer," the prosecutor calmly said.

"Well... fortunately that plan didn't work out for me," Akechi replied.

Minato cleared his throat loudly. "Yeah, let's not waste any more time on nostalgia. We need to get a move on, we're nearly at the Kirijo building."

"Right... let's get going," Akira remarked, before turning his focus toward Akechi. "Don't start thinking that this makes up for your crimes. You're still going to be punished when we're done with this," Akira warned.

"Of that," Akechi began "I have no doubt."
The Show Must Go On (II)

The automatic doors rolled apart easily, allowing the team to rush into the sterling lobby of Mitsuru's tower. The sparkling marble floors reflected the Persona users neatly, rows of seats marking the left and right sides of the lobby. A currently vacant, rounded reception desk was at the far end of the long room, with the name 'Kirijo Group' positioned on the wall behind it in heavy silver kanji pieces.

Mitsuru cast her gaze toward Fuuka. "Yamagishi," she curtly said.

Fuuka nodded gently, clasping her hands together as if in prayer. An ethereal white glow shimmered around her slender frame, casting a circle of light around her feet.

It expanded outward, passing by the various heroes until the light had vanished into the walls. Fuuka furrowed her brow, a few trembles rising in her body from a mounting exertion. The walls and ceiling glowed briefly, the light washing further and further up until it had moved through every floor in the tower.

Fuuka exhaled slowly and released her hands. "There... a protective charm around the whole skyscraper. This way they can't just bowl the whole building over." Well, Fuuka hoped so at least.

"Impressive Fuuka... have you been practicing all this time?" Minato asked.

Fuuka's cheeks turned slightly pink, a nervous laugh escaping her. "W-well with you gone, I wanted to... do what I could to pick up the slack, so I've learned some new tricks. It's good to know I impress you."

Akira and Yu shared a brief glance. Their predecessor certainly had an interesting relationship with his team.

"Well done," Mitsuru said, smiling confidently at Fuuka. It vanished as quickly as it came, the redhead resuming her serious expression as she reached into her fur coat and produced a formal Kirijo Group ID bearing her likeness. She quickly made for an elevator door behind the reception desk and swiped the card down the reader, a loud beep signalling the action. The metal doors rolled apart to reveal a rather large elevator, but it would still make for a tight fit for the whole group.

"Everyone in," Mitsuru firmly said. "We don't have time to waste making more than one trip to the top."

"Oh. Great," Shizuka flatly said.

"You're welcome to make a complaint with Mitsuru if you want... Personally, I wouldn't," Akhiko replied, removing his hands from his hoodie as he jogged along to the elevator.

Sure enough it was a cramped trip upward, but it was an express elevator at least. They climbed the floors at an impressive speed, climbing higher and higher until it came to a stop on the final floor.

The elevator opened out to reveal a grid of offices and wide corridors dividing them, while the rows of windows bordering the floor gave a solid glimpse at Tokyo's mutated, warped skyline.
group quickly poured out, eager to stretch themselves out after the cramped ride up.

"I did what I could to clear the building in advance... hopefully there aren't many of my employees left behind... but with the top floors being empty, I doubt they'll target anyone but us," Mitsuru remarked. She certainly hoped so.

"Alright... looks like we're set to begin. Futaba, think you can get us started with the satellites?" Akira asked.

Futaba snapped her fingers, grinning sharply. "No problem-o!" He reached into her parka, to one of the large interior pockets, and quickly pulled her sleek black laptop into view. She sat down on the floor and quickly got to work, her fingers a blur on the keys.

"While she gets set up, we need to plan out how we'll defend this place. As it stands, there's only one access point to the roof from this floor," Mituru stated.

"Well... the Stand users seem to specialize in close combat. So maybe it would make sense for them to block anything trying to attack from here, while we use our ranged abilities to attack anything airborne?" Yukari suggested.

Jotaro shrugged his broad shoulders. "I can live with that."

After a moment, Hifumi gently cleared her throat. "I um... if it's all the same, I think I'd like to hang back here and help defend this area."

The other Phantom Thieves looked at her in surprise. "Hifumi, are you sure?" Yusuke asked.

"Yeah... it might be for the best. I don't add much raw firepower in a fight, and Camael is so fast that even Flaming Telepath can't predict his movements. When we come up against him, I'll just be a liability. Against regular Shadows I might be able to do more," Hifumi sadly explained.

"Well..." Sergio scratched at the back of his neck. "If you're sure. Just... be safe, alright?" The blond leaned in, giving the shogi princess a quick kiss on the cheek. A faint pinkness crept along Hifumi's cheeks.

As the group continued their planning, Akechi inspected Futaba from the elevator door for several long moments. He reached slowly into his trouser pocket, until he was gently clutching a flash drive in his grasp.

Futaba looked up as he approached, giving him an icy stare. "What do you want?" the redhead testily asked.

Akechi pulled the flash drive into view and tossed it her way, with a small black tendril rising from Futaba's collar to catch it mid flight. "There's about eleven gigabytes worth of evidence in there. Photographs, emails, text documents, audio files... all containing rather incriminating things about all the members in Shido's conspiracy. Things you'll need."

Futaba quirked her left brow, while Prometheus scanned the drive and its contents. No virus or malware... it was legit. "I... don't understand. Why would you give me this?"

Akechi shrugged. "Why not? The world is ending, and I don't want that drive getting damaged." He turned his back on the redhead, staring out to the rows of windows. "I'm... sorry about your
mother." With that he made his way toward the others.

Futaba watched him go in silence, casting her attention briefly to the flash drive suspended near her face. Had he really given her all this evidence to do 'the right thing'? It was quite sudden. But, then again, he had just learned the truth about this situation. Learning that you're the pawn of an evil deity is the kind of thing that would sober a person.

Regardless, Futaba pocketed the drive and resumed her work. Getting a message out to the whole world in the midst of a supernatural apocalypse? Child's play.

Several minutes later, the team had gathered on the roof of the skyscraper, with the three scanners gathered in the center of the helipad. Rise settled her hands on her hips, a white light engulfing her briefly as her Persona formed directly behind her. A six armed obsidian-skinned female figure, the bottom two set of hands holding a visor over Rise's eyes. She wore a clean white dress and had a telescope in place of a head, several small planets orbiting around her neck.

"Been a while since I had to do this... fortunately, Kouzeon can maintain her power better than most," Rise mused.

Kouzeon glowed briefly, the light stretching outward toward the edges of the rooftop before expanding upward and forming a domed beehive of light overhead. The light faded soon after, with the redhead breathing a tiny sigh of relief.

"Another layer of defence?" Naoto asked.

Rise nodded, grinning sharply. "Got it in one, detective prince. It's to try and block out any incoming projectiles before they can hit here... since I'm sure we're bound to have ranged attacks."

"But, in the event that that fails..." Yu raised his left hand, a specter rising up from his right side. A stark white humanoid in a flowing longcoat, the entirety of his head a fanged steel helmet with a long spiked plume rising from the top. He held a long spear in his right hand, a ring encircling the handle.

Izanagi-no-Okami held his blade forward and abruptly twirled it in a complete arc, a ring of purple light forming in the path of the sharpened peak. As he completed this, a similar glowing ring formed around the helipad. A focused dome of white light formed over the three oracles and faded entirely.

"Just for insurance," Yu said, smiling slightly at Rise.


From the far end of the rooftop, Jotaro tugged the brim of his cap down until his eyes were blotted out in shadows. "Good grief..."

After a few more minutes, Futaba raised her arms overhead and languidly stretched them overhead. "All done!" she said in a chipper tone. "Got the network all set up, so now... All we need to do is start the broadcast."

Futaba took a few steps away from the other two girls, and once there was enough distance between them, Prometheus black mass formed into existence around her. Juno materialized around Fuuka, the transparent bubble wrapping around her body while the female visage atop it held her
arms out wide.

Prometheus extended two black tentacles out, one coiling around each of the other sensor Personae. The three specters glowed brightly, with Juno and Kuzeon working as one to broadcast Futaba's message to the world.

'The world is not as it should be. It's filled with distortion, and ruin is fast approaching. Open your eyes and your mind, and understand the reality of the situation. You need to resist and see the world for what it is.'

It was a constant repeating whisper, filtering through every radio broadcast, every television channel, every web page, translating across different language as it went around the globe...

Once the broadcast was reaching around the world, Futaba exhaled slowly and dispelled her Persona. "That's that... you guys just need to keep that broadcast going, while we deal with that damn magic cup," Futaba said.

Minato gave her a firm nod. "Then you guys better get a move on, we'll try and keep things secure here," he remarked.

"Good luck, all of you," Akira told him, nodding at the others. One by one, waves of blue fire washed over the members of the Arditi as their attire shifted into their phantom gear. Once everyone was ready, Akira grinned and made for the roof access door. "Alright guys... it's showtime!"

Sae smiled sadly at the team. "Be careful. We're counting on you."

"We'll do what we can," Makoto replied. She gave her older sister a brief hug, before turning and making her way after the others.

Soon after the Phantom Thieves had left, Jotaro removed his hands from his longcoat and idly cracked his knuckles. "Josuke, Okuyasu, Nijima, Togo... let's get going. We need to defend the floor below."

Jotaro led the way, with Minato watching the Stand users make their way downstairs. The bluenette exhaled slowly. "I can already feel them coming for us," he remarked.

"Huh? You have sensing powers now too?" Yukari curiously asked. She turned, examining the warped skyline of Tokyo.

"Not as refined as them, but I can feel it when large scale Shadows are near," Minato warned, removing his hands from his trouser pockets.

Yu slowly stretched his arms overhead. "I'm a little out of practice, admittedly. But Izanagi still has a lot of power on hand."

"Well... it's hard not to be confident when you're around se-" Naoto caught herself, clearing her throat awkwardly. "Yu." Rise snickered from the center of the helipad.

There was a rumble in the distance, and from afar Akihiko and Aigis could distinctly see a ball of light emerge from the black clouds on the horizon. It rushed toward the Kirijo skyscraper at an impressive speed, causing the gathered Persona users to tense in preparation for what was to come.
Fuuka gasped slightly. "I can sense more Shadows forming inside the building, coming from below us!" the teal-haired girl exclaimed.

"We'll handle it, don't worry. You just need to keep focus on broadcasting that message," Mitsuru instructed. Her body glowed as her Persona formed into existence: A pale female in a blue dress, adorned in heavy plates of spiked armor.

The light drew in closer until it was just beside the looming structure. It flashed brightly and then began to grow and expand, warping in dimensions until it had formed into a glowing humanoid shape with unfurled wings. As the light faded, the giant's visage became more detailed.

His scarlet skinned, muscular frame was covered by a golden breastplate and a white skirt, his wings consisting of serrated feathers. His dark hair was slicked back, his crimson brow furrowed in annoyance. In his right hand he clutched a large spear, light gleaming along the sharpened head.

"Michael," Minato grumbled. "One of the archangels... the Grail is really going for the whole 'God' thing head on..."

"Mortals." Michael spoke with a thousand voices at once, his low rumbling tone strobing off the clouds like a roll of thunder. "You stand against the Almighty, trying to disrupt his great works... why?"

"Someone has to," Akihiko taunted, rolling his broad shoulders a few times. "You wanna try and stop us? You're welcome to goddamn try."

"We've come too far to let the world be destroyed... we'll fight to the bitter end, no matter what," Aigis said, spreading her legs slowly as an azure light rose up around her.

Michael narrowed his eyes and raised his spear overhead, blessed light glittering along the sharpened edges of the spearhead. "Very well."

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Their path took the Phantom Thieves toward the heart of Shibuya, sprinting through crowds of mildly dazed pedestrians on the blood-slick streets. soon enough they reached an intersection, the facades of several buildings dominated by large TV screens.

The static that had previously been playing on the monitors had been replaced with their repeating message, which was replaced again when the screens started showing footage of the Arditi in motion.

They stood at the foot of the expansive bone bridge that led up to the mouth in the sandstone tower, the last leg of their journey. No matter what happened, it would all end here.

"So... this is it huh?" Ryuji asked.

Shiho nodded firmly. "Looks like... You all ready?"

"As I'll ever be... I'll take great pleasure in crushing that Camael creature, and putting an end to this insanity," Haru said, speaking with an uncharacteristic venom in her tone.
"Be on your guard everyone. We have no idea what we'll find inside the temple," Akira warned. As usual he took the lead and started to jog along, making his way up along the bridge of gnarled flesh and twisted bones.

Akechi was following close behind, turning his gaze toward the tower as their sprinting drew them closer and closer. "Well if that Camael freak is just another underling, then it's all too likely something much stronger is in the tower," the brunet stated.

Akira grumbled in agreement. "No doubt. But he's definitely going to be the first hurdle.

Sure enough they only made it halfway up the bridge before the monster in question appeared before them. He swooped down from the peak of the tower, the unfurling of his wings producing a shockwave that rapidly drew all eyes toward his descent.

The Arditi came to a stop in a wide expanse on the bridge, several flesh platforms linked into the area around them. Camael came to a stop a few feet across from the thieves, his large arms folded across his chest.

"Well... here you are again. I had hoped that giving you heaven would be enough to keep you out of my sight, but even that did not satisfy you. Your arrogant belief that you know what is best for the world, that you know more than Him... it sickens me," he growled.

Shizuka took a step forward, glaring firmly at the dark angel. "Hey asshole, let me ask you a question... how does it feel?"

Camael narrowed his eyes slightly. "How does what feel, you loud ape?"

"How does it feel... when even after you've cheated every step of the way, and rigged everything in your favor... to still be losing?" Shizuka spat.

Camael growled loudly, spreading his feet along the hardened surface of the bridge. "We hold the world in our thrall, and this pitiful resistance of yours will be snuffed out shortly. You can't win."

"I unno... we're pretty used to having the deck stacked against us. You're nothing special," Ryuji said.

"And we won't be fooled by your illusions ever again!" Makoto shouted.

Camael lowered his hands, letting them rest near his hips. "Hrm... truth be told, I don't know if Dies Irae could work on a target a second time... but that is irrelevant. I have no intention of imprisoning you creatures... here and now, my primary goal is to destroy you all," Camael stated.

"You're welcome to try, but you're outnumbered and outgunned. We're aiming to destroy you too," Morgana said, pointing toward the dark angel.

Camael lifted his right arm slowly, until his hand was raised high overhead. "You intend to destroy me? Humorous... Even if you can beat me, you can't best Him. But, just to be safe, I'll do everything in my power to destroy you." The air around Camael began to crackle, energy pulsing up through his exposed skin. "Light of God! Shine upon me, grant me strength! Let me the instrument of destruction against these heretics!"

As he spoke, a vibrant spark of purple light formed at the peak of the tower, like a new star being
born. It morphed suddenly, becoming a continuous ray of light that shone down on the armored angel, until the purple glow highlighted him from every angle. It soaked into his flesh and armor, until sparks of purple lightning began to dance through the air around him.

Futaba gasped sharply. "His power's rising! Hit him now!"

Seiten Taisei made the first move, erupting forward at a frightening speed and striking the angel across the face with his spiked cudgel. Camael skidded backward, his head tilted a bit and his heels carving twin trenches in the ground.

Still wreathed in the unholy light, Camael endured the blow and swung back, launching Seiten Taisei away with a powerful right hook. Ryuji cried out, skidding backward, while other members of the team moved in.

Hecate arced around his right, shoving her palms forward and unleashing a blazing column of fire that slammed against Camael's upraised wing. He grunted from the impact, but endured the rising heat.

But, while he was distracted, Anat closed in from Camael's right. Her steely fists struck his chest and face in a rapid flurry of punches, knocking him back a step. "I swear... you're going to pay for what you put us through!" Makoto shouted.

"Doubtful," Camael replied in an annoyed growl. A wave of almighty energy exploded from his body in a rush of purple light, blowing Anat backward and disrupting Hecate's attack. Camael leapt through the smoke, the glow in his body briefly intensifying before he struck Hecate into a nearby platform with a powerful kick. Ann screamed in pain, her Persona being pinned to the cracked material from the strong blow.

Camael whipped his hands forward, a volley of blessed daggers flying forth from the arcing motion and racing down toward Hecate's briefly downed form. Shiho sprang into action, Eris flying from her body and quickly intercepting the projectiles. Eris absorbed the blessed light into her body, giving Ann the opening she needed to recall Hecate back.

"Th-thanks," Ann breathlessly said.

"Don't sweat it, you're not getting skewered on my watch," Shiho replied.

Camael threw his exposed right arm forward, the coil of barbed wire elongating and shooting forward like a flexible rope. He sharply whipped his arm at the Arditi, the long wire smashing into the bridge hard enough to carve a trench in the material and shaking the area around it. The thieves scattered, some jumping onto the nearby platforms and taking aim.

Morgana quickly summoned Mercurius, his persona shoving his staff forward and unleashing a mighty hurricane that cleaved through the air. It slammed into a bubble of crackling purple light that had formed around Camael, keeping the gale from fully reaching him. He growled loudly, struggling against Mercurius' blast.

Anat lunged at him from below, an atomic blast exploding against Camael's barrier and punching straight through, fresh burns smudging his shining armor. It gave an opening for Susanoo and Seiten Taisei to strike him from behind, the hard blow driving him face first into the bridge.

He was downed only briefly, a pulse of energy knocking the two physical Personas back long
enough for Camael to rise back up. He spun around swiftly, a flurry of bladed feathers flying from his wings with several of them slicing into Susanoo and Seiten Taiese, opening fresh wounds and making Ryuji and Yusuke cry out and recoil.

"Are you beginning to understand your situation now, you ignorant creatures?" The length of barbed wire snapped taut around Anat's shoulders, with Camael whipping her down violently into one of the platforms, making Makoto scream in pain. "You should have stayed in whatever paradise I granted you... but clearly mercy is not something you deserve."

A series of powerful telekinetic pulses from Astarte pummelled Camael's body before he could swing Anat around again. Mercurius raced over, slicing the barbed wire apart and giving her the opening to pull free.

"Oh, that's good. 'Cause we don't have mercy for your tin-plated ass either," Shizuka said.

Two invisible figures lunged at him from the sides, sharp blow striking the backs of Camael's knees and making him stagger violently. Houdini and Breakthru pummeled him from both sides, using their unseen status to rapidly strike Camael's joints and head repeatedly, each spasm making him stagger about, struggling to keep fully upright.

With those two keeping Camael occupied, Akira turned his attention toward Akechi. "Ak-Crow... when we fought this thing before, curse energy seemed to hurt him more than anything else... was that still the case when you fought him earlier?"

Akechi nodded grimly. "I didn't get too many hits on him, but Loki did more damage to him than Robin hood... the sword in particular managed to cut him deep."

"Good... then it looks like it's up to us to nail him. Let's try a two pronged assault," Akira instructed.

With an inarticulate shout of anger, an explosion of purple light flashed around Camael's body. The tide of energy swept Houdini and Breakthru off their feet, catapulting both Stands into the air away from him.

There was a sudden volley of fire and psionic light from another platform, as Ann and Haru unleashed twin bursts at the angel. It struck against him, Camael grunting briefly in pain, but he was quick to power through and floored both girls with a burst of almighy light exploding in the air above the duo.

Arsene lunged at his side, bursts of chaotic energy exploding from his fists and sending the dark angel skidding backward, Camael roaring in pain. Before he could try and right himself, Loki swept in from behind and drove his sharpened heels into Camael's back, a powerful burst of crimson energy scalding the dense plates of his armor.

Camael swung his body around, his wing crashing against Arsene and smashing him into the bridge. But he was unable to dodge another chaotic surge from Loki, the energy making Camael's exposed skin blacken and bubble.

With impressive swiftness, Arsene recovered and slammed both of his fists into Camael's temples, his steel-plated head shuddering for a few seconds, leaving him open. Loki shot forward as the angel started to pull back, his striped sword aglow with a halo of ruby light. It slashed upward in a crescent arc, leaving a matching scar trailing along Camael's exposed upper arm.
Camael roared loudly, another burst of almighty energy exploding violently from his frame. It blasted both Personas backward, Akira and Akechi both growling from the burning pain inflicted on them.

But, despite this, they had managed to see through Camael's seeming invulnerability. All they needed was one good shot with Loki's sword.

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Meanwhile, on the streets below, some of the bleary eyed people began to stir from their enforced ignorance. Some people in the crowds stopped mid-step, others raising their hands and inspecting the bloody rain that was falling from on high.

And, naturally, panic was starting to set in.

"Holy shit!"
"W-what the fuck?! Is it raining blood?!"
"What are those things growing out of the streets?!"
"We're all gonna die!"
"S-someone call the police!"

Bit by bit the world was waking up, coming from a blissful dream into a waking nightmare.
The blue skinned, blond haired angel sharply swept his sword through the air, the motion unleashing a flash of light that triggered a powerful almighty explosion on the roof. The shockwave struck off Aigis and Naoto, blowing both women back, with the blonde crashing against an air conditioning unit and crushing it flat under her body.

They had managed to best Michael, but it hadn't been long before another angel appeared by the skyscraper. Uriel, according to Minato. A few sections of his blue skin were marked by slashes and burns, but he seemed to press on regardless.

A bolt of lightning flew from the sky and slammed against the angel, making him grunt as the explosion knocked him back a bit. Caesar burst through the smoke to follow up his attack, his blade crashing against Uriel's left pauldron as the angel tried to pull back. A shockwave rolled through the air at the strong impact, a few cracks rolling through the air.

Snarling, the angel swatted Caesar into the roof with a strong swing, making Akihiko grunt as he was nearly brought to his knees by the blow. Beads of sweat dripped from his face.

Uriel lifted his sword high, set to strike it down on Caesar's prone silver body, only for a strong gale of wind to blast against his forearm with such force that the cyclone held Uriel's forearm aloft. The blue angel grimaced and grunted, but found he could make no progress.

"Keep it up Isis," Yukari breathed to herself. She stood a few feet behind Akihiko, her Persona floating at her side. It was some manner of large white statue that seemed a mix of a oxen and a woman, the large white wings of the sculpture catching the crimson light overhead.

With Yukari keeping his right arm at bay, Mitsuru moved to the other edge of the roof to strike at his left. "Artemisia!" Her Persona flashed into existence, a series of ice shards sailing through the air. They punched across Uriel's left forearm, tearing into his flesh and sending sprays of black sailing out of the fresh wounds. Uriel snarled loudly in pain, throwing his head back.

It gave just enough of an opening for Yu and Minato to strike in unison, Izanagi's armored form rushing ahead like a streak of white light. His spear plunged into Uriel's gut, shattering a chunk from his crimson armor.

Uriel gagged loudly, an explosion of dark bile exploding from his lips. Minato's own Messiah floated above the angel, his stark white glow radiating a constant holy glow that was at it's strongest around the orbiting ring of his armor. Messiah plunged his hands downward, unleashing a surge of almighty energy.

Uriel's entire body was blackened, engulfed in a tide of light, before he exploded with a wave of almighty power of his own. The shockwave floored the gathered Persona users, those closest to the roof stricken with some fresh burns.

Once the shock subsided, Rise called out to the team. "You guys okay?" she asked in concern.

"We... we'll be fine," Mitsuru said as she rose to her feet. She grimaced, clutching the left side of her stomach where a shard of energy had managed to cut into her.
"How many more of those will we have to go through?" Yu asked, grunting as he forced himself to stand. He was sweating slightly, blood oozing down over his right brow.

"As many as it takes," Minato replied, sounding a little breathless himself. "Gather round guys... I can heal you. But we need to move quickly before another angel arrives."

From where he stood, Minato could hear some distant 'ora ora' cries, punctuated by faint tremors underfoot. The Stand users were still holding ground, but who could say how long that would last?

Already he could sense another power on the horizon, drawing in close.

Aigis straightened up once she regained her footing, rolling her synthetic shoulders. Sparks of electricity rolled around the slices in her synthetic skin. "I can only hope the Phantom Thieves are closer to the Grail by now," the blonde said.

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The bridge shuddered violently as Susanoo and Breakthru struck into Camael from both sides, their blows meeting the upraised surface of Camael's wings. The dark angel growled in protest, planting his feet to steady himself, and then catapulted both specters away with a snap of his steely wings.

He snapped his right arm off to the side, unleashing a volley of blessed light that exploded outward as Haru and Morgana tried to take aim from one platform. Haru landed hard on her side, her hat flying off from the blast. She glared at him through her open right eye, a crimson glow suddenly enveloping her as Shiho charged her with extra power.

"Astarte!" At Haru's command, the floating skull materialized into existence and unleashed a potent glow of purple light. She drew upon all her psionic power and focused it toward Camael's right arm, a glow encircling it and leaving his arm frozen in place.

"Hrr-!" Camael grunted, giving his arm a few jerks to no avail, he and Haru struggling against each other.

Meanwhile, behind Camael, Sergio managed to recover and rolled onto his knees while panting heavily. "Angel or not," the blond growled. "I'm gonna enjoy watching what comes next!"

Breakthru reached forward, his fists pummelling the bridge with machine gun speed, each swing sending a spray of debris racing into Camael's left leg. Once it was covered, Breakthru clenched his fists tight until a crimson glow had engulfed Camael's left calf.

"What?! What... is this?!!" Camael snarled, jerking and struggling as two of his limbs were suddenly frozen in place by two impressive unseen forces.

"This my friend is what we humans call 'a snare.' And your ass is caught in one!" Shizuka had taken up a position on one crumbling platform, popping into view with Houdini standing in front of her, the Red Stone of Aja glowing warmly along the plates of Houdini's right fist.

The glow magnified massively as Houdini started to fill the stone with her power, with the scarlet gemstone glowing like a freshly born star. The chiming noise grew more intense, resonating through the area around the bridge.

"Eclipse... OVERDRIIIIIIIVE!" A focused beam of glittering white light instantaneously exploded out from the Aja, a beam thicker than Shizuka's forearm. It slammed into Camael's face, the explosive roar of superheated light grinding violently into metal managing to drown out Camael's screams of pain.
The bridge was shaking violently, the power projected by the stone far in excess of anything Shizuka had done before. She could feel the jewel becoming rapidly heated, but even as the skin on her right knuckles began to sizzle, she didn't relent. She simply grit her teeth and powered through it.

The air around Camael crackled violently, before a vibrant white flash exploded off him with a great surge of force. It was strong enough to blow Sergio and Haru back, while the platform under Shizuka's feet collapsed entirely. She gasped in shock, quickly becoming invisible as she landed on the bridge.

Camael was left huffing, moving his left hand to touch numbly at that side of his face. The armour around his left eye had become melted and warped, the pupil whited-out and burnt from the vibrant wave. "You... you filth... I swear... I will break you, bone by bone!"

Another powerful fireball swept toward him, launched from Hecate's palms. It exploded violently into Camael's side and swept him off his feet, with the armored giant grinding along the surface of the bridge and forming a deep trench as he went.

In an instant, Susanoo and Mercurius had landed atop him, kicking up a large cloud of dust as they did so. They hammered him with over a dozen blows each in the span of a few second, the bridge rattling violently from the strength of their strikes. But Camael recovered swiftly, launching both Personae off him with inhuman flexes of his arms.

Mercurius was launched aside, while Camael's right arm threw a rapid volley of strikes that hammered Susanoo vigorously into the bridge, earning pained gags and gasps from Yusuke before he found the strength to recall his Persona. "He's... barely slowing down..." Yusuke gasped.

Anat started to rush the dark angel from the side, but even with one eye out of commission he had the means to feel her coming. Camael turned, his aura glowing brighter as he unleashed a tide of vibrant blessed light from his armoured palm.

It washed over Anat's metallic frame, hisses of smoke rising from her as she tried to power through the incoming flash like Moses parting the red sea. Yet she only managed to make it a few extra inches before Camael's power overwhelmed her, flinging Anat back through the air and earning a pained cry from Makoto.

In that brief instant of distraction, Arsene unleashed a firestorm of chaotic energy that crashed into Camael's abdomen and sent him skidding backward. He snarled and planted his ironclad feet, only to find himself growling violently in protest as a tide of chaos energy washed over him, burning the entire front of his body.

Loki shot down from on high, his sword clutched high overhead with the entire blade glowing crimson and leaving a trail of black light in its wake. He struck Camael from behind with a sweeping slash, the burning edge striking the flesh surrounding his right wing. The flesh burned and bubbled, with Loki's sword carving through him like a slab of roast beef.

There was a sudden snap, punctuated by a loud roar of pain from Camael as his right wing was shorn clean off, exposing a patch of black sinewy muscle. The disembodied wing crashed heavily into the bridge, kicking up a cloud on impact.

Snarling furiously, Camael powered through Arsene's attack and clocked him in the face with a mighty right hook, blood spray from Akira's nose as the impact hit. His left wing snapped backward, sprays of bladed feathers punching into Loki's torso. Akechi grimaced and recoiled, fresh wounds opening along his arms and chest.
The two Wild Cards pulled back, moving behind a layer of cover behind one of the few remaining platforms. "He's a stubborn one... but then again, your friends are too," Akechi remarked, watching as a surge of psionic energy slammed into Camael's injured body, punctuated by another spike of light from the Aja.

"We're not the sort to give up," Akira replied, slowly catching the breath and rubbing at his nose with the right sleeve of his coat. "But... you're not so bad yourself, in a scrap."

"Heh... yes, well... if I had been more like you, and had allies of my own, I wonder how strong I would have become," Akechi mused. "Then again, if I had been more like you... things never would have turned out the way they did."

Akira smiled just a bit. "You're trying to make things right now, and that's the important part... come on, we're not done yet... let's show this piece of shit why he shouldn't have messed with us."

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"ORAORAORAORA!" Star Platinum's fists were a pair of unseen blurs, his dense knuckles flying outward in flurries of machine gun speed that splattered several incoming Shadows along the nearest wall. A bolt of lightning flew down the corridor, making a beeline for Jotaro. Star Platinum moved to intercept, but the bolt still struck hard enough to slam Jotaro's broad back into a wall, making him grunt in pain.

"DORA!" Crazy Diamond's fist shot forward with the speed of a sniper's bullet, striking the lightning-tossing Shadow across the face and launching his armored bulk across the air. He slammed into an amorphous pile of his kin, with The Hand quickly moving in to vaporize them with swift swipes of his palm.

Josuke cast a gaze toward his 'nephew.' "Jotaro!" he breathlessly said. "You alright?"

"Fine," Jotaro grumpily replied, his right hand rubbing over his chest. "How are the other two doing?" he quickly asked.

Josuke was quick to glance over his shoulder, down a narrow shaft that linked their corridor to another. Flourished of gunfire flew from the cartoonish rifle clutched neatly in Sae's right hand: An assault rifle that had two underslung miniguns.

The few that managed to get by Sae's hail of gunfire were quickly smashed away by Flaming Telepath, the floating Stand easily swinging a large fire extinguisher in her hands. The red material was already dented and scarred all over, but it still made for a good bludgeon. It helped that she could easily see which Shadows were going to get past Sae's salvo.

"Yeah they... they're doin' well... geez, that lawyer lady has a lot of anger. I don't think she's stopped yelling since this began," Josuke mused.

There was a sudden yelp from Okuyasu as a particularly large Shadow burst through the floor, the bulk of his fist striking Okuyasu in the gut and slamming him into the ceiling. It leapt toward Okuyasu, sharpened spikes rising from his knuckles.

"STAR PLATINUM! THE WORLD!"

Josuke was vaguely aware of a strange split surge of static buzzing through his brain, a half-second where something felt distinctly off.

One moment Okuyasu was in the air, and in the next instant he was plopped down harmlessly near
Josuke. The Shadows that had been coming up from the floor had been smashed apart, leaving
black strains across the wall and windows.

Jotaro's mouth was closed in a tight scowl, with the towering man taking in heavy breaths through
his nose. "Jotaro..." Josuke murmured. While the older man probably wouldn't want to admit it,
time was (ironically) starting to catch up to him. Forty-seven years old, and a lifetime of fighting,
meant he wasn't quite the machine he used to be.

Crazy Diamond aimed his fists toward Jotaro, an aura of golden light encompassing him and
working to heal his injuries. It couldn't do much for his stamina, but he wouldn't be aching too
much.

"Catch your breath, me and Okuyasu can cover for you," Josuke quickly said.

Okuyasu forced himself to his feet. "Man... it's like something from a movie or something..." he
murmured under his breath.

Josuke watched as more Shadows began to materialize in the corridor ahead, while the ceiling
rumbled powerfully from something happening on the roof. Another one of those giants had likely
made the field.

'Shizuka...' Josuke thought to himself. 'I hope you and your friends know what you're doing...'

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While losing an eye and a wing had harmed Camael significantly, and slowed him down just a
touch, the Arditi weren't in the best shape right now either. Ryuji and Morgana were out cold in
two craters near the base of the bridge, while Haru and Shiho were behind cover at a large slab of
rubble, trying to catch their breath.

Anat had taken up Camael's disembodied wing by the warped steely bone, swinging it as a
makeshift sword as it repeatedly slammed into Camael's armored frame. Each mighty blow
knocked him back a step, punctuated by roars of anger from Makoto that seemed to further
strengthen Anat's swings.

"You son of a bitch... digging up memories of my father like that... angel or not, I'm sending you on
a one way ticket to Hell!" Makoto yelled, her whole body glowing with power until the bridge
began to crack under her feet.

Anat gave another mighty swing of her acquired weapon, the steely surface colliding with Camael's
chest and driving him back first into the bridge. The force was so immense that the joints of his
wing shattered apart, leaving Anat with just a gruesome cudgel in her hands.

Camael sprang up sharply and drove his left fist into Anat's body, a purple flash exploding from his
knuckles. Makoto cried out, landing harshly on her back and falling still. She grimaced, fighting
tooth and nail to get back up to no avail.

The dark angel huffed heavily, traces of black blood oozing from his wounds. He grunted and
scanned his surroundings with his remaining eye, until he spotted Akechi and Akira further down
on the bridge.

"So... just you two left?" he asked.

"For now," Akira replied in a careful tone. "You're pretty damn strong, I hate to admit it... but I
think the two of us can beat you when you're so damaged."
"Then you're a bigger fool than I thought, Trickster. I may be injured, but righteousness will guide me to victory," Camael boasted.

Akechi groaned, rolling his eyes. "God... What a pair of windbags. Are we going to fight, or what? I don't plan on sitting here all day."

Camael held both of his hands out to his sides, arcs of purple lightning crackling around him with a mounting intensity. "Let that arrogance be your epitaph."

He lunged forward at a frightful speed, his body angling to the side to dodge an incoming arc of cursed energy from Arsene. His right fist met the bridge, striking between Akechi and Akira, launching both boys away from each other. Akechi hit the ground on his side, grunting loudly, and swiftly summoned Loki again.

Loki aimed his sword out, firing off several focused bursts of crimson energy that rapidly closed in on Camael. He growled and lifted his remaining left wing, the cursed energy colliding against his armour. Camael clenched his fists tight, burning pain coursing through his nerves.

"Is that... all you have?" Camael spat. He lunged off to the right, only barely avoiding an explosion of almighty light that tore through where he had been standing mere moments ago. Camael was diving toward him before Akira could fully gain his footing, but the dark haired boy managed to just barely summon Arsene to block him. He caught both of Camael's wrists in his hands, with Akira grunting sharply from a colossal pressure weighing down on his back. "Hgh... you seem... upset about something..." Akira mocked, his knees wobbling.

Arsene's palms started to glow, unleashing continuous rays of black and scarlet light. The energy clashed violently against Camael's hull, the hulking angel snarling and pushing through the pain. His head snapped forward, a clanging sound echoing through the air as he violently headbutted Arsene. Akira was flung back, gasping loudly as his back hit the bridge.

Camael got set to jump at Akira again, only to be stopped by a massive obsidian bulk crashing down upon him. Prometheus rushed at him at speed, cracks exploding out around his feet. The angel gagged violently, struggling as Prometheus continued pressing down on him.

"Keep away from him!" Futaba shouted. The neon lines on Prometheus' hull were glowing with a greater intensity, the entire bridge shaking violently.

"AWAY!" A jolting shock exploded off of Camael's armour, blowing the dark sphere off his back and launching Futaba skyward. Snarling, he leapt back toward Akira with his right fist cocked back.

Akira's eyes widened.

He felt a splash of blood across his face.

And then soon realized it wasn't his own.

Akira's froze up at the sight before him, of the two figures just a few inches in front of him. There was Camael, his right fist jutting outward. Loki's striped sword was buried deep in his exposed
flesh, his shoulder split wide open as the sword threatened to slice him open like a sandwich. And there, impaled on Camael's fist in place of Akira, was Akechi.

"Khh... hh..." The brunette vomited a spew of blood onto Camael's arm, while the angel seemed frozen in place, afraid to move against the cursed sword scorching his grey flesh. "S-seems I... got caught up in... working with you all..."

"Akechi..." Akira breathed, his mouth agape in shock and horror. "What... what did you do...?"

"Saved... your life... nobody is more shocked than me..." Akechi said in return, struggling on every syllable. His body was glowing with crimson light, his own power trying to keep his body going despite the mortal damage he had taken.

Camael grimaced, his remaining eye fixed on the strands of smoke rising from the boiling wound in his shoulder. "You lunatic, you... you'll doom us both! P-pull back, now!"

The other members of the Arditi were starting to stir, coming up to the shocking sight that Akira had a front row seat for. Ann pressed her hands to her mouth in shock, while Sergio and Yusuke seemed frozen in place.

"Holy shit..." Shizuka whispered, unable to look away.

"He... he's not really..." Haru trailed off, her eyes watering.

Akechi grimaced, managing to turn his head just enough to look Akira in the eye. "L-listen... you like... proving me wrong... y-yeah?"

"A-Akechi, I-"

"Shut up and listen! I don't have a lot of time here!" Akechi spat, before another spew of red exploded from his lips. "You... y-you all... you love proving me wrong... so if you th-think you can make this shitty world a b-better place... do it!"

Akira swallowed and found himself nodding without realizing. "I... W-we will... and you can too!" he desperately said, trying to rise. A pulse of energy from the two restrained figures knocked him back, a gasp escaping Akira.

"Too late for that... I've always been... too late..." Akechi smiled. A tiny, sad smile. "Goodbye and good luck, everyone..."

"No!" Akira tried to rise, desperate to intervene, only to be stopped by Sergio grabbing him from behind.

"It's too late," the blond hastily said. "We can't lose you too!"

A vortex of light was churning around Camael and Akechi, waves of scarlet and purple energy swirling and colliding off each other. "W-wait! It's not too late, the Grail can still fix you! Think about it! You can have your revenge! You can spend eternity, destroying your father over and over again!" Camael desperately said.

Akechi turned and looked Camael dead in the eye, a smug smirk on his bloodied face. He let out a tremendous roar that was drowned out in the ensuing, blinding explosion, as Loki summoned all his remaining strength into tearing his blade through Camael's body. Both figures were engulfed in the blast, the Phantom Thieves being knocked flat as Camael and Akechi blew each other out of existence.
The blinding flash died out, leaving only a smoldering crater where the two had been standing a split second ago. Boiled ash, with no trace of either being... save for a fragment of Akechi's mask that flew down from on high, coupled with a singed police badge. The mask fragment turned to ash, vanishing from existence utterly.

Akira staggered to his feet, slowly making his way to the smoking crater until he was able to lift the scorched badge into his hands. "He died... to save me?"

The others were frozen in place, stunned by all that had transpired. "I didn't think... I didn't like the guy, but I didn't want to see him die..." Ryuji murmured.

"I just... don't understand... why would he save me?" Akira said in a soft tone.

Prometheus floated back to the bridge, the dark shell opening out so the redhead could land on her feet. She touched the pouch on her belt containing the flash drive. "I guess... I guess he wasn't as cold hearted as he liked to think..."

Ann raised her mask and started to quickly dry her eyes. "I always knew there was a chance one of us could die doing this, b-but I never... I never thought..."

Shiho settled a hand on Ann's back, her own expression grim. She had no idea what to feel right now, weighing Akechi's crimes of the past with what he had just done... it was definitely hard to wrap her head around with so much going on.

"I'm feeling... very conflicted right now," Shizuka said. "But... he still died so we could see this through to the end. We have to keep moving... there's no time to waste."

Akira continued to inspect the badge in his right hand, squeezing it to his chest for a few quiet seconds. He slipped it into his long coat and turned his attention to the tower. "Right... he'll have died for nothing if we don't. Come on, let's get going..."

Chapter End Notes

Yep, Akechi dies, but with a bit more finality than what happened in vanilla P5. Got what he deserved for the most part, but I look forward to Royal and the fandom glossing over his atrocities.
Once everyone had gathered, the team did what they could to heal up after their pitched battle with Camael. Defeating the angel had cost them a lot of energy, and the life of one ally, and so naturally the rest of the journey upward was conducted in a slow and painful silence.

"I'm just gonna go ahead and say it," Shiho remarked. "After all we had to expend against Camael... I don't think we'll have the power needed to beat the thing in that tower... whatever it is."

"That may be true," Haru replied, brushing some of her strawberry blonde locks into place. "Even so... we can't afford to back down here. The world is relying on us."

As Haru said this, Futaba suddenly paused mid-step. "Hm?" Her goggles glowed briefly, with the young redhead briefly peering down to the cityscape below. "Ooooh, that's cool... Fuuka and Rise really outdid themselves."

From on high she could see the various large television screens affixed to some of Shibuya's buildings, all of them showing the same footage: The Arditi making their way up the bridge, with an image of the Phantom Thieves logo positioned in the bottom right of the screen.

And the steadily awakening populace were starting to take notice.

"Hey, wait..."
"That symbol, isn't that...?"
"I think I remember it..."
"Those are the Phantom Thieves, right?! Aw man, they'll totally help save the day!"
"Th-those guys, yeah... I remember now! They were like, real superheroes!"
"Then... are they trying to put a stop to whatever the hell is going on?"

With the world being the way it was, the slowly rising belief of the public was starting to have an effect. Shimmering white light briefly washed over the Arditi, fully healing whatever soreness they felt, and marginally restoring some of the stamina that had been drained against Camael.

Akira raised his hands and inspected them, before clenching both of his fists tight. "Sure, now they believe in us... oh well. If it improves our odds, I can't complain."

"Looks like people really are coming around... I hope the others can keep safe," Ann said, turning her gaze back up toward the tower.

"If we've come this far, then they're doing a great job... Let's keep moving," Akira replied.

"Right. We've got a world to save!" Morgana said, loudly smacking his paws together.

Akira took the lead, his renewed vigor allowing him to sprint up to the entryway at a greater speed. The others followed his lead, keeping a good pace as he moved up to the glowing crimson entryway. He passed through the vibrant light at speed and skidded to a halt along the ornate stone floor within.

"Oh..." Akira's widened considerably at the sight that awaited them: A massive chamber with glowing red walls. At the center of the floors was a massive golden cup, the size of a house, with
vibrant metal feathers and whirring wheels engraved along the exterior. On either side of the goblet was an equally massive hand, sculpted from a similar golden metal, with an eye built into the palms of them.

Long red veins sprouted from the top of the goblet, leading off into the open rim at the top of the tower.

"So the Holy Grail is an... actual grail..." Yusuke said in some surprise.

There was a sudden rumble in the tower, seeming to rise up from the ancient bones of the very earth. "The Phantom Thieves, here to disrupt paradise. You destroyed the heaven you were given, and now wish to do the same for everyone else... your selfish drive knows no bounds..." His voice was deep and dripping with menace, just like 'Igor.' Akira tried to keep his anger from rising.

"Again with the paradise talk," Ryuji spat. "Listen you overgrown cup! You don't know shit about people! You got no right messing up the whole planet like this!"

"We came here to get the treasure of Mementos... and you can either make this easy, or hard. Either way, this nightmare is ending today!" Ann shouted.

"Is that so? You're welcome to try... it seems it falls to me to personally strike you down, for the good of the world," The Grail calmly said.

The entire chamber rumbled violently, a flash of light rolling across the golden surface of the Grail until the metal was gleaming. One of the wheels on the rim of the Grail started to rumble with a surge of purple light, followed by a sharp beam of energy exploding out toward the Thieves.

The Arditi swiftly scattered, the blast striking the stone surface of the floor and punching a deep crater. The two 'hands' of the Grail twisted slightly, the palms aglow with similar plumes of lavender light that erupted into two more beams of energy.

Both blasts fractured apart, splitting into six smaller beams that bounced and ricocheted along the floor and walls. Once more the Arditi were forced to dodge and leap away, the focused stabs of energy scorching every surface they struck.

Yusuke landed on his feet and quickly summoned Susanoo, the spectral samurai driving his palms into the floor. A dense wall of ice exploded up in front of him, a hemispherical barrier that blocked a few of the beams, chunks rumbling off as the energy beams exploded against the ice. "This energy..." he murmured.

Haru skidded to a halt a few feet from Yusuke, her back to him. Astarte floated above the young heiress, projecting a glowing pink barrier of psionic light that blocked the rest of the beams, the ground rumbling under Haru's feet.

"The energy this things giving off..." Futaba took a step back toward the entryway, examining the Grail with a keen interest. "It's stronger than Camael obviously, but something feels... off." She couldn't quite tell what it was, given how utterly vast and alien this thing was compared to the other Shadows.

But Futaba had a distinct feeling she was only looking at the tip of the iceberg right now.

Mercurius flew high and thrust his staff forward with his right arm. A focused cyclone of green
wind exploded outward and struck the golden hull of the Grail. Sparks lit up the armor, carving and scratching at the polished material, but the hulking Shadow remained comfortably in place.

A sharp lance of blessed light shot from the gleaming armor of the grail, instantly striking Mercurius. Morgana yelped in pain, sent skidding along the floor on his back.

An arcing beam of almighty power surged forward from the rim of the Grail, carving a deep path in the floor as it went. Several of the Arditi scattered away from it, but the pulse of energy still struck off Sergio and Makoto, flinging both of them away.

"Damn... this thing is pretty tough already... Give me a second, I can try charging up something particularly strong.... if you guys can cover me at least!" Ann said.

"No probs Panther!" Shizuka quickly replied. Houdini's hands clapped down on Ann's shoulders and got a firm grip, with the two figures turning invisible straight after.

Akira nodded and touched his mask. "Skull, with me. Thor!" A flash engulfed Akira, with Thor's hulking armored visage rising up behind the dark haired boy. He thrust his hammer forth, unleashing a powerful bolt of lightning that exploded against the gleaming gold of the Grail and shook the entire chamber.

With Thor laying down some explosive covering fire, Ryuji jumped off to the right and summoned his own Persona. Seiten Taisei raised his cudgel high overhead, swinging it forward and unleashing another electrical burst that washed over the Grail, scorching it deeply.

"Can we even damage this ugly ass cup?!" Ryuji asked.

Futaba nodded quickly. "Y-yeah, it seems like you're hurting it. But... Something about all this still feels weird..." Futaba said, her uncertainty still rising.

A sharp spear of blessed light lanced down toward Ryuji, only for Susanoo to race in to intercept. He projected a dense barrier of ice from his palms, but it shattered instantly in the ensuing explosion, with Yusuke gritting his teeth as his knees met the floor.

It gave Ryuji an opening to change position, another bolt of lightning shooting from his Persona and exploding against the Grail. A weighty swing of Thor's hammer smashed through another incoming dagger of light, the chamber trembling briefly in protest.

Makoto aimed her right arm toward the sculpted left hand. Anat shot toward it, her ironclad knuckles glowing brightly before unleashing a focused wave of nuclear light that scorched the armored plating. A purple beam of light exploded from the palm, which Anat swiftly dodged. However a second beam shot forth a split second after, this one striking Anat into the floor and earning a pained shout from Makoto.

A rapidfire flurry of almighty beams shot from the sculpted hands, and despite their swiftness it seemed that Akira and Ryuji could only dodge so much before the waves caught up with them. Ryuji was knocked off his feet, sent screaming across the chamber before his back slammed into one of the large pillars by the entryway, while Akira was driven into the floor hard enough to carve a trench with his body.

Fortunately, it seemed they had bought Ann enough time. The ground rumbled briefly under her invisible frame, her immense power rising through her veins. A massive fireball lit up the interior
of the tower, engulfing the Grail with such force that the roaring explosion was enough to drown out the Grail's pained snarls.

The wave of fire persisted for several seconds, before slowly dying out. Shizuka and Ann became visible again, with the blonde taking in a few heavy breaths. "Man... if I held that any longer... I would've exploded..." Ann said in between heavy breaths.

The smoldering flames and billowing smoke started to vanish away, revealing the entirety of the Grail. Sections of the gold were scorched and melted, fresh dents marking the outer layers of armor.

"Well... it definitely worked out..." Shizuka said, grinning sharply.

The veins protruding from the Grail suddenly glowed with an unearthly pink light, pulsating as some alien matter was steadily sucked through them. The armor of the grail glowed brightly, the dents and sections of molten metal rapidly being repaired until the entire thing looked good as new.

"Pointless." The chamber rumbled again, the Grail channeling more power into itself. "You can't beat me, not when I am what the earth itself desires. There is no power you can align against me, no strength you can produce to overcome my own... there is nowhere you can hide. There is only me. I am absolute."

"Absolutely full of shit..." Ryuji grumbled, clutching his chest as he rose back to his feet. "That's just goddamn cheating..."

Futaba adjusted her goggles, staring up toward the pulsating veins. "Those weird tentacles... it's drawing power from there," Futaba said.

"That so?" Shizuka remarked. "Looks like we'll have to do something about that."

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From the comfort of his Naples estate, sequestered in his office, Giorno Giovanna examined the expansive flat screen TV on his manilla-colored wall. His hands were clasped behind his back, the crimson light from the window casting a stark shade over his fuschia longcoat.

Passione were laying low for now, keeping off the streets to avoid the angels that had taken to the skies. Even Giorno wanted to keep a low profile, the sheer numbers proving worrisome. And with them ignoring normal humans outright, there was no need to attack head on quite yet. But with everything going on now, the angels seemed to have gone dormant.

His attention was locked on the footage being psychically streamed across the world, of the mysterious Arditi engaging a monstrous golden grail in mortal combat.

"I had a feeling something strange was going on these past few months..." Giorno remarked, settling his hands in his coat pockets. "But to think, something like this was going on..."

Giorno paused and cocked his head to his left side, his golden braid falling evenly down his left shoulder. The Phantom Thieves were giving their all, lobbing powerful destructive bolts that repeatedly struck against the golden hull of the strange grail.

"If you're really the only ones there that stop that thing... then I'll put my faith in you. Just for a
little while," Giorno said.

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With the chaos unfolding in the heart of Shibuya, the angels of Tokyo had ceased their patrolling for the time being, growing statue still in the darkened skies. With this in mind, outside of the rising panic in the public as they steadily became aware of the hellscape surrounding them, there was no threat of paying the surface a visit.

Besides, there was no smoking allowed underground.

Sojiro emerged from one of the secret access points, disguised as a worn out metal door inside a trash-strewn alley. He glanced from side to side briefly, before quickly slipping the butt of a cigarette between his lips.

"Raining blood... bet that's gonna me murder to wash out of my clothes," he remarked, leaning against the metal doorframe. Sojiro slipped a lighter from his trouser pocket and quickly lit the end of his cigarette.

"Sakura-san?"

Sojiro glanced into the tunnel he had emerged from, watching as Mishima awkwardly came into view. "Oh, you're that Mishima kid. Don't worry about me, I'm just grabbing my daily dose of death... seems like all the monsters in the air are a little distracted right now."

"Yeah, I... I guess with the Phantom Thieves going through with their plan, they must have bigger things on their minds," Mishima said, scratching the back of his head.

Sojiro took a long drag of his cigarette before letting the smoke out in a long whistling puff. He was trying to quit, had been for a while now. It didn't help that he now had two kids to look after. "Oh well... even if the world is going south, I'm sick and tired of sitting down there. Those kids... they're doing everything they can to save the world, least I can do is watch things."

"I um..." Mishima swallowed hard. "I want to see the end too. Everyone turned their backs on the Arditi, but... not me. I owe them so much, ever since they took down Kamoshida. And so... I want to be here, when they need support the most," he explained,

Sojiro nodded slowly. "Yeah... taking out that gym teacher helped a lot of people. That's all those kids have been doing all year. And I'm sure they can finish the job now too." He took another drag of his cigarette.

"You... want to come along? It'd mean a lot to Kurusu, I bet," Mishima said, awkwardly stepping past Sojiro into the damp alley outside.

Another drag reduced Sojiro's cigarette to a stump, which he promptly stubbed out on the doorframe. "Well... why not? I've already got my shoes on, might as well keep going. Come on kid, let's see if we can get a view from Shibuya."

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Haru shoved her right arm out toward the sculpted left hand protruding from the stone floor. Astarte floated beside her, projecting a glowing barrier of pink light that struggled to suppress an
incoming wave of blessed light that scorched the floor around her.

"O-oh my!" Haru breathlessly said, her heels pushing back along the hard floor. "This... this pressure!"

Yusuke weaved away from a fracturing beam of focused purple light, Susanoo springing ahead of the bluenette. He swung his sword toward the Grail, uneashing a conical blizzard of sharpened icicles that struck repeatedly against the Grail.

"Attacking it head on won't do much, not if it can just keep healing," Akira said, glancing over his shoulder at the others. "We need to cut those veins."

"I might have the tool for the job," Shizuka said, gesturing to the Aja resting comfortably atop Houdini's hand. "And I can slip in close... but you guys gotta make an opening to me."

Akira nodded toward her. "Right... leave it to us then. Mada!"

A flash of azure fire washed over Akira, followed by a hulking golem of obsidian appearing in the air above him. A four-armed, faceless monster, with a column of fire rising from the top of his conical head, a ring of fire crackling around his armored waist. A large wheel of white metal was positioned comfortably on his back.

Mada raised his upper pair of arms, the obsidian surface of his palms blocking an incoming wave of almighty energy. Akira grit his teeth but powered through, while Mada thrust his lower hands forward and unleashed a blinding flash of fire that exploded against the golden shell of the Grail.

"Your efforts are in vain, Trickster. The human race is the very source of my being, their innermost desires giving me strength and purpose... There is nothing you can do to overcome me."

The chamber rumbled around the Grail, more energy gathering around it.

There was a combined pulse from both palms, unseen waves of psychic pressure lashing outward and crashing against Yusuke, Makoto, and Sergio. The team tried to brace against it, both all three were swept upward by the blast and smashed into the ground roughly.

An arc of black and purple light stroked along the rim of the Grail, rapidly forming into a densely packed sphere crackling with dark lightning. The bullet of energy rocketed toward the downed Phantom Thieves, only for the blast to be intercepted as Prometheus' dark mass zoomed in front of the warped energy.

The air in front of Prometheus hardened into an invisible barrier, flashes of light illuminating the entirety of the tower and making the ground tremble. Futaba grit her teeth, struggling against the bullet of light. "This guy... and his damn purple junk!"

"You can't best me. It would have served you all well to stay in whatever paradise Dies Irae granted you. But now I have no choice but to destroy you utterly, and when I do I'll be able to direct all my power to crushing the false messiah and his followers. Once that is dealt with, establishing order again will be trivial."

The energy bullet exploded, sending Prometheus spinning away through the air until it crashed into one of the pillars hard enough to carve a large chunk out of it. Futaba gasped harshly, her body rattling around inside her craft.
"Oracle!" Akira exclaimed. "You son of a bitch... So help me, I'll wipe out every last atom of your golden ass!"

Two more beams of light shot out of the sculpted statue hands, causing Mada to stir into action again. He shoved his upper set of arms outward, his own palms unleashing narrow beams of highly focused heat that struck violently against the incoming waves until the stone floor was rumbling and melting beneath the blazing focal point of the entwining energy.

All the while, with the Grail focusing on obliterating Akira, Shizuka's unseen body was able to close in on the gleaming left hand. She jumped onto Houdini's cupped hands, with her Stand flinging her upward in a casual burst of strength,

Aloft, Shizuka narrowed her eyes and took aim, her Stand rising up in front of her. "Establishing order? Yeah, good look with that you overgrown chamberpot."

A brilliant beam of focused light shot from the blazing surface of the Aja, instantaneously crossing through the chamber. In a single stroke, the laser sliced clean through the glowing veins, severing them in their entirety.

"Hm? I can no longer draw strength from the ignorant masses... what have you done?" the Grail asked, a thunderous anger stirring in his already deep tone.

Mada's flames overwhelmed the Grail's attacks, twin explosions striking against the sculpted metal hands and engulfing them in flames. "We just cut your lifeline," Akira firmly stated. "And now to destroy the rest of you!"

Hecate shot upward and threw a charged fireball forward, the swirling wave of flame exploding against the Grail's right side with enough heat to leave blackened scars along the metal. Ann grinned at the sight, pleased that the damage was remaining in place.

Yusuke ducked and dodged, working to avoid a salvo of blessed daggers exploding at his heels. A few burns marked Yusuke's back, the bluenette gritting his teeth. Breakthru moved ahead of Sergio, catapulting several chunks of debris toward the Grail, the hunks of rock exploding against Grail and producing a smokescreen that gave Yusuke an opening to move around.

Susanoo burst through the smoke, his sword striking against the Grail hard enough to leave a dent. The samurai leapt over the golden surface, while Seiten Taisei drove his cudgel into the opposite side. His immense strike was punctuated by an explosion of lighting, scorch marks trailing along the golden surface.

More waves of blessed light exploded out around the Grail, a wave of damaging holy energy racing toward the Arditi. However before it could go too far, Eris flew forth at Shiho's command. Her Persona held her arms out, large swathes of the Grail's attack being sucked inward and absorbed by Shiho.

Haru and Makoto stepped forth in unison, both girls shouting at the top of their lungs as their Personae took aim at the Grail. An entwining wave of psychic and nuclear energy flew from Astarte and Anat, illuminating the inside of the chamber with a vibrant glow as the surge ground into the Grail.

The potent wave of energy died out after a few seconds, the tremors dying out while the thick clouds of smoke faded away from the Grail, revealing the scorches and dents in the armor of it.
Their foe was still as a statue, coils of smoke easing off the blackened scorches on the previously flawless gold.

"Did we... did we do it?" Shizuka asked, glancing toward the others.

Prometheus floated upright again, with all eyes turning toward the sphere. "Oracle?" Akira asked, his tone a mix of concern and curiosity.

"Just... just a sec, I'm still a little dizzy," Futaba replied, falling silent for a few seconds. She examined the Grail, both it and the sculpted hands unmoving. "It's... it's dormant, but I think... h-huh?!"

The entire tower suddenly started to rumble, chunks of masonry breaking off the top of the structure and raining downward. Breakthru and Mada jumped upward, unleashing rapid attacks to blow away the incoming sandy debris. All the while, the ominous voice of the Grail began to fill the air.

"Very well... I had hoped I could destroy you all without needing to exert myself... but it seems you insist on being troublesome toward the very end..."

"This power... he wasn't exerting himself until now!" Futaba exclaimed.

The floor rumbled, suddenly starting to rise upward as hisses of soot and steam rushed up from forming gaps in the ground. Sections of the stone floor began to force apart, separating into distinct platforms. Morgana yelped loudly in shock, waving his arms at his sides as he struggled to maintain his balance. His legs were being spread by two parting sections of floor, forcing him to speedily jump to the platform on his left.

From the bloodstained streets, the startled masses watched as the sandy tower began to collapse apart, swathes of debris flaking into dust on the way down. The badly damaged bridge came undone, melting away like snow in the morning sun.

The floor rose higher and higher into the air, the large slabs of dense stone forming into an orbiting ring that was held above near the central form of the Grail. And, with the floor splitting open, it gave a clear look at the figure that had been hidden away under the stone.

The sculpted hands started to suddenly clench, the new opening revealing bulky arms of pearlescent steel. Akira watched in mounting shock and worry, getting a glimpse at the angular torso that the arms led down to, with the waist of the strange creature marked by a honeycomb of strange steely boxes. Metal wings unfurled from the small of his back as the group rose skyward, until the clouds felt as it they were within arms reach.

The Grail glowed a vibrant golden shade, the damage on the sculpted wings coming undone. The bonds on the wings shattered apart, allowing the feathered objects to rise up and take the shape of a gleaming, slowly rotating halo. It came to rest atop on the angular head of the giant now looming above the floating platforms, the gathered Arditi freezing up at the sight.

A chilly breeze wafted around them, the air growing thin and harder to breathe.

While there was no definable face on the steely surface of the animatronic man's giant head, but the thieves could feel that he was watching them. All of them, with a burning intensity that scoured their souls.
"G-give me a break..." Futaba whispered, nearly falling over in her shock.

"Th-that thing... he's like, as big as a building!" Ann exclaimed.

Morgana was standing in place, his expression unreadable. "This thing was at the heart of Mementos, all this time... amazing..."

"Doesn't matter how big this thing is... we've taken down plenty of giants so far! And this one will be no different," Sergio proudly stated.

Shizuka nodded, keeping her harsh gaze locked firmly on the ironclad giant. "Right... this son of a bitch has cheated every step of the way, and rigged the game at every turn... but we're still standing! He'll fail here, just like before!"

There was a roar of thunder, the skies briefly blackening around their foe as he spoke up, his voice a deafening legion. "I AM THE ADMINISTRATOR BORN OF THE COLLECTIVE HUMAN UNCONSCIOUSNESS: THE GOD OF CONTROL YALDABAOTH!"

"Taking on a 'god of control' huh? Yeah... this seems like a fitting final chapter," Akira firmly stated. Today would decide the fate of the world. Whether humanity would spend eternity in ignorant chains, or if they would finally be free to find their own path again.
By now the rooftop looked like a warzone, marked with multiple craters and scars in the concrete that left the area looking as if it was close to collapse. It likely would have by now, were it not for how well designed the building was, and how much money the Kirjo group poured in toward sturdy building materials.

Given the line of work Mitsuru dedicated much of her life to, she had to ensure that all her major properties were... doomsday proof, to an extent.

With the last of the archangels taken care of, the various Persona users were scattered around, waiting for Minato to dish out some healing. Akihiko and Naoto were both swaying, while arcs of electricity were dancing around the stump where Aigis' left forearm had previously been.

Yukari was panting heavily, leaning against an air conditioning unit that had been heavily crushed. "This is... this is nuts," the brunette breathed. "I know I'm out of practice, but even at my best I'd be struggling right now..."

"It's not over yet," Yu said, grimacing a bit. "You saw what happened to the tower... the Phantom Thieves are taking the Grail on right now, and we can't even get close enough to help them."

Fuuka let out a suddened startled gasp, not moving from her current position. "Y-you guys... we may have more pressing troubles on our doorstep!" the meek navigator exclaimed.

Akihiko's eyes widened, with the looming man slowly rubbing his right fist into his left hand. "Another angel? Man... I'm already getting sick of this schtick..."

Minato turned slightly, glancing to the left end of the rooftop. All the while Messiah was maintaining his steady healing speed, trying to mend wounds and rejuvinate stamina. The black clouds overhead parted, a blinding lance of holy light shooting down from on high until it was a perpetual wave resonating from the dark clouds.

HUMANS.

The voice was the sound of thunder and lightning, a low roar that flowed through their ears, minds, and very souls. The gathered Persona users tensed, with the exception of Minato and Yu who stared into the golden void.

THOUGH YOUR COURAGE IS ADMIRABLE, YOUR REBELLION WILL END NOW. IT IS THE WILL OF THE ONE ABOVE ALL, AND IT IS MY DUTY TO ENSURE THAT HIS WILL IS CARRIED OUT. LET YOUR RESISTANCE BE THE LAST GASP OF A FAILED PERIOD OF HUMAN FREEDOM.

"What... what on earth is that?!" Mitsuru exclaimed in shock, spreading her legs as she braced for what was doubtless coming.

Minato's expression was unreadable, his mouth a thin crease. "Metatron," he flatly said.

"The voice of God," Yu added, clenching his fists tight.
Naoto sighed heavily, her ragged posture slumping just a touch more. "Of course," the bluenette muttered under her breath.

The wave of light steadily parted, the beam sputtering out and revealing the outline of a massive figure in the blinding gold wave. A towering humanoid with skin sculpted from flawless steel, his joints made of fine gold. A clear white toga fluttered around his armoured chest, while his sculpted metal face stared dispassionately down at the Persona users. Great wings forged from the same heavenly light protruded from Metatron's shoulder blades, casting their blessed radiance across the nearby city blocks.

**YOU HAVE FOUGHT WELL, BUT YOUR RESISTANCE ENDS HERE.**

The group stood to attention, forming a vanguard between Metatron and the two navigators. "Take your best shot... We'll fight you to the bitter end," Yu growled. For all his bravado, right about now he really hoped the Phantom Thieves were having luck against the Holy Grail.

Yukari sighed, her body glowing a deep azure shade as she worked to summon Isis yet again. "This is a lot harder than I thought it was gonna be. God damn it..."

**INDEED.**

Metatron raised his arms high, until swirls of blessed light illuminated his fingers and set the skies aglow in his presence.

**YOU HAVE FOUGHT WELL. NOW FALL.**

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Akira held his ground firmly, watching the looming mass of Yaldabaoth glower down upon them. From the orbiting platforms, they could only see him from the waist up and his scale was still massive.

"This power, it's... insane," Futaba remarked from the comfort of Prometheus. "All this time, Camael really was a part of him. Like a really angry finger..."


"You have some nerve! You don't know shit about people!" Shiho shouted in return.

Yusuke nodded in agreement. "This 'game' that you conducted... you truly had no interest in gauging human potential. If that was the case, you would not have rigged things in your favor at every turn... This was your plan from the start. You simply wanted to amuse yourself all the while," the bluenette accused.

"You just decided that all humans are evil, but you never tried to learn anything about us!" Shizuka
Akira flicked his coat back, his sharp glare affixed to the smooth metal of Yaldabaoth's 'face.' "Believe me when I say this... we've seen some of the worst that humanity has to offer. Kamoshida, Kaneshiro, Arisawa, Shido, Mr. A... I know how depraved humans can get, and the terrible things that can drive them But even after seeing how bad people can be... I haven't lost faith in them."

The wind whirled around Yaldabaoth for several seconds, with the giant silently processing what the leader of the Arditi had to say. "IS THAT SO? EXPLAIN."

"Simple... even seeing some of the worst people in the nation, and going up against Shadows and evil-ass Stand users, I haven't lost faith in the world. Because of these guys right here," Akira said, gesturing to the other Phantom Thieves. "And everyone else who helped me get to this point, who helped me every step of the way. The people like Lifeson and Satoshi who gave their lives to help us... Having so many people like this helping me, it leaves me thinking that for every Kamoshida, or Mannish Boy in the world... they're outnumbered a hundredfold by people like my friends," Akira firmly explained.

And, to the people on the world below, Akira's words seemed to resonate with more than a few of them. His speech was heard around the world, Kouzeon and Juno passively translating his words. This young man, whoever he was, was standing up to that abomination, giving an impassioned defence for them all. It was hard not to feel a little excited by it.

The mounting belief of the people, even if it was only by a small amount, caused waves of white light to wash over the team. Their injuries were healed further, more power filling the gathered Phantom Thieves.

"People aren't perfect, and maybe they never will be... but I know there's good in the world. People can change. Even Akechi... And you have no right to destroy, or enslave the entire world!" Akira shouted.

Once more Yaldabaoth was silent, the high winds washing over the pearly metal of his armored shell. "INTERESTING. PERHAPS THERE IS POTENTIAL IN YOU AFTER ALL... THEN I SUPPOSE IT FALLS TO ME TO TEST THIS HUMAN POTENTIAL, TO THE VERY LIMIT!"

The platforms rumbled violently, with the steel-plated god raising his arms high. A wave of cursed energy struck out across the platforms. Yusuke and Haru sprang into action, generating a combined barrier of ice and psychic energy that rapidly expanded out into a crackling frosty hemisphere.

It exploded against the crushing force of Yaldabaoth's power, instantly being shattered apart. While it had taken the brunt of the explosion, it still hit hard enough to sweep Sergio, Makoto, and Shiho skyward, while the others scrambled to avoid the explosive flashes.

"Son of a bitch!" Ryuji spat, landing hard on one floating expanse of stone. His whole body glowed, Seiten Taisei's power causing lightning to crackle around the blond's body. A massive arc of lighting, as broad as a house, arced from Seiten Taisei's staff and exploded against Yaldabaoth chest, leaving a scorch that glowed red hot for several seconds. The giant seemed not to notice.

A sparkle washed over Yaldabaoth's left eye, causing the air near Ryuji to shimmer. The blond leapt backward, his Persona appearing before him as a living shield as the shimmering air ignited in a mighty explosion. He gave a sharp cry of pain, being launched to the next platform.
Yaldabaoth raised his right hand high, swirls of light dancing along his steely digits. The clouds blackened around them, a sudden tear slicing across the blood red sky: A vortex of warped purple electricity that provided a window to the stars.

Futaba let out a startled gasp, using Prometheus to launch herself off the dark stone floor beneath her feet. "Guys, watch out! He's got something big incoming!"

"FUTILE."

A volley of flaming asteroids suddenly tore through the rip in space Yaldabaoth had torn open, the heavy car-sized rocks racing down toward the platforms. Akira's eyes widened in shock, but he was quick to right himself.

"Futsunushi!" The spectral swordsman shot ahead of Akira, several of his spectral swords flying outward to intercept some of the incoming meteors. His strikes destroyed three with impressive quickness. But the fourth exploded right in Futsunushi's face, making Akira shout in agony as he was suddenly floored from the violent explosion.

Haru stepped up quickly, taking aim with her left hand. Asterte swept her arms across the sky, unleashing a storm of pink lightning that shattered several of the incoming asteroids. However a particularly large one exploded with such violence that the strawberry blonde was knocked screaming to the hard ground, several of her nearby allies being swept aside in the firestorm.

Yaldabaoth clenched his fist, sealing the tear he had formed. He made a low grumbling noise, perhaps exerting more effort than he had expected.

As the rumbling shockwaves on the platform came to a halt, Shizuka landed heavily on her side, grimacing to herself. Houdini floated above her, taking aim with the Aja in her right hand. "Why the hell... do things... keep escalating?!"

A brilliant lance of gleaming white light shot from the Aja and struck against Yaldabaoth's golden neck. But, while powerful enough to carve through stone and titanium like butter, the energy wave only served to form a white hot scorch on his neck.

Yaldabaoth dismissively snapped his left hand toward Shizuka, a sudden wave of air pressure slamming into her body and catapulting Shizuka backward. She let out a pained cry, scrambling swiftly until Houdini sank her claws into the stone in a desperate bid to halt her own momentum. But even this wasn't enough, and she was only halted when one of Prometheus' dark tendrils coiled around her waist.

Shizuka breathed a heavy sigh of relief, coughing a bit of blood up onto the floor. "Th-thanks..." The gale of Yaldabaoth's attack, she was sure something in her chest had been banged up from it.

"Anytime," Futaba quickly replied.

Landing on another platform, Shiho took a deep breath and settled her right hand against her blindfold. "Eris!" A flash of green light washed over Shiho's body, with similar lime green waves washing over the various other Phantom Thieves, boosting their speed and agility.

Ann skidded to a stop next to her best friend, smiling slyly at Shiho. "Wanna hit this jerk with a double assault?" the blonde suggested.
"You just read my mind," Shiho said, matching Ann's grin with one of her own.

Eris and Hecate joined each other side to side, raising their hands in unison. A tremendous flash lit up the skies, a wave of fire coiling around a thick spear of holy light. The tide of fire slammed into Yaldabaoth's torso, splitting off into other coils that blazed against Yaldabaoth's face and shoulders, sections of his armor glowing white hot.

Yaldabaoth grunted, raising his left hand up as the wave of energy crashed against him. He held up his sharpened index finger. A dense purple beam of almighty energy lanced from his fingertip, making a beeline for the two girls. But, with their heightened speed, they swiftly leapt to the next platform while Yaldabaoth's attack carved a trench in the stone in passing. Smoke hissed off his armor, a few thin signs of damage marking the pearly surface.

More flashes of energy stabbed out of Yaldabaoth's fingertip, keeping Shiho and Ann on the move while the others tries to change position. "ALREADY I AM DISAPPOINTED. WAS DEFEATING CAMAEL A FLUKE? WERE THE OBSTACLES I PUT IN YOUR PATH LESS IMPRESSIVE THAN I EXPECTED?"

Futsunushi and Susanoo shot forward in unison, both swordsman clashing violently against Yaldabaoth's torso as the giant had his attention affixed to Ann and Shiho. The thunderous boom echoed through the clouds, followed by several dozen violent slashes colliding against Yaldabaoth's chest in an instant, both swordsmen striking him hard enough to carve a few scars into his armor.

The duo pulled back as arcs of purple lightning danced along his armored shell, a pulse exploding out of his body and narrowly missing the swordsmen.

"Okay..." Shizuka breathed, turning her attention toward Prometheus. "Some of our heavy hitters are sluging this bastard with everything they got... and we're barely ticking him! So uh... got any ideas in that big noggin of yours?"

"I'm doing what I can, I'm scanning this guy all over looking for waknesses, but..." Futaba trailed off, audibly swallowing. "I can't... I can't pick up anything noteworthy!"

"Well... We might just have to get a little creative. Start mixing abilities." Sergio landed on the stony platform beside Shizuka, a coy smile on his handsome face. "And you, my dear Oracle... I think your Prometheus would make for a very nice bullet."

"Uh... excuse me?!" Futaba indignantly asked.

Shizuka glanced between Prometheus, and Breakthru floating at Sergio's side. Prometheus' durability, coupled with all the momentum Breakthru could pump into an object... "He might just be onto something," Shizuka mused.

Futaba bristled a bit. "Wh- you can't just launch me!"

"We may just have to... You guys can talk that one out. I have a plan of my own," Shizuka added, sparing a glance toward the Aja, and then to Yusuke.

A hurricane raged above, a cyclone of deep green wind directed by Mercurius' hands. The tapered edge struck into Yaldabaoth's chest and dragged along the armor, laving a jagged scar in passing.
Yet the looming deity seemed not to notice. There was a shimmer in the air near Mercurius as he tried to move around, punctuated with a mighty fireball that exploded against the Persona and flung him away, leaving Morgana howling as his body crashed into the floor.

There was a sudden stirring in Yaldabaoth's body, a golden glow rolling across his armored hull before a skeletal steel limb began to rise from the small of his back. "I RELEASE UPON YOU THE DEADLY SIN OF LUST! YOU HAVE NO MEANS OF ESCAPE, HUMANS. THE INSANITY OF MANKIND SHALL BRING FORTH THE DEMISE." The strange skeletal limb stretched around and dipped into one of the armored boxes at Yaldabaoth's waist. Gold light enveloped it as the pointed end pulled back into view, now topped with a large golden handgun shape.

"It... grew an arm?" Akira asked himself. "The deadly sin of lust... guys, be careful! We have no idea what that thing is!"

"We know that gun is freakin' huge!" Ryuji shouted.

Crackles of black lightning danced along the golden surface of Yaldabaoth's new weapon, a shockwave erupting from the barrel. The Arditi braced themselves, only to be caught out by Makoto's sudden screams as a similar wave of dark lightning washed over the brunette. Her muscles spasmed, with the brunette gritting her teeth. "H-he's... he's in my mind!" she screamed.

Anat rose above her, suddenly thrusting her palms forward and unleashing a powerful atomic flash toward Ann and Shiho. The two girls only barely avoided a direct hit, but the power of Makoto's attack still smashed them violently into a nearby platform, leaving them dazed and downed.

"Wh- Queen?!" Morgana balked.

"She's not in control of her actions!" Futaba shouted in return. "That new weapon, it's overriding her free will!"

Makoto grit her teeth, her right arm trembling as she desperately sought to stop herself from taking aim at Akira. To no avail.

Grunting, Akira quickly changed his Persona. "Thor!" The armored juggernaut flashed into existence in front of Akira, raising his mighty hammer as a shield to block an incoming wave of nuclear light blasted his way by Anat, the ground trembling beneath him. Akira grimaced, swiftly glancing between Yaldabaoth and Makoto.

Shizuka narrowed her eyes, turning invisible. "I can get close to her, but I need someone to give me cover... overgrown silver-plated asshole, worming into my girl's head..."

"Leave it to me!" Haru called out, landing neatly near Shizuka's position. She took aim at Makoto from two platforms away, firing off low-power pulses of psionic light toward the brunette. Enough to throw Makoto's balance, but not majorly injure her.

Even so, the brunette snapped off to the right, her arms and legs twisting in strange fashion like a puppet on strings. At the very least, when forced to dodge Haru, she couldn't be used against the team.

"Think you can get away with screwing in our heads? Guess again asshole!" Ryuji shouted, his body glowing with a plume of blue fire around his feet. Seiten Taisei appeared behind the blonde
and raised his cudgel high overhead, generating a swirl of dark clouds directly above Yaldabaoth's bulk. Great arcs of lightning bombarded him from several points, each explosive white flash generating a molten scar on his armor. Yaldabaoth growled loudly, burning marks forming along his newly grown limb as a lightning strike cracked against the golden material.

Once more Yaldabaoth stirred, a new skeletal limb rising from the left side of his back to mirror the first one he spawned. "I RELEASE UPON YOU THE DEADLY SIN OF VANITY. YOU HAVE NO MEANS OF ESCAPE, HUMANS. THE FRAUDULENCE OF MANKIND SHALL BRING FORTH RUIN."

The pointed end dipped into another of Yaldabaoth's armored boxes, slowly pulling back up with a large golden bell glowing into existence on the spindly limb. His sculpted head shifted toward Ryuji, the bell lifting slowly and letting out a loud chiming ring that had an alien wobbling noise underneath it. Rippling waves of orange light coiled around Yaldabaoth's bell, with similar vibrations radiating around Ryuji's body.

The blond looked himself over curiously, he felt no different. "Uh... what the hell was that?" he asked uncertainly.

Futaba scanned him quickly, her curiosity rising, and she gave a startled gasp when she realized what Yaldabaoth's bell had done. "S-Skull, he just removed your elemental resistances!"

"The hell does tha-" Ryuji was cut off by a bolt of lightning exploding against him, the explosion drowning out his roar of pain as he was driven across to the edge of the stone platform.

"Skull!" Akira called out, before gasping as a wave of almighty energy was shot his way from Yaldabaoth's left index finger. It struck against Thor's hammer, the stone cracking and flaking apart under his feet.

Futaba grimaced, before glancing to Sergio at her side. Things were getting desperate, and fixating on her own safety wouldn't amount to much at this rate. "Alright Diabolik... let's go with your idea," she said in a quick tone.

Meanwhile, as several of the others continued lobbing attacks at Yaldabaoth's seemingly invulnerable hide, Shizuka was maintaining an invisible sprint toward Makoto. Haru's psychic attacks were keeping the brunette on her feet, her panicked breathing serving to only motivate Shizuka further.

Shizuka suddenly tackled the brunette, managing to take Makoto off balance in her surprise. She landed heavily atop the older girl and gave her a sudden smack across the face. "Queen! Snap out of it!" she exclaimed.

"Agh!" Makoto winced a bit, the sudden smack managing to jolt Yaldabaoth's control for a brief second. She reached down, digging her fingers into the hard ground beneath in a bid to fight against the dark god's control, writhing and continuing to push against the corrupting influence of the wicked sin.

With Makoto restrained for the time being, Haru breathed a heavy sigh of relief and turned toward Yaldabaoth. "Alright... your turn."

Her eyes narrowed, with the strawberry blonde taking aim at the mechanical limb holding the glowing golden gun. Haru took in a deep breath and drew upon the power deep inside her body,
before Astarte thrust her hands forward and unleashed a mighty tide of psychic energy that rocketed through the darkened air. The coils of pink and yellow light struck viciously against the weapon until it started to glow red hot. It exploded in a violent flash, Yaldabaoth grunting as several superheated shards of shrapnel struck into his face and shoulders, becoming embedded in place.

Despite this, Yaldabaoth kept his focus on Ryuji, taking aim while the blond was still dazed and clutching his chest. A beam of condense purple light erupted from his left index finger, making a beeline for Ryuji's prone body.

Akira sprinted toward Ryuji, quickly shoving the blond aside to save him from harm. Thor moved to Akira's side, his hammer raised to block the wave as it exploded directly against his armored bulk. Akira was launched off his feet, crying out and landing heavily on his back while smoke rippled from his left arm. His sleeve had been shredded in the blast, along with his glove and layer of synthetic skin, revealing his steely hand to the elements.

"Hgh... fucking hell..." Akira said, sitting up in a heavy slump.

He managed to get a good look at Yusuke stomping forward, the bluenette avoiding a swirl of flame summoned by Yaldabaoth's mind. Skidding to a halt, he summoned Susanoo and let his Persona unleashing a mighty gale of ice that blasted against Yaldabaoth's face. Dense ice blossomed along his armor, flowing into the minor cracks and exploding into frosty shards.

Rising up to his feet, stroking at the fresh scorches on his left arm, he managed to turn his attention to Futaba. Breakthru was at Prometheus' back, repeatedly striking the ebony hull of its armor until a scarlet glow was steadily crackling around the edges of it.

"Hah... and what are you two doing?" Akira said. As he started to approach, he became distinctly aware of Ann, Yusuke, and Makoto doing what they could to hold Yaldabaoth's attention with explosive volleys lancing against his pearly shell.

"Something really dumb," Futaba awkwardly admitted. "I'm not gonna sit back and watch any longer... and with Diabolik here, I think we might just be able to hit him hard enough to make it hurt."

"In that case..." Haru landed on the edge of the platform near the trio, with the heiress quickly approaching them. "Maybe I can help? I think I see where you're going with this one," she said.

Astarte appeared at Haru's side, extending her ebony arms toward Prometheus until coils of radiant psychic energy began to ring around Prometheus, steadily generating a dense bubble of pink light that encapsulated Prometheus. It was richly packed with energy, beads of sweat rolling down Haru's face from the effort.

Akira frowned... Futaba getting into danger was something he wasn't a fan of, but with the whole world being in danger... well they had to do what they could to put an end to Yaldabaoth. "Arsene." Akira's first Persona materialized beside him, chuckling darkly as he held a hand toward Prometheus. A wave of chaotic flame flowed from Arsene's palm, the cursed energy forming another layer that intensified the glow surrounding Prometheus.

A pained shout echoed through the air, a mighty swing from Yaldabaoth swatting Susanoo aside and launching Yusuke in the process. Houdini leapt high and caught him mid fall, her arms straining with his weight before she landed on the furthest platform.
Yusuke grimaced, sparing a brief glance to Shizuka as she rendered herself visible. "Sup?" the dark haired girl casually asked.

"This is... more challenging than I expected..." Yusuke admitted between heavy breaths.

"Yeah... I'm not too happy either. But I do have a bit of an idea in mind. One that needs that keen artistic mind of yours," Shizuka said.

Yaldabaoth turned his dispassionate glare toward Shiho and Ann, the two girls continuing to lob powerful attacks toward the towering god. Their flashing attacks managed to leave dark scars on Yaldabaoth's body. While they were doing damage, the team seemed incapable of majorly harming the looming god.

With him distracted, it gave Breakthru an opening to steadily aim Prometheus toward Yaldabaoth's face. His arms were glowing with crimson energy, while Sergio had started to work up a heavy sweat. "I think... this is... as much as I can do...." he heavily breathed out.

"Well..." Futaba exhaled softly, closing her eyes. Inwardly she was wondering if her friends had become a bad influence on her sanity. "Looks like this is as much as we can do... Let her rip!"

"Best of luck, Oracle," Akira said, giving a quick glance to the sphere as he stepped back.

A thunderous sonic boom echoed through the air as Prometheus was fired forward, the shockwave nearly bowling the three thieves over as the energy infused spear hurtled skyward, a crimson trail of light marking Prometheus' path.

There was a shriek of steel filling the air as Prometheus' accelerated mass tore through the spindly limb holding Yaldabaoth's bell. A thunderous roar echoed out for miles around once Prometheus struck the side of his head, a blinding explosion erupting around the two as the twin layers of energy surrounding the sphere burst violently and engulfed his armor in a tide of psychic and curse energy.

The dark god's howl of pain was lost in the chaos of the deafening boom, followed by more shrieks of steel being torn and sliced. Prometheus rebounded from Yaldabaoth, wreathed in smoke, and crashed into one of the platforms. The sphere laid still, the lights on the hull flickering repeatedly.

"Uuugh..." Futaba's pained whine rose from Prometheus' smoking mass. "I think I'm gonna puke up my everything...

The smoke steadily cleared from Yaldabaoth's left side, fading to reveal the extent of the damage. A gnarled black scar arced around the left side of his chest, while his left forearm looked vaguely melted. A chunk of his head had been shorn off entirely, while a portion of his halo had been badly melted.

"YOU FILTH... YOU DARE WOUND ME?! I... WILL NOT STAND FOR THIS!" His right hand snapped toward Prometheus' downed frame, a powerful bolt of lightning arcing from his palm. Breakthru and Anat both raced ahead to intercept, the ensuing blast launching both spectral figures away, causing sharp cries of pain from their users.

Akira narrowed his eyes. They had managed to injure this guy, and he was certainly pissed off now, but it was clear he still had plenty of power left. Could they even win?
Despite Akira's concerns, the general public felt elated at the sight. The monster that was set to lord over them had just been heavily and graphically wounded, far more than by anything that had been done to him before than point. There were cheers from around the globe, the mounting belief of the people filling the Arditi with more vigor.

Arsene emerged at Akira's command, throwing out a dense orb of cursed energy that was aimed squarely at the wound on Yaldabaoth's chest. A black and scarlet explosion echoed through the air, the blast expanding his injury further, but the deity merely grunted in return.

Morgana grunted, watching as another thin metal limb grew from Yaldabaoth's back. "Guys, watch out, he's drawing another weapon!" the feline exclaimed.

"I RELEASE UPON YOU THE DEADLY SIN OF GLUTTONY. YOU HAVE NO MEANS OF ESCAPE, HUMANS. THE SELFISHNESS OF MANKIND SHALL BRING FORTH RUIN!" The pointed end slid into one of the glowing compartments at Yaldabaoth's waist, pulling back up to reveal a truly massive golden sword.

"That thing..." Morgana narrowed his eyes as he examined it. "It's not just a bladed weapon, I can tell that much..."

"I CONDEMN YOU!"

Yaldabaoth raised the sword high, his golden sword releasing a continuous orange glow. It cast an immense pressure over the area, a sudden press of gravity weighing down the Phantom Thieves. The radiating energy from the sword served to sap some of their energy, with the strain rising by the second.

Akira grit his teeth, landing hard on his left knee as he struggled against the unseen press of enhanced gravity. A few of the others were struggling too, leaving them open as Yaldabaoth began to lift his armored hands.

Groaning, Futaba lurched forward in the confines of her Persona. "That sword, it... it's draining your power... you gotta take it out, quickly!"

Once more Makoto and Sergio took action. A series of flashes lit up along his armored right arm, nuclear flashes burning molten wounds along the previously polished surface. Meanwhile, Breakthru bombarded a pile of debris at his feet, catapulting the masses of reinforced stone at high velocity.

"IS THIS ALL YOU CAN MUSTER? THEN IT'S PERHAPS TIME I PUT AN END TO THIS..."

"Not yet!"

It was at that moment that Shizuka and Yusuke became visible again, standing on the platform furthest to the right. In front of the two was an ice sculpture hand crafted by Yusuke and Susanoo, still releasing plumes of frost. It stood on a dense rounded base of ice, the shape on top like a scaled up model of the Aja with similar reflective surfaces lined throughout the interior.

Of all the things Yusuke had formed in the heat of battle with his power, he was considering this to
be his magnum opus.

Houdini held her right fist forward, firing off a bolt of light into the sculpted mass. The entire structure glowed in a blinding white light, followed by three far larger beams erupting out from the heart of the frozen structure. One struck against Yaldabaoth's face, a second scorching at his chest, while a third sliced straight through the spindly limb supporting the sword.

On her own, Houdini's beams of light were rather potent, and were magnified a hundredfold by the crystalline structure of the Red Stone. And now, through Yusuke's artistry, the ice sculpture magnified the beams tenfold further.

Yaldabaoth snarled as the energy beams tore strips from his armor, managing to do much more damage than the Aja had previously managed alone. The frozen sculpture lasted for only a few seconds under the strain, before it shattered apart into rapidly melting sludge, putting an end to Shizuka's attack.

"ENOUGH!"

Yaldabaoth's rage hit a tipping point, his orbiting halo wreathed in crackling waves of black and red lightning. Violent explosions lit up the platforms, punctuated by a crushing wave of gravity that drove the Arditi to the floor, pinning them in place despite their struggles. Even Futaba was knocked clean out of the safety of Prometheus.

Akira grit his teeth, his right cheek being pressed hard to the damaged floor thanks to the great weight forced upon him by Yaldabaoth's will. "Ghh... C-can't... can't move..."

The team were pinned in place, helpless against Yaldabaoth's rage. He lifted his large hands high, the air around him suddenly starting to shimmer. "YOU FRUSTRATE ME TO THE BITTER END... HUMANS TRULY ARE A TROUBLESOME SPECIES. SOME WOULD FIND YOUR PERSISTENCE ADMIRABLE... I DO NOT."

"Son of a... son of a bitch!" Shizuka growled with great effort as she tried to force herself up by her palms, only to be knocked flat on her stomach. Yusuke was in a similar predicament, cracks forming along his mask. "This pressure... how much power does this monster have⁈!" Yusuke gasped.

A violent crack echoed over the platforms, a chunk of dense stone on the farthest left platform cracking open. A length of chain flew from the new opening, more and more links of the dense steel materializing from the ether as the chain grew out further and further. In the span of seconds the chain had coiled around the individual thieves and snapped tight, restraining them in the sturdy bonds and hoisting the teenagers upward.

They struggled in their bonds, to no avail, each attempt at resistance only tugging the chains tighter until their elbows were digging into their hips. "YOU HAVE INJURED ME... PERHAPS THAT IS ACCOMPLISHMENT ENOUGH. BUT NOW I'VE GROWN TIRED OF YOUR EFFORTS. I'LL DESTROY YOU ALL, AND THEN..."

There was a boom of thunder above Yaldabaoth, sections of the sky cracking like a fractured mirror. A great tear split open in the air above his injured body, revealing a glimpse of the vast expanse of the multiverse. A sea of rainbow light and massive steely sphere. Morgana and Futaba
gulped hard at the sight.

"ONCE I HAVE RESUMED MY CONTROL OF YOUR WORLD, AND GAINED MY FULL STRENGTH... I CAN EXPAND TO OTHER WORLDS, ESTABLISH MY ORDER ACROSS THE EXPANSE OF CREATION. WITH EACH WORLD I WILL GROW STRONGER, UNTIL ALL SEE THE LIGHT."

"I can't... effin move!" Ryuji growled through clenched teeth, continuing to struggle in the binding chains.

"J-Joker!" Ann gave Akira a panicked look. "What... what are we going to do?!"

Akira tried to keep a calm expression, staring up at the corrupted deity lording his power over them. What were they going to do?

What could they do?

Akira closed his eyes, and felt himself slip into a world of velvet blue light.

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The people on the streets below, watching the chaos unfold around the globe, froze up at the sight before them. Those kids who had been fighting for their sake, currently bound and helpless. The crowds had fallen silent, despair starting to bubble up from where hope had been. And in Shibuya, just outside the heart of the chaos, the murmurs of uncertainly quickly grew loud.

"Oh my god..."
"Is... is this it? Are we doomed?!"
"Wh-where's the police? The army?! Featherman?! ANYBODY?!"
"It can't end like this!"
"I DON'T WANNA DIE!"
"Oh shit, oh shit..."

But, with the panic rising in Shibuya, a sudden shout cut through the gloom and fear. "DON'T GIVE UP PHANTOM THIEVES!"

Many eyes turned toward a young man at the center of the blood-slick streets, a bluenette in a Shujin uniform. He was staring at one of the large screens, his left fist raised and clenched tightly.

Mishima knew that quite a few eyes were on him, and that the crowds had fallen silent again. But this didn't seem to stop him. "Come on! Why do you think they've risked their lives all this time?! Damnit... they're giving everything to save you all... that's what they always do! Even after you turned your backs on them!"

A few uncertain murmurs passed through the crowds, but a few people did seem to steadily come around to what Mishima was saying. "Those kids... if it wasn't for those kids, you'd be under the thumb of a corrupt bastard like Shido! Or still suffering under crooked mobsters! You owe them your trust and belief!"

Now the people turned their focus to Sojiro, managing to keep a calm stance as he watched the
screen. He adjusted his glasses, sparing a brief glance toward the surrounding crowds. "I'm not wrong, am I? No matter how bad things get... always bet on those kids! Doing the impossible is their best talent!"

There was a rumble from the screens, Morgana's voice suddenly filling the airwaves.

"Don't... Don't underestimate the human race!"

"HM? THE DREGS OF HUMAN HOPE? DON'T INSULT ME... A PITIFUL EXISTENCE LIKE YOU IS NO THREAT TO ME! THE IGNORANT HUMAN WRETCHES ARE ALREADY LOSING FAITH IN YOU... A WEAK SPARK AGAINST MY INFINITE PRESENCE."

"You can... say that as much as you want... but look where we are! Me, and the others... we found out the truth, even after you threw everything you had at us! We beat every obstacle, and every enemy! The Phantom Thieves won't give up, or bow down to any enemy! Even a so-called god!"

"I AM THE TRUE DESIRE OF MANKIND, FORGED FROM THE INNERMOST DESIRES OF THE IGNORANT MASSES. THEIR FEAR OF FREEDOM, AND THE PERILS OF FREE WILL... THEY WISHED FOR ME TO REMOVE THOSE CONCERNS, AND SO I SHALL. HUMAN HOPE HAS FALTERED, AND MY ORDER SHALL REPLACE IT."

"You... won't win!"

By now, people around the world were watching Morgana's protest, his words filling their minds as they watched his defense of their very existence. For as odd as the squat feline looked, they couldn't help but be drawn to him. As if there was something strangely familiar about Morgana's existence.

He was, after all, a part of them.

"The Arditi don't surrender, no matter how hopeless the odds are... and that's the same for the people down there too! They want nothing to do with you! We'll fight you to the bitter end, and if we fall... then more will come to replace us! And we'll definitely... definitely... Take the world!"

Morgana's rallying cry filled the hearts and minds of people around the world, and despite the seeming hopelessness of the situation... they couldn't help but be excited, having some of their faith and hope restored through his conviction.

Cheers filled the crowded streets, the shouts and cries of the rattled masses. All across the world, in that instant, the people were united in one desire: Seeing the Phantom Thieves overcome this twisted false god.

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"Agh... I've had enough of uppity blowhard 'gods' in my lifetime..."

Hol Horse, notorious fiend and thief, set his beer bottle down on the counter, beside the similar bundle of empty ones he had polished off today. Originally, with the world ending, he had simply found the nearest bar to get liquored up in, until the end fully set in.
But now, here he sat alone, and things didn't seem so utterly hopeless anymore...

"Ah fuck it... I'm rooting for you kids. Put that jumbo-sized asshole in the dirt."

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From the comfort of the Amagi Inn, the gathered Investigation Team continued to watch events unfold.

"It's about time those assholes out there started seeing sense," Kanji muttered, reaching up and adjusting his glasses. "And hopefully it's not too fucking late."

Chie sighed and adjusted the collar of her azure police blazer, unable to tear her gaze from the large screen in Yukiko's room. "It's never too late," the brunette remarked. "I mean... we probably would've won by now, but I'm sure those kids have got this. I sure as hell believe in 'em!"

"I just hope Yu, Rise, and Naoto are okay," Yukiko calmly said, tucking a few strands of long raven hair behind her left ear.

"Heh, you kidding? Yu's indestructible. If he's around, everything is gonna turn out okay," Yosuke confidently said, grinning and pumping his left fist in the air.

"Yeah! There's no need to worry!" Teddie pounced onto Yosuke from behind, his hands pressed into Yosuke's shoulders as the brunette found himself face first on the matt of the inn's floor. "Those Phantom Kids have got this in the bag!"

"So help me Bear, I am gonna throw you straight into that screen!"

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Sojiro kept his eyes on the biggest screen in Shibuya's main square, watching with slowly widening eyes as a wave of azure light began to swarm over Akira's restrained body. "Futaba, Akira... You kids... you better pull through, or I'll be pissed."

The will of the people had just hit a tipping point.
Akira opened his eyes slowly, instantly familiar with the azure walls of the narrow prison cell surrounding him. He was seated on the thin bed, but unlike his past visits to the Velvet Room he was currently dressed in his Joker clothing. And the cell door was still gone.

Turning, Akira cast his eyes toward the center of the main chamber and found himself looking at Igor and Lavenza. The former, as ever, wore his eerie smile that left him totally unreadable, while Lavenza kept a calmer smile on her face.

Akira grimaced slightly, thinking back to his most recent memory: Staring up at that corrupt idol of apathy, his entire team chained and helpless.

"Did we... did we lose?" Akira grimly asked.

Igor tittered, his voice high and airy. "Oh, far from it. Listen..." He cupped his left hand to his ear, tilting his head up a bit. "Do you hear the people sing? The song of rebellion that they all carry in this moment, it was stirred by you and our young creation. The spark of hope has been reignited a hundredfold."

"You mean... we actually inspired them? Minato's plan worked?" Akira asked, rising up quickly from his seat.

"Oh more than you could have imagined! The Savior's plan managed to break through the ignorance created by that despicable imposter! In this moment, the heart of humanity beats as one. And you, my Trickster, have created a miracle!" Lavenza excitedly said.

As she spoke, the silver haired girl hefted up the massive compendium in her slim hands until she was toting it overhead. The thick tome took on an ethereal white glow, the power radiating from it producing enough light to illuminate the gloom of the prison.

"A miracle?" Akira murmured in surprise.

"I bestow upon you the final, and strongest gift that we can provide. The final tool to aid in your journey..." Igor raised his right hand, the glow from the compendium being sucked toward his palm until it had materialized into a sphere of sparkling energy. "It is the power of Ultimate Freedom, born from the collective will of humanity and tempered by your own inner power."

The sphere floated toward Akira, with the young man reflexively reaching out to it with his right hand. The warm light unravelled and filled him, his eyes widening from the immense rush of power it triggered within him. "Ultimate... Freedom..." he repeated.

"Yes. No force can constrain you, nothing may imprison you... And with that power, you can call upon the strongest fusion we can fashion inside your heart," Igor said.

"And with the world at large fueling you, even the Holy Grail cannot best you now. Incredible... you truly have grown, Trickster," Lavenza said, idly wiping a tear from her left eye.

"Indeed. Rallying the whole world under your banner. A most marvelous guest... how unfortunate that I was not here to see the entirety of your journey... But now, at the end, I can truly say you
have been a fantastic guest..." Igor explained.

Akira looked down at his chest, before slowly pressing his right hand to his chest. The world around him began to white out, as his consciousness was sucked back to reality.

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Akira found himself once more staring at Yaldabaoth, the fear slowly being drained from his body until his heartbeat was level again. Even though the chains should have been hampering his ability to breathe, he felt little strain on his body.

"Joker!" Sergio shouted. "We could really do with a plan right about now!"

"If any of you guys have any bullshit up your sleeves... now's the time to do it! Cause I know I'm all out of Hail Mary's right now!" Shizuka exclaimed.

"I can't break these effin' chains!" Ryuji spat, a frustrated growl rising in his throat.

"It's not over yet!" Morgana called out. "You can hear it too, can't you? Those humans you were looking down your nose at... they're all calling out against you! All those voices sending you a simple message: Get the hell off our world!"

Shiho grinned. "Then... no matter what... I'm glad those 'puny humans' are giving you the middle finger you deserve!" the dark haired girl exclaimed.

"THEIR PROTESTS ARE ULTIMATELY MEANINGLESS. I HAVE SEEN THE LIMIT IN HUMAN POTENTIAL THROUGH YOU PHANTOM THIEVES... AND IF THE APPOINTED 'CHAMPIONS' THE WORLD CANNOT BEAT ME, THEN WHAT HOPE DOES-"

Akira silently reached up, until he was gripping the chain in his right hand. It rattled briefly, before the chains surrounding him suddenly exploded apart in a wave of blue fire. The blaze raced across every link, much to the shock of the other Phantom Thieves. With the chains being burned into nothingness, Akira landed heavily on his feet while the others landed with much less elegance.

He stared up at Yaldabaoth, slowly flexing the metal digits of his prosthetic hand. While he didn't look much different, Akira could feel the massive well of power rising inside him, far beyond anything he had experienced since this whole adventure began. Futaba was staring toward him in shock, nearly knocked out from the sudden pressure of Akira's new strength.

"TRICKSTER..." Yaldabaoth growled. "ONCE MORE YOU STAND IN MY WAY..."

A wave of blue fire rolled across Akira's back, until the thin white fabric had been burned right off his face. A great tide of blue fire washed over Akira's whole body, a loud cry leaving the dark haired boy as Arsene materialized above him. The scarlet demon threw his head back, screaming to the heavens as the flames engulfed him too. The winged figure exploded apart into stardust, the twinkles of light falling upon Akira as the flames died down.

The rest of the Phantom Thieves looked on in a mix of surprise and confusion, watching as Akira stood firm even with the disappearance of his Persona.
"EVEN AFTER ALL THIS, YOU STILL CANNOT DRAW UPON THE POWER OF THE IGNORANT MASS."

There was a sudden and massive boom of thunder overhead, followed by Yaldabaoth's portal being drawn shut by some unseen force. The seams slammed together, arcs of lightning outlining where the two edges met, before the tear in spacetime was sealed entirely.

The red sky turned black, pulses of lightning dancing through the dark clouds. "WHAT... IS THIS?"

"You and me are having a similar reaction..." Ryuji muttered, staring toward a swirl of clouds that was steadily forming behind the Arditi.

"Oh my god..." Makoto whispered, her jaw nearly dropping as a truly massive figure began to descend from the clouds. A monster that loomed a few heads taller than even Yaldabaoth, coated from head to heel in plates of black metal.

A crimson sash went across his broad chest, the golden buttons at the center making it look as if the ebony giant was wearing the jacket of a formal military officer. His face was partially concealed by a gleaming golden domino mask, a pair of golden ram horns protruding from his temples and hooking upward. Three pairs of black wings protruded from his broad back: The wings on his right were leathery and bat-like, while those on the left were made up of silky raven feathers. A jet black halo rotated silently over his head.

"Arsene is gone. Now you're looking at Satanael... the voice of rebellion," Akira said, glaring sharply up at Yaldabaoth.

The false god recoiled slightly, stunned at the sudden presence of a creature that eclipsed even his immense size. All while Satanael silently floated toward the platform, his expression grim and unreadable.

"That thing... is a Persona?!" Ann exclaimed in shock.

"Damn son... where were you hiding this bad boy?" Shizuka asked aloud.

"I see..." Morgana grinned and settled his hands on his rounded hips. "The ultimate rebel to stand up to an authoritarian God."

"THIS... THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE... HOW COULD HUMAN WILL PRODUCE A CREATURE LIKE THIS?!" Yaldabaoth balked indignanty.

Akira smiled despite himself, slowly lifting his left hand. Satanael mimicked the motion, a powerful gale following the path of his bulky arm. "You've spent so long looking down your nose at humans, of course you have no idea what their spirit can accomplish when it's fully worked up. And you, my friend, really kicked the hornet's nest. My buddy here, Satanael, is a living message: That you're not wanted... no matter what, for better or worse, humans will forge their own history! No gods, no masters!"

"Hell yeah!" Ryuji shouted, pumping his right fist high.

"He is so handsome right now..." Futaba whispered under her breath, unable to look away from
"ENOUGH OF THIS FOOLISHNESS. THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE CANNOT OVERCOME MY ORDER!" Yaldabaoth raised his right hand, a tremendous flash of blessed light exploding from his palm.

Akira clenched his fist tight, a gesture faithfully copied by Satanael. A dome of purple light formed above the group, the rest of the Arditi reflexively bracing themselves. Yet, as Yaldabaoth's attack connected against the barrier, they felt no tremors or shakes. The blast packed enough of a wallop to flatten several city blocks, yet it washed over Satanael's shield like a gentle breeze.

Akira smiled, the smoke parting slowly around him. He let out a gentle exhale, waves of blue fire washing over Akira's limbs in heated coils. "Hit me as hard as you like... I'll keep coming."

"HOW... HOW IS THIS POSSIBLE?"

Panicking, Yaldabaoth unleashed another lance of holy light that erupted from his hands, and once more it struck against Satanael's barrier to no avail. Satanael gave a slight snap of his right wrist, unleashing a shockwave from the barrier that hit back against the corrupt god, the blow forcing him to recoil. Yaldabaoth grunted, several cracks suddenly racing along the pearly surface of his armor.

"Not so invincible now..." Sergio remarked, unable to suppress the grin that broke out across his handsome features.

Haru blinked at the spectacle. "This power, it's... it's immense..." she whispered in shock.

Akira started to slowly raise his right hand and took aim, pointing his index and middle fingers forward while his thumb brushed over the flat of his fingers. His fingers took the shape of a gun, aimed decisively toward Yaldabaoth.

Satanael repeated the motion, and as he raised his right hand something began to take shape from the darkness. A revolver forged of an alien dark metal, gleaming in the light of the distant pulses of lightning. The massive barrel was aimed toward Yaldabaoth, arcs of electricity rolling down the freshly forged material.

Yaldabaoth was frozen in place, while Akira ensure that his aim was dead on.

"Bang."

It was the shot heart around the world, the jet black bullet arcing out instantaneously with a boom of thunder. The glowing path of the magic bullet sliced the black clouds in half in passing, before it punched straight through Yaldabaoth's face.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl, the shards that exploded from the back of Yaldabaoth's head seeming to be frozen in the air. The breeze rolled through the freshly formed hole in his face, revealing the crystalline matter that comprised his being.

The black clouds were washed away, the rain of blood halting across the world. One by one, the angels that surrounded the globe winked out of existence, as if they had never been there at all.

The sun was rising. Church bells were tolling.
"WHAT POWER... SURPASSING EVEN MY OWN... HOW...? ... SO YOU TRULY ARE THE TRICKSTER I WAS WARNED ABOUT..." Yaldabaoth's limbs were twitching and jerking, as portions of his body began to flake away and steadily evaporated into shards of vanishing light. "DAMN THAT IGOR... IT SEEMS HE WASN'T JUST SPOUTING NONSENSE..."

His voice was slowing down, his voice beginning to slur as larger and larger chunks of him broke apart. "CHILDREN OF MAN... THE FUTURE IS IN YOUR HANDS NOW..." Yaldabaoth's remnants glowed a vibrant gold, before being blown away like dust in the wind.

Shizuka blinked a few times. "Did we... did we just win?"

"I think... I can't sense that thing anymore!" Futaba exclaimed, a broad grin breaking out across her face.

"Look!" Ann shouted, pointing to a shape that was rapidly forming in the heart of the fast fading sparkles. Something slowly floated down toward the platform and landed only a few feet in front of the Arditi: A golden chalice, floating a few inches off the ground.

Yusuke regarded it in silence. "So this is it... the treasure born from the hearts of the people," the bluenette remarked.

"Then when we take it, it will finally be over. No more Shadows, no more Palaces..." Makoto remarked.

A tiny frown crossed Ryuji's mouth. "No more Phantom Thieves," the blond added. He had been trying not to think about it, but that was the truth that now faced them.

Morgana let out a sad sigh and looked up at Ryuji. "That's true... but at least we can say we had a good run," the feline remarked.

Akira smiled at him in return, and steadily made his way toward the floating treasure. "A great run," the dark haired boy clarified. "And I owe you guys, for everything... never could have made it here without you all. Come on, let's end this." He reached out and took the treasure into his hands. It vanished in his grasp, fading out of existence.

A sudden pulse raced through the floating platforms, the damaged slabs of stone cracking violently and steadily collapsing apart. The Arditi swayed on their feet, struggling to keep upright.

"W-we should probably haul ass right about now!" Shiho shouted.

Shizuka held her arms out to her sides, swaying back and forth. "Uh, did any of you guys grow wings in the last half hour? Cause we're pretty fucking high up right now!"

"Don't worry, I got it," Akira said in a calm tone. Satanael's great mass lowered behind the platforms and raised his hands up, his palms cupped together to form an expansive platform for the team. "Jump on, quickly!" Akira exclaimed.

Things being as they were, none of the group protested this move.
The rooftop had only gotten more ragged and beaten down in the chaos against Metatron, though now a series of unconscious bodies were strewn about the roof. With the exception of the two navigators, only Minato and Yu were still standing.

Both men were panting heavily, marked with bruises and cuts along their bodies. Yu had long red streaks of oozing blood coating the left side of his face, while Minato's shirt had been blown away to reveal a black welt on his stomach. They were both clearly struggling to keep upright.

Not that Metatron was untouched. His formerly pristine armored skin was dyed black in places by worrisome burns, while his left forearm and foot had been blown off in the chaos. His face, however, was still impassive.

**THIS STRENGTH YOU HAVE SHOWN IS ADMIRABLE. PERHAPS IF THERE WERE MORE MORTALS LIKE YOU, THIS OUTCOME WOULD BE DIFFERENT.**

"Heard that one before," Minato muttered.

"Ditto," his silver-haired ally replied.

"Yu!" Rise gasped in a worried tone, visibly struggling to remain planted where she was. "Both of you! You need to get out of here!"

A sad smile crossed Yu's face, watching as Metatron raised his right hand slowly. The air shimmered around his armored fingers, pulses of purple lightning arcing between his digits. "Sorry, Rise... but a long time ago I told myself that I'd throw my own body before yours, no matter what. Same with everyone else from Inaba..."

**YOUR VALIANCE IS ADMIRABLE. WHILE YOU WILL PERISH, AND THE IGNORANT MASSES WILL NEVER KNOW YOUR NAMES, I WILL ALWAYS REMEMBER YOU HUMANS.**

"Small comfort," Minato murmured in a calm tone, Messiah's gleaming form materializing at his left side. "Come on then... hit us with whatever you have left... and we'll hit back ten times as hard!"

**FAREWELL. PERISH.**

The two young men braced as Metatron started to drive his remaining arm forward, powerful tremors rolling through the building as he drew in near. Yu grit his teeth and took a decisive step forward, Izanagi gleaming at his heel.

There was a boom of thunder rolling across to the distant horizons, causing Metatron to freeze up entirely.

**WHAT?**

The two young men froze up too, looking at the mechanical angel in a curious silence. They shared a brief glance with each other, neither seeming to have much of an idea what had given Metatron pause.
A vibrant golden glow engulfed Metatron's whole body, illuminating him until he looked like a man-shaped sun. The flash caused Minato and Yu to recoil, shielding their eyes from the sudden explosion that obliterated Metatron into fast-fading golden dust.

The ensuing shockwave of the blast rattled the entirety of Mitsuru's tower. Minato and Yu planted their feet, both men being left panting heavily in the aftermath as the gale finally subsided.

Looking up, Yu blinked a few times through his good eye. "Okay. What just happened?" the silver-haired man calmly asked.

Fuuka let out a sudden gasp. "Th-the angels! I can feel them vanishing, all around the world!" the teal-haired woman exclaimed.

"Me too! A-and... the Holy Grail, it's gone too! Those kids, they really did it!" Rise squealed, elation rising in her voice.

Yu breathed a small sigh of relief, opening his eyes to see a great white light slowly build on the horizon line. He held no fear of it... when they removed the infestation from the TV world, a light of rebirth had washed over the landscape. Something similar must have been happening now.

"Looks like they did it... not that I doubted them," Yu calmly said.

A faint smile crossed Minato's face. He closed his eyes, the light washing over him. He anchored his body and spirit in place for just a moment, and opened his eyes to find himself alone in an impenetrable black void.

Alone, outside the bonds of conventional reality... well, not as alone as one would initially expect.

The darkness was staring back at him, formless and presently passive. Despite his injuries, Minato remained calm. Right now, the darkness could do nothing.

"I know you're watching. You're always watching, even if you can't directly interfere anymore," Minato calmly said. The darkness shifted imperceptibly, a yawning vastness that stretched beyond human comprehension.

The darkness was starting to stare back at him.

"Erebus, Izanami, and now Yaldabaoth... how many more of these little 'aspects' of yourself are you going to birth into reality? You're wasting your time," Minato added, silently folding his palms into his trouser pockets.

Now the Crawling Chaos, still unseen, was watching Minato closely.

"But... you won't give up, will you? Then... fine. Keep coming, and we'll keep batting your agents away... Eventually, humans will overcome you for good. That's all I wanted to say."

Minato vanished in a wave of azure light, being pulled back toward the real world by his own power. He left the darkness to stew in this message, already contemplating it's next move.
The future was full of infinite possibilities, after all...

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Satanael descended toward the base of the bridge, his immense mass phasing harmlessly through the neighboring buildings. His large hands lowered the Phantom Thieves down, until he silently set them on the asphalt below.

As they disembarked, the Arditi looked around to notice something odd. The rain of blood had stopped, but there was a dense layer of crimson on the ground, and the various pedestrians were frozen in place. As if time had ground to a halt.

"Huh. So this is what it feels like to be Jotaro," Shizuka murmured.

"What the heck is going on here? We won, didn't we?" Ann asked in a slightly worried tone.

A few heads turned toward Futaba, who was inspecting their surroundings in silence. Eventually, she let out a small noise of surprise. "The world merging with the Metaverse was a pretty big deal, you know. And so with Mementos collapsing without the Grail... then we're really gonna feel something this time! The whole world is resetting!"

"Whoa, what?!" Ryuji barked in surprise, before a sudden tremor nearly knocked him off his feet.

A white glow rapidly spread out across the horizon, until every atom of the city seemed to be glowing either white or pale blue. The glow grew most intense at the alien growths caused by Yaldabaoth's incursion, followed by more tremors as those structures were uprooted from the ground.

"W-whoa!" Shiho staggered back, being caught by Ryuji before she lost her footing. Powerful fissures were suddenly being torn through the streets, beams of radiant light washing over the frozen citizens of Tokyo.

"Are we... going to make it through this?" Yusuke asked, glancing around at his teammates.

A faint smile touched at Morgana's feline face. "I think... I think we will," he said with a hopeful note in his tone.

More and more tremors rolled through the area, as the eldritch structures were uprooted and pulled skyward. They broke apart into twinkling white stardust, blowing away in a spectral wind.

Haru exhaled slowly, and found herself unconsciously reaching out and taking Yusuke's right hand for support. The artist seemed not to object to this. "The whole world is being recreated, a world without the Metaverse... do you think it will be a good one?" she softly asked.

Akira looked over his shoulder at the strawberry blonde. "I guess that remains to be seen, but..." He smiled ever so slightly as the blinding white light washed over the Arditi, the last glimpse of the Phantom Thieves vanishing into legend.

"... I think it will be."

The light faded, and the noise of the city filled their ears. A welcome sound, a familiar one that had almost fallen into memory with how chaotic the past few days.
Akira blinked a few times, realizing that he was once more wearing his glasses. He slowly looked down at himself, at the immaculate streets of Shibuya, and slowly patted the jacket of his Shujin uniform. Whatever injuries he had were long gone... save for his missing hand. But at least the fake skin was back in place.

Slowly but surely he looked at his allies, and found his relief rising as he counted them all in turn. Their injuries had been healed too, and they seemed just as pleased to be in the fully restored city.

The various pedestrians were glancing around in a similar mix of confusion and relief, chattering among themselves. Something huge had happened, and yet... no person present could define exactly what they had just experienced.

"Uwah!" Morgana let out an elated squeal, wrapping his arms around himself in a tight hug that made the zipper of his dark hoodie rattle. "Yes! My human body! Oh yes, I missed it so much!"

Ann breathed a heavy sigh of relief and slumped forward, settling her hands on her knees. "Oh wow... oh god... we... we did it! I think... I think I've had enough of adventure to last me a lifetime..."

"You and me both," Makoto said, laughing and scratching the back of her right hand. Her left had reached over, taking a comfortable hold on Shizuka's right. "But seeing a clear blue sky again... it makes it all worth it," she added. Thick snow clouds were in the distance, and steadily rolling in toward Tokyo.

Ryuji subtly glanced away from the others, reaching up and hastily drying his eyes. "Geez... why the hell am I gettin' all worked up?"

"Weeeeell..." Sergio grinned toward Ryuji. "No shame in being emotional after such a hard victory. Personally... I think I'm going to get good and liquored tonight."

After a few moments of inspecting his human frame, Morgana let his attention move to Ann. He swallowed hard, seeming to be transfixed by her. They had just climbed out of hell, overthrew heaven, and beat a literal god.

After doing all that, and knowing how fleeting life could be, the former feline was feeling rather confident right now.

"Lady Ann," the shorter figure said.

"Hm?" Ann turned a bit, maintaining her happy smile. "What's up Mona?"

"After everything we just went through, would you... would you consider going on a date with me?" Morgana hastily asked.

"Whoa ho..." Shizuka raised her brows a bit, giving Makoto's hand a faint squeeze in her own. "Lil' dude is feeling all fired up now..."

Ann pondered this for a moment, tapping her chin with her right index finger. Eventually she shrugged and flashed him a bright smile. "Sure!" she excitedly said. "With how crazy these past months have been, something as normal as a date... I could really do with that."
Morgana looked about set to faint. "E-eh? It was... that easy?" the shorty asked himself.

A heavy sigh left Ryuji. "Told you it wasn't gonna be that much of a big deal. Dumbass," he muttered under his breath.

Before things could get any further between the two, a series of heavy footsteps came racing toward the team. The gathered Persona and Stand users were running toward the Phantom Thieves, their own injuries having been healed from the sudden reboot of the world.

"You kids," Naoto said, sounding a little short on breath as she skidded to a stop near Akira. "You... you're okay! And you... you actually did it! Thank goodness!"

Minato smiled just a bit, holding his right hand out to the dark haired boy. Akira gave it a quick shake, and then did the same when Yu held out his own hand to shake.

"You guys were pretty impressive," Minato said, smiling fondly. "Rallying the whole world like that, it's no easy task... how're you gonna top that one?"

Akira let out a small laugh, looking down at his feet. "Sorry, but... I think that was our limit. No more Metaverse, no more Arditi. Next time the world is in danger, it'll fall to another group of plucky high school students to save the day," he casually remarked.

"Well... fortunately there seem to be no shortage of people like us," Yu said, managing a small laugh.

Mitsuru nodded toward the dark haired boy. "All the same, with how well you all did... I'd be happy to welcome you to the Shadow Operatives. When you've graduated from college, of course," she explained. It was hard to believe she had distrusted these kids at first, she felt. They had every reason to hate the world, and yet... when the time came they had stepped up and put everything on the line to save everyone.

Meanwhile, Minato could feel Yukari and Aigis moving in on either side of him. The bluenette stiffened, particularly when their strong hands settled on his shoulders.

"Soooo... looks like you're back," Yukari remarked, trying her best to play it cool.

"Well uh..." the bluenette cleared his throat. "I... made sure that Nyx and Erebus are unfathomably far apart, and it's going to take a while before Erebus is going to get any strength from the people. If anything happens with either of them, I'll know."

Aigis smiled fondly. "That's good to hear. You've been gone for a while, and there's a lot we need to catch up on."

"Yep, a whole lot," Yukari said with a wry grin.

Minato swallowed hard.

Shizuka grinned brightly as her brother and nephew approached, both looking just a little drained from all that had transpired. With Makoto rushing over to excitedly tell everything to Sae, who found herself smiling and listening patiently, Shizuka quickly made her way over to Josuke and Jotaro.
"You guys!" She tried her best to hug both giants at once, hopping up and coiling her slim arms around their shoulders until her feet were wiggling off the ground. "Oh shit, you don't know how glad I am to see you both!"

"It got pretty hairy there for a sec, I'll admit," Josuke said, giving Shizuka a quick pat on the back. The two men awkwardly bent down until her feet met the floor again, whereupon she released them. "But... holy shit, you really did it. My little sister, savior of the world."

Jotaro smiled as best as he could. A very tiny, but rather noticeable in his case, tug on the corners of his mouth. "The old man would be really proud of you. And I am too..." He let out a heavy sigh. "But... good grief, this has been a long day. I need a drink."

"Ah, you and me both... guess I can spare an extra night before I go back to Morioh," Josuke added.

"Me three!" Shizuka said eagerly.

"Absolutely not," Jotaro and Josuke said in unison, much to Shizuka's annoyance.

With everyone catching up, and celebrating their mutual survival, Futaba abruptly took Akira's right hand in both of her own, leading him over to the sidewalk where they were partially shaded by a lamppost.

"Hm?" He peered down at the redhead, who seemed to be shuffling awkwardly on her feet while her cheeks were redder than Panther's catsuit. "Something wrong?" Akira asked.

Futaba breathed in heavily through her nose, about as much as her lungs could take in, before she drove into a lengthy spiel. "I just wanted to say that you were really awesome back there, when you summoned that huge ass Persona that totally destroyed Yaldabaoth! I mean, wow, where did that even come from?! Agh, not important! What is important is that you totally won! You were just. So. Cool! A-and, and, and you saved the world Akira!"

Akira laughed awkwardly, scratching the back of his head with his left hand. Futaba seemed to have no interest in releasing his right. "It wasn't just me Futaba. I wouldn't have been able to summon Satanael without the help of everyone else," he replied.

Futaba let out a tiny exhale. "What I wanted to do, before I lose my nerve and realize just how many people are around us, is..." Her hands suddenly gripped the lapels of Akira's school blazer and yanked him in close, their lips meeting firmly.

Akira's eyes widened in surprise, but he certainly wasn't complaining. He reached down and gently set his hands on her shoulders. He would have been content for this moment to continue on forever, were it not for an abrupt interruption.

Sojiro loudly cleared his throat.

The two teens felt their eyes shooting wide open, and broke apart to see Leblanc's owner glaring toward the two of them. Yelping, Futaba quickly ducked in behind Akira, leaving him alone to face Futaba's father.

Seemed saving the world wouldn't entirely get him off the hook for this one.
"I'm not gonna lie to you... it's exactly what it looks like."

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**12/12**

The human mind, when faced with something it is clearly not meant to handle, has a miraculous ability to 'scab over' the offending memories. In the days following Yaldabaoth's defeat, there was a global sense of joy and relief, where everyone was happy to just be alive. It was perhaps as close to world peace as humanity would ever reach, with crime at an impressive low for several days.

Nobody could expressly articulate *why* they were so relieved, or recall what had happened over the past fortnight in great detail. They knew something terrible had happened, and then... ended. Everything was fine, and whatever had happened the people were generally glad that it had passed.

Some people had enough memory to recall that the Phantom Thieves had something to do with the world being saved, while others still doubted if the Arditi had ever existed at all.

One poll was still on the Phan-site: 'Do the Phantom Thieves really exist?'

It was sitting evenly at 50%.

The world was steadily going back to normal. Crime was starting to take up the news once more. But without the Metaverse, maybe people could genuinely change and improve.

Sae was still gearing up the case against Shido and his co-conspirators. With his testimony, Okumura's testimony, and all the evidence on Akechi's flash drive, they had more than enough to ensure they would be seeing the inside of a jail cell.

It didn't hurt that Hideki Sanshiro, in exchange for a little lenience from the SID, was willing to add in a little extra incriminating material.

They had even managed to get hold of the woman who had given false testimony for Shido's allegations against Akira. And with her help, it seemed Akira's criminal record was likely to be expunged. The end result remained to be seen, but Akira was eager to see the outcome. But, today, those legal matters were in the back of his mind.

A thin layer of winter snow blanketed the graveyard, forming frosty white shelves over the blocky stone surfaces of the different graves. It stood in stark contrast to the various Phantom Thieves, all dressed in black funeral attire.

There hadn't been anything of Akechi to bury, not after what had happened with Camael. But, even so, he deserved a funeral at least. And putting his urn with that of his mother... from what Akira knew, his mother was one of the few people that ever meant anything to him. Akira hoped he would have liked it like this.

He tucked his hands into the pockets of his dark slacks, silently inspecting the name of Akechi and his mother written on the small plaque of the grave. "Even now, I can't get over it... that he died to save me."

"Yeah. In the end, he wanted to do good," Makoto said, pulling her dark jacket tighter as a chilly breeze rolled through the cemetery. "It's unfortunate that it was only in the end."
"I wish I had known... that I could have helped him," Sae remarked. She paused, brushing a few strands of her hair behind her left ear. "But, then again... I doubt he would have taken any aid from me. He was proud like that."

Futaba glanced up at Akira. "Are you gonna be okay?"

"I don't know. Someone giving up their life for you, I... that puts a certain kind of pressure on you. And the fact that he went so far for me... I can't help but think that if I had reached out to him sooner, then... we wouldn't be standing here now, looking at his grave," Akira admitted. He gave a heavy sigh and closed his eyes. "And his life being manipulated by Yaldabaoth... that didn't help."

Sergio silently adjusted his crisp blue tie, his gaze resting on the grave. "It's good that Akechi changed toward the end, and while Yaldabaoth set things in motion... you can't forget that Akechi made a lot of his decisions of his own volition. His life was an unfortunate one, but nobody forced him to work with Shido. Nobody forced him to kill those people. And yet he did so anyway, because those means justified his ends. Even if he lived, I don't think he good have brought himself to ever fully integrate with the regular world," Sergio explained.

Futaba nodded slightly. "Right... I don't think I ever could've fully forgiven him for what he did to Mom. But, I think I understand him better now. And he... well he gave us a lot before he died."

Ann paused and looked up, watching in silence as snowflakes began to fall from on high at a steadily rising volume. She reached over and settled her left hand on Morgana's shoulder, the former feline brightening at the contact. "Snow's moving in... we should probably get going."

"Right... Let us grab a coffee at Leblanc to warm up. Forged by Akira's hands, of course," Yusuke said, glancing over to their leader.

"Speaking of which... are you really gonna be staying in Tokyo?" Hifumi asked, glancing over to Akira.

Akira nodded slightly. "I got in touch with my folks, and while they're glad that my record is clear... the damage has kind of been done. It'll be a while before I think I can really face them. And Sojiro is fine with me continuing to work at Leblanc. Even if he's still a little steamed about..." He looked at Futaba, a bashful smile on his face.

The hacker shrugged lazily. "Meh. He said better you than anyone else, so you can take comfort in that!" Futaba remarked.

Akira nodded. He considered himself quite lucky that he was such a good apprentice, otherwise Sojiro would have been much harsher about all this. Even saving the world hadn't earned him many brownie points regarding dating Futaba.

"Well..." Shiho trailed off and gave a final glance toward Akechi's grave. They'd need to come by here in the future, to pay their respects. She only wished Lifeson wasn't buried in America, so she could do the same for him. "I guess we should get a move on."

"Yeah... Cold's only gonna get worse if we linger," Shizuka remarked.

Sae and the gathered Phantom Thieves started to make for the exit of the graveyard, as the snowfall continued to get stronger all around them.
Akira gave the tomb a final glance, but did not slow his walking pace. 'Goodbye, Akechi. Things could have gone so much better...'

17/12

Even now, days later, it was still a little hard to get to sleep at night. Akira had been steadily adjusting to a life without the Metaverse, where the only thing he had to worry about now was schoolwork. And after everything that had happened with Yaldabaoth, his dreams were still a little troubled.

This night, however, his dreams were velvet blue.

Akira opened his eyes, finding himself lying on his back on the modest bedding of his prison cell. Rather than prison clothes, he was dressed in his bedclothes of a black longsleeve shirt, and breezy khaki trousers.

Slowly sitting upright, he ran the fingers of his left hand through his messy raven locks, and looked around until he spied Igor and Lavenza waiting in the center of the Velvet Room. He pushed beyond his tiredness and made his way through the door toward them.

"Sorry about not coming to you two sooner... I wanted to thank you, after all. If you guys hadn't made Satanael, I wouldn't be here right now," Akira stated.

Igor's grin was static, but Lavenza's smile seemed sadder. "The time has come for us to part. You have completed your journey, and bested a malevolent will that threatened your entire world. Not an easy feat, it must be said," Igor calmly said.

"Part? You guys... really have to go?" Akira asked, a bit of sadness rising in his tone.

"Sadly, yes... Our task involves aiding you on your journey, and with Yaldabaoth's defeat... you're at the end of your journey," Lavenza sadly explained.

"How unfortunate that I could not be here to see the entirety of your journey, but those circumstances were out of my control," Igor remarked, tenting his gloved fingers. "All the same, your accomplishments are legendary. And you will always be a most remarkable guest," Igor said.

Akira swallowed hard. Not having the Velvet Room around again... it was hard to imagine, with the spectral dimension having been a part of his life for this whole year. But... well, his journey was at an end. And he didn't doubt someone else would need Igor's help.

A very faint rumble began to roll through the Velvet Room, and from the corner of his eye Akira could see the most distant walls start to glow white. Bit by bit portions of the room broke apart into glowing white butterflies, which proceeded to flutter away.

Akira nodded at the two. So this really was it... "I wanted to thank you two, for... for everything. The power you gave me... and the fact that you never gave up on me," he said, settling his sights on Lavenza. "I owe you a lot."

Still smiling, Lavenza reached up and wiped a tear away from her right eye. "I love you, my
Trickster," the silver-haired girl admitted. "Please... don't forget about us!"

"As if I ever could," Akira replied, smiling and fighting back his own tears. "Don't say goodbye... because no matter what... I know we'll meet again in the future!"

"Yes... I would very much like that..." Lavenza said, her smile never faltering.

More and more of the room vanished away, a flock of butterflies washing over Akira. Igor and Lavenza both glowed white, and vanished in a similar swarm that took to the skies until Akira was standing alone in a jet black void.

He looked up slowly, watching a single blue butterfly flutter off into the unknown, into the future. Already doubtless in search of the next 'Wild Card' that the world would need.

The future... what would the future possibly entail?

Akira dried his eyes, already feeling himself being pulled back to the waking world. He supposed all he could do now was wait and see.
Epilogue: With the Stars and Us

Seven Years Later

"So... what do you think?" Shizuka settled her hands into the pockets of her tailored black jacket, the dark material giving a glimpse at the fuschia blouse she was wearing. It matched her expensive dark skirt quite nicely. In the years that had followed, she had taken to growing her hair out a bit, now wearing it in a ponytail that went past her shoulders. Though her habit for wearing sunglasses hadn't faded in the slightest. Her heels did little for her height.

These days Makoto had taken to gifting Shizuka sunglasses on her birthdays, keeping up the tradition Joseph had left behind. The pair currently covering her face were gold rimmed, the black lenses exceptionally clean.

Currently the dark haired girl was examining the storefront of a vacant Shibuya building, the open door giving a glimpse at the expansive yet derelict interior. "This spot's been available for about two months now... used to be a bookshop, but there's nothing the power of renovation can't take care of."

Akira, standing comfortably at Shizuka's side, slowly folded his arms over his stomach. He was dressed reasonably well, if not as expensively as Shizuka, in a short-sleeved white shirt and blue jeans that led down to clean brown shoes. He had not changed much, beyond his face looking sharper and a little wiser. The hair on his temples was cut a little shorter than the dark curls atop his head. "Yeah, well that's probably for a good reason. Considering where we are in Shibuya, this place must be pretty expensive," he remarked.

"Dude, come on," Shizuka grinned and adjusted her sunglasses. "Money's no object."

Having finished her undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in business studies, she was steadily dipping her toe further into the world of her family's business. The Joestar fortune was expanding into new territory across Japan and China, working to further justify Shizuka's presence in Tokyo. And she was always on the lookout for new investments.

"Admittedly, the kind of renovations you'd want to do to this building are pretty pricey. But it'll be worth it, I'm sure," Makoto said as she came up behind the two. The brunette had grown her hair out a bit, and currently wore a dark raincoat and red skirt that stopped at her knee, walking easily on her dark lifts. While they hadn't had access to the Metaverse for years now, Makoto had worked hard to keep in shape and carried a sort of casual strength in her posture. A bit of a necessity, when she now worked as an investigator for Mitsuru. "And, well... thse types of ventures can pay for themselves quickly enough."

Shizuka leaned up and gave Makoto a quick peck on the cheek, which the brunette quickly reciprocated. It spurred Akira to glance off to his left, watching as Futaba made her way over, clutching a freshly purchased can of soda in her hands.

The hacker had not grown much over the years, and looked much the same. Even her hair was still flowing freely down her back at a great length, her thick-rimmed glasses gleaming in the light. She wore a lime green hoodie with feline ears on the hood, along with dark shorts and boots.

College had been contemptibly easy for Futaba, to the envy of her fellow former Phantom Thieves.
She had barely needed to study, and even then Futaba's idea of studying translated to 'stream anime and snuggle with Akira.' These days she put her big brain to work on government IT, a degree of power that would have been terrifying if Futaba wasn't a good-hearted nerd.

"Hehe!" Futaba flashed her boyfriend a peace sign with her left hand. "Last grape soda at the general store! My luck is golden today!"

"You don't even like grape all that much," Akira replied.

"I like it on certain days of the week," Futaba admitted with a lazy shrug.

Shizuka made for the open door, snickering to herself. "Well, c'mon. We can take a lil' looksie inside before the others arrive... knowing them, we might be waiting a while anyway," she stated.

The other three made their way inside, examining the expansive interior of the store's main room. Akira glanced off to his left, quickly spying several cans of paint and a brush positioned by the wall. In his mind he was dividing up space and envisioning where things could go, already having a good notion of where to put the booths and counter.

"Look at it this way: This spot is about... five minutes from Shibuya station? Ten, tops. You're bound to have pleeenty of commuters passing by here all day long, all looking for a rush of caffeine. This spot's golden for that," Shizuka casually explained.

"This spot is also pretty expensive. And I'm not exactly swimming in cash these days," Akira said. Sojiro had of course been paying Akira for his work these past years, it certainly wasn't enough to handle this kind of property. Even Futaba's pay wouldn't be enough for here.

"I told ya, I'll take care of it. Keeping this place on my tab for a couple of months while you get this place off the ground? Simple," Shizuka said.

Akira shrugged. "You know I don't like feeling like a burden to people. And it'd take some time to train up some staff who know my personal recipes..." He wouldn't be giving any Leblanc secrets to this side business, but he wanted to make sure some good quality stuff was coming out of here.

"Is this the right place?" Haru's sweet voice caused the four to glance over to the doorway which gave a glimpse at the head of Okumura Foods, who seemed to only be more beautiful (if a little more focused looking) with age. Her strawberry blonde locks were tied back in a tight bun, while her clothing consisted of a white blouse, dark slacks, and ivory heels. "Sorry! We were on our way over, but there was this man selling artwork on the street-

"And it was magnificent!" Haru was soon joined by a lanky bluenette entering through the doorway, Yusuke managing to loom over his girlfriend at his full height. He wore a clean cream jacket and dark trousers, his white shoes exceptionally clean. A fashionable pair of glasses rested on the thin bridge of Yusuke's nose.

Yusuke made good money off his artwork, and as such he didn't need to rely on Haru's money. He did, however, require Haru's help to remind him of basic things such as eating and dressing sharply when they went out together. Even now he could very easily get lost in his own work for hours or days at a time.

"So I may have spent some time asking him about his technique... perhaps longer than I should have," Yusuke admitted, adjusting his fashionable glasses.
"It's alright," Akira said, smiling. "We only just got here after all... and there's not a whole lot to see here," he added.

"So great to see you guys again... man you've been the busiest out of all of us, I'd have no idea what you were up to if you both weren't famous," Makoto said, smiling and giving Haru's left hand a quick shake.

"Apologies... running the family business has been quite time consuming, and the growing popularity of Yusuke's works has also occupied a good deal of our time," the heiress stated. It had been particularly hard for Haru in the past, having to work through the stigma generated by her father's crimes. But, these days, the strawberry blonde seemed to be on top of things.

Yusuke idly inspected their sparse surroundings, casually sauntering to the blank wall, he took note of the labels on the paint cans and noted the colors they displayed. "So this is the spot? I think there's some potential, with the right kind of interior design."

"Yo!" A gruffer male voice called from outside, causing the group to watch as two figures entered through the open doorway. Ryuji lowered the hood on his dark jacket, revealing his short golden locks. What had started out as a sign of rebellion from the loudmouth had evolved into a fashion choice he was fond of, and for the time being he had little interest in changing his hair color back.

And, in college, he hadn't needed to. Shizuka had pulled a few strings to make sure he got a good track scholarship, in exchange for a monetary incentive. And besides, everyone knew Kamoshida was an infamous pervert. Those 'blemishes' on Ryuji's were clearly a result of his corrupted meddling. The board at the university had little issue believing that.

"We... may have slept in a little," Shiho admitted, moving in close to Ryuji's side. Her white blouse and scarlet skirt still fit the former athlete nicely, though now there was a noticeable swell in Shiho's stomach that would definitely cause a change in fashion in the coming months. The couple also did work for Mitsuru to make ends meet, but that work was presently on the back burner for Shiho. "But we're here now! How're you guys doing?"

"Not awful. I'm just thrilled to see all these familiar faces in one place," Shizuka said, giving Shiho a quick high five.

"Hey ya big bastard! Nice to see you gettin' your head out of a coffee mug for a couple of minutes," Ryuji teased, giving Akira a playful dig in his right arm.

Akira smiled in return, a modest chuckle rising in his throat. "Sorry. Leblanc is a popular spot and all, and I like to keep my skills sharp... and if I have to train people to work here, then it's gonna take up even more of my time."

"Well... not too much, I hope," Futaba said, puffing her cheeks out at her boyfriend.

As the group spoke, Yusuke idly lifted the lid of a red can of paint, and slowly dipped the clean brush into the crimson liquid. Already an idea was forming in his mind, of the perfect symbol to plant on the wall.

"So, how's..." Akira glanced briefly to Shiho's stomach, and then moved his eyes back to Ryuji. "Well, everything?"
Shiho snickered. "Well, I can already feel a whole lot heavier now than I ever had in the past, but I guess I don't mind. And it's only gonna get heavier, sooo I'm just gonna have to adjust," the dark haired girl admitted.

The pregnancy had not exactly been planned by either of them, but they weren't the sort to back away from a challenge. It helped that Mitsuru took care of the people who worked for her, meaning that the duo had support in place.

"Nothing we can't handle... but I'm already scared shitless, regardless of how our kid turns out. Gotta teach a boy not to get dragged into any dumb shit, gotta alway watch out for anyone a girl could get into a relationship with," Ryuji said, scratching the back of his head.

Shizuka shrugged. "Or vice versa," she replied.

"You worry too much. These things have a way of working out," Shiho assured him. "Anyway... I got a text from Ann a few minutes ago. Guess her and Mona are still on the way," she added.

Haru spared a brief glance toward Yusuke, who was starting to hash out a path in his mind, his left index finger starting to outline the path for the image he had in his head. Her attention turned back toward Shiho. "Well... Ann is rather busy too. She's become so popular in recent years, she really is one of the best in her profession."

"Saw it coming years ago. She's the kind of girl that can make it far on looks alone, but with her drive and determination she managed to go a whole hell of a lot further," Shizuka said, leaning up against the wall behind her.

"Oh, oh! I think I hear my ears burning!"

The voice was followed by Ann's appearance in the doorway, the blonde wearing a wine red track jacket and black trousers, her silky gold tressed flowing freely past her shoulders. Her heavy boots punctuated her movements, with the blonde swiftly entering. Under her right arm she held a glossy magazine, the cover image detailing Rise Kujikawa's incoming first child.

Morgana followed behind, grinning brightly as he entered. The ex-feline had only gotten a little bit taller in his human body, while his features retained the same sort of youthful energy his new body had started with. Much like Ann his clothing was outwardly expensive, a dark sweater and dark jeans, his white sneakers having only a few smudges of dirt on the soles.

"It took a... little bit longer to get here than usual, I'll admit," Morgana said in greeting. He made his way to Akira and hugged his oldest friend tight, with Akira quickly returning the gesture.

"You're here, that's the important part. You guys get to be here to check this place out, and chat a little about the future," Akira said.

"And catch up. We don't get to hang out as much these days," Futaba added, giving a dainty shrug of her shoulders.

"Yeah... sorry about that," Ann replied, laughing and rubbing at the back of her head with her left hand. "Being a top model takes up a lot of time... but, then again, you all have stuff that keeps you busy."

By now Yusuke had started putting his brush to the wall, the scarlet paint steadily starting to
outline the image that had been so richly defined in his head.

Makoto shrugged. "The price of growing up... so we're only waiting on two more people, right? Is... Sergio actually coming?"

Sergio had stuck with the SID, finding it a good use for his power. While he sold sculptures on the side, his SID work was his main source of income. Much of his time was spent in Japan, overseeing the Tokyo office, but he had had several long stints back in Europe.

"Hifumi said he'd be here... knowing him, he wants to make us wait a little," Shizuka admitted, sighing slightly.

"He can be a bit of a tease when he wants to be," Yusuke mused, not looking away from his work. An arcing stroke of his brush began to form the corner of a flame pattern on the wall.

Akira sighed, scratching the back of his neck with his synthetic hand. "Honestly... we probably should have agreed to meet up somewhere in advance before coming out here. I didn't think we'd still be waiting for people by now."

"Adulting is hard," Futaba replied, sighing and seeming to sag her whole body in the process.

"So... what's the idea here? You leaving Leblanc?" Ann asked, regarding the sparse interior of the property.

Akira gave his head a quick shake. "Of course not. I have every intention of inheriting Leblanc. But this spot here... it's gonna be a way to reel in more money, and a chance for my own recipes to get out in the open," the dark haired man explained.

"Yeah. The way things are now, Sojiro wouldn't ever give the shop to someone else," Futaba remarked. "Sooo... yeah. He's gonna be the second owner of Leblanc, cause I sure as heck don't want that headache."

"I still don't like coffee, but... yeah, I could swing by here if they make some of your curry," Ryuji admitted, shrugging lazily.

Morgana gave him a quick nudge with his elbow. "Give it a couple of months. I'm sure you'll be pretty eager to get caffeine in your system."

"Well, that makes two of us my fuzzy friend."

The confident words were followed by two more figures entering through the open doorway, with Sergio's frame being the larger of the two. Sergio had grown into a tall and strongly built man, carrying a confident mafioso air to his broad-shouldered frame. He wore a long white coat over his shoulders, the sleeves hanging low, the material covering his dark suit. A silver cat pin was resting in his right lapel.

Hifumi was the same height now as she was seven years ago, slim and sweet looking. Though now she was sharply dressed in a dark suit of her own, her skirt stopping at her knees. Her hair was tied in a neat bun, two sharp needles positioned in her hair. Hifumi's eyes were covered by sunglasses, the lenses ruby in color.

She, like Sergio, had made a career out of working with the SID. She had no interest in making
shogi into a job, feeling that it would only drain the enthusiasm she had for her passion. She still did it on the side, of course, but the SID paid the bills for the duo.

"Sorry about being late. We got held up on the way over," Hifumi admitted with a small sigh.

Shizuka shrugged. "Better late than never Hifumi. Just nice to have the whole gang back together like this... can't even remember the last time we were all together like this," the short woman remarked.

Haru tapped her chin a few times in thought. "I think it was... oh, around this time last year? You know, when we went to Minato-san's birthday, and there was that void of misery creeping up from the unconscious world in Kyoto."

"Oh yeah," Makoto replied in a flat tone. Such supernatural happenings had become normal for the group, even if they had never encountered anything as dangerous as Yaldabaoth in the last few years.

The group gathered around and got to talking, catching up and exchanging information of what they had gone through in the past year. They were still young and moving up in the world, each finding success in what they loved to do.

Even Morgana was getting by, doing locksmith work and developing security measured for paying customers. On some level it felt against his base nature, making it harder for people to steal things, but he was a natural expert at this sort of thing. Few people could inconvenience a thief quite so well as a master thief.

Trouble still seemed to find its way to them, of course, but they had grown seasoned to monstrosities and wicked Stand users. Even flying solo, they could handle the small timers.

"So..." Shizuka began, a smile creeping onto her face.

"Oh boy, here we go..." Sergio remarked with a heavy sigh.

Shizuka was quick to shoot him a dirty look. "What? What's with the huffing?"

"This is what you really gathered us all here for, right? You have a devilish little scheme in that head of yours," Sergio chimed.

Makoto shrugged, giving her girlfriend a casual sideways glance. "Well... he's not wrong. And you're not exactly the most subtle person out there," she admitted.

Grumbling, Shizuka decided to carry on. "What I was going to say is... we can't live out the good old Phantom Thieves days anymore, that's true. Even without the Metaverse, real life has kinda put a stop to the Arditi's actions... but we're all together right now."

A faint smile tugged at the corner of Akira's mouth. He pushed off the blank wall and examined the team. "Is that so? And what do you propose we do with that fact?"

"Weeeell... It just so happens that I've been keeping my ear to the ground these past few months, and I've heard talk about a gang of Stand-using thieves hanging out in Harajuku," Shizuka remarked.
"My stomping grounds? Can't have that," Ann remarked with a confident smile.

"Yeah... so how's about we go find these guys? Maybe give them a stern talking to?" Ryuji suggested, loudly cracking his knuckles in his left hand.

"And... finished."

All eyes quickly turned to Yusuke, getting a good look at the design he had painted onto the wall. The flaming top hat of the Phantom Thieves was instantly recognisable, acting as the corner of a painted scarlet box. A word had been neatly painted into the box: 'Fantoma.'

Akira found himself smiling at the sight. "Fantoma huh? I think that'll do just nicely. Guess I don't need to rack my brain thinking of a name now..." he mused.

"Yeah. Nice to see that old logo again," Morgana said, rubbing at the corner of his left eye.

"I think this spot has a pretty bright future," Hifumi said, chuckling slightly.

Now Akira started to make for the doorway, tucking his hands into his pocket. "Well... come on guys, let's get a move on. For old time's sake," Akira said.

"You're talkin' my language bud," Shizuka said, grinning brightly.

One by one the former Phantom Thieves followed after Akira, until the last one left and closed the door of the presently vacant property. A lone shaft of light came through the glass pane in the door, illuminating the crude logo Yusuke had painted on the wall.

These days the Arditi were little more than an urban legend, but with this shop... it would leave their thumbprint on Tokyo for years to come.

*Persona 5/JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: Vanishing Act*

*~Fin*

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