Shadow Gate

by SomewhereFlying

Summary

No one, not even Morgana, knew why Akira’s power was so different from everyone else’s. Akira didn’t really mind the whole “learn as you go” approach, but as Igor granted him more power, he started to feel strange side effects – random fits of anger, melancholy, mania – without any obvious source. In a fit of inexplicable rage, he storms into Mementos on his own, only to be saved by another persona-user wearing a black and purple body suit…

Forming a tentative alliance, they delve into Mementos to discover the source of their strange, shared power, and begin to unravel a vast conspiracy, the cogs of which were set in motion long before Akira ever came to Shibuya.

Notes

This story is based on vanilla Persona 5, and will be disregarding Persona 5 Royal entirely. That said, it will also contain spoilers for the entirety of Persona 5 – like, the whole thing. So please be warned!

Chapters with sexual content will be marked, and the passages themselves will be marked with double bars for those who’d like to skim.

The canon divergence in this story will explore Akira and Goro’s wildcard ability as well as Morgana’s nature, among other things. I hope you enjoy!
See the end of the work for more notes.
Since the moment Akira had first fallen into the Metaverse, that strange place where reality and cognition blurred into an indistinguishable mishmash, one question had plagued his mind: Why me?

He didn’t mean to sound ungrateful. Awaking to Arsene made him feel as though maybe all his troubles had been for a reason after all, that his probation wasn’t just the result of some rich asshole throwing his weight around in order to ruin a teenager’s life – no, it was an honest question. He didn’t know why he had been chosen to wield a Persona… and he had been chosen, hadn’t he? He was the only one who had been granted the ability to traverse that other reality from the very beginning; for Ryuji, for Ann, the app only appeared after they’d met Akira, while Yusuke had been dragged into that world by pure coincidence.

Then there was the matter of his power. Even Morgana was stumped as to why Akira was so flexible, why humanity’s lost souls resonated so strongly with him, why the Personas they found in the Metaverse were so willing to merge with Akira’s mind and his mind alone. It wasn’t a bad thing, really. It was just… different.

Akira supposed that was why the others had elected him to be their leader, another position for which he had been chosen, and not entirely of his own volition. He wasn’t going to say no, of course, not when everyone seemed so eager to follow him, but every time he led an exploration into the Metaverse, his heart would race and his chest would grow tight, his mind swimming with anxiety instead of excitement. Their lives were in his hands, and honestly, he didn’t have a clue what he was supposed to be doing.

One of the only places he felt remotely comfortable was that mysterious blue room, a place only he was able to see, apparently. He’d hoped to find some answers there, but the long-nosed man was annoyingly vague at best and downright cryptic at worst, and while the twin wardens were at least open to conversation, they didn’t seem to know any more about his abilities than did Morgana, though he couldn’t fault them for trying.

They were the ones who taught him about fusion.

The first time had been the worst, with the twins incessantly badgering him to give up Arsene, to pass on his untapped power like a baton… but more than anyone else, Arsene was a part of Akira’s soul; the thought of putting him in those stocks made Akira feel like he was killing himself. He couldn’t do it.

The Personas he’d picked up in the Palaces, however, those he didn’t mind sacrificing, and really, after the initial shock wore off, Akira found fusion to be rather soothing. When he was done, he felt a renewed sense of clarity, the anxious chatter in his mind quieting for a moment, allowing him to see the world in a different way. He was pretty good at fusing, too, so much so that the twins had started giving him little challenges. He wasn’t sure why, exactly – maybe it was simply to torment him – but it was fun, and seeing the twins freak out when he succeeded was a reward all its own.

Besides that, he felt a strange kinship with the wardens. It was nice to see them happy.
“Have you decided yet?” Caroline asked, snapping Akira out of his thoughts. She was standing beside the gallows, tapping her foot impatiently, her arms crossed over her bright blue uniform. “We don’t have all day.”

“Day is a meaningless term here, Caroline,” Justine said. “You know that.”

Caroline’s hardened expression faltered. “I – I’m just trying to get him to hurry up…”

“Hold on,” Akira said, waving at them distractedly. “Okay. These two,” he declared, singling out a Makami he’d found wandering around Mementos the other day, as well as his Jack Frost. It’d be a shame to lose Jack, whom Akira had been raising for a few weeks now, but progress demanded sacrifice at times.

“Finally,” Caroline intoned, shooting a deliberate look at Akira. He knew better, though; this was her favorite part, and she couldn’t quite hide her smile when it was time to whip out her riding crop and herd the two victims to their guillotines.

Justine shook her head and smiled fondly at neither of them in particular as she took her own position at the controls. “I look forward to seeing what you’ve made for us, inmate,” she said, and threw the lever.

Akira looked away, wincing at the dull thud of the blade hitting his Personas – he may have been used to it now, but that still didn’t make the process pleasant. When he opened his eyes, he found a strange little lion walking out from behind the gallows, shaking its green mane and pawing at the ground until it caught sight of Akira and bounded over to him, sniffing at the cell bars. Akira reached out and pet the creature, which leaned into the touch and nuzzled against his palm before disappearing into a cluster of light, absorbing into Akira’s skin.

“Ah, and he has the skill we asked for, as well,” Justine said, nodding and making a note on her clipboard. “An impressive fusion, indeed.”

“Hmpf.” Caroline had wandered over to Akira’s cell at some point and was now leaning against the wall, looking down at him. “You’re pretty good at this, inmate,” she said.

“At least I’m good for something, right?” Akira asked, and flashed a weak smile. It was enough to make Caroline giggle, a rare sight.

“Oh? Have you made a new discovery?”

A deep voice that seemed to originate from all directions at once reverberated across the room. Akira looked up and saw that Igor, who had been absent when he first arrived, had returned to the Velvet Room, stepping out of the blinding light coming from one of the other cell doors. Akira wished he didn’t have to see Igor walking; it was bad enough to have him staring at Akira while he was at his desk, but seeing him walk around on his spindly legs was just… unnerving.

“Indeed so, Master!” Caroline said, standing at attention and snapping her arms to her side. “He has impressive resolve for a delinquent.”

“Marvelous,” Igor said. He took up his usual place at his desk and began to drum his bony fingers against the surface, all the while watching Akira with his giant bug-eyes.

“I believe I shall grant you the power to hold more Personas within your mind,” he stated after a long moment.

Justine and Caroline looked surprised, exchanging hesitant glances with each other.
“Already, Master?” Justine asked.

“Yeah, are you sure he’s ready?” Caroline added.

Igor turned to look at them. His face didn’t change expression from what Akira could tell, but both the twins blanched like he had fixed them with a death glare, and Justine’s grip on her clipboard tightened dramatically.

“I-Inmate!” Caroline exclaimed, her voice a little squeaky while she tried to regain her cool. “Our Master has deigned to grant you a generous gift! You should be grateful.”

Akira blinked and held up his hand, examining it as if expecting to see some sort of physical change, but he neither looked nor felt any different. He supposed he’d just have to take Igor’s word for it.

“Thank you,” he said. A good response; Igor’s smile spread wide across his face, turning him into a grotesque Cheshire Cat. Akira stood up, feeling a little unsteady on his feet, and wondered if perhaps something within him had changed, after all.

“Enjoy your fleeting moment of rest, inmate,” Justine said to him, his vision turning white as he began to wake.

Akira was able to test the full extent of his new ability a few days later when he and the Thieves ventured into Mementos with the hopes of making their way to the next barrier wall. Every time they knocked a group of enemies to the ground, Akira stopped the team from pouncing immediately, instead attempting to reason with the monsters and invite them into his consciousness.

He was wildly successful, and he left the Metaverse with a mind full of new personalities. It was interesting, this power, but it was… strange, too. Akira could hear the Personas, feel them inside his mind at all times, his constant companions.

They liked to talk.

Although Akira wasn’t always sure it was the Personas doing the talking. He recognized Arsene’s voice – it sounded a bit like Akira’s own internal monologue, albeit deeper and more prone to reverb – but sometimes the things he heard seemed out of place coming from Arsene’s mouth.

One night when he was up late, unable to quiet his mind, he realized he must have been hearing the thoughts of Shibuya – all of Shibuya, and yet no one in particular. Personas were their own beings, certainly, but they were representations of humanity’s souls first and foremost – at least, if Morgana was to be believed. So when they started to clamor about a messy breakup or a big project deadline, Akira decided he must have been tapping into the public’s collective unconscious, with the Personas acting as conduits for humanity’s dreams, fears, and desires, funneling their every thought into Akira’s head.

It could get… distracting, at times.

“Akira,” someone said.

He was in school right now, he knew, in the courtyard, having lunch with Ryuji – but at the same time, he was in Mementos, his Personas spread out before him like so many soldiers waiting for
their next order.

That cheating jerk Hirano got what he deserved, the angel thought, and Akira – who had never met a Hirano in his life – felt a rush of petty satisfaction.

Beside the angel, a tall knight riding atop a shadowy horse was arguing with a faerie, although over what, Akira couldn’t tell. The knight swung his lance towards her face and she shrieked, firing off a blast of wind in retaliation, while Shiisaa stood to the side, barking and snarling at them both, raking its claws against the ground. Akira’s head throbbed in pain.

“Akira – Akira, c’mon, back me up here!”

“Shut it,” Akira snapped.

Everything went silent, and the courtyard came into clear focus. Ryuji was sitting beside him, a bite of noodles halfway to his mouth when he stopped, stunned, while Morgana turned to shoot Akira a baffled look.

Akira clasped a hand to his forehead and winced. “Sorry – I’m sorry, Ryuji,” he said. “I was just thinking. What were you asking?”

“Ah… s’cool. Don’t worry about it,” Ryuji said. He scratched the back of his neck and looked away before asking, with a noticeable strain in his voice, “So, uh… you wanna do anything this afternoon?”

“…I really need to study,” Akira said.

Ryuji groaned, squeezing his eyes shut. “Don’t say things like that. Bein’ all responsible…”

“Hey, you should take a page out of our leader’s book, Ryuji,” Morgana said with a smug lilt, puffing out his chest. “A true gentleman thief is cultured in both mind and body.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ryuji muttered, slurping down the last of his instant noodles. “I’ll stick to training my body for now, thanks.”

“Suit yourself,” Morgana said, shrugging and hopping into Akira’s bag. “But if you end up needing remedial lessons, you won’t be able to explore Palaces with us anymore.”

If it was possible, Ryuji let out an even louder groan, hanging his head and leaning back in his chair so sharply it threatened to tip over. “Okay, okay, I get the picture. Hey, how about I come over to Leblanc after I’m done at the gym? I can bring Ann. She pro’bly needs to study, too.”

“Sure,” Akira said, forcing a smile. “Sounds like a plan.”

Returning to class for the afternoon, Akira made an honest effort to pay attention to Kawakami’s lecture, with middling success. His Personas were no longer arguing, but at the same time, they seemed uninterested in letting him focus on schoolwork, instead opting to talk to each other – and occasionally, directly to Akira – about whatever popular subject struck their fancy. The day passed
in a haze, so much so that the final bell startled him when it rang.

After carefully hiding Morgana away, Akira slung his bag over his shoulder and made his way to the third floor. It was cloudy out, maybe already starting to rain, which meant the library would be more crowded than usual; indeed, when he arrived, he found only one free study booth, one where his back would be turned on the room at large. It wasn’t his favorite place to sit – given the choice, he’d much rather have his back to the window, able to observe the room at a glance if he needed – but he’d already drawn attention upon his entrance, so he sat down at the open desk and pulled out his notes.

Things went well, for a time. The rain dampened everyone’s mood and kept the room quiet, despite how crowded it was, and Akira was just starting to fall into a rhythm when he overheard a too-loud whisper:

“Isn’t that the kid with the criminal record? What the heck is he doing in a library?”

They’d made an effort to be quiet, Akira had to acknowledge that. It was a comment that would have gone completely unnoticed anywhere but the library.

“Wait, is that guy really going to sit down and study? Maybe… he’s more of a serious student than he looks?”

Fuck off, Akira thought, gripping his pen tightly. I need to study as much as anyone.

“Whoa, don’t stare at him. If your eyes meet, that guy is gonna kill you…”

For fuck’s sake. He abruptly snapped his textbook shut, standing and snatching up his bag, leaving the study corner in a rush without bothering to push in his chair on the way out.

“Akira… don’t let them get to you,” Morgana warned.

“Too late,” Akira muttered. It was useless advice now, even though Akira knew Morgana was right: he was just feeding into the rumors by storming off like this, but if he had stayed there for a minute longer, he might have actually yelled at someone, which would have been so much worse.

He hoped to cool off on the way back to Leblanc – perhaps it was the atmosphere at Shujin that was getting on his nerves – but the subway ride was just as awful. It was uncommonly crowded for the time of day, and Akira found himself squished up against a wall, something metal digging into the back of his leg whenever the train took a wide turn – and the noise. Were people always this loud on the subway? A dozen whispered conversations, each unobtrusive on their own, amplified one another in a never-ending feedback loop until the little train compartment became a hovel of mindless sound.

Akira all but shoved his way out of the train when it arrived at Yongen-Jaya. His legs were jittery and tense with unused energy, and he walked briskly back to Leblanc, just barely keeping himself from breaking out into a run, as if that would relieve some of the tension in his body. The weather mirrored Akira’s own mind: thunder rumbled through the dark covering of storm clouds that painted the sky steel grey, and he felt a drop of water hit his nose just before he stepped under Leblanc’s awning.

He had enough control not to slam open the front door – he didn’t want to suffer the consequences for that particular action – although he ignored the pointed look Sojiro gave him as he crossed Leblanc. Once upstairs, he threw his bag across the room, where it landed on the bed with a little more force than he’d intended.
“Ow! A-Akira? Hey!” Morgana yelped, scrambling out of the bag. “Where are you going?”

“Out,” Akira said. “Walk,” he clarified, already on his way back down the stairs.

“Wait!” Morgana yelled, but Akira did not, striding out the front door without even pausing to grab an umbrella. Before the rain could really pick up, however, he ducked into one of Yongen-Jaya’s unused alleyways and activated the Meta-nav, entering Mementos.

The relief he felt was immediate, from the comforting anonymity of his mask to the familiar weight of Joker’s coat settling on his shoulders. Rain had begun to pour outside the cognitive subway, too, and as he stood at the top of the staircase, Akira could sense the shadows within were riled up, irritated by the rain just as he was. Good. This was what he’d been craving. With a sharp smile, Akira adjusted his gloves and tore off down the stairs into the tunnels, while in his mind, his Personas seemed to realize where they were and grew even more energetic, itching for a fight.

It was hard to navigate the labyrinth without Morgana, but it wasn’t impossible; alone and on foot, he noticed employee access doors hidden periodically along the tunnel walls, which he took the opportunity to explore. Mostly they led to small hallways that ran parallel to the tracks, many acting as shortcuts straight to the next platform – and there were shadows aplenty, all the more for Akira to test his abilities.

After warming up in Aiyatsbus, he dared to delve into the lower floors – maybe even deeper than they’d traveled as a group – eager for a challenge. He was delighted by the way his Personas performed: Arsene was as impressive as always, but even the Personas he’d picked up around Mementos weren’t slouching, winning fight after fight with ease. This constant success – not to mention the arsenal of spells at his disposal – made Akira reckless and cocky, forgetting he was alone, forgetting how long he had been down here already.

It was only a matter of time before he let his guard slip.

Rounding a corner with haphazard speed, Akira ran smack into a pair of Orthruses, who reared back and knocked him straight to the ground. They could have been relatives of Shiisaa with their golden coats and deep turquoise manes, but their fur was matted with dirt and dried blood, and they each had a bony, purple tail flicking violently behind them – a far cry from the friendly creature cowering in Akira’s mind.

Four sets of eyes glared down at him as each of the two-headed beasts stalked forward until they had him flanked. The leftmost creature pawed irritably at the ground, one head shaking its mane, the other gnashing its teeth before lashing out at him with its tail. The sharp edge landed a solid hit to Akira’s side, and he hissed in pain, yet before he even had the chance to catch his breath, the Orthrus on his right lunged forward, snapping at him with both sets of jaws. He only barely managed to roll out of the way in time to avoid having his arm chomped off.

All of a sudden, his mind became clear, and he realized how stupid he had been to come here alone, and on a rainy day of all times…

He threw his arms up around his head and braced himself, hoping only that he could survive one more round and then look for an escape route, but instead of the attack he expected, he felt a rush of wind fly over his head and heard an Orthrus wail in pain. Tentatively, he opened his eyes and peered out between his arms.

Someone new had joined the fray. It looked like a human – a boy? – dressed in swirling grey and indigo stripes with a coal-ash cape fluttering behind him, the fabric dark enough that it blended in with the walls, to the point that it made Akira dizzy to look at him. Akira groaned; his head was
pounding, but for a brief moment, the sounds of battle shut out the yelling in his mind, and he listened patiently until, at last, he heard the Orthruses let out a death cry.

Akira managed to open his eyes, blinking blearily as the world came back into focus. The shadows’ bodies dissolved into thin air, and the stranger holstered his weapons, emerging victorious from the cloud of dust their battle had kicked up. Rather than be on his way, however, the guy was now walking towards Akira, staring him down over the long slope of his nose – he was masked, too, Akira realized – and stopping only once he was looming above Akira, who felt rooted to the ground by the stranger’s imposing aura.

“I never thought I’d see you without your entourage,” he said.

It was the last thing Akira expected to hear. He wanted to laugh, but now that he was out of immediate danger, his Personas had woken up again, chattering incessantly, their words blending together into an incomprehensible racket. He opened his mouth, willing himself to speak, but he choked on every thought, too many ideas trying to escape him at once.

The boy was less than impressed. “Hey, what the hell is wrong with you?” he snapped, grabbing Akira roughly by the collar and pulling him to his knees with a strength Akira hadn’t anticipated. As he stared at Akira, however, his face scrunched up in confusion. “You have more than one Persona within you?” he asked, and Akira managed to nod. “How many?”

Akira tried to focus the cacophony in his mind, separating the souls and counting them out.

“Eight.”

“Eight?” The other boy balked and nearly dropped Akira. “Idiot! Release half of them, at least. As many as you can stand to lose.”

Akira twisted his head around to look down the hallway. “Gotta go… see the twins, then…”

His companion scowled. “What are you saying? Just release them from your mind!”

Even if he were able to think properly, Akira thought he wouldn’t know what this guy was talking about. He must have noticed, because he then added: “Let them go! Say goodbye, end your contract; however you got them to join you in the first place, undo that!”

Akira closed his eyes again, trying to concentrate, and at last a few of his weaker Personas appeared to him.

You can go, Akira thought at them. He wasn’t sure if the point would get across, but shortly thereafter he felt their presence fade, growing more and more distant until they had disappeared completely.

It was like flipping a light switch. The roar in his mind immediately quieted, and he could clearly envision his remaining two Personas: Arsene, of course, as well as his Shiisaa, both of whom settled down as if nothing had ever been wrong. Akira let out a long sigh, delighted at last to hear the sweet sound of silence in his brain, and got to his feet, at which point the boy finally let go of Akira’s coat.

“Thank you,” Akira said.

Now that his mind was clear, he was able to get a good look at the one who had saved him, and… he looked like a Phantom Thief, if Akira was being honest. A heavy grey cowl covered his neck and most of his head, and what wasn’t covered by the cowl was obscured by a mask. It was mostly
jet-black, but there were tints of red pigment running through the two long, curved horns that dipped over the back of his head, while a pointed nose adorned the front of the mask – an intimidating get-up, with the visibly sharp edges serving the same purpose as a rose’s thorns: a warning to keep away.

The boy just scoffed at him. “Fool. Who would have thought the illustrious leader of the Phantom Thieves would let himself get caught like that?” Akira’s eyes went wide, and the boy laughed. “Are you surprised? Of course I know who you are, Joker,” he said, all but spitting out Akira’s codename.

If Akira was surprised, the feeling was only fleeting; this guy clearly had experience traversing Mementos at the very least, so it shouldn’t have been surprising that he knew about the Phantom Thieves, who were relative newcomers to the Metaverse – and considering Shibuya’s size, it wasn’t out of the question to think there would be more Persona-users running around than the few Akira had recruited to his team.

Choosing to ignore the stranger’s condescending tone, Akira asked, “What happened to me?”

For a moment, it seemed like the boy wasn’t going to answer, but then, in a much less aggressive voice, he said, “I can do it too, you know. Carry multiple Personas. It’s quite a rare ability.”

“Do you know others, then?”

“No, but I’ve done research. Personas are elements of one’s soul. Do you think most people have more than one soul?”

Akira shook his head, declining to mention that, had someone asked him the same question before April, he would have laughed in their face for thinking souls were even real.

“Our minds aren’t meant to hold more than one consciousness, and yet we are able to do just that,” the boy continued to explain. “When you have too many with you at once, it becomes… chaotic.”

“That makes sense, I guess,” Akira said. It would explain the myriad voices, anyway.

“The most I’ve ever had with me at once is five,” the boy said, holding up his hand. “Two I keep with me permanently, and I borrow the others as I need them, releasing them after I’m done.”

That’s smart, Akira thought. He wasn’t going to tell this guy that, though. He seemed to have a big enough head as it was.

Akira rubbed the back of his neck and rolled his shoulders, wincing at the dull pain he felt. “Well… thanks, again. I feel a lot better now,” he said.

“Good,” the boy said. “Now, let’s get out of here. I doubt you could survive another encounter.”

“Let’s?” Akira repeated. “You, too?”

“Obviously.” He gave Akira a snide smile. “You already needed me to save you once. Who knows what sort of trouble you’d run into on your way to the surface?”

Frustrating as this guy was, Akira couldn’t argue that it would be smarter to leave together. In his right state of mind, he wouldn’t dream of turning down an extra hand in the event they happened to encounter resistance on the way back.

“Fine, let’s get going.”
The boy laughed, obviously delighted by Akira’s resigned tone, and began to lead the way back to
the surface.

They crept through the tunnels cautiously, the world around them lit with an unnatural cobalt blue
light that caught on the fleshy spider-web growths coating the walls, making them look like
grotesque graffiti art. Without the noise of battle or of his Personas to fill his mind, Akira was
struck by how eerily silent Mementos could be, a condition which was only exacerbated by his
companion, who seemed wholly uninterested in talking. They climbed through a few floors in
silence before Akira couldn’t take it any longer.

“What’s your name?” he asked. The other boy nearly jumped, looking at Akira sideways and
narrowing his eyes. Akira smirked. “How can I thank my savior if I don’t even know his name?”

The boy let out a short bark of a laugh. “Is that what you want? Very well… your teammates favor
animal names, don’t they? Then why don’t you call me Crow?”

“Crow, huh.” It certainly suited him visually, Akira thought. “Are you saying you’re a teammate of
mine?”

“Ha! Hardly. If I were a Thief, that disgusting excuse for a teacher would have been dead where he
stood.”

Akira frowned. If this guy knew about Kamoshida, then… could he have been a Shujin student,
too? It was hard to tell through his costume, but he certainly seemed to be no older than Akira
himself. Asking about that, however, might reveal too much about his own identity, and after
deciding it would be best to tread cautiously around this stranger, Akira instead asked, “You’ve
been following me?”

“I’ve been following the Thieves,” Crow corrected. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

“So if you’ve been following us, why were you surprised I can summon more than one Persona?”

Crow rolled his eyes. “I had to tail you from a fair distance, thanks to your pet.”

Pet?

“Oh, Mona,” Akira realized. “Our navigator.”

“Mm. I couldn’t have him notice me, after all.”

“Guess not.”

“I admit I was surprised by what you all accomplished,” Crow added after a moment. “To get the
man to confess his crimes with his own mouth… I’m still not sure how you managed that, even
knowing that you had access to this place.”

“You don’t know how?” Akira asked.

“I have different methods for getting my way down here – superior methods – though I will say
your technique certainly has a theatrical flair—”

Crow cut himself off, recoiling from the upcoming corner and nearly bumping into Akira, who had
been walking just behind him. “Damn,” he growled, shooting a look at Akira. “Are you prepared to
fight?”
Peering around the bend, Akira found himself staring at the back of a shadow, red and angry and huge, easily double the size of the enemies he’d been fighting earlier, and he took a moment to assess. All things considered, he hadn’t been roughed up too badly by those Orthruses – Crow had swept in far too quickly for any real damage to befall him. He could handle another fight, no problem, especially if he had assistance.

“Yeah, I’m good,” he said.

Crow stared at him, his face impassive, before turning to face the monster.

“Okay,” he said. “Get ready.”

Leaping from the corner, Crow brought his sword down upon the shadow’s head, causing the shadow to howl in pain and split apart into five oozing green Slimes, which fanned out in a loose semicircle around the pair.

Crow was lightning fast on his feet, summoning his Persona before Akira had even grabbed his dagger, and though their enemies heavily outnumbered them, Akira couldn’t help but tear his eyes from the battlefield, momentarily captivated by his new acquaintance’s Persona. It was humanoid, probably, its form lost beneath black and white lines that zigged and zagged across its body without direction or purpose, fire licking at its heels and long red braids cascading from its head, its whole being exuding exactly the same kind of wild power Akira could sense coming from Crow.

He waited for Crow’s attack, but it never came; instead, his Persona pointed its sword right at Akira, bathing him in pale red light, and Akira felt a sudden rush of energy: his senses became sharper, his limbs became springy and light – he felt like he could take on the world.

Crow tossed a toothy smirk his way and gestured toward the Slimes. “Alright then, Joker,” he said. “Show me what you can do.”

It took a moment to realize what Crow was asking of him. As leader, it benefited the whole team for Akira to keep a cool head in battle, but it would be a lie to say he didn’t enjoy showing off from time to time, and with Crow all but giving him permission, what choice did he have?

“Arsene!” he commanded, throwing his arm back and summoning his Persona to the battlefield.

Arsene appeared behind him, his eyes burning with fierce energy. His voice reverberated through Akira’s mind, asking, What are your orders?

Akira singled out a Slime right in the middle of the pack with a twirl of his dagger, and replied, We’re putting on a show.

Aloud, Arsene boomed with laughter. Without asking for clarification, he spread his wings impossibly wide, swirling blue fire sparking between his feathers, and unleashed a wave of cursed energy that radiated out from the center of the Slimes, hitting each enemy in turn and landing with such an impact that Akira could feel the ground vibrate beneath his feet.

Wow. He’d never seen Arsene use curse magic quite that… intense before. Perhaps he should try showing off more often.

Beside him, Crow returned Arsene’s laughter with his own, leaping forward and summoning that same Persona again.

“Go, Loki!”
This time, Crow’s Persona pointed his sword towards the enemy, letting loose a barrage of powerful slices, some so quick they seemed to hit the Slimes twice. Two shadows couldn’t withstand the attack, exploding into piles of useless sludge on the ground, while one of the survivors made a move towards Akira. Thanks to Loki’s spell from earlier, however, he dodged without a second thought, and then, before the next Slime could even think about reacting, Akira called Arsene forth again, snapping his fingers and burying the Slime in a column of shadowy energy. The creature barely registered the hit before dissolving into nothingness.

Again, Crow laughed, staring down the remaining two Slimes and pulling out a gun. It was a frighteningly real looking item, firing a bullet that burned a hole straight through one Slime and into the next, leaving a gaping, charred wound in its wake. Akira took advantage of their confusion to slip in with his dagger and deliver the killing blows, slicing the shadows to soggy, sludgy ribbons.

For a moment, he held his breath, waiting to see if any other enemies planned to show up, but as the last Slimes dissolved away, it became clear that the fight was over. Akira stood up and flicked the excess muck off of his dagger, wiping it on his pants before sheathing it again.

“Arsene Lupin, hmm?” Crow’s eyes flicked up and down Joker’s costume appraisingly. “Figures.”

“You’re one to talk, Loki,” Akira shot back. Crow looked halfway offended at the insinuation, scowling and striding past Akira with a huff.

With the battle over, they were free to make their way towards the surface once again, and Akira noticed that Crow seemed a good deal more relaxed now – pleased, perhaps, to know that Akira wasn’t a complete pushover – and chattier, as well.

“How long have you had him? Your Persona?” Crow asked.

Akira shrugged. “Since April.”

“…April,” Crow repeated. “Absurd. That you’re so powerful after a mere two months…”

“Ah, so you admit it.”

Crow growled at him, but there was no bite to it. “Don’t forget who saved you today. I said you have strength, but in a one-on-one fight, I’d crush you.”

“Oh yeah?” Akira stretched casually, crossing his arms behind his head. “Name a time and a place, and we’ll see.”

“Mm… tempting, but I fear I’m far too busy to indulge you in such trivial whims.”

“Sounds like someone’s afraid they’ll lose to a newbie,” Akira commented, earning himself a glare from Crow.

“Do you always make a habit of antagonizing the people who intend to help you?” Crow asked.

“Nah, just you,” Akira said. In the back of his mind, a nagging voice told him he probably shouldn’t act quite so blasé around this – admittedly very powerful – stranger, but for all his tough talk, the guy had saved Akira’s life, and escorted him back to the surface as well.

Surely he couldn’t be that dangerous.
From there on, it was a quick, uneventful stroll back to the entrance level of Mementos. Akira had been thinking about this for a few floors now, about how things were going to play out now that it was time to leave, and once they had finished climbing the final set of stairs, they both paused, standing awkwardly a few feet apart.

“I’m staying,” Crow finally said. “You, however, should probably go.”

“Gotta protect that secret identity, huh?”

“Sure, why not,” Crow said, waving his hand dismissively. “Anyway, shouldn’t you be glad about that? You wouldn’t want me to discover your identity either, now would you? Oh great leader of the Phantom Thieves?”

“I guess,” Akira said. He toyed with his bangs, twisting a tuft between his fingers. “Well, thanks again for saving me. I owe you.”

Crow laughed. “You may regret saying so.”

Unexpectedly, Akira found himself grinning along. “Hey, if you see me around again, you should come say hello,” he said. “I bet the others would like to meet you.” Morgana especially – but really, he thought the whole group would be interested to meet another Persona-user, especially someone as experienced as Crow.

Yet at this suggestion, Crow’s eyes went dull, his lips set in a thin line. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said. “You and I have different goals. We may even be enemies… it wouldn’t be wise for us to meet again.”

“Oh, I got it,” Akira said, giving Crow an exaggerated eye roll. “Lone wolf, huh.”

Crow sighed irritably. “Just go home already, Joker.”

“The Thieves and I have reasons to explore this place, y’know,” Akira said. “If you’re trying to scare me off, it’s not going to work.”

“I couldn’t care less what you and your merry band get up to in your spare time,” Crow snapped. “Just don’t go wandering around here alone again… I may have no choice but to attack you.”

It was such a serious declaration that Akira’s first instinct was to laugh, though he had enough sense to tamp down that urge and simply nod instead.

“All right then.”

“Good. I’m glad you understand.”

Crow stood solidly in place, obviously uninterested in turning his back on Akira, who, on the other hand, thought it would be a delightfully cocky move to turn and leave without looking back, curious though he was. Once he had all but reached the exit, he heard the distinct sound of footsteps echoing through the cavernous room, and when he glanced back over his shoulder, Crow was gone.

Back in reality, the rain had slowed to a steady shower, and Akira walked back to Leblanc without rushing. He was almost completely soaked when he arrived, and he stood under the awning for a
moment, vainly trying to squeeze the water out of his sleeves before he finally bit the bullet and stepped inside.

“Wel– oh, for god’s sake,” Sojiro muttered.

“Sorry, Boss,” Akira said.

“Don’t apologize; just go get changed already and – and stop dripping on my floor!” Sojiro said, glaring at him.

Akira didn’t need to be told twice. He made his way to the stairs and up into the attic, where he found – to no surprise – Ann and Ryuji sitting around his table playing some sort of card game, with Morgana perched on top, watching.

“Akira!” Morgana exclaimed, leaping to his feet so suddenly he startled Ann and Ryuji, who instantly threw their cards down and stood up as well.

“Hi,” Akira said.

“You idiot!” Ann yelled, rushing over and punching him in the arm with a surprising amount of force.

“Did you go to the Metaverse?” Morgana asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

“I just went to Mementos,” Akira said. He swallowed, and decided they didn’t need to hear exactly what he did. “I didn’t go anywhere, just hung around the surface. I wanted to be alone.”

“Really?” Ann asked. “Are you sure about that? Don’t think that wasn’t the first place we went to look for you.”

“Mementos is pretty big,” Akira said. “Even the surface. I walked for a while. Are you sure you looked hard enough?”

“You must’a gone for a hell of a walk, then,” Ryuji said, “since Mona couldn’t even sense you.”

Damn, Akira thought. They really had gone looking for him. “Sorry if I worried you,” he said, running a hand through his hair. It came back damp.

Ryuji sighed, walking over to Akira’s box of clothes and digging out a towel, which he tossed at Akira’s head. “You’ve been totally weird lately, dude,” he said.

“Sorry,” Akira said again. He wrapped the towel around his neck, drying off the fringe of his hair. “Are you angry at me?”

“I mean, a little!” Ann said. She wandered back over to her chair and collapsed into it. “You could have died, y’know?”

“I was worried, too,” Morgana said. “I don’t like to admit it, but I’m not strong enough on my own. If I ever want to discover who I am, I need you guys.” His eyes flashed as he fixed Akira with a glare. “We made a deal, remember?”

“I remember,” Akira said, a pang of guilt running through his chest. It was embarrassing now to realize how reckless he’d been, rushing off to fight alone when he had so many people relying on him. He owed them at least a little transparency. “It’s… my power. Taking in so many Personas the other day… it messed with me. I went to Mementos to release them.”
The admission sparked an immediate reaction: anger was replaced with concern, surprise, even mild horror – the realization that they still knew so little about their newfound abilities was, perhaps, a bit of a slap in the face.


“Well… at least you know now, right?” Ann asked.

“…it’s understandable that you’re still discovering the full extent of your power,” Morgana said, “but that’s all the more reason for you not to go wandering off by yourself!”

“Morgana’s right,” Ann said. “We’re all learning together, yeah? So you can lean on us.”

“For sure!” Ryuji came up and clapped his hand against Akira’s shoulder, causing his wet shirt to squelch a little. “I mean, I might not always know what to say… but I’ll listen, y’know?”

Akira nodded. “Right. Thanks, guys. I won’t run off again.”

It was naïve of him to think he’d mastered his new abilities after a scant two months, but at least failure was a good teacher. He knew now to be more selective about the kinds of Persona he accepted into his mind, to ensure he would always stay in control, and he knew he shouldn’t go looking for Crow again, either; it would be irresponsible of him. The mystery of this new Persona-user, one whose power so closely mirrored Akira’s own, would have to remain just that – a mystery.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! ♥ If you enjoyed it, feel free to come say hello to me on twitter, @somewhereflying.
With one final cry, the Yaksini before them crumpled to the ground, the edges of her skirt turning to cinders in the aftermath of Ann’s devastating flames. Her long black hair curtained her face as she faded from sight and was replaced by an ordinary high school girl, one who looked on the verge of a breakdown. She screamed and sobbed as her worldview was suddenly and drastically altered, allowing her to see how possessive and cruel she had acted.

Akira holstered his gun and hung back, letting Ann take the reins on this one, and after a polite but firm order to back off, the shadow seemed to accept her fate. Then she, too, faded away, leaving no obstacle between the Thieves and their destination.

Morgana sighed. “I’m glad that’s over with. Now all that’s left is…”

He trailed off, wandering over to the barrier that marked the far end of this path. Akira was quick to follow him, and soon all the Thieves stood before the door, which remained immobile for a moment, until – as if recognizing their existence – it began to creak and groan, separating into four smooth sections that folded away into the cavern walls.

“Yesss!” Morgana punched his fist in the air. “I knew it! The more people know of our existence, the more we’ll be able to explore this place.”

“All this is because of Madarame’s confession, then?” Yusuke asked, taking a step closer and noting the stairs leading further down. “How fascinating…”

“Well, yeah,” Ann said. “His exhibition was, like, a totally big deal. So I bet a bunch of people watched his confession.”

“Totally!” Ryuji suddenly appeared between Akira and Ann, slinging his arms around both of their shoulders. “And this just means we’ve gotta go after an even bigger target next, right, Monamona?”

“That’s right!” Morgana beamed up at them like a proud mentor, too excited to complain about Ryuji’s choice of nickname. “I knew you guys had it in you… so what are we waiting for? Let’s go!”

They took to the stairs, skipping steps as they descended even deeper into Mementos. The wind picked up, carrying a dense cloud of black specks along with it, while the stone walls began to change color, shifting from blue to grey to sickly olive green, though it was all still familiar to Akira. He’d definitely managed to bypass this barrier somehow…

They had just reached the platform on the next level when Morgana stopped abruptly.

“Wait, guys,” he called out to the group as they prepared to step onto the rails. He ran back to the staircase, his ears swiveling around like he was trying to pinpoint the location of a sound.

“What is it, Mona?” Ann asked.

“I… I thought I…” Morgana sighed, shaking his head and jogging back over to the group. “It’s nothing. I keep sensing something, but when I go to look for it, it’s gone.” Then he leapt from the platform, transforming mid-air and landing heavily on his tires. “Let’s just keep our eyes open
The group piled into the car, Akira taking the wheel. This path was more naturally lit than the previous, but it was also darker, somehow, as if the light was being bottlenecked through a thick layer of grime. It would have been difficult terrain under any circumstances, and right now, Akira was distracted, unable to keep from glancing in the rear-view mirror every couple of seconds, hoping he might catch sight of... something.

He hadn’t said it at the time, but honestly, he’d felt the same thing Morgana had: a presence lurking just beyond his line of sight, as if there was something right in his peripheral vision, but no matter how he turned, he couldn’t catch a glimpse of whatever it was.

Despite that, he was pretty sure it was Crow. The guy had already admitted to following the Thieves, so it wasn’t a stretch of the imagination to say he was doing it again... except Crow was a pretty competent fighter, at least from what Akira could tell, and with that outfit, he’d have no trouble blending in with his surroundings. If he was following the Thieves and didn’t want to be caught, Akira was sure he’d be practically invisible.

So for Akira to have noticed him... it must have been on purpose. The only question was why.

After a few minutes of exploring, they approached a set of narrow tunnels through which they couldn’t comfortably drive, so they disembarked the Mona-bus and continued on foot. Without the rumble of Morgana’s motor, they could more easily tune in to the ambient sounds of Mementos: the distant hum of subway trains roaring below them, the whistle of wind blowing through cracks in the stone walls, and the vaguest hint of... voices.

This time, it wasn’t something only Akira and Morgana noticed; everyone seemed to hear it, the noise indistinct but growing louder by the second, and without ever giving the order, the team shifted into a stealthier formation, Akira at the helm. He followed the sound down a few twists and turns before finally pinpointing the source: a room a few meters away, one attached to this tunnel by nothing more than an empty door frame. Akira gestured for the Thieves to group up on the opening, and once they were in position, they peered around the corner carefully.

Two long, noodly dog shadows were floating in the middle of the room, twisting around in the air as they spoke with each other. The cylindrical Inugami buried its dark-furred face in its paws, shaking its head violently.

“N-no way!” it said, in the kind of squeaky voice one would expect to hear from an anxious puppy. “I’m not goin’ out there. Not when that black mask guy is around...”

“Oh, come on! That must have been hours ago,” the paper-flat Makami retorted. “Don’t be such a wimp. We’re just waiting for trouble sitting around here...”

“Hey,” Ryuji whispered, ducking his head down to address the group. “Didn’t Madarame mention something about that? About a black mask or whatever?”

“I seem to recall that, as well,” Yusuke said.

“Hmm... hey, Joker!” Morgana whispered, his eyes already gleaming with excitement. “They might know something. If we beat them up, we could ask them some questions. What do you think?”

Akira turned back to the shadows, who were still squabbling and seemed like they weren’t going anywhere in a hurry. Compared to what they’d fought in Madarame’s dungeon, these two were...
nothing special; taking them down would be a walk in the park, and even if their interrogation yielded no results, it would pose no risk to the team. Worst case scenario, they’d just waste some time.

“Okay,” Akira said. He pointed to Ryuji, Morgana, and Yusuke in turn. “Once we get into battle, Skull, I want you to take the flat one; Mona, take the round one. Use your skills; Fox and I will back you up just in case.”

The group nodded, and on Akira’s signal, they rushed into the room, Akira firing two bullets into the closest shadow’s back, catching them both by surprise. The Inugami wailed in pain, while the Makami flipped around to confront the Thieves, only to immediately turn on its companion.

“I told you!” it barked. “Told you we were gonna get caught!”

The Inugami opened its mouth to defend itself from the verbal attack, failing to notice the far more physical attack Morgana was preparing; Zorro’s gust of wind made a direct hit, leaving the shadow crumpled and whimpering on the ground before he could say a word. The Makami growled, about to go on the offensive when Ryuji called down a bolt of lightning that sparked and crackled over its body, causing it to go rigid for a moment before floating gently to the floor.

“That’s… no fair…” the fallen Makami huffed as the Thieves closed ranks around their enemies.

“Oh, chill out,” Ryuji said, lazily brandishing his gun at it. “We just wanna ask you some questions.”

The Makami scowled, but as it tried to get to its feet, electricity sparked through its paper-folded fur, and it remained firmly on the ground. “Fine… what you want?” it asked.

Morgana pulled his slingshot taut and demanded, “What can you tell us about that guy in the black mask? The one you were talking about earlier?”


At this, the Inugami whimpered in protest, and Akira pointed his gun in its direction. “Hey,” he called out, causing the shadow to peer up through its paws. “Is that true?”

The Inugami looked back and forth between Akira and the Makami before finally blurting out in one big rush: “No way! He, he – I heard if he looks at you funny, he’ll make you go totally crazy!”

“Please, that’s just a myth–”

“It’s not!” the Inugami barked, cutting off its friend and growing a bit bolder as a result, shifting its gaze frantically between all the Thieves. “You humans know it too, right? I can hear your thoughts all the time. Weird stuff’s happening out there, yeah?”

“I believe we’re asking the questions here,” Yusuke said.

“Yeah! And what d’ya mean, ‘go crazy’?” Ryuji asked.

“It’s like… you can’t talk, you can’t think, you just… run around, attacking friends, attacking strangers – no reason why,” the Inugami said. It placed its paws against the side of its head and threw them out, imitating an explosion. “Totally scary.”

The Makami shook its head. “You don’t know what you’re talkin’ about. He’s just some guy. No
different than you four,” it said, finally dragging itself up from the ground and glaring at Akira. “Okay, you got your answers. We good now?”

Akira glanced at Morgana, who gave him a subtle nod.

“We’re good. Scram,” Akira said, gesturing off to the side with his gun, while Ryuji and Yusuke stepped away, leaving the path to the exit unobstructed. The shadows hesitated for only a moment before they scrambled into the air and bolted from the room, disappearing into the labyrinth of tunnels.

“Those reports seemed somewhat inconclusive,” Yusuke commented.

“That’s what it sounded like from my end, too,” Ann said, as the group rejoined her outside. It was dead silent and completely still, the shadows already long gone.

“Well…” Morgana said, glancing up and down the hallway, “that wasn’t exactly helpful, but as long as we’re here anyway, what do you say we do a little more investigating?”

No one objected. As they interrogated shadow after shadow, however, a pattern began to emerge: not only were most of the stories as similarly far-fetched as the Inugami’s, but some were outright contradictory with each other.

“He goes around looking for the strongest human shadows he can find,” one shadow claimed, “as a test of his strength,” while another swore up and down that the mysterious figure would kill any shadow that stood in his way, regardless of origin, just to get his hands on their cash. Some said he was a human, or no, he was a shadow, or something else entirely – no one had ever seen below that mask of his, the most striking feature of his costume. Was he even male? It was hard to say. What were his motives? No one knew.

The most worrisome account came when Akira asked one shadow how long the Black Mask had been around, and the creature simply answered,

“As long as I can remember.”

Perhaps it didn’t mean much. Akira had no clue as to the average lifespan of a shadow; it was possible this creature had materialized into existence just yesterday… but it was equally likely that this shadow was several years old, and Akira honestly wasn’t sure which was the more frightening choice: that the Black Mask had been around for years, with all the experience that entailed, or that he had appeared only as recently as the Thieves themselves – and yet in that time, he had made such an impact that the shadows were telling stories about him.

“We don’t even know if this guy exists,” Ann said later that evening, when the group had retired to Leblanc’s attic for the day. “What if he’s just, like, some kinda fairytale monster for the shadows?”

“But I did sense someone following us,” Morgana protested. “I’m sure I did…”

“I think it would be best to trust Morgana’s judgment for now,” Yusuke said. “Furthermore, how could Madarame’s shadow know of this person if he didn’t truly exist?”

“That’s true,” Ann conceded.

“I guess it won’t hurt to be careful,” Ryuji said. “It sucks, though… I’m so revved up after Madarame. I just wanna jump right back in, y’know?”
“We have plenty of time to find a new target,” Akira said. “We don’t want to rush into something and risk exposing ourselves.”

“I agree,” Morgana said, nodding. “You guys should lay low for a while. It won’t do to have you getting in trouble here in the real world... and we should keep a low profile in Mementos, as well. If this Black Mask does exist, it’s almost impossible he doesn’t already know of us, but there’s no need to draw undue attention our way.”

“I know; you’re right, you’re right,” Ryuji grumbled in resignation. “Ugh, this is gonna be so boring... we’ve still got, like, a month until summer break, huh?”

“Well hey, we’ve got that field trip coming up soon, right?” Ann said, her voice squeaking up an octave in an attempt to sound optimistic, but she wasn’t even fooling herself. The information they’d gathered today – regardless of its legitimacy – had left them all feeling anxious, and the promise of a school-sanctioned excursion did little to help.

And all the while, Akira never once mentioned Crow. He had ample opportunity, and even incentive, to do so, yet something compelled him to keep quiet. He didn’t want to admit he’d lied about what happened when he ran off to Mementos unsupervised, and besides, the information they had right now was just too weak to draw any real conclusions. If they were totally off base, then telling everyone about this other Persona-user would just cause unnecessary worry. Yes, the best course of action was to keep this little tidbit to himself for a while longer...

Crow’s mask was black, though. Akira couldn’t deny that.

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For all that Shujin had hyped up their trip to the television station, the actual day itself was dreadfully boring, Akira spending most of his time moving heavy equipment from place to place, seemingly without purpose. What was he supposed to be learning from this experience, again? He’d honestly forgotten – assuming there had even been a reason in the first place. By the end of the day, the only thing Akira felt he had learned was that television stations were evidently much larger than he’d imagined, as when he finally met back up with Ann and Ryuji, they were so far backstage that they had become completely lost.

“I am sooo tired,” Ann groaned. “How can I be so worn out when I didn’t do anything all day...?”

“Well I know exactly why I’m tired,” Ryuji said, rubbing his shoulder emphatically. “Who knew television involved so much heavy lifting...”

Ann winced in sympathy. “Ugh, yeah. I guess it coulda been worse for me, huh? They treated you two like pack mules.”

“Right? Like, what the hell, man. I thought we were supposed to be guests.” Ryuji shoved his hands into his pockets and kicked ineffectively at the floor. “And the worst part,” he added, “is there’re a whole buncha garbage people here, but not like... y’know.”

“Not like Madarame,” Akira filled in.

“Not even like Kamoshida,” Ann said.

“Hey! What’d we say about keeping a low profile?” Morgana chided. “Even somewhere like here, we could be overheard...”
Ryuji rolled his eyes. “Other people are talking about them, y’know. We don’t hafta be that careful.”

“And – hey!” Ann said, waving at Morgana, “Wouldn’t a cat be way more suspicious? Keep down!”

Morgana whimpered, flattening his ears and ducking back down into Akira’s bag with a quiet, “Sorry, Lady Ann.”

They reached the next hallway intersection when, as if summoned by the sheer force of irony, came the sudden and unmistakable sound of footsteps approaching. From inside Akira’s bag, they heard Morgana mutter “Told you so,” while the rest of the group stopped short to avoid a collision.

They waited and watched as a young man came walking down the hall. He was very neatly dressed, his blazer crisp and fitted, his dark slacks freshly ironed – perhaps the only thing out of place about him was his hair: warm chestnut brown locks that fell below his chin in the back and hung in choppy tufts around his face. Perfectly poised and focused, he traversed the halls with a clear destination in mind, his attention flicking over to the three of them only very briefly. For a moment he looked as though he would pass them by without pause, but when his gaze landed on Akira, he stuttered and came to a halt, his eyes going wide with surprise.

Akira stared back. He couldn’t help it – the newcomer had pretty eyes, deep garnet red and incredibly striking, bordering on… familiar, though in a way Akira couldn’t quite place.

“Um, is everything okay…?” Ann asked after a lengthy pause.

This seemed to snap the boy out of his reverie. He blinked, and suddenly his entire disposition changed, a perfectly manicured smile coming to his face. “Oh! My apologies,” he said, his voice bright and peppy. “You just looked very familiar to me for a moment. But clearly I was mistaken, yes?”

Akira nodded. Surely he’d have remembered someone like this.

“Oh… your uniforms.” The boy had fully recovered from his awkward entrance now, slipping into an easy, casual stance. “Perhaps that was the reason for my confusion. Are you from Shujin Academy, by chance?”

“Uh. Yeah?” Ryuji said.

The boy chuckled. “Ah, I’ve seen so many of you around today. Your outfits are quite distinct, after all.” He paused, his attention momentarily drifting back to Akira before he refocused yet again. “Well! Please don’t let me keep you; I’m sure you’re eager to get home. If you’re looking for the exit, you can head down the way I just came,” he said, making a sweeping gesture with the arm that wasn’t currently holding a small grey briefcase.

“Uh, cool!” Ann said, peering around the corner to confirm that an exit was, indeed, within sight. “Thanks!”

“It’s my pleasure,” he said. “I hope you enjoy your afternoon.”

With that, he continued on his way, walking briskly down the hall in the opposite direction of the exit, turning around a corner and disappearing.

“ Weirdo,” Ryuji muttered. “But hey, at least we’re outta here now! C’mon.”
They toppled out of the plain backstage exit and found themselves, at last, free from the confines of the television station. They began their walk back to the train station, though they’d barely made it a few meters before Ann gave Akira a quick jab to his side.

“Wow,” she intoned, a huge grin spreading across her face.

“What’s that for?” Akira asked.

“Um, that guy literally stopped in his tracks when he saw you,” Ann pointed out. “Or did you not notice?”

Akira felt his face go hot. “It’s nothing,” he said, waving his hand. “He probably just thought he recognized me, like he said.”

“Ugh, you shouldn’t be so modest, y’know.” Ann sighed wistfully. “I wonder who he was… he didn’t even say his name.”

“You’re readin’ too much into this,” Ryuji said.

“I agree,” Akira said, adjusting his glasses and pulling his arms in close, trying to make himself smaller. He couldn’t shake the feeling that he was being teased.

“Oh my god, can you guys just let me have this?” Ann asked, pouting. “Nothing exciting ever happens to me.”

“What?” Ryuji almost shrieked. “How can you say that after–” he caught himself, lowering his voice, “after all the shit that’s happened to us?”

“I mean – not like that, dummy, I mean something… dramatic!” Ann said, waving both hands for emphasis. “Y’know?” She looked to Akira and Ryuji, who stared blankly back.

“Um…” Morgana said, the tips of his ears just visible over Akira’s shoulder, “I don’t really get it, either.”

“Oh, forget it,” Ann groaned, hanging her head in defeat. “You’re probably right… what are the odds we’ll ever see him again, anyway?”

“I can’t believe it’s this fuckin’ guy again,” Ryuji muttered, slumping down into his seat and crossing his arms over his chest.

“Ryuji, shush!” Ann hissed, swatting him lightly on the shoulder. “And sit up! What if we end up on camera?”

Ryuji grumbled, but he sat up straight nonetheless.

The second day of their field trip had been, if nothing else, less labor-intensive than the first, though no less boring – at least until it was time for filming to begin. The studio executives ushered all the Shujin students into several rows of plastic chairs that faced a gaudy sound stage on which a small live interview was about to be conducted, and as they were waiting restlessly for the show to begin, who should appear but the very same boy they’d run into yesterday. Goro Akechi, the host had called him, a high school detective, one important enough to be interviewed by at least the local news, it would seem.
“I should have recognized him,” Ann mumbled under her breath. “He’s been all over the place lately.”

“Oh yeah?” Akira asked, though he wasn’t really listening to her, too engrossed with the conversation happening on stage. He was a little surprised the topic had turned to the Phantom Thieves; even after Madarame’s confession, their popularity seemed very localized and sparse – not something he’d have thought would catch the eye of the police.

On the other hand, it must have presented a very unique case for a detective. That was how Akechi seemed to think, at least, and he theorized at length about their methods, their sense of justice – about how he hoped they existed, and yet if they did, that he would have to prosecute them – while the hosts ate up every word he said. In fact, the whole room was buzzing with excitement; Akira hadn’t realized how big an impact the Phantom Thieves had made on their little school.

The female host stood up, sweeping through the audience in search of an eager participant, and despite the fact that he clearly lacked his classmates’ enthusiasm, Akira was the one she singled out of the crowd. She approached him, bent over slightly, and asked,

“Hypothetically speaking, what are your thoughts on these Phantom Thieves, if they were real?”

Akira looked from the host back to the sound stage. The studio lights were blindingly bright, Akira knew – he had helped to set them up – but still, there seemed to be a moment after the camera turned to him and the host shoved a microphone in his face that he and Akechi locked eyes.

Akira lowered his mouth to the mic and said, “They do more than the cops.”

The audience gasped, and Akira could practically feel Kawakami glaring at him from somewhere out in the studio, but Akechi, who steadfastly held Akira’s gaze, did not gasp. He blinked slowly, thoughtfully.

And then, he laughed.

It broke the tension in the room quite effectively, the audience laughing alongside him, though to Akira, the sound seemed forced. The look on Akechi’s face during the split second before he laughed had been so contemplative, like Akira had really caught him by surprise; Akira wanted to have that conversation, not… whatever this was about to turn into.

“You have such conviction,” Akechi said. “I wonder if all those believers in the audience would agree with you, as well…?”

“Well, everyone?” the male host asked. “Using your buttons, do you agree with this young man’s assessment?”

There was a brief flurry of movement while the students all fumbled to buzz in. Out of the corner of his eye, Akira saw Ryuji frantically mashing the “yes” button.

“56%!” the host exclaimed after the results were tallied.

Again, Akechi laughed. “Oh, come now. How many of you voted yes just to spite me?” he asked, earning another peal of laughter from the audience. Then the host asked Akechi something bland about working alongside the police, and Akechi, with the grace and talent of an experienced actor, followed suit. It was all very surface-level details, and yet Akira could sense Ryuji and Ann growing more and more tense the longer Akechi spoke about the budding investigation into the Phantom Thieves.
The short meet-and-greet segment wrapped up just a few minutes later, which meant the Shujin students were at last free to leave. Akira followed the tide until he found a small alcove in which he could stand, dutifully waiting for Ryuji to return from the restroom so they could leave together and idly scrolling through his phone when a sudden voice caught his attention.

“Oh, it’s you…!”

Akira looked up. The boy from before – Akechi – was coming his way, and for a moment, Akira thought he must have been looking for someone else, but a quick glance over his shoulder told him he was largely alone in this part of the studio. He was definitely the one Akechi had addressed.

“Ah… yeah,” Akira said. He stood upright and pocketed his phone while Akechi came closer, close enough that he could speak and be heard over the general commotion in the studio.

“I’m glad I was able to catch you,” he said. Off-stage, Akira noted, Akechi spoke in a soft-toned, melodic voice, his words unhurried and measured, as if he was considering them very carefully before committing to any one sentence. “You really took me by surprise earlier, you know. I wanted to thank you.”

“Thank me?” Akira asked.

“That’s right,” Akechi said. “It may surprise you – or perhaps it wouldn’t – but many people are unwilling to say something contrary while being filmed. So for you to disagree with me so openly… it was quite refreshing.” He trailed off, dropping his smile. “Also, I wanted to apologize again for my behavior yesterday; it was terribly rude of me to stare.”

“It’s fine,” Akira said. “Don’t sweat it.”

“I’m sure you’ve already guessed my name, but I’d like to properly introduce myself,” he said, bringing his free hand to his chest. “My name is Goro Akechi… I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Akira Kurusu. And, uh, likewise.”

“Still… of all people, for the host to pick you out of the crowd… it almost feels as though we were supposed to meet.” Akechi gave him a small smile – different, somehow, than the one he’d used on camera – and Akira wondered if maybe Ann had been onto something, after all. “If it’s okay with you, would you mind speaking with me again sometime?”

One of Akira’s hands gravitated unconsciously to the back of his neck. Akechi’s drive to apprehend the Phantom Thieves was still fresh in his mind, and while it was highly unlikely an ordinary detective could draw a connection between Akira and the group, it still seemed unnecessarily risky to give Akechi a chance to learn more about Akira.

“I – yeah, sure,” was what he ended up saying, though, the thought it’s important to keep my enemies close flitting through his mind as he retrieved his phone.

“Ah, wonderful. Well, I shouldn’t keep you any longer,” Akechi said. “I hope to see more of you in the future. Until then…!”

Akechi lifted his hand in a quick wave, leaving so swiftly after his arrival that Akira barely had time to process the encounter. He looked down at the phone in his hand.

*He didn’t even wait to exchange chat IDs…*
The next day, after Morgana had curled up for an early evening nap, Akira slipped out of Leblanc and made his way to the Velvet Room.

He wasn’t sneaking off simply to be contrary this time; his visit did have a purpose. Now that he knew the dangers of carrying too many Personas, he was hyper-aware of their presence, and even carrying as few as four felt like a Herculean task. So when he found himself unable to focus on something as simple as crafting a lockpick, he knew he needed to rid his mind of at least one of those extra personalities.

Now he was standing in his cell, his arms looped through the bars as he contemplated which of his Personas he would send to the gallows today. Arsene, as always, was out of the question; instead, he pointed out a tiny, punk-rocker pixie girl and a bored-looking Nekomata, leaving his final Persona – a giant bird with brilliant vermilion plumage – safe for now.

Justine and Caroline swept the two victims away, and in no time at all, a tall, noble skeleton emerged from the guillotine. He grinned a permanent, bony smile and gave a sweeping bow before he faded away, reappearing in Akira’s mind only seconds later.

“An impressive job, as always,” Justine said, making a note on her clipboard.

“Yeah. You almost look cool now, trickster,” Caroline said.

Ah, that again. Inmate, trickster, wildcard – Akira was starting to wonder if the twins even knew his real name. Given the unique quality of his power, he supposed the title made sense, although… he wasn’t quite so unique anymore, was he?

“Hey, Justine?” Akira asked. The quieter twin turned to him expectantly. “Am I the only wildcard?”

“The only wildcard?” Justine repeated. Her eyebrows rose up beneath her hat. “As far as I know, yes…”

Akira hummed thoughtfully. It was the answer he’d expected – Crow had seemed just as confused when Akira had alluded to the wardens as Justine was now – if not necessarily the one he had wanted.

“What, not going to bother asking me?” Caroline asked, crossing her arms.

Akira blinked. “Do you know?”

“Well… no,” Caroline admitted, her voice faltering. “But only people with a contract are allowed to enter this place! And we don’t have contracts with anyone else right now. So doesn’t that mean you’re the only one?”

“Do you know of another wildcard, inmate?” Justine asked.

“…I don’t know, I guess,” Akira said. “I was just curious.”

“I see,” Justine said. “A second wildcard… that would be quite the development.”

“Well I think you’re just making things up,” Caroline said, thwaping her riding crop against the wall. “Don’t be foolish.”
“Right,” Akira said. He pushed himself up off the door, and, with a half-hearted wave, he shuffled
to the far end of his cell, the heavy chain around his foot scraping against the floor as he did.
Caroline huffed and walked away, but Justine watched him leave with a contemplative expression
on her face.

Stepping out of the ethereal blue jail cell, Akira found himself back into the lobby of Mementos,
which was as empty and silent as always. He glanced to the exit, knowing he should simply head
back to reality now – it would be the responsible thing to do – and yet… in that moment, an intense
curiosity gripped him.

He wouldn’t have to go far, he reasoned with himself, already descending the broken escalator
leading into the depths. He could stay on the upper levels, open his senses, and just… observe for a
little while. Who knew? He might learn something useful.

Sticking to the walls, Akira began to prowl around Mementos. Five minutes became ten, which
quickly became twenty, forty, and as he was approaching an hour of aimless wandering, he realized
what a stupid idea this had been. Mementos was huge, and what were the odds that Crow was here
today, at this very moment? Sighing, Akira stepped away from the wall and brushed some dirt off
his coattails. He should have turned around and gone straight home after fusing Matador… he
could only hope Morgana was still asleep back in reality; he wasn’t looking forward to explaining
yet another hour-long disappearance.

It was easy traveling on the way back to the entrance, as Mementos was oddly devoid of shadows
tonight, so much so that Akira didn’t even bother to hide himself, casually strolling down the
middle of the subway tunnels. The unnatural calm should have immediately triggered his mental
alarm bells, but he was too busy sulking about his dumb decision to notice, and it wasn’t until
several floors later that he finally noticed something was off: the air had become too still, the skin
on the back of his neck prickled uncomfortably, and he froze in place, because there was someone
behind him…

“I have to wonder, do you have the memory of a goldfish, or are you just stupid?” a voice asked,
and Akira felt something hard press against the back of his head.

As quickly as fear had gripped him, it dissipated, and Akira let out a shaky breath. He couldn’t be
100% sure without looking, but with that tone of voice – and the way he spoke as if he were
familiar with Akira – there was no way this could be anyone else.

“…let’s pretend I’m stupid,” he said.

“Ha! Who’s pretending? Why, they way you were walking around out in the open, it’s like you
were begging to be caught…”

Akira turned around, slow but unfazed, to face his assailant. Swathed in that same tattered grey
cloak and striped bodysuit, Crow looked as though someone had erased a small part of Mementos
and left a dark void in its place, except that this void was also pointing a gun right at Akira’s head.
He was smiling – or, well, he was showing his teeth, but the look was too smug to be a proper
smile – and something about that expression just made Akira want to provoke him.

“Maybe I was. Looks like it worked, huh?”

Crow growled, his gun still pointed squarely between Akira’s masked eyes. “Arrogant bastard. I
believe I was fairly clear about what would happen the next time I saw you here alone, was I not?”

“Fairly,” Akira agreed. “You gonna kill me, then? Or,” he tapped the side of his head with his
finger, “are you gonna drive me insane, instead?”

The statement didn’t seem to upset or even surprise Crow. “You’ve been listening to rumors about me, I see,” he said.

“Just a few.”

“I didn’t peg you as the type to listen to idle gossip, Joker.”

“Only if it’s interesting,” Akira slipped his hands into his pockets and leaned back on one leg, trying to look casual. “So… is any of it true?”

Crow smiled sharply. “Would you like to find out?”

“I’ll pass.”

Crow sighed and stowed his gun away now that Akira had effectively called his bluff. “Then what are you doing here, Joker? I have a hard time believing you came here simply to make jokes at my expense.”

That was the question of the hour, wasn’t it? Akira was hardly sure himself. He had no particular reason to seek out Crow other than simple curiosity, but was that really a good enough reason to go looking for trouble…?

Crow looked restless, his lips turning down in an increasingly-irritated frown, so finally Akira blurted out the first thing that came to mind: “Do you want to train together?”

“Do I – what?” Crow stared at him, a look of genuine shock crossing his face.

“You wanna train? Spar, maybe?” Akira repeated, nodding his head towards the stairs leading further down. “I’m bored, and you seem like you know what you’re doing, so…”

“I–!” Crow stared at him incredulously. “I have a job to do today; I don’t have time to play around with you….”

“Who’s playing?” Akira asked. “Take me with you, then. Let me verify those rumors for myself.”

“…absolutely not.”

“C’mon. You told me you don’t know how to change hearts, right? Well I don’t know how you do… whatever it is that you do. Show me, and I’ll teach you how to change hearts. Fair’s fair, right?”

“You have no idea what you’re asking right now,” Crow said, his voice laced with such cold fury that Akira was momentarily taken aback, and then he turned sharply, taking a few steps towards the stairs.

“You want to see that badly? …fine. Come, then. See if I care.”

Akira barely stopped to think before following.

Once they were on the move, Crow did not slow down for him, nor did he seem at all interested in conversation, pausing only occasionally to check his phone – and when he did, Akira caught a glimpse of the Meta-nav app, identical in every way to the one Akira used. How strange… if Crow had the same kind of technology as the rest of the Thieves, could it mean their powers originated from the same source?
Akira was so caught up considering this new possibility that he failed to notice the shadow lurking just in front of the exit platform; it was only through Crow’s good sense to grab him by the shoulder and pull him to a halt that he didn’t go crashing into an enemy… again.

“There’s a pest in our way,” Crow announced. “Or didn’t you notice?”

“Right,” Akira said, instinctively reaching for his dagger. “I noticed. Are we gonna fight it?”

“That depends. Are you just going to get in the way?”

Akira scoffed, lowering his voice to a whisper when the shadow turned its head, searching for the unexplained noise. “I’m plenty strong. Remember? You said so yourself.”

“Then please,” Crow whispered back, gesturing to the shadow with an exaggerated sweep of his arm, “walk headfirst into the shadow, Joker. Show me your strength.”

By now, the shadow had all but spotted them; any more of this, and they’d be ambushed for sure. Akira adjusted his grip on his dagger and said to Crow, “You’re kind of a dick, you know that?” before leaping from cover and bringing his blade down onto the shadow’s face. His aim was true, but it was still a clearly telegraphed attack, and the four feathery Tengu that spawned from the shadow were on guard and prepared for battle, dodging Akira’s first strike with relative ease.

Crow appeared at Akira’s side, quickly surveyed the battlefield, and sneered at the enemy.

“How pathetic,” he said, stretching his arm out and opening his hand.

This new Persona was Loki’s polar opposite in almost every conceivable way: where Loki was lithe and seemed to be more liquid than solid, this Persona was as broad and solid as a boulder, sporting white and blue in contrast to Loki’s black and red, with the letters “RH” emblazoned in shining gold on his chest. The Persona readied his weapon, a feathered longbow that seemed to be nearly as long as Akira was tall, and when he fired, a burst of radiant light bloomed from the arrow, catching the enemy off-guard. As the spell faded, Akira saw that every single Tengu had been knocked to the ground.

“Are you going to stare, Joker, or are you going to help?” Crow asked, breezing by Akira with his sword in hand. Instantly, Akira leapt into action, lunging forward and assisting Crow, decimating their fallen foes in record time.

“What was that?” Akira asked after the dust had cleared.

Crow, who was sheathing his sword and straightening out one of his belts, frowned at this. “I told you I could use more than one Persona, did I not?” he asked. “Or did you not believe me?”

“I believed you,” Akira said. “It’s just, he’s, y’know… after Loki, I sort of expected…”

“I – I don’t owe you an explanation,” Crow snapped. “He is my second Persona. Accept it.”

“Okay,” Akira said, holding his palms up to placate the suddenly irate Crow. “I was just surprised, that’s all.”
Crow pursed his lips and said nothing, opting instead to pull out his phone and briefly check the app. “We have to head a little further in,” he said.

“Right. Lead the way.”

As if they’d never been interrupted at all, they fell back into their silent exploration, veering off the well-worn subway tunnels into a maze of smaller, craggier alcoves – the kind of place where the shadows were all humanoid and largely docile… provided you didn’t try to get too close.

During the last leg of their trip, Crow was all but staring at his phone while he walked, tracking his target until he had pinpointed its exact location. When he finally stopped, they were facing an alleyway of sorts, inside of which stood the shadow of a man in a black business suit. He was perfectly ordinary – plain, even – but one look at Crow’s face told Akira this was his target.

“Stay back,” Crow said, holding his arm out in front of Akira. “This shadow’s strength is far inferior to mine, so I won’t need your backup; however, we’ll need to make a quick exit, so be prepared to run.”

*Ominous,* Akira thought, but he did as he was told, hanging back while Crow approached the shadow. He did not, as Akira had expected, attack it immediately; instead, they appeared to be having a conversation. It wasn’t terribly different from the way the Thieves handled a change of heart, though whether Crow was attempting to reason with the shadow or squeeze it for information, Akira couldn’t be sure.

After exchanging a few tense words, the shadow let out a guttural scream, splitting in two and transforming into a bright blue demon. This did not seem to concern Crow in the slightest – indeed, he had obviously *expected* things to turn sour, given the way Loki appeared on the field in an instant, ready for combat. This shadow was no match for Crow, who was aggressive and completely uncompromising in battle, pressing every advantage he could find and allowing the shadow no reprieve, though Akira couldn’t sense the sort of vicious enthusiasm he’d felt while fighting beside Crow against those Slimes. He wasn’t enjoying himself here – this was purely business.

Finally, with one particularly effective strike from Crow’s blade, the shadow fell to the ground, reverting back to its human form, and Akira held his breath as Crow stalked forward. He hadn’t asked Crow about the nature of his “job” – he wasn’t sure Crow would have told him even if he had – and he wondered if he wasn’t about to witness a human shadow’s death.

Loki reappeared in the air, perching atop his sword and grinning his huge, unnerving smile, showing off far too many teeth for Akira’s liking, and as Crow spoke, Loki pointed his sword at the hapless shadow, bathing him in a deep crimson miasma that distorted his colors, turning the man jet black all over.

The shadow, which had been trembling and begging for its life not five seconds prior, suddenly stilled. Crow sheathed his sword, dismissed Loki, and leapt back several meters as the shadow managed to stand. It now wore a pair of crazed, pure-white eyes, and Akira realized he wasn’t watching the beginning of a mental shutdown, but that of a psychotic break.

Crow clearly did not intend to stick around for the aftermath, running nearly full-speed back towards Akira. “Go,” he commanded, taking Akira by the shoulder and shoving him forward.

Akira stumbled briefly before he was able to match Crow’s pace. A dozen questions flooded his mind, but now did not seem to be the time for conversation, so Akira pushed those thoughts away and simply ran. They ran and ran, longer than Akira thought himself able, the tunnels bleeding...
together until Akira lost track of their location. His lungs were burning when they finally stopped to rest in a barren safe room several floors away.

At first, neither spoke. Akira wasn’t sure what he wanted to say, if anything, and Crow eyed him suspiciously. He looked sharper than usual, his face darkened by his serious intent, as if he was daring Akira to speak his mind.

“That shadow… you turned him berserk. Right?” Akira asked.

“…that’s right,” Crow said.

“It’s… something Loki can do,” Akira continued cautiously. “Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t do it. Right?”

“Very clever.” Crow’s eyes flashed and before Akira could process the movement, he’d stepped up into Akira’s personal space, the pointed tip of his mask threateningly close to Akira’s face. “Well, Joker? What do you think now? You’ve only seen a fraction of my abilities, but you know I’m capable of much more. So tell me, are you horrified? Enraged? Do I disgust you?”

Akira was taken aback by the note of searing hatred that permeated Crow’s question, even while Crow’s face remained utterly devoid of emotion.

“It’s not quite as dramatic as I expected,” Akira admitted.

“…I see.”

Suddenly, Crow stepped away. He looked towards the stairs and began to walk, though his pace was slow, his chest still heaving in the aftermath of their sprint, and Akira easily fell into step beside him.

“On shadows, the change is usually minimal,” Crow said. “It will have a compounding effect in the real world, however.”

“What’s going to happen to that guy?” Akira asked.

“I don’t know, exactly. The effects of a berserk shadow – what the media has termed “psychotic breakdowns” – seem to vary from individual to individual. They may simply lose consciousness for a time, or they may lash out and become violent… I’m only speculating at this point, but I assume it is based on their own personality and inclinations; that is, whatever they end up doing would be dictated by their own hearts.”

“So you’re making them ruin their lives of their own volition, essentially,” Akira surmised. “Seems pretty cruel.”

“Oh, I’m the cruel one, am I?” Crow asked, his voice taking on a defensive edge. “And what about your own methods? Forcing people to have a change of heart, to publicly confess their crimes, to live with the consequences… their minds will never be the same again. In a way, couldn’t you say your methods are even crueler than mine?”

Akira opened his mouth to respond, but found he had no rebuttal.

“Food for thought, isn’t it?” Crow asked. “…say what you will about me, but don’t try to pretend you have the moral high ground just because you stop short of murder.”

Murder… yes, Akira supposed that was the most accurate term for assassinating a human’s
shadow. Any fight with a shadow had the potential to turn deadly, as Morgana had warned them, but to purposely seek that outcome… Akira took a surreptitious glance at Crow. He hadn’t hesitated at all to turn that shadow berserk, but would he be so cavalier when it was time to kill one, instead? If the shadows were to be believed – and if the news reports about “mental shutdowns” were what Akira thought them to be – then he must have already done it at least once…

Yet somehow, Akira felt that the person walking beside him wasn’t anything like the Black Mask spoken about in the shadows’ rumors. This Crow projected an aura not of mindless violence, but of steadfast determination… and deep, pervasive melancholy.

The next time Akira looked over, Crow was already watching him.

“You’re so transparent,” he said, although the contempt Akira had expected to hear was mysteriously absent – in fact, Crow sounded quite weary. “Why don’t you just ask it, already?”

It took Akira another half-dozen floors to work up the courage. It was only as they climbed the final set of stairs, the lobby of Mementos nearly in their sight, that Akira turned to Crow and asked, “Killing a shadow… is it hard?”

“No.”

The immediacy with which Crow responded was startling in its own right, and the unwavering certainty in his tone even more so. “Do you recall those Tengu we killed earlier?” he asked.

Akira nodded. He could easily remember the sensation of slicing his dagger through the Tengus’ bodies, the way the blade’s edge caught only briefly before sliding smoothly, effortlessly through their flesh, like he was cutting through thin air.

“It’s the same… it’s exactly the same as that. The disconnect between my actions and their consequences is immense.” Crow turned his eyes to the ceiling. “It’s frightening how easy it is. The first time is the hardest. After that… it’s nothing.”

It didn’t seem as though he was boasting. It sounded, if anything, like a warning.

“Well… thanks,” Akira said. “For showing me, I mean.”

“Thanks,” Crow repeated. A fleeting, joyless smile crossed his face. “To think you’d thank me for something like that.”

Akira shrugged. “It was new information. I’m glad to know.” He kicked at a rock on the ground and then took a look at his phone. It was late… Morgana was really going to kill him at this rate. “Anyway,” he said, “I’ll leave you alone now, so–”

“Wait.”

A hand closed around his wrist, Crow’s claws pressing against Akira’s thick jacket sleeve.

“…come back next week,” Crow said. “Show me how you change a heart. You promised.”

Had he? Akira remembered offering as much, but at the time, Crow had seemed uninterested, barely even acknowledging what Akira had to say. Surprising, then, to hear him bring it up now… Akira turned, pulling his arm from Crow’s grip.
“Okay,” he said. “When?”

“How soon can you secure a target?”

Akira paused, trying to recall if they’d received any requests from the Phan-site lately. Even if they hadn’t, Mishima could probably scrounge up a target before the weekend was over – and surely he would leap at the chance to help Akira, especially with a personal request like this.

“Probably Monday, if you want,” Akira said.

“Monday… all right.” Crow straightened his back, suddenly all business. “I’ll meet you here, then – after school lets out, I presume?”

“Yeah. Give me an hour,” Akira said – *an hour to ditch my watchdog of a cat* – “but I’ll be here.”

“Okay,” Crow said. He nodded resolutely and began to walk away, turning only briefly to look over his shoulder and add,

“…you’d better.”
Akira was starting to forget what the word “quiet” meant. Leblanc’s attic was never truly silent, of course, not when it was perched above the café, protected by only the bare minimum of insulation and with no door to speak of, but even at night, as he lay in bed and tried to fall asleep, Akira’s mind whirred with noise.

Three… he only had three Personas with him right now. Ordinarily, he could keep that many under control without much trouble, but tonight, the denizens of Shibuya were particularly unsettled, their thoughts abuzz with all the gruesome details of the latest psychotic breakdown to plague the city.

It had been all over the news today: the president of a small accounting firm had simply gone mad, tearing through his office like a rampaging animal, breaking furniture, destroying personal documents, and assaulting his employees when they attempted to rein him in. It had taken multiple security officers to pacify him, and although no one had been seriously injured, the whole event called the firm’s integrity into question, not to mention the dozens of legal documents that had been destroyed… it was a mess that would take some time to clean up.

Akira frowned up into the darkness. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that this accountant was the same man Crow had turned berserk the other day, yet knowing the man’s identity only made the whole situation more confusing. What could Crow, who was by all accounts just a high school student, possibly have to gain from shutting down some random company?

The thin futon mattress pressed uncomfortably against Akira’s ribs, forcing him to twist around and lie on his left side instead, rustling the bed sheet and rousing Morgana from his catnap. He blinked, his eyes gleaming in the dim light, and stood up, padding over to sit beside Akira.

“Hey. You seem restless.”

“Yeah.” Akira pressed a few fingers to his temple and massaged little circles into his skin. “My Personas are keeping me up.”

Morgana made a pained noise, his ears drooping behind his head. “I’m sorry… I really had no idea the extent of your powers, did I?”

“It’s okay,” Akira said. “It’s not your fault. You’re still trying to regain your memory, too.”

“I guess,” Morgana said, more to placate Akira than anything else. “Um… what’s it like? Having all those Personas in your head.”

Akira half-shrugged into his pillow. “It’s… strange. Sometimes they’re so quiet I can forget they’re there, but… I guess something’s bothering people tonight.”

He barely held back a disgruntled sigh. Perhaps he should have been grateful to get a glimpse into other people’s minds like this – to become connected to society in a way he couldn’t as a delinquent-branded student – but at times it simply made him feel even more isolated, like he was constantly eavesdropping on a conversation in which he could never take part. The fact that he couldn’t even shut out the voices on command simply exacerbated the issue.

“Say… do you think we could tap into that?” Morgana asked. “I mean, those Personas you picked up in Mementos are part of the collective unconscious, right? So if they’re all worrying about
something, that could point us to our next target.”

“Huh.” Akira had never thought of it that way. “Maybe…” He flipped over onto his back and closed his eyes, allowing his Personas to appear before him again. For a moment, his mind was filled with nothing but thoughts of the accountant’s psychotic breakdown, but he allowed that panic to flow through him, and then, slowly, new worries began to emerge:

“That could point us to our next target.”

“Huh.” Akira had never thought of it that way. “Maybe…” He flipped over onto his back and closed his eyes, allowing his Personas to appear before him again. For a moment, his mind was filled with nothing but thoughts of the accountant’s psychotic breakdown, but he allowed that panic to flow through him, and then, slowly, new worries began to emerge:

“Someone my friend knows got blackmailed…”

“Did somebody really get kidnapped?”

“Apparently you can never shake ‘em off… They said it’s hell.”

“I hear they get really aggressive…”

These were the only coherent thoughts his Personas brought to him; everything else was a mismatch of disjointed words and feelings – panic, mostly, about money or personal safety, but also hopelessness, and a single word, one so faint that it seemed as though people were afraid to even think it: mafia.

“Sounds like a lot of people are being blackmailed,” Akira said. “Students, even… and the mafia might be involved.”

“What?” Morgana’s eyes went wide. “Really?”

“I guess. But that might just be a rumor.”

Morgana kneaded the futon roughly with his paws. “A crime lord would make an impressive target for the Phantom Thieves, don’t you think?”

“Impressive for sure… if that’s really what’s going on.”

“Let’s talk with the others about it tomorrow,” Morgana suggested when Akira declined to elaborate. “We don’t have to pursue it, but looking into the blackmail might make a good lead anyway.” Akira hummed in vague approval, and they were quiet for a long moment before Morgana added, “…it might even help you. Y’know… if we take care of what’s bothering people, maybe your Personas will leave you alone.”

Akira tilted his head back so he could look at Morgana, who had his tail curled tightly around his legs, and felt a sudden surge of appreciation for his friend. Despite all his troubles, Morgana was still committed to helping the Phantom Thieves – to helping Akira. He reached out to scratch Morgana under his chin, and to his surprise, the cat allowed it.

“Maybe you’re right. Thanks, Morgana.”

With a pleased purr, Morgana walked carefully over Akira’s shoulder, settling himself on the far edge of the pillow so that his tail just barely touched Akira’s head. “Do you think you can fall asleep now?” he asked.

Akira took a deep breath and tried to relax his muscles. He did feel better after talking through it, his Personas seeming to calm down now that they’d had the chance to voice their anxieties, and – though perhaps this was a quality of all cats – Akira felt soothed by Morgana’s presence, the voices in his head growing muffled behind a layer of pleasant fog as Morgana’s rhythmic purring lulled him to sleep at last.
After school the next day, Akira gathered up Ann and Ryuji and dragged them out to a lonely part of Shujin’s courtyard to share what he and Morgana had discussed. It was pouring outside, the rainy season now in full swing, which left the whole courtyard deserted, while the noisy raindrops hitting the roof provided the perfect cover to speak about delicate topics like the Phantom Thieves.

“Oh yeah, I feel like I’ve heard about that,” Ann said once Akira was done recounting his and Morgana’s conversation. “A bunch of people suddenly got a really lucrative part-time job or something…”

“I heard that, too, ‘cept it ended up being something real shady,” Ryuji said.

“If the mob is involved, there’s no doubt it’s shady business,” Morgana said. “And if you two have heard about it, then it’s probably more than just a rumor.”

“You think it’s mafia stuff, though?” Ann asked. “That feels a little out of our league…”

“No way!” Ryuji said, an excited glint in his eyes. “Dude, can you imagine if we took down a mafia boss? People’d have to believe in us for sure!”

“It would be pretty cool,” Morgana agreed. “No one could deny our justice if we changed the heart of someone as vile as a mobster, especially one who targets high school students.”

“I just wish I’d been able to learn more,” Akira said. “We’ll be starting from nothing.”

“I mean, was it really any different with Madarame, though?” Ryuji asked. “And at least we know there’re some victims at Shujin this time, so findin’ leads shouldn’t be so hard…”

“If people are willing to talk,” Morgana said, flipping his tail thoughtfully. “And a mob boss would be careful not to give out any personal details. Akira may be right… this will be far tougher to identify that our previous two targets.”

“Still…” Ann looked down, twisting the end of her ponytail around her finger. “This isn’t the kind of thing I can just ignore, y’know?”

No one replied – there was no need. They were all in agreement.

“We don’t need to rush,” Morgana said. “If we want to do this right, we—”

Before he could finish his thought, however, Morgana cut himself off, meowing faintly at something behind them and leaping into Akira’s open messenger bag, hiding himself away.

“Morgana?” Ann asked, twisting around to look over her shoulder. When she caught sight of what had startled Morgana, she immediately dropped her sunny expression. “Um, excuse you? We’re trying to have a conversation here.”

Standing in the walkway, half attempting to hide herself behind the corner, was another student, a girl with dark brown hair. Though he had never spoken to her, Akira recognized her instantly; it would be impossible for anyone at Shujin not to know the identity of the student council president.

“Oh, please don’t let me interrupt,” Makoto said, holding up her hands and stepping into the gazebo now that she’d been caught. “That was quite the conversation you were having just now… I couldn’t help but be curious.”
“Don’t you have anything better to do?” Ryuji asked. He got to his feet and stood shoulder-to-shoulder beside Ann, the two of them radiating an intense distrust that was palpable even to Akira as they formed an impassable wall in front of Makoto.

“There’s no need to be so hostile,” Makoto said, putting on a disarming smile. “You’re discussing the scam that’s been going around Shibuya, aren’t you? A fair number of students have come to the student council with just that kind of concern, you know.”

“Oh yeah?” Ann asked. “Like they came to you about Kamoshida, right?”

“That—!” Makoto physically recoiled like Ann’s question had struck a nerve, and she took a moment to compose herself before speaking again. “The – the Kamoshida incident was a… unique situation for the faculty…”

Ryuji scoffed. “That’s a real nice way of sayin’ it.”

Makoto brushed off his comment much more easily than she had Ann’s. “At any rate, these scammers have no connection to the school administration, so it would be much easier for us to act if we were to find a lead.” She swept her gaze from Ryuji to Ann to Akira, directing her next statement to him specifically. “It would seem you and I are on the same side. If you know something, it would really be in everyone’s best interest for you to share it.”

“Well, sorry to disappoint, but we’re clueless,” Ann cut in before Akira could even think of a response.

“Just a buncha dumb troublemakers, right, class prez?” Ryuji asked.

Makoto’s mouth parted in shock, and she sighed, tucking a tuft of hair behind her ears. “Yes… you three certainly make an odd group, you know. And all this trouble only started after your arrival,” she said with a pointed look at Akira. “You may want to be careful about drawing undue attention to yourselves. All right?”

Without waiting for an answer, she turned on her heel and retreated back towards the school.

“Was that a threat?” Ryuji yelped, barely managing to keep his thoughts to himself long enough for Makoto to walk out of earshot.

“Don’t worry about it; she’s all talk,” Ann said, waving her hand. “But… if people have been complaining about this to the student council, then I definitely want to do something about it. There’s no way she will, after all.”

“Well, what do you guys think?” Morgana asked, popping back out of Akira’s bag. “Should we do some investigating?”

Ryuji sighed and shook his head. “Can’t today – I promised my mom I’d come home and help with some chores.”

“Aww, you’re such a good son!” Ann ruffled his hair affectionately, while Ryuji tried to swat her hand away, grumbling indignantly when he failed. “Well, it’s fine. We probably shouldn’t do this without talking to Yusuke, anyway,” she said, turning her attention from Ryuji to Akira. “So what are you gonna do today, Akira? Nothing suspicious, I hope.”

Ann grinned, and for the briefest of moments, Akira’s heart stopped. Had he been found out? Surely there was no way Ann could know about his plans for the afternoon… he’d been very careful to cover his tracks. Mishima was easy enough to goad into keeping quiet – keeping a secret
for the leader of the Phantom Thieves was a great honor – and Ann didn’t seem the type to check the Phan-site obsessively; she wouldn’t have seen the calling card Mishima sent out…

But then Ann threw a look over her shoulder in the direction Makoto had just left, and it all clicked into place.

“Me, suspicious? Never,” Akira said, affecting a shocked expression that made Ann giggle. “Nah, but really… I’m not sure. Go work at Rafflesia, maybe.”

“The flower shop?” Morgana asked, wrinkling his nose. “Ugh, I’ll pass. That place makes me all sneezy.”

“Aww,” Ann cooed, scratching Morgana behind the ears. “You want me to take you back to Leblanc? It’d be a waste for Akira to go all the way home and then back here.”


Ann laughed. “Whatever you say. Here, hop in my bag,” she said, shifting her backpack off of her shoulder and holding it open. “Sorry; it probably won’t be as comfy as Akira’s…”

“Oh, not at all!” Morgana said, happily leaping from bag to bag. “Lady Ann, I’m certain it will be the most comfortable trip I’ve ever taken.”

“Yeah? We’ll see,” Ann said. She closed her bag enough that Morgana wouldn’t fall out and then turned to Akira. “Well, I guess we’re headed off, then. See ya!” she chirped, waving goodbye.

“I gotta split, too,” Ryuji said. “You wanna walk to the station together?”

“Sure,” Akira said, shouldering his much lighter messenger bag and opening his umbrella as they left the protection of the gazebo.

The walk to the subway station always seemed twice as long when it was raining, and it was pushing four pm by the time Akira waved Ryuji off at the Ginza line and returned to the surface. He slipped his hand into his pocket, his fingers closing around his phone. Ordinarily, he would have waited to activate the Meta-nav until he was somewhere more secluded, but today, everyone he passed had their heads bowed against the pouring rain, paying him no mind as he stepped into an empty alcove and disappeared from view.

“You’re late.”

Crow was sitting cross-legged on top of a turnstile, tapping his claws against the rusting metal when Akira finally reached the lobby of Mementos. His admonishment echoed throughout the cavernous room alongside the sound of thunderous rain, and as Akira approached, Crow stared disapprovingly at him from across the sharp slope of his nose.

“Maybe you’re just early,” Akira said. “Were you excited to see me?”

“Don’t be stupid.” Crow pushed himself off his perch, landing nimbly on the ground in front of Akira. “Aren’t we here to do a job? Don’t tell me you failed to acquire a target.”

“I didn’t fail,” Akira said. He had to give Mishima credit; he really came through, as if he’d pulled
this request out of thin air. “He’s not on the scale of Madarame or anything, but…”

Instantly, Crow looked more alert, standing up straight and nodding once. “That’s fine; I expected as much. May I ask about the nature of the target?”

“It’s a guy who’s been using his mother’s illness to gain sympathy from his friends and coworkers,” Akira said. “Apparently he even set up an online fundraiser under the guise of paying off medical bills, while he just pocketed the cash.”

“I see,” Crow said, cupping his chin thoughtfully in his hand. “It’s certainly deplorable behavior, but not so extreme as to spawn a Palace, I suppose.”

“Pretty much,” Akira said, pulling out his phone and double-checking the coordinates of the man’s shadow. “He’s down pretty far. Are you ready?”

“Please,” Crow scoffed, flashing Akira a sharp-toothed smirk. “Remember who you’re dealing with, Joker.”

Though for all Crow’s bravado, he still kept his guard up – he knew as well as Akira did that the torrential rain made Mementos a treacherous place – and he didn’t mock Akira for his cautious behavior. Today, he had only Crow as back-up, not the four Thieves he was used to, and he had no idea the strength of the target’s shadow. Better, then, to conserve his energy for the fight he knew lie ahead of him…

With careful timing and a little bit of luck, they avoided most of the shadows on their way down, reaching their destination in a little under an hour. The cavernous tunnel felt eerily reminiscent of the cave in which they’d found Crow’s target the other day: it was dark and craggy, with a lone, humanoid shadow standing in the middle. He was nicely dressed, though not as nicely as the accountant’s shadow had been, and he had a cell phone pressed up to his ear, talking to a ghost and seemingly without a care in the world.

“This is him?” Crow asked, peering around the edge of the cave.

“That’s him.”

“I see. Well? What’s the protocol here?”

Crow already had fire in his eyes, and when Akira placed a hand on his shoulder, he could feel the tension Crow carried there.

“Let’s just try talking to him first,” Akira said.

The shadow had been standing in a relatively relaxed position, but as the pair approached him, he stood up straight, already on the defensive.

“What do you want?” he asked, looking the pair of them up and down. “Don’t tell me… you’re the ones who posted that damn message?”

Akira opened his mouth to respond, but the shadow barreled on before he even had the chance:

“You don’t understand!” the shadow barked, shoving his phone into his pocket so that he could menace them with both fists. “All my friends have become so successful, while I’m stuck working a dead-end job… I just wanted people to sympathize with me! And a little extra cash… if they’re willing to donate it, it’s not like they really needed it, right?”
“How pathetic,” Crow said, a note of genuine contempt in his voice. “Taking money from your sick mother…”

“She – she’s fine!” the shadow said. “We have a great doctor – and my dad’s life insurance policy is paying most of the costs…”

“That’s all the more reason not to lie,” Akira said.

“What do you know? You’re just a kid – you don’t know how the real world works! Fucking brat!” the man yelled, his skin bubbling and churning until he shed his human shape entirely, transforming into a fierce, solid-gold oni.

“Does this usually happen?” Crow asked, taking a step back and readying his sword.

“Usually, yeah,” Akira said. He closed his eyes, and the air rippled around him as Arsene shimmered into existence. “We’ll need to wear him down first, but once we do, we can steal the source of his heart’s distortion – we call it his treasure.”

He thought he heard Crow mutter “of course you do” from under his breath, but he wasn’t sure.

The shadow stomped his foot and roared, causing a wave of red light to waft over his body and settle on his golden armor, making it glow gently in the dim light. Akira frowned.

“His skin looks tough,” he said, “so it might be hard to knock him off balance… loop around back and try to disorient him, and I’ll attack from the front once we have him flanked.”

The orders had slipped from his mouth without conscious effort, so used was Akira to taking up the role of leader, and he paused to consider the possibility that Crow would outright ignore his orders, or perhaps even that he would act completely contrary to them, just to spite Akira for daring to order him around.

Yet Crow did none of these things. He looked Akira in the eye and gave a firm nod before zipping off around the shadow, summoning Loki as he did. A second wave of light passed over the shadow, but it was deep purple this time, and once the mist faded, the oni’s armor had lost its glow. He growled and whipped his head around to face Crow.

Perfect, Akira thought. The oni’s back was now fully turned to Akira, leaving a wide open target for Arsene to hit with his curse magic. Howling in pain, the shadow raged, buffeting Akira and Crow both with a handful of light blows before they had the chance to retaliate.

Across the room, Akira saw Loki materialize for a brief moment, but Crow quickly waved his hand, dismissing him and bringing Robin Hood to the field instead. Crow mimed the action of drawing a bow, and his Persona did the same, aiming his weapon at the oni and piercing his armor with a beam of light.

The shadow snarled and reared back with both arms in the air, prepared to bring them down upon Crow with the full force of his strength. Without stopping to think, Akira summoned Matador, pointing at Crow and imbuing him with heightened dexterity. Perhaps it was unwelcome, considering Loki had a much stronger buff, but the sudden boost in speed allowed Crow to dart out of the way of the oni’s fists without so much as a scratch to show for it.

As the battle progressed, Akira and Crow danced fluidly around the battlefield, dodging the oni’s attacks and playing on each other’s strengths like they had been fighting together for years, and Akira had to wonder – was it due to their shared power? That each of them could wield multiple Personas, did that make them more adaptable, more able to complement each other’s fighting style
with grace and ease? Akira couldn’t be sure; he only knew that the fight was as effortless with Crow as it would have been with a full team of four, and in only a matter of minutes, the shadow reverted back to his original form.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” the man chanted, dropping to the ground and pressing his forehead into the gravel.

“Don’t apologize to us,” Akira said. “Apologize to the people you scammed.”

“They’ll hate me… they’ll never forgive me,” the man said. “I’ll be all alone…”

“Maybe. But it’s your mistake. Own it; take responsibility,” Akira said.

“Okay… I’ll try,” the shadow whispered, already turning translucent. After a few more seconds, he was completely gone, leaving behind a glowing sphere, the source of his distorted heart.

“Well, there you have it,” Akira said. He looked at Crow and gestured to the small, floating object. “You wanna take it?”

“This?” Crow squinted at the item suspiciously before snatching it out of the air. “This is his treasure?”

“Yep.”

The object solidified into a small keychain, which Crow flipped over in his palm. “I have never seen an item like this appear in all my time chasing shadows,” he said.

“Yeah, well… most people aren’t going to bare their hidden desires just for fun,” Akira said. “The treasure doesn’t appear until the target thinks it’s in danger of being stolen.”

Crow’s eyes widened like he was putting together the pieces of a particularly convoluted puzzle. “You mean to tell me that’s why you send calling cards? To manifest the treasure in physical form?”

“You got it.”

For a moment, Crow appeared stunned to silence, and then he began to laugh. Unlike the mocking laughter he’d offered Akira before, this laugh seemed genuine: surprised, bright, and practically delighted.

“I can’t believe it,” he said. “To think there’s a reason for it…”

“What, did you think we just sent them to be cocky?” Akira asked.

“Frankly, yes, that’s exactly what I thought.” Crow slipped the keychain into his sleeve – did his outfit even have pockets? Akira couldn’t tell – and looked back at Akira. “I see… so this is the benefit of changing hearts. You really are a thief in every sense of the word, aren’t you?”

“Guilty as charged,” Akira said. He gestured for Crow to follow him back into the tunnels; they had no more business here, and the sound of battle tended to attract unwanted attention. “There are other perks to changing hearts, though.”

At this, Crow’s smile faded. “Yes… I suppose so. The public may not have taken to you so readily if your targets turned up dead instead.”

They walked in silence for a long time before Akira finally admitted, “We nearly did kill him, you
know. Kamoshida.”

“Oh?” Crow glanced sideways at Akira. “After all you go on about changing hearts, you still considered killing him?”

“Yeah.” Akira could clearly remember the conversation they’d had, Ryuji and Ann and Morgana all huddled around Akira’s table, trying to decide if changing the man’s heart would be worth the risk of causing a mental shutdown… and whether it would really be so bad if he died, after all. “Panther said… she said that living with his guilt would be a fate worse than death.”

“You have a very clever friend,” Crow said, his voice taking on a solemn, gravelly tone. “She’s absolutely right.”

“Yeah. I think so, too.”

“And what of the plagiarist artist?”

“Madarame is an old man,” Akira said, shrugging. “Why bother? He’ll spend the rest of his short life miserable.”

Crow laughed. “You’re quite pragmatic, aren’t you? It’s an admirable trait.”

“Pragmatism goes a long way down here, don’t you think?” Akira asked.

“I can’t disagree with you.”

They trailed off, climbing the last few broken stairs and ascending into the dingy lobby of Mementos. It was a different part of the cognitive subway than usual, and Akira briefly wondered where in Shibuya he’d end up if he were to leave right now. Even more briefly, he wondered if this was where Crow usually arrived – wondered if he could follow him out, and maybe learn a hint as to this stranger’s identity.

(Just as quickly, he discarded that thought. For some reason, it made him uneasy.)

“How intriguing,” Crow hummed, turning to Akira. “You know, given your public M.O., I assumed you’d be some sort of naïve, wide-eyed idealist, but you clearly have your reasons for changing hearts as you do.”

“Uh. Thanks?”

This made Crow laugh again, quick and good-natured. “What I mean to say is… I’ll be back here on Thursday. Not for a job; I just like to keep myself sharp. Come if you like,” he said, shrugging his shoulders, “or don’t. It doesn’t matter either way to me.”

He didn’t wait around for Akira to respond, passing through a broken turnstile and disappearing down the hall – back to his corner of reality, perhaps – but his carefully-worded not-quite invitation stuck with Akira for the rest of the day, even as he returned to Leblanc, where Morgana was still happily snoozing on his futon. Later, when he turned to the Phantom Thieves’ group chat to organize their investigation into the mafia scam, he politely requested they meet up sooner rather than later; he had plans this Thursday.

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Searching for leads on this purported mafia boss was a task truly unlike any of their previous
investigations. Kamoshida had been a familiar face to Ryuji and Ann, with months and months of allegations piling up behind him, while with Madarame, one of his former pupils had approached them indirectly through Mishima. This would be the first time the Phantom Thieves were truly striking out on their own, and Akira had to admit now that he was no detective.

After meeting up with Yusuke the next day, the Thieves set about their search, pacing up and down the length of Central Street, sticking their heads in stores and around street corners in search of shady characters to interrogate. It was a warm and breezy afternoon, the streets bustling with students – it should have been the perfect day for some low-life to find a poor victim to prey upon, and yet after more than an hour of wandering, they’d come up with nothing. In desperation, they meandered down to a quieter stretch of road that housed a few less popular shops, where the crowd of pedestrians had thinned and where Akira was more easily able to listen for anything that may have been out of place… yet nothing seemed amiss. Frustrated, he found himself yearning for his third eye – why was it that he could hear his Personas out in reality but couldn’t access any of his other powers? That hardly seemed fair.

“Ugh, it’s like they’re avoiding us on purpose,” Ann said. “Do we look that suspicious?”

“We are a rather large group… we may not be the easiest targets,” Yusuke noted. “Perhaps we need some way to attract this group’s attention?”

“Gosh!” Ryuji said loudly, shoving his hands in his pockets and looking up at the sky. “I sure wish I had a little extra spending money right about now…”

“Hey, hey!” Morgana interrupted, springing up out of Akira’s bag. “Be quiet for a second…” The group fell silent, waiting as Morgana’s eyes darted back and forth over the street. “There – look, over there! Isn’t that the girl from the other day?”

Indeed, Makoto was there, walking just a few meters down the street, easy to pick out from a crowd of Shujin students thanks to her white halter top. She was picking her way through the throng of afternoon shoppers – right towards the Thieves – and everyone froze, but after only a few seconds, it became clear that Makoto wasn't looking for them; actually, she didn't even seem to notice their presence, quickly veering off the sidewalk towards a lonesome alleyway that was wedged between a derelict grocery shop and a dingy brick wall.

Akira glanced back at the others. This was easily the most suspicious thing they’d seen today, and they nearly tripped over themselves in their haste to follow, scurrying down the road until they had reached the same alley down which Makoto had just disappeared. It loomed in front of them, and when Akira finally peered around the corner, the sight that greeted him was this: three figures standing a row, two wearing Shujin uniforms, and one wearing a conspicuous grey trench coat, a man notably older and bulkier than the students. Makoto had wedged herself in between the younger Shujin student and the hulking stranger, her arm thrown out to shield the boy from harm and her face contorted with rage.

“What the hell…” they heard the strange man growl. “I thought I told you to keep quiet about this, huh?”

“Oh, he didn't have to say anything,” Makoto said. The man glared at the student from over Makoto's head, and the boy trembled in fear. “You weren't exactly subtle, dragging a high schooler into an alleyway in broad daylight… any sane person would be suspicious.”

“Who the hell're you?” the strange man snapped, turning his eyes on Makoto instead. “This is between me ‘n him, so why don’t you mind your own business?”
The mafia punk had his hands up, and he stepped forward, using his size to try and intimidate Makoto, who wasn't fazed in the slightest. She squared up, waiting for him to lurch even closer, and when he finally did, she reared back and punched him clean in the nose, following through with her strike so thoroughly that she staggered the man, who howled in pain and clutched his face.

“Um,” Morgana said. “Did she just…?”

“Uh huh,” Ann said.

“That’s… bad, right?” Ryuji asked.

“Indeed,” Yusuke said. “Should we…?”

“We should,” Akira agreed, already on his way into the alley.

“Go! Go now!” Makoto yelled, waving her hand frantically at the student, who didn't need to be told twice. He rushed out of the alley and right past the quartet of Thieves as if they weren’t even there, leaving Akira and the others plenty of room to circle up around Makoto protectively. The mobster snarled, looking from Makoto to the four newcomers, and decided that – despite being an adult – he didn't like the odds of five on one, especially after he’d been so thoroughly sucker-punched. He twisted his head to the side and spat a little blood onto the ground.

“You fucked up, brat,” he declared, jabbing a finger in Makoto’s direction. “You’re on our shit list now! If I were you, I'd watch my fuckin’ back.”

Clutching his face, he bolted from the alleyway, and Makoto stood stock-still, unable to turn and watch him go – unable, it would seem, even to acknowledge that she was no longer alone.

“Hey, uh… Niijima-senpai…?” Ann asked, touching her gently on the shoulder.

This snapped Makoto back to reality, and the full ramifications her actions hit her all at once, her whole body shaking with hysterical tremors as she fought to breathe, taking in giant gulps of air. Akira placed an arm around her shoulders, and instantly she fell against him as if he were a human crutch.

“C’mon, we gotta get outta here,” Ryuji said, already edging his way back to the front of the alleyway.

“Yes,” Yusuke said. “It would be unwise to linger, especially if that man attempts to return with back-up.”

“Let’s go to the diner,” Akira said. “It’s close, and it’s always crowded. It’ll be easy to hide there.”

Cautiously, the Thieves escorted Makoto up the narrow staircase to the Central Street diner, where – as Akira had predicted – there were dozens of other Shujin students, all identically dressed: the perfect place to hide in plain sight. They eased Makoto into a booth seat next to the wall, with Ann to her right, while Yusuke, Ryuji, and Akira squeezed into the seats across from them. Once they were settled, Akira flagged down a waitress, ordering a coffee for himself and a fruit tea for Makoto; Ann ordered the same, while Ryuji got himself a steak and Yusuke asked for water, and then the group was finally left alone.

By now, Makoto had calmed significantly, and aside from the occasional hiccup, she looked almost normal, though to say the mood at the table was still awkward would have been a grave understatement.
“…I’m sorry,” Makoto said, her voice watery and broken, like an unshed tear. She stared at her hands, unable to look any of them in the eye.

“It’s okay,” Akira was quick to say, but Makoto shook her head.

“It’s not. I’m so stupid.” She sniffed, rubbing away a lingering tear with the heel of her palm. “But I was so tired… so sick of being useless. I wanted to act for once, instead of waiting for orders like usual… and look where it got me.”

Ryuji scratched his head and looked at the ceiling. “Hey, you’re not… useless, c’mon. I mean, you’re student council president…”

“Please, spare me the platitudes,” Makoto said, in a much firmer voice. “You don’t have to pretend to like me.”

“Hey, I’m not–!” Ryuji began, only to be interrupted by the arrival of their food. Conversation took a pause while their items were doled out, and when Ryuji spoke again, it was in a much quieter voice. “Look, forget about that. What you just did… that ain’t useless.”

“Indeed,” Yusuke said. “Perhaps this means little coming from a stranger like me, but my first impression of you is that you are a woman willing to confront a great foe to protect your classmates… an act worthy of admiration.”

Makoto’s expression grew ever so slightly less somber.

“You… looking at your uniform, you must attend Kosei, right?” she asked.

“That is correct.”

“I see.” Makoto took a deep breath and finally turned her attention to the fruit tea in front of her, tugging it close and taking a sip. It must have been to her liking, because she took the glass from the table and drained a quarter of the drink in one go.

“You did something reckless,” Akira said, “but you did it to help someone in need. You did the right thing.”

Makoto swallowed and looked at him curiously. “Um… Kurusu-kun, isn’t it?” she asked. Akira nodded. “Do you remember when I caught you discussing these scams the other day, how I mentioned that several students have come to me with concerns about their friends? Well… after we spoke, I approached Principal Kobayakawa with my concerns.”

Her eyebrows furrowed like she was in pain. “However… he told me in no uncertain terms to drop the issue. In fact, lately he’s been of only one mind: he wants to put a stop to the Phantom Thieves rumors. He’s even enlisted me to spy on the student body for him.”

Ryuji nearly choked on a chunk of steak. “For – for real?” he asked.

“Mm. But I can’t – I can’t see how that is a more pressing issue!” Makoto said. As she spoke, her rage built, and she gripped her tea so strongly the glass appeared close to shattering. “The Phantom Thieves are ostensibly on the side of justice, while these… these criminals are extorting our own students, and he won’t do a thing about it!”

“Hey, uh… it sounds like you’re really goin’ through a lot, huh?” Ryuji asked, speaking in the kind of soft voice one would use if they were afraid of spooking an injured animal.
“Don’t tell me to calm down!” Makoto snapped.

“That’s not what we said…” Morgana muttered from beneath the table.

Ann, who had remained notably silent since arriving at the diner, now took a deep breath. “Nii-jima-senpai…” she said, “you really had no idea, huh? About Kamoshida…”

“No one confides in me,” Makoto said, shaking her head. “I could only rely on what I heard in passing… but whenever I confronted Principal Kobayakawa, he just told me to drop it. Without any evidence, I couldn’t do anything, and I started to wonder if I was just being paranoid.”

Ann placed a hand on Makoto’s shoulder, and she nearly jumped. “Listen, I… I know I kinda got on your case about that earlier, but I think you did the right thing today,” Ann said. “Honestly, that was pretty cool of you, senpai.”

“I agree,” Yusuke said, “but still, you may wish to be cautious for the next few days… in case that man starts looking to retaliate.”

“Yes… yes, you’re correct,” Makoto said. “I suppose I cannot take back my actions now, so I’ll just have to accept the consequences.”

“Um, do you want us to, like, walk you home or something…?” Ryuji asked.

“That won’t be necessary,” Makoto assured him. “Besides, I don’t wish for you to be involved any more than you already are.”

“Okay,” Akira said. “But we’re invested in this too, you know. If you decide you need some allies… let us know.”

The others all nodded agreeably, and as Makoto looked around the table, she finally managed to smile.

“Okay… thank you. I’ll remember that.”

They finished their food in relative quiet, and then, after quickly scanning Central Street and deciding there were no shady figures to be found, the group at last parted ways with Makoto.

“Man,” Ryuji said, watching her leave. “I’ve never seen Miss President act like that before…”

“She has conviction,” Yusuke said, “though… perhaps not the best impulse control.”

“Hey… you might want to try and gain her trust,” Morgana said. “A person like that could make a valuable ally.”

“The fact that she has been ordered to investigate the Phantom Thieves is somewhat troubling, however,” Yusuke said.

“We’ll be careful,” Akira said. “But Morgana’s right. She could have more resources than we do. If we want to find this guy’s name…”

“Yeah! That’s the spirit!” Morgana flung his paws over Akira’s shoulder and grinned. “So learn to play nice, okay, Ryuji?”

“H-hey!” Ryuji exclaimed. “C’mon, man, what’s that supposed to mean…”
Perhaps it was little more than wishful thinking on Akira's part to hope that things would quiet down for a few days, to hope they would be granted some kind of reprieve before being forced to leap from the frying pan and into the fryer, but the final bell had hardly rung the next day before Makoto herself strode into Kawakami's homeroom, making a beeline for Akira and Ann, who were still in the process of packing up their things for the day.

“Um… hey, Niijima-senpai!” Ann called out, a twinge of nervousness in her voice.

“Takamaki-chan, Kurusu-kun,” Makoto said, nodding curtly to them. She was holding onto the strap of her shoulder bag with white-knuckled strength. “Do you think we could speak privately for a moment?”

Ann and Akira exchanged a look.

“You’re not in trouble,” Makoto added. “…please.”

She spoke the last word in the same kind of broken voice she had used back at the diner, and it was enough for Akira. He tapped Ann on the arm and nodded.

“Uh, sure!” Ann said. “Where to?”

“The student council room.” Makoto said. “There’s no meeting today, and I can lock the door.”

Ann shot Akira a look and mouthed the word “lock??”, but still they followed Makoto up to the third floor and into the vacant classroom. The room had once been neatly organized, but now papers were strewn across various flat surfaces, supplies piled up in cluttered groups that had only tangential relation to each other, and even though it was empty, the place felt very small and busy. Makoto pushed some papers aside and cleared a spot on the table, at which she then sat down.

“I, um…”

She sighed, and then she retrieved an envelope from her backpack, placing it delicately on the table, like she was afraid it might combust on contact.

“This was in my apartment’s mailbox yesterday,” she said.

When it became obvious that Makoto wasn’t going to elaborate, Akira picked up the letter and unfolded it, holding it up for Ann to read. It was a convincing mock-up of a medical bill, labeled with Makoto’s full name, her address, the name of Shujin Academy as well as her cram school – the amount of detail was staggering – and at the bottom, a request for three million yen by the middle of July, though to whom she was supposed to pay that money, the letter did not say.

“This is from that mafia guy,” Akira surmised. “He’s blackmailing you?”

“Yes,” Makoto whispered. She covered her eyes with her hands and shuddered visibly. “Turn the page.”

Ann did so. Attached to the next page was a photo – clearly taken from afar, a little blurry around the edges, by someone trying not to get caught – of a young woman with long silver hair.

“Who is she?” Akira asked.

“My sister,” Makoto said.
Ann whistled. “Damn, that’s freaky,” she said, handing the letter back to Makoto. “So, uh, not to sound callous or anything, but… why are you showing this to us, Niijima-senpai?”

Makoto sniffled weakly and stared at her hands. “It’s you, isn’t it?” she asked. “You’re… the Phantom Thieves. Aren’t you?”

“Wha-haha, what are you talking about?” Ann asked, shooting Akira a nervous half-smile.

“And if we were?” Akira asked.

“Akira!” Morgana hissed from inside the bag.

“If you were, I’d say… I envy you,” Makoto said. “You were able to find out what Kamoshida was doing and put a stop to it in a way I never could.” She gripped the ransom note tightly in both hands and thrust her arms straight out towards Akira, bowing her head as she did. “If you were, I’d ask for your help. To protect the students here, and to protect Sis… I can’t do it alone. It pains me to admit it, but I’m in over my head…”

Ann threw a look at Akira.

“We, uh… well, we’d have to talk to the others, but…”

“We can look into it,” Akira finished. He looked up at Makoto and asked, “Can I make a copy of this?”

She winced at him. “I would really prefer if you didn’t… but, if you think it’s important…”

“I’ll redact all the identifying details,” Akira promised, already eying the copy machine sitting in the back of the room.

“Okay,” Makoto said. “Thank you for this… thank you.” She took a long breath, and for the first time that afternoon – even if for just a moment – the tension in her shoulders seemed to dissipate.

“This is worrying,” Yusuke said, frowning down at the copied blackmail letter. “That this group was able to respond so quickly, with such intimate personal details…”

“That’s the mob for you,” Morgana said. “They’re as shady as they come.”

“We gotta go after this guy now, right?” Ryuji asked. “I mean… Niijima-senpai ain’t exactly my favorite person in the world, but no one deserves this, y’know?”

“Yeah,” Ann said. “It’s just… who exactly are we looking for? This letter is totally anonymous.”

“The only thing that stands out to me is this symbol,” Yusuke said, pointing out a small golden insignia adorning the top of the paper. It was printed in shiny gold ink and appeared to depict a stylized pig head, but with the kanji for gold stamped over its nose. “Surely this is intended to be a logo of some kind.”

“Oh hey, you’re right!” Ann said, leaning over the table to get a better look. “That’s gotta be something, right?”

“But what kind of a crappy lead is this?” Ryuji asked. “I’m no crook; how’re we even supposed to find out what it means?”
Ryuji had a point – aside from the Phantom Thieves themselves, Akira didn’t know any criminals. Well, he knew Iwai over at Untouchable, but Iwai was retired and wouldn’t tell Akira anything that might get him into trouble, anyway. They could try to gather intel on their own, but poking around Central Street for clues might just tip off the mob boss, putting them in an even more precarious position. What they needed was someone who could look into the affairs of the criminal underworld without drawing suspicion… someone who knew where to look and what to look for.

The gears in Akira’s mind had already begun to turn, and he stood up abruptly, placing his hand on the medical bill.

“I need to borrow this,” he declared.
It was a little worrying how quickly Akira had learned to elude Morgana’s watchful eye. Of course, it was easier to pull off when Morgana was trapped in a cat’s body, with all the limitations that entailed, but Akira still didn’t feel good about taking advantage of him, trapping Morgana in Leblanc for the afternoon while he himself slipped back out the front door under the guise of going to the laundromat. In a desperate attempt to dispel the guilt that nagged at him, Akira reasoned that he was just doing his due diligence – he was still getting a feel for Crow, trying to judge his character and whether or not he would make a trustworthy ally – and maybe that was all true, but…

Akira leaned against one of the less grimy walls in the Mementos lobby and tapped his foot restlessly against the ground. Although it was around the same time they’d met up the other day, Akira hadn’t yet caught a glimpse of Crow, and he was beginning to wonder if he wasn’t just wasting his time. Who was to say whether or not Crow would even show up? Or perhaps he was already here, but he never intended to reveal himself, watching from some hidden spot and laughing at poor, gullible Joker.

A quick scan of the area with his third eye, however, told him that the only other living being around here was Justine, who was standing patiently outside the entrance to the Velvet Room on the other side of the lobby. She shot him a curious glance every so often, but otherwise she kept silent and steady, never abandoning her post.

Every second that dripped by was agonizingly slow, and Akira was about two minutes from giving up entirely when the soft sound of footsteps broke through the ambient static of the Metaverse. Finally, Crow appeared, creeping out from around the corner of a long hallway Akira had never explored. He looked on-edge, his gaze unwaveringly trained on Akira and his hand hovering over his sword hilt, but once he came close enough that the shadows no longer obscured his face, he suddenly stopped and stood up straight.

“...Joker?”

“That’s me,” Akira said. He pushed off from the wall and slipped his hands casually into his jacket pockets. “You sound surprised.”

Akira moved to take a step closer, but as soon as he did, Crow jumped back and unsheathed his sword, menacing it in Akira’s direction.

“What do you want from me?” he asked, and if Akira had weaker nerves, he might have flinched at Crow’s hostile tone.

“What do you mean, what do I want? You’re the one who invited me to come train with you, remember?”

“And you thought that a good use of your time?” Crow snapped. “Why? I obviously have nothing to teach you, not when you know about changing hearts – it’s not as though you’ll ever be able to turn shadows psychotic.” He paused, and his lip curled up into a disgusted sneer. “Do you intend to try and unmask me, then? Am I such a threat to your little group that you need to ascertain my identity, take me down back in reality?”

“Wh – where’s this coming from all of a sudden?” Akira asked, holding his hands up, palms out. “Chill out. I meant what I said: I showed up because you told me you’d be here, and I want to train
with you because you’re strong. That’s it.”

Crow’s eyes narrowed in suspicion so blatant that it was obvious even beneath that mask of his, and yet his sword hand wavered, the blade lowering just a little.

“That’s it?” he asked.

“That’s it.”

In the back of Akira’s mind, Arsene’s eyes flashed with fire, and a voice called out to him, *Except that’s not true, is it? Not today.*

Akira clicked his tongue.

“Actually, I do also have a favor to ask you today,” he added. “But I won’t, if you want me to prove it.”

As soon as the words left Akira’s mouth, the fire in Crow’s eyes flickered out, leaving them cold and empty. “…I see,” he said, his words clipped and razor sharp as he stowed his sword away, turning his shoulder to Akira. “Fine, go ahead, I suppose. I can’t promise I’ll answer, however.”

Akira shoved his hand into his pocket and dug around until he found his copy of Makoto’s letter. The paper was slightly crumpled, and the letter itself was almost entirely illegible, given that every potentially identifying detail had been redacted, but that didn’t matter; the logo was the only thing of interest. He extended the item to Crow, who regarded it warily for a second before snatching it from Akira’s hand.

“We’re pursuing a new target, but this is all we have to go on,” Akira explained. “The logo caught our eye, but we don’t… I thought you might be able to help us figure out where it came from.”

While Akira spoke, Crow studied the paper carefully. “This is likely the insignia of a crime lord of some kind,” he concluded. “You think I have those kinds of ties?”

“I think you’re resourceful,” Akira said. Crow blinked at him. “I’m just looking for a name, that’s all.”

“You’re looking for keywords, you mean.”

Keywords to identify a Palace. So, Crow knew how to do that, too.

“…I’ll look over it,” Crow said, folding the paper up and slipping it into his sleeve. “But I make no promises.”

The words almost didn’t register in Akira’s brain, and he had nearly blurted out a further plea for help when he realized Crow had *agreed.*

“That’s – that’s plenty,” he stammered. “Thank you.”

“Meet me back here in three days, and I’ll report what I’ve found,” Crow said, and though he spoke with outward confidence, Akira thought he looked tense, like some unwanted thought was pulling his mind in two directions at once.

“…I have one condition,” Crow added. “Don’t follow me. Don’t even try – if you do, I’ll kill you on the spot. Understood?”
“Okay,” Akira said. He wasn’t sure why Crow was bringing this up now; to Akira, that was a rule they’d quietly established during their first meeting, a rule that hadn’t needed clarification. “As long as you promise the same.”

Crow didn’t reply, but his silence spoke for itself:

_That goes without saying._

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“Where were you?”

Morgana’s piercing stare and sharp tongue were waiting for Akira the moment he returned to Leblanc’s attic.

“Hello to you, too,” Akira said, walking past Morgana, who was perched on the banister, his tail swishing aggressively back and forth. “I told you, I was just following up on a lead.”

“Did you go to the Metaverse again?” was Morgana’s next question, and this time, Akira kept silent on the grounds that he was unable to implicate himself if he said nothing. Morgana’s ears drooped. “So you _did_ go…”

Akira dropped his school bag on the ground, where it landed with an unceremonious thud.

“Morgana, listen—”

“Akira, do you trust me?”

Morgana’s voice quivered as he spoke, and Akira stopped abruptly.

“I trust you,” he said. The words left him in an instant; he hadn’t even paused to think. “Yeah. I did go to Mementos. I found… something.” _Someone_. “And I’ll tell you about it soon, Morgana, but…”

But what? But he wasn’t done befriending this mysterious Persona-user – the one who very well could be the assassin about which they had heard so much? As if that kind of confession would soothe Morgana’s worries…

“Just for a little bit, can you trust me, too?” Akira asked.

“Trust… that this is something you need to do alone, you mean?” Morgana asked.

“Yeah. Just for now – just until I’ve confirmed a few more things for myself. I don’t want to put the team in danger.”

Akira held his breath, watching the turmoil play out behind Morgana’s eyes, until finally the cat sighed and hung his head. “Okay, Leader,” he said. “I’ll trust you… You haven’t steered us wrong yet, after all.”

Relief flooded Akira’s heart, and he smiled. “Thanks, Morgana,” he said. “I owe you.”

“You sure do!” Morgana agreed, jumping down and following Akira downstairs. “Hey, try and convince Boss to pick up some raw fish next time he goes to the store. That can be your first act of penance.”

Sojiro looked up from his crossword puzzle as the duo came down into Leblanc. “Boy, he sure is
chatty tonight, huh?” he asked, his eyes following Morgana, who jumped up into a barstool and made himself comfy. “I heard him meowing when you went upstairs, too.”

“He says you should buy him some fresh tuna fillets from the market,” Akira said, taking the open seat beside Morgana.

“Tuna? Sheesh, that cat’s got expensive tastes. It’s completely out of season…” Sojiro trailed off, shaking his head like he was trying to forget that he had momentarily entertained the thought of buying something solely for a cat’s whims. “Anyway… you’re back a little earlier than usual. All done for the day?” he asked.

“Yeah. I was going to work at the convenience store, but they didn’t need me, so I’m back early, I guess,” Akira said, fiction flowing from his mouth without a second thought. That, too, was a little worrying; he hadn’t realized he had become such an accomplished liar.

Sojiro grunted and stepped away from the bar, rummaging around in the kitchen for a moment before returning with a worn green apron in his hands. “Well, if it’s work you’re looking for, you don’t need to go so far,” he said, laying the apron on the counter. “There’re plenty of chores I can’t be bothered to do around here.”

Akira hesitated, then picked up the apron and pulled it on over his head. It wasn’t as though he had anything better to do tonight, and if left to his own devices, he would only agonize fruitlessly over his decision to ask Crow for help with Phantom Thieves business. This, at least, would keep his hands occupied.

Indeed, for such a quiet café, Leblanc had no shortage of tasks. Sojiro kept him busy: there were dishes to be washed, floors to be swept, shelves to be arranged – it may have been tedious work to some, but Akira took solace in the simple, mechanical rhythm of doing mindless chores, and the hours ticked away without his notice.

He was standing in front of the coffee maker, replacing the used filter with a fresh one when Sojiro walked up beside him and asked, “You wanna try brewing a cup?”

Akira looked around. It was dark out, and the sign on Leblanc’s door had been flipped to ‘closed’ – the only other person in the café was Morgana, who was snoozing peacefully, having never moved from his barstool.

“Yes,” Akira said, and wiped his hands on his apron. “What do I do?”

Sojiro rummaged around on the back shelf, examining several jars of coffee beans before selecting a half-empty container from a lower rack.

“Make sure there’s fresh water in the bottom carafe and light the burner again,” Sojiro instructed. Akira nodded, and while he tended to the equipment, Sojiro measured out a small scoop of beans and ran them through the grinder.

“You’ll need to wait for the water to boil before adding the grounds,” Sojiro explained, handing Akira the small container of ground coffee. “You’ll know it’s ready when the siphon pulls the water into the upper chamber.”

They fell silent, each watching the burner as it slowly brought the water to a boil.

“So…” Sojiro said, turning from the counter and lighting a fresh cigarette, “are you, uh… doin’ alright in school?”
It was an innocuous question, but it caught Akira by surprise. The whole day had been a little strange, actually, but this was just icing on the weird cake – not only because Sojiro, who was usually fiercely territorial about his equipment, was allowing Akira to try his hand at coffee-brewing, but because Sojiro may have said more to him in this one night than he had since Akira first moved to Yongen-Jaya back in April. He wondered if this was cause for alarm, or if, perhaps, Sojiro was starting to warm up to him after all this time.

“Yeah,” Akira finally said. Slowly, he tipped the coffee grounds into the upper carafe, where the water had come to a boil. “I was top ten in my class for midterms.”

“That so? Huh.” Sojiro looked honestly impressed, and took a long drag on his cigarette.

“You know, I heard smoking dulls your sense of taste,” Akira commented, keeping his head ducked as if he were concentrating seriously on the coffee brewing before him.

Sojiro gave a dry, wheezy laugh. “Yeah? Well, you’re not wrong,” he said, flicking some ash onto the floor. “But it doesn’t matter how many of these things I smoke… I’ll never lose my taste for coffee or curry. It’s in my blood.”

Akira hummed thoughtfully. “How long have you been running Leblanc?” he asked.

“Oh… a good few years now,” Sojiro said. “I’ve been brewing coffee all my life. As for curry… well, not quite as long as coffee, but that doesn’t make it any less important to me.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, and for a moment, it seemed as though he had traveled somewhere very far away, the plumes of cigarette smoke swirling around him like hazy memories.

“All right,” he said, abruptly stubbing out his cigarette in the ashtray by the cash register. “Let’s see how you did.”

Akira removed the heat source from the siphon and gave the boiling coffee grounds a quick stir, just as he’d seen Sojiro do dozens of times, before the siphon sucked the coffee through the filter and back into the lower chamber. Careful not to burn himself, he poured two mugs of coffee, and Sojiro took one, taking a sip of the piping hot beverage without even flinching. He paused thoughtfully, grimaced, and swallowed.

“You over-boiled it – it’s too bitter.” He paused. “Of course, some people like that,” he added, taking another sip.

Akira blew over the top of his mug and took a sip himself. Sojiro wasn’t kidding; the coffee’s flavor was harsh and acidic, leaving Akira’s mouth paradoxically dry, but still, the underlying flavor was there…

“Not bad for your first time,” Sojiro said, setting the cup down on the counter.

“I’ll keep practicing,” Akira said. He rubbed the top of the coffee brewer gently. “I’ll stay up all night brewing until I get it right.”

“Ohhh no you won’t. No operating the brewer when I’m not around,” Sojiro said, but although his tone was harsh, something softened his words – traces of amusement in his eyes and pride in his voice. “You got plans tomorrow afternoon?” he asked.

“No yet. Why?”

“Come back to Leblanc and help me watch the café. I want to make a batch of curry, and it’ll be convenient to have someone watching the customers while my back is turned,” Sojiro said. “And
I’ll let you take another crack at brewing that coffee.”

The corners of Sojiro’s lips lifted up into the barest hint of a smile, and as he finished tidying up from his failed brewing experiment, Akira couldn’t help but smile a little, too.

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Even though the days were growing longer, most of Leblanc’s customers cleared out well before closing time, with only a few locals remaining as the sun began to sink and the shadows outside grew long. Akira had been tending Leblanc’s counter all afternoon, and he was sure he’d seen the last of their customers for the day when he heard the front door chime again.

“Welcome— oh, it’s you,” Sojiro said. Akira had never heard someone change their tone so quickly before; Sojiro jumped from his pleasant-but-gruff customer service voice into an icy-cold utterance that bordered on a growl, and Akira immediately glanced at the door, curious as to what – or rather, who – could have caused such a reaction.

Two customers had just arrived. The first was a young woman with a striking presence, from her long silver hair to her sharp black suit, but perhaps the most striking thing of all was that Akira knew her – this was Makoto’s sister, Sae, who Akira clearly recognized from the blackmail photo Makoto had shown him yesterday. She was obviously the one who had caught Sojiro’s attention, and she paid Akira no mind, walking up to the bar directly in front of Sojiro.

Behind her was – Akira almost couldn't believe it – Goro Akechi. What was it he’d said back at the TV station? It felt like they were supposed to meet? Akira was starting to get the feeling he was right.

“I have nothing to say to you,” Sojiro said.

Sae frowned at him. “Why the hostilities? Perhaps I’m just here for a cup of coffee,” she said, lowering herself into the barstool closet to Sojiro. She turned her head sharply towards Akechi, who had been ambling into the room and surveying Leblanc with a mild expression. “Akechi!” she snapped. “What do you want?”

“Oh, just a coffee for me, as well,” Akechi said, flashing a strained smile at Sojiro. “If you recommend it, I’m sure it’s an excellent choice.”

“Two house blends, please,” Sae said – not a request, but a demand – and barely-contained fury flashed through Sojiro’s eyes. Akira wisely backed away from the coffee grinder – to stand between Sojiro and his coffee right now would surely end in death – and wandered off to another part of the bar, where Akechi had just taken a seat.

“Ah, Kurusu-kun,” he said, the tension melting away from his smile as he turned his eyes on Akira. “How unexpected to see you here. When Sae-san invited me to come along to this café tonight, I didn’t imagine I’d end up seeing a familiar face.”

“Likewise,” Akira said. “Uh…”

“You know, I’ve tried to contact you several times these past few weeks, Sakura-san,” Sae said. Her tone would have been conversational if her posture hadn’t been so severe; she looked like a wire that had been pulled taut, ready to snap at any moment. “It’s not very good business to ignore repeated phone calls.”

Sojiro ignored her, busying himself with making the coffee.
“Aha, um…” Akechi winced, tearing his eyes away from Sae and looking back towards Akira. “Ah, so you work here? Do you like it?”

“Yeah, it’s nice,” Akira said. He nodded his head towards the stairs in the back. “It helps that I live here, too.”

“Oh?” Akechi twisted in his seat to look. “How interesting; I wouldn’t have guessed. Are you a relative of the owner, then?”

“No, it’s…” Akira trailed off. This wasn’t exactly his first choice of topic, but Sae’s harsh words to Sojiro had clearly left Akechi on edge, and killing the conversation where it stood would just make things more awkward. “It’s sort of a complicated set of circumstances. I had to move to the city for a year; Boss is just providing my lodging.”

Akechi’s eyebrows shot up in curiosity, but before he could ask any follow-up questions, Sojiro appeared at Akira’s shoulder, placing Akechi’s coffee on the counter.

“Here you are,” he said, just barely managing to speak in something other than a furious growl.

“Oh! Thank you very much,” Akechi said, though his thanks was hardly out of his mouth before Sojiro had shuffled away to deliver Sae’s coffee.

“I know you’re hiding something,” Sae said, her voice as hard and cold as steel. “Do you want me to charge you with obstruction of justice? Because you’re gunning for such a charge with the way you keep dodging my calls.”

Sojiro presented the coffee to her silently, and, after a long second, she took it without a word, immediately tilting her head back and taking a long sip. Akechi tugged his own cup closer, following Sae’s lead and sampling the coffee for himself. His eyebrows furrowed, and he suddenly went very stiff, swallowing with some difficulty.

“We have cream and sugar, if you want it,” Akira said, surreptitiously moving the sugar bowl and a little pitcher of cream onto the bar.

“Yes… thank you,” Akechi murmured, taking a moment to add a small spoonful of sugar, stirring it until it dissolved, and then to lighten his coffee a shade with the cream. He took another drink and came away looking much happier this time.

“Well then, how are you adjusting to life here so far, Kurusu-kun?” he asked.

“I like it,” Akira decided. “Shibuya’s nice, but I like living in Yongen-Jaya. It’s closer to the way home was.”

“Ah, so you lived in a smaller town, did you?” Akechi leaned forward, taking another sip of his coffee and glancing around the café. “I think I understand how you feel. This café is lovely; very peaceful. I rather enjoy this atmosphere…”

From the other end of the bar, Sae spoke up again.

“I only ask for your cooperation,” she said, in a milder tone of voice this time. “Provide a copy of Isshiki-san’s research to the Special Investigations Department, and I’ll get out of your life forever.”

Sojiro glowered at her. Sae was unfazed.
“I’m being generous here,” she said. “Ordinarily I’d make you turn over the original documents, but I’d be willing to turn a blind eye if you’ll provide us with copies.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” Sojiro said, sounding not very sorry at all, “but what you’re asking for doesn’t exist.”

Sae scoffed. “You expect me to believe that?”

“I don’t care whether or not you believe it,” Sojiro snapped. “I’m telling you, I can’t give you a copy when there are no originals in the first place.”

Instead of responding, Sae picked up her coffee mug and drained the rest of her drink in a single gulp.

Akira turned to Akechi. “She’s your coworker?” he asked in a low voice.

“Indeed so,” Akechi said, looking solemnly down the bar at Sae. “It’s a bit surprising, I know. We seem to be on different levels, don’t we…?”

“Akechi-kun!” Sae stood abruptly, fixing Akechi with a look so stern it may well have been a glare. “We’re leaving.”

“Oh, but…” Akechi frowned. His coffee cup sat half-full on the counter in front of him.

“It’s okay,” Akira said, taking the saucer and pulling it away from Akechi. “Come back sometime and finish it.”

Akechi’s eyes widened – in surprise, perhaps – and a warm smile crossed his face. “…yes. Okay, then,” he said, standing up from his barstool. As he made his way to the door, he turned back to Sojiro and said, “Thank you for the coffee and the hospitality; I truly appreciate it –”

But then Sae barked his name again, and he flinched, hurrying outside and disappearing into the growing twilight. Leblanc’s door clicked shut behind him, and the café went quiet again.

Sojiro groaned and rubbed his face with his hands. “Hey,” he said, “forget everything you just heard, okay?”

Akira blinked. “I… wasn’t really listening,” he said. Another lie, but at least this one was mostly true – overhearing a nearby conversation wasn’t the same as listening on purpose… mostly.

“Oh.” Sojiro let his hands drop to his side, and the hard lines on his face softened. “Right, you were busy talking with that kid… you know him?”

“We’ve met,” Akira said. He gathered up the two coffee cups and carried them over to the sink.

Sojiro laughed bitterly. “I wonder if I should be worried that you’re making friends with the police,” he said.

“He’s a detective, actually,” Akira corrected him.

“Oh, well that’s much better.” Sojiro sighed, tossing a dishrag into the sink beside Akira. “At least maybe you’ll have to keep your nose clean if you’re friends with him. Whatever… I’m heading home now, so lock up behind me, all right?”

“Sure thing, Boss.”
Once Sojiro was gone and Leblanc was safely locked up, Morgana leapt up onto the countertop. He looked wide awake, like he’d been eavesdropping for longer than Akira had assumed.

“That was the same guy we met during your trip to the TV station, wasn’t it?” Morgana asked. “That lady he was with sure seemed angry… she’s not investigating the Phantom Thieves too, is she?”

“Nah,” Akira said. “She mentioned a name I didn’t recognize… sounds like she and Boss have a history of some kind.”

“Huh… think we need to watch the Chief’s back for him?”

“Sojiro can take care of himself,” Akira said, and that was… true, probably; Sojiro had the look of someone who’d seen hell in his life and came out stronger because of it, but at the same time, he didn’t seem to have many friends, or even acquaintances. Akira wouldn’t say Sojiro was “lonely”, exactly, but Akira himself couldn’t have survived as long as he had without with Phantom Thieves, and so if Sojiro didn’t have a similar kind of support network… it would be easy for a woman as harsh as Sae to wear him down.

“…but maybe let’s keep an eye on him just in case, okay?”

Morgana purred proudly at him. “Right,” he said. “You do owe him for taking you in so suddenly… it’s the least we can do. And it’s proper for Phantom Thieves to stick up for those who can’t protect themselves, after all.”

Akira passed the next few days restlessly, deflecting questions from Ann and Ryuji about his mysterious new lead with less and less convincing arguments until finally, three days after handing off the blackmail document to Crow, Akira returned to the lobby of Mementos, idly tapping his foot and feeling a distinct sense of déjà vu. He wondered again if Crow was even going to show – he’d probably think it would be funny to ditch Akira completely – but Akira’s fears were assuaged after only a few more minutes, when he heard the now-familiar sound of Crow’s boots clicking against the smooth stone floor.

“Junya Kaneshiro,” Crow said, in lieu of a greeting. He stuck his arm out straight, proffering the redacted blackmail letter, which Akira took from him.

“Junya Kaneshiro,” Akira repeated. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

Akira flipped the letter over and found the name Junya Kaneshiro written in neat script that must have been Crow’s handwriting. “Did you find anything out about him?” he asked.

“As I theorized, he has ties to the mafia,” Crow said. “He’s no small fish in the criminal underworld, though it’d be charitable to call him much more than that. That said, he is almost certainly the one behind the blackmail cases that have plagued Shibuya as of late; it fits a pattern of behavior from a few years back.”

As he relayed his findings, Crow kept a watchful eye on Akira, almost as if he was gauging his reaction.

“This is incredible. Crow, you – how did you find all this?” Akira asked, allowing a hint of awe to
permeate his voice. Part of it was genuine – he was impressed by Crow’s quick work, and the depth of information he’d retrieved was astounding – but it was also partly to test a theory, a theory Crow proved correct mere seconds later when a smile bloomed across his face. It lasted for only a brief moment, but Akira noticed it all the same: Crow was proud.

Interesting.

“I believe I already told you not to underestimate me, didn’t I?” Crow asked. “That applies to the real world as much as the Metaverse. I have a great number of resources at my disposal.”

Very evasive, but Akira had expected nothing less.

“So,” Crow continued, dropping any hint of self-satisfaction from his voice to affect an air of casual disinterest instead, “is this man to be the Phantom Thieves’ next target?”

“It’s looking that way,” Akira said. It wouldn’t be hard for Crow to put two and two together, so there was no harm in telling the truth, he reasoned.

“Hmm. An interesting choice, to be sure,” Crow said. “He’s certainly several steps above your previous two targets in terms of his influence, to the point that it makes me wonder how and why you chose him.” He paused and studied Akira’s masked face. “Kaneshiro is victimizing students in the Shibuya area, the same as Madarame and Kamoshida. It’s not a stretch to assume that’s how you came across him. Am I right?”

Akira blinked. Damn, this guy was almost too clever.

“You’re not wrong,” Akira said.

“And you intend to change his heart?” Crow asked.

“I don’t see any reason to break tradition.”

“Hmm… I wonder.” Crow paused, dragging his finger over the dust-encrusted turnstile beside him and frowning at the mess. “Crime lords can rise to power for a number of reasons, you know. They may be exceptionally charismatic, clever, physically powerful, or, if they lack those qualities, they may simply use their vast wealth to buy their way to the top of the criminal food chain. Would you care to wager which one describes Kaneshiro?”

The shiny golden pig adorning Makoto’s medical bill flashed clearly through Akira’s mind. “Money, huh,” he said.

“Precisely. So, say he has a change of heart – say he even turns himself in to police custody – what’s to stop one of his underlings from using that money to immediately bail him out?”

“He – he wouldn’t agree to that, though,” Akira said. “After his change of heart…”

“Are you sure?” Crow moved to face Akira head-on, a deadly serious expression on his face. “How many hearts have you changed, Joker? Two? Perhaps a handful of other, less prominent targets? That’s hardly a fair sample size. Who’s to say what a change of heart can do to a person?”

It… was true, Akira had to admit. The only thing Kamoshida and Madarame had in common was that they both chose a public forum to confess their crimes, albeit on a much smaller scale for Kamoshida. But Kamoshida’s mind immediately went to suicide after his change of heart, while Madarame simply wallowed in self-pity and begged for the public’s forgiveness. As for the smaller targets Mishima had culled from the Phan-site… Akira had no idea.
Kamoshida and Madarame’s distortions had been different, too. Morgana had said that stealing a person’s treasure would cause their distorted desires to disappear, but beyond that… who could say? The Metaverse was a wild, unpredictable place, and the result of a change of heart was no different.

“…you’re right,” Akira admitted. “I don't know what would happen if we changed his heart, exactly.”

“On the other hand, if you were to assassinate his shadow, I could tell you exactly what would happen, and how to plan such an event to mitigate the fallout,” Crow said. Akira must have made a face, because Crow then added, “I can see the disbelief in your eyes, but please listen to what I am saying. This man is not the same as a teacher going on a power-trip. There are plenty of mobsters who have control over local politicians, or that have politicians with control over them. That is the level of influence Kaneshiro may hold.”

“…that doesn’t matter,” Akira said. “It’s not about his power or influence; a change of heart… it’s an equalizing force. He’ll confess, and everyone will know what he’s done, and…”

“And then what? Do you think it will make his victims happy to know that the man who ruined their lives feels bad about it now?” Crow asked sharply. “…I won’t deny that it can be a harsh punishment to force someone to live out their life wracked with guilt. But there are some crimes that can’t be forgiven. For a man like Kaneshiro… anything less than death would be an insult to his victims. Do you understand?”

Akira nodded slowly. “I hear you.”

“I’m not sure you do,” Crow said, shaking his head. He made for the exit, but before he could get far, Akira lunged forward and seized Crow’s arm, yanking him back. Crow whipped his head around and glared at Akira. “What now?” he asked.

“You’re not going to interfere, are you?”

Crow tilted his head and frowned.

“Kaneshiro is our target,” Akira clarified. He could just imagine it: the calling card sent, Kaneshiro’s treasure stolen, and then, at the last moment, Crow swooping in for the kill…

“Ah… I see.” Crow sighed. “No, I won’t interfere. You are correct that Kaneshiro is your target… it is, ultimately, your decision.”

It could have been a lie. It probably was a lie, considering Crow had already expressed his distaste for the Phantom Thieves in general, but when Akira sought to look Crow in the eye, he didn’t look away. Akira dropped his arm. Despite everything, a thin strand of trust connected the two of them, and Akira decided to take Crow at his word.

“So, I think I’ve got the name of our guy,” Akira announced.

After returning from Mementos, he’d shot off a quick text to the Thieves, asking them to wrangle Makoto and meet him in Leblanc’s attic as soon as possible. Now the group was congregated around the worn wooden table, with Morgana hiding underneath, impatiently waiting for Akira’s breaking news.
“You found him… you really got his name?” Makoto asked, stunned.

“Woah! Seriously?” Ann burst into a smile and punched a fist into the air. “All right! Way to go, Akira!”

“Are you absolutely certain your information is legitimate?” Yusuke asked, though it was clear that even he was becoming swept up in the excitement. The whole room buzzed with energy.

“Only one way to find out, right?” Ryuji asked. He fished his phone out of his pocket, thumbed over to the Meta-nav app, and activated it, extending it out towards Akira. “A’right, man, lay it on us.”

“Junya Kaneshiro,” Akira said.

The Meta-nav beeped.

“Candidate found.”

“Well, whoever this guy is, he certainly has a Palace,” Morgana said. “But there are lots of people with Palaces… how do we know this is the crime lord we’re looking for?”

“We just gotta go to his Palace, right?” Ann asked. “If we talk to his shadow, it should be obvious.”

“That seems the most logical course of action,” Yusuke said. “Even if it turns out to be incorrect, this man may make a good target in the future.”

“So then we just gotta figure out his keywords…” Ryuji hummed, pulling his feet up onto his chair and resting his outstretched arm upon his knees. “Oh!” he exclaimed, turning to Makoto. “Uh, sorry; you’re probably kinda lost right now, huh?”

Makoto gave a weak smile. “A little… I assume this is how you usually operate as, um… Phantom Thieves?” she asked, her voice going a little quiet at the end, like they had to worry about being overheard when they were tucked safely away in Leblanc’s attic. “I’m surprised that you use an app… wouldn’t that be easy for the public to find?”

“It’s not really a normal app,” Ann said. She pulled the Nav up on her own phone and scooted a little closer to Makoto. “We didn’t even download it; it just kinda showed up on our phones.”

“How suspicious,” Makoto said.

“It’s not suspicious just because you don’t understand it!” Morgana protested from beneath the table.

Makoto frowned, glancing to her left and right. “At any rate, you said you needed to find something? Is there any way I could be of assistance?” she asked.

The group went quiet, and several pairs of eyes turned to Akira.

“…there are two things we need to know before we can get started,” he said. “The location and appearance of his distortion – uh, the way he sees a certain part of the world, and where it is.”

“So like, Kamoshida thought of himself as the king of Shujin, so his distortion was ‘Shujin Academy’ and ‘castle’,” Ann explained.

“And my sen – that is, Madarame thought of his atelier as a museum,” Yusuke added.
“I see…” Makoto nodded, her brows knitting together in concentration. “Well, given the students he’s chosen to victimize, the location must be somewhere in Shibuya…”

The Meta-nav beeped.

“Candidate found.”

“What?!” Ryuji yelped, fumbling with his phone and nearly dropping it. “Shibuya – like all of Shibuya?”

Akira leaned over to double-check, and indeed, the location had been set to ‘Shibuya’ – simply Shibuya, and nothing more.

“I guess so,” he said. “Now we just need to figure out how he sees Shibuya.”

“Hmm…” Ryuji set his phone down on the table and crossed his arms over his knees. “Well, he’s a mob boss, so he prob’ly thinks he can do whatever he wants… maybe a playground?”

“No candidates found,” the Meta-nav told him.

“As if a crime lord would have such a childish distortion, Ryuji,” Morgana taunted.

“Hey, I’m trying my best, okay?”

Ignoring the bickering, Yusuke leaned in closer to the phone. “Perhaps a nightclub?” he asked, only for the Nav to shoot him down. “Ah. I was trying to think of places where a crime lord would spend a lot of time… a hideout, then?”

Again, no match.

“Okay, so maybe it’s not a place a crime lord would usually go – I mean, he probably owns a ton of nightclubs in the city, anyway,” Ann said. “How did the scam work, again? They made kids deliver packages of drugs and then took incriminating photos…”

“No candidates found.”

“Damn it,” Ryuji muttered.

Makoto sighed. “This is more difficult than I thought… it must have been a lot easier with Kamoshida and Madarame. We don’t know anything about this Kaneshiro person…”

“Well,” Akira said, “nothing except that he likes money.”

“Huh? Whaddya mean?” Ryuji asked.

Akira pulled the slightly crumpled blackmail letter out of his bag and laid it on the table. “The logo, remember? It’s got the kanji for gold on it – it even kinda looks like a piggy bank.”

At this, Makoto seemed to light up. “Could that be it, then? A bank?”

The Meta-nav beeped.

“Result found.”
“Woohoo!” Ann cheered, clapping her hands together. “Great job, Niijima-senpai!”

Makoto laughed, shyly tucking some of her hair behind her ear. “I’m still not sure exactly what I did, but… I’m glad I could help.”

“Well then,” Yusuke said, “shall we give it a look?”

“No time like the present,” Akira said.

“Yeah! Let’s – oh, hold on,” Ann said, turning to Makoto. “Do you know how to get home from here, Niijima-senpai? We can walk you to the train station if you want…”

“Wait!” Makoto leapt to her feet. “You’re going to confront him now, right? …Take me with you. Please. I want to help…”

“What? Hell no, it’s way too dangerous for regular people,” Ryuji said.

“I believe Ryuji is right,” Yusuke said. “It’s a little hard to explain, but…”

“Hey, hold on!” Morgana said, suddenly leaping up onto Ann’s lap and catapulting himself onto the table. “Don’t you remember what happened the last time she felt useless? That’s what got her into this mess! If we take her with us, we can keep an eye on her.”

“Are you for real?” Ryuji asked, stuck somewhere between outraged and baffled.

“Totally serious,” Morgana said. His gaze drifted over to Makoto. “Besides… I don’t know why, but I’ve got a good feeling about her. Maybe she has the potential, too.”

Ann sighed. “I mean, I guess Yusuke and I both went in there before we got our powers, too, and we came out okay, so… what do you think, Akira?”

Morgana looked up at Akira with big, pleading eyes.

“I trust Morgana,” Akira declared. “Plus, we have enough people to keep an eye on her. If we’re just going to scout out the Palace, I think she can come.”

“…um.”

The Thieves turned to see Makoto staring incredulously at them.

“Sorry, but… is that a cat?”

Kamoshida’s castle had been an exciting Palace to be sure, and Madarame’s opalescent museum had a certain modern charm to it, but Akira had to admit that infiltrating a bank made him feel more like a Phantom Thief than any other heist they’d pulled. Security was tight; Kaneshiro was so miserably paranoid that it wasn’t enough to rely on patrolling guards and security cameras – no, his bank had to contain a labyrinth, too, a place where less skilled thieves would surely meet their end. Truly, the Palace had been a surprise to them all, and Makoto’s awakening even more so – to everyone, it would seem, except Morgana.

“How did you know?” Akira asked Morgana later, sitting in the dark attic before bed.

“I don’t know,” Morgana said. “But I remember when I first met you back in Kamoshida’s Palace,
I felt like I could see a second you – your true self. I got the same feeling when we first met Makoto. When she punched out that guy, I didn’t see a high school student at first. I caught a glimpse of something… it must have been her Persona.”

“Huh.”

Well, Akira certainly wasn’t going to complain about having another addition to the team – even if only temporarily – and already, Makoto had proven herself to be strong and reliable, but Morgana still seemed troubled, pacing restlessly around on the futon.

“…Akira, what do you think I am?” he asked.

Akira hummed quietly. “You’re human, aren’t you?” he said.

“That’s what I thought, but… it’s more like, I feel like I belong with humans. So that must mean I’m one of you, right?”

“It could,” Akira said.

“But… the thing is, when we’re in Mementos, I kind of feel like I belong there, too. So… what if I’m really a shadow?” Morgana asked.

“Mementos is humanity’s collective unconscious, right? So if you’re a human, wouldn’t it make sense that you feel connected to it?”

“Is that how you feel when we go there?” Morgana countered.

Akira didn’t answer.

Morgana sighed and flopped down on the bed beside Akira. “What I mean is, um… when I’m with you guys, it feels right to me. So… so don’t leave me, okay?”

“Of course not,” Akira said. “Phantom Thieves stick up for each other. Right?”

“Right… that’s right,” Morgana said. He curled up comfortably and closed his eyes, and then, just before Akira drifted off to sleep for the night, he heard Morgana’s quiet voice one more time:

“Thank you, Akira. I’m… really glad you’re the one who found me back then.”
A Fool's Vision

With Makoto now at the Thieves’ side, breaching Kaneshiro’s Palace was a trivial matter – they might as well have walked in through the front door. They didn’t, of course – the bank was heavily guarded, with a dozen security cameras monitoring the first-floor lobby alone – but instead opted to sneak in through a secret passageway, a small tunnel hidden beneath an ostentatious piggy bank statue in the Palace’s garden.

Though a map of the bank revealed it to be absolutely massive, the Thieves were in good spirits as they began their infiltration, and Akira was pleased to see the team working so well together, breezing through the main floor and taking down droves of guards with ease. Even newly-recruited Makoto seemed to learn quickly, no doubt motivated by the blackmail letter waiting for her back in reality, a ticking time bomb looming over their mission and spurring on the rest of the Thieves to work harder, too – not just for Makoto’s sake, but for everyone Kaneshiro had victimized.

After clearing the bank’s lobby of its shambling shadow guards and casing the joint for every bit of hidden treasure they could find, Akira led the group up a wide staircase onto the second floor. It was quieter up here, and the floor plan far less open; the walls closed in around them and made it much more difficult to scout ahead for enemies. Crouching behind an abstract silver statue of a yen symbol and sensing no immediate danger, Akira was about to leave his cover when Morgana grabbed him by his coattail and tugged.

“Joker!” he exclaimed in an urgent whisper. “Hold on a second… I don’t think we’re alone up here.”

“Like, you sense a shadow?” Ann asked, poking her head out from around another statue a few feet away.

Morgana shook his head. “No, this is different. I can’t describe it, but it feels familiar…”

Cautiously, Akira crept forward, leaping from one statue to the next until he had reached the wall. The team held its collective breath as he inched closer and closer to the corner’s edge, close enough that he could peer around to the other side, unsure of what he would find waiting for him: another pair of demon guards, maybe, or perhaps even Kaneshiro’s shadow himself…

When he stuck his head around the corner, however, he found himself staring down nothing more than a shadowy black guard dog that had a mask perched on its snout. It blinked its bright red eyes at him, and he blinked right back, and then the animal howled, charging around the corner and knocking him prone.

Three shadows spawned above him: two high pixies, which floated above the battlefield, their wings fluttering hummingbird-quick, and one very familiar face – an Orthrus, two heads and all, catching Akira off-guard once again… but compared to the hulking creatures that had accosted him in Mementos so many weeks ago, this creature looked much smaller – downright puny, in fact – and even though it was flanked on both sides by blue-haired faeries, it wasn’t behaving as though it had the upper hand. If anything, it looked surprised, like it never expected to get this far.

Before Akira could drag himself off the ground, Makoto leapt over him and onto the battlefield with Johanna at her side, laying into the high pixies and preventing them from coming anywhere close to Akira. Then Yusuke joined her, stepping over Akira’s legs to block him from harm and
hurling a lance of ice towards the Orthrus, which screeched in pain as the spell collided. As the shadows prepared to retaliate, Morgana dashed over to Akira’s side and offered him a hand.

“All good there, Joker?” he asked, pulling Akira to his knees.

“Yeah. Sorry, Mona; even after you warned us…”

“Don’t worry about it,” Morgana said. “Besides… look.”

Akira turned his eyes once again to the fight, where Makoto had dismissed Johanna in favor of whipping out her revolver and raining a hail of bullets down over the shadows, while Yusuke dashed in and out of the fray, corralling his foes into a corner with every slice of his katana. Bits of ice clung to the Orthrus’s mane, and it shivered and trembled on unsteady legs, while the pixies struggled to stay afloat, their wings riddled with bullet holes, all three shadows unable to escape as the two Thieves trapped them against the wall.

“Joker?” Makoto shouted, throwing him a look from over her shoulder. Yusuke, too, turned to him for confirmation, and Akira gave the command to deliver the finishing blow.

From his low vantage point, he couldn’t see the ensuing fight, but he could hear it: Makoto’s guttural battle cry, the crackle of ice magic in the air, the pixies’ shrieking death rattle, and finally, the decisive thud of the Orthrus crashing to the ground, signaling the end of battle. The shadows wisped away into nothingness, and the Thieves regrouped, with Makoto and Yusuke looking a little winded but otherwise unscathed.

Ann jumped in place and clasped her hands together, delighted. “That was incredible!” she cheered. “Queen, Fox, you were really amazing!”

Makoto smiled a bit shyly, dusting herself off. “Is it bad of me to say I find this sort of… cathartic? Not that I’m enjoying the violence, but… it’s nice to be able to let loose.”

“I feel the same,” Yusuke said, and though it was clear he was trying to suppress it, a small smile crept onto his face, too. “This is a rare opportunity; it would be more surprising if you found no enjoyment in it whatsoever.”

“So, that’s it?” Ryuji asked, throwing a glance down the hallway. “I guess it was just another shadow after all, huh?”

“No, no – that’s not…” Morgana closed his eyes and flicked his ears forward, listening intently. “It wasn’t a shadow, I swear. Or, not a normal shadow, at least. Maybe Kaneshiro’s watching us…”

“Well, it is his Palace,” Ann said. “I guess that’s not so surprising.”

“We have to keep moving, regardless, but it won’t hurt to stay cautious,” Yusuke said. He sheathed his katana and turned to Akira. “Joker?” he asked, and Akira nodded, returning to the front of the group and motioning for the other Thieves to follow.

Now that its guard had been summarily defeated, the short hallway was completely empty, and so was the next. A handful of deserted office rooms populated the floor – including one with particularly weak cognition, where the group paused for a moment to catch their breath – but otherwise, there was nothing of interest to be found up here. The good news, though, was that their winding path had lead them to another set of staircases, which promised to lead them even deeper into the bank and – with any hope – closer to their goal.

As they descended the stairs back onto the ground floor, another long hallway stretched out before
them, and though it appeared no different than any hall before it, Akira’s instincts prickled and made him stop short, throwing his arm out to halt the Thieves. He didn’t have to explain himself: one only had to look up to see the row of security cameras hanging from the ceiling, plainly visible and spaced just far enough apart that they covered the entire length of the hallway. Akira frowned, analyzing the area carefully, but before he could draw any conclusions, Ryuji got up from his position and started to walk forward.

“H-hey, Skull!” Ann called out, grabbing for him and missing by a wide mark, but as he stepped into the first camera’s line of sight… nothing happened. Ryuji kept going, standing up on the tips of his toes to stare directly into the camera’s lens, and then he tapped it with his lead pipe, causing several chunks of plastic to fall off.

“Yo, these things are wrecked,” he said. He hesitated for a second, and then he reared back with his pipe, smashing the rest of the camera for good measure and knocking it clean off the wall.

Upon closer inspection, Akira was able to see that yes, every single camera had been broken to various degrees – even the control panel on the other side of the hall had been destroyed – almost to the point of overkill.

“We haven’t been this way yet, have we?” Makoto asked.

“We have not,” Yusuke said. He pulled out the map and peered over it with Ann, tracing a path with his index finger. “This is the first time we’ve reached this side of the ground floor.”

“ Weird. Maybe something about Kaneshiro’s cognition caused them to become broken?” Morgana suggested.

“What’s it matter why it happened?” Ryuji asked. He moved on to the next camera and smashed that one, too. “It just makes things easier for us.”

“I dunno… isn’t this kinda sketchy?” Ann asked. “We don’t know what did this… what if it’s really powerful?”

There were a dozen possible explanations for what had happened to this hallway. It could have been a rampaging shadow, or the cognitive manifestation of Kaneshiro’s rage, or perhaps it was meant to be symbolic, a representation of the law enforcement’s inability to catch Kaneshiro… it could have been any of these things, but from deep within his heart, Akira knew it was nothing of the sort.

“I don’t think we need to worry,” Akira said slowly, staring into the hallway as he spoke, looking for something that was already long gone. “This is just a lucky boon, nothing more. We don’t need to over-think it.”

“I think Joker’s right,” Morgana said. “We shouldn’t take anything for granted – and we shouldn’t assume this means every camera from here on out will be broken – but for now… it’s a nice surprise, don’t you think?”

“Sure,” Akira said.

(This destruction was too deliberate to have been accidental. But he didn’t need to say so.)

Over the course of the next several days, the Thieves progressed through the back half of the bank, and though they found no further signs of an intruder, they did find plenty of “customers” – living ATMs heaped atop one another in stairwell corners or hunched up against the wall, sparking and smoking and bemoaning their broken lives – dozens and dozens of reminders that Kaneshiro was
disturbing on a completely different level than Kamoshida or Madarame had been.

Oh, certainly on the surface Kaneshiro appeared no different: like Kamoshida, he preyed upon a vulnerable populace, extorting them for his own gain, and like Madarame, he perceived himself to be a victim of society and thus justified in his actions. The scope of Kaneshiro’s influence, however, was what truly set him apart from the Thieves’ previous targets. One only had to look around his floating bank fortress to understand that Kaneshiro viewed humans not as individuals, but as resources to be exploited.

“So… this is Kaneshiro’s heart,” Makoto said. They were passing through a cavernous hallway, the floors of which were littered with hundreds and hundreds of bills, each one marked with a huge denomination of currency. “This is the level of distortion it takes to spawn a Palace…”

“That’s right,” Morgana said. “And it’s obvious from this room that the source of his distortion is his insatiable greed.”

Distantly, they heard Kaneshiro speak, the voice of his heart ringing out:

Money… I need money!
As long as I’m rich, anything will be possible...

Makoto crossed her arms tightly over her chest. “Was it like this with your previous targets?” she asked. “Did you hear their thoughts while you were in their Palaces, too?”

“We did,” Yusuke said. “We heard things I couldn’t imagine Sensei ever saying out loud, and yet they were undeniably spoken in his true voice… it was difficult to bear, at times.”

And while the Thieves lacked the intimate personal connection to Kaneshiro that had been present with Kamoshida and Madarame, it was nonetheless painful to hear him speak so callously about his victims – his “employees” – or at least, it felt that way to Akira. The way Kaneshiro championed the hierarchy of the wealthy exploiting the weak, as if it were the natural order of things, made Akira furious on a visceral, primal level.

It reminded him of the man who had pulled so many strings to get Akira falsely accused of assault. Kaneshiro was exactly the same.

In idle moments, Akira wondered how Kaneshiro’s inevitable change of heart would play out. Would he confess to his sins over public broadcast, as had Madarame? Akira couldn’t imagine such a thing; with the number of criminals Kaneshiro commanded, revealing his crimes in public would be tantamount to committing suicide. So then, like Kamoshida, was that where Kaneshiro’s mind would turn…?

And if it did, wouldn’t that really be for the best? A man like this could ruin dozens of lives with a single order – had already ruined more lives than they could count – and it made Akira nauseous. Certainly Kaneshiro had information that could prove invaluable to the police – if he was willing to give it up. But if he didn’t? If the Thieves changed his heart and he went underground, dropped off the grid and disappeared, what then?

Was a change of heart even permanent?

If Kaneshiro’s desires had become distorted once, what was stopping them from distorting again?

Who’s to say what a change of heart can do to a person?
Akira wished he knew.

In time, Kaneshiro’s laundering office gave way to a long glass elevator overlooking the bank-Palace’s huge expanse of underground vaults, and there, in the very center of the room, lay the Thieves’ prize: Kaneshiro’s treasure was hiding somewhere down there. Now all they had to do was find it.

The deeper they went, the more abstract the Palace became – that is, the less it came to resemble a real bank – and Kaneshiro’s distortions only grew stronger, his voice more unhinged. They trawled through the labyrinth, reshaping the room with every massive lock cylinder they turned, until finally the Thieves stood on the precipice of the deepest part of Kaneshiro’s vault. His treasure surely lay just beyond the elevator doors, but before they took that plunge, Akira carted everyone into the nearby safe room to rest.

“We’re so close,” Morgana groaned, dragging himself up onto the sturdy wooden desk sitting in the middle of the room. “We can make it, right? I can almost smell the treasure…. treasure…."

“Do we hafta?” Ryuji asked, plunking himself down in one of the numerous office chairs. “I’m wiped, man.”

“I’m exhausted, too,” Makoto said, “but if the treasure is as close as Mona says, then I’d like to push on just a bit longer.” She sighed and sat down in a sleek leather armchair. “I’d like to send the calling card as quickly as possible, as well.”

“For sure,” Ann said. “I can’t wait to change this scumbag’s heart.”

A murmur of agreement rippled around the room, and Akira felt a pang of fear run through his body.

There… really wasn’t going to be a better time than this.

“I’ve been wondering about that,” Akira said.

“Wondering about what, Joker?” Morgana asked, pushing himself into a sitting position and tilting his head curiously.

“Wondering about changing Kaneshiro’s heart,” Akira said. He tried to swallow, but his tongue felt too thick for his mouth. “Wondering if that’s really what we ought to do.”

“Uh… I mean, obviously?” Ryuji said. He had been spinning idly around in his rolling chair, and turned to face Akira. “He’s blackmailin’ Queen.”

“That’s exactly what I mean,” Akira said. The air in the room grew heavy, the tension thick enough to be palpable, like when a Palace-owner went on high alert and the world became oversaturated with energy.

“Ah.”

Yusuke, who had been sitting quietly in the back of the room near a large green houseplant, spoke up. “I see. You are suggesting not that we ignore Kaneshiro, but that we pursue a different course of action than a change of heart,” he said, eyeing Akira thoughtfully. “Could it be that you want to induce a mental shutdown, Joker?”
Akira looked Yusuke hard in the eyes and nodded.

“You wanna kill him?” Ryuji shrieked, nearly losing his balance on the wobbly chair. “For real??”

“Where’s this coming from all of a sudden?” Ann asked. Even though her face was partly obscured by her mask, Akira didn’t think she looked angry – no one looked angry, in fact. Bewildered, perhaps, or concerned, but not angry. Akira took it as a good sign.

“From his Palace,” Akira said. “Compared to Kamoshida or Madarame, Kaneshiro is different. You must have noticed.”

“You mean in terms of scale,” Makoto said. “Kamoshida was terrorizing a high school, and Madarame could only take on so many pupils at once, but… a mob boss…”

“It’s impossible to know the number of lives he’s ruined,” Morgana said. “That’s what you’re thinking, right?”

“Yeah,” Akira said. “After seeing all this… I just wondered if the world would miss a man like him.”

“I follow your logic,” Yusuke said. “However, do we really have the right to judge whether he lives or dies?”

“Well, I mean, we could turn that on Kaneshiro, too, couldn’t we?” Ann asked. She wasn’t looking anyone in the eye, toying with the edge of her mask. “What gives him the right to extort all those kids? Or stalk Queen’s sister?”

Both questions had come to Akira during their trek through the Palace. It was true that someone had granted Akira his power – someone had looked into Akira’s soul and deemed him worthy of Arsene – but did that give him the authority to end another’s life?

By that same token, what made Kaneshiro believe such a right belonged to him, either?

“Yeah, but…!” Ryuji exclaimed, looking around the room as if everyone had just grown a second head. “Wouldn’t a change of heart take care of that? He’ll confess, ‘n quit taking advantage of people, and…”

“And what?” Akira asked. Unbidden, Crow’s words flew to his lips: “Do you think it would make his victims happy to know that the man who ruined their lives feels bad about it now?”

Instantly, the room went still; the only sounds Akira could hear were the soft whine of the air conditioning and the heavy beating of his own heart. His entire body shook with tremors, and he braced himself on the back of a chair just to keep steady.

It was Makoto that broke the silence.

“Mona,” she said. “The treasure is close, correct?”

“Very,” Morgana said with a definitive nod. “I feel like it’s just around the corner.”

“Then I propose we table this discussion for another day,” Makoto said. “We’re exhausted, and we’re in no position to make such a crucial decision right now. Let’s secure the route to the treasure, head home, and regroup later – say, two days from now?” She turned to Akira. “Is that acceptable, Leader?”
“…yeah,” Akira said, nodding. “It’s fine by me. Everyone?”

The group agreed. Summoning up one last burst of energy, they traveled down the final elevator and into the treasure room, and then, with their infiltration route secured, they returned to reality with a cloud of mild discomfort still clinging to the group. They said their stilted goodbyes, each too preoccupied with their own thoughts to bother saying much more, and Akira returned to Leblanc with Morgana in tow. He must have looked drained, because Sojiro didn’t even suggest he come work tonight, instead encouraging him to head upstairs and turn in early, for once – and Akira wasn’t one to argue.

“You surprised me today, you know,” Morgana said. He was sitting on top of Akira’s bookcase, just next to a large, decorative ramen bowl. “I didn’t think you’d be interested in causing a mental shutdown, even in someone like Kaneshiro.”

“He’s just… different. I don’t know how to explain it,” Akira said. He tugged his sleep shirt on over his head and asked, “Do you think the others are going to agree?”

“Hard to say. I’m glad Makoto suggested we sleep on it, though. You wouldn’t want to rush into that kind of decision,” Morgana said, leaping down from his perch to hop up onto Akira’s futon. “But I just want you to know… whatever you decide, I’ll support you.”

“Thanks, Morgana.”

“Hey, can you prop open your window for me?” Morgana asked. He pawed at the window pane closest to him. “I want to go take a walk before bed.”

“Sure,” Akira said, sliding open the window and allowing the warm summer breeze inside. The sky was clear, the moon hanging low over the rooftops, starlight gleaming on Morgana’s fur as he hopped out onto the ledge.

“I won’t be long; go ahead and get some sleep, okay?” he asked, waiting for Akira to nod before bounding off into the night. When he was fully out of sight, Akira turned off his lamp, settling into bed and allowing the gentle sounds of the evening to lull him to sleep.

But the moment he was sure he’d drifted off, Akira felt a tug, insistent and demanding, dragging him into the Velvet Room.

He stumbled, the weight of his manacles heavy around his ankle, and made his way to the wrought iron door. It had been a while since he had last visited this place, but its inhabitants appeared the same as always, with Justine and Caroline standing at attention on either side of his cell, while in the dead center of the room, Igor sat at his desk, one long leg crossed over the other.

“It would seem you have made another step towards your rehabilitation. You have even made an unexpected ally in the process,” he said, steepling his fingers together. “However… I urge you to be cautious around the one with powers that mirror your own. Like forces are fated to repel one another.”

Justine gave a startled gasp. “So… you knew, Master?” she asked. “The second wildcard that the inmate mentioned…”

“Justine,” Igor said, turning his nose in her direction. She immediately fell silent. “Yes,” he continued, “I feel compelled to warn you that if you continue to cooperate with that one, your rehabilitation will be doomed to fail.”

So, Akira thought, Igor did know about Crow – but the twins still seemed genuinely surprised to
learn about him. Interesting.

“Do you know who he is? Why he has the same power as I do?” Akira asked.

“The answer to those questions is both beyond my knowledge and none of your concern,” Igor said.

Akira held his tongue. Igor was usually cryptic, but he was very rarely outright contradictory, which made that declaration somewhat strange. If he didn’t know the answer, how could he know it was none of Akira’s business…? He wanted to protest, but a quick glance at Justine and Caroline told him this was a line of questioning he should drop.

“Okay,” he said instead.

Igor smiled until his face looked to be cut evenly in half by his teeth. “Very good,” he said.

“Now then,” Justine said, turning to Akira, “on to the matter of your most recent target…”

“You’re gonna need some real firepower if you want to stand a chance against a shadow like Kaneshiro’s,” Caroline said. “Luckily you for, we’ve prepared something to help.”

At this, Justine tore a sheet of paper from her clipboard and held it out through the cell bars. Akira accepted the gift, and found that it had the names of three Personas written on it, followed by a crude sketch of a bipedal tiger with machine guns for arms.

“Ha-ha!” Caroline smiled triumphantly. “Think you can handle it, Inmate?”

Akira opened his mouth to answer, but before he could, his alarm pulled him back to the real world, and he woke up. It felt like no time at all had passed, but the sky was already growing light – summer mornings started so early – and his phone told him it was seven am sharp, and so, reluctantly, Akira sat up. His bedroom window was still open, but there was a lump at the foot of the bed where Morgana was curled up, yawning loudly as Akira’s alarm roused him from his peaceful slumber. He opened his eyes.

“Morning,” he said. “Did you sleep well?”

“Okay, I guess,” Akira said. “Had a weird dream.”

“Oh yeah?” Morgana padded over to sit beside him. “Hmm? What’ve you got there?” he asked.

“Got where?”

“There.”

With his paw, Morgana tapped Akira’s right hand, which was clenched into a tight fist – he was holding something. Frowning, Akira uncurled his fingers, revealing a crumpled sheet of paper: the fusion recipe he’d received from Justine and Caroline, just as he remembered from his dream.

“Joker.”

Akira closed his eyes. A knight dressed in stately red-plate armor and riding atop a jet black horse stood before him. His name was Eligor, and when he opened his mouth, words spilled out:
I’m afraid to even leave my house… what if they follow me and find out where I live? What if they jump me on my way to school? What if…

“Are you listening to me?”

Another knight rode up beside Eligor, this one in shining black armor, and then they were both joined by a strangely muscular owl-headed demon. They, too, began to speak without moving their lips, the thoughts and fears of Shibuya flooding Akira’s head.

What if…

I don’t have enough money to do what I want…

…Haven’t there been a lot of pictures leaked recently?

What if, what if…

“Joker!”

Something grabbed Akira by the shoulder and dragged him out of his own mind. When he came to, he found himself in the near-darkness, though he could see a faint red haze in the air, and – right, he was in Mementos this afternoon, hoping to pick up the components of Caroline and Justine’s Persona spell, and the one who had been yelling his name was Crow, whom Akira had run into along the way.

“You’re doing it again, aren’t you?” Crow asked.

Akira stared blankly at him.

“Huh?”

Crow scowled. “Look at me,” he said, and fixed Akira with an unblinking glare. After a moment, he released Akira’s shoulder and declared: “Six.”

“…what?”

“You have six Personas with you right now, don’t you?”

Akira shifted the souls around in his mind and counted them out.

“Yep,” he said. “You’re right.”

Crow crossed his arms and sighed. “Look, I’m not going to stop you,” he said, “but if you’re going to insist on following me into battle, I need you to be sharp. You should see yourself right now; you can hardly stand upright. It’s embarrassing.”

A rush of shame flooded Akira’s mind. It was true that he didn’t really need the shiny necklace that he’d encountered by chance a few floors back, nor did he have any use for the Pixie who had hitched a ride with him – Arsene, plus the three he needed to fuse Flautos, were more than enough. He allowed the two weaklings to leave, and almost instantly the fog cleared from his mind; he felt like he’d just had a shot of espresso.

Crow must have noticed the new clarity in his eyes, because some of the frustration left his posture. “Better?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Akira said, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. “Sorry about that.”
“Why are you bothering to pick up all those strays, anyway?” Crow asked as they began making their way back to the top of Mementos. “Arsene seems perfectly capable.”

“If you must know,” Akira said, “I’m going to take them to a small blue prison and send them all to the gallows to form an even stronger Persona from their residual energy.”

Crow stared at him.

“If you don’t want to explain yourself, you can just tell me to fuck off,” he said. “I’d listen.”

Akira laughed, casually tossing his dagger in the air and catching it easily. “You know,” he said, “you told me when we met that you’d borrow Personas as you need them, but I’ve never even seen you try.”

Crow wrinkled his nose. “I don’t particularly enjoy the thought of inviting a stranger into my head,” he said. “Robin and Loki both originated from my heart… they are part of me. Other shadows are simply tools, and I don’t care to keep tools with me at all times.” He paused, watching Akira’s dagger sail up into the air and back into his hand. “Besides, I don’t like the way they talk.”

“They do like to talk,” Akira mused. “And I don’t even know how I picked up a few of them…”

“You need to be more careful,” Crow said. “Keep track of the Personas you’re accepting and let the weak links go regularly. Otherwise you’ll end up in a daze somewhere dangerous… you can’t keep expecting me to bail you out of tricky situations.”

“You’re never going to let me live that down, are you.”

“Oh, absolutely not,” Crow said, his lip curling up into a sharp grin, and then he laughed, bringing one hand up to cover his smirk. “I have nearly two years of experience over you, after all… Really, you should be calling me senpai, shouldn’t you?”

In a flash, Akira sheathed his dagger, allowing him to reach out and clasp Crow’s raised hand with both of his. “Thank you for always looking out for me, Crow-senpai,” he cooed, exaggerated gratitude curling through each word.

Beneath his mask’s red lenses, Crow’s eyes went wide. He gave a puff of nervous laughter and yanked his hand out of Akira’s grip.

“Well, let’s just stick to Crow then, shall we?” he asked.

Akira righted himself, a self-satisfied grin lingering on his face.

“Regardless,” Crow said, in a very particular tone of voice that told Akira they were changing the subject whether he liked it or not, “how has your infiltration into Kaneshiro’s Palace been going?”

“You need to be more careful,” Crow said. “Keep track of the Personas you’re accepting and let the weak links go regularly. Otherwise you’ll end up in a daze somewhere dangerous… you can’t keep expecting me to bail you out of tricky situations.”

“Like you don’t know,” Akira said, doing everything in his power to restrain himself from rolling his eyes.

“Hmm?” Crow looked at him with affected shock. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean.”

“I know you followed us the other day,” Akira said.

Crow shrugged, as if it wasn’t even worth denying. “Yes. And?”

“And… I broached the subject, actually. Of causing a mental shutdown instead of stealing his heart.”
Crow almost tripped over the uneven cavern floor. “What, are you serious? I’m… surprised, honestly. How did the others react?”

“We haven’t decided yet,” Akira said. “We want it to be unanimous… I guess it’s a tough decision to make.”

“…would you like me to do it for you?”

It was Akira’s turn to stumble clumsily over his own two feet.

“What?”

“Would you like me to kill him? Kaneshiro?” Crow repeated, casually examining his clawed fingers as if he was asking nothing more serious than if Akira wanted to go grab lunch.

“You’d do that? For us?”

“I have seen the man’s heart,” Crow said. “I have no qualms about killing such a waste of human life… if you Thieves cannot harden your hearts, then pass that responsibility off to someone who can.”

Akira opened his mouth and shut it again.

“You’d have plausible deniability,” Crow continued. “The kill couldn’t be traced to you, provided you never sent a calling card. You’d have nothing to fear, and you’d have no blood on your hands.”

Crow wasn’t lying about that; the news had only reported a handful of mental shutdowns, and thus far, they were all entirely unsolved cases. Furthermore, no one knew the Thieves were currently pursuing Kaneshiro, no one except for Crow, and if Crow was offering to induce a mental shutdown, he wouldn’t rat them out – couldn’t rat them out, not without exposing himself, too.

It was fool-proof, really, but…

“That’s not the point,” Akira said. “It’s never been a problem of being caught; it’s a personal thing. Getting someone else to do it for me, that’s… cowardly.” He took a steadying breath; the longer he spoke, the faster his heart raced. “If I don’t have the conviction to kill someone for myself… if I forced that burden off on another, just so I could claim moral purity, what kind of coward would I be?”

“You truly feel that way?”

Crow’s voice sounded distant, and it took Akira a moment to realize why: turning around, he saw Crow had stopped dead in his tracks, staring at Akira incredulously.

“Sure,” Akira said. “And I would have blood on my hands, for the record. If I was the one that told you to go kill Kaneshiro’s shadow, that’s as good as pulling the trigger myself. You’re just the vector; I had the intent. You know?”

At first, Crow didn’t respond, but then he started to walk again, catching up to Akira and shaking his head at him. “You continue to mystify me, Joker,” he said.

“Oh? That’s a funny way to say, ‘Wow, Joker, your strength of will is truly impressive – admirable, even,’” Akira said, leaning up in Crow’s face and smirking. “But you’ve never been good at saying what you mean, so I accept the compliment, anyway.”
Crow scoffed, lifting his chin up and inadvertently poking Akira in the nose with his mask before he shifted aside, turning his shoulder on Akira. “As always, you’re a reckless fool,” he said. “When the time comes, whatever you choose, I hope you won’t waver.”

“That’s as close to ‘good luck’ as I’m going to get out of you, so thanks, I guess,” Akira said.

The familiar sight of the Mementos lobby greeted them when they finished climbing the last set of stairs, and Akira began to make his way to the Velvet Room, tossing a casual wave at Crow on his way.

“Are you not heading home?” Crow called to him.

“No, I told you; I’m going to go execute these guys,” – he spun around to face Crow and tapped the side of his head – “and make them stronger.”

Crow groaned and rubbed the visible part of his face with his hand. “Fine; I don’t care. Goodbye, Joker,” he said, walking away without looking back.

Akira didn’t even pretend to pay attention in class the next day. It was obvious to anyone who looked at him – even Chouno-sensei could tell his head was in the clouds, and her frustration was just about to reach a boiling point when someone called over the intercom, summoning her to the faculty office for an urgent meeting. Akira recognized Kawakami’s voice and vowed to thank her for this moment of reprieve when he got back to homeroom tomorrow.

Grateful for the chance to keep his hands occupied, he pulled a few pieces of scrap material out of his desk and began shaping some plant balm into a vaguely spherical shape. As he did, Ann twisted around in her seat to face him, looping her arms over the back of her chair.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about what you said,” she told him.

“You?”

“Yes, and about… maybe actually going through with it.” Ann sighed, sinking her head into her arms. “I just wonder, y’know… what it would be like. Would it make us…?”

She trailed off and threw a surreptitious glance at the student sitting behind Akira. While the guy had always seemed content to ignore Morgana whenever he poked his head out from Akira’s desk, the word “murderers” might give him a little more pause, and Ann wisely kept quiet.

“I would do it,” Akira said. “It was my idea.”

“But if we’re gonna do this, it had to be a unanimous decision,” Ann protested. “So even if you were the one to… y’know, we’d still be responsible.”

Akira gave her a noncommittal shrug.

“Have you talked to anyone else about it?” she asked.

“Just Morgana,” Akira said. “Why? Have you talked to anyone?”

“I tried to talk with Ryuji,” Ann said, “but he got really quiet when I did. I haven’t heard from Yusuke or Makoto, though.”
“We’ll find out how they feel soon enough, I guess,” Akira said.

“I guess so.” Another sigh, and then she lifted her head somewhat. “Are gonna meet at the hideout, or Leblanc?”

“Leblanc,” Akira decided after a moment’s thought. “The accessway is too open… we’ll be overheard.”

“In retrospect, such a public place maybe wasn’t the best choice for a hideout,” Morgana commented, his voice slightly muffled by the desk.

“Yeaaaah,” Ann said, shaking her head. “Well hey! Maybe we can talk about that this afternoon, too.”

Then the classroom door opened, and Chouno-sensei returned from Kawakami’s wild goose chase. Akira spent the rest of the school day imagining places that would make a more secure hideout than a large public walkway in the underground mall, an endeavor that successfully carried him through the rest of class and all the way to the final bell.

The Shujin-attending Thieves congregated outside the school’s front gate, making their way to Yongen-Jaya together and discussing painfully surface-level topics during their commute. When they entered Leblanc, they found Yusuke already there and waiting for them, a small and completely empty bowl of curry sitting on the counter in front of him. When he saw the team arrive, however, he got to his feet without a word.

Akira side-eyed Sojiro, who was staring at him with a mix of blatant curiosity and skepticism, surprised to see that a so-called delinquent like Akira had amassed so many friends in such a short time period. Akira smiled weakly and gave him a casual wave, making a mental note to introduce him to Makoto before the afternoon was over.

Upstairs, Ryuji helped Akira pull the table out from the corner of the attic, and everyone sat down silently. They didn’t need to introduce the topic; everyone knew why they were here.

After a few long, tense seconds, Ann sucked in a breath and spoke up.

“Makoto? What do you think?” she asked. “You’re the one he’s hurt the most. It should be your call.”

Makoto sat completely still, her hands clenched into tight fists in her lap. “We… we can’t,” she said slowly. She paused, looking around the group as if waiting to be interrupted, but she had the Thieves’ full attention. “If he dies, the rest of his crime ring will go underground out of fear. Sis would never be able to track them down again. I just can’t bring myself to give up an opportunity for her to gain such incredible information. But…” she bit her lip and looked up. “After the police had finished interrogating him, if he were to suffer a mental shutdown, I… I don’t think I’d mind if…”

“I believe I agree with Makoto,” Yusuke said when it became apparent that Makoto couldn’t quite finish her thought. “The information Kaneshiro could provide to the police is more valuable than his life, and it isn’t as though his shadow will disappear forever. We can always return at some later date, if we think it appropriate.”

Ryuji let out a long sigh. “All right. Okay, cool. I’m down with that.”

“Okay then,” Akira said, nodding firmly. “We’ll carry on like we usually do.”
“I’m sorry, Akira-kun,” Makoto said. “I just –”

“Don’t.” Akira held up his hand, cutting her off. “It was just a thought. I don’t want everyone blindly following me just because I’m the leader. If you think we should induce a change of heart, that’s what we’ll do.”

“I suppose, then, that makes it time to create the calling card,” Yusuke commented.

“Do you think I could help?” Makoto asked. “If that’s all right, I mean.”

“Totally,” Ann said. “We wouldn’t have gotten here if it wasn’t for you, after all.”

“Now,” Yusuke said, retrieving his backpack and rummaging around for a moment before pulling out a red and black card, “if you’d like to see Madarame’s calling card for reference, we can start working on a first draft.”

Ryuji winced and snatched the calling card out of Yusuke’s hand. “Dude, are you just carryin’ that around all day? That’s gonna get you in trouble, man…”

Yusuke began to defend himself to Ryuji, while Makoto and Ann huddled together, examining the old calling card and beginning to brainstorm what kind of a call-out would cut deepest for a man like Kaneshiro, and just like that, the team fell back into their usual rhythm, as if the moral conflict they’d just navigated had never happened in the first place.

Though a hint of apprehension lingered in the back of Akira’s mind, he pushed it aside – there was work to be done, and with Makoto at the helm, they finished the calling card in record time. Distributing the cards was a task that usually fell to Morgana, the least suspicious of the group, but this time the others had no choice but to help out; without knowing where Kaneshiro was hiding, a scatter-shot approach seemed most likely to get his attention, and so, in the dead of night, they plastered Shibuya with calling cards, careful to obscure their faces and never linger too long in one place.

They waited until after school the next day, not even a full twelve hours after the calling card went live, but they had no way to confirm that the message had been received – until they arrived in Kaneshiro’s Palace and found the place swarming with guards and pulsing with energy. Success.

Kaneshiro’s shadow was waiting for them at the vault, of course, and the fight he put up was… impressive, though Akira wouldn’t call it admirable; he fought like a fly that had been trapped in a spider’s web: frantic and desperate. By the end of it all, he was on his hands and knees, begging forgiveness, Makoto staring down at the pitiful shell of a man while Ryuji and Morgana secured his treasure.

“You’ll turn yourself in and cooperate with the police,” she said. “Give up your information, and perhaps your life will have some worth after all.”

Kaneshiro’s shadow whimpered. Makoto’s tone left no room for argument. Behind her, Morgana pulled Kaneshiro’s briefcase from its pedestal, and the entire bank trembled beneath them.

“A’ight, we gotta split,” Ryuji said. “Queen, you ready?”

With one last disparaging look at Kaneshiro’s shadow, Makoto nodded and turned towards the exit. “Yes,” she said. “Let’s go.”

The Palace began to crumble, and the Thieves fled, leaving Kaneshiro’s shadow behind, sobbing and lying flat on the ground as it disappeared from sight. Plaster cracked and fell from the ceilings
as the Thieves ran for the exit, the very floor itself starting to quake beneath their feet, and only once they were back outside did they realize that the bank’s floating island was crashing to the ground. As soon as they could, they re-activated the Metaverse navigator, returning to real-world Shibuya just before the island collided with the pavement.

The app deposited them back on the stable, motionless ground outside Shibuya’s subway station, and they toppled over each other, stumbling with excess inertia. For a brief second, they all held their breath, looking each other over as if expecting to see cuts or bruises or some other sign of failure at the last minute, but they were all healthy and whole. Makoto laughed breathlessly.

“We… we did it, didn’t we?” she asked. “We stole his heart.”

“That we did,” Akira said. He offered the team a small smile. “Good work, everyone.”

“Well, Makoto?” Morgana asked, leaping up from the ground and onto Akira’s shoulders. “How do you feel about your first heist as a Phantom Thief?”

“Oh? I, well…” A tiny smile graced Makoto’s face, and she tucked some hair behind her ear. “It’s quite exhilarating, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Yusuke agreed. “Despite the circumstances, the rush you feel when running for your life… it is a feeling I doubt I shall ever manage to recreate here in reality.”

“Although… Morgana, you said first?” Makoto asked. “Am I to take it you’d like me to join your team?”

“Course we do!” Ryuji said, and then his eyes went suddenly wide. “I – I mean, don’t we? I, uh, I guess we never talked about it…”

“I guess we didn’t need to,” Ann said, “because we all felt the same way. Right, guys?”

“There’s safety in numbers,” Morgana said. “And I think Queen has proven herself to be quite reliable, don’t you?”

“I concur,” Yusuke said. “Though… it would be best if you refrained from picking fights with crime lords in the future.”

“I promise that is not an experience I’d like to replicate, trust me,” Makoto said.

Ann turned to Akira expectantly. “What about you, Akira?”

“We can’t force you,” Akira said, “but you’ve more than earned a spot on the team.”

“I see. Then… I’d like to accept your offer,” Makoto said. She closed her eyes, and a quiet resolve washed over the team. “Working with you all, I felt more powerful than I’ve ever felt before… so, thank you. I won’t waste this opportunity.”

The first few days after a successful heart-heist were always tense, and it was even worse when they had no way to keep tabs on their target. Nearly five days had passed since Kaneshiro’s Palace collapsed, but despite their best efforts to scour the internet for any stories regarding mob bosses, regardless of their content, the Thieves were completely clueless as to Kaneshiro’s whereabouts or state of mind.
They’d done all they could do, and Akira knew this, but it didn’t make the waiting any easier.

Luckily, Sojiro seemed perfectly content to let Akira waste his evenings away behind Leblanc’s bar, tidying up the cabinets and re-organizing the coffee beans. That’s where he was tonight, down on his hands and knees sorting Leblanc’s myriad pots and pans so that they might actually fit in the drawer beneath the sink, when he heard the tell-tale chime of the front door.

Akira didn’t move. The café was empty; Sojiro could take care of this.

Yet instead of the generic customer greeting Akira can anticipated, what Sojiro said was this: “I already told her I have nothing to say to you people, so if you’re here for information, you’re wasting your time!”

Startled, Akira stood bolt upright and turned towards the café, where he found Akechi standing in the doorway looking like a startled deer.

“Oh, um… my apologies,” Akechi said, “but I’m not here on Sae-san’s behalf. It’s, well…”

“He’s here to see me,” Akira chimed in. Akechi’s eyes darted towards him, and even from this distance, Akira could see relief flood his eyes. “And to finish his coffee from last time. Right?”

“Yes, precisely,” Akechi said, taking a few more emboldened steps into Leblanc.

“Oh… right,” Sojiro said, going faintly red from embarrassment. “I forgot that you two knew each other… sorry for jumping down your throat.”

“That’s quite all right,” Akechi said. “For my part, I’d like to apologize for Sae-san’s behavior the other day. She has become uncharacteristically tense in recent weeks…”

“No, no,” Sojiro said, waving his hand. “Don’t apologize for someone else’s behavior. You’ll end up paying for mistakes you’ve never made.” Akechi sat down at the bar, taking the same seat he’d used last time, and Sojiro cleared his throat. “…well, what’ll it be?” he asked. “Let me get you something on the house.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary,” Akechi said with a smile, “but if you insist, I’ll just have a cup of coffee, please.”

“Sure. Comin’ right up,” Sojiro said. “Grab that blend I was working on this afternoon, would you?” he asked, this time speaking to Akira, who found the requested beans and handed them off to Sojiro without question – Akira was not so arrogant as to assume Sojiro was ready to let him serve coffee to customers just yet. Instead he returned to the ground, hastily shoving the last few pots into the drawer so that he could speak with Akechi, instead.

When he got back to his feet, Akira saw that Akechi already had his coffee and was in the process of adding some sugar and cream, just as he had the first time he visited. Sojiro hesitated for just a moment, looking between Akechi and Akira before gruffly mumbling, “I’ll be in the back,” and shuffling off towards the refrigerator.

“You made it back,” Akira said.

“I did indeed.” Akechi gave him a tired smile. “I would have loved to come back earlier, if I’m being honest, but work has been so hectic… even more so than usual these past few days.”

“Oh yeah?” Akira asked. Akechi nodded, lifting his coffee mug to his lips and drinking deeply. “Lots of cases to solve, I presume?”
“Something like that,” Akechi said. “Have you been keeping up with the latest news about the Phantom Thieves, Kurusu-kun?”

“When I can,” Akira said. “A new calling card showed up, right?”

Akechi didn’t respond immediately, taking a long sip of his coffee like he was buying himself some time to think. “Just under a week ago, yes,” he said, and then, more slowly, “…Junya Kaneshiro. Do you know of him?”

Akira shook his head.

“That’s not surprising,” Akechi said. “It’s not a name with which the public would be familiar. I myself am only tangentially aware of him due to my work at the police station…”

Akechi set his coffee cup down and observed Akira curiously. Akira was in a risky position; if he appeared too nonchalant, Akechi might stop talking before revealing any classified information, but if he slipped up and revealed how intrigued he truly was, that would raise suspicions, too…

“He is a crime lord,” Akechi finally said, “one we’ve been trying to apprehend for well over a year now. And just this afternoon, he turned himself in to police custody.”

A shock of surprise coursed through Akira’s body, and he was sure he gave a visible start. “Uh – wow. Really?” he asked.

“Indeed so. It’s a completely unprecedented situation,” Akechi said. His expression darkened. “It would seem the Phantom Thieves have succeeded again.”

“You don’t sound too happy about that,” Akira commented.

“Ah, please don’t misunderstand,” Akechi said, flashing him a disarming smile. “I’m overjoyed that such a vile criminal is under arrest now, but the circumstances are… troubling. It all but confirms the fact that the Phantom Thieves have some way to manipulate individuals on a psychological level, the likes of which we’ve never seen before. Additionally… Sae-san has been pursuing this case aggressively. Now that he turned himself in of his own volition – or rather, through the Phantom Thieves’ volition – Sae-san cannot claim responsibility for his arrest. It’s very likely that she will be passed over for a promotion as a result.”

“That’s rough,” Akira said.

“Indeed… but ultimately, I think we’d all agree that it’s better to have Kaneshiro behind bars.”

“It’s kind of hard to argue against that, huh?”

“Oh, certainly.” Akechi’s smile turned wry. “It’s part of what makes my job so difficult.”

After this, Akira stepped away, allowing Akechi to drink his coffee in peace instead – he would undoubtedly keep trying to talk to Akira if he had the chance. Besides, this was – this was incredible. Akira was practically buzzing with excitement, and he turned his back to Akechi so that he could fish his phone out of his pocket. He thumbed over to the Phantom Thieves’ group chat.

>>Akira Kurusu: Guys, I have some good news…
Broken Calm

It was late Sunday afternoon, usually Leblanc’s busiest time of the week, but today, a heavy downpour warded off all but the most loyal customers, leaving the café nearly deserted until Akira came home, sopping wet from getting caught in the rain during a run with Ryuji. Sojiro had seemed content to idle the afternoon away with the two of them hanging out at the bar – after they had thoroughly dried off, anyway – but soon Ann joined them, and once Yusuke and Makoto traipsed through the door, Sojiro sighed roughly, said something about closing up shop early, and left for home with little more than a vague threat to keep the store clean while he was gone.

Now the Thieves were alone, sprawled out around the café and anxiously watching Leblanc’s mounted TV unit, waiting for confirmation that the news Akechi had revealed to Akira wasn’t simply wild speculation.

And speculation it was not. It took some time, but sure enough, once the news had broken, all sorts of media outlets began to pick up the juiciest story they’d seen in weeks: a notorious mob boss, turning himself in to the police of his own free will? Such a thing was completely unheard of – except, wait now, what about the calling cards people had seen in Shibuya the previous week? Those cards that addressed Kaneshiro by name… this was the work of the Phantom Thieves, the media was sure of it, yet what this meant, no one knew.

A crisp, clear picture of Kaneshiro’s calling card – complete with the Phantom Thieves’ logo – popped up on the TV screen, and Ryuji cheered, raising his soda glass in the air and tipping his head back, polishing off his drink in one go. He sighed in satisfaction and clacked the glass back down onto the table. “Ahh, another successful heist for the Phantom Thieves!” he said, crossing his arms behind his head and leaning back in his seat, a triumphant grin on his face.

“We really did succeed, didn’t we?” Makoto asked. She had slumped down into her booth seat like she’d used up the last of her energy for the day, but her eyes were still glued to the news report as it continued. The case details were all still highly classified; it seemed the police wanted to play their cards close to their chest for the time being.

“I’ll have to ask Sis about it later tonight,” she said. “I might be able to learn some more details.”

“Ooh, yeah! Be sure to let us know if you find anything out!” Ann said.

“Don’t push too hard, though,” Akira warned her. “You don’t want her becoming suspicious of you.”

“Yes, of course. I promise I won’t do anything to compromise our identities… Joker,” Makoto said, nodding seriously, though she couldn’t keep the smile off her face when she said his codename.

Then, without explaining much more about the situation, the news shifted gears to a discussion of the Phantom Thieves themselves. It was too early to say exactly how strongly Kaneshiro’s arrest would impact their popularity, but one thing was clear: their name was beginning to spread far beyond Shibuya’s borders.

“It seems as though public opinion of us has improved,” Yusuke said.

Morgana cackled with delight. “Of course! People have no choice but to recognize us now that
we’ve changed the heart of such a terrible villain.”

“Oh, right!” Ryuji said, sitting upright suddenly and shoving his hand into his pocket, pulling out his wallet. “Hey, I sold Kaneshiro’s stupid briefcase. Turns out it was pretty valuable!”

“Woah, no kidding,” Ann said, looking at the impressive stack of bills Ryuji produced. “Ooh, we should do something to celebrate!”

“We should!” Morgana agreed. “You all did very well… and it’s nearly tradition to have a welcoming party for new Thieves at this point.”

“Hold on a moment,” Makoto said. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten that exams start next week?”

“Ahh, c’mon, Makoto-senpai,” Ann said, nudging her in the shoulder and grinning. “We deserve at least a little bit of a break before then, don’t you think?”

“Shouldn’t we be laying low after this change of heart?” Makoto asked in return. “If your grades were to drop suddenly…”

“Eh, it’d be more suspicious for me to do well all of a sudden,” Ryuji said. “Besides, that’s a week away! We’ve got time.”

Makoto looked utterly pained. “It’s less time than you’d think…”

“After exams, then,” Akira said. “We can afford to wait a little while.”

“I agree; exams must take priority for now,” Yusuke said. “Although… I see no harm in planning our celebration ahead of time. Does anyone have something in mind? I certainly wouldn’t be opposed to sharing another meal…”

“But we’ve done food the past two times,” Morgana said, pouting as much as a cat could pout. “Unless you’re going to take me out to sushi, I’ll have to pass.”

“Oh hey, how ‘bout we hit up a fireworks festival?” Ryuji asked. He had his phone in his hand and had been scrolling through it intently, finally stopping on a small listing of upcoming events in the area. “There’s gonna be a big one in, like, a week.”

Ann frowned. “The one in Shibuya? Ugh, it’s always so crowded…” she looked at Ryuji’s phone from over his shoulder and pointed to something on the screen. “Here, look, there’s gonna be a little festival in Inokashira Park the week after. Why don’t we go there? It’s smaller, but it shouldn’t be as crowded, and we won’t have to stand around in the city, either.”

“I think that sounds lovely,” Yusuke said. “That should be after exams have finished, too… would that be acceptable, Makoto?”

“…I suppose so,” Makoto said, resigning herself to the will of the overwhelming majority.

“Ooh, fireworks! I can’t wait!” Morgana chirped. “Are you guys gonna wear yukatas?”

“Oh, I am for sure,” Ann said. “What about you, Makoto?”

“I think I’ve got something I could wear in the back of my closet, somewhere,” Makoto mused.

“Ah… Lady Ann in a yukata.” Morgana sighed happily, curling his tail around his feet. “Watching fireworks in the park on a summer night… it’s so romantic.”
“We’re gonna be goin’ as a group, though,” Ryuji said. “Don’t make it weird.”

“I – I’m not making it weird!” Morgana exclaimed, indignant. “I was simply commenting, you know, on the yukata… it’s, uh, an elegant piece of clothing!”

“Ah, indeed,” Yusuke said, closing his eyes and smiling serenely. “The yukata is the height of traditional summer fashion… I’ll certainly wear mine, as well.”

“Man, now you’re making me feel weird that I won’t be all dressed up,” Ryuji muttered, picking up his empty glass and staring into it, willing a new beverage to appear.

“We could go shopping!” Ann suggested, her eyes lighting up at the thought. “Akira? What about you?”

Akira shrugged noncommittally, which Ann took as tacit approval.

“All right! Ooh, this’ll be fun; when do you want to go? Are you free tomorrow?”

“Ann,” Makoto said, exasperation leaking into her voice. “Exams…”

“Okay, okay,” Ann said, waving her hand at Makoto. “Fine. We can go shopping when we need to take a break from studying. Breaks are important, right?”

“I suppose I can’t argue with that…”

“Great!” Ann said, throwing an arm around Makoto’s shoulder and pulling her into a side hug. From there, the group devolved into idle conversation, organizing study groups and daydreaming about summer vacation, while on the television, the news droned on, the anchors lamenting the fact that the cause of the recent psychotic breakdowns was still unknown.

Akira wasn’t sure he’d ever studied so much, or for such a sustained period of time, as he did over the next few days. Makoto seemed determined to keep them all from failing, and even Ryuji had to admit – reluctantly – that her tutelage was top-notch. When exams rolled around the next week, they were a breeze; Akira barely struggled at all, which was a refreshing change from midterms, where – although he did perfectly well – he had to fight tooth and nail for every right answer. This time around, the answers seemed to flow from his mind to his pencil completely autonomously.

True to her word, Ann took Akira and Ryuji shopping for yukatas after school on Wednesday, when their minds were too exhausted from the exams themselves to study any further. Though Akira had no love for shopping in general, and even less for clothes shopping in particular, it was fun to go as a group, and Ann had a strong eye for fashion. For Akira, she found a black yukata decorated with criss-crossing grey lines that created a pattern of overlapping squares, which she insisted would suit him perfectly, and by the end of the day, it was hanging neatly beside Akira’s ramshackle bookshelf, waiting to be worn.

It poured rain on the night of the 18th, and Akira couldn’t have been happier that they decided to forgo Shibuya’s grand festival in favor of the little gathering at Inokashira Park a few days later. When the night in question came around, Akira felt a flood of relief he hadn’t felt since… well, since he moved to Shibuya, probably; for once, for one night, he would get to have a regular evening with his friends, not as a Phantom Thief and not as a delinquent – just as Akira, and he found that normalcy to be strangely refreshing.
Stepping out of the metro station closest to Inokashira, Akira looked upwards, and noted with delight the perfectly clear sky; he could already start to see a faint pinprick of stars coming out, even though sunlight still glowed low on the horizon. The early summer heat kept the world warm long into the evening, and with the soft breeze and the distance sound of cicadas whining, the scene was set for a festival.

“Hey, Akira! Over here, man.”

Ryuji’s voice hailed him over to a pillar where he and Yusuke were waiting. Akira had already seen Ryuji’s outfit – he had been there when Ann picked it out – but it was still nice to see him dressed up in the moment. His yukata was olive green, a color that complemented his skin tone in a way that Akira wouldn’t have even noticed if Ann hadn’t mentioned it, with intricate white detailing that stood out nicely in contrast to the simple elegance of Yusuke’s own deep blue garment.

“Hey, hey! Nice to see you guys,” Morgana said, popping his head out of Akira’s bag. “Are we waiting on the ladies?”

“Yeah, Ann just texted – she’s nearly here,” Ryuji said.

As they stood and waited, they watched as more and more people – many of whom were similarly yukata-clad – exited the subway station, making their way to the festival, too. Finally, as one particularly large crowd poured out of the station, two familiar faces appeared. Ann spotted them immediately, taking Makoto by the hand and leading her through the crowd towards the boys.

“Hey!” Ann called out, beaming at them. The girls were much more brightly dressed than the boys: Makoto wore a white yukata decorated with stylized plum blossoms, while Ann wore something flashy and colorful, with a cotton candy blue base and covered in a splattering of differently-sized circles. Though their outfits were hardly coordinated, when they stood side-by-side like this, it reminded Akira of being in the Metaverse, each thief uniquely dressed to reflect the will of their own heart, and he felt an unexpected swell of joy.

“We’re all here… shall we head in?” Makoto asked, and with that, they fell into step behind a few other people who seemed to be heading in the same direction and made their way to Inokashira.

When they arrived, they found a steady stream of visitors pouring into the park, where paper lanterns lined the paths and dozens of white lights had been strung through the trees, guiding the guests around. Down one path, Akira could see the tops of a few pop-up tents, while down another, he saw a sidewalk that traced the edge of the lake and continued off further into the park.

“It’s likely the fireworks won’t start until it gets darker,” Yusuke said. “Until then… shall we have a look around?”

“Totally! Oooh, something smells so good!” Ann chirped. With one hand, she took hold of Yusuke’s loose sleeve; with the other, she grabbed Ryuji by the wrist, and tugged on them both. “C’mon, let’s go check out the stalls!”

Before they got very far, however, Makoto stopped short, looking over her shoulder and frowning. Akira followed her line of sight to the street, where a long car had pulled up to the curb, and though it was hard to tell from here, it seemed like someone was being escorted out of the car.

“Oh, is that…?” Makoto glanced at Akira as she began to walk away, waving her hand distractedly back at the group. “You guys go on ahead; I just want to check something…”
Akira smiled faintly and made to follow the others, when he happened to glance down a less-crowded pathway, and then he, too, stopped short, because something – someone – had caught his eye. He was standing alone, apart from the crowd, and although his figure was obscured by the dark, Akira was still certain…

He looked back at Ann, Ryuji, and Yusuke, with Morgana trailing behind them, and then to Makoto, who was speaking with a young woman, a girl about their own age, and decided he could slip away for a moment. No one would even notice he was gone if he was quick about it…

He wove his way through the loose crowd towards the one he had seen: a young man wearing a deep blue yukata decorated with threads of silver rice stalks that swam elegantly over the fabric and under his pale grey obi. He stood facing the lake, his back partly towards Akira, and held a paper fan over his face, with which he fanned himself lightly as he stared out over the water.

“Akechi-kun?” Akira asked. The boy turned to look at him with a shocked, almost hostile expression on his face, and for a split-second, Akira thought he missed his mark. A moment later, however, the boy lowered his fan and revealed a smile.

“It was Akechi, but Akira was certain that to anyone unfamiliar with the detective, he would have been nearly unidentifiable. Not only was he wearing uncharacteristic clothing, but he had that fan to obscure his face, and his hair, instead of hanging loose, was pulled back in a low ponytail that exposed his neck and made him look more youthful than usual.

“I’ll say. I almost didn’t recognize you like this,” Akechi said.

“Kurusu-kun. This is an unexpected surprise,” Akechi said.

Akira rubbed the back of his neck and winced. Of course; he should have realized that someone like Akechi would want the chance to spend some time outside without being recognized. “Sorry,” he said. “If you want, I can just—”

“No!” Akechi said quickly, holding up his free hand. He blinked and cleared his throat. “That is – I’m merely looking to avoid being mobbed with attention tonight. I wouldn’t mind your company.”

Akira hesitated for a moment, then stepped off the path, closer to the fence and closer to Akechi. “Is that why you’ve got your hair in a ponytail?” he asked. “So you won’t be recognized?”

Unconsciously, Akechi lifted his hand and touched the back of his neck. “Oh, something like that,” he said. “I suppose that my goal for tonight is… I’d just like to pretend I’m someone else. Someone ordinary.”

They stood awkwardly for a moment, the bustling crowd flowing behind them like a river current passing beside rocks. Akechi played with the edge of his fan and gave Akira an apologetic smile.

“Ah, forgive me,” he said. “I’m afraid you’ve caught me somewhat out of my element.”

“You’re okay,” Akira said. He rested his elbows on the fencepost, looking out over the water and casting around in his mind for a suitably neutral topic of conversation. “Do you live around here?” he asked.

“Not exactly,” Akechi said. He paused, and then he joined Akira, leaning against the fence as well. He waved his hand vaguely to the west. “Actually, I’m somewhat far from home. I simply… prefer the atmosphere here.”
“It was the same for me,” Akira said.

“Is that so? How lucky for us to happen across each other, then,” Akechi said. “Are you here to celebrate the end of the semester, perhaps?”

“Oh, something like that,” Akira said, and a tiny smile flashed across Akechi’s face. “The end of exams is more like it.”

“Always a time worth celebrating, in my experience.”

“Did you have exams, too?”

“I did,” Akechi said. “Due to my obligations at work, I missed a good deal of class this semester, but that did not mean I was exempt from exams. Luckily, I am quite skilled at teaching myself.”

“And so modest,” Akira said. The second the words left his mouth, he panicked internally, wondering if Akechi was the kind of person who would respond well to teasing or if he’d just find the comment rude.

And indeed, at first Akechi’s eyes went wide in surprise, but then his face relaxed, he hummed in amusement, and he… smiled. He was smiling, but it was a smile Akira had never seen, neither his public smile nor the little smile he had shown Akira before; no, this smile was wicked, just as playful as Akira’s but with an underlying edge that pierced right through Akira’s chest.

“I think I’ve earned a little immodesty, don’t you?” Akechi asked.

Somehow, Akira felt like the air had been knocked out of his lungs, and he laughed a little to clear the feeling away. “I won’t argue,” he said once he’d found his tongue again. “It’s impressive that you can balance work and school so easily.”

“Does it seem easy to you, Kurusu-kun?” Akechi asked. His wicked smile faded, replaced with a more familiar, more sober expression. “I suppose that’s good… that is the image I want to project.”

He didn’t elaborate, and Akira got the feeling that perhaps Akechi had said a little more than he’d intended to just now. The polite thing to do, Akira thought, would be to change the subject, and so he pushed himself away from the fence and asked, “Do you want to walk around and get some food?”

“Oh?” Again, Akechi looked baffled at the suggestion, but he shook off that surprise quickly and replaced it with a mildly pleasant expression. “Ah, certainly. That sounds nice.”

They waited until there was a break in the foot traffic, and then they merged with the crowd again, following the winding path along the river that would eventually branch off and lead them up towards the food stalls. A breeze picked up while they walked, fluffing Akechi’s bangs and pushing some hair into his face, which he brushed aside, glancing sideways at Akira.

“Well then… do you have any plans for the summer yet?” Akechi asked.

“Not yet,” Akira said. “I’ll keep busy somehow… Boss will probably rope me into working at Leblanc, I guess.”

“Ah, so you’ll be working, too. It’s the same for me.”

“You’ll still be working with the police over the summer?”
“Indeed,” Akechi said. “If anything, I expect to be swamped with cases.”

“Things have been busy since Kaneshiro’s arrest, huh?”

“What?” Akechi asked, his eyebrows shooting up. “Oh… that’s right; the news must have gone public by now. I’m sorry, Kurusu-kun; I’m not really at liberty to discuss such confidential information…”

“It’s okay.”

“But perhaps I’ll make time to visit Leblanc, if you’ll be there,” he added, more quietly.

“You should,” Akira agreed. “It’s been a little while.”

A blank look graced Akechi’s features. “Ah? Wasn’t it just two weeks ago?” he asked, as if two weeks wasn’t nearly half a month.

“Yeah, just about,” Akira said.

“I… suppose that is a fairly long time,” Akechi conceded. He looked a little embarrassed. “I didn’t realize… um, that is, I didn’t want to overstay my welcome.”

“You wouldn’t,” Akira said. “But consider this a formal invitation to stop by whenever you’d like.”

Akechi looked down, fiddling with his fan again.

“Thank you,” he said. “I appreciate that.”

They were really in the thick of the festival now, a dozen little shops and stalls lining the footpath on both sides, the smell of freshly fried food wafting through the air. Akira felt his stomach growl in anticipation.

“Let’s eat something,” he declared. “What’s your favorite?”

“My favorite?” Akechi blinked. “I suppose… I rather enjoy takoyaki. I don’t eat it very often, but it’s my favorite festival food.”

It was easy enough to find a stall selling takoyaki, its portable frying station on full display for the customers, ensuring that only minimal time was spent between removing the morsels from the oil and placing them in a customer’s hands. They each purchased an order for themselves, and together they moved off the path, out of the way of traffic so they could eat in relative peace.

Akechi skewered one of his takoyaki balls with a toothpick, holding it up and allowing it to cool in the air before stuffing the whole thing into his mouth. His face lit up as he chewed.

“It’s delicious,” he said. “I know it may not be the highest quality, but outside during the summer… it’s the perfect time to enjoy this kind of snack.”

Akira ate a piece of his own takoyaki, finding it to be a little chewy and blisteringly hot, but Akechi was right: something about the atmosphere made food taste even better. The air was warm and heavy with the sound of cicadas and conversation, but the breeze was pleasant, and Akira was surprised by how calm he felt, comfortable standing beside Akechi even as no words passed between them.

By the time they had finished their snacks, it was dark enough that without the plentiful lights, Akira wasn’t sure he’d be able to find his way back to the footpath. He turned to face Akechi, who
was looking at him expectantly, but before Akira could say anything, he felt his phone start to vibrate. When he pulled it out, he saw Ryuji’s name, and a pang of fear hit him. How long had he been gone? He’d completely lost track of time…

“Sorry,” Akira whispered to Akechi before turning away to answer. “Hello?”

“Hey man, where’d you go?” Ryuji asked.

“Sorry, I got distracted,” Akira said. “Where are you guys?”

“We’re over by the lake! Makoto’s friend, man, she’s got, like, connections – had this huge place roped off just for her, but she invited us over and it’s just – c’mon, come find us! It’s getting dark.”

“Right, right. Okay. You’re by the lake?”

(The entire park was by the lake.)

“Yeah, like – we’re kinda close to the entrance I guess? Uhh… hey Ann –”

There was a brief scuffle on the other side of the phone, and then Akira heard Ann’s voice say: “Oh my god, we’re just over the bridge. You can’t miss us.”

“Right, thanks,” Akira said. “Okay, I’ll be there soon.”

Akira slipped his phone back into his pocket and turned back to Akechi. He opened his mouth, but Akechi held up his hand and shook his head.

“I wouldn’t want to impose. Please, go be with your friends,” he said.

“I’d hate for you to watch the show alone, though,” Akira said.

“There are certain perks to solitude, you know,” Akechi said, smiling in a way that didn’t reach his eyes. “Besides… as long as you’re watching the same fireworks, I’m not really watching alone, am I?” He tucked some hair behind his ear, and the flush on his cheeks seemed to deepen – from the heat, certainly. “At any rate… thank you for spending some time with me, Kurusu-kun. I appreciate it.”

“Of course. It was fun,” Akira said. “Okay… have a good night, Akechi-kun.”

“And you as well, Kurusu-kun.”

With that, Akira dipped into the crowd and attempted to follow Ryuji’s vague directions, passing the park’s entrance and crossing over the bridge Ann had mentioned. There weren’t many spots along the lake where a person could sit – most of the lake being surrounded by a fence – a fact which narrowed his search significantly, so much so that it took only a few minutes to find his friends.

“Akira! Over here,” Ann called out, waving a hand high in the air and beckoning him closer.

“There you are. Where’d you go?”

“I ran into somebody and got sidetracked,” Akira said. “Sorry for disappearing.”

“Well, you’re here in time for the most important part, at least,” Ann said.

Akira looked at the group assembled around him. Ryuji and Yusuke were sitting on a large, plush picnic blanket, Morgana at their side, while Makoto was standing next to a young woman with
short, fluffy hair. This must have been the friend Ryuji mentioned; she wore a yukata made of shiny silk, decorated with delicate, overlapping pink flowers, and carried herself with an air of elegance that made her stand out among the significantly less dignified Thieves around her.

“Oh, Akira-kun,” Makoto said, stepping closer. “I’d like you to meet Haru Okumura. Haru-chan, this is Akira Kurusu; you remember, I mentioned him before…”

“Of course! It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Akira-kun,” Haru said, bowing deeply to him. When she stood upright again, she wore a bright, sunny smile that seemed in stark contrast to her otherwise refined demeanor. “Mako-chan speaks so highly of you!”

Akira caught Makoto’s eye and mouthed “Mako-chan?” before turning his attention back to Haru. “It’s nice to meet you, too,” he said.

“She’s a third year at Shujin, like me,” Makoto explained. “I happened to see her on the way in, and she invited us to come watch the fireworks with her.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Akira said.

“Oh no, it’s my pleasure!” Haru said. “I’ve enjoyed chatting with everyone so much, and besides, I haven’t had the chance to speak with Mako-chan much since she joined student council…”

“Well, you’ve been hard to find yourself,” Makoto said. Unwittingly, her eyes flicked to look behind Haru’s back, and only now did Akira notice the two men in suits standing off just a few meters away, watching Haru intently. “Will you be staying in Japan over the summer?” she asked.

“Mm, yes,” Haru said. She paused, and Akira thought he saw her smile fade just a touch. “I must start preparing for my wedding… it’s arranged to happen this winter, so there’s a good deal I need to do.”

Something about the way she spoke, the sudden tightness to her posture, didn’t sit right with Akira, but before he could speak up, he was interrupted by a magnificent crash of sound.

“Oh!” Haru exclaimed. “It’s starting…”

The whole park seemed to grow still as everyone collectively turned their eyes to the sky, watching as the fireworks soared overhead in bright bursts, colorful light glittering off the lake’s surface and setting the world aglow.

For the show’s duration, Akira felt a now-familiar sensation, a connection to the people of Shibuya – but this was different from what he was used to; where his Personas often brought him the fears and anxieties that linked society together, the festival instead united everyone under a blanket of warm emotion, of happiness.

It didn’t last long, but for the time, it was nice.

The summer began slowly, lazily, with a heavy heat wave settling over Shibuya and sapping Akira of any energy he might have used to go explore the Metaverse, or even simply to leave the café. After such a whirlwind first semester, however, he thought he’d earned a few lazy days, and the others seemed content to scour the internet for leads on a new target, dropping names in the group chat and debating their worthiness as a follow-up to Kaneshiro.
Late one afternoon, as Akira was lying flat on the couch and trying to survive the overbearing heat for a few more hours until he could go to the bathhouse, he heard a sustained humming noise. He brushed it off at first until he realized it was coming from inside the attic, from his phone: someone was calling him, a rare enough event already, and rarer still that Makoto would be the one doing the calling.  

Frowning, Akira picked up and answered, “Hello?”  

“Akira-kun,” Makoto said. She was speaking very softly, her voice quiet and a little weak. “Hello. I’m sorry to bother you like this…”  

“It’s no bother,” Akira said. “What’s up? Is something wrong?”  

“…yes. Well, I’m not sure.”  

Akira wanted to say it wasn’t like Makoto to be so anxious, but he quickly corrected himself: it wasn’t like Queen to be so anxious. Makoto, on the other hand, seemed to be well-versed in the art of worrying for hours before making a snap decision, and that was only in the short time Akira had known her.  

Something was definitely troubling her, though, so Akira hazarded a guess as to what he could do to help right now and asked, “Do you want to come over to Leblanc?”  

For a long moment, Makoto was silent, and Akira said nothing, listening patiently to her harried breathing. Distantly, he thought he heard the sound of a door slamming.  

“Could I?” Makoto asked. “Just for an hour or two. I wanted to discuss something with you, and I’d rather not speak about it over the phone.”  

“Yeah, of course. Do you need to stay the night?”  

“I don’t think that will be necessary… but I appreciate the offer.” On the other end of the line, Makoto breathed a sigh of relief. “Um. Okay then. Shall I see you soon?”  

“Yeah. I’ll be here – come over whenever.”  

They said their goodbyes, and when Akira set his phone down, he found Morgana at his feet, looking up at him.  

“That was Makoto,” Akira said. “She’s going to come over for a little while.”  

“Oh?” Morgana asked. “What’s the occasion?”  

“She didn’t want to say,” Akira said, “but she didn’t sound thrilled.”  

They moved back down into Leblanc, where they sat at the bar and waited until the door chimed a short while later, heralding Makoto’s arrival. She had her school bag with her, and when she stepped inside, she glanced first to Sojiro and then to Akira.  

“Good evening,” she said. “I, um, wanted to do some summer reading, but I was having trouble focusing at home, so…”  

“You’re always welcome,” Akira said. He hopped up from the bar and walked casually over to a booth seat, silently inviting Makoto to follow. She did so, sliding into the seat across from him and setting her bag down on the table.
“Everything all right, Queen?” Morgana asked, winding his way beneath the table and then up onto the seat beside Makoto.

“I… I don’t know.” Makoto sighed, twisting a zipper strap on her backpack between her fingers.

After giving her a few moments to compose herself, Akira gently asked, “Does this involve your sister?”

Makoto’s lips lifted up in the weakest facsimile of a smile, but her eyes remained glued to the table. “Ha… nothing slips past you, Joker,” she said. “Yes… I was studying in my room a little while ago when Sis came home. I don’t think she knew I was there… she may have forgotten about my summer break. She was talking to someone on the phone, and she was… furious.”

“Something happened at work?” Akira asked.

“I’m not sure, exactly,” Makoto said. “I could only hear half of the conversation, after all, but… I did hear Kaneshiro’s name.”

“Well, Kaneshiro is in police custody;” Morgana said. “Maybe she’s been assigned to work on his trial?”

“It’s not a ‘maybe’ – I know for a fact she’s been assigned to prosecute him,” Makoto said. “But based on what I overheard, I think… it sounds like someone is working to get Kaneshiro out of prison, regardless of Kaneshiro’s will, or that of the police.”

“What!” Morgana yelped. “Already? But it’s only been a few weeks!”

“Precisely. His trial is set to begin in the middle of August, so if someone wanted to keep him from testifying about his criminal acts in court, now would be the time to get him away from the police,” Makoto said. “And… there’s something else,” she added, finally lifting her head to look Akira in the eyes. “Have you been watching the news lately, Akira-kun?”

“Only when I’m here,” Akira said, gesturing over his shoulder to Leblanc’s TV unit. “Why?”

Makoto pulled out her phone, thumbing through a few pages as she spoke. “I’ve been watching nearly every evening, trying to keep up with Kaneshiro’s case, but the strangest thing is… I haven’t heard his name in days. And then today, this surfaces online…”

She turned her phone towards him and slid it across the table. She had opened to a sparsely-populated website, one that contained nothing more than a very peculiar logo and a long message in English, which was all gibberish to Akira.

“It’s not great. There’s a translation of this speech somewhere online, but the gist of it is that this hacker group – they call themselves Medjed – has decided to ‘declare war’ on us.”

“You… you mean the Thieves?” Morgana asked, and Makoto nodded.

“I haven’t done much research into this group,” she said. “They seem to have been fairly prolific in the past, but mostly they tended to leak confidential company secrets to the public in order to break a scandal. Additionally, they haven’t been very active in recent years… it seems odd that they would call out the Phantom Thieves in this way.”

“You think it’s something to worry about?” Morgana asked.
“Hard to say at this juncture,” Makoto said, “but you have to admit, it’s strange timing, isn’t it? That this Medjed group would suddenly reappear, dragging the spotlight away from Kaneshiro…”

“You think it’s on purpose, then,” Akira said. “A smokescreen.”

“As much as I hate to say it, that is the only logical conclusion I can draw right now,” Makoto said. “I know I must sound paranoid, but I’ve never heard Sis so angry before… I had to talk to someone about it.”

“You know… we could settle this right now,” Akira said. He pulled out his phone and thumbed over to the Metaverse navigator as way of an explanation. “Let’s go find Kaneshiro’s shadow, talk to him. Maybe we can learn something.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Morgana said. “It certainly can’t hurt, right?”

“Shouldn’t we call the rest of the team?” Makoto asked.

Morgana shook his head. “We’ve stolen his treasure, so his shadow should be much more docile now. If we’re just going to talk to him, I doubt we’ll need more than three teammates,” he said. “Besides, it’s so hot. Surely the shadows will be feeling lethargic today.”

“And if things get bad, we can just bail,” Akira said. He got to his feet, and Makoto did the same.

“Okay,” she said. “How far do we need to go?”

Akira motioned for her to follow. They left Leblanc, informing Sojiro in the vaguest of terms that they were going to go hang out somewhere cool for a while, and walked through the backstreets of Yongen-Jaya until they reached a small alleyway tucked beside a vacant building, a place isolated enough that they could activate the app without drawing any undue attention.

Mementos was achingly humid, the air as thick as fog and hot as steam. The three Thieves felt like they were swimming as they pushed their way through the lobby, coming to a halt at the top of the escalator leading further down into the subway. Then, for a long moment, they stood there, unmoving.

“So…” Morgana said, “where to?”

“Huh? Don’t you know?” Makoto asked.

Morgana gave a start, whipping his head around to look at Makoto. “H-how would I know?” he asked.

“Well, his Palace is gone, so he can’t be there,” Makoto said. “You’re from this place, aren’t you, Mona? Where do shadows go after their Palaces have been destroyed?”

“I…!” Morgana bit his lip, casting his eyes around frantically. “Um, Joker? This was your idea, wasn’t it? So where’re we going?”

It had seemed obvious at the time that Mementos was their destination, but now that they were actually here, Akira found himself questioning why he’d thought that.

“We destroyed Kaneshiro’s Palace,” he said slowly, “but we didn’t kill his shadow, and we know he didn’t accept his shadow and gain a Persona… so his shadow must have come back to Mementos. Right?”
“This place is society’s Palace… your logic makes sense,” Morgana said. “Presumably, this is where all shadows live until their hearts become distorted enough to form a fully-fledged Palace…”

“So this should be like locating one of our lesser targets, then,” Makoto said. “Mona, can you try to scout for him like that?”

“Right… okay.” Morgana got down on one knee and placed a paw on the ground, closing his eyes and concentrating. His ears twitched, and he grunted in exertion, squeezing his eyes shut as tightly as possible, but then his arm began to shake, and he collapsed to the ground.

“Ugh… it’s no good. I can’t sense him,” Morgana said.

“So he’s not here?” Makoto asked. She stooped down and offered Morgana a hand, pulling him back to his feet.

“No, it’s not – you guys don’t understand,” Morgana said. “Mementos is huge… picture the biggest Palace you can think of, and then go even bigger than that. Kaneshiro probably is here, but… he’s so far away, even I can’t tell where he might be.”

“What about Kamoshida or Madarame?” Akira asked. Morgana looked thoughtful for a moment, but then shook his head.

“Nope… nothing.” He growled, balling up his paw into a fist and rapping it against his forehead. “I’m sorry…”

Makoto pulled out her phone, opening the Meta-nav to its map of Mementos. “Every time we get a little farther, this map just updates to show the new path we’ve found… there’s no indication of where it ends. Does it even have an end?”

“I don’t know,” Morgana said. “When I try to get a feel for Mementos, it’s not like I hit a wall or anything. There’s nothing stopping me from scanning, it just… never ends.”

Around them, Mementos was silent, offering them neither confirmation nor denial.

“…I suppose there’s no point in hanging around here any longer,” Makoto finally said. “Shall we head back?”

“Wait a second,” Akira said, holding up his hand.

The gears in his mind were spinning in what he knew, rationally, was a very dangerous direction, but he just couldn't stop himself; what they needed right now was more information, and there were precious few sources of knowledge about the Metaverse available for them to tap. The Velvet Room might offer some answers – for Akira, anyway – but the twin wardens seemed wholly ignorant of anyone but Akira himself.

Someone who had been around for as long as Morgana, someone who had been exploring this place just as they had… Akira had an idea of where to look.

The others weren’t going to like this.

Although Mementos was full of nothing but ambient noise, Akira decided to take a gamble anyway, cupping his hands around his mouth and shouting out, “I know you were listening, Crow, so would you come out and talk?”
Morgana screwed up his face in confusion. “Huh? What’re you saying, Joker?”

“Just hold on,” Akira said softly.

Several tense, heavy seconds passed before they heard something drop to the ground and land just behind them, and collectively, the trio turned around. Makoto gasped, and Akira was suddenly struck by just how dangerous Crow seemed, looming behind them, all dark colors and sharp edges; Akira had grown so accustomed to his appearance by now that he’d forgotten what Crow must look like to the unfamiliar.

“Joker, what… who is this?” Makoto asked him in a harsh whisper, though not quietly enough to escape Crow’s notice.

“You didn’t tell your friends about me?” he asked. He pressed his hand against his chest and grinned a terrible, toothy smirk. “I’m hurt, Joker… I thought we had something special.”


“Very astute,” Crow said dryly.

“This energy… wait!” Morgana jumped in place, his paw hovering over his slingshot’s holster. “You’re him, aren’t you? Back in Kaneshiro’s Palace, and here in Mementos… the one following us, the one I kept sensing was you!”

“And if I am?” Crow asked in reply. “What are you going to do about it, you little monster cat?”

Morgana growled. “I’m not a monster and I’m not a cat, damn it!” he snapped, pulling his slingshot back and launching a pellet directly at Crow’s face.

“Ow!” Crow flinched, raking a hand over his face where he’d been hit. “Damn insolent pest!” he snarled at Morgana before turning his furious eyes on Akira, instead. “What do you want from me this time, Joker? Did you bring your teammates here just to berate me?”

“No,” Akira said, calmly taking a step closer and holding his hands up in a placating gesture. “You heard everything we just said, right?”

“What if I did?”

“So, do you know? Where a shadow goes after its Palace has been destroyed?”

Crow straightened up, the anger leaving his expression to be replaced by vaguely disinterested contemplation.

“I do not,” he finally said. “As you may have gathered, my targets don’t tend to survive an encounter with me. I’ve never destroyed a Palace while leaving its occupant alive.”

“The mental shut downs, then…” Makoto’s voice was shaking, though whether with fear or with fury, it was impossible to say. “That’s you. All those people… you killed them.”

Crow sneered at Queen before turning sharply on his heel. “I answered your question,” he said. “Now, I believe we’re finished here.”

“Wait!” Akira called, but Crow continued to retreat. Akira balled his hands into fists and shouted the only thing he could think of to make him stop: “How’d you get your power, Crow?”

It worked. Crow stopped in his tracks, his head turning just a hair back towards the Thieves.
“…what?”

“Your Persona. How’d you get it?”

Crow grit his teeth and said nothing.

“Do you remember how the app activated for the first time?” Akira pressed on. “Because I don’t. It just happened. I didn’t summon it, and I didn’t turn it on; it dragged me to the Metaverse and I didn’t even have to do anything.”

The silence around them was deafening, physically palpable, like bundles of cotton pressing up against Akira's ears and muffling him to the world.

“It was… the same for me,” Crow finally admitted.

“How long ago?” Makoto asked.

“…About two and a half years.”

“T-two and a half?” Morgana yelped. “So that means…”

“That’s about the same time you woke up, huh?” Akira asked.

“Hmm? What do you mean?” Crow asked, his interest finally piqued enough to turn around fully.

“This guy,” Akira gestured to Morgana, “is from here. But he doesn’t remember much; the last thing he remembers is waking up in Mementos.”

“And that was nearly three years ago,” Morgana said.

“…is that so.”

“Something happened here, three years ago,” Akira said. “Something that got us all involved in this world, and we don’t know anything about it. And neither do you, right?” He took another step closer to Crow. “We could cover a lot more ground if we had someone experienced helping us.”

“Joker!” Makoto and Morgana exclaimed at once.

“You cannot be serious right now,” Crow said.

“Deadly serious,” Akira said. “I’m not saying he should join us,” he added, this time to Makoto and Morgana, “but we have information we could share. He didn’t know about stealing treasure… there’s a lot we could learn from each other.”

“Joker,” Makoto said, grabbing him by the shoulder and yanking him back, “this is not a decision for the three of us to make alone. We need to go and regroup with the others.”

“Yes, leader;” Crow said, disdain saturating his tone, “you’d best go consult with all your other Thieves. Working with someone like me might tarnish your impeccable reputation, after all.”

Akira sighed. “Will you at least think about it?”

“Oh, if you’re offering to let me use you for information, you won’t hear me complaining. This decision is entirely yours to make,” Crow said. He waved a hand in the air and began to walk away once again. “Well, you know when I’m here, Joker,” he called back to them. “Do what you will.”
They waited and watched as Crow got farther and farther away, until the inky darkness of Mementos had consumed him completely, and he was gone. Silently, Akira opened the Meta-nav app and brought the trio of Thieves back to reality.

“So,” Makoto said once they were safely back in Yongen-Jaya, where it was impossible for Crow to eavesdrop on them, “when were you planning on telling us you’d made contact with the one in the Black Mask?”

Akira pursed his lips and didn’t answer.

“Akira!” Makoto snapped, glaring sternly at him. “That was incredibly reckless of you! What if he had decided you were a threat – what if he had killed you? None of us would have known what happened to you.”

“I didn’t want to worry anyone,” Akira said. “Besides, you saw him; he’s practically our age. He’s dangerous, but he’s not… he’s not crazy. I can feel it.”

“I admit, he’s not what I expected,” Morgana said. “I assumed he’d be a hardened criminal… but he kind of looked like us, didn’t he?”

Makoto groaned, massaging her temple in frustration. “Honestly, he… the thing that stood out to me was that he seemed so familiar,” she said. “It’s strange. We only just spoke, but I can hardly remember his voice now…”

“That’s because he was disguised,” Morgana said. “You’ve never had this problem because we Thieves know each other’s real identities, so our memories from reality persist even when we put on our masks. But with Crow, he doesn’t want you to know his identity, so you can’t remember his voice. His mask was affecting our subconscious, and we didn’t even realize it.”

“Do you really think it’s safe for us to ask someone like him for help, Akira?” Makoto asked. “I don’t like this, and I don’t think the others will, either.”

“I know it’s not ideal,” Akira said, “but I think we’re in over our heads. Even if it’s just for the time being… I think having another Persona-user to help us explore Mementos would be advantageous.”

“We shouldn’t make a decision without consulting the others,” Morgana said. “But if it means getting more insight into where I came from, well…”

He looked up at them, resolution shining in his eyes.

“This might be a concession we have to make.”
“You WHAT?”

Wisely, Akira had waited until Ryuji was no longer drinking his soda before revealing the purpose of this afternoon’s meeting, because the moment the words “I want us to team up with the Black Mask” left his mouth, Ryuji reacted exactly as one would have expected.

“As he said, Akira has made contact with the other Metaverse-user we’ve heard about,” Makoto repeated, running one hand over her face in exasperation. “Furthermore, he believes it would be... useful for us to work alongside him, at least for the time being.”

“That’s, uh…” Ann glanced from Akira and Makoto to Ryuji and Yusuke, looking for a cue to follow but finding none.

“So then, we were correct in our assumption that the mental shutdowns are linked to the Metaverse?” Yusuke asked, carefully skirting around the main issue as he tried to make sense of it.

“I’m not surprised,” Morgana said. “Mental shutdowns are definitely the result of a shadow’s death. As for the psychotic breaks…”

“It’s his Persona’s special ability,” Akira said, and then, before anyone could question him: “…I’ve seen it happen.”

Yusuke hummed in thought. “How mysterious... he even has a Persona.”

“And you want us to team up with a psycho like that? A murderer?” Ryuji asked, mouth agape.

“A hitman,” Akira corrected. “And I do. He awoke to his Persona at around the same time Morgana’s memories begin. I think there’s a connection.”

“It’s true,” Morgana said, his ears drooping back as he reluctantly agreed. “It may seem far-fetched, but I think there’s some significance to it.”

“Okay, but do you really think this is a good idea, Akira?” Ann asked. “He sounds like a super dangerous guy…”

“Yeah! And what if he, like, tries to kill a shadow in front of us?” Ryuji added. “I’m not just gonna let that fly – you know that, right?”

“Please don’t forget that we seriously considered causing a mental shutdown not too long ago,” Yusuke pointed out, which made Ryuji splutter in wordless protest.

“If he tries to murder a shadow in front of us, we’ll simply overpower him,” Makoto said. “There are six of us, after all, and only one of him.”

“As far as we know,” Ryuji muttered.

“No, it’s just him,” Akira said. “He’s too paranoid to work with anyone else.”

At this, Ann frowned. “Then isn’t it kinda weird he decided to work with us?” she asked.
“I’m certain he intends to use this as an information-gathering opportunity,” Yusuke said. “I imagine he finds it very worrying that there are other Persona-users running around the Metaverse; leaving us unaccounted for would be very risky for someone in his… particular line of work.”

“Yusuke’s right,” Morgana said. “Luckily, it’s a two-way street: He might try to learn about us, but we’ll learn just as much about him. Who knows… maybe we’ll even find out why he’s causing all these terrible incidents.”

Groaning, Ryuji slumped over the back of his chair in defeat. “Okay, okay,” he said. “I guess it’s cool that we can keep an eye on him or whatever.”

“…I have another reason,” Akira said slowly, and the room went quiet. “I think the Black Mask… I think Crow has a boss. I want to find out who that is.”

“Crow,” Ryuji repeated under his breath in the verbal equivalent of an eyeroll.

“You didn’t mention this before,” Makoto noted. “What makes you think so?”

“Because if he isn’t working for someone, then he has no motive,” Akira said. “If you look back at our targets, it’s obvious why we chose them. Crow’s targets… there’s no connection. I don’t think they’re Crow’s enemies.”

“But they are someone’s enemies,” Yusuke said. “Hmm… I see. Suppose someone became aware of the Metaverse without having a way to physically access it… if they came across a person like Crow, then…”

Morgana flicked his tail restlessly. “It’s pretty dangerous that someone villainous enough to employ a hitman found a Persona-user to do their bidding,” he said. “Even disregarding my own existence, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to try and learn more about their arrangement, whatever it is.”

“So,” Akira said, “we’ll tell Crow we want to learn as much as we can about Mementos and the Metaverse – and we do – but our secondary goal is to determine the identity of Crow’s boss. That’s it. We won’t involve him in any changes of heart, and we won’t get involved with… any of his business. Agreed?”

From all around the room, the Thieves gave an unenthusiastic but firm chorus of agreement, which was good enough for Akira.

“So when do we start?” Ann asked. She was acting uncharacteristically fidgety, toying with the tip of her pigtail absent-mindedly. “I’m totally anxious to meet this guy now.”

“He usually goes to Mementos on Thursdays and Sundays,” Akira said, ignoring the suspicious glances that turned his way as he did, “but now that school is out, I’ve seen him on Tuesdays, too. I think that’s when he’s expecting us.”

“Tuesday… tomorrow, then,” Yusuke said.

Ann winced. “That’s cutting it kinda close, don’t you think?” she asked.

“Nah,” Morgana said, shaking his head. “It’s better to capitalize on this kind of momentum quickly.”

“Well then,” Makoto said, “for now, I suppose we have our plan. We’ll meet up tomorrow, mid-morning, as usual… unless there are any other concerns?”
Ryuji sighed. “Nah, nothing that won’t get answered tomorrow, I guess…”

With that, Makoto adjourned the meeting, and one by one, the Thieves left Leblanc. Once he was alone, Akira shut and locked the door behind them with a quiet sigh. Whatever relief he had felt after revealing Crow’s existence to his teammates had been immediately replaced with a new wave of anxiety, and it only grew stronger now that he was alone and preparing for bed.

Maybe he shouldn’t have done this. Maybe it had been a mistake to reveal Crow’s existence to the Thieves, and furthermore, to reveal that Akira had met with him more than once. Perhaps it would have been easier to keep these two parts of his life separate. He was already living a double life – what was one more secret?

“So… Akira.”

Morgana was perched on a small medicine cabinet in Leblanc’s bathroom, watching from a high vantage point as Akira brushed his teeth.

“All those times you disappeared to Mementos without me… you were meeting with that guy, weren’t you? With Crow?”

Akira glanced up at Morgana, then spit out his toothpaste and rinsed out his mouth.

“Well, there were only so many places you could have gone,” Morgana said.

“But you never followed me.”

“No… I wanted to put my trust in you,” Morgana said, jumping up onto the windowsill as Akira turned off the attic light. “Now that I know what you were doing, I guess I understand why you didn’t tell me.”

For a long moment, Akira was quiet, and then he pulled his thin summer blanket up over his knees and said, “He saved me. When I stormed off that first time, I got caught by some shadows, and he took them down for me.”

“What?” Morgana’s ears perked up. “For real?”

“For real.”

“Hmm… and you’re sure this guy doesn’t know who you are?”

“I’m pretty sure,” Akira said, but honestly, he wasn’t. If Crow did know Akira’s true identity, he was playing his cards very close to his chest, but on the other hand, Akira was always careful to check his perimeter before leaving Mementos, and he never lingered long once he returned to reality. So, provided that Joker’s mask had the same distortion effect as did Crow’s, it was highly unlikely Crow had found him out.

Besides… they had promised not to pry into one another’s identity.

“Huh,” Morgana said. “So he’s willing to assassinate shadows, but he’s also willing to rescue complete strangers… he seems like kind of a strange guy, huh?”

He’s definitely strange, Akira thought – a walking contradiction, equal parts vicious and
thoughtful, just like his mismatched Personas – and Akira sort of hated that, sometimes. Maybe if he wasn’t so strange, Akira wouldn’t find him so interesting.

When the Thieves reconvened the next day, the tension between them was still stiff and heavy, but somehow they managed to push their discomfort aside. By the end of the day, they would – with any hope – have forged a partnership that would grant them access to secret information the police could never dream of finding, and that alone was incentive enough to play nice with the rumored Black Mask. Silently, resolutely, they walked through Mementos towards the turnstiles, where – beneath a broken light fixture and half-shrouded in shadow – a figure stood before the subway gates, waiting for their arrival. Akira didn’t need his third eye to know it was Crow; there was no one else it could be.

“Well, well,” Crow drawled, stepping out of the gloom and revealing himself to the Thieves at last. His mask’s sharp points gleamed in the harsh spotlight, causing him to look more menacing than usual, and the toothy grin on his face did nothing but enhance that effect. “Look who it is. Shibuya’s saviors. Am I expected to kneel?”

No one responded, the Thieves seemingly stunned by Crow’s abrasive attitude, while Crow himself appeared downright delighted to wallow in the awkwardness he created. Finally, knowing that no one else was going to take that bait, Akira stepped forward, positioning himself halfway in between the Thieves and Crow himself.

“So… this is Crow, the one we’ve been calling the Black Mask,” Akira said. “Crow, you’ve already met Mona and Queen, but this is Skull, Panther, and Fox,” he explained, pointing out each member of the Phantom Thieves in turn.

Crow tipped his nose up, staring them down with a clearly dismissive air.

“Charmed,” he said.

“What the hell,” Ryuji muttered, elbowing past Ann to stand at the front of the group, where he could address Crow more directly. “You’re the one who’s been causing all that shit in the news? You?”

“Skull…” Ann began to say, placing a hand on Ryuji’s shoulder.

“No, don’t you give me that!” Ryuji protested, shrugging off Ann’s hand. “If we gotta work with him, I wanna know what the fuck’s his problem!”

Under his mask, Crow’s face scrunched up in confusion. “My problem?” he repeated.

“So, we’re going to do this right now, are we?” Crow crossed his arms and leaned back against the turnstile. “Fine. Yes, I believe I’m entitled to use my powers as I see fit – after all, they’re mine,” he said. His eyes flicked over to Ryuji’s weapon for just a moment before refocusing on Ryuji himself. “You feel the same, don’t you? Manipulating a person’s heart until they feel guilty enough to confess their sins, forcing them to live with that guilt for the rest of their lives…”
“It’s not the same at all!” Ryuji exclaimed, his voice pitching high and shrill. “At least changin’ a heart doesn’t kill someone!”

“That’s right,” Makoto said, and although she wasn’t as openly aggressive towards Crow as Ryuji had been, her voice still had a notably icy tone to it. “Even criminals deserve a chance to redeem themselves.”

“Deserve a chance to be brainwashed, you mean,” Crow said.

“Hey! It’s not like that,” Ann said. “Like… we would have done something about Kamoshida back in the real world if we could have…”

“Could’ nothing – we tried,” Ryuji said. “And no one fucking listened to us.”

“That’s right! Adults don’t take us seriously. And then with Fox, he…” Ann cut herself off and glanced at Yusuke.

“…without your assistance, I doubt I would have removed myself from that situation of my own volition,” Yusuke said.

“So yeah, dude, get over yourself,” Ryuji said. “You think you can do whatever you want ’cuz you got a Persona, but look around! You’re not special.”

Something flashed across Crow’s face, but he set his lips into a thin line, effectively masking his expression before Akira could process what it was. Slowly, without a trace of emotion in his voice, he said, “Neither are you.”

Before anyone had the chance to escalate the situation, Akira held up his hands in a plea for peace. “Okay,” he said. “Look, we can discuss our ideologies more later. Let’s call a truce for now.”

“Joker’s right,” Morgana said. “Regardless of how we feel about each other, we met up today so we could explore this place together. Mementos is hiding plenty of secrets… we just need to go deep enough to uncover them. All right?”

At this, Morgana looked to Crow, who pushed off the turnstile and stood up straight. “I won’t object,” he said.

“Good.” Morgana nodded towards the stairs. “Let’s get going, then. We’ve made it pretty far down now, so if we want to make any new progress, we need to move quickly.”

Slowly, with no small amount of reticence, everyone began to make their way down the stairs – everyone, that is, except for Crow, who remained stationary at the top of the stairs, watching the Thieves from above.

“And where exactly are you going?” he asked.

Ryuji threw a disparaging look over his shoulder. “Is this a trick question or something?” he asked.

“We’re heading into the depths,” Makoto said. “Is there somewhere else you expect us to go?”

“You… don’t tell me you’ve been traveling from the entrance to your destination every time you come here?” Crow asked, his voice tinged with disbelief and a hint of derision.

“Well… yeah,” Ann said.

Crow pinched the bridge of his mask’s nose and sighed roughly. “Open your Metaverse navigator,
someone,” he snapped.

The group shared a look, and then Akira pulled out his phone, bringing up the Meta-nav and walking over to Crow.

“Show me your map,” Crow said, and Akira did. “Do you see here,” he said, tapping the lowest visible level of Mementos, “how each path has a name? Now bring up the destination search… and replace Mementos with ‘Chemdah’, and…”

The Meta-nav beeped.

“Beginning navigation,” it said, and then Akira’s vision blurred as the Mementos lobby disappeared from sight. He winced and screwed his eyes shut, straining against the powerful forces that pulled him through the fabric of space until, mere seconds later, his feet were back on solid ground. He blinked, and when his vision cleared, he found himself standing the sickly yellow-green lobby of the Chemdah path alongside all the other Thieves – and Crow, too.

The phone in Akira’s hand beeped again. “A new area has been confirmed in the depths. Updating guidance information,” it informed him. Then the map flickered and flashed, revealing another twisted pathway heading even further down.

“What the hell?” Ryuji exclaimed, scrambling to his feet and peering over Akira’s shoulder to get a look at the map. “We’re all the way down here already?!?”

“Woah,” Ann said, genuine awe in her voice. “Why didn’t we think of that?”

“This is… certainly convenient,” Makoto agreed.

“You’re fucking with me, right?” Crow asked, staring at them incredulously. “How have you not figured this out? You’ve had to run down two dozen floors every time you came to visit… are you running marathons for fun?”

“Of course not!” Morgana said, weaving around the other Thieves’ legs to stand beside Crow. “That’s where I come in. Watch and learn!”

Faster than Akira could blink, Morgana was down on the tracks, transforming into a bus and turning sharply on his tires, flashing his headlight-eyes at the rest of them.

“Now, hurry up! Everybody in!” he yelled.

Even behind his mask’s lenses, it was obvious that Crow’s eyes had gone wide, his mouth slack in utter shock.

“You… what…”

Akira pulled on the back door and held it open for Crow.

“I’ll take the back with you?” he asked.

Crow hesitated for a moment, as if waiting for Akira to reveal that this had really been a prank the whole time, but Akira just smiled earnestly until Crow climbed into the car, grumbling to himself all the way. How amusing; Akira had never seen Crow so thoroughly caught off-guard – except, perhaps, for the very first time they met, when Crow had learned Akira could hold multiple Personas – and Akira decided that surprised was a good look for him. Without a harsh expression darkening his face, he was almost cute.
Soon they were speeding off through the dark tunnels with reckless speed, but instead of their usual chatter, the bus was filled with stark, tangible silence. Ryuji was staring at Crow, the suspicion still clear in his eyes and his hyper-attentive posture, and Akira wondered how long he was going to keep up this shtick... though he couldn’t exactly blame Ryuji for his wariness. For his part, Crow was sitting stiffly beside Akira with his knees drawn together, but Akira could see his eyes darting rapidly around the van’s interior, glancing out windows and lingering on the Thieves one at a time, like Crow was trying to memorize every detail he could see.

“Hey,” he suddenly called out, startling Akira and most of the others, who hadn’t expected Crow to be the one to break the silence. “You, cat.”

“I am not a cat!” Morgana growled, his voice coming in loud and clear through the van’s speakers. “I am Mona!”

“Mona, then,” Crow corrected himself. “You said you’re from here, correct? Mementos?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“But you must not remember the exact circumstances of your arrival to Mementos, or you’d be more specific,” Crow continued, talking more to himself than to anyone else and affecting a softer, less aggressive tone of voice than he’d been using previously. This wasn’t the first time Akira had seen him act like this – he behaved much the same when he was trying to determine how the Thieves had discovered Kaneshiro – almost as though the pull of a good mystery could tempt him to drop his antagonistic persona for a moment. “Do you recall anything? Any clues at all?”

Morgana hummed, and the floor of the bus vibrated. “I remember coming out of a room... or maybe a cage? There was a really bright light, too...”

“A cage, hmm?” Crow asked. “I’ve seen plenty of exposed rebar in the cave walls, but nothing so extensive that you could call it a “cage”... and a bright light... I wonder, if you saw it again, do you think you would recognize it?”

“Definitely,” Morgana said. “There’s a kind of feeling I get when I think about where I came from... I know I’d remember it if I found it.”

“So, uh... Crow,” Ann said, turning around in her seat to address him. “It sounds like you know your way around Mementos pretty well, huh?”

“As well as one can when the topography changes as frequently as it does here, I suppose,” Crow said. He was starting to relax a little, the tension dropping from his shoulders as he leaned back more comfortably in his seat, though – like Ryuji – he still seemed hyper-vigilant towards his traveling companions.

“You’ve really been exploring Mementos alone for all this time?” Makoto asked. “It’s amazing you’re still in one piece.”

“Ha! Do you think so?” Crow asked. “I’d say the same to you. How a group as large and boisterous as yours has managed to survive this long is a mystery to me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ryuji asked.

Crow waved his hand, dismissively brushing Ryuji’s hostility aside. “With a group this large, you certainly can’t be all that stealthy,” he said. “And this... vehicle... are you telling me you’re truly able to get the drop on shadows in this monstrosity?”
“Hey, don’t call Mona a monstrosity!” Ann protested.

“As for ambushing shadows, well… you’re about to find out,” Makoto said, easing off the gas and slowing the van to a crawl. Peering out the windshield, Akira could see a shadow lumbering off in the distance, its back still turned to them as they idled just outside its field of vision.

“Prepare yourselves.”

That was all the warning Makoto gave before stepping on the gas pedal, revving Morgana’s engine and surging forward, sending the van crashing into the shadow and splitting it apart, revealing two frail, shriveled Onmoraki. As the shadows groaned and writhed on the ground, trying to get their bearing after the successful sneak attack, the Thieves hurried out of the van, forming a loose semicircle around the perimeter of what would become their battlefield.

Akira adjusted his gloves and began to give his orders, but he hadn’t gotten farther than “Okay, Mona” when he was interrupted.

“Woah, woah, hey, hold on, Joker,” Ryuji said. “I think we need to see the new guy in action.” He strolled over to Crow, pointing towards the Onmoraki with his pipe. “Think you can handle it?”

Though the shadows had gotten to their feet – their weird, vestigial feet, which floated a few feet off the ground – they were nonetheless a pathetic sight, and Akira was certain anyone on the team could take these two shadows without much trouble, something Ryuji must have known; he had picked out a weak shadow on purpose, just to see how Crow would react.

And he reacted precisely as Akira expected. With two fingers, Crow pushed Ryuji’s pipe aside, sneering as he did.

“They?” he asked, brandishing his sword and taking an offensive stance. “Please. You insult me.”

He lunged forward without hesitation, parrying one of the Onmoraki as it tried to take a swipe at him. He wasted no time, herding the two shadows around with careful strikes of the sword until they were standing side-by-side, and only then did he summon Loki, who billowed above the battlefield, his black and white stripes swimming over his body like a living optical illusion.

On Crow’s order, Loki spread his arms wide, summoning a stunningly bright ball of light, which he lifted into the air and allowed to hover for a second before bringing it crashing down upon the shadows. Akira’s vision went white as a tremendous shockwave rocked the ground, and when the light dissipated, the shadows had been completely obliterated – not a trace of them remained.

Sheathing his sword, Crow sauntered back over to the group. All told, the battle was over in less than a minute, and it seemed as though he was only barely holding himself back from yawning in exaggerated boredom.

“Okay, you made your point,” Ryuji mumbled.

“Yes, very impressive,” Makoto said, with a kind of cool indifference that masked any actual admiration she may have felt towards Crow’s skill. “However, I’m frankly more interested in seeing how you fight as part of a team. You are capable of following orders, aren’t you?”

“That,” Crow said, looking pointedly at Akira, “depends entirely on who is giving the orders.”

“That would be me,” Akira said. He looked from Crow to Ann to Yusuke. “We’re heading into uncharted territory now, so Panther, Fox, and Crow, I want you on the frontlines with me. Mona, you’ll keep navigating, Queen will provide tactical support, and Skull will watch our tail in case
we need back-up.”

“Very well,” Makoto said before Ryuji could protest. She pointed the way forward. “The tunnel narrows up ahead, so we’ll need to travel on foot for a while. Lead the way, Joker.”

Following Makoto’s guidance, Akira moved to the head of the pack with Crow right on his heel, with Ann and Yusuke falling into step behind them. If he listened carefully, he could hear Ryuji talking to Morgana – griping about their new companion, probably – while Makoto tried her best to keep them from speaking too loudly, but the windy tunnel masked any other conversations the Thieves may have been having. The only person he could talk to comfortably right now was Crow, who kept pace beside him.

Akira glanced sideways and said, in a loud whisper, “Show-off.”

Crow met his gaze, barely holding back a laugh. “I’m sorry, was I not asked to showcase my abilities?” he asked. “Perhaps you all just need to improve your own skills if I impressed you that much.”

“Who says I’m impressed? I’ve seen you do better.”

“Ah, so you were paying that much attention, at least. Well, the day has barely begun… don’t let your guard down, Joker.”

Crow laughed again, and Akira had to bite his tongue to keep from doing the same. He felt strange; his skin was buzzing like he was coursing with electricity – adrenaline, surely, except he hadn’t done any fighting – and his body seemed so light…

He almost mistook it for anxiety, but no; he recognized a second later that he was feeling excited, though he could hardly believe it.

When was the last time Mementos had been honestly exciting?

Shadow traffic was light as they traveled through Chemdah, descending flight after flight of stairs with minimal interruptions. Though they saw some combat, the shadows were hardly dangerous, and Crow barely had the chance to do any fighting at all, let alone to prove himself a valuable party member… at least until they reached the final floor.

Standing before the barrier wall was not the shadow of a human as they had expected, but a simple, ordinary shadow, albeit an extremely massive one. It was vaguely bipedal, holding a rough-hewn club loosely in one hand, and while it must have noticed them as they came down the stairs, it made no move towards them, apparently content to wait for their approach.

Akira surveyed the group. By his estimate, it had been about around three hours since they’d arrived in Mementos – Crow’s shortcut had saved them immeasurable time, but they still had to traverse eight entire floors – but aside from a few scrapes, everyone still looked fresh and ready to go.

“Okay, everyone’s all healed up,” Morgana announced. He eyed the large shadow warily and nodded to Akira. “Whenever you’re ready, Joker.”

Motioning for Ann, Yusuke, and Crow to follow him, Akira approached the shadow and drew his dagger. Before he had the chance to strike, however, the shadow dropped its club and began to
shake, condensing into a single floating ball of black muck. Akira paused a few feet away and waited for the shadow to take form, but it remained an amorphous lump, hovering in the air and burbling violently until, at last, a grotesque human face pushed its way through the blob’s surface.

It blinked, clearing some goop from its eyes, and then it opened its mouth and uttered a terrible wail. All at once, two more faces sprouted to the left and right of the first, then another, and another, and in mere seconds, the featureless ball had become a floating, multi-faced monstrosity.

“Woah, it’s huge!” Morgana exclaimed. He leapt up onto a broken concrete pillar and quickly scanned the battlefield. “But there’s only one of them… try and surround it! Hurry!”

The team of four split up, Yusuke circling around behind the shadow, while Ann and Crow flanked Akira until they had the shadow covered on all sides. Realizing it was trapped, the shadow spun in place, half of its heads roaring as it shot out a dozen powerful bursts of force energy that nearly knocked Akira off his feet. He coughed, feeling a dull ache in his chest from where he’d been hit, and braced himself against the pain.

Ann was the first to summon her Persona to the battlefield, but as flames began to gather in Carmen’s hand, Makoto suddenly called out to her.

“Panther, wait! No fire; it has a molten core, you’ll just make it stronger… and Fox, be cautious!”

“Uh, okay!” Ann said, dismissing Carmen and brandishing her whip instead. She caught the shadow in one of its many eyes, causing it to screech in pain and breathe a pillar of fire onto her in retaliation. She threw her arms up to shield herself from the fire, and while the shadow was distracted, Crow summoned Loki to try and catch the shadow off-guard – but to no avail. The shadow had too many eyes; it was impossible to take it by surprise.

Slowly, they chipped away at the behemoth, but with every spell, every bullet, every strike of the sword, the monster appeared wholly unaltered – it was hard to tell they were even doing damage. Akira growled in frustration, firing off a spell while dodging another huge gout of flames that came pouring out of a nearby mouth when he heard Yusuke cry out in pain beside him; evidently, he had not been so lucky as to dodge the attack, and the fire knocked him flat to the ground.

Damn it; Panther, cover Fox!” Akira ordered, falling back from the battle somewhat to call back to the reserve team, “Queen, do you have a weakness yet?”

“It’s – I think it’s weak to bless type attacks!” Makoto shouted back. “But…”

“But Joker doesn’t have a Persona with those kinds of skills right now, does he?” Ann asked.

Currently, Akira did not. But he knew someone who did.

“Crow!” Akira yelled, throwing his hand out towards the shadow. He said nothing else – Crow had heard Makoto’s warning just as he had, so the command was implicit and obvious – but nevertheless, this was a gamble. Given that Akira was also a wildcard, it must have been easy enough for Crow to reveal his true nature to Joker alone, but the other Phantom Thieves were a different story entirely. So then, if he chose to swap to Robin Hood right now…

For just a second, the battlefield went still, as if even the shadow itself wanted to see what would happen. Then Crow snapped his fingers, and seconds later, Robin Hood stood above him, as shining and golden as Akira remembered. He pulled his bow taut and fired off a beam of blessed energy, which pierced the shadow and caused each of its many heads to scream in pain as it dropped to the ground.
“Yes, it’s down!” Morgana exclaimed. “Go, now!”

The four Thieves descended upon the legionous shadow, mercilessly tearing away at its already weakened form until it was summarily defeated, melting into nothing more than a harmless puddle on the ground. Then, once it was clear the battle was well and truly over, Akira let out a sigh of relief, slipping his dagger back into its sheath and adjusting his gloves. His body was battered and bruised, his coat a little singed at the edges, but otherwise he was alive and well.

For the longest time, no one spoke, and when Akira turned back to question why, it became immediately obvious: everyone was staring at Crow, shock on their faces as they realized now what Akira had known since April – that he wasn’t alone, that his ability wasn’t as unique or special as they thought it was.

Akira cleared his throat.

“Uh. So…”

But he couldn’t think of the right words.

Ann took a step closer. Slowly, like she couldn’t decide if she was asking a question or making an observation, she said, “He’s like you.”

“He – yeah.” Akira opened his mouth, closed it again. There was no better way to put it.

“Another wildcard…”

Morgana appeared at Akira’s side, looking first to Crow and then back to Akira. “Joker… you really have a knack for finding people, don’t you?” he asked, smiling warmly, and Akira wondered if maybe that wasn’t his real power, after all; Crow had explored the Metaverse for two years before he happened upon Akira, but Akira had been in Tokyo for barely four months, and yet he’d managed to find so many others with the spirit of rebellion hiding in their hearts…

“All right!” Morgana suddenly exclaimed, turning on his heel and punching a fist out towards the end of the platform. “Enough sitting around. Let’s go open this barrier!”

With Morgana leading the way, the team congregated in front of the smooth, flat cave wall and waited patiently… but after nearly a full minute, the rock still hadn’t moved.

“What’s going on?” Morgana wondered, walking up to the wall and knocking on it a few times. “We changed Kaneshiro’s heart, and he even made that public apology… shouldn’t the public’s Palace respond to us?”

“…I wonder if we waited too long,” Makoto said. “I told you I’ve been keeping up with the news, didn’t I? The only thing people are talking about now is Medjed… it’s possible the public has already forgotten about Kaneshiro’s change of heart.”
Morgana bristled in irritation. “What?! How? It only just happened…”

As the team continued to debate this problem, Crow sidled up beside Akira and quietly asked him, “What the hell are they going on about?”

“Usually when we hit one of these walls, it opens up for us after we change someone’s heart and get the public talking about us,” Akira explained, causing Crow to frown at him.

“What, you rely that heavily on the public’s perception of you, and you never thought to try anything else – to look for a back-up plan in case your popularity waned?”

“We never needed to,” Akira said,shrugging. “Not until now.”

Crow sighed. “You guys really are helpless,” he said, gesturing for Akira to follow him over to the barrier wall. “Come... I’ll show you how to open the door.”


“If he’s been traveling here alone for so long, I suppose it makes sense that he has some way to bypass these walls,” Yusuke said, stepping aside and allowing Crow and Akira to pass.

“I can open them,” Crow confirmed, “and… I believe Joker should be able to, as well.” He stopped about a foot away from the cave wall and then tugged the clawed gauntlet off his left hand. “Take your glove off,” he instructed, “and place your bare hand on the wall.”

Akira shared a look with Morgana, but then complied, taking off his right-hand glove and doing as he was told. The wall was unnaturally smooth and quite warm to the touch, pulsing with rhythmic energy – like a heartbeat.

Crow placed his own hand on the wall and said, “Now, just wait…”

Everyone went quiet, waiting for something to happen, and for a long moment, nothing did. Akira frowned, but just as he was about to ask Crow what was going on, static crackled in his ears, and he heard a voice speak to him:

_I don’t care… I just don’t care anymore…_

Akira yanked his hand away from the wall, recoiling in surprise. That sound – it hadn’t come from inside his brain; his Personas hadn’t relayed that message him – rather, it seemed to have leapt from the wall to his fingertips, crawling up his arm and into his ear like a whispered secret.

“As I suspected,” Crow said. “We have the same ability, so of course, you can do it, too.”

“What just happened?” Akira asked.

“You said it yourself, didn’t you? This is humanity’s Palace,” Crow explained. “It mimics the human heart, in that way. People build emotional walls around themselves all the time, but we – that is, Joker and I – can reach them through the shadows that populate this place. Once their secrets have been heard, there’s no reason for the walls to remain, and the path will open for us.”

The group stared at Crow.

“…or at least, that’s my theory,” Crow mumbled, turning back to face the wall.

“Huh. Did it hurt, Joker?” Morgana asked.
“No, not really,” Akira said. “I was just surprised, that’s all.”

“Then… I guess it’s worth a shot?” Ann said.

Nodding, Akira closed his eyes, placed his hand again the wall again, and listened. It took a moment before the thoughts came to him, but once they did, they poured into his brain without pause, a deluge of sound and emotion:

Hackers declared war on the Phantom Thieves?

Medjed… they’re really scary…

He freaks me out. I’m so glad he’s not in my class; it’s scary enough having him in our SCHOOL, y’know?

…I don’t wanna hear about justice from some shady hackers

How can I rest when things are going to hell? But what can I do? I’m useless, useless…

His eyes are so dull…

…he freaks me out…

I wish Kamoshida-sensei really had suspended him…

…I don’t care what happens, as long as it’s interesting!

Then the voices became less distinct, blurring together until Akira could no longer differentiate individual words. He registered only feelings – intense hostility, anxiety, and a gaping, empty nothingness that felt as though a black hole had opened up inside his chest…

And then, just as suddenly, it was gone.

As soon as the voices had reached a fever pitch, they faded away, like a subway train rushing past and leaving nothing but wind in its wake. The wall began to vibrate, the rock crumbling under Akira touch, and he hastily took a few steps back, watching as the once-impassable barrier wall turned to rubble, revealing the stairs that would lead them down to the next path.

“I can’t believe it! It really worked – that was amazing!” Morgana exclaimed, rushing forward and standing beneath the craggy archway where the wall had once been. He bounced happily on his feet, grinning to himself before he remembered that he wasn’t alone, and his ears fell back in embarrassment. Coughing, he turned around and approached Crow with careful, deliberate steps. “Um. What I meant to say was, it seems you have a great deal of knowledge about this place. Despite your past actions… I’d be happy to explore Mementos with you.”

Crow stared Morgana down, glancing once to Akira and once to the rest of the Phantom Thieves, and then he sighed. “I suppose it’s fine,” he said. “If nothing else, it’s nice not having to think so hard about strategy now that I’m not taking on a group of shadows completely solo.”

“I’m okay with it, too,” Makoto said. “The greater our numbers, the safer we’ll be down here.”

“So then, how will we move forward with this partnership?” Yusuke asked. “I can’t imagine you’d like to exchange contact information.”

“Absolutely not,” Crow said at once. “No, I come here on Tuesdays and Thursdays – Sundays, too, but those are usually reserved for… work.” He grinned sharply. “We managed to meet up just fine
today... and my schedule is light now that summer has begun.”

“So you want us to come back on Thursday?” Akira asked, but Crow simply shrugged.

“I’m telling you that’s when I’ll be here; if you want to explore, then all you have to do is show up.” He paused, his eyes drifting over to Akira. “Well then, are we finished for the day? I know from experience that opening a wall for the first time can be draining…”

After taking a second to assess, Akira had to admit he was still feeling dizzy after hearing all those voices, not just from the physical strain, but from the content of the secrets themselves... as absurd as it sounded, he couldn’t shake the feeling that some of them had been about him, and it left a strange taste in his mouth.

“It looks like the Meta-nav has registered our progress,” Makoto noted. “If we wanted to leave now, we wouldn’t lose anything.”

“Then we should head back,” Akira said, nodding. He opened up the Meta-nav, wondering if perhaps Crow’s trick would work in reverse, and keyed in “Mementos – Lobby” as their new destination. His phone beeped, the world blurred, and seconds later, they were back in the lobby, a different location than where they’d started – but the lobby, nonetheless.

“Well then,” Crow said. “It was... interesting, getting to see you all in action. And I suppose this won’t be the last time, will it?”

“No,” Akira said. “I suppose not.”

The Thieves paused, waiting and watching as Crow turned his back on them and disappeared, before they themselves returned to reality, arriving just outside Shibuya station. Ryuji and Ann looked around, not-so-subtly scanning the area for a suspicious individual who might have just come from the Metaverse, too, but ultimately seeing nothing of interest.

Ann sighed. “What a weird guy... I wonder who he is,” she said.

“He looked to be around our age, from what I can remember... could he attend Shujin with you all?” Yusuke suggested.

“Ugh, you mean he might already be spyin’ on us? Don’t like that,” Ryuji said, rubbing his hands over his bare arms like he’d suddenly come down with a chill.

“He doesn’t know our identities,” Akira insisted. “Our masks are protecting us.”

“To be honest, I agree with Akira,” Makoto said, though her inflection made it seem as though she was reluctant to say it. “That said... we’ll need to be especially cautious going forward – especially you, Morgana. You may have to stop accompanying Akira to school.”


“Because all he has to do is see a talking cat and it’s all over!” Ann said. She reached over Akira’s shoulder to give Morgana some apologetic head scritches. “I’m sorry; I know you like hanging out with us.”

“What if I’m quiet?” Morgana asked, practically begging as he pushed his head against Ann’s hand. “I’ll be quiet as a mouse! And I hate mice, so that’s a big concession!”

“People already know I’m carrying you around; they’d have to be blind not to,” Akira said. “You
don’t have to stay home all day, but you probably ought to work on keeping your comments to yourself for a little while, okay?"

The look Morgana gave him just then made it seem as though he could think of no worse fate than that.
Haunted by the Past

Chapter Notes

As we are moving into Futaba's arc, this chapter will involve some discussion of suicide (though nothing graphic or specific). Tags have been updated to reflect this.

On Akira’s orders, everyone took the next day off. It was rare that they would return to the Metaverse so quickly when they weren’t actively in the process of infiltrating a Palace, and he didn’t want anyone burning out, especially not in this heat. Besides, everyone deserved a chance to relax, or else to do whatever activities would normally occupy their summer days if they weren’t busy exploring an extra-dimensional world.

As for himself and Morgana, who happily tagged along inside Akira’s backpack wherever he went, they spent the day hopping around Tokyo in order to shore up their Metaverse exploration supplies. With seven people technically on the team now, they would quickly exhaust their energy if they tried to rely on their Personas alone for healing and recovery – luckily, Akira had made a few allies out in Shibuya by now, people who were willing to help him without asking too many questions.

Starting in the Underground Mall, he browsed leisurely in search of things that struck his fancy, although he ultimately found very little aside from some odd-looking vending machine drinks, which he duly purchased… mostly as a joke. More important was his visit to Iwai’s shop, wherein he stocked up on ammo and a few upgraded weapons after spending an hour or so helping Iwai unpack boxes and organize the shelves.

Once his business at Untouchable was finished, Akira stepped back out into the ally, catching sight of the Velvet Room’s glowing blue prison cell from the corner of his eye. It appeared no different than usual, though he noted that its guard was mysteriously absent… but despite this, he passed it by. He didn’t need to fuse anything right now – Arsene was serving him perfectly well – and the sun was so oppressively bright that he wanted to spend as little time outside as possible.

His last stop of the day was to Takemi’s clinic, purposefully chosen because it was the closest to Leblanc: after spending half the day shopping, his backpack was so heavily laden with goodies that Morgana struggled to fit inside, and he wanted to get home as quickly as possible after he had loaded up on fresh medical supplies.

He greeted Takemi at the front desk, hastily explained that he wasn’t here for a medical trial today, and allowed her to lead him into the back room, where she had laid out a half-dozen new medications for Akira’s perusal. Sifting through the gels and healing salves, he found his mind wandering back to Crow again. How had he managed to stay healed up all by himself for over two years? Neither Robin nor Loki possessed recovery spells from what Akira had seen, so Crow must have been keeping himself patched up in some other way… unless he really was as deft as he claimed and never got seriously injured.

Akira quickly discarded that thought, however. No one was *that* good.
It was mid-afternoon when he returned to Leblanc, his wallet a few thousand yen lighter and his backpack a few pounds heavier. Sweat clung to his skin, and Leblanc’s meager ceiling fans offered him little respite, but it was still better than standing in direct sunlight. He was glad to be home, ready to go upstairs and spend the rest of the day doing nothing at all, but no sooner had the café door closed behind him than Akira heard a voice call out to him:

“Ah, Kurusu-kun – good afternoon.”

Aside from Sojiro himself, there were three others occupying Leblanc today: an elderly man and woman Akira recognized as some of Sojiro’s non-adjacent neighbors, and Goro Akechi, the one who had greeted Akira. He was sitting not at the bar, as he usually was, but at the booth seat closest to the attic stairs, positioned in such a way that he could see the entire café at a glance, the front door included. On the table in front of him sat an old wooden chess board that Akira thought he’d seen sitting on the counter beneath Leblanc’s TV. The pieces were scattered about the board like Akechi had been in the middle of a match, but he wasn’t sitting with anyone else; the only thing occupying the seat beside him was his attaché case.

“Hey,” Akira replied. He waved at Sojiro in passing, stopping beside Akechi’s table. “You play chess?”

“From time to time,” Akechi said. “It’s a good way to keep my hands and mind occupied at the same time. Though I admit, I usually end up playing against myself.”

It was subtle, but to Akira, that sounded like an invitation. “Give me a second,” he said, tapping his fingers on the table before continuing on past Akechi towards the attic. “I’ll be right back.”

Upstairs, Akira dropped his backpack on the ground, causing some of its contents – Morgana included – to spill out onto the floor. Disregarding the mess, he stripped off his sweaty shirt in favor of something light and dry, tossing the old clothes onto what had become a fairly formidable pile of laundry, another mess he chose to ignore for the time being.

“Hey, aren’t you going to put these away?” Morgana asked, carefully side-stepping a roll of thick, gauzy bandages.

“Later,” Akira said. “We have company.”

“Ugh, you mean the detective?” Morgana wrinkled his nose and squinted disapprovingly. “I don’t know how you can stand talking to him for so long. He’s in love with the sound of his own voice.”

Akira shrugged. “You don’t have to come with me, then.”

“But it’s so hot up here…” Morgana whined, lethargically following Akira back downstairs. After taking a quick look around the café and seeing that the two older patrons were on their way out the door, he clawed his way up onto an empty barstool, flopping down and trying to catch as much of the ceiling fan’s breeze as possible.

On the counter, a cup of coffee was waiting for Akira, who grabbed it with a quiet “thank you” directed towards Sojiro before he returned to Akechi’s table. Akechi himself didn’t seem to notice his approach, his eyes instead glued to the chessboard in front of him, where he had moved a few pieces in the time Akira had been gone.

“Hey, I thought I said to give me a second,” Akira said, sliding into the booth seat opposite Akechi.

“Hm?” Akechi glanced from Akira to the chessboard, his expression falling as realization swept
over him. “Oh! I’m terribly sorry; I didn’t realize you – you wanted to play?”

Akira nodded. “If you want an opponent, that is.”

“I – certainly. That would be quite refreshing, I think.”

Akira took a drink of his coffee, watching as Akechi gathered the pieces and returned them to their home positions. He was dressed rather formally this afternoon, wearing a white button-down shirt and a striped tie, with his hair falling neatly around his neck. He must have had work today, Akira thought, and his mind flashed back to the fireworks festival, recalling how relaxed Akechi had seemed in his yukata, with his hair pulled back into a loose ponytail, and how guarded he now seemed in comparison.

They settled into a quiet rhythm, trading moves while Akira sipped on his piping hot coffee. He didn’t think he was doing very well, and admittedly, the fine intricacies of chess strategy were a mystery to him, but then again, he didn’t much care if he won or lost. It was fun simply to play, and although Akechi’s face remained deceptively neutral throughout, there was a new energy to his body language that hadn’t been present when he was playing alone; he obviously enjoyed having a partner to play against.

The game was just getting particularly heated when Akira heard Leblanc’s front door chime. He didn’t let that break his concentration, but Akechi glanced up instinctively, and seconds later, a small, surprised gasp of recognition left him, which was enough incentive for Akira to twist around in his seat and see what had grabbed Akechi’s attention. He figured it couldn’t have been one of Leblanc’s regulars if it incited that kind of reaction from Akechi, and indeed, it wasn’t – the new arrival was none other than Makoto’s sister, Sae. She was wearing the same black suit she’d worn the last time she had visited Leblanc, and she had a leather bag slung over her shoulder, looking like she’d come here straight from the courthouse.

Akechi smiled and raised his voice a little, calling out to her, “Sae-san, hello–”

But instead of replying, Sae held up a hand and shot a stern look at Akechi, silencing him instantly. She strode purposefully over to the counter, stopping in front of Sojiro, who stood up straighter and met her gaze head-on.

“Sakura-san,” she said. “I presume you know why I am here.”

“I couldn’t hope to guess,” Sojiro said tersely. “But you should already know my answer hasn’t changed.”

Sae pursed her lips.

“How’s business, Sakura-san?” she asked.

Sojiro’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion, and so did Akira’s – both the topic and her tone had shifted so abruptly that even a seemingly-innocuous question like that came off as suspicious.

“I get by,” Sojiro said. “I’ve even got some extra help now, see?” he asked, jabbing his thumb in Akira’s direction. Sae’s attention flickered to Akira for just a moment before returning to Sojiro.

“That’s good,” she said. “Am I to assume that means you’re spending more time at home nowadays?”

Sojiro’s eyes narrowed, but he kept his mouth firmly shut. Even he could see that Sae was trying to lay a trap, though what she intended to gain from it, Akira couldn’t tell.
“Because if you aren’t,” Sae began, “and you’re continuing to leave your home unattended for twelve hours a day… well, child services may need to pay you a visit.”

Sojiro gripped the counter tightly with both hands, his knuckles going white from exertion.

“I’ve been in contact with a certain man – Youji Isshiki-san – perhaps you know him?”

“There’s in nothing wrong with my home life!” Sojiro snapped, and although he seemed outwardly composed, Akira could hear how the cold fury in his voice had become tinged by panic. “If you bring that man into this, I swear—”

“Swear all you like,” Sae said calmly, “but believe me when I say that if Youji-san chooses to push for custody, you won’t stand a chance.” She sighed and adjusted the strap of her shoulder bag. “This is your last warning. Cooperate, or I will act.”

Then she was out the door, leaving Sojiro reeling. Akira glanced at Akechi, hoping to share a look of confusion with him, but found the detective watching the door with a pained expression on his face instead. With a huff, Sojiro tore off his apron and haphazardly threw it to the side, rushing past Akira towards the front door.

“Watch the café,” he muttered, and then he, too, was gone, the door chiming softly as it closed again.

Suddenly, the café was dead silent – the TV had been turned off somewhere along the line – leaving Akira and Akechi alone with their thoughts. Akira shifted around until he was sitting properly in the booth seat again and asked, “Do you know what that was all about?”

Akechi sighed and picked up one of Akira’s captured pawns, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger. “Sae-san believes Sakura-san may have some information he is purposefully withholding from the police,” he said. “It would seem she’s decided the best way to get him to cooperate is by threatening to take his daughter away… I’m disappointed. It’s unlike her to stoop to such methods.”

Akira blinked.

“Daughter,” he said.

“Yes, she – did you not know?” Akechi asked, his attention snapping back to Akira. “I assumed, given Sakura-san is your guardian, that he…”

“I live here, though, not at Boss’s place,” Akira said. “And he’s pretty secretive about his personal life.”

Akechi laughed awkwardly and averted his eyes. “Then perhaps it’s not my place to tell you…”

Akira, however, was not content to leave things at that. He leaned forward and cocked his head to the side curiously, propping his elbows on the table and lacing his hands together, staring at Akechi with a pleading look in his eyes. Almost immediately, Akechi sighed and nodded, his resolve crumbling under Akira’s unwavering gaze.

“Oh… all right, very well. But keep this to yourself, okay?”

He didn’t say anything right away, observing the chess board instead, but once he had picked up his knight and captured one of Akira’s pawns, he began to speak.
“Futaba Sakura is her name… but although she shares Sakura-san’s last name, she is not related to him by blood. Rather, Sakura-san took custody of Futaba-chan after the death of her biological mother.”

The mother of a child who was now in Boss’s care… for some reason, that concept made Akira’s brain itch, like he was on the verge of remembering something important. He tried to recall the last time Sae had visited Leblanc – hadn’t she mentioned a name Akira didn’t know? And then, just now…

“Isshiki?” Akira guessed.

Akechi’s eyebrows rose. “Yes, that’s right… Sae must have mentioned her at some point.” He paused, frowning as Akira captured Akechi’s bishop with an adjacent pawn. “Isshiki-san was a researcher – a cognitive scientist, as a matter of fact. Brilliant; one of the top minds in her field, from what I’ve gathered.”

“Cognitive science, huh?”

“Indeed. Have you figured out the source of Sae-san’s interest yet?” Akechi asked. He smiled like he was happy Akira was following along, but that smile dropped almost immediately, and he continued, “Yes, Sae believes that Isshiki-san’s research may reveal something about the recent psychotic breakdown incidents; however… about two years ago, she – that is, Isshiki-san – committed suicide.”

Akira’s fingers closed tightly around one of his pawns, cold shock washing over him.

“That’s…” He floundered for the right words. “Awful.”

“Mm.” Akechi’s tone turned dull, and he moved his queen listlessly across the board. “It was a dreadful affair, and it hit no one harder than it did Futaba-chan. From what I’ve gathered, she withdrew from the world after the incident, isolating herself from everyone… even from Sakura-san.”

“I had no idea,” Akira admitted.

“That’s not terribly surprising; I imagine it’s something of a sore subject for Sakura-san,” Akechi said. “I only know as much as I do from reading the police report on Isshiki-san’s suicide.”

“So why is she living with Boss?” Akira asked. “Did Isshiki-san not have any living relatives?”

“She must have at least one – this Youji that Sae-san mentioned – but clearly, Sakura-san was able to take primary custody of Futaba-chan despite the existence of this man.” Akechi paused, curling one hand into a fist around his knight before gingerly placing it back on the board. “It’s possible that Youji-san was uninterested in rearing a child… though, to be frank, it is something of a mystery to me why Sakura-san wanted custody of Futaba-chan in the first place. All I know is that Sakura must care for her deeply, or Sae would not think to use her as emotional leverage.”

Akira leaned back in his seat, letting out a long breath. All this time, Boss had been hiding a secret like that, and he still welcomed Akira into his custody, even if only temporarily? It only raised more questions in Akira’s mind.

And if Isshiki-san had been a cognitive scientist…

“Check, by the way,” Akechi said, pointing to his knight, which was in a prime position to take Akira’s king. Akira blinked away his thoughts, moving to capture Akechi’s final knight with one of
“Do you think Boss really is hiding evidence?” he asked.

“Honestly… I don’t, but only because I don’t believe that research exists, at least not in the capacity Sae-san would like,” Akechi said. “Futaba-chan’s mother was in enough pain that she took her own life… it is very possible that she destroyed all of her research before doing so. If Sakura-san says that no original copies of her research exist, I’m inclined to believe him.”

They each grew silent, and after staring at the chessboard long enough, Akira realized that, despite his best efforts, Akechi had checkmated him. It was getting dark outside, too, the sun having finally set far enough that the streetlights had come on. Half-heartedly, Akira tipped his king over, conceding the game.

“We ought to call it there, I think,” Akechi said, sweeping his pieces off the board and into their container for safe storage. Together, they cleaned up the table and returned the chessboard to its original place on the shelf, and then Akechi gathered his personal belongings in preparation to leave. “Thank you for playing with me, however. I had fun.”

“No problem,” Akira said as he walked Akechi to the door. “And thanks for telling me all that.”

“You’re welcome,” Akechi said. “Though… please, I really must ask you not to spread this information around. I told you far more than I should have…”

“It won’t leave this café,” Akira promised, which made Akechi smile.

“All right; I’ll hold you to that. Goodnight, then, Kurusu-kun…”

Once Akechi had left Leblanc, Morgana crept out of his hiding place, jumping up onto the counter, his eyes shining bright and alert.

“Wow… it sounds like the Chief is going through a lot more than we thought, huh?”

“Sounds like it,” Akira agreed. Before he could suggest a reason why, however, his phone vibrated in his pocket, and he pulled it out to respond to the text – probably one of the Thieves asking a question about tomorrow’s exploration…

> **Unknown Number:** Who was that

> **Unknown Number:** The one who knew all about Futaba Sakura

Akira frowned. It must have been a wrong number, but that question was too specific, too targeted to be a coincidence. Akira looked around the café, but he knew for a fact that he and Morgana were completely alone. Could this have been Akechi? Akira didn’t have his phone number – but no, this person was asking about Akechi. Cautiously, Akira typed out a reply.

> **Akira Kurusu:** What? Who is this?

Almost immediately, he received another text:

> **Unknown Number:** Don’t answer questions with questions

> **Unknown Number:** I asked first. Who was that man?

Akira clicked his tongue. Ordinarily, he wouldn’t have responded to a message like this, but the fact that this unknown number knew exactly what he and Akechi had been talking about – during a conversation they had only just finished having – kept him from ignoring the texts. These were
murky waters; Akira wanted to keep them talking, see if they wouldn’t reveal something about themselves, but on the off chance this person was dangerous, he didn’t want to compromise Akechi’s identity…

>>Akira Kurusu: Just a detective. He works with the police.

There was a longer pause this time.

>>Unknown Number: I see

>>Akira Kurusu: Answer mine now.

>>Unknown Number: Fine
>>Unknown Number: You may call me Alibaba
>>Unknown Number: And you…
>>Unknown Number: You are the one called Joker, are you not?

If Akira had been on edge after the first message, this last one shoved him right over the cliff side; now he was free-falling, his stomach flipping uncomfortably on the way down.

“Hey, Morgana,” Akira said, swallowing around the lump in his throat. “C’mere for a second…”

“Hmm? What’s up?”

Akira placed his phone on the countertop, and Morgana padded over, tilting his head so he could read the messages. Slowly, his ears fell back until they were pressed flat against his head, his pupils going huge and dark.

“Wh-huh? Who is this?”

“I don’t know,” Akira said. “They just messaged me out of nowhere.”

“And they – they know you’re Joker? Are we – is someone spying on us?”

Before Akira could answer, another text appeared on the screen:

>>Unknown Number: Answer me

“I don’t want to ignore this guy,” Akira said.

“I – I agree,” Morgana said. He took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “Try to play it cool for now… maybe we can find out what he wants.”

>>Akira Kurusu: Maybe. Why’re you asking?

>>Unknown Number: I’ve seen what you do
>>Unknown Number: what you CLAIM to do
>>Unknown Number: Stealing hearts
>>Unknown Number: Changing them
>>Unknown Number: It’s almost impossible to believe
>>Unknown Number: But you know what?

>>Unknown Number: I think you’re the real deal
“Where’s he going with this…?” Morgana wondered aloud.

>>Unknown Number: So I have a request
>>Unknown Number: As you can see, I have ascertained your identities
>>Unknown Number: ALL of your identities, not just yours, Joker
>>Unknown Number: If you help me, I won’t reveal that information to the public

“T-this is blackmail! Isn’t it? Is it??” Morgana exclaimed.

>>Akira Kurusu: Help you with what?

There was a long pause again.

>>Unknown Number: I need you to change a heart.
>>Unknown Number: Futaba Sakura’s heart.

“What – Futaba again? Does Futaba-chan even have a Palace?” Morgana asked.

Akira thumbed away from the messenger app for a moment and pulled up the Meta-nav instead. He held down the speaker button and said, “Futaba Sakura.”

The phone beeped. “Candidate found.”

Morgana shook his head in disbelief. “I don’t believe it… just who is this girl?”

>>Akira Kurusu: I need to speak with the other Thieves first.
>>Akira Kurusu: Can you give me some time?

>>Unknown Number: That is acceptable.
>>Unknown Number: I’ll contact you again in 24 hours.
>>Unknown Number: Be ready.

Akira tried to type out another message, but the text bounced – he could no longer reply.

“This is not good,” Morgana stated. He was pacing around the counter, his tail swishing in agitation. “We need to tell the others about this as quickly as possible…”

Looking around the dark café, a thought struck Akira, one that left him feeling even more nauseous than before.

“Hey, let’s go upstairs,” he suggested, scooping Morgana up before he could protest. He locked the front door and switched off the lights, silently retreating into the attic, at which point he set Morgana down on the couch and immediately began inspecting the room. He didn’t know what he was looking for, exactly – stray wires? The glint of a glass camera lens? – but after a few solid minutes of searching, he came to the conclusion that the only things populating this attic were Akira’s own possessions and dusty old bags of junk.

“Do you think Leblanc has been compromised?” Morgana asked him.

“Hard to say,” Akira said, sighing and flopping down on the couch beside him. “That person – Alibaba, I guess – knew I had been talking about Futaba Sakura, but I don’t think they could see Akechi, or they wouldn’t have asked who he was. And I don’t see anything up here, either.”

“Between this and Crow, we really DO need to start keeping a lower profile.” Morgana sighed.
“Maybe Makoto was right… maybe I’m the problem.”

“It’s not you, Morgana,” Akira assured him. “That person only mentioned things I had said. To them, you must have sounded like an ordinary housecat.”

“Yeah? …yeah.” Morgana nodded to himself. “Still, this is strange… I never thought we’d end up blackmailed into changing a person’s heart. And someone like Futaba-chan… so far our targets have all been adults, but it sounds like she’s about your age, doesn’t it?”

“Sounds like it,” Akira agreed. “And she has a Palace.”

“And she has a Palace,” Morgana said. His whiskers drooped, and he lowered his head. “Okay, well… there’s no sense in trying to figure this out right now, and we shouldn’t worry everyone else so late at night, so we’ll just have to fill them in tomorrow – before we go to Mementos. I think we’re safe for now… will you be able to sleep?”

Akira wasn’t sure. He settled into bed, turned out the lights, and closed his eyes… but sleep never came to him, his mind overflowing with questions to which he had no good answers.

Before heading into Mementos the next day, Akira and Morgana briefly caught the other Thieves up on the previous night’s events, to their slow, dawning horror that someone may have been spying on them in Leblanc, which had been a safe haven up until now.

“Okay, so that’s definitely Crow, right?” Ryuji asked after hearing the full story. “We’re all agreed on that?”


“Cuz we just fucking met him and then this happens! Who else could it be?”

“Correlation and causation do not have to be linked,” Yusuke said. “However… you have to admit, the timing is very suspicious.”

“I don’t think it’s him,” Akira said. “If Futaba-chan is really a hermit, then only a few people even know she exists, and Crow… I think his efforts tend to be focused elsewhere.”

“Who, then?” Makoto asked.

That was the question of the hour – the question that had kept Akira up all night, tossing and turning as he tried to put together the pieces of this puzzle without seeing the box. At some point, he’d reached a conclusion, one he’d written off at three in the morning as conspiratorial nonsense, but now, revisiting the thought in the light of day, it didn’t seem so crazy…

“Hear me out,” Akira said slowly. “I think this Alibaba might be Futaba herself.”

“What?!” Ryuji exclaimed. “No way.”

“What?!”” Ann asked.

Yusuke frowned in thought. “You mean to say that Futaba-chan wants us to steal her own heart?”

“It’s either that, or it’s Sojiro, and…” Akira trailed off, shaking his head. That was simply not the case.
“But… this is Boss’s daughter we’re talking about,” Makoto said. She had gone unnaturally pale, her expression tight. “How could someone in Boss’s care become such a terrible person as to spawn a Palace?”

“Well, Palace-owners don’t have to be evil,” Morgana reasoned. “A Palace is only born from a distorted heart. If Akechi is right, and Futaba shut herself off from the world after her mother’s death, well…”

“That sounds pretty distorted to me,” Akira finished.

“Damn,” Ryuji whistled. “And she’s got a Palace, too?”

“Yep,” Morgana said. “We confirmed it last night.”

“Do you have any idea as to her keywords?” Yusuke asked. To this, Akira had to shake his head, and Yusuke nodded in sympathy. “I see. If she has truly locked herself away, then it will be hard to gather information about her…”

“Couldn’t we ask Boss?” Ryuji suggested. “I mean, he’d know the most, right?”

“I’m not so sure he’d be comfortable telling us anything,” Makoto said. “If he hasn’t said anything about Futaba-chan to Akira, then we have even less of a reason to think he’d tell us anything.”

“Well, Alibaba said they’d contact you again tonight, right?” Ann asked, turning to Akira. “So if they really are Futaba-chan, we can try and ask her then.”

“Lady Ann is right,” Morgana said. “You’ve all been briefed on the situation, but there isn’t much we can do about it right now… so we may as well keep exploring Mementos, like we planned.”

They entered the Metaverse without much fanfare, and when they arrived in the Mementos lobby, Crow wasn’t there yet, giving the Thieves a few minutes to themselves. Morgana and Makoto examined the Meta-nav app, trying to find any other hidden features it might hold, while Ryuji and Yusuke helped each other stretch out, limbering up in preparation for a fight. Ann, meanwhile, lingered towards the back of the group, looking at Akira like she wanted to say something.

Akira caught her eye and asked, “What is it?”

Ann jolted, surprised she had been called out. “It’s just, uh…” She paused, twisting her whip between her hands. “You really don’t think Alibaba could be Crow? Like, really really?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Akira said. “I told you already, I don’t think it suits him.”

“And… you’re sure you’re not just saying that because you’re kinda in to him?”

 “…

What.

“I’m… I’m not in to Crow,” Akira said, taking a few steps closer to Ann and dropping his voice to a near-whisper. “I don’t know who he is; I don’t even know what he looks like. What – why would you—”

“Right! Right, okay,” Ann said, holding her hands up. “Sorry; I just forgot you’re kinda flirty as Joker.”
“I wasn’t – when was I flirting?”

“The only other time we’ve met him, duh! But okay. If you say it doesn’t mean anything, then I believe you,” Ann said, nudging him in the arm with her elbow, an action that hardly instilled confidence in Akira. He was beyond embarrassed, his heart beating so fast he could feel it in his ribcage, and he wondered, was everyone else thinking the same thing? And since when was he “flirty” in the Metaverse; what did that even mean? What…

“You seem somewhat agitated this morning, Joker.”

Akira nearly leapt out of his skin at the sound of an unexpected voice so loud and so close, and he whipped around to find Crow standing there, not three feet behind him; he must have crept up while Akira and Ann were talking.

“Crow! God… were you eavesdropping?” Akira snapped, hoping he came off as accusatory instead of defensive, and hoping that the tips of his ears weren’t as red as they felt.

“How harsh… wouldn’t you like to know,” Crow said. He hummed, looking Akira up and down appraisingly. “You really are tense… were you that troubled by Medjed’s threats?”

Medjed? Akira frowned; he hadn’t given Medjed much thought since Makoto brought them up the other day.

“The hell’re you talkin’ about, dude?” Ryuji asked. By now, Crow’s entrance and Akira’s outburst had gathered the attention of the other Thieves, who grouped up beside Akira and Ann. “Medjed’s old news, ain’t it?”

“You… do you not know?” Crow asked. Slowly, his neutral expression morphed into a cruel, delighted smirk.

“The last thing I remember was Medjed ‘declaring war’ on us or whatever,” Ann said. “Then they just kinda disappeared, right?”

“I’ve been watching the news when I can,” Makoto said. “People have been talking about Medjed, but the group itself hasn’t made another move – at least, not to my knowledge.”

By now, Crow was outright laughing at them, bringing one clawed hand up to cover his mouth.

“Something you’d like to share, Crow?” Akira asked dryly.

“Oh no, I…” Crow took a deep breath, trying to stem his laughter. “I couldn’t spoil the fun, in that case.” He smiled at them with his lips tightly shut. “Ah, well then. You’re all here, so shall we go?”

“…sure. Let’s get going,” Akira said. There would be no reasoning with Crow in this state – he was too obviously amused at their ignorance to tell them anything – and besides, it wasn’t as though they had much of a choice. There was no phone service down here, so unless they wanted to turn right around and leave, they would have to wait until they returned to the real world to figure out whether or not Crow was just fucking with them.

It was easier getting started today now that they didn’t have to trouble themselves with introductions, and as far as Akira could tell, most of the Thieves had made their peace about working alongside Crow, who likewise seemed to have grown bored of mocking the Thieves to their faces… at least for the time being. They warped down to the next path and began to scour the caverns, seeking a way down.
Every path of Mementos looked more or less the same, though the walls in Kaitul were a deeper green than they had been upstairs. The ground was scuffed from repeated travel, and the train tracks that snaked through the tunnels looked ready to fall apart, their wooden rails old and rotting, but the most striking feature of this path were the thick black roots that traced across the tunnel walls like wild kudzu, taking hold wherever there was a crack in the stone. Those roots had been an omnipresent feature of Mementos since the very beginning, of course, but they seemed more pronounced down here: larger, stronger, the tendrils pulsing in time with Akira’s heartbeat. Now that he had touched the cave walls for himself, Akira couldn’t help but see Mementos as something **living**, the roots like veins carrying black ichor all the way back to the heart of this beast… wherever that was.

They didn’t even get much farther that day; with Akira’s mysterious blackmailer on their minds, not to mention the new worry that Medjed may have done something worthy of note, the Thieves were far too distracted to fight properly, and it didn’t help that Kaitul was so dark that they could either travel safely, or they could travel quickly, but not both. After a few hours, they’d barely made it down six floors. This level, at least, was relatively quiet, and while they were settling in to take a rest, Crow turned on them and sighed.

“Look, just go back home already, why don’t you?” he said, crossing his arms and looking them over disapprovingly. “I’ll keep progressing to the end of this route… you can catch up to me when your heads aren’t in the clouds.”

“Or,” Ann suggested, “you could save us the trouble and just tell us what you know…”

“Would you believe me if I did?” Crow asked in return. He scoffed. “Please. You need to see it for yourselves.”

“Crow’s right,” Akira said, because no one else on the team would admit it, even if it was true. “Besides, we made it to a new checkpoint. We don’t have to rush ourselves down here.”

“I have no qualms about turning in for the day,” Yusuke said. “But… you’re going to keep exploring, Crow?”

“That’s right,” Crow said. “Unlike some people, I have nothing to distract me.”

“If you plan on getting ahead of us…” Makoto began to say.

“Relax,” Crow said, rolling his eyes at Makoto’s obvious suspicion. “I’m not lying – I won’t go any farther than the end of the path. It will be easier to break down the wall with Joker’s assistance, anyway…”

“Plus, Queen, didn’t we find a way to sync our Meta-navs earlier?” Morgana said. “So there’s no harm in letting Crow go ahead.”

“Ugh, fine,” Ryuji muttered, throwing his hands up in the air. “Let’s just get out of here.”

The Thieves collected themselves to leave the cave, but before they parted ways, Akira turned back to Crow.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” he said.

Crow smirked at him. “Bold words coming from you, Joker,” he said. “But fine… if I get in trouble, I promise to do the exact opposite of whatever you would do.”

Grinning, Akira waved him off and moved to join the other Thieves. Just before they were
transported back to the lobby, Akira noticed that Ann was trying to catch his eye, and he
consciously avoided her gaze, dropping the smile from his face. To her credit, Ann didn’t say
anything to him, not even once they were back in reality and walking back to Leblanc, but still,
Akira fought to keep his face expressionless. He certainly didn’t need to add any more fuel to her
conspiracy theory – although if there was one thing Akira knew with absolute certainty, it was that
he wasn’t into Crow.

Please.

Sojiro regarded them with a mildly curious eye as the Thieves made their way back into Leblanc
that afternoon. The café was empty – most customers preferred to avoid the summer heat rather
than make the trip out to see Sojiro – and to fill the silence, Boss had turned on the television,
which almost immediately caught Akira’s attention: it was perpetually tuned in to a local news
station, and what else were they reporting on but Medjed itself?

Instead of sitting down or heading up to the attic, the Thieves grouped up near the bar and stared
intently at the TV screen, on which a single news anchor was pictured. She sat in an adequately-lit
sound studio, her expression serious and solemn, while over her shoulder, the news station
displayed an image of Medjed’s logo, accompanied by the group’s name typed neatly below it.

“The hacker-activist group called Medjed, which just a few weeks ago issued a challenge to the
Shibuya-local vigilante group known as the Phantom Thieves, released another statement late last
night,” the woman said.

“Medjed, huh,” Sojiro commented, clearly unimpressed. “I’m getting real tired of hearing that
name everywhere.”

“The message, which was written in English and posted to Medjed’s official website, reads as
follows.” The anchorwoman cleared her throat and began to read. “We are disappointed in the
people of Japan and their belief in the Phantom Thieves’ false justice. Hence, we shall proceed
with our plan to cleanse Japan. This process will commence—”

In the middle of her speech, however, the TV suddenly cut off, switching over to some kind of
daytime drama. Collectively, the group cried out, causing Sojiro to startle and nearly drop the
remote control.

“Woah; what’s with that reaction?” he asked.

“It’s uh – just, could you turn it back for a minute, please, Boss?” Ann asked. “We’re just, um…
really interested in current events?”

Sojiro furrowed his eyebrows, but he did as requested, flipping the TV back to the news report just
in time to catch the tail-end of Medjed’s statement.

“…if these demands remain unmet. The future of Japan rests with the Phantom Thieves. We are
Medjed. We are unseen. We will eliminate evil.”

The woman took a short breath, turning her eyes back to the invisible audience before her.
“Authorities say that this statement is not cause for panic,” she said. “Any threats to Japan’s
economy will be treated with the gravity they deserve…”

The news report continued after this, but Akira stopped paying attention. So had Makoto; halfway
through the news report, she had pulled out her phone, her thumb flying rapidly over the keyboard until she had navigated to Medjed’s website, which contained another long block of text.

“Did we miss anything?” Akira asked her.

Makoto frowned. “I’m not sure… Ann, could you…?”

“Huh?” Ann perked up, tearing her eyes from the news report. “Oh, sure – here, let me see…”

She took the phone from Makoto and quickly scanned the page, her eyes darting back and forth as she read. “‘We are disappointed with the people of Japan’ – we heard all that on TV already… oh, August 21st. That’s when their ‘cleanse’ is going to happen, or whatever.”

“Have they made any demands?” Yusuke asked.

Ann winced. “They want us – err, they want the, uh, Phantom Thieves to… reveal their identities to the public.”

Below them, Morgana sighed. “Seems like that’s what everyone wants nowadays… what part of ‘Phantom Thief’ are these people not understanding?”

While Akira was still formulating his own opinion on the matter, his phone vibrated in his pocket, and a spike of anxiety pierced his heart. Given that all of his friends – all those who had his phone number, at least – were currently gathered in Leblanc alongside him, there was only one person this could be…

>>Unknown Number: Well? Have you decided?

Akira tapped Makoto on the shoulder and tilted his phone in her direction. Her eyes went wide, and she in turn got Ann’s attention, and soon all four of the other Thieves were crowded around Akira, looking over his shoulder as Alibaba continued to inundate him with texts.

>>Unknown Number: I can sweeten the deal.

>>Unknown Number: You’re worried about Medjed, right?

>>Unknown Number: I can take care of them for you

“Can they really do that?!” Ryuji yelped.

“What’s it say? What’s it say?!” Morgana pleaded from his spot on the ground.

“They must have heard the TV report,” Makoto said, dropping her voice to a whisper. “You might be right that Leblanc has been compromised…”

“But do you really think they could be… y’know?” Ann asked in the same low tone as Makoto. “If everything we heard about her has been true, could she really have the resources to stop Medjed? Or even to reveal our identities?”

From the other side of the counter, Sojiro watched them whisper back and forth with a growing look of concern on his face. “You guys seem pretty upset about all this,” he commented. “Trust me, this isn’t anything to worry about… these kinds of groups just live for attention. They’re all talk.”

“O-oh!” Ann exclaimed, like she had forgotten they weren’t alone. “Right… um, thanks, Boss.”

Akira looked from the phone in his hand to Sojiro. There was only one person who could clear up
the mystery of Futaba Sakura once and for all, and he was standing not five feet away… but if Akira was being honest, he really didn’t want to pry into Sojiro’s personal life. When Akira’s parents had decided that his reputation was more trouble than he was worth, Sojiro had taken him in, barely asked him any questions, and even granted Akira a remarkable amount of personal freedom despite the assault charge that loomed over his past. So Akira didn’t want to upset Sojiro; if anything, he wanted to help the man.

But right now, the Thieves needed help, too, and somehow, Akira got the feeling that their circumstances were more closely linked than he’d initially assumed.

“Hey, Boss,” Akira said slowly. “Could we ask you something?”

Sojiro narrowed his eyes. “I don’t like any request that starts out like that,” he said.

“No, nah, it’s nothin’ bad or anything!” Ryuji insisted, glancing at Akira as if to confirm that they were really about to do this. “It’s just, uh…”

“It’s about what that prosecutor woman said the other day,” Akira finally stated.

This obviously was not the response Sojiro had been expecting, and he reeled back in shock. “That’s—it’s none of your concern,” he said.

“If she keeps showing up at Leblanc and harassing you, then it’s my concern,” Akira said. He could sense anger raging beneath Sojiro’s calm exterior, but if he stopped pushing now, he might never get his foot in the door again. “If she tries to approach me when I’m alone… I need to be prepared to counter her.”

“It’s really nothing,” Sojiro said, more firmly this time. “That woman, she… she’s just…”

He cut himself off, unable to find the right words—or perhaps simply unwilling to say them—and Makoto stepped forward hesitantly.

“Boss, if I may… this whole incident, it’s… about Futaba-chan, isn’t it?”

Instantly, Sojiro’s tough facade crumbled.

“How did you…?”

The phone in Akira’s hand buzzed to life, and he looked down.

>>Unknown Number: Stop!
>>Unknown Number: Don’t press him on this

“I didn’t pry on purpose,” Makoto said. “I’m just, well, Prosecutor Niijima, she’s… my older sister, and I…”

“Y-You’re related to Niijima?” Sojiro balked. He studied Makoto’s face for a moment, running a hand over his hair. “Ah… I can see the resemblance, now that you mention it…”

Akira looked down at his phone.

>>Unknown Number: We can drop this
>>Unknown Number: I won’t reveal your identities
>>Unknown Number: Just leave it alone
“We want to help,” Akira said aloud, his words meant for Futaba as much as they were for Sojiro.

“Help?” Sojiro nearly laughed in disbelief. “No offense, but… what do you think you can do? You have no idea what’s going on.”

“Only ‘cuz you haven’t told us!” Ryuji said. “But like, if she’s tryin’ to say you’re a bad dad, or something…”

“Yeah!” Ann agreed. “If that’s what Prosecutor Niijima is trying to say, then we could be… I dunno, character witnesses?”

“Yes… if Sis is trying to take Futaba-chan away under the grounds that you are an unfit father, then contrary testimony would be the best way to prove her wrong,” Makoto said.

Sojiro blinked slowly at them, his eyebrows so far up his forehead that his wrinkles had all but disappeared. “You all want to do that? For me?” he asked.

“We do,” Akira said.

“You offered me a place to stay after the incident with my sensei,” Yusuke added. “That’s not to mention what you’ve done for Akira-kun. I believe we all owe you a debt of gratitude.”

“But…” Akira continued, “before we can, we’d like to know more about Futaba. About you. If you wouldn’t mind telling us.”

For a long moment, Sojiro said nothing, and then he shoved a hand into his apron pocket, pulling out a packet of cigarettes. He grabbed one, lighting it habitually and looking like he was going to take a long drag on it before he glanced back at the group. Then, with a rough sigh, he stubbed the fresh cigarette out, dropping it unceremoniously into the ashtray.

“Futaba is my daughter,” he said. “Or, well… that’s how I see her, anyway. I knew her mother long before she was ever born. You might already know this, but her mother… isn’t with us anymore.”

“Her mother,” Makoto repeated. “Would that be…?”

“Wakaba Isshiki,” Sojiro said, a fleeting smile crossing his face at the sound of her name. “She was a scientist, spent most of her free time working… I’ll be honest, I could never make heads or tails of it, but nothing captured her interest more than her research. She always stayed up late into the night, focused on one project or another, right up until the day…”

He trailed off, shaking his head like he was chasing away a bad memory. “Anyway, obviously I couldn’t leave Futaba alone after that, so she came to stay with me. The loss of her mother really took a toll on her, though. She never came out of her room, she barely ate… honestly, I thought I was going to lose her, too.”

“Where was Futaba-chan’s father during all of this?” Yusuke asked.

Sojiro laughed without humor. “Your guess is as good as mine,” he said. “I’m sure he was out there, somewhere, but Wakaba never mentioned him, and I never asked. Didn’t want to know.”

He picked up his cigarette, rolling it around but never lighting it again. “So that’s the situation. Niijima wants to take away my custody of Futaba because she’s a shut-in, but she’s fed and clothed and comfortable – and she even talks to me now, most days.”
“And what about the research?” Makoto asked. “It might be naïve of me to say, but… if you have it, isn’t that the easiest way to get Sis off your case?”

At this, Sojiro let out another long sigh. “…when I told Niijima-san that Wakaba’s research doesn’t exist, I was telling the truth… mostly. Actually, there’s a tiny bit left, some data stick we found when we were cleaning out her bedroom. It’s nonsense to me, but it’s all I have left of Wakaba – and it’s all Futaba has left of her mother. I won’t give it up to that woman, or to the police.”

“I get it,” Ann said. “It’d be hard for anyone to give up something so precious, especially when it’s all you have left to remember someone…”

There was a long moment of silence, during which the TV droned on mindlessly in the background. The air felt heavy with emotion, but strangely, Akira no longer felt tense.

“Could we meet Futaba-chan someday?” he asked.

“…that’s not up to me,” Sojiro said. “It took months for Futaba to start speaking to me… if she doesn’t want to see you, I can’t do anything about it.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Ryuji said. “Still… she’s lucky to have someone like you watchin’ out for her. I can’t believe Makoto’s Sis doesn’t see that.”

Though Ryuji had surely intended his words to be soothing, Sojiro only looked more pained now.

“She told me something,” he added. “Futaba, I mean. A few months after she finally came out of her room, she… I don’t know why, but she told me that she blames herself for her mother’s death.”

Several people in the room gasped; Akira felt like someone had just punched him in the gut. His heart ached in sympathy for someone he’d never even met, for a circumstance he had never experienced personally — but it hardly mattered. You needed only a modicum of humanity to feel empathy for something like that.

“That explains it,” Morgana said quietly. “She doesn’t have a Palace just because her mom died… she has a Palace because she thinks it’s her fault.”

“So that’s why I’m worried,” Sojiro finished. “If Prosecutor Niijima forces Futaba to talk, and that comes out… there’s no way they’ll allow me to take care of her any longer.”

“Boss, I’m so sorry we pried,” Makoto said, bowing weakly to Sojiro. “These memories must be particularly painful for you…”

Sojiro laughed again, but this time, he actually seemed happy. “No, no. It’s… ah. It feels good to share the memories again. I haven’t had anyone to rely on since Wakaba, you know. Maybe it was stupid to try and handle this by myself, if I’m feeling so much better after telling a bunch of high schoolers about my problems.”

“Thank you for confiding in us,” Yusuke said.

“Yeah!” Ann said, smiling brightly. “I dunno what we’re gonna do, exactly, but… we’re on your side! And Futaba-chan’s, too!”

“All right, all right,” Sojiro said. He grinned wryly at them, and Akira smiled right back. “I think that’s enough heavy talk for the afternoon… go goof off or something.”

He waved them off, and they made their way up into the attic, although Akira had barely reached
the top step when Alibaba messaged him again:

>>Unknown Number: Are you happy now
>>Unknown Number: You know the full story
>>Unknown Number: Do you see why I need you to change her heart?
>>Unknown Number: She’s a murderer.

“Got another one,” Akira said, revealing his phone to the others.

“Yes… it seems there’s no doubt about it now,” Makoto said. “Alibaba and Futaba Sakura are one and the same.”

“Man,” Ryuji said, “I can’t even imagine… she’s spent all this time thinkin’ she killed her own mom? That’s insane.”

“Right? I mean, there’s no way that’s true,” Ann said. “You should tell her that, Akira. Tell her we believe in her!”

Hoping that his messages would actually go through this time, Akira composed a text.

>>Akira Kurusu: I don’t think I know the full story at all
>>Akira Kurusu: Let me come over
>>Akira Kurusu: I need to know about you before I can change your heart

>>Unknown Number: No!
>>Unknown Number: I won’t let you in
>>Unknown Number: This is my tomb
>>Unknown Number: I won’t let anyone else suffer
>>Unknown Number: Not Sojiro
>>Unknown Number: Not you
>>Unknown Number: Just me
>>Unknown Number: Until I die, too

“That’s it, isn’t it,” Yusuke said softly. “Her home is a tomb… that is the location of Futaba-chan’s Palace.”

A quick check on the Meta-nav was enough to confirm Yusuke’s suspicions.

“Futaba-chan’s situation… I know it’s not quite the same, but to me it feels familiar,” Yusuke said. “If she would like us to pursue a change of heart, I see no reason to deny her.”

“I agree,” Makoto said.

“Oh yeah,” Ryuji said. “We’ve gotta snap her outta this - for her sake, but for Boss, too.”

“Seems we’re all in agreement, then,” Ann said, nodding to Akira. One more time, he picked up his phone.

>>Akira Kurusu: Sorry, but…
>>Akira Kurusu: I don’t believe you’re a murderer, Futaba

>>Unknown Number: …
>>Akira Kurusu: We’ll change your heart and prove it to you

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed; after this chapter, the new additions to the plot are really going to start picking up, so I hope you look forward to it! ♥ Next chapter will go up (with hope) on **Sunday, February 9th**. Until then~

End Notes

Thank you for reading! ♥ If you enjoyed it, feel free to come say hello to me on twitter, [@somewhereflying](https://twitter.com/somewhereflying).

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://archive.org) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!