

CHANGING MASKS

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Something had gone very wrong.

Joker had been exploring Mementos with the rest of the Phantom Thieves as they always did. Fighting Shadows, avoiding the Reaper – you know, *regular teen things*. Multiple battles had already been fought that day without incident, and they had made so much meaningful progress already that they were thinking of heading back after reaching the next station.

But midst a completely normal battle, committing to completely normal actions, an unexpected twist had taken place. The leader, after removing his mask in an action that would normally summon a Persona, found himself standing in a completely different place. A bamboo forest, the cold night air tickling his cheeks with the moon hoisted high. “**What!?**” Joker was naturally surprised.

Just as surprising? The mask he’d pulled from his face was still in his hand, but it wasn’t the same mask that had always been associated with his Phantom Thief identity. It was a mask made of porcelain, fashioned, and painted in the shape of a traditional, Japanese *fox*. “**Something isn’t right here! Everyone!? Where are you!?**” More than being worried for himself, he was worried for the others as well. He could see no lights other than the moon, and even pulling out his phone with his free hand produced no signal.

Then again when he’d looked away from the phone and back at it again? His phone had been replaced by a second mask. A mask typically known as a Hannya mask, fashioned to resemble an angry demon woman. The moment it appeared there, additional confusion was accumulated by

Joker. For all of that anger he'd felt just a moment ago because of his situation? It was completely *absent*, as if it had been translated into the mask itself.

Honestly? It didn't even matter that he'd become distracted by these masks, for his initial intention of finding his friends would have been fruitless. One by one, by removing their masks they would be brought into this strange world of magic and youkai. But they would not be appearing here. Those would be tales for another time.

What he failed to notice in the beginning was that an off-color had begun to take root in his mane. A pale, *purplish pink* that so obviously contrasted the raven black it usually was. It was mixed in at first, almost like he'd had a layered dye job done, but as it usually went with these things, before long his curly do was *completely* pink. But so were his eyes. Red at first, they now shone with the very same rose that his hair did, but...

Those eyes looked empty somehow.

“How did I end up here?” Speaking of emptiness, his voice held a vacant tone that wasn't typical of Joker's usual voice. That isn't to say he was ever all that expressive, and he was the type of guy that hardly spoke at all in the first place, but there was a hollowness to it now that felt even *less* expressive than it normally did.

Unsure of whether or not this was reality or the Metaverse, he approached one of the nearest bamboo stalks, boots crunching against the cool dirt below as he did so. Reaching up, the stalk was smooth. It felt real, and none of the elements of this chilly bamboo maze held any of the features he was typical accustomed to thanks to the Metaverse itself. Yet he was still in his Joker costume.

“...What?”

Thinking about his clothes, he gave the most deadpan sound of confusion once he looked down to find that his clothing was not how he'd remembered it. He should have realized when the hand that touched the bamboo had been bare, but now? He'd dropped the masks to the ground to do this, but hadn't noticed that they'd instead disappeared, reappearing in the air behind him while decorated by a bright blue flame.

Joker's jacket and vest had merged into a single piece of clothing, but more than that their colors were lightening away with inconsistency from black and greys. Instead they almost looked green, with plaid pattern fluctuating between darker and lighter variants of the color. It

was clear enough by looking at the material that the leather texture was softening, and what was left as the coattails were swallowed up behind him was a flannel, button up shirt with open sleeves. It felt a little tight, but at least it was still a shirt.

His pants? They didn't fare anywhere near as well. The legs merged and opened outwards; blacks dyed an almost Halloween-y orange as the shape of a puffy skirt became evident. It was segmented into a number of vertical sections, each one featuring a cut-out near the base that resembled a facial expression. His boxers hugged his junk more tightly as they transitioned into something akin to panties, and his boots? They practically melted away into a cloth alternative.

“Is that a skirt? These clothes... They look like they belong on a *GIRL!*?” Because his voice had been so expression free since these unusual circumstances began piling on, it was all the more apparent that something shocking had just occurred for he cried out with such emotion. Behind him, another mask appeared in the air. In this case, the mask's expression seemed shocked.

Well, it was behind *her*, really. The shocking feeling had been the sudden and shocking erasure of her dick, living a girl's genitals in their place beneath whatever was passing for her undergarments now. Somehow, she wasn't certain that she was wearing modern underwear. It didn't feel... right, and something was telling her that fancy undergarments did not exist here.

“Did I...?” Her voice softer now, more and more masks were beginning to appear in the air at her rear. Each one signifying an emotion that was torn from her body and soul, rendering her incapable of properly expressing it with her body. Joker *should* have been confused, and yet as mask implying that emotion was among those that were collected in the air at her rear.

In the meantime, Joker's face was beginning to sport a femininity more expected of one with the genitals she now possessed. Her pink eyes became wide, showing off their splendid new color while lashes danced longer, and softened cheeks made her optics look even greater in size. Her expression, while blank, was carrying a new youthfulness that gave off the impression of someone in her early teens, lips just a little plumper than they had been prior.

She looked around, ignoring the fact that more masks were appearing at her rear. There were over forty of them now. Some complicated, some simple; each rendering her emotionally distant. **“*Mm...*”** Did she have to be somewhere? Was she looking for someone? Evidently, the masks

were pulling more than just her emotions away. Her memories... they felt jumbled up somehow.

“...Ah?” Moving from one sound effect to the next, her head tilted slightly to the side as a feeling of inertia struck her. She felt as if she were falling very slowly, with the grooves of the nearest bamboo stalk slowly moving upwards. But she wasn't incapable of identifying the truth. That she was actually becoming smaller.

The inches peeled off her limbs, clothing growing much more comfortable as her figure shifted to fit snugly within its accommodations. Not all was lost for example, and some places experienced gains. For her skirt to stay on, wider hips were needed. So they swung a little wider, making room for extra volume that gave her body a more girlish glow. Fat padded her rear more specifically, seeing buns inflate while her thighs grew taut and round. Nothing overtly abundant, but it all made her look more like a girl than the boy she'd once been.

Even the front of her flannel shirt filled out where room was created thanks to her diminishing torso. Breasts were, of course, the cause; thickened nipples prodding the underside of her shirt, clearly not bound by a brassiere as they rounded out into orbs that were both small and perky. Her figure wasn't at all impressive and seemed to match an apparent physical age of around thirteen to fourteen. Otherwise, Hata no Joker's waistline pinched in towards her bellybutton, which was better defined than it had ever been in the meantime.

The girl *youkai* exhaled, and as she did? Her curly, pink hair began to finally grow. It straightened and spilled out behind her,



falling as far as her rounded caboose while carrying a soft but unkempt quality. This hair was regularly brushed, but shampooed? It didn't seem like it was done very often. But then again, as she was now? The *menreiki* did not know what shampoo *was*.

In fact, she no longer had any awareness of modern concepts, the final and 66th mask that appeared behind her erasing the last of her old memory. This place... the era was current, but it was detached from regular society, so much that modern conventions were not common here. Forget television or video games, there weren't even cars or electricity here.

Gensokyo was, truly, a place spared from the passing of time thanks to the barrier that surrounded it.

Hata no Kokoro tilted her head to the side slowly. How had she ended up in the bamboo forest? How was she supposed to feel about this sudden development? Her emotional palette, as always, was absent. She demonstrated how she felt by adorning one of the sixty-six masks that were swirling slowly around her while clad in blue flame. She summoned the one that best displayed her confusion to her right hand and pressed it up against her face.

Even though there was no one here to perceive that emotion.

Acting, perhaps, on instinct, she began to float in place among her masks, and one by one their lights began to flicker out as they disappeared into nothingness, a void from which she could summon them whenever she so desired. "**I need to go back...**" Admittedly, she felt like she was forgetting something important. She wasn't even sure where she needed to go *back* to.

But Kokoro trusted in herself and these instincts that guided her, so she was confident that she would surely return where she was meant to be. Not back to the world Joker had come from, but to the temple that had been housing her since the incident of which she'd been a main focus.