Twisted Fates

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Summary

Akira Kurusu was supposed to be dead.

Except, fate had allowed him to live and the chance to fix things this time. Fate was allowing him one more chance to bring justice to light.

And maybe save someone else in the process.

*based on first major bad ending*

Notes

So I'm super pumped about this story. I've been thinking about it for a while and am still mapping everything out, but I hope you all bear with me! Obviously there are a lot of spoilers up ahead - for now it's just up to the first bad ending but my plan for this story is to run all the way through to the end of the game, but that won't happen for quite awhile we're only in April of this story.

I decided to post the first three chapters because the beginning is just a lot of set-up before the canon really starts to diverge - I don't really go through the beginning in detail because that's all pretty much the same save for more Akechi, but after the third chapter (but really
after Kamoshida's palace), things start to progress a bit faster.

Also someone pls give Goro a hug.
Akira Kurusu is dead.

When he opened his eyes and saw the familiar sight of a prison cell ceiling, that’s what he expected to hear. It couldn’t have been a dream. It felt all too real. He sat up, rubbing his eyes, and then a loud clank against the bars made him turn his head towards the three figures outside of the cell.

Then it hits him all at once. The last thing he remembered. Goro Akechi’s face. And the press of steel against his forehead.

The plan… That’s right… Akira gripped his forehead as he feels a sharp pain in the center of his forehead. He’d been shot. He’d been shot by Akechi. He ran his fingers over but feels nothing. Quickly, he stood and rushed to the edge of the cell, his hands gripping the bars so hard that his knuckles turn white.

Igor sat, as calm and composed as ever. “In the end, it seems your rehabilitation was not carried through.” He looked vaguely disappointed.

“Huh?” Akira gripped his forehead again as a fresh wave of pain seeps through. “Am I dead?” Akira managed to say though his throat feels dry.

“You incompetent prisoner!” Caroline hit the cell again with a stop of her feet.

“The assistance that we provided was all for naught,” Justine added, casting her eyes downward.

“Disappointing, indeed,” Igor said with a wave of his hand. “It appears I have overestimated you.”

“Wait,” Akira said. *It wasn’t supposed to happen like this.* And the others…? What would happen to them? They had been so close to uncovering the truth behind the mental shutdowns and everything. So close to finding the one behind it all. *Akechi… Why did Akechi…? “…Ngh…”*
Another wave of pain shot through him. “It can’t end like this,” Akira said, trying his best to ignore the feel of needles stinging the center of his forehead.

Igor seemed to contemplate this. He continued to stare at him wordlessly.

“You did this to yourself, inmate,” Caroline said furiously. “You should’ve been better than this!”

“I can fix this,” Akira said, wondering how on earth he could ever fix his own death. Still, he hoped the bravado is enough to convince him. Stranger things have happened. After all, he’d never have expected to be in a room with three strange people and would never have imagined a world where you could summon manifestations of the inner self. Compared to that, a second chance at life was child’s play. “Don’t give up on us.”

Igor tilted his head slightly. “Very well. I will grant you one more chance.”

Akira blinked as something uneasy stirred at how easily this second chance had been granted to him. But he didn’t have time to dwell on that now.

“Master?” Justine asked cautiously.

“Perhaps there is a chance for you to avoid the ruin that is approaching. Watching you for a while longer may prove amusing.” Igor rapped his fingers against the table. “You shall have what you desire.”

“Though it may prove to be…different than you intended,” Igor added with a smile that sends another uneasy feeling down his gut. “We will observe this awakened path to see if your rehabilitation will come to fruition… or his.”

“His?” Akira said, but he barely gets the word out before the pain gets so unbearable that his vision begins to turn white. “Wait,” he managed through clenched teeth. Igor doesn’t, and eventually everything goes blurry as a wave of dizziness washed over him.

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April 10

“Hey, are you listening?”

Akira rubbed his head, opening his eyes as his vision blurs back into focus. “Huh?” Akira muttered. “What was that…?” He blinked a few times.

“I said, what’d you think of the school?”

Akira turned his head and sees Sojiro Sakura sitting in the driver’s seat of the car. Car…? Akira looked around, his eyes wide open and still dazed. Cars are lined up in front and to the side; none moving. Sojiro was looking at him with annoyance; the complete opposite to the way he’d looked and spoken to him as of late.

“What day is it?” Akira asked, suddenly feeling nauseous.

“Hm? You’ve forgotten the day already?” Sojiro shook his head. “It’s April 10th.”
The words create something hollow. “April 10th…?” Akira repeated. He thought back to Igor’s words. So this is what he’d meant by different. He was getting another chance from the start. But why this day? It was the day before he’d awakened to his persona, but surely things hadn’t gone wrong from day one, had they? Akira subtly shook his head, feeling another headache right in the center of his forehead. He shook away the impression of steel. There was no point in dwelling on that. He had to start thinking to his rewritten future. He’d been given more time.

His train of thought was cut off by the sound of the radio. “Again, a subway has derailed at Shibuya Station, greatly affecting the timetable all across the--”

“Another accident?” Sojiro said. “So that’s why it’s so crowded. There’s been a lot of those lately.” He groaned. “No wonder the traffic is like this.

“The mental shutdowns,” Akira muttered to himself.

“What?”

“Oh. It’s nothing,” Akira said, and Sojiro makes a displeased noise before turning his attention back to the slow-moving traffic. Akira leaned forward thoughtfully in his seat, resting his elbow on the door and looking out the window. It was still a little hard to wrap his mind around. He was truly back in April. And the realization hits him that he didn’t have much to go off of before he’d been killed. He rubs his forehead mindlessly as he tries to think of what his next step is.

He hadn’t officially met Akechi until after Madarame’s palace, but there had to be something he could do before that.

*I need to find out who Akechi is working for.* Akira – and the others too – had a hard time believing that Akechi had been behind everything from the start, but they hadn’t gotten a name yet. They’d been so close. And then Akechi…

Akira groaned again. He’d have to get used to the headaches. He pulled out his phone, and sure enough, the Meta Nav was there. *Right.* Tomorrow was the day he awakened to Arsene…again. He couldn’t exactly do much until then.

“Hey, are you spacing out again?” Sojiro said with a sigh. “What a troublesome kid I’ve taken in.”

Akira looked at his temporary guardian. He hadn’t noticed the first time around how tired Sojiro’s eyes looked. He’d have to make all those memories again. All the evenings helping out at the café and the facts about coffee he’d slip in.

“Thank you, for taking me in,” Akira said earnestly, unable to stop himself from smiling faintly at the future memories. “I’ll try not to be too much trouble.” He’d meant it as something lighthearted, but Sojiro just made another displeased sound in response.

Everything was starting from square one. And this time, he’d get it right. He had to.
“Case closed… This is how your ‘justice’ ends.”. The cold barrel of the gun was smooth against his forehead.

Sae hadn’t taken the phone. There was no way out. For a moment, he thought he could’ve seen an ounce of regret, but he knew his eyes were playing tricks on him. There was nothing there but malice. All he could do was look up at the crazed and smug look in his former teammate’s eyes.

There was nothing he could do.

Akira awoke a few seconds later in a cold sweat. It took a few seconds before he realizes that he’s back in the Velvet Room. With a groan, he sat up on the edge of his bed and rubs his neck before standing and walking over to the bars.

“Welcome to the Velvet Room,” Igor said with a knowing grin.

“Why did you send me back to this date?” Akira asked immediately.

Caroline responded by hitting the bars. “Show some respect, inmate!”

Despite her tone, Akira couldn’t help but feel some relief that at least they’re memories had stayed intact too. “We will be here to observe the path to your rehabilitation,” Igor said instead of answering the question.

It doesn’t look like he’s going to answer many of my questions. “…I see,” Akira said, letting his hands fall from the bars and to his sides. “Thank you for giving me another chance.

Igor simply smiled in that unsettling way again. “Caroline and I will assist you along this path,” Justine said gently with a curt nod. “As our master requests of us.”

“Let us see what cards fate will deal you,” Igor said.

Akira nodded. He would be meeting the others in the coming weeks – no, months. “I won’t lose,” Akira told him resolutely. He turned and sat back down on the bed of his prison cell without waiting for a response. He rested his head back against the wall.

Akechi and the mastermind behind it all… He’d bring them to justice.

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April 11

The next morning, Akira woke up right on time for his first day of school. Today was an important day, after all. Thinking back on it, it had all seemed rather sudden, yet at the same time, it had felt
like his life had finally started moving.

He woke up that morning determined to set things along the right path. He’d meet Ryuji, Morgana, and Ann today. Briefly, he considered how they would respond if he’d told them that somehow been given a second chance at life and that they would all become closer than imaginable in the near future, but there was no way to be able to tell them that without having them think he was unstable.

Akira walked down the stairs and greeted Sojiro with a nod and a smile. Sojiro gave him some curry for breakfast just like he remembered. It made him think of Futaba’s mom.

*Right. Futaba…* Akira looked at Sojrio, who was busy wiping down a coffee pot. It would be easier if Akira could somehow get Futaba to join them much earlier, and he’d wracked his brain trying to think of a way to make that happen, but considering she’d been the one wanting her own change of heart, he’d found it difficult to come up with a way to make that happen.

Akira found himself wondering just how many things he could change, though. He thought it best to proceed the same way he had before, at least in the beginning.

He was grateful that this time he knew the path from the beginning, although, it took him some time to remember where exactly he’d been when he’d seen both Ann and Kamoshida. When he got there, it had only just started to rain, so he stood under the building where they’d first met and glanced at his phone.

*Time travel, huh?* He wondered what the limits were of Igor’s power. It still seemed like one large dream that he had yet to wake up from. He slung his bag back over his shoulder, leaning back against the wall and looking up.

Out of the corner of Akira’s eye, he just barely registered the sight of brown hair from across the street and tensed involuntarily.

“Akechi…?” He whispered, pushing up his glasses as if to further the point. Sure enough, Goro Akechi, his would-be murderer, was across the street standing at the entrance of a building that didn’t have any cover and trying unsuccessfully to pry open an umbrella that didn’t seem to budge.

*He wasn’t there the first time.* Or, maybe he was. It wasn’t like he’d been looking for him. Akira looked around as his brain moved a lightning fast speed to come up with a plan. Whether he’d been there before or not, it couldn’t have just been a coincidence that he’d notice him this time around.

Akira spotted an umbrella in a trash can nearby. It was bent in a slightly unshapen way, but otherwise seemed to be intact. It would have to do. Akira walked over to it casually, then picked it up. He tested it briefly to make sure that it opened and closed, then made his way across the street.

He reminded himself once more that, to Akechi, Akira was a total stranger, and then stepped so that his broken umbrella was now blocking Akechi from the rain.

The brown-haired boy looked up at the sudden cover that been thrust upon him, and his eyes met Akira’s.

*Case closed… This is how your ‘justice’ ends.*

“Oh.” Akechi smiled kindly. “Can I help you?”

Akira searched his kind eyes for some trace of disdain – anything that would give way to his true
nature. He put more weight onto his right leg, tilted himself slightly with a nonchalant shrug and small, welcoming smile. “You looked like you were having trouble with your umbrella.

Akechi blinked, slightly taken aback, before the expression is replaced by another bright smile. “Ah. Yes. It seems I’m overdue for a new one.” He glanced up with a light and amused expression at Akira’s umbrella. “Although I may not be the only one.”

Akira figured he’d been talking about the bent wiring, but as he really looked at it, he noticed the medium-sized hole that was on the umbrella. “When did that get there?” Akira said. “Eh, it’s nothing a little duct tape can’t cover.

“Duct tape… That’s new,” Akechi sort of laughed, though it was a low and throaty one, like he hadn’t been expecting to laugh and then unsuccessfully tried to suppress it. “Well, hole or not, I appreciate the act of kindness.”

Akira nodded. “Where are you headed?” He asked, then glanced back over to the building where Ann would show up shortly. “Since your umbrella isn’t working, I can walk with you,” he asked, even though he knew how Akechi would answer.

Akechi blinked in surprise for the second time in less than two minutes. “Oh, no, that’s quite alright. It’s a bit far. Besides--” He leaned back, looking at Akira’s uniform. “Don’t you go to Shujin Academy?”

“Oh. Right.” Akira feigned forgetfulness. “It’s my first day.”

Akechi smiled. “Then I certainly can’t be responsible for your tardiness on the first day.”

“Here, you can just use this, then.” Akira extended the umbrella to Akechi.

“Huh?” Akechi’s gaze went from the umbrella in his hand back to Akira’s eyes. “You won’t have an umbrella.”

Akira shrugged. “Shujin’s not far.”

“That’s alright. I wouldn’t feel comfortable taking this from a stranger. I have no way of returning it to you.”

“You can just bring it back then. I work at Café Leblanc in Shibuya,” Akira told him, electing to leave out that really he lived there. “And let’s not be strangers, then. My name is Akira Kurusu.” He extended his hand out to the brunette. Akechi regarded him with a curious stare, and Akira thought he’d seen a fleck of suspicion too. Admittedly, it was an odd thing for a stranger to do, so Akira chuckled. “I don’t have the plague, if that’s what you’re wondering,” he said when Akechi still hadn’t taken his hand.

Akira didn’t understand why his small statements seemed to catch the boy off-guard, but it worked to his favor, and, admittedly, flustering him was kind of satisfying. Akechi smiled slightly. “Good to know.” He placed his hand in Akira’s, shaking it. “Goro Akechi.”

“Goro Akechi,” Akira repeated, and the feeling of cold steel against his forehead came back to him. “You’re the first person I’ve met here. Maybe you could show me around--”

Akechi’s phone started to ring, and he slipped his hand into his pocket and dug it out, placing his umbrella on the ground in his bag in the process. Akira tried to sneak a glance at the name. ODIN. Akira frowned inwardly. That didn’t help. “I have to take this, please excuse me,” Akechi said.
At that exact moment, Akira could see two swirls of blonde hair under the building. “I should get going, anyway,” Akira told him. He shoved his own umbrella into Goro’s free hand. “Here. It was nice meeting you.”

“Wait-wha--” Goro said. Then he leaned into the phone. “No, that wasn’t towards you. I apologize.”

“Don’t forget the duct tape!” Akira told him lightly, unable to waste any more time. He turned on his heel, speed-walking as Ann stood under the building as a car pulled up next to her. *Already?*

Akira crossed the street just as Ann shut the door to the passenger seat. By the time he made it to the other end, the car has driven off. He swore under his breath silently. Had he already changed the timeline? Akira looked back across the street. He could see Akechi walking in the opposite direction, using a broken umbrella with a hole and bent wiring. The sight of it almost made Akira laugh. Pristine, polished Goro Akechi using such a worn-down thing. Honestly, it had been a gamble whether or not he’d accept it in the first place, and—

“Oof!” Akira stumbled slightly as someone ran clean into him from behind, interrupting his thoughts.

“Ah! Watch where you’re goin’!”

*Ryuji.*

Akira fought back an urge to smile and seeing his easily angered and excitable best friend. He also fought back the urge to teasingly remind him that *he’d* been the one moving and Akira himself had been stationary.

“I wasn’t moving,” Akira quips lightly, much more cautious than the way he’d say it after they’d become good friends.

*Ryuji* blows air before folding his arms across his chest. “Oh. Watch where you’re standin’ then!”

“Where were you running to?” Akira asks him.

*Ryuji* pouts. “Why? You gonna rat me out to Kamoshida?”

Akira glanced briefly at the now-empty spot where he’d met his murderer for the first time, again. Akira wondered what was hiding behind that cheery disposition and kind composure that led to such a hatred for the Phantom Thieves. Considering his death, he wondered what type of justice Goro Akechi wanted to prevail.

Akira frowned, remembering briefly after he’d first spoken to Morgana at the school about not being able to trust Akechi. There’d been a part of him that had been genuinely sad at the loss of a friendship before it even got to truly begin. He’d felt connected to him, although maybe this was the real reason why.

Turning back to *Ryuji*, Akira mentally breathed a sigh of relief. Though he’d missed Ann and the day had played out differently, he’d ultimately still be able to go to Kamoshida’s palace with *Ryuji*. He already knew the keywords. All he had to do was utter them while *Ryuji* showed him the way to the school.

After all, meeting Goro Akechi for five minutes on that day can’t have changed things too much.
silly Akira, don't you know the first rule of time travel is every action affects everything

ps why i keep switching between saying 'Goro' and 'Akechi' is beyond me but i promise i will be more consistent with it soon
April 15

It turns out that reliving a persona awakening is just as painful as it was the first time. Despite the minor setback, everything was on track for taking Kamoshida’s heart. It still hadn’t made it any easier. Stopping Shiho from jumping had taken every ounce of willpower in him, but her doing so had been the catalyst for Ann’s persona awakening.

By the time he finally made it back to the backstreets of Shibuya, Akira wanted nothing more than to rest. He rotated his neck. Did Igor really need to send him this far back?

“Hey, are we there yet?” Morgana piped up, his paws resting on Akira’s shoulders as he peered over him.

“Almost,” Akira replied.

“My new residence. I can’t wait to see what it’s like!” Morgana said excitedly.

Akira smiled slightly. “Don't get your hopes up too high.”

“Hm. And y’know, you’ve adjusted really well to your persona already!” Morgana added in a chipper tone. “That’ll make nabbing Kamoshida’s treasure that much easier.”

“It'll be easy,” Akira said with resolve. “We’ll be fine if we work together.” He said as he pushed open the door to the café. He vaguely remembered that he’d met someone on this day, but he couldn’t recall exactly who it was supposed to be.

Sojiro looked up as the familiar bell went off. “Oh. You’re back. Store’s still open. Go upstairs,” he told Akira gruffly.

Akira nodded, prepared to go upstairs, when he noticed Tae Takemi sitting at a booth and Goro Akechi sitting at the counter with a cup of coffee. Akira blinked. He wasn’t supposed to be there yet. Akira walked over to him, biting back the urge to ask him straight out what he was doing there.

“Hi,” Akira started when Sojiro interrupted.

“Hey, lay off the customers,” he said.

Akechi laughed. “Oh, I don’t mind. He’s actually the one I came here to see.” Akechi turned and greeted with a kind look in his eyes, though he seemed a bit tired as well. “Hello, Kurusu-san.”

Akira smiled as well. “You don’t have to call me that,” he told him. “Akira is fine.”

“Ah. Then please feel free to address me the same. I trust you’ve adjusted well your first week?” Akechi asked.

“Something like that,” Akira offered up as a response. “How’s the coffee?”

“Delicious. I may have found my new spot,” he said with a smile that crinkled his eyes. “But that’s
not the only reason I’m here.” He reached down and picked up a slim black umbrella.

Oh, right. I’d given him an umbrella... but... “That’s not mine,” Akira told him.

Akechi chuckled. “Very observant. You were kind enough to lend me an umbrella, so I thought I would return the favor. It’s for you. Consider it a welcome gift.

He looked down at the brunette’s outstretched hand, and the memory of gun in his hand shooting a guard in cold blood flashed through his memory.

A part of him wished that he wasn’t left with his last memory being the crazed look in the brunette’s eyes, because it only made it more difficult for Akira to take his words as genuine. Still, the gesture surprised him. Akechi at this point had no idea of Akira’s true nature, so Akira allowed himself to relax.

Although, the thought of teasing him was a little too strong. “That umbrella belonged to my late grandmother…” Akira said, trying to sound as distraught as possible. He even lowered his head to bring home the point.

“Wh-What?” Akechi sputtered. “I didn’t know that. I apologize. I didn’t--” He stopped when Akira started to laugh. “That...was a joke,” he said, his voice flattening. “You’re...quite the joker.” You have no idea.

“I couldn’t help it,” Akira told him with a smile. Then he took the umbrella. “I appreciate this. Thank you,” he added sincerely. “I wasn’t expecting it.” He looked down at the umbrella in his hand. “You’re a detective, right?”

Akechi nodded with a soft smile. “That’s what they call me.”

“The detective prince.” Akira turned to the source of the voice. Takemi had turned to them in her booth. “Don’t you watch the news? This guy’s an ace detective around here.” She told them with a wave of her hand as she placed money on the counter and stood up.

If Akechi detected her sarcasm, he did a good job of hiding it. “Ha ha. I certainly hope I can live up to the expectations.” He said, rubbing the back of his head.

“Heh.” She turned to Sojiro. “Thanks for the coffee. I’m headin’ out.” She said as she turned on her heel. She lifted up her hand in a wave as she placed her hands in her pockets and strolled out the door.

“It must be nice,” Akira said to Akechi.

Akechi’s smile faltered for a split second, and then it was back plastered on his face. “Yes, it’s... what I’ve been aspiring to for quite some time.”

“Then you must be really happy.”

The smile on Akechi’s face was much more forced this time. “I certainly can’t complain.”

What exactly are your motivations, Akechi? What’s behind that smile?

Akira tilted his head to the side. “Well, if you ever need a break from being a prince, I’m still getting used to my way around the city. I could use a tour guide.”

Akechi tilts his nearly empty mug towards himself, looking down into it. “I’m probably not the
best one to ask.”

“Who is the best to ask, then?”

Akechi paused for a moment. “Ah, tossing it back to me. I’m sure there’s a wealth of other experts around. I would probably get us lost,” he said with a charismatic smile.

“That’s okay. Besides, if we get lost, at least it will be the two of us together,” Akira added with a shrug. “If we need to start living off the land as we wait to be rescued, we’ll survive.”

Akechi let another throaty laugh at Akira’s response. “You’re quite an odd person.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Akira asked with an inquisitive smile.

Before the brunette could answer, Morgana stirred behind him. “Hey, are you done yet? I wanna see my new room!”

Akira tensed up at the same time that Akechi froze. I forgot Morgana was there. Akechi had surely heard the cat speak. If there had been any uncertainty, his wide-eyed expression was answer enough. Damn it, this wasn’t supposed to happen.

“Did I just hear a cat meowing?” Sojiro said, turning to him with an empty glass.

Akira’s eyes darted between both Akechi and Sojiro. Without thinking, he moved the bag from his shoulder, placing it onto the empty stool so that Morgana was in full view. “He’s a stray,” Akira said. “He doesn’t have a home.”

“Uh-uh. Animals are a no-go. This place is a restaurant,” Sojiro said immediately. His face softened as he looked at the cat’s face. Morgana gave him a very convincing meow in response.

“Ugh…although, I guess taking care of a pet might help you stay on good behavior. But I’m not gonna take care of it, that’s all on you.”

Akira smiled, thoughts moving a mile a minute. “Thanks. I’ll take good care of him.” He patted Morgana’s head.

“Ow, not so rough,” Morgana said, though he leaned into the comforting touch.

“You okay, kid?” Sojiro looked at Akechi, who still looked very much ill-composed after his face had turned white.

“Are you allergic to cats?” Akira offered, praying to the gods that Akechi would take the bait.

“U-Um—” Akira kind of wanted to laugh, if the full seriousness of the situation hadn’t hit him first. An entire cognitive world, personas, and time travel, yet even Akira could agree that a talking cat somehow still trumped all of those things on the strangeness scale. “Y-Yes, I am. I apologize, but I-I should be going.” Akechi got up—so quickly that he nearly toppled his mug. He seemed to realize his own state of dishevelment, because he took a breath and put an easy smile on his face. “Thank you for introducing me to this place.” Then he turned to Sojiro. “Coffee was delicious.”

“Thanks for the umbrella,” Akira said calmly.

After Akechi left, Sojiro had shooed both he and Morgana upstairs.

Akechi didn’t actually know that he’d heard Morgana talk until he confronted us about being the Phantom Thieves. It had certainly flustered him more now than it had before, but that had to be...
because there was nothing supernatural tied to him in Akechi’s eyes at the moment. Akira rubbed his forehead. *As long as I don’t make it clear that I can hear Morgana, this will be fine.*

“Hey, are you okay? You haven’t said anything for a few minutes,” Morgana asked, stretching his paws against the futon.

Akira turned to Morgana, unaware that he’d been lost in thought again. “Morgana,” he started. “What if I told you that I came from the future?” There was no way that he’d be able to get through this without telling someone.

To his utter lack of surprise, Morgana looked at him like he was crazy. “Are you feeling well? Maybe the palace took more out of you than I thought.”

He dug his hands into his pockets. “Hear me out for a moment.” Akira proceeded to tell Morgana the condensed version of what had happened, all the way up to Igor’s giving him a second chance and placing him back in time to April 10th.

Morgana didn’t anything for what seemed like hours after Akira finished. “So…you’re dead, but you’re not?” Morgana said cautiously. “Oh no, don’t tell me I miscalculated. You’re crazy, after all,” he groaned. “My judgment was off.”

“Kamoshida’s treasure is an Olympic medal that takes the form of a crown in his palace,” Akira told him. He described in as much detail as possible what Kamoshida’s shadow had transformed into. “If I’m wrong, then okay, I’m crazy,” he added.

“I guess I can’t dismiss it. There’s something special about you, that’s for sure…” Morgana said skeptically. “But if what you’re saying is true, then the long-haired boy kills you in the future?”

“Someone’s commanding him. We hadn’t gotten that far yet,” Akira said. “I’m hoping to figure that out without dying this time.”

“Ah, so it’s a keep your enemies close kind of thing.” Morgana nodded, impressed. “If you really aren’t crazy, then that’s pretty clever.”

Akira looked to the wall at the edge of his futon. The black umbrella leaned against it. He frowned. The Phantom Thieves had worked to change the hearts of unrepentant criminals. If Akechi didn’t have a persona, it was likely he was just the type of person they would target. Even still, something unsettled stirred within him. He’d watched Akechi murder and then watched him turn the gun onto him, and yet somehow, it still felt like he didn’t fit the mold of the ones that they’d changed. He couldn’t place it.

And the bigger question was how and when exactly had his persona awakened? Robin Hood. The heroic outlaw.

_This is how your justice ends._

He felt his head start to throb. Thinking about it too hard wasn’t getting him anywhere. He had to bring him to justice somehow.

“Seriously, it had to keep calling out in that cute little voice…” Sojiro’s words broke through Akira’s thoughts. He walked over to them with a plate of food and placed it down in front of Morgana. Then he turned to Akira. “Make sure you wash that dish. By the way…have you decided on a name?”

Akira smiled. “Morgana.”
“Morgana? Oh, I, uh, I was hoping I’d get to name it.” Sojiro rubbed the back of his neck. “Well, I guess that one’s not so bad.” He nodded to himself before turning and walking back out of the room without another word.

Morgana grinned. “Looks like the chief likes me better than you.”

“Give it a few months,” Akira couldn’t help but tease.

“You know, you might be crazy, but I expect great things from you. Don’t let me down.” Morgana sat down and made himself comfortable. “And…if you’re telling the truth, try not to die again this time, okay?”

“You seem to be taking it well,” Akira noted.

“Something tells me that I’ve seen stranger things,” Morgana hummed thoughtfully. “I may not have my memories, but I have that. We’ll work together. To stop the long-haired one and find this mastermind, and to find my memories. Deal?”

Akira nodded with a smile, feeling a wave of exhaustion come over him. “Okay. I won’t let you down, Morgana.”

Chapter End Notes

After this we can get to interactions with the other characters, some palace exploration, and Akechi because there is never enough Akechi. I won't be doing too much more with Kamoshida's palace, to be honest, but after this palace, it will diverge a lot because time travel ruins everything

Hoping to update every week, but I'll say it's more likely to be every two weeks
We're Friends, Aren't We?

Chapter Notes

THANK YOU for all of your wonderful comments, all the kudos, and bookmarks <3 I'm glad you're loving this story as much as I'm loving writing it! You guys’s comments gave me life so I had to post this early. Next one will probably actually be in two weeks though haha.

I’m posting two chapters because I’m really ready to be done with Kamoshida and move onto Yusubae and Madarame lol

Enjoy :)

April 21

“So all that’s left is to steal the calling card, right?” Ryuji said as they emerged from Kamoshida’s Palace once more into the side alley near Shujin. “Heh heh. I’ll take care of that.”

Ann looked at him skeptically. “That laugh has me worried.” She folded her arms across her chest. “Are you sure you’ve got this?”

“Why are you doubting me? I’ve been waiting for this. I can’t wait to finally take that bastard’s heart. I wouldn’t miss the chance to send the calling card to do it,” Ryuji declared triumphantly.

A few people looked over at them funny as Morgana groaned. “Not so loud!”

“No one’s listening anyway,” Ryuji said, brushing it off.

“So his heart will really change if we do this, huh?” Ann said, twirling her hair around her finger. “He won’t be able to hurt anyone anymore. I hope it goes smoothly.”

“We’ll be fine,” Ryuji said enthusiastically. “Especially since we got this guy with us.” He put his arm around Akira. “Did you see how he took down those shadows? Man, I gotta start training just to keep up.”

Akira smiled inwardly. “I didn’t do much,” he said, rubbing his neck.

“No way, your power is incredible!” Morgana noted. “Much better than Ryuji’s.”

Ryuji’s good mood immediately vanished, replaced by a flash of anger. “What was that cat?”

“I’m not a cat,” Morgana shot back, just as irritated.

“There they go again,” Ann said to Akira warily. “Well, I should go see Shiho anyway,” she added. “Just a little longer,” she added. “Then it’ll all be over.” She brightened up. “I’ll see you guys later.”

“See ya,” Ryuji said to her, already cooled down from before. He turned to Akira. “Anyway, I was serious about training. What do you say? You wanna go for a run?” He started stretching already.
“We gotta be as prepared as possible to take that asshole down.”

Akira opened his mouth to agree, then stopped himself. He’d nearly forgotten that he’d already made plans – well, almost. “Not today,” he told him. “I have something planned already.”

“Huh? Oh, okay,” Ryuji said, disappointment clear in his voice. “Alright, well, if you change your mind, just give me a ring.”

After he walked away, Morgana leapt onto a trash can. “Plans?”

Akira nodded. “I’ll try to get in contact with Akechi,” he said, leaning back against the wall.

“Do you need me to talk again?” Morgana asked. In the past few days, Morgana had started to really come around to believing that Akira’s words were true. It had been a huge relief to have someone else to discuss everything with. They hadn’t gotten very far in coming up with a plan, which didn’t surprise Akira considering the fact that although he’d told Morgana everything, this Morgana hadn’t actually lived through all of that. Still, it helped to at least be able to talk it through out loud.

Akira shook his head. “No, he agreed when I asked if he was allergic. It would be odd if I decided to show up again with you. I considered getting him to see that I have the Meta Nav app, but if he gets too suspicious too early, he might just eliminate me without a second thought.”

Morgana shook his head. “He’d really do something like that so easily?” He asked, shock laced through his voice.

Akira frowned slightly. His kindness towards them had been fake. The care for his fellow teammates had been fake. Perhaps the most frustrating part was that Akira, who considered himself able to see past people’s masks, couldn’t get a read on him. “I don’t know. That’s what concerns me.”

“This Akechi guy is really twisted, huh? If only he didn’t have a persona, then we could enter his palace and make him confess everything himself,” Morgana said in frustration.

“Twisted…” Akira repeated, mostly to himself. He sighed. Somehow, there was still so much that he didn’t know. Even now, when he had the upper hand. “Who’s more twisted, the hitman or the one who orders the hits?” He wondered aloud. “Anyway, I just need to get a sense for his motivations. We should be patient.”

“So the plan is just to talk to him?” Morgana asked. “You came all the way back in time just to talk?”

Akira smiled slightly at the cat’s tone. “A little boring, but necessary,” he said. “Akechi doesn’t really pay attention to us until after we steal Madarame’s heart.”

“The…artist, right?” Morgana said unsurely.

Akira nodded. “I want to make a move before that. I was thinking…” He glanced at Morgana. “What if we brought him into the palace?”

“Kamoshida’s?”

Akira shook his head. “It has to be after we’ve changed someone’s heart. That way we’re already on the radar. If we’re already seen as threats when we enter Madarame’s palace, then his clothes will change automatically too.” Akira folded his arms across his chest. “I imagine he’ll have to
“Think of an excuse on the spot about why that is.”

“Won’t he just kill you after you emerge?”

“No, he’s smarter than that. It’ll force him to come up with a different plan. He’ll probably ask to join until he can come up with a way to get rid of us.”

“How will you get him into the palace?”

Akira rubbed his chin. “Not sure yet.”

“And what will happen if he does decide to join us? How will you get the information out of him?”

“Also not sure yet,” he said nonchalantly.

Morgana peered up at him unsurely. “You’re so calm about this. Is this really going to work?”

At this, Akira gave him a small smile and shrugged. “No idea,” he said, and Morgana nearly fell over in response. “But there’s no way he’ll give up his boss just through talking to me.”


“Fitting you say that,” Akira teased.

“I’m not a cat!” Morgana huffed. “Anyway, how are you going to get in touch with him?”

Akira shrugged, then opened his bag so that Morgana could hop in. Once he did, Akira slung his bag back over his shoulder and started to walk out past the school gate. “I could call the police station. He’s likely got an office line.”

“What if he just thinks you’re a stalker?”

“Then I’ll probably die. Again.”

“You don’t even sound worried,” Morgana noted, clearly impressed. Akira didn’t have the heart to tell him otherwise. They continued to walk, Akira lost in thought, until Morgana nudged him again. “H-Hey. Look over there,” Morgana said to him, using his paw to point.

Akira looked in the direction that Morgana was pointing. “You know, you said that you didn’t even meet Akechi until after Madarame, but this is the third time you’ve seen him in two weeks,” Morgana commented as Akira saw the brunette sitting at the window of a ramen shop nearby.

*That is weird,* Akira thought to himself.

“I’ll go wander around town for a bit,” Morgana told him. “Are you going to talk to him?”

Akira nodded. “I should,” he told the cat. He had been hoping for some extra time to prep, but if fate was going to throw them together again so soon, he didn’t want to waste the opportunity. He lowered his bag, and Morgana crawled out of it. “Be careful,” he said to Morgana.

“You’re about to go hang out with your murderer and you’re telling *me* to be careful? You’re something else,” Morgana mused.

Akira walked into the ramen shop. Whatever Akechi was looking at, it had completely engrossed him. He looked almost ethereal, especially with the angle he was sitting at and the way the sunlight was streaming in through the window. Akira blinked, and the illusion was broken as his
vision was replaced by the smug, malicious look as a gun pressed against his forehead.

He dug his hands into his pockets and walked over to Akechi. “Nothing on animals…” Akechi mumbled to himself when Akira was in earshot.

“I’m starting to think you’re stalking me,” Akira said, and Akechi looked up at him with surprised and tired eyes.

“Kuru--Akira?” Akechi corrected. He closed the folder that he was reading, but before he did so, Akira caught a glimpse of two key words.

_Cognitive psience._

Akira smiled. “Hi,” he greeted with a friendly wave. “I saw you when I was walking home. Are you busy?”

“Ah, well,” Akechi shifted in his seat before he smiled. “I have some time. It’s good to see you again. You’re adjusting well, I take it?”

Akira shrugged. “More or less. There’s a lot going on at Shujin.”

“Right. I heard that a student almost committed suicide,” Akechi said, and Akira saw a flash of something distraught in Akechi’s eyes.

“Yeah. A friend of mine’s close friend,” Akira told him. “It hasn’t been easy.”

“It never is,” Akechi breathed quietly.

That’s when he saw it. The first crack in Goro Akechi’s mask. He got a faraway look in his eyes, and the closest that Akira could describe the expression would be that it was the exact opposite of the one he’d given him before he shot him. “Please…pass along my well-wishes to your friend.”

“I will,” Akira told him. “Are you okay?” he asked.

Then it was gone, replaced by another easy smile. “Sorry about that. I tend to get lost in my thoughts sometimes,” he added with a carefree laugh. “I’m glad she’s alright.”

“Yeah,” Akira said. “Me too.” He chose his next words carefully. “The man who drove her to that point, though, I think he’s going to crack under the pressure of his crimes soon.”

“Hmm?” Akechi hummed thoughtfully, prompting Akira to continue.

“There’s been rumors about the volleyball coach. That he’s been abusing his students. He drove a girl to nearly commit suicide. I can’t imagine anyone being able to live with that.”

Akechi was silent for a long time. “I’m not so sure. People can be quite horrid,” he finally said.

“That’s true, but I think there’s a part of us that doesn’t want to believe that someone’s all bad,” Akira told him truthfully, rubbing the center of his forehead without thought.

“Belief and reality aren’t always one and the same.”

“Not always. But they aren’t always different, either,” Akira pointed out.

Akechi looked at him for a moment before smiling slightly. “I can’t argue with that.”
Akira smiled too. “Good. Do you have some time today? I was thinking about going to the park. Wanna come with?”

“You’re quite tenacious.”

“Is that a yes?”

“I suppose I have a bit of extra time to spare.”

“So yes, then?” Akira teased lightly.

Akechi chuckled. “Yes.” And he sounded so genuinely pleased about it. He placed his folder into his bag before getting up from his chair. “I didn’t have a chance to order anything,” he noted, but he didn’t sound disappointed.

“That’s okay, we’ll get something to eat afterwards,” Akira replied easily.

After Akechi finished packing up his things, the two of them made their way outside of the shop. They walked for a bit when Akira caught wind of a cat in an alleyway that they’d been about to pass. He’d thought that it was Morgana, but it wasn’t. Just a cat that looked similar. Akira continued to walk, then stopped abruptly when he realized that Akechi was still studying it.

“This cat…” He said quietly. He walked over to it, then bent down, his hand stroking his chin thoughtfully.

“I thought you were allergic,” Akira said carefully.

Unsurprisingly, he had an answer ready. “Ah. Well, it’s not really the cat fur that causes the allergies, you know. People are really allergic to proteins in the cat’s saliva, urine, and dander. Hypoallergenic cats are a little better for me,” Akechi said easily. He sounded impressed with himself; it was almost endearing. He turned his attention back to the cat, who gave him an inquisitive meow.

Akira readjusted his weight as Akechi frowned and a sliver of disappointment crossed over his face. Wait.

“Nothing on animals…”

Akira looked at Akechi, who wasn’t completely facing him yet. Was he…reading the research to see if it said anything about cats? Involuntarily, a laugh escaped before Akira could completely stop it, so it came out half-choked. Somehow, despite not knowing much about the brunette, the action had seemed just like Akechi, but it still made him want to laugh.

Case closed… His forehead began to hurt again. A gentle reminder that would never go away of his last fated path, and as if on cue, his amusement was met with confliction.

Akechi turned to him, confused. “What is it?” he asked genuinely.

“Nothing,” Akira said, some traces of amusement still lingering in his voice. “Are you ready to go, Catmaster Akechi?”

***

Inokashira Park seemed more serene than usual that day. They’d walked until they came to a spot where the sunlight seemed to hit the water just right, making idle chatter along the way. Akira
didn’t know if Akechi had been suspicious of him from the start after giving his answers at the TV station, but he seemed different this time around. Then again, thinking back on it, most of their interactions hadn’t been anything special either. Even when he’d come to Leblanc, he’d speak with him only briefly before taking his leave. While he’d come to know Akechi, he hadn’t really known him, and there’d always been an air of something that inclined Akira to think that something was off about the detective. But it seemed stranger this time around. Nature had a way of creating a tranquil simplicity around the world and the people in it.

“Thank you for inviting me,” Akechi said, sticking his hands into his coat pockets. “I go cycling here sometimes, but I usually go alone.”

From where they were standing, Akira could see a few couples on row boats, and some others walking down the path and having picnics. He took a seat with his back to the water, while Akechi continued to stand overlooking it.

As he looked around, he spotted a familiar head somewhat in the distance.

…It was Yusuke. Yet another person that he’d seen before he was supposed to officially meet them. His fingers formed a square in front of him, capturing whatever he was looking at into a picture frame of his own hand. Akira smiled slightly at his odd friend. *Soon.* Yusuke moved his finger frame over until it looked like he was framing them – it was hard to be sure because of the distance. It lasted for a second before he continued on, turning his frame away.

“Do you know him?” Akechi’s voice broke him out of his thoughts.

He looked up at the brunette. “Not really,” he answered. He placed his hands back behind him, leaning against them.

Akechi hummed contemplatively. “You know,” he started. “I looked you up.” Akira didn’t say anything, though he made an inquisitive noise that prompted Akechi to continue. “You have a criminal record,” the brunette said. “Assault.”

Akira hadn’t really been expecting to Akechi to bring up something like that, so he waited a few seconds before responding. “That’s what it says,” Akira said.

“Except, it’s odd,” Akechi started. “Your case file. It said that you suddenly attacked a man, but there was no motive. You denied it, and the other parties had no motive to offer either. Furthermore, the man did not want to be identified, and neither did the woman.” He placed his hand on his chin thoughtfully. “It leads me to believe that you were incriminated on false charges.”

Then he turned to Akira with a bright, charismatic smile. “I’m right, aren’t I?” he said, clearly expecting Akira to be impressed.

And he wasn’t impressed, not really, since Akechi’s intelligence had never been something he doubted. However, he was surprised that the brunette said it in the first place. *Had Akechi come to the same conclusion last time, too? Had he even looked into it?* Wordlessly, he nodded.

“Yet, your fate was still sealed. Judging by the relative swiftness and anonymity of it, it must have been someone powerful.”

“I don’t remember who he was,” Akira said. He looked at him curiously. “You believe that I didn’t do it?”

“It was just a matter of simple deduction. It’s the only logical conclusion once you look at all of the facts of the case. Er, all of the facts that can be accessed by a high school student, that is,” Akechi
added with an easy laugh. “You must be angry, having so many people have a false impression of you.”

Akira might’ve been inclined to answer that yes, he was angry about it, but considering the path that it’d led him down and the friends that had come as a result, it was hard for him to be truly resentful about it. “It doesn’t matter. It’s in the past.”

“Your life was spurned by that man, yet you don’t let things like the past tie you down. I’m a little envious.” This time Akira looked, and really looked at Akechi. The brunette was looking at the sky as he spoke, a faint smile on his face.

Akira folded his arms across his chest. It wasn’t like he hadn’t had his fair share of anger about the situation. It was only human. But eventually there didn’t seem to be any point to it. “All I can do is my part to make sure that the society we live in doesn’t allow that sort of corruption to happen and people like that to continue to go free.”

Akechi laughed another throaty laugh. “That’s quite idealistic of you. There will always be people like that.”

“And luckily for us, there will always be people to catch those people and bring them to justice, Ace Detective Akechi,” he countered. He’d meant it to sound teasing, but he studied the detective’s reaction closely.

“And so it becomes an endless game of cat-and-mouse then,” Akechi said, and the words made Akira think back to Morgana’s comment. “Criminals and those who pursue them.” Akechi’s words suggested something different from the comments he’d given about straight-and-narrow justice when they’d first met.

The brunette then turned to Akira. “If only I knew the man’s name, I could take care of him for you,” Akechi said with a light, joking laugh. If anyone else had said it with that much charisma, he would’ve laughed along too at the intended joke, but instead, the comment did little else other than unnerved him. “Ha ha. I’m only kidding. I’m only a high school detective, after all. Give me a few years, once I become truly acknowledged as a proper detective in the legal system, I’ll take care of it,” he added with a bright smile. Akira briefly wondered if ‘taking care of it’ really meant murder or some other sort of brutal retaliation, and wondered if Akechi, in his own mind, thought that an action like that would seriously make Akira happy.

Akira’s forehead started to hurt again, but he ignored it and stood up.

“Well, until that day comes, you’ll have to deal with being friends with a criminal,” Akira said, facing the water along with Akechi. The irony didn’t escape him. “I’ll try not to tarnish your reputation,” he added with a cheeky grin.

“Friends?”

*Now or never. “Aren’t we?”*

Akechi blinked, like he’d just been given a foreign concept to grasp in a short amount of time. “…I suppose.”

Akira smiled even as his stomach felt uneasy. He looked down at the ground before standing up and then picking up a few pebbles. “How far can you toss one?”

“Sorry?”
Akira flipped a pebble around in his palm. “Skipping rocks.” To prove the point, he placed one of the pebbles into his free hand and tossed it towards the water. It skipped three times before sinking downward.

“I…don’t know how to do that,” Akechi said, sounding more frustrated with himself than anything else. He frowned, stroking his chin like he was trying to solve an equation.

Akira tossed another pebble up and down in his hand before turning to Akechi with a haughty grin. “Jealous?”

Akechi stared at him for a moment before letting out a chortle. “Hardly. I will gladly accept this challenge,” he added with another smile that Akira guessed was full of bravado. Akira tossed a pebble towards him, fighting back his own amusement.

Akechi sort of looked at it, then started studying the water. He stayed like that for what seemed like hours, staring at both the water and the pebble, stroking his chin with a studious gaze.

After a while, Akira dramatically yawned, stretching his arms to prove the point. Akechi turned to him, and Akira threw him a lazy smile. “It’s not rocket science.”

“Yes, I understand,” Akechi said. Then he smiled too. “If it was, I would likely be a lot more at ease.” He tilted his head slightly, then tossed the pebble…

…it skipped five times before sinking below the water. Akechi smiled triumphantly. “Ha. Not bad for a first timer, don’t you think?”

Akira shrugged, then tossed another one that skipped seven times.

“Lucky throw.”

“What, you’re the only one who can be impressive?” Akira rolled the last pebble mindlessly around in the palm of his hand as Akechi laughed again.

“I suppose your skills do exceed mine in this regard,” he said.

“You suppose?” Akira replied, raising an eyebrow with another complacent grin.

“I haven’t given up yet.” Akira wouldn’t have really pegged Akechi as the competitive type, but he found it kind of suited him. “I’m sure if I tried once more, I could--” He was cut off by the sound of his phone going off in his pocket. With a look that genuinely seemed apologetic, he pulled it out, then frowned when he looked at it. When he looked back at Akira, a smile was in its place. “Please excuse me. I have to take this.”

He stepped a few steps away, though not entirely out of earshot, and pressed his phone against his ear. “Yes? Okay, I’ll be there right away,” he said with a nod. After hanging up, he placed his phone in his pocket then turned to Akira with a rueful smile. “Sorry, it seems I’ve got to get going.”

“Okay,” Akira said, surprising himself with his own genuine disappointment. “I should head back anyway.”

Akechi nodded. “Today was quite fun. If it’s alright, I’d like to hang out with you again.”

Folding his arms across his chest, Akira tilted his head with a shrug. “…Nah.”
Akechi was caught off-guard again, and Akira smiled not too long after. “Ah. Ha ha. I’m starting to think you simply like catching people off-guard.”

“Just you,” Akira said, and that wasn’t necessarily a lie. Catching someone off-guard was sometimes the only way to get a glimpse of who they are behind the mask.

“Oh, one more thing.” Akechi started. “About your cat…” Akira tried not to make it seem like he’d just frozen in place. “Have you noticed anything strange about him?”

Akira shrugged again even as the image of Akechi pressing a pistol against his forehead clouded his memory. “He meows a lot.”

“I see,” Akechi said curiously. “Have you taken him to the vet to be tested? You should keep a close eye on it. It could be dangerous,” he added. Then, almost as an afterthought: “Stray cats can carry a variety of diseases.”

Akira knew for certain that his words of warning weren’t related to any sort of diseases at all, but —“Are you worried about me?” Akira noted, but behind his teasing, genuine curiosity was there.

“Ah, maybe a little,” Akechi admitted with a modest smile. “Animals can be dangerous, after all.” Somewhere, deep down in the pit of Akira’s stomach, something that felt suspiciously like remorse towards his murderer planted itself into Akira’s subconscious.

***

“He’s not suspicious of me at all,” Akira said distractedly, trying to focus on the third lockpick that he was trying to craft.

Beside him on the table, Morgana scratched behind his ears with a screwdriver in his mouth. Akira took it by the handle. “That’s a good thing, right? Did he tell you anything?”

Akira shook his head. “His past is important,” he said, tinkering a bit more. “I think that’s the key. Might give us some insight into motivation.”

You don’t let things like the past tie you down…I’m envious. He’d seen a side of Akechi that he hadn’t been expecting. Truth be told, he didn’t quite know what to expect, but the general humanness of it all left him feeling strangely unsettled.

Akira inhaled sharply as he pricked himself on the finger.

“Are you okay? Usually it doesn’t take you long to craft those,” Morgana said cautiously.

Akira smiled in the way that only a brave and confidant leader could. “I’m fine,” he said, rubbing his forehead even as it started to hurt. The headaches had become a daily occurrence now, sometimes every couple of hours. And only in one spot.

“Nothing fazes you, huh? You’re incredible,” Morgana said. Akira smiled tiredly, patting the cat’s head lightly before turning back to his poorly constructed lockpick. “You’ve got to think about the palaces and trying to prevent your future fate. It’s still hard to believe that he shot you,” Morgana continued. “I can’t wait until we catch him and the others!” The cat scratched behind his ears again. “I was worried, but knowing that you’re our leader, we can definitely do this!”

“We have to be patient,” Akira reminded him.
“Heh. I know. I’m not Ryuji,” Morgana teased, and Akira laughed quietly.

As if on cue, Akira’s phone buzzed on the table, and he was glad to take a break from his infiltration tools as he looked at it.

**Ann Takamaki**
*Visited Shiho today.*

**Ann Takamaki**
*I’m even more determined to do this tomorrow. We can’t let him getting away with hurting anyone ever again.*

**Akira Kurusu**
*We’ll do this for Shiho.*

**Ann Takamaki**
*For Shiho.*

**Ann Takamaki**
*Thank you. I’m so grateful to you.*

**Ryuji Sakamoto**
*I’m here too ya know!!!!*

**Ann Takamaki**
*Maybe you should say something nice for once then!*

**Ryuji Sakamoto**
*Whatevs. Let’s steal that treasure and make that bastard pay!*

“Looks like everyone’s fired up,” Morgana said cheerily. “And, if what you said lines up, then I’ll know for sure that you’re not crazy,” the cat added with a nod. “We’ll definitely succeed.”

***

When he woke up in the Velvet Room after falling asleep, he was met with the sound of Igor’s ominous laughter. “Your rehabilitation is progressing nicely. You have awakened to your power and have found companions to aid you in your journey.”

Akira didn’t say anything in response. He considered turning around and laying back down in the bed.

“It seems change has already begun to happen. I wonder just how possible it is to escape a fate like one’s own death,” Igor mused.

At this, Akira placed his hands on the bars. “What is that supposed to mean?” He hadn’t gone back in time just to have the same thing happen again.

He jumped back when Caroline hit the bars. “Show some respect, inmate!”

“Fate can be an interesting thing,” Igor continued. “I wonder how it will approach you this time.”

Igor was going to keep being cryptic, that much was true. There wasn’t any point to trying. Akira lowered his hands. “I want to fuse a persona,” he said. *Since I’m here… “Archangel.”*
Caroline scowled at his response, but Justine was more lenient. “A strong one, indeed,” she offered.

“Yes,” Igor agreed. “This persona will receive a considerable amount of power.”

Akira blinked. Archangel held the Justice arcana, he knew this. He hadn’t been speaking to Akechi for long, yet it was still going to receive a lot of power? It wasn’t like it carried over – he’d just fused Slime last week and it had hardly received any power even after the vast amount of time he’d spent with Ryuji.

Igor seemed to note his perplexed expression, because another ominous smile crossed over his face. “Is this the persona you want?”

“Yes,” Akira said, ignoring his growing headache. He wondered just who Igor was to have this kind of power, but he knew he wouldn’t get any answers, so he’d have to figure out the rest later. Real world first. “Archangel.”
May 14

Taking down Kamoshida, watching him confess his crimes, and the birth of the Phantom Thieves: it had all gone as smoothly as possible. After defeating him and taking his treasure, Morgana had truly come around, even though the cat had already been accepting Akira’s claim as true before the proof had arrived.

Taking the same exams over again made his life infinitely easier, since he didn’t have to spend the same amount of time studying as he had before, although taking it still felt just as tedious the second time around.

Ryuji and Ann couldn’t really place his confidence and lack of interest in studying, and it wasn’t exactly like he could say, *hey, I already took this exam because I’m from the future*, as amusing as it would’ve been to see the surprised looks on their faces, so he chalked it up to material that he’d learned at his old school.

“Ah, hello.” Akira turned towards the source of the voice as he stood at the walkway to the train. Akechi walked up to him with a bright smile. “It’s been a while.” He’d only seen the brunette a few times in between their time at the park. Akechi peered past him at the bag over his shoulder. “You brought your cat?”

“He gets lonely.” Akira said as Morgana stared at him curiously. Akechi looked at the cat with slightly narrowed eyes. “Will your allergies be okay?” He added quickly.

“It seems to not be acting up this time,” Akechi replied easily, still regarding the cat with a suspicious gaze.

And then Morgana, in calculated move on his part, genuinely meowed.

*Of course not.* “That’s good.” Then, to change the subject, he said, “Sorry I haven’t been able to hang out. Exams,” he added.

“Oh, that’s quite alright. Mine were finished last week,” Akechi said. “If you need any help, I’d be happy to lend you my assistance,” he offered kindly.
“That depends. Are you good at philosophy?” He asked. He might’ve done well on the multiple choice, but essays were another story entirely.

Akechi laughed. “Does Hegel state that both antithesis and thesis are essential for new discoveries?”

“…” Akira stared at him blankly.

“Ah. Ha ha. Sorry. Yes. Yes, I am,” Akechi said. “I have some time to spare today. Perhaps—”

“Yo!” Ryuji slapped his hand on Akira’s free shoulder. “Man, I can’t wait for exams to be over.”

“Did you study?” Akira asked.

“Well…I started, but then I decided to play video games instead,” Ryuji admitted.

“How manly,” Akira teased.

“Eh, it’s what I always do. No matter how many times I fail, nothing’s gonna change,” Ryuji said. He dug his hands into his pockets, finally noticing Akechi standing there. “Who’s this?” He asked, nodding towards him. “This guy your friend?” he asked tactlessly.

Akira nodded with a faint smile as Ann came up to them with a yawn. “I’m so tired,” she said as she came to a stop in front of them. “My brain feels like mush. I studied so much.”

“Lady Ann is so impressive,” Morgana whispered quietly enough so that Akechi couldn’t hear, although when Akechi glanced over at him, he coughed loudly into his fist.


“Hello,” Akechi said brightly. “My name is Goro Akechi.”


“He’s this guy’s friend,” Ryuji said, gesturing to Akira.

“You are all students of Shujin, right?” Akechi piped up.


“Oh. I heard about the teacher that caused quite a stir at your school. He confessed to a number of crimes.” He turned to Akira. “Looks like your prediction was right after all,” he said. Akira could’ve sworn he heard a hint of something like suspicion, but it was hard to tell with his cheery disposition.

“Good. Guess he couldn’t handle the guilt of all the shitty things he did,” Ryuji said, folding his arms across his chest heatedly.

“Yes. I heard that before this happened, calling cards were placed all over to school telling him that he would soon have his desires stolen and would confess his crimes,” Akechi said, his hand on his chin. “Quite an interesting form of blackmail.”

“E-Er, yeah,” Ann said, and Akira sort of wished that the two of them were much better at lying.

“Still, their choice of wording is curious,” Akechi continued. “It would seem they forced him to confess, wouldn’t it?”
“Forced?” Ann repeated.

“The guy got what was coming to him no matter what.” Ryuji said. “Why’re you obsessing over it?”

“Oh. My apologies. I’m a detective,” Akechi said with a light laugh. “I suppose I can’t help it. The students who pulled such a trick certainly were clever about it. It makes me what sort of students would do that.”

“It was us,” Akira said nonchalantly, and both Ann and Ryuji stared at him, dumbfounded.

Akechi blinked, clearly caught off-guard, before giving way to a smile. “I wasn’t expecting that response. You never cease to surprise me.”

“Anyway, you guys want to get some food after this?” Ryuji asked, scratching his head and clearly trying to get the topic off of anything but the Phantom Thieves at the moment.

Akira turned to Akechi. “Do you want to join us?”

“Him too?” Ryuji said.

“Ryuji,” Ann scolded with a frown. She turned to Akechi. “Ignore him. You’re welcome to-.”

Then she paused as she turned around to look behind her. “Am I imagining things?” Akira craned his head to see if he could spot Yusuke anywhere, but he couldn’t find him, even after knowing exactly who he was looking for.

“You need the bathroom?” Akira asked since he already knew what she was bothered about.

“What? No!” Ann said.

“You see a groper or somethin’?” Ryuji asked.

“No, it’s…nothing,” Ann told them. “Let’s just get going.”

Ann and Ryuji began walking, and Akira turned to Akechi. “Come with us,” he said.

“I…don’t want to be a bother,” Akechi said, sounding somewhat perturbed.

“I wouldn’t ask if I thought you were,” Akira told him with a lazy smile. “Come on.”

“Well, alright,” Akechi nodded gleefully. “My school is nearby.”

The two of them caught up to Ann and Ryuji. They rode the train, and once they got off, Ann, on cue, turned around when they got to the escalator.

“That guy got off!” Ann said, and Akira tried and failed once again to find Yusuke in the crowded of bustling faces. “Isn’t this bad?”

Akechi turned as well. “Who?” he asked curiously.

“I don’t know!” Ann said. “What do we do?” Ryuji yawned, and Ann turned to him with her hands on her hips. “At least act like you care!”

Ryuji sighed dramatically. “Fine.” He drudged his way up the escalator as the others followed him. When they reached the top, he turned to Ann. “Just stand there, and if he comes up to you, we’ll get him. Easy.”
“Is that the best idea?” Ann said.

“We’ll be here,” Akira told her comfortingly, and she nodded with a slightly worried smile in response. He turned to Ryuji. “You go over on that side. Goro and I will be over here.”

“Ugh, fine,” Ryuji said as he drudged his feet in the opposite direction.

“Sorry for the detour,” he told Akechi with an apologetic smile as they stood nonchalantly to Ann’s right.

“No, this is… I’ve never done this before. And life is all about new experiences,” Akechi said. “Someone is following her, then.”

“I don’t think he’s dangerous,” Akira said knowingly.

“How are you so sure? People can be more dangerous than they let on,” Akechi said somewhat darkly.

Akira, not wanting the path to go down conversation-killer lane and seeing the faraway look that had started to form in Akechi’s eyes, chose to tease him instead. “Please protect me, Senpai,” Akira said in his best helpless voice.

Akechi laughed – a light and free laugh – one that Akira hadn’t heard before, and it filled the air. “Shouldn’t you be telling me to protect Takamaki-san?”

“Oh,” Akira said, feigning disappointment. “Her too.”

Akechi laughed again. “You’re quite an odd person.”

“You said that already,” Akira pointed out. Then he gestured towards Yusuke coming up the escalator. “There. Let’s go.” He gestured over to Ryuji.

The two of them moved from their position and Akira speed-walked over to Yusuke walking slowly – although, it was odd, it didn’t seem like he was walking towards Ann this time but preparing to walk past her. Akira ignored it, and the three of them stopped Yusuke in his tracks before he got a chance to even reach out a hand like he had last time.

Ryuji looked him up and down, then turned to Ann. “Uh. This guy? Are you sure?”

“I knew it!” Ann said, ignoring Ryuji’s comment. “You’ve been stalking me!”

Yusuke blinked, confused. “Stalking you? That’s preposterous.”

“Don’t lie!” Ann said. “You’ve been following me ever since the train!”

“My goodness, I was wondering why you’d left the car,” an older voice said from afar, and Akira tensed when he saw Madarame in the backseat. He’d truly been an awful person, and after getting to know Yusuke, in all of his innocence and love for art, it only made Akira more determined to stop Madarame as soon as possible. He could see Akechi frown minutely out of the corner of his eye. “So this is where your passion led. All’s well that ends well.”

“Forgive me,” Yusuke said. “I hadn’t even noticed the calls from Sensei. But I’m glad I caught up to you.”

“Ok…” Ann said.
“I simply couldn’t stop myself when I saw you. You’re what I’ve been searching for all this time! Please, won’t you be the models for my next art piece?!” Yusuke asked with a passion that could only suit someone like Yusuke.

Akira had been waiting for this, so it took him a few seconds before he realized that 1) he’d said models instead of model and 2) a hand was suddenly on his wrist…

…and another was on Akechi’s.

Akira blinked, looking up – and found himself staring at Yusuke’s determined eyes. He’d gripped one of their wrists with his hands.

“Wait, what?” Ann said, completely shocked.

“Ha ha, he wasn’t stalking you,” Ryuji said. Then he also frowned. “Wait a minute, what?”

Akira’s mouth dropped open slightly, and he turned to Akechi, who had an equally confused expression that he didn’t even bother to cover up this time. “I…beg your pardon?” Akechi finally said when Akira was still at a loss for words.

What is going on? The changes thus far hadn’t been too big, but this one was definitely not how things happened last time. “Please, you’re the ones I’ve been looking for!” Yusuke continued. He pushed past Ann, releasing their wrists but still taking a step closer. “I spotted you weeks ago when I was searching for inspiration, and to have found you again, it can only be the call of art. I sense a great deal of passion and connection between the two of you that must be captured on canvas!”

“Passion?” Akechi repeated.

“And connection,” Akira finished cautiously. If there was ever a time to think that he was in an alternate timeline, this was it.

“What is going on?” Ryuji said. “And who the hell are you, anyways?”

“My apologies. Where are my manners? My name is Yusuke Kitagawa. I’m a second-year at Kosei High’s Fine Arts Division. I’m Madarame-sensei’s pupil, and I’m being allowed residence at his place,” Yusuke greeted.

“Madarame? The one on ‘Good Morning Japan?’ Isn’t he that super famous Japanese style artist known all over the world?” Ann said, wide-eyed.

“The very same.”

“But we heard his name in…” Ann glanced over at Akechi unsurely as she drifted off.

“Yusuke!” Madarame called.

“Oh. I must be going,” Yusuke told them. “There will be an exhibition at the department store near the station, and I will be there to help out tomorrow. Come by. It would be great if you could give me an answer to becoming my models then.”

Well, Akira, thought, it’s not the worst thing to have happened. And if he wanted to get Akechi into a palace soon, perhaps he was being thrown this chance for that exact opportunity. He shrugged. “Make us beautiful.”

Yusuke looked at him with grateful eyes. “I will do nothing less. So you will do it?” He looked
between the two of them.

“W-Wait a minute,” Akechi said as Akira nodded, and flustered Akechi was kind of endearing, Akira noticed. “I’m not quite sure I understand,” the brunette continued with an attempt at a carefree smile that did little to hide his confusion.

“There is no need to be modest,” Yusuke said. “As I promised, I will capture the true essence of your lives beautifully.”

“He needs us,” Akira said with a smile.

“Needs?” Akechi repeated. After a few seconds, he regained his composure. “A-Ah. How can I say no to that, then?”

“Wonderful!” Yusuke exclaimed. He dug out four tickets from his pockets. “Here. I will go ahead and give you the tickets now,” he said. Then he turned to Ann and Ryuji, and his smile dropped. “You probably have no real interest in fine arts, but I suppose I’ll give you tickets too,” he said scornfully towards Ann and Ryuji. If the situation wasn’t so bizarre, Akira would laugh at the callous way he spoke to Ann this time around.

“Don’t sound so excited,” Ryuji grumbled sarcastically.

“Well then, I hope to see you both tomorrow!” Yusuke said. With a final goodbye, he turned and made his way over and into Madarame’s car.

Once he drove off, Ryuji looked at his ticket. “What the hell was that? Anyway, you’re not plannin’ on going, are you?” He asked Akira specifically.

“I think I’ll go,” Akira noted.

“Seriously?” Ann said. “That was so weird,” she noted. “It sounded kind of sketchy.”

“I must agree,” Akechi said. “It was quite a strange request from an individual who’d been following us,” he concluded.

“Go with me then,” Akira told him. “We are his muses.”

Ann’s phone started to buzz. “Oh crap. We’d better get going,” she said as she looked at her alarm.

“I’m going,” Akira said again, pointedly to Akechi.

Akechi turned to him with an apprehensive expression. “I would not advise that you go alone…” he started.

Akira smiled triumphantly at Akechi’s apparent relent. “Then I’ll see you tomorrow.”

As they went their separate ways, Akira made a mental note to talk to Morgana. The cat had been forced to remain silent because of Akechi, but he wasted no time in sharing his opinion with everyone on the entire situation afterwards.

If he and Akechi were going to be the ones to ‘inspire’ Yusuke, they would have to bring him into the Palace, and once they brought him into the Palace, the others would find out that Akechi had a persona, and vice versa. Akira wondered if things would really go as he’d planned though.

*I sense a great deal of passion and connection between the two of you...* Akira didn’t doubt Yusuke’s artistic ability, but that had been a strange comment.
Briefly, he thought about what would happen if, somehow, Akechi were to find out that he’d been tricked so that Akira could catch both him and his boss.

His friend, Akechi.

His murderer, Akechi.

The center of his forehead began to hurt again, and the next time he closed his eyes, he saw his ‘friend’ Akechi pressing a gun to his head.

It surprised Akira how much he wasn’t angry by it. When he thought about it, he didn’t feel a need to get revenge; he just wanted to make things right this time. His friends would likely have been killed if things had continued to go that way, and who knows how many other crimes would be committed by Akechi, especially since he’d been so readily able to kill him on his boss’s command.

Akira thought briefly if a part of him wanted to stop Akechi not just for the sake of justice. He began to wonder how difficult it is to change hearts when stealing treasures isn’t an option.

No, thinking like that would get him nowhere. Akira’s plan from the start had been to get close enough to catch them this time. He’d murdered him, after all. Put a bullet into a brain with a sinister smile on his face.

Still.

Changing a heart the old-fashioned way. And not just any heart. Changing a heart capable of cold-blooded murder. He wondered if it was possible. Or maybe, like the others’ hearts they’d changed, he’d already reached a point of no return.

Chapter End Notes

akira: should I strip
yusuke: yes
akechi: wat

inb4 Akechi kills them all because he doesn’t want to model like the husbando he is poor akechi he’s never had to deal with such zany friends before
First of all, THANK YOU everyone for all of your wonderful reviews <3 I know I don't respond to them often but I read every single one of them and end up smiling like an idiot i promise. seriously they make my day and I appreciate each and every single comment, bookmark and kudos ^.^ but ultimately i appreciate you just for reading <3

I hope you all enjoy this chapter as well!

Flashbacks are in all italics

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Mm-hmm, now this is a good cup of coffee,” Sojiro said with a pleased smile on his face. The praise from his temporary guardian made Akira smile as he prepared to brew another pot of coffee. Of course, he’d already mastered this once before, but Akira wanted to move past the distrust and lack of fondness that Sojiro had showed him in the beginning. It had been harder than he thought, Akira realized, to have so many people that he’d become close with see him as a stranger once more.

“Looks like you’re learning after all,” Sojiro said with a pleasant smile. “Y’know, you don’t look too bad in that apron, either.”

Akira smiled. “Better than you?”

Sojiro laughed heartily at that, which only made Akira feel even better. “Don’t get ahead of yourself now,” he said amusedly. He brought the coffee up again as Akira started to wipe down the counter.

The bell to the café chimed and the two of them looked over to see Akechi walk in. He was wearing a blue argyle sweater over a button up, and Akira looked down at his own casual attire underneath his apron.


The latter shook his head. “Just finishing up,” he said. “Coffee?”

Akechi shook his head. “That’s alright. I already ate before I arrived. How are you both today?”

“Doing better now,” Sojiro said with another sip of his coffee. “Jamaican Blue Mountain. Mm. Good choice. You boys know why this coffee’s so good?” Akira did, of course, because he’d heard this before, but he shook his head anyway and prompted Sojiro to continue. “The Blue Mountains have volcanic soil and a climate that makes this coffee high quality.”

“Ah, and it’s also harvested in small quantities, correct? And it undergoes a very strict inspection process. I wondered how it could smell so good. Now I know,” Akechi said with a charismatic grin.
“Well, color me impressed,” Sojiro said. He looks at Akira. “Looks like you’ve managed to keep good company.” Akira smiled and nodded. “Hard to believe someone like you is supposed to be a troublemaker with a criminal record.” Sojiro scratched the back of his head, then cleared his throat. “So you’re off to an art show, then.”

Akira took off his apron. “And underdressed for it,” he teased towards Akechi.

“This is what I normally wear,” Akechi said with an uncertain frown as he looked down at himself.

Akira couldn’t help but smile. “Of course it is.”

“Well—” Sojiro paused. “Don’t go causing any trouble. I’ll close up the store, so go ahead on.” He turned to Akechi. “Make sure you come around more. It’s nice to know that someone else appreciates the fine art of coffee.”

When the two of them got out the door, Akira looked at Akechi. “I think he likes you better than me now,” he joked.

Akechi laughed as he seemed especially pleased at the comment. “Ha ha. I doubt that. I just happened to know a few facts of my own about coffee. Will the others be arriving soon?”

Akira tilted his head to the side slightly.

~

“Do we really gotta go to this art show?” Ryuji said, hanging his head.

“We have to gather information,” Akira reminded him, leaning back against the wall.

“Besides, it sounds kinda cool to say we’re going to an art show,” Ann said in a starry-eyed voice.

“So sophisticated, Lady Ann,” Morgana purred. Then he looked up at Akira. “Will you be able to gather information with Akechi with you guys?”

“Yes, what’re we supposed to do when there’s another person with us?!” Ryuji said. “Can’t we just go without him?”

Ann shook her head. “Don’t be so rude, Ryuji. We can’t go without him. He was invited along with Akira.”

Ryuji blew air. “Still. Something about that guy upsets me. I mean, what the hell was he saying about forcing him to confess, like we committed some sort of crime?”

“Keep your voice down!” Morgana shushed him. “Anyway, when we get there--”

“You’ll have to stay back, Morgana,” Akira said.

“Huh?” Morgana said, shocked. “I-I don’t get to go with you guys?” Akira looked at him apologetically, trying to will to him that he would explain later. Morgana slumped. “Well, I guess that makes sense.”

“Heh. Don’t worry, we’ve got this,” Ryuji said.

“I’m so excited for this,” Ann said with a smile. “An actual art show.”

“Ugh. This sucks,” Ryuji said as he dragged his feet forward and started to walk. “I can think of a
Ann shook her head as she walked behind him. Akira told them he’d meet up with them later, then lingered back with Morgana.

“It’s because you don’t want him to be suspicious of me, right?” Morgana said.

He nodded. “I’d bring you otherwise. It won’t be like this much longer.”

~

“Ann and Ryuji will meet us there,” Akira told the brunette, who nodded in response. “Thanks for coming with me.”

“Oh. Well, like I said, I don’t think it would’ve been wise to go alone.” Akechi smiled. “Besides, I quite enjoy art exhibits. I’ve gone to a fair share already. It’s nice to have company this time, though.”

“I’ve never been,” Akira started, then half-smiled. “But the company is nice, I agree.”

***

They arrived at the art show before Ann and Ryuji showed up, so Akira lingered near the entrance where they’d been last time.

“Such exquisite pieces of art,” Akechi said as he looked around, his hand on his chin.

He looked at the pieces of art from Madarame. Pieces that had been taken from the lives of unsuspecting children who simply wanted a place to belong and someone to believe in them. The thought made his fists ball up involuntarily as he frowned. “Madarame’s talented,” Akira said dryly.

Akechi turned to him a frown on his face. “Madarame… Right,” he said. Then he smiled. “You sounded a little sarcastic, there.”

Akira threw him a small smile. “You catch on quick.” He shrugged. “I’ve heard some rumors about him and his artwork.”

“There are rumors about you as well.”

Akira twirled the edge of his hair. “Touché,” he said after a moment of silence as Ann and Ryuji walked up to them.

“Hey,” Ann greeted cheerfully. She turned to Akechi. “It’s nice to see you again Akechi-kun,” she said with a smile.

“Oh,” Akechi said, seemingly slightly taken aback by her enthusiasm towards him. “It’s nice to see you both too. This is a lovely exhibit,” he commented.

“Did we really have to come here?” Ryuji complained.

“Yes,” Ann told him. “You’ve been complaining all day. You know why,” she said pointedly.

Ryuji sighed again. “Yeah, yeah.” He scratched the back of his head. “I got it,” he said as he dug
his hands into his pockets and looked around. “How does this work, anyway?”

“You came,” Yusuke’s thrilled voice broke through as he approached them. His good mood dropped considerably and his face fell when he caught wind of Ann and Ryuji. “You really came,” he told them flatly.

“Kitagawa-kun,” Ann said with a kind smile. “Thanks for the tickets.”

“Yes, well,” Yusuke frowned. “Try not to cause any trouble,” he told her, and her face fell at his shortness with her. Ryuji snickered at her, and she glared at him in response. Yusuke turned to both Akira and Akechi. “Please, let me show you around.”

“That would be great, thank you,” Akechi told him.

Akira turned to the others, signaling with his eyes that it was their time to shine and do some reconnaissance, before trailing after Akechi and Yusuke.

As they walked, Akechi and Yusuke talked about art in various forms. Akira wasn’t sure how much Akechi really cared for art or if he’d just studied various forms of art so that he could appear as such, but Yusuke didn’t seem to mind either way. He seemed happy enough that someone could keep up with his level of artistic knowledge. Akira smiled slightly watching the two of them. They chatted like that, with Akira briefly interjecting every once in a while, until they came to a stop at the painting that Ann had pointed out last time that actually had been painted by Yusuke.

Akira never got a chance to really look at it last time. Ann was right. Akira could sense Yusuke’s frustration just by looking at it.

“This exhibit is quite expansive. There are so many different styles of art,” Akechi noted with a smile.

“Yes,” Yusuke nodded. “Usually artists focus on one style, but Sensei creates all this by himself.”

Akechi stiffened slightly at the words. “Hm. You don’t say?”

“There you are, Yusuke,” Madarame said as he walked up to them with a pleasant expression on his face. “Ah. The two from yesterday. Are you enjoying the exhibit?”

“It is quite interesting,” Akechi said brightly. “It’s almost hard to put into words.”

“Ah. You’re sensing something from the artwork. That alone is enough to give us artists satisfaction,” Madarame said easily.

Akira couldn’t help himself. “It’s almost like someone else created these with how different each painting is,” he said boldly, twirling the front edges of his hair.

Madarame turned to him, unfazed, and Akira stared back at him. “I’ll take that as a compliment,” he said. “I do pride myself in my diverse styles.” He then turned to Yusuke. “I hope this becomes a wonderful piece, Yusuke. I can tell you have some quite expressive muses with you.”

Yusuke nodded in thanks, and Madarame walked away.

“Well, shall we continue the tour?” Yusuke said.

Akira turned towards Yusuke’s painting, his hands in his pockets. “This one is really good,” he noted kindly.
“This one?” Yusuke repeated.

“I must agree,” Akechi said. “One can really sense the anger that must’ve went into a piece like this. He must’ve truly felt a sense of catharsis at the—” Akechi paused abruptly when he saw the look on Yusuke’s face. He glanced back at the painting, then at Yusuke. “—at the work. It’s a phenomenal painting,” he said. “You should tell… the artist that.”

Yusuke managed a smile. “Yes, I will relay the words to Sensei,” he said, and Akechi nodded with what looked like an empathetic expression. “But there are far better pieces than…this one. Come now.”

Meanwhile, Akira stared at Akechi curiously. Did he…know? Akechi caught his eye and smiled kindly at him. If so, he was even more perceptive than he’d originally thought. And he already envisioned him as exceptionally perceptive to begin with, so he’d have to be even more careful going forward.

“And as Sensei said, this will be a wonderful piece that I create. Thank you for agreeing to do this,” Yusuke said, his voice showing just how much gratitude he was trying to express.

“We’ll be excellent models,” Akira said.

“Ah. So you really intend to paint us…” Akechi said unable to keep his usual charisma up. “Yes, we’ll do our best.”

“Do you need us to strip too?” Akira said plainly.

Whatever Akechi planned to say got caught in his throat.

Yusuke brightened instantly. “That could be an excellent idea! A nude painting worthy of competition against the Michelangelo!” He smiled thoughtfully.

“Hold on,” Akechi said. “That’s a little hasty, don’t you think?” He said with a light but also clearly nervous laugh.

“Don’t be nervous. I’m sure you look great naked,” Akira teased.

“Th-That’s beside the point—”

“Ah. So you do think you look good naked.”

“That’s not what I—” Akechi took a breath, regaining his composure once more. The detective plastered a charismatic smile on his face. “I think this conversation seems to have derailed from its original intent,” he said, turning to Yusuke. “We will let the art create itself.”

Yusuke nodded pleasantly. “Yes. I am merely the vessel through which the art will flow through.”

They spent the rest of the exhibit walking around. After some time, Ryuji and Ann texted for him to meet them at their hideout, but he’d wanted to talk with Akechi a bit more, so he told them that he couldn’t leave just yet. Their discussion was exactly what he thought it would’ve been anyway. They messaged him about the post regarding Madarame’s plagiarism. Akira responded that he would let Morgana know and that they could get some information tomorrow.

When the two of them finally left the exhibit, they walked together casually. Eventually, Akira fell into step beside Akechi, who was leading the way to some unknown destination that was in the opposite direction to Leblanc. It was most likely to his apartment, and Akira didn’t bother to correct
“That was quite a statement you made to Yusuke,” Akechi noted. “About posing nude. It certainly caught me off-guard again.”

“Was I being obnoxious?” Akira asked.

“A little,” Akechi said before smiling. “But I didn’t mind. It was nice to be able to attend. It’s a shame that your friends had to leave early.”

“I’ll catch up with them after. I’m glad you enjoyed yourself.”

“I…did,” Akechi smiled. “Very much so.”

Akira rotated his shoulder, feeling oddly empty without Morgana and his bag slung over it. “You were nice about Yusuke’s painting,” he said carefully.

“Hm?”

“You could tell too, couldn’t you? That Yusuke painted that one piece.”

Akechi was silent for a noticeably long time. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

Akira stopped him. “The rumors I mentioned before… They were about him plagiarizing his students’ work.”

“…You certainly know about a lot of rumors.”

“You’ve heard them too.” Akira flicked his eyes to him as they continued to walk. “Haven’t you.” He didn’t pose it as a question.

Akechi looked at the streets ahead of him. “You’re observant,” he said. “Even if that were the case, he’s just one of many. There are millions of Madarames in the world. People do what they can to survive in an eat or be eaten world.” He didn’t even sound bitter about it, just resigned.

Certainly he knew there was some dishonesty to Akechi’s public statements about justice considering he’d forsaken said justice to kill him, but he hadn’t imagined him to sound this…jaded.

“So many people in the world are suffering because they can’t fight back due to the society we live in. The people who have the ability to do something about it should.”

“The controversy lies in the ‘something.’ Unfortunately, justice is not objective. Right and wrong are dictated by the rules of society. If Madarame were in fact plagiarizing the work of his pupils, in our eyes, it is wrong. And yet it persists, to the benefit of himself and others. In their eyes, it is both right and necessary to survive. Whose eyesight is clearer?” Akechi said curiously.

“People are benefitting from the pain of others. That alone makes it objectively wrong.”

Akechi smiled faintly. “You’re a noble person.”

“You don’t think the same?”

Akechi’s eyes fluttered, not quite blinking, before turning to Akira. “Of course I do. I’m a detective. It’s my duty to uphold such an ideal.”
“You don’t have to act like that in front of me,” Akira told him. “You can be yourself.”

“No. I can’t,” Akechi said. Then he smiled again. “But thank you for saying that.” He laughed softly. “Goodness, though. I don’t usually speak out of turn like that. I don’t know what others would think of me if they heard me say such things. If you don’t mind, could we keep this conversation between us?”

Akira pretended to zip up his lips, and Akechi chuckled. “You know, we should go to the arcade,” Akira suggested.

“Right now? That’s quite a random request.”

“Not now.” Akira glanced at him. “When I start to get into my head too much, I play video games.”

“I’ve…never played.”

“Tomorrow then?” Akira said, even though he knew that that wouldn’t happen. “I did beat you at skipping rocks, so I understand if you’re scared to go against me again,” he added cheekily.

“I had a phone call. That hardly counts as a disqualifier,” Akechi said in the same playful tone. “I told you I hadn’t given up yet,” he noted. “It was simply a…pause in the game.”

“I knew it. You are competitive.” Akira smiled, nudging him in the shoulder playfully as they kept walking.

When Akechi finally slowed to a stop in front of a small building Akira correctly assumed that it was the brunette’s apartment complex. “I hadn’t even realized we’d walked the whole way here,” Akechi said, surprised. He frowned slightly. “I’m usually fairly observant.”

Akira shrugged. “It happens.”

Akechi shook his head. “I apologize. This direction to Leblanc is quite the distance from here.”

“I’ll be fine,” Akira said, then glanced around him. Truth be told, he didn’t quite know where he was.

Akechi seemed to notice. “I can walk you back.”

“Don’t be silly,” Akira said. He held up his phone. “I have a GPS.”

Akechi relented, but still had a look of concern on his face. It was odd, to see that much concern on the face of his murderer. “Alright. Wait, what’s—” Akechi craned his head slightly at the phone, and Akira realized he’d unlocked it and his home screen was in full view. He dropped his arm down quickly even as Akechi followed it with his eyes before he could pick out the Nav app.

“So I’ll be fine,” Akira said as a means of distraction.

He wasn’t sure if it worked or not, but Akechi nodded after another moment of pause. “At least let me know when you’ve arrived home safely. If you get lost, please feel free to call me.” It was dizzying to Akira that Akechi was saying these things to him. Would this Akechi hesitate before pulling the trigger? If only for a second? “You seem… are you alright?” Akechi said after Akira presumably hadn’t spoken or moved for a while.

“You’re different than I expected,” Akira admitted.
“What do you mean?”

“How? Akira exhaled, because he couldn’t exactly tell him that he’d never really known him in the other timeline and that’s what he meant. “You’re wrong, you know.”

“About what?”

“Not letting my past control me.” He said as the center of his forehead began to throb incessantly. “It is. It’s tiring.” But the others were counting on him, and he knew what fate would be waiting for them if he didn’t succeed this time. So he couldn’t afford to be tired. Still, it felt nice to say it out loud. It was a new experience, though. Akira was used to other people being the ones to confide their problems to him, so he certainly hadn’t been anticipating the words to spill out of him.

Akechi stared at him, looking both pained and grateful that Akira had shared that with him. “…I know how you feel. It’s hard,” Akechi said. Akira nodded wordlessly. “Thank you,” the brunette said after a few seconds of silence passed. “For being open with me as well.”

He got an odd look for a second—a strange faraway look in his eyes, and Akira tilted his head. Akechi blinked suddenly, refocusing his eyes on Akira. “My apologies. I just felt something strange for a second,” He smiled. “As I was saying, thank you for trusting me with that. Get home safe.”

Akira nodded. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Tomorrow. Tomorrow was an important day. He couldn’t mess this up.

***

“So, uh, this Madarame’s place, huh?” Ryuji said unsurely.

Akira nodded towards the unfavorable shack, his hands in his pockets. “Hehe. No one sneeze or it might blow it all down,” Morgana snickered from behind his shoulder.

“Akira should be the one to talk to him, right? I mean, there’s no way Yusuke’s going to speak to us,” Ann lamented.

Akira nodded. “I’ll do it. I’m his muse.”

“Dude, are you ever going to let that go?” Ryuji groaned.

Akira hardly covered his laugh before walking up to the front door and knocking on it a few times. Morgana stirred beside him. After a few moments, Yusuke opened the door with a look of surprise. “Akira—” He stopped, frowning when he saw Ann and Ryuji behind him. “You two are here as well?”

Ann tried her best to wave kindly. “Yusuke, it’s nice to see you again.”

“Hm.” Yusuke continued to frown at them.

“Hey,” Ryuji said casually. “Sorry, we ain’t here to talk about the modeling thing. Is it true Madarame’s plagiarizing his pupils’ work? He’s abusing them too, yeah”’

“Ryuji!” Ann said. “We agreed that Akira would be the one to talk to him!”

“I couldn’t wait,” Ryuji shrugged. “Whatever. We read about it online.”
Yusuke’s eyes narrowed considerably. “Are you serious? That’s preposterous. Not only is the plagiarism impossible, but abuse? He would never allow children into his home if he hated them.”

“He would if he was using them,” Akira said. It was hard enough to have to see Yusuke going through this a second time. Yusuke flashed over to Akira, who simply looked back at him with an empathetic expression. “If it’s not true, then we’ll let it go.”

“Yeah! What he said,” Ryuji quickly agreed.

“That’s…” Yusuke averted his gaze for a moment. “That’s complete rubbish. I had no family when Sensei took me in and raised me to what you see now. I’m telling you it’s not true.” Yusuke brightened. “I know! I think you’ll be able to believe in Sensei if you saw that painting.”

Akira stirred. Where was Madarame? Through the open door, Akira attempted to look inside without appearing too obvious, to no avail. Madarame was nowhere in sight.

“What’re you looking at?” Morgana whispered next to him.

Akira shook his head, turning his attention back to Yusuke, who was showing them the painting of the Sayuri.

“…that inspired me to become an artist,” Yusuke finished telling them.


Ryuji nodded. “I don’t know much about art, but it’s impressive.”

“When I saw you both, I felt the same powerful emotion as when I saw this painting,” Yusuke said, turning to Akira with an intense yet serene expression on his face.

Akira tilted his head to the side. “What did you mean by that?” he asked, genuinely curious.

Yusuke rested a hand on his chin. “It’s hard to put into words. It felt as though I could capture two interconnecting fates. The beauty of two linked by an inexplicable connection. I wish to capture and pursue beauty like that.”

“You’re makin’ it sound like they’re soulmates or somethin’,” Ryuji said.

"Wouldn't that be something?" Ann giggled.

_Soulmates with his murderer; wouldn't that be something, indeed, _ Akira thought humorlessly. “I hope not,” Akira quipped.

“I do not believe in soulmates,” Yusuke said with a pleased expression. “However, I do believe drawing you both will be part of that pursuit. I’m sorry you took the time to come all this way, but I must assist sensei today. Perhaps another day you and he can stop by.”

Yusuke shut the door at the exact moment that Akira realized that Madarame hadn’t stepped foot outside at all.

Akira racked his brain, trying to remember what he’d missed for that to have happened. It’d been so long ago, and there was no way he could’ve remembered all of the conversations they’d ever have as a group.

“What do we do now?” Ann said unsurely. “I mean, maybe this isn’t what we think.”
Akira’s phone buzzed in his pocket as he was in thought, and he pulled it out.

Goro Akechi
I’m almost there. This is an odd meeting place.

“Hey, you good?” Ryuji asked, and Morgana had to nudge Akira to get his attention.

Akira looked up distractedly. There were too many things running through his mind at once. He ignored his headache and hit the Nav app. “He has a palace,” he said, hoping to speed their conversation up.

“He’s right,” Morgana said. “We know he’s a hit for a palace. We just need to figure out the keywords.”

They struggled for a bit trying to figure out what the last word could possibly be as Akira kept an eye out for Akechi.

People go what they can to survive in an eat or be eaten world.

“Who said that?” Morgana asked, suddenly appearing in front of Akira’s face as he looked at the words written in the tiny notebook Sojiro had given him.

“Akechi.” Akira shifted slightly from where he was laying on the bed so that Morgana could see the words better. “I’m writing updates. Noting any changes in the timeline.” He twisted himself over the bed, placing the notebook back down into his bag, then moved and sat upright against the edge of the bed.

He’d considered hiding it somewhere, but it looked like a notebook to anyone else, so there didn’t seem to be much point. “The question is: What exactly is he doing to survive?” Akira mused out loud.

“You should get some rest. It’s been a long day,” Morgana said.

“Yeah,” Akira nodded. Instead of laying back down, though, Akira placed his hand up against his forehead. “How did he know about Madarame’s plagiarism? I wonder…” Akira closed his eyes. “I wonder if Akechi’s boss is affiliated with him.”

“Another artist?” Morgana asked.

“No. That’d be competition. He’d probably want to get rid of him then. Someone else who would profit from Madarame’s fame…” Akira’s head started to hurt. What had he said last time? Art is a business transaction? “A businessman?” he wondered aloud. “It’s no use speculating,” he concluded after another moment. Then he glanced over at Morgana. “I thought time travel was supposed to be fun,” he said with a wry smile.

“Yet you’re spending most of it trying not to get yourself killed,” Morgana said warily. “Some second chance this is.”

“Tomorrow might change everything,” Akira told the cat. “If Akechi ever finds out about this or suspects I knew all along, I don’t know what he’ll do. We have to tread carefully.” He pressed his fingers to his temple. “It’s fine if I die, but if something happens to you or the others--”

“Whoa, die?!?” Morgana’s shrill reaction made Akira looked up. “You’re not allowed to die,
okay?! Once is enough.”

“But if I do,” Akira said. He gestured to his bag. “That notebook has everything important noted down in it. You’ll have to take over.”

“You want me to be the leader?” Morgana said incredulously.

Akira nodded. “I trust you,” he said.

“Well, it won’t happen ‘cause you’re not gonna die, but I’m honored,” the cat beamed. “I knew my judgment was right about you.”

Akira smiled, pulling out his phone mindlessly and re-reading the conversation he’d had with Akechi a couple of hours ago when he returned home.

**Akira Kurusu 17:34**
I’m home.

**Goro Akechi 17:41**
Good. Thank you for telling me. I considered sending you additional directions, but I see it wasn’t necessary.

**Goro Akechi 17:41**
Thank you again for inviting me today.

**Akira Kurusu 17:42**
Thank Yusuke.

**Goro Akechi 17:43**
I will when I see him. It was greatly enjoyable. I hope we can do it again sometime.

**Akira Kurusu 17:44**
Buy a man dinner first.

**Goro Akechi 17:57**
I chuckled. Your responses still never cease to surprise me. Although there is a new restaurant opening up next week if you’re interested.

And Akira had smiled to himself because writing out that he’d ‘chuckled’ seemed like something Goro would do, but it amused him regardless.

**Akira Kurusu 17:59**
Sure. Arcade tomorrow though?

**Goro Akechi 18:00**
Alright. I’ve never been. Is there anything I should know?

**Akira Kurusu 18:01**
It’s not an argyle event.

**Goro Akechi 18:08**
Funny. What time?

“You guys seem to have gotten awfully chummy,” Morgana said, once again popping up in front of
Akira and staring at his phone.

Akira’s stomach turned with that remorse again, and he tried his best to ignore it. “He has to trust me,” he replied.

Morgana looked at him unsurely. “Do you trust him?”

Akira knew what Morgana was asking. He thought back to the concerned look on Akechi’s face when he told him he’d be walking back from a place that he wasn’t sure of. He thought of their conversation, one that he’d never really had with anyone before, but found he liked it.

He didn’t want to admit to, well, anyone, just how many sleepless nights he’d had because of the memory of his death. The nights he’d close his eyes with a nightmare that this was all really a dream, and he was, in fact, dead. A few nights he’d even woken up in a cold sweat at the thought of Akechi and his boss going after his teammates one-by-one after the brunette had shot him, but thankfully, Morgana hadn’t stirred from his sleep even as Akira jolted awake. He had to be strong for them. That’s just what leaders did. They were selectively vulnerable. Akira had to do the same.

So it was nice to be able to tell someone just how tiring it was, even if the person he’d said it to was the person who’d caused it. And Akechi had seemed entirely genuine when he’d responded. Maybe Akechi was tired too. Maybe everyone’s tired, in a way.

It left Akira wondering what else he’d had to say. In all honesty, he would’ve been content to keep talking with him more until he figured out those secrets. Then again, it might take someone an entire lifetime to figure out what exactly was behind that charismatic smile. A lifetime of figuring out Goro Akechi’s secrets.

But time was one thing that Akira didn’t have when it came to Akechi. He glanced at Morgana's studious gaze and thought of his own life being cut short by his comrade’s hand. Yes, he knew exactly what Morgana wanted to know.

“Don’t worry. I won’t forget what I’ve been given this second chance for,” Akira assured him.

"Good,” Morgana said. “I’ll be here to keep you on track,” the cat added confidently.

~

“This is taking forever,” Ryuji said. “How the heck are we supposed to figure out the last word?”

Akechi came into view out of the corner of Akira’s eye, and after a few more seconds of incorrect guesses and complaining, once Akechi got closer, Akira brought his phone’s mic up close to him.

“Madarame, plagiarism, shack, museum,” he said in a comically quick fashion.

The others just gaped at him as the app registered the hit. Akira turned to them. “Lucky guess,” he offered as the app had already started to transport them into Madarame’s cognitive world. Akira hoped that the brunette had gotten close enough to be taken in with it.

The familiar sight of Madarame’s palace was welcome considering all the changes he’d recently had to wrap his mind around.

Before Akira could even turn around, Ann’s voice confirmed exactly what he’d been hoping would happen.
“A-Akechi-kun?”

Chapter End Notes

“i hope not” hehe silly akira the red string is already too strong

who else is ready for goro to have confidant links with the others bc I AM READY TO WRITE IT

sorry I really sped through that last section but i was ready for the chapter to end lol and anything else would’ve just been unnecessary detail just to fluff it out.

THANK YOU all again for reading. I will hopefully have the next chapter up (or two) next week :)

SERIOUSLY YOU GUYS ARE GIVING ME SO MUCH LIFE WITH YOUR COMMENTS. Thank you guys so much for all the support, all the comments, kudos, bookmarks, and views :)

This has been tough to write at times but I'm really enjoying it and it makes me really happy that you all are enjoying it too :)

I've got two chapters for all you lovely people :)

Quick note: I did make some changes to Madarame's Palace, mainly in terms of how he views threats, it's not really in line with how threats work haha but luckily fanfiction allows me to take creative liberties haha pls forgive me

Everything had worked out like Akira had planned. Akechi was in Madarame’s palace. Everything had worked out, except for one key thing.

When he turned around, Akechi was staring at them with a clearly shocked expression; one that perfectly mirrored the confusion on Ann and Ryuji’s faces.

He could see their faces perfectly. He glanced down at his school uniform. They weren’t seen as threats yet. Why is that?


“What…” He blinked, his gaze turning to Akira. “What is this?”

“D-Don't panic,” Ann started. “This is…well…”

“He got pulled in too?” Ryuji said, also turning to the leader. “I didn’t even see him nearby.”

“P-Pulled in?” Akechi said slowly, still struggling to find his voice. “Where are we?”

“This must be Madarame’s Palace,” Akira said, mostly to the others. Then he looked at Akechi. “It may be hard to believe, but we’re inside Madarame’s heart. His cognitive world.”

“Palace…Cognitive world?” Akechi repeated disbelievingly, although Akira suspected it had less to do with the concepts themselves and more to do with the fact that they were in the cognitive world with him.

“Wait a minute, how come our clothes didn’t change?” Ryuji asked.

“We must not be seen as threats,” Morgana piped up. Akira hadn’t planned for that. It must’ve meant that Madarame coming to the door last the time was the trigger for him. Even so, Akira had even taken the extra step to make a comment about the different styles at the show. Had that still not been enough? There was no way that Akechi didn’t have a persona yet, so he’d been anticipating Akechi in his Crow attire having to explain why his clothes changed as well. “If we’re
not seen as enemies, our clothes don’t change.”

He’d messed up.

Akechi, on the other hand, pointed at Morgana with his mouth slightly open. “That cat thing just talked… Wait…”

“That is a he. I am Morgana,” he said, clearly filled with disdain after all Akira had told him.

“Morgana…the cat…” Akechi said, eyes flickering to Akira. “Of course,” he added warily. “This…is the cat you continue to bring with you.”

“This is probably a lot to wrap your head around,” Akira said evenly.

Akechi pressed his fingers to his forehead as though he’d had a headache. Although, from the unfocused stare he’d almost entirely concealed (one that Akira wouldn’t have noticed if he hadn’t been closely observing Akechi for any changes), it looked almost like he was--

No. That’s impossible. You’re reading too much into things.

“Should we not explore the Palace today?” Ann wondered. “He looks a little sick. Are you okay, Akechi-kun?”

It would’ve been ideal to head into the Palace to begin with so that he could get his clothes to change, but as a leader, there was no way Akira could explain away having someone like Akechi – who supposedly had no knowledge of the cognitive world and no ties to Madarame like when Yusuke had come in -- actually come along with them to explore.

“This can’t be…” Akechi said slowly. He shut his eyes briefly, exhaling before opening them again. He let out a humorless laugh. “You’re telling me that we’re inside of a person’s heart?” Akechi said, and if Akira didn’t know any different, he would’ve been inclined to believe his shocked words.

“I know it’s hard to believe,” Ann said. “But yes.”

“Are you alright?” Akira asked him.

Akechi turned to him, and his mouth twitched slightly before turning into a tight smile. “Forgive me, but this is all just a little bit farfetched to believe.”

“You’re awfully calm about it,” Morgana said accusatorily.

“Shock processes in different ways,” Akechi said, adding a shaky tone to his voice in an almost dramatic fashion.

“Well, there’s no way we can explore now with him here with us,” Ryuji complained.

Akechi opened his mouth like he’d been about to protest leaving so early, but Akira could practically see the gears turn in his head and come to the same conclusion that Akira had about bringing him along.

“I think that’s smart,” Akira said. “Let’s go back.”

***

When they returned to the real world, unsurprisingly, Akechi asked them questions about what
exactly had just happened. Akira had stayed mostly quiet, only interjecting here and there, since he still had some trouble with pinpointing just how much he was supposed to know at this stage. The cognitive world, stealing treasures and distorted desires, awakening to a persona (of which Akechi seemed more surprised to learn that the others had knowledge of than the other bits of information).

Akechi himself hadn’t said much either. He’d simply soaked in all of the information in an unsettlingly quiet way that made Akira wonder what exactly he was planning to do next. In Akira’s mind, at this point, Akechi was going to ask to join them, but since they had no knowledge of Akechi being a persona-user as well, Akira felt more shaken than anything else.

Nothing was stopping Akechi from even taking them down the normal way. They hadn’t gotten big enough to attract worldwide attention. Akechi could call the police and notify them immediately and he would be carted away yet again.

If he’d failed again, and put the others in danger…

“You okay man?” Ryuji’s voice broke through his thoughts as they sat in Big Bang Burger. He took a bite of his food. He’d invited Ryuji to get something to eat after they’d decided to split for the day.

Akira nodded. “Just thinking about Akechi.”

“Aw man, why’d Ann have to go and tell him all that stuff about what we’re doin’?” Ryuji said, already getting heated.

“Pipe down!” Morgana hissed from next to Akira.

“You’re one to talk. No pets allowed. Stop talking,” Ryuji shot back. He turned back to Akira. “I mean, what if he blabs to the cops or something?”

“I don’t think he’d do that,” Akira said, even though he absolutely was not sure if he would at this point. There were too many unknowns for the leader to feel comfortable with anything right now.

“Are you sure?” Morgana asked curiously, reading the expression on his face.

Akira managed a smile. “Can’t get one past you. I’m a little concerned,” he admitted, but then quickly added, “but I don’t think it will be an issue.” Akira picked at his burger. “What if he asks to join us?” He asked, mostly towards Ryuji since Morgana already knew the plan.

“I hope not,” Ryuji groans. “People like him can’t be trusted,” he said.

That was surprisingly accurate in this context, Akira thought. “Why do you say that?”


“That was helpful,” Akira managed to tease.

Ryuji kind of laughed. “I’m just saying.” He takes a bite of his food, barely swallowing it all before continuing his line of thought. “But if you want him on, I trust you, man. You’re the leader.”

“Right…” Akira said contemplatively.

Ryuji paused as he looked at his friend. “You’ve been looking tired lately. We should start training
again. Get back to running. We haven’t hung out in a while,” he added, picking up his drink and
taking a sip. He peered over at Akira’s tray, stealing two fries and popping them into his mouth.

“We should,” Akira said apologetically. In between spending time with Akechi, talking things out
with Morgana, and taking part in Takemi’s experiments, he’d been lacking in the time spent with
his best friend. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it man. As long as you’re okay.” Ryuji waved it off like it was nothing, which
made Akira smile. He was lucky to have someone as loyal as him for a friend.

As if on cue, Akira’s phone buzzed from beside him. He reached into his pocket, staring at the
screen as Akechi’s name popped up.

Goro Akechi 19:08
I hope I’m not interrupting. If it’s not too much trouble, could we speak tonight?

Being at the Palace, even for that short amount of time, had drained him, but Akira shook it off and
began typing his response.

Akira Kurusu 19:09
Sure. Where?

Goro Akechi 19:09
Could we go back to that Palace? I’d like to speak to you alone.

Akira paused as Morgana maneuvered his way over to look at the screen. He glanced up unsurely.
“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he offered.

“What?” Ryuji said, trying unsuccessfully to look at the screen.

“Akechi wants to talk to me,” Akira said vaguely.

“In the Palace,” Morgana finished. “ Alone.”

“What?” Ryuji said. “Why the hell’s he wanna do that?”

Akira shrugged, wondering if maybe Akechi was just going to kill him as soon as he entered the
Palace. No, he wouldn’t do something that reckless, would he? He’d probably consider that Akira
would tell someone that he was going into the Palace, and so if something were to happen to him, it
would be clear who had done it.

Then again, would they even be able to find a body if someone died in the cognitive world? Akira
had no way of knowing that. Perhaps it would be the perfect crime. Even if his teammates knew, it
wasn’t like they could prove it.

Goro Akechi 19:12
If you aren’t comfortable with that, I understand.

Akira Kurusu 19:13
It’s fine. I’ll meet you outside of Madarame’s shack, and we’ll go from there.

“I’m going to meet him,” Akira told them.

“What?” Morgana practically screeched, and a few people glanced over to find the source of the
loud cat that they’d presumably just heard.
“Shh!” Ryuji said.

Morgana ignored him. “I expect something stupid like this from Ryuji, but you? You can’t go in there alone with him!”

“Why not? It’s weird,” Ryuji said. “But it’s not like he’s got a persona or anything. Maybe he just wants to see if we’re really making it up or not.”

“You’re such an idiot,” Morgana said dismissively.

“What was that?”

“It will be fine,” Akira said with as much bravado as possible. “I can handle Akechi.”

Morgana hummed. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Akira said, and if the others noticed how uncertain it was, they didn’t comment.

***

Akechi greeted him with a smile when Akira arrived. The breeze blew through when Akira approached, and with moonlight, Akira was reminded of the ethereal way that the brunette had looked all those days ago at the ramen shop.

“You came.”

“You asked.”

And Akechi regarded him curiously before gesturing to him. “After you, then.”

Akira brought his phone up, speaking the keywords and watching just how calmly Akechi stood there as they were transported into Madarame’s cognitive world.

He’d never traveled to a Palace at night before. It wasn’t really much different since it was an entirely different world to begin with, but it seemed colder somehow without the others. They were still in their regular clothes, which wasn’t anything of a surprise considering they hadn’t even seen Madarame between now and then.

He looked at Akechi, whose hands were in his pockets as he looked up at the world around him. “His cognitive world.”

“It’s hard to wrap your brain around the first time,” Akira said cautiously.

“Is it?” Akechi said slowly.

“You tell me.”

Akechi turned to him this time, then shook his head with a humorless laugh. “You know, I spent a lot of time thinking after we all separated. You invited me. You told me to meet you there, and then suddenly we were in this world. Curious, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t know we were going into that world that day. It was spur of the moment,” Akira lied. He sort of hated that he was lying to him, but it was necessary.

Akechi studied his face for what seemed like hours. “You weren’t lying about before, then. You… changed his heart? Kamoshida,” Akechi said. Akira nodded.
“Will you turn us in?”

He turned his back to him again, staring at the museum. “I should.” Akira saw Akechi wrap his hand around something in his coat pocket, and he stiffened involuntarily as he pictured Akechi pulling out a pistol. Finally, he pulled out his phone as Akira let his shoulders un-tense. He unlocked it, then showed Akira the screen.

The Nav app was in full view.

“This popped up on my phone.”

“That happens,” Akira said. “It happened to me and others too.”

“Not today. A while ago.”

Akira frowned. What was he doing?

He placed the phone back into his pocket and resumed his off-into-the-distance stare. “It showed up one day, and I ended up traveling into the Metaverse. I nearly got killed, and I started thinking that I couldn’t die there, and that’s when it happened. I have one too. A persona.”

Akira had to stop himself from saying “Robin Hood” in response. Akechi seemed to be gauging Akira’s reaction, so the latter nodded. It was odd. This was incredibly close to the story that Akechi had told them back when he’d joined the last time.

Akira wondered if that really had been how he really awakened to his persona, just in a different context. If so, Akira wondered what Palace had been the one he’d went into the first time and what near-death situation happened that awakened the persona.

“It was a bit hard for me to wrap my mind around, so I never returned, but I couldn’t get rid of the app. So I simply ignored it,” Akechi said. Akira knew that had to be a lie, but he’d made it sound almost believable. “There’s research on cognitive psience, and this entire aspect of entering someone’s heart. I’ve read a lot since then.”

“Cognitive psience?” Akira feigned surprise. “There’s research on it?”

“Akira,” Akechi said clearly. He looked him straight in the eyes this time. “Did you know?”

“How could I possibly have known?” Akira deflected, keeping his voice calm yet inquisitive.

Akechi smiled humorlessly. “Answering a question with a question. That’s so very you,” he said, unable to keep the sad infliction from his tone. “Do you expect me to believe that you honestly had no clue?” He asked. His tone was just as non-accusatory as Akira’s had been. He simply sounded curious. Nothing more, nothing less. That’s what it sounded like, at least. Akira figured there was more going on underneath that surface.

“I don’t expect you to believe anything. You can come to your own conclusions,” Akira told him softly. “But if you have a persona…we could use the help.”

“Help to do what, exactly?”

“Change the hearts of criminals,” Akira told him.

“You’re going to go into the cognitive world to change the hearts of criminals?” Akechi asked. “Why?”
“Because…” Akira said, hesitating slightly at his answer. “We want to give people hope.”

“But why?” Akechi persisted. “You want to force people to confess their crimes. There is a justice system in place for a reason.”

“It’s not easy to take down people who are above the law,” Akira said. “Let’s face it, this world is corrupt. We should do what we can to make it right. By making them have a change of heart and confess to their crimes themselves, we can do that.”

“If you’re forcing them to have a change of heart, is their confession truly one made by them?” Akechi wondered. “If they have no knowledge of coming to the decision themselves, is that just?”

Akira had spent a lot of time thinking about the moral repercussions of their actions, but it wasn’t enough to stop him. “You’re saying we should do nothing?”

Akechi frowned. “You can’t possibly take down every criminal in the world. Criminals will continue to exist no matter what.” Akechi shook his head disbelievingly. “What’s your plan?”

“We’re not a forward-thinking group,” Akira said in an attempt to lighten up the situation. It didn’t work very well, because Akechi simply stared at him with an expression that looked almost wistful.

“Akira, you should stop this,” he added with a hint of something pleading.

“Join us,” Akira said instead. “You don’t have to decide now, but…I’d like for you to fight with us. Will you think about it?”

Akechi stayed silent. He dug his hands deep into his pockets and turned to the sky. Akira moved so that he was standing beside him, soaking in the same view of the cognitive world before them. When he glanced over at Akechi, he saw the brunette with a placid expression on his face, so it was hard to tell what he was really thinking.

A part of Akira almost wished that he’d delayed bringing him into the palace just a little bit longer, for entirely selfish reasons. As much as he didn’t want to think about it, he’d enjoyed getting to know this version of Akechi before being suspicious of his involvement with the Phantom Thieves.

“I don’t agree with what you’re doing,” Akechi started. “But I am curious.”

“So what you’re saying is…” Akira said, the smallest hint of teasing evident in his voice.

Akechi involuntarily smiled, though it was a minute one, before quickly replacing it with an even expression. “Yes.”

“I’m glad,” Akira told him. He extended his hand to Akechi. “Welcome to the team.”

Akechi stared at his outstretched hand as a mix of different expressions flittered through his face at once. Finally, he managed a charismatic grin full of bravado. “I won’t let you down,” he said, placing his hand in his. Akira imagined that a million stars were probably born and died in the space between their palms at that moment.

Akira nodded, and as he opened his mouth to respond, his head started to throb much harder than before. The sheer shock of pain that shot through him caught him off guard, and he let go of Akechi’s hand and grabbed the side of his head with a groan. It felt like someone was drilling directly into the center of his forehead. It felt like—
--like he’d been shot in the head and survived.

If Akechi still had any ill-mannered expression left in him towards Akira, it vanished in that moment, replaced by concern as clear as the Hawaiian waters he’d seen before as he tentatively reached over to put a steadying hand on his shoulder.

“A-Are you alright?” He asked.

“I’m—uggh—I’m fine,” he said, balling his hands into fists at his sides even as his head began to feel like it was going to implode.

“Here—lean on me,” Akechi insisted.

Akira went to shake his head when a fresh shot of pain came through him and he reached out for something—anything—to steady himself and found Akechi’s shoulder. He felt like he was going to pass out, and the irrational fear that if he passed out he would wake up in Igor’s prison or whatever else his afterlife was supposed to be flood through him only made him try that much more to stand upright on his own two feet, only to find that he couldn’t.

“I’ll…I’ll be fine,” Akira tried to say.

“Let’s go back first,” Akechi told him, and he sounded like someone who was trying not to show that they were worried. He pulled out his phone, and Akira didn’t bother to bring up how easily he knew how to navigate the app.

Suddenly, the world around him vanished and was replaced by the familiar sounds of crickets chirping and light steps from afar.

He moved to help Akira so that he was sitting on the edge of the sidewalk, and Akechi himself took a seat next to him. He pulled out a handkerchief because of course Akechi had one on him, and he extended it to Akira. “Should we go to the hospital?” Akechi asked.

“I’m okay now,” Akira told him. Even as he said it, he could feel the pain get slightly less debilitating. He took the handkerchief from his hands, noticing the small yellow flower sewn into the corner of it, before dabbing his forehead with it. He hadn’t realized he’d been sweating.

“Do you suffer from migraines?” Akechi said.

“It would seem so,” Akira said. “I’m fine, though,” he reiterated.

Akechi looked him at like he didn’t believe him, but he didn’t push it. “I’ll walk you back this time.”

“That’s okay—”

“I wasn't asking,” Akechi said with a lazy half-smile.

Akira shrugged. “If you want to. Sorry if I worried you.”

Akechi frowned slightly, resting his hand on his chin. His gaze focused on a line of ants crawling visible underneath a street lamp. “It’s a curious thing. Worry makes you think about the things that matter.” He turned his head slightly to Akira, not quite looking at him. “I hope this doesn’t sound too strange with the short amount of time we’ve known each other, but I’m very grateful for our friendship,” he said genuinely.
Akira looked down at the handkerchief, now lined with his sweat. His goal now was supposed to be to find out who Akechi was working for. He turned to Akechi, extending the handkerchief back to him. “Don’t get all sappy on me,” he teased.

The brunette smiled minutely, taking the handkerchief back. “Of course not.”

“Me too, though,” Akira said, almost like an off-hand comment. He pushed himself up off the sidewalk. “By the way, what’s your persona’s name?”

Another pause. “Robin Hood,” Akechi said, standing up as well. “Shall we get going?”

***

Despite Akira telling him it wasn’t necessary, Akechi walked back with him. He’d even accompanied him on his detour to pick up some sushi for Morgana (“I still have a few questions about that cat,” Akechi had said to him; and Akira told him that he probably wouldn’t have any answers).

The roles were reversed this time, and Akira told him to let him know when he arrived safely. The store was closed, so Akira made his way upstairs, handing the sushi over to a very concerned and upset Morgana as a means of apology before explaining everything that had happened.

“See, I told you it wasn’t a good idea!” Morgana said with a mouthful of sushi.

“You shouldn’t talk with your mouth full,” Akira teased as a deflection. He stopped writing in his journal.

Morgana made a face at him that was probably supposed to be mean but only came across as an adorable cat expression with the way his nose scrunched up. “These headaches are bad.”

“It’s because of the timeline, I think,” Akira offered.

“But it’s been getting worse, hasn’t it?”

“I’m fine,” Akira said. “How’s the sushi?”

“It tastes like it’s about to go bad,” Morgana said.

“The store was about to close. It was probably their leftovers.”

“Then why did you get me this one?!” Morgana huffed. “I believe as second-in-command, I should be entitled to such privileges like decent sushi,” the cat added in a mock-haughty tone.

Akira chuckled. “We were in a hurry. I’ll provide you the very best from now on, Your Majesty,” he said faux-dramatically.

“Liar,” Morgana said, though his tone lightened considerably. Still, now that he’s on the team, what do we do?” Morgana asked. “We have to figure out who he’s really working for, right?”

Akira nodded. “Yes. After we finish with Madarame’s Palace, I’ve got a plan. Just need to figure out the details more.” He was about to place his journal in his bag for the night, then paused, moving back to sit on his bed instead. “Morgana?”

“Hm?” The cat asked with another mouthful of food.

“Personas are a manifestation of the inner self, right?”
“Yep. People wear masks to hide their true selves, but by ripping off that mask and facing that true self, they awaken to their persona, which reflects that rebel soul no longer chained to their mask. Why’re you asking? You probably know more than I do - being from the future and all,” Morgana points out.

Akira tapped his pen against the journal. “I never thought about it before, because I never really got a chance to soak in his betrayal, but Akechi’s persona is Robin Hood. Isn’t that kind of strange? Robin Hood.” Akira thought back to the other personas of his teammates and the books he’d read about them. “A hero in his own right.”

“Maybe that’s just his perception of himself,” Morgana offered.

“Is someone’s perception of themselves and their true selves one and the same?” Akira wondered.

“You think he’s lying about his persona?”

Akira scribbled mindlessly into the journal, shaking his head. “No. I’ve seen it. It’s really Robin Hood. I’ll go to the library tomorrow and pick something up on Robin Hood. Maybe I just haven’t read up on him enough.” He sighed, placing his journal down and stretching. “We’ll discuss it after. I don’t want this to distract from the task at hand.”

“Changing Madarame’s heart.”

“And saving Yusuke,” Akira said.

They chatted for a bit longer after that, and once Morgana finally finished his sushi, Akira cleaned up and got ready for bed. He just settled in when his phone buzzed twice in rapid succession.

Goro Akechi 21:23
Honey, I’m home.

Goro Akechi 21:23
That was a joke.

Akira Kurusu 21:25
9/10.

Goro Akechi 21:26
9.5/10.

Akira Kurusu 21:26
9.25/10.

Goro Akechi 21:27
I’ll accept that rating. How are you feeling?

Akira Kurusu 21:29
I’m okay now.

Goro Akechi 21:31
Ginger can also help reduce inflammation of the blood vessels in the head if it returns. But I believe rest will be the best medicine.

Akira Kurusu 21:32
Yes, honey.

**Goro Akechi 21:37**
5/10. Go to sleep.

Akira chuckled to himself, and when he put the phone down, he was met with Morgana’s suspicious eyes. “You’ve been smiling like an idiot staring at your phone,” Morgana pointed out.

“Ouch. An idiot?” Akira said smoothly, placing his phone to his side.

“He shot you,” Morgana said as though that were enough of an explanation. And unfortunately, it was.

Akira frowned. “I know that. It’s not exactly something I can forget.” His face softened, and he patted Morgana’s head. “I know you’re concerned, but you don’t have to be. As long as I have you and the others with me, we’ll be fine. We will win this time. We’ll take them both down.”

Morgana nodded, pleased with this answer as he moved and patted down his spot on Akira’s bed.

And something akin to uncertainty tugged in the back of his mind.

***

Akira was almost grateful to find himself in the Velvet Room, because a part of him was expecting yet another nightmare of the past-future.

“It would appear that your plans are progressing smoothly,” Igor said ominously even before Akira fully got up from his prison bed. “The bonds that you have reeled in are quite…interesting. It seems your heart has inspired theirs.”

Akira nodded slowly. They were mostly the same, except for one. “I have a question though,” Akira said as the Caroline glared at him for his abruptness. Igor simply gestured for him to continue, and Akira was entirely sure that he wouldn’t answer the question. “Why do I keep having these headaches?”

Igor simply chuckled to himself. “It is not easy for one to simply turn back the wheels of time. You have done a feat not accessible to most. It is only natural that there will be some…side effects.”

His hands gripped the bars. “That’s not good enough,” he said.

“Such insolence,” Caroline said. “To think you would have the audacity to speak to our master like this.”

“Such impertinence is truly not good for your rehabilitation,” Justine added quietly.

Akira took a breath, stepping back from the bars. Igor continued to look at him with a smile that confirmed that Igor knew something else about them that he wasn’t letting on. “Okay, I got it,” he said. “All in due time.”

Igor smiled. “Time has already woven a very different web due to your actions. Perhaps the ruin can be avoided after all.”

The ruin. He’d heard that one, two, twenty times. “No pressure,” Akira said, moving to sit back on the bed.

Change Madarame’s heart (and the others), find the name of Akechi’s boss, stop Akechi and his
boss, and stop this supposed ruin. Things were a lot easier when he only had to think of it one at a
time.

He pressed his hand to his forehead. With a long sigh, he closed his eyes, not quite ready to return
to the real world yet. Instead, he let himself be hit with the exhaustion that was always beckoning
just below the surface. It was the only place he could really let himself be tired. Except—

“How not letting my past control me. It is. It’s tiring.”

“...I know you feel. It’s hard.”

--Well, that didn’t count.

Although, it had been nice not to just feel but to speak it.

If he was honest, he could do with a few more moments like that.

***

“What?!” Ryuji sputtered out at their hideout after school.

“You really have one too?” Ann said in hushed tones.

Akechi stood next to Akira with a smile. “I do.”

“And you wanna join us?” Ryuji said in disbelief. “You’re shittin’ me.” He turned to Akira, and
Akira nodded minutely.

“While I’m a little unsure of the ethics behind your methods, I believe I have also been given this
power for a reason,” he said brightly.

“I told him I’d like it if he’d joined us,” Akira told them. “But we’re a team, so I wanted you all’s
approval.”

Ann twirled one of her pigtails around before clapping her hands together with a smile. “I say yes!
You were given this power just like the rest of us, so maybe it was like fate,” she said cheerfully.

“Well, if our leader can vouch for you, then it’s fine with me. Heh, you better not slow us down
dough,” Ryuji said.

“I will not allow that to happen,” Akechi said resolutely.

Akira smiled, then turned to his shoulder to glance over at Morgana with a hopeful expression.

“Morgana?”

Morgana peered over at Akechi, who chuckled lightly. “I must say, it’s still a bit odd of a concept
to wrap my mind around a talking cat.”

“I hope we can trust you,” Morgana said simply.

Akechi blinked, slightly taken aback by Morgana’s brash response, but it was quickly replaced by a
smile. “Of course you can.”

“Hm. I’ll need proof.”
“Such as?”

Morgana tilted his head both sides as though thinking to himself. “Sushi will do. You can always judge a person by the time of sushi they eat.”

Akechi looked at him unsurely. He’d likely been expecting a much more different answer.

“He’s joking,” Akira said.

“I’m not.”

“He is,” Akira said more resolutely.

“Not.”

“Ha ha. Well, joking or not, I’m happy to oblige.”

“Don’t encourage him. How about after we change Madarame’s heart?” Akira said. “We’ll celebrate the new member—” He stopped before he could pluralize the word without thinking. “And the change of heart.”

“Ah. Yes. So we must secure a route to the treasure, correct?” Akechi said with a hand on his chin. “How intriguing.”

“Alright,” Akira said. “Let’s get exploring.” He turned to Akechi with a smile. “I have high expectations.”

Akechi grinned haughtily. “I promise to exceed them.”
It felt odd to be exploring Madarame’s Palace without the proper attire, although it didn’t take long for that to change. Though they were left to enter the museum in their regular clothes, once they’d infiltrated the actual museum, Akira found himself in his Joker’s attire, meaning that when he turned around—

Akechi was there in his Crow attire. All that seemed to be the same, at least.

“This museum,” he said, peering at the paintings. “Such odd paintings. Who are these individuals?”

“Dude. What’s with that outfit?” Ryuji said.

“Hm?” Akechi looked down at his gaudy outfit. “What do you mean?”

“It’s, um, well, interesting,” Ann offered.

“It just means that’s what he thinks a rebel looks like,” Morgana offered, though he looked like he wanted to laugh at it as well.


“It looks like you’re gonna pierce someone’s eye out. Wait. Don’t tell me that’s how you attack?” Ryuji said.

“Ha. Perhaps if it gave me enough range I would consider it,” Akechi said with a charismatic laugh.

“What kinda code name should we give him?” Ann asked. She turned to him to explain. “We’ve all got code names for when we enter a palace. I’m Panther. He’s Joker. Ryuji’s Skull, and Morgana’s Mona.”
“Ah. I see. So some are given based on appearance,” he stroked his chin thoughtfully.

“How about Bird?” Ryuji offered.

Akira barely manage to conceal the snorted laugh that shot out of him as Akechi scoffed in a clearly disapproving way. “P-Perhaps we can re-think that one.”

“Hmm,” Ann said thoughtfully. “How about Pecker?” She said with a hint of teasing.

“Surely you jest,” Akechi said. “Th-That’s not it, is it?”

“So picky,” Morgana pointed out.

“I think you mean so pecky,” Akira punned.

“Well I dunno,” Ryuji finally said when it was clear that it was going nowhere. He turned to Akira. “Any ideas?” Ryuji asked him.

Akira couldn’t help himself. “Igor.”

Akechi got a weird expression on his face as he frowned. “What?”

“What? The hell’s an igor?” Ryuji interrupted before Akechi could say any more.


“Ooh, that’s a good one,” Ann said. “I like it.”


“It’s still a bird…” Ryuji grumbled.

As they began to explore the museum, the sickening sight of all of Madarame’s pupils was still as awful as Akira remembered it. He looked at the sights of all of his pupils – the bright kids full of gratitude and more creativity than Akira could ever hope to have -- that he’d taken in only to rip them of their hopes and aspirations.

Even Akechi seemed to be off-put by the grotesque nature of it all. He seemed especially unsettled when he saw Yusuke’s portrait on the wall. The last of his pupils.

Finally, they made it to The Infinite Spring, of which Ann approached curiously. “What is this?” She said, peering at the plaque. “A conglomerate work for art that the great director Madarame created with his own funds. These individuals must offer their ideas to the director…for the rest of their lives.” She gasped. “Those who cannot do so have no worth living,” she finished, horrified.

“What the hell? This has to be about the plagiarism,” Ryuji said angrily.

“I see,” Morgana said. “Those paintings must be his pupils through his cognition.”

“He sees them as objects,” Akechi added. He turned to the group. “Objects that provide him with money and power,” he said with a somber smile.

“What a piece of shit,” Ryuji said, stomping his foot. “Why the hell’s Yusuke keeping quiet about this? There’s no reason to cover it up!”

“He may have his own reasons,” Akechi said distantly.
“The guy’s stealing his students’ work and doing who knows what else to ‘em!” Ryuji countered. “I’d say this is enough to nail him. What’s the call?” he asked Akira.

Akira nodded, ready to get this started. The past few days had felt like they’d been going on for weeks. “Let’s do it.”

“Wait.” It was Akechi. He scratched his chin lightly. “I think it would be beneficial to confirm these facts with Yusuke beforehand.”

“Why? He could just lie to us,” Ryuji said.

“Still,” Akechi continued. “Acting rashly without all the facts will surely prove to be more dangerous, don’t you think?”

“He’s got a point,” Morgana agreed. “No matter how much we know, we don’t want to get too sloppy.” He turned to Akechi. “Guess you’re pretty smart after all.”

“Ha ha. Thank you for the compliment,” Akechi said with a cheerful smile even as Morgana kept his disapproving look.

“What a pain in the ass,” Ryuji said. “So how’re we supposed to confirm this with him?”

“We could get it out of him when we model for him. He never set a date, so we can schedule it for tomorrow,” Akira said, glancing over at Akechi. “If you’re available.”

Akechi nodded. “Of course. I will help in any way I can.” He paused. “Er, we won’t actually be posing nude, correct? I do have my limits,” he said with a short laugh.

“Make sure your six-pack is toned and ready,” Akira teased, twirling the front of his hair. He turned to the others. “Do you two want to come?”

“Do we have to?” Ryuji groaned.

“Goro and I should be able to handle it, but you’re welcome to come along anyway.”

“We probably should,” Ann said. She placed a hand on her hip lazily. “But he might be more inclined to talk if it’s just the two of them.”

“Alright.” He turned to Morgana. “I’d like you to come with us, though.”

“Well, duh,” Morgana said as Akira smiled.

“It’s decided then,” Akechi said. “The three of us will go tomorrow.”

When they returned from Madarame’s Palace, he said goodbye to Ann and Ryuji and didn’t really mind when Akechi fell into step beside him instead of going in the opposite direction.

“That was certainly an adventure,” Akechi said. “So that’s what someone’s cognitive world looks like.”

*Laying it on thick.* Akira nodded. “It’s only our second one,” he noted, turning over his shoulder. “Make sure you have a lockpick tomorrow,” he said to Morgana. Better to kill two birds with one stone. “You’ll have to look around while we’re in there.”

Morgana shifted in the bag, leading Akira to refocus his own weight too. “Got it. There’s no way I’d want to sit there and watch him paint you guys anyway,” Morgana said.
“I do wonder what Madarame’s treasure will be. The source of one’s distorted desires… I wonder,” he said in that distant voice again, frowning slightly.

“Poor Yusuke,” Morgana comments. “If this is all true, he’s probably been in a lot of pain.”

“Once we confirm it, we’ll do this for him, and to make sure that no one else can suffer under Madarame’s hands anymore.” Akira glanced over at Akechi. “Even if there are millions more out there in the world, we can at least stop this one.”

Akechi managed a small smile. “I suppose that’s one way of looking at it. I wonder how many of those portraits were simply children who had nothing when he approached them. I’d never thought of it before.”

“You okay?”

“Hmm?” Akechi said distractedly. “My apologies. I was thinking for a moment. I…grew up in foster care. A few different ones. To some extent, I believe I can understand what Yusuke must be feeling.” Oh, right. Akechi had told him that before too. “To him, perhaps Madarame using his work is a form of acknowledgement of his talent.”

“Twisted acknowledgment,” Akira pointed out.

“You have a point there. But acknowledgement nonetheless. For Yusuke, that may be enough to continue to live the way that he does,” Akechi noted with a hint of sadness. Akira contemplated bringing it up further, but it didn’t look like he wanted to talk about it any further and Akira wasn’t one to push it.

When they finally came to a stop in front of Leblanc which seemed to be closed early, Akira turned to Akechi. “Since you’re here, do you want some coffee?” he asked.

Akechi shook his head. “I would like to, but I’ve got some work that I need to take care of,” he said. “Thank you for the offer. We’ll have to take a rain check.”

“We still have to celebrate the addition of another group member,” Akira pointed out.

The brunette smile. “Yes. I am very much looking forward to it. I’m not surprised that you’re the leader. They seem to trust you a lot.”

Akira hesitated for a moment, before lowering his bag. “I’ll meet you inside,” he said to Morgana, bracing himself for the protest that would immediately follow.

“Huh?” Morgana repeated. “You want me to leave you guys alone? No way!”

“Please?” He offered kindly, giving him his best smile. They seemed to have an entire conversation with their eyes before Morgana sighed.


Akira smiled. “Thank you.” Morgana hopped out of the bag. He unlocked the door and pushed it open so that Morgana could walk through, then turned back Akechi, who was regarding him with that steady curious gaze that he’d given him a lot of lately.

“Is everything alright?” Akechi asked, drawing out his words carefully. “Did I say something out of turn?”
“Hm?” Akira said. “No. Nothing like that.” That was it. He didn’t say anything else.

Akechi frowned slightly, and Akira could see the gears turning in his head. “Tired again?” He finally settled on deducing.

Akira just barely managed a smile. “It’s not like I can’t talk to them, but it feels like I shouldn’t. Not about this. I don’t want to worry them.”

“Because you’re the leader,” Akechi finished.

“I haven’t been sleeping well lately,” he admitted, and again, it was nice to be able to say it out loud.

Akechi blinked, looking somewhat surprised at his answer. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

Turn yourself in. Tell me your boss’s name. End this before more people get hurt. All things that Akira wanted to say to him, but instead, he simply shook his head. “No. I just wanted to say it, I think.”

“Oh. I’m grateful that you chose me to say it to, then,” Akechi said kindly.

They were both playing the same game – trying to get as close as possible to gain the other’s trust (Akira figured that that had to be what Akechi’s boss had instructed him to do after he inevitably told him about the other Persona-users), but there was something distinctly genuine about Akechi’s words, even underneath it all, that still left nothing but an unsettling feeling in Akira’s chest.

“Don’t you want to know why?” Akira wondered, because even though he didn’t exactly want to answer why, most people would probably want to know what the source of it is.

Akechi stroked his chin. “If you would like to share with me, I am willing to listen, but it doesn’t look like a subject you are particularly keen on talking about. I’ve got a fair share of those myself,” he added.

Before Akira could respond, Akechi’s phone rang in his pocket. With an apologetic smile, he pulled it out and pressed it to his ear. “Hello?... Alright. I’ll head over shortly and pick it up on my way back… Did you? I apologize. I was out. It…won’t happen again.” Akechi hung up, then started scrolling through his phone for a second before putting it back in his pocket. “It seems I’ve got to get going.”

“Work?”

“Something like that,” Akechi said. “Ah. Before I forget.” He reached into his other pocket and pulled out two…tea bags? “It’s lemon-ginger tea. For the headaches. It also has calming qualities similar to chamomile that may help for sleeping.” Then he laughed quietly. “I hope that Sakura-san won’t be too rattled that I’ve got tea instead of coffee.”

Akira stared at his outstretched hand for probably a few seconds too long with a look that was decidedly uncertain, because he saw Akechi flinch slightly. “Have I overstepped my bounds?”

“You…brought that with you into the Palace?” Akira asked, taking them from his hands. He was touched.

“Oh. Haha,” Akechi said, somewhat relieved. “I wasn’t sure what would happen if I had something in my pockets when my clothes changed. It turns out they are still intact.”
“Th-thank you,” Akira said, for lack of anything better. It didn’t feel like it was enough, but Akechi smiled and somehow it seemed to make it feel like it was enough.

“Of course. I’ve really got to get going. Have a good evening.”

“You too. Let me know when you get back.”

***

If anyone had told Akira that he would be modeling with Goro Akechi for Yusuke Kitagawa, he would’ve laughed.

However, after school, he found himself standing inside of Yusuke’s studio with one Goro Akechi. Morgana was in the bag on the chair to the wall, with Ann and Ryuji sitting alongside the same wall.

They hadn’t been intending to come at first, but figured that it’d be easier to tag along. By which Akira deduced that they didn’t have anything else to do, so why not?

“I thought it would just be you two,” Yusuke said with a frown. “It’s a little crowded in here.”

“Ah. You know what they say,” Akechi said smoothly. “Three’s a crowd.”

“So, by default, five is much better,” Akira added cheekily.

“Yeah, yeah. We’re just here to make sure you don’t do anything weird, kay?” Ryuji said, leaning back in his seat.

Yusuke scoffed. “I would never dream of it. Don’t be ridiculous.” He sat down in front of his easel. “Now, I must ask so that I can capture the full extent of this piece. What is your relationship?”

“We’re passionate lovers,” Akira deadpanned.

Akechi did that thing where he nearly choked on air again. “He’s joking, of course. We’re just friends.”

Yusuke looked vaguely disappointed, and Akira almost wanted to know what sort of far-fetched image he’d had in his head about them. “I see.”

Akechi laughed. “I apologize for disappointing you.”

Yusuke hummed to himself. “Well then, let’s get started.”

And he didn’t offer much by way of direction, so Akira looked at Akechi, wondering if he would take the lead. Akechi thought for a moment, then sat down on the stool, turning so that only his left side visible and he was staring at the wall. He placed a hand on his chin with a faint smile, and his expression was that of someone who’d just cracked an impossible case.

“What’s he doing?” Ryuji said.

“Modeling…I guess,” Ann whispered back.

Akira didn’t really know what to do with himself. He’d considered posing in the strange way that Yusuke had him pose as Jesus on the cross, but figured something like that might be funnier if it was when Yusuke inevitably asked them to pose nude. Although, the thought of Akechi having to pose like that was almost enough to make him do it then. Almost. Instead, he turned so that his
back was against Akechi’s. He didn’t sit, but he stood and folded his arms across his chest. He turned his head slightly towards Yusuke, glancing down so that he was able to see Akechi just barely out of the corner of his eye.

“They’re really posing,” Morgana commented in awe.

They stood like that as Yusuke quietly (and sometimes noisily) attempted to paint them. He tilted his head, nodded to himself, grunted in frustration – the whole nine yards.

“Hey,” Ryuji finally said out of boredom, and Akira had to hand it to him because he’d lasted longer than he thought he would.

“Kitagawa-kun?” Ann said when he didn’t respond.

“…” Yusuke hummed thoughtfully again. He furrowed his brow as he glanced from the two of them to his easel.

“This is getting boring. I’m going to go have a look around,” Morgana said, and if Yusuke heard the meowing, he didn’t comment on it. Akira glanced over at Morgana without breaking his stance and tried to relay his approval with his eyes.

“Don’t get caught,” Ryuji hissed.

“Heh. Who do you think you’re talking to?” Morgana said confidently.

Ann made some excuse to go into the hall for a phone call. Yusuke hardly responded, so she stood and Morgana very openly hopped out of the bag and strolled out the door when Ann opened it without so much as a noise from Yusuke.

Akira wasn’t sure how much time passed, but he had a new respect for Ann’s modeling because standing still for so long made him feel restless. Finally, Yusuke put down his brush with a discontented sigh.

“Finished?” Ryuji said eagerly, standing up.

Yusuke shook his head, clearly disappointed in himself. “I’m sorry. I’m having trouble focusing. We’ll have to resume this another time.”

“Madarame’s seriously messed up. He just thinks of his pupils as tools!” Ryuji said animatedly. “That’s why he doesn’t give a damn whether he steals their work or beats them! There’s no point in hidin’ it from us.”
Akechi stepped forward, something akin to disapproval at Ryuji’s tactics crossing over his face before turning back to Yusuke. “We won’t tell him what you’ve told us,” he said. “He’s been taking your own creations and using them as his own.”

Yusuke’s tortured expression didn’t get any better. “It’s…just as you all say. We’re…our sensei’s ‘artwork.’” Then he quickly added, “But don’t misunderstand. I offered my ideas to him myself. As such, it can’t be called plagiarism.”

Akechi shook his head. “Permission has nothing to do with it,” he said quietly. “Plagiarism is simply the practice of taking someone else’s work and passing them off as his own. He knows he is not the true artist, and yet, he uses them for his own profit.”

“That’s…” Yusuke fumbled over his words. “He is simply suffering from artist’s block right now.”

“Dude, still!”

Akechi placed his hand on his chin. “Claude Monet suffered from creative block after the death of his wife. He broke the hiatus by painting the rose-colored trellises at the entrance to his water garden at his home. Picasso became infuriated with the mere sight of his paintings and broke his creative block by turning to writing poetry. Georgia O’Keeffe moved to New Mexico in America for new inspiration,” he rattled off, and the others, Akira included, stared at him with wide, impressed eyes. “Artists suffer from creative block, as is human nature, but none have turned to taking the work of pupils who wish to learn from someone they consider an idol. I haven’t seen Madarame do much to relieve himself of this supposed artist’s block. Have you?” He asked curiously.

“He’s good,” Ann whispered.

“Should one of us be playing bad cop?” Ryuji whispered back.

“I-I’m supporting sensei as his pupil. Where’s the wrong in that?” Yusuke managed to say.

“Oh, come on!” Ryuji said, maybe in his attempt to play bad cop. “All his other pupils ran away! Aren’t you the only one left?”

“You’re really okay with this?” Akira said with the same gentle, curious voice that Akechi had been using.

Yusuke hesitated again. “I…”

“A quick search into Madarame’s pupils reveals that many of them did not come from affluent backgrounds. I can only imagine what it must have been like for them to be approached by the Great Madarame,” Akechi said, going in for the finishing blow. “You can stay here and learn, on the condition that you provide me with artwork.” He smiled, albeit it was a slightly sad one. “I imagine the need for approval is important here. Perhaps it is because you think you have nowhere to turn.”

“That’s enough!” Yusuke said. “Don’t come here again.” He sat down in his chair, clearly disturbed. “If you do, I’ll sue you for causing a disturbance.”

“Hold it! We’re not done talking here!” Ryuji started.

“You could, but I can tell you that a lawsuit will only bring more attention to the claims against Madarame,” Akechi pointed out. “We aren’t here to antagonize you. In fact, I…understand where you’re coming from. You are continuing to live under the shadow of someone who most likely
intends to dispose of you once you’ve outlived your usefulness,” Akechi said, his eyes falling down to his own feet for a split second – one where if Akira had blinked, he would’ve missed it. “Surely there’s a part of you that knows that it’s not about getting past artist’s block. You want to continue to be useful by providing him with artwork. Am I wrong?” It echoed the way he’d said it to Akira after he’d deduced that he’d been charged with false accusations, but it didn’t hold any bravado or expectations of impressing Yusuke. It was surprisingly empathetic.

Yusuke stayed silent for a considerable amount of time. Akira could see Ryuji getting anxious to say something, but he caught his eye and shook his head subtly. Somehow, Akechi was handling it. “If I could leave, I would.”

Akechi nodded like Yusuke had just told him the most interesting fact in the world. “I see. You don’t think you can leave. That’s understandable, considering the circumstances.”

“Further, if don’t submit a new piece to Sensei soon, there will be some… consequences,” he finally said.

“How consequences?” Ann said quietly.

“So he is abusing you?!” Ryuji said.

“What can we do?” Akechi said, tilting his head slightly. He offered him a warm, inviting smile.

Yusuke frowned for a moment, then brightened as he turned to Akira, who raised an eyebrow. “I’d like to take you up on your offer.” Akira gave him a confused look in response, prompting him to continue. “Perhaps I will be able to break through this slump if you are willing to bare it all.”

Akechi’s warm demeanor dropped considerably as it was replaced by shock. “I-I’m sorry?”

“Sensei is out during the afternoon while the art exhibit is on, so I can use this place freely. I should buy more art supplies…” He said, already starting to get that voice that meant he was getting lost in his own artistic world.

“Wait,” Akechi said with a short, nervous laugh. “To clarify: you’re saying that the two of us posing…nude…is what will help you?”

Yusuke turned to him, bowing his head ever so slightly. “Thank you for your words. I will create a worthwhile piece that captures an enrapturing beauty. After that…” He glances down. “I may be more open to talking with you.”

That was new. And he was speaking directly to Akechi, who had stiffened up.

“I-I see. I think we may have to deliberate on that first,” Akechi said.

Akira shrugged. “I’m fine with it.” Ann had never gotten to that point, so Akira didn’t see why it would be any different.

Then again, Akechi didn’t know that.

“But sure, we’ll talk it over,” He added to pacify the brunette.

“Of course. I’ll make time according to your plans. But, please come before the exhibit ends,” Yusuke said. Then, he turned and began to focus on cleaning his brushes and rearranging his paints, completely ignoring them.
“Uh… So what should we do?” Ryuji asked.

“We leave, I guess,” Akira said to them.

Morgana met them at the door, and once they’d exited the shack, they convened just outside of it.

“It seems he truly expects us to pose as such…” Akechi said dejectedly. It was almost endearing.

“And it sounds like it’s gonna be full-on nude too…” Ryuji added.

“We’ll just make Madarame confess before the exhibit ends,” Akira told them – directing most of his statement to Akechi.

“Is there really a need to make him confess?” Ann wondered. “Kitagawa-kun thinks he owes his life to him.”

“Madarame’s no different from Kamoshida. That asshole’s usin’ Yusuke, who doesn’t have parents,” Ryuji said. “Besides, he even told Akechi that he wanted to leave!”

“That’s true,” Ann said. “And it’s too frustrating to leave this alone.”

“You can’t leave it be because you’ve endured a lot yourself, with Kamoshida,” Morgana said sympathetically.

Akira turned to Morgana. “Did you get the door open?”

“Almost. I…broke the lockpick,” Morgana admitted. “But if you go back, I’ll be able to get it open really quickly. What’s so important about it anyway?”

Akira smiled. “Thank you. I just have a feeling it will be useful to us.”

Ryuji looked at Akechi with a grin. “By the way, how’d you know all that stuff about artists?” He scratched his head. “I’ve never even heard of any of those people ‘cept Picasso.”

Ann nodded in agreement. “That was really impressive, Akechi-kun.”

“Oh. It was nothing. I’m simply versed in what it takes to get someone to open up. It’s an essential skill for a detective,” Akechi said with a smile.

“So none of it was true?” Akira said.

Akechi paused. “That’s beside the point,” he finally settled on. “We’ve confirmed the facts. What is the next step in the process?”

***

After settling on the plan for dealing with Madarame, the group split for the day, with Morgana tagging along with Ryuji and Ann.

He felt a little bad for asking Morgana to go back without him, and it honestly still felt odd whenever Morgana wasn’t with him. He’d become accustomed to Morgana popping up out of his bag and generally staying with him for nearly all 24 hours of the day unless he happened to be hanging out with someone, which technically, he was doing. He figured he’d take the time and try to get any tidbit of information from Akechi.

He knew it’d be difficult, considering the only real reason they’d even figured out that Akechi had
been lying to them was purely based on luck and an unlucky slip of the tongue by the brunette.

“You did good today,” Akira said to him.

“It was nothing,” Akechi said again, though he beamed at the praise.

“Maybe you should be the leader,” he teased. He thought about what Akechi would be like as the leader, in a different universe and separate galaxy where he hadn’t gone down the path he’d started. He’d probably be good at it.

“I could never measure up, I’m sure,” Akechi said earnestly.

“That’s humble of you.”

“Ha ha. Are you saying I’m conceited?” Akechi laughed the laugh of his that filled the air and seemed to make the sunshine beam a little warmer on his skin. Akira was starting to memorize all the different laughs that Akechi had, and he wasn’t quite sure how he felt about that yet. “I am very much aware of my limits, as a leader and other contexts as well.”

They walked like that in the direction of Akechi’s apartment. Akira was vaguely aware that they were headed that way, but like Akechi walking him back before, he’d practically done it without thought. Once they got closer to his building, they passed through a section filled with various small shops.

“I meant to ask: How did you sleep?” Akechi asked.

“What?”

“You said you were having trouble sleeping,” Akechi recalled. “Has it gotten any better?”

“Oh…” He was silent for moment, unsure for a second if he wanted to admit it. “Not really.”

“I was reading up on sleep remedies last night—”

“Because of me?” Akira couldn’t help but ask.

“…Well, it was on my list of books to read anyway,” Akechi deflected. He reached into his briefcase. “Regardless, I think this will help.” He pulled out a small book and extended it to him. “Would you like to borrow it?”

He looked at the cover, expecting it to be a book filled with nothing but tools for falling asleep, so he blinked in surprise when he saw the title of it. It was a book by Plato. *The Republic*. He’d heard of it in his classes, but he’d honestly had no knowledge of what it was or why Akechi had handed it to him in the first place.

“Thanks…” He said unsurely.

“It’s Plato’s *Republic,*” Akechi reiterated, and a bit of uncertainty crept into his voice. “I’ve read it multiple times. It’s one of the most influential works of philosophy. It can be quite a challenging read, it’s not exactly a page-turner.”

“I’m sold,” Akira said sarcastically.

Akechi chuckled. “Perhaps if you read it, it will help you fall asleep.”

Once the words registered in his brain, Akira let out a laugh that was followed by another laugh
that he couldn’t conceal, and he saw Akechi’s smile widen. “Did you just call one of ‘the most influential works of philosophy’ something to fall asleep to?” He said, amused.

“That’s not to diminish the value of it,” Akechi was quick to point out. “But even I can admit that having to think so deeply such radical and thought-provoking ideas can only last for so long before exhaustion takes over and it becomes hard to stay awake.”

“You’re so...” Akira paused, unable to find the correct words to describe someone like Goro Akechi. “Thanks. This is--”

“Excuse me?” The two of them turned at nearly the same time as a middle-aged man walked up to them with a worried expression on his face. He looked like he’d just been dropped into this area without any knowledge of what he was supposed to be doing. “Can you help me?” he asked.

“What’s wrong?” Akechi asked.

The man suddenly held up to small figurines. One was of some sort of stuffed red, white, and blue bear, and the other was of one of the Featherman toys that Akira recognized from Futaba’s room. “Which of these would you prefer?”

“We’re not interested,” Akira said as he exchanged a look with Akechi.

“No, no. Not to buy,” the man said quickly. “I’m buying a gift for my son. He’s young, but I don’t know anything about this stuff. Please, will you help me?”

“Er, sure. We can be of some assistance,” Akechi started.

“What does he like?” Akira finished.

“I-I don’t know,” the man said, hanging his head in shame. “I saw on TV that these Featherman toys are all the rage, but he wouldn’t sleep without these bears when he was a baby.”

Akechi stroked his chin. “Sentiment would be more effective, I think,” he said, looking at Akira who nodded in agreement.

The man nodded profusely. “Yes. Yes, of course. That must be true. Thank you so much,” he said. In his frantic state, he nearly tripped over himself as he rushed past them.

“Hm,” Akechi said.

“He’s going towards your building,” Akira pointed out. They watched from a short distance as the man ran up towards a woman and a young boy, who didn’t look any older than eight, as they approached the entrance to the building.

“I’ve seen that child before,” Akechi noted. “He lives in the building. I often see him playing by himself outside at that small playground,” he said, gesturing to the small area that was part of the complex.

As they approached, the voices became clearer.

The presumed mother pushed her son behind her with a scowl on her face. “What are you doing here?” She asked rudely.

The man pathetically held out the toy. “I know it’s a few days late, but I wanted to bring by his birthday present.”
The woman scoffed. “You’re kidding, right? You can’t buy his love with gifts,” she said scornfully. “He doesn’t want that,” she said. Akira could see the boy peering curiously from behind his mom’s waist. “Don’t come back here.”

“Wait, please—” He said, reaching for her. She immediately snatched her arm back. “I-I miss you.” He dropped his eyes to the boy’s. “Both of you.”

She shook her head at him. “You should’ve thought of that before you left.” She looked down at the boy with loving eyes. “Come on. Let’s go, sweetie.” The woman took her son’s hand and began to walk towards the building. The boy turned his head to watch as his father stared down at the toy with eyes brimming with tears as his mom pulled him away without so much as a second glance.

The man closed his eyes, dropping the toy onto the ground and pressing his hand against his forehead. He turned on his heel and walked without really paying attention to where he was going. When he spotted Akira and Akechi, he rubbed his neck with a solemn expression. “Thanks for the suggestion,” he said sadly. He didn’t make any comment on whether or not they’d heard what happened – he probably didn’t care. With a short wave, he dragged his feet in the opposite direction.

Akechi’s gaze remained on him for a few seconds before he turned the toy on the ground. With a stoic look, he walked over and picked it up off the ground. He brushed a few specks of dirt off of it. Akechi saw the woman stop just outside the building, then she pulled out her phone and began to speak animatedly to someone on the other end. She said something to the kid, then stepped away from him as she continued to chat on the phone.

“What are you going to do?” Akira asked him.

“Huh?” Akechi blinked, breaking his gaze from the boy. “Oh. Haha. I was just making sure he wasn’t littering.” And it was almost believable.

Akira smiled a little. “C’mon,” he said.

“Wait—”

He heard Akechi fall into step behind him as they both walked over to the boy, who was sitting against the building. He’d picked up a stick and was dragging shapes into it.

“I think this belongs to you,” Akira said softly to the child.

The boy looked up at him, pausing what he was doing. He glanced over at Akechi, then to the toy in his hand. His eyes widened slightly.

“Ah. Here,” Akechi said somewhat awkwardly. He extended it to him.

“…I don’t want it,” the boy said quietly, returning to his abstract shape drawing.

“Are you sure?” Akechi asked with a bright smile.

The kid did not smile back. “Mom says Dad hates us. She says if he loved us, he wouldn’t have left. I don’t want it,” he said, dropping his eyes to the ground.

Akechi’s smile fell and he looked incredibly uncomfortable, like he hadn’t been anticipating anything close to that reaction. He pulled his hand back, no longer extending it. It was clear that he didn’t really know what to say to that, which surprised Akira since he’d seemed to speak to Yusuke with no problem at all. Then again, that was for the mission.
Akira squatted down so that he was level with the boy. “Would he have gotten this for you if he hated you?” he asked.

“Mom says he does,” the boy said with some hesitation.

“What do you say?” Akira said gently.

He hesitated, glancing over at the toy. Before he could say anything, his mother’s voice called for him. “Kioshi!” She called with her phone still pressed to her ear. She gave the older boys an odd look before gesturing for him to come over to her.

“I don’t want it,” the boy said again, standing and dropping the stick. He gave the toy another wistful look before he turned and ran over to his mom.

Akira smiled, turning Akechi. “You should hold onto that. He lives in your building, right?”

Instead of immediately responding, Akechi stood there, appearing slightly baffled at what had just transpired. “You’re…good at that,” Akechi noted.

Akira’s smile tilted as he stood and pushed his weight over to one side. “Talking to people?” He put his hands into his pockets. “Next time you see him, you should talk to him. He looks a little lonely,” Akira commented. When Akechi continued to stare at him, he shook his head subtly. “Something on my face?”

“Hm? No. My apologies. It’s just that I’ve seen that child often. He’s lived here for a few months, and yet, I’ve never spoken to him outside of a casual greeting to he and his mother in passing. I’d never noticed how sad he looked, but you’re right. He does look lonely,” Akechi said quietly. He looked at the toy again.

“Maybe he misses his dad?”

“I wish I knew the feeling,” Akechi blurted, then his eyes immediately went wide and he shook his head with a short laugh. “I-I apologize. I didn’t mean to say that out loud.” He clutched the toy a little tighter. “I’ll hold onto this, as you suggested.”

His phone began to ring shortly after, and he frowned when he looked at the ID before answering. Akira couldn’t hear the voice or the words, but whomever it was sounded angry on the other end. “Yes,” Akechi said calmly in response. “I can be there in an hour.”

“You’ve gotten a lot of those lately,” Akira pointed out.

“Yes. It seems work is picking up.”

“New cases?”

*Give me something to work with.* Akechi nodded. “I can’t discuss details, of course. There’s a lot more to be done, though.” *Or, maybe nothing to work with.*

“Make sure you keep some tea for yourself.”

“Haha. I’ll probably need it. Thank you,” Akechi said. He looked at the toy like an alien thing he’d never held before. Without looking at Akira, he spoke. “Thank you for walking back with me as well. I enjoyed the company.”

***
When he returned to Leblanc that evening, he was met with the sight of Morgana on the counter and Sojiro picking up a finished plate of food that been in front of him. Morgana looked like he’d just finished off the best meal of his life.

The bells chimed, and the two of them turned to look.

“You’re back,” Morgana said with a voice of someone who’d just returned from the bliss of a food coma.

“I told you to watch the cat,” Sojiro said sternly. “Good thing he found his way back to the café. Where’ve you been? Not causing trouble, are you?”

Akira considered saying something sarcastic, but decided against it with the tone Sojiro was using. “I was out with a friend. Akechi.”

“Ah. Coffee detective kid.” Sojiro seemed pleased enough with this. Akira made a mental note to call Akechi "Coffee Detective Kid" next time he saw him, at least once. “Well, as long as you’re not out causing a ruckus.”

Akira smiled. “Not yet,” and Sojiro groaned.

“So, how was it?” Morgana asked, even though he knew full well that Akira wouldn’t be able to answer with Sojiro standing there.

“Cat’s certainly happy to see you. He barely meowed at all before you came back,” Sojiro said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“He’s probably angry at me for being back late,” Akira said, placing his bag and his book onto the stool.

“Well, you’re not wrong,” Morgana said.

_Akira Kurusu_

_I’m home. Good luck with work. Catch the bad guys._

Morgana had somehow made his way over to looking at Akira’s phone. He was more deadly than Futaba with how stealthy he’d been able to look at his phone.

“Why do you always tell him when you’re home?” Morgana asked suspiciously.

Sojiro had turned to go into the kitchen, so Akira spoke in hushed tones. “It’s only when I leave from his apartment. He asks me to. Let’s go upstairs.” He picked up the bag that he’d just put down, then made his way for the stairs when he paused at the TV playing the local news.

“And now back to this developing story about the car accident just yesterday that led to 8 casualties and even more injured. Said to be driving the vehicle was rising democratic candidate Hiroshi Fukuda. When questioned by police, he claims that he has no recollection of the events that transpired before the accident,” the newswoman said as she showed images of the pile-up. Akira felt his stomach sink.

“In a statement made earlier this afternoon, Detective Goro Akechi, a high school student who has steadily gained a reputation amongst the police department and has worked on numerous similar cases, had this to say,” she continued as an image of Akechi smiling his signature charismatic smile popped up.
The screen changed to a video of Akechi standing with who Akira assumed to be the police chief and being talked to by reporters. “With the gracious help and guidance of the police department, I am willing and able to deduce that this accident was in fact caused by human error, and that Fukuda was distracted of his own terms and lost situational awareness. I believe the department will be pursuing the appropriate charges for such reckless endangerment and loss of life.”

If it was even possible, Akira’s stomach sank lower.

The newswoman resumed speaking on screen. “If charged, Fukuda faces eight counts of involuntary manslaughter and other crimes including causing a catastrophe and reckless endangerment. This is surely to be devastating for the young candidate, who was considered to be a rising leader amongst young voters for his views and more lenient stance towards international--”

“Akira?” Morgana said, and Akira nearly jumped as he stopped watching the TV. He looked at the screen. “Is it Akechi?” the cat said warily.

Akira felt a little sick, but he managed to smile and shake his head minutely. Psychotic breakdowns. Black mask. There was no proof that that had even been the case. Perhaps Fukuda had truly not been paying attention. No. Akira knew that that would be too easy. But it couldn’t have been Akechi, Akira was nearly certain of that, unless he’d taken the time to change out his mask, but at the same time— It all had to be related somehow.

His phone buzzed.

**Goro Akechi**

*Ha. Thank you. Have a pleasant rest of your evening. Have some tea if you begin to feel a headache.*

He almost dropped his phone.

“Do you think Akechi knows something about that?” Morgana asked instead.

Even if it wasn’t Akechi, there was no doubt in Akira’s mind that he’d at least known about it, and that was almost just as bad. His head started to hurt, and he said something that sounded close to a goodnight to Sojiro before walking up the stairs with a concerned Morgana following after him.

Akira wondered if, in another timeline, this hadn’t happened to this candidate. He hadn’t been watching the news much back then, but what if it had been something exclusive to this timeline? And he hadn’t acted quick enough… If he’d acted sooner—if he’d been cleverer and hadn’t spent so much time enjoying the small moments of genuineness that he’d had with Akechi, could he have already gotten to his boss and prevented this?

He geared up for another sleepless night, laying in his bed and reminding Morgana that he was alright, even though he kind of wasn’t. He knew that he was being unfair to Morgana, and he made a mental note to get the good sushi for him as an apology when he stopped feeling like this. He reached over and pulled the book that Akechi had given to him, which suddenly felt as heavy as a brick, and hoped that maybe it would do something about the thoughts whirling around in his mind. He thought of the toy in Akechi’s hand and the complex look in his eyes as he stared at it and the gentle way he’d spoken to Yusuke. He thought of the tea he’d given to him and concern he’d shown for both his headaches and his lack of sleep. The others were already warming up to him too. He blinked, and then thought of the malicious look in his eyes in the last timeline. He thought of listening with Futaba and Morgana and hearing Akechi plan to stage Akira’s 'suicide.'

He flipped it open to a random page, eyes falling on a section that Akechi had highlighted.
What about someone who believes in beautiful things but doesn’t believe in the beautiful itself and isn’t able to follow anyone who could lead him to the knowledge of it?

Akira closed it. This wasn’t off to a good start.


Chapter End Notes

goro pls when will you stop killing people it hurts your bae even though he doesn’t know for sure that it’s you

Redemption ain’t easy, yo

Got some IRL stuff going on this week, so I won’t have much time to write, so look for the next update in a few weeks :S Hopefully these two chapters will do until then!
Ok. I know I say this every time but seriously THANK YOU for all of your wonderful comments. I am a very harsh critic of my own writing, so seeing that you all are enjoying the story and loving it just as much as I love writing it seriously makes my day. Thankyouthankyouthankyou to everyone who’s left a comment, kudos, bookmark, or even just took the time to read this story. You rock my socks off.

I cut out a loooot of this chapter and yet it's still insanely long. Pls forgive me.

PS the more I read the Republic the more I realize that the entire book (and Glaucon and Socrates) are a really great parallel for Akechi and Akira haha.

“Man, I’m so pumped for this. It’s been awhile,” Ryuji said, stretching his legs.

Akira masked a yawn as he stretched his arms above his head. “I’m a little rusty,” he said lightly.

“Ha! We’ll get whipped right into shape. How far should we run today?” The faux-blond asked as he began to jog in place. “We gotta make it far. If Ann and I are gonna be going into the Palace without you guys, we hafta make sure we’re prepared,” he added, rotating his left arm.

“I have faith. You two will be fine,” Akira told him confidently.

“Heh. I’m more worried ‘bout you guys. What’re you gonna do?”

Akira tried to think for a moment of what Ann had said before. Then he shrugged. “Seduce him with my acting.”

“Dude, you did not just say that,” Ryuji groaned. Akira smiled, kneeling down to re-tie one of his loose shoelaces. “Oh. Should we invite Akechi too?”

Akira paused. “To jog?”

Ryuji nodded. “I mean, doesn’t he look kinda lanky to you? Plus he’s new to all this.”

“We’re new too,” Akira pointed out carefully.

“Yeah, well, he was the one all scared to go back into the Metaverse after getting his persona. We’ll toughen him up,” Ryuji said enthusiastically.

“…Alright,” Akira said, slowly pulling out his phone. When they’d gone to visit the Palace yesterday, he was sure that Akechi noticed how distant he’d been. It wasn’t on purpose – not completely. He’d just needed some time to think.

Not to mention he hadn’t been able to sleep. He’d spent more time than he wanted to admit reading about that accident and wondering if he could’ve done something to prevent it this time. There was no point in dwelling on the past, and he knew this too, but knowing and doing were two different
things. What was the point of having the advantage of knowing the future if he couldn’t prevent more innocent people from getting hurt? Of course, there was still nothing that Akira could do to verify whether or not the person had actually been affected by a breakdown, but after reading up on what had happened, it was hard for him to think otherwise.

He’d hoped that maybe Ryuji would change his mind in the timespan it took him to pull out his phone and scroll to Akechi’s name. No such luck. Akira pressed the call button and placed the phone against his ear.

Akechi picked up on the second ring. “Hello?” he said eagerly.

“Hey. It’s Akira,” Akira said, glancing up at Ryuji, who was looming over him.

“I know,” he said, sounding especially pleased. “What’s going on?”

“Ryuji and I are going jogging. Do you want to join us?”

“Right now?!”

“Yeah. You don’t have to--” he started.

“Sure,” Akechi said as soon as Akira started to backtrack. “I can meet you now. I just need to change. Where are you?”

When Akechi arrived, he was wearing blue tailored track pants and a white t-shirt, and it was the most casual he’d ever seen the brunette. On his wrist was some sort of fitness tracker.

“Hello,” he greeted kindly. “This was quite a surprise. But I suppose it is important to keep up a good fitness regimen.”

“Yeah. You’re all good with the brain stuff, but you gotta make sure you stay fit,” Ryuji pointed out.

Akechi chuckled. “I assure you, I’m quite agile.” He started fiddling with the tracker on his wrist.

“Let’s get started,” Akira said. He hadn’t meant for it to come out so abruptly, but thankfully Ryuji didn’t seem to notice because he nodded enthusiastically, eager to finally get back into training.

Akechi, on the other hand, looked at him oddly, and Akira kind of hated how perceptive he was at that moment. “Right,” he said, his voice a little unsure. “Let’s.”

It turns out that Goro Akechi’s claim to agility wasn’t entirely accurate. It wasn’t that he couldn’t keep up, but Ryuji was a runner by nature, and even with his leg, he knew how to get the most out of a good run.

So it was almost charming to see Akechi try to mask just how out of breath he was at the end of it. Akira could barely hide his smile, and he could practically hear Morgana’s judgment purring into his ear.

You’re smiling like an idiot.

“Phew,” Ryuji said, his hands on his thighs but a triumphant smile on his face nonetheless.

“Yes…Th-that was…quite the workout,” Akechi said in between long pauses where he was probably trying to mask his long breaths of air. He coughed into his arm, just barely managing a smile.
“Talk about a good workout, am I right?” Ryuji said, still pumped from the workout. He slapped Akechi on the back, which didn’t help his case at all. The brunette nearly toppled over even though he was sitting, but he hid it pretty well. Ryuji didn’t seem to notice how Akechi was on the brink of death via jogging, taking a satisfied sip of his water.

Akira sighed inwardly, then walked over to the brunette even though his own legs felt like jelly and extended his water bottle to him. “Here,” he offered.

“Th-That’s okay,” Akechi said slowly. “I’m fine. In fact…I could go for another.”

“Really?” Ryuji said, wide-eyed. “Dude, impressive. Even I’m beat,” he said, even though he didn’t show it in the slightest.

Either his best friend was oblivious or just didn’t care to point out the obvious contradiction between what Akechi was saying and how he looked, but either way, Akira just pushed it even more towards him. “Then drink it to stay hydrated,” Akira said instead. Then he wouldn’t have to admit that it was because he was completely out of breath.

“Ah. Yes…hydration is important,” Akechi emphasized, and Akira fought past his amusement as Akechi took the water bottle from his hands and tried to pretend like he didn’t want to gulp the entire thing down in two large sips.

“You wanna go again though?” Ryuji asked. “Now that you said it, I could go for another one.”

Akechi stopped immediately. “O-Oh. Right now?”

“Why not? You said you’re up for it,” Ryuji said.

“I…did say that, didn’t I?” Akechi said, clearing his throat. Akira raised an eyebrow, wondering how he would get out of it. Somewhat shakily, he stood up from where he’d been sitting on the grass, then smiled brightly. “W-Well, I’m ready when you are.”

“Alright!” Ryuji said excitedly. “You up for it?” He said, turning to Akira.

Akira frowned. There was no way Akechi would get through another run, especially if it was the same route they’d gone just before. And as entertaining as it may have been to see Akechi struggle —

“I’m kinda tired,” Akira said to Ryuji. “It took a lot out of me.” If Akira had to be the one that seemed like he couldn’t handle it, so be it.

“Oh. You wanna stay behind then?” Ryuji said.

“Maybe we should all take a rain check on the double run. You were going to help me with my homework, right?” He said, directing his statement to Akechi. “It’s better if we go back together.”

Akechi exhaled in what was probably a thinly veiled sigh of relief. “Ah. Yes. I’d forgotten,” He said, playing along. “I agree.”

And then, just as Akira predicted—“Blech,” Ryuji said. “I’m gonna go play some video games then.”

Akira nodded with a smile. “We’ll meet up before you and Ann go into the Palace to go over the plan again,” he told him as Ryuji agreed.
“Sounds good man!” Ryuji said, holding up his hand for a high-five. Akira brought his hand up, and the second he did, Ryuji slapped his hand against it. Then he turned to Akechi, who blinked in confusion as he looked at Ryuji’s hand. After that moment passed, he also held up his hand, and Ryuji slapped it against his too. It was so delightfully awkward that Akira once again had to try not to laugh. “I’ll see you guys tomorrow!”

“Did you actually need help with your homework?” Akechi asked once Ryuji had started walking in the opposite direction and the two of them had fallen into step together. “Because I’m happy to provide assistance.”

Akira smiled, mostly to himself. “Did you actually want to go for another run?” he teased.

“That was…quite different from cycling, which was to be expected.”

“He wouldn’t have cared if you said you were tired. There’s nothing wrong with that,” Akira said, glancing at him out of the corner of his eye.

“I-I wasn’t tired.” Akira gave him a knowing look, and after a few seconds, Akechi just barely relented. “Well, perhaps I was a little short of breath,” he admitted, and he’d even lowered his voice like it was a secret that was meant for no one else’s ears.

Akira smiled slightly, placing his hands into his pockets. Akechi sort of smiled back. “By the way…” he started, and Akira hadn’t even noticed that Akechi was still holding his water bottle until he saw his fingers tap against the red outer cover.

“Hm?”

“I apologize if this is a strange question, but…have I done something to offend you?” Akechi asked. He’d tried to make it sound light and casual, but it wasn’t hard to miss the uncertainty hidden underneath all of that. Then again, maybe it was hard to miss but Akira had honed in how to pick it up on it.

“Why do you think that?” Akira deflected, wanting to see just how much Akechi would say about it. When he looked over at the brunette, Akechi was frowning to himself, and when he caught wind that Akira was looking at him, it quickly disappeared.

“It’s nothing,” Akechi finally said, throwing on another signature easy smile. “I apologize for asking. It was out of place. How have you been sleeping?”

“I’m fine,” Akira told him. It was probably a bigger lie than he was willing to think about.

Instead of nodding in agreement, however, Akechi stared at him curiously. “Is there a reason you’re lying?” He asked quietly. Calmly. Patiently.

I could ask you that same question. Akira managed a smile. He was supposed to be playing it cool and trusting, but it was getting harder and harder for him to get through it. Not when every moment left him conflicted with the boy in front of him who cared in a way that was a bit too close for comfort and the memory of the same boy as a ruthless murderer and an accomplice to possibly more crimes that Akira didn’t even know about. Still, the brunette’s question caught him by surprise. “Yes,” Akira finally answered. He caught his eye. “Did you hear about the accident with the politician?”

Akechi blinked in surprise. “I assisted with the case,” he answered carefully. “Did you know someone who was hurt?” It sounded like he was holding his breath again.
“No,” Akira answered. “But that doesn’t matter. Innocent people were hurt. Some were killed. It’s just awful.”

“…Yes. It was a very tragic accident. Certainly he…hadn’t intended there to be so many casualties. But he has only himself to blame for his actions,” he said, sounding like he was in front of a camera and reporters rather than the intimacy of friendship.

Akira gaped at him. That was all he had to say about it? Akechi was staring at the ground now as he spoke, so he missed the look that Akira gave him when he’d answered.

“I wonder if it’s that simple,” Akira told him.

“What do you mean?”

Akira shook his head. He probably shouldn’t be so cryptic when he was supposed to be gaining Akechi’s trust. “Dunno. Either way, his life has been ruined. Poor guy.”

Akechi didn’t respond.

They talked for a bit more as Akira ended up going with Akechi all the way back to his apartment yet again. As they approached it, Akira briefly wondered what the inside of Akechi’s apartment would look like. Was it clad with books about different subjects? Was it almost empty? Did he have a roommate? He’d really surprised himself with just how much he wanted to know about Akechi’s personal life.

As they approached his apartment, both boys at the same time noticed the kid from the other day – Kioshi – sitting against one wall of the outside of the complex by himself. He had a small bag next to him, and, not too far away, a group of other kids were playing tag or something similar to it.

“It’s that kid,” Akira said first.

“It would seem so,” Akechi added.

“We should say hello,” Akira said, already taking off to talk to him.

“What--” Akechi started, but his words faltered as once again he was left to follow after Akira in as he went off to speak to the small child.

When they got to him, Akira noticed that Kioshi had a small flattened marble and was rolling it around in front of him. The boy looked up when he noticed them, and Akira smiled kindly and threw him a wave.

“Mom says I’m not supposed to talk to strangers,” Kioshi said cautiously.

“Mom’s smart,” Akira agreed. “How about this? I’m Akira. Kurusu.” When Akechi didn’t say anything, Akira turned to him, prompting him to snap out of whatever train of thought he was lost in.

“Ah. Hello. My name is Goro Akechi. I live in this building too,” Akechi offered with a kind, yet somewhat unsure smile. “I live right down the hall from you, I think.”

“I know,” Kioshi said. “You always look sad when I see you.”

“Huh?” Akechi blinked, shocked.

“Every time I see you outside the building, you smile a lot. But when I see you inside, you look
sad,” the kid remarked.

“Th-That’s quite observant of you. Although, I wouldn’t say that I’m sad,” Akechi started, glancing over at Akira.

The kid just shrugged, not offering any more information as he continued to roll his flattened marble against the concrete. A moment of silence passed over as no one spoke or really knew what to say.

“Well, I suppose we should get--” Akechi started.

“That’s a nice marble,” Akira noted at the same time that Akechi spoke. “Sorry,” he added after realizing he’d interrupted the brunette.

Kioshi glanced up again. He bit the inside of his lip, then gestured to the bag. “I won a bag of ohajiki at school today.”

“Really?” Akira said, acting like it was the coolest thing in the world. “That’s impressive.”

“Not really…” Kioshi started. Then he kind of got a small smile, like he was proud of himself but wasn’t sure if he should be proud of himself. “I just won the spelling contest in my class.”

“I failed my spelling contest,” Akira said, putting on a dramatic frown. “You must be a genius.”

“I…usually win it…” Kioshi said shyly.

“Definitely a genius,” Akira nodded. “How come you aren’t playing over there?” He asked, pointing to the other kids.

The boy frowned. “Mom told me I should go downstairs and share with the other kids, but when I asked them to, they said they didn’t want to play with me.”

Akira thought for a moment, then turned to Akechi, who was regarding him with the same look that he’d given him the first time they’d spoken to the boy. “Do you have extra time?”

“I suppose I do. For what?” Akechi said.

Akira smiled, then turned back to the kid. He sat down cross-legged on the concrete across from him. “I haven’t played in years, so go easy on me, okay?”

Kioshi stared at him for what seemed like hours. “You don’t have to do that, Mister.”

“You scared?” Akira teased lightly.

“I-I’m not scared!” Kioshi said, and Akira noted the way that he tried to hide a smile. It was almost a shame. Kids shouldn’t feel like they have to hide their smiles.

“You need a flat surface for optimal gameplay,” Akechi pointed out.

Akira shrugged with a smile. “More fun this way.” Then he glanced up and down at Akechi. “You should sit down.”

“Oh. Right. Of course,” Akechi said, moving so that he was also sitting cross-legged next to Akira.

They played like that for a while, and Akira wasn’t oblivious to the way that Akechi’s eyes bored into the side of his face with a mixture of curiosity and something that Akira couldn’t quite
pinpoint. Akechi was good at a lot of things, but it somewhat surprised Akira that he’d been mostly quiet the whole time they played with the child.

So, when Kioshi flicked the winning ohajiki and clapped triumphantly and got a childish grin on his face, the tender and somewhat sad look that Akechi got on his face also wasn’t lost on Akira.

“I won!” Kioshi declared.

Akira pretended to be upset. “I can’t believe it. You’re a pro at this.” Then he turned to Akechi. “Do you want to play?”

“Yeah, you should play too Mister!”

Akechi fumbled over his words slightly. “O-Oh, well, I’ve never played myself. I’ve simply read about it.”

“That’s even more reason to try,” Akira said. Then, dramatically, he added, “Avenge me,” with a tilted smile.

Akechi couldn’t stop his smile from forming. “Your expectations may be too high.”

“True. Go easy on the newbie, okay?” Akira teased to Kioshi, who giggled again.

“Newbie?” Akechi said as they both laughed at him, and it took him a second to register their gentle ribbing and allowed himself to chuckle. “I learn very quickly, so I don’t anticipate being called that for long.”

They started setting up the ohajiki again when Kioshi paused. “Do you still have Dad’s toy?” He asked Akechi.

“I do…” Akechi said carefully. “Would you like it?”

Kioshi bit his lip, fumbling with one of the flattened marbles before shaking his head. “N-No.” After another moment, he continued. “Dad used to play this game with me all the time. Mom thinks I don’t remember, but I do. He used to read me stories too.”

“Before he left?” Akira said calmly.

Kioshi nodded. “I think Mom’s scared that he came back. She was really sad when he left, and she worked a lot after so I didn’t see her much.”

“It must’ve been hard for you both,” Akechi added, mindlessly moving one of the marbles around in the palm of his hand. “It’s a little surprising that you don’t hold any malice towards your father.”

“Malice?”

“My apologies. I meant anger.”

Kioshi thought for a moment, tapping one of the marbles in his hand against the ground as he tilted his head to the side with a thoughtful expression. “I should. Mom says I should. Everyone else says I should.” He shook his head. “But when I saw him, I wanted to hug him. Is that bad?” Kioshi said unsurely.

“That’s good,” Akechi said quietly.
“Huh?”

Akechi smiled softly. “You should try your hardest to never let that anger get inside you. Once it does, it’s hard to get rid of it.”

Kioshi stared at him for a long moment. “You’re kinda weird, Mister,” he noted.

Akira stifled a laugh as Akechi blinked, caught off-guard at the young boy’s statement. “He’s not wrong,” Akira teased.

“I beg your pardon?” Akechi asked as Kioshi giggled to himself.

Akira’s phone went off, and when he pulled it out of the pocket of his gym pants, he saw that it was the alarm he’d set for himself to get back home. He needed to make sure that he had some time to craft some infiltration tools for Ann and Ryuuji for tomorrow’s mission. A few extra tools would make things easier for them, and on the off-chance they needed to get back quickly, he made a mental note to craft some Goho-Ms and Vanish Balls for them.

“I think I have to get going,” Akira said, and the boy’s face fell.

“A-Already?” Kioshi pouted. “But we were about to play…”

Akira smiled, placing a hand on Akechi’s shoulder. “Luckily, we both know someone who lives here, remember?”

Kioshi’s eyes brightened. “Do you mind, Mister?” He asked Akechi. “I promise I’ll apologize for calling you weird.”

“You…still want to play with me?” Akechi said cautiously.

Kioshi nodded. “Can we? Please? I don’t wanna go back inside yet.”

“O-Oh. Of course. Yes, I can play with you.”

“Yay!”

Akechi opened his mouth to say something else, but before he could, he paused abruptly, placing his hand to his forehead for a second, and it almost masked the distant look that just barely showed. After a second, the look passed and he shook his head, looking slightly dazed. Akira tilted his head questioningly, and Akechi smiled back uncertainly. “I apologize. I’m fine,” he said, and though his face didn’t show it, his voice seemed as clear as day about it.

***

When Akira got home that evening, he was able to craft a good number of tools for the others as Morgana prodded him for details on anything new that had happened with Akechi. When he told him about hanging out with Kioshi, the cat gave him another suspicious gaze, reminding Akira once more of just who he was getting chummy with.

He thought about it. If he got the name through a slipup, they could take him down and Akechi would likely be taken to jail along with all the other conspirators. Even if Akechi somehow did decide to give up the name voluntarily to help them, he’d could get a shorter sentence, but Akira had a hard time imagining any type of scenario where the brunette didn’t end up serving some bit of time for his crimes. When he’d voiced this to Morgana, he was met with another round of protective, suspicious eyes.
“Why are you even trying to imagine a scenario of him not going to jail?” Morgana wondered.

That was a good point, and one Akira didn’t have a rebuttal for. Not yet.

So he’d laid in bed after finishing the tools, mindlessly reading through The Republic and taking note of all the things Akechi had highlighted and starred when he got a text.

Goro Akechi 20:47
I tried to go easy on him and he beat me.

Goro Akechi 20:47
So I stopped going easy on him and he beat me.

Akira Kurusu 20:49
Maybe you just suck?

Goro Akechi 20:50
Thank you for the kind words.

Akira Kurusu 20:53
Do I detect a hint of sarcasm?

Goro Akechi 20:59
Ha. Perhaps you’re the ace detective after all.

Akira Kurusu 21: 03
I might let you be my assistant if you’re lucky.

Goro Akechi 21:04
How very generous of you.

Goro Akechi 21:07
By the way, I wanted to thank you.

Akira Kurusu 21:09
What for?

Goro Akechi 21:23
He asked me to play with him again. If it’s alright, I’d like for you to join me. I don’t know if I ever would have spoken to him had you not been there that first day, yet he lived down the hall from me. It seems being around you has brought some new faces into my life that I hadn’t anticipated.

Akira placed his phone down, pressing his thumb and index finger to the bridge of his nose. Morgana hopped onto the bed, staring at him. “Is it Akechi?” Akira nodded. “I could tell because you were smiling again,” the cat added with a tone that suggested that he definitely wasn’t happy about it. “I thought you said he might be involved in that incident with the politician?” Morgana asked, his tone softening and turning into one of concerned curiosity.

“It’s hard to explain,” Akira finally said.

Morgana stared at him further before groaning. He stretched, pressing his paws against the sheets with a wary expression. “Oh no. What if it turns out like that movie you watched about the two rivals who fall in love?”
Akira smiled, amused. “Is that how this story is supposed to go?” He chuckled, but his words didn’t do much to stop Morgana’s concerned look. He smiled even wider. “That won’t happen.”

“Are you sure?”

“If it does, you have full permission to knock some sense into me,” he said.

“I won’t forget that, you know!” Morgana said with a determined tone.

And Akira knew that he probably wouldn’t forget either. He leaned back against the wall, thinking about that for a moment. It was hard for him to picture a scenario like that happening, but then again, he also hadn’t anticipated bonding with Akechi to this degree. The thought certainly hadn’t crossed his mind in the last timeline either.

To be honest, he’d hadn’t really thought about it at all with the others either. The last time, he’d only just started to feel like he could be more than friends with Makoto, but he hadn’t quite gotten to that point yet. Maybe this time around he would. He’d gotten along with her easily, and he enjoyed spending time with her. Plus, he had to admit that her lack of knowledge about things that most teens their age knew about was adorable. He thought about her brown hair and reddish-brown eyes. He definitely found her attractive too. If he were to think of himself as the person who had a “type,” she’d probably be pretty close.

He shook his head. He could think about that later, since he’d only just barely spoken to Makoto in this timeline.

Instead, he resumed to where he was reading in the book. On some level, Akechi was right. It was boring. But what wasn’t was seeing Akechi found interesting. Akira wasn’t even really reading it in any particular order, which left him confused, but he found it easier that way. His eyes fell to one portion that Akechi had underlined:

> *And this, then, is the genesis and being of justice: it is a mean between what is best—doing injustice without paying the penalty—and what is worst—suffering injustice without being able to avenge oneself.*

The mean between doing injustice without paying the penalty and suffering injustice without being able to avenge yourself. Akira wondered that too.

Akira noticed a little note scribbled next to it in the margins that was most likely written by Akechi:

*So what then is the mean of these two? What does it look like in reality?*

He had nice handwriting, Akira noticed. A little slanted, like he was in a rush to write out his thoughts or else they would leave him and not return. But nice.

Akira rubbed his forehead. He read a little more before he finally couldn’t keep his eyes open and went to sleep.

He dreamt of the genesis of justice and of brunettes with reddish-brown eyes.

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“Madarame will be returning soon, will he not?” Akechi asked for confirmation as he and Akira stood in the same room of Madarame’s shack that they’d been in before.
Akira was sitting against the wall, casually watching the scene unfold. Yusuke nodded from behind his canvas, a placid expression on his face. Morgana was off at the room hopefully getting the door unlocked, with Ryuji and Ann in the Palace awaiting the all-clear to move forward. Even though he’d spoken of his high confidence in them, it didn’t change the fact that he was still nervous. It felt odd to have them in the Palace without him. It probably didn’t seem too strange for them to go without him, since it was only their second Palace in this timeline, but for Akira, it was another story altogether.

Plus, seeing Akechi fidgeting this much while trying to hide it was almost worth having them go instead.

“I apologize if that causes some anxiety on your part,” Yusuke replied.

“It’s perfectly alright,” Akechi said kindly. Then he cleared his throat. “Although, since he will be coming home soon, I wonder if it would be more beneficial to perhaps move to a room with a lock.”

“A lock?” Yusuke said, confused for a moment. “Ah. There is no need to worry. I have alerted Sensei to this, so he will not bother us.”

“I…see…” Akechi said slowly.

Akira moved so that he was more comfortable on the seat, rotating his neck to get out some of the knots from the night before.

“Shall we get started then?” Yusuke said.

Akechi cleared his throat. Again. “I-I suppose we should…” He looked over at Akira, who shrugged and reached up his hands for the top button of the button-up shirt that he specifically wore for today.

“Did you know that a majority of nude models are female?” Akechi blurted as soon as Akira unbuttoned the top button. “And yet, from the 16th to 19th centuries, women were barred from studying the nude model. Isn’t that interesting?”

“I didn't know that,” Akira said calmly as he continued to unbutton his shirt.

“Yes—” he said abruptly right at the heels of Akira’s statement, and the swiftness and urgency in his tone made Akira pause to actually look at him, which was probably what he’d intended. “And the statue of Michelangelo’s David was cut 43 years earlier for an artist who planned to turn it into a statue of Hercules.”

Akira had to admit, Akechi’s attempts at stalling were kind of adorable, though he knew he could never say that to Morgana or the others when they inevitably asked how it went. Calm, collected Akechi was fidgeting more than he ever would’ve expected a Detective Prince to.

“I knew my instincts were correct,” Yusuke mused, his interest clearly piqued. “Your knowledge of art is fascinating.”

“He’s pretty impressive,” Akira piled on. “I’m just here to look pretty.”

“He’s being modest. He’s quite knowledgeable about many things as well,” Akechi was quick to add.

“So this is what the bonds of friendship look like. A truly beautiful bond indeed,” Yusuke said, and
Akira wasn’t even sure he was really addressing them anymore. “Not to worry, I will have a series of dynamic poses to demonstrate the rawness of such beauty,” he added.

“Oh good. I was so worried,” Akira said dryly, unable to stop himself from smiling when he saw Akechi fidget where he stood.

“Dynamic poses?” The brunette repeated, then let out a short, slightly less charismatic laugh. “That’s very creative of you. I’m sure it will turn out exceptional.”

“I appreciate it,” Yusuke said with a smile. “Now, I suppose we should begin.”

Akira nodded. “Yeah. Guess so.” Then he flicked his eyes over to Akechi, biting the inside of his lip for a second to keep from smiling. “After you,” he said, gesturing to Akechi.

“Ah. Yes, of course…” Akechi said slowly. He reached up at the top of his shirt. Then he cleared his throat (Akira really needed to keep count) once more and stopped before undoing it. “Also--” Akechi started once more as Akira failed to stifle his laugh this time. Akechi paid it no mind. “The small town in Van Gogh’s *The Starry Night* was painted while he was a patient at the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole psychiatric hospital.”

“I think someone’s nervous,” Akira teased, glancing over at Yusuke.

“Nervous?” Yusuke repeated.

“Nervous might be a bit of an overstatement,” Akechi pointed out, and Akira gave him a knowing look as he smiled.

“I think he might feel a bit more at ease if we knew for sure that we wouldn’t be interrupted,” Akira noted.

“Won’t be interrupted…” Yusuke said, still looking a little confused.

Akira’s smile deepened as he leaned forward where he was sitting, his elbows now resting on his thighs. “Locks are generally good for that,” he reiterated. “Just to be sure.”

“I see. The only room with a lock is Sensei’s room,” Yusuke said, his tone portraying it like it was some bit of devastating news. He brightened slightly. “Oh! Perhaps it would put you at ease if I were to turn the other way.”

Akira fought the urge to playfully tell him that inevitably he would have to be looking, and instead reached for the middle button on his shirt, but before he could get it undone and before Akechi could blurt out yet another fact about art, the three of them heard a loud noise coming from outside the room.

He caught Akechi’s eye, and the brunette nodded subtly at Morgana’s signal.

“Hm?” Yusuke said curiously. “What was that?”

“It sounded like a crash,” Akechi said. “Did Madarame get back early?”

“I don’t believe so,” Yusuke said in quiet bafflement.

“We should check it out,” Akira said, standing from his seat.

Yusuke hesitated for a moment, then nodded. “Alright. I’ll be back shortly. Please don’t trouble yourselves,” he told them before sliding open the door and walking out into the hall and towards
Akira started to follow after him, when Akechi stopped him. He cleared his throat again, somewhat nervously before giving way to another charismatic laugh. “I think you can re-button your shirt now.”

“Does it turn you on?”

“Wh-What?” He sputtered.

“Kidding,” Akira teased as he past him to walk out the door, buttoning up his shirt in the process. He paused at the entrance and turned back to look at Akechi, who was somewhat flustered but otherwise smiling. “Let’s go. You ready?”

Akechi nodded. “As I’ll ever be.”

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There were a lot of things that Akira didn’t know about Akechi. Yet, in the short time span that he’d hung out with him, he felt like he’d learned more about him than he ever did in the last timeline. Not from the things he said, but from the small things that he’d tried to hide.

Their plot to stall had gone off without a hitch. All they had to do was keep Yusuke talking until Morgana got the door open, then he would do something to make noise so that the artist would leave the room to search for the source of it.

Ann had been especially cagey about the details of how she did it last time, so he was left to his own vices of how to go about it this time.

Still, it had all turned out, and that was what mattered.

It had surprised Akira, even though he’d known it was coming, to see all of the paintings that Madarame kept in his locked room.

Not only that, but there was a hardness in the way that Akechi confronted Madarame that he also hadn’t been expecting. But when he addressed Yusuke, his tone was softer, almost like he was looking at a part of himself when he spoke to the artist.

Madarame made his excuses, and Akechi shot them down one-by-one, his tone calm and inquisitive, like he was inviting him for a cup of tea instead of challenging him to try and find a flaw in his logic.

Akira remembered that last time Ann and Yusuke entered Mementos, they’d come down from the sky somehow, maybe since they’d been running. When Madarame threatened to call the police on them, Akechi didn’t seem fazed in the slightest.

They’d left the room, and the next part had really been on Akira to implement. The others didn’t know that Yusuke was supposed to enter the Metaverse that day. And if he’d brought it up to Akechi, he would’ve surely denied the idea of actively bringing yet another person in. The less people exposed to it, the better, was what he’d likely have said. Only Akira and Morgana had known.

“What do we do?” Yusuke had asked.

So just like that, it had all happened just like before, albeit different people. Akira didn’t know
much about time travel (and really, still had a hard time believing it himself), but it made Akira wonder if maybe certain things were just set to happen. And that maybe changing fate only exists for minor occurrences, and certain events happened in every timeline.

The thought didn’t leave him at ease.

“This grotesque world is Madarame’s heart?” Yusuke had said.

Akechi was the one who’d spoken up first. “It’s hard, to see what others may truly be thinking beneath the surface,” he’d said.

Yusuke, poor, pure Yusuke who loved art and wanted to believe that the person he admired the most loved art just as much as he did.

Akira understood. All of them did, to some extent. Having high expectations of the adults they admired and looked up to only to realize that they were never worthy of it to begin with. Akira wondered how that could change a person.

By the time Madarame confronted them in the Palace, Akira was reminded of the sheer horridness of it once more. He hated having to witness his friend go through it again. But it was necessary. He had to awaken to his persona. No. Maybe he didn’t. Maybe they could’ve stopped Madarame without recruiting Yusuke this time around.

But in the end, Akira was grateful that Yusuke had joined them. Who knows what would’ve happened to him if he’d found out the horrible truth behind Madarame and was then left to his own vices?

“It’s much easier to steal the futures of children who won’t fight back,” Madarame had told them without an ounce of regret.

It was deplorable, even the second time around, and Akira half wanted to abandon the plan and all common sense as a leader and tell them to just go all-out.

“That’s how you really think, then,” Akechi had said calmly, like he hadn’t been affected by the words at all.

It was yet another thing that Akira wouldn’t have noticed had he not be specifically looking to see how Akechi would react. His hands—

--they were balled into fists. And (it was hard to tell with the lighting) it almost looked like they were shaking, ever so slightly. But from his tone, Akira would’ve never been able to tell that he was holding something back. The others likely hadn’t noticed it themselves.

“Livestock are killed from their hide and meat. This is no different.”

And Akira didn’t know what Akechi’s persona awakening was like, but he realized that maybe Akechi had never seen anyone else awaken to theirs until that moment. Akechi had been one of the ones telling Yusuke to get back, but his eyes widened and he watched as Yusuke stood up to the man that had once been the source of so much gratitude.

Akira never knew what Yusuke’s persona had said to him, and he likely never would, but seeing his friend stand up to the person who’d taken so much from others reminded him of just how much he’d grown to care for his friends and teammates. They’d all come such a long way, and it reignited Akira’s determination that he wouldn’t let the same fate befall them.
He glanced over at Akechi, who was watching Yusuke with a carefully guarded expression, his fists still balled up but looking significantly less clenched.

“No matter what it takes, I will bring you to justice,” Yusuke had said.

And Akira thought again about the very being of justice.

When they beat Madarame’s henchmen, Akechi had stayed fairly quiet. He regarded Yusuke with a curious expression, but chose not to speak. He still looked tense, but when the others looked at him or addressed him, it vanished quickly into an easy and charismatic expression that betrayed nothing.

They parted ways for the night after the stint at the café, and Akira knew that Morgana had really started to have enough of him always hanging out with Akechi, but he found himself reaching for Akechi’s shoulder before he could really think about what he was doing.

He’d promised Morgana sushi, and the cat reminded him that his tally was steadily rising and he’d been charged interest on all the sushi that was being promised.

“What is it?” Akechi had asked, a bright smile on his face.

“Come with me,” Akira told him.

Akechi looked at him curiously, before nodding and gesturing for him to lead the way. When Akira led him to the train station, the brunette opened his mouth to ask what they were doing there, and Akira held up his phone instead, the Meta Nav app in full view. “You haven’t been to Mementos,” Akira said, as though that was enough of an explanation.

“I haven’t,” Akechi agreed. Then he blinked in surprise. “Are we going now?”

*It’s the best place to blow off steam,* Akira wanted to say. But he knew that Akechi would deny that he’d ever been upset in the first place and might even insist that it wasn’t necessary. “I need money for sushi,” Akira said instead, giving him a tilted smile.

Well, it wasn’t entirely a lie.

“I…see,” Akechi said with thoughtful puzzlement. “Aren’t you a bit tired from spending the day in the Palace?”

“Are you?” Akira said knowingly.

“Well…” Akechi said slowly. Then he smiled again. “I suppose I am curious.”

And so, that was how Akira found himself in the depths of Mementos with his rival and friend.

Morgana would have a field day with him if he ever decided to tell him, because, as it turns out, it was a bad idea. Akira thought of all the times that he’d gotten mildly frustrated with Morgana for heavily persuading him that he shouldn’t go out and should just rest after coming back from a day in the Palace and made a mental note to give Morgana the chance to brag and tell him “I told you so.”

Not to mention, the quiet echoes of Mementos already left an almost eerie feeling, especially considering it was just Akechi and Akira.

He’d gone into the deeper part of Mementos, and that had been his first mistake. Akira could
already feel that he wasn’t at full strength, but he figured that they wouldn’t be there for too long; just enough time until Akechi seemed as light as he tried to portray himself to be.

It was the fourth battle they got in that led Akira to make his second mistake. When the Shadows turned into Jack Frosts, Akira immediately knew the weakness and summoned Hua Po. Akechi didn’t have any fire abilities with his Persona, and so he figured he’d get rid of them quickly before they could get the jump on him.

It was his own fault, really. He hadn’t been paying attention. Akechi had nearly gotten hit with an bufu spell, but had jumped out of the way at the last second. It was much slower than how quick he usually dodged, and to be on the safe side, he’d hit one of them with a Tarunda so that if Akechi did happen to get hit, it wouldn’t be so bad.

In retrospect, it was almost funny that Jack Frost hit Akira with a bufu spell as a result of not immediately using fire to take them down. The sudden chill that shot through him didn’t stop as he was knocked back onto the ground, and felt his entire body start to freeze up. The cold kept coming in waves and it was almost like his blood would freeze completely.

“C-C…” Akira tried to say, but even his tongue felt it was incapable of moving. He was on the ground, entirely helpless and almost entirely frozen.

He’d conquered death only to be killed by a measly shadow in Mementos, all because he’d wanted to help Akechi blow off some steam. He couldn’t believe it. Akira felt himself start to lose consciousness as his entire body felt frozen and his eyesight began to get dark spots in front of his vision.

He saw Akechi stand over him with wide eyes, then turn to the shadows that were dancing around with that cheerful grin on their faces. The brunette looked back down at Akira with a complicated look on his face, and, for a second, he thought that Akechi would just kill him there and pretend the shadows had been the ones to deliver the final blow. He was too frozen and too cold to stop him anyway. The edges of his vision blurred into black. He tried to say something—anything, but nothing audible came out.

The last thing he saw was Akechi get a faraway look in his eyes, and as Akira faded out of consciousness, he couldn’t see the brunette, but he thought he heard him speak in the calmest voice he’d ever heard.

“Incinerate them.”

***

The feel of a handkerchief on his forehead was the first thing Akira came to. He hadn’t opened his eyes yet, but the silence and lack of city noise made him think that he was either dead or still in Mementos.

Slowly, Akira fluttered his eyes open, only to be met with Akechi’s face as he knelt next to him. His Crow mask wasn’t on his face, though the rest of his rebel’s attire was on. The brunette froze, the handkerchief in his hand and pressed lightly against his forehead.

Akechi suddenly brought his hand back, and he smiled kindly. “Ah. Welcome back to reality,” the brunette said.

Akira pressed his fingers to his forehead, trying to recall what had just happened and a little surprised to find that his forehead was sweating even though he’d just been frozen. “I’m cold,” he
finally said after a few moments of silence.

Akechi laughed. “Ice spells will do that. Are you alright?” Akira nodded as he slowly sat up.
“Good.” Another pause, then Akechi took a breath. “Do you…remember anything from before you passed out?”

“I remember getting hit. That’s about it…” Akira admitted. He wracked his brain, with no such luck. It felt like there was something, especially when he saw Akechi’s shoulders un-tense in relief. Some semblance of a forgotten memory that was fighting to return back to him. Oh, right. “Were you okay without any fire? They were weak to it.”

Akechi smiled slightly, like he was privy to something Akira hadn’t quite figured out. “I managed.” He scooted back to give Akira some room. “Perhaps coming to Mementos wasn’t such a good idea.”

Akira rotated his neck, still feeling tired even though he’d just spent the past who-knows-how-many minutes knocked out. “Do you feel better?”

Akechi furrowed his brow, offering him a short laugh. “Isn’t that what I should be asking you?”

Akira shook his head subtly. “You seemed upset at the Palace. Thought this would help.”

Akechi stopped then, his mouth dropping slightly open. “You…came here for me?” He placed his hand on his chin. “I recall you needing money for Morgana.”

Akira smiled and shrugged. “That too.”

Akechi started to speak, but it took a second before he found his voice again. “You never cease to surprise me…” the brunette said tentatively. “I wasn’t upset, per se,” he continued. Akira didn’t speak, but he gave him a look that prompted Akechi to continue speaking. “It turned out that Madarame thinks quite horribly about those below him. It was a little disorienting to hear. But Kitagawa is not allowing himself to be held captive by Madarame anymore. The man he wanted approval from just this morning no longer holds that spot in his heart.”

“That’s a good thing,” Akira said after a beat.

It took a little longer than a beat for Akechi to reply. “Yes. It is.” He closed his eyes briefly, and when he opened them, he met Akira’s steady gaze. “Akira,” he said. “Do you trust me?”

That had been a surprise. Akira stared at the brunette, who kept his steady gaze trained on him as well. Akira contemplated the many different ways that the lie could come out. He could deflect, or answer a question with a question, which Akechi had become somewhat accustomed to Akira doing.

“Yes, of course.
You’re my teammate.
We’re friends, aren’t we?”

But despite acknowledging that he didn’t know a lot about the brunette, Akira also knew that he and Akechi were probably more similar than he’d like to admit. So, instead, he gave him a small, sad smile.

“Not really,” Akira said, and Akechi blinked wordlessly. “I found your story about awakening to your persona and the Nav app a little too convenient.”
After another moment, Akechi sort of smiled back. He trained his eyes down to his handkerchief, which was still slightly damp from dabbing against Akira’s forehead. The brunette folded it over carefully, a faint smile still on his face. “I also found your explanation of the circumstances surrounding bringing me into the cognitive world a little too convenient to be ‘accidental.’ I can’t say that I trust you completely either. But--” Then he exhaled, as though frustrated with himself. “I like being around you.”

No amount of sushi would sate Morgana for Akira’s next statement. “Me too,” Akira admitted, and Akechi looked at him in surprise. “I like being around you, too.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Makes it difficult when I remember that I’m not really supposed to trust you.”

Akira had meant it to be taken lightly, but all it did was cause Akechi to cast his eyes down with that indistinct smile of his. “I know the feeling. You wouldn’t like being around me, though, if I was honest with you.”

“Do you want to be honest with me?”

“No.” He didn’t even hesitate. Akechi smiled tautly for a moment, nodding to himself with a dry chuckle. “Do you want to be honest with me?” He asked, turning the question back on Akira.

He tried to imagine how Akechi would react if he actually told him the truth. I was actually killed by you in another timeline but somehow I got transported back to April thanks to a strange man with a long nose named Igor.

You shot me in the head.

The truth was an ugly thing sometimes. Akira wondered what truth was hiding past Akechi’s secrets. Maybe it wasn’t as bad as he was imagining.

Or maybe it was much worse.

“It seems like we both know more than we’re letting on,” Akechi said when Akira didn’t answer his question. “Where does that leave it, then.”

Akira pressed his fingers to his temple. “We should focus on saving Yusuke and stopping Madarame.”

Akechi gaped at him. “You still want me to fight alongside you, even after acknowledging a level of distrust?”

Of course Akira did. Casting him out wouldn’t exactly help his case. Akechi had to realize that too. Isn’t that why you’re still here, Akechi? But instead of offering him a serious answer or question in response, Akira shrugged nonchalantly. “I saw you training with Ryuji. I think I could take you.”

Akechi scoffed, this time in disbelief. “I find you hard to understand sometimes.”

“You saved my life back there,” Akira told him.

Akechi frowned. “I-I suppose I did.”

“I can’t ignore that,” Akira said. He shifted where he was sitting. “Are my friends safe around you?” He asked plainly.

Akechi didn’t speak for a moment, and a flicker of a million different emotions crossed over his face in the span of a few seconds before his face showed one of frustration, again, with himself, it
seemed. “Yes,” he finally admitted.

Akira didn’t know if he was lying, but he nodded nonetheless. “There you go,” he said. Akira didn’t ask if he himself was safe around him. He didn’t want to, really. He knew the answer without even needing to ask. He wouldn’t forget that Akechi had saved him just then, but he also couldn’t forget that Akechi had killed him.

He felt his head start to throb again. A reminder of the future that had befallen him in the past.

“We should get back before the others begin to worry,” Akechi said, getting up.

The quiet stillness of Mementos seemed to sate some of the pain. Even though his mind was swirling with thoughts, he knew that returning back to the real world: having to answer questions from Morgana, come up with the next plan for his teammates, avoid ruin and make friends with the strangers he’d once become close to, wouldn’t help at all. Before Akira could fully process the words, he spoke. “Just a little longer? It’s quiet here.”

“Don’t you want to be alone for that?”

Alone. Akira knew that feeling too well. He didn’t like it so much, but recently being around people hadn’t helped him much either. Well, except—

Akira managed a smile. “Not even a little bit.”

Akechi matched his expression, nodding slowly before resuming his spot next to Akira. He brought one knee up to his chest and rested his arm against it. He didn’t say anything. Akira felt another wave of exhaustion hit him, and instead of ignoring it, it let it in. He brought his knees up and put his head in his hands, exhaling deeply and closing his eyes.

The brief thought came to him that the others might come into Mementos and find their leader weary and with tired eyes, but he hoped that maybe they’d been tired too after entering the Palace and had chosen to rest in the real world. Akira also briefly thought that Akechi had yet another chance to kill him right there if he wanted to. But when he peeked and looked over, he saw that Akechi had mimicked him, his head already down against his folded arms atop his knees.

Akira wondered if maybe this all would’ve been easier had he just done exactly the same thing as last time, except actually succeeding in getting Sae to take the phone. There wasn’t much point in dwelling on it now, but maybe he wouldn’t have felt so stressed.

How would his teammates react when he told them that Akechi wasn’t really on their side after all? What would Akechi do, when they finally caught his boss and the brunette was taken away in handcuffs? Morgana was right, there was no scenario where he didn’t picture that happening. Not to mention, Akira couldn’t picture a scenario where he would be okay with that not happening. It had nothing to do with resentment or revenge. It was just what had to be done.

But he could enjoy these moments while they lasted, couldn’t he?

Akira his head back down, closing his eyes and trying to take in as much sleep as he could.

***

When Akira opened his eyes, the blurry sight of Mementos came into view. He rubbed his eyes, looking around and stopping when he saw Akechi sitting not too far away, organizing what looking like various healing and support items. His mask was still off.
Akechi heard noise and glanced up, then smiled slightly when he saw Akira. “Good evening. How’d you sleep?”

Akira rotated his shoulders. It wasn’t like when he’d woken up after passing out. This time, he actually felt some of the tenseness leave him. “Did I really fall asleep?” He could only hope that it wasn’t too late in the real world. Sojiro and Morgana would have a field day with him. And not a good one.

“You snore, in case Morgana never told you,” Akechi said lightly. “I’m not sure how much time passed here, but I better arranged all of our support items for when we undertake our next mission.”

“Did you sleep too?”

“For a second, but I realized that it would not be beneficial if we were both asleep. I know this is a safe area, but it’s best to be on guard for surprises,” Akechi pointed out. “You slept well, though?”

Truthfully, he had. So he nodded slowly. “You didn’t have to do that. A few minutes would’ve been fine.”

“I know,” Akechi said. “I wanted to. You seemed so peaceful that it seemed almost sinful to disturb you.”

“You can sleep now, if you want. I’ll keep watch,” Akira said, even though it probably wasn’t a good idea considering they had no idea what time it was in the real world.

“That’s alright.” Akechi frowned slightly. “Isn’t it odd? Despite everything, I can still sleep soundly at night. What does that say about me, I wonder,” he said quietly. Then he brightened almost instantly. “Besides, a lot of time has probably passed. We should be heading back soon.”

Akira nodded, but neither boy got up to move. After another beat, Akira picked up one of the life stones. “Have you ever tried to juggle these?” Akira asked. “It’s fun to do when it gets tedious in Morgana’s car.”

“Juggle…the items?” Akechi said unsurely.

“These life stones for instance,” Akira said. He moved and sat cross-legged in a very clear attempt to prolong returning to the real world. “Watch.”

He didn’t really know what he was doing, but he felt proficient enough to do a fairly decent job. And he did—for about ten seconds before he lost his grip on one and it somehow defied all laws of physics and landed, hitting the tip of Akechi’s nose.

Akira opened his mouth and started to apologize, but the baffled look on Akechi’s face was almost too much. Akira hardly concealed his laugh. “Sorry.”


He picked up three of them, then tossed each one up in the air, and Akira shouldn’t have been as surprised as he was to see that Akechi somehow knew how to juggle because of course he did. He glanced over at Akira with a look that seemed to expect Akira to be impressed.

After a moment or two, his grip slipped on one when he tossed it upward out of his read, and it hit right on top of Akira’s head—
And the force of it seemed to activate because Akira suddenly felt a surge of extra energy.

Akechi’s mouth dropped as Akira chuckled. “I-I apologize, I didn’t--”

“Thanks for the heal. Though I think your plan to show-off backfired.” He glanced up as though he could see on top of his forehead, then placed his hand on top of his head to confirm that it had dissipated. He made a face at that, and when he looked back at Akechi, his shoulders were shaking and his hand was covering his mouth.

It took a moment for Akira to realize that Akechi was laughing. Not quite a belly-laugh, but one that he was clearly trying to control. But at that moment, he wasn’t good at controlling the laughter living inside of him, and the dark, foreboding Mementos was filled by the laughter of two boys who didn’t quite trust each other and didn’t ask for the fates that had been handed to them.

Akira decided then that before this was all over, he wanted to hear what that laugh sounded like without Akechi trying to conceal it.

Akira geared up to toss another one back at him.

“We shouldn’t waste them,” Akechi frowned as his laughter eased down, like a child who was scolding himself.

“We’ve got Morgana and Ann. We don’t even use these.”

“Then why did you buy them?”

“Dunno. Thought they’d be fun to throw at people,” Akira shrugged as Akechi stared at him at a loss for words yet again.

He finally managed to chuckle. “You’re such an interesting person.” Then he started to gather up the items. “Nevertheless, I think it’s best we start to head back.”

Akira nodded, then as he stood up, he clutched his side in pain. The brunette’s eyes widened as he stopped what he was doing and placed a hand on his shoulder to help steady him. “Are you alright?”

Akira smiled, then plopped his life stone on top of his head as it activated. “Gotcha,” he said.

“I-” Akechi opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again. “You’re insufferable sometimes,” he said. But he was smiling.

“I thought you liked being around me. Which is it?”

“Perhaps I spoke too soon.”

"Ouch," Akira smiled. "Alright. I agree, though. We should get back."

***

Thankfully, when they returned to the real world, it wasn’t too late into the evening, just a little past 9 PM. Sojiro would have a few words for him, Akira was sure, but it wasn’t nearly as bad as getting back at midnight.

Akechi insisted on walking back with him to the café, but he said that he wasn’t able to stay for coffee, since he had “work” to do that he’d already slacked off on completing.
“Well then,” Akechi said once they stopped in front of the door. “It was quite an eventful day. We should see how Yusuke is holding up.”

Akira nodded.

“Also,” Akechi continued. “Thank you for today. I’m not sure we collected enough yen for Morgana’s sushi desires, but I’m grateful that you invited me. It is hard for me to admit, but I suppose I did need to release some stress.” He shifted slightly. “I…meant what I said yesterday. It seems knowing you has led to situations that I wouldn’t have anticipated.”

Akira paused. He didn’t have the words. He rarely did. Instead, he reached up and placed his finger gently at the top of Akechi’s left cheek, catching him off guard. He tapped it lightly, and he could’ve sworn he heard Akechi stop breathing. Akira hadn’t noticed it before, but thinking back on it, he didn’t have it before the fight with Jack Frost. He didn't have it before Akira had gotten hit with the Bufu spell. “You have a small cut here.” From when you saved me? “Probably from Mementos.”

“…It’ll heal,” Akechi finally breathed.

“Good. Some things don’t.”

Akira stared at him for a moment, and for a split second, he thought he could’ve seen the universe in his eyes if he looked close enough.

So he didn’t look, and he removed his finger, turning pointedly to the door and placing a hand on the handle.

“Goodnight,” Akira started.

“Wait.” Akechi looked at him, and Akira looked back at the eyes that held the universe within them. "That accident with the politician."

“Hm?”

"I-I'm sorry," he finally said.

"Why are you apologizing?" Akira felt himself still. Was it happening already?

Then he smiled, kind of sad and kind of wistful at the same time. "I don't know," he said. "It...felt like I should," he admitting, his brows furrowing in slight confusion himself. "It was tragic."

“Yes, it was,” Akira said, his mind swirling with thoughts. It wasn't an outright admission to his involvement, but at the very least, it made Akira even more sure that Akechi knew far more about the politician's accident. Akechi seemed to realize that Akira would come to this conclusion too, because he didn't make eye contact after speaking the words. The thought didn't help him at all. He wondered if it was possible to enjoy a moment with Akechi without the thoughts of his alliances and deeds haunting him in the back of his mind soon after. Akira thought back to a passage he'd read in the Republic the other day.

Is there... a kind of good that we choose to have not because we desire its consequences, but because we delight in it for its own sake...?

Akira thought about the evening they'd spent in Mementos, where he didn't have to think about the real world. Where he'd slept in the same room as his murderer without fear that he would kill him, even though he very well could have at any moment. Despite the fact that Akechi hadn't harmed
him, it wasn't a smart decision to begin with to go with Akechi alone to Mementos, but he didn't regret it. A good that we delight in for its own sake. He looked at Akechi. Yes, Akira thought, there was.

When he got back inside and went to bed, Morgana purposefully kneaded the bed endlessly while he tried to sleep. Akira figured he probably deserved that. Since he wouldn't be able to sleep - both because of Morgana's revenge and having already spent time resting in Mementos with Akechi -- he thought back to Akechi's words; a few in particular:

"Despite everything, I can still sleep soundly at night. What does that say about me, I wonder," Akechi had said.

Akira had spent most of his nights not sleeping, and napping in Mementos with Akechi had actually been one of the best sleeps he'd had in a while. Yet even then, he still felt the knots in his neck. If Akira was the type of person that thought things were unfair, he would've noted how 'unfair' it was that Akechi slept soundly while he didn't. But Akira wasn't one of those people, and instead, all it did was spark his curiosity.

"Despite everything, I can still sleep soundly.

Akira felt no closer to discovering what that 'everything' was. He laid in bed, staring at the ceiling. He could keep progressing as he was, and he'd started to get Akechi to open up, but he couldn't say with certainty that he could get Akechi to fess up or slip up, despite the day's events, and Morgana's words from before seemed to come back in echoes. There was no way he'd be able to get through it in one piece without help, just like before. But he couldn't say anything to Ann and Ryuji. As much as he cared for them, he doubted they'd be able to do much other than offer support, even if they believed him. Morgana was helping him stay on task, but in his cat form, there wasn't much he could do either. There was always another person - the one who'd been essential in the initial plan to trick Akechi.

Futaba.

Akira thought about her often when he went back to Leblanc. Sometimes he would stop by the house, wondering if he should go inside and ultimately deciding against it. There was no doubt that her skills would be useful, and the sooner they could help her through her situation, the better. Makoto had been the next one who'd awakened to her persona and they'd stopped Kaneshiro. She was already suspicious, just like last time, so it was best to let that situation play out as it would.

But, he wondered how different the timeline would be if he moved differently. If he could just to Akechi's phone ahead of time--

Morgana kneaded him in the leg, and he turned the other way. No. That could be dangerous, to actively change the timeline in such a way. And as much as he'd kept telling Morgana that the first priority was saving Yusuke and stopping Madarame, he'd spent a lot of time thinking about the future. He exhaled audibly, hoping Morgana wouldn't say something about it. He needed to focus. Yusuke was counting on him.

Still. It was something to think about.

Chapter End Notes
JUST KISS ALREADY GEEZUS

Dat maragion doe. so hawt.

Also the amount of random facts about painting and art that I looked up is unreal.

Next chapter will probably be in about the same time frame (2-3 weeks). BUT might have a short chapter for you guys next week because I need to write something with less angst for them lol. YAY for sort-of filler chapters.
The Bridge From Solitude Leads Where?

Chapter Notes

There's not really anything plot-heavy in this chapter, except at the end (which I didn't originally have but once I got into the characters it just happened naturally lol). but like I said I wanted to write a chapter with minimal angst to counter the last chapter haha I mean there's still some here but it's to a minimal xD

THANK YOU to everyone who has read, left a comment, kudos, and bookmark! This fandom is seriously awesome. I will respond to comments from last chapter tomorrow :).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So this is your room?” Akechi said, his hand on his chin as he began to look around with a thoughtful expression.

“Ten out of ten?” Akira asked cheekily.

Akechi chuckled. “It’s clean at least.”

“Eight out of ten?” Akira said, leaning back against his bed but not quite sitting on it. Akechi made a face that made it clear that that wasn’t the rating he planned to give to it, and Akira pretended to pout. “Tough crowd.”

“Not as tough as you’d think,” Akechi said with a smile. “Anywhy, should we get to studying?”

Akira nodded, stretching his arms and yawning. Akechi moved to pick up his briefcase from the couch when he accidentally knocked over Akira’s bag as its contents came tumbling out. “Ah—Sorry about that,” Akechi said quickly.

He placed his briefcase back down and bent over to pick up the notebooks and textbooks that had fallen out of them. Akira barely had time to register when he picked up the journal that Sojiro had given him, which had fallen open with the book spine facing Akechi.

“It’s fine—” Akira said quickly, but not quick enough.

Akechi picked it up and turned it over, preparing to close it and place it back in the bag. “Huh?” He said, blinking and looking at the page that most likely had his name scribbled into it.

Akira felt his blood run cold as he froze. That was it. His brain tried to think of something—anything—that could excuse the things he’d written. The intel.

Akechi’s expression changed from surprise to shock to bewilderment to…something much darker. Betrayal. “Wh-What is this?” He said, holding it up and waiting impatiently for an explanation. “You’ve been keeping tabs on what we’re doing?” His voice was trembling now.

Akira opened his mouth, but no words came out. Of course they didn’t, because he had nothing to
say. He had no excuse, no lie to offer.

“Different from the timeline?” Akechi read. “What does that even mean?” Then he scoffed.
“You’ve been planning this from the beginning, haven’t you? Of course you did. Of course it wasn’t—” He exhaled, clearly frustrated with himself. He flipped to the beginning.

“Just calm down,” Akira said in what was probably an uncharacteristically dumb move on his part. But he didn’t know what else to say. He couldn’t explain. He hadn’t planned for this.

“Calm down?” Akechi said with a bitter, ironic laugh. “You’d like that.” He placed a hand to his forehead, laughing in a very unsettling way. “I was such a fool.”

“Ake—Goro—”

“Don’t,” Akechi said. “Don’t call me that. You’re the same as them. I was right not to trust you.”

"Just listen for a-"

“Stop talking! Just stop,” Akechi said callously. And then he lunged right for Akira---

---And Akira sat up in a cold sweat from his bed. He looked around, dazed and relieved to see the moonlight streaming in and Morgana sleeping soundly in the corner of his bed. He breathed a sigh of relief, running his fingers through his hair as he rested a hand on his forehead.

Just a dream.

But it felt real. He looked over to his TV and saw the journal sitting on the stand next to it. Was that where he’d left it before? It had to be…right?

He was going insane. It was just a dream. Don’t be irrational.

“Mm…what’s wrong?” Morgana said sleepily. He stirred from his comfortable position, blinking a few times before focusing on Akira.

He shook his head. “Nothing,” he said, throwing the cat a weary smile that he hoped Morgana wouldn’t notice with the dim lighting. “Had a weird dream.”

But was it?

Morgana looked at him with a furrowed face. “It was probably the food you ate. I told you not to try the Big Bang Challenge tonight!”

Akira managed to laugh. “Noted.” He dug his phone out of the pocket of his pajama bottoms, then laid back against his pillow and scrolled to Akechi’s contact. Just a dream. Just a--

“Who are you calling?” Morgana piped up. “It’s so late.”

Akira closed his eyes, trying to ignore the heart pounding against his chest. After a few rings, Akechi’s voice came on the other line. “Yes?” It sounded vaguely frustrated. Akira froze. It had to have been a dream. “I won’t be able to keep up with my studies at this rate,” Akechi said with a laugh, taking on a much lighter tone that still sounded irritated underneath. “I’ll take care of it in the morning, I promise.”

Akira didn’t know what to say, so—“It’s me.”
He heard shuffling around and the sound of something nearly falling over. “A-Akira?” He said on the other line. The irritation was gone as his tone became more questioning. “Is everything alright?”

Akira didn’t answer. He exhaled, relieved. He didn’t know anything. It really was just a dream. Of course it was. You knew this. What’s happening to you?

“Why are you calling at such a late hour?” Akechi persisted when he didn’t get a response from Akira. There was a hint of concern in his voice. Akira glanced at his phone. 11:47 PM.

“Is that Akechi?” Morgana screeched from the bed.

“Ah, hello Morgana,” Akechi said, raising his voice so that Morgana could hear him clearly through the phone.

Morgana narrowed his eyes at Akira; his eyes demanding an explanation. “Morgana says hi back,” Akira said to Akechi.

“I most definitely did not.”

Akira smiled softly, running his hand through his hair again. “Why are you still up?” He asked.

“Me? Oh. I’ve been especially busy lately, so I’ve not had time to keep up with my studies,” he said. “That didn’t answer my question. Did you need something? Are you alright?” He asked again.

Akira started to nod, then remembered that Akechi couldn’t see that. “Yes,” he said. “I needed to make sure I was dreaming.”

“…I’m sorry?” Akechi said, confused.

“Nothing. Sorry,” Akira said, for lack of anything better.

Akechi didn’t speak for a moment, and Akira figured he should end the call there, but he didn’t. “Will you be able to get back to sleep alright?” The brunette asked after another beat. He didn’t let Akira answer before continuing. “If you need any assistance, perhaps you can help me solve these quadratic curve equations,” he said lightly.

“I don’t even know what that is,” Akira deadpanned.

Akechi laughed. “It’s not too difficult once the basic math is down,” he said in a way that was clearly meant to subtle brag.

“Show-off,” Akira teased with a smile, resting his free arm underneath his head.

Akechi shifted on the other end. “Doesn’t pique your interest?” He asked with a soft chuckle. “Hm. I could tell you about the latest book I’ve been reading.”

“That’ll put me to sleep for sure.”

“Don’t be insufferable about it.” But Akira could hear the smile in his voice.

“Tell me,” Akira said with a smile.

He happened to look over, and Morgana was glaring at him. “For a leader, you can really be an
idiot sometimes,” Morgana said with a hopeless sigh. He moved around in a circle on the bed before laying back down shaking his head the entire time.

“Very well,” Akechi started. “It’s *The Story of Hong Gildong.*”

“Korean?”

“Yes,” Akechi said, his voice upbeat. He was clearly excited to share this with someone. “It centers around the character of the same name. Gildong is brilliant, but he’s an illegitimate son of a government noble,” he started. “Thus, he cannot advance in society. So he leaves home and becomes the leader of a band of outlaws hoping to build his own empire and gain acceptance from his family. It’s quite compelling.” Akira smiled to himself. So that was the kind of thing Akechi *really* liked. It was hard to tell what he really was interested in, since he seemed to have knowledge about everything – well at least to the point of being able to hold a decent conversation about it. “Er…was that boring you?” Akechi said quietly after what Akira guessed was a moment too long of silence.

“You would know if it was,” Akira reminded him. “Go on.”

“We…have school in the morning,” he said, though he sounded like he really *did* want to tell him more about the story. It reminded him a little of Kioshi.

“Live life on the wild side.”

A pause on the other end. Then Akechi sort of laughed. “You’re quite the influence. I suppose I have a few more minutes before I should rest.”

Akira wasn’t sure how much time passed, but he remembered sleepily responding to something that Akechi had said about the story and Akechi laughing and telling him to go to sleep.

He woke up that morning laying against his phone, which was on top of his pillow. Akira was beyond tired, but at least he’d been put at ease about his unsettling dream. He wouldn’t forget how real it had felt.

As he yawned in the middle of putting on his uniform, Morgana hopped up onto the couch with a knowing look. “Tired?” he said smugly.

“Do I really snore?” Akira asked Morgana cheekily instead of answering the question.

“Fine. Don’t tell me what’s going on,” Morgana said with a dramatic sigh.

Akira placed the journal into his bookbag. “I had a dream that Akechi found the journal. Found out that I’ve been keeping track of him and what he’s been doing. That this has been the plan from the beginning.”

Morgana tilted his head to the side. “He’s going to find out eventually,” said Morgana, ever the voice of reason that Akira needed but also didn’t really want to hear. “Besides, aren’t you more concerned about what Akechi is hiding?” he continued. “I may not like him, but you clearly have become chummy with him. What if the things he’s done are much worse than we’re thinking?” Akira didn’t say anything, but gestured to prompt Morgana to continue. “What if he’s not just aware of it and in the group, what if he’s the one you mentioned – whose been going into the Palaces to do whatever he pleases?”

*There’s a criminal using other people’s Palaces to accomplish whatever they damn well please. They don’t care about consequences. Psychotic breakdowns, mental shutdowns…anything goes.*
Those were the words Kaneshiro’s shadow had uttered to them.

“How many other Persona users can there be?” Morgana continued. “It has to be him. But—” Then he paused. “You…know that already, don’t you?” he said, this time sounding somewhat sympathetic.

Akira rubbed his eyes, stifling a yawn to avoid answering right away. Yes. But without proof his thoughts didn’t mean anything but speculation. It wasn’t nearly enough to confront him on. Besides—“He doesn’t have the black mask.”

“Hm. That’s true,” Morgana said contemplatively. “And he can’t hide his attire since it changes as soon as we’re seen as threats. Still…” he mused. “I wonder if we’re missing something.”

“Probably.”

“How can you be so casual about this?” Morgana said in wonder.

Akira smiled to himself, somewhat ironically as he thought about the sleepless nights and endless headaches. If only he knew.

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Luck seemed to be smiling down on Akira that day, because just as he was struggling to stay awake, Kawakami let him slack off in class. He debated making more infiltration tools, but the temptation of sleep was just a little too strong.

By the time he’d met up with the others at their meeting spot, he’d felt far more rested than he had at the beginning of the day. He made a mental note to pick up a gift for Kawakami for the next time he requested her services.

“Let me know when you are ready to send the calling card,” Yusuke said with an artist’s smile. “I’ve already devised a wealth of designs that are sure to capture the essence of our thievery,” he said thoughtfully.

“I’m sure it’ll be much better than Ryuji’s mediocre one,” Morgana snickered.

“Shut up, okay! I did much better than you coulda done!” Ryuji retorted.

“Even with cat paws, I could come up with something better,” Morgana shot back.

Ryuji blew air. “Yeah, right—”

“There they go again,” Ann said, throwing a weary smile over at Akira. Then she nudged him lightly in the arm. “You okay? You seemed super tired in class today, and it sounded like you were snoring halfway into Kawakami’s lesson.”

Akira smiled. “I’m fine. How’s Shiho?”

At this, Ann managed to brighten up even more if possible. “She’s good, I think. I’m going to go visit her again after this.”

“Oh, hello there.” The others paused their conversation when they saw Makoto come to a stop in front of them. “You’re meeting again,” she noted, her hand resting against her schoolbag.

“Ugh, again?” Ryuji said. “Why’re you always on our case?”
Makoto brushed her hair back. “I was simply passing by, so I thought I’d said hello,” she said. “I hope you’ve been staying out of trouble.”

Ryuji scoffed, and Akira’s gaze softened when he looked at her. It would be much later when they would find out just how much pressure the principal put on her to investigate. And really, all the pressures put on her in general. It had been annoying the first time around, and he remembered how abrasive she’d come across. But now, knowing what he knew, it was hard for him to respond in the same way, even if that was what he should have done.

“You look nice today,” Akira finally said, catching Makoto completely off-guard.

“What? D-Don’t change the subject,” she managed to say, though slightly flustered.

Akira smiled softly. “We’ll stay out of trouble.”

Makoto seemed even more taken aback at this, and her expression went from suspicion to uncertainty then into something unreadable.

“Hello. You’re Sae-san’s younger sister, correct?” Akechi said as he joined the group.

“Akechi-kun?” Makoto said curiously. “What are you doing here?”

“Ah. I was here to meet with some…friends,” Akechi said, saying the word ‘friend’ like it was still some sort of foreign concept to him.

“You know them?” She said slowly.

“What? Now we can’t have other friends?” Ryuji scoffed, still filled with disdain.

“Of course not, I just—” Makoto sighed, frustrated. “Why do I have to deal with this?” She said in exasperation. She brought her eyes back to them. “Well, just know that my door is always open to my fellow students, should you need it.”

When Makoto was gone, Ann turned to Akechi. “Do you two know each other?”

“Ah, only a little,” Akechi admitted with a bright smile. “Her older sister is a prosecutor. We’ve worked together on a few cases.”

“She’s been on our case for a while,” Ryuji said bitterly.

Akechi frowned contemplatively. “Has she? Hm. That’s interesting. We should be more cautious. Certainly meeting in an open place like this to discuss our plans is not the best course of action.”

“Meh, it’s fine. No one even pays attention to us,” Ryuji waved it off. Akechi furrowed his brow, clearly not feeling any more at ease with Ryuji’s casual way of dealing with it.

“By the way, Yusuke,” Ann started, turning her attention to him. “Once we change his heart…” She hesitated slightly. “Er, where will you live?”

“Ah. I can stay in the school dorms with my arts scholarship. It may not be ideal, but it is but a small result in relation to the task we will be undertaking,” Yusuke said with a nod.

“You don’t sound too happy about it,” Morgana pointed out.

“You can stay with me if you want.” And it took a moment for Akira to realize that Akechi had been the one to say it. The brunette seemed surprised at it himself, but his face stayed welcoming.
“Oh,” Yusuke said. “That very generous of you.”

“If it doesn’t work out at the dorms, that is,” Akechi added with a short laugh.

The thought left Akira slightly unsettled. After all… If Akechi did find out, he might do something to his teammates, and it would be easier for him to get to Yusuke if they were living together.

Yes. That’s why it bothers me so much.

“Wait,” Akira said before he could really think about the word and what he planned to say after. The group looked at him. He realized then that he didn’t have anything to add after that, so he rubbed his forehead. “That’s really kind of you to offer,” he decided to say to Akechi.

“There’s an art café nearby that I’m sure you would greatly enjoy,” Akechi continued. “It features local artists’ work around the gallery while also serving as a café and diner. I can show you, if you’d like.”

“You’re too kind,” Yusuke said. Then he turned to Akira, who managed a smile when he saw that Yusuke had turned his attention to him. “You have no need to worry, as I have no intention of getting in between your relationship.”

“Relationship?” Ryuji snickered. “Dude, these two?”

Akira blinked, this time the one at a loss for words. “That’s not it,” he said, covering up the fact that he’d stumbled over the first word by coughing into his hand.

…I see. Perhaps there is still much I must grasp with understanding actions and reactions of others,” Yusuke said, nodding to himself. “Nevertheless, I appreciate the offer,” he said again to Akechi, who nodded and smiled, though he was kind of looking at Akira strangely.

“I live alone, so it would not be any trouble if you felt inclined to stay for a bit.”

“Alone? What happened to your parents?” Ryuji said casually.

Akechi immediately stiffened up, and the others, except for Ryuji clearly took notice. “Ryuji! You can’t just ask people that!” Ann said, nudging him harshly in the ribs.

“Ow!”

“Don’t you have any tact Ryuji?” Morgana piled on.

“Wh-It was just a question! He don’t gotta answer it,” Ryuji said, rubbing his side. “Ow. Did you have to hit me so hard…”

Akechi finally laughed. “It’s alright. I don’t mind,” he said cheerily. Then his tone softened. “My mother passed away when I was young, and I’m not very close with my father,” he told them, casting his eyes down slightly.

“You lost your mother as well?” Yusuke said.

Akechi nodded slowly. “Though I was slightly older, I can understand your feelings to some degree,” he admitted to Yusuke.

“Oh wow. I’m sorry, Akechi-kun…” Ann said solemnly.

Akechi chuckled. “There’s no need to apologize. You were not the cause of it,” he said.
“I know, but…” Ann drifted off again, unsure of what to say in response. In fact, no one really knew what to say in response to it. An uncomfortably long amount of silence passed between everyone before Morgana perked up.

“Alright, so we’re all set on the card? We’ll finally be able to take down Madarame. Are you gonna be okay, Yusuke?” Morgana asked.

“I clouded my vision for a long time, but now that I am able to see who Madarame truly is, I won’t let him continue on with this charade,” Yusuke said with determination.

Akechi looked down at the ground again, then nodded with a smile that didn’t entirely reach his eyes. “That’s very noble of you.”

And Akira could’ve sworn he saw something akin to penitence in his eyes.

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Afterwards, Akira went to go buy a gift for Kawakami and some more items from Takemi’s clinic for the fight that would awaiting them soon enough. On his way back, he passed by Sojiro’s house, pausing and contemplating knocking on the door.

Of course, Futaba wouldn’t answer, but he wished he could somehow tell her that everything was going to be okay. She’d suffered possibly the most out of all of them, trapped in a prison of her own mind. Sojiro was doing the best he could, but nothing had helped.

Akira smiled tautly, filled with renewed determination as he thought of freeing her from her ‘tomb’.

Finally, he made it back to the café, Morgana complaining all the while about the items that were intruding on his space inside the bag, and when he opened the door, the familiar bell went off, and he was surprised to see Akechi sitting at the counter and chatting with Sojiro.

He was sipping on a cup of coffee with a smile on his face when he turned to the door and smiled even brighter when he saw Akira. “Ah. You’re back.”

Akira nodded, moving to the empty seat next to him and placing the bag with Morgana on top of it. “You really bring that cat everywhere, huh?” Sojiro wondered. “Where’s he go when you’re at school?”

“I hide him under my desk,” Akira told him plainly.

“My neck still hurts,” Morgana complained in agreement.

Sojiro let out a dry laugh. “Yeah, right.” He started to fill one of the empty coffee pots with water again. “Well, your friend and I were just chatting about coffee. What he’s got there is genuine Guatemalan SHB.”

Before Akira could even try to remember what Sojiro had told him about that once upon a time ago, Akechi turned to him. “It’s quite delicious. Strictly Hard Bean is given to coffee grown at high altitudes of 4,500 feet above sea level. I had read about it, but I must say that its citrus-like acidity is much more than I’d imagined through reading.”

“Heh. Where’d you learn all this about coffee?”

“Oh, I just like to learn,” Akechi said with a charismatic smile. “Coffee is an especially interesting
subject, considering how many people in the world drink it."

Sojiro nodded, impressed. “Well, if you ever want to learn about how to take that into making real coffee, you know who to call.”

“Me?” Akira said cheekily.

“Kid thinks he’s a smartass,” Sojiro said with a hint of a smile, pushing up his glasses as Akechi smiled politely in amusement. “I’m happy to teach you the tricks of making the coffee you seem to know a lot about.”

Akechi blinked, uncertainty creeping into his voice. “I’m afraid I don’t have anything to offer in return.”

Sojiro laughed. “Not everything’s gotta be give-and-take,” he said, and Akechi didn’t know how to respond so he gave another tentative chuckle in response. Sojiro’s phone started to ring, and he reached into his pocket and answered it. “Hello?” His face immediately softened. “Okay, I will. Same as usual, right? Alright.” He hung up, then turned to Akira. “I’ve got to run out for a bit. Can I count on you to watch over the place for me?”

Akira nodded, and Sojiro said something close to a thank you as he took off his apron and walked out the door. Akira’s gaze followed him out. It was most likely Futaba that had called.

“Is there something on your mind?” Akechi said, tilting his head slightly to get a better look at Akira’s face. “You look pensive.” He brought the cup up to his lips.

Akira shook his head. “Just this girl,” he mentioned absentmindedly.

“Oh?” Akechi said, pausing before he took a sip of his coffee. When he did, he cast his eyes down into the cup. “I didn’t know you were interested in someone,” he said distantly.

Akira gave him a tilted smile. “Jealous?” He teased.

Akechi nearly choked on his coffee. “D-Don’t be ridiculous, I-”

“Kidding,” Akira said, as he walked behind the counter. He picked up one of the aprons hanging on the hook and placed it over himself.

“You two are so weird,” Morgana commented, hopping up from the bag and onto the counter.

“Ah. Hello Morgana,” Akechi greeted kindly.

“What’re you doing here, anyway?” Morgana said in lieu of a traditional greeting. “Isn’t there an art café near your apartment?” He didn’t sound abrasive, but it was clear that Morgana was not happy about Akechi’s unexpected presence.

“There is,” Akechi replied smoothly. “I quite like this café, though. It has a certain charm about it.” He gestured towards the fridge. “I also brought a bit of sushi. I told Sojiro-san that it was for he and Akira to share, but I’m sure he won’t notice if a few are missing.”

“Sushi?” Morgana said, interest piqued despite himself. Morgana turned to Akira, who walked over to the fridge and opened the door. Sure enough, there was a container of fresh sushi sitting inside. Akira pulled it out, placing it on the counter. Morgana gasped. “Is that fatty tuna?” He said, starry-eyed.
Akechi chuckled. “That it is. I take it you enjoy that one the most?”

Morgana’s mouth practically watered. “C’mon, I can’t open the container with cat paws,” he complained to Akira, who laughed himself and took off the lid. The cat stepped closer, closing his eyes and inhaling. “Mmm. Smells so good.” Then he looked at Akechi. “Well, I guess you can stay for a little bit,” Morgana said, like he had full authority over when he would leave.

Akira took out a few pieces of the fatty tuna and placed them on a plate for Morgana, then moved the rest back to the fridge. When he closed the fridge door, he felt his phone vibrate and pulled it out.

Goro Akechi 17:37 PM
Thank you for telling me to get the fatty tuna.

Akira smiled to himself, and when he turned around to rejoin them at the counter, Akechi had just placed his phone down and was sipping at his coffee as though he hadn’t sent the message at all, though he was smiling too.

Akechi stayed for a bit longer until a little after Sojiro returned. After that, he said his goodbyes and headed back for the night. As Akira wiped down the empty tables, the clattering of coffee pots and cups could be heard from behind the counter.

“That Akechi seems like a good kid,” Sojiro noted.

Akira stopped for a second in mid-wipe, thinking about that. Akechi wasn’t good. But he didn’t seem entirely evil, either. What was that moral grey area called, anyway? There was also the chance that Akechi was just playing him like a fiddle, but even that didn’t explain certain things. Akira sort of wanted to tell Sojiro that “a good kid” didn’t seem like enough to describe someone like Akechi. It seemed too vague, too impersonal. It seemed like what one would say when describing a friend of a friend or an off-hand comment about the boy who helped an elderly woman cross the street. He wanted to tell Sojiro that Goro Akechi was the first human being that made him want to talk about the things that made him tired. But the things that made him tired all stemmed from the very fact that Goro Akechi was the one who would eventually kill him, so he couldn’t, and he was well aware of how completely messed up it was. “A good kid” didn’t even begin to cover all the mysteries and intricacies of Goro Akechi. But Akira didn’t have the words, and if he did, he certainly didn’t want to speak them, so place of that, he continued to wipe off the counter.

“I guess so,” Akira said instead.

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Despite his original intent to send the calling card on Sunday, Akira decided on sending it the day after so that he could get some studying done. Boring, but he hadn’t done so hot in his last timeline, so he wanted to get as much as he could.

At least, that was his original plan until he packed up his bag and picked up his phone to a text from Akechi.

Goro Akechi 09:37 AM
Good morning. How did you sleep?

Akira Kurusu 9:41 AM
Tonight wasn't so bad.
Goro Akechi 9:42 AM
Excellent. I hope the tea and book have helped.

Goro Akechi 9:43 AM
I also have a request of you.

Akira Kurusu 9:44 AM
Take a number.

Akira Kurusu 9:44 AM
Kidding. Shoot.

Goro Akechi 9:50 AM
Kioshi has asked me if I could take him to Big Bang Burger. His mother has already approved it. She would have taken him but she is attending to another matter. There is supposedly some sort of challenge that he wants to undertake for children that is only for today. I was wondering if you were free to join us.

Goro Akechi 9:50 AM
Of course, if you are busy, please do not feel obligated.

Morgana peeked up into his phone again. “What’s up?” He said, looking curiously before turning back to Akira. The latter waited for Morgana to scold him or give him those judgy eyes again, but instead, he looked up at Akira. “Going to hang out with Akechi?”

“You aren’t mad?” Akira thumbed the corner of his phone mindlessly.

Morgana sighed. “As much as I want to tell you it’s a bad idea, you are the leader. What kind of co-pilot would I be if I didn’t have some faith in you?” He said, a smile dancing in his eyes. “Oh, but you’re still an idiot for doing it.”

“Good to know,” Akira teased before turning to his phone.

Akira Kurusu 9:52 AM
Sounds good. Just let me know what time.

When Akira arrived at Big Bang Burger, the two of them hadn’t arrived yet, so he went to the front to place the order ahead of time as Akechi asked. Sure enough, there was a discount on the all the challenges and some sort of toy as a listed prize for the children who enter. There was also no prerequisites of having completed the other two first for this day only.

He went ahead and placed the order, taking a booth by the door, with the two of them arriving shortly after.

It was sort of amusing to see Akechi talking to Kioshi. He still seemed a little tense, like he wasn’t quite sure how to talk to a child, but for the most part, he looked pleased. It was a nice look for the brunette. Come to think of it, Akira couldn’t really recall a time when he’d ever seen Akechi hanging out with someone else in all the times that he’d run into him in the other timeline. Even when he’d been at Leblanc before, he certainly hadn’t been talking to Sojiro as much as he had yesterday.

“Here you go, Mister,” Kioshi said, outstretching his hand with the money to pay him back.

Akira waved it off. “Don't worry about it.”
Kioshi brought his hand back. “Really?” He smiled a toothy smile. “Wow, thanks Mister!”

Akira smiled as Kioshi slid into the booth across the table, and Akechi took his seat next to the child. “Forgive me for asking, but I’m afraid I’m still a little confused about the challenge,” Akechi noted. “If I’m to remember correctly, one simply must finish a burger in 30 minutes?”

Kioshi sighed dramatically. “You get a prize too!” He said, bouncing up and down in his seat.

The waitress, with impeccable timing, brought out three large trays not one minute later, and Akira watched Akechi’s eyes go wide in surprise. The waitress placed the smallest Comet Burger in front of Kioshi, who grinned happily. Akira just barely managed to hide his laugh as the waitress placed one Cosmos Tower Burger in front of Akira.--And another one in front of Akechi. “Oh, I believe there’s some mistake,” Akechi said, trying hard to conceal his shock. To Akechi’s credit, he was doing an okay job at hiding it. “I didn’t order this.”

“No?” The waitress said. “This young man placed three orders,” she said, gesturing to Akira.

“It’s no fun if it’s just him,” Akira said cheekily when Akechi looked at him for explanation.

“You’re going to try it too?!” Kioshi said with wide eyes. He stared at Akechi’s burger. “Whoa, it’s taller than my head!”

“It…certainly is,” He said, eyeing the burger as though trying to figure out some sort of equation to actually finish it in thirty minutes.

“When you’re ready to start the challenge, let us know and we will start the timer,” the waitress said cheerfully and obliviously to Akechi’s discomfort before stepping away to check on the table next to them.

“S-Surely this is a jest. How is it possible for one human being to finish this in the span of thirty minutes?” Then he cleared his throat. “Logically speaking, it seems implausible.”

“C’mon, you have to! We’re gonna do it!” Kioshi goaded with a set of childlike eyes that could probably create world peace with how kind and hopeful they were.

“I’ve finished it,” Akira said with a somewhat smug shrug.

“You haven’t,” Akechi said, only just barely able to hide the disbelief creeping into his voice. Then he straightened up, full of false bravado. He put on a smile. “I’m sure I could finish it as well, I simply had been curious about the volume.”

“It won’t kill you,” Akira adds.

“You shouldn’t speak so soon,” Akechi replied with a wary but still charismatic smile.

“But you’re gonna do it, right? It won’t be any fun if you don’t do it too,” Kioshi pouted.

Akechi swallowed thickly, rotating his plate around to get a better look. “Yes, of course. I will do it,” he said brightly, and Kioshi cheered happily. Then, so quiet that Akira wasn’t even sure if he’d heard him say it, Akechi muttered to himself: “Once I figure out how to pick it up.”

Akira flagged the waitress down again, and she held up her stopwatch to prepare to start the timer, telling them that she’d be back in 30 minutes. Without further ado, she held up her hand as a few
heads turned to watch them start, and pressed the button on the stopwatch.

Kioshi hungrily dug in, doing surprisingly well for a kid. Akira decided to start with the top portion of his burger, but not without observing Akechi. The brunette continued to look at it like an alien specimen, and it was getting increasingly difficult for Akira to mask him his laugh at how dramatic the brunette had made the entire thing appear.

Finally, Akechi was able to get somewhat of a grip on it, then took a tentative bite—

And a plop of onion, tomato, lettuce and an odd mix of sauces came spilling out of the bottom and somehow landed past the plate and into his lap.

Akira couldn’t mask it then. He put his burger down so that the same thing wouldn’t happen to him as he placed a hand over his mouth to mask the laugh that threatened to escape. Even Kioshi paused to look, his mouth dropped open and he didn’t even try to hide his laughter.

Akechi, however, frowned. “It’s…not that funny,” He said quietly. He placed the burger back down, and Akira reached over to hand him some napkins only to find that he didn’t need to because somehow Akira had missed the part when Akechi placed a napkin on his lap. The brunette wrapped up the napkin from his lap, which had a nice pile of burger toppings in it, and placed it on the table. Akira tried once again and failed to cover his laugh, and Akechi looked at him curiously.

“Nothing,” Akira said with a twinkle in his eye. Of course Goro Akechi had a napkin in his lap for eating a burger at a fast food restaurant because *why wouldn’t he.* "Just your napkin."

“It’s…good to be prepared,” Akechi said.

“I’ll say.”

Kioshi’s laughter filled the air once more. “That was so funny! It fell out like *plop.* You should’ve seen your face!” The kid said, already having forgotten his burger. At that rate, none of them were going to win.

“I’m sure it was quite amusing…” Akechi said. He sounded disappointed with himself.

Kioshi frowned slightly, then brightened two seconds later. “C’mon, we gotta finish though! It’s not over yet!”

And it wasn’t – not for Kioshi, at least. Thirty minutes later, Kioshi’s plate was completely empty. Akira had made a valiant effort, but he’d only gotten about halfway through it this time, albeit mostly to placate the brunette who still had nearly the entire thing on his plate.

The waitress brought out the prize for Kioshi, which only happened to be a keychain with the Big Bang mascot. The child seemed pleased enough about it, though.

“I won! I won!” He exclaimed gleefully as the two boys smiled. Kioshi looked at it for a second more, then he smiled brightly at Akechi and extended it to him. “Here.”

“H-Huh?” Akechi blinked.

“You seemed sad ‘cause of the challenge, so you can have mine,” Kioshi said kindly.

Akechi’s mouth opened, but no words came out. “You…That’s alright,” Akechi said just as kind. “That's the whole reason we came here. You won that yourself.”
Kioshi bit the inside of his lip. “That’s why I want you to have it. Pleeeaaase?” He said with puppy dog eyes.

Akechi gingerly reached out to take it from the boy’s hand, a million unreadable expressions passing over his face all in the span of one second. “Are you sure you would like me to have it? This is your prize. It shows that you won.”

Kioshi nodded gleefully. “Now it’s like we both won,” he said with another toothy smile.

Akira smiled, resting his chin on his hand, but when he looked at Akechi, he didn’t look very well. Before he could ask if Akechi was okay, the brunette abruptly stood up, the keychain still in his hand. “Er, please excuse me for a moment. I need to step out for a moment.”

He didn’t let either of them answer before he walked out the front door with a complicated expression on his face.

Akira could feel Kioshi kicking against the stand for the table. “I don’t think he liked it…” Kioshi said sadly. “I just wanted to cheer him up.”

Akira turned to look out the window. He could just barely see Akechi’s form, but he couldn’t see his expression or anything else. He turned back to Kioshi, who looked crestfallen at Akechi’s reaction.

“It just caught him off-guard,” Akira finally said. “I don’t think he’s used to receiving gifts.”

“So he liked it?” Kioshi said unsurely, pressing both his index fingers together in front of him nervously.

Akira smiled. “You’ll have to ask him.”

Akechi returned not too long after, and Kioshi slinked down in his seat, too shy to say anything this time. The brunette turned to him with a small smile. “Thank you for this. I’ll take good care of it.”

“Y-You will?” Kioshi said, peering up from his lowered head to look at Akechi.

“I apologize for my reaction earlier,” Akechi said with a nod. He smiled brightly. “Thank you,” he said again.

Kioshi allowed himself to relax, smiling back. “Y-You’re welcome.”

Akechi looked down at the keychain, holding onto it tightly, and Akira wondered why things couldn’t always be this easy.

***

It had unexpectedly begun to rain shortly before they left Big Bang Burger, but luckily, Akechi was entirely prepared and had brought an umbrella that the three of them ended up having to huddle under.

“What do you do?” Kioshi asked Akechi, bounding up the stairs for his apartment. His wet shoes squeaked against the floor as he walked up.

“I’m in high school,” Akechi answered smoothly. He made sure that no one was below them on the stairs before shaking some excess water from his umbrella that had somehow found its way despite him having shaken it when they first entered.
“Mom said that you’re on TV sometimes. I haven’t seen it ‘cause I’d rather watch cartoons, but she says you’re famous.”

“Ah, that,” Akechi said, tensing slightly. “I’m a detective as well,” he said cheerfully.

“So you solve crimes and stuff?” Kioshi said, stopping abruptly on the stairs and nearly causing Akira to bump into him.

“Ha ha. Something like that. I work alongside the police and prosecutor’s office,” Akechi replied.

“Whoa. You’re so cool!” Kioshi said, and Akechi kind of beamed at that. “Can you teach me? The kids at school always make fun of me for reading detective stories instead of playing during free time. But I can never solve the mysteries in them,” Kioshi added with a short pout as he resumed climbing the stairs.

“I…suppose I can teach you how to make deductions…” Akechi started.

“Deductions?” Kioshi pouted, furrowing his brow. “Is that solving crimes?”

“Ah. Sorry.” Akechi chuckled. “It is the process, yes.”

“Coooool!” Kioshi said again as they made it to the floor of both Akechi and Kioshi’s apartments. “I wanna be like you!”

Akira nudged him lightly. “So popular this week,” he teased, and Akechi rubbed his neck uncomfortably in response.

The brunette managed a laugh, but before he could say anything, Kioshi paused, staring at the person standing at the door to his apartment. It was Kioshi’s father, who was pacing back and forth, muttering something to himself. He looked like he’d been caught in the rain without an umbrella himself. He was completely soaked from head to toe, but he didn’t seem to care, even as he sneezed twice in a row.

“Dad?” Kioshi said quietly, but it was enough for his father to look up. When he spotted his son, he rushed over to him as Kioshi flinched involuntarily, cowering behind Akechi’s waist.

“Kioshi--” He started, then he stopped when he saw the look his son was giving him. “I wanted to see you. I knocked on the door, but no one answered.”

“Mom might not be back yet…” Kioshi said cautiously.

The man looked at the two of them, realization dawning over his face. “Wait. You two are the boys from before. I never introduced myself. My name is Brian Amano. Are you two babysitting for Michiko?”

_Michiko. Must be his mother’s name_, Akira thought.

Akechi shook his head. “No, nothing like that,” he said with a soft laugh.

“We did the Big Bang Challenge…” Kioshi said tentatively. He took a slow step to the side so that he was no longer behind Akechi.

“You did?” Brian said with an excited gasp. “Let me guess. You won with flying colors,” he said excitedly. It was a little hard for Akira to watch, honestly. He was trying his best, but Kioshi seemed hard-trained on maintaining a distance from his father attempting to rekindle their
relationship. “That’s my little champ,” he said, squatting down so that he was eye level and raising up his hand for a high-five.

Kioshi stared at it for a second before biting his lip. “Mom won’t be happy if she sees me talking to you…”

“I know. I know she won’t,” Brian agreed. “You’ve gotten so big. How’s school? Have you been making a lot of friends?”

“They don’t like me ‘cause of what you did,” Kioshi said. “I overheard Mom telling someone that all the parents don’t want their kids to hang out with me.”

“O-Oh,” Brian said.

“I’m okay, though, Dad,” Kioshi admitted. “You look sad, though.” The kid was admittedly more perceptive than most adults Akira knew.

“Do I?” Brian said slowly. “I just miss you guys, that’s all.”

Kioshi opened his mouth to respond, but he didn’t get a chance to speak before he was interrupted.

“What the hell is this?”

Everyone turned to the source of the noise. Kioshi’s mother – Michiko – was standing at the door of the apartment that was now open. Ah. So she had been there. She stormed over to them as Brian stood up. “Didn’t I tell you not to come here?”

“Michi--”

“Am I going to have to call the police? How dare you come into this building in the first place?” She gestured to Kioshi. “Come here, Kioshi.” The child looked between the two of them, unsure of what to do. Michiko noticed, because she scoffed. “Kioshi,” she said more sternly.

“M-Maybe…” Kioshi started.

“Don’t argue with me. Come here. Right now,” Michiko said, and without warning, she grabbed the child by the wrist and pulled him over so that he was forced to join her at her side.

“He just came to talk,” Akira said.

Michiko turned her death glare onto Akira. “Excuse me?” She then looked him up and down. “Ah. You look like a teenager. Let me give you a bit of life advice. Don’t stick your nose into family business.” She turned to Akechi as well. “Thank you for taking my son to…whatever the hell he went to, but I’ll take him from here.”

“Let’s go. Now.” Michiko let go of Kioshi’s arm, giving him the chance to walk away himself. When he didn’t immediately move, she lightly pushed him forward, prompting him to take a first step.

The kid looked back at them. “Bye…” he said solemnly before turning and leading the way to the apartment with Michiko following behind him. She didn’t even look back once before shutting the door behind them.

“I appreciate you having said that,” Brian said to Akira.

“If I may be so bold to ask,” Akechi started. “What was the incident that caused this tension?”
Brian shook his head. “Nothing you kids need to concern yourself with,” he said gently. “I’m better now, though. Y’know, he used to look up to me. Kids can be annoying that way,” he said with an ironic laugh. “There’s something that stirs in every human being with some semblance of a moral compass when a child looks up to you. It makes you want to be better – to be worthy of holding the title of the person they admire.”

Akechi got a complicated look on his face as he nodded, thumbing the keychain mindlessly in his hand.

“But the bad news is, your choices and intentions, the things you’ve done, the people you’ve associated with, can lead you to the bottom of the pit,” he said. Then he nodded to them. “I’d better get going. She’ll want to make sure I’m gone.”

Once Brian left, Akechi made his way over to his apartment, with Akira following after him. When they stopped in front of it, Akira leaned against the wall as Akechi fumbled for his key. The brunette stopped when he found it. “That was certainly an eventful end to the day.”

“I hope he’s okay,” Akira said, folding his arms across his chest. He smiled slightly when he looked at the keychain. “He’s taken a liking to you.”

Akechi looked up, slightly flustered. “On some level, I can understand his loneliness. I didn’t have many friends growing up either,” he admitted.

Akira wasn’t sure if that was something Akechi intended to let slip, so he waited a moment before considering his response. When Akechi didn’t say anything, Akira gave him a tilted smile. “They were probably jealous of your dazzling charisma and intellect.”

Akechi blinked, and when he caught wind of Akira’s smile, he allowed himself a small chuckle. “Despite the past ten minutes, I quite enjoyed today. And it seems I will have to prepare myself for the next challenge. I was ill-prepared, but I will not allow that to happen again.”

“So competitive,” Akira teased. “Thanks for inviting me.”

The two of them lingered there for a little longer before Akechi looked down at his key again. “It seems impolite to not invite you inside. Would you like to come in for some tea or coffee?”

“I’ve had a lot of coffee,” Akira said. “Tea sounds good.”

***

The inside of Goro Akechi’s apartment was both what he did and did not expect. For one, it wasn’t really anything special. It was quiet, and had enough things for one person to just get by. It was remarkably simple, yet it felt comfortable at the same time. All Akira could really see was the kitchen and living room, with the darkened hallway leading to what was presumably his room and the bathroom.

His living room had a small TV, nothing lavish, and a couch with two arm chairs by it. Behind it was a painting of something that Akira didn’t recognize. Behind it was a painting of something that Akira didn’t recognize. Next to the window, however, were two bookshelves that were completely lined with books, and, upon further inspection, it seemed almost like a library. Akechi had labeled certain sections and grouped the books accordingly.

His kitchen wasn’t anything special either. There was a kettle and a coffee pot, and a few boxes of cereal sitting on top of his fridge. Huh. Akira wouldn’t have pegged him for a cereal person. Akechi opened the cupboard and brought out two plain white mugs for the tea. He wondered how many guests Akechi had had in his apartment.
“You can have a seat on the couch, if you’d like,” Akechi said kindly.

Akira made his way over, taking note of the coffee table in front of it. The book that Akechi had been telling him about was sitting on top of it. Akira sat down, picking up the book to look at it.

Akechi came over a minute later with two cups of tea. He placed one on the coaster directly in front of Akira, and the other to the left of it, closest to the armchair. “Ah. It’s quite a good read,” Akechi noted, taking a seat at the armchair.

They chatted aimlessly for a while, mostly about the plan for the calling card and school, as they drank tea. Akira couldn’t place it, but the entire experience left him feeling strange. He chalked it up to the strangeness of the situation in general – that he would one day be sipping tea and talking about nothing and everything with his murderer.

“How has your head been?” Akechi asked as he finished his cup, settling back into his seat.

Akira leaned back. “Not so bad lately.”

“And sleeping?”

At this, Akira smiled dryly. “Not so good lately.”

Akechi frowned at this. “Will you be alright to send the calling card tomorrow? Perhaps we should wait until you feel at full strength. Madarame will no doubt be powerful, so we must exercise caution.”

“I’ll be ready,” he said, though as he said it, a wave of exhaustion that Akira didn’t even know he had somehow washed over him.

“How are you certain?” Akechi bit the inside of his lip. “You’re welcome to take a nap now on that couch, if you want.”

“What?” Akira blinked.

“I was simply thinking back to when we went to Mementos. It would be difficult to go into Mementos every time you felt a need to get some rest. Please, don’t take it as an obligation or requirement.” Akechi was quick to say, and he glanced down at his empty cup. Akira hated this. He hated it because he didn’t know if Akechi was doing it out of kindness or as a part of some master plan that Akira wasn’t yet aware of.

He looked at his phone. It was Sunday, but he wanted to try and reach Kawakami to thank her. Still, it looked like he had a few hours before he had to start heading back.

Akira, feeling genuinely awkward for the first time in a long time, moved so that he was laying down on the couch. “What are you going to do?” He asked.

Akechi smiled, picking up the book and holding it up. “I’m not too far in.”

After a minute or two, Akira turned to stare up at the ceiling as a comfortable silence fell over them. The whole concept of going to sleep in someone else’s house was already strange to Akira, but he’d actually offered to let him do it. Yet what took the cake was how contented he felt. There was a conflicted part of Akira that figured that maybe that was Akechi’s plan: to get him comfortable enough so that he could easily find a way to get rid of him should he need to.

At this point, he probably could, and Akira kind of hated that. He still didn’t have the upper hand.
Although, maybe Akechi didn’t either. Maybe neither of them did.

He turned his head to look at Akechi. The brunette had already opened his book and started reading, and he looked completely engrossed in it. Akechi didn’t even look up at Akira. No, he was intently staring at the page with a furrowed brow as he read. Akira noticed that he also mouthed the words silently to himself. Was that something he always did? He’d never known that about the brunette either.

He stayed like that, observing Akechi instead of taking the nap that he’d offered to him. And Akira didn’t even notice that it stopped raining until the sunlight came streaming through the curtains and onto Akechi’s face. Akechi’s face was in the light and the book in his hand as if it was meant to be there, in his hands, and only in his hands. He wondered how many other people had seen Akechi like this.

Akira blinked abruptly, turning back to the ceiling as he forced his eyes shut.

_He shot you. Remember that._

***

At some point, Akira did manage to doze off, only to be woken up by a gentle nudge at his shoulder.

“Akira?” The voice said softly.

Akira groaned, somewhat disoriented as his mind started to come back to reality. Sunlight hit his closed eyelids and he made another displeasing noise. “Five more minutes…” he said in a sleepy daze, thinking that it had been Morgana that had wake him up.

The voice chuckled, deep and throaty, and distinctly unlike Morgana. Akira’s memory came back to him, and he blinked slowly, his eyes fluttering open and being met by Akechi’s face in front of him. He'd knelt down so that he was eye level. “I’m sorry to wake you,” he said, genuinely apologetic. “I’ve actually got to get going to the Prosecutor’s Office.”

Akira rubbed his eyes. “I fell asleep again?”

Akechi gave him a half-smile. “It’s a comfortable couch,” he offered.

That was true. Akira’s shoulders felt lighter than usual, and even though it had only been a short nap, he already felt more awake. He reached for his phone, glancing at the time. So much for having plans. Morgana probably thought he was dead in a ditch somewhere at this point.

Akira placed his phone back down, sitting up on the couch and rubbing his eyes again. When he finished, Akechi was staring at him, causing Akira to tilt his head curiously.

Akechi cleared his throat, averting his eyes as he stood upright. “It… seems your hair has gotten a little out of place.”

“Hot, right?” Akira teased, thinking that his absolute mess of a bedhead had to be anything but attractive, and Akechi managed a short but kind-of uncomfortable laugh. “I’ll help you clean up,” Akira said with a yawn, picking up his nearly empty tea cup from the coaster. He followed Akechi into the kitchen, standing next to him in the kitchen as he placed it into the sink.

Another silence fell over them as Akechi paused, opening his mouth then closing it again. Finally,
he turned to Akira, and Akira could see the little specks of red throughout his eyes. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you.” Akira prompted him to continue, and Akechi nodded. “Do you...often call your friends at midnight?”

There were certain things that Akira couldn’t be honest about for the sake of his friends’ safety. But he figured he could at least be honest about everything else. If not to himself than at least to the people who asked. “No,” he said.

“But you called me.”

“Yes.”

“And before, when you seemed a bit rattled by my suggestion that Yusuke stay here. Was that due to the lack of trust we discussed or...” He cleared his throat and the red disappeared from Akira’s vision as he instead focused on rinsing out the cups in the sink. “Should I read into this?”

“I wish you wouldn’t,” Akira said quietly.

Akechi nodded, eyes still unfocused. “Very well,” he said after some hesitation. “I think that would be best.” He nodded to himself again, seeming relieved yet tense at the same time. A silence fell over them again as Akechi seemed to have trouble with the basic task of washing his dishes. “Well...If you do feel the need to call me again at night when you have trouble sleeping, I won’t mind,” Akechi said.

Akira smiled. "Are you going to tell me a bedtime story?" He teased.

"Not with that attitude," Akechi said, biting the inside of his lip to hide his smile.

After a minute or two, Akechi turned to him with a half-smile. “While you were resting, I was thinking about what Brian said. He wanted to be better because Kioshi still saw him as someone who could be forgiven, despite what it was that transpired between their family.”

And Akira didn’t know Kioshi very well, so he mimicked Sojiro. “He’s a good kid,” Akira said.

Akechi nodded. “Yes. But the bad things he’s done has dragged him to the bottom of the pit,” he said distantly. Akira wondered if Akechi was also thinking about his own actions.

Akira thought back to all the people that he’d met and formed bonds with. He thought about their strengths. He thought about how they overcame the things holding them down. He thought about Futaba, who would no longer be held captive by the distorted lies that had been told to her. He thought about Iwai, who’d joined the Yakuza and now aimed to support the child that he’d never expected to come into his life. He thought of Yoshida’s political scandals and so many others. Akira managed a smile. “You know, there’s good news in that too.”

Akechi shook his head in confusion. “Good news?”

Akira’s smile became more tilted as he leaned back against the counter. “It wouldn’t be the first time someone’s crawled, tooth and nail, out of hell.”

Akechi stared at Akira like he was an alien thing that didn’t quite belong on this Earth. “I really don’t get you,” Akechi breathed, searching Akira’s eyes for something.

Akechi’s phone started to ring, and the brunette jumped, nearly dropping his cup. He shut off the water, wiping his hands before grabbing it off the counter and placing it to his ear without looking at the ID.
“This is Akechi,” he said, still studying Akira even with the phone up against his ear. “Ah. Hello. Yes, I did. I’m heading to the Prosecutor’s Office shortly, so I can’t stop by until tomorrow.” Akira couldn’t tell if it was the same one that always seemed to get him stressed. “Alright. I’ll talk to you later.” Akechi hung up the phone.

“Who was that?” Akira asked nonchalantly, twirling the edges of his hair. It had seemed more passive than the other times that Akechi had answered the phone.

Akechi turned to Akira and really looked at him. It made Akira slightly uncomfortable. It felt like Akechi was somehow staring into his entire soul, and he definitely didn’t want that.

He glanced down at his phone, pressing his fingers to his temple with closed eyes before he reopened them and studied Akira’s face again. What was he doing? Akechi seemed to find whatever answer he was looking for, because he finally spoke.

“It was my father,” he finally said.

Akira blinked, and Akechi continued to carefully study Akira’s reactions. “I thought you weren’t close.”

“We’re not,” Akechi said. “He’s a good-for-nothing man.”

“Does he need a change of heart?” Akira asked. He’d meant it to be joking, but Akechi got a dark look in his eyes that the former had never really seen before.

“He needs far more than that,” Akechi said plainly. Then he shook his head, another smile crossing over his face in an instant. “I…apologize. I shouldn’t have said that.”

Akira chewed the inside of his mouth. “I’m not very close with my parents either,” he admitted.

“You’ve…never mentioned them.”

Akira gave him a drained smile. “You have secrets. So do I.”

After a second, Akechi allowed himself to laugh, some of the tenseness leaving his shoulders. “Touché.” He placed the cups into the drying rack. Then he reached for his key, which Akira noticed, now had Kioshi’s keychain attached to it. It was the only thing attached to it besides the lanyard. “Well then. Shall we be going?”

***

When Akira got back to Leblanc and made it back upstairs, Morgana understandably pelted him with questions.

“Where were you? You’ve been gone the whole day. I thought you were just going to see him and that kid for a little bit,” Morgana said. “I thought you were dead somewhere!”

“No you didn’t,” Akira said with a gleam in his eye.

“If you were with Akechi, then you may as well could have been. Where were you?” He asked again.

“With Akechi,” Akira said cheekily.

Morgana studied him, then his eyes when slightly wide. “And what exactly did you two do?” he
asked. Akira had no idea what he meant with his tone, so he shook his head in confusion. “Why does your hair look like it does when you first get out of bed?” Morgana said, sounding slightly horrified.

*Oh.* Akira laughed. “It wasn’t like that.”

“Well…” Morgana said suspiciously.

“You think so little of me?” Akira said, pretending to sound hurt.

“People can get swept up in the mood like in that one movie we watched with Lady Ann!” Morgana said, and Akira laughed again at that.

“Even if that were the case, I’d like to think that the memory of being shot in the head by him is enough to kill any mood,” Akira said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Yeah, but you’re also an idiot.”

“I don’t remember you calling me an idiot this much in the last timeline,” Akira said with a cheeky grin. “I’m a little hurt,” he joked.

“Har har,” Morgana said, though the cat seemed to be in good spirits. “Well, did you get any more info out of him after you were done flirting?”

Akira decided to ignore the last part of the question. “His dad’s an awful person.”

Morgana groaned. “And how does that help us?”

Akira reached for the journal and a pen to write inside of it. “It doesn’t. But he’s starting to open up to me about more important things.”

“We still don’t have any information on who he’s working for. I’m ready to catch them already and be done with it. It clearly stressing you out,” Morgana said carefully. “Just because he brought me sushi doesn’t mean I like him,” Morgana pouted.

Akira sighed. “Maybe he just needs help,” he pondered.

“Help with what?”

Akira tapped his pen against the paper. “Crawling out of hell.”

“What?” Morgana said, gaping at him. “People should pay for their crimes. Isn’t that the whole reason we’re changing people’s hearts? To get them to confess their crimes and pay for all the pain they’ve caused?”

“You’re right,” Akira said. “I know you’re right.”

Morgana climbed up so that he was looking at Akira. “Don’t let a few nice encounters cloud your judgment. Maybe we should think of a different plan of attack. This whole getting close thing seems like more trouble.”

“I can do it,” Akira assured him. He just wasn’t sure what would be left of him after he did.

Chapter End Notes
Just a quick note: Some of Goro’s confidants will be exclusive to Goro (like Kioshi), and others will be of ones that Akira also has links with (e.g. Sojiro, Yusuke, other party members). Goro-exclusive ones will of course be OCs, so I’ll try to make them as interesting as possible because I know sometimes OCs in fanfics can be kinda meh and that’s probably not what you all are here for lol.

Also, that whole “he’s a good kid” part and the ‘book in the light’ part was actually interpolated from a book called Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe, which is a phenomenal book and I highly recommend it to you if you’re looking for a good read that will knock you right in the feels. The scenes are different but it fit so well here that I had to use at least some of it.

Also I really love Kioshi and Akechi’s budding sibling-esque relationship so I’m sorry I keep shoving it down your throats lmao

Next chapter in probably 2-3 weeks like I said before. Plot-heavy chaps are usually more difficult for me. BUT next update will be finishing Madarame's arc and beginning the next :)
oh man. You guys sure know how to put the pressure on a gal! Haha, thank you all SO much for your wonderful and encouraging comments. I can only hope to continue to live up to your standards as the story goes on haha. THANK YOU to everyone who has read, left a kudos, bookmark, comment, or just enjoyed the story.

Gonna be honest with you guys, I hate the way this chapter came out and I feel like it's absolute trash :S haha. I've been in such a funk lately, I can picture the scenes perfectly in my head and I even have a outline of all the scenes I want to write, but when I sit down to actually put the words to it, my brain is like blah, so this chapter took way longer than it should have, so I'm sorry for that! And I'm just not thrilled with it. It could be better, but I have desperately been trying to fight the writer's block that is slowly coming haha. My initial plan was to post two chapters: this chapter as Akira-Akechi focused and then the next chapter up at the same time more focused on Akechi & his other confidants for some balance buuuut that next chapter is going to have to wait bc I was barely able to finish this one in two weeks :( 

ALSO, someone made this incredible fanart for the story which I am absolutely in love with: https://franqiworld.tumblr.com/post/161246905331/guess-who-has-been-reading-fanfiction-again

You’re…taking coffee into battle?” Akechi asked with surprise as Akira poured a cup into a small thermos.

They’d sent the calling card today, and so all that was left was to prepare for the difficult battle that lay ahead of them tomorrow. Akira didn’t have any doubt that this battle would be as difficult as it had been the first time. After all, he had an entirely new teammate with him this time. That alone made him rethink his strategy.

Leblanc was empty, aside from Akechi sitting at the counter. After they’d all met, it didn’t surprise either boy that one of them would end up walking back with the other. It was almost getting unsettling with how Akira started to expect it without even thinking. Sojiro had run out again, most likely to tend to Futaba.

“We’ve got to keep up our stamina,” Morgana pointed out from the seat next to Akechi.

“I suppose that’s true.” He turned to Morgana. “However, I have read that cats can get heart and nervous system damage from drinking coffee, so perhaps it wouldn’t be beneficial if you were to have some.” Akechi pointed out.

“I’m not really a cat!” Morgana huffed.
“Perhaps not,” Akechi agreed. “You are able to talk, and you have your own form in the cognitive world,” he said, nodding to himself and going distant in the way that Akira had come to recognize when he started to get lost in his own thoughts. Then he blinked and resumed speaking to them with a smile. “But your body in this world is distinctly like a cat, therefore we can assume that your anatomy would be one of which, correct?”

Morgana opened his mouth to retort something, then abruptly closed it when he realized that he didn’t have anything to say. Akira bit the inside of his lip to keep from smiling as Morgana huffed. “It’s different in the cognitive world,” Morgana finally said. “I’m not really a cat there either.”

Akechi thought for a moment before nodding. “Yes. That’s true,” he said, hand on his chin. “So the effects of coffee could be different there.”

“Although if you suddenly drop dead, we’ll know that multiple coffee uses were the cause,” Akira added cheekily, frowning when he looked at the coffee brimming at the top of the thermos.

“Et tu, Joker?” Morgana gasped.

Akira smiled, then turned to Akechi. “I made a little too much,” he said. “Do you want a cup before you go?”

Akechi nodded, and Akira poured the remains into an empty mug. He wondered if he should put anything into it, but before he could look up at Akechi to ask, the brunette spoke. “I’ll have whatever you recommend,” Akechi said when he noted Akira’s thoughtful expression.

Akira went into the kitchen and brought out the milk and sugar. He could leave it as is, as he’d done it exactly the way Sojiro had taught him and so he knew it was up to par the way that it was. Or he could put a little bit of his own flair into it. He glanced back over at Akechi, who was mindlessly watching the TV.

Flair, it was.

In retrospect, it hadn’t really been the best idea. To be honest, he’d probably fallen off when it came to adding a bit of creativity to coffee, since Kawakami had taken over once he’d gained her trust enough to request her to do so.

He slid the cup in front of Akechi, who smiled in thanks and brought the cup up for a sip. When he did so, he nearly choked on it instantly but stopped himself at the last second. He masked it as clearing his throat instead even as his eyebrows shot up as he swallowed it.

“How is it?” Akira said. Akechi turned to Akira with a smile and an expression that looked like he was contemplating the bitter (ha!) truth or lying to make Akira feel better. Akira leaned against the counter. “I don’t offend easily,” he added.

“To be quite honest…” He managed a smile to break the news a little easier. “It’s…awful.”

Akira dropped his expression. “I’m benching you tomorrow,” he deadpanned in response.

“I’m sorry? I don’t-” Akechi stopped when Akira peeked up at him and gave him a teasing smile. “Funny,” he said with a half-amused chuckle himself.

“Do you want to try?” Akira asked.
“Making coffee?”

Akira nodded, then took off his apron with a gleam in his eyes as he outstretched it to the brunette. “Impress me with your coffee skills, Ace Detective Akechi,” he teased with a gleam in his eye.

Akechi stared at him for a moment before allowing himself to laugh. He pushed himself up off the seat. “You do know that those two aren’t one and the same, right?” Akira shrugged as Akechi moved behind the counter and gingerly took the apron from Akira’s hands. “Are you sure it’s alright for me to be back here?” Akechi asked slowly.

Akira moved so that he was on the other side of the counter and Akechi was now the only one behind it. “You’re helping serve coffee to an expectant customer,” he said with a cheeky smile.

Akechi didn’t speak again before he smiled slightly, albeit still unsurely, as he slipped the apron over his head. It didn’t look half-bad, actually. Green was a nice color on him. “Oh, are you going to pay? I expect a nice tip,” he said in the same cheeky tone as Akira.

“Dunno. I’m tough to impress.”

“I bet it’s not as tough as you’d have me think.” And Akira dully remembered his nightmare and quickly shoved it in the back of his mind as he smiled at Akechi.

Morgana abruptly cleared his throat, causing the two to look at him. “You’re just grinning like an idiot again,” he said to Akira. Then he looked at Akechi. “Actually, both of you are. Just thought I’d let you know. It’s creepy.”

Akechi furrowed his brow in confusion, unsure of how to respond, so Akira waved it off as he got comfortable in his seat. “My smile is creepy? I’m hurt,” he said with a pout.

“Morgana, may I ask you a question?” Akechi asked, picking up an empty coffee pot.

“What is it?” Morgana asked cautiously.

“Is... there a reason that you’re so apprehensive of me?” Akechi asked slowly, though he kept a light tone like he didn’t matter which way the answer would go. Akira knew it was likely the opposite.

Morgana glanced over at Akira, who took that opportunity to look down at his phone so that it wouldn’t be suspicious if the two of them exchanged glances.

“Should I not be?” Morgana finally answered challengingly. Akira almost wanted to smile. He probably would’ve lost his sanity by this point if he didn’t have Morgana’s voice of reason getting him through this timeline.

“Ha ha. You’re like him, then. I suppose that’s not surprising, considering how much time the two of you spend together. I hope I can win you over some day,” Akechi added with a charismatic smile.

“Hm, I wouldn’t count on it.”

Akechi didn’t seem too deterred. He started to prepare coffee as he turned to Morgana with a casual grin. “I meant to ask, how did you enjoy the sushi?”
Morgana turned his chin up. “I’ve had better,” the cat said, and Akira realized just how much of a horrible liar he really was.

Akira placed his chin into his hand, flicking his gaze over to Akechi. “He was complaining about how I never get him good sushi like that all evening.”

“I did not!” Morgana protested.

Akechi smiled. “I was thinking of going back there to try the anago next time. Should I bring some back?” He said nonchalantly as he looked at the various coffee beans in stock.

Smooth, Akira thought to himself.

“A-Anago?” Morgana said, mouth practically watering already. Then he turned on his heel and cleared his throat. “Whatever. You can’t win someone over with a few good pieces of sushi,” he said, and Akira smiled inwardly as he pulled out his phone.

Akira Kurusu 20:48
You can win him over with anago.

Akira Kurusu 20:48
I’ll take salmon.

Akechi frowned. He stopped what he was doing, then pulled his phone out of his back pocket. Once he stared at it, the frown softened and gave way to a smile that he unsuccessfully tried to hide.

Goro Akechi 20:49
I don't need to win you over.

Akira bit the inside of his mouth.

Akira Kurusu 20:49
Sure about that?

“Are you two texting while you’re in the same room?” Morgana said increduously, trying to peer over at his phone. Akira placed it face down casually as Morgana huffed at his inability to view the messages.

The brunette got to work making the coffee. Morgana got comfortable on the seat he was on, and the gentle sounds of the TV played in the background past the noises of the coffee grinder and soon the coffee machine. Akechi seemed entirely in his element. He didn’t even look at Akira while he worked. Just like when he’d been absorbed in the book he read when Akira was on his couch, he was entirely entranced with what he was doing. Had he always been that focused?

Akechi didn’t speak while he worked, which was fine, because a comfortable silence fell over them as Morgana readjusted himself and Akira watched TV. It was almost peaceful with just the three of them there.

Akira thought briefly about how much had changed. When he really thought about it, things had still happened exactly as they had before, which didn’t make Akira feel too much better about changing fate. The only difference had been the addition of another person. A new friendship. He wondered what would be there after it was all over. If Akira sneakily got the
name of Akechi’s boss without the brunette’s help, Akechi would likely not forgive him, and rightfully so. However, if by some chance Akechi willingly gave over his name, Akira didn’t know what would happen then. Would he decide to go to prison of his own free will or think he should be pardoned for giving them the name and helping them?

He thought about how peaceful it was again in the café, and Akira surprised himself with an unrecognizable feeling when he thought about what would happen when that day finally came. Relief, mixed with something that he’d rather keep buried.

“Here you are.”

Akira blinked, cut off from his thoughts as Akechi placed a steaming hot cup of black coffee in front of him. He smiled confidently as the familiar ding of the door’s bell came. Sojiro walked into the door, pausing when he noticed Akechi behind the counter. “Ah. Sakura-san. I apologize for being back here. He suggested that I try my hand at making a cup of coffee. I hope that’s alright,” he said kindly, although he was already slinking back to exit the counter.

Sojiro stood there for a moment before waving it off. “Hey, pour another for me,” he said with a throaty chuckle. “Let’s see how it tastes.”

“Of course,” Akechi said, and he quickly poured another cup for Sojiro. “I believe you’ll find it especially to your liking.”

“Sure is smug about it,” Morgana muttered.

Sojiro, the ultimate coffee judge, took a seat in front of the cup of coffee, and Akira took a sip at the same time that Sojiro did.

…it was delicious. Of course, he hadn’t really been expecting it to be bad, but he hadn’t been expecting it to be this good either. He was good at a lot, it seemed.

“Mmm,” Sojiro said, content. “Now that hit the spot,” he praised, and Akechi beamed with a bright smile. “You ever get tired of being a detective, you’ve got a future in coffee.”

Akechi smiled. “I quite enjoyed that. Ha ha. It’s a little different when making coffee for someone else.”

Sojiro nodded. “There’s a lot of technique behind it. Come by next time when it’s not too late and I’ll show you how to add your own personal touch to it.”

At this, Akechi dimmed as he frowned slightly. “Personal touch?”

Sojiro half-smiled. “This is good, but it tastes just like the Blue Mountain it is. Doesn’t taste like your coffee.”

Akechi’s brow furrowed even deeper. He glanced over at Akira, who shrugged, before turning his attention back to Sojiro. “I’m…afraid I don’t understand.”

“Heh. It’s like you’re reading it from a textbook. Like I said. Come by again and I’ll show you.”

Akechi his hand on his chin unsurely before slowly nodding, a slight smile forming on his face. “I think I would like that.”

“Ace Barista Akechi?” Akira said, tapping his finger against his own chin.
“Ha ha. I’m not sure that has the same ring to it,” Akechi said.

When they finished, Akechi packed up his things, and Akira walked him out the door. He could practically feel Morgana’s eyes watching him from inside Leblanc as he leaned against the door. Akechi turned to him. “I hope we’ll have enough coffee for tomorrow,” the brunette said.

“It was really good.”

“Ha. Thank you. People do tend to like someone who knows how to make a good cup of coffee,” he said with a charismatic laugh, his eyes brightening as he did so.

Akira shifted. It was a strange thing to say, so— “Is that why you learned it?”

Akechi blinked, caught off-guard by his words. “That’s…” He cleared his throat. “There are many beneficial reasons to learn how to make decent coffee,” he deflected. “I should be going. Tomorrow is a critical day. Be sure to rest, alright?”

“You too,” Akira said. “Oh, one more thing.” He paused as though he was about to say something critically important, and Akechi looked at him attentively, probably expecting an actual statement strategic to the mission. Instead, Akira gave him a tilted smile. “Don’t waste the life stones.”

Akechi, clearly not expecting that answer, responded not in his usual flustered way, but by looking up and half-rolling his eyes with an amused smile… And it was so out of character for someone like Akechi that Akira wanted to say something else ridiculous just to see him do it again. “I’ll do my best,” he said in an equally as amused tone.

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Akira didn’t remember feeling so jaded when he entered the Velvet Room in the last time. He wasn’t quite frustrated with Caroline and Justine – they were kind of amusing and they seemed to be in the middle of their own mental crises. No, it wasn’t with them.

“It seems things are getting quite interesting,” Igor said. “It seems you have forged something of a bond with the one who has caused you to approach death. I wonder how this will change your fate.”

“Fate isn’t absolute,” Akira said.

Igor simply laughed at that. “Indeed. Perhaps you will win the game after all.”

And something about his statement really grated Akira. “This isn’t a game,” Akira said boldly, unsure of where he got the guts to say so but not really caring at that point. “People’s lives are on the line. Not just mine.”

“Quiet, inmate! How dare you speak that way to our master!” Caroline said irately.

Akira let his hands drop from the bars. There was too much at stake to let this just play out like a game. He knew that he had Igor to thank to even give him a second chance, but to call it a game implied there were winners and losers. Akira wished that he could think of it that simply. Somehow, if he did come out on top, Akira knew he wouldn’t feel anything like a winner. He felt trapped.

Looking around the prison, he’d never felt it to be more appropriate.
It had been the statement about Yusuke’s mother that set a certain brunette off. Although, from the moment that they confronted Madarame, Akira could see Akechi’s clenched fists yet again. To his credit, none of the others were really paying attention to him. No, they were horrified at Madarame’s confession (rightfully so), and studying Yusuke’s reaction.

“You let her die?!” Ann said in disbelief.

Akira glanced over at Yusuke, who had something of an expression mixed with both rage and brokenness. The person he’d trusted most had proven himself to be entirely different than the man Yusuke viewed him to be. It made Akira think back to what Kioshi’s father had said to them.

Perhaps Madarame’s moral compass had become too skewed for him to want to be the person that Yusuke admired. Yusuke, and all the other children who just wanted to find a place to belong and a place where they could create.

“She was physically weak. No one would doubt if she just dropped dead because of a seizure,” Madarame cackled. “Above all, Yusuke, didn’t you think it was odd—that I discovered your talent when you were only three? The reason why I kept you around was to keep you from realizing the truth behind ‘Sayuri.’”

Akechi’s fists clenched even tighter. Whatever emotion he was feeling, he was trying his best to hold it in.

“You killed her…!” Yusuke finally declared, his voice nearly collapsing from the sheer despicableness of it.

Akira wondered what kind of person could willingly watch another person die in front of them. His eyes flickered to Akechi again and tried to ignore the image of Akechi smiling over him with a gun pressed to his temple.

What kind of person, indeed.

“The artistic talents you inherited from your mother were a delightful miscalculation though. If I’m to steal ideas, it’s much easier robbing the future of brats who won’t talk back than adults. It’s thanks to you that I came up with the idea. You have my grati—”

“That’s enough.”

Akira blinked, as did the others. “A-Akechi-kun?” Ann started.

Akechi stepped over so that he was standing next to Yusuke. “We’ve heard enough. This is enough of a confession,” he said with a hardened yet calm voice, glancing up at the artist.

Yusuke nodded in agreement. “Yes.” Then he looked at Madarame with renewed determination. “I thank you, Madarame. Every reason for me to forgive you has disappeared without a trace at this very moment.”

What followed was a more difficult battle than Akira had been expecting, but it had nothing to do with the shadow this time. He’d tasked Morgana and Ryuji with being on support and standby, but it only took Akira a few minutes to realize that that had been a mistake.
It was Akechi.

Ann and Yusuke focused well enough on the fight, and it took so much concentration and strategy that they wouldn’t have had time to look over and notice anyway. But Akira noted the almost-aggressive way that Akechi had started to attack. Confidence mixed with recklessness. It was entirely unlike him and incredibly unexpected, though perhaps he shouldn’t have been so surprised considering what had happened in Mementos. Still, Akechi was the collected one, yet it was up to Yusuke to cast an sukukaja to buff his evasion so that Akechi could dodge the dust flurry that would’ve surely killed him or knocked him flat out.

Not to mention his own worrying nearly caused him to get hit by it as well.

When they’d finally gotten rid of those ridiculous painting parts and Madarame revealed himself, Akira was able to stop focusing so much on Akechi since Madarame’s true form hadn’t been anything difficult to deal with.

But when he returned back into the painting form, he could practically feel Akechi’s frustration. He wanted to beat him, that much was clear. But it was almost like he wanted to beat him way more than even Yusuke did.

“Again?” Akechi said in disbelief.

“Everybody stay on guard,” Akira told the group when the attack buffed painting prepared to strike.

“We can take him down if we go all out,” Akechi said with a shake of his head, as confident as ever. He hadn’t even looked at Akira. He was completely focused on the shadow before him.

Akira blinked as he watched Akechi decide to use a bless move rather than guard. Frustrated wasn’t the right word. Akira didn’t think him the type to get irritated either. It sounded bad, but it was the first time someone had openly under-minded his command. He wasn’t angry about that, because they were free to act as they wanted and it wasn’t like he ever craved the title or responsibility of being a leader in the first place, but he hadn’t been expecting it from Akechi, of all people. As much as he cared for his best friend, Akira would’ve pegged Ryuji to act so rashly before the rest of them. Or even Yusuke, since this was ultimately his battle to win.

“What the hell are you doing Crow?!” Morgana’s voice broke through Akira’s thoughts.

“We can win this now,” Akechi said. “We don’t need to hold back.” The others looked a bit unsure of what to do as they contemplated guarding or going all out.

Akira might’ve been inclined to agree with him if he didn’t already know what type of power that they were up against. For once, Akira didn’t know how to respond. Despite whatever traitorous intent he’d had, Akechi remained on the frontlines back in the last timeline because Akira knew that Akechi was on par with skill and strategy. It was simply unlike him.

“I’ll cover him,” Yusuke said, breaking through Akira’s lapse in thought, and he turned to see the artist case yet another sukukaja to buff Akechi’s evasion once more. It was great, except now it left Yusuke open, so Akira was forced to in turn buff Yusuke’s defense, leaving all of them but Ann not guarding.

He didn’t like those odds, and he was right.
Akira was starting to think that he was turning into a shadow magnet. The sudden force of a thunderclap struck him, and he nearly toppled over as his vision blurred slightly and his whole body felt electrified.

“Joker! Oh no, you’ve been shocked. You can’t move!” Morgana cried out.

“Persona!” Ann said, and though he couldn’t move, he felt some of his energy return to him as she cast a Dia spell on him.

It took another moment before his body relaxed as he heard Yusuke toss a Nohar-M to him, and Akira realized that once again they were left defenseless as a result of having to heal and cure him.

Akira couldn’t do it anymore. At this rate, they were going to get themselves killed. He turned to Ryuji and gave him a knowing look, and the faux-blond happily obliged, hopping into the space where Akira once was. “Got you covered, man!” he declared confidently.

Akira nodded, then walked over to Akechi, who didn’t notice that Akira had come up to him until Akira placed a hand on his shoulder. Akechi turned to him, eyes focused and determined.

“Switch with Ryuji,” Akira said.

Akechi blinked wordlessly for a moment. “I’m sorry?”

“Captain Kidd!” Akira heard Ryuji say, and he was grateful for Ryuji’s enemy distraction while he spoke to Akechi.

“Surely you aren’t serious…?” Akechi said.

Akira frowned, though he managed to furrow his brows sympathetically. He didn’t know how to sugarcoat it, and he knew Akechi wouldn’t want him to anyway. “You’re not thinking clearly,” he said gently. “Which is fine, but I think you should sit the rest out.”

Akechi still stared at him in disbelief, and when he opened his mouth, no words came out. He was…angry that Akira had said that? No, it didn’t look like it. He didn’t know how Akechi was feeling, but the brunette finally exhaled slowly, plastering on a smile full of false bravado. “Of course. You are the leader.”

Akechi didn’t protest being switched out, but he could see that the brunette was clearly unhappy and about it. But he could focus on that later. Akira turned to the paintings menacingly stood before them ready to attack. He glanced at each of his teammates, poised and ready to take Madarame down.

“Joker?” Ann said.

With a smile, he summoned Shiki-Ouji. It was time to finally finish this.

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Defeating Madarame didn’t take long after that. Finally, his shadow crumpled to the floor, deflated and groveling.

“You’re done for, along with this abominable world,” Yusuke said.
The artist stepped forward, and Akechi stepped forward too, although not quite as close as Yusuke had gotten. “What happens now?”

“We’re going to take the treasure,” Morgana said to Madarame and indirectly answering Akechi’s question.

“Please…just don’t kill me!” Madarame pleaded.

Yusuke walked over and grabbed Madarame. “Return to yourself in reality and confess your crimes – all of them!” He said, his voice colored with emotion.

Akechi blinked, staring at Yusuke with an unreadable expression.

“Y-You’re not going to kill me?” Madarame said unsurely.

Yusuke’s fists clenched as his grip on Madarame tightened. “Swear it!” he said.

“Alright…alright!” Madarame said, and with a sharp breath, Yusuke let go of his grip on the artist.

“Okay, let’s grab the treasure and get out of here!” Ann said.

“We’re…just going to leave him?” Akechi said, some of the hardness entering his voice again.

“That’s all we need. He’ll confess in reality,” Morgana said.

“That’s… I see,” Akechi said, a hand on his chin.

Madarame looked between them. “Wh-What about the other one though? The one with the black mask?”

Akira froze, but for a decidedly different reason than the others. The black mask comment had still happened? The person still came into the Palace at the same time as them? His gaze fell to Akechi, who had stiffened significantly.

“Black mask?” Ann repeated.

“Another persona-user, huh…” Morgana said, catching Akira’s eye and exchanging a knowing glance.

Before anyone could say anything else, the Palace began to rumble. “C’mon, we’ll think about that later. Let’s get out of here!” Ryuji declared.

With Yusuke’s final words to Madarame, they rushed towards the exit of the Palace as quickly as possible as the cognitive world crumbled around them.

They returned to the real world without a hitch.

Whatever thoughts Akira had were pushed aside for the moment as Yusuke gingerly held the Sayuri in his hands with a tender and placid expression on his face when they returned to their hideout. Yusuke had been through so much – had been burned by someone close to him in a way that Akira had never experienced before. He’d never be able to truly understand what Yusuke had gone through, but the serene expression Yusuke held and the gratitude in his eyes was enough to make him feel like maybe he didn’t need to. Maybe this was enough, to do his part to make sure that Yusuke never had to go through something like that again. Now he
could start to rebuild. It wouldn’t be easy; Akira already knew that much, but he was free to be his own artist. He was free to become the artist that a child not unlike him would one day look up to. Akira thought about Akechi’s words: asking him why he was doing this. Akira still wouldn’t be able to give him a complete answer, but moments like this made the moral grey area seem worth it, even if it wasn’t entirely morally “just” or “right.” What did that even mean, anyway?

Akira smiled inwardly. He hadn’t even started hanging out with Yusuke again yet and the artist was already able to open his eyes to things he hadn’t thought about before – things he hadn’t thought about in the last timeline either.

“I’d like to thank all of you, for allowing me the chance to fight alongside you and bring Madarame to justice,” Yusuke said, and Akira blinked out of his thoughts as the others smiled in response. Then he turned to Akechi with a slightly wider smile. “I’d like to thank you especially.”

“What? Oh please, he could’ve gotten all of us killed if it weren’t for Joker’s quick thinking,” Morgana argued.

“It's fine,” Akira started. “Yusuke says it’s fine.” He noticed Akechi look over at him, and Akira threw him a half-smile. It didn’t seem to do much other than make Akechi furrow his brow as he gave a forced smile in response.

They all decided to get something to eat together and then parted ways shortly after, and Akechi hesitantly moved into step beside Akira without speaking. Truth be told, a part of Akira was a little too tired today, but when he considered voicing this to Akechi and asking to walk back with just Morgana, he thought about how strange it would’ve felt without him, and he decided against it. He could think about what that meant at a later date.

Akira wasn’t sure what to think in regards to the mask. It couldn’t have been Akechi, unless he willingly put on another mask so that they wouldn’t be able to tell it was him just in case Madarame spotted him in his Crow attire and decided to say something as he did. Not to mention he wasn’t sure when Akechi would’ve had the time to go into the Palace. He’d seen Akechi almost every day since they’d first discovered Madarame’s Palace. Then again, there were a few days that were unaccounted for.

They spent most of the walk in silence, and it wasn’t until they reached Leblanc in the evening that Akechi stopped him. “May I ask you something?” He said.

Akira nodded. Akechi’s eyes fell to Morgana, and Akira gave Morgana a weary smile. “I’ll meet you inside.”

“What? Seriously?” Morgana said incredulously. Akira gave him his most charming and
persuading smile in response. “Ugh, fine. It’s not because you’re trying to grin at me like an idiot, either.”

Akira thanked him, opening the door so that Morgana could walk in before closing it back. He leaned against the doorway, briefly wondering if Sojiro would be upset that he was blocking the entranceway. He turned to Akechi, giving the brunette his full attention.

“A-Are you angry with me?” he asked slowly, not quite meeting Akira’s eyes.

“What?”

“The battle,” Akechi said, and Akira wondered if maybe Akechi was more upset about it than he’d initially let on. “When I didn’t listen to your commands to guard.”

And Akira thought that it was such an odd thing for him to be angry over. He’d been surprised. Frustrated. Not angry. There were more productive things to do than be angry over a single person not listening to his advice. If he wasn’t angry at a man falsely accusing him of assault or at a person literally shooting him in the head, he didn’t know how he could be angry at something so insignificant as that. “I’m just glad you didn’t get hurt,” Akira answered truthfully.

“But you did. In my place, perhaps.”

“Your knight in shining armor.” He gave Akechi a half-smile, nudging him slightly, and the brunette just barely managed to smile in response. “I didn’t think you’d act so rashly, though,” he added, and Akechi didn’t hide his flinch very well. “You were angry?” Akira asked.

Akechi got a strange look on his face, then, slowly, he spoke: “I…apologize,” he said.

“For?” Akira said curiously.

“For being angry…” Akechi said.

*What an odd thing to say.* “Don’t,” Akira told him plainly.

“Huh?”

Akira shrugged, then folded his arms across his chest. “Feel whatever it is that you want to feel. You shouldn’t apologize for that.”

“I-I don’t understand,” Akechi started, and Akira furrowed his brow, this time the one confused.

“If you want to be angry, then be angry. It doesn’t matter to me,” Akira said, and he hoped that it came across as confident as he intended it to be. Then he shrugged. “You can’t always control how you feel, but you can control how you act on it. Apologize for actions, not feelings.”

“V-Very well…I…apologize for…acting recklessly and subsequently doubting your leadership during the fight.”

Akira shook his head again. “That’s not what I meant. You didn’t. You acted. I might be the ‘leader,’ but we’re a team. I don’t control you. And I wouldn’t want to,” Akira told him earnestly. Akechi furrowed his brow even further, if it was possible. “It’s the same reason why we have a unanimous decision rule in place for targets. I trust all of you to act in the
manner you think is best.”

“Trust…” Akechi repeated distantly. He forced himself to smile, though it looked a little disbelieving. “I suppose that is what you do in a team.”

“Besides,” Akira started. He gave Akechi a lopsided grin. “It all turned out, didn’t it?”

The ridiculousness of Akira’s grin finally made Akechi chuckle genuinely. That fact that he’d been able to make Akechi feel better also stirred something that he decided to ignore.

“Yes, I suppose so. All that is left is to await the change of heart, correct?” Akechi hummed contemplatively. “Then he will confess his crimes?”

“That’s the idea.”

“We went into his mind, and stole his distorted desire,” Akechi mused. “I wonder if that is truly the best way to go.”

“I don’t know,” Akira admitted, and Akechi blinked at Akira’s admission of their morally questionable actions. Akira already knew that. He’d known that for a while. “But it’s all we’ve got.”

“That may be up for debate. We forced him to feel guilty. Is that truly his own guilt then, or the subconscious result of our own actions?” Akechi said, getting that distant voice that showed he was about to get lost in his own thoughts. Then he smiled, turning to Akira. “Well, I suppose I have to see it firsthand myself before rushing to make such judgments,” he said with a sparkle in his eye.

Before he could say anything else, thunder that Akira hadn’t even heard during their entire conversation rumbled clearly and ominously, and seconds later, rain quickly turned into a torrential downpour. The two of them hurried inside Leblanc, which was empty save for Morgana and Sojiro.

They waited for a while for the rain to let up, but when it showed no signs of stopping and lightning accompanied it, Akechi frowned and looked at his phone. “According to the weather forecast, it’s supposed to be like this all night.” He turned to Akira. “Would you mind if I borrowed an umbrella? I’ll return it.”

Akira peered past him out the window. The wind gusts looked like they would blow that umbrella out of his hand in seconds.

He glanced over at Morgana, who returned his glance with raised eyebrows, and then threw the cat an apologetic smile before turning back to Akechi. “Just stay here.”

“I beg your pardon?” Akechi said almost instantly.

“What?” Morgana screeched.

Sojiro nodded. “He’s right. It’s supposed to be a pretty bad storm the rest of the night. It’s fine with me.”

“I don’t want to impose…” Akechi said, already slinking towards the door.

“I wouldn’t offer if you were,” Akira reminded him.
Akechi opened his mouth, and it took a few seconds for words to escape it. “Th-That’s quite alright. I will be fine out there.” As soon as he said that, a loud clap of thunder made all of them jump slightly, followed by the crack of lightning illuminating the insides of Leblanc even more. A strong wind gust following, creaking the windows.

Akira raised an eyebrow with a coy smile. “You were saying?”

“I better get going before it gets worse. Better make sure…the house is in intact,” Sojiro told them. “Make sure you lock up, alright?” Sojiro said to Akira, who nodded. Sojiro then turned to Akechi. “I mean it. Don’t feel like you’re imposing.”

Akechi let out a nervous laugh, but didn’t respond.

Once Sojiro left, Akira walked over to the door, placing his hand on the lock but not turning it. He looked at Akechi. “Should I leave this unlocked for you?”

After a moment, Akechi relented. “I…I’ll stay.”

***

“Your room is nice,” Akechi commented with a soft smile as he looked around.

Akira was grateful that he’d finished doing the last of his cleaning a while ago. His plant was healthy, and he’d just added a game console to his room as well. It still wasn’t much, but it was cozy, and it felt distinctly his.

“Oh, this journal,” Akechi said, and Akira froze instantly. He turned from where he was rummaging through his clothes. Akechi was holding his black notebook, and Morgana’s eyes widened at the same time that Akira forced himself to smile nonchalantly. “I have one of these too. They certainly come in handy for taking notes on cases,” he said kindly. He placed it back next to the TV, and Akira un-tensed.

He has no reason to look at that.

Akira paused in his pajama-searching to place a pillow and a spare blanket onto the couch, and Akechi smiled. “Thank you again.”

Akira shook his head. “This is for me. You can sleep on the bed.”

“What? I couldn’t possibly intrude to that extent. I’m a guest,” Akechi sputtered out.

“Exactly,” Akira agreed. “You’re a guest.” He walked back over to his clothes, picking out a pair of pajama pants and a plain t-shirt. “Here. We’re about the same size, I think I’ve got a spare toothbrush from packing.” He paused when he noticed Akechi giving him an odd look, then tilted his head with a furrowed brow.

Akechi finally broke his stare, gingerly taking the clothes from his hands as though it might crumble at any moment. “You’re very hospitable.”

“You’d do the same, I’m sure,” Akira waved it off. “You can change downstairs in the restroom.”

Akechi smiled lightly. He nodded, then disappeared downstairs.

Morgana hopped onto the couch and once he heard the sound of the bathroom door close, he
turned on Akira with a displeased expression. Akira gave him a small smile. “I wasn’t going to send him out in that weather.”

Morgana made a face at him, but nodded. “I know. I wouldn’t have either. Doesn’t mean I like him being here,” he was quick to add.

Akira smiled wearily even as he rubbed his forehead. “I know.”

“You’re not going to do anything funny with him are you?” Morgana added. Akira just laughed, shaking his head as he tried to make his bed look more presentable for someone else to sleep in. “I’m just saying. You kind of look at him different.”

“It’s not on purpose.”

“That’s what worries me.”

And Akira had no words to placate the cat that he hadn’t told him already, so instead he changed the subject. The two of them chatted for a bit more, and Akira turned on the TV for some extra background noise as he prepared the room until Akechi came back up the stairs, looking entirely unsure of what to do with the clothes that he’d changed out of it. Akira was in the middle of recounting some story about Takemi when the brunette came back up. He turned to Akechi, then paused.

The clothes fit him snugly, it seemed. Better than he thought they would. His hair was pulled into a loose, low ponytail behind him. Akira had never really thought about how long Akechi’s hair was. It looked nice that way too. It framed his face well.

“Is something the matter?” Akechi said slowly, peering over at Akira.

Akira blinked, not realizing that he hadn’t done so in a long time. Then he gestured to Akechi. “You sleep with your hair in a ponytail?”

“Is that a problem?” Akechi asked, confused.

“No, it’s nice,” Akira replied, and he saw Morgana roll his eyes out of his peripheral.

“Nice? It’s hard to sleep with it in my face, is all. It’s not there to look nice,” Akechi said with a soft laugh that filled the room.

“Call it a welcome side effect, then,” Akira said. He gestured to the bed. “I made it up for you.”

“Thank you, again,” Akechi said sincerely. “I’m very grateful.”

“It’s what friends do,” Akira said, waving it off. But instead of smiling, it just made Akechi frown even further.

After changing himself, Akira picked up the remote to turn off the TV when a voice stopped him.

“…That is why I will fight to ensure the safety of this nation.” Akira stared at the TV and the man that spoke. He looked so familiar, and his voice—“Ggh.” Akira placed his hand on his forehead as a fresh wave of pain shot through him. It felt different from the headaches that he’d gotten that strained the center of his forehead like a bullet. No. This one felt like the semblance of something that wanted to come back into his memory.
“Akira?” Morgana asked worriedly.

“Are you alright?” Akechi said, and Akira nodded unbelievably so even as Akechi tentatively placed a hand on his shoulder to help steady him. He looked at the TV himself, and Akira felt Akechi’s hand stiffen slightly on top of him. “Is it the TV?” He persisted.

“Just…that voice…” Akira finally said. “I’m fine,” he added, mostly for Morgana’s sake. He pointed the remote towards the TV and turned it off.

Akechi was still looking at the black screen where the man’s face once was. He furrowed his brow. “His voice?” He said. His hand was on his chin, and Akira imagined that this was probably the tone he got when he was solving a case. Then he looked at Akira, then back at the black screen. “I wonder…” Akira tilted his head at him as his headache subsided. At once, Akechi managed an easygoing smile and he chuckled. “My apologies. Don’t mind me. I’m…simply thinking out loud again.”

Akechi didn’t bring it up again, and Akira didn’t either, since there was no reason for him to. When the two of them got settled in their respective sleeping locations for the night, Morgana hopped onto the couch at the base of Akira’s feet.

Exhaustion hit him like a tidal wave, and as he let his eyes close, the sounds of thunder could be heard. It sounded almost gentle from the inside. Storms were strange that way. They ravaged and raged against the world but it could never quite break it.

“May I ask you something?” Akechi’s voice broke through the silence.

“Hm?” He said, somewhat sleepily.

“You said that you weren’t close with your parents. Is that correct?”

Akira craned his head from where he was laying on the couch. Morgana looked like he was already sleeping soundly. He could see Akechi sitting with his back flat against the bed, but he couldn’t tell if his eyes were open or closed. “They sent me away for a year. What do you think?” Akira said lightly. Akechi hummed thoughtfully, and Akira faintly smiled as he turned to look up at the ceiling. “They aren’t bad people, though.”

“No?”

Akira shook his head even though Akechi probably couldn’t see him. “I don’t think I’d have even stepped in for that woman if they didn’t raise me this way.” He bit the inside of his lip. “Before I left, they told me, ‘you did the right thing.’” He hadn’t told anybody that. He knew that most people figured he was sent away because his parents thought that the backlash from the case made him a pain in the ass, but Akira knew them.

“Then…why…?”

Thunder rumbled. “People talk. They’re good people, but they let what other people say get to them. I always knew that. They’ve always lived their lives according to other people’s expectations.”

_It’s just one year, then this will all blow over and you can come back home._

He hadn’t even been mad when they sat him down to tell him this. In fact, he was surprised it didn’t happen sooner.
It’s just…there’s a big promotion up at work and it’s making some of the others a little concerned about the type of child I’m raising that would assault a man.

He’d simply looked at them. No response, no nod. Just listened.

Never change who you are.

“You don’t resent them for it?”

Akira didn’t speak for a while. Instead, he counted the thunder and lightning that came in the span it took for him to open his mouth. He glanced down at Morgana. He still looked like he was asleep. Akira closed his eyes briefly, and when he opened them again, lightning lit up the room. “Sometimes,” he admitted. Akechi didn’t respond, and he was glad for that. “I don’t resent them as people,” he clarified. “Just that they weren’t stronger like they taught me to be.” Then he lazily waved his hand in the air. “It’s in the past. I don’t dwell on it anymore.”

“So it is. However, I’m glad you said that,” Akechi said, and Akira could hear the smile in his voice. “It makes you feel a little bit more human.”

“Am I an ethereal being to you?” Akira teased.

Akechi exhaled. “Sometimes,” he echoed. “Before, Yusuke thanked me for working so hard to help him.” He paused. “But I can’t say that I did it entirely for him. Perhaps I’d just been taking out my own frustrations on someone that I can’t touch yet myself.”

“Your father?”

Akechi paused again. “Yusuke did not decide to change Madarame’s heart for revenge. He did it so that Madarame wouldn’t be able to rob the futures of children anymore. And thus, he was content with simply stealing a treasure to have him confess him crimes. He’s a good person. His reasons were noble.”

Akira frowned slightly. Maybe Akechi was hurting more than he’d thought. He’d never thought of him to be an evil criminal to begin with, but his words made him think that there was still so much left to uncover about Akechi’s mindset. That was the key to stopping him. Not just getting him to trust him, but understanding the reasons why he’s doing what he’s doing.

Could he be doing it for revenge? But even that seemed a bit far-fetched. Who would do so much just for revenge? Akira couldn’t fathom it. He supposed he couldn’t discount the idea completely, but whatever he was doing, it seemed like he at least had some acknowledgment that it wasn’t noble, at least from the tone he’d taken on.

“He’s strong,” Akira finally said.

“Yes.”

“You’re strong too,” Akira said.

“Wh-What?”

“You don’t think so?”

“It’s not that. I hadn’t been expecting that response, is all,” Akechi said quietly. “Perhaps I should keep a tally of all the times that your words have surprised me.” Another pause.
“Thank you.”

“For surprising you?”

“For…extending your umbrella to me.”

Akira smiled, glad that both Akechi and Morgana couldn’t see it this time. Despite the guilt that lingered at the fact that truly, honestly, he’d initially approached him with the sole purpose of trying to find a way to bring both Akechi and his boss to justice, he allowed himself to smile. Of course, that was still his goal, but Akechi himself had been an expected surprise.

He wondered what had really been so different. Was this Akechi, the one who got flustered at the smallest things and failed at the Big Bang Burger challenge and accepted keychains from boys with broken families and acted rashly sometimes because of his own resentment and emotions – was this the same Akechi that was capable of shooting someone in cold blood?

It had to be. Morgana would remind him time and time again of this. He’d conquered death, yet he still felt helpless. Akira was right. Yusuke was strong. Ryuji and Ann were strong. Morgana was strong. And yes, even Akechi was strong.

Yet, in that moment, Akira himself felt anything but.

But he was the leader. He had to be that plus everything. The wind howled and the rain pounded against the window, causing it to creak under the pressure. But it remained, even as the storm relentlessly continued on.

Creaked, worn, battered, but unbreakable.

He wondered if people were that unbreakable against relentless storms. He was inclined to not think so.

“Thank you for accepting it,” Akira finally said.

Another silence overtook them for a moment.

“Akira,” Akechi started. Then that was it. Akira waited for him to continue. Didn’t speak or prompt him. He just waited. When Akechi spoke, it was uncharacteristically shaky. “I… started to read into it. I suppose I couldn’t help myself.” Akira knew what he was talking about. Of course he did. “I think I like…the rain.”

Akira turned his head, and when he looked at Akechi, he saw that the brunette was looking at him, not out the window at the rain. Akira went back to looking at the ceiling. Then he closed his eyes, just for a moment, allowing himself to just be. What a difference a couple of months could make.

“I think I like it too.”

Akechi let out a disbelieving noise. Then he chuckled, somewhat ironically. “It’s funny. It feels a little sad.”

Akira nodded, opening his eyes. “It’s not supposed to be.”

“No, it’s not.” Resigned. Disappointed. Unreadable.
“Just don’t think about it,” Akira told him, his eyelids suddenly feeling more heavy than they had before.

“I suppose that’s best,” Akechi said after a pause. “After all, one doesn’t run out into the rain just because one likes it.”

Akira nodded again, unsure of whether or not Akechi was even still looking at him. He supposed it didn’t matter much anyway. Akechi likely wasn’t looking for a response after his statement, and Akira didn’t have one to give even if he had been looking. The silence was more than enough for both of them. The silence, filled with the things they didn’t talk about. He wouldn’t bring it up again, and he wasn’t sure if Akechi would but he got the sense that he didn’t need to. He was starting to understand how their--friendship or whatever--worked. Sometimes it was enough to just say it once. Pushing it further wouldn’t help anybody.

The criminals using the Metaverse would be taken down, and all would be right again. Still.

He dreamt that night of unbreakable things, the hesitation behind steel, and a third timeline without metaverses or personas - just boys with broken umbrellas.

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Akira woke up a little before the sun came up. He blinked sleepily, finding that Morgana had moved from his feet and curled up in the space between his stomach and the edge of the couch. It didn't sound like it was storming anymore either.

Akira carefully sat up, scratching his head and masking a yawn with his hand as he looked over to the bed. He furrowed his brow when he saw that Akechi was nowhere to be found, and his bed was made pristinely.

He reached for his phone and looked at it to see if maybe Akechi had left while he was sleeping. No messages, save for a couple from Ryuji and an update on whatever manga he’d been reading.

Akira carefully got up, making sure not to wake Morgana, and he started to go downstairs when he heard faint noise down below. He glanced at his phone again. It seemed far too early for Sojiro to be there, and it didn’t sound like him either.

He paused, skipping over the fourth step that squeaked, just as a precaution.

“I’m here now, so I don’t think it would be wise for us to chat at the moment, despite him being asleep.” It was Akechi, clear as day.

Akira moved more slowly, feeling somewhat odd to bring his stealth into the real world. When he peered down, he could see the Akechi was facing the window. He turned back towards the interior of Leblanc, but Akira moved back so that he could still get a glimpse of when Akechi was facing in his direction but was out of the brunette’s eyesight. When he turned towards the counter, Akira bent down to watch Akechi’s expressions again.

Akira also noted that Akechi was fully dressed back in his regular clothes. “In regards to that...” Akechi frowned. “…It wasn’t the right time. I believe it would be more beneficial to wait before truly getting rid of them.” Akira felt his stomach churn again. “After all, I’m still unsure of their tactics in practice.” Another pause. “He already doesn’t trust me, if I act in such a manner, he will--” Another pause, and Akechi’s jaw tightened. “No,” he said quickly. Then he cleared his throat. “I apologize. I just mean to say that you don’t need to use him.
Kurusu doesn’t need to disappear. I’ll…take care of it.”

Disappear? Akira frowned. So he had told his boss. He’d suspected as much, but hearing it firsthand and knowing that Akechi had told the guy his name left him unsettled. He hoped that he hadn’t spoken of his teammates’ names.

“I have a plan. I just need a bit of time.” Plan? Akira shifted slightly, careful not to make any noise. What plan did he have in place? “After all, we are working together on this and--”

Akechi stopped, and Akira could see that faint, fleeting bit of irritation flicker through his eyes. “Y-Yes, of course. I would never question your leadership…You do know best.” He said, and he sounded almost…sad? It was hard to tell. Akira was still in the process of waking himself up, and hadn’t been expecting to be eavesdropping so early in the morning. Another pause, and then the irritation in his eyes was gone and replaced with something else. “R-Really?” the brunette said. The best way that Akira could describe the look would be like a puppy that had just been rewarded for not peeing in the house.

Akira heard faint noise from behind him, and he turned around to see Morgana’s curious gaze. He gestured for the cat to be silent, and Morgana nodded, then started hopping down the stairs to get a better look as well.

"By the way, I was hoping to ask question about the incident you were involved in quite a few months ago, where you were injured. Was it-

Unfortunately, Akira hadn’t counted on Morgana not knowing about the fourth stair, and the cat hopped on it during a pause in Akechi’s conversation. The loud squeak of the stairs caused Akechi to look over in their direction.

Akira quickly moved and walked down the stairs, masking his concern with a yawn and sleepily rubbing his eyes. “Morning,” he said as casually as he possibly could, digging his hands into his pockets as though he hadn’t been there eavesdropping for the past few minutes.

“I’ll update you later,” Akechi said into his phone. He hung it up, then smiled at both Akira and Morgana. “Ah. Good morning. Did you just wake up?” He asked cautiously. Akira nodded, and Akechi allowed himself to smile, probably in relief. “You look well-rested.”

“You look stressed.”

Akechi smiled charismatically but it wasn’t entirely believable. “A little stress is healthy. Just a…difference of opinion with work.”

“Want to talk about it?” Akira knew that he wouldn’t, but he figured he’d dangle the bait anyway.

“No,” he said with a shake of his head. “These cases are confidential, after all,” he said with a light chuckle. “Thank you again for allowing me to rest here. I apologize for having to leave so early, but I’ve got to get back to change and then head to school.”

“Coffee before you go?” Akira said, already moving behind the counter. “I’ll put it in a thermos.”

“That’s quite alright. I shouldn’t stay any longer than need be.” He peered over at Morgana, then back at Akira. “I’ll see you both later, then.”

When he left Leblanc, Akira contemplated going back to sleep, since he still had an hour before Sojiro would be in to open the café. Instead, though, he decided to get ready early.
Once he finished, he started to make a bit of morning coffee for himself. He found it somewhat hard to concentrate. His entire morning was tainted with the thoughts of what Akechi’s plan could be.

His distracted nature became evident to Morgana when he accidentally overfilled the mug, causing some of it to spill over and reach Morgana’s paws on the counter.

“Ah!” Morgana jumped, and Akira blinked back into reality. He looked down and quickly lifted the pot, cursing under his breath. Morgana peered at him worriedly. “You’ve been so distracted,” he commented as Akira brought over some paper towels to wipe up the mess. “Did something happen?”

He turned to Morgana. “Yes,” he said. Then he recounted the entire phone conversation that he’d heard and this supposed ‘plan’ that Akechi had in motion. He told him about the conversation he’d had with Akechi about Yusuke and revenge. Pieces were slowly coming to them, they just had no way to link all of them.

“A plan, huh?” Morgana said. “I don’t like those odds.”

“I don’t think we’ll be able to figure it out. We’ve just got to move quicker on our end,” Akira noted. Akira leaned into the counter. “The politician. The black mask. Revenge.” He looked over at Morgana. “It could be that all of the people he’s been involved with hurting have been friends of his father?”

“You think his dad’s the reason he’s messing around in the cognitive world? If that were the case, why not just go into his own father’s cognitive world than doing whatever he’s been doing?”

Akira rubbed his forehead. When he said it like that, it didn’t make much sense. “That’s true. Perhaps they’re just people who remind him of his father, then.”

“If that’s enough to make him get involved with mental shutdowns and psychotic breakdowns, then he might be even more dangerous than I thought.”

Akechi was dangerous. That was a given. Yet their moments together, with the two of them or just Kioshi, Akechi felt like just the opposite. He didn’t know how to read that. Was that just a part of his plan as well?

“But I guess I see why you like hanging out with him. If I didn’t know what you told me, I’d think he was a good guy. Kind of annoying, and he goes of into his own thoughts way too much and is kind of a show-off. But he doesn’t seem like the person that I know he is. And he’s obviously into you,” Morgana commented like it was nothing.

Akira didn’t like the wording of his last statement, but he frowned nonetheless. “I don’t know which one is the real him.”

Morgana gave him that pitying look again. “Why does it have to be one or the other? Maybe both are the real him.”

Both? Now that was interesting. Maybe the real Akechi was broken, somewhat naïve to friendship and companionship, and equally as capable of heinous acts. Maybe everyone was, if pushed hard enough and didn’t have enough of something to keep from falling over the edge.

Maybe everyone was one thread away from reaching their limit. It didn’t excuse it, since there
were millions of kids who'd grown up in horrible conditions, kids who'd been wronged in their lives and unfairly treated, and didn't become murderers, so it was hard for Akira to find a way to fully fathom that a rough childhood was enough of an excuse for his actions. Maybe because he hadn't experienced it himself. Not to mention he didn't truly know the extent of Akechi's childhood. So he wasn't sure. But at the very least, he was starting to understand a bit more. He was starting to understand that maybe everyone was capable of horrible things if there was nothing to stop them. But it didn't have to stay that way. Maybe he'd never be able to fully understand, and that was okay, too. Perhaps it was enough to realize that maybe before Akechi could crawl out of hell, he had to realize that it was possible in the first place.

Redemption. He wanted to believe Akechi was capable of it. But then it forced him to think about something else he didn't want to think about.

The others whose hearts they'd forcibly changed - were they capable of redemption too? Maybe they were just as human as Akechi or Akira. Maybe evil liked spending time with children or painting in its free time. Maybe evil liked to try the Big Bang challenge on rainy days and cycling when the weather was just right.

Akira didn't like where his thoughts were taking him. The worst of all: Would he change forcibly change Akechi's heart by going into the Metaverse if it was possible like he'd done to the others?

He didn't have a complete answer for that. A part of him found that he wouldn't want to, but then what did that say about how he viewed their actions? His head started to hurt, this time from his thoughts running rampant in his mind, and inhaled sharply. He'd never really thought about these things in the past, and yet somehow, in the short span he'd gotten to know Akechi, these thoughts kept popping up in his head. Was that a good thing? He wasn't sure.

Akira picked up his bag, and Morgana tilted his head. “We’re going to school already?”

“I should go to the library and computer lab. It would be helpful to have Futaba, but we’ll have to do as much as we can without her for now.

“What are you looking for?”

“Information on cognitive pscience. More importantly--” he said. “Information on Goro Akechi. I still think his past is important.” He rubbed his eyes. “Akechi is brilliant. Whatever his plan is, we have to be able to counter that.”

Morgana hopped into his bag, and Akira got to the door when he realized it was raining lightly. He picked up his umbrella and went outside, feeling the sprinkles against his fast.

*I think I like...the rain.*

Akira, despite the sudden death that would’ve come upon him if Morgana had heard him, had agreed. Maybe he did. He still wasn’t sure. He wasn't sure he wanted the clarity either.

From the distance, he could see a man and a woman talking. They looked like they were a couple, and the man was laughing. “C’mon. A little rain won’t kill you.”

The center of his forehead throbbed lightly. Another dull reminder of what Goro Akechi was capable of.

He looked at the two again as he tried to get the woman to walk out in the rain with another statement of how the rain wouldn't kill her. And he wanted to tell them that *it could.* It really
could.

He opened up his umbrella, shielding himself from the rain completely and began to walk. Even if decided to admit that he liked the rain (and he hadn't), he still had to protect himself from it.

The analogy wasn't lost on him.

Chapter End Notes

spinoff incoming the adventures of ace barista akechi

WHAT COULD AKECHI'S PLAN BE FIND OUT ON THE NEXT EPISODE OF DRAGON BALL Z (and by that i mean a lot of chapters unless you figure it out beforehand lmao but if you squint there are hints in the past few chapters hehe)

I'll have end of Madarame + Akechi social links + beginning of next arc next chapter, I PROMISE! And it will be 1000000x better than this chapter haha and hopefully up next week!

Any tips for getting past this writer’s funk or anyone interested in beta’ing this would be greatly appreciated :0
Chapter Notes

I took a lot of creative liberties with Dome Town, since I don’t actually know what all the rides are like. The website only told me so much, haha.

Goodness, you guys are amazing. THANK YOU all for the wonderful comments and advice and encouragement. I might have teared up but don’t tell anyone. I’m so happy you guys love this story as much as I do, and that the last chapter didn’t deter you guys haha. I feel a little better about this chapter. Still a little meh, but not as much as the last chap. Thank you to all who offered to beta as well! I haven’t decided to do it yet, but I’m SO grateful that if I do, that so many of you are willing to help me out (more on this in end notes). I say this time and time again, but this Phan-dom (ha) is incredible. I heart all of you.

Now everybody buckle up and join me on the feels wheel I mean ferris wheel

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Madarame’s change of heart happened exactly as last time. Akira met up with the others at their hideout directly after. He’d met all of them except for Akechi, who was tied up in something related to his ‘work’ and said that he would join them later.

They’d celebrated their successful efforts and reaffirmed what they were doing. Ryuji’s comments about getting more famous didn’t ease any of his concerns, but it was nice to see everyone enthusiastic about reforming society.

As expected, Yusuke didn’t have any more information to report about the black mask, much to the disappointment of the others, save for Morgana and Akira.

After some time, Akechi met up with them, looking a bit tired but otherwise had a smile on his face.

“It’s been quite a busy day at the Prosecutor’s Office with Madarame’s confession,” Akechi said lightly.

“Are they talkin’ about the Phantom Thieves at all?” Ryuji said excitedly.

“A little,” Akechi admitted. “It seems the Phantom Thieves have started to make an impression on those in power.”

“Yeah! We just gotta keep doing stuff like that! We’ll take down an even bigger target this time,” Ryuji said, his anticipation unable to be quelled.

“We need to be cautious,” Morgana said.

“I agree,” Akechi said with a nod. “It may be useful to find a separate spot to convene. It is already suspicious to have Shujin students and one of Madarame’s pupils in the same group. Especially since that is precisely the affiliation of the two targets.”
Ryuji sighed like it was the biggest hassle in the world.

“But still, I’m excited to get started on finding a new target,” Ann said cheerfully.

“So, we will be actively searching for another person?” Akechi asked, his hand on his chin as he leaned back against the railing. “That is the process?”

“Yeah, we found out more bout Madarame from the Phan-site,” Ryuji said, pulling out his phone to show Akechi. “People left comments about him.”

“You…decide based on the comments of a website?” Akechi blinked incredulously.

“He’s condensing,” Akira said, hoping to make it seem a little less like they were doing this on a whim. “But it does help us on who to look into.”

“I see…that’s a rather unorthodox means of working,” Akechi said with a short but still incredulous laugh. “But it is interesting,” he added thoughtfully.

“Oh yeah! We still have to have our welcome party for you two!” Ryuji said, completely bypassing Akechi’s comment. “What should we do?”

“Hm,” Ann said, tapping her chin as she swayed lightly. “Well, last time we went to a buffet…”

“A buffet?!” Yusuke said, after not having spoken for a considerable amount of time. “I propose we revisit that location.”

Ann laughed. “We could,” she pointed out. “Hm, how about we figure it out later? Maybe we can plan it for after we get back from the TV Station.”

“TV Station?” Ryuji said. “Whaddaya mean?”

Ann groaned. “Ugh, don’t tell me you forgot. Our social studies trip to the TV station.”

“When is this trip?” Akechi suddenly asked.

“Huh? I think it’s June 9th.”

“Oh. You’ll be there too, then,” Akechi noted.

“Wait, what?” Ryuji asked.

Akechi chuckled lightly. “I’ve got a few TV appearances scheduled. It looks as though they are interested in discussing the work of the Phantom Thieves, considering I have worked cases of sudden lapses of judgment.”

“That’s awesome! You’ll get to talk us up so people start believin’ in us more!” Ryuji said with a satisfied chuckle.

Akechi kind of smiled. “Well, that’s not quite the point behind my appearance…”

“It’s so cool that you’re going to get to be on TV, Akechi-kun,” Ann persisted. “Maybe there’ll be actresses there too.”

The conversation from there went to the trip as Akira fought against telling them that the trip would be anything but exciting. He was curious about what Akechi would say, but when he’d asked him about it, the brunette had simply smiled with that twinkle in his eye, saying, “I suppose
you’ll have to wait and see like everyone else,” with a bright laugh.

It was strange to be at the TV station this time around. Last time, it had been the first time they met Akechi, and it had been the moment (in retrospect) that he’d inadvertently revealed that he’d already been to the cognitive world. This time, they openly greeted Akechi when they saw him at the end of the first day of their trip.

“Ah. Hello. How was the first day of the trip?” Akechi had said to them.

Ryuji hung his head with a groan. “Ugh, don’t bring it up. What kind of trip is this?”

Ann sighed too. “Maybe we should stop by Dome Town,” she said, perking up slightly. She turned to Akechi. “Do you want to come too?”

“Ah, I would like to,” he said with genuine disappointment. “But it seems I have to attend a briefing for tomorrow’s show.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. But hey, it sounds pretty exciting!” Ann offered.

“Yeah, good luck, man,” Ryuji agreed.

“Haha. Thank you. Have some pancakes for me in my absence,” he said with a soft smile.

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The next day, the three of them along with Morgana piled into the TV station yet again. Luckily, the highlight of the day would be Akechi. Ryuji texted the group the night before about the interview – something else about getting the Phantom Thieves’ name out there, but Akechi had been uncharacteristically dodgy about it.

He didn’t know what to expect going into it. When he saw Akechi walk out and sit on the couch, the Ann and Ryuji grinned and waved at him, and he looked a little taken aback by the others’ enthusiasm, but he managed a half-wave at them in response.

It was almost odd how at ease Akechi looked up there. It was clear that he was in his element. He looked completely comfortable. Akira couldn’t help but smile. He didn’t know what he was going to say this time, but it was nice to see him at ease, despite Akira’s own added stress from the past week.

“And now, onto the hottest meet-and-greet segment of our show,” the male announcer said. “After his last appearance was so well-received, we decided to bring back this fine gentleman today. It’s the high school detective, Goro Akechi!”

Akira didn’t expect the ecstatic cheers from the girls in the audience. He knew that Akechi was popular, but he was this popular already? He leaned back in his seat, rubbing his neck as the girls swooned. “You look upset,” Morgana said from the bag at his feet.

Akira didn’t say anything in response, instead his arms across his chest with a faux yawn.

“Hehe, it’s kind of cool that we know someone who’s kind of famous,” Ann whispered to the group.

Akechi grinned. “Hello there.”

“Thank you for taking the time to join us, Akechi-kun. Your popularity is stunning,” the male
announcer continued.

“Ah. Yes. Even I’ve found it to be a surprise.” He chuckled. “It’s a little embarrassing.”

“Nothing to be embarrassed about,” the female announcer said cheerfully. “Moving along, we’ve been told there’s a case on your mind right now. Care to share, detective?”

Akechi briefly glanced over, making eye contact with Akira. Akechi gave somewhat of an assuring smile before placing a hand on his chin contemplatively as he turned to the announcers. “Yes. That would be the scandal involving the master artist, Madarame.”

“Oh ha! So the Phantom Thief excitement has caught your attention too, Akechi-kun!” The male announcer said. “Allow me to be blunt for just a second. What do you think of these justice-oriented Phantom Thieves?”

“Here it comes!” Ryuji said excitedly.

Akira frowned. Something seemed off.

“If they are truly heroes of justice, I sincerely hope they exist,” Akechi started.

“Ohhh, so you don’t deny the possibility that they’re real?”

Akechi laughed. “I may not seem like it, but sometimes I wish that Santa Claus was actually real. Although if he did, I’d have to arrest him for breaking and entering,” he added as the crowd and the announcers laughed.

Morgana groaned. “Why is he like this? I can’t believe this guy was able to charm you.”

It was a little cringe-worthy, but he knew he was putting on a show. Akira chose to ignore Morgana’s last statement, since talking at his bag would probably not be the best course of action at a live taping.

“But, hypothetically speaking, if these Phantom Thieves are real…” He glanced over at Akira again briefly. “I believe they should be tried in a court of law.”

Akira could feel Ann and Ryuji tense up immediately. Akira froze himself, but kept his neutral expression. *He’s saying the same thing, even after all that had happened?*

“That’s quite the statement. Are they committing crimes? Some people even say that the thieves are helping their victims abandon their evil ways.”

Akechi’s jaw tightened. “What the artist Madarame did was truly an unforgivable crime. He robbed the futures of children who had nothing and no one else to believe in them, and he will pay for what he did.” Then his jaw softened. “However, they’re taking the law into their own hands by judging them. It is far from justice. More importantly, you should never forcefully change a person’s heart.”

“What the hell’s he doing?” Ryuji whispered.

“You have a point. These people are calling themselves the Phantom Thieves after all,” the female announcer said.

The male announcer nodded enthusiastically. “Amazing as always, Akechi-kun. I could listen to you for days! You have the most radiant charisma!”
“I have to say though, I would be embarrassed if it turns out these Phantom Thieves don’t exist. If that were the case, I’d summarize it into a report as a school project,” he said lightly, causing more laughter.

“I just decided that I hate him again,” Morgana groaned.

“Now then, let’s try asking some students the same age as Akechi-kun about the Phantom Thieves! First, please press your button if you believe the Phantom Thieves exist.”

Akira kept his gaze trained on Akechi for any signs of reasoning behind his words.

“About 30% or so. What are your thoughts, Akechi-kun?”

“It’s certainly higher than I expected. I’d love to hear some detailed opinions on the Phantom Thieves,” Akechi said curiously.

Unsurprisingly, the female announcer made her way over to Akira. When she stopped in front of him, Akechi’s eyebrows went up just a little bit, before he smiled kindly. “Hypothetically speaking, what are your thoughts on these Phantom Thieves, if they were real?” the announcer asked.

Akira looked at Akechi, who was studying him just as much as he’d been studying Akechi a few seconds ago. Last time, he’d claimed that they’d done more than the cops and that that was worth noting. But he hadn’t even known Akechi when he’d said that, he so hadn’t put too much thought into it.

This time was different. He didn’t know what angle Akechi was playing at. He didn’t expect his words to be nearly exactly the same.

“They’re stopping people from suffering,” he said, thinking of Ann and Yusuke and Mishima and so many others.

Akechi smiled, clearly pleased that Akira had dared to say that on live TV. “Haha. That’s quite a strong acknowledgment. So you’re saying that what they’re doing is necessary?”

“Ask Madarame’s former pupils,” Akira said. Akechi narrowed his eyes at that – but he didn’t do it as though he was suspicious or upset. It looked like he was…enjoying the challenge with his self-assured smile that accompanied his gaze.

“Ha. I suppose asking those directly affected would provide some context, bias as it may be,” Akechi pointed out. “However, I’d like to ask one more question. The person next to you,” he said with a pause. Akira glanced over at Ryuji, who had a serious scowl on his face. Akechi was unfazed. “If his heart suddenly changed…wouldn’t you think it was the work of the Phantom Thieves?”

Akira leaned back. “Does it matter?”

Akechi smiled. “I would think so. The manner by which someone decides to change is essential. If it is not truly of their own will, can one say that justice is really being served?”

If Akira was honest, he was starting to get tired of the word ‘justice.’ “It’s not about justice. It’s about helping people.”

“If a man shoots and kills an abusive father, one can say that ultimately this has helped the victim, but was that truly the just way of doing it? Law and order exists so that this ‘help’ does not end up
doing more harm than good.”

“They haven’t murdered anyone.”

“How could we possibly know that?” Akechi said curiously, another boastful expression hidden behind his eyes.

Akira opened his mouth, then closed it when he realized he didn’t have an answer that was a sufficient enough argument without directly saying that he knew because he was a part of it. Damnit.

“Well, this has been a fruitful discussion,” the male announcer said, Akira blinked, suddenly remembering that it wasn’t just the two of them in the room and he was actually answering questions on live TV. Akechi seemed to have forgotten as well, because he also turned from his stance with a brief look of surprise that was masked within a second. Akira could hear some people whispering behind him.

“Wow, they were really into that. It’s like they forgot we were even here.”

“Some people get off on that kind of thing.”

“Isn’t that the kid with a criminal record? It’s kind of ironic he’s the one talking about helping people.”

“Akechi-kun handled it so well. He’s so dreamy and confident.”

Akechi placed a hand on his chin. “Back to my original point. Whether or not the Thieves’ actions are good, there is a more important issue at hand. If they honestly possess that ability, it could be used for more than extracting confessions. It could be that what seem to be ordinary crimes are actually being perpetrated by these methods.”

“You know, you’re absolutely right,” the male announcer said.

“Oh, please don’t misunderstand, though. It is only if people who can use such a power truly exist. Either way, this cannot be ignored. The existence of the Phantom Thieves would be nothing but a threat to our everyday lives.”

He’d thought it was odd in the last timeline, but after having gone through the incident with Okumura, it was almost painfully obvious how Akechi had used this appearance to start to subtly shift their crimes to the blame of the Phantom Thieves. All he had to do was plant that initial seed of doubt. He didn’t know if that was his reasoning this time around too. He just had no way of knowing, and that’s what bothered him the most.

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“I can’t believe he said all that!” Ryuji fumed as they stood at the side after the show. Akira followed them slowly, leaning back against the wall as the others spoke.

Ann frowned, looking down at the ground with an unsure expression. “Do you think there’s some truth to what he was saying though?”

“Of course not! It’s just like our leader said. We’re helping people,” Ryuji insisted.

“Oh, there you all are,” Akechi said, saying his goodbyes to one of the cameramen before walking over and coming to a stop next to Akira. “That was quite a lively dialogue. I enjoyed it,” he said to
“Why the hell’d you say all that? Whose side are you on?” Ryuji demanded. Akira almost wanted to laugh and say, *if only you knew.*

Akechi turned to him, the pleasant expression still on his face. “Oh. I thought that that would be the best course of action since we are adamant about keeping our meeting location in an open area. After all, if people get suspicious of Shujin students and one of Madarame’s former pupils meeting together consistently, would it not diminish those suspicions if someone who public denounced the Phantom Thieves were seen with them?” He said proudly, looking at them with an expectant expression on his face.

“So…You did it to keep suspicion off of us?” Ann said cautiously. “I…guess that makes sense.”

“Don’t be so fooled, Lady Ann!” Morgana piped up. Then he turned a suspicious gaze to Akechi. “Is that really the reason?” Morgana asked.

“Haha. Suspicious as always, Morgana. However, I can assure you that that was my reasoning behind my words,” Akechi offered with a kind smile. He turned to Akira. “I thought you had caught on and were playing along,” he said with a short laugh, and something told Akira that Akechi hadn’t been thinking that at all.

“Whoa, that’s pretty clever,” Ryuji said, and Morgana rolled his eyes.

“Really though. I guess it’s a good thing he’s on our side,” Ann said with a chuckle herself. “He’s kinda like our…strategist,” she said with a nod.

Akira furrowed his brow. He got that strange feeling again, like he was missing something that he shouldn’t be missing.

“I did quite enjoy that discussion, though,” Akechi said to Akira. “It was quite fun playing devil’s advocate. Few people around me are so willing to speak their minds as freely as you did earlier. Though with you as an adversary today, I suppose I should have had no need to worry about that,” Akechi said with a charming laugh.

“Don’t worry man,” Ryuji grinned. He put his arm around Akechi, pulling him slightly towards him, swaying the brunette casually and catching him off-guard. “We’ll always be here to speak our minds and tell you whenever you’re wrong!”

“Ugh, Ryuji,” Ann groaned, practically face-palming at his unabashed tone.

“What!? It’s true. Why’re you making that face?”

“Besides, I don’t think *Ryuji* is in any place to be telling someone when they’re wrong,” Morgana pointed out with a cackle.

“Wha—And what is *that* supposed to mean?”

“You’re an idiot,” Morgana said smugly.

Ryuji huffed. “Okay, y-you know, why’re you all getting on my case?!”

“Just don’t be an idiot and we won’t,” Morgana added cheekily.

“At least I’m not a cat,” Ryuji said with a cackle of his own.
“For the last time, I am not--”

Akechi chuckled, a genuine one that seemed to light up the room and caused the brunette to cover his mouth with his hand, and the others paused their bickering to look at him. “My apologies. It’s just… You are all so strange.”

Ryuji removed his arm from around Akechi’s shoulder, choosing instead to playfully hit him in the arm with a laugh. “Yeah, well, you’re hanging with us now so that makes you just as strange.”

Akechi’s smile wavered a bit. “I-I suppose so.”

“Anyway, do you guys want to check out Dome Town again before heading back?” Ann asked. “I could go for another day of roller coasters.”

“Ah, I’m afraid I can’t. I’ve got a de-briefing this time,” Akechi said, disappointed.

“Plus I’m beat. I’m ready to get back and start looking for the next target,” Ryuji said.

“Yes, that’s true,” Ann said. She turned to Akechi. “It’s too bad you didn’t get to visit with us. Next time for sure, though!”

They said their goodbyes, and Akira walked out with Ryuji and Ann. He was going to go home. He really was. But before he could fully register what he was saying, he told them to go back without him, and that he’d catch up with them later. They didn’t question it, and instead said their goodbyes, and when it was just Akira and Morgana, the former walked over to the entrance of the TV station, taking a seat at the bench just outside of it.

“I knew you were going to do this,” Morgana said warily.

“He looked disappointed,” Akira said.

“There’s no way I’m sticking around to third wheel. I’ll just keep you company until he comes out,” Morgana said, scratching at his ear with his paw. Morgana then hopped out of his bag, and Akira reached down into the bottom of it and pulled out a thick packet of paper that had a fair share of cat hair on it. “What’s that?” Morgana asked.

“Wakaba Isshiki’s research,” Akira said. Then he corrected himself. “Sort of. I found it online. Most of her research can’t be found, but she wrote this as her dissertation for university. It’s publicly available. It’s outdated since it was done years ago at university, but it may provide some more insights.”

“Hm,” Morgana commented. “Did you find anything on Akechi?”

Akira glanced around, then shook his head. “Nothing really. He started springing up in the news about two years ago. He was investigating a potential involuntary manslaughter case that ended up being ruled as suicide. A businessman. I didn’t have much time.”

Morgana hummed thoughtfully. “It’s a start. Two years ago, huh… he’s had his persona for a long time, then,” he realized.

“Yeah,” Akira agreed. “It was just him, probably.” He wondered what that would be like. Akira had been lucky that his friends had personas not much longer after he did. Hell, he’d found Morgana within 20 minutes or so of awakening to his persona. He wondered how he could control his persona.
“So you’ve finally conceded that he’s the same person in the black mask?” Morgana asked.

“I don’t know. It’s hard for me to think anything else at this point. But I still don’t know how he can change his rebel’s attire, if that is the case.” He glanced over at Morgana, unsure of how the cat would take his next statement. “I thought for a moment that he might have another persona, but even that doesn’t explain the attire. My clothes don’t change.” He’d been meaning to pick up a book about Robin Hood to read on the train but hadn’t gotten around to it. If his true self was reflected by Robin Hood, there was bound to be some inkling of truth in the books and legends somewhere. The very fact that his inner self manifested itself as a heroic outlaw already seemed out of place, but he had no concrete knowledge about Akechi’s motivations, only theories and ideas built from stray thoughts and conversations. It briefly occurred to Akira that he could ask Igor more about personas and the thief attire, but he knew that all he’d do is provide cryptic answers and unsettling laughter, neither of which would really help him.

“That’s true. Hm. He’s gotta be doing it somehow,” Morgana said. “You know, it’s a little strange.” Akira turned to Morgana, confused. “You’re about to go on a date with him but you’re also secretly investigating him behind his back. Humans are so strange,” Morgana said.

Akira shook his head with a gleam in his eye. “You’re one of those strange humans, remember?” Morgana beamed at his implication. “Heh. That’s true. I’ve got to be.”

“Also, it’s not a date,” Akira said as an off-hand comment as he glanced down at the thick research documents in his lap. “He’s probably never experienced Dome Town.”

“Right, because that makes it not a date,” Morgana said sassily, and Akira just smiled to himself, shaking his head again minutely as he tried to focus on the words before him. “Do I need to remind you that he shot you and has some sort of secret plan to ‘take care of you’?” he added, the worried tone creeping into his voice.

“We’ve got a plan too.”

“Just be careful, okay?”

Akira turned to Morgana to make a joke, but he stopped when he saw the serious expression on Morgana’s face. “You’re…really concerned about this,” he said.

Morgana looked like he wanted to claw Akira’s eyes out. “Of course I am. Not just because you guys are the key to helping me become human again. It’s fine that you don’t want anything to happen to us, but something happening to you is also not okay. Okay?”

Akira gave him an assuring smile. “Okay. I’ll do my best.” He reached over and scratched behind the cat’s ears.

“Stop that,” Morgana said stubbornly, but he leaned into it yet again nonetheless.

After some time, Akira heard the door to the TV Station. He turned and saw Akechi walking out as he chatted with the female announcer. Akira watched as a few teen girls walked over to him and started to talk animatedly at him. He smiled and said something to them, and they laughed like it was the funniest thing in the world.

So he had fans now. That seemed about right.

Akechi just so happened to glance over at that moment, and Akira offered him a lazy half-wave and smile. He said something to the people around him, and then made his way over to where Akira
was sitting. “Hello again,” Akechi said kindly. “What are you both still doing here?” Then he glanced down the papers in Akira’s hands.

Akira swiftly placed the paper into his bag, then stood up. “Are you free?” he asked. “I was thinking we could go to Dome Town.”

Akechi blinked in surprise. “Right now?”

Akira nodded. “It’s right here.”

Akechi looked to be at a loss for words. “Didn’t you already visit with the others?” he said hesitantly. “I can’t possibly imagine it would be any different with me as company.”

“I beg to differ,” Akira told him sincerely.

“God, this is almost hard to watch,” Morgana groaned. Then he turned to Akira. “I’m out of here.” He turned his attention to Akechi. “And don’t do anything funny.”

“I-I beg your pardon?” Akechi said, confused and flustered. He glanced between the two of them, finally settling on Akira. “So it will be just the two of us?”

Akira nodded. “Is that a problem?”

“No, of course not. I’m…I’m just a tad confused. I don’t quite understand.”

Akira smiled. “It is possible to enjoy something you don’t understand.” Then he batted his eyes teasingly. “Won’t you go to Dome Town with me, senpai?” And Akechi nearly choked on air again, which was funny since he hadn’t reacted like that the first time he’d said something like that.

“Yeah, I’m definitely out of here,” Morgana said.

“He still doesn’t seem fond of me,” Akechi commented when it was just the two of them.

“It’s my fault,” Akira said, and that wasn’t entirely untrue. If Morgana had had the chance to know Akechi without Akira having forewarned him about the brunette, he probably wouldn’t be so abrasive and defensive towards him. He couldn’t blame Morgana at all, but he was glad for the extra line of defense from Morgana. “Don’t let it get to you.”

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“So, what should we do first?” Akechi asked, somewhat unsurely. It was hard to tell from the outside, but Akira could see the excitement dancing in the little flecks of red in his eyes, hidden away behind uncertainty at this unfamiliar situation.

The amusement park was bustling with activity, and the sun was beaming down with just the right amount of a breeze. In essence, it had somehow felt like the perfect day to be at the park.

“Dad, c’mon, c’mon!” A small child said as she excitedly tugged on her father’s sleeve, while he somehow managed to balance both his food and his daughter’s prize as he was pulled forward with a smile on his face.

Akechi’s excitement dimmed slightly as he watched the parent and child moved in front of them and towards one of the rides.

“It’s up to you,” Akira said, leaning forward to capture Akechi’s attention and take it off of the
potentially distracting sight in front of them.

Akechi caught his eye and smiled, though it was missing some of the brightness it had had a few minutes ago. “I wouldn’t even know where to begin. I’ll defer the judgment to you.”

“So stiff,” Akira teased. Then he looked around the entirety of the area, his gaze finally settling on the large roller coaster. “We could ride the coaster,” Akira offered, gesturing to it in the not-so-far distance.

Akechi immediately stopped. “Oh.” His voice took on a strange tone. “Yes, I suppose that is an option. However, haven’t you just eaten? I wouldn’t want to be responsible for your upset stomach,” Akechi said with a short but light laugh.

Akira shook his head. “I didn’t eat yet.”

“I-I see…” Akechi said, clearing his throat. Akira furrowed his brow as he looked at the brunette’s uneasy expression that, quite frankly, he wasn’t doing as good of a job as usual at masking. “Perhaps it would be better then, if we were to have something to eat first. I’ve still been craving pancakes from yesterday,” he said with a smile.

Akira paused, then really looked at Akechi. “…Are you scared?” He said, already having to fight away his own smile from showing.

“Of course not,” Akechi said right on the heels of his statement. “Roller coasters are nothing to be frightened of. I was simply point out the pitfalls of riding such a coaster on an empty stomach,” he added, unbelievably so.

“Oh. Wow,” Akira started as a sudden bout of realization hit him.

“And as a result, especially from the height and speed at which the coaster is descending would surely be bad for one’s digestive—”

“You’re scared of roller coasters,” Akira finished incredulously.

“I…didn’t say that,” Akechi was quick to point out.

Akira bit the inside of his mouth to keep his smile from spreading. It was almost funny. He could shoot a man without so much as blinking an eye (and yes, Akira was aware that that ‘man’ was himself) and defeat shadows easily, but the thought of getting on a roller coaster was enough to fluster him into giving a poor reason as to why he didn’t want to ride one.

Morgana was right. People are strange.

“You’re scared,” Akira said, failing to stifle a laugh completely.

“I am not scared of roller coasters,” Akechi said, and Akira assumed that it was supposed to have a bit more bravado behind it.

“Let’s go then. We can eat after.”

Another pause. “Right now?”

“I knew it,” Akira said. Akechi opened his mouth again, probably to deny it, but Akira shook his head with a smile. “It’s not a bad thing.”

“It isn’t, for those that have such a fear,” Akechi said lightly. Akira could hardly believe he’d keep
it up so far just to save face, but then he remembered the running with Ryuji. “In fact, I…agree. I think that we should go.”

Akira shrugged. “Okay.” He raised an eyebrow. “But if you don’t want to, we don’t have to,” he said, giving him another opening.

Akechi cleared his throat, then smiled. “Let us proceed.”

The entire time that they walked to the coaster, Akira was subjected to listening to Akechi discuss some bit of knowledge about the history of roller coasters. Boring as it may have been, it was endearing. And it was also painfully obvious how Akechi acted when he was nervous. It didn’t happen often, but Akira sort of liked those moments.

It wasn’t until they got to the front of the line that Akechi poorly masked a nervous laugh. “Ah. It would appear that we’re next in line…”

“It’s not too late to head back,” Akira said nonchalantly, his hands in his pockets. He couldn’t resist teasing him a little. “I think the teacups are around here somewhere.”

Akechi let out a short laugh. “Funny,” he said as Akira chuckled to himself. “As I said, I was simply looking out for your stomach.”

The cart came up to the front, and Akira made his way over to the end seat as Akechi trailed behind him sort of slowly until he got into the seat. He watched as Akechi somewhat awkwardly got settled into his seat, pulling the safety over him as tight as it could go.

“You should loosen it. It’s more fun that way,” Akira said with a cheeky grin.

“You’re…enjoying this, aren’t you,” Akechi said flatly.


One of the ride attendants walked over and secured them into the seat. As the young kid prepared to walk away, Akechi stopped him. “I apologize for stopping you, but this does feel a tad loose,” Akechi pointed out with a charming smile.

The kid, who looked like he’d rather be anywhere but there, checked the seat, then brought his dull eyes to Akechi. “It’s as tight as it goes,” he said monotonously, then prepared to walk away.

“Ah, it’s just—I don’t mean to trouble you,” Akechi started, and Akira stifled a laugh. Akechi glanced at Akira disapprovingly before turning his attention back to the man. “But I do detect a little bit of extra space here,” the brunette said, pointing it out.

The kid frowned, then looked at Akira, who waved it off. “It’s fine. He’s just a little scared.”

“That, haha, that’s not quite true,” Akechi was quick to point out. “I was simply pointing out that the safety precautions of roller coasters sometimes have fallen short of regulations, causing--”

“Yeah, listen, I gotta go start the ride,” the kid interrupted, bored, before he walked to check the rest of the seats as Akechi frowned.


“Aren’t we quite the joker today,” Akechi said with somewhat of a forced laugh that was cut short
as he distractedly examined his seat. It was almost cute to see him try to mask his fear.

Akira got a little more comfortable in his seat. The kid somehow went from a mundane tone into an excited one as he announced the start of the ride. Akira lightly gripped the handles of his seatbelt. When he looked over, Akechi was staring straight ahead, and Akira’s mouth opened slightly when he saw how tightly Akechi was gripping the handles. His knuckles were almost white. He stayed that way until they reached the top of the coaster.

“Do you want to hold my hand?” He teased.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Akechi said almost immediately. “That would hardly keep me locked in.”

Akira laughed, then extended his hand with a shit-eating grin, even wiggling his fingers towards him and his eyebrows to prove his point. Akechi was decidedly not amused by his jest, which only served to make Akira himself smile even harder. “Are you ready to admit you’re scared?”

“I’m not scared. In fact…this is a marvelous view,” he said through a forced smile and even more forced light-hearted tone. Not to mention he was looking at the safety instead of the view from the top.

Before he could say anything else, the ride truly started, and they were plummeted down. At the sudden down-falling jolt, Akira moved his free hand to grip the handle when suddenly he felt another hand grasp tightly around his.

He tightened his hold of the only hand he had on the handle, then turned to look at Akechi. His eyes were open and staring straight ahead, but he was completely still, like he was forcing every nerve and muscle in his body to remain as calm as possible so as not to break composure. He was gripping Akira’s hand so tight that he was certain he was cutting off blood circulation.

Akira smiled to himself. He decided he’d wait until after the ride to tell Akechi about the picture.

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“Ah. That was…quite fun,” Akechi said, once they got off the ride, even as he moved somewhat shakily and looked happy that it was over, though it was hard to tell.

“Again?” Akira suggested.

“…You want me to admit it that much?” Akechi said, his voice going up an octave as he tried to smile as though it were nothing.

Akira smiled. “Nah.” He flexed his fingers. “You have some grip, though,” he teased.

“I think it would be beneficial if we chose to not speak of that again,” Akechi said.

Akira wordlessly grinned as he walked over to the nearby booth where the photos from the ride popped up.

“…What is this?” Akechi said hesitantly.

Akira turned to him with a gleam in his eye. “Photos from the ride.”

Akechi half-spoke some sort of word. “Ph-Photos?”

Akira stood in front of one of the tablets with the photos rotating. He scrolled through them until he found the one of he and Akechi.
He heard Akechi make some sort of displeased noise from next to him. Akechi’s eyes were widened, like he’d just stared his worst fears in the face, while Akira was softly smiling, so fondly that he knew Morgana would call him an idiot if he saw the photo. Their expressions in the photo were in such a sharp contrast: Akechi with a chaotic expression on his face while Akira sat there with a serene smile and eyes glancing at Akechi.

He could just barely see Akechi gripping his hand like it was his life support at the bottom of the photo, though it was partially cut off from the coaster design on the outside.

Akira took out his wallet, and Akechi immediately stopped him. “Surely, you aren’t thinking of buying it?” he said slowly. “Perhaps it would be better if we didn’t have a memento of it.”

“I like it,” Akira said. “It’s nice.”

“Nice may be a severe overstatement,” Akechi said disbelievingly.

Akira smiled, then hit the order for two sets of the photos, one on a keychain, and the other as a 4x6 photo, then hit order. He walked over to the desk to purchase them, and when the cashier handed him the bag with the photo, he stepped over to the side with Akechi, then dug into the bag and handed him the keychain.

Akechi stared at it like it would burn him if he touched it. Akira smiled. “For your collection,” he said, thinking of the gift that Kioshi had given him.

Gingerly, Akechi took it from his hands. He looked down at it. Then he looked back up at Akira as something unreadable flitted across his face. “…I must assert, It’s still an awful photograph,” Akechi finally relented, and Akira grinned.

They spent the rest of the day walking around the park. About halfway through, Akechi wanted to try his hand at playing some of the games for prizes. He played competitively, of course, and when Akira would go first, he seemed to be adamant that he could one-up him. He snapped a mental picture of the half-annoyed, half-amused face that Akechi made when Akira distracted him so that he missed one of his shots and lost. It only worked a couple of times before Akechi caught on and didn’t allow that to happen anymore. However, it wasn’t until their fifth game that Akira realized that he was trying to win a prize for Kioshi.

“He’d like that one, I think,” Akechi had quietly mumbled to himself when Akira stepped off to the side to respond to a message. It was so quiet and the noise around them was so loud that Akira wasn’t sure that he’d heard him.

Akira didn’t know what kinds of things Akechi cared about, but Kioshi seemed to have made the list. He wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not, especially considering Akechi’s supposed plan.

By the time they’d finished, Akechi ended up with a small Jack Frost plush.

The sun began to set on them when he finished. Akira stifled a yawn when he saw that Akechi still seemed to have a bit of energy. His keys jingled lightly off the side of his pocket as they walked, now holding both a Big Bang keychain and a photo of the two of them at Dome Town. His plain keys had two keepsakes now.

“Want to go on the Ferris Wheel?” Akira said, finding that he didn’t quite want the evening to end just yet. It involved heights like the coaster, so he wasn’t sure if he would have to tease him into it again or if it wasn’t heights that scared about the ride but something else.

Akechi smiled and nodded. “I would like that.”
The two of them settled into the seat of the Ferris Wheel as the street lamps and lights all came on with the beginning of the sunset.

It had been a while since Akira went on a Ferris Wheel. The view remained as breath-taking as it always did. He glanced over at Akechi, who’d become other-worldly again as he looked out at the city.

Akechi seemed to be entirely taken by the view. He looked so serene that Akira almost felt like an intruder for sitting there and watching him. A strong breeze came through for a moment, moving the strands of his hair, and someone’s hat flew past them as a child cried out in the background. Akira still wasn’t an art expert by any means, but he imagined that this was the kind of portrait he’d want to paint.

*Chaotic Serenity.* He’d title it something simple like that. Simple and complex at the same time.

Akechi turned and met his gaze, then smiled, almost tragically so. “The world seems different up here. It’s as though I’m merely an outside observer, not a part of it myself.”

“It’s nice.”

“Very much so,” he breathed. “I wouldn’t mind staying up here for a lifetime,” he said with a light, joking tone that somehow felt entirely serious.

“Let’s?” Akira offered with a tilted smile.

Akechi laughed, humorlessly, then looked down at the plush in his hand, then thumbed the keychain with the photo from the coaster. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you that it’s cruel to make offers that can’t be kept?” he said quietly, with a disarming yet disheartening smile.

Just as he said so, they both felt the light sprinkling of rain. It wasn’t torrential by any means. It was just the opposite. The rain was just barely there as it delicately drizzled from the sky, but at the same time it was quietly demanding to be noticed, almost as though it simply wanted to alert Akira and Akechi of its presence in its own subtle way. “It’s raining,” Akechi said obviously, though his tone sounded almost disbelieving.

“Of course it is,” Akira said with a sullen smile, because life was kind of funny that way.

Akechi matched it with another humorless chuckle, looking up and letting the slight droplets hit his face. He exhaled. “This is starting to become a problem.”

“The rain?”

“…Yes.” Akechi replied, and Akira didn’t ask what he meant by that. He didn’t have to. The brunette looked away from the sky and back to Akira. “I was thinking about Yusuke and the Sayuri today. The Sayuri *is* beautiful, but that isn’t what draws people in. That isn’t the allure.”

“It was the mystery,” Akira answered.

Akechi nodded. “Yes. The Sayuri doesn’t leave a lasting impression because she’s beautiful or perfect. There’s something that draws the viewer in. Even after seeing the true Sayuri holding the infant, the focus becomes her eyes and the emotions held behind the gaze. It can’t help but draw one in. It’s almost like--”

“You can’t explain it, but it’s there.” Akira could feel Akechi looking at him, but he was staring up at the sky. He could see a plane flying by in the distance.
“His mother was truly talented,” Akechi finally said.

Akira nodded this time.

After another moment or two, Akechi cleared his throat. “I want to tell you something.” A beat passed, and Akira turned to give the brunette his attention. He didn’t say anything then. Akira wondered if this would be the moment that everything would be revealed, and he found himself wishing for just a little bit more time. For what? He wasn’t sure. “I…was…afraid to ride the roller coaster.”

Akira furrowed his brow. *That was it?* Akira opened his mouth, prepared to tease him and tell him that he already knew that, but Akechi was looking at him like he’d just revealed his deepest darkest secret. It wasn’t entirely what Akira would’ve liked to have Akechi reveal, but that admission was somehow a big deal to the brunette. Akira couldn’t ignore that.

He smiled tenderly. “You should do the things you’re afraid of.”

“I wonder,” Akechi breathed, his eyes searching Akira’s. They stayed like that for a few seconds, both looking at each other but neither moving. Then he managed a small smile. “Do you have any fears? Or are you truly a fearless leader?” Akechi asked, infusing some joking into his voice even as his curiosity was evident.

And he was starting to really get tired of the lies, so he sighed and said, “I’m afraid of a lot of things, Goro.”

Akechi blinked, clearly not expecting that answer. Akira didn’t speak his name often, so that probably added to the surprise. Then he heard a whisper, so faint and quiet that it could’ve easily been lost to the wind: “Me too,” Akechi finally said in response. Neither of them spoke after that, a comfortable silence falling over them as Akira closed his eyes and leaned back against the seat as the Ferris Wheel moved slowly around, stopping at the top for everyone. The breeze and the light drizzle felt nice. When he peeked over at Akechi, he wasn’t looking at the view anymore. He’d taken the keys off of him and held both of the keychains in his hands as he stared down at them, a complicated expression on his face.

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The two of them left Dome Town just after the sun set. It had been a long day for both of them, and Akira tried to push past his tiredness because he knew Morgana would be awaiting him with questions when he returned, and rightfully so.

The gentle chirping of crickets made up the noise as they walked side-by-side.

“Today was…” Akechi started, then stopped as he seemingly struggled to find the right word.

“Fun,” Akira offered. And it had been.

Akechi nodded, then gave him a tentative smile. “I…was looking for a noun, actually,” the brunette said, his voice falling quiet.

Morgana’s words shot to the front of his brain like a cannon. “Are you really going to make me say it?” He said, sort of echoing Akechi’s words from the roller coaster.

“I was considering it,” Akechi said, and Akira turned to him, finding Akechi smiling genuinely and somewhat teasingly. It was so infectious that Akira couldn’t help but smile himself. “But perhaps the unspoken is sufficient enough in this case.”
Akira nodded, preparing to respond when they both stopped. At one of the far benches, dimly illuminated by a flickering streetlamp, was a girl sitting with her knees hugged up to her chest. There was a bottle next to her and her shoulder bag. Softly, he could hear the sounds of crying.

There wasn’t anyone else around, and the two of them exchanged a glance. She had her head buried into her arms, so she didn't seem them looking at her. Her cries were soft, yet Akira could still hear the brokenness in them. Slowly, he gestured to Akechi, who surprisingly also nodded, and the two of them walked over to the woman.

Akechi was the first to speak up. “Excuse me, Miss? Are you alright?”

The girl abruptly stopped her sobbing and slowly lifted her head up to look at them. She sniffled loudly. “Does it look like I’m alright?” Then she immediately sighed, shaking her head. “I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you like that. I’m fine,” she told them, putting on a faux smile.


“Maybe if I say it enough times, it’ll be true, then,” she said, using her sleeve to wipe the tears off her face.

“Maybe,” Akechi offered.

She gave him a short, sour laugh, then looked down at the bottle that sat on the bench. “I bought this because people are supposed to drink their sorrows away. First thing I buy in this city. Classy.” She glanced up at them. “Sorry. You have no idea what I’m talking about. Are you here to kick me off of this bench for causing a disturbance?”

Akechi softly chuckled. “I don’t have the authority to do that. We simply wanted to make sure that you were alright.”

She made an ‘O’ motion with her mouth in realization. “Ah. Well, I suppose this was a nice reminder that I really shouldn’t be sulking out in public.” Then she looked at Akechi with a curious expression. “Wait… Do I know you from somewhere?”

Akechi paused. “I…don’t think so. I did just have an appearance on TV, perhaps that was where you recognized me?”

She shook her head, brow still furrowed. “No…I don’t know. I’m just tired, I guess. Maybe you just have one of those faces and wait—TV?” She blinked. “Are you a celebrity? And if you are can I have your autograph?”

“You…want an autograph even though you would have no idea who I am, if I were a celebrity?” Akechi asked, slightly confused.

“Meh. What can I say? I’m a bandwagoner,” she said lightly as Akechi laughed and Akira smiled. “Plus,” she started, swaying lightly as she tapped her finger against her chin thoughtfully. “Those things can really sell, y’know. I do have bills to pay. Tokyo is expensive.”

Akechi chuckled. “Well, I apologize for disappointing you. I’m not quite a celebrity, in case you count a few select appearances on TV. I’m a student and a detective.”

“Oh! I know a detective,” she said. Then she immediately backtracked. “N-not because I’m in police trouble or under investigation or anything,” she added quickly.

Akechi smiled. “I hadn’t been thinking that. Although perhaps now I should be,” he added with a
charming laugh.

The girl grimaced in embarrassment. “I should really be going, mostly to save myself the trouble of embarrassing myself further.”

Akechi smiled. “I hope that everything turns out well for you,” he said.

She managed to smile in response. “Everything works out in the end. It always does. Someone used to tell me that.” Her smile dimmed. “Although, she’s dead now, so…” She drifted off. Akechi’s mouth opened, but no words came out, and both he and Akira exchanged an uncertain glance. After a moment of uncomfortable silence where neither of them knew what to say to that, she met their eyes again quickly. “Sorry, wow, that was really bad, and I feel like I just made it super awkward.”

Akira shook his head. “The saying is still true,” he assured her.

She turned to Akira with a short nod. “I hope you’re right.” She stood up, then picked up the bottle of alcohol. “I don’t really trust myself with this. Do you want it?” She asked them.

“Well, we’re students, so…” Akechi reminded her, his voice trailing off with just a hint of amusement.

“Oh my god you just said that too,” She groaned. “Wow. I feel really bad again. This day is just…wow. I’m--Sorry. I have chronic foot-in-mouth disease,” she said with an awkward laugh. Then, before either of them could respond to her statement, she kept going. “I guess I’ll just hold onto this. It’s not exactly the type of thing you donate to charity or give away to someone for free,” she mused. “Thank you for asking if I was alright.”

“Good luck with what it is that you’re dealing with,” Akechi told her sincerely.

She smiled, though it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Have a nice night.”

When she was gone, Akechi turned in the direction she’d left, his hand on his chin thoughtfully. Akira met his gaze, then subtly shook his head in confusion. “My apologies. She does look familiar somehow…” Akechi said, furrowing his brow. “I can’t seem to place her, though.”

“Got a revolving door, do you?” Akira teased.

Akechi chuckled at that. “Hardly.” He turned back to the bench, then bent down, picking up a small chip. He flipped it over, then showed it to Akira. It was a 1-Year sobriety chip. Akira frowned. *Uh oh.* “Is it hers?”

Akechi frowned too. He glanced in the direction that she’d left, but she wasn’t anywhere in sight. “I…don’t know. I hope not, otherwise we may have just allowed her to leave with that bottle of alcohol. Perhaps I’ll hold onto it for now,” he said.

Akira nodded. “Sounds good.”

Akechi studied it for a second longer before dropping the chip into his pocket. Then he smiled at Akira, his gaze softening. “Thank you for today, Akira.”

“Thanks for keeping me company,” Akira told him sincerely. “Let’s do it again.” And Akechi looked taken aback by this, but he kept his smile nonetheless.

“Yes…let’s.”
“I saw you guys on TV last week! It was soooo cool!” Kioshi said, bouncing up and down in his seat at the diner they were at.

Akechi had invited him to eat out with them again. Apparently, Kioshi had asked his mother over and over again if Akechi could watch him while his mother went out to run some errands instead of the babysitter that normally took over. Akechi seemed flustered enough over it, and had invited Akira to join them, which was odd, since Akira stayed mostly quiet each time they hung out with him anyway. He figured it was more of a safety more than anything else. Kioshi picked at the small bowl vegetables on his place, then chose instead to eat another one of his fries.

Akechi smiled lightly. “Ha ha. I don’t know about that. But thank you.”

Kioshi was bouncing in his seat. “I told my classmates, but they thought I was lying,” he said, frowning slightly. Then he stopped bouncing, biting his lip. “Plus, they only said it would only be really cool if I knew the Phantom Thieves.”

“Oh,” Akechi, his own smile faltering. “Is…that something you would like?”

Kioshi looked at them unsurely. “Um…I dunno.”

Akira raised an eyebrow. “Not a fan?” He asked, genuinely curious.

Kioshi slunk down into his seat, seemingly afraid to answer. Akechi’s expression softened. “You can tell us. It’s alright.”

Kioshi started to pick at his food again before he finally looked at Akechi with an uncertain expression. “Wh-Why did Dad’s heart change? Was it because of the Phantom Thieves?”

Akechi looked at a loss for words, and even Akira was a little surprised. He was young, but he was surprisingly thoughtful for his age.

When it became clear that Akechi had been flustered into silence, Akira smiled at the child. “I think he changed because of you.”

Kioshi looked at him skeptically. “B-Because of me?” He said shyly and hopefully, pressing his two index fingers together as he often did when he was nervous.

“Yes,” Akechi piggybacked. “Perhaps he realized how much he cherished your relationship, and that spurred him to want to remedy the actions he’d done.” Then he added, quietly, “That’s very noble of him, and not something that every parent does.”

“Oh.”

“But not everyone realizes something like that. The Phantom Thieves change the hearts of bad people who don’t want to change,” Akira told the child.

Kioshi furrowed his brow, seemingly trying to grasp this new bit of information. “Dad says that if you’re kind to people over and over and don’t give up on them, they can change. Is it like that?”

He asked with a childlike innocence. Akira smiled. He wished that things could be that simple. He wished that he could change hearts in such a pure and innocent way.

“Something like that,” Akira finally answered to placate the boy. Akechi didn’t seem to be too happy with Akira’s response, but it wasn’t like he could tell him no, they steal their distorted
“Well, I don’t care about all of that; he just didn’t want to eat it because it was gross. Kioshi had been through something horrible at such a young age, his family had been broken apart, and yet, at his core, kids were so innocent. Glancing at Akechi, he wondered how a child would grow up if he’d lost that innocence.”

Kioshi looked up at Akira. “Do I have to?” he asked, clearly in the hopes that Akira would agree with him.

Akira smiled, then picked a carrot off of Kioshi’s plate to help him. “There. Only four left,” he said as he tossed it into his mouth.

“Aha—haha, while that was a noble gesture, the health benefits don’t exactly help unless he eats them himself,” Akechi was quick to add in an oddly parental tone. Akira just smiled. He clearly cared about Kioshi. It was charming to see him like that, in a strange sort of way. To see him have things that he cared about.

“Aha, hello there.” Akira looked up to see Yusuke standing at the diner.

Akechi turned to him. “Have you finish getting settled?”

Ah, that’s right. After their celebration, Yusuke had decided to accept Akechi’s offer to stay with him. It still made Akira feel a little uneasy, for multiple reasons. Number one of which being the fact of Akechi’s unknown plan. Still, there had been nothing malicious or no sign of ill intent in
Akechi’s offer. In fact, he seemed to be the fondest of Yusuke in the group.

Yusuke nodded, a pleasant look on his face. “Yes, you have my gratitude. There wasn’t enough room for my canvas and brushes, so I have rearranged some of the design of the living room to make room and to make the area as a whole more conducive to my artistic process,” he said casually.

Akechi’s smile froze in place. “I-Is that so?”

Oh, and there’s that. Akechi had yet to experience Yusuke’s endearing eccentricities.

“But alas, it appears that even through a redesign, my art feels tainted,” Yusuke said as he decided to take a seat. “Ever since Madarame, it feels as though I’ve lost the inspiration to find beauty.”

“Yes, that must be tough,” Akechi sympathized. “Also… may I ask how you’ve re-designed? I’m…just a little curious,” he said with a short laugh. Akira tried to stop himself from smiling.

“There is no need to worry. It is now a room that is aesthetically pleasing and artistically envisioned.”

“I see… I’m very lucky…” he said, clearing his throat.

“However, I must lament. I fear I’ve lost sight of the true meaning of art,” he said with a forlorn expression.

Kioshi peered up at him. “I’m sorry you’re so sad, Mister…” Then he cheekily pushed his plate towards him. “I think some carrots would make you feel better.”

Yusuke looked at the boy, then the plate, then smiled. “Oh, my thanks. I am quite hungry. I had spent the last of my money on some delectable Japanese sweets as a thank you for the hospitality.”

Kioshi smiled triumphantly as Akechi was rendered temporarily speechless. “Don’t mention it! It’s got great health benefits and vitamin stuff too!”

Akira couldn’t help but laugh. He was clever. Akechi looked over at Akira after he laughed, and Akira just shrugged with a lingering smile. “He’s not wrong.”

“Er, Kioshi-kun…” Akechi started, seemingly unsure of what he wanted to say next.

Kioshi turned to him with a cheeky and toothy smile. “You told me to be kind to people.”

Akechi smiled, but shook his head. “That’s…not quite what I meant.”

Kioshi slunk down in his seat. “Fiiine,” he said. He picked up one of the carrots, then took a bite as he dramatically and childishly glared at Akechi while he chewed it. It was more adorable than intimidating though.

Akechi chuckled. “How about I make you a deal? If you eat three, I’ll give you this,” he said. Then he reached down into his briefcase and pulled out the Jack Frost doll.

Kioshi’s eyes widened immediately. “Is that a Jack Frost doll? Cooooool!” He said, immediately changing his demeanor as he become more excited. “I want it, I want it!” He said, bouncing in his seat. “It’s one of the super rare ones with the gold on it too! Where did you get it?”

“We went to Dome Town,” Akechi answered.
“Dome Town?” At this, Kioshi’s excitement lessoned, and he hesitated. “I think...I went there with Mom and Dad. I remember fighting,” he said, biting his lower lip.

Akechi’s face softened. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

Kioshi brightened a little. “No, it’s okay. I have good memories too. Dad said to always remember good memories when I get sad,” he said, nodding to himself. “That’s supposed to make me feel better.” Akira smiled at his optimism as Akechi’s face remained contemplative. “And maybe Mom will let me see Dad again soon. Once she sees that his heart has really changed!” Then his shoulders slumped a little. “But we won’t go to Dome Town.”

“Maybe you can come with us next time,” Akira offered.

Kioshi pressed his fingers together. “Oh. Mom doesn’t like me going on the subway anymore because of all the accidents.”

Akechi stiffened slightly. “…Is that so?”

He nodded, then picked up a carrot and bit into it, making a face even as he chewed it. “I think it’s because I was supposed to go on the train the day of that big accident, but we didn’t get there on time.”

This time, he didn’t stiffen, he completely froze. “I-I see. Well, it’s a good thing you were late.”

Kioshi nodded. “I wish everyone was late to that train. It was really scary. She’s scared I’ll get hurt now.”

“That... Yes, just be vigilant,” Akechi said, clearing his throat.

Kioshi perked up. “But maybe she’ll let me go now with you!”

Akira studied Akechi’s expression. He got a distant look on his face, and Akira could just barely tell that Akechi was biting down on the inside of his mouth. He wondered if Akechi had ever really given it much thought before. The psychotic breakdowns didn’t kill the ones that it happened to, but there were victims. A lot of them. It was odd to think that the boy they were sitting across from could have been one of those victims. How did he view those people? Maybe he didn’t think about it at all, if he didn’t have anyone that he truly cared about. Perhaps it was just a means to an end. But what was the end?

The four of them chatted for a while longer, and Kioshi begrudgingly finished up his carrots, then gleefully accepted the plush from Akechi with a declaration of “I’ll hold onto this forever!”

Akechi’s smile was significantly less bright in response.

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The next few days passed by uneventfully up until the day that Makoto called him into the student council room. He’d been waiting for it, truth be told. After he’d had the conversation with the others that he recognized as the one Makoto recorded, it was only a matter of time before it all came to fruition.

So when Kawakami called him over to let him know that Makoto was waiting for him in the student council room, he mentally prepared himself for what was to come next. She was a valuable asset to the team and one of the most powerful and intelligent. He was curious to see how both Makoto and Akechi would do on the same team, both probably better at strategizing than all of
them.

Maybe he would even come to like her romantically this time. That would certainly make his life easier. That way he wouldn’t have to deal with—

“Akira?”

Akira stopped blinking as he saw Akechi approach him, his briefcase in hand as he came to a stop in front of him.

“Hey…” Akira said, confused.

Akechi smiled. “Ah. I presume you are a bit confused. It appears I had some business to take care of at this school. As I may have mentioned, the police are investigating the Phantom Thieves. Where are you headed?”

“Student Council Room. Nijima-san wants to speak to me.”

“Oh?” Akechi said curiously. “What about?”

Akira shrugged, pretending as though he didn’t know. Morgana piped up from behind him. “That’s what we’re going to find out.”

Akechi nodded a few times, his hand on his chin. “Hm.” Then he brightened. “Perhaps I’ll accompany you, if it’s alright. It’s been a while since I’ve seen Nijima-san. It would be unkind of me to not say hello.”

Akira shrugged again. If Akechi were in the room, he didn’t think it make much of a difference, honestly, even if he very clearly had an alternative reason for going other than just to say hello.

When the two of them (with Morgana in tow) walked into the Student Council Room, Makoto was sitting at the table. She turned to them, then her eyes widened slightly when her gaze fell on Akechi.

“Akechi-kun?” She said unsurely.

Akechi smiled and waved kindly. “Hello. I ran into Kurusu while I was here, and he mentioned that he was on his way to see you. It wouldn’t be kind of me to leave without greeting you.”

“I see…” Makoto said, somewhat confused. “That’s very kind of you,” she said, brushing her hair behind her ear. “But I was hoping to speak with him alone.”

“Oh. That makes sense. I certainly don’t mean to intrude upon your meeting. By the way,” Akechi said with a twinkle in his eye. “I heard that you were investigating the Phantom Thieves potentially being Shujin students.”

“How did you…?”

Akechi smiled. “I am a detective, novice as I may be. Perhaps our investigations will cross over,” he said with a gentle laugh. “Well, then, I should be off.”

Makoto furrowed her brow in the chair, her hand thoughtfully at her chin. As Akechi prepared to exit the door, Makoto turned to him as her eyes widened ever so slightly. “Actually—” she started, and Akechi’s smile became infinitesimally wider, though Makoto herself couldn’t see it since his front was to the door. “Won’t you stay for a moment as well? I wonder if this would apply to you
as well.”

It was almost scary how clever Akechi could be sometimes. Even Akira wasn’t sure what he was getting at. The two of them took a seat next to each other, and Akira placed the back with Morgana down next to his feet.

“I’m concerned,” Morgana whispered when Makoto coughed briefly.

Makoto looked at them with eyes of steel. Akira glanced over at Akechi, who had a curious expression on his face, his head slightly tilted to the side as he looked at her, awaiting what she had to say.

“I’ll…get straight to the point,” she said, choosing to focus on Akira. “Mr. Kamoshida and Madarame. Won’t you tell me the truth behind the Phantom Thieves’ incidents?”

A beat of silence passed, and Makoto continued. “Can’t answer that? Ah, of course. There’s no way you would want to admit to such things.”

Then she pulled out her phone, and Akechi moved from his confident position as he furrowed his brow slightly. Akira was almost certain that by the end of this, he’d end up thinking that Ryuji was a liability. Ryuji wasn’t by any means, but even Akira knew that they’d been too careless about it, even if it had to happen this way.

“Have a listen,” she said calmly.

Ryuji’s voice came clear through the speaker. “If someone else could help ‘em, we wouldn’t be doin’ stuff as the Phantom Thieves to start with!”

He saw Akechi twitch in irritation out of the corner of his eye.

“So you think it’s true…? We’ll be okay if we keep doing this… Right?” Ann continued.

“What could this all mean?” Makoto said. “Was it blackmail? Hypnosis? How do you corner someone into making them confess? Won’t you tell me how you did it?”

Akira looked at Akechi, who looked like he was solving a puzzle in his brain. Akira turned back to Makoto. “Ask the culprits,” he said cheekily.

Makoto shook her head. “I believe that you three--” Then she looked at Akechi, narrowing her eyes slightly. “No, perhaps you four, are the Phantom Thieves.”

“I must say, that is certainly a creative deduction. I can see how you take after Sae-san,” Akechi said with a laugh. “I would have to argue that it is a bit off.”

Makoto scoffed. She looked down at her phone, then back at the two of them. “What would the police think if they heard this recording?”

Akechi placed his hand on his chin, crossing his legs and leaning forward. “I am curious. Perhaps we should take it to them.”

“What the hell is he doing?” Morgana hissed. And Akira didn’t know. He really and truly didn’t. This couldn’t be his plan. He’d had no way of knowing what Makoto would’ve called him in for.

“Wh-What?” Makoto said.

Perhaps they’ll be able to analyze it. I do have police connections. I’m sure it would be very
fruitful towards the investigation,” Akechi said kindly. “However, it wouldn’t be solid evidence, in fact, it’s quite contextual. Is there a longer recording? That may prove to be a bit more solid than a 15 second clip,” he said, and if Akira didn’t know any better, he actually might’ve thought that Akechi was on Makoto’s side. He sounded perfectly believable and cordial as he offered his help and advice to Makoto, who was stunned into silence.

“I don’t—You’re going to keep denying it, then?”

“I’m afraid we aren’t the ones you’re looking for,” Akechi said. “But we’d be glad to lend our assistance. Shall I make a call to the police? We can get this looked into right away.”

At this, Makoto stood up, both her hands on the table. It was reminiscent of her sister. She didn’t speak for a second, but she looked beyond frustrated. “…Fine. Keep denying it.” Then she looked at Akira. “As you know, my door is always open, should some…new revelations or thoughts come to fruition,” she said, returning to her calm, “student body president” composure.

She’d just walked out the room when he dug his phone out of his pocket. He’d missed a call from Ryuji. Akira blinked down at the missed call. He hadn’t even noticed it buzzing in his pocket this time.

Akechi exhaled. “That was close,” he said, a charming smile on his face. “I’m glad we were able to deter her. Though I suspect we haven’t seen the last of it. Perhaps we should discuss this with the others?”

There was nothing Akira could say. He couldn’t exactly say actually, Makoto becomes a really useful teammate and friend, so we should let her discover our identities. It would only make Akechi suspicious about why Akira would want to add someone else to the group and draw more attention to themselves. So he nodded, a faint smile on his face. “That was good,” he complimented. And it was. It really was. If this had happened in the last time, he would’ve praised him for sure. This time around, though, he would’ve thought it was great, if it didn’t just potentially ruin Makoto’s chances of joining.

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“So she’s onto us, huh?” Ryuji said, folding his arms across his chest as he leaned back against the railing.

“You should’ve been more careful,” Yusuke said disapprovingly towards Ryuji. “Anything else to say?”

“Wha--! Pft, what’re you only getting upset at me for? Ann was on it too!” Ryuji countered.

“I’m sorry, everyone…” Ann said, downtrodden.

“Besides, Akechi saved our asses,” Ryuji said, patting Akechi on the back. The latter hadn’t been expecting it, so he moved forward slightly as he let out a light laugh. “Dude, you’re seriously impressive.”

“It was nothing,” he said, though he very clearly expected them to be impressed.

“I must agree,” Yusuke said, pleased. “It was quite clever of you to turn her own words against her. You remedied the situation quite beautifully.”

“That…was pretty smart of you,” Morgana admitted. There was a bit of hesitation in Morgana’s voice, and he knew it was because Akira had told him that Makoto would join the party next, so Morgana likely wasn’t sure what to think at the moment. Admittedly, it was pretty smart, it just hadn’t been what was supposed to happen.

“Should we change our hideout after all, then?” Ann wondered.

Akechi shook his head. “No. If Nijima-san is anything like her sister, she’s incredibly bright. It will only make her more suspicious if we were to suddenly meet somewhere else. I suggest we continue to meet here. Besides that, if someone is suspicious, we will just make sure that I, as the person who has adamantly spoken out against the Phantom Thieves, am present when we meet in public. We must just be more mindful of the content of our conversations.”

There it was again. That nagging feeling that Akira was missing something that he shouldn’t be.

The others nodded. “That sounds good to me, man. Whatever you think is best,” Ryuji said.

“Oh, no, I was simply making a suggestion. I’m open to other ideas as well,” Akechi said in a friendly tone. “I’m not the leader, after all,” he said with a chuckle.

“That sounds good to me too,” Ann agreed. “Besides, you’re one of us, so it’s already kind of a given that you’d be at all of the meetings,” she added with a cheerful smile.

“It is fine with me as well,” Yusuke said with a nod. He turned to Akira. “And as for our leader?”

Akira blinked, somewhat lost in thought. He looked at the others’ expectant faces, then smiled and nodded.

“Awesome!” Ann said. “Well, I gotta run to a shoot, but let’s all chat, later, ‘kay?”

“Yes, and I must get to work on my next art piece,” Yusuke said.

As they all scattered, Ryuji lingered behind for a moment, turning his attention to Akira with a slightly concerned expression. “You okay man? Seems like something’s botherin’ you,” Ryuji asked.

He wished he could tell Ryuji everything, but he either wouldn’t believe him or, even worse, if he did believe him, he’d do something reckless. Still, it was nice that he’d noticed that much. Even if he couldn’t tell him, he was grateful for the offer. Akira smiled. “It’s nothing.”

Ryuji nodded. “Alright. If you change your mind, lemme know. I’m not so great at the advice, but I can listen.”

“Even that’s questionable at best,” Morgana couldn’t help but quip.

“Can it, cat,” Ryuji retorted. “I better get going. Gotta pick up some stuff for dinner.” He turned to Akechi. “I’ll see you guys later.”

Akechi looked at Akira, and his gaze softened. He opened his mouth to speak, but Morgana beat him to it.

“If you guys are going to flirt again, I’m leaving,” Morgana said before Akechi could get a word out.

“Wh-What?” Akechi said.
Akira chuckled. “You don’t have to go,” he said to Morgana.

Morgana shook his head. “No, it’s okay. I think it’ll be more useful if I left, anyway.”

“Useful…?” Akechi repeated.

Akira didn’t need the explanation. He knew that Akechi was more likely to share things with him when it was just the two of them, so he didn’t blame Morgana for wanting to leave. He turned to Akechi with a suspicious glance. “But remember what they always say, everything gets back to the cat.”

“I…don’t think I’ve ever heard that saying,” Akechi started, with a genuinely confused smile. Then he placed his hand on his chin, somewhat playfully. “Is that an English idiom?”

“What? No!” Morgana said, clearly unamused with Akechi’s light ribbing.

Akira bit back a smile. “Maybe it’s a French one?” he offered as he glanced at Akechi, joining in with a joking tone.

“That would explain why I wouldn’t have heard of it,” Akechi nodded thoughtfully, the teasing grin still on his face.

Morgana looked back and forth between the two of them wordlessly for a moment. “Oh god, there’s two of you.”

Akechi furrowed his brow, still amused but giving way to confusion. “I’m sorry?”

“Nothing, just—just no funny business!” Morgana finally exclaimed as Akira chuckled.

When it was just the two of them, Akira turned to Akechi.

“How does Yusuke’s redecorating look?” Akira said, smiling.

“Ah…That,” Akechi started.

“That bad?”

Akechi turned with a light laugh. “Of course not. Yusuke is quite talented. It’s…quite different from the original layout, but I’m sure to an artist it is quite an aesthetically pleasing view.”

“So it’s bad,” Akira teased.

“I didn’t say that,” Akechi said lightly. He grinned. “You’re going to get me in trouble,” he added with a chuckle. Akira smiled. “Still, I told him he is welcome to stay as long as he likes. He’s been through quite the ordeal. Yet his determination seems as high as ever.”

Akira nodded. “He knows what it’s like to be helpless. He doesn’t want other people to go through that.” Akira bit the inside of his lip. He wasn’t sure if this was the right time, but if he waited, he was certain that he’d realize that there wasn’t a such thing as a right time. He could only hope that Akechi wouldn’t question his advanced knowledge. “Especially with finding out about the black mask.”

“Ah,” Akechi said with a nod. “That is strange. I wonder if Madarame may have just been speaking out of turn or if it is truly a threat we should be concerned about.”

“I think the latter,” Akira started, and Akechi turned to him with a decidedly intrigued expression.
“I think there’s someone else using these palaces for malicious intent. I wonder if these mental shutdown and psychotic breakdown cases… if they’re the results of someone using the Palaces for their own personal gain.”

“That’s…certainly an interesting deduction,” Akechi said. He was looking at Akira, but his eyes seemed unfocused. “What brought that line of thought on?”

“There was a researcher. Wakaba Isshiki. It’s hard to find her research, but her theses from university are publicly available. The news says she committed suicide, but I find that hard to believe too. She was onto a discovery. The timing seems odd,” Akira said. He was taking a risk by saying all of this, but he didn’t have that many more cards to play. He needed Akechi to slip up or give him something that would help.

“I see,” Akechi said. He paused. “You suspect foul play.”

“It’s all linked. It has to be. There’s a mastermind behind all of this, but I doubt it’s just one person,” Akira said. He pinched the bridge of his nose. “We have to find them. I think the black mask is the key.”

When Akechi spoke, his voice became quiet. “What will you do if you catch them?”

“When,” Akira corrected, and Akechi just smiled, though it looked somewhat broken.

“Yes, of course,” the brunette said with a nod.

“The same thing we’ve been doing,” Akira said. “Get them to confess their crimes.”

“How did you gather all of this information?”

“Does it worry you?” Akira asked.

Akechi tilted his head with a faint, tired, and weary smile. “I’m not sure what you’re implying.”

“You’ve worked on a lot of these shutdown cases.”

“I have,” Akechi said evenly.

Akira didn’t have any proof. There was nothing he could do or say that would cause Akechi to change his mind and openly tell him everything. After all, Akechi had to know by this point that Akira had nothing even close to evidence. “You don’t know anything about the cases, then,” he said.

“Perhaps there is something strange about these cases,” Akechi offered, his voice hardening slightly. “But I’m afraid I have nothing that can help you. I’ve only investigated what’s been given to me. You’ll have to ask the prosecution or chief of police about potential links or connections to the Metaverse.” Akira stared at Akechi, and Akechi stared back, both unwilling to budge.

Akira thought for a moment about what response would be best. Akechi was clearly waiting for him to make his next move. Finally, Akira nodded. “Okay. Because if you’ve done something, I don’t care.” It was only a small lie. He did care, just probably not in the way that Akechi might’ve guessed.

He’d chosen correctly, because whatever response Akechi had prepared got caught in his throat. “Wh-What?” He finally said.
“You’re a good teammate, and friend, and—” Akira stopped himself before he reached that dangerous territory. “The others care about you a lot.”

“I-I’m unsure of why you’re telling me this.”

“You’re a valuable asset to the team. I just want to make sure you know that--”

“Just, could you please not--” Akechi’s voice wavered for a millisecond, and that’s when Akira knew for certain. It was all false bravado. And he could only tell because he was full of that same thing.

“--If you need help with anything, we’re here,” Akira offered, searching his eyes.

“I never asked to be helped.”

“You didn’t have to,” Akira countered. Akechi looked down, thumbing his keychains again. Was that becoming a new habit of his? “What are you afraid of?” Akira persisted.

Akechi blinked, his mouth twitching ever so slightly. Then he managed a drained smile. He took a step closer so that Akira could see the flecks of red shimmering in his eyes from the sunlight and could feel his breath on his face when he spoke. “I could ask you the same thing.” It was so close that his brain started to scramble to remember what it was that he needed to be doing. But he knew that Akechi was half-doing it on purpose.

Thus, Akira smiled, tantalizing and full of that false bravado once more, even as he could feel his chest pounding and he was millimeters away from Akechi’s face, which held something of a tragic sense of confidence.

Akira glanced up and met Akechi’s eyes with that same tilted half-smile, as Akechi’s own smile and confidence faltered slightly, like he’d been expecting to hit some sort of weak point of Akira’s but it backfired. And truthfully, it hadn’t backfired at all, but Akira couldn’t very well let that show.

“What are you afraid of?” Akira asked again, though it came out lower and breathier than he’d intended.

Akechi knew that they were in the same boat, Akira realized, as Akechi didn’t speak or respond, and Akira distinctly heard the sound of the brunette’s breathing get caught in his throat. This was the proof, as he noticed that past that Akechi’s confidant expression, he could see the nerves of desire and fear jumping around in Akechi’s dilated pupils.

He knew that the very same thing that they were both running from could easily be used to destroy the other. He knew that behind everything was the fear that if he was the first one to move, he or the people closest to him would get hurt. He knew that Akechi was feeling something similar, maybe not in regards to the people closest to him but for himself and his goals. He knew that they had the same weakness but opposite convictions that didn’t allow either of them to move just yet. That same weakness, where if he moved just a little closer-

“Hey, isn’t that Akechi-kun?”

“The guy from TV?”

“‘He’s...awfully close to that guy.’”

“Ugh, all the good ones are, of course.”
Akechi glanced over to the side, not bothering to completely turn his head, and it was then that the ringing in Akira’s ears stopped and he glanced over too and heard the people whispering and sort of glancing at them curiously.

“Tik think we’ve drawn an audience.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Akira said, mirroring his smile as he thought of the TV station. He took a step back as his heart rate returned to normal.

“Another time, then.”

Yet Akira knew they likely wouldn’t speak of it again. “I meant what I said.”

Akechi blinked. “As did I,” he said. “I apologize that I can’t be of more help,” he said evenly, keeping a steady gaze. Akira fought the urge to remind Akechi that he knew full well that he could help them the most, and Akechi continued, tilting his head. “Have you told the others about the results of your investigation?”

And Akira wondered if the others would potentially be targets if he’d answered with a yes. “It’s too early right now,” Akira finally told him. “But we will discover the truth. I hope you’ll help us.”

Akechi smiled tiredly. “I’ll do what I can,” he said, and it wasn’t lost on Akira that he’d said it in the tone he used whenever he was in front of a camera.

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“I have complete confidence in you, but remind me again just how this helps us?” Morgana said, especially worried. Akira was once again attempting to focus on making some infiltration tools, even though they were some ways away from the next Palace and he definitely wasn’t feeling up to Mementos. It served as a good distraction. “He basically knows that you know now, and he also knows that you can’t do anything about it,” Morgana continued.

“I don’t think that was part of his plan. It caught him off-guard. He had to think on the spot of what to do,” Akira said, crafting a poorly constructed Goho-M. He held it out to Morgana. “What do you think?”

Morgana raised an eyebrow. “That’s not taking you anywhere near out of the Metaverse.”

Akira rubbed his forehead, putting it down with the others that he’d messed up and preparing to start again. “Brian said something interesting a while ago. He said that most people try their hardest to be the person that a kid thinks they are. Maybe it’s the same for friends.” He thought of Akechi, who’d kept up a good façade until Akira mentioned how the others felt about him and his value both as a teammate and friend. He’d wavered, just for a moment.

“I knew it,” Morgana said with a resigned sigh. Akira paused to look at him. “It’s really not just about getting the name anymore, is it? You want to get him to our side, even though we know he now has his own plans to get rid of you.” It was dangerous to play the long-game like this. It was putting the others in more danger than if he were simply trying to get a name. But--

“I don’t think it’s impossible anymore.”

“I don’t think so either,” Morgana admitted, to Akira’s surprise.

“You don’t?” Akira questioned.
Morgana huffed. “I mean, I still think he’s awful, but I don’t get the same vibe from him that I got from Kamoshida and Madarame.” He stretched out his paws. “But what’s bringing on your thinking this?” he asked curiously.

I never ask to be helped.

He thought of the past week and the events leading up to this day. He’d needed Akechi to give him something that could even just marginally help, and, even though he’d left still feeling somewhat powerless, he’d gotten that something – this culmination of events in the past couple of weeks.

“Call it a hunch,” Akira finally said, tossing a smile over to Morgana.

“However, this could severely backfire. He didn’t even budge, from what you’re telling me.”

Akira paused.

Why did Dad’s heart change?

I think he changed because of you.

If you’re kind to people over and over and don’t give up on them, they can change. Is it like that?

And it wasn’t that simple. It was nowhere near that simple. But maybe it wasn’t as complex as he’d been thinking, either.

Another sigh broke Akira out of his thoughts. Morgana hopped up on the desk, and Akira stopped crafting his failed Goho-M. The cat’s face softened, and he even managed to smile, despite the worry that was evident in his eyes.

“Just don’t get killed. Please.” He’d heard Morgana say this so many times, but it still held the same sense of urgency. The same importance.

“Got it,” he said, hiding his uncertainty behind a smile.

“And don’t kiss him either.”

Akira let out a laugh. “This again? I already told you, I don’t-”

“Yeah, yeah. I do have eyes, you know,” Morgana pointed out. “You told me to knock some sense into you if you do something stupid like fall for him, and I will do it. I’m just looking out for you, for the sake of not having your eyes clawed out.”

Akira hummed thoughtfully. “Maybe I’ll kiss Lady Ann instead.”

Morgana gasped. “You wouldn’t.” Akira smiled jokingly, and Morgana did too, despite himself.

“What’s the next move, then?”

"I have to think,” Akira said. “We have to be careful though, especially since Yusuke is living with him. I don’t think he’ll lay a finger on him or any of them, but it’s still something to keep in mind,” Akira said.

“And what about the Palaces? I mean, isn’t Makoto supposed to already know who we are?” Morgana asked.

Oh, yeah. Not only did he have to think about Akechi, he now had to find some way to bring Makoto into their group that didn’t arouse any suspicions.
He closed his eyes, imagining he was back on that Ferris Wheel with Akechi, where he could feel like an observer of the world rather than an active participant spending every moment trying to avoiding his eventual fate, change someone else’s fate, and take down the mastermind behind these criminal cases.

He’d never admit this to Morgana, but he knew that his failed Goho-Ms weren’t due to his distractedness like Morgana thought. It was due to the subtle shaking of his hands that he was grateful Morgana didn’t notice (or if he did notice, he attributed it to that supposed distracted state of mind). The truth was something that he wasn’t quite ready to admit to Morgana.

Despite everything, he knew that he’d let his guard down, and he knew that the only thing stopping Akechi from using it against him or doing any of the things he could do to get rid of the Phantom Thieves was Akira’s own flimsy knowledge that Akechi had let his guard down around him too. But what did that mean in the long run?

He didn’t think that Akechi would hurt his friends, but he also didn’t think in the last timeline that Akechi was capable of murder until he was forced to confront it. Maybe Akechi wasn’t immovable, but he had convictions. One false move, and Akechi very well could kill him, or alert the police, or make him ‘disappear.’ Not to mention Akechi’s boss could get impatient or this could end up as a gross miscalculation.

Was it worth trying, even though he could die (again) and he would be potentially putting the people closest to him in danger – the people who trusted him as their leader and friend – all for the chance to save a single person who didn’t want or ask to be saved and wasn’t guaranteed to be saved in the first place?

He felt Arsene laugh in the depths of his soul and his booming voice echo throughout the far reaches of his mind.

What a ridiculous question.

Chapter End Notes

ryuji is best bro

Kioshi death flag count: 1

Jk…Or am I…Hehe

Fun fact: Research shows that your pupils dilate when you’re attracted to someone so sorry Akechi you can push aside your feelings all you want but you can’t hide from science

Going to be a bit of a break in between the next chapter. I’ve got a new schedule starting next week with work and an online class + student teaching, so it will take some time to adjust to the new busy schedule haha so I wanted to try my best to get this one out before that to close out the previous arc and lead into the next AND hence why this sudden bout of writer’s block was so inconvenient. Was hoping to have more before class started but I hope this will suffice.

Any feedback is welcome. I took a lot of you guys’ advice and it really helped so
THANK YOU again for all the advice and encouragement *thumbs up emoji*

Apparently Tumblr is the comm of choice haha, and since I couldn’t recover my old Tumblr I just made a new one haha so if you’re interested in being a beta, I still haven’t decided on whether or not to have one (or a few), although I am leaning towards it bc it’ll help keep me encouraged and on a good upload timeline, my Tumblr is the same as my username: duhitsnisha. I’m pretty much looking for someone (or a few people) to help with plot cohesiveness, and making sure the tone I’m trying to portray in the chapter comes across and that things build up in a natural way, because there are so many arcs and confidant storylines and such to keep track of that I’m bound to get mixed up with pacing haha so if you are still interested I may be reaching out to you via Tumblr ^.^.
The Illusion of Things Never Changing

Chapter Summary

Akechi *might* be changing and/or starting to reveal more of his personality behind the cool and collected Ace Detective, and Akira is not sure how to process this.

Chapter Notes

*peeks head out* Wow uhh….hey guys. Nice weather we have here :S IRL has been kicking my butt and it isn't done yet, but I have emerged from the ashes.

THANK YOU all so much for all the comments, kudos, and bookmarks. It’s definitely helped keep me going and to write this chapter. You guys rock my socks off.

ALSO wow somehow this story reached 10K views???? I’m officially shook. You guys are insane. Thank you so much <3

Mentions of child abuse in this chapter. Nothing explicit by any means, but just so you’re aware.

Also, I moved up when you can start Yusuke's rank. He's at Rank 2 at this point :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Heh, we really don’t belong anywhere…but y’know, maybe that ain’t so bad after all,” Ryuji frowned for a moment before a decidedly more placid expression crossed over his face. He pushed his empty ramen bowl back, leaning back in his seat and looking at Akira. “I guess now that I’m thinkin’ about it, tryin’ to fit in is a real pain in the ass.”

Akira nodded as his friend stretched his arms a little behind his back. He had to go through the entire situation with Nakaoka and the track team again, but Ryuji, hotblooded as he may be, had grown a lot through the experience. Akira felt a little bad, since it really had been a while since he hung out with Ryuji with all of the time spent with Akechi and trying to hold everything together so as not to slip up, but being with Ryuji in the ramen shop reminded him of just how much he missed it.

“I mean, I’d never’ve met you guys if I wasn’t an outcast, right? So, uh, it’s all good,” Ryuji said with a determined smile. “I’m glad we’re changing people’s hearts, but it’s also been a shitton of fun! Hangin’ out with you guys is so freakin’ cool!”

Akira smiled as he tilted his glass towards him, glancing inside of it. “I’m having fun,” Akira told him.

“Right?! Man, now I see while all those superhero groups are so cool. It’s nice changin’ the world with your friends,” Ryuji said with a nod. “Ann and I didn’t talk much after middle school, so it’s kinda nice to be talkin’ to her like this again. And I mean, Yusuke’s hella weird, but he’s a good
“You didn’t trust Akechi at one point,” Akira noted, mostly to see his reaction.

“Huh? Oh, yeah,” Ryuji nodded. “Something seemed off about him, but the more I think about it, even though he’s famous and all, the more I think he’s an outcast like us. I think maybe he just doesn’t like to show that he’s one.” Had Ryuji always been this perceptive? “I dunno. That prolly didn’t make any sense,” Ryuji said with a short laugh. “Anyway, what I’m sayin’ is, I think he’s cool.”

Akira’s smile fell a little even as he tried to keep his expression from changing. He hadn’t put much thought into how the others might react if and when they found out that Akechi had been working against him. Ryuji’s loyalty to his friends was unrelenting, but he also had a quick temper.

“I mean, when we went jogging the other day, he knew a lot about some good techniques to help with my stamina ‘cause of my leg. Guess he knows more about running than I thought, heh.”

Akira blinked. “Jogging?”

“Yeah, I invited him on that day when you couldn’t hang because you had to go help Ann with something.”

After some hesitation, Akira spoke. “Just the two of you?” Akira had to remind himself on more than one occasion that Akechi would most likely not do anything to his teammates, but that didn’t mean that it didn’t unsettle him at least a little bit.

“Yeah man. What’s--” Ryuji started, then stopped. “Oh…” he added after some silence.

Akira tilted his head, confused, as his friend suddenly seemed a lot more uncomfortable.

“Stupid Ann,” Ryuji muttered. “Putting ideas into my head.”

“Ahh?”

Ryuji looked at Akira, eyes wide, as though he’d somehow forgotten he was there in the few seconds that had passed. “Oh, uh, it’s nothing. I’m, you know I’m not…uh…” Ryuji scratched the back of his neck. That was different. Ryuji didn’t really stammer like this – he’d always been the straightforward one and always spoke his mind, which only made Akira more confused at this.

“Listen man, you don’t have to worry about that. I mean, I’m not…y’know?”

“Crystal clear,” Akira said lightly with the same confused expression on his face, and Ryuji sort of laughed in response.

“Yeah, that was probably not so good,” he said with another laugh. “It’s just…okay, I’m forgot I’m supposed to tell you something and, uh, it’s not gonna be weird, k?” Akira nodded, giving his friend his full attention. Ryuji sighed, this time slightly annoyed. “Ann owes me big time.” Then he turned to Akira. “Listen, it’s totally cool if--”

Before he could say anything else, Akira’s phone started to ring, and Ryuji let out an audible sigh of relief. “You can get that,” Ryuji said a little too enthusiastically.

“Are you sure? I can let it ring. This sounds important,” Akira told him.

“No, no, answer it. It’s totally fine dude,” Ryuji said as though the phone was a lifeboat he never
Akira furrowed his brow, then pulled out his phone. It was Yusuke. He answered the phone, pressing it against his ear even as he still regarded Ryuji with a curious gaze. “Hello?” Akira answered.

“Ah. Akira. Do you have a moment?” Yusuke said on the other end. Akira made an affirming noise in response, prompting Yusuke to continue. “Do you remember our foray into Mementos? I would like you to see the completed form of my draft. However, I understand if you are quite busy—”

“Yusuke,” Akira said softly. “It’s fine. I’d love to.”

“Oh,” Yusuke said with just a hint of surprise, which only made Akira smile minutely on the other end. “How wonderful.”

“Where are you?” Akira said with a lingering smile as he balanced his phone between his shoulder and his ear so he could reach into his back pocket for his wallet. “I can meet you after I’m finished here.”

“I am at Akechi’s abode currently. He is out at the moment but he has said that visitors are allowed. Shall I send you the location?”

“No need,” Akira said.

“Ah. Of course. I should have suspected as such,” Yusuke said with a decidedly pleased tone that made Akira think that Yusuke was nodding to himself as he spoke. Before Akira could comment on it, he continued. “Very well. I shall see you shortly. Thank you.”

When Akira hung up, he turned to Ryuji. “Gotta go see Yusuke?” Ryuji asked, leaning back in his seat. “Sounds good. We were just about done here anyway.”

“What did you want to talk about?”

“Nah, it’s nothin’,” Ryuji insisted, waving it off with a smile that was a little too big. “Just Ann being dumb is all.” He stood up quickly, nearly tripping over his chair. “Anyway, guess we should go, yeah? Say hi to Yusuke for me.”

Akira narrowed his eyes at his friend, even as his eyes crinkled in amusement. “Yeah, okay.”

The two of them paid for their meal, and as Akira followed Ryuji towards the exit, he realized that he left his phone on the table. He let Ryuji know that he’d be right back, and made his way back over, where, sure enough, his phone was sitting there.

As he picked it up, he paused as an odd feeling overcame him as the hairs on the back of his neck stood on edge. He turned around, but the patrons at the other tables were chatting with each other, all looking engrossed in their own conversations.

“Hey, you okay?” Ryuji said, and Akira turned abruptly back around, now face-to-face with Ryuji.

“Were you just watching me a second ago?” Akira asked.

“Huh?”

Akira blinked. He rubbed his forehead. Some days it felt like he was losing it. The salmon had
tasted a bit off today anyway, and maybe if he kept telling himself that that was the cause then he would believe it, so— “…It’s nothing,” he said. Then he smiled, even as the feeling didn’t leave him. “Let’s get going.”

Nothing could’ve prepared Akira for the inside of Akechi’s apartment the second time. He remembered how organized it had been before, and, to be fair, it wasn’t necessarily disorganized. Yusuke had a canvas and easel that was set up in the corner of the living room by the window. Underneath it was a mat which had already collected some splatters of paint. There was some paint that he missed it seemed, and was splattered against the wooden floor. A few more canvases were stacked on top of the coffee table so that it was nearly impossible to put anything down onto it. It looked like Yusuke had just bought some paints and brushes too, since Akira could see a plastic bag with empty plastic containers sticking out of it sitting on one of the armchairs.

The couch, which Akira now realized was really a futon had been folded back into a bed and was pushed back. It seemed as though Yusuke had almost moved and turned the arm chair with the bag so that it was facing the canvas.

In short, it was perfectly and authentically Yusuke, and so opposite Akechi. It only served to make him wonder how the two of them got along with living together. It had been a couple of weeks since then, after all.

Yusuke greeted him calmly, but he could tell that the artist was excited to show him the work. From his pocket he can feel his phone buzzing, but Yusuke was looking at him with such anticipation that he refrained from glancing at his phone so that he could give the artist his full attention.

Yusuke led him over to the kitchen area, where the painting sat atop two stools and it stood upright against the kitchen island. Of course, Akira had seen this painting before. He knew the criticism that the piece would receive from Kawanabe and the struggle that he would experience as he tried to rekindle the feelings he once felt when he painted. Akira had been killed before he could see Yusuke’s finished product. But this time would be different.

“This is the completed form of my draft earlier. I would like your honest opinion, if you would.”

He’d found it odd the first time around. At first glance, the painting was beautiful. It showed Yusuke’s talent and his ability to capture the darkest parts of desire. Of course, thinking back on it, there had been something missing from it. What was it that Sojiro had said when Akechi had made the coffee? Something about making it his. Looking back on it, it had been missing something that made it a piece distinctly by Yusuke Kitagawa, instead of just Desire by Yusuke Kitagawa. “It’s… novel,” Akira decided.

“Just as I had hoped,” Yusuke said, pleased for only a second before he furrowed his brow slightly. “But… is that truly all you have to say about it? I would like something more concrete. A four-hundred-word review should serve that purpose nicely.”

“Do I have a deadline?”

“To be determined,” Yusuke replied without missing a beat and with a good-natured nod that caused Akira to smile. Only Yusuke could say these things without wondering how it would sound to other people. “Regardless, this is how I choose to interpret the idea of ‘desire.’ It is the foul charm held deep within the abyss of the heart…”
Akira took a step closer, peering at the painting in front of him. Desire. He’d been well-acquainted with that lately. Was it supposed to feel as hopeless as the painting made it seem? Was it supposed to make him feel like the murkiness of desire could only lead to the swirl of darkness before him? He didn’t want to think so, but as he stared into the abyss that was painted, his mouth formed a thin line as he started to fall into his thoughts.

“I have grown to understand the intricacies of the heart in a way I had once thought impossible…” Yusuke continued, and Akira was glad for the words so that he could be broken out of his preemptive pitfall into his mind. “To be honest, I had intended on submitting this piece to an upcoming public art exhibition. However, I believe I must consider leaving it here as gratitude towards Akechi for allowing me to stay with him. I have entrusted the Sayuri to you and Boss, therefore I believe this is only fair,” he said with a nod. Akira looked at him wordlessly for a moment.

“That’s kind of you,” Akira offered, even as his mind swirled for some reason to convince him to instead enter it into the exhibition.

“How?” Yusuke nodded thoughtfully. “I cannot thank him enough for his hospitality, and the sweets that I’d bought as thanks were inedible due to his unforeseen allergy. Thus, I spent the last of my money on the proper paints and brushes to create this piece.”

“That’s—” Akira paused. Wait. “He has an allergy?”

“It would seem so,” Yusuke said somewhat distractedly as he framed his portrait between the square created with his fingers and tilted his head to the side slightly.

How about that.

Akira hummed pensively. He shoved his hands into his pockets, suddenly remembering the slew of messages he’d gotten and pulled out his phone.

Ryuji Sakamoto 17:35
What I was tryna say is that we’re all totally cool if you date someone from the team!!!!

Ryuji Sakamoto 17:35
Phew. I said it.

Ann Takamaki 17:39
RYUJI. You were supposed to tell him this IN PERSON.

Akira suppressed a breathless chuckle, typing a response.

Akira Kurusu 17:43
Ryuji, are you asking me out?

Akira Kurusu 17:43
I’m hard to please, just so you know.

Ryuji Sakamoto 17:44
wtf. No man. I’m talkin’ about you and Akechi!!!

Ryuji Sakamoto 17:44
Ugh. Ann. Why didn’t you do this?!
Akira took a breath as he read the message over. He thought back to their conversation earlier. Had Ryuji really thought that his reaction to Akechi had been because of…*that*? He couldn’t help but frown.

“Is something the matter?”

Akira looked up and found Yusuke regarding him curiously, framing his face between his fingers for just a second longer before lowering his hands and giving Akira his full attention.

Akira rubbed the back of his neck, moving to lean against something before realizing that there wasn’t anything nearby to lean on. Instead, he shifted his weight to one leg and put one of his hands into his pocket again as he felt his phone buzz once more.

“How is it living here?” Akira asked, using his other hand to adjust his glasses.

“Oh,” Yusuke said. “He’s an excellent cook.”

Akira chuckled. “That’s not quite what I meant.” Yusuke furrowed his brow, seemingly filled with genuine confusion as to how Akira wanted him to answer. Truth be told, Akira wasn’t sure what he wanted Yusuke to answer.

*Do you feel safe?*
*Has he said anything suspicious?*
*Is he a morning person?*
*Does he sing when he cleans?*

…Akira blinked and shoved the last two questions into the far corners of his brain, turning to Yusuke. He opened his mouth, not really sure what was going to come out of it, but luckily, he was saved by the sound of a lock entering the apartment and the door opening.

Akechi walked in with phone pressed against his ear. “—I’ve spoken to him, though, if a more permanent--” Akechi looked up, then stopped abruptly as his eyes widened slightly. He leaned into his phone. “If something more permanent is desired, that can be arranged,” he said vaguely. “We can discuss this more later.”

With a nod, Akechi hung up his phone, training his eyes to Akira, who threw up a lazy wave. “Akira--” Akechi started, but then he didn’t finish his thought, as though he wasn’t sure what he was supposed to say next to begin with. It hadn’t been that long since they’d last seen each other, but the sight of him in his apartment was enough of a surprise.

“Hiya,” Akira finally settled on saying, giving him a small smile. He gestures towards the living room with a quick tilt of his head. “Room looks nice.”

It’s so subtle that Akechi just barely heard the teasing in his voice. Akechi blinked at him once before returning his smile with a charming one of his own. “Yes,” Akechi said. “It’s certainly different,” he said with a short, meant-for-TV laugh. “What brings you here?”

“Oh,” Yusuke said. “I invited him, as I was hoping to receive his opinion on my newest art piece. In fact, I had intended to give this painting to you as an expression of my gratitude.”

Akechi looked down at the painting, placing his hand on his chin as he shot an uncertain glance over at the artist. “This…is for me?”

Yusuke nodded. “It was created from Akira and I’s trip into Mementos. This is my interpretation of ‘desire.’”
“It’s quite the piece,” Akechi said, and Akira honestly had no idea if he truly liked it or not. Then he glanced over at Yusuke. “Mementos, hm?” He said, turning back to the piece and furrowing his brow slightly. “I thought you planned to submit it to the art exhibition,” he added, and Yusuke turned to him in wide-eyed surprise. Akechi looked over at him with a good-natured laugh. “You have a tendency to speak…quite loudly when you’re engrossed in your work.”

“Ah. So I’ve been told,” Yusuke said. “The pupils that stayed would tell me the same, but Sensei often encouraged such a habit as essential for creating a discourse between the artist and its piece,” Yusuke said, realizing his error only when he finished his sentence. He cast his eyes downward, folding his arms as if to hug himself in comfort. “Er, Madarame,” he corrected.

Both Akechi and Akira exchanged a short glance. “Yusuke…” Akira was the first one to break the silence, taking a step closer to his friend, who shook his head.

“My apologies,” he started. “I have no reason to think of a foul man in such a manner, but it has been difficult.”

“You don’t need to apologize for that,” Akira told him. “You’ve been with him all your life. I don’t think it’s supposed to be easy,” he pointed out, and Yusuke considered this for a moment.

“If it’s alright for me to ask,” Akechi piped up. “What was it that made you stay with him for so long?” Akira was certain that Akechi had heard this before, but his question seemed to have a different meaning under it this time.

“It is as I said. It isn’t easy to admit that someone you admire is capable of and responsible for horrible deeds. And despite everything, I owe him a great deal. I am not sure where I would have ended up had he not provided a shelter for me,” Yusuke admitted honestly.

“Do you hate him?” Akechi blurted, and Akira turned to him with slightly raised eyebrows. When he saw Akechi’s face, he noticed that the brunette also seemed surprised that the words had even escaped his mouth.

Yusuke hummed. “Hate? I don’t believe so. I am not sure I have the words to describe the feelings that stir inside when I think of Sen–Madarame. Perhaps the answer spoken is something I would prefer not to think out loud. But that is the reason I have my brush. Art is the word we give to our feelings made public. And art has never worried anyone.”

Akira glanced over to see Akechi’s reflective expression, and he imagined that it probably mirrored what his own face looked like. On some level, Akira was a bit envious of Yusuke. He was himself. He was authentic in anything he undertook, even if it involved his own lack of understanding. And the more he thought about the time the two had spent in the last timeline, the more he realized that Yusuke had a point. Maybe artists were nervous about showing off their work or letting others see their heart laid bare, but that was it, wasn’t it? Art, in its purest form, was entirely vulnerable.

“He allowed your mother to die, and is responsible for all of these things that have happened to you,” Akechi said with a bit of disbelief in his voice. “And you don’t hate him.”

“Akechi,” Akira started, mouth slightly open. Akechi didn’t turn to look at him. Akira felt like he was starting to get a sense of how Akechi really was. There was the ace detective who always kept his cool and could put on an award-winning smile in an instant, but maybe Akechi could be more brash than Akira originally thought.

“It’s alright,” Yusuke started. “It’s a fair point. I myself find it quite frustrating at times. It is true that he will always be unforgivable, but hard as I may try, I cannot bring myself to hate him.
Perhaps that is the weakness of my own heart.”

“It’s not weak,” Akechi said quietly with that distant look in his eyes.

“Nevertheless, that duality of the human heart is what I hope to capture...” Yusuke then drifted off as he looked at his painting, something akin to doubt creeping onto his face as he studied his painting a little harder than he had before with a short hum.

“What’s wrong?” Akira asked.

Yusuke blinked, returning his focus back to the company in front of him. “I was simply...thinking, is all.”

“I should apologize. I didn’t mean to stir up any unpleasant feelings. I let my curiosity get the better of me,” Akechi said with a short laugh. “I seem to have gotten us a bit off topic. I’m very grateful for this, but I think it would be better suited in an exhibition.”

“That is... I am curious of the discourse. Nobody has ever seen...the abyss of the heart in such a raw manner before...” Yusuke said, sounding slightly less certain as he had the first time as his eyes once again traveled to his artwork. “But then, how shall I repay you for your kindness?”

Akechi smiled. “That’s alright. Your company is gratitude enough.”

“How kind,” Yusuke said. Then, without missing a beat, “Will you make dinner now? I’m craving curry with extra rice.”

Akechi let out one of his genuine laughs again, one of the ones that Akira didn’t hear often. Yusuke seemed to be able to bring it out in him, though.

“Ahh...” Akechi asked. “Though I am grateful that you are enjoying my cooking. It’s nice to hear,” he said. “They always say that the key to any person’s heart lies in his stomach,” he added with a charming laugh.

Akira blinked. He also hadn’t realized that they’d become so friendly with each other. He rubbed the back of his neck, and before he could really register the ugly thing that stirred in his chest, he opened his mouth and said, “So—” Then that was it. The word hung off of his tongue without purpose or meaning. Both Yusuke and Akechi turned to him expectantly.

He reached up and twirled the front edges of his hair, mostly so that he didn’t have to look at them when he spoke. “How was your day?” He finally settled on saying to Akechi, who had already moved to the other end of the kitchen.

“Uneventful,” Akechi said with a smile. Akira hoped that Akechi would elaborate, but instead, he gestured to his phone, which was now on the table. “Have we made any progress towards selecting a new target?”

He didn’t have any way to tell Akechi that their next target had to be Junya Kaneshiro, so he shook his head. “Just Mementos requests.” He moved over so that he was in the kitchen as well. Akechi had bent down and was rummaging through his pots and pans. Akira walked over to him, leaning his side against the counter. “Can I help?”

Akechi continued rummaging until he found the proper pan. “That’s quite alright. Please, just make yourself comfortable and...” Akechi stopped as he stood and realized how much closer Akira had gotten. He nearly dropped the pot that he was holding, then quickly cleared his throat and put on a smile. “Oh. I...didn’t expect you to be there,” he said lightly as his eyes danced around the
different parts of Akira’s face, finally settling on meeting his eyes.

From that distance, he could see how tired Akechi was.

“Have you been getting enough sleep?” Akira asked.

Akechi blinked, then squinted his eyes just barely. “Have you?” He said with the same soft expression and a faint smile.

“Oh, how delightful,” Yusuke suddenly said. The two boys looked at him. Yusuke was looking down at his phone, then he met Akira’s eyes. “It appears Ryuji and Ann have provided their blessing for your relationship.”

Akira felt himself tense up as Akechi once again nearly dropped his pan.

“R-Relationship?” Akechi said with an all-too-forced laugh.

“I would like to extend mine as well,” Yusuke said with a pleasant smile.

Akira reached into his pocket and stared at his phone. Oh. He hadn’t even noticed that Ryuji had put Yusuke in that particular chat too.

Ann Takamaki 17:46
You’re his friend!

Ryuji Sakamoto 17:49
So are you!!!!

Ann Takamaki 17:51
You’re his BEST FRIEND.

Ann Takamaki 17:54
Akira, we just want you to know that we want you to be happy, and dating Akechi won’t make the team awkward at all. So don’t not date him on our account. :)

“What’s going on?” Akechi asked, confused as he peered down at the phone in Akira’s hand.

“We aren’t dating,” Akira said as an answer, mostly to Yusuke. He typed a similar as such answer into their four-person group chat.

Akira Kurusu 18:03
We’re not dating, and we don’t plan to.

Ann’s response was almost instantaneous.

Ann Takamaki 18:03
what.

Ryuji Sakamoto 18:03
HA! I told you they weren’t. You’re blind Ann.

Ann Takamaki 18:04
Well they should.

“Dating…?” Akechi said.
Akira slipped his phone into his back pocket. “Ryuji and Ann are under the impression that we want to date, but aren’t for the sake of the team,” he said. Maybe it was partially to see how he would react to it.

Understandably, he started to laugh, but it got caught in his throat so that he nearly choked on air instead. “Th-That’s ridiculous,” Akechi finally managed to say.

Akira turned to him with a small smile. “That’s what I said.” He glanced down, looking at the unread message from Iwai that he’d also gotten. “I should probably get going,” he said, clicking on the message and reading Iwai’s note to come by the shop for work.

Akechi’s face was barely able to hide the flash of disappointment, but he covered it with a kind smile. “I can walk back with you.”

He’d been kind of expecting Akechi to offer, so he started to nod when Yusuke piped up.

“But what of the curry?” Yusuke asked with a genuinely confused look.

Akira tried unsuccessfully to hide his laugh. He imagined that if Ann was there he’d hear something about what it meant to read the air. Yusuke furrowed his brow in confusion, probably in response to Akira’s sudden laughter.

Akechi smiled, then turned to Akira with a still amused expression. “Perhaps I’ll just walk you to the door.”

Akira nodded at that, and after saying goodbye to Yusuke, Akechi trailed behind him as he walked out the front door. Akechi half-shut the door when the two of them were standing in the hall together, and Akira turned to him.

“I’m glad you two are getting along,” Akira settled on saying, putting his hands into his pockets once more.

“Ah,” Akechi started, shutting the door completely now. “Yusuke is good company. I will admit I was initially taken aback at his boldness, but it’s rare to see someone refreshingly authentic with themselves,” he said with a short laugh. “And…it has been quite a while since living with another person. The last time was…” Akechi paused for moment, seemingly weighing his words. “—in foster care.”

Akira chewed on the inside of his mouth. “Was it bad?” He whispered.

Akechi’s smile said it all. “It wasn’t ideal, but nothing that I couldn’t handle,” said the ace detective. “Besides, I do quite well for myself now.”

“I’ve said this before, but you don’t have to act like that around me,” Akira told him earnestly.

Akechi blinked once in surprise. “I don’t—That is to say, I’m not—”

As much as Akira liked to fluster him, he waved it off with a gesture of his hand. “It’s okay. I’m just saying, I’m here to listen. In fact, I think all of us are,” Akira told him. Akechi didn’t appear to have a response ready for that, so Akira just gave him another smile. “I’ll see you, okay?”

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“...And now back to the developing story of the arson of popular food chain...”
That was the first thing that Akira heard when he got back from Iwai’s and tiredly turned on the TV in the attic as he got changed. He leaned back against the chair that he’d pulled up to watch and saw Morgana hop on the couch out of the corner of his eye.


Morgana gave him a pitying smile and Akira just barely managed to give him one in return. Of course, he still hadn’t expected the crimes to stop completely yet, but it didn’t make it any easier. He rubbed his forehead, closing his eyes for a moment and suppressing his urge to let out his frustration.

“I have to stop him.” He was supposed to be wearing him down with kindness, he knew this, but he wondered how many other people could be hurt before that happened.

“I know,” Morgana said.

“I know he’s involved. If anyone else dies…I’ll have done nothing to stop him,” Akira admitted.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Morgana practically screeched, and Akira turned to look at him. “You’re not gonna blame yourself, are you? I mean, this isn’t an easy thing. It takes time. You’re not allowed to blame yourself for something that he’s doing, okay?”

Akira had never really felt that way until he was forced to start over. He’d never put much thought into it. But now, knowing what he knew, it was hard not to. He thought about Ann, who blamed herself for so long for suspecting Kamoshida’s crimes or not doing enough to help Shiho. He’d told her then, that it wasn’t her fault. And he believed that, truly.

Yet Akira was starting to think that maybe he wasn’t so adept at following the advice he was giving. He shouldn’t blame himself, and he knew that, but there was the distinct feeling that there had to be something that he could do, even as another part of him tried to reassure him that there wasn’t.

“Are you going to be okay?” Morgana asked, and somehow it felt heavier, more weighted than it should have.

“I’m fine,” Akira said with a forced smile.

Much to his surprise, Morgana placed his paw against Akira’s wrist with a sigh. “So, how many more times should I let that slide before I tell you to stop pretending that you’re fine?”

It turns out that not-cats are surprisingly perceptive.


Morgana leaned back with a disapproving look. “You have all of us around you, yet you’re still choosing to go through this alone somehow.”

Akira’s jaw tightened with another forced smile. “…Force of habit, I suppose.”

“From when you were young?”

Akira closed his eyes. Talking about it wouldn’t help anyone. “I’m a little tired. How about we go to sleep for the day?”
“Isn’t that my line?”

“I learn fast, don’t I?” Akira said with another cheeky albeit small smile.

Morgana gave him that same worried expression, but thankfully he didn’t push it. “So, what’s the plan for tomorrow? We have some Mementos requests we should do. And we should keep looking for a new target. Unless you’re adamant on this Kaneshiro guy.”

Akira nodded. “Makoto’s valuable to the team, and she’s a good friend. I have to try.”

He didn’t know what he was going to say to Makoto or how he would even attempt to get her into the group, but not only was it important to have Makoto join, Kaneshiro himself needed to be taken down.

***

The next day, Akira had the day off from school, so he wasn’t entirely sure where he’d find Makoto. He decided to take a chance, swinging by the school anyway to see if maybe she was lingering around there for some reason.

His luck paid off, because when he arrived at Shujin, he found Makoto sitting at a bench reading a book.

“Hey, whaddaya know, she is here,” Morgana commented from his bag.

Akira nodded, readjusting the bag so that both he and Morgana were more comfortable, then walked over to where the brunette was sitting. When she noticed someone approaching, she looked up from her book, and her eyes widened slightly in surprise before she regained her composure and tilted her head curiously at him. “Kurusu-kun. Hello.”

Akira smiled and waved. He could tell she was still irritated with the events that transpired last week, and he couldn’t blame her. “Are you busy?”

“No,” she said, closing her book. *Almost Transparent Blue.* “I was simply catching up on some reading. Was there something you wanted?”

Akira took the opportunity to take a seat next to her on the bench, much to her surprise. He placed his bag down on the ground.

“You brought your cat?” Makoto say, eyeing his bag warily.

“He gets lonely,” Akira said with a shrug. “I was hoping to speak with you.”

“What about?”

Akira glanced down at Morgana, who seemed to give up a look that implied to go for it, so he placed his hands in front of him and leaned forward a bit. “How is your investigation going?” he started.

Makoto immediately scoffed. “If you’ve come here to mock me, save it,” she said.

“That’s not why I’m here,” Akira told her sincerely.

Makoto continued to regard him with a suspicious gaze. “Well, I suppose it doesn’t matter much. The principal has eased the pressure off of my investigation. There is no need to look into the incident anymore. Isn’t that curious?” Makoto said.
“He called it off?” Morgana piped up from his bag.

Akira thought back to the day that Akechi was at the school. He’d said that he had some investigative business of his own to keep up the ruse of looking into the Phantom Thieves, but Akira wondered what else he could’ve done while he was there.

He returned his gaze to Makoto. “Whose heart would you want the Phantom Thieves to change?”

“Why do you ask?” She said with that slightly raised voice that she got when she was onto something, even if she couldn’t prove it. “You aren’t the Phantom Thieves,” she said with a bit of disdain that showed that she didn’t believe the words she’d said at all. She placed her book back into her bag and stood up. “In any case, I should be on my way.”

“Wait,” Akira started. And surprisingly, she did. “I was hoping you’d help me.”

“With what?” Makoto said, turning to face him with her arms folded across her chest.

“There are students here that have been targeted by a phishing scam,” he said. “They’re being threatened by some sort of mafia group that primarily targets young people.”

“You know about that?” Makoto said, her arms unfolding as she looked at him with curious eyes. She looked down at the ground for a moment before meeting his eyes again with an unreadable expression. “The victims are threatened not to testify, so even the police can’t get a grasp of the situation. What do you intend to do about it?”

“I want to take them down.”

“And how could you possibly do that?”

“If we can stop the boss, it will probably trickle down and disorganize the entire organization. We can help those students.”

“We…” Makoto said, a hint of something hopeful in her eyes. “Are you asking me to help you?”

Akira gave her a small smile. “Why do you think I’m here?”

Makoto seemed a bit taken aback at Akira’s sudden smile. “You were quite adamant about your denial of being the Phantom Thieves just last week, and now suddenly you’re approaching me with this information. Yet you still expect me to believe that it isn’t the group of you?”

“You can believe what you want,” Akira told her.

“Interesting,” Makoto said. She placed a hand loosely at her side. “Then again, it was Akechi-kun that seemed obstinate on the matter. And yet, here you are, subtly contradicting what he’s said.” Akira must’ve been silent for too long, because Makoto hummed musingly. “Could it be that there’s some discord amongst your group?” She didn’t give him a chance to respond. “I really should be going, though.”

“Wait-” Akira said again.

“I will consider your offer,” Makoto said. Her gaze softened just a bit. “You seem a bit more trustworthy than he does, at the very least. However, if you’re just doing this to mess with me--”

“I’m not,” Akira said resolutely.

Makoto faltered again, probably a little stunned at the resolution in his voice, and she cleared her
throat. “Y-Yes, well, I have no way I knowing that, do I?”

Akira nodded. She had a point. His word didn’t mean much in the long run, considering she didn’t even know him. “Think it over,” he told her. “You know where to find me.”

Makoto nodded, giving him a bit of a half-hearted goodbye before she made her way out of the area. Akira rubbed his forehead, feeling it sting a bit in the center as he turned to Morgana.

“She’s bright,” Morgana said. “You think she’ll help?”

“I don’t know. She has no reason to,” Akira admitted. “I don’t think it helped that she thinks there’s discord in our group. We have to be seen as Kaneshiro’s customers, so regardless of whether or not she is with us, we have to see him, anyway.”

“Why not just tell her outright that we’re the Phantom Thieves?”

“She already suspects us. I think saying it outright would have made her think we were taunting her even more. She wants to help those students. That was the first step.”

“That’s true. So all we can really do is hope that she agrees,” Morgana said. “The ball is in her court.”

Akira nodded, suddenly feeling more stressed than he had before. “Morgana,” he started. “I’ve lived through the future, yet why does it feel like everyone is still one step ahead of me?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you’re just bad at time travel,” Morgana said.

Akira chuckled. “It wouldn’t surprise me, at this point,” Akira said. He bent down to pick up the bag with Morgana, then paused halfway. He looked up and turned around at a rapid pace, furrowing his brow. He saw a flash of burgundy turn the corner of the building, but other than that, there were just one or two students chatting and walking in the distance.

“What’s wrong?” Morgana asked.

Akira turned back to Morgana. “It’s…nothing. I thought maybe Makoto was still looking,” he said, picking up the bag as the hairs on the back of his neck still stood on edge.

“Yeah, we might not want to have her think you’re a crazy person who talks to animals,” Morgana pointed out.

He managed to smile, unable to shake the feeling completely. “Mmhmm,” he said, turning to glance behind him one more time. “Let’s get going.”

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Akira was starting to think that Akechi’s redemption would come in the form of a small eight-year old boy with a big heart and childlike innocence that he imagined Akechi had never had the chance to experience himself.

“Ach, brain freeze!” Kioshi said as his face scrunched up and he held his cup of ice cream away from him like it was poison. He stopped where he was, near the entrance of the apartment building as he frowned in pain. “Owww….”

“Here, do this,” Akira said with a smile, sticking his thumb to the roof of his mouth.

Kioshi, in any attempt to stop the pain, hurriedly followed what Akira did, and after a few seconds,
sighed in relief. “It worked!” He said gleefully. He continued his walk and started for the stairs of the building.

“Just eat it a little more slowly next time,” Akechi chided lightly. Akechi had once again been asked to watch Kioshi, although this time, running into the two of them had been purely coincidence. He’d seen them when he was studying in the diner, and Akechi had seemed all too grateful when Akira nodded yes when Kioshi pleaded that he join them.

Kioshi nodded, then looked at his ice cream like it was a final boss rather than a dessert. Akechi turned to Akira. “I… didn’t know about that. That’s quite the trick to get rid of it,” he said with a light smile. “It seems you’re a wealth of knowledge about things that I’m unaware of, and vice versa.”

“It’s almost like we complete each other.”

Akechi nearly tripped on the stairs.

“A-Are you okay?” Kioshi said. “You almost fell!”

Akechi cleared his throat as Akira stared at him smiling, half-amused with one hand in his pocket and the other with one finger twirled around his hair. Akechi him a decidedly unamused look, which only served to further Akira’s smile. Akechi turned to Kioshi. “I’m fine. Thank you.”

“Are you sure?” Akira asked with a gleam in his eye.

“Aren’t we funny today,” Akechi said, though he was unable to stop his gaze from softening and a smile to form on his face.

The three of them made their way up the stairs to Akechi’s apartment, where they’d wait until Kioshi’s mother arrived. They were nearly at the top of the stairs when Kioshi spoke up. “I think I’m gonna try to get Mom to let me see Dad,” he said as something of an afterthought as he ate another spoonful of his ice cream.

“Oh?” Akechi said.

Kioshi nodded. “I think if she sees he’s changed, she’ll agree! I just have to help her see!” Then he stopped on the stairs, turning to the two of them and chewing the outside of his bottom lip. “Will you help me? I don’t know what to say.”

Akechi looked over at Akira, who shrugged and nodded, and Akechi turned back to Kioshi. “I believe the words will have more effect if they come from you, but I’m happy to assist as best I can.”

“Yay! Thank you!” Kioshi said, smiling brightly, turning back and hopping up the stairs as he hummed happily.

They made up the rest of the stairs, then Kioshi practically made a beeline for Akechi’s apartment. Akechi pulled out his key, still laden with the keychains, and he slid the key into the lock. He’d just opened the door when Kioshi caught wind of someone walking towards Kioshi’s own apartment.

“Dad?” Kioshi said, and the man turned to him. It was, in fact, Brian, but… something seemed off. Kioshi took a tentative step towards him, then gave up on that and rushed over and stopped in front of him with a shy smile as Akira and Akechi followed after him. “Dad!” He said, though it missed some of the gumption he likely intended it to have.
“Kioshi… Oh, Kioshi, there you are,” Brian said.

Or…maybe it would’ve been more appropriate to say he slurred. Akira squinted his eyes. It was hard to tell in the hallway, but his eyes looked a little glassy as well.

Kioshi seemed to noticed as well, because he stiffened slightly and moved one foot back behind him. “D-Dad?”

“Kioshi… I really have missed you. C’mere, give dad a hug,” he said, opening his arms wide and nearly stumbling forward as he tried to take a step towards them. “I could see you so much more if it weren’t for her always stopping me.”

“Dad… s-stop it,” Kioshi said, failing to hide the quiver in his voice.

“You all never appreciated what I did forr you,” he said, reaching out for Kioshi, who hurriedly scurried back behind Akechi and clutching onto his side.

Akira looked over to exchange a glance with Akechi, but he found that the brunette had his eyes fixated on Brian, his jaw hardened and something distant in his eyes.

“Are you drunk?” Akira finally said to Brian.

“I’m f-f-fine,” Brian said. He peered at Kioshi. “C’mon, how’se about you n’ me go have some father-son time like ol’ times…” he said with a hiccup.

“M-Mom doesn’t like it when you do this,” Kioshi said from behind Akechi.

“What’s going on?”

Kioshi turned as his mother stood at the top of the stairs, eyeing the situation as her lid looking like it was dangerously close to blowing. Instead of running towards her, though, Kioshi only furthered cowered behind Akechi’s form, as though he knew the situation would only get worse.

Brian rolled his eyes. “I’m tryiiiiinnngg to she my sson,” he said.

Michiko scoffed. “You’re drunk, aren’t you?” She shook her head. “This is unbelievable. I knew it. You’re the same as always. You’re confusing my child. Having him think you’re actually a decent person.”

“Your child?”

“Yes. You relinquished any claim to fatherhood when you gambled away our money and turned into this sad state of a human.”

“Wow. This is rich,” Brian said. “You don’t even watch him. You get these kids to do it. Where’re you even going at all hours of the day? Doesn’t seem like work,” he said.

“S-Stop it…” Kioshi said meekly, fighting through tears that Akira could see stinging his eyes. But the two just ignored him.


“I-I don’t…” Kioshi started.

Akechi opened his mouth. “You… can’t…” he started evenly, though his voice coming out much
harder than Akira anticipated. But the words were slow and calculated, as though he had to carefully train each word to come out in the even tone that he’d said them in.

Michiko trained her eyes on Akechi, interrupting him. “Was anyone speaking to you? What the hell are you two still doing here anyway? Can’t you see this involves family?”

At Michiko’s words, Akechi just barely managed to hide his flinch, as no other words came out. Akira could see the brunette’s hands balled into fists. It was then that Akira noticed that Akechi looked locked in an expression that looked both angry and tormented at the same time.

To be perfectly honest, Akira wasn’t even sure that Akechi was fully present in the room, even when he spoke up. He looked like he was having just as much trouble trying to hold it together as Kioshi. Except, unlike Kioshi, Akechi’s expression was decidedly more disconcerting.

“Like you’re one to talk about family,” Brian spat.

“Excuse me?” Michiko scoffed again.

“You wanna know what drove me to this point? How about the affair that-”

“I’ve heard enough,” Michiko cut him off sharply, then turned her steely gaze to Kioshi. “Get over here. I won’t tell you again.”

“I-I don’t like it when you’re mad, Mom…” Kioshi started. Akira could see a few tears falling down his face.

“Ungrateful child. You have no idea how hard I work to help you, and you still act like this,” Michiko muttered. Kioshi started breathing a little harder, like he was trying to just get through the entire thing without bawling his eyes out completely.

Akira looked at Akechi, who looked like he was having trouble regulating his breathing as well.

Michiko paid him no mind, side-stepping Akechi and reaching to roughly grab Kioshi by the arm when Akira finally stepped between them, levelling his gaze to the woman in front of him. “You’re scaring him,” Akira said evenly.

“And what do you know about my--”

“H-He’s right,” Kioshi finally said, drawing large breaths between words as he tried to stop the tears from falling. “I-I don’t like it when you’re like this!” he declared, then turned on his heel and ran into Akechi’s opened apartment, shutting the door behind him with a loud slam.

“This is all your fault,” Michiko said to Brian.

“My fault? At least I never laid a hand on him,” Brian scoffed.

“It’s called discipline. Maybe you should learn some yourself instead of disappearing from our lives for years,” Michiko said. She prepared to move towards Akechi’s apartment, but Akira stopped her again. “You can’t be serious.” Akira raised a curious eyebrow wordlessly as if to show that yes, yes he was. Michiko glared daggers into him in response. “Fine. Let him cool off.” She turned and blatantly brushed her shoulder against Brian as she walked back towards her apartment muttering to herself.

As for Brian, it looked like the argument had sobered him up somewhat, because he scratched his head with a frown. “Will you…tell him I’m sorry?” Brian finally said.
Akira shook his head minutely. “Tell him yourself. When you’re not like this.”

Brian groaned, frustrated with himself, but Akira found it hard to really sympathize with him at this point. “You’re right. I know you are. I really messed up,” he said. He pressed his fingers to his temple as he sighed deeply and slowly dragged his feet to the stairs.

When he was out of eyesight, Akira turned to Akechi. The brunette looked a little paler than usual. Akira’s gaze softened, and he lightly touched Akechi’s wrist. “Hey,” he started, but he stopped when Akechi jumped at the touch and looked at Akira like he’d just beamed down in front of him without warning. “Let’s go inside,” he continued calmly.

Akechi finally moved, nodding and clearing his throat before looking down at the ground, blinking rapidly before bringing his eyes to Akira with a forced smile. “Y-Yes. Let’s do that.”

Akechi didn’t say anything as they walked inside, and when he shut the door behind him, he excused himself to the kitchen for a glass of water, keeping his back to Akira as much as possible as his whole body looked stiff.

Akira wasn’t quite sure what to do (it wasn’t just unknown territory, it was unknown territory and an entirely different side of Akechi that he’d never seen or would’ve expected). Kioshi wasn’t in the living room, so Akira cautiously went to the hallway. It was when he got closer to Akechi’s room that he could hear the quiet sounds of a crying child tucked away behind the door. Akira’s mouth formed a thin line. He contemplated knocking, but ultimately decided against it, turning and making his way back to the kitchen.

“He’s in your room. I think we should give him a minute,” Akira said. Akechi still had his back to him, and his hands were both gripping the counter. Akira wasn’t sure how to navigate this new facet of Akechi, so he lingered awkwardly on the other end.

“How is he?”

“He’s crying.”

Akechi’s grip on the counter tightened. “Then… shouldn’t I-” Akechi started, then stopped, frustrated with himself.

“I think he’d rather be alone,” Akira started, even though he didn’t really know that for sure. He’d mostly been speaking from experience. “He’ll come out when he’s ready.”

“…Yes. Perhaps that would be best,” he said after some pause. He turned his head to the side without fully facing Akira, then closed his eyes for a second before giving him a faltering smile. “I want to apologize for my conduct earlier. I have worked much worse cases than that. Gruesome, tragic cases that have put me in situations that are quite devastating to investigate.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Akira started. “It’s okay.”

Akechi turned around then, full of something akin to disbelief. “Surely you aren’t serious.”

Akira furrowed his brow. “Why lie?” Akechi actually looked like he expected to be reprimanded. That seemed so bizarre. It didn’t even have anything to do with him, really. “It was an upsetting situation.”

Akechi’s jaw tightened again. “Yes. That is their own child, yet they continue to act selfishly, despite how much it hurts him.”
“Yes,” Akira nodded.

“Yet Kioshi’s kindness and forgiveness appears to be relentless.”

“I know.”

“But they continue to trample over it as though the well-being and happiness of their child is not more important than their own individual problems.”

“Akechi.”

“I was told once that parents are selfless towards their children, but that appears more untrue than not. Above all else, children want to be with their parents, and yet--”

“Goro,” Akira finally said with some conviction.

Akechi stopped talking then, and, for all Akira’s charm, he didn’t know what else to do, so he just sort of stood there looking at him for a few seconds. He didn’t look like Ace Detective Akechi or the Detective Prince, he looked like a teenager who was trying unsuccessfully to hide the cracks in his mirror.

Akira didn’t know if anything he could say would even help, so instead of speaking, Akira took a breath against his own pounding chest, then reached over and put his hand over Akechi’s hand on the edge of the counter. Akechi didn’t jump at the touch, like Akira had been expecting from the last time. Instead, he exhaled, and Akira felt just a sliver of tension leave Akechi’s body.

Akechi glanced down at Akira’s hand, now adopting this look as though it could kill him at any moment. Akira didn’t speak, and neither did Akechi. After a few seconds of Akechi staring down at his hand, the brunette’s breathing changed, and, somewhat tentatively, he threaded his index and middle fingers over Akira’s ring and pinky fingers so that Akechi’s fingers lay atop those two while Akira’s other three fingers remained on top of Akechi’s hand. Akechi closed his eyes for a moment.

Akira once again didn’t know how to describe it. He wasn’t one with words and he wasn’t wax poetic by any means, but sometimes things deserved words, even if they only lived inside of his head, hidden away from the ears that probably needed to hear them.

It felt like two people touching after weeks of being numb, which didn’t make sense because Akira had never been numb in the first place. He’d touched hands and books and not-cats and things outside of reality that only excited in someone’s cognitive world, but it felt like maybe he’d never really touched anything until this moment.

And he didn’t know how to process that. So he didn’t think about it.

“As I have mentioned before,” Akechi started, opening his eyes and focusing them on Akira. “I…was passed through many foster homes as a child after my mother committed suicide.” He stopped for a moment. “Some were…worse than others.”

Akira didn’t speak, but his thumb somehow had a mind of its own and started to rub circles around the top of Akechi’s hand. If he noticed, he didn't comment on it.

“Seeing that altercation seemed to bring back some of the memories in a manner I did not anticipate,” Akechi admitted.

“It’s okay,” Akira finally said lamely.
Akechi, as expected, shook his head. “No, it isn’t,” he said with a charming smile that entirely failed to meet his eyes. The frustration was clear in his voice. “I wanted to protect him, and yet, I froze. When he needed it, I was unable to provide help, and yet I am so easily able to--” he stopped abruptly, and Akira tilted his head out of curiosity.

“Able to?” He repeated, even though he knew that it would likely end there.


“I already told you,” Akira said with a lazy smile. “We’re friends.” Then he raised an eyebrow, nudging him with his free hand and leaning forward with a brighter smile this time. “Right?”

Akechi looked at him for a moment, then after his initially flustered expression went away, he managed to nod. “…Yes.”

“Good,” Akira said with a softened gaze. “Then stop apologizing.”

Akechi nodded, then stopped when he realized how close they were yet again. Akira was starting to think they had a knack for getting themselves into these situations. Akira’s thumb stopped circling around his hand as his breathing stilled considerably.

Akechi opened his mouth again. “Akira,” Akechi started, with something that sounded like a question hanging off of it.

“Yes.” Whether he meant it as a question or an answer, he wasn’t sure.

Akechi did that thing again where his eyes darted around Akira’s face as though searching for something, but before he could do or say anything, the sound of the door opening causes them both to look. Akira removed his hand from Akechi’s, rubbing the back of his neck with it as Yusuke walked through the door.

Yusuke might be oblivious to a lot, but it was hard for him to miss the tension in the air, even as Akechi plastered on his detective smile and Akira offered a soft smile to the artist as well. Akira took the liberty of explaining what had just happened, pointing out that Kioshi was in Akechi’s room to be alone.

“I see,” Yusuke said, lowering his eyes as his arms wrapped around himself loosely. “I can certainly understand his frustration. I don’t know much about him, but he seems like quite a brave child. Would this be a potential target for us in Mementos?”

Akira shoved his hands into his pockets. “We can discuss it with the others, but I don’t think we should unless Kioshi says he wants it.”

Yusuke nodded. “A fair point. It would be unwise to proceed without his consent.”

The sound of the door opening caused them all to look up, and Kioshi finally peeked his head out from around the corner. When he saw all of the people in the kitchen, he rubbed his eyes before walking over and coming to a stop in front of them, mostly to Akechi, though. He turned to Akira. “Th-Thank you for helping me,” he said.

Akira nodded. “I-I’m okay now.” Then he turned to Akechi. “I-I’m sorry,” he said, looking down at his shoes and kicking the air. “They were really mean to you, a-and then I ran into your room
without asking.” He looked up at Akechi, then bowed quickly. “P-Please don’t hate me,” he said, peeking up from his bowed position.

Akechi looked at him in disbelief, a humorless laugh mirroring that feeling escaping from his lips. “You…don’t need to apologize for that,” Akechi finally said. “I certainly don’t hate you for it. Besides, I’m a little more concerned about you.”

Kioshi scratched his head, pressing his fingers together. “I thought Dad said he was better,” Kioshi started. “He used to get really strange and Mom said he spent all of our money. Then Mom would get mad at him, and sometimes she’d get mad at me after they fought. She used to get all scary like that.”

Akechi stiffened slightly, but he kept his detective’s smile in place. “She got mad at you how?”

Kioshi rubbed his arm thoughtlessly. “I-It’s nothing bad. She just gets mad sometimes when Dad gets like that. She hasn’t gotten mad like that in a while since Dad’s been gone. Plus, she works really hard, so she’s tired a lot.”

“Kioshi,” Akechi started again, his voice trying and failing to maintain the air of charm. “What does she do?”

Kioshi stayed silent for a long time as Akechi’s face hardened. “She just yelled a lot.”

“That’s all?”

Kioshi was growing increasingly uncomfortable. “I-”

“What else does she do?” Akechi persisted. There it was again. He was being brash, again.

Akira stepped forward. “You don’t have to tell us if you aren’t comfortable,” he said, meeting Akechi’s gaze for a moment before turning back to Kioshi. He knelt down so that he was eye level with him. “Do want you them to change?”

“Change?” Kioshi blinked. “Like changing their hearts?” Akira nodded.

“The Phantom Thieves can probably help,” he said. He realized he wasn’t being very subtle with it, but then again, he rarely was when it came to this.

“I-I don’t…” Kioshi looked at the ground again. “I just have to show Mom and Dad that they can change, right?” he said, regaining some of the brightness in his eyes.

Akira’s face softened. Kioshi didn’t want the Phantom Thieves to help. He wanted to believe that he could do it on his own. It was so idealistic that Akira wished he could still have that same sense of idealism to think that this could be solved so easily. Akechi knelt down so that he was also at eye level. “If this persists,” he said. “We can’t leave it alone.”

“I-I know…” Kioshi looked at Akechi, tilting his head, then, without warning, he wrapped his little arms around Akechi’s shoulders and engulfed him in a hug as Akechi froze at the sudden contact. “You seemed really sad that I was sad. I’m okay. You don’t need to be sad or angry.”

Akechi let out some sort of noise, then after a few moments of frozen shock, slowly wrapped his arms around the boy.

“You know, it’s okay to be sad, Kioshi-kun,” Akira told him.
Kioshi nodded. “I know. I’m not. Or…” he leaned back from the hug. “Maybe I’m a little sad, but I used to be really sad ’cause I didn’t have anywhere to go.” Then he shyly grinned at Akechi. “I-I do now.”

Akechi frowned in response.

“What a remarkably brave child,” Yusuke commented.

Kioshi turned to Yusuke thoughtfully. “Oh! I hope you’re feeling better about your art stuff,” he said. Then his eyes widened as he finally caught sight of the canvas in the living room and he bounded over in childlike excitement. “Whoa, it’s so big!” He turned to Yusuke, who had followed him over. “They only give us paper at school.”

“Ah. Would you like to paint something? When I am overcome with emotion, I find that channeling those emotions to my artwork produces cathartic results,” Yusuke said with a nod.

Kioshi furrowed his brow. “I dunno what you said, but yeah I wanna paint! Can I-can I pleaaaase?” He said, bouncing up and down and all traces of sadness lost from his eyes.

Yusuke got out the paints and prepared the palette, handing it to Kioshi when he was done. Then, in the time it took Yusuke to turn around and get the brushes, he turned back around and paused when he saw that Kioshi had taken the liberty of sticking his finger into the paints and moving it along the blank canvas.

When Kioshi noticed the look on Yusuke’s face, he stopped. “D-Did I do something wrong?”

“You’re using your fingers?” Yusuke started. Then, after a beat, he nodded to himself with a small smile. “Ah. Yes. Why hadn’t I thought of that before? There is a simplistic creativity that can only be created through a childlike innocence. The purity of the human heart can certainly be captured in such a way.”

“…You talk funny,” Kioshi said cheekily.

“I-I beg your pardon?”

Kioshi giggled. “C’mon, let’s paint something.”

Akira turned to Akechi, who had an unreadable expression on his face. “Lively in here,” he commented with a faint smile.

Akechi turned to him then, blinking unsurely before a smile mirroring his came on his face. “It would appear so. It’s quite different from what I’m used to,” he added with a short laugh.

Akira was about to respond when his phone started to buzz in his pocket. He dug it out, seeing that it was Ryuji calling him, and pressed it to his ear after hitting the answer button.

“Hey man!” Ryuji said on the other end. “Whaddaya up to?”

“I’m at Akechi’s.”

“Oh. Oh,” he said with a semi-awkward laugh. “I didn’t mean to interrupt haha…but hey, you go man! I’m happy for you!”

Akira let out a laugh. “Yusuke’s here too.”

“What? Why didn’t you say that?!” Ryuji said loudly, causing Akira to smile. Ryuji spoke again,
this time his voice sounding far away. “He says he’s at Akechi’s. Yusuke’s there too.” Then, back to Akira: “Ann and I are gonna stop by, kay? Send me the address!”

Before Akira could say anything, Ryuji hung up, and Akira turned to Akechi, who looked at him curiously. “Ann and Ryuji wanted to stop by.”

“Oh. Alright. The more the merrier, I suppose,” Akechi said with a smile, and Akira wondered if that was maybe the most people Akechi had ever had over at his apartment at one time.

They came knocking on the door somewhere around 15 minutes after the call, and they’d somehow found Morgana too because he strutted into the apartment after them. Morgana caught Akira’s surprised eye and hummed.

“You were taking forever. I had to make sure you weren’t dead somewhere,’ Morgana pointed out.

Akira smiled. “Thanks.”

“A cat?” Kioshi said, his finger frozen above the palette. His eyes danced with excitement as Ann giggled from the spot she’d taken on the couch.

“You want to say hi? He’s really friendly,” Ann said, leaning forward.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Ryuji mumbled as Ann nudged him in the ribs. “Ow!”

Kioshi nodded and went over to Morgana who meowed uncertainly. “Hehe. He’s cute,” Kioshi said, then started petting Morgana, much to his chagrin.

“Urgh, he’s getting paint on me,” Morgana complained.

“Well, we thought we’d stop by since it seemed like everyone else was here,” Ryuji said. He looked around the apartment. “Whoa, this place is nice. Can’t believe you get to live here all on your own.”

“It does have its perks,” Akechi said with a half-smile.

“Ha. Gotta be tough living with this guy, am I right?” Ryuji said with a chuckle as he gestured to Yusuke with his thumb.

“What do you mean by that?” Yusuke said, half-challenging and half-clueless.

Akechi just laughed. “It’s quite alright. I enjoy having the company. It’s usually just myself here.”

“Still, must be nice havin’ your own bachelor pad. I mean…” Ryuji leaned forward. “Have you ever brought a girl here?”

“Ryuji!” Ann said, elbowing him harder this time.

“Or a guy, fine!” Ryuji said, glaring at Ann. “There, you happy?”

“That’s not what I was—ugh,” Ann said, face-palming. “There’s a kid here.”

Kioshi scrunched up his nose. “You guys are talking about kissy stuff, aren’t you?”

Akechi just smiled. “Haha. Sorry to disappoint, but I haven’t. I’ve never really had time to think about that sort of thing.”
“You’re really dedicated to your work, huh?” Ann said cheerfully.

Akechi nodded. “Quite. I don’t really have time for romance.”


“Welllll,” Ann said in that sing-songy voice that told Akira that she definitely had an ulterior motive. “I mean, if the right person comes along, then you shouldn’t fight that, y’know. Sometimes the perfect person is right next to you,” she said cheekily as she pointedly looked next to Akechi where Akira was standing.

Akira fought back a smile as Akechi let out a somewhat flustered laugh. “Ah. Ha ha. That’s…good to know.”

“Smooth…” Akira teased, and Ann stuck her tongue out at him with a playful smile.

“Does anyone want something to eat?” Akechi offered, probably to take the subject off of romance and onto anything else. “It would be rude of me not to offer something to eat or drink.”

Shamelessly, the lot of them started rattling off things that they wanted, and Akechi soon retreated into the kitchen, with Akira following in tow and offering to help him. When he got there, Akira leaned against the side of the counter. Akechi looked over at the group for a second, something wistful in his eyes before he opened the fridge.

“What do you think?” Akira asked softly. “Something you could get used to?”

Akechi paused as he looked into the fridge. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I’ll be a little sad when it ends, though.”

Akira wondered how long they were going to tiptoe around the knowledge that both of them knew about. “Why does it have to end?”

Finally, Akechi turned to him. “Don’t all good things?”

Akechi’s phone started to ring, and he shut the fridge door as he dug into his pocket to pull it out. A complicated expression crossed over Akechi’s face, and Akira folded his arms across his chest as he tilted his head.

“Just don’t answer it,” Akira said, taking note of Akechi’s tired look.

Akechi looked at him, the weariness somewhat evident, and he smiled minutely, in an almost apologetic way, as he pressed the phone to his ear as he answered it. “Hello.” The voice on the other end spoke animatedly, even as Akira couldn’t make out the exact wording. “…Right now?” Akechi hesitated. “I-I can stop by tomorrow.” Ah. Akira could hear the tone clearly now. The person on the other end was angry at this, it seemed. Akechi’s eyes sort of flashed, at least, that’s the best way Akira could describe it. He got that distant look again that he’d gotten in front of Kioshi, except it seemed a little different.

Akechi turned his gaze to the living room. Kioshi was painting on the canvas, his tongue just barely peeking out between his lips as he looked up at Yusuke and followed the same strokes that Yusuke was doing with his own finger. Ryuji and Ann were watching them, and Ann rested her elbow on Ryuji’s shoulder, with the latter getting irritated and shrugging it off. They started bickering not long after that, and Akira could see Morgana stretch out his paws and say something to Ryuji with a taunting expression in his eyes.
It wasn’t perfect, but Akira wouldn’t have wanted it any other way. Akechi’s gaze traveled from the living room to meet Akira’s, and the latter boy gave him a half-smile, and the distant look in Akechi’s eyes slowly returned to normal.

“I…understand. It’s just…I’ve got a lot of homework to catch up on that is due soon. If I’m going to keep this up, I’d like to not fail my studies, at least,” Akechi said with a charming laugh that barely hid the irritation under it. Whether he was irritated with himself or the person on the other end was still up for debate. “…Yes. I promise I’ll be there first thing tomorrow.”

Akechi hung up the phone then, taking a breath, and Akira could see how tightly Akechi was gripping the phone. “That…was a first,” he muttered, mostly to himself and so quiet that Akira didn’t know if he should address it or not.

“Homework?” Akira said cheekily, choosing the latter.

Akechi looked at him, then managed to smile, despite the somewhat worried and bewildered expression on his face.

It wasn’t a big step, but the step itself wasn’t lost on Akira.

“What was that?”

“Ah. It was work.”

“You sure you don’t need to go?” Akira asked, testing the waters.

Akechi exhaled. “It’s alright,” he said, opening the fridge again in a way that suggested that he didn’t want to bring it up again.

And Akira didn’t. Akira helped Akechi put together something for everyone, and the group of them spent the rest of the afternoon into the evening chatting eagerly amongst themselves. If Kioshi thought it was odd that they would occasionally respond to something that Morgana said by directly turning to the cat and talking to him, he didn’t say anything. Like Akechi, it seemed like he was just pleased enough with being around the others.

Eventually, Ryuji was the first one who had to go, and Ann took that as a cue for to leave as well. Akira decided to leave with them, both at Morgana’s expression and the promise that he’d help out Sojiro at the café. Akechi walked them to the door with Akira trailing behind. Yusuke and Kioshi also followed suit, stopping at the door to say goodbye as well.

“Today was enjoyable,” Akechi said. “I’m glad we were able to do this.”

“You talk so stiff all the time,” Ryuji pointed out. “But yeah man, it was a lotta fun! We’ll see ya, man,” he said.

Akira nodded, then threw up a lazy wave before starting to follow Ryuji when Ann stopped him.

“Actually, why don’t we give you two a chance to say goodbye?” Ann said cheekily. Akira raised an eyebrow.

“Th-That’s not necessary,” Akechi sputtered out.

“Yes, did they not just say goodbye?” Yusuke said curiously.

“Ugh, read the air!” Ann said. “Okay, in, both of you!” She said, pushing Yusuke back inside as he
yelped and pushing Kioshi in in a much more gentle and light way. Then she shut the door so that both Akechi and Akira were still outside of the apartment. “C’mon Ryuji,” Ann said. “You too Morgana.”

“Lady Ann-” Morgana started.

Ann, in what was a well-calculated move on her part, batted her eyes at Morgana sweetly. “Pleaaase? C’mon, you can walk with me back home.”

Morgana, who clearly saw through it but didn’t give up the chance to walk back with her, turned to Akira. “I’ll be waiting for you outside Leblanc. Don’t get up to anything weird.”

“Or, you know, do.”

“Ann, you’re takin’ this way too seriously,” Ryuji said with a groan. “Ow! Alright, alright, I’m coming,” he said as Ann dragged him by the ear to get him to start moving. “We’ll see you guys later,” he said, rubbing his ear as he shot a death glare at his friend.

When they were down the stairs, Akechi softly chuckled. “You don’t have to stay.”

“I think they’re expecting us to kiss goodnight.”

“I gathered as such. That would create quite the nuisance.”

“Yeah…Want to anyway?” Akira teased.

“Wh-What?” Akechi stared at him, seconds away from becoming another flustered mess, when Akira playfully wriggled his eyebrows towards him faux-suggestively, and Akechi un-tensed and allowed himself to chuckle.

Akira smiled fondly, leaning his side against the doorframe. “Kidding. Mostly.”

Akechi smiled too, and subtle as it was it reflected a sort of fondness in his eyes as he chose to lean his back against the door itself. “Mostly, hm?” He glanced down at his hands, then brought his eyes back up to Akira. “I acted quite rashly today on multiple occasions.” Then he laughed, somewhat charming, somewhat bitter. “I don’t know what the others would think of me if they’d seen those sides,” he added.

“Have you met us?” Akira teased lightly. “We’re not perfect. But we accept each other, for all of our flaws,” he said, folding his arms across his chest. “And even if they didn’t, who cares what they think?”

Akechi sort of smiled at that, though it felt entirely humorless. “The approval of others doesn’t affect your decisions at all.”

Akira rubbed his eyes. “I’ve seen what it does to people.”

Akechi tilted his head slightly. “Your parents?” Akira just barely nodded, something close to a sigh escaping his lips before he swallowed it back down. “Even their approval doesn’t impact you. It’s admirable.”

Akira didn’t think it was admirable at all. Besides, as much as everyone seemed to think of Akira as the ‘cool guy’ who didn’t care— “Everybody wants their parents’ approval,” he said, not quite looking at Akechi. “On some level.”
“So you…?” Akechi stopped, placing his hand on his chin. “Is it odd to say that I’m glad to hear you say that? I suppose that makes you more human. It’s strange, even if one is filled with negative emotions about his or her parents, having them acknowledge you can feel more valuable than most anything. I wonder why that is.”

Akira hummed thoughtfully. “It’s like you said. In theory, parents are supposed to love their children unconditionally. It’s hard to accept when you realize that they don’t.”

“Do you believe your parents love you unconditionally?” Akechi asked after some pause.

Akira nodded without hesitation. “Yes. It’s not how I’d prefer it, but people express love in their own way,” he admitted.

“Haha. You didn’t even hesitate,” Akechi pointed out. “I’m a little jealous.”

Akira clicked his teeth. “What about you?”

Akechi laughed, and it sounded bitter to the point where Akira was a little unsettled by it. “No. My father sees me as nothing more than a commodity to be used.”

Akira pressed his fingers against his temple. “Well, the good news is that family doesn’t have to be blood.” Akechi furrowed his brow. “You’re not a commodity here.”

“You don’t have to say that,” Akechi said.

Akira leaned forward, placing a hand on Akechi’s shoulder. “You, Goro Akechi, are a person. And a friend. And a teammate.” Akira smiled lightly, lowering his head and peering up at Akechi from his glasses. “And an excellent cook, according to one artist.” And Akechi laughed at that, except it sounded so full of emotion that he had to mask it with a cough into his hand. Akira’s smile tilted as he pushed himself up off the doorframe.

Akechi hesitated a moment before his next statement. “When we saw Brian earlier, I wondered about whether or not people can truly change. One would normally think that it is possible if the person wants it enough. He said he’d turned over a new leaf, yet today directly contradicted that.”

Akira hummed. “I think that people forget it’s a choice,” he said.

“Hm?”

“Being a good person isn’t genetic. No one decides to be a good person and then becomes it, either. It’s a choice that people have to make every day to be good, whatever that means. And he has to decide every day when he wakes up to not be the person that he used to be. People forget that. He woke up today and chose to not be the person he wants to be, but tomorrow is a new day. It won’t forgive what happened today, but it’s something,” Akira told him. And he wasn’t sure if he really believed that with the same amount of conviction that he used to speak it, but he wanted to.

Akechi laughed then. “That’s…such a simple-minded thought,” he mused. “So idealistic that it’s almost to the point of naïveté.” Then he glanced at him with a knowing smile. “Is that how you really think?”

It unnerved him sometimes how much Akechi sort of got him.

“I don’t know,” Akira said. “But the fact that you’re asking about it means that maybe it’s not as difficult as we think, right?”
Akechi let out a breathy sigh. “Hm. I don’t know about that.” Then he shook his head, putting on a charismatic smile that was lacking a lot of the charm it usually had. “…How is your investigation into the potential other Metaverse user progressing?” he asked quietly.

Akira stiffened slightly as the reality of the situation hit him yet again. “Odd change of topic.”

Akechi laughed a little. “I am a detective. My curiosity is peaked, after all. We could likely talk about the ethics of being good for quite a while. I think the change of topic is refreshing.”

Right. If Akira didn’t know any better, he might’ve been inclined to believe him.

“I haven’t really been looking,” Akira told him. “Not lately.”

“Ah,” Akechi said thoughtfully. “Well, as I said, please do let me know if I can be of any help. I am a detective, after all. This would appear to be right up my alley.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Akira said hollowly as his head started to hurt.

Akechi responded by tilted his head curiously. “I wonder…” He said carefully, then brought his eyes up to meet Akira’s. “I suppose I should get back inside. Get home safe,” he told him. “Let me know when you’ve arrived.”

Akira nodded, giving him a weary smile, wondering if maybe perpetual exhaustion and headaches was his cross to bear for trying to change fate like this.

***

“So, what do you think?” Akira stared up at his ceiling as he sprawled out against his bed, tossing up a ball as he counted the splits in the wood. He’d told Morgana everything from the day, fighting to keep his eyes open so he could talk about it while it was still fresh in his mind.

“It’s something,” Morgana said. “It’s making me think that maybe the revenge angle isn’t so far off,” he said. Akira turned his head a bit and saw Morgana kneading at the edge of the bed so he could get comfortable.

Akira closed his eyes, thinking back to the expression on his face. “Maybe his foster father? One of the more horrible ones?” Akira mused, opening them and resuming throwing the ball.

“Could be. It seems more likely it’d be his actual father, though, right? I mean, he’s definitely still in his life in some way.”

“Yeah, unless--” Akira froze as soon as he threw the ball, and it landed past him on the floor as he sat up abruptly. His legs hung off the bed as he brought his hands up to his chin, folding them together as his elbows rested on his knees. “What if it is the father? He called himself a commodity to be used and says he needs far more than a change of heart. And the look on his face when he was on the phone today…”

Morgana tilted his head and looked at him a bit skeptically. “I was just shooting the breeze,” he admitted. “Why would he be working for his father if he wants to get revenge on him? Why work for someone you hate?”

“Sabotage?” Akira offered.

“Wouldn’t he realize after the first few times that Akechi was killing his own people?”
“No, you’re right,” Akira said. “Let’s think about this.” He felt like he was on the brink of a breakthrough. “He’s got a plan to get rid of me, but he hasn’t made his move yet.” Akira’s brain went through all the possible answers to his unspoken question before he finally met Morgana’s eyes.

“…Gaining his trust?” Morgana finally concluded with a gasp. Akira raised his eyebrows with a worried expression and half-smile, humorless, to match.

“He’s playing the long-game with me. It’s not unreasonable to think something similar, right?”

“I mean, here, he’s helping us change people’s hearts to gain our trust. But with him…that would mean…he’s willing to kill people and ruin people’s lives just to gain his trust, for sake of his own revenge plan…” Morgana said, and Akira could hear the distaste in his voice. “I mean…this Futaba, wasn’t her mother…?” Akira nodded grimly. “And the other one that we end up helping, this Haru’s father… It makes me feel kind of ill, to think that someone could do such awful things just to get back someone else.”

“I know,” Akira sighed. “But this is pure speculation. We don’t know this for sure. If it is his father, it’s someone influential enough to want certain people to be taken out.”

“This worries me,” Morgana said. “We don’t know what this guy is capable of.”

Akira chewed on the inside of his lip. What worried Akira was that maybe he did know what he was capable of. “What we’re doing seems to be having an effect on him.”

“Just be careful,” Morgana said. “We don’t know what he’ll do if he finds out that this was all an act.”

“It’s not-”

“I know it’s not anymore, but how would we convince him of that if he finds your journal or overhears us? He’s already got some serious issues from his dad, it sounds like. He’ll probably think we’re using him, too.”

Akira scratched his head with a frown. “We’ll be careful.”

Morgana nodded. “I guess that’s all we can do,” he relented. “Hey, Akira?” he asked slowly.

“Hm?”

“If this is all said and done, and Akechi stays on the side he’s on, even after all of this, what will you do? I’m only asking because I know you care about him. A lot,” Morgana said, sounding both worried and frustrated at the thought. “What if he’s stubborn all the way up until the end?”

Akira paused. “At the end of the day, he’s responsible for his own actions.”

“Will you be okay?” Morgana asked again, probably detecting the lack of resolution in his voice this time.

Akira nodded, then glanced over at Morgana. “Am I down to two times now?” Akira said lightly. Morgana didn’t look too amused by it, so Akira reached over and patted Morgana’s fur. “We’ll do our best.”

“Do you need help?” Morgana asked.
“There’s nothing you can do,” Akira said, then he backtracked, thinking of the abrupt way he’d left their group after Futaba joined due to feeling inadequate and unappreciated. “It’s just, it’s not something that you can help with. Trust me, having you here like this is more than enough.” He even gave Morgana an assuring smile, but Morgana just sort of frowned in response.

Before he could say anything else, his phone buzzed in his pocket, and he reached into it to pull it out. It was a new number, but he semi-recognized the digits. With a furrowed brow, he clicked on the unread message.

090-1790-1357 21:14
Hello. This is Makoto Niijima. I hope it’s alright that I got your cell phone number from the owner of Leblanc. Is this Akira Kurusu?

Akira sat up a little straighter, saving her number into his phone before replying.

Akira Kurusu 21:15
Yeah. It’s fine. What’s up?

Makoto Niijima 21:16
Ah. Thank you. I thought about what you said. Would you be free to meet with me tomorrow after school?

Morgana peered over at his phone. “What’s going on?”

Akira tiled his phone towards Morgana so he could see. “Makoto.”

“She’s going to help?”

Akira shrugged. “Maybe. Seems like it, but we’ll know for sure tomorrow.”

Morgana nodded. “You have another message too.”

Akira scrolled back, clicking on the message from Akechi.

Goro Akechi 21:15
Thank you for today, Akira.

Akira Kurusu 21:19
I didn’t do anything.

Goro Akechi 21:22
Ha. I suppose you would think that.

Goro Akechi 21:22
Goodnight.

Akira put his phone down after responding with a yes to Makoto, then moved back so that he was back on the bed.

“Akechi’s father, huh?” Morgana mused as Akira heard him get comfortable in his own spot on the bed. “I wonder what kind of man he is.”

What kind, indeed.

***
He expected to meet Makoto outside the student council room as per usual, but instead, he found himself outside by the school gate when she texted him the location of where to meet him. He greeted her with a smile, and the one she gave him in return was only half-hearted.

“What are you playing at?” She asked immediately.

“No hello?” Akira joked lightly. It didn’t help his case.

“I mentioned to you that the principal said that it was no longer necessary for me to look into these Phantom Thieves,” Makoto started. “Today, I was called into his office, where he told me with quite a forcefully suggestive tone that I cease looking into it, else I suffer the consequences. What did he mean by that?” She asked, darting her eyes at the students walking by and walking over to an area where less students were present.

“What the heck?” Morgana said. “Why would the principal do that?”

Akira followed suit, furrowing his brow. What was going on? It couldn’t have been that Akechi met with the principal—or, Akira supposed it could, but he had no knowledge of he and Makoto meeting the other day in the first place.

“I originally called you here for a different purpose, but it seems I was mistaken,” Makoto said.

“This isn’t good,” Morgana said. “You have to do something.”

“It is us,” he finally admitted, much to his own chagrin.

“Yes, I gathered,” Makoto said evenly, and Akira blinked. “And you seem adamant on letting me know that I can do nothing about it at every turn.”

“We didn’t speak to the principal.”

“Are you sure about that?” Makoto asked, tilting her head. “I seem to recall asking if there was discord in your group. Akechi-kun seems to have a different mindset.”

“Could Akechi really have done that? Does that seem like something he’d do?” Morgana asked worriedly.

If he did, Akira didn’t know how Akechi would’ve even have known to see the principal a second time to begin with. What was going on here?

Akira took a breath. He didn’t like playing his cards like this. But then again, though he was trying to change someone’s heart the old-fashioned way, that didn’t mean he didn’t need to watch his own back in the process. He wasn’t sure what repercussions this would have on their group, but he didn’t have time to think about that. Makoto had said that he seemed trustworthy. He had to draw on that.

“I think he’s going to backstab us,” Akira said resolutely.

Makoto blinked in shock, and her mouth dropped open slightly. “Wh-What was that?” She furrowed her brow. “A-Are you talking about Akechi-kun?”

Akira nodded, then prepared to speak when someone suddenly bumped into his shoulder as he walked past him. Akira turned to the man, pausing when he saw the burgundy-purple pinstripe suit he was wearing. Akira blinked. He was almost certain he’d seen that before, but—Akira looked up at the dark-haired man. He didn’t look familiar at all.
The man smiled, pushing up his sunglasses. “Sorry kid. Didn’t see ya there,” he said.

Akira nodded. “It’s alright.”

“Heh. Gotta be more careful out here, I suppose,” he said ominously. Akira furrowed his brow. The man chuckled and let out a half-hearted wave. “See ya,” he said, digging his hands back into his pockets and walking away.

“That guy just reeked of creepy,” Morgana commented with a groan. “He totally bumped into me too.”

“A-Anyway,” Makoto said, and Akira turned to her. “What was this you were saying about Akechi-kun?”

Akira dug his hands into his own pockets, trying and failing to shake off the unsettling feeling that wouldn’t leave. He glanced around, then slightly leaned in, looking directly at Makoto so he could try to relay how sincere and serious he was. “Nijima-san,” he said clearly. “I need your help.”

Chapter End Notes

A suspicious Makoto now joins???? Maybe????

I think the real joke here is Ryuji at Rank 4 at this point in the game/story LOL.

Proooooobably gonna streamline this arc much more than I originally planned. Going to try and finish up the Makoto arc in 2 more chapters, maybe 3. Because I mean is anyone else ready for the angst of Futaba’s arc with Akechi on the team? Bc I am 100% ready for the angst

Also, next chap will hopefully have two new confidants: one an OC and the other an already existing Persona character (no, it’s not Sae or one of the other Phantom Thieves) hehe let the guessing games begin

P.S. @augur-of-ebrietias & @someone-who-believed, you guys are the real MVPs here. This chapter capped at 38 pages in Word and they read ALL of it to help me with this chapter.

Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m off to go work on my final project for the next week and a half, and then I can write in peace again. *disappears into the void*
“You're beautiful,” replied the fly, to the spider.

As always, THANK YOU TO ALL YOU WONDERFUL PEOPLE for reading this garbage story. I just a wanted to fix Akechi’s fate and so I decided to write one myself – I did not expect this many people to enjoy my self-indulgent fic haha but I am BEYOND grateful for all of you who continue to read, kudos, comment, and bookmark this fic. Your comments seriously give me life and I swear I go back to them constantly to keep myself inspired. You guys rock. Seriously.

This chapter is unbeta’d unfortunately. :( I just finished this chapter today, and since I’m traveling for the next two weeks, I’ll be able to write but the only internet I’ll have will be on my phone, so if I didn’t upload it today, I wouldn't have been able to post this for another 2-3 weeks, so I just decided to post today

Anyway, since it’s been awhile, enjoy a VERY long chapter!

“Good issue,” Akira said, his hands in his pockets as he looked over Makoto’s shoulder at the manga she was clearly not reading.

She jumped at his words, turning to the side to face him. “Kurusu-kun,” she started. “What are you talking about?”

Akira smiled. It was nice to see that some things that didn’t change; namely, Makoto’s lack of tact when it came to investigating. She was standing by one of the shops in Central Street holding up a manga as she surveyed the area.

He gestured to her manga. “Ryuji and I read that issue together. It was pretty good. Not a good villain, though.”

Makoto looked at what was in her hands. “I-I wouldn’t know,” she said, clearing her throat, and Akira wondered if maybe she actually did. She closed the book, straightening her back as she looked at him. “We’re doing surveillance on the mafia boss. That’s why I brought it,” Makoto said, somewhat defensively.

“So, what are we looking for?” Akira asked, readjusting his bag with a lingering smile.

“We have to scout out for anyone who seems like they’re trying to coax high schoolers into a delivery job. You mentioned that they’ll use code words, correct?” Makoto asked him, and Akira nodded. “That’s good. We’re just looking for anyone who may have ties to Junya Kaneshiro.”
Then she paused, glancing up at Akira somewhat suspiciously. “By the way, should I question how it is that you got his name?”

“If you really want to know…” Akira twirled the edge of his hair. “I’m from the future.”

Makoto pursed her lips, clearly unamused. “Fine. I suppose you don’t have to tell me the truth. Your sources can remain anonymous.”

“If only she knew,” Morgana piped up from his bag.

“You brought your cat again?” Makoto asked. Pressing her fingers to her temple, she sighed. “Nevermind, I suppose it doesn’t matter. We should split up and see what we can find,” she said.

Akira nodded. “Sounds good to me,” he said, and before he could walk away, Makoto stopped him.

“I’m surprised to see you here without your friends. Or teammates, I should say, hm?” she said with a knowing look.

Akira shoved his hands into his pockets. “Man, she really isn’t too fond of us, is she?” Morgana said warily from his bag. That was true. Makoto had already been somewhat like this last time, but she definitely felt a little colder this time. Then again, he couldn’t really blame her.

“We’re a team too, right?” Akira asked instead of directly responding to her inquiry.

She blinked, somewhat taken aback, then cleared her throat into her hand before brushing a few stray strands of hair out of her face. “I-I wouldn't go that far, Kurusu-kun. I still have a lot of questions for you. We’re working together for a mutual goal.”

Akira shook his head slightly in response. “You don’t have to call me that.”

“What?”

“Kurusu-kun,” he said, waving it off. “That’s not necessary.”

“I see. V-Very well then… Akira-kun?” she said, then she got an odd look on her face, like it’d left a strange taste in her mouth. Akira smiled. “Come on. Let’s see what we can find.”

They spent a majority of the afternoon split up but trying to gather information. It wasn’t very fruitful for him, but that didn’t matter too much. He just had to relay the right information to Makoto, which wasn’t too difficult since they were searching separately.

He ended up somewhere near one of the back alleys of Central Street when Makoto approached him again.

“Have you made any progress on finding someone who can lead us to Kaneshiro?” She asked upon her approach. She placed her hand on her bag. “I couldn’t find any of his recruiters.”

“They use code words to communicate.”

Makoto gave him this look, like she wasn’t entirely impressed with that bit of information. “I figured. It would be odd if they were to communicate using straightforward language in broad daylight.”

“There’s more. These scams…they’re making students traffic drugs, then threatening them,” Akira said slowly.
Makoto’s mouth dropped open. “I-I figured it would be something awful, but to ruin the lives of teenagers just to make a profit…” He could see her grip tighten against her bag. “It’s horrible.”

“People can be cruel,” Akira said.

“You can say that again,” Makoto agreed. She brushed her hair back. “In any case, we should be on the lookout for these code words,” she continued. Then she paused, glancing up at Akira. “We have been at it for quite some time, so I understand if you have other plans or have somewhere else to be.”

“That’s alright. I don’t-”

“Hey there. You kids have some time?” Akira was cut off by a man approaching them. Took him long enough. Except… Something was different. “You’re young, probably looking for work, am I right?”

“Ah. It seems we didn’t have to look very far, hm?” Makoto said to Akira.

Akira frowned. This man… he looked familiar, but not from the last timeline.

“Hey…” Morgana piped up. “Isn’t this the guy that bumped into you the other day?”

Akira furrowed his brow. He looked vaguely familiar, but Akira hadn’t paid too much attention to the man that had done so. After all, he wasn’t the first person to ever have bumped into him on accident. Still, when Morgana said the words, Akira started to recognize the man as such.

So… he was part of this mafia, then?

Life certainly seemed to work out in strange ways.

Still, this guy seemed different somehow. Akira wasn’t sure how to explain it.

“Let’s say I have a… delivery job for you guys. You interested?” The man with a sly expression.

“Delivery?” Makoto hummed. “You wouldn’t happen to be referring to the delivery of suspicious materials, would you?”

“Heh. Clever girl.”

“I see. So I was right,” Makoto said, probably much louder than she intended.

“Hm,” the man said with a lingering smile on his face. “You kids interested or not?” he said with a knowing tone.

“If we are interested in this so-called position, would we be able to discuss the terms with your boss? I’d like to talk to him in person, if that’s the case,” Makoto said boldly.

She wasn’t exactly being very subtle. But then again, the man didn’t seem to be exercising any himself. In fact, it felt like they were playing exactly into his hands.

“Heh.” Akira was waiting for the man to confront Makoto, like the one from before had done. Instead, the man took one of his hands out of his pockets, then adjusted his sunglasses with an unsettling smile. “Alright. I’ll take you right to him.”

Akira furrowed his brow even deeper in confusion, and even Makoto seemed somewhat shocked at how willing he was able to agree. He was going to give in that easily? Something about this entire
situation felt unnerving.

“Mako-er, Niijima-san,” he started, taking a step forward. He didn't know what to say when she turned to him. “We should think about this.”

Makoto gave him a look that suggested that she thought this was the only way they could proceed. She tilted her head in slight confusion, then gestured for him to come on.

“What’s wrong? Gettin’ cold feet?” The man said, grinning down at Akira, who frowned in response but otherwise didn’t speak. “Listen, this is a one-time offer, kids.”

“No, please take us to him,” Makoto said.

“Good choice. Let’s go~” He said with a smug expression on his face.

Makoto seemed adamant on going, but something didn’t feel right. Akira didn’t know how he was supposed to stop her, though, short of making the man even more suspicious. And it was better if he was there with her anyway, just in case it was something different. He took a step after them to follow--

“Akira?”

Akira turned towards the source of the voice, his mouth opening slightly when he saw Akechi approaching him with a puzzled expression. Akechi’s face changed once he saw Makoto standing next to him, and then the man in the pinstripe suit turned around to face him, and Akechi stopped in his tracks a few feet away from them.

With a significantly more suspicious look, he still managed to give a light-hearted smile that didn’t meet his eyes as he continued to approach them. “I’m surprised to see you here,” Akechi said to Akira. Akira wanted to ask him what he was doing hanging around a back alley, but before he could, the man spoke up.

“Well well. The Boy Detective,” the man said. “From TV.”

Akechi stiffened a bit, but he turned to the man. His smile seemed a little more strained. “Ah. You’ve heard of me. Goro Akechi. And your name is?” He said.

“Not important. Nothin’ to worry about here. Just talking to these kids about some work,” the man replied smoothly.

“Oh. What sort of work would that be?”

“Sorry. Confidential. And if the boss finds out I’ve been lying to him, there are consequences. Y’know how it is. I’m sure I don’t need to tell someone like you that what happens when you don’t follow authority,” the man said, tilting his head slightly with a crooked smile.

Akechi cleared his throat. His smile looked almost painful at this point. Akira glanced back and forth between the two. It was clear that there was something that he was missing, but what? All Akira could think was that it was such a strange statement for the man to have said, but it had clearly done a number on the brunette, even if he was doing a fairly okay job of hiding it.

“Yes. My line of work does have such a ladder of authority. I…understand.”

“Heh. I knew you would,” the man said. Then he turned to both Makoto and Akira. “Well, looks like I should be off.”
“Wait, but I thought—” Makoto started.

“You guys idiots or something? I’m outta here. My job is done...for now.” And looked at Akira when he said it.

*Job?*

“You guys should be more careful of who you talk to,” he added. “Never know what could happen.” He dug his hands into his pockets, then after a second, lifted one of them out just to half-heartedly wave as he turned on his heel and made his exit.

When he was gone, both Makoto and Akira exchanged a glance.

“There’s no doubt about it. He’s got to be one of the ones we’re looking for.”

Akira wasn’t so sure, but he could feel his shoulders finally un-tense, and he half-nodded.

Akechi regained some of the color in his face, plastering on yet another smile. “Looking for? Who was it that you’re looking for?”

Makoto looked at Akira, probably remembering the information he’d told her, and she straightened out her back a bit before turning back to Akechi. “It’s nothing. Akira-kun and I were simply working on a project. What brings you here, Akechi-kun?”

“Ah. I had some business to take care of in the area, and I take this shortcut sometimes on my way back. I…I’m glad I was able to run into you.” He still looked a little disoriented.

“Are you okay?” Akira asked after a second of silence.

“Hm? Oh. Thank you for asking, but I’m fine,” he said, his hand lightly placed against his chin.

“Akira-kun, should we continue, then?” Makoto asked, raising an eyebrow.

Akira rubbed the back of his neck. He looked over at Akechi, who still didn’t seem entirely like himself.

“Please, don’t let me interrupt,” Akechi said.

“No, it’s fine,” he said before he could fully register the words. He turned to Makoto. “Is it alright if we resume this another time?” Akira could hear Morgana groan from behind him.

Makoto looked between them oddly for a moment, then nodded slowly. “Alright. I’ll message you, then?” she said, and this time Akira nodded. “It was nice seeing you, Akechi-kun,” she said, and he relayed the same before she made her way out of the area.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Akechi said once she was gone. Akira turned to face him fully.

“Are you really okay?”

“Ah, er. To be honest, it was just that man. How much do you know about him?”

Akira shook his head. “Hardly anything. He just approached us while we were talking.”

“I…see. Please tell me if you see him again,” Akechi said seriously. “I believe he’s dangerous. I’ve…worked on a few unsolved cases involving Yakuza members. I believe he is a prominent one.”
Akira sort of smiled. “Are you worried about me?”

“I’m simply informing you of the danger,” Akechi said right on his heels, though he averted his eyes as he said it. “After all, the Yakuza clan is known to be one of the most…”

Akira bit the inside of his lip, then placed his hand on Akechi’s shoulder. Akechi stopped in the middle of his rambling and fully looked at Akira. “Thanks for worrying,” he said, and the words sounded out coming out of him when he considered who he was talking to. “But I can take care of myself. I shouldn’t have to tell you that.” After a moment, Akechi managed a smile, though Akechi himself still seemed a little bewildered.

“Yes. You certainly can.”

“Oh brother,” Morgana muttered from his bag.

Akechi blinked, then smiled as he leaned to the side slightly to talk to Morgana. “Ah. Hello Morgana.” He turned his attention back to Akira after Morgana gave a half-hearted greeting in response. “Truly, I didn’t mean to interrupt you.”

“I said it was fine,” Akira said, removing his hand just to wave it in the air. “You seemed a little off. You want to grab a bite?”

Akechi looked a little flustered at his words, but nodded nonetheless. “Alright. I’d like that.”

“This is what I get,” Morgana muttered, mostly to himself. “He’s a teenager. What should I have expected? Of course he’s thinking with the wrong head.” Akira nudged against his bag and Morgana let out a yelp.

“Hm? Sorry, I missed that,” Akechi said, turning his attention to Morgana.

“It’s nothing. He’s just being a little catty today,” Akira said with a shrug.

“Hey!” Morgana exclaimed. “Anyway, if you two are gonna hang out, I’m gonna go walk around for a bit,” Morgana said. Akira nodded, then lowered his bag so that Morgana could hop out. “Be careful,” he said to Akira as he got out of the bag. “Don’t get up to anything funny.”

Akira smiled. “Are you going to say that every time?”

“Well, somebody has to,” Morgana said, and Akira could see both the smile and concern dancing around his eyes. He’d taken it for granted last time, just how much Morgana was vital to everything, but he wouldn’t make that mistake again.

When Morgana was gone, Akechi opened his mouth, presumably to once again tell him that he didn’t need to do this, but Akira beat him to it.

“Crepes?” He asked, putting his hands into his pockets.

Akechi’s words, whatever they might have been got caught in his throat, and he closed his mouth and nodded with a small smile.

They fell into step together, and after a few moments of walking in silence, Akechi spoke up.

“So,” he started, clearing his throat. “What were the two of you up to, anyway?” Akira turned to him as Akechi continued. “You two were in the alley together when you were approached by that man, correct?”
Akira looked up at the sky. He figured Akechi would ask, but he also hadn’t expected to run into him, meaning he had to think twice as fast about how to respond without saying something that could backfire. “Were you jealous?” he finally said, turning to Akechi with a teasing smile.

Akechi chuckled at that, although it sounded a little forced. “Hardly. I…was simply curious.”

Akira nodded. “Okay. We’re dating secretly,” he said, trying to say it as seriously as he could muster.

Akechi choked on air.

Akira fought back a smile as he watched Akechi try to regain his composure. “O-Oh. Th-That’s… certainly…news,” he said, as composed as he could possibly be. It kind of reminded Akira of Akechi’s reaction after he’d eaten that takoyaki at the festival, where he’d tried to pretend like he wasn’t about to combust. “Certainly not the answer I was expecting…haha…but I’m, er, that is to say, Niijima-san is very-“

“I was kidding,” Akira said with a twinkle in his eye.

Akechi paused, then abruptly cleared his throat again. “I…see,” he said, and it was hard to miss the way his whole body seemed to un-tense – in relief? Akira wasn’t sure. Either way, Akira half-smiled. “That was quite the jest.”

Akira hummed. “It’s nothing like that,” he clarified. “But I am working on the next target.”

“Ah,” Akechi said with a short nod. “Can I be of assistance?”

“A maybe. I think Makoto and I have handled it so far.”

“With our means, though, I presume that you couldn’t possibly proceed very far without informing her of our true methods,” Akechi said. “Who is it that you’re considering as a target?”

Akira knew that Akechi and his boss were connected to Kaneshiro in some way, so he wasn’t sure whether or not saying the name at this point would help or hurt.

Thankfully, the fates didn’t require him to make a choice, because as they continued to walk, Akira’s eyes spotted a tuft of blonde hair sitting at a nearby bench. Once he saw the crepe in said blonde’s hand, it was even more clear that it was Ann. However, next to her, in a wheelchair, was Shiho.

“Should we say hello?” Akechi said, and Akira turned and saw that Akechi had followed his gaze to where the two girls were sitting.

When they made their way over to them, Ann was the first to notice. Her eyes got brighter when she saw them, and she smiled wide as she waved. She turned to Shiho and said something, and the quiet girl turned as well and gave them a polite and slightly more timid smile.

“Hey you two!” Ann said when they came to a stop in front of her. “Shiho and I just came here after her physical therapy for some crepes.”

“We had the same idea,” Akira said.

“Oh?” Ann said. She looked between the two of them. It looked like a lightbulb went off in her head then, and she turned to Shiho. “Sorry, I didn’t even introduce you. You already know Akira, I think,” she said, and Shiho nodded and smiled at him.
“It’s nice to see you again,” she said sweetly.

“You too,” Akira agreed. “You look well.”

Shiho blushed lightly, her hands laid flat against her thighs. “I…don’t know about that. But thank you. That’s very kind.”

“And this is Goro Akechi,” Ann continued, gesturing to him. “He’s another one of our friends.”

“Hello. It’s very nice to meet you, Akechi-san,” she said with a soft smile.

“The same to you as well. Ann-chan’s spoken very highly of you,” Akechi said kindly.

Ann let a beat pass before she spoke up again. “They’re the ones I said were dating.”

Akira let out a playfully exasperated sigh as Akechi blinked in surprise at Ann’s unabashed statement. Maybe Ryuji was rubbing off on her more and more.

“She’s kidding,” Akira was the first to speak up.

Shiho giggled, and it felt so pure and infectious that Akira had a hard time not smiling fondly in response. “It’s okay. I know.” Then she turned to Ann, leaning forward in her wheelchair. “Remember when we tried to play Matchmaker?”

“Hey!” Ann said through a laugh. “I was right. Er, 20% of the time,” Ann said, twirling one of her ponytails around her finger as she pouted.

Shiho laughed too, using her left hand to slightly cover her mouth. “You weren’t so good at it.”

Ann pouted even more, if that was even possible. “I’ll nix painting from my list of talents, but hey, matchmaking is still up in the air.”

“Painting?” Akechi piped up.

Ann smiled dotingly at the memory. “Yeah. Did I tell you how Shiho and I met?” She asked, and then she launched into the story of when Shiho told Ann that her paintings sucked. Akira smiled as his friend recounted the story as Shiho sat bashfully, though her eyes sparkled in amusement as Ann told him the story. He’d gotten to know Ann a lot in the last timeline, but he’d never really seen her when she was with Shiho, aside from the day they went to the rooftop of the school again. Here, both girls looked more comfortable than he’d ever seen them.

He figured that that’s how it must have been, before Kamoshida. Before the reality of how cruel people in positions of power could be set in and loomed over like a cloud.

“I see,” Akechi said, his hand thoughtfully on his chin, and Akira blinked back into the conversation. “It’s good to know I’ll stick with Yusuke-kun on all matters related to painting,” he added with a gleam in his eye.

“Hey!” Ann said through her laughter. “Not you too! I already gave up on painting,” she said. “Buut c’mon,” Ann said, taking a sip of her drink. “You can totally see these two dating, right?” she asked Shiho.

Shiho looked at them, seeming uncertain of whether or not she should answer it seriously. It was kind of funny, when Akira thought about it. She didn’t really know anything about the two of them, so Akira wasn’t sure how she would be able to even answer Ann’s question.
Akira tilted his head to glance over at Akechi. “Should we do a trick?”

Akechi blinked in surprise for a moment before he let out a light chuckle. “I can juggle.”

Akira raised an eyebrow, a smile playing on his lips. Of all the talents he could choose… “Are you sure?” he asked, thinking of that afternoon they’d spent in Mementos. It had seemed so long ago.

Akechi’s mouth opened slightly until he curled it into a half-smile. “I seem to recall juggling quite a bit longer than you.”

“I’ve been practicing.”

“You’ve…been practicing so that you can out-juggle me?” Akechi asked with a playful skepticism.

“You haven’t?” Akira said, pretending to be offended at the thought that he didn’t practice juggling 24/7, and the cheer dramatic tone he’d taken on seemed to be enough to make Akechi laugh one of his genuine, caught off-guard laughs that made the world seem a little bit more bright to Akira.

“Ah. I see. I’ll clear my schedule and get started on it as soon as possible,” Akechi said with a lingering smile.

“I mean, I’m not asking for much,” Akira deadpanned, mainly to try to hear another one of those laughs. When he did, it was hard for him not to break into a smile right there.

Akechi started to respond, but something that sounded like a concealed squeal came out, and both boys turned to the source of the sound.

Akira remembered where he was as he saw Ann biting her lip in an unsuccessful attempt to hold back a smile that was practically beaming. Shiho was softly smiling too.

“See? See?” Ann said, gesturing to them.

“We’re just talking,” Akira said amusedly, swaying his arms slightly before placing them into his pockets.

Akechi nodded, but once again, his words were cut off. Though this time, it was due to the sound of his phone buzzing in his pocket. He shot them an apologetic look and pulled out his phone. Akira felt himself tense up just a little at the thought that it was his boss. Akechi typed something into his phone quickly, and then placed it back into his pocket. “Ah. I’m sorry about that. I needed to confirm a TV appearance next week.”

“TV?” Shiho wondered. “Oh. That’s right. I thought you looked familiar. I’ve seen you on TV. You were the special guest when Ann went on the social studies trip. You were talking about the Phantom Thieves.”

Akechi nodded. “Yes. That tends to be my focus in appearances as of late,” he said with a light but charming laugh.

Shiho smiled. “It must be a nice change of pace. I’ve seen you on the news a few times. You’ve worked on very tragic cases, it seems like.” Then her smile dimmed a bit. “That must be hard.”

“A-Ah…” Akechi said, faltering slightly at the sincerity in her voice. “Yes, it…can be difficult. However, I hope to become a full-fledged detective one day, so I’m fortunate for the chance to gain a wealth of experience.”
Shiho nodded. “I’m glad. And I’m glad that you have Ann and the others if it becomes overwhelming,” she said delicately, as though she wasn’t sure if she was overstepping bounds or not. “I may be a little biased,” she said with a light smile. “But Ann’s really great to talk to whenever you feel burdened.”

“Shiho-“ Ann started, clearly touched.

“-And I’m sure Kurusu-kun is too,” Shiho finished, glancing up at him shyly.


Akechi didn’t seem to know how to respond to that, so he cleared his throat and said, “Th-Thank you for saying that.”

Ann’s smile dimmed, but it held the same fondness. “Anyway, I guess we should get going,” she said, glancing over at Shiho. “So I can get you back before your physical therapy.”

Shiho nodded. “Okay. Would it be alright if stopped by the bookstore? The newest Cold Harbor novel wasn’t at the last store, and I was hoping to pick up a copy before I get home.”


“Oh…er…” She looked down at her hands. “Y-Yes. It’s a guilty pleasure of mine.”

“Shiho’s been reading them since she was a kid,” Ann said, standing up.

“I’m…not great at solving the mysteries,” she admitted with a timid smile. “But I enjoy the characters. And I’ve had a lot of time both in the hospital and in between therapy.”

“I have a copy, if you’d like to borrow it,” Akechi offered.

“Oh! You like them too?” Shiho said, scratching her cheek with a short laugh. “They get awful reviews, so I didn’t think many people read them. I-I couldn’t possibly use your copy.”

“I don’t mind,” Akechi insisted kindly. “Besides, with cases picking up, I haven’t much time to read, anyway.”


“Where is your physical therapy at? I can bring it to you. There’s no need for you to go out of your way with your injury for this, so-”

It looked like Akechi unintentionally hit a sore spot, because Shiho flinched slightly, and Akechi stopped speaking. “No, I-I can meet you wherever,” Shiho said, her hands closed lightly against her thighs in loose fists. “It won’t be out of my way. I can still travel,” she said with a smile.

Ann’s gaze softened as she took in her best friend’s expression. “You’re so strong, Shiho,” she breathed so low that Akira wouldn’t have even heard her if he was just an inch further away from her.

Akechi smiled. “Of course. I didn’t mean to imply that you couldn’t.”

“N-No, I’m sorry. I…didn’t mean for it to come across as ungrateful or anything like that,” she
quickly said, shaking her head as her voice got quieter. “It’s very considerate of you to think about my injury. It’s just--” She stopped talking and started fiddling with her fingers.

“Here,” Akechi said after the silence extended for an extra beat. “I’ll exchange my contact information, and we’ll find a spot that works for both of us,” Akechi said with a smile.

Shiho smiled back. “O-Okay. Thank you.”

They exchanged information, and after that, Ann and Shiho bid them goodbye, with Ann telling them to have an especially good time on their “date,” and there was no point or no time to convince Ann otherwise, so Akira just left it.

“Shiho Suzui,” Akechi said when they disappeared into the crowd. “It’s interesting,” he said with his hand on his chin.

“Hm?”

Akechi blinked and turned to him. “Ah. Sorry. I was simply thinking. She…became so consumed with negative thoughts and unable to bear the weight of the world that she attempted to end her life, but fate decided that she would live…and she’s able to smile.”

“Does that surprise you?”

“Perhaps it shouldn’t,” Akechi said with a soft, yet thoughtful laugh. He hummed once more, pensively, before he gesturing to the shop. “Anyway, should we eat?”

“After you.”

***

Some days, he felt like Akira just had a knack for ending up in the same place as Akechi. The next day, Akira had suggested that the group meet up at a karaoke bar to discuss what their next steps should be. He told them that he had some intel on a new target, which, of course, the others were ecstatic about finally get back to their ‘work.’

But before that, he’d wanted to get some extra studying in. He’d probably been at it for 15 minutes before he saw Akechi walk into the same café and take a seat by the window.

He looked like he was there with a purpose, and Akira watched as the waitress approached him for his order, and when she was gone he pulled out a large file.

Unsure if he should approach, Akira pulled out his phone and typed out a message.

Akira Kurusu 16:24
Hey, is that you by the window?

Akira Kurusu 16:25
No worries if you’re busy.

Akechi reached down for his phone almost immediately, and when he glanced down, he looked up and around the café, and when he locked eyes with Akira, Akira half-waved. Akechi smiled. He looked down at the message, then shook his head.

Well… he was going to study. He could only imagine how Morgana would react as he packed up his bag and slung it around his shoulder as he made his way over to Akechi.
He didn’t take a seat across from the brunette’s high table, but he did lean his elbows against it as he greeted him.

“It seems we have a knack for running into each other as of late,” Akechi said with a charming smile. “Haha. It’s a bit reminiscent of the first few times we ran into each other. What brings you here?”

Akira gestured to his bag. “Studying.”

Akechi tilted his head slightly. “No Morgana today?”

Akira half-smiled. “I was with Ryuuji and Ann beforehand. I think they were going somewhere else before karaoke. I think he’d rather ogle Ann than watch me study,” he said, sounding only mildly offended, though he kept his playful smile. “How about you?”

“Ah.” He tapped against his closed folder. “I’m actually awaiting someone from the police department. She’s supposed to be bringing over a report on a case, but it seems she was running a tad bit late. Thus, I suggested we meet here.”

Akira nodded. “Are you doing better?” he said, drumming his fingers against the counter.

Akechi seemed caught off-guard by his prolonged worry. “That was yesterday,” he said, the surprise echoing his expression. “But thank you for your additional concern. I’m well now. Besides, between my work with the police and our side escapades, I hardly have the time to reflect on things like that lately,” he said with a short laugh, though Akira could hear the tiredness in his voice.

“Hm,” Akira hummed. He wondered just how well Akechi was juggling all of this. Not only was he committing crimes for someone, he was also a part of the Phantom Thieves. And when he wasn’t, he was assisting the police and making TV appearances where he had to disavow the morality of the Thieves’ actions. He had to wear a lot of different masks, it seemed. “Shiho’s right. Make sure you take some time for yourself,” he said. He brought up his right index finger and tapped on the file folder. “Especially when you’re working on tough cases. Don’t work too hard.”

“A-Ah. Not to worry, I will not allow any distractions to affect my abilities in the Metaverse,” Akechi said with an assuring nod.

Akira frowned. “That’s not what I meant.” He leaned in a little closer, and once he’d done so he could see that Akechi did seem more tired than he was letting on. “I mean in this world.”

Akechi sort of smiled. “Once again I…appreciate the concern. It’s as I said. My work can be very demanding… But,” he said, taking note of Akira’s trepidation. “I will try.”

Akira tilted his head, offering him a coy smile. “Good. I’d hate to enforce a curfew.” Then he tapped his finger against his cheek. “All thieves in bed by 9 PM.”

Akechi’s laugh caused Akira to stop and look at him. “That would be hard to enforce, I imagine,” he said.

“You haven’t tried living with Morgana,” Akira said warily.

Akechi chuckled quietly at that. “And I should be grateful for that, it seems.”

“’S not so bad,” Akira said with a wave of his hand. “To be honest, it’s been so long, that it’d feel strange if he wasn’t there, at this point.”
“After a few months? Haha. He must’ve made quite the impression on you,” Akechi said kindly.

Oh, right. Technically it hadn’t even been that long. He looked at Akechi. How had things changed so much in such a short amount of time? Akechi’s expression turned to one of confusion after a moment too long where Akira didn’t respond, and the latter boy shook his head to break free of his thoughts. “You could say that.”

Akechi smiled. “Ah. Well, perhaps he’ll warm up to me one of these days. There is a sushi place that I had been meaning to stop by,” he said with a gentle stroke of his chin. “Something to consider, I suppose.” He toyed with the edge of his file. “So, you mentioned you had some intel on a new target to discuss this evening?”

Akira tilted his head and wagged his finger. “Ah ah. You have to wait like everyone else.”

“Keeping secrets, I see,” Akechi said with another short chuckle. “I suppose I can quell my curiosity for the time being. I don’t think I’ve been to a karaoke bar before.”

“Akechi’s eyes glimmered. “To quite literally sing for my supper, hm?” Akira tilted his head, and Akechi let out a half-laugh. “Ah. Sorry. It’s an English idiom,” he said in the way he did when he wanted Akira to be impressed with how much he knew.

“Oh, now you’re definitely going to sing for it,” Akira teased, unfazed as he smiled at him.

From Akira’s angle, he could see anyone who entered the café. So, when their conversation lulled for a moment, he took the opportunity to glance over with mild interest. He saw a young woman with a shoulder bag enter, somewhere in her mid-20s, with a bewildered, out-of-breath expression on her face. Akira furrowed his brow. She looked familiar…

Akechi followed his gaze to the woman. “Hm? Oh. Isn’t…Isn’t that the woman that we saw as we were leaving Dome Town?” he said, looking to Akira for confirmation.

Ah. That was it. He nodded.

The woman looked around the café, and when her gaze brushed across the two boys, she did a double take, and her mouth opened slightly. It seemed she recognized them too. Akira was just able to lift up his hand to offer a wave—

--when her eyes widened with something that looked like embarrassment, and she abruptly lifted her hand and used it to shield her face from their view as she turned on her heel and hard-walked over to the nearest empty table. She plopped herself down as Akira paused in mid-wave and turned to Akechi with a confused expression on his face.

She sat and then pointedly turned the chair so that her back was facing to them as much as possible.

“Was that directed towards us?” Akechi asked, his voice laced with confusion.

“Seems so. Do you still have that chip?” Akira asked. Perhaps that had been why she’d been so quick to avoid them.

Akechi nodded. “I believe so.” After another second, the sound of Akechi’s phone buzzing made him reach down into his pocket to dig it out.

“Ah. This is the woman I’m to be meeting here,” Akechi said, holding up the phone a bit so Akira
could see. Naomi Akiyama.

“Uh…I think I found her.” Akira pointed towards the woman who was seemingly avoiding them. She had a phone pressed against her ear.

Akechi furrowed his brow, but before the call went to voicemail, he answered and pressed it against the ear. “Hello. This is Akechi.”

“Akechi-san. Hi. Er, this is Naomi Akiyama. I, well, I’m supposed to be meeting you at a café.” Akira could hear her almost clearly, but he wasn’t sure if it was just because he was standing so close to Akechi or because the café was nearly empty as it was, so he could just hear her from her table. Either way, it became clear that it was the same person.

“Yes. Hello. Have you arrived?” He said, craning his head slightly to get a better view of her. She looked like she was biting her nails now with her free hand.

“Um. Sure…er, are you here yet? I don’t mean to change up the plan last minute, but is there any way we could meet somewhere else? There’s just some people that I’d rather not run into here.”

Akechi turned to Akira, who was having a hard time not finding the entire situation amusing. “Ah. I apologize. I’ve actually arrived already as well. I’m by the window, in the brown coat. I’m sitting with someone in a Shujin uniform.”

“Shujin…Shujin…” She said, and Akira watched her crane her head around. It didn’t take look for her gaze to fall on them again. “Ah…haha. That’s funny. It’s almost as if you’re the two that I’m looking at right now…but…that would be…” Her voice trailed off as Akechi offered her a wave with a charismatic smile. “…Oh god,” she said as her voice dropped into one full of dread. She stood up quickly, nearly tripping over her chair as she dropped her phone into her back and walked over to them.

“Hello,” Akechi started kindly. “You must be-”

“I’m not an alcoholic!”

Akechi blinked, clearly taken off-guard by her sudden statement. “I-I beg your pardon?”

“I…” She drifted off. “I mean…what?” She tugged at her hair. “Er. I just…I think it’s important that I explain. I mean…you are the ones I saw last week, right?”

“Ah. That,” Akechi said, turning on the charm. “I do hope you’re feeling better, but trust me, I certainly don’t think any less of you for it.”

“You…You aren’t upset?” She said, and Akechi furrowed his brow. “I mean…I heard that you’re a big deal at the police department…so…” Then she managed to laugh, though it still sounded nervous. “O-Oh. Wow. Well, this is awkward.”

“Perhaps we can start over,” Akechi said with a soft chuckle. “As I was beginning to state, my name is Goro Akechi. And this is…a friend of mine. Akira Kurusu,” he introduced.

“Friend?” Naomi blurted disbelievingly. She seemed to immediately notice that she’d spoken it out loud, because she forced a cough into her hand. “I mean…it’s nice to meet you,” she said, sticking her hand out to shake their hands. “Naomi Akiyama.” Then she hummed. “You’re so young. They told me that you were still in high school, I didn’t really know what to think. I wish I were that achieving in high school.”
“Haha thank you. Perhaps it would be different if I didn’t have such a strong goal that I aimed to achieve,” Akechi said, and Akira felt a little uneasy at it.

“Even still-” Naomi started, then stopped. She reached down and opened her bag, then pulled out a bunch of files clumsily held together by “Here’s the affidavit for the case,” she said, flickering her eyes to Akira. “Er, I guess you’ll read it later.”

Akechi nodded. “Yes. Thank you. You’re a criminal psychologist, yes?” he asked.

She nodded enthusiastically. “Yep,” she replied, popping her lips at the ‘p.’ “Leave it to me to get into the minds of criminals,” she said with a mock salute. Not a second later, she seemed to realize the relative strangeness of her words and action, and she visibly deflated with another embarrassed look-away. “Er…so I’m helping on a few cases.”

“Aside from this-” Akechi tapped against the file. “You’ll be working on the Phantom Thieves case?”

“Um, I think so?” She said, her voice raising a bit at her uncertainty. “Today’s my first day, but the SIU Director and Police Chief told me I’d be working on a big case. I was a little nervous, since I just got my master’s but still, it was a huge boost of confidence.”

Akira frowned. That was odd. If the web of Akechi’s boss ran so deep that the police were involved, which was highly likely considering Akechi had been put on all of the breakdown cases, it seemed odd that they would bring in a competent criminal psychologist. So then…

Akira looked over and saw that Akechi was frowning too. He wondered if Akechi had been made aware of all that was happening behind the scenes. And Akira had certainly never heard of her in the last timeline. Granted, he hadn’t been at a stage where he could be this close to the police network, but still.

Was this yet another thing that had only happened in this timeline? If so, how? What had caused this?

“O-kay. Your relative frowns are not doing wonders for that boost of confidence,” Naomi pointed out, and Akechi turned his attention back to her, his concern giving way to a smile.

“Ha. My apologies. I should congratulate you. The others are correct. I believe this will turn into quite the high-profile case, so be working on it surely means that your talents are being rewarded,” Akechi said charmingly.


“You’re going to study their actions?” Akira couldn’t help but pipe up. If Akechi wasn’t going to ask, it was better to find out how exactly they should be more careful around this new development, even if she was still new at her job.

“Kind of,” Naomi asked. “It’s studying the intentions behind the actions, which in turn can eventually lead to discerning their true identities, and then psychological assessments after they’ve been caught.”

“Any preliminary deductions?” Akechi asked with a gleam in his eye.

“Oh…I mean…” Naomi shook her head. “I’ve barely looked at the file, but it’s pretty obvious they
go to Shujin, right?” She said, throwing another glance at Akira. “Most will target someone close to them. Consider it a crime of passion, in an odd way. Not the smartest move, honestly. I’d definitely kill someone random first, and then make my third target the one that I was truly after to throw suspicion off,” she mused, and when the two gaped at her, she cleared her throat and backtracked. “Not that I’m planning a murder or anything.”

“That’s an interesting deduction,” Akechi said, lightly smiling. “Sans the murder. I’d thought the same.”

“Yeah?” She said, perking up. “Oh, good. I mean, technically, it could also have been someone random, but that seems unlikely. With the two crimes they’ve committed, it’s pretty clear that they’re doing it to take down people that seem to be above the law, so the first victim was probably someone they felt very strongly about. There was someone they wanted to protect or avenge. The girl who almost killed herself was probably the last straw.”

He knew what she was saying, but Akira kind of hated the wording. It frustrated him to no end.

“Kamoshida isn’t a victim,” Akira told her.

Naomi blinked at him, and her expression softened. “Well, yeah, from what I read, he’s a total asshole, but considering those cute calling cards, it doesn’t seem like he had much of a say in his confession. That alone implies he was a victim of something.” Akechi chuckled, and Naomi turned to him with wide eyes. “Sorry, am I speaking out of turn? I-I really don’t know what I’m talking about anyway.”

“Quite the contrary,” Akechi said. “You raise interesting points.”

“I dunno. The breakdown cases are kinda interesting too. I saw that-” She stopped when she looked at Akira. “Ah. I probably shouldn’t talk about this in public.”

“I promise that I will restore this country to one that can compete with the rest of the world-” Akira looked over and saw that the barista was turning up the volume on the TV, and that same politician as before was on the screen talking about something.

Akira felt a light headache come on, but not so bad that he couldn’t ignore it. He turned back to Naomi when he heard her blow raspberries. “Now if there’s anyone that needs a change of heart, it’s that guy,” she said with disdain.

Akechi’s eyes widened ever so slightly, though he tried to cover it up with a stance and tone filled with mild interest. “You’re not a fan?”

Naomi scoffed. “Yeah right. If the guy can’t even take care of his own kid, I don’t think he has the right to take care of a country.”

“Kid?” Akechi said, his fingers stilling. “I wasn’t aware Representative Shido had children.”

“That’s because he’s a terrible human being. No one even knows he has a kid. I mean, it’s just not fair that kids like me and him get stuck in a system that doesn’t look out for us while-”

“Er,” Akechi started with a light laugh, effectively cutting her off. “I’m sorry. What did you say your name was again?”

“Oh god you aren’t going to report me already are you? I-I didn’t mean it, I just have a tendency to foam at the mouth sometimes,” she said frantically.
“No,” Akechi said, his voice slightly strained. “Nothing like that. If it’s true, though, it’s quite something that you know something about Shido-san that most do not.”

“Yeah…I…actually probably shouldn’t have said that for that reason. I only found out on accident anyway, since he never talked. I just remember he was always crying, so I could never sleep…” she said with a groan. Akechi’s breath caught in his throat, and the girl turned to him. “A-Are you okay?”

Akechi looked like he’d gotten the wind knocked out of him. “Y-Yes. Just a bit of a headache, is all,” he said, forcing a smile.

Just then, a Featherman theme song began to play, and Naomi sheepishly dug out her phone. “I thought I silenced that…” She muttered. Then she answered quickly. “Oh. Nijima-san. Hi. Yes… You asked me to deliver them…”

Akira couldn’t hear what Sae was saying on the other end, but whatever it was, it caused Naomi to silently mimic her and make a face as she listened, causing the two to chuckle. “I just brought them to him,” Naomi said. Then she froze. “I…er…the originals? I-I was supposed to bring a copy, not the original? Uh…no, I-I’m not s-stuttering. I think th-the phone is just breaking up. Bad service, y’know,” she said with another nervous laugh. “Y-Yeah, that’s what I did. Okay… see you then.”

Akechi raised an eyebrow. “Trouble?”

“Ah. Haha. N-No, of course not. Er, do you mind if I borrow those files for like an hour…?” She said sheepishly.

Akechi chuckled at her apprehension. “I think I deduced the issue. Sae-san has a tendency to be a little anal at times, but she is far from unreasonable. I will make a copy of this and bring her back the original.”

“Really?” Naomi blinked. “Oh my god, thank you. She’s so cool and is pretty much every bit of successful woman that I hope to be, but geez, she’s kinda scary when she’s determined,” she huffed.

Suddenly the phone began to ring again, and Naomi placed it against her ear before even looking at the ID. “Sae-san, I promise, I didn’t…” She stopped abruptly, and Akira could hear a man on the other end; this one significantly more animated than Sae’s voice had come across on the other end. “Oh. Hey.” Naomi winced as she listened to the man on the phone. “I did that already…” she said quietly. “Listen, can I call you back? I’m working.” More angry words. A sigh escaped Naomi’s lips. “Alright, alright. I… know what I said. You don’t have to remind me. I…I’ll be right there.” She gulped, then hung up the phone.

When she looked back up at them, her expression reminded Akira of the night in that park near Dome Town.

“Are you okay?” Akira asked.

“Isn’t that the question of the century?” Naomi said with a wry laugh. “I-I’m okay, thanks. But I think I have to run home. Duty calls,” she said. She brought her eyes back up to Akechi. “Thank you for delivering that. It was nice to meet you, Akechi-san, and-” She turned to Akira. “Kurusu-san. The not-couple,” she started, tapping her forehead. “I’ll remember that.”

Akira tilted his head with a slight smile. “Friends is also a good synonym.”

“Yeah, I do have eyes, you know. I think not-couple is more fitting,” she said, and at least her
smile didn’t seem pained as she chuckled. Akira could count that as a small victory.

When she left, Akechi drummed his fingers on the table. “Akiyama…Akiyama…” he repeated quietly.

“Akiyama,” Akira joined in for a third time.

Akechi met his gaze, and Akira noticed that he’d gotten a distant look in his eyes. Akechi smiled at Akira’s words. “I apologize. I hadn’t been expecting…her.”

“Know her after all?”

“No… I don’t know anyone with that last name,” Akechi said with a frown. “Ah. I suppose I’ll be a little late to karaoke. I will go deliver this to Sae-san and then meet the rest of you there.”

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“This sucks. The singers aren’t even good,” Ryuji complained as he stuck a finger in his ear just to prove the point. Ann nodded with a grimace as Morgana adjusted himself in Akira’s bag. Yusuke seemed almost entirely unfazed, hunched over his sketchpad with quiet focus. “I don’t know how you can even focus on that with this screeching,” the faux-blond said, leaning over to poke at Yusuke in the arm.

Yusuke, of course, didn’t even flinch.

“Hey, Yusuke!” Ryuji said, waving a hand in front of him. Yusuke frowned, but otherwise continued.

“We’ve lost him,” Akira said lightly as Ann smiled.

“Eh, may as well let him finish. It’s not like we’ll be discussing anything related to the target ’til Akechi-kun gets here, right?” Ann said, crossing one leg over the other as she rested an elbow on her knee and placed her chin into her palm. “Y’know, maybe we should go up there and sing,” Ann suggested with a short laugh.

Ryuji laughed. “Yeah, right, and you know what’s worse than that up there?” He said, gestured to the stage with his thumb. “You haven’t heard Ann sing.”

“Ugh. What is that supposed to mean?”

“Uh, you suck?”

Ann’s smile immediately turned into a glare as she reached across the table, leaning over Akira, just so she could pinch him roughly on the arm. “That’s not funny!”

“Ow! What, only Shiho can tell you when you suck at something?! You didn’t hafta pinch me so hard,” he said, rubbing his arm.

“Oh, I have an idea!” Ann said, plopping herself back down on her seat and said pressing her finger against her cheek as she turned to Akira pointedly. “Why don’t we change Ryuji’s heart?”

“Should we vote on it?” Akira teased.

“I vote yes,” Ann said, sticking her tongue out at Ryuji.

Morgana snickered from the bag next to Akira. “I vote yes too.”
“Ah…Yes…This is perfect…” Yusuke finally spoke up, though he was still huddled over his sketch. “No…perhaps not…”

“Yusuke’s voting yes too, right Yusuke?” Ann said, taking his brief moment of relative consciousness as an opportunity to strike.

“Hm?” he said, looking up with a slightly confused expression as he tilted his head, a strand of hair falling in front of his forehead.

“We’re going to take Ryuji’s distorted desires,” Akira said plainly, flicking a bit of lint off of his sleeve as he said so.

“Oh, c’mom, don’t humor her,” Ryuji groaned as Ann placed her elbow on Akira’s shoulder and leaned against him with a triumphant smile.

“Ah. I see,” Yusuke said. “That would be quite the interesting venture. I wonder what sort of artistic musings could come from seeing the depths of Ryuji’s distorted desires. Perhaps this will be the burst I am looking for into my forays of the human heart. Very well, I will vote yes as well.” Ann’s grin grew even wider, if that was possible.


He glanced over at the agemochi on her plate, already moving on. “You gonna eat those?” He said, reaching over to toss one into his mouth.

“Hey! Maybe I wasn’t done.”

“I don’t want this milkshake,” he said, hitting her with her weak spot: sweets. “I’ll trade you for it.”

“Fine…I fold.”

“Uh-the hell? This isn’t poker.”

“I was trying to be funny.”

“You shouldn’t. It’s…it’s just weird,” Ryuji said.

“Oh, shut up,” Ann said, though she had a smile on her face that mirrored Ryuji’s own as she pushed her plate of fries towards him. “What are you drawing, anyway, Yusuke?” Ann said, peering over to try to take a peek.

Yusuke heaved a sigh. “It’s no use. How can I capture all facets of desire if I do not understand it? Though perhaps that is part of the problem, that I would seek to understand instead of approaching it from the perspective of…”

“Uh, Yusuke?” Ann said. “Did we lose him again?”

Akira shook his head. “No, look. You want some fries?” Akira said pushing his own unfinished plate of food towards the artist.

“…and thus if I were to—” Yusuke stopped in the middle of his ramblings as he spied the food now much closer to him. “That smells delicious.”

Akira chuckled. “I’m surprised it doesn’t just smell like grease.”
“On the contrary, the small of the potato mixed with the furikake provide something that is not only visually appealing, but also an aroma that is quite stimulating for the senses.”

Akira smiled. “Such refined tastes, Fox.”

“You say the strangest stuff. Can’t you just say you’re starving so anything would look good at this point?” Ryuji grumbled as he scratched his head.

“Well, yes, that too,” Yusuke said point-blank, causing Ryuji to laugh despite himself.

“You’re so weird, man,” he said with a smile as he took another bite of his-well, Ann’s-food.

Ann, seemingly uninterested with the subject, turning to Akira and draped her arm around him. “Anyway, how are you and Akechi-kun doing?” She asked, which earned a collective groan from both Ryuji and Morgana while Yusuke quietly stuffed his face with food.

Akira scratched his cheek as Ryuji shook his head. “This again, Ann.”

“What? I’m asking a question!” She said innocently.

Akira just shook his head. “We’re…fine,” he said, knowing that wasn’t the answer she was looking for. “He’s a good friend,” he emphasized.

“Exactly. Trust me, I’d knock some sense into him if there was something more than that,” Morgana piped up.

Ann pouted, but looked at Morgana. “Oh, yeah. I’ve been wondering. How come you don’t like Akechi-kun, Morgana? You’re always so abrasive when he’s around, or you’re short with him,” she asked with genuine curiosity.

Morgana exchanged a glance with Akira, who minutely shrugged. He trusted Morgana, so he wasn’t concerned with whatever response he had.

“There’s just something off about him,” Morgana said. “Especially this whole thing surrounded how he got his Persona. I just find it hard to believe that he’s being completely honest with us.”

“I guess that’s true…” Ann said. “But Akira’s spent the most time with him, so if he says he’s okay, then I think we should be fine, right?” she said with a chipper, though slightly uncertain smile.

Akira did his best to hide his frown. So it would fall on him, then. He didn’t want them to trust him completely, but he also didn’t want them to walk around suspicious of him. Makoto would do a good enough job of hiding it, but he wasn’t sure how the others would handle it. Last time, they’d been able to act oblivious because they had a concrete plan in place. This was different. Then again, he also didn’t want to be the one to dismiss Morgana’s suspicions.

“I haven’t seen anything suspicious, but I can keep an eye out if you request?” Yusuke suggested as he turned to Akira.

Akira shook his head. “We have to trust each other, otherwise, we don’t be able to work together.”

“That’s true,” Ryuji said. He gestured to Morgana. “You’re way too suspicious.”

“It’s good that he is,” Akira was quick to say, and he could see Morgana’s gratitude out of the corner of his eye. “If we are wrong, then it’s good to have someone looking out for us.”
“Oh, and I’d never let you guys forget that I was right too,” Morgana said smugly. Akira smiled. He’d have been more surprised if he did. “Besides, it’s my job to make sure you guys stay out of trouble and that none of you make any stupid decisions. Well, it’s too late for Ryuji but as for the rest of you—”

“What the hell does that mean?” Ryuji exclaimed. Then he gestured to an amused Akira. “I thought we were talkin’ about him banging a teammate!”

Akira nearly coughed into the glass of water he’d been about to take a sip of.

“Ryuji!” Ann started.

“I mean, not that there’s anything wrong with that!” Ryuji was quick to add. “More power to you and all that. It’s just, ugh, this is all Morgana’s fault.”

“What’s is all Morgana’s fault?” Akechi said, and all of them turned to look at him. He smiled kindly, offering them a wave. “I apologize for being late. I’d intended to only drop something off to the Prosecutor’s Office, but I got a little sidetracked with some additional work,” he explained. He moved to sit next to Yusuke on the other end when Ann stood up abruptly.

“No, you can sit here,” she said.

Akechi looked at Ann, then at Akira who was sitting next to her, then he laughed lightly. “That’s quite alright. You’re already sitting there.”

Then Ann, with speed that Akira didn’t even know she had, comically scrambled over so that she was now sitting square in the space next to Yusuke. “Oh. Haha sorry, I’m sitting here. There’s a spot over there next to Akira now,” she said sweetly, earning yet another groan from both Ryuji and Morgana.

Akechi blinked, still somewhat in shock with the speed at which she’d moved, before shaking his head as he met Akira’s amused smile.

“You’re…quite relentless,” he said with a soft chuckle as he slid into the spot next to Akira, his arm pressing against Akira’s in the tight booth. “So, now that we’re all here, shall we discuss the next target?”

“Akira said, gesturing to his plate, which Yusuke had already pushed away in favor of his sketchpad again. “Eat something first.”

Akechi opened his mouth, but no words came out for a second. “Ah. Th-That’s alright. I’m already a bit tardy to our meeting, so we should begin.”

“Akira persisted, tilting his head. “You didn’t eat at the café.”

“No… I didn’t have time…” Akechi admitted.

“Humor me then,” Akira said with a small smile, dragging the plate over to him.

Akechi finally relented, exhaling with a minute smile himself. “…I suppose I am feeling a bit peckish. Th-Thank you.”

Akira smiled. “Don’t thank me for reminding you to sustain yourself,” he said, nudging the arm that was pressed against his own. “If you starved to death, I’d be pretty sad,” he said, and he’d meant it to be teasing, but the traitorous heat rising at the tip of ears made him look away slightly.
and his throat feel sort of dry. He’d sort of forgotten the others were there too until he heard
Morgana’s unhappy click of the tongue. “So…take care of yourself,” he reminded.

Akechi looked down at his plate, a complicated look crossing over his face. “Then…I would ask
that you take care of yourself too,” he said, finally glancing up to meet Akira’s eyes with a soft and
somewhat unreadable expression on his face as he smiled back.

“That’s it!” Yusuke suddenly exclaimed, and everyone turned to look at him. He was looking at
Akira and Akechi with a gaze that looked like he’d just had an epiphany. “That is the expression of
fondness and love – the purest incarnation of beauty – that I wish to capture!” Akira looked at
Akechi, confused, while the latter boy’s mouth had dropped open in frozen shock.

Akechi seemed to be trying to string together some sort of coherent statement, but to no avail. “Ah-
er…l-what?”

“Please, return to your prior expressions,” Yusuke said determinedly, a pleasant look on his face.

Akira couldn’t help the amusement that bubbled in him as Yusuke stared at them expectantly and
Akechi tried and failed to form an intelligible statement. “It wouldn’t be as natural if we tried to do
it over,” Akira said. “Let’s discuss the next target first, then you can sketch us all you want, hm?”
he asked.

Yusuke paused for a moment. “Ah. Yes. I believe that would be acceptable.”

“You’ve been keeping us in serious suspense man,” Ryuji said. “Who is this target?” He said,
leaning back in his seat.

Akira cleared his throat. He gave them the basic recap: students being targeted, trafficking drugs,
some sort of mafia, how they threaten families and livelihoods and the lack of police intel on the
situation.

“He sounds like the scum of the earth,” Ryuji said animatedly. “What’s the asshole’s name, so we
can take him down?”

“Yeah, did you get a name?” Ann said, leaning forward with an interested expression.

Akira was careful not to look at Akechi. Not yet. “Junya Kaneshiro.”

As soon as the words escaped him, he took the moment to glance over at Akechi, who’d tensed
significantly.

Ryuji clapped his hands together excitedly. “Yes! That’s our leader! Man, you found all that out on
your own? That’s impressive, man.”

Akira sort of smiled. “Not entirely. I had help,” he said, and the others waited for him to continue.
“Makoto Niijima. She helped me.”

“Guess maybe we misjudged her a bit, huh…” Ann pondered. “Still, I can’t forgive her for
keeping silent about Kamoshida. There’s no doubt she had to know what was going on, being the
Akira hummed. “That’s fair. I think there’s a lot more to her than meets the eye, though,” he added. Then he looked each one of them. All who’d had their lives negatively affected by people who took advantage of them just because they could. Just because they had the power to. “She’s not unlike us.”

The others responded by giving him thoughtful looks. Ryuji kicked against the leg of the table. “I guess Miss Prez has her own issues, huh?” he said, scratching his head. “Well, if you trust her,” he added. “Then she’s good in my book,” he said with a grin, and Akira really wasn’t sure how to handle being the person that was responsible for who they could and could not trust.

“But that as it may—” Akechi was the first to speak up. “About this Kaneshiro. I’m unsure if he is a suitable target for us.”

“What do you mean?” Ryuji asked.

“Akira’s onto something,” Morgana said, eying Akechi carefully. “Taking down someone that the police can’t even find will help us get our name out there.”

Akechi placed his hands on the table. “I understand,” he started slowly. “However, we must consider the consequences of such an action. For instance, taking out the leader may cause one even more brutal to take his place. We must consider the structure of the organization and the rippling effect that it may cause.”

Akira shook his head. “I don’t think so. There’s a chance, but let’s consider that if our change of heart is successful, Kaneshiro will be willing to give up the names of all the members in the mafia.”

Akechi opened his mouth, but it didn’t look like he had a rebuttal prepared. “I see…” he said. Quiet. Contemplative. Calculated. “I still believe we should take some time to consider this before taking action.”

“Are the police any closer to finding him?” Ann asked. “Akira did mention that the police have had trouble catching him.”

“Well…” Akechi nervously chuckled. “That is to say—I don’t believe we’ve gotten too many leads on that case.”

“Well, I think it’s a great idea!” Ryuji exclaimed. “If this asshole’s really ruining students’ lives, then we have to do somethin’ to stop him! Plus, Morgana’s got a point. It’ll get our name out there too if we can take him down.”

“I must concur,” Yusuke said, tapping against his open book with his sketch pencil.

Ann nodded cautiously, glancing at Akechi’s stoic expression. “I think he’s right, too. I think it’d be good to be able to take him down, especially since the police have been trying to catch him for so long,” she said.

“I agree with Lady Ann,” Morgana said, not missing his chance to look at her with hearts in his eyes. “In any case, I think we’re all in agreement.”

Akira flickered his eyes to Akechi. “Unless…” he drifted off. He didn’t think it would be likely that Akechi would be the only one to disagree.
Akechi pursed his lips thoughtfully. He didn’t speak for a few moments, leaving the rest of them in a terse silence as they waited for him to give his opinion. “Certainly, I agree that he should be taken down,” Akechi said carefully. He slowly brought his eyes up with a charming smile. “Very well… Let us proceed, shall we?”

Akira smiled, though it wasn’t nearly as big as the others, since he could see Akechi’s hand balled up around his thigh under the table.

Luckily, before he could say anything, Ryuji spoke up. “Hey, isn’t that Miss President over there?” he said, gesturing over to where a group of girls were about to exit.

Akira leaned over to get a better look. Makoto was among one of the girls with them, and as he looked, she just so happened to glance over at the same time. She stopped when she saw him, and he gave her an inviting smile, gesturing for her to come over.

She gripped her bag a little tighter, furrowing her brow for a moment before saying something to her friends and walking over to them.

“Hello,” she greeted kindly as she came to a stop. “It’s quite a surprise to see all of you here. Though, to be completely honest, I noticed you earlier. I hope you’ve all been well.”

“Did you sing?” Akira asked playfully.

Makoto looked a bit taken aback. “O-Of course not. I don’t sing.”

Akira clicked his teeth, leaning back in his seat. “That’s a shame.”

She brushed her hair back with a faint smile. “Besides, I think I’d hardly call what we heard tonight singing.”

“I’ll say,” Ryuji said, and Akira was glad to see his friend at least making somewhat of an effort to be more conversational with her. “I told ‘em it sounded more like screeching.”

Makoto chuckled politely at that. “That’s an apt comparison.” Her gaze became slightly more concerned when it fell onto Akechi. “Akechi-kun, you look a little ill.”

Akira turned to look at him, and sure enough, he did look ill. It looked like the color had drained from his face, and from their closeness, Akira could tell that he’d tensed up even more. He knew that the revelation that Kaneshiro was the target, but he didn’t think it’d have affected him this much.

He hadn’t meant to do it. Really, he hadn’t.

Without warning, his hand went up to Akechi’s forehead to check for a fever. Akechi immediately jumped at the sudden contact, blinking a few times to come back to reality as he look at Akira, who’d withdrawn his hand. Well, at least it didn’t feel like he’d suddenly had a fever.

“Sorry,” he offered. “I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m fine,” he said, throwing on a chipper smile. “I apologize. There’s been a lot of additional stress as of late, and I suppose it’s piling up in a way I didn’t anticipate, haha.”

“What did I tell you about apologizing?” Akira chastised quietly as he picked up his glass of water and handed it to him.
“That’s quite al-”

“Goro,” he said, and he again, he hadn’t meant to. The word had flown out of him faster than he could think about who he was with and where he was. Akechi closed his mouth, then took the glass of water with a nod of thanks.

“What’s a girl gotta do to get someone to take care of me that way?” Ann huffed with a sigh.

“I’d do it for the rest of you too,” Akira said, mainly because of the curious way that Makoto was staring him down. He knew he’d have to answer some questions from her tomorrow. He turned his attention back to Makoto. “Sorry. We were talking?”

“Ah. It was nothing,” she said, readjusting her own bag. “I was just noting the karaoke talent. I suppose I should be going after all, anyway. It was nice to see you all. I hope you feel better, Akechi-kun,” she said. She turned to walk away, then stopped and…smiled? A genuine one, it looked like, with a slight air of amusement.

“You…certainly bring your cat to interesting places, Akira-kun,” she said, tilting her head to gesture at the cat.

Akira turned to Morgana, who let out a very convincing *meow*. He thought for a moment at how Makoto would react when they were finally able to get her into the Metaverse, and she was able to see the Morgana was in fact an integral part of their thief business. Akira smiled back at her, resting his elbow against the table. “He lives for danger, what can I say?” The others likely wouldn’t know what he’d meant when he’d said that to her, but the positive crinkle around Makoto’s eyes was enough for him.

“He doesn’t seem to be the only one,” she replied. “I should get back to my friends. Enjoy the rest of your evening, everyone,” she said before ducking her head and trailing after her friends towards the exit.

“Huh. She doesn’t seem as uptight as I thought. What’d you do to her?” Ryuji asked.

Akira chuckled. “I didn’t do anything. I just talked to her.” He pushed up his glasses. “In any case, we’re all in agreement, yes?” he said, glancing over at Akechi, who’d somehow gulped down the water already. He nodded tentatively, following the others words of confirmation.

“Alright!” Ryuji said, raising his fist half-way in the air with a grin. “Let’s do this!”

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Akira felt a little bad that the second phase of his plan didn’t involve the others just yet. They were ready and willing to figure out how to get into Kaneshiro’s Palace, but with the knowledge that they would be stopped before they could even truly enter the Palace meant that it would be easier for Akira to kill two birds with one stone: become a customer before infiltrating the Palace, and bring Makoto in.

When he’d told Morgana the plan, the cat had nearly flipped, but he assured him that this could work.

Or, more apt, it *had* to.

“You know, you and Akechi-kun seem very close,” Makoto said from the bench they’d met at. She’d lowered her open book onto her lap and was staring at him with those curious eyes again. “I took note of his expression when we confronted who I assume to be one of Kaneshiro’s lackeys. I
also noticed a few observations when I saw the group of you at karaoke, both before and while I came to speak to you.”

Akira was starting to wonder when he’d be able to escape the questions about he and Akechi. His head throbbed lightly as he scratched his head. “I guess we are.”

“You told me he was planning to betray you.”

“I wouldn’t lie about that.”

“So then—” Makoto started, her voice remaining even but with a frustrated edge to it. “What’s going on? Is this some sort of game? Or is this more intimate than you let on, because—”

Against the pounding of his head, he felt the pain get worse. “Nijima-san, please,” Akira said, closing his eyes.

And she stopped, thankfully. When he opened his eyes again, Makoto’s gaze had softened significantly, filled with some sort of understanding. “You…don’t have to call me that either,” she told him. She stood up from the bench, placing her book into her bag, and extended her hand to him.

He didn’t need it to stand, but the symbolic gesture wasn’t lost on him. “Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” She asked him as he took her hand and stood up.

“No,” he admitted. “That’s why I told you what I told you. I’m not thinking clearly.”

She seemed to hesitate at her next question, but she looked him straight in the eyes when she asked it. “Because you have feelings for him?”

Akira blinked. He’d spent a lot of time not thinking about what things meant since he wasn’t sure he had the words for it. But under Makoto’s scrutinizing gaze, he wondered if talking about it might actually do some good. He swallowed, his hands shoved as far deep into his pockets as it would go, and nodded.

Makoto’s face melted into one of both pity and understanding. He wasn’t sure that he liked that. “Say no more. However, I will say that I find it very reckless of you to develop feelings for someone that you already know how plans to turn on you.”

At that, Akira chuckled – bitter and kind of ironic – but he couldn’t help it from escaping. “You say it like I had a choice in the matter.”

Makoto hummed. “I…guess that’s true. Perhaps I’m thinking of it from too concrete of an angle. I suppose there is much I have to learn when it comes to romance,” she said thoughtfully, though it didn’t come with the same sense of obliviousness as it had when Yusuke said it. Akira looked down at her, with her furrowed brow and pensive expression on her face – presumably thinking about romance – and he couldn’t help but smile.

“I’ll be your teacher,” he said in a light, playful tone.

She blinked at him once. Then - he was surprised to see her laugh at that. It was the first genuine laugh he’d heard from her in this timeline.

“Sorry,” she said as she covered her mouth with her hand. Her eyes still sparkled with amusement and somehow she managed to look graceful even when she couldn’t control her laughter. “I’m not just so sure that you are the one I should be approaching for assistance in that regard, considering
your situation.”

“Ouch. Talk about a critical hit.”

Makoto smiled warmly at him, and he grinned back in response.

He wondered if maybe in another timeline, things would be different between them. If he’d only been able to get Sae to take the phone – he wouldn’t be here, and he could be—No. There was no point in thinking about the past. Dwelling on it was pointless. He’d never been the type to dwell on it before, so it wouldn’t help to start now. He was here now. He had to focus on what he could do here.

“You ready?” he asked. “Whatever happens,” he said, thinking of the blackmail that would likely be coming. “I need you to trust me.”

She nodded, taking a breath. “Alright. I…trust you.”

The plan was set after that. He wasn’t sure where Makoto had found the two that had led her to Kaneshiro, but he ultimately left it up to fate as they walked around searching for any suspicious characters. He hoped that somehow she would wander over to the same spot over her own volition, though it wouldn’t be because she’d stomped off in an attempt to not feel useless.

Akechi’s words also burned in the back of his head. *It was just that man. How much do you know about him?* Akira wasn’t sure if that man would pop up again, but he kept a look out just in case. Even though he knew Akechi was ultimately working against them, his warning seemed sincere. A part of Akira wanted to confront the man, but since he was with Makoto, he had to push that thought aside until it was just him. It didn’t matter much, anyway. He didn’t even see him anywhere.

Eventually, they were able to run into a few of Kaneshiro’s lackeys. They’d approached them with the guise of making extra money, and Makoto wasted no time with speaking Kaneshiro’s name and demanding that they take the two of them to meet him in person.

He didn’t know whether to be impressed or slightly shell-shocked. Maybe a little of both. Miraculously, it had worked, but a part of Akira knew that they could really just lead them to an unknown location and kill them without a second thought.

As he was shoved into the backseat of a car, he tried to move as stealthily as possible. He reached down for his phone, which was already pulled up to his contacts. He’d told the others that they should meet at the hideout at around this time, so hopefully everyone was already together. He wriggled around until he could hit the button on someone’s name – he’d been aiming for Ryuji or Akechi but any of them would do.

“Hey man! We’re all here! Where the hell are ya?” Ryuji said cheerfully – and loudly - on the other end. Akira turned down the call volume as the men turned back to look at them in the front seat. Akira offered them a cheeky cough in response, and one of them glared at him before turning back to the front seat.

He looked over at Makoto, who met his eyes and gave him a confident nod.

“You’d better be taking us to Kaneshiro,” Makoto said clearly as Akira subtly leaned the phone towards the sound of her voice.

As for where they would be, the others wouldn’t have been able to follow their car.
So, he would leave it up to fate. And fate this time took the form of a certain brunette who had to know where Kaneshiro’s hideout was.

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As expected, they were taken to Kaneshiro, but surprisingly, the others showed up not long after. He figured it would take them a bit of time to arrive, but it the others had arrived at almost the same time.

“You got followed, you dumb shits!” Kaneshiro had said, when the others burst into the room.

“No, there’s no way we did!” One of the lackeys exclaimed nervously.

They started speaking, but Akira wasn’t listening. As the others stood there, he noticed that Akechi was missing. If he hadn’t been with them, then how…?

“You brats sniffing around and barging in like you own the joint,” Kaneshiro said, and Akira blinked, turning his attention back to the mafia boss. He would think about that later. “I’d kill you all, but maybe you’d be more useful to me in other ways,” he mused.

Suddenly, the sound of a phone ringing could be heard, and Kaneshiro made an annoyed sound as he reached into his pocket to pull it out with an irritated expression on his face. When he looked down on the phone, he pursed his lips before answering. “What?” he said. Akira didn’t know what was being said, but he saw Kaneshiro glance over at them with a curious expression before he leaned back into the phone. “Hm. I see. I want double for this,” he said, not giving the other party a chance to respond before hanging up the phone. Then he turned back to them, tilting his head for a moment before holding up his phone and snapping a picture of them.

“What the hell?” Ryuji exclaimed.

“Hm, I think I’ll call this one, debauchery of minors at a club,” he hummed. “I want five million yen, or I’m turning this over to the police.” Five million? That was even more than last time. If it was nearly impossible before, it was definitely more so this time around. “Or maybe I’ll just kill you,” he added plainly. He leaned forward in his seat. “You have two weeks.”

Akira’s mouth dropped. Five million yen in two weeks. Why had he raised the stakes so much higher this time? It didn’t matter much, since unbeknownst to Kaneshiro they were planning to change his heart, but it certainly made their timetable more crunched.

He didn’t have much time to think about it before Kaneshiro waved at them to get out, and his security in the room swiftly shoved them out the building.

They convened outside, and Akira’s head was still trying to make sense of what had just happened.

“Are you all alright?” Akira heard Akechi’s voice approach them, and he turned to the brunette, blinking in confusion at his sudden appearance.

“He said it’d be better if someone stayed outside just in case one of them came,” Morgana explained when he took notice of Akira’s confusion, though he sounded like he was suspecting some alternative reason. Akira didn’t have the chance to wonder how Akechi had convinced them of Kaneshiro’s location. It didn’t matter much anyway. It’d been done.

He nodded, pressing his hand to his forehead. “Akira?” Ann said unsurely.

With a few blinks, he waved himself off as being fine, and his eyes suddenly focused on Makoto,
who looked a little shaken. “Makoto-chan,” he started, taking a step towards her. He placed a hand on her shoulder, and she jumped slightly, meeting his eyes. “You okay?” he asked.

She took a breath, and Akira could feel the others’ eyes on them. “Yes. Thank you. Although, it seems I’ve gotten us into some trouble,” she said. “Five million yen…"

“What happened?” Akechi asked. Akira wasn’t looking at him, but it sounded like he was tense.

“It wasn’t you,” Akira assured her as Ryuji quickly explained to Akechi the events that transpired. He wanted to tell her that this was necessary, but he’d be able to show her soon enough. He turned to the others, and he could see now that Akechi had stiffened considerably. “If we’re going into his Palace, I thought it was critical he see our faces. It might be important,” he offered cheekily.

“Dude,” Ryuji said in a hushed tone, gesturing with his head to Makoto.

“Er…Palace?” Makoto said.

“We’re all stuck in this together,” Akira continued, catching Morgana’s eye, and the cat gave him a nod of encouragement. “I think we should show her. She deserves that much.”

“Show me?” Makoto asked. “Show me what?”

The others exchanged a glance. “She is in the same boat as us,” Yusuke commented, and Akira threw him a look of gratitude.

“Surely you aren’t serious,” Akechi voiced, his tone laced with disbelief. He cleared his throat, then fell silent for an extra beat. Akira figured he was weighing his options. He’d already shown some opposition to targeting Kaneshiro in the first place. “But…” he said, a bit of his polite smile already chipped at the edges. “You raise a fair point.”

“I’m fine with it,” Ryuji said, and Ann nodded.

“Yeah…” Ann said, then she turned to Makoto. “Thanks for helping Akira. He’s told us how helpful you were to him,” she noted, and Akira smiled. He knew it was probably hard for her to say that, considering her thoughts about Shiho and the school’s handling of it.

“Oh,” Makoto said, bringing a hand up to her mouth. “It was nothing. I think he helped me every bit as much as I did him, though.”

“Let’s meet up tomorrow and try to figure out those key words, ‘kay?” Ryuji suggested.

“Keywords?”

“It’ll make sense soon enough,” Akira assured her. Then he half-smiled. “Well, maybe not completely,” he added, since he still had trouble wrapping his mind around the whole concept himself, even after months.

She nodded slowly. “A-Alright. I must say,” she added. “I wasn’t completely sure of the plan, but you handled it exceptionally well, considering the danger we were in,” she said to Akira.

He shrugged. “I was more concerned with making sure nothing happened to you.” And he could’ve sworn he saw a faint hint of pink color her cheeks. “Not that you couldn’t take care of yourself,” he added.

“It was quite reckless, considering the adversary,” Yusuke noted. “But I am glad that you both are
alright – and that we were able to get a step closer to this target.”

Akechi stood there stoically for a moment. “We should disperse for the night then,” he said, interrupting their conversation. His tone had hardened slightly.

Akira furrowed his brow. It was hard to tell, but Akira had taken to some of his nuances. He noticed the way the fingernail of Akechi’s middle fingers pressed harshly into his thumbs.

“Hey,” Akira started, but Akechi seemed to know that he was about to ask him something that he probably didn’t want to answer.

“It’s getting late. Let me know what time we’re all meeting up tomorrow,” he said, already turning on his heel.

The others nodded. Akira almost opened his mouth to ask if he could walk back with him, but Makoto still looked a little shaken. “Do you want me to walk you back?” Akira said to Makoto.

He could see Akechi stiffen up even more.

“Hm? You’re very kind, Akira-kun,” she said. “I’m capable of it on my own, but I’ll take the company.”

“Alright, then I’ll see you back at home,” Morgana said to him, and he just nodded.

Makoto looked at the source of the meowing that she was hearing, then back at Akira with a dumbfounded expression.

“It’ll all be explained,” was all he could say, and she didn’t seem too placated by this, but she nodded nonetheless, at the very least just to placate Akira himself.

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Akira wasn’t sure what force of nature brought him to Akechi’s apartment after walking Makoto back, but he couldn’t get Akechi’s face out of his brain. He didn’t look hurt; it was something different. Something that he wasn’t sure how to place with the rest of Akechi’s nuanced faces. He hid most of them from the world, but Akira was starting to catch onto them in those moments of vulnerability.

He’d called Sojiro to let him know that he would be back late, much to his caretaker’s frustration. He promised that he’d help him out at the café to make up for it, and while Sojiro complained about how he needed to take care of his own cat, he begrudgingly allowed it.

So, he’d found himself standing in front of Akechi’s apartment. He could hear some noises from the inside, so at the very least someone was home.

He took a breath, then offered a few knocks on the door.

No answer.

Akira furrowed his brow. There was definitely someone there, so he knocked again, a little louder than before.

After a few more seconds and with Akira about to give up and head back, he heard the click of the door, and Akechi was on the other end. He was holding a book that Akira could see the title of, and from the angle that the door was open, he could see Yusuke sitting at his canvas, though Akira
knew him well enough to be able to tell that he wasn’t grossly invested in what he was looking at.

“Akira,” Akechi said, a slight bit of surprise in his voice.

Akira dug his hands in his pockets. “Hey,” he offered lamely.

He tilted his head to the side. “Was there something you wanted?” his voice had gotten that slight hardness to it again. And he still hadn’t opened the door to even let him in further. So something was bothering him.

“I wanted to talk to you,” Akira said.

After another moment where Akira had to seriously consider whether or not Akechi would just shut the door on him, the brunette offered him a smile. “You…make it difficult to deny you anything, you know,” he said, something akin to sadness in his tone as he opened the door further for him to walk inside.

When he was in, Akechi turned to Yusuke. “Ah. Yusuke,” Akechi started. “Would you mind giving us a moment?”

As expected, Yusuke wasn’t entirely distracted, so he blinked a few times before looking at him. “Oh. Akira. Yes, of course. I was considering taking my sketchbook to gain inspiration from outside anyway.”

He stood, then rummaged around for his sketchbook and sketch pencils, as well as the spare key before he said something of a goodbye as he walked out.

When it was just the two of them, Akechi shut his book completely, then placed it at the coffee table. He picked up a half-finished cup of tea that was sitting on the coaster and made his way into the kitchen. Ah. He must’ve been reading while Yusuke was painting.

Akechi ran the sink and rinsed out his mug. “Would you like something to drink?” he said, a smile on his face. His eyes betrayed him though, and Akira frowned.

“No, I’m okay,” he said slowly. “It seems like something’s bothering you.”

Akechi turned off the sink. He let out a laugh that wasn’t entirely believable. “Is that your concern? I assure you, I’m fine,” he said.

Akira hummed. “You wouldn’t have asked Yusuke to leave if that were the case.”

Akechi paused. He closed his eyes for a moment longer than an average blink and inhaled. “I think it would be best if we didn’t speak of it.”

Akira was all too-used to other people confiding in him with their problems, but he knew that that didn’t fly with Akechi. He’d already inevitably revealed parts of himself to the detective without intending to. The words had just flowed out of him. Somehow, he got the feeling that if he opened his can of worms, it wouldn’t be as easy as it usually was when the others confided in him. “Do you want to anyway?” He said quietly.

“Akira,” Akechi started, and Akira imperceptibly jumped out of his thoughts. “I have the utmost faith in your abilities as a leader… More so than I originally thought, if I were to be completely honest,” he said. Finally, he turned to look at Akira. “However, your actions today were very reckless.”
So…that was it? “You were worried?” Akira blinked. “I had it under control,” he started.

“You could’ve gotten yourself killed,” Akechi said on the heels of his statement. The words sounded odd, coming from his murderer. It made Akira’s mind spin a little.

“Everything we’re doing could get us killed,” Akira countered.

“These-” he started, then stopped. He shook his head, pressing his finger to his temple. “These are dangerous people. I…If you keep proceeding this way, I can’t help you,” Akechi said, and it sounded like something had triggered inside of him.

It sounded like he was close to his breaking point.

“Help me…?” Akira said.

“You won’t reconsider targeting Kaneshiro?”

Akira took a step closer to him. “If you tell me why I shouldn’t, I’m willing to listen. But he’s hurt a lot of people.” He took a breath. “I know these are dangerous people that we’re going up against, but that’s all the more reason we should be taking them down. Someone has to show them that they’re not invincible.”

Akechi let out a humorless laugh. “You’re so stubborn. I suppose that’s why you’re the leader. You’re determination is admirable.”

“I’m just doing what anyone else would do with this power.”

“No,” he said, somewhat sadly. “Not everyone.” Akechi leaned back against the kitchen counter. “You could’ve died today.”

“You said that already,” Akira pointed out in an attempt to lighten the mood.

“When I considered that possibility, I-” Akechi cut himself off again. “I was worried for your safety, and I acted without thinking.”

Akira put his hands into his pockets, gulping down his nerves as he tried to ignore the irony of it all. “That’s normal, isn’t it? You worry about your friends. That’s okay.”

“No, it’s-” Akechi sounded frustrated with himself. “It’s not okay. I’m not sure you truly recognize the danger that you were placed in today, and-”

Akira didn’t know what to do. Words didn’t seem to be helping much, so he did the only thing he could think of. He reached over and took his hand, the warmth enveloping him. And then he brought his hand up and pressed against the spot over his heart. “Hey. I’m alright, see? I’m alive.”

Akechi met his eyes, and Akira felt like he was trying to stare into the far-reaches of his soul. The urge to look away nearly overcame him, but he stood his ground. He felt Akechi’s fingers involuntarily flex over the spot, seemingly grasping for something – as though he could reach through and grasp his heart right there - but there was only the thin layer of his shirt.

Abruptly, Akechi took his hand back like it’d been touching hot coals, except that Akira’s hand followed it like a magnet. He couldn’t help it. He couldn’t think clearly over the sound of his heart thumping loudly against his chest.

“Akira…?” Akechi started, another unspoken question hanging off of his tongue. Akira felt his
breathing still as Akechi’s eyes darted across his face until it finally dropped down to his mouth. He shifted so that he was infinitesimally closer.

*Is there a kind of good we choose to have not because we desire its consequences, but because we delight in it for its own sake?*

“Just once?” Akira said. He’d thought that the words had just flitted through his thoughts, but when Akechi slowly and somewhat nervously nodded, he realized that they’d come out as a whisper.

Akira felt the heat rise to his cheeks in full force this time. Just once, he could make a bad decision. He was allowed that much, right? He brought his hand up to cup Akechi’s cheek in his hand, hesitating for a moment before placing it against his face and running his thumb along his cheek and then under his eye.

“You haven’t been sleeping.”

“I believe I have you to thank for that,” Akechi admitted, his voice no louder than a whisper even though it was just the two of them.

And Akira didn’t even realize that he’d moved him further against the counter until he felt Akechi inhale just before he leaned in and pressed his lips against his.

It was a little awkward, and Akira wasn’t really sure what to do with his other hand, so he placed it against the counter and sort of…stopped thinking about it. He closed his eyes, allowing himself to focus on the feel of Akechi’s lips against his. They were softer than he’d imagined, and he tasted like honey – probably from the tea.

The thought occurred to Akira that maybe they should stop now, but he felt Akechi coyly pull him closer, and another thought occurred that since they’d only agreed to do this once he should maybe try to go for the world record for longest kiss.

At some point, Akechi breathed for air and Akira used that moment to pull him back in after a second and deepening their kiss. Their tongues met and danced against each other, clumsy, experimental, and full of pent-up desire, and when Akira pressed their bodies together and heard the muffled groan that the brunette let out between their kiss, he swallowed back the urge to explore the ways he could somehow elicit more of these noises from Akechi.

Somewhere down the line, Akria once again realized that enough was probably enough, but his brain felt like it was short-circuiting. He was only somewhat aware of his actions at that point, and it was hard for him to think of anything except the moment right then. He probably shouldn’t have, but he trailed his lips downwards, planting kisses against Akechi’s neck.

He heard Akechi bite back another one of those noises.

Huh. Good to know.

“Just once?” Akechi chuckled breathlessly, something teasing in his tone even as Akira could feel him trying to maintain his breathing.

“You want me to stop?” Akira hummed against his throat with the same playful tone. He’d even raised an eyebrow, even though Akechi couldn’t see it.

“I…didn’t say that.”

Akira chuckled, kissing his neck once more before bringing his mouth back to his, and their
mouths met, a little sloppier than last time, but not nearly as coy and nervous.

Akira felt Akechi’s hand move up to Akira’s neck, and oh, he’d never touched him there. Akira barely had time to process that thought as Akechi’s hand fully rested against his neck—

--And in that instant, a flash of a gun, a sinister smile flickered through his memory and the image of those same hands potentially wrapping around his neck – and with that, the fall of everything – caused Akira to jerk back reflexively.

Akechi’s hands hovered in the air for a moment as he stared at Akira, and Akira swallowed as he reached up to the spot where Akechi’s hands had been. He wasn’t going to do anything. Akira knew that. And yet he’d still… he couldn’t shake the thought that he could have, if he’d wanted to. After all, Akira had felt himself become vulnerable at that moment.

Akira looked at Akechi again. In those pools of brownish-red, Akira saw something break. Akira felt his head start to throb as he opened his mouth to say something, anything—

“I-” That was all Akira could say before he pressed the palm against his head. It hadn’t felt this bad since the day that he’d gone into Mementos with Akechi the first time, when he’d asked him to join them in their Thief business. Except, it felt infinitely worse this time, like someone was drilling into all angles of his head.

“Another headache?” Akechi said, still somewhat hesitant and somewhat hurt, but the concern was also evident in his voice.

“No, it’s—I’m okay,” Akira said, except—when did the ringing begin?

He saw Akechi reach for him, then stop at the last minute. He’d caused that apprehension, and he hated that.

“You should sit down,” Akechi said.

Akira shook his head, but his head started to feel dizzy and even the slight shake of it made him feel nauseous. He took a step, but somehow the room had started to rotate and he lost his balance.

Then his vision blurred out.

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Akira’s vision came back, he found himself hoping that he wouldn’t have to deal with Igor and the Velvet Room. As a bright light came into focus, he felt silent gratitude that that wasn’t the case as he tried to recall his bearings and where he was.

“You’re awake.” It was Akechi’s voice. Akechi.

Oh, right.

His eyes widened and he sat up – a bit too quickly because he felt his head throb lightly. He looked around. He was on Akechi’s couch, and Akechi was sitting at the armchair. Yusuke was sitting in front of his canvas, and from the look and stance of him, it didn’t look like he’d be able to be disturbed.

“How…are you feeling?” Akechi asked. He picked up the glass of water that was near him and handed it to Akira. “You fainted.”
Akira took a large sip of the water. “I did?” So it had been like that other headache. “Thank you for taking care of me, then.”

Akechi hummed.

“Should we…discuss before?” Akira said after more silence. Akechi flickered his slightly widened eyes over to Yusuke engrossed in his painting. Shades of red and black and white swirled together and the beginnings of silhouette filled the canvas. “Oh, that’s fine,” Akira told him. “Yusuke,” Akira said. No response. He shifted over to Yusuke. “Hey, Yusuke!” he said with more volume. Then he turned to Akechi. “See?”

“You…know him quite well.”

Akira shrugged, scratching his head. “I guess.” Then he sighed. “Listen, Goro…” He started. Except, he’d sort of expecting Akechi to cut him off or something. Instead, he waited patiently for Akira to finish his statement, and Akira realized that he didn’t know what he was planning to say after that. “I didn’t mean to react like that.”

Akechi nodded slowly. He didn’t meet his eyes. “While you were resting, I thought about your words and your actions. Did…you think I was going to harm you?”

“That’s not—” Akira started, but what was he supposed to say? That it wasn’t true? Would he have even believed him if he’d tried to give a lie like that?

“Were you…scared of me?” he said quietly.

Akira shut his eyes for a moment, shaking his head before he met Akechi’s solemn gaze. “Scared’s not the right word.”

“Apprehensive. Anxious. Hesitant. Do any of those words sound more fitting?” Akechi asked evenly, tilting his head with a tone that didn’t show anything but polite curiosity, though Akira knew there was more bubbling underneath it.

“…Can you blame me?” Akira finally said.

Akechi let out a dry laugh. “I suppose I shouldn’t. In fact, I find it more valiant that you exercise such caution.” He thumbed at the open page of his book. “You expressed that you still do not entirely trust the circumstances surrounding my persona, so you shouldn’t be blamed for reacting as such.” He sounded so distant, even though they were both sitting in the same room.

“It doesn’t feel valiant.”

“…In any case, it doesn’t matter. We said just once, correct?” Akechi said with a tight smile. “We don’t need to address it. It doesn’t need to be an issue.”

“And when it is?”

Akechi cleared his throat. “…I’m perfectly capable of controlling my emotions. It won’t be an issue, right, leader?” he emphasized.

Akira stared at him wordlessly. Then he nodded, tiredly. The leader, who always had everything together. That’s who he had to be. “Right,” he said. “I should go.”

“I agree. I think that would be best,” Akechi said calmly, like he was training his voice to be that way.
“Hm? You’re awake!” Yusuke’s voice arose through the silence, and, despite the sharpness in his chest, Akira laughed at Yusuke’s obliviousness as he turned towards his friend. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine,” he assured the artist. He even gave him a smile to further prove the point.

Yusuke furrowed his brow. “Are you certain? Your smile does not appear as bright as I am used to.” He might miss a lot, but sometimes Yusuke was more perceptive than he let on, especially if he noticed something like how forced his smile was.

Akira patted Yusuke's thigh with a smile that was a little more genuine thanks to Yusuke’s concern. “I’ve been better, but I’m fine. Promise.”

Yusuke glanced over at Akechi, who nodded minutely, and he turned back to Akira with a bit of an unsure gaze. “Very well. Do make sure you rest before our excursion tomorrow.”

Akira nodded and stood up. “You too. No late night paintings,” he said lightly. He started towards the door.

Akechi didn’t move from his seat.

“Are you not going to accompany him to the door as you normally do?” Yusuke asked point-blank.


“That’s okay. You look comfortable,” Akira said. “I think I can make it to the door in one piece,” he joked with a short laugh that didn’t entirely feel like his own.

Then that was it. Akechi nodded, and he didn’t say anything else. Neither did Akira. What else was there to say, anyway? _Hey, I’m sorry I thought you were going to kill me but you did before so can you blame me?_

As he opened the door and then turned to close it behind him. He could see Akechi press his fingers against his forehead as he leaned his elbow against the armrest.

Yusuke turned to him and leaned forward against his legs. He extended his brush to him, and Akechi gave him a small, broken smile in return as he reached out towards it—

And then Akira shut the door behind him.

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“What do you mean you kissed him?”

Akira expected that. In fact, he’d even braced himself to be clawed to death. Morgana was standing with his tail straight out and murder in his eyes.

“How much sushi will placate you?” Akira said cheekily.

“Why would you do something so ridiculously stupid like that?” Morgana continued.

He felt like a child being scolded by a parent. He sort of deserved it though. “We were only going to do it once.”

“Then…As much as I hate it happened, do you think it’ll cause a problem?” Morgana said.
Akira leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. “I don’t know. He knows it’s because I thought he was going to hurt me, meaning on some level, he knows that my distrust is to the point where I think he’s dangerous enough to kill me. That can’t be good, right?”

Morgana huffed through his nostrils. “Of course not. But all you have to do is pretend like it didn’t happen. You’ve been doing that all along with pretending he didn’t shoot you, so as much as I want to claw your eyes out, I don’t think it’s that detrimental.”

Akira’s face softened, and he opened his eyes to look at Morgana. Though the cat still looked annoyed, his face had become more reassuring.

“I couldn’t get the image of him killing me out of my head.”

“This certainly sounds like a healthy relationship,” Morgana said sarcastically, and Akira pursed his lips, pressing his finger to Morgana’s nose. “Argh, I’m just saying!” he said, wriggling his nose away from Akira as he smiled lightly.

“No kicking a man while he’s down,” Akira joked. His smile dimmed a bit. “I want to trust him, but I can’t. Not yet.”

“Good. He killed you. And for all we know, someone on their side is still trying to get rid of you,” he noted, and Akira didn’t miss the fact that Morgana had changed it from Akechi specifically to “someone on their side.” “Anyway, I’m surprised I have to say this, but I’d be more surprised if you did trust him. Plus, I’d have to claw your skin off, so that would be unfortunate too.”

“That would be unfortunate,” Akira hummed playfully. He shook his head. “I think we’ll be fine now. Maybe we just needed to get that one kiss out of our system.”

“Well if that long time you spent at the bathhouse as soon as you got back was any indication then probably not just kissing so-”

“Okay, okay!” he said quickly, waving his hand as Morgana snickered. “What did I say about kicking a man when he’s down?” Akira groaned.

“Well, if I can’t claw your skin off, I have to take my wins when I can.”

“…That’s fair.”

Morgana yawned. “In any case, you should get some sleep so we can get ready for tomorrow. All of this business with Kaneshiro has been stressful,” he said, and Akira nodded. “Was it like this the last time?”

“After Makoto and I got taken to him last time--” Akira started.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Morgana cut him off, and Akira looked at him. “I thought you said last time it was just Makoto, and then we ended up tailing the car.”

“Hm?” Akira’s head started to hurt lightly. He reached up and rubbed light circles around the center of his forehead as he waited for the pain to subside. He felt like his mind had gone fuzzy around that for second. Like he could think of everything except what Morgana was asking him about.

“Akira…?” Morgana said worriedly. Akira blinked a few times. “Are you okay?”

He nodded. “Ah…Yes. I-Sorry. You’re right, that is what happened the last time.”
“Did you…just misremember something that happened in the last timeline?” Morgana said with wide eyes.

“I…didn’t misremember. I just wasn’t thinking straight because of my headache,” Akira said uncertainly. He felt odd.

“The fainting headache is also concerning,” Morgana said. “You think…You think something with the other timeline is causing this?”

He thought about the last timeline and how they’d confronted Kaneshiro. It still felt a little fuzzy, like he was remembering a dream rather than an actual, other reality. Morgana continued to look at him curiously.

“Let’s just get some rest, okay?” Akira said, clearing his throat.

Which was ironic, because he spent that night without a wink of sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I don’t even ship Makoto/Akira in any way but wow their interactions were so much fun to write lol

Next up: Awkward adventures in a Palace and out with two boys who aren’t quite sure how to act around each other.
**Chapter Summary**

More of an interlude chapter here before we enter the Futaba arc.

**Chapter Notes**

Streamlined Makoto’s arc sorryyyyyyy. Consider this the interlude before the Futaba arc! Enjoy some nice friendship fluff, some subtle Akeshu, and Akechi confidants! There is not nearly enough angst in this chap and for some reason that makes me very sad lmao

In other news, I apologize if updates are more spread out….at the end of this week (so, two days LOL), I’m moving…..to another country (O_O) so I’m going to be spending a lot of time getting settled and used to the new culture before I start working at my new job (which will also take some time to adjust to). Trust me, I will not be abandoning this story. It means so much to me that so many of you love it, and I love it just as much, and I hold it very dear to my heart, even as I become more infuriated with the realization of how poorly done Akechi’s character is in the game lmao

As always, THANK YOU for all the lovely kudos, comments, and bookmarks! They seriously give me so much life. You guys are the best. Now, enjoy the obligatory sickfic chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Whew, nice job Queen!” Ryuji said as he climbed back into the Mona-mobile, his footsteps echoing in the eeriness of Mementos.

Makoto smiled. “Thank you. But it was a team effort. I simply dealt the finishing blow.”

Kaneshiro’s Palace had gone just about as well as Akira could’ve hoped for. All that was left now was to await his change of heart. Even though Akechi had been opposed to it, eventually, he’d relented. Akira was certain that something had gone on behind the scenes for that with Akechi’s boss, but he wasn’t exactly able to push the issue.

“You and Joker work well together,” Yusuke commented. “It is quite the synergy.”

Akira looked over at Makoto, who smiled at him. “You think so?” he asked her.

“I think it’s just because we think similarly in terms of battle strategy. Not to mention, I think by spending time with him, I’ve gotten more apt in my own strategic abilities.”

“I don’t know,” Akira said, scratching the back of his head. “You don’t need me for that.”

Makoto shook her head with a lingering smile. “I disagree. Your company has been a breath of
“Well, shucks,” he teased, and she laughed gracefully, covering up her mouth with her hand.

“Yes--” Akechi’s voice piped up from the emptiness. “However, might I suggest that it would be beneficial to cast a bit of defense prior to healing when we face such a tough enemy,” Akechi suggested kindly.

Makoto’s smiled tightened. “I can agree with that. However, I believe I made the right call considering the circumstances. We did underestimate the strength of that shadow’s magical abilities.”

“Yes. There was a point where Joker’s additional defenses that you supplied had gone down,” Akechi hummed, but he did it in his charming voice that made it seem like he’d only said it as a simple observation.

“But as we’ve seen, he’s quite capable of protecting himself. He is the leader for a reason,” Makoto mused.

Akira felt an arm come around his shoulder as he got into the backseat next to Ryuji. “Man, I dunno how you do it,” he said with sigh, even though a smile was on his face. Akira raised an eyebrow in confusion. Ryuji huffed and gestured to Makoto and Akechi still outside of the van. “You have two people fighting over you, you know.”

Akira let out a short laugh. Was that how he saw it? He tilted his head to get a better look at the two of them. He’d already figured they would butt heads a little bit over their own strategic visions for battling within the team – not to mention coupled with Makoto’s foreknowledge of what Akira had told her – so it was hard for Akira to see it as anything but that.

“So am I finally desirable enough for you?” Akira said, batting his eyes as he tried to stop himself from laughing so he could keep up the ruse.

“Dude,” Ryuji said, shaking his head with a laugh. “You’re so odd.”

“Worth a try,” Akira shrugged. He leaned forward after everyone was back in the van. “How’s everyone doing?” he asked.

“I can keep going,” Ryuji said, and the Morgana, Makoto and Yusuke said variations of the same affirming statement.

Akira looked at Akechi, who was sitting in the passenger seat. He’d worked the most during that last battle, and Akira had kept him fighting for most of their trip into Mementos. He could easily see that the brunette looked a bit low on energy as he sipped on Arginade.

“I can keep going as well,” Akechi said after a moment’s pause.

Akira clicked his teeth as he scratched his cheek. “I’m actually a little tired,” he lied. Akechi was still going to be stubborn about keeping up appearances with the group, it seemed.

“I’m a little tired too,” Ann joined in. Akira turned to look at her, and she seemed to gesture over at Akechi with her eyes as she gave Akira a soft smile.

“What? You hardly even fought!” Ryuji said, looking past Akira to stare at Ann on the opposite side of him.
Ann huffed. “I had a long day today, alright?” she said, turning her chin up at him. “You hardly fought either!”

“That’s why I said I was fine,” Ryuji said with an annoyed sigh.

“In any case, we shouldn’t push ourselves,” Akira said. “Should we head back for the day, then?” he suggested, and he saw Akechi’s shoulders fall in relief. Akira smiled to himself.

“Uh, why’re you smiling like a creep?” Ryuji asked, pointing at his smile.

“Wow. I’m never smiling again, thanks,” Akira said, dropping it quickly as he deadpanned at Ryuji.

The others laughed as Morgana made his way out to the top of Mementos.

When they finally got back to the real world, it wasn’t until the rest of the group prepared to separate for the evening that Akira walked up to Akechi. The air felt thick and smelled like rain, even though it had only been cloudy.

He placed a hand on Akechi’s shoulder from behind, and the brunette jumped slightly before turning around to meet Akira’s eyes.

“Are you busy?” Akira asked Akechi.

He cocked his head to the side. “I do have some work to catch up on tonight,” he started. “But I have a bit of free time. Why?”

“You want some coffee for the work? You can take it to go.”

Morgana groaned. “Oh, brother.”

Akechi stared at him, and Akira thought that this invitation would be like the others he’d extended to the brunette after their kiss. However, Akechi had at least said that he had free time this time. Akechi had been right. He didn’t let anything get in the way of what they were doing in the Palace. And he’d been friendly enough whenever the group would hang out together.

But he hadn’t really hung out with just Akechi since that moment.

Not that he didn’t extend the invite.

“I apologize. I would, but I’ve got quite a bit to do. Things are picking up,” he would say, with a charming smile and kind eyes that still hid hurt underneath it.

Still, he’d figured that it was worth trying, over and over again, even as Morgana continued to sigh heavily.

He saw Akechi fidget where he stood. “I-I suppose that would be alright.”

Akira blinked. He honestly hadn’t been expecting that. “Really?” Akira said, the word tumbling out of him without thought as his mouth opened slightly.

At that, Akechi sort of laughed. “Have I been that distant?” he said quietly. Akira scratched the back of his head wordlessly, which seemed to be enough of a response to Akechi’s whispered question. Although, it hadn’t just been about their kiss, Akira suspected. After all, Kaneshiro had said the same thing that he had last time: he’d revealed the existence of another Metaverse user using the Palaces to do whatever they pleased.
"We have no idea who this could be," Ann had said. "I mean, Akechi-kun also already had his persona, so if he's telling the truth, who knows how many other people might have gotten a persona before us?" Makoto had stiffly stood next to Akira and Morgana as Ryuji and Yusuke agreed with her sentiment.

He imagined that Akechi was probably going to be more careful than usual now.

“I do have to stop by the police station briefly, but I can stop by for a cup of coffee," Akechi said, breaking Akira out of his thoughts.

“You better not stay long. We’ve had a long day, so everyone needs to rest,” Morgana warned them, though it extended to all of them.

It turns out that the smell of rain should’ve been enough of a premonition. Fifteen minutes after Akira had stepped foot inside of Leblanc, it had started to rain. It wasn’t torrential by any means, but it wasn’t exactly drizzling either.

Akira kept glancing out the window as he helped Sojiro with cleaning up around the kitchen. When he got a break, he glanced at his phone, waiting for Akechi’s message to apologize for cancelling due to the weather. Morgana sat on one of the stools, licking his paws contently.

It wasn’t until Akira had nearly forgotten that the gentle chiming of the bells by the door prompted Akira to look up from the counter that he was distractedly trying to scrub a stain off of.

Akechi walked in – and from the looks of it, he hadn’t been anticipating the rain either. His hair was somewhat wet, and his coat also looked like hadn’t done too well in the rain.

When Akira met his eyes, Akechi laughed, somewhat shyly, which was rare. “I was about halfway here before it started to rain. The nearby shops were closed, as well…”

“I can’t believe you walked here like that,” Morgana huffed from his spot on the stool. “You’re going to catch a cold.”

Akechi opened his mouth to respond when he glanced over at Sojiro, who also had a slight frown on his face. “Ah. Sakura-san, hello. I apologize for dripping water on the floor. I am usually much more observant when it comes to the weather. I hope it doesn’t cause too much trouble.”

Sojiro shook his head. “Take a seat. I’ll fix you up some nice curry and warm you up. Or better yet – I just taught this one how to make it, so maybe I’ll test him,” he said with a humble laugh, turning to Akira.

Akira nodded. “I can make it,” he said as he took of his apron for a moment. He shrugged off the coat that he’d still been wearing and extended it to Akechi, who stared at it with wide-eyed surprise. “You can hang your coat over there to dry,” he said, offering his own without any other explanation. The air conditioning had been running, so the short sleeve Akechi was most likely wearing underneath his wet coat wouldn’t do either.

Akechi opened his mouth to protest. “Th-That’s alright. It’s not that bad,” he said, and Akira tilted his head and gave him a knowing look.

“You should know by now that once this kid’s got his mind set on something, it’s hard to change it,” Sojiro chuckled to himself, like he was both pleased but also somewhat annoyed that the kid he’d taken in could be so stubborn.

Akira smiled slightly at Sojiro. “I can’t help it.”
“I know. Heh. Reminds me of myself some days…” Sojiro said, rubbing the back of his neck with a fond smile, before he shook his head and his smile faded, as though he remembered that he wasn’t supposed to be fond of the ‘criminal’ he’d taken in.

Akechi slowly reached over to take Akira’s coat. “Again, th-this isn’t necessary,” he reiterated. “But thank you…” he took off his coat, and Akira was already around the counter so that he could take it from him and hang it on the coat rack.

“It’s been awhile since you came around here,” Sojiro noted to the brunette. “I hope you’ve been helping keep Akira out of trouble.”

Akechi chuckled softly, slipping his arms through the sleeves. Huh. It looked nice on him. “I’m not so sure he needs me for that.”

“So he has been staying out of trouble?” Sojiro wondered.

“If I haven’t, I’ll use his police connections to get out of it,” Akira said cheekily as Sojiro groaned, picking up a coffee pot to inspect how clean it was before starting on a cup for Akechi. He moved over and started the stove to cook some curry too.

“You really don’t have to make that,” Akechi said. “I don’t mean to be a bother. Truly, I wasn’t in the rain for that long,” he added--

--And then he sneezed.

Sojiro raised an eyebrow. “I’m sure your parents won’t want you to return with a cold.”

Akira paused in the middle of rummaging underneath to find the right pan, he glanced up from his spot underneath the stove. Akechi’s smile had chipped away a bit.

“I don’t live with them. My mother passed when I was young, and I’m…not very close with my father,” Akechi admitted, his hands pressed flat against his thighs.

Sojiro’s eyes widened slightly until it was replaced with a pensive look, his hand thoughtfully against his chin. Then he nodded to himself.

“I’ll make you my special curry for colds. I’ll even make a little extra so you can take it back with you if you feel yourself start to get sick,” Sojiro said, and Akechi’s face melted into one of shock.

“Sakura-san, that’s too kind, I couldn’t possibly--”

“You may be a hotshot detective around these parts, but at the end of the day, you’re still a kid. You have to take care of yourself.” Sojiro turned to Akira. “You take over the coffee. I’ll get started on the curry,” he said, and Akira nodded.

“I’ve…been hearing that a lot recently.”

Sojiro gave him an oddly parental look. “Then don’t you think you should listen?”

“Ah. I…suppose so. Do you have children?” he asked, and Akira wondered if he already knew the answer to this question.

Sojiro’s eyes flickered over to Akira for a split second before he met Akechi’s eyes again. “Let’s just say I know a thing or two about taking care of a sick kid.”

“I wouldn’t say that I’m exactly si-” Akechi started, but was interrupted by another sneeze. Sojiro
gave him yet another look, and Akechi rubbed at his cheek. “A-Alright. I suppose I should take some precautions. Th-thank you, Sakura-san.”

Sojiro chuckled, a deep throaty rumble coming from his throat. “You’re way too polite. The others call me Boss. No need for you to be so formal.”

Akira had seen Akechi in various states of nervousness, but seeing him with Sojiro this time seemed different. He wondered if Akechi had ever had someone take care of him like this. He was inclined to think not, and that thought left him with a feeling in his chest that he wasn’t sure how to describe. It wasn’t quite pity – no, Akechi didn’t deserve something like that; it’d only upset him.

After Sojiro finished making the curry, he pushed it towards Akechi, then reminded Akira to close up the shop as he hung up his apron. Then he turned to Akechi. “Don’t stay too late,” he’d said. “But feel free to rest here if you need to.”

Akechi had nodded numbly, and then it was just the three of them, with Morgana still quietly licking at his paws.

It was only when Akira excused himself to go upstairs to grab a thermos that he’d forgotten to take out of his bag so that he could wash it and give it to Akechi to use for the coffee to go. He’d rummaged through and after some trouble with finding it, he finally dug it out.

When he went back downstairs, he paused, skipping over the fourth stair as he heard voices. “I just don’t get it.”

“Hm?”

Some silence. Then shuffling. “You’re really on our side, right?”

Akira froze. It was unmistakably Morgana’s voice asking that question, but what exactly was he doing? It wasn’t like Akechi would admit it straight to the cat’s face, especially knowing how close he and Morgana were.

Akechi let out a charming laugh. “That’s quite an out of the blue question. But of course I am,” he said smoothly, to no surprise of Akira’s.

Akira tried to peer around so that he could see them. Morgana nodded, keeping his steely eyes on him. “Good. Because Akira won’t admit it, but he’ll be really hurt if you aren’t,” he said. Akira pursed his lips, and Akechi’s fingers stilled on his spoon.

“My…goal is not to hurt him, or any of you all.”

“You say that like you might have to.”

Akechi’s tightened his grip on the spoon. “That is not how I intended it. I simply meant that there is something that I absolutely must do.”

Akira and Morgana had already spent a lot of time discussing what that something might be. And how hard it would be to stop Akechi from doing whatever it was. Still, Akira was a little surprised. He certainly didn’t expect Akechi to say this much to the cat.

Morgana shuffled. “You know, I don’t know whether or not your intentions are noble. All I have are my own suspicions. The others trust you a lot. They let their guards down in front of you.” He flicked his eyes briefly up to Akechi, then to anywhere but. “He’ll fight you, if he has to,” he added quietly.
Akira exhaled as quietly as he possibly could.

“Even if it hurts him, he’ll fight you if it means protecting the people he cares about. Even though you’re one of those people too.” He could hear Morgana’s voice swell with emotion. “He’s a big idiot like that.” Akira smiled to himself. His gratitude for Morgana knew no end.

“I know that,” Akechi said. He smiled fondly. “After all,” he started. He wasn’t even trying to hide it now, Akira thought. “He is…exceptional,” he said, and Akira felt his chest constrict. Why had Akechi said that? He wasn’t anything of the sort. He could barely keep up with this timeline’s changes as is.

“What will you do?” Morgana prodded.

“I will do what’s necessary for my goals. As will he, I presume.” Akechi hummed. Morgana stared at him for a long time then, and Akira wondered if one of them would comment on how long it was taking him to come back down. “This is all moot, in any case, is it not?” Akechi said, glancing up at the ceiling for the briefest of moments. “After all, I have stated that I am completely on your side. Though I have my own goals, they have nothing to do with the Phantom Thieves,” he said, and Akira wondered if the brunette knew how hollow it sounded.

“Right,” Morgana said sarcastically. Then his face softened. “Anyway, just remember: you awoke to your persona because you wanted to break free from whatever oppressive chains were holding you down. Don’t forget that you have the power to shape your own reality. You’re not bound by anything. Not your past, not whatever you think you need to accomplish.”

Akechi stared at him, his face complicated and wide-eyed. “I…” he breathed. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Oh, also, I’ll take fatty tuna next time you come around.”

“I’m…sorry?”

“My advice isn’t free you know.”

Akechi blinked in surprise before he let out a chuckle. “Of course.” Then his smile become a bit warmer as he stirred his curry. “Thank you for the kind advice.”

Morgana huffed, turning away with his tail pointed in the air. “D-Don’t let it get to your head or anything. I still don’t trust you.”

Akechi was still smiling. “I would expect nothing less.”

Morgana turned his head to look at Akechi, and the cat’s eyes softened into ones that held a smile. “Good,” he said. “I’m not joking though about the tuna though,” he added pointedly, and Akechi’s smile gave way to another laugh that he hid behind his hand.

“What’s this about tuna?” Akira said as he walked down the stairs, thermos in hand.

“Ah. You found it,” Akechi said, choosing instead to gesture at the thermos rather than directly answer Akira’s question. “We were simply chatting while we waited for you.”

Akira nodded, making his way over to the back area to try and find a decent washcloth to clean the thermos with. He knelt down, and he saw Morgana hop over to where he was.

“You were eavesdropping, weren’t you?” Morgana asked.
Akira glanced up and over at Akechi, who had a distant and thoughtful expression on his face as he mindlessly picked at the curry in front of him.

He smiled a bit. “Morgana,” he said. “Thank you.”

Morgana turned his nose up, but the way his eyes relaxed betrayed his stance. “Yeah, yeah.”

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Unsurprisingly, Akechi got sick not long after. Of course, he’d tried to pretend like it was nothing when he arrived at their hideout to fulfill a few Mementos requests. But as soon as he’d arrived, it was clear from his red eyes and heavy sniffling that he was in no shape to be fighting shadows.

It was Ann’s idea afterwards to visit him. Akira suggested that maybe Akechi might want to be by himself until he recovered, but he knew his friend, and, like himself, once her mind was set, it was hard to change it.

So that’s how five Phantom Thieves found their way in front of one ace detective’s apartment, all crowded around the door and knocking eagerly until Yusuke opened the door.

“Ah. You’re here,” he greeted.

Akechi was sitting at his armchair, reading a book. He pulled out a tissue from the box sitting at the stand next to him, coughed into it, then turned to look at who’d entered – only to greet them with slightly widened eyes.

“What are you all doing here?”

“Surprise!” Ann said, holding up a bag of food with a bright smile.

He looked over at Yusuke, presumably for an explanation. “I received a message asking if it would be acceptable for them to stop by, since you have not been feeling well.”

Akechi blinked. “…haha, I thought you all were going into Mementos today.”

“We were gonna,” Ryuji started, already moving to plop himself down on the couch. “But it didn’t seem right goin’ in when you were here by yourself coughin’ up a lung.” He waved his hand in the air. “So, change of plans,” he said, grinning at the brunette, who was still stunned into almost total silence.

“We’ve brought some okayu if you don’t have much of an appetite,” Makoto spoke up, gesturing to Ann’s plastic bag, which she’d already set on the kitchen counter. “And zosui with udon.” Then she held up the thermos in her hand, using her free hand to brush her hair back. “This is from my sister.”

“Sae-san…?”

Makoto nodded, her lips pursing ever-so-slightly. “When I told her that I was leaving to see you and that you weren’t feeling well, she took some time to make negi-miso-yu. She made it quite frequently when I was ill as a child, so I hope that it’s to your liking too.”

“Ah. There is also some tea,” Yusuke said. “Kioshi-kun brought over some that he made. It appears his mother wouldn’t let him over since he might catch a cold too, but he did knock when you were napping.”
Akechi opened his mouth, his words a bit raspy from his cold. “He did?” he said, some of the tenseness evident despite the cold.

“He is well, don’t worry,” Yusuke said with an assuring nod, and Akechi nodded in relief.

“Oh, yeah, they all brought the food n’ stuff, but I brought the best part!” Ryuji said, holding up his own bag. “I brought the movies!”

Morgana shook his head with a snicker. “They’re probably stupid ones.”

“Wha—shut the hell up, cat!”

“Yeah, there’s no way I was only going to let you bring only yours,” Ann said. “So, I brought my own.”

“I also have some art documentaries that I brought with me. I spent the rest of my money last week on a few new ones as well,” Yusuke said pleasantly.

“I…also thought that it would be a good idea to catch up on a film that I’ve yet to watch,” Makoto said, turning her face away slightly.

“We brought one too! Since this one still hasn’t fixed his DVD player,” Morgana said, peering up at Akira with a displeased look.

Akira lightly chuckled. “I’ll get around to it.”

“Wait a minute. Everyone brought a movie?” Ryuji huffed. “What the--I thought we agreed that I was the one in charge of movies!”

“What movie did you bring?” Makoto asked.

Ryuji slumped a little bit in his seat. “Well, it’s…The Baker Begins…”

Ann immediately groaned. “That’s an awful one!”

“What do you mean? Cake Knight Rises was so good, so naturally the prequel’s good too!” Ryuji argued. He turned to Akechi. “Listen man, don’t let these guys fool you. It’s a great movie,” he said, but Akechi still looked a little surprised at what was transpiring.

“The aesthetics for that movie were quite hard to understand,” Yusuke commented with a slight frown. The camera angles did not seem to convey the emotion they intended to.”

Ryuji blinked. “Dude, trust me, no one but you is lookin’ at the camera angles. And it’s way better than whatever you guys brought! Uh…what did you guys bring anyway?”

“Please,” Ann said, sticking her chin up and pulling out her DVD to show him. “Hapless in Hyōgo is a classic.”

Yusuke reached down to show them his movie choice. “I have just picked up a fascinating documentary on Ai Weiwei, a Chinese contemporary artist. I have heard that his styles mixed with activism have been vibrant within the excessivism movement of recent times.”

“Uh, what?” Ryuji said, kicking the coffee table as he leaned forward with a shake of his head. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter, it can’t beat the Baker.” He glanced over at Makoto. “What’d you bring, Miss Prez?”
“Must you continue to call me that?” Makoto said with a soft sigh. She shifted her weight a bit before clearing her throat. “If you must know…it’s Germinator 2: Judgment Day.” The others froze as they looked at her. Makoto furrowed her brow slightly but otherwise maintained her composure. “Wh-What?”

Ann was the first to start laughing. “That seems so unlike you, Makoto.”

“W-Well, it’s got quite the storyline and…” She looked at her feet for a moment before abruptly turning to Akira. “Let’s move on, shall we. What did you bring, Akira-kun?”

Akira smiled. “Don’t be embarrassed. It’s cute.”

“I’m not trying to be cute,” Makoto responded as she rested a hand against her neck. Akira kept his smile as she cleared her throat again. “In any case, movie?”

Akira looked at Morgana, then lowered his bag so that the cat could hop out of it. He pulled out a single movie from the bottom after he did so.

“Animus? The horror movie?” Makoto asked as she tilted her head to look at it.

Akira shrugged. “I thought we could scare the cold out of him,” he said with a straight face.

Akechi finally stopped looking so shocked at those words, and he snapped out of his trance to offer a weak smile. “If only it were that easy.”

“Well, what do you want to watch, man?” Ryuji asked. Then he leaned in. “Remember the Baker…” he unsuccessfully whispered.

“Oh, hush,” Ann said, sticking her tongue out at him. “Though, I guess we do have quite a bit to choose from,” she added with a short laugh.

Akechi looked between all of their expectant faces. It was hard for Akira to read his expression, but he seemed genuinely conflicted, although with what, Akira wasn’t sure.

“I think the only option is to watch them all,” Akira finally said with a shrug after a moment too long of Akechi not answering.

That seemed to work. Akechi managed a short chuckle. “Ha, I…don’t want you all to get sick, is all.”

“That’s what you’re worried about?” Ann started. “No worries, I’ve got an immune system of steel!”

“When she gets sick, she’ll complain about this, but we’ll just remind her that it was her idea, so it’s fine,” Ryuji said with a wave of his hand.

“We wouldn’t be here if we cared about that.” It was Morgana who spoke. Akechi looked down at him, and Morgana almost immediately turned his chin up. “I-I’m just saying, stop thinking you’re a burden just by being sick.”

“Morgana’s right,” Makoto said slowly, her gaze falling to Akira for a moment before returning to Akechi. “We knew you were sick, so we decided that it would be best to pay you a visit and provide some company.”

Akira walked over to him with a tilted smile. Akechi opened his mouth, but no words came out.
When he was close, Akira could see how sick he looked. And it was easy for Akira to mistake the wetness at the corner of Akechi’s eyes as an unfortunate result of the cold and miss the emotion laced into them. “Just relax,” Akira told him.

And, for once, Akechi did. Although, he might have stood up a few too many times while watching the horror movie, and Akira didn’t tease him too much about it when he felt Akechi’s hand subconsciously reach for Akira’s hand under the fleece blanket during the jump scare moments.

***

Kaneshiro’s change of heart came and went just as it had before. There were people that thought that it had been the doing of the Phantom Thieves. The authorities, as expected, took credit for the arrest to save face, though it didn’t matter much.

Taking down Kaneshiro had been necessary, but Akira knew that it was only a matter of time before Futaba would become involved. He rubbed his head, feeling it ache as he tried to remember the details of the situation. It was still a bit foggy, like he’d just woken up and was trying to re-orient himself.

Medjed.

Akira fixed his apron, then reached into his back pocket for his journal. He opened it up to the next available page, then scribbled the name onto it.

Futaba Sakura. Alibaba. Medjed - Akechi’s doing too?

“What are you writing?” Morgana asked as he peered over the counter.

Akira coughed, closing it and placing it back. Then he leaned against the counter to whisper to Morgana, even though Sojiro had left a while ago and there were no customers to hear him.

“I was thinking about what Futaba figured out the last time. The person who threatened us with Medjed wasn’t the same as the past ones,” Akira noted, rubbing his chin.

“Akechi’s people were involved. Is that what you’re saying?” Morgana asked.

Akira rubbed his forehead, which was starting to become sharper in the pain. “I don’t know. I’m having trouble thinking clearly today.”

“About the last timeline?” Morgana said warily. “Akira, this isn’t good. What am I supposed to do if you end up forgetting everything?!”

“That won’t happen,” Akira assured him, even through the unease in his own chest. He felt his phone buzz against his pocket and reached down to pull it out.

Ryuji Sakamoto 16:57
Yo have you guys seen the site! More people are starting to talk about us!

Yusuke Kitagawa 16:59
I believe the calling cards that were spread out have played a role in the majority discussing the role of the Phantom Thieves in apprehending Kaneshiro. Well done, Makoto.

Makoto Niijima 17:00
It was a team effort. Ryuji helped quite a bit, and you did the design, Yusuke. I’m grateful that you all have allowed me to work with you.
Ann Takamaki 17:03
How are things on your end Akechi-kun?

Goro Akechi 17:09
Hm? How do you mean?

Ann Takamaki 17:10
It must be difficult. You have to continue to talk about us negatively. I heard some people talk about how you don’t know what you’re talking about. I wish they knew just how helpful you’ve been.

Goro Akechi 17:10
Ah. That is nothing. I’m quite used to hearing criticism. It’s nothing that I can’t handle.

Ryuji Sakamoto 17:11
That’s the spirit! Don’t let it get to you man. We know the truth!

Akira’s chest tightened again.

Goro Akechi 17:12
Ha. Thank you. I will be heading to the police department again later tonight and will report back any new knowledge.

Akira Kurusu 17:13
Do you want some coffee before you head in? On the house.

Akira Kurusu 17:14
Don’t tell Sojiro.

Goro Akechi 17:15
I would love some.

Akira Kurusu 17:16
If you have time, we can chat too.

Ann Takamaki 17:17
D’awww. Have fun on your coffee date you guys!

Akira Kurusu 17:18
Morgana is facepalming so that I don’t have to.

“Oh. This is nice.”

Akira looked up from his phone when he saw Naomi walk in, looking around the café in awe. “Akechi-san wasn’t kidding when he recommended this place. It’s got like a rustic charm to it,” she said, and she still seemed to be talking to herself. Akira slipped his phone into his back pocket.

Finally, her gaze settled on Akira, and her eyes widened comically. “It’s you!”

Akira smiled gently. “It is.”

“I just—wow, haha. You work here? Is that why Akechi-san recommended it to me? That’d be kinda weird, huh? Ha…nevermind, then.” She slumped down into a booth, and Akira walked over to her with a pot of fresh coffee and an empty mug.
“Coffee?” he offered.

“Yes, please,” Naomi said, nodding enthusiastically. “I feel like I could collapse from exhaustion,” she added sliding her arms forward on the table until her cheek was almost touching the table. She yawned loudly. “You should never grow up. Adulthood sucks.”

Akira smiled, setting the mug down. “I’ll do my best to stop the aging process. Just tell me when.”

Naomi sat up again. “If there are people out here changing hearts, why not halt aging too?” she said. “Oh, that’s good.”

Akira looked at it. He’d barely filled half the mug. Naomi distractedly reached to the end of the booth and grabbed a handful of sugar packets and the creamer. He watched wordlessly as she opened six packets of sugar and poured creamer into the mug until it was filled nearly to the brim. With a pleased smile, she stirred it all together and miraculously, none of it spilled over the edge, and then she brought the mug closer to her. Instead of picking it up, she leaned down and sipped a bit.

“Mmm,” she said, closing her eyes with a smile. “This is perfect.”

“Would you like a little more coffee with your milk?” he said with a cheeky smile.

Naomi stopped to give him a look. “Har har,” she said, though she was smiling.

Akira paused for a moment instead of immediately turning around to go back around the counter. He wondered if it would be a good time to get some information out of her.

“It feels a little awkward that you’re just standing there,” Naomi said with a short, nervous laugh. “Sorry,” he offered with a minute smile. “I was just thinking the office must be up in arms about Kaneshiro,” Akira said casually.

Naomi blinked, caught off-guard for a moment, before she shook her head. “It’s insanity,” she said, her voice rising. She must’ve been waiting for the chance to talk about it with anyone. “Usually I’m dying of boredom and throwing paper airplanes at my colleagues by the third hour, but it’s, like, pandemonium. It’s a little overwhelming.”

“The Phantom Thieves seem to have taken things by storm,” Akira mentioned as he flicked some lint off of himself.

“I’ll say!” She started, then she cleared her throat with wide eyes. “I-I mean, I don’t know what you’re talking about. The police apprehended Kaneshiro…” she said, scratching at her cheek as Akira realized with 100% certainty that she was a horrible liar.

“Right,” Akira said with a wry smile.

She peered up at him. “That…wasn’t very believable, was it?” Akira shook his head, and she blew air. “Well, you’re Akechi-san’s not-friend, so if I get in trouble I’ll just blame him,” she said before immediately backtracking. “That was a joke, please don't tell him I said that.”

Akira chuckled quietly. “Is he that intimidating?”

Naomi hummed, resting her cheek against the palm of her hand. “I dunno. Not really. There’s just something about him…” She furrowed her brow, then sighed. “Anyway, plus, he’s buddy-buddy with all the important people. I’m like…an ant. And he’s like…er, well, a person.” She slunk
down her seat sheepishly. “Did that make any sense?”

“Good enough,” Akira said, waving his hand. He paused a moment before making his next statement. “It seemed like you knew him the last time I saw you.”

Naomi’s eyes widened slightly. “Did it?” She drummed her fingers against the counter. “It feels like I know him, but I can’t place it. I don’t even know where we’d have crossed paths.”

“He grew up in foster care,” Akira said tentatively. He wasn’t sure if that was the right thing to say, but his curiosity was starting to get the better of him.

“He…did?” Naomi said slowly.

“Akiyama-san?” Akechi’s voice travelled from the entrance of the café as he walked inside, taking note of both Akira and Naomi chatting at one of the booths. “What are you doing here?” he said, slightly puzzled as he glanced between them.

Naomi threw him a wave. “I don’t know how you can work with some of those people, Akechi-san. The office was insane crazy today. I considered jumping out the window,” she said nonchalantly, and Akira raised his eyebrows. “But I remembered that you said the coffee at Leblanc was incredible. Plus I would’ve died if I jumped, so that’d be unfortunate.” She hummed. “Actually, I might live, since I work on the second floor. I don’t know. I’d have to try and land on my head if I were serious.”

Akechi looked temporarily like he didn’t have a response. “You have quite the morbid sense of humor,” he finally settled on saying, laughing a little as he did so. “I wouldn’t have expected that.”

“Do I not give off that vibe? That’s also unfortunate,” Naomi pouted as she rested her chin against the table, stirring at the coffee with a spoon.

“That’s…your fifth cup today, is it not?” Akechi started. Then he gestured to the open seat across from her. “When I briefly saw you earlier today, I recall you stating that it was your fourth.”

“Hey, the study I read said that four is healthy, so indulging in one extra shouldn’t kill me,” she said as she nodded to his gesture. He slid into the booth. “And if it does, then at least it’ll be after I have a delicious cup of coffee.”

Akira slipped away for a moment to grab another empty mug before returning to the two of them. He placed it in front of Akechi and filled it nearly to the top.

“Thank you,” Akechi said, the crinkles in his eyes forming as he smiled. He reached over to stir in a single packet of sugar before bringing the cup to him and taking a sip.

“Dear god what are you doing?” Naomi said, horrified, and Akechi froze with the mug at his lips. “Coffee with one sugar? What sort of freak are you?”

“I’m…sorry?” Akechi blinked.

The second the words left Akechi’s mouth, Naomi started shaking her head. “Oh no. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to say that out loud. I-I was just—I mean, I didn’t mean to call you that. I-I’m not in trouble am I?”

“It’s fine,” Akechi started with a laugh. “Please, don’t feel the need to address me a certain way due to my connections. At the end of the day, I’m simply a high school student aiming to be a detective,” he said kindly. “I actually quite admire your…honesty.”
“You want people to call you a freak?” Naomi said, raising her eyebrow. She pointed her spoon at him. “Is that your thing?”

Akechi chuckled. “Perhaps not so much that in particular. I mean to say that many people in the department and the prosecutor’s office don’t speak honestly to me, so I appreciate your honesty, blunt as it may be at times.”

Naomi pursed her lips. “If I were a kid and had that much authority, I would definitely let it get to my head. I’d be calling my subordinates peasants by day three, so I admire your humility,” she said. “Besides, you’re a big deal, so of course people are gonna treat you differently,” she responded. “You were on TV just yesterday, weren’t you?”

“Ah. Yes. Discussing the Phantom Thieves yet again,” Akechi said with a short laugh. When Naomi chewed at her bottom lip, Akechi tilted his head slightly, stirring his coffee mindlessly. “Is something the matter?”

“I-It’s just…” She seemed to be weighing her next words carefully. “I don’t mean to overstep my bounds, but…do you really think that the Phantom Thieves and the breakdowns are connected?”

Akira stilled, and Akechi’s smile momentarily froze. The two of them exchanged a glance, probably for different reasons, before Akechi turned back to her.

“Oh. Well, certainly the possibility cannot be denied. That seems to be the consensus of the police station as well, does it not?” Akechi said.

“Yeah…guess so…” Naomi said. “It’s just…I don’t know, it’s weird. It feels like things aren’t really adding up. The Phantom Thieves are obviously a group of kids,” she said. “I-I tried to bring it up with the SIU Director, but--”

“You spoke to him about this possibility?”

“Er, not my guess as to their identities, but just that I don’t think they should be lumped together. He dismissed it though. I’m supposed to be assessing mafia guy, not throwing guesses to the wind,” Naomi said. “That’s more or less what he said to me.”

“A psychological assessment on Kaneshiro?” Akira spoke up.

Naomi nodded. “Which was…freaky. I spoke to him in jail, and-” She looked between them. “Er, I-I guess I shouldn’t be speaking about this right here…”

Akechi shook his head. “I’m curious to hear about it. So long as nothing confidential is revealed, I believe it’s fine that Akira is here as well.”

Naomi bit her lip as she looked at Akira, who did his best to give her an assuring smile. “My lips are sealed,” he added.

“W-Well…It’s a little disturbing. I mean, just imagine all the bad things that you’ve ever done in this world, and suddenly, all you’re left with is crippling guilt about all those things,” Naomi said with a shudder. Akechi’s grip tightened. “From a psychological standpoint, I’m a little concerned. You should’ve seen him. After speaking to him, I wouldn’t be surprised if he killed himself from the guilt.”

Akira wasn’t sure how he felt about that. To be honest, he hadn’t put much thought into what happened to them after they had the change of heart. He’d wanted them to repent for all the pain they’d caused other people, but he didn’t think about what was running through their mind now,
after the fact. Spending time with Akechi had changed that. It didn’t change his conviction that these people needed to be stopped, but it entered his mind more and more.

“In any case, I don’t think its blackmail,” Naomi said. “Or hypnosis. I…I don’t know what it is. They obviously want to do good, but I just hope they know what they’re doing and thought about the consequences. You don’t need psychology to know that people are messy and complicated.”

“You’ve put a lot of thought into this,” Akira commented.

“H-Huh?” Naomi blinked, “W-Well, I I don’t really know what I’m talking about. This is all just a guess.” She took another long sip of her coffee, casting her eyes downward. Before she could say anything else, her phone started to ring.

With a huff, she set down her coffee and dug it out of her purse. “Oh, speak of the devil,” she said, showing them the SIU Director on her screen before answering. “Hel-” she stopped abruptly as the man on the other end started to speak without even waiting for her greeting. She made a face towards the other man, even though he couldn’t see it. “Er…I…Um, y-yes, I can come in now… W-Wait, really? Oh my gosh you rock!” She said, her mouth dropping open. Then she cleared her throat. “N-No, sorry, I didn’t mean that. I-I mean, I did mean that you rock, but in like a professional way and…” she groaned. “I won’t do that again.”

She hung up the phone, then looked at them as a gradual smile formed on her face. “Oh my gosh. The SIU Director just asked me to meet with him. He looked over my email about the two cases, and he says he has a proposition for me, which could include a raise. Uh, score one for Naomi!” She said, clapping her hands together. “This is awesome!” In her excitement, she chugged down another sip of her coffee before immediately stopping. “Ow, ow, that was a mistake. Too hot still. I regret my life choices,” she said with a frown.

“A raise?” Akechi said carefully. “You started very recently, did you not?” The way that Akechi’s tone was, Akira knew that he was suspicious of something.

“Well…yeah…but…maybe he’s just impressed?” Naomi said, uncertainty creeping back into her voice.

Akira stepped forward, giving her a kind smile. “I’m sure it will be fine.”

Naomi beamed at that. “You think? I think. It has to be.”

Akechi frowned at their exchange. “I would just ask that you be wary.”

Naomi tilted her head. “I’ll be sure to be on the lookout for any banana peels on my way over.” Then she smiled. “C’mon, don’t look so serious.” Then, her hand seemed to have a mind of her own. She lifted a finger, then pressed it against the center of his forehead, where his forehead was creased from his frown. “You’re too young for forehead wrinkles.”

Akechi froze.

Akira paused, confused.

Naomi froze, and her mouth dropped open as she removed her finger like it was touching a hot potato. “I-I don’t know why I did that. Oh god. You just reminded me of someone and I just—oh god. That was weird. That was so weird.”

“I-” Akechi started, but it seemed like he was having trouble speaking too. He got a strange, distant look in his eyes, and when he re-focused on Naomi, they were now much wider. “I-It’s alright.”
“No, it’s not. God, I hardly know you. That wasn’t okay. I’m so sorry,” she said, shaking her head frantically. “It was just, that look you gave me reminded me of someone and that’s what I used to do when he was upset, and—oh my god.”

“Who?” Akira prompted as he glanced between them.

“Oh,” she pressed her fingers to her temple. “Actually, it was--” Naomi paused at the same time that Akechi’s grip against the handle of his mug tightened. She opened her mouth, but no words came out as she got the same eyes as him. “O-Uh.”

Akira raised an eyebrow. Akechi took a breath. “It was…?” He prompted carefully.

Naomi blinked rapidly. “Um. N-No. I don’t know. Names…uh, I’m bad with those.” She tugged at her hair. “Wow. I, um, I—haha, life is so funny. I should—leave. Yes. That is a thing that I will do.”

“Are you okay?” Akira said. They must’ve met each other in foster care, Akira thought. Though if that were the case, Akira wasn’t sure why something like that was cause for this extreme of a reaction. Perhaps another type of meeting was powerful enough to warrant this kind of response.

“What?” She said, turning to him with wide eyes, like she hadn’t heard him. “Oh. Yes. I think the coffee’s getting to me. I-In any case, I should go, um, away from here. Far away.” She pulled open her purse. “How much for the coffee?”

Akechi lifted a hand. “I’ll take care of it.”

Naomi blinked at him. “Y-You will?” He nodded. “Thank you! I-I mean, I can pay for a little cup of coffee, but money is definitely tight, so I appreciate it. Speaking of which, is this place hiring? I wonder if I can work here…” she said, already seeming to have recovered from whatever shock had taken over before.

Akechi froze. “You…need money?”

“Yeah, but it’s not a big deal. I’ll make it work. My fiancé is sick, so things have been kind of a struggle lately…” Naomi said, and Akira tilted his head. She wasn’t wearing a ring. She seemed to notice that both pairs of eyes had dropped to her empty left hand, so she cleared her throat and shoved them into her pockets. “I-In any case, that’s enough of that. Personal and professional life separate. Or something. I should really go.”

Akechi’s face remained thoughtful, but when she turned for the door, he shook his head and sat up in his seat a little straighter. “Wait--” he started. Akira blinked. It was rare for him to react so openly shaken like this.

Naomi paused and turned to him, her brows knit together in slight concern. “Yes?” she said.

“Just—you seem like a person of integrity. I can tell you, from working closely with him, that the SIU Director is not. Be wary of what he asks of you, and especially wary of what he may offer in return.”

Naomi looked at him pensively for a moment. “C’mon, you make it sound like he’s some shady, corrupt criminal. I mean, what’s he going to do, break my mind and give me a shutdown if I don't do his evil bidding?” Naomi chuckled at her words, but when the others didn’t laugh, her smile subsided. “O-Kay. I’m very weirded out by the seriousness on your faces.” Her gaze fell to Akechi. “I-I’ll be careful. Sh-Should we like, meet or something after…?” She said, somewhat awkwardly.
He hesitated. “Yes. Let’s.”

Naomi nodded as Akira continued to look back and forth between him. He was most definitely missing something. It was easy to make an assumption, but that was just that. He couldn’t get very far on just assumptions. She turned to Akira with a soft smile. “Thanks for the coffee. I’m going to tell all my friends to come to this place!” She declared, and Akira couldn’t help but smile. Then she frowned slightly. “Er, that’s only like two people, but still…”

Akira chuckled. “I’ll look forward to seeing them.”

Naomi smiled back, then gave Akechi one more curious look as a bit of worry etched into her forehead before she left the café.

When she was gone, Akira just barely was able to look at Akechi before he shook his head. “I should be going as well,” he said distractedly, nearly toppling his coffee mug.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Akira asked.

“No, it’s—I apologize, I just—”

“Goro,” Akira started again. He placed a hand on Akechi’s wrist, against his better judgment. “What’s wrong? Is everything okay?”

Akechi stared at him for a moment before he cast his eyes down, trying and failing to force his usual charming smile. “No, everything is not okay,” Akechi admitted, and Akira blinked. He hadn’t been expecting an honest answer. He looked down at where Akira’s hand was rested against his wrist.

“Can I help?” Akira said, breaking the long silence that passed.

Akechi looked at him, tilting his head like he was trying to solve an equation. “You don’t trust me, and yet, you continue to offer to help me.”

Akira shrugged, giving him a half-hearted smile. He removed his hand from Akechi’s wrist, then slid Naomi’s almost finished mug of coffee towards him. “I can’t really explain it, either,” he said.

Akechi didn’t say anything else after that, so Akira brought the empty mug to the back, taking note of Akechi’s half-full mug. Akira made sure that Akechi was still there, then he went upstairs as quickly as he could, rummaging through until he found what he was looking for. He went back downstairs to find Akechi looking at him with a furrowed brow.

Akechi moved until he found what he needed behind the counter, then once he was done, poured a fresh mug and walked back over to Akechi, sliding it in front of him.

Akechi blinked, confused. “What is this?”

“I picked up the tea you suggested, back when I first started having those headaches,” Akira said, leaning against the counter with a kind smile. Then he slid Akechi’s mug of coffee towards himself. “As much as coffee is good, I don’t think it’ll help much with the tension,” he pointed out. “Don’t tell Sojiro that either,” he added with a short laugh that he tried to make sound as carefree as possible, for Akechi’s sake.

“This is… the tea I brought you?” Akechi asked, surprise coloring his face.

Akira nodded. “It is. And as much as beating up shadows in Mementos would also relieve stress,
I’m a little tired. Maybe tomorrow?” Akira hummed. “I did buy some new weapons. You and I can go, just the two of us.”

“You’re…far too kind to me,” Akechi said after a second of stunned silence. His voice was full of emotion.

Akira shrugged. “You’d rather I wasn’t?”

Akechi fiddled with the spoon in the tea cup, a faint yet fond smile on his face, but before he could respond, his phone began to buzz. With an inhale, he pulled out his phone and stared at the screen for a long moment before answering.

“This is Akechi,” he said tiredly. “Yes…I’m aware.” Then he sat up abruptly. “What do you mean?” He glanced over at Akira, who raised an eyebrow as he remained leaning against the counter. “Are you certain that’s necessary? It’s just---No, I…” his voice tightened. “Yes, I understand. ...Alright. I will meet with him right away.” He hung up the phone, with the force of it hitting the counter a bit harsher than he probably intended.

“Everything okay?” Akira said curiously, standing upright.

Akechi blinked, his face appearing a bit more pale than usual. “It appears that I must really be going,” he said. He reached back to take out his wallet.

“I already said it’s on the house.”

“This is for Akiyama-san’s, and the tea,” Akechi started to explain. Akira shook his head to stop him.

“Don’t worry about it,” Akira said. “Here, I’ll put the tea into a to-go cup,” he said, taking the mug before Akechi could protest. He went back behind the counter and pulled out one of the cups, then carefully poured the tea into it before going back to Akechi and handing it to him. By the time he finished, Akechi was already standing and by the door. “Good luck with work,” he offered, extending the tea to him. “Here you go.”

“Thank you,” Akechi said quietly.

“I already told you, you don’t need to thank me.”

“I do,” he said, and Akira knew he wasn’t talking about the tea. “Truly, I do. And I…apologize.”

Akira furrowed his brow. “For what?”

He didn’t answer. He simply turned to him with a tiredly charming smile before walking out the door, leaving Akira standing as the door shut--

And then he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Next update will begin the next arc! GET READY FOR ANGST (my poor bby Akechi I am SO sorry for what I’m going to do to you but what you did to Futaba’s mom demands it)
I am very much enjoying writing Naomi and it makes me VERY sad that I’m not writing for Akechi’s POV because writing his scenes with all of his confidants is so fun, but I can’t put them in as much as I want because Akira always has to be there since it’s his POV.

Also: in case anyone was curious, the ones that he has established a link with at this point are:

Akira (obvi)

Yusuke

Shiho (I did have a scene with her in this chap to make it more clear that she’s a link but it didn’t really fit anywhere, so I’ll put it in the next chapter)

Morgana (AS OF THIS CHAP FINALLY)

Kioshi (OC)

Naomi (OC)

The other PTs – while he does have bonds with them, in my head I wouldn’t consider them truly confidant links just yet. I have stuff planned for his relationship with each of them, but idk if I’ll put it in just for length’s sake. If I feel like I can fit all in, then I’ll call them confidants. But until then, the ones I’ve listed are actual established ones (in my head at least LOL)

PS Akira you should not be talking time travel when Leblanc is bugged by the girl that you’re talking about…hopefully this doesn’t cause any problems hehehehehe
In the Name of Love

Chapter Summary

another interlude chapter before Futaba as I get back into the groove of things

Chapter Notes

*peeks head out again*

First of all you guys are absolutely amazing. Every kudos, bookmark, and comment warms my heart, and I can't believe people are still interested in this story. It means the world to me <3

Now, onto the nitty gritty. Unfortunately, when I posted that chapter months ago about me saying that I would post soon, I thought I had the notes for this story. Come to find out that I in fact lost the notes that I had with the plans for the story and for all the confidants, and it's been so long that I can't remember how some of the storylines were supposed to connect, so it's been rough trying to get back into it without those things. BUT, I'm getting there, slowly but surely. Thank you all for bearing with me, and let's finish this story!

Also---- it's going to take me a few chapters to get the tone back to the way it was before, so the next couple of chapters are going to sound a little off, and I'm also sorry if there's some continuity things. I did read the past chapters again, but sometimes things slip.

This chapter is kind of a prequel to the beginning of the Futaba arc and I also just wanted to post something for you guys because this support has been so motivating. It's shorter than my usual chapters but I promise once I get back into it it'll be back to my longer, meaty chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Akira waited for the day that Medjed would give their ultimatum.

And then he waited some more.

Then a little more.

But it never came. Akira wasn’t all too surprised at this. He figured that if Akechi truly was involved in all of this, he would have little reason to make such a public statement like that, especially since he already knew who the Phantom Thieves were. Besides, all of them weren’t Akechi’s target.

Only Akira was. Still, this wasn’t good. He already felt like his memory about the other timeline was starting to fade, and if even more things started to change like this, he wasn’t sure he would
still be able to keep a leg up against Akechi and his boss.

And it was precisely not having a leg up that had gotten Akira killed in the first place.

“Helloooo, Earth to Akira?”

Akira blinked out of his thoughts and looked at the French fry that Ann was pointing at him from across the table. She lowered the fry and her face softened, becoming more concerned. “You’ve been spacing out a lot lately. Is everything okay?”

He looked around the table. Ann, Ryuji, Makoto, and Morgana were looking at him curiously. He wished desperately that he could tell all of them what was going on. Morgana had been a big help, but he was starting to realize just how much of a toll this was taking on his mental state. But no matter what he thought, he knew it was too much of a risk to involve any of them.

So he smiled, as usual. “Yeah, sorry. Got a lot on my mind.”

Ann chewed the top of her fry before putting it back down and resting her palm against her chin. “Yeah?”

“I dunno about you guys but I’m getting restless! Mementos is cool and all, but we gotta find a new target soon!” Ryuji said, kicking the leg of the table by accident with his animated movement.

Makoto hummed. “While it would be nice, I believe patience would be best. We don’t want to act too rashly.”

“You sound like Akechi,” Akira teased lightly.

Makoto blinked, then cleared her throat. “I-I do not,” she said stubbornly.

Even still, Ryuji had a point. Akira wasn’t so sure how much longer he could wait. Especially knowing that Futaba was supposed to be the next target. He knew all too well just how much she was hurting, and he wanted to be able to help her as quickly as possible.

“I wonder if Akechi’s got info on some shady dudes that we can take down,” Ryuji said irritably.

“You’re so impatient,” Morgana piped up from Akira’s bag. “We should just lay low and wait on Akira to give us our next target.” He peered up at the black-haired boy. “Do you have any leads?” Morgana asked, even though he already knew the answer.

Akira tapped his fingers against the table, taking a sip of his water. “I have some thoughts. Just need to follow up on some things first. We can use this time to return to normalcy.”

Makoto nodded with a soft smile. “I agree. Besides, we can also use this time to study.”

Both Ann and Ryuji mutually groaned. “Summer vacation’s comin’ up soon anyway. Why do we need to study?” Ryuji complained.

“It’s answers like that that make me concerned about your ability to graduate, Sakamoto,” Makoto answered warily as Morgana snickered.

“Stop laughin’!” Ryuji said to Morgana with a pout. Then he scratched his neck. “Yeah, well… who needs school when you’re a superhero?”

“Even superheroes need to be careful,” Makoto said curtly. Then she quickly added, “N-Not that I agree with that statement. We are far from heroes. We’re just trying to do what adults should be
Ryuji blew air with a wide smile on his face. “Sounds kinda like you agree with me,” he said. Makoto pursed her lips, but before she could respond, Ann reached over and twisted Ryuji’s ear. “Ow! What the hell, Ann?”

“You’re being annoying,” Ann said.


“I am not!” Ann countered.

“Are too!”

“Hey, don’t call Lady Ann annoying! She is far from it!”

Makoto leaned over at Akira. “We sure keep interesting company.”

Akira smiled, noting her use of the word, ‘we.’ It was no secret that Makoto had felt someone detached from the others, but he was glad that she seemed to warm up to them much better. “I’ll say.”

“At least if we ever decided to tell someone who we are, I’m not sure they would believe us,” Makoto said with a breathless laugh.

Akira drummed his fingers against the table as his friends talked amongst themselves. It had been Medjed that made it so that Futaba would join. It had already been painful enough to not immediately jump in and help the girl who’d become something of a sister to him. It put him a little on edge, knowing that she was still there, suffering.

‘Dude, you’re spacin’ out so much today,” Ryuji said as his face popped into Akira’s peripheral. He popped one of Akira’s fries into his mouth.

“Did you just steal one of my fries?” Akira said, raising an eyebrow.

“I’m makin’ sure they don’t go to waste, like a true pal,” Ryuji grinned.

“A true pal,” Akira echoed with the same smile. “Thanks a bunch,” he deadpanned. “What would I do without you?”

Ryuji knocked his elbow against Akira’s arm, and Akira let out a dry chuckle. It seemed like all he could do was wait, and at least try to live in the moment for once in his newly given life.

Although…

Maybe, just maybe, though, there was something he could do.

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“Hey, Akira!”

Akira looked up from the mindless scrolling on his phone. He saw Ann waving at him as she sped up to meet him. He pushed himself up from the entranceway that he was leaning up against and threw her a wave.

Ann stuck her hands into her pockets, glancing at the house that they were in front of. “Where…
are we?"

Akira cleared his throat. “It’s…Sakura-san’s house.”

Ann’s eyes grew wide. “Why are we here? Is everything okay?” She said, concern laced deep into her voice.

Akira nodded and put on his best smile. “Yeah. Sakura-san…he’s looking after a young girl, around our age.” Ann opened her mouth, but no words came out, so he continued. “She needs our help.”

“Wait, what do you mean? What…does she need? Don’t tell me Sakura-san is-”

“No,” Akira was quick to say. “Nothing like that. But I think she’s hurting. PTSD, I think, maybe. So, I wanted to talk to her.”

“So…why am I here? Don’t you want to ask Makoto or Akechi for help?” She said unsurely.

Akira’s expression softened. “You’re good at things like this.” Ann sputtered a bit and turned a little red from embarrassment at hearing this, but Akira knew it was true. There wasn’t anyone else he’d trust to be able to talk to Futaba when she was still in such a vulnerable state. He thought about how Ann had done her best to be there for Shiho.

“Talking to people?” Ann asked, twirling an end of her hair.

Akira smiled. “Empathy.”

Ann blinked at him again, and he felt something tug at his stomach. He knew that he’d neglected the others a bit because of how much he was trying to prevent the future from happening again, but he felt a little bad that Ann’s first instinct was to ask about using either Makoto or Goro for help. After another second or two, she brightened. “Alright, I’ll help,” She said, trying to mirror his smile. “What do we need to do?”

“We need to break in.”

Ann’s smile fell as she nearly fell over herself. “I’m sorry, what?”

Akira opened the gate and walked inside, his hands in his pockets. “Well, the gate was unlocked, so it’s not really breaking,” he said nonchalantly.

“Ah… Just entering,” Ann said warily. “I…can’t we just knock and see if she’s home?” Ann asked.

“Possibly, but I don’t think she’ll answer,” Akira said. Nevertheless, he knocked on the door as Ann closed the gate behind her and met Akira at the top of the steps to the front door. She lightly grabbed his arm with the closest hand, and the other she stuck into her jacket pocket.

“What if she calls the police?” Ann wondered.

“I…” Akira paused. “I didn’t think about that.”

“Oh, god, we’re going to get arrested, aren’t we?” Ann said warily. “Maybe we should call the others-”

“We can do this,” Akira said, even as a seed of doubt planted itself in his mind. But he was running out of options. He couldn’t sit around and wait for Akechi and/or Medjed to make their move. The
difference in this timeline was putting him on edge too much. “I promise, I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Yeah, and what about yourself?” Ann pushed.

“Don’t worry about me,” Akira told her as he stared at the door.

Ann huffed, pulling on his arm to get his attention. “Stop saying that. You matter just as much as the rest of us,” she said resolutely. “We’re in this together, okay? So…” Ann took a breath, then knocked on the door with a stance that gave off a whiff of false bravado.

No answer.

Ann knocked again, then once there was no response, she turned to Akira. “I guess Sakura-san isn’t home,” she said, then paused after seeing Akira’s expression. “Buuuut I’m guessing you already knew that.”

Akira shrugged with a small smile. “I’m omniscient.” Ann chuckled as he reached for the door and – as expected, it was also unlocked. Akira was mixed at the fact that everything was unlocked. On one hand, it made things easier for him. On the other, it wasn’t exactly the safest thing, especially when Futaba was inside.

“Why are these unlocked?” Ann wondered rhetorically. Her voice had dropped lower as Akira opened the door and walked inside. He felt Ann’s arm slide into his as she took a breath. “What now?”

“It’s Akira,” Akira called, mostly so Futaba wouldn’t think an actual thief had come in. He felt a dull thump in his chest, but he tried to ignore it. Akira knew that he was about to tread into territory that was completely unlike the last timeline, which meant he didn’t know what would happen next, which was both discomfiting and comforting at the same time. “Is…there anyone here?”

Silence.

He walked forward, leading Ann to Futaba’s bedroom door. “This feels eerie,” Ann whispered. “Are you sure this is okay?”

“Yes,” Akira said, and he wondered if Ann could hear the slight uncertainty in his voice. “I’m sure.”

“Yeah,” Ann breathed affirmatively. Akira could hear the comfort in her voice. “And at least we’re together. It’ll be fine.”

“That’s my line,” Akira said as Ann laughed softly. Akira turned his head to her slightly, peeking at her from his peripheral. Ann raised an eyebrow, meeting his gaze. He gave her a slight lopsided smile. “I told you you were good at empathy.”

A tinge of pink colored Ann’s face, even in the dark. “Q-Quit it.”

Akira smiled, but it dimmed as he turned his attention to the door. He cleared his throat. “Futaba?” he started. “I…we heard about your situation, and we want to help you.” He paused, letting her (if she was listening) take in the implications of his words. “But only if you want our help.” They couldn’t change her heart until she asked for it. It wouldn’t be right.

Akira looked over at Ann. She gave Akira a concerned look before knocking on the door. “Er, I’m not going to say that I know everything that’s going on, but I know that if you’re hurting, no matter
what it is…it’s not good to go through it alone. I don’t know your situation, but I want to help.” She turned to Akira, then gave an uncertain lift of her shoulders.

Akira nodded and squeezed her arm lightly in encouragement. “This is probably out of the blue,” he called out. But maybe not. “So, I understand if you need some time. But…I want you to know that we’re to help.”

After a few moments, Akira and Ann were met with…silence.

“What should we do now?” Ann said. “It doesn’t look like she wants to talk – if she’s even in there.”

Akira exhaled. He’d figured that that would happen. In fact, he’d been hoping for it. “Yeah. Let’s wait a little longer, then we can head back.”

**

Akira waited for only a few more minutes before deciding to call it a day. Futaba still hadn’t said anything, but he knew that she’d heard him, and that’s what he wanted. The two of them left the house, and Ann and Akira stopped when they were in front of Leblanc. “Coffee?”

Ann nodded. “I’ll come in for a minute. Then, I have to go visit Shiho.”

The two of them stepped inside, and the café was nearly empty save for two people. Sojiro was wiping down the counter nonchalantly. He looked up when the bell rang, then eyed the two of them.

“O-Oh, hello Sakura-san!” Ann said a bit too quickly.

“Smooth,” Akira chuckled under his breath, and Ann nudged him with her shoulder – although without the roughness that she would have nudged Ryuji. “Do you need help?” Akira asked Sojiro.

“Heh. Don’t let me get in the way of your alone time,” he said, and Akira was almost sure he was saying that only because Ann was there. He turned to Ann. “And you know you can call me Boss.”

“A-Ah, right, of course,” Ann said.

As if the gods were looking out for them at the moment, Sojiro’s phone rang. He dug into his pocket as Akira tried to stand as calm as possible. Sojiro answered the phone, leaning into it for a second before saying, “Okay, okay, I’ll be right there.” He hung up and turned to the two of them. “Looks like you’re in luck kid. Need you to take over.” He sounded a little…wired.

“Got a date?” Akira teased lightly.

“Heh. I’ll tell you when you’re older. I’ll be back soon,” Sojiro said.

Akira assumed his position behind the counter as Sojiro cleaned up and left the café. Once he was gone, Ann sat at the counter as Akira brought her a cola from the fridge. He’d started to make her some coffee before he realized that she was already nervous.

“Do you think he knows?” Ann said quickly in a hushed tone, even though the other people who’d been there before had left as Sojiro was leaving.

“Oh, yeah, definitely,” Akira said, leaning against the counter. Ann’s eyes widened until she noticed the gleam in his eye. She huffed, and Akira smiled. “Sorry. I promise, he doesn’t know.”
“What if she tells him?”

Akira thought for a moment. “I don’t think she will.”

“Yeah…and even if she did, maybe it’ll be okay.” Ann took a breath, looking down into her cola can. “It feels like you have something planned, something that you probably can’t tell us right now.” Akira’s eyes widened a bit at Ann’s statement. “That’s why you’re our leader.” She stopped looking at the can and looked at Akira, resting her chin in her hand.

Akira focused on wiping down a single part on the counter, and after a few seconds of comfortable silence, he spoke up again. “Ann-“ he started. She quirked her head to the side, prompting him to continue. “What would you do if Shiho were hiding a big secret from you?”

“Wh-What?” Ann said. “What’s that question for?”

“Just asking.”

Silence for a few moments.

“Is it about Akechi?” Ann asked slowly. Akira blinked at her. It was the second time in five minutes that she’d completely surprised with her insight. “Things seem a bit different between you two lately. He’s been really busy too, so we haven’t seen him as much either, except for in Mementos.”

Akira simply nodded numbly, but then he realized that he hadn’t said anything. “Yes.” He didn’t know what else to say to that. It was true. He’d tried to make things a little better, but after the day with Naomi and Akechi at the coffee shop, something seemed off. Akechi seemed otherwise focused. He’d wondered if maybe Akechi and his boss were busy planning their next move. The thought of it worried him. He might be planning something even bigger than before.

“Shiho spent time with him yesterday, and she asked me if everything was okay with him.”

“She saw him?”

“She asked to borrow his book, and she asked him if he wanted lunch,” Ann said. “She told me that he said no at first, but it’s hard to say no to her,” Ann said with an affectionate laugh. “She said that he seemed tired.”

“He’s not good at taking care of himself,” Akira couldn’t help but say. He frowned. He was probably being overworked too. Then he sighed, but light enough that Ann didn’t hear it. “I do think he’s hiding something.”

“What kind of thing?”

“I don’t know.” A small lie, but not entirely untrue. “I wish I knew what he was hiding.”

“Well, he really likes you, and you really like him, so you guys should just talk it out,” Ann said, infusing a bit more energy into her voice. “You’re a great guy, Akira, but sometimes it’s hard to tell what you’re thinking.” She said, taking a sip of her cola. Then she smiled.

Akira couldn’t help but let out a humorless laugh at that. “I know,” he said. “I’ve been told.”

“Akechi too. I’m sure he’s wondering what you’re thinking too. You should just sit and talk with him,” Ann said optimistically. Akira knew it wouldn’t yield much result, but Ann had said it so positively that he wanted to believe her. Truly, he did. “I miss the flirting and the googly eyes you
guys give each other,” Ann said with a teasing grin, and Akira let out a real laugh this time.

“I would hate to keep disappointing you.”

“You should. I’m a simple girl with simple needs,” Ann grinned. She tapped on the table. “Okay, I have to go visit Shiho.”

“For flirting and googly eyes?” Akira said innocently. Ann’s mouth dropped open, and Akira smiled. “Payback.”

“I solemnly swear that I hate you, Akira Kurusu.”

“No, you don’t.”

Ann smiled. “No, I don’t.”

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Akira continued working the counter, and when there were no customers, he leaned against the counter, writing everything that happened today in his notebook. Sojiro hadn’t come back angrily to talk to him, so Akira assumed that that meant Futaba hadn’t told him about them entering the house. That was good. And he felt better after getting to speak to Ann. He’d missed the times of just getting to talk to her. It didn’t happen as much as he’d like, but he was reminded of just how great a friend she was.

He pulled out his phone, hovering over Akechi’s number. He could call him, if only to hear the detective’s flustered voice on the other end, but Akira wasn’t even sure what he wanted from the conversation.

He wouldn’t get the truth.

Only sighs and gazes and the wall that separated it from becoming anything truly genuine.

Except…things had felt genuine. Some of it. A lot of it. Even through the secrets. Akira clicked into his messages. His eyes glossed over the messages from Hifumi and Makoto from today, and his past messages from other people who’d asked him to hang out. He got to Akechi’s name. The last few messages had been a notice to him about Mementos. Akira started to type into the phone.

Akira Kurusu
I want to see y

Akira paused, backspacing, then shook his head, frustrated at himself. He almost couldn’t believe that Akechi had had this effect on him, unintentionally. Had Akechi also started messages, only to backspace them?

Akira Kurusu 18:23
We should talk soon.

Akira stared at it for a moment longer before sending the message and putting it back into his pocket.

“Finally, you’re here!”

Akira looked up and saw Morgana trailing into the café. He hopped up onto the stool. “Do you know how long I’ve been wandering around? And this cat kept meowing at me!”
“Oh, what’d he say?” Akira said lightly.

Morgana glared at him, and Akira had trouble keeping his faux-stoic composure. “I don’t know! I don’t speak cat!”

“Also, I’ve been here for a while,” Akira noted.

“What? Why didn’t you tell me?” Morgana huffed.

“Right, I should’ve texted you.”

“I can’t tell if your renewed sense of humor makes me relieved or annoyed,” Morgana said as Akira smiled. “Still, you seem like you’re in a better mood…” Morgana’s eyes widened. “Don’t tell me Akechi was here and you two-!”

“No, no,” Akira said with a light smile. He twirled his pen in his hand. “Ann’s noticed that Akechi and I have been more distant.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. Lady Ann is most perceptive and talented, of course,” Morgana purred, as Akira just shook his head, the smile still there, albeit a little fainter.

He worked quietly, pulling out some sushi from the fridge to give to Morgana. Once he finished cleaning, he started on some homework while he dully listened to the TV. It wasn’t until after it started getting late that Akira heard a ping from his phone.

Mindlessly, he pulled out, then immediately sat up. Morgana seemed to notice, and looked up from licking his paws to stare at Akira questionably. He showed the message to Morgana, who nearly meowed shrilly. Akira opened his mouth, then quickly closed it.

The café was bugged, after all, so Futaba would hear them. What Akira had wanted to say was that somehow, their plan had worked.

He needed to get Futaba’s attention and be on her radar somehow. She clearly already knew that they were the Phantom Thieves, what with their talk at the café, and as sarcastic and brash as Futaba could be, she was a good person. He needed her to realize that he knew she knew who they were and that they were fully capable and willing to help her.

The conversation with Ann had gone well too. He needed Futaba to hear just how much he needed to know what Akechi was hiding. No doubt Futaba knew something that Akira didn’t – since he’d had that phone call so long ago down in the café the morning after he stayed over.

To be honest, Akira thought that it would take a much longer time. He’d planned to get Akechi into the café too, to talk to him, and then maybe Sojiro if he needed to, so Futaba could hear all of it.

He wondered if maybe the fact that she’d already heard so much made her act faster.

A part of Akira didn’t like being this scheming. It didn’t feel manipulative – ultimately it was for Futaba. But he needed to do something, and when he and Morgana came up with the idea at Big Bang Burger, he wasn’t even sure it would work. They had nothing to bargain with Futaba for after all. There wasn’t a Medjed to prompt her into enlisting the Phantom Thieves, so the need had to be something else.

Akira breathed out through his nose, clicking on the unread message from who he already knew was Alibaba.
UNKnown 20:31
I think we can help each other, Akira Kurusu.

Then, directly after, by some act of some god:

Goro Akechi 20:31
I agree.

Chapter End Notes

Things are gonna get wild from here guys
It's a Long Way Forward (So Trust In Me)

Chapter Summary

Alternatively titled: (I Haven't Asked You, But...) Have You Noticed I've Been Gone?

Chapter Notes

You guys are gonna make me cry, seriously. I was a little nervous to post a new chapter, but the support from you guys has been so overwhelming. Every comment, kudos, and bookmark has been so motivating. I'm so glad that you guys are still as into this story as I am. I'm falling in love with this story all over again, so reading all the comments on the last chapter was so amazing. Sorry I didn't respond to all of them, but it really does mean the world and I want to thank each and every one of you.

I'm starting to plot things out again - I've got vague ideas of where I want character arcs to go (again) and such - so hopefully once I get my groove back the updates will be more consistent. But I had a surge of inspiration and motivation after seeing how supportive you guys were and cranked this one out haha.

Again, thank you guys, and without further ado, have a very high dosing of angst

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Do you think the others will already be there?” Morgana asked, his head propped up from Akira’s bag as Akira turned the corner for Leblanc.

He shrugged. He called a meeting with the other Phantom Thieves to tell them about another target, but he needed to pick up a book before heading back home. Akira also wasn’t sure if Sojiro would be there, which would’ve put a dent in his plan. He wasn’t counting on Sojiro being there, considering the last message he’d gotten from Futaba.

Akira Kurusu 11:23
I need to talk to the others first. I’m planning to speak to them after school.

Akira Kurusu 11:23
I assume you will be listening.

UNKNOWN 11:25
Hmm…alright. That’s right. So don’t try anything funny.

UNKNOWN 11:25
Remember that I know your identity! And you won’t get the information that you want without my help.

Akira had chuckled when he saw that. It was a threat of sorts, and yet it had still sounded distinctly like and unlike Futaba at the same time. He felt confident that she wouldn’t expose his identity,
but, at the thought of learning what info she had, his fingers had tingled on the screen of his phone as he typed a response.

_Akira Kurusu 11:27_
_Will Sojiro be working?_

**UNKNOWN 11:29**
_I will make sure he’s not there._

How exactly she planned to do that, Akira didn’t know, and he didn’t ask, but he knew that whatever it was would be effective.

So, he was only partly surprised to walk up to the café and see the café sign turned to CLOSED. Akira could see the lights still on inside. He adjusted his bag a little before opening the door and going inside.

Akira blinked, surprised, when he saw the two people at the table. He could only see the back of Akechi’s head, but it was clear that it was him, and he looked like he had his head down. Across from Akechi, he could see Kioshi sitting and staring hard at a handheld video game.

At the chime of the bell, Kioshi looked up from his game, and a bright smile crossed over his face as he waved at Akira then immediately turned his attention back to his game. Akira gave a small smile and wave back as he started to walk over to them.

“Kioshi-kun,” Akira said. “What are you doing here?”

“Humm…” Kioshi’s tongue stuck out of the corner of his mouth as he moved the device around as though it would control whatever character he was playing as. “Jumpjumpjump!” Another pause, then he looked back at Akira. “Mom and I were in the area, but she had to pick up medicine, and we ran into Akechi-san,” he said happily. “Mom’s clinic is boring. So I can spend time with Akechi-san instead,” he added.

Akira raised an eyebrow, looking at Akechi, who was definitely asleep and had his head down on his arms. “He’s sleeping?”

Kioshi nodded. “I think he’s tired, so I said he could sleep. I just got a new game so I wanna play that.”

Akira ooh’d and peered over at Kioshi’s game with exaggerated interest as Kioshi showed him a game with some kid with yellow hair running around a field. From the angle, Akira also caught sight of Akechi’s phone on the table.

Akechi’s phone. What sorts of things were hidden on there? No doubt there would be a tough passcode on it.

“How did they get in here?” Morgana piped up, and Akira shook away his thoughts.

Kioshi lowered his game, turning to the source of – to him – the meowing. He gasped excitedly. “Your cat!”

Akira chuckled, taking off his bag and opening it so that Morgana could jump out and onto the table, even though Sojiro would probably chastise him for it. “You want to pet him?”

“Nuh-uh. Nope. I’m not getting out of this bag,” Morgana huffed.
“Oh boy! Can I, can I?” he said with sparkles in his eyes, forgetting about his game. “I want a cat but mom says I can’t have one.”

“If you ever want to see him, just let me know. I am at Akechi’s sometimes, so I will bring him with me.”

“Really?” Kioshi gasped.

Akira nodded, trying to match Kioshi’s childlike excitement. “You can pet him anytime you want.”

“Absolutely not. I don’t know where this kid’s hands have been,” Morgana said stubbornly. “Don’t you dare—!”

“C’mon, Mona,” Akira said sweetly, mostly for Kioshi’s pleasure. He gestured for the cat to hop out of the bag, trying not to chuckle at Morgana’s disgruntled words.

“I’m absolutely not getting out,” Morgana said, lowering himself into the bag to prove his point. He could’ve sworn he saw Morgana stick out his tongue too.

Before he could do anything more, Akechi made a noise and his body stirred. He lifted his head from the table, blinking sleepily and trying to get a sense of his surroundings. When he saw Akira, Kioshi, and Morgana, his eyes opened wider, and he cleared his throat.

“A-Akira?”

“Mornin’ sleepyhead,” Akira said with a lopsided smile, causing Akechi to flush slightly. “You were sleeping when I got back.”

Akechi looked from Akira to Kioshi, then to Morgana. He instinctively smoothed out his sleeves with his hands. “I apologize. I am usually a light sleeper, so I thought that I would wake up as the bell rang. I didn’t mean to sleep here.”

Akira waved it off. “It’s fine.” He placed his hand against the booth, leaning slightly on his arm. “The café was closed.”

“Ah…well, still, the point still stands. Kioshi-kun and I arrived, and shortly after, Sakura-san—”

“Boss.”

“Ah…right. He received a phone call and needed to leave. I informed him that I was waiting for you and the others, and he agreed to let me wait here for you. It was very kind of him.”

“He’s a kind guy.”

Akechi looked thoughtful. “You’re quite right on that.”

A short ping went off, and Kioshi reached down into his pocket and pulled out a small flip phone. He answered it. “Hello? …Aw…okay, I’ll go now.” Kioshi closed the phone, then pouted. “Mom’s done, so I have to meet her.”

“I will walk with you,” Akechi offered.

Kioshi shook his head. “It’s ‘kay. It’s not far.” He hopped up from the booth, picking up his game. He thought for a moment, then it looked like a lightbulb went off. “Oh!” Suddenly, he looked a little shy. “I forgot.”
“Yes?” Akechi said kindly.

“I-I’m going to a summer camp for a week,” Kioshi started. “And when I come back, Mom said we can finally go back to Dome Town for my birthday.” He said, his voice an odd mix of nerves and excitement at getting to return to the place that he hadn’t been to in so long. “A-And I think maybe Dad’s coming too for some of it. Mom said no, b-but I want to try and convince her.”

Akechi smiled, though he still looked a little unsure. “That’s very good, Kioshi-kun.”

“Er…Do you want to come too?” Kioshi said fast. His face looked like it was turning red.

“Beg your pardon?” Akechi said, and Akira wasn’t sure if it was because he actually didn’t hear him or didn’t believe it.

“Mom said I can make it into a birthday party, and I don’t really get along with the other kids at my school, but she says I have to invite them,” Kioshi said. “But I want you to be there too.” Kioshi said. He turned to Akira. “Both of you,” he said, his face turning redder.

Akechi sat there in stunned silence, while Akira smiled. “I’d love to be there,” Akira told him.

“Y-Yeah?” Kioshi said, his face losing some of its red.

Akira kicked lightly at Akechi’s shoe from under the table, and Akechi blinked a few more times before smiling – one of his genuine ones that Akira knew was coming from the bottom of his heart. “I would be honored to attend.”

Kioshi scrunched up his nose. “Does that mean yes?”

At that, Akechi’s smile gave way to a breathy laugh. “Yes, it does.”

“Yay!” Kioshi bounced up and down on his feet. “I’ll go tell my mom!”

“Enjoy your camp,” Akechi told him.

Kioshi nodded vigorously. “Yeah! I’ll see you when I get back, right? And you’ll come to the party!”

Akechi nodded too. “Of course.”

“You promise?”

“I promise that I will be there.”

Kioshi looked thoughtful for a moment. He stuck out his pinky finger, and Akechi stared at it. “You have to pinky promise!”

Akechi didn’t respond for a moment, then he let out a soft chuckle. “Ah…I apologize.” Akechi stuck out his pinky, but before he could even get it out, Kioshi hooked his pinky into the detective’s. “That means you have to be there, and if not, then…I’m gonna hate you!” Kioshi said in a tone that didn’t seem too believable. “For 12 years!”

“That’s quite a specific time,” Akechi noted.

Kioshi paused as he released Akechi’s finger, then wrapped his arms around Akechi. It was a little bit of an awkward position, since Akechi was sitting, but the endearing look in Kioshi’s eyes made up for it. “Thanks,” he said, then let go faster than Akechi could properly react aside from being
Akira watched him leave, a pep still in the kid’s step, and he found himself wondering when people end up losing that kind of innocent happiness in their lives. He hoped Kioshi would have it for a long time.

“That kid adores you,” Akira commented.

“For reasons that are beyond me. I certainly do not deserve his affection,” Akechi said absently.

Akira pursed his lips. He wanted to say something to refute that, but instead, he clicked his teeth and placed the bag with Morgana onto the booth where Kioshi had sat. “Do you want some more coffee?” he said, peering at Akechi’s empty cup.

“That’s quite alright,” Akechi said. “I have had a few cups already today. It appears caffeine is starting to lose its effect,” he added with a humorless laugh.

“Busy day?” Akira asked.

Akechi nodded tautly. “There have been…many new developments that have been keeping me busy.”

And even though Akira burned to ask about what these developments were, he refrained. “Is that why we don’t see you as much anymore?” Akira asked. It hadn’t sounded accusatory, just an even tone. Akechi stared at him, clearly taken aback by his statement. “Aside from Mementos.”

“I…” Akechi paused, as if weighing his words. “Apologize.”

“Don’t,” Akira told him. “As long as you’re okay?”

Akechi smiled, this one mirroring his Detective Prince smile. “Yes. I’m okay.”

“Good. I miss talking with you,” Akira said in an even tone. Akechi sputtered at this. “And Ann misses our flirting and googly eyes.” Okay, Akira might’ve thrown that in because it’d been a little too long since he’d been able to properly fluster Akechi. Akechi’s eyes widened, and his sputtering happened again, before he made a fist with his hand and coughed into it.

“You’re messing with me, aren’t you?”

“Kind of,” Akira smiled, and after a second, Akechi allowed himself to un-tense and smile back. “Ann did say that though. And I meant what I said. We’re all still here for you, if you need anything. Even if what you need is a jog with me and Ryuji or taking a nap in Mementos.”

“I will keep that in mind.”

“That’s all I ask,” Akira said. “Here, I’ll take your cup.”

Akechi picked up his cup and handed it to Akira, and their fingers brushed together for a second. Maybe it was Akira, or maybe it was Akechi that made it linger for a few seconds more.

Morgana cleared his throat. “You are aware that I’m still here, right?” he said brashly.

“Who are you, again?” Akira said jokingly as he took it from Akechi’s hands and walked over to place it into the sink.

As he put it down, the sound of the bell to Leblanc chiming made him turn his head. Ryuji, Ann,
Yusuke, and Makoto were walking in. Ryuji waved above his head. “Yo,” he grinned. “We were waitin’ outside ‘cause we saw the CLOSED sign, then we heard talking and just decided to come in.”

“Boss had to run out before I got here,” Akira explained.

“Closed… Does this mean I cannot order curry?” Yusuke pondered aloud.

“Yusuke, that’s what you’re thinking about?” Ann said, shaking her head with a disbelieving laugh.

“I can heat some up for you later,” Akira offered.

“Ah. That would be most welcome. With a cup of coffee too,” Yusuke added.

“Dude, you’re so demanding,” Ryuji huffed.

“Do you want some curry too, Ryuji?” Akira asked knowingly.

“Hell yeah, Boss’s curry is amazing!” Ryuji said loudly as Akira and Akechi chuckled like Ann and Yusuke groaned and exchanged glances. Ryuji slid into the booth across from Akechi. Akechi scooted in to make more room, and Ann and Yusuke slid in next to him. Makoto took a seat next to Ryuji.

Akira pulled up an extra chair at the head of the table, sitting down.

“Kay, so you said you got a new target for us?” Ryuji said, thumping his leg excitedly.

“Yes,” Akira said. He exchanged a glance with Morgana. They were in this one together, along with the girl on the other end of the bug, wherever it was planted. “I received a message from someone named Alibaba,” Akira started, and from there, he launched into his explanation.

Or, more accurately, he launched into his lie. He told them about how Alibaba had found out that they were the Phantom Thieves, and he told them that she had threatened to expose them as the Phantom Thieves if they didn’t help.

He couldn’t exactly tell them that he was promised information on Akechi as a bargaining chip, after all.

“Wait, you were being blackmailed?” Ann said, her palms flat down on the table in surprise.

“How long ago was this?” Makoto asked calmly, though she looked a little shaken herself.

“Not very long,” Akira told them. “I thought it was a prank at first, so I didn’t want to worry anyone.”

“Some prank,” Ryuji scoffed. “So what the hell does this person want?”

He told them that the person wanted a change of heart. Then he told them the target: Futaba Sakura at Sojiro Sakura’s house, and explained to them that that was probably how she found out who they were.

He watched the way that Akechi stiffened considerably.

“Sojiro…Sakura…” Makoto said slowly. “You don’t mean…?”
“Yes. She’s Sojiro’s ado—She’s his daughter. And I think Alibaba and Futaba Sakura are the same person,” Akira explained.

“Futaba is the girl we tried to talk to, right?” Ann said breathlessly. Akira nodded. “And now she wants a change of heart?”

“Wait, I’m confused. We’ve always been changin’ the hearts of criminals. What’s she done that warrants changing her heart? ‘Specially since she’s asking for one,” Ryuji said, rubbing at the back of his neck.

“I think we need to talk to Boss about it,” Akira said. “Not the change of heart, but to get more information about why Futaba might be requesting this. He has answers that we’ll need,” he added. “There is a reason that she wants this.”

“And you’re certain this is genuine?” Yusuke said. “These circumstances are quite unusual from our usual suspects.”

“Trust me,” Akira said with a resolute nod.

“It seems we were quite reckless, to have her be able to find out our identities,” Makoto said. “This is quite the mess. I admit I feel a little uncomfortable doing a change of heart simply because we’re being blackmailed to do so. Do you really believe she would reveal our identity?”

Truthfully, no. “I don’t think we should risk it. She’s clearly good at hacking, so she’d find ways to get the information out.”

Makoto hummed, furrowing her brows. “I see.”

“Akira told me that Futaba is hurting a lot. I wonder if that has something to do with it.”

“You knew about her too?” Makoto asked, catching this statement rather than the previous one.

“Er…” Ann looked to Akira, unsure if she’d made a mistake or not.

“When I found out about Futaba, I asked Ann for help to try and talk to her, but it didn’t work. I’m not sure if she knew who we really were at that point,” Akira said, trying to stay as calm as possible.

“Hmm,” Makoto said, and Akira could see the gears turning in her head. “The timing is very close.”

Akira shrugged, trying to play it off as nonchalant as possible, even as Makoto looked at him with slightly questioning eyes. “Either way, I think we should take to Boss after school tomorrow before we act.”

“I agree. As of now, we don’t have enough information on the situation,” Yusuke nodded. “Now, as the meeting seems to have come to a close, I would like some curry now,” he said, staring at Akira.

Akira chuckled, grateful for the escape from Makoto’s scrutinizing gaze. “Right.”

“Akira.”

It took Akira a moment to register Akechi saying his name. He hadn’t spoken during the meeting at all, but Akira kept notice of how rigid he became once he’d said Futaba’s name. “May I speak to
you for a moment?” Akechi brought his eyes to Akira. “Outside?”

Akira glanced over at Morgana, who was subtly shaking his head no. It wasn’t a surprise that Akechi wanted to speak to him both alone and outside from the café’s ears. “Sure,” Akira said. The others got up so that Akechi could get out of the booth.

Akechi turned to the others with a plastered smile. “I apologize. It will only take a moment.”

Ann waved it off. “You guys talk as long as you need,” she emphasized, staring at Akira with a knowing look.

“Hey, did you do the English homework?” Ryuji asked Ann as Akira followed Akechi to the exit of Leblanc.

“Ryuji!”

“What, I’m just asking, you don’t have to—ow!”

Once the two of them were outside, Akira leaned his side against the wall. Akechi shook his head instead of speaking, and Akira chose not to prompt him. His mind was racing with a million different answers to a million different questions that Akechi could ask.

“How did you find out about Futaba Sakura?” Akechi said evenly.

Akira leveled his gaze. He could be just as calm. “I live in the café,” Akira answered.

“So, Sakura-san told you about her?”

Akira weighed his options. If he said yes, then there was no doubt that when the group spoke to Sojiro tomorrow, Akechi would try and find a way to see if Sojiro did in fact mention it to Akira. If he said no…then what the hell was he supposed to use for a reason?

He was grateful that the others seemed to accept it at face value, except for Makoto a bit. With any luck, he hoped they would just assume that Sojiro had mentioned Futaba to Akira once before, and Akira had found out about Futaba’s existence that way. But this was different.

The mental chess was almost too much sometimes. This mental push-and-pull. And this Akechi standing in front of him, who looked on edge and on the verge of something that Akira wasn’t sure of. “Does it matter?”

Akechi visibly bit the inside of his lip as he nodded minutely. “I suppose it doesn’t. However, you told me that you were researching Wakaba Isshiki.”

Shit.

When had he said that? Was that this timeline? The pasts kept blurring together.

Oh, right. It was one of the cards he’d tried to play.

“That’s not how I found out about Futaba,” Akira said, choosing to play it safe.

“Yet, you won’t tell me how?”

“She’s not a secret,” Akira said. A recluse due to her trauma, but not a secret.

“Akira…I…I would caution you to think twice about this,” Akechi said, and Akira wasn’t sure if
his voice was quivering or not.

“She’s asking us for help, Goro,” Akira said, his voice quieter. “You know I can’t not do that.”

Akechi’s mouth formed a thin line. “Yes, I know. It’s part of what makes you…” His voice trailed off.

“What’s going on?” Akira said, taking a step forward. Akechi took a step back.

“I just…there are a lot of factors to consider and I would like to make sure we are properly informed of the risks. As the others have stated, this is a highly unorthodox situation.”

“There are always a lot of factors to consider. We’ll get the answers we need tomorrow, and then decide,” Akira told him. He turned to go back into the café, only to feel a hand on his arm.

Akira turned to face Akechi. He’d never really done that before, so Akira knew that whatever Akechi was going to say was serious.

“Please-”

Akechi stopped. Akira cocked his head to the side. He stared into the pools of Akechi’s eyes, trying to read him and wondering what words were hanging off the edge of his tongue. Akechi opened his mouth, then closed it. He blinked, swallowing thickly. Then let go of Akira’s arm. “Forgive me.”

And Akira wasn’t sure if he was saying that about the arm or for something entirely different.

“Let’s go back inside,” Akechi said, putting on a smile. “I believe the additional pile of work is starting to affect me,” he said with a forced laugh. “I will…trust your judgment in this case.”

Akira didn’t say anything. He just kept looking at Akechi, who tried to remain still as Akira stared at him. “Shall we go back and join the others?” Akechi said.

Akira wanted to make the moment last longer, even though it was filled with tension and secrets. He wanted it to last longer, and he hated that. And he hated how his heart stirred when Akechi had placed his hand on his arm.

But instead of confronting all of that and talking like Ann had demanded the two of them to do, he nodded, and they went back inside.

He promised himself he’d buy Ann some crepes to minimize her anger.

***

The next day, Phantom Thieves all convened before going to Leblanc. A lot was riding on this conversation, and Akira had busied himself with lockpicks during class to ease the stress and roaming thoughts. Twice he’d told Morgana that was fine, even though he knew that Morgana knew otherwise.

“Is it a good idea for all of us to do this?” Makoto wondered, coming to a stop next to him. She glanced over at him warily. “Wouldn’t it be better if it were just you? It would seem a bit suspicious if all of us walked in.”

Akira clicked his tongue. “It’s okay,” was all he said, offering no other explanation. He turned his head to meet her gaze, allowing some of the uncertainty to cross his face, only for Makoto to see.
He knew Makoto noticed it, because she mustered up a smile, albeit a wary one.

“Are you sure?” She asked, already knowing the answer.

Akira tilted his head at that. “Nah.”

And instead of groaning like usual, she put her hand on his arm – unusual for Makoto. “Me neither. But I trust you,” she said, which surprised Akira. It was different from the logical stance she usually took. “We trust you.”

And Akira was getting a little tired of people saying that they trusted him.

"Someone's being sentimental today," Akira teased, mostly to ease the tension.

Makoto's face turned pink. "I wasn't trying to be, I just wanted you to know that-"

"I know," Akira said with a smile. "I know."

Akechi cleared his throat. “I apologize for interrupting, but shall we go inside?” He said, his voice sounding just the slightest bit sharp. His face held a twitch of irritation.

"Or should we, uh, leave you two alone?” Ryuji joked with a laugh. The laugh abruptly stopped when he saw Ann's death glare. "Wh-What're you staring at me like that for? Geez."

"I'm not giving you a death glare," Ann countered easily. "Let's just go inside," she added in a breezy voice, pointedly walking straight forward so that Akira and Makoto had to separate for her to walk through.

Akira nodded, but not before giving Makoto a look - to which the brunette looked 20% amused and 80% bemused by the situation - and the Thieves pushed open the door to the café.

“I see-” came a stern voice from the inside. Akira and the others stopped. Sae Niijima was there looking very frustrated at Sojiro. Next to her was…Naomi, who did not have the same intimidating presence as she furrowed her brow, clutching her bag at her side. “We’ll be in touch soon.”

Sae turned on her heel to exit.

“Hey, w-we’re not done here!” Sojiro demanded.

Sae stopped only when she saw everyone blocking the door. Her gaze was still steely, so everyone made room for her to exit.

“Sis?” Makoto said.

“Makoto?” Sae said, confused. Her eyes traveled over everyone, lingering on Akira for a second extra before turning her attention back to everyone. “And Akechi-kun. What are you doing here?” Then she added as an afterthought: “I wasn’t aware you two were well acquainted.”

“Oh, uh…” Makoto said. “We happen to travel in the same friend group, occasionally. What about you?”

“Work,” Sae said, and Makoto nodded, knowing that she wasn’t going to get anything more out of her sister unless her sister wanted to share it. “Akiyama-san and I were out on business.”

“Oh, Akiyama-san,” Makoto said. “Please excuse the rudeness. It’s nice to see you.”
Naomi looked taken aback at Makoto’s formality. “Nah, it’s fine,” she said, waving it off. “I’m like, a shadow right now. Just watching the master at work,” Naomi said, to which Sae even managed a minuscule smile. “Should I call you Sensei?”

“No.”

“Yeah, that’s a no, okay, got it,” Naomi nodded quickly. She looked over at Akira, giving him a small wave. “Hey. I came by on Monday, but you weren’t working.”

“Were you looking for me?” Akira asked.

“Well, no, but your cat was here and he kept meowing at me.”

“She was petting me,” Morgana said disdainfully. “I almost clawed her eyes out.”

“He’s doing it again!” Akira chuckled. “He can be a little restless.”

“What sort of business was it, Sae-san?” Akechi cut in kindly. “Perhaps it’s something I can help with?”

Sae turned to him. She hummed thoughtfully. “Maybe. The three of us should have a meeting, to inform you of what Akiyama-san and I have been up to.”

“You’ve been investigating, just the two of you?” Akechi said, his detective’s smile chipping at the edges.

“A few loose cases to prosecute. Her analyses have been invaluable.”

“Whoa, really?” Naomi blurted. “Ah ha ha…thanks.”

“I’m afraid we must be going now, though,” Sae said. “Enjoy your time with your…companions,” she said to Akechi. She then turned to her sister. “Makoto, I’ll see you at home.”

“Will you be back for dinner?” Makoto asked, a bit hopefully.

“I don’t think so,” Sae said evenly, and Akira saw Makoto’s shoulders fall. “I’ll heat up leftovers from yesterday.”

The two of them shuffled out the door, and Akira didn’t miss the pointed away that Naomi’s eyes shifted to the floor in the opposite direction when she passed Akechi. He’d also noticed that Akechi and Naomi didn’t interact with each other. In fact, Naomi pointedly didn’t look in his direction during the entire conversation. Akechi was a little better at hiding whatever he was thinking, but he did look much stiffer.

Akira briefly wondered if something had happened between them…his chest twisted with something ugly, but he quickly quelled it. He remembered the scene he saw a few days ago – the day that Naomi had supposedly come to the café, in fact.

“Whew, man, I could go for another!” Ryuji said, his hands on his hips as he laughed. He stood, then slapped Akira on the back so hard he thought he’d fall over.

“Way to slap a man while he’s down,” Akira said between labored breaths. Ryuji laughed again as Akira stood upright, placing his hands at his sides.
“Still, it’s nice to be doin’ this again. Seems like everyone’s been so busy lately. And like, we only really been seeing each other in Mementos.”

“It’s my fault,” Akira had told him. “I’m sorry.”

Ryuji knocked his arm against Akira’s. “Stop that. I wasn’t tryna get you to say sorry. You got enough on your plate as it is.”

“I think that’s why I needed to go for a run. Clear my head.”

Ryuji grinned. “That’s what I’m sayin’!”

"Increase my heart rate to an unhealthy degree," Akira continued, deadpanning it this time. "Get painful leg muscle pains. Squeeze every drop of water from my bottle-"

Ryuji playfully shoved Akira, and Akira chuckled. "No pain, no gain, man. You know who said that?"

"Some dead guy, if my calculations are correct," Akira said, saying it in his most faux-scholarly voice.

It nearly earned him another playful shove, but then Ryuji paused. "Eh, you’re probably right," Ryuji shrugged with a toothy smile, and Akira just smiled as he sipped at his water bottle.

“But hey, seriously, a little bit of fresh air is good for you,” Ryuji said, inhaling a large breath of air---then he must have inhaled something that was decidedly not air, because he exhaled harshly through his nose, then reached up and rubbed at it vigorously. “Ah—ugh, what the hell just tried to fly up my nose?”

Akira’s shoulders trembled a little as he tried to hold in his laugh.

“Ugh, stupid nature. I take it back,” Ryuji said, rubbing at his nose again. “Ugh, it was like…big or had big ass wings or somethin’.” He frowned, shaking his nose. “Eff it, I’m goin’ back home to read my manga.”

Akira couldn’t help it then. He laughed – genuinely, and Ryuji paused as he looked at Akira. Once he realized that he was laughing, Ryuji couldn’t help but laugh too. “That was pretty effin’ unexpected, huh?”

“I should be saying that to you,” Akira said, his laughs giving way to a gentle chuckle.

“Yeah, well,” Ryuji waved it off. “I mean it about the manga though. You in?”

Akira nodded. He’d felt less tense than he had in a while. It didn’t surprise him in the lease that Ryuji had been the one to help him with that. “Cool. Wanna race back?” Ryuji added, nudging his shoulder teasingly.

“Not even a little bit.”

Ryuji laughed. “Yeah, me neither.”

The two of them strolled to the exit of the park, but once they got to the exit, Akira stopped. Across the street, he could see Akechi and…Naomi talking together at a crosswalk.

“Hey, ain’t that Akechi?” Ryuji said. Then his eyes widened. “Whoa, who’s the girl?”
Even though they were in public, they looked entirely engrossed into their conversation. Akira squinted a little. He could see Naomi moving her hands up and down animatedly, but Akechi remained calm. Akechi shook his head at whatever Naomi had said.

Then, she reached out and placed her hand on his shoulder, right by his neck, and Akira didn’t need glasses to see Akechi harden from it. Before anything else could happen, their crosswalk turned green, and Naomi abruptly jumped away and gestured towards the road.

“Uh….I’m sure they’re just friends,” Ryuji said awkwardly.

Akira blinked. Somehow, he was certain of Ryuji’s statement too. But jealousy was a funny, irrational sort of thing. “I wasn’t wondering,” Akira said, and Ryuji just nodded and word-vomited something about the monster he beat in his current mobile game. “C’mon, we should get going.”

“What brings all you kids here?” Sojiro asked, breaking Akira out of his memory. He could worry – or not worry – about that later.

Akira stepped forward, and the others trailed behind him. “I wanted to talk to you.”

Sojiro stopped drying one of the cups. “And you sound like you mean business,” he said, raising an eyebrow. “What’s this about?”

Akira cleared his throat. “…Futaba.”

Sojiro stopped entirely now. He stared at Akira wordlessly, probably waiting for him to continue, but Akira shoved his hands into his pockets, keeping his gaze with Sojiro’s.

Finally Sojiro sighed. “Futaba told me that some kids came by the house looking for me and that they saw her by chance. I figured it was you. And, uh, I guess your friends here were with you too.”

Akira blinked in mild shock at Sojiro’s admission. So Futaba is helping me, Akira thought. He chose not to correct Sojiro and instead nodded.

Sojiro walked over, settling himself on one of the barstools as the others crowded around him. “Was wondering when you’d ask.”

“I didn’t want to push it. She seemed…troubled.”

“She is,” Sojiro said bleakly. “I adopted her some time ago.”

“She’s not your real daughter?” Ann asked.

Sojiro shook his head. “It’s kind of a long story.”

“You don’t have to tell us,” Akira said, hoping the opposite would happen.

“No, I suppose I owe you an explanation,” Sojiro said. He got himself settled, ready to tell a story. “Futaba’s mother and I knew each other long before Futaba was born.” He smiled fondly. “She was sharp-witted, somewhat stern, a little socially inept, but always carefree…She was an excellent woman. When something piqued her interest, that’d be all she focused on.”

“Sounds like our artist,” Ryuji said with a nod to Yusuke.

Yusuke leaned forward. “She seems like a remarkable woman,” he said kindly, a soft smile on his
“Even I can see how fondly you think of her.”

Akira stole a glance at Akechi, who had gone still and silent, his eyes unfocused.

“Yeah…When Futaba was born…they were an ordinary loving family. You could really tell how much she cared for Futaba. But one day…she left, leaving Futaba behind.”

“She left?” Makoto breathed.

“She…committed suicide,” Sojiro said as the others gasped. “She threw herself into the street, right in front of Futaba’s eyes.”

“Oh my god,” Makoto said, covering her mouth with her hands. “That poor girl.”

“I can’t even imagine a kid having to witness that,” Ryuji said.

A few seconds of silence passed as Sojiro silently recovered from the admission. “A lot happened after that, but I ended up taking custody of Futaba…That’s when I found out, Futaba blames herself for her mother’s death.”

Another silence, then, “She…blames herself?” It was Akechi this time, voice quiet and eyes glassy. Akira saw his hands balled into fists at his knees from under the table.

Sojiro nodded. “I wanted to know what led her to believing that, but I decided not to rub salt in the wound. She started getting real scared, even when nothing was happening. She’d say things like, ‘I hear voices,’ and ‘Mom is looking at me…’”

“It sounds like obvious trauma and PTSD,” Makoto said, gripping her arms with a concerned expression on her face. “What about a doctor?”

“I wanted to take her to a doctor, but she refused. Even when I had a doctor come, she locked herself away in her room. Since then, she’s become what you’d call a shut-in. She won’t take a single step outside the house, or even try to see other people,” Sojiro told them. He wiped his palms against his apron. “Her situation is why I didn’t want you in my house. What Futaba needs is a safe place where nobody will threaten her. Somewhere she can be at ease.”

“A safe place,” Ann echoed.

“That’s why I don’t do anything she doesn’t want. I don’t make her do anything she’s unwilling to either. I know that’s no way to live. But more than anything, I want Futaba to be happy like a normal person.”

“She’s just a kid,” Ryuji said. “She shouldn’t have to go through this. It-It ain’t fair.”

“Thank you for telling us this,” Akira told Sojiro. “I know it wasn’t easy.”

“Yeah, thanks a bunch. I…really want to help her,” Ann said. “In any way I can. She has her whole life ahead of her.”

“She deserves to be happy,” Yusuke chimed in. “And observe the beauty in life for herself.”

The loud creak of a barstool caused everyone to turn to Akechi, the source of the noise. He threw them a shaky Detective Prince smile. “I-Please excuse me—It feels a bit hot in here, so I’m afraid I—need to step out for some air.”

“I-Is he okay?” Ann said, standing as he hurried out the door.
“I’ve never seen him look like that…” Makoto observed with an unreadable expression.

“He did also lose his mother to suicide,” Yusuke said quietly.

Ann looked at Akira with a concerned expression, and the leader nodded. Akira stood. “I’ll see how he’s doing.”

Akira went out of Leblanc, trying to find where the brunette had gone. He could hear the gentle sounds of people meandering and chatting aimlessly, but he couldn’t see Akechi. He walked up to the end of the street, and it was only when he got to a nearby alley that he heard the distinct sound of labored breathing.

Akira put his hands into his pockets, following the source of the noise.

He found Akechi standing against the wall, with his hands on his thighs.

“Goro…?” Akira said. At the sound of Akira’s voice, Akechi stood upright, brushing against his hair and putting on a smile.

“A-Ah, Akira. What are you doing here?”

“You ran out pretty quickly. Everyone was worried.”

Akechi’s face darkened. “The action was uncalled for. I regret running out like that, but it was feeling a bit stuffy. I do hope the others don’t get the wrong impression. It wasn’t in regards to Sakura-san’s story,” Akechi said, and Akira wasn’t sure if Akechi was trying to say it so that he could believe it himself.

Sometimes, Akira was certain that Akechi was one “stuffy room” from a panic attack.

“It’s just me,” Akira told him. “You can be honest.”

Akechi gazed at him for a few agonizingly long moments. “Then, in all honesty, I would rather not talk about it.”

Akira nodded. “That’s alright too.”

After a beat, Akechi continued. “However, Akira. I don’t think we should complete a change of heart.”

Akira paused. “Why not?”

“Well, for one, we’re meant to change the hearts of criminals. She’s done no crime. It certainly can’t be possible to do something like this. We don’t need to enter her palace – if she even has one.”

“I’m sure she does. And I think everyone else will be on board. We can take away her pain.”

“What she requires is not for us to whisk away her trauma, but professional help. Now that can be arranged.”

“She won’t leave her room, Goro.”

“Still, there must be another way.”

Akira took a step closer. “You can sit this one out, if you want to.” Akechi’s eyes shot up to him in
disbelief, as if that were a completely ridiculous idea. That made sense. Akechi’s boss probably made sure that he always went with them. “You’re probably right, she does need to speak to a professional, but maybe she also needs us to help her get there.”

Akechi stared at him, his mouth slightly open. “I don’t think it’s a good idea,” he finally said.

“Is it…about your mother?” Akira said, unsure if it was the right thing to say.

Akechi breathed in sharply. “I don’t think it’s a good idea,” he finally said. “Is it…about your mother?” Akira said, unsure if it was the right thing to say.

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“Is it truly alright to go into her palace for something like this?” Yusuke pondered.

A dull silence came as each of the thieves thought about Yusuke’s question. Akira sat there, feeling a heavy weight on his chest, as he waited to see what his teammates would say about it. He glanced over at Morgana, who tried to give him a comforting look.

“If it’s possible… I think we should try and help her,” Ann said.

Ryuji nodded. “I agree. She ain’t gonna let this pain control her life anymore. We gotta make sure of that.”

“So, we’re in agreeance?” Akira asked, inwardly exhaling. The others affirmed aloud, though Akechi only nodded, and his was slow and hesitant.

The message came only a minute later.

UNKNOWN 17:52
So we officially have a deal, then.

“I still think it’s kinda creepy she can hear everything we’re talkin’ about,” Ryuji groaned.

Ann turned her gaze to Akechi. “Akechi-kun, will you be alright?”

Akechi smiled. “Of course. I had a lapse in emotional judgment, but I assure you I am fully prepared for any of our palaces.”

“It might be a tough one,” Akira said. “So rely on us if you need to,” he added fondly. “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Well duh. That’s what friends are for,” Ryuji said obviously.

Akechi’s smile faltered for only a moment. “Yes…thank you.”

Another message came to Akira’s phone. Akira pulled it out, and when he read the message, his jaw stiffened.

“Akira?” Makoto said with concern. “Is it Alibaba?”

“No,” Akira said. “Just forgot I had plans to hang out with someone.”

“Look at Mr. Popular,” Ann said with a teasing smile. Akira forced a smile back. He peered down at his phone to read the message again.

UNKNOWN 17:52
Best not to get too attached to Slim Shady McShaderson. I know things that you don’t.

Chapter End Notes

akechi bby im so sorry for what i have to do to you in this arc
Act 1: Rising Tension

Akira stared up at the first hieroglyph that they were able to unscramble and solve. Their journey through the pyramid had gone just about as expected. Still, Akira noticed that Akechi seemed more tense and on edge than usual as they traversed through the Palace.

“What’s this a picture of?” Ann said, leaning forward as though it would provide some big insight or understanding.

“An adult seems to be reading something to a crying child…?” Yusuke said. Then he hummed despondently. “Hm. The emotions of the artist are often depicted in the art they produce. I can sense serious pain harbored in her heart.”

Akechi stared up at the work with a pensive expression.

“She was always such a bother.” A voice boomed throughout the room, echoing through the halls.

“It seems you caused your mother a great deal of trouble, Futaba-chan.” Akira felt his blood boil at how unkind and derisive the voice sounded.

“She must have had some kind of maternity neurosis.”

“What was that?” Ann said.

“It sounded like a suicide note,” Akechi said without looking at him. His eyes remained trained on the hieroglyph.

“Maternity neurosis…?” Makoto said. She crinkled her brow. “I’ve never heard of that.”

“Well, a state of neurosis occurs when.” Akechi started.

“I know what neurosis is,” Makoto said, cutting him off. Then her face softened when she realized how sharp her voice had come across. “But maternity neurosis? I would presume that that’s a state of mental distress that occurs from the stress of being a parent. It sounds dubious at best.”

“What makes you say that?” Akechi said, finally turning to look at her with a stiff voice.

“I don’t doubt that that sort of stress can harm someone’s mental health, but why then, at that age and at that time? Don’t you think something else would have had to trigger it?” Makoto said
questioningly.

“That’s a good point,” Akira said.

Akechi pursed his lips. “Maybe. But we can’t begin to know what was going on inside of her mind. What if she was already mentally unstable? What if she had been dealing with a particularly difficult time with Futaba? Maternity neurosis appears to make sense as a cause for suicide,” he said. He sounded almost like he was just trying to convince them to believe it.

“Appears? Maybe? Hm. I didn’t think a detective relied so heavily on ‘what ifs’ when it came to cases like this.” Makoto said evenly, and Akira wondered if Akechi would try to off her right there and then.

Akechi put on a forced smile. “Yes, well, if I don’t start with asking the what ifs, then I can’t begin to make progress on reaching the truth, don’t you think?”

Ann cleared her throat. “G-Guys, can we finish this later?” she said, staring between the two.

“Yeah, is that really what we’re tryna focus on right now?” Ryuji said. “C’mon. We’re wasting time.”

“I agree. Whether it is true or not, it seems to be what Futaba remembers of her mother’s suicide,” Yusuke said. “Let us proceed. We might find more clues about this as we go further.”

“That’s still a fuckin’ sick thing to do to a kid if that’s really how it all went down,” Ryuji said with a frown. He started to lead the way with the others trailing after him.

Akira lingered back for a moment, tugging on Akechi’s arm to get him to stop. “Hey. You doing okay?” he asked.

“I would appreciate if you stopped asking me that,” Akechi said, staring straight ahead. “Let’s go before we fall behind.” He lightly shook off Akira’s hand from his arm and sped up so that he could catch up with the others.

“Akechi-” Akira started, then sighed. There was no use. He followed after them without another word.

Act 2: Climax

When they got to the second painting, the others gasped when they saw the picture of Futaba’s mother jumping in front of a car.

“Could this be the moment when Futaba’s mother committed suicide…?” Ann breathed. “How horrible.”

“She…died right in front of Futaba’s eyes,” Ryuji said solemnly. Akira stole a glance at Akechi, who had his head lowered slightly with a darkened expression. He noticed his hands balled into fists. “I can’t believe her kid had to witness that.”

“I can’t even imagine that that would do to me,” Ann said. “Honestly, Futaba’s so brave to even have come this far.”

“It can’t have been easy,” Akechi said. “Trust me, I know.” Akira swallowed thickly. He realized that he never really knew who discovered Akechi’s mother after she committed suicide. Could this be the reason that he was so tense? Akira wanted so desperately to believe that that was the only
reason he was acting that way, but unfortunately he knew better than that.

“Akechi-kun…” Ann said softly. “Do you guys want to take a break in a safe room?” she said. “This is all getting really heavy.”

“I can keep going,” Akechi said. “Please, let’s not stop on my account.”

“You’re just like Akira,” Ann said with a sigh. “There’s nothing wrong with wanting to take a break. If you won’t ask for one, then I will,” she said, throwing her hands in the air. “Akira, mind if we stop?” she said, and Akechi’s eyes bore into his.

“Lady Ann, I don’t think we should stop. We’re almost done,” Morgana piped up. “Akechi says he’s fine, so we should keep going.”

Akira was ready to agree with him. As much as Akechi probably wanted to have a moment, Akira's frustration and eagerness to help Futaba as soon as possible started to take over. Akechi had played a part in this somehow. Even though he wanted to help him, he should know how his actions affected Futaba, right? She had suffered for so long.

So, Akira took a breath. “Ann, we can switch you out if you’re tired. I don’t want to push anyone. But I agree with Morgana. I get the sense that we’re almost to the end,” he said. Ann stared at him, somewhat surprised, and Akechi just looked at him with another unreadable expression.

“I’m kinda tired too,” Ryuji said, slumping his shoulders. “How about you, Yusuke?”

“I’m actually doing quite we-!” Yusuke coughed for air as Ryuji roughly patted him on the back.

“I said, how about you, Yusuke?” Ryuji said with a poorly acted laugh.

Yusuke frowned a little. “Well, now my back hurts a bit. I wouldn’t mind a rest, I suppose,” he told them.

If it had been any other palace and any other day, Akira would have smiled at how much they cared for Akechi and were willing to stick together for him. But now he just felt some unsettling rest in his stomach. Akira (and Morgana, to some degree) was the only one who knew that Akechi was involved in what had happened to Futaba.

While he still didn’t know what, what he did know was that Akechi knew exactly what had happened to Futaba. And Akechi was being stubborn and wasn’t budging at all. He needed Akechi to take a step or something. What good was him feeling guilty if he wasn’t going to do something about it?

“…Alright. We can rest,” he finally relented.

When they got back to the safe room, Yusuke pulled him aside so that he could talk to him privately as the others went inside.

“Is everything alright?” Akira asked once they were alone.

“Quite. Although my back is still in a bit of pain,” Yusuke said with a short pout. Akira smiled a bit at that. “But I wanted to speak with you privately about Akechi.”

Akira rubbed his forehead. “What is it?”

“I am a bit concerned about his state of mind,” Yusuke admitted. “Even before we decided to go to
the palace today, he has been a bit…erratic, as of late.”

Oh, right. Akechi had still been fairly MIA in their hangouts outside of Mementos, but Yusuke lived with him and saw him practically every day. Akira leaned back against the door with a hum. “Yeah, I can tell. Any idea what’s going on?” he said, hoping Yusuke would have some additional information.

“He is quite private,” Yusuke said. “Not that I can blame him. When he comes home, he fixes dinner and then immediately retires to his room. However, there was one instance where I believe he thought I was asleep, and I heard him.” Akira felt his heart thud a bit faster. Could this be the thing that he was looking for? He patiently waited for Yusuke to continue. “He got into quite a heated argument.”

“What did he say?” Akira said thickly.

“I didn’t hear all of it, but he mentioned Futaba in the phone call, and I heard him say that ‘they’ – I don’t know who this ‘they’ is – could be exposed,” Yusuke said, casting his eyes down. Akira’s breath hitched in his throat. “I also heard him mention your name as well, but not the specifics.”

“I see,” Akira said as calmly as possible. “What do you think it could mean? I had my suspicions that he knew more about this case than he was letting on.”

“He would have been only 15 himself, if that were the case,” Yusuke said, and that fact hit Akira for the first time. Of course he’d known that, but he never really thought about it. If Akechi was truly involved, then he would’ve been Futaba’s age at the time. “Much like art, Akechi’s heart is quite easy to read sometimes, through the expressions on his face. I think this pains him for many reasons. Some to do with his mother and some…less than noble.”

So Yusuke had his doubts too. He shouldn’t have been surprised. Yusuke had always been somewhat oblivious but also unbelievably perceptive in other ways. Still, Akira had to tread carefully.

“Makoto and I have been thinking the same thing,” Akira said. “Morgana too. But we have to be careful. All we have are doubts. They could ultimately mean nothing,” Akira said.

“Do you think he is deceiving us?” Yusuke said, his voice quieter than before.

Akira chose his words carefully. “Yes and no,” he said earnestly. “I think he’s got a lot of secrets, but I don’t think he wants to hurt us.” But that doesn’t mean he won’t, if he has to.

Yusuke nodded. “Yes…I want to believe that.” Then he bore his eyes into Akira’s. “For your sake as well.”

“Huh?”

“While he may be hiding things... the feelings that I sense, that affection between you that I’ve been aiming to capture in my work – that, I believe, is very real,” Yusuke said, even putting his hand over his heart for emphasis. “While I cannot draw from experience of having such feelings, I can sense how the loss of that affection would feel.”

Then- Yusuke did something that Akira would never have imagined. He walked up to Akira, and wrapped his arms around him in a somewhat awkward hug. Akira stood there, stunned at the sudden contact and the fact that Yusuke had just hugged him. “I apologize if this is not the correct response, but...I am sure you must be hurting as well.”
Akira lightly patted his back, still feeling a bit dazed. He wasn’t sure how to feel about everyone looking at him like he was some kind of wounded puppy because of Akechi. He was usually pretty good at hiding things...how could he have made this one so obvious? “It’s...fine, Yusuke,” Akira told him. Thank you.”

*Act 3: Falling Action*

“A child pulling on her mother’s clothes?” Yusuke said. The others stared at the final hieroglyph. Futaba’s voice echoed from the work. “…Mom...I’m...I’m tired of eating dinner all the time. It’s always just convenience store bento. I wanna go somewhere. Take me on a trip!”

“The one clinging to her mother would be Futaba-chan, right?” Ann said.

“Don’t be so selfish!” Wakaba’s voice startled all of them. “You know I’m working hard to support you, right?”

“Geez, she seems pretty angry,” Ryuji said.

“I wonder if it’s the maternity neurosis that the voice from earlier mentioned,” Akechi hummed, and Akira saw Makoto make a face off to the side. She still wasn’t buying this maternity neurosis thing, and honestly, the more that Akira thought about it, he wasn’t so sure why he bought it either.

“I thought it was pretty normal for a child to want to spend time with their parents though…” Ann drifted off.

“Yeah. Looks like Futaba was a pretty lonely kid growin’ up…” Ryuji agreed.

“I think we can all relate to that,” Ann said. “We have to help her.”

“So these incidents compounded, forcing her mother to suicide...?” Yusuke said.

“I don’t know. Something seems off,” Akira commented.

“Yeah,” Ann said. “I feel like that too. But...what?”

“I must die.” Everyone jumped at the sound and turned to find Futaba’s Shadow at the exit. She stared at them with hurt and broken eyes. “I killed her...” she said. “That’s why I’m here in this tomb.”

“D-Don’t say that!” Ann said, stepping forward. “You can’t blame yourself, Futaba-chan-”

“I will die,” Shadow Futaba said, before vanishing again. Ann bolted after her and went to reach her, only to extend her hand and grab a handful of air.

“I can’t believe she thinks that,” Ryuji said.

“She...wants to die because she blames herself for her mother’s actions,” Akechi said, his voice sounding hollow and not fully present. “She thinks it is her fault that she lost her mother.” He moved so that he was in front of the hieroglyph again and stared at it for a long time.

“Akechi-kun?” Ann said.

Akechi put his hand over it. “Futaba Sakura...no. Futaba Isshiki.” He balled the hand that was against the hieroglyph into a fist. “I see now.”
“Akechi? You alright, man?” Ryuji asked, and Akechi turned his head, giving him a dull smile.

“Always. Let us keep going.”

*Act 4: Resolution*

They went through the rest of the palace without incident, and as Akira expected, they couldn’t proceed without Futaba letting them inside of her room. They decided to wait a few days before giving her the calling card and going into her room.

Those few days passed, and as Akira made sure that everyone was ready to go…

Akechi didn’t respond to their message. In fact, he didn’t respond to any of their messages. They tried to figure out when he would be good to go, but to no avail. Even Yusuke, who lived with him, told him that Akechi had started taking odd hours, and when he did happen to be awake when Akechi got home, he would be on the phone or say something about being swamped with work and would retreat immediately into his room.

On the third day of trying to get in contact with him, he sent a message to the group apologizing that he was busy with work and would let them know when he was free to go. He was shutting them out, and Akira was determined to figure out why.

Morgana suggested just going without him, but the others were adamant about bringing him along. But after he continued to not speak to them, Akira decided to take matters into his own hands.

*Ann Takamaki 16:07*

*Good luck, Akira!! Hope Akechi’s okay.*

*Ryuji Sakamoto 16:08*

*And if he is okay sock him in the face for leaving us hanging and worryin’ all of us!*

Akira smiled a little, typing up a response to them as he walked down the street. He felt a little empty without Morgana at his side, and he considered going back to Leblanc to get him, but he knew the cat wanted to rest rather than “gallivant around the city for this guy”, as Morgana put it.

Fate was on his side, because as he neared the ramen shop next to Kosei, he could see Akechi through the window. He was actually almost out the door, so Akira sent a quick message to the others, then picked up his pace as Akechi exited the ramen shop and started down the street. Akira caught up to him as they neared an alley, and he reached out and tapped Akechi’s shoulder.

Akechi let out something like a sigh as he turned around. “I’m sorry, I can’t do photographs to-Akira?” His eyes widened.

Akira smiled and gave him a lazy wave. “Hey, stranger.”

Akechi’s lips tightened into a thin line before giving way to a forced smile. “I apologize for not being more forthcoming with my availability,” he began. “However, as I said, I’ve been busy.”

“How slow down. First, how’ve you been?” Akira said coolly.

“I—” Akechi paused for a moment. “I can’t say I haven’t been stressed.”

“We missed you,” Akira said. “Anything we can do to help?”

“Are you adept in both calculus and piecing together a string of grainy camera images?” Akechi
said warily.

“Yeah, my eyesight is 20/20, didn’t you know?” Akira said, and Akechi finally allowed himself to give a genuine smile. “And ah. Calculus. The true killer of souls,” Akira said. “Who knew math was the ace detective’s weakness?”

“Seven-year-old me would be appalled to know that my math is not as strong as it used to be,” Akechi said with a soft laugh.

Akira smiled, wishing that it could always be like this. He wished that he could hang out with Akechi like he would with the others. But… “You have a minute to chat?” he said, and Akechi was back to tensing up.

“I…suppose it’s unavoidable.” Akechi walked to the entrance of the alley so that they were out of peoples’ way.

Akira followed him, sticking his hands into his pockets. When he made sure they were out of earshot, he spoke in a low tone. “We’ve been waiting for you to send the calling card.” May as well get straight to the point.

“Yes, well, as I’ve said…” Akechi started. “Do you not want to be a Phantom Thief anymore?” Akira asked. “That’s fine. But we want to know if we should go into the palace without you.”

“…Why did you wait for me to begin with?” Akechi said curiously. “I’ve been busy, and I know there was a sense of urgency to do it.”

“Ask Ann, Ryuji and Yusuke. They didn’t want to go without you.” Even Yusuke, who had already started to doubt Akechi, had made it clear to Akira that they should wait for him to join.

“And Makoto and Morgana?” Akechi said. Akira shrugged, and Akechi nodded. “I suppose I can’t fault them for wanting to proceed.” Then he flexed his fingers, casting his eyes in another direction before meeting Akira’s gaze once more. "I was hoping that it wouldn’t come to this.” Akira gestured for him to continue.

“The reason I have been trying to busy myself with work is because I cannot agree with what we are doing to Futaba,” Akechi said clearly. Akira blinked wordlessly at him. “I was hoping that the extended time before the card would give enough chance for everyone to reflect, but I suppose not. It’s ridiculous to do something like this when she isn’t even a criminal.”

“We’ve been over this.”

“Yes, I understand, but where do we draw the line?” Akechi said. “Do we start going to counselors and searching for people who suffer from mental illness and whisk it away? Akira, the world doesn’t work like that. Doing it to criminals was dubious to begin with, but this opens an entire new area of moral ambiguity that I don’t feel comfortable with.”

Akira pursed his lips. He knew that part of what motivated him to help Futaba was personally driven, and to some degree, Akechi had a point. But he also knew that Akechi was probably trying his best to make sure that they didn’t find out the truth, so he had to take everything the detective said with a grain of salt.

“She has been cooped up for so long, and is finally ready to ask for help. Who are we to deny her that?”
“Who are we to help her in this way?” Akechi said, his voice rising a little before he cleared his throat. He smoothed down his shirt. “Akira. I’m sorry,” he said. “If things continue on this way... It’s just. There have been some developments. Through investigations into Shujin, there have been...some suspicions that you are in fact a Phantom Thief. It’s because of me that they’ve held off on taking you in for questioning,” Akechi said, his voice hardening.

Akira stared at him, and Akechi met his eyes, unwavering. “Are you...threatening me?” he said as realization dawned.

Akechi looked away. “I’m-”

“If you’re going to threaten me, at least look at me,” Akira told him.

Akechi slowly brought his eyes to Akira. “I’m simply telling you about the possibility. I have no say in the matter if they decide to proceed with it.”

Akira felt a little sick. This Akechi...it was sounding more and more like the one who was capable of putting a gun to his forehead. But there was something hidden deep in his voice that made Akira want to believe that it was for show – he wouldn’t really do that. Would he?

“Goro,” Akira said. “You do what you have to.”

Akechi’s mouth dropped a little. “You will still proceed with it?”

“I’ll face the consequences. I’ll help Futaba first and accept whatever comes next,” he told Akechi. “I hope you’ll do the same.”

“I can’t let you do this,” Akechi told him.

“Why?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Just say it, Goro,” Akira told him.

“Say what?” Akechi’s eyes flashed challengingly.

And Akira didn’t know what exactly it was that he wanted Akechi to say to him. “I don't know. Anything. I already know you’re involved. How many times do I have to tell you that I want to help you?” Akira said.

“And what would you do then, if I told you that I caused her death?” Akechi burst, and Akira froze. “How would you help me then? What would you do if whatever it is that you keep asking from me is worse than you could’ve ever imagined?”

“Did...you kill her?” Akira said, feeling his blood go cold and struggling to keep his cool. The image of Akechi’s face right before he killed him flashed through his mind. He knew exactly what Akechi was capable of but this...there was no way it could be true, right?”

“That’s not what I said. I believe I said, ‘if’.” Akechi said. “I’m simply trying to convey to you that your belief in me and desire to help me is naïve when I never asked for it in the first place.” Then he took a step closer so that they were only inches apart. “Think about it.”

Akechi looked at him teasingly, but Akira could’ve sworn he saw pain behind Akechi’s eyes. Akira felt his head spin and heard the thumping of his heart beat loudly against his chest. The
brunette looked like the Goro Akechi that he’d known in another timeline – before keychains and the Ferris wheel and sick days and the kiss and—maybe this was truly him all along. Maybe no matter what, this was who he would be. Maybe it had always been futile.

“Would you still want to help me then?” Akechi breathed. “Would you still want me…on your side?”

Except, when Akechi looked at him like that, and Akira could see the flecks of red perfectly and the tired lines behind his eyes, he wanted to believe otherwise. Could people really change without having a change of heart?

“Yes,” Akira said quietly, and Akechi jumped back with uncertain eyes, all of his bravado from before gone.

“I-I beg your—what?” Akechi said.

Akira backed him into the wall. He thought back to the palace, when he’d wanted Akechi to see how his actions have affected other people. Maybe if he saw that…maybe that would trigger something. “I said, yes. But only if you’re willing to face whatever it is that you’re hiding from us, head on.”

“Even if I were a criminal? That goes against the very logic of the Phantom Thieves,” Akechi said, and Akira wasn’t sure if he sounded disgusted or bewildered.

“We take the distorted desires of people who we don’t think are capable of changing on their own.”

“What are you implying?” Akechi said, and Akira didn’t really think he had to put it into words.

He’d seen it, with his friends and with all of the people he’d met and built relationships with. What was the answer? What had truly made them capable of changing on their own?

“Akechi-kun! There you are!”

Fate truly did continue to be on his side that day. Akira took a step back and looked at the rest of the Phantom Thieves as they rushed over to where Akechi was standing. Even though he still felt a little uneasy at what Akechi implied before, he was glad that the others got his message.

Ann was the first to reach him and she immediately threw her arms around him in a hug, nearly making Akechi hit his head against the wall behind him. “We’ve been so worried about you,” she said, releasing Akechi as he stood there a bit flustered. She stood to one side of him, a hand still on his shoulder. “Were you really that busy with work?”

Ryuji punched Akechi square in the arm, causing the brunette to yelp a bit and rub his arm. Ryuji’s anger quickly gave way to a relieved grin. “Dude. You can’t just disappear on us,” he said, standing on the other side of Ann and putting his arm around Akechi. “We had to make sure you didn’t die from stress!”

“I’ve also been quite worried about your well-being. I even considered trying to cook dinner for you so that you will have food ready and can eat,” Yusuke said. “But I spent most of my money on a new set of paint, so I couldn’t get groceries,” he said sadly.

Akechi looked back and forth between Ann and Ryuji on either side of him, clearly confused. “Wh-What are you all doing here?”
“Akira-kun let us know where he was so that we could all come find you,” Makoto said with a level tone. Even though she trusted him the least, he was still glad that she came too, with the others.

Ann flexed her free arm with a big grin. “We’re here to help you get some work done.”

“Yeah, we’re ready to kick ass and solve some crimes!” Ryuji said excitedly. When Akechi continued to stare at them, Ryuji moved his arm and gave him a nudge. “What we mean is, we want you to be part of this. It ain’t the same if we’re not doin’ it together. Oh, uh, and sorry for punchin’ your arm.”

Akechi stayed at a loss for words for another few moments before he chuckled slightly. “You don’t sound very sorry.”

“Yeah, I’m not really that sorry since you were bein’ so distant,” Ryuji said with a smile. “Nothin’ a three-mile run won’t fix to make up for lost time!”

Akechi’s face turned a little pale. “I-I see,” he said as Ryuji laughed, and it was so contagious that the others – even Makoto - couldn’t help but laugh with him.

“So, what do you need help with?” Makoto said.

“His weakness is Calculus. Level 100 boss,” Akira said, twirling the front of his hair.

“Ugh, mine too,” Ryuji said.

“Ah. Ha ha. Yes, This unit does seem to be a bit difficult,” Akechi said with a soft laugh.

“I can help,” Makoto offered. “Should we go into the ramen shop, or did you just come from there?”

As they tried to decide where they should go, Akira wondered thought about the things that Akechi had told him. He couldn’t just leave it as it was. Then he thought about Futaba, Sojiro, and Wakaba. Futaba deserved the truth, and Akechi deserved a chance to tell her the truth. Akira only hoped that Akechi would be willing to talk about it. If he was willing to do that then...maybe he could change after all, and Akira could stop struggling with that ugly feeling in his chest that made Akira want to both kiss him and kick him.

That was the change he wanted. But was it even possible? Akechi had practically threatened to arrest him one moment and then seemed to wonder if his redemption was possible in another, so Akira felt like he was back to square one when it came to figuring out the detective.

* *

“Akechi said he’d be here, so he’ll be here,” Ryuji said, standing outside of Sojiro’s house with the others.

“Hmph. I sure hope so. Otherwise we just have to go in,” Morgana said. “He’s the one who said that this time would work for him, right?” he asked.

Akira checked the group chat again.

Goro Akechi 06:32
I will be available to send the calling card on Friday at 5:00PM.
“Let’s give him another minute,” Akira said, ignoring the fact that Akechi was 15 minutes late. Morgana hummed quietly from Akira’s bag, whispering so that the others couldn’t hear him.

“He’s not going to show up with an army of cops, right?” Morgana sneered. Akira realized in retrospect that he probably shouldn’t have mentioned the arrest part to Morgana, but he needed to make sure that someone else was aware that it could’ve happened. Morgana had been pretty pissed and ready to claw his eyes out, but Akira was able to convince him that Akechi most likely wouldn’t have actually done that to him, even though he 100% did that to them when he captured Akira in the last timeline.

Before Akira could quip something back, he saw a mop of brown hair approaching them.

“I…apologize. There was…a delay on the train,” Akechi said, out of breath. He coughed into his hand. He met Akira’s eyes first, and the latter boy smiled at him. He sounded genuinely sorry, and though Akira could still see some tension in his face, he also looked determined in a way that Akira hadn’t seen before. He wasn’t sure if it was a positive or a negative, so he made a mental note to keep an eye on his face – for observation purposes, clearly.

“Are you ready?” Akira asked.

“Yes. I’m ready.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry but maternity neurosis makes no sense and I don’t buy that makoto would believe this is a thing lmao

oMg Is aKEchI cHANgiNG finAILY

Anyone want some fan art of Akechi looking confusedly between Ann and Ryuji 'cause im definitely enjoying writing tidbits of their friendship and akechi just being like wot

So who wants to take guesses on what makes Morgana leave the party this time L O L
“What the hell is this thing? We can’t even hit it?” Ryuji said as he dived out of the way of the Sphinx Wakaba swiping its hand towards him.

Akira clutched at his side, which was throbbing in pain, and sucked in air. He felt Ann’s diarama spell hit him, but which made the pain hurt only a little less. They were royally getting their asses kicked, and Akira was willing Futaba to show up before one of them got killed.

“Akira!” Akechi yelled, and Akira looked up and stumbled back just as another hit came for him. Akira fell back onto the ground, feeling his head start to spin.

“A-Akira,” Makoto said, strained. “I don’t think we can win this fight.” She summoned another defense spell. “What should we do?”

Akira frowned. They couldn’t escape, not when the stakes were this high. She was coming, right? They had convinced her to open the door and everything up to this point had gone exactly as it had before. So where was-

“Futaba?”

Oh. Right on time.

“Y-You entered your own palace?” Makoto sputtered.

Futaba stared up at the sphinx of her mother with wide eyes. She weakly tried to lift up an arm to point, to no avail. “That’s…”

“You killed her.”

“Don’t just sit there. Say something.”

“It was your fault!”

Futaba clutched her head, groaning in pain. “I-It was my fault… Mom…”

“Right. You killed me,” the sphinx roared.

“Impossible. That monster is her mother?” Yusuke said.
“Her desires and guilt changed her perception,” Morgana said. “Futaba, it’s not real!” he called out to her.

“You’re going to get in my way again,” the sphinx said over Morgana’s voice. “If you didn’t exist, I wouldn’t have had to waste my time. I could’ve presented my results. The find of the century that I poured so much into. You should die! There’s no reason for you to live. You’re not needed by anyone.”

Akira gritted his teeth. Even the second time around, he couldn’t believe how much Futaba had suffered through. “N-No one cares about me…” she said meekly.

“It would’ve been better if Futaba wasn’t born.”

“Hey, if this keeps up, it’s gonna be bad,” Ryuji said.

“The feelings that Futaba had that she killed her mother – they’ve manifested into a palace where her mother wants her dead,” Makoto said.

“Futaba, that thing ain’t your mother,” Ryuji told her.

“B-But…”

“She didn’t abuse you,” Makoto added. “Sojiro said it. Your mother worked hard to raise you by herself.”

“Aren’t you mixing the wrong memories?” Yusuke prompted.

“The…wrong memories?”

“Your mother abandoned the fruits of her research for you Futaba, even though she worked so hard. She went crazy because of you.”

Futaba groaned, falling to her knees and grabbing at her head in pain. “M-Make it stop. It’s because of me. It’s all because of me!”

Akira walked up to her, kneeling down. “Futaba,” he said, but she didn’t budge. “That monster isn’t her. You have to believe that.”

“This place exists because she thinks her mother never wanted her,” Akechi said, mostly to himself. “That’s why she’s suffering.” He took a deep breath, then stepped forward so that he was next to Akira. “Futaba-chan. Look at that…thing. That’s just a monster. An illusion you created.”

“No…it’s real. I-I killed her.”

“You…you didn’t kill her,” Akechi said, his voice rising just barely. Akira stared at Akechi for a moment, thinking of what he’d told him outside of the ramen shop. “Perhaps it doesn’t mean much, but I can promise you that. I’m sure that…she…loved you very much,” he said, his words coming out slower and slower.

“No…it’s real. I-I killed her.”

“Futaba Sakura, remember!” Futaba’s Shadow appeared, and both Akira and Akechi stood, taking a step back as the Shadow approached her. “Why do you think she committed suicide?”

“In her note…” Futaba croaked.

“The men in black read her suicide note to you, and what did it say?” the shadow asked.
“All of her complaints…about me…” Futaba said.

“Yes. The shock and pain led you to avert your eyes,” the shadow told her. “But they kept reading it aloud to your relatives.”

“What?” Akechi said, his mouth falling open.

“Think hard. Was the suicide note real? Would the mother you loved so much truly have written that? Would she have said such horrible things?”

Slowly, Futaba lifted her head up, and then she stood, and Akira fought the urge to fist pump like Ryuji. He felt his chest swell with emotion. These were the things that made him feel good about what they were doing, no matter how much Akechi tried to convince them otherwise. Maybe it wasn’t the right method, but watching Futaba finally see the truth was more than enough to make him think it was worth it.

“No!” she declared. “She scolded me whenever I had tantrums, but she cared for me.”

“Then what about the suicide note?” the shadow prompted her.

“A total lie!” Futaba said, stomping her foot onto the ground.

“You were used. They forged her suicide note, then laid the blame of her death upon you!” the shadow said.

“They wrote a fake note?” Akechi said, his hands balling into fists. “And blamed her for the death?”

“Goro…?” Akira said curiously.

“I-I simply cannot believe…” Akechi started. He shook his head tersely. “Why did this happen to her? Why did they say such things to her?”

Akira was about to respond, but he was cut off by the sight of Futaba’s persona awakening. They would have to save that conversation for another day.

When Futaba awakened to her persona, the rest of the fight went by in a breeze. She was able to reconcile with a proper memory of her mother, and – in true Futaba fashion – still left them behind in the palace.

They returned to the real world, where they made sure that Futaba was alright and were able to let her rest, just like last time. All Akira could hope was that she didn’t sleep for days and become practically comatose while they waited for her to wake up like last time.

Once they made sure that she was alright with Takemi’s help and Sojiro assured them that she was perfectly okay, he invited them into Leblanc for some coffee and curry.

It was definitely needed, and everyone slouched into the benches or over the counter, exhausted and worn out from the day’s events.

“You all look like you’ve been through the wringer,” Sojiro said, tossing an apron to Akira even though he felt like his arms were about to collapse from exhaustion. “What’re you doing sitting down? You have waiting customers.”

Akira groaned, but put the apron on over himself. “Can’t I take a day off?” he quipped with a small
smile.

“Ha. Nice try. It’s not like you’ve run a marathon or something,” Sojiro said.

Morgana snickered, and Akira made a mental note to pick up some sushi from the place with low reviews as revenge for that.

“But seriously, what’s got all of you so beat?” Sojiro asked. Akira moved slowly behind the counter, forcing his mind to stay up while the Ryuji and Yusuke didn’t even bother to keep their eyes open.

At Sojiro’s question, though, they did exchange a look. “It’s just been a long day. For all of us,” Akechi said with an easy but weary smile. “And of course, we were worried about Futaba-chan.”

Sojiro nodded solemnly. “Thank you guys.” He started fixing up some curry and handed another pan to Akira. The pan nearly slipped out of his hands because his fingers felt like lead. “You know, tomorrow is the day that Wakaba passed. Maybe that’s got something to do with it this time around.”

“Futaba really loved her,” Ann said. Her head was resting against the top of the booth so that she was staring up at the ceiling.

Akira took a few seconds before mustering up the strength to lift the pan and put it onto the stove. Suddenly, it was lifted from his hands. “Alright, alright, slow poke. Either you’re a good actor or you really are beat. Go seat with the others,” Sojiro said, taking the pan out from his hands.

“I don’t mind helping,” Akira said slowly, and Sojiro let out a hearty laugh.

“You lie to everyone like that? If so, you might need some lessons,” Sojiro said with a gleam. “Go sit before I change my mind. I’ll let you off… this time.”

Akira didn’t waste any time. He tried to take off the apron, then realized that it would take too much mental and physical stamina and collapsed next to Akechi in his booth. All things considered, Akechi didn’t really look physically tired like the rest of them did. But he could see the mental toll that the entire thing had taken on him.

“Futaba reminds me so much of her mother,” Sojiro said after some silence. “She’s a smart girl. Doesn’t just go with the flow, either.”

“We can tell,” Makoto said warmly.

“Wakaba…” Sojiro said quietly. “Your work and your kid were so fulfilling for you. Why’d you have to die so suddenly?”

Akechi’s fingers twitched on the table. He leaned his head back like Ann, staring up at the ceiling. “Sakura-san…” Akechi said without turning to look at him. “I apologize if this is too invasive of a question, but…do you believe that she committed suicide?”

“I told you to call me Boss,” Sojiro reminded him. “But…” he sighed. “I don’t know. She was doing some research. You don’t need to know what it was about, but there was some trouble around it that she got dragged into. They ruled her death a suicide but…I’ve got my doubts.”

“You really think people woulda hurt her for this research?” Ryuji said.

“Supposedly, there were people who wanted to take her research and use it for their own benefit,”
Sojiro said. *And they succeeded,* Akira said bitterly. Still, they either didn’t know or didn’t care about the ability to change people’s hearts.

“Right before Wakaba died, she told me, ‘I think I might die.’”

“She said that?” Ann said. “So she knew that it would be dangerous…”

“If only I’d taken her seriously,” Sojiro said, gripping his coffee pot tighter. “That was another reason I took her in. They just yelled at her.”

“You…can’t blame yourself for not taking her seriously. How could you have known?” Akechi said with unfocused eyes. “How could anyone have known that…this would happen?” He said, and Akira wasn’t so sure he was still talking about the same thing that Sojiro was talking about.

Silence passed as Sojiro fixed up some food for them. He placed cups of decaf coffee in front of all of them, as well as a small plate of curry. “She’s been through so much. They said such horrible things to her, and she was just a kid,” he said. “How do you heal emotional scars like that?”

“I don’t know,” Akira said. He glanced over at Akechi, who still didn’t look like he was fully present. He was still trying to figure that out himself.

“I guess it all just takes time,” Sojiro said. He sighed. “If you all don’t mind, I’m gonna turn in. Sometimes Futaba gets cold in her sleep.”

“I’ll clean up,” Akira told him. “I can do that much.” His arms didn’t feel like literal noodles anymore at least.

Sojiro nodded. “Appreciate it. You kids don’t stay up too late now, okay?” he said, and everyone said a tired goodbye as Sojiro left Leblanc.

“This has been quite the day.” Yusuke said. “I haven’t felt this tired since I stayed up for 72 hours to finish my final project last year.”

“But we did it,” Ryuji said, giving a weak fist pump.

“Still, what Boss said was troubling,” Makoto said. “If it wasn’t really a suicide, then what could have happened to her? I mean, it’s very clear that she jumped in front of a car. There were witnesses for that.”

“That’s true,” Ann said. “Then what could it have been?”

Makoto hummed. “She was doing research on the cognitive world. It’s possible that something related to that may have happened to her.”

“That’s quite the leap,” Akechi said stiffly. “How would that be possible?”

“I dunno. There are those weird cases that’ve been coming up,” Ryuji mentioned. “And we already know there’s some guy in a black mask also goin’ through palaces.” He frowned, then leaned his head over so he could look at Akira. “’Member when we were first dealin’ with Kamoshida? Didn’t Morgana say something about how we could totally turn his brain into a vegetable if we messed up?”

“If we aren’t careful,” Morgana said with a nod. “We could seriously ruin their psyche.”

“Kaneshiro said it too,” Ann added. “About someone going into palaces and causing psychotic
breakdowns and mental shutdowns.”

“Right,” Makoto said with a soft hum. “Do you think that someone deliberately did that to her mother?”

“It would be a perfect crime,” Yusuke said. “No one would be able to prove it.”

“I didn’t realize that there were such dangerous people involved in this,” Makoto said. “There is so much we don’t know. I don’t want to push Futaba before she’s ready, but when she’s feeling better we should find out how much she knows.”

“Yeah,” Ann agreed. “She might be able to help us figure things out. I’ve been so focused on what we were doing, but to know that there’s a whole research field about this and people are using it to hurt even more people…” she frowned. “That’s so messed up.”

“Well, we won’t learn more until Futaba wakes up,” Makoro said. “Let’s focus on her recovery for now.”

“Yeah, guess that’s all we can do,” Ryuji said. Then he groaned. “Ugh. Getting home’s gonna be a bitch.”

“You can stay here if you want,” Akira said. “Any of you.”

“Nah. Mom’s gonna kill me as it is for gettin’ home so late,” Ryuji said. “I was supposed to get the groceries too, shit.”

“I should get back too,” Ann said. “Your house is in the same direction as mine, so I’ll go back with you.”

“Yes, I should also be leaving,” Makoto said. “My sister will be cross if I’m home too late, even on a Saturday. We’ll table this discussion for another day.”

In took all of them close to half an hour just to get the energy to move and leave Leblanc. Finally, Akira was able to muster up the energy to pack up their curry into boxes and coffee into disposable cups. The others said their goodbyes, leaving just Akira, Akechi, Yusuke, and Morgana.

“You should get some rest,” Morgana prompted to Akira.

Akira finally finished boxing Yusuke’s curry, but when he brought it over to him, he saw Yusuke’s head lolled to the side and his eyes closed as he breathed softly. “Yusuke?” Akira said, putting the box down. He looked over at Akechi, who had his head in his palm and looked like he was about to collapse himself. It was kind of adorable to watch him try to keep his head up.

“I’ll wake him up for you,” Morgana said mischievously, and Akira clicked his teeth. “Fine, fine, you do it in a way that doesn’t involve claws. We can’t just leave them down here to sleep. I’ll meet you upstairs.” Then the cat trotted upstairs into the attic.

“Yeah,” Akira said. He walked over to Akechi and picked up his plate, boxing it up and bringing it back to him. “Goro,” he said softly.

“Hm?” he said in a sleepy daze. Akira smiled a little.

Akira lightly shook his shoulder. “Hey Sleeping Beauty,” he said. Akechi’s eyes fluttered open and then closed, then open again. “You’re falling asleep.”
Akechi blinked a few times, looking around Leblanc. “O-Oh.” He rubbed at his eyelids. “My apologies. While you were packing up everyone’s food, the exhaustion must have hit me.”

Akira gestured to Yusuke with his head. “You weren’t the only one.” Akechi looked over at Yusuke’s sleeping form, then offered an apologetic smile. “Must be a roommate telepathy thing,” Akira added.

Akechi slowly got up, picking up the box. “I suppose I should wake him.”

“You two can stay,” Akira told him.

“I couldn’t possibly intrude. Besides, you only have the one couch.”

“I don’t mind sharing a bed,” Akira shrugged, and Akechi nearly choked at how nonchalant Akira had said it. “Or I can take the floor.”

“Th-That’s quite alright,” Akechi said. “I wouldn’t dream of making you to that.”

“I can make you take the floor if that’s better,” Akira shrugged, and Akechi stared at him in a moment of disbelief before Akira cracked a smile. “C’mon, I’m not that cruel, am I?” he said with a twirl of his hair.

“Ha ha. I suppose not,” Akechi said. He walked over to Yusuke, but before he could nudge him, Akira stopped him, grabbing his arm lightly.

“Before you do,” Akira started. “How are you feeling after all of this?”

Akechi stiffened. “I don’t want to talk about this right now.”

“We’re right, aren’t we?” Akira continued. He felt a little bad for cornering him after he was already so tired, but the curiosity was burning inside of him. “Wakaba suffered from a mental shutdown.”

Akechi pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose. “Akira, please. It…It was already difficult enough having to hear all of that.”

“Hear what?”

Akechi gripped his box tighter. “She was fooled into thinking that it was her fault that her mother died. A false note was given, and she’s suffered for two years because of that.”

The more Akechi spoke, the more Akira got the sinking feeling that he wasn’t just trying to throw him off and he really was the one responsible for Wakaba’s death. He’d already spent enough nights losing sleep at the possibility, and he’d tried to ready himself for if and when Akechi would say it out loud and admit it. A part of him wanted to never hear it because it was easier to pretend that it wasn’t true so long as Akechi never said it out loud.

“You know exactly what happened to her, don’t you,” Akira said as a statement rather than a question.

“If I said yes?”

“I wish you would tell me,” Akira said.

“Yes, well. You’ll know soon enough, won’t you,” Akechi said a bit sadly. Akira tilted his head, slightly confused at what he meant by that. “I can see now that you all are getting closer and closer
“The truth…”

“I do know what happened to her,” Akechi admitted in a quiet voice, and Akira felt the air grow thick. “But I…I didn’t know…about after,” he said with a tense voice, as though every word was a struggle.

“She was a regular person with a life and a child who loved her,” Akira said. “Goro, just tell me, please. Was it you?”

“Akira, I don’t need to answer that question,” Akechi said darkly, and Akira felt something start to rise in his throat. “Yusuke,” Akechi said, nudging Yusuke’s shoulder so that he would wake up – and probably so that he could escape the conversation.

“Wait a minute, Goro.”

“Mmh?” Yusuke stirred, lifting his head up and yawning. He rubbed the side of his neck. “My neck hurts,” he noted.

“You fell asleep,” Akechi said with a forced smile. “Come, we should get back to the apartment.”

“Ah. Yes. You’re right.” Yusuke paused, then hummed as he looked between the two of them. “Is everything alright? Akira, you look ill,” he commented, then looked at Akechi.

Akechi looked at him with a blank stare, waiting for Akira’s next move. Akira swallowed thickly, then shook his head. “Yeah. Just a side effect of one of Takemi’s medicines, probably,” he said.

“Alright…” Yusuke said, obviously confused.

“Let’s head out. Please, keep us updated on Futaba’s condition,” Akechi said kindly. “We will see you soon,” he told Akira, who was barely able to nod.

As Yusuke followed him out, Akira reached for him. “Yusuke,” he said, and the artist turned towards him, perplexed. He saw Akechi stop from in front of Yusuke and turn his head slightly to the side. What could he say? What could he even do in this situation? Akechi hadn’t admitted to it upfront, and yet he’d admitted to everything at the same time. “Be safe,” was all Akira could say.

Yusuke stared at him. “Are you quite sure that you’re alright?”

“I know we’re very tired, but I can assure you that we will be fine to walk home,” Akechi said. “Yusuke-kun can text you when we arrive home.” Was this his way of telling me that he won’t hurt him, Akira wondered.

Yusuke looked back and forth between the two of them, studying their faces. Akira tried his best to keep his mask on, but even he could feel his start to crack even more so than Akechi’s. To avoid Yusuke’s eyes boring into his, he turned around and started to walk towards the counter and search for a rag. “Okay,” was all Akira said.

“Well, alright,” Yusuke said. “We will await word about Futaba.”

Akira nodded, then waited for them to exit the café. And then once he locked up—

He promptly went into the bathroom and heaved into the toilet. Akira’s mind was starting to spin. Akechi hadn’t really sounded sorry that he’d done it, only sorry with the way that they’d handled
Akira had hoped that this would be the moment when Akechi would tell him that he wanted to change and do better – he had hoped that Akechi would confess to everything and be ready to turn over a new leaf. But he seemed resigned that he had to follow the path that he was on. What was he supposed to do against someone like that? It had been months since they’d met and he’d barely even scratched the surface.

Akira rested his head back against the wall, trying to regain his composure before he went upstairs to face Morgana’s questioning. Then he felt himself start to get sick again and leaned over the toilet, his heart thudding in his chest. The others couldn’t see him like this. No one could see him like this, except…

Akechi had, at one point, been close to getting there. Akechi knew more about him than any of the others had. Even as he become close with everyone, he was content to be more of a listener of their problems rather than the one talking about his own. It had just been the nature of his friendships – he didn’t like talking about himself and the others didn’t push it. But Akechi had been different. Akechi had never pushed, but Akira had felt the urge nonetheless.

And look where it had gotten him.

After a few more minutes in the bathroom and thoroughly swishing mouthwash, he slowly went up the stairs to meet Morgana with a forced neutral expression on his face. Surprisingly, Morgana was sleeping curled up on his bed, and Akira thanked his lucky stars that he would be able to at least get through the evening without having to face him.

Akira tiptoed like a true thief around the room, changing out of his clothes. He was tiptoeing to his laundry basket when—“You’re here!” Morgana said. “Geez, what took you so long?”

Akira twitched ever so slightly, then quickly fixed his stance. He put his clothes into the basket, and before he turned around, he took one final breath to regain his composure. Then he went towards the bed where Morgana was laying down. “Had an interesting conversation.”

“Oh?” Morgana said curiously. The cat studied Akira closely, and Akira made sure to not let anything betray on his face. “Do tell.” When Akira sat down, Morgana stood and put his front two paws on Akira’s thigh, peering up at him. “You look a little green in the face. Did you eat something weird?”

Akira considered going along with that story for a moment. But then he numbly put his hands against the blanket. “It was him,” he said calmly.

Morgana practically screeched in surprise. “No way! He admitted it?”

“No,” Akira said. He reached down to the corner of his bed and picked up his journal and pen to log the day’s events and differences in the timeline. “But he didn’t deny it.”

“W-Well, now we know! What did he say? What happened? Tell me everything!” Morgana said with a fiery hatred in his eyes. With tired breaths, Akira recounted the conversation that he’d had with him, and once he was done, Morgana’s fierce stance morphed into a more subdued anger. “It doesn’t sound like he’s ready to give up any names yet…”

“Nope,” Akira said. He couldn’t concentrate on his writing, so instead he put the journal on the bed and made his way over to the desk to work on some materials for the metaverse.

“What are you doing?” Morgana said.
Akira didn’t answer him, and instead started pulling together some materials for a lockpick. It was mindless work to him at this point, anyway. Something to keep his hands busy even though the meticulous work of it made it obvious that his hands were shaking.

“Akira…” Morgana sighed unsurely. “We knew all along, though, didn’t we?”

Of course. They’d had this conversation before. Akira had known deep down that he was the black mask, and he had known that he was responsible for the shutdowns, even if he refused to believe it without solid proof. But—“I know, but there’s a difference between suspecting and having to hear it.” Akira shook his head. “But he won’t even admit it even though he knows that I know.”

Akira’s head started to hurt. He waited to see if another reality-splitting headache was about to come, and he kind of hoped it would so that he could focus on something other than the pain that he felt in his chest.

“We should plan our next move,” Akira said.

“Are…you sure? It’s already been a long day…” Morgana said uncertainly.

“I’m sure,” Akira said. “We have to start planning for worst-case scenarios.”

“You mean…if he puts a gun to your head again?” Morgana said.

Akira nodded expressionlessly. “And I won’t let him kill Haru’s father.”

“Well…doesn’t he seem a little doubtful about his actions now? He’s different,” Morgana said. *That* was rare. Morgana seemed to notice, and he backtracked. “I mean, I-I’m not defending that blockhead, I’m just saying, there’s still a chance that he’ll come around.”

Akira hummed. “We can’t bet on that. I have some ideas.” Akira felt his phone buzz in his pocket, and he fished it out to look at it.

**Yusuke Kitagawa 20:32**
*Akechi-kun informed me that I should send a message to you that we are home.*

**Yusuke Kitagawa 20:32**
*I am a bit baffled, as he is fully capable of using his own phone.*

**Yusuke Kitagawa 20:33**
*I considered the possibility that he did not want to use his minutes, as I don’t either, but that seems a bit silly upon further reflection.*

**Yusuke Kitagawa 20:34**
*Is this about Futaba’s Palace?*

Akira put his phone down. He would have to think of a response to that later. He tried to once again start focusing on another lockpick but Morgana hopped up on the table, distracting him.

“I know you’re trying to be all cool and collected, but it’s okay to be upset about this, you know,” Morgana said. “I…We all know how much you care for him. But we can’t save everyone.”

Once again, Akira didn’t speak. Instead, he moved his arms a bit so that he could resume the work he was doing. Morgana’s eyes softened into a gentle, friendly concern, but thankfully he didn’t push it. Akira had to think of a plan – no, multiple plans for multiple scenarios.
Minutes passed as he was lost in thought, and soon his phone buzzed again.

**Yusuke Kitagawa 20:42**

*He informed me that he’s sorry for the pain that I had to suffer through for so long and then returned back into his room. Should I be concerned?*

Akira pursed his lips. He took a long, concentrated breath, and put down the lockpick materials. Maybe it was time to go all out.

*Er, Futaba, are you even listening?!” Morgana said, his tail going straight as Futaba strolled over to Akira’s bed and plopped down with a bowl of hot ramen in her hands. She gave a confused ‘hm?’ as she dug into her food. “Ugh, she’s not listening.” Morgana groaned.

It was just the three of them in the attic of Leblanc – and Akira was hoping to get some information out of her.

“We’re glad you’re better,” Akira said, leaning back in his chair. Futaba slurped loudly, and Morgana stared up at Akira warily. Akira wasn’t fazed, and instead smiling a bit in response. “Are you feeling well enough to talk about—”

“You wanna know about Slim Shady, right?” Futaba said, not looking them in the face as she spoke and slurped up her noodles.

“What? Who’s that?” Morgana said.

Akira ignored Morgana in favor of nodding to Futaba. “You have the cafe bugged, don’t you?”

Futaba chewed at her noodles. “You’re not gonna tell Sojiro, are you?” She said absentmindedly.

“No. We just want to know what you might have heard about Akechi…”

“Mhm, mhm,” she said, taking another long slurp of her noodles.

“Ugh, this is so frustrating. Can you at least turn to look at us?” Morgana said, and Akira hadn’t even really registered that Futaba was sitting with her back to them.

“That’s how she feels comfortable,” Akira said. “It’s fine, Morgana.”

“He’s definitely a bad guy,” Futaba said after she finished chewing. Akira would never feel comfortable with hearing that, but he nodded and waiting for her to keep going. “But like the kind of villain in anime that’s got a troubled past and people secretly write fanfiction for to try and redeem,” she said.

“What does that even mean?” Morgana groaned.

“He thought about having you taken in, but not so much anymore. Dunno. He’s always with you guys so he doesn’t say much that you don’t already know,” Futaba continued. “Oh, and I know that you’re all wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey.”

Akira blinked. “What?”

“You like…time traveled or something, right?” Futaba said.

“You would believe me?” Akira said unsurely.
“There’s a talking cat and you guys traveled into my mind. Why not?” Futaba said. “Besides, I heard you talking about things that didn’t even happen yet.”

“Right…” Akira shifted in his seat. “Since we don’t have a lot of information, I wanted to ask you for your help.”

“You want me to join the Phantom Thieves and get some info on Slim Shady. Got it,” Futaba said simply.

“Wh-That’s it?” Morgana said.

Akira smiled. “Except, maybe not call him that to his face. Also, we need to keep an eye on him.”

Futaba chewed more of her noodles. “Can you get me his phone? Should be pretty easy if I can get my hands on it.”

“That can be arranged,” Akira said thoughtfully. “First, we’ll have to get you acquainted with the others.”

“Wha-Huh? Why do I have to talk to them too?” Futaba said, her voice spiking anxiously.

“You’re gonna be a Phantom Thief, aren’t you?” Morgana said. “We’re a team.”

“Y-Y-Yeah, but that’s a little soon, don’t you think? I’m way too underleveled for that.”

Akira got up out of his chair and moved so that he was sitting in front of Futaba. The girl jumped back when he took his spot in front of her, her face getting slightly red from nerves. “I know it’s nerve-wracking, but I promise, it’ll be fine. We’re all people who wanted to help you. And I’ll be there too.”

Futaba frowned deeply, but ultimately sighed, slumped down. “A-Alright.”

“Futaba-chan,” Akira started, and she peeked up at him. “You’re not alone anymore. Okay? Just remember that.”

Akira thought he saw her bottom lip tremble, but before he could say anything, she leapt back and nearly fell off of the bed, spilling her ramen onto his sheets. “Ach!” She exclaimed. “Sorry!”

“It’s fine,” Akira told her quickly. “I’ll get some towels.”

“I’ll get them-!” She said, jumping off of the bed and running down the stairs of the attic.

“Do…you think she’s actually coming back?” Morgana said warily.

Akira smiled a little. He was glad that Futaba didn’t lose her charm. He hoped that this timeline would still allow her to feel much more comfortable in her own skin and to be more confident in herself. She was going to be a good ally, but more than that, a great friend.

* 

“Ah…what is that supposed to be?” Akechi asked, his voice faltering at bit as he stared at Futaba’s mask.

Futaba once again kept her back to the others, this time while in her room. Akira had taken Akechi and Yusuke with him and Morgana to go to Futaba’s room this time, rather than Makoto. Futaba had told him that she would be able to hack into his phone, so all he could do was wait.
“Such avant garde design. You have excellent taste,” Yusuke said, framing it in his hands.

Futaba snickered victoriously.

“Still, don’t you think it will be easier to converse with us without that on your head?” Akechi said unsurely, looking over at Akira for help. Akechi had done a good job of avoiding really speaking to Akira for most of the day – the week, really. Akira had called the two of them together to ask if they could help with Futaba, and Akechi didn’t bring up the events from last week, and neither did Akira. Akira was certain that Akechi was wondering what Akira would do next, and it had taken Akira those few days to come up with something and to make sure his head was on straight.

“Ugh. Fine,” Futaba said. She took off the mask with a pouting face, and then immediately spun back in her chair to avoid looking at them. She brought her knees up to her chest and hugged them.

“Why were you wearing it in the first place?” Akechi said in a calm, friendly tone.

“Dunno. For extra defense,” Futaba mumbled.

“Defense?” Akechi blinked. “Ah. Well, it’s good to see you up and about. You were resting for quite a while.”

“Yeah,” Futaba said.

All things considered, Akira was never tired of seeing the charismatic detective prince at a loss for words like this. Granted, he was far too used to seeing this now, but it was somewhat refreshing to see him bested so easily by Futaba.

“I wonder what shade of red this is… It would be perfect for the painting I’ve been working on as of late…” Yusuke said, leaning forward to study it more closely.

“Shouldn’t we have brought Ann or something?” Morgana groaned. “Why’d you bring the socially inept artist along for this?”

Akira just smiled. He knew that Futaba and Yusuke would grow to have a pretty endearing friendship. Not only that, but Yusuke had been the only one to really spend time with Akechi since they’d left Futaba’s palace. Though it was mostly due to them living together, it was clear that their bond was growing stronger in their own subtle way. He certainly wasn’t as outgoing about it like Ann and Ryuji, but Akira could see it in his own way. Despite Yusuke’s suspicions, he told Akira that he had complete faith in what he would do, and that he would continue to talk to Akechi as he had before. Yusuke wanted to trust in Akechi too, and which should have made Akira feel good. Instead, it left him feeling uneasy.

“Er, this room is quite nice,” Akechi started. “You certainly have a lot of TVs,” he said charmingly.

“Guess so,” Futaba said.

Akechi cleared his throat, looking around for something else to talk about. “What’s your favorite TV show?”

“Well, if you must know, it’s—eek, what have you done?!” Futaba said, jumping out of her chair to gawk at what Yusuke did to her action figures. “M-My children…? What have you done to them?”

Yusuke hummed pleasingly at the work. “Ah. It looks superb. Some of their heads came off when I was moving them, but I made sure to rearrange them pleasingly.”
“Waaaahhhh!” Futaba put her arms out towards them, her hands trembling.

“Is there a problem?” Yusuke said. “They do appear to be quite shoddily-made.”

Futaba’s eyes flashed. “They’re from ‘Phoenix Rangers Neo Featherman’!” She stared at her figures in pain. “No… Yellow and Pink’s heads… And Red’s been hacked to bits… This is all Inari’s fault…”

“I-Inari?”

“Your thief clothes were like a fox. According to Japanese folklore, foxes like inarizushi, thus Inari,” Futaba explained. Yusuke didn’t look too pleased about that one. “Rghh, they were in the perfect poses too…! It was so much work getting them set up just right! You wouldn’t know aesthetics if it hit you in the face, Inari!” Futaba declared.

Yusuke recoiled. “I beg your pardon? How dare you say that to me of all people?!”

They started bickering back and forth before Akechi stepped forward. “Ah, haha, perhaps I can help you put it back together, Futaba-chan. I enjoy that show as well.”

Futaba froze. “Ehhh?!” She said, turning to him.

“I’ve…been a fan for a while,” Akechi said, and with the way that his cheeks tinged slightly pink, Akira was inclined to believe that he was really telling the truth. “I think my favorite would have to be the Pink Argus in Phoenix Ranger Featherman Victory.”

“Ooooooowha?” Futaba said. “She’s so cool. And her bow is one of the best weapons that the characters have!”

Akechi chuckled lightly. “I agree.”

“What do you think about Neo?” Futaba said excitedly.

“Hm, well, I’d have to say that Neo’s got the best-“

“Transforming suit?!” Futaba finished, and Akechi’s eyebrows crinkled with mirth. “And Victory is great for action! So cool.”

“Wow. I guess…it’s working?” Morgana commented, while Akira felt conflicted once more.

Futaba matched Akechi’s smile, then glanced at Akira and promptly furrowed her brow. “Okay. I guess you’re all right, Robin.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your persona is Robin Hood, right? And I can’t call you Hood. That’s weird.”

“You can just call me by my name,” Akechi told her.

“Nah. I already went through all that trouble for Inari. It’d be weird if I didn’t do the same.”

Akechi cleared his throat again. “It’s just…I think calling me Robin is also weird,” Akechi said, sounding slightly annoyed.

“I’ll think of something else. Crows eat carrion. Should I call you Carri? It even rhymes.”
“N-No, that’s even worse!” Akechi said with a higher octave. He recovered quickly and stood up a little straighter. “I-I just think calling me by name would be a much better arrangement.”

“And I as well,” Yusuke chimed in.

“Anyway, Inari and Carri, I’m rearranging this back to the way it should be before Inari ruined it,” Futaba said. “Carri, can you look it up?”

Akechi’s eyebrow twitched. “…of course…” He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, and Futaba’s eyes went wide.

“Whoa! Is that the newest model? Let me see!” Futaba said, reaching over and snatching in from his hands. She started messing with it with excited eyes as Akechi couldn’t get a word in fast enough.

“Ah. Yes, er, can you hand that back, please?” Akechi said. Futaba ignored him and continued working, and when she caught Akira’s eyes for a brief second, he knew that it was done. She tossed the phone back to Akechi. He stared at his phone for a moment before typing and finding an image.

“So this is all I gotta do?” Futaba said, stretching her arms as she once again took the phone out of Akechi’s hands – this time for the picture. “This is easy.”

“Ready for the beach then?” Akira said teasingly, and Futaba’s eyes widened. Akira smiled. “Kidding. Although we would like you to go to the beach with us over the summer.”

“Fnngh…alright…” Futaba said dejectedly as she moved one of her action figures.

They chatted for a bit longer as Akechi and Futaba carefully rearranged the action figures. Akira watched the two of them working together, focused and chatting about the show. Futaba talked animatedly while Akechi did his best to hide just how much he really enjoyed the show.

Akira felt that ugly thing stir again as he watched them because it was so easy to imagine the two of them going over to Futaba’s and spending time together without Personas and the metaverse and any of this, and he figured that now was as good a time as any to put his cards on the table.

“Goro,” Akira started, and Akechi paused to look at him. “Can I talk to you for a minute outside?”

“Eh? You’re leaving me alone with Inari and Mona?” Futaba said.

“Was that meant to be an insulting remark?” Yusuke frowned.

“I’ll be right back,” Akira assured her.

Akira looked over at Akechi, who nodded. “Yes, of course. Please excuse us.”

The two of them walked outside of Sojiro’s house, and Akira made sure that no one else was around before he turned back to Akechi, who had an unreadable expression on his face. “The last time we properly spoke, you looked ill just looking at me,” Akechi said evenly. Akira blinked. He hadn’t realized how Akechi might have taken that.

“It was a lot to take in,” Akira said. “I wasn’t sick looking at you.”

Akechi hummed, turning his head to the side. “I suppose it doesn’t matter anyway. I’m surprised you contacted me. Why…have you not yet told the others about your suspicions?”
“Because I want to believe that you’ll tell them—no, us—youself, Goro,” Akira told him, and Akechi looked at him in surprise. “You’re our friend and teammate.” He took a step closer, shoving past the thumping of his chest and the subtle shake of his hands. “I want to believe in you.”

“Why? Why do you continue to believe in me?” Akechi said.

Why? He wished he had some kind of noble reason behind it. “I know that you want to be here, with us, even if you don’t agree with our methods,” Akira told him, and Akechi averted his eyes. “But I also know that you have your own goals.”

“Yes. A goal that I cannot just give up,” Akechi said.

“Goro,” Akira started, and his shoulders tensed up. He had never been on the giving side of this before. He took a step closer. “I like you.”

“Wh-What?” Akechi said, and Akira was close enough to breathe in his response.

“I like you,” Akira said, feeling the tips of his ears get red. “And I still think you’re capable of turning over a new leaf, with us.”

“I-I” Akechi stuttered over his words and appeared flustered, clearly not expecting this when he’d agreed to talk with Akira. Which was exactly what Akira was hoping for. “I-I can’t,” he said, closing his eyes. “This is too important to me. He’s almost in my grasp.”

“He?” Akira said questioningly, and Akechi just shook his head even more.

“Akira, please stop this.”

Akira exhaled, and Akechi opened his eyes to meet his. He could see that same determination that he saw just before they’d send the calling card to Futaba. So this had been it all along. “This is it,” Akira said. “This is where you choose.”

“What?” The determination from before starting wavering.

“I want you to be here. With me. With us,” Akira said. His head started to pound. “But not unless you tell me everything. That’s the only way that I can begin to trust you.” How many more people have to die before you budge? He had let this go on for too long, even though he knew Akechi could go back to his boss with all of this information. The stakes were too high now and they were too close to Haru’s father being killed again, and as terrible as he was, Akira couldn’t let that happen. So he had to start thinking about it as Joker, as the leader of the Phantom Thieves.

“You’re going to kick me out of the Phantom Thieves? Even with the knowledge that I’ve gained of all of you,” Akechi said, and Akira wondered if he was going to threaten him again.

“No, I’m giving you a choice,” Akira said. Futaba had already bugged his phone, so even if Akechi chose not to stay, he could rely on that for information. Akira reached up and lightly brushed Akechi’s cheek, and the detective stiffened. “Yusuke told me that you apologized for the pain he must’ve suffered through. No one else should have to suffer. That includes you,” Akira said. “Do you really want to be with people who cause people like Futaba to suffer?”

“Don’t you see?” Akechi said with a quiet desperation. “This—this is why it’s even more important that I continue with my goal.” His eyes looked unfocused. Unsure. Lost.

“What is this goal, Goro? What is so important that you’re willing to hurt so many people for?” Akira prodded.
Akechi balled his hands into fists. “Please, that’s enough.”

Akira breathed deeply. “You don’t have to decide today,” Akira said. “I want you to think about it. Think about what you really want.”

Akechi pushed past him and walked so that he was in front of the gate. Akira turned around to look at the back of his head. “I think about it every day, Akira.”

“And…?”

“I…” Akechi clicked his teeth in frustration. “I apologize, Akira. Please tell Futaba-chan and Yusuke that I had to leave a bit early.”

And Akira let him go with a fleeting, but still flickering, hope that he would come around and a despairing resolve that his efforts might have all be for nothing and he might be forced to go against Goro Akechi once more.

Chapter End Notes

the power of friendship isn’t enough D:

honestly it’s a wonder akira hasn’t had a breakdown sooner from all this stress

ps writing akira’s hurt when akechi practically admits to the shutdown hurt me to write lmao im sorry I must do this to our boys

the next chapter will be a defining moment in this story…. but also i can only apologize for the next chapter too so sorry akechi bb

I’m also working on an original story, so I’m aiming for bi-weekly updates on this story so if I don’t update in two weeks I give you all full permission to spam my tumblr with memes of our favorite pancake boi

I gave you guys a long chapter to hopefully hold you over until then xD
The Boy Who Changed Fate

Chapter Summary

“Step one, you say we need to talk
He walks, you say sit down, it's just a talk
He smiles politely back at you
You stare politely right on through
Some sort of window to your right
As he goes left, and you stay right
Between the lines of fear and blame
You begin to wonder why you came”

Chapter Notes

Hint: it’s not akira

Also Known As Return of the O.C.s

Honestly I love working on Akechi’s links

I was planning to break this into 2 chapters but I felt like the cliffhanger was too cruel
so I gave you all one long monster chapter instead lmao

Had to give my bbs some good times in Hawaii before I completely ruin their lives

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was by pure chance that Akira happened to be working at the beef bowl shop on the day that Akechi and Kioshi were there. He had decided to take on some shifts for some extra money before the school trip to Hawaii and to pass the time, but he wasn’t prepared for this. And not only that, but it was just as his shift ended, meaning he had just walked out from the back the moment that the two of them walked inside.

Akira wasn’t sure what their status was as of late. He didn’t really know how Akechi was doing either. He hadn’t gone to the beach with them, and he hadn’t spoken to Akira in days either.

What he did know was that he was still spending time with some of the others – Ryuji mentioned going running with him and Ann commented about how she’d seen him with Shiho when she went to visit her after physical therapy. It was just Akira that he wasn’t speaking too - which was probably for the best if he still didn’t have an answer for him. Akira wanted to believe that he still hung out with the others because he had decided to stay with them, but it was more likely that he didn’t want to raise suspicions with the others.

But his lack of an answer had to mean that he was at least considering it.

Luckily the others hadn’t mentioned Palaces yet, since their mind had been on Futaba’s
rehabilitation and prepping for the upcoming Hawaii trip.

Akira stood stiffly by the employee door, wondering if his Joker stealth would get him to the door before they noticed.

“Kurusu-san!” Kioshi’s excited voice drifted to him, and Akira was forced to lock eyes with Akechi, who looked equally as shocked as Akira. Kioshi bounded over to him without a care in the world. “What are you doing here?” he said.

Akira smiled, though it became more strained as Akechi walked up next to the kid and the air suddenly felt a little thicker. “I work here.”


Akira chuckled. “Something like that.”

“D-Do you want to join us?” Kioshi said. “Mom is working late, but I asked Akechi-san if I could hang out with him,” he said, somewhat nervously. “And he said yes!”

“Yes, well…” Akechi started, staring at Akira for a few agonizingly long seconds before finally tearing his gaze away. “You are leaving for summer camp soon, so it’s the least that I could do. However, I’m sure that Akira is very busy.”

“Awww. Are you really?” Kioshi said with sad puppy-dog eyes.

Akira should decline. He should definitely decline. In fact, he was getting ready to decline when Kioshi grabbed at his hand in a disarming way. “Please, please, please, just stay for a little!”

“Well…alright,” Akira relented, and Akechi tensed up. “Only for a little.”

The two of them ordered and got their food, and then Akira followed after them, trying to muster up as much energy as he could to keep up with Kioshi’s unrelenting energy. He settled uncomfortably next to Akechi after Kioshi took up the booth side of their table.

“How have you been, Akira?” Akechi said with a forced kindness that only Akira could hear.

Akira mirrored his false smile. “Oh, you know. Busy saving the world and all. You?”

“Work seems to have picked up as of late, but I can’t complain.”

Kioshi stopped stuffing his face with fries as he looked between the two of them. He blinked a few times with big eyes. “Are you two fighting?” He asked.

Akechi was the one to falter, while Akira turned to him evenly. “Wh-Why would you think that?” Akechi said, flustered.

“No, of course not,” Akira said at the same time.

Kioshi wasn’t convinced. “Y-You guys are talking like Mom and Dad talk when they don’t want to see each other. I don’t want you guys to be fighting,” he said with a childish pout.

Akechi was stuck at a loss for words, so Akira leaned forward kindly. “You’re perceptive.”

“Per…wha?”

Akira chuckled. “It’s okay, Kioshi-kun. Sometimes friends fight. It doesn’t mean we don’t care
about each other anymore.”

Kioshi tilted his head, seeming to consider this. “Akira’s correct,” Akechi said slowly. “Perhaps we’re not on the best of terms right now, but it’s nothing you need to worry about.”

“But you’ll make up again soon, right?” Kioshi said nervously.

Well, that was up to Akechi.

Akira just smiled. He didn’t have the heart to lie to someone with an innocent face like that. Akechi didn’t say anything either, and instead fidgeted in his seat. “Perhaps we should eat before the food gets cold,” Akechi deflected.

“I don’t want you to fight,” Kioshi said, slumping into his seat with his arms folded across his chest. “Whenever one of my classmates gets into a fight, the teacher makes them say one kind thing to each other. Why don’t you do that?” Kioshi said.

“I-I don’t think it’s quite that easy, Kioshi-kun. Here, take a napkin,” Akechi said, passing the child a napkin so he could wipe his face. Kioshi pouted, but took the napkin reluctantly and somewhat sloppily wiped it over his mouth.

“It always helps! I’ll go first!” Kioshi said, pointing his finger into the air for some kind of emphasis.

Akechi swallowed thickly and nodded. “Alright. If it is that important to you,” he said. He stole a glance at Akira, who sat there with a stoic expression that took most of his energy to maintain.

“Umm. Kurusu-san is always nice to me – oh, oh, and he plays games with me so I don’t feel lonely,” Kioshi said brightly. Then he turned to Akechi. “And Akechi-san always…always hangs out with me when Mom and Dad are too busy. Even though he’s really busy, he always says yes when I ask him.”

Akira looked at Akechi, who looked uncomfortable. Akechi was creating relationships of his own – and Akira had to wonder if he was really okay with lying to them for so long.

“Okay! Your turn!” He said, pointing at Akechi first.

Akira turned fully so that he could face Akechi, and slowly, Akechi met his eyes. The detective fidgeted ever so slightly in his seat, but otherwise maintained his calm composure. They were both becoming unhinged from this entire situation, Akira noticed.

Just as Akechi opened his mouth, his phone started to ring, and Akechi quickly pulled his phone out from his pocket and placed it to his ear while throwing them an apologetic smile – though Akira suspected there was some relief in there too.

“Hello?” Akechi nodded against the receiver. “I see. Yes. That…Of course. I’ll be there shortly.” Then he hung up the phone. “I apologize, but we’ll have to continue this another time.”

Kioshi slumped in his seat, ready to protest, but then stopped himself. “Okay. You’ll be at my birthday party, so I guess it’s not so bad.”

Akechi smiled charmingly. “Of course. I would not miss it for the world.” He looked at Akira. “I’m sorry to trouble you, but would you mind taking him home?”

“I can go home by myself,” Kioshi announced.
Akechi just looked at Akira warily, and Akira nodded. “Yeah. Sure.”

“Hey!”

“Thank you,” Akechi told him stiffly. “Ah. Well.” Then he didn’t say anything, letting the words linger in the air for a bit. “I will see you,” he said, but it sounded empty.

Akira just nodded again, and Akechi apologized to Kioshi one more time before walking out of the restaurant. When he was gone, Akira felt Kioshi nudge his arm while he chewed nervously on a French fry. “You guys won’t really be fighting forever, right?” he said.

Akira looked down at his sad, expectant face. Saying no to that face was like kicking a puppy. “You like him a lot, don’t you?”

Kioshi nodded. “Uh-huh. He’s so cool. I want to be just like him when I get older! Except without all the big words. Sometimes I don’t know what he’s talking about,” he said, scratching his chin. “Why are you mad at him?”

Akira hummed quietly. “He did something that made me really sad.”

“Oh. Does that mean you hate him?”

Akira inhaled. “No, I don’t hate him.”

“Sometimes Mom and Dad do things that make me sad too,” Kioshi admitted quietly. He picked at his food for a bit before meeting Akira’s eyes again. “But I don’t hate them either. I just want to go into my room for a little and not talk to them. Is it like that?”

“Something like that.”

“Okay,” Kioshi nodded. “Then that means you won’t be sad forever. I hope not,” he added. “Then we can all play together again soon.”

Akira just smiled, wishing that he could have that kind of innocence.

The next day didn’t fare any better for Akira. The loud opening and closing of Leblanc’s door caused Akira to peek out from where he was washing dishes to see who’d opened the door with such force. He stopped wiping down a plate when he saw Naomi Akiyama strolling through the doors with a frustrated expression on his face.

“Hey, isn’t that the criminal psychologist that’s been working with that prosecutor?” Morgana said from the nearby stool. “She knows Akechi too, right?”

Akira wiped his hands on a towel and walked over to her to take her order. By the time he got there, she was already huddled over a laptop that she’d taken out with lightning fast speed and was grumbling to herself.

In some ways, she reminded him of Futaba with how focused she looked. Akira cleared his throat, and she looked up with wide eyes.

“Whoa! You scared me!”

Akira just smiled. “Can I take your order?”
“The strongest coffee you have. Oh, but with like a ton of cream and sugar,” Naomi said. Then she slumped down onto the table. “At least five cups.”

Akira walked over to the counter and picked up a freshly brewed pot of coffee. “Busy day?” he said nonchalantly.

“Have I told you that you should never grow up?” Naomi huffed.

“A few times, I think,” Akira said with a short chuckle.

“Oh. Well I definitely mean it this time. The Phantom Thieves have totally ruined my life. I thought this case would be fun, but everyone’s just angry and on edge,” Naomi groaned and sat up. “I had to do so much scanning for Nijima-san…” she said wearily. “My hands…never want to see a copier…again. I’m not even her assistant. I can’t imagine she ever had Akechi-san doing this.” She took a breath. “But she’s a pro, so I can’t believe I even get to see her work.”

“Has Akechi been on the case much?”

“Nooooooo,” Naomi said with a long, drawn-out sigh. “Probably because Nijima-san is really scary when she’s focused. Not that Akechi-san has been much better lately.”

Her phone pinged and she jumped with wide eyes, hurriedly pressing her phone to her ear. “Yes?” she said, sitting up straight. Akira got a large mug for her and poured some coffee into it while trying not to eavesdrop. Naomi hung up the phone just as Akira brought her the mug and a bowl of creamer. “Oh. It was just a junk call. Phew. This—” she said, cradling the coffee. “This is my savior.”

“Naomi’s kinda weird, huh?” Morgana said.

At the sound of Morgana’s meowing, Naomi perked up. “Oh! Your cat! How much do you want for me to just cuddle your cat? That would be the ultimate stress-reliever.”

“I don’t want to go anywhere near her,” Morgana said defiantly. He shook his head stubbornly. “Nope.”

“He would love to cuddle with you,” Akira said with a gleam in his eye. He reached towards Morgana as the cat yelped and hopped off of his stool.

“No way! I’m not doing it!” Morgana said before trotting towards the stairs.

“He’s still shy,” Akira offered. He gestured to the laptop, hoping to get her talking about the Thieves or Akechi again. “Anything I can help with?”

“Have you got a degree in criminal justice and can track down some teenage thieves for me?” Naomi said, and Akira smiled sympathetically. “This is like the case of the century, but it’s absolute hell. The Thieves supposedly haven’t made a move, so everyone’s on edge.”

Akira nodded as he started to turn around, then stopped. “Supposedly?” he said.

“Oh. Ah. Ha ha. I just mean…well…it’s nothing.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

“Well…it’s just. I have a friend of a friend who was in this abusive relationship and he suddenly changed. And there are a lot of people who have been posted on the Phansite thanking the Thieves
for helping them. So they’re doing smaller cases instead of just high profile people,” Naomi said nervously. “Probably because they don’t have a big target yet. I just mean that they haven’t made a move that’ll put them on national news.”

Akira briefly wondered if Naomi could give Akechi a run for his money.

“I don’t know. Something about this whole thing just feels off,” she said. Akira hummed contemplatively. “I had a weird conversation with the SIU Director. He gave me this weird offer in return for a huge raise.”

“Oh?” Akira said, pausing.

“I don’t know…I’m probably just losing it.” Naomi sighed. “I’m just wondering if there’s someone else we should be worried about besides the Phantom Thieves,” she said, and Akira’s hands stilled instantly. Was she starting to suspect foul play? Akira’s tongue burned with a desire to just ask her what the SIU Director had said, but he knew there was no way she would tell him. If the SIU Director was involved, that changed the stakes a lot.

“Have you ever heard of something called the cognitive world?” She said, and Akira just barely stopped himself from gasping out loud. “Probably not.” Naomi rubbed her forehead. “Just forget I said anything. I wanted to talk to Akechi-san about it, but he’s been terse to everyone lately.”

“He has?” Akira said.

“You haven’t talked to him?” Naomi said curiously.

“We haven’t spoken much recently,” Akira said evenly.

“I wouldn’t take it personally. Niijima-san has noticed that he’s been acting strange too. And I saw him leaving the SIU Director’s office and he immediately starting busying himself with a case before running off to some interview. I don’t know how he does it,” she said. “I hope he’s actually taking some time to enjoy being a teenager. I’ve told you guys how much adulthood sucks, right?”

Akira smiled with a gleam in his eye. “Have you? I hadn’t noticed.”

“Har har,” Naomi said, though she allowed herself to smile too. Then she sighed. “I worry about him.”

“Have you told him that?”


Akira thought back to that time that they were all at Leblanc together. It seemed so long ago at this point, but Akira hadn’t forgotten how strange they had both acted that day. “You two know each other, right? From before this?”

Naomi started twirling the ends of her hair. “U-Uh, I-I don’t know what you’re talking about. Nope. Me? Knowing Akechi-san? Pffft,” she said with a forced laugh. “That would be cuh-razy. I’m…I just…” Under Akira’s lingering gaze, she faltered a bit. “I-It’s really not my place to say, but let’s just say he’s been through a lot of shit, so to see him so successful is pretty great. And I’m really proud of him. O-Of course I’d never say that.”

Akira wondered how many things could be avoided if people would just say how they really felt – not that he was an expert in talking about feelings. “Maybe he needs to hear that.”
“Nah. Dude’s got enough praise as is. The charming Detective Prince,” she said with a grandiose wave of her hands. “I almost got accosted by his fangirls because they saw us walking together once.” Akira went back behind the counter to get her some sugar without another word. “You know, you being all silent is really making me question what I just said…” Naomi called after him, rubbing the back of her neck as she poured an insane amount of cream into her coffee.

As Akira placed some sugar onto her table, Naomi’s phone started to ring again, and she tensed. “Never a dull day.” She pulled out her phone and immediately placed it to her ear, and Akira wondered if half of her stress would be cut out if she would just look at the caller ID before answering. “Yes? Oh. Akechi-san,” she said. She sounded relieved, but the tension in her shoulders was still apparent. “We were just talking about you…Who? Oh, I’m at Leblanc since a coffee IV still hasn’t been invented yet. Kurusu is here.” She paused for a moment, then smiled at Akira. “He says hi,” she said, and Akira just smiled in response. “Oh. You got my email? Yeah, I, uh, wanted to talk to you about something kinda big. We should talk in person. Yeah, I can meet you in an hour. Okay, see y-Oh, wait! One more thing.”

Naomi glanced at Akira, then closed her eyes and blurted, “I just wanted to say that… I’m really proud of you.” She opened her eyes then, and after a few seconds, she spoke again. “Um. Are you still there? I-I didn’t mean to catch you off guard. I just… a little birdy told me that that might be important to hear. What? No, that birdy is not named Akira Kurusu!” She said – way too quickly. “Ah. Uh. Okay. Uh. I’ll see you soon,” she said, hanging up the phone, the smiled sheepishly. “We’ve been found out.”

“A shame. We almost got away with it too,” Akira said evenly, with just a hint of teasing.

“Well, guess that means I should go soon. But I just got here so I’m going to down my coffee first,” Naomi said. “Hey, can I ask you something?” she asked, and Akira nodded. “Does Akechi-san seem happy?”

Akira tilted his head to the side. “Why do you ask?”


Akira exhaled. “Yeah,” he breathed. He wasn’t so sure he would be able to do that for much longer. “Only if you do the same,” he told her, and she hesitated for a moment herself before nodding.

“Yeah. I promise.”

“Man, I wish Akechi woulda been on the trip too! I mean, even Yusuke showed up,” Ryuji said as he stretched his arms under the Hawaii heat. It was just the two of them, as the others had gone off to do their own thing and explore as much of the area as possible while the two of them relaxed by the beach.

Ryuji leaned his hands back on the sand. “It feels like that guy don’t even know how to be a regular kid sometimes.”

“We’re not exactly normal,” Akira said teasingly.

Ryuji looked at him, then broke into a smile and nudged his arm. “You know what I mean. I mean, his school had a trip too, and he couldn’t go ’cause of work.” He scratched his head.

“Hm,” Akira hummed. “We’ll do something next time,” he told Ryuji, even though he wasn’t sure
if he was lying to him or not.

“Yeah,” Ryuji said excitedly. Then he laughed a little. “Y’know, it’s kinda crazy when I think about all the shit we’ve done. Can you believe people know about us all the way out here? We’re totally famous dude!” Ryuji practically got stars in his eyes, which Akira found endearing. “Dude, imagine if we end up reading a manga about us like the ones I’ve been bringin’ when we hang out.”

“What would it be called?” Akira mused.

Ryuji sincerely thought about it. “Shouldn’t it just be like The Phantom Thieves? Or The Freaking Awesome Phantom Thieves. Or…I dunno man, I’ll think of something. What if they made us into a movie, or a TV show-”

“Slow down,” Akira said with a soft chuckle, even though it was hard to not get caught up in the excitement of it all. Even Akira marveled at the fact that they were starting to be known around the world. “Let’s not forget the real reason why we’re doing this.”

Ryuji paused. “Yeah. Guess all that stuff don’t matter too much.” He smiled. “But it’s still fuckin’ cool. It’s just hard to believe that the rowdy kids from school are now famous all over the world.”

“Very,” Akira agreed with a smile.

“I’m glad I met you, man,” he said. Ryuji turned to the look in the direction of the setting sun. “You think we’ll always be doing this?”

Akira thought back to all the stories of heroes that he’d read about and that Ryuji had showed him. It was hard for him to think about doing anything else at the moment, but it was odd to think about doing this forever. “Eh, guess that don’t matter either. All that matters is that we’re havin’ fun and helping people who need it.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Ann’s voice travelled to them, and when the two of them turned to look at her, they saw Yusuke and Makoto approaching along with her. She flopped down on the sand next to Ryuji.

“We finished touring around the area,” Makoto explained. “May we join you?”

“No,” Akira said, and Makoto was taken aback for a moment before Akira’s smile gave him away, and she allowed herself to smile back as she tucked some hair behind her ear. “How was the tour?” he asked.

“I spent most of my money on these macadamia nuts,” Yusuke said, sounding only slightly regretful about it. “But I must say, this island is quite beautiful,” he said. He turned to the view. “Such a picturesque sight before me. How I wish I had a sketchpad with me at this moment.”

“He’s said that about five times,” Ann groaned with a smile. “What a relaxing trip,” she told them. “I wonder where we’ll go next year!” Then she glanced over at Akira, her smile dimming a bit. “Oh, but…you won’t be here for the trip next year…”

A silence fell over them as Akira let the words sink in. He hadn’t put much thought into that either, to be honest. All his energy had been on the current timeline – so much so that he’d forgotten that this whole thing was only temporary.

“Well,” Makoto cleared her throat. “We don’t need to think about that right now.”
“Yeah, can we just talk about somethin’ else…” Ryuji said.

Ann brought her knees up to her chest and placed her arms on top of them. “You know…even though we’re doing all of this together, it feels like we still have so much to learn about each other. You know, things like what kind of people we like,” Ann started, and Ryuji groaned. “So, time to come clean, Akira,” she said, and Akira was surprised at her making him go first.

“Ann, c’mon, not this again…” Ryuji started, and Ann stuck her tongue out at him childishly, and then swatted his hand when he reached for it to pull it again.

“Go ahead, Akira. What kind of person are you into?” She said with an ominously innocent smile.

Akira thought about it for a moment. He knew what she wanted him to say, but he didn’t have an answer for her. He certainly hadn’t been a fan of Akechi in the first timeline – but maybe that was because his first impression hadn’t been that great to begin with. Had he even liked anyone back then? Back then… It was starting to become more and more of a distant memory.

He’d liked the time he spent with Yusuke, and he hadn’t been able to spent much time with Haru before he died – ‘died’… now that would never be weird to think about – but he’d enjoyed her company as well, and he’d even imagined once or twice what it would be like to run a café together.

Akira figured that once this was all over, he would be able to think about these things further, and then everything changed.

Akira shrugged. “I don’t have a type,” he said.

“That’s not an answer!” Ann complained. “Fine, fine. Makoto, how about you?”


Ann huffed. “Yusuke?” She said hopefully. “Uh…Yusuke?” The others looked around as they realized that he’d disappeared. “Where’d he go?”

Akira scoured the beach for him, and finally found him standing at a stand and digging into his pockets. He smiled and turned back to the others. “He’ll be back soon, I’m sure,” he said.

“Alright,” Ann relented. “Well, you guys wanna get some food after this and then head back?”

“Hey, wait a minute. How come you ain’t gonna ask me?” Ryuji said.

“I don’t need to ask you,” Ann shot back. “It’d hafta, like, be the one with the hottest bod,” Ann said, deepening her voice and speaking dramatically to try and mimic Ryuji’s voice. It ended up sounding more like one of the surfer voices that Akira had watched in American beach movies.

“I don’t sound like that. And I wasn’t gonna say that!” Ryuji told her.

“Sure it wasn’t,” Ann interrupted, waving him off as Yusuke finally came back to them holding a cloth of some kind.

“Isn’t this stunning?” Yusuke said, unveiling the medium-sized cloth. On it was some kind of design clad with triangles going in one direction all around the border of the cloth and two outlines of turtles in the center. “It is called kapa, a fabric made by the bark of certain trees. Such unique design and creativity. I wonder if I can re-create such a thing in my own artwork,” he mused.
“Yusuke…where are you even gonna put that?” Ryuji said.

“There is a space on Akechi’s living room wall that is blank. I intended to put my own piece up there, but I believe this would be a nice addition to the room.”

“Is he gonna be okay with that?” Ann asked.

“Hm?” Yusuke said obliviously. “Okay with what?”

Akira smiled. “I’m sure he’ll love it,” he said.

“Yes. I believe so. He did seem quite upset that he wouldn’t be able to go on a school trip, so this should suffice. Perhaps the piece I create can go into his room instead…” Yusuke said. “Anyway, what were we discussing?”

“Oooh, I know!” Ann clasped her hands together. “Let’s play a game of fuck, marry, kill.”

“Ann, you can’t be serious,” Makoto said with wide eyes.

“Okay, fine. Kiss, marry, kill,” she relented with a mischievous grin. “Out of all the Phantom Thieves.”

“Fine. Then you gotta go first,” Ryuji said with a shrug. “Since you’re on our case, you should go first.”

Ann was unfazed. She leaned back on her palms and hummed thoughtfully. “Hmm. Well, I’d kiss Akira because I wouldn’t want to take him from Akechi—” that earned another couple of groans. “I think I’d marry…Makoto,” she declared, which made Makoto’s cheeks get a little red. “I feel like she’d take care of me and help keep me grounded,” she said with a short laugh. “And as for who I’d kill…” she looked between Ryuji and Yusuke – who was busy studying his kapa – before her eyes settled on Ryuji. “Gee, who could it be?” she said, playfully tapping at her chin.

“Wha-me?!” Ryuji exclaimed. “Aw, c’mon! You’d kill me over Yusuke?” he said, pointing at the artist. “I at least make you laugh!”

“Yusuke makes me laugh,” Ann said, sticking her tongue out at him. Then she clapped her hands together again. “Okay! Makoto, it’s your turn.”

“M-Me? I don’t think I should participate in this game,” she said coyly.

“Nonono, this is a Phantom Thief prerequisite,” Ann said, wagging her finger. “Right, leader?” she said.

Akira shrugged at Makoto with a teasing smile. “Sorry, them’s the rules,” he said, and Makoto gaped at him. Ann laughed and cheered victoriously.

“Makoto’s so hard to read sometimes,” Ann said. “I don’t even know who she’d say. Same for Yusuke.”

“D-Do I really need to participate in this,” Makoto said, clearing her throat.

“You might as well,” Ryuji said. “We won’t judge ya or anything. It’s just jokes.”

Makoto pursed her lips. “…Fine. I suppose I can partake. I would…marry…Ann,” she admitted, and Ann shot up in surprise.
“Really?” She said.

“She’s only sayin’ that ‘cause you picked her,” Ryuji rolled her eyes and Ann made a face at him.

Makoto turned a bit red. “Well, I suppose that was part of it, but I think she’s fun to be around as well,” she said, and Ann grinned happily. “As for who I would kiss… I-I don’t know. Y-Yusuke, I guess, if I had to choose.”

“You’re kidding me,” Ryuji pouted.

“Well, he’s very handsome,” Makoto said, casting her eyes down in embarrassment.

“That’s true,” Ann agreed. “Yusuke is like, super pretty. I’d kiss him after Akira.”

“He is easy on the eyes,” Akira agreed.

“Pretty?” Yusuke said with a confused look. He tilted his head to the side. “You think I’m pretty?” he asked innocently enough, which only made Makoto blush even further.

“Just take the compliment dude,” Ryuji grumbled. “Anyway, I swear to everything holy that if you pick to kill me…” he groaned.

“Who would I kill?” Makoto said. She seemed significantly less embarrassed, but still a bit hesitant. “I would have to pick Akechi.”

“Oh, thank god,” Ryuji exhaled.

“I’m not surprised at that,” Ann said with a soft hum. “You guys already sound like you’re ready to anyway sometimes.” She scratched the top of her head. “Have you warmed up to him any more than before?”

Makoto stiffened. “It’s not that I dislike him,” she said, and it didn’t take a genius to see that she was stretching that truth a little bit. “Anyway, i-it’s someone else’s turn, right?” She met Akira’s eyes as if pleading to take the spotlight off of her.

It turned out that he didn’t have to. “Excuse me?” a tiny voice piped up from the direction of the boardwalk, and none other than Haru Okumura came walking up to them timidly. “Sorry to surprise you,” she said. “I’m another third-year who was asked to come on this trip.”

“Oh, hey,” Ann said kindly. “What’s up?”

“Free time is almost done. I just wanted to let you know that you should be heading back soon,” Haru told them. The others nodded, and she was about to turn and walk away when she stopped. “By the way, you seemed pretty excited on the plane,” she said to Ryuji. “Are you enjoying the trip?”


“Hm.” She looked unsure. “I accepted the task to take my mind off of things, but I wasn’t sure how to spend my free time…”

“I’m sure Ryuji would love to show you around,” Akira said with a light smile, and then he barely managed to get a laugh out as Ryuji nudged him harshly in the side.

“Oh?” She looked even more unsure. “Well, I…I think I should be going. See you,” she said, and
then walked away in the direction of the hotel.

“Dude. That girl…” Ryuji said, his mouth dropping open as he watched her walk away. He nudged Akira’s arm. “You think I’d have a chance with her if I told her I was a Phantom Thief?”

“No, because I would literally kill you for telling someone we don’t even know,” Ann said, rolling her eyes as she stood up.

Akira smiled, mostly to himself. “I think she’d like it more than you think.”

“Really?!” Ryuji exclaimed. “We totally had a moment, right? That wasn’t just me. That was a moment.”

“Totally a moment,” Akira said lightly.

“Right?! That’s what I’m-aw, dude, you’re just messing with me, aren’t you?” he groaned, and Akira just laughed.

“Come on Casanova,” Akira said with mirth in his eyes. “Let’s head back.”

The rest of the trip went like this, and Akira was grateful for the time to be away from Tokyo and having his mind clouded with thoughts of Akechi and the future. He felt like something was tugging at his mind, like he was forgetting about something major that he couldn’t quite place. It was only when he went to bed the night before the flight back that it all came back to him.

“Wake up, inmate!”

Akira’s eyes fluttered open at the sound of Caroline’s loud voice. He stared up at the ceiling as his head felt like it was slightly pounding. He stayed like that for a moment before sitting up on the bed and then getting up to stand at the bars.

“I was on vacation,” Akira said cheekily, and he didn’t flinch with Caroline slammed on the bars.

“Iron and steel, watch how you talk to our master,” Caroline said with a sneer.

Igor hummed ominously, ignoring Akira’s quip. “It appears you have been making quite a bit of progress.” Akira wasn’t so sure that that was the case. He certainly wasn’t feeling that way. “However, it seems that a true trial will be awaiting you soon.”

“Will you just decide already?!” Akira exclaimed. “A choice will be made very soon. Will all your work be for naught, or will you find the outcome you’ve been hoping for?”

“Ignorant, please try to think carefully,” Justine said calmly. “Are you forgetting something?”


“Ignorant, please try to think carefully,” Justine said calmly. “Are you forgetting something?”

Akira had heard that before. He already felt like the true trial was upon him, so he didn’t want to think about what might happen in the future. “A choice will be made very soon. Will all your work be for naught, or will you find the outcome you’ve been hoping for?”


“Ignorant, please try to think carefully,” Justine said calmly. “Are you forgetting something?”

Akira racked his brain to try and figure out if he was missing something. Was something going to happen soon that would make Akechi forced to choose? He knew that some parts of his memory of the last timeline were starting to get spotty, but it only happened for a moment before it all came back to him.

“The decision to restart anew doesn’t come without consequences,” Igor said. “However, the time
“What’s approaching?” Akira said, growing exasperated and feeling a bit frantic. He tried to contain it as he gripped the bars of the cell.

“Quiet down, inmate,” Caroline said.

“Keeping a calm head is important even in tense situations such as this,” Justine said, looking at Akira with a neutral expression.

Akira stared at each of their expressions, wondering what was to come and feeling increasingly frustrated at being so helpless, despite supposedly having a leg-up in this situation.

“You will soon see,” Igor told him. “Now, it is time to return to rest.”

“No, wait—” Akira said, feeling himself growing tired. “What do you mean?” he breathed as the Velvet Room faded and he fell asleep.

“That trip was way too short,” Ryuji said, standing in the lobby of the hotel and leaning on his suitcase. “But I’m excited to get back to what we been doing.”

Ryuji chatted with the others as Akira shook off a yawn. He wished that he could’ve been as relaxed as he had been for the last Hawaii trip. Igor hadn’t exactly made the ordeal any easier with his cryptic words. But there wasn’t much he could do other than think about it. Not much came from that, so he tried to keep his mind off of it as best he could. Even still, he couldn’t shake the sinking feeling that something was going to happen very soon, just as Igor said.

He chatted with the others for bit before he felt his phone buzz in his pocket. Frowning, he reached into it and pulled it out, seeing that it was a call from Naomi. He wondered if he should answer it. He knew that his parents wouldn’t be happy if they opened their phone bill and saw how much it spiked from an international call.

Still, if Naomi was calling him, he couldn’t imagine that it would be for a trivial reason, so he stepped away from the others and answered the phone.

“Hello?”

“Ah. Kurusu. Uh, it’s me. Naomi. Akiyama,” she said slowly. “But you probably knew that. Um. Where are you right now?”

“I’m in Hawaii.”

“What?” She shrieked. “Shit, that’s so gonna hike up my phone bill…” she groaned. “And I barely had enough for last month. Ugh. A-Ah, I mean, not important. That doesn’t matter. Um. I just… well, if you aren’t here then…”

“What’s wrong?” Akira said, feeling his own nerves start to spike despite his outward demeanor.

“I-It’s Akechi-san. I-I’m not sure what to do. There…was some kind of accident.”

Akira felt his heart stop for a moment. “Is he…?”

“No! No, he’s okay. I mean, well, not okay – it’s just-” she stopped again, and it sounded like she was sniffing. “We were at work, and we got a call about a hit and run. And now he won’t… Um.
I-I don’t know how to tell you this, but…the principal of Shujin Academy was hit by a car and nearly killed.”

Then it all hit Akira. Kobayakawa. He’d completely forgotten. That was the thing that was tugging at his memory. The circumstances around it had been suspicious, and last time Akira and the others had wondered if it had been the result of a shutdown. So…did that mean…? Akira felt his stomach start to churn.

That was it, then. Had Akechi made his choice? He exhaled, trying to ignore the stinging he felt in his eyes before the others could see. But wait, there was - “Nearly…?” Akira said. That had been different, hadn’t it? The principal had been killed before.

“That’s the thing. Some kid decided to try and be a hero, and-” Naomi paused. “His name hasn’t been released to the public because of his age, but Akechi-san seemed…I don’t know, I’ve never seen that that sort of look on him before.”

A kid? A kid that Akechi would be broken up abo-

Akira felt every nerve in his body shake. “Kioshi,” he breathed.

“Wha-u-uh, h-how did you know his name? D-Did Akechi-san already talk to you?” Naomi said.

The phone nearly slipped out of his hand, and then he remembered that the others were nearby, so he acted fast to regrip it and maintain his composure, even though he felt like he was sitting inside of a pressure cooker. “Is he okay?” Akira said in a forced tone. “Kioshi?”

“Both of them are in critical condition, but are alive… but it doesn’t look so good,” Naomi said solemnly. “It’s just, when we got the case, Akechi-san just…I don’t know what happened to him. He said he wasn’t feeling well and then went home, and he’s never done that before. He doesn’t ever do that…so, I went to check on him, and he won’t let me into his apartment or answer my calls or texts. I’m…really worried about him, but you aren’t here, so I-I don’t know what to do.”

Akira felt a distinct ringing in his ears, and Naomi said more words to him that began to get drowned out by the sound growing louder and louder. Everything seemed to start moving in slow motion. He vaguely remembered saying something in Naomi before hanging up – or maybe she hung up first, he wasn’t sure.

Akira felt like he was moving in a dream state as he made his way back to the others and told them the news.

He watched all of their shocked expressions and

- the way that Ann’s hands shot up to her mouth, and how

- Yusuke dropped his bag of souvenirs, and

- Ryuji stomped his foot on the ground and nearly crushed the bagel in his hand, and

- Makoto shut her eyes like she wanted to shut herself off from the world, and at some point, one of them asked him if he was okay

- and he nodded like he always did

He wasn’t sure if his mask was on well enough for them to believe him, but if they didn’t, they didn’t say anything about it.
Kioshi. Kioshi could be dead. Kobayakawa could be dead. Akechi. Akechi. Akechi had done it. It had to be. It couldn’t have been anyone else. Kobayakawa had had a mental shutdown, the same as last time, it had to be. But Kioshi – why had Kioshi been there too? Why did he try to save him?

Because he was good. Kioshi was good. Was Goro Akechi?

Akira fought with that tiny voice in his mind as the rest of his thoughts swirled inside of his head. Maybe there was no saving Goro Akechi, Akira decided. The sadness and grief he felt molded into a quiet fury.

Where did I go wrong?

Akechi had made his choice. And Akira sure as hell wasn’t going to let him get away with it.

The mood on the plane ride back was tense, and the others sat there worried about Kioshi and about how Akechi was doing, and Akira sat there thinking, like usual.

All of Akira’s anger and sadness just kind of neutralized themselves until there was… nothing. He couldn’t feel anything at all. On one level, he thought that maybe it was for the best, but on the other hand, he wondered if that meant that it would all come rushing back to him at the worst possible moment.

When they finally landed in Japan, Akira knew that he should take the time to rest before going to see Akechi, but the adrenaline of it all made his jet lag sit in the backburner of his mind. He parted with the others, but beforehand, he pulled Yusuke to the side. Before Akira could get a word in, Yusuke told Akira that they should go back to the apartment together.

So the two of them went to Leblanc to drop off his things, and, while they protested, Akira told Futaba and Sojiro that he would be back soon, and exchanged a glance with Morgana that told the cat that he would explain everything soon.

And so Yusuke and Akira went to the apartment, and Akira numbly went up the stairs with one of Yusuke’s suitcases while the artist followed him with the other. For a moment, Akira heard a child’s laughter and his heart leapt for a moment at the thought that it might be Kioshi’s, only to realize that it was just wafting in from outside. His steps felt wooden and heavy, yet they seemed to reverberate with each step.

Finally, the two of them made it to the right floor, and Akira was taken aback by Naomi sitting against the wall next to Akechi’s apartment door. She was dozing off a bit, nodding her head forward against her arms. Next to her was a to-go bowl of ramen.

Akira approached her first and knelt down, gently nudging her. After a brief stir, Naomi’s eyes slowly went open, and her eyes widened as she looked at Akira and then Yusuke. “K-Kurusu. You’re back,” she said. Then she glanced over at Yusuke.

“This is Yusuke Kitagawa,” Akira said. “His roommate. And our friend. Yusuke, this is Naomi Akiyama. One of Akechi’s…co-workers.”

“Ah. Then I suppose you have a key?” Naomi said to Yusuke.

“I do indeed,” Yusuke said. His eyes dropped down to the food. “How long have you been sitting out here?”
Naomi chewed at her bottom lip. “A while. For the past two days, I’ve come here and tried to contact him and see if he’ll at least come to the door. I brought this food for him because I just wanted to make sure he was eating. Niijima-san was here too because Akechi-san wasn’t at work today either,” she said. “It’s bonkers. He must be pretty torn up. Was he close with the kid?”

Akira’s heart constricted again, and he was certain that it was going to give out before the end of this. Yusuke stepped forward. “Kioshi-kun is very special to all of us.” Then his eyes darted elsewhere hesitantly. “Was?”

Naomi shook her head. “Dunno. I know he went in for additional surgery this morning but I went out for a lunch break a couple of hours ago and came straight here.” She slowly stood up, picking up the ramen too. “I should actually get back. My state-sponsored lunch break has come to an end,” she said dryly. “But I’m glad you’re here now. Er…but…aren’t you tired?” She leaned and looked at the suitcases. “Did you just get back?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Akira told her, and Naomi’s face softened.

She smiled a bit. “I’m glad he has you, Kurusu. Both of you,” she said, gesturing to Yusuke. “I mean, I’ve only just met you, but I can tell that both of you care deeply for him.”

“He is a valuable friend,” Yusuke said. “I would not have a place to live were it not for him.”

“Yeah,” Naomi breathed. “He’s a good kid who’s had to deal with shitty situations all his life.” Then she shook her head, extending the ramen to him. “Anyway, please give this to him. I have to go to work.”

Akira took it, nodding at her. She gave them one last sympathetic smile, squeezing Akira’s arm before disappearing down the hall and down the stairs.

“Akira, I believe it would be best suited if you were the one to speak to him,” Yusuke said. “After all, you are the closest.”

“I thought we were going together,” Akira said dumbly.

“Yes, that was my original intent. However, the fact of the matter is…you suspect his involvement, correct?” Yusuke said, and Akira blinked at him in shock. Of course he knew that Yusuke had budding suspicions, but he’d been careful to not say much. “I am oblivious to many things, but as I’ve said, one’s face is akin to looking at a piece of art in motion. You can read so much into it through the nuances of expressions in one’s face. I’ve learned greatly about this recently, through my time with you all. So I believe that sort of discussion should be had in private.”

“I don’t want to have that sort of talk with him,” Akira said, even though he 100% did and 100% planned to do just that. “I just want to see how he’s doing. As his friend. You’re his friend too.”

“Yes,” Yusuke said. “And as his friend, I think it would be best that I not be there. I will perhaps go to the dorms or return to Leblanc to enjoy a cup of Boss’s coffee.” He dug into his pocket and pulled out the key to the apartment, extending it to Akira.

Akira hesitated for a moment before taking it from his hands. “Thank you,” he said, and Yusuke just nodded in kind. Yusuke was incredibly grounded, Akira realized for the millionth time. He didn’t know why he kept allowing himself to be surprised by it.

Once Yusuke went down the stairs, Akira stood in front of the door, and suddenly it felt like an entirely new weight was placed on his shoulders.
He didn’t want to blame him or accuse him at all. But he wanted to know what this meant. What if Akira opened the door only to find that Akechi didn’t have any remorse at all for his actions? What if he opened the door and Akechi was entirely too overcome with remorse? It wouldn’t change the fact that he’d done it.

It had happened, and Akira just wanted to know what it meant going forward. And then there was the increasingly annoying part of him that knew deep-down that Akechi was probably crushed at the news and that same part of Akira also wanted nothing more than to just be there with Akechi and comfort him and assure him that he wasn’t alone at a time like this.

Kioshi’s birthday party was supposed to be next week.

It wasn’t supposed to happen like this.

Goro was supposed to choose right and run with the Thieves and go to Kioshi’s birthday party with Akira and Futaba was supposed to tell him that they got the true ending and he was supposed to finally be okay with letting the detective in and instead it was just all so completely f**ked and-

Akira’s grip on the ramen fumbled and the bowl slipped out of his hands and onto the floor and his breathing hitched. He cursed silently, putting his hand on the wall and closing his eyes. He had to keep calm. Especially in this situation. He had no idea what to expect from Akechi, and he had to be ready for whatever came at him.

Once his breathing returned to normal, Akira calmly scooped as much of the noodles as he could back into the bowl, preparing to throw it out in the garbage in Akechi’s apartment. Then he took a breath and unlocked the door.

He stepped inside, pulling both of Yusuke’s suitcases inside before closing the door behind him.

“Oh, Akira, you startled me.” Akira paused at the sound of Akechi’s kind and calm – almost mechanical - voice. “I was expecting to see Yusuke. I know that his flight got back today at around this time.”

Had Akechi been monitoring Yusuke’s flight to know when he had to pull himself together?

Akira turned around towards the kitchen and met Akechi’s eyes. On the outside, he seemed…fine. His hair was in place, and he was dressed down for his apartment, and… he didn’t look very affected by it. He smiled politely at Akira, and Akira just stared at him in response.

“He…had some things to do, so I brought his things inside,” Akira said. He held up the ramen. “Naomi brought this for you. She was outside.”

“Oh, was she?” Akechi said with a short laugh. “I must have missed her knocking. I just woke up from a nap myself. That’s quite kind of her.”

“I dropped it on the floor,” Akira said. “…accidentally. Sorry.”

“Ah. Ha ha. No worries. I was going to fix myself up an afternoon snack. Would you like something?”

Akira felt entirely unnerved. Was he going to say something? Was he expecting Akira to say something? He couldn’t get a read on the detective. Akira felt like he was back at square one.

Akira walked over to the kitchen and dumped the ramen into the trash can. Then he just sort of lingered at the edge of the kitchen as Akechi hummed quietly to himself and gathered ingredients
to make a quick sandwich.

Akira watched the way that Akechi’s hands unsteadily held the knife, it was barely there, and yet Akira felt like it was the most obvious thing in the room. “Goro…I…You know why I’m here,” he started.

“Yes, well-” Akechi’s response died on his lips. “I’m a bit busy at the moment, so.” He stopped then, and Akira swallowed thickly.

“How are you doing?” Akira asked, taking a small step forward. What does all of this mean? Where is your head at?

“Hm?” Akechi said. “In regards to what, might I ask?”

“Kioshi,” Akira told him, a little frustrated. “Naomi told me about the accident. She called me to tell me she was worried about you.”

“I can’t imagine why. I was feeling a bit ill, so I took left a bit early yesterday to rest, but I had eaten some bad sushi, I think.” Akechi continued to busy himself with the task of making a peanut butter and banana sandwich. “In regards to the accident, we haven’t gotten any updates on their conditions, but it’s not-excuse me-” Akechi cleared his throat abruptly. “It’s not looking like a positive outlook,” he said evenly.

“Goro,” Akira started. “I’m here because I’m worried about you.”

“Is it?” Akechi said, his hands pausing in their mechanical put-together of the sandwich. When Akira didn’t respond, Akechi paused fully, not looking at him. “Is that truly the reason you decided to come here?”

“You’re my friend,” Akira said in lieu of the full answer.

Akechi chuckled at that, and Akira thought it sounded just a little unhinged. “I think it’s become quite clear that it would be truly senseless for you to continue with that train of thought.”

Akira frowned. “Why did you do it, Goro?” he lowered his voice, and Akechi started shaking his head.

“Haven’t I made my decision?” he said, the evenness in his tone rising a little bit. “You know the news as well as I do. That’s why you’re really here, isn’t it? You asked me to make a choice, and I’ve made one,” Akechi told him, finally turning to meet Akira’s shocked expression. “You should go.”

Akira felt that sickening feeling again as he stared at Goro Akechi’s stoic face that betrayed no emotion, no remorse. Just simple acceptance that this was just what had to happen. This was his choice. So…what was Akira supposed to do now? Why did he even bother to come? He had planned for worst case scenarios, but not like this. Had he really not cared about what happened to Kioshi and the fact that he indirectly caused the situation to happen? This was the end. Really and truly…

Except, was it really? Akira felt Arsene’s presence flood through him. You’ve got a choice too. 

> walk away and accept it

>treat him like an enemy
Akira blinked, and in an instant, it felt like a lens was being lifted off of him. What had Yusuke said? You could see so much of a person’s heart through the expressions on their face. But it was also easy to blinded by your own emotions so that you couldn’t truly see the expressions on someone’s face.

Akira blinked, and Akechi’s stoic expression seemed to morph into one that was barely being held together. Akira hadn’t noticed before, but his eyes were red at the edges, and the side of his lip was twitching ever so slightly.

Akira blinked, and he saw the sloppy way that the sandwich had been put together. It wasn’t cut very evenly, and the bananas didn’t look placed very well, nor was there much peanut butter. It was much less neat than Akira even thought Akechi was capable of being.

Akira blinked, and he noticed the small wrapped present sitting on the counter next to the garbage can.

Akira blinked, and he saw Kioshi’s keychain sitting on top of the present.

Akechi was giving him the choice. Akira could accept this, listen to Akechi’s words and go, and fully see him as the enemy – the role that he was fully prepared to play. He was giving him the chance to walk away for good.

A part of him wanted to take it. Akira worked hard not to show it, but the nothingness had exploded in full emotional force -- he was furious and disappointed and – Kioshi almost died – and he didn’t even know how he’d be able to move forward with Akechi or if he even wanted to. And he was tired of having to constantly be on edge. But his feet seemed to move of their own accord, and he took a few strides forward and grabbed at Akechi’s wrist, surprising the detective.

“Let’s go visit him,” Akira said. “Kioshi.”

“I can’t,” Akechi said, his voice down to a whisper.

“Why not?” Akira steeled himself. Akechi pulled his wrist away, and Akira let him without any resistance.

“Why do you think?” he said, and Akira could see his hands start to tremble.

All Akira wanted was for him to say it. To speak the words out loud. “You didn’t know this would happen,” Akira said comfortingly, despite himself.

“Does that make it any better?” Akechi said, tilting his head, and Akira noticed his eyes start to get redder.

Akira pinched the bridge of his nose, blinking hard for a moment. “No,” he admitted. “It doesn’t. Not even a little bit.” It wouldn’t do him any good to grant him any innocence when there was none to be found.

“No,” Akechi repeated. “And I knew exactly what was supposed to happen.”

Akira felt a sour taste fill his mouth. “You have to see him. You at least owe him that much,” he said firmly, and Akechi’s breathing went unsteady for a bit. “Wouldn’t you agree?” he said to the detective, his forceful Joker-esque voice coming out without Akira even realizing it himself.
Akechi could have declined, and if he did, Akira would’ve been even more disappointed than he already was. But instead, Akechi closed his eyes for a few seconds before pushing his plate back. “Let me get changed,” he said, walking over to his room.

When Akechi opened the door, Akira was able to get a slight sliver of a peek into his room, and he thought he saw things completely trashed, but the door was shut before he could confirm it.

The trip to the hospital was a quiet, contemplative one. Akira knew that he was thinking as Akechi’s friend at the moment, but the truth was, he didn’t know what it meant going forward. Akechi was still determined to put up this front.

When they got to the hospital and to the ward with Kioshi’s room, they saw Naomi and Sae talking outside of what Akira assumed to be either Kioshi or Kobayakawa’s hospital room. Naomi was in the middle of talking about something, moving her hands animatedly, when she spotted Akechi. She nudged Sae’s arm and then ran over to Akechi. She looked like she was about to hug him, and then she stopped at the last minute and nearly ran into him as Sae trailed after her.

“Oh my god, are you okay?” Naomi blurted. Sae cleared her throat, and Naomi did the same. “Er, I mean…I left ramen for you…”

Akechi smiled in true detective prince fashion. “Thank you. I appreciated it. I’m completely fine.”

Sae put a hand on his shoulder, and Akechi blinked at her, somewhat surprised at the motion. “Are you sure you’re feeling up for this?” she said.

“Of course,” Akechi said. “When have you ever needed to worry about me?” he said with a light chuckle.

Sae hummed, then tucked her hair back just like Makoto did. She brought her gaze over to Akira. “You’re the kid that’s staying with Sakura-san, correct?” she said. Akira nodded.

“What is the status for both of them?” Akechi piped up.

“It does seem like both will make a recovery. Kobayakawa is stable, but the doctor said he may retain some memory loss. Akiyama will question him once he wakes up,” Sae said, and Naomi smiled as Akechi tensed up. “And the boy is also stable for now. He’s got a few more surgeries for his legs, but he’s alive. He’s already woken up and told us what happened and is resting right now.”

Alive. He was alive. Akira felt some of the tension leave his body. That was all that mattered at the moment. The rest could come later. The hard part could come later.

“What about the driver?” Akechi asked.

“I already talked to him,” Naomi said with a twirl of her hair. “I truly think it was an accident. He says the principal just walked and stopped right in the middle of the crosswalk, and that his eyes were totally shot. I think it was a mental shutdown and even though that stupid calling card was in his office it just doesn’t match—”

“Akiyama,” Sae said, and Naomi piped up instantly. “We don’t need to discuss this publicly.”

“S-Sorry,” she said.

“Calling card?” Akira repeated, and Naomi pointedly averted her eyes. Did…did he plant a calling card in the office still? Akira looked over at Akechi… but the detective looked a bit shocked
himself at the news.

“I-Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. Stupid,” Naomi said to herself. “Just forget you heard any of that,” she said to Akira. “We can have a debrief later,” she told Akechi, who nodded stiffly. “I don’t think it’s the time to talk about that kinda stuff anyway.”

“Nonsense,” Akechi said. “Since I’m here, I think it’s best that we discuss the case and the matter at hand. I’ve already been out of the loop for a couple of days now.”

Sae sighed. “No,” she said, and Akechi stared at her. “We can talk about it later. You two are here to see the boy, right? Then you should do that. There’s no point in working if you aren’t 100%.”

“Niijima-san’s such a softy at heart. She was pretty worried about you,” Naomi chuckled, and when Sae shot daggers at her, Naomi clamped up. “Ha ha…just kidding?”

Sae pressed her fingers to her temple. “Let’s go, Akiyama.” She turned to Akechi. “We’ll have a meeting tomorrow.”

Akechi looked like he was about to protest, but then he nodded resignedly. They exchanged a few more words before Sae and Naomi decided to go back to the office.

“I’ll bring you more ramen later!” Naomi told him.

“A-Akiyama-san, that’s really not necessary,” Akechi told her, a bit flustered.

“Well, I know that,” Naomi said. “I’m not doing it because it’s necessary,” she said while Akechi just looked at her like she was crazy.

Akechi didn’t realize how many people he really had who cared about him now. Akira wasn’t sure what else he could do to show him that. Perhaps it was a fear that once he revealed everything, those people would turn on him. Distrust and abandonment seemed to be all he knew.

“Technically, Niijima-san was the one who bought it anyway. I just delivered it,” Naomi added with a cheeky grin.

“Akiyama,” Sae said sharply and Naomi stifled a laugh. “Let’s go. We’re going to be late getting back to the office.”

Naomi pointed them to Kioshi’s room. And then they said their goodbyes and walked away until it was just Akira and Akechi standing there outside of the room.

Akechi put his hand on the door handle, and then it just stayed on there for a few moments. Akira could hear his unsteady breathing. There was a part of him that wanted to put his hand over Akechi’s and open the door together. But he also felt like it was something Akechi needed to do for himself.

Akechi brought his eyes to Akira’s, and Akira barely managed to muster up a tired smile. He was just so tired of it all. He imagined Akechi was too.

Akechi exhaled, and in the same breath, he opened the door and stepped inside. Kioshi was there in the bed, and Akira took note of the bandages that covered him. His left arm was wrapped in a cast, and both of his legs were also in casts and elevated. His breathing was slow and ragged, but the steady beeping of the heart monitor put Akira’s heart a little more at ease.

Akira could hear Akechi’s breath hitch again, but he couldn’t bring himself to look at the detective.
The back of Akechi’s head came into view as the detective took a few steps forward so that he was standing much closer to Kioshi’s bed. “I caused this,” Akechi whispered, so low that Akira was certain that he was even meant to hear it.

Akira hesitated. “He’s going to be okay,” he said.

“Isn’t it odd?” Akechi said, hovering his hand over Kioshi’s tiny body before retreating it back to his side. “People look so fragile like this. So helpless.”

Kioshi stirred a little bit before his eyes fluttered open, looked worn and more exhausted then any child should have to be. “Hm…?” he said, dazed. He looked around the room. “Oh. I’m still here.” He sounded disappointed.

“Hey, Mr. Hero,” Akira said with a soft smile. “How are you?”

Kioshi blinked a few times, then when his eyes settled on the two of them, it lit up. He wasn’t quite able to muster up a true Kioshi smile, but it showed in his eyes. Akira was reminded again of how remarkably brave the boy was. Not only had he tried to save someone, but he was in a less than ideal state and seemed to be taking it in stride. Kids were always resilient like that though. “Kurusu-san, Akechi-san,” he said, his voice rising a bit in excitement. “You came to visit me?”

“Of course we did,” Akechi said in a strained voice. “Are you in pain? Should I call the nurse?”

Kioshi managed to shake his head. “I can’t really move, but it doesn’t hurt all that bad. The doctors already told me that I’ll be able to move again soon. Mom and Dad went to eat, I think. And then they gave me a bunch of toys, but I can’t play with them,” Kioshi said. Then he pouted a bit. “I-Is the other guy okay?”


Kioshi curled inward a bit with a sheepish smile, and Akira wondered how someone who looked like that and had literally been hit by a car was able to smile so freely. “Are you proud of me?” he said hopefully.

“Beyond proud,” Akechi said. He gripped the handle of the bed. “It takes a certain kind of person who be willing to save someone that they don’t know.”

“Isn’t you supposed to help people when they need it?” Kioshi asked like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “That’s what everyone always tells me.”

“Of course we did,” Akechi said in a strained voice. “Are you in pain? Should I call the nurse?”

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“Yes,” Akira said. “But not everyone is as brave as you. You’re like a superhero.”

Kioshi just furrowed his brow, and then his eyes filled with awe. “R-Really?” he said excitedly.

“A real Anpanman,” Akira joked, and Kioshi’s eyes got brighter and brighter. Akira smiled, feeling optimistic that maybe this world could change as long as kids like Kioshi were around. He lightly poked at his head. “You’re missing the anpan head though.”

Kioshi giggled. “I don’t want that for a head. It’d be all squishy and stuff.”

“Kioshi,” Akechi said, and the sharpness of his voice broke through the air like breaking glass. “I…I want to apologize to you.”

“Huh?” Kioshi said. “What’d you mean?”
“I apologize for putting you through this, and I… I want to thank you as well,” Akechi said. Akira wondered for a moment what Akechi was on about, but then it fully dawned on him.

Kobayakawa had died in the other timeline. And he was supposed to die in this one too. Akechi had gone ahead and tried to kill him. Akechi had chosen. Akira had offered a hand to him, and Akechi had all but turned it away.

But because of Kioshi, no one had died as a result of his choice. Thanks to Kioshi, Goro Akechi didn’t have any more blood on his hands.

Akira had given him a choice, and Akechi had chosen wrong.

…But Kioshi had changed fate. An absolute and inevitable thing like death had been changed.

“You’re talkin’ all funny again,” Kioshi told him.

“I…” Akechi struggled to find words. “I am just truly glad that you’re alright.”

“Me too. I’m still sad I can’t play with the toys the doctor gave me though,” Kioshi said lightly, and Akechi forced a laugh. “You think I can still have my birthday party next week?” Kioshi sighed deeply, and as he did so, the hospital door opened and in walked Michiko and Brian, Kioshi’s parents.

“Oh,” Brian stopped when he saw them. “It’s you two. You came to visit?”

“They came to see me. They’re proud of me,” Kioshi said proudly.

“Well, it’s hard to not be,” Brian said warmly. “Thank you for visiting.”

“We were just on our way out,” Akechi said. “We simply wanted to come and see how he was faring.”

“You’re leaving already?” Kioshi pouted. “I don’t want you to leave.”

“We’ll be back soon,” Akira assured him. “Rest up,” he said, and Kioshi saluted with his good arm.

The two of them said their goodbyes and exited Kioshi’s room. They stood there for a moment, with Akechi pacing back and forth a bit. Akira watched him, straddling a line between fear and blame.

“Well then,” Akechi said, eyes glassy and unfocused. “I suppose it’s unavoidable that we have a chat.”

Akira nodded. “I agree. Where do you want to go?” It had to be somewhere private, and there was a shortage of places like that around here.

Akechi hummed. “Will you go to Mementos with me?” he asked, and Akira felt a little bit uneasy at the neutrality in his tone.

Akira hesitated. He wasn’t so sure if that was a good idea to be there alone with him. Truth be told, he couldn’t get a read on Akechi at all or where his head was at. Akechi smiled a bit, seeming to read Akira’s mind, and it didn’t exactly make Akira feel any less tense because his smile looked slightly unsettling. So instead, it made his stomach turn. “Are you afraid of me now?”

“I’m afraid that you aren’t thinking clearly,” Akira said. Still, it was probably the only place where
they’d be able to have any sort of privacy, and he wanted to believe that Akechi wouldn’t really pull anything at the moment. And if he was wrong, then, well…he would fight back if it came to that. “But alright,” he agreed. “Let’s go.”

Akechi raised an eyebrow. “Truly?”

Akira nodded through his nerves. “We need to talk, so let’s talk.”

Chapter End Notes

HONESTLY IM SORRY FOR THE CLIFFHANGER BUT ITS BETTER THAN WHERE I HAD THE FIRST CLIFFHANGER (which was after the phone call in Hawaii)

(hides for two weeks)

coming up in two weeks is the most emotionally draining chapter I’ve ever written and its taking me forever to get through it (and I’m still not done tbh) because I have to put myself in such a mood so if anyone has some nice sad boy hours music pls send it my way

come cry with me friends

p.s. fuck time differences am I right
Akira could feel some of his jet lag hit him as they entered Mementos, and he thought it was quite a feat that he still hadn’t passed out. He’d been going off of adrenaline, but as the mental exhaustion was starting to mix with his physical exhaustion, and he became slightly worried that he wouldn’t be able to react quick enough if Akechi pulled something.

And he hated that his mind was starting to feel more and more like he couldn't trust him no matter what. Whatever he had been feeling for Akechi from before seemed muddled and cloudy – he wasn’t exactly sure what he felt for Akechi at the moment.

They found a place without any shadows, and when they did so, Akira moved so that he was leaned up against a wall. “You’ve chosen, then,” Akira said.

“And what?” Akechi said, his hands balling into fists. “Because I’m not sure what you mean by ‘chosen.’” He closed his eyes for a moment, then met Akira’s steady gaze. “I did what I thought was necessary. I was given a task, and I carried it out,” Akechi said, and Akira hated how calmly he could talk about it.

“Okay,” Akira said. He fought through the sickness in his stomach to be able to maintain his composure.

“And why is that?” Akechi said, his eyes narrowing. “You were given a task, and you carried it out. But what if it meant you had to kill someone who was close to you? What then?”

“Because it was ordered to me,” Akechi said, his voice cold and flat. “And I followed orders. It’s what I was trained to do.”

“Okay,” Akira said again. He fought through the sickness in his stomach to be able to maintain his composure.

“And you’ll begin to wonder why you came”
“It’s different when it’s someone you care about,” Akira said. “Kobayakawa wasn’t a good person, but I’m sure he had people who cared about him and wouldn’t want him to die. The people on the train had ones who cared about them. Wakaba Isshiki had people who cared about her.”

“Akira—” Akechi started, his voice strained.

“They’re not just means to an end, Goro. They’re people with families and friends.”

“How is it any different from what we’re doing as the Phantom Thieves?” Akechi accused.

Akira blinked at him in sheer and utter shock. Was he truly comparing the two? He could hear the indecision in Akechi’s voice. The fear. The doubt. The unknown. “It’s completely different. We’re not murdering people. The pain that you feel right now. The pain that you would feel if Kioshi had died, it’s the same pain that Futaba felt. It’s the pain that Sojiro felt. It’s the pain that Kobayakawa’s family would feel,” Akira told him, trying really hard to keep his voice even.

“Isshiki aside, you’d rather send them to prison where they still wouldn’t be able to see their loved ones or where they might end up getting the death penalty anyway?”

“It’s not our job to play judge, jury and executioner,” Akira said. “I’m not so naïve to think that I’ve got enough knowledge to make those kinds of decisions. All we do is get them to confess their crimes, and let the law take care of the rest. What you’re doing isn’t just at all.”

“You don’t think I know that?” Akechi said, his voice rising. “You think I’ve been doing this for justice or some noble, lofty goal?”

“No,” Akira conceded. “I know it’s not anywhere near that. But I thought that maybe from being with us you would give up on your revenge plan.”


“I didn’t. I don’t,” Akira said. “But I’ve suspected that this goal of yours is entirely personal. And I think you’ve been so blinded by this goal of yours that you can’t see how much it’s hurting people and can’t see past the blinders.” He had to go for the jugular now. “Kioshi could have died. If he had, would you still continue on with this goal?”

Akechi let out a bitter, humorless laugh. “You think I wanted this?” he said. “Of course, it was nice for a little, to be a part of your group. It was nice to play pretend. But it was never going to last.”

“Why would you ever think that it wouldn’t last?”

“If you all knew half of the things I’ve done, it wouldn’t matter. The relationships I built wouldn’t matter. You all would cast me aside just like everyone else. My hands are stained. There’s nothing that will change that,” Akechi said. “And so, my decision was made for me.”

“That’s not true. This isn’t a decision that someone else can make for you. It isn’t a decision that just happens. It’s about what you want and how you choose to live your life going forward. If you choose to be honest and change, and we don’t accept your past, then that’s on us and should have nothing to do with your decision,” Akira said, growing increasingly frustrated. He was certain that only Akechi could do this to him. Goro Akechi was complication in its purest form. “Why do you care so much about what other people think?”

Akechi scoffed. “It’s quite easy for you to say that. You immediately had so many people that were drawn to you. I-I was extremely particular about everything so that someone would want me around,” Akechi said, and Akira could hear the raw emotion in his voice.
“We want you around, Goro,” Akira said, and he tried his hardest to convey just how much he meant it. They were going in circles at this point. Akira didn’t know what it would take for Akechi to open his eyes and see that they were all standing in front of him with open arms.

“This argument is meaningless,” Akechi said tiredly.

Akira pursed his lips, feeling like the entire situation was a ticking time bomb inevitably about to explode. “If you tell me that that’s what you want, then I’ll have to accept it. I don’t want to hear about the things you did in the past. Kioshi gave you a second chance to do the right thing. Your target was Kobayakawa. You failed. What do you want to do now?”

Akechi tried to walk past Akira, but Akira side-stepped and blocked his path. Akechi exhaled. “There is no turning back for me, Akira.” Akira just looked at him expectantly. That wasn’t much of an answer at all. “Accepting me would go against all of your ideals as a Phantom Thief.” Akechi bored his eyes into Akira’s, as though that would explain everything, but it didn’t. It didn’t explain anything at all. Under Akira’s scrutinizing, relentlessly patient stare, Akechi looked more and more unbalanced. “Why can’t you just let this go? Why can’t you just let me go?” Akechi continued.

“I know you. And I know who you could be. But if you’re okay with what just happened, then… then maybe I was wrong all along, and that’s on me.”

“Akira, let’s just stop this,” Akechi told him. “It’s not going anywhere. I told you that my decision has been made, so there’s no point in discussing it further.”

There they were again. Pushing and pulling. Bending and breaking. Stuck in a never-ending cycle. Akira was tired. It was the jet lag and the mental exhaustion and the seed of doubt that Akira never let grow, but he had tried time and time again.

Akechi was upset about Kioshi, but he still stood in front of Akira and told him that there was no turning back for him.

Maybe some things were absolute and inevitable, and Akira had to decide which was which. Were things really that grim? Akira ran a free hand through his hair, and his other hand dug into his pocket. His eyes widened a bit when he felt something. The thing that he’d taken from Akechi’s apartment when he went to go change.

Akira pulled out the keychain that Kioshi had given to Akechi, and he saw the way the detective’s eyes shot down towards it. He’d taken it and meant to give it to Kioshi to keep in his hospital room – he knew it’d make the child feel better but it had slipped his mind.

Akira extended the keychain to him. “I meant to give this to him. You should be the one.” Akechi inhaled a shaky breath, and then he took the keychain out of Akira’s hand. Akira lightly grabbed his wrist and met his eyes. “You said you didn’t expect to feel a certain way when Kioshi was injured. What way was that?”

“Akira-”

“No. I need to hear this. If nothing else, I need this.”

Akechi broke free of Akira’s grip and turned so that his back was facing Akira, and Akira was half inclined to spin him around and force the brunette to look at him. “I considered what would happen if I walked into this hospital room, only to hear his heart monitor flat line. I thought about how I would react,” Akechi started. “I…have never felt that before,” he admitted.

“Felt what?”
“Such despair,” Akechi said solemnly. “If that were the case, I think I would hear that flat line for the rest of my life. And even though that didn’t happen in reality, I can still hear it. It’s all I can hear. For the past two days, it’s all I can-” Akechi stopped abruptly.

Akira was about to say something in response, but he stopped when he heard something that sounded distinctly like a sniffle. “Goro… Are…Are you…?” Akira took a large stride over to him and spun the detective around and saw the way his eyes were red.

“I almost killed him,” Akechi whispered, and Akira heard an entire world break in the crack of Akechi’s voice. Akira lowered his head, nodding. “All I can think about is if what if he’s there again – or any one of you, the next time that I-”

Akira figured that Akechi didn’t really care about what happened to Kobayakawa or any of the other fates of criminals, whether they lived or died, but he admitted that he cared about them, and that was a start. It was start from just seeing the world through his own twisted, tunnel-vision lens.

“Then don’t do this.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Then help me understand. Whatever it is, we can get through it together,” Akira said, and even though he didn’t know what he was going to hear, he surprised himself with the conviction behind his own words.

“Together,” Akechi repeated. “You keep going on and on about together. It’s man’s greatest deception. In reality, people only exist to save themselves.”

“I wouldn’t be here if that were the case. Yes, I’m disappointed in you,” Akira told him honestly. “And I’m not even sure that I can ever get past what’s happened,” Akira realized. “But I’m still here because I think you know that you made the wrong choice.”

“Stop it.”

“We keep going in circles because you won’t look inside yourself and admit it,” Akira said, squaring himself up for what might happen next. “You’re being a coward.”

“Stop it, just stop!” Akechi finally exploded, and a black aura overtook him for a moment.

In shock, Akira took a step back at what he just saw. Akechi’s entire form changed into something black for a split second. Akira stared dumbfounded at Akechi, feeling like his skin was crawling. The black mask – not that he ever needed the confirmation. But how was he able to change his Metaverse clothes like that? What sort of trick was it? “What…was that?” Akira asked.

Akechi laughed humorlessly. “Well, I suppose there’s no hiding it anymore.” Akira backed up even more, his mind spinning. He hadn’t even been in Japan for more than a few hours – but it felt like the entire world changed already. Akechi closed his eyes.

A mass of energy surrounded him, and Akira watched as Akechi’s Robin Hood outfit gave way to a black and purple striped outfit. And with it—

Akira stared up, mouth open, as a different persona from Robin Hood appeared above Akechi for only moment – one that Akira didn’t recognize and left him reeling. Then it was gone, and Akechi was just left in his black outfit.

“This is… the persona you use when you went into palaces yourself,” Akira said as a statement.
“You…have two personas?” Were they the same in that regard? Was that why he had felt so connected to Akechi? How was that even possible? Did that mean that Igor knew about Akechi? Akira’s mind was swimming and he felt himself start to get dizzy.

“You want to know the truth? Fine. I’ll tell you,” Akechi said, and Akira felt his blood go cold.

“It was an interesting theory. You can certainly cause someone to have a mental shutdown through killing their shadow, but the incidents – the psychotic breakdowns – it can only happen if someone possesses the ability to make one’s heart go psychotic,” Akechi said in an eerily calm tone.

Akira felt Arsene stir inside him just in case, and he considered taking another step back to put some distance between them. But he stood his ground and didn’t speak, letting Akechi finally admit to him the things that he’d suspected all along.

The ability to make someone’s heart go psychotic…what might something like that do someone over time?

“I made it so Kobayakawa would have a mental shutdown and commit suicide. I made it so Wakaba Isshiki jumped in front of that car. When I found out you knew about the cognitive world, I initially got close to you so that I could kill you if necessary. I was willing to do whatever it took to achieve my goal.” Akechi continued. “Is that what you wanted to hear?”

Akira felt like each of his nerves were being pulled, one-by-one. “Are you still willing to do whatever it takes?” Akira said, studying the way that Akechi’s shoulders shook.

Akechi blinked, clearly shocked that Akira hadn’t been completely repulsed or turned off by what Akechi had just said. But Akira had had a lot of time to come to terms with it – he had already figured out that Akechi had been ruthless and blinded by his goal. Of course, that didn’t make things any easier to hear, but if he let it all out now, when Akechi was studying his every reaction, it would all be for nothing. “I…” Akechi said, fumbling over his words.

“I’ve told you before. It’s not that I don’t care. But I believe you can change. No-” Akira paused. He looked at the space where the mystery persona had appeared. “-if we’re two sides of a coin…I know it.”

Akechi shook his head. “Stop it! Stop trying to compare us.” He put his hands up to the sides of his head. “This is all your fault. I have made it this far on my own. I don’t need this.”

“Goro-”

“Enough. I’ve heard enough,” Akechi growled, and Akira froze as the detective pulled out his metaverse weapon and aimed it straight at Akira.

Akira felt his head start to pound as he stared down the barrel of the gun – again. This wasn’t happening again. It couldn’t be happening again. Except, no matter how many times he blinked, it stayed.

“Everything would be so much easier if you had never come into my life,” Akechi said, his voice cracking in frustration.

Akira considered his options, but he was having a hard time thinking straight with a gun being pointed at him. If he tried to go for his own weapon, he wouldn’t be able to reach it in time. If he summoned one of his personas, it also wouldn’t come out in time. His entire brain started to short-circuit, and he felt his heart start to pound in his chest as he remembered the cold look in the detective’s eyes as he pulled the trigger in the last timeline. They had been nightmares of the past,
but now it was another reality. The panic that bubbled within him almost couldn’t be quelled.

After all that had happened, was he really in the same situation he had been in before? There were no tricks this time. No other play. Akira didn’t have anything up his sleeve.

Igor wouldn’t give him another chance. There was nothing. There would be nothing. He would be gone. He would be gone and the world wouldn’t change.

His friends and all the people who had trusted him would have to carry on without him. Akechi would continue on this path, and maybe he would win, or maybe it would all blow up in his face in the end. Either way, Akira wouldn’t be there to see it. He felt his limbs start to give out. What was the point? Everything had brought him to the same place.

Maybe he was never fit to be their leader. Akira’s legs started to wobble, and he was half-inclined to just let them give and fall to the floor. After all, he was starting to get so, so tired. If he could just-

*Is this the fate you’ve decided for yourself?*

Akira blinked at the sound of Arsene’s voice filling his head. He had been hearing it more and more lately, and he wasn’t sure what that was supposed to mean.

*Your trial truly begins now.*

Akira looked at Akechi and thought that maybe his hand was shaking a little bit. “You don’t understand, Akira. You will never understand. If I can just get rid of you, then I won’t have any more interference and can do what needs to be done.”

*Will you cower in fear and let all of your work be for naught?*

He wanted to yell out that he had been fighting all this time. Akira closed his eyes. It would be over soon.

*Are you forsaking the bonds you’ve forged? Death awaits you if you do nothing.*

Akira’s heart pounded a little harder as Ryuji’s face flashed through his memory. Arsene had said something similar to him back then. He had awakened to his persona so that he could help them. All of his friends’ faces moved through his memory like burst photos, finally resting on Akechi.

*Death awaits him if you do nothing. Was your chance to re-write fate a mistake?*

No, it wasn’t that – it was just – this was different.

“Knowing you all has only made things more complicated. I don’t need complications – not when I’m so close.”

*Why did you come here?*

Why had he agreed to go to Mementos? To fight? To talk? To die? To give up?

No, he hadn’t wanted any of that. He had come precisely because he didn’t want to give up. He didn’t want Kioshi’s second chance to go to waste.

*What is the resolve you wish to heed?*

Akira’s eyes fluttered open. He hadn’t pulled the trigger yet, and Akira saw the doubt in Akechi’s
eyes. It was different this time. It wasn’t cold and calculated, and his eyes weren’t filled with pride and vengeance. It was the same Akechi, but it wasn’t at the same time.

Akira heard Arsene’s rumbling laughter of support inside of him, and he stepped forward, even though he wanted to vomit and felt dizzy from the anxiety at the notion that he could get shot again, so that the barrel was pressing directly against his forehead.

Akechi’s hand shook, watching Akira with wild, confused eyes.

“If you want to shoot me, then shoot me,” Akira said, his tone coming out perfectly even – which was a surprise even to him.

“I…I beg your pardon?”

“But it won’t cure your loneliness. It won’t make Kioshi any better.” He bored his eyes into Akechi’s. “And if you do decide to pull the trigger, then I also want to say that… I’m sorry.”

“What?”

Akira took a breath and looked into the broken detective’s eyes. “I’m sorry that we let you down.”

The gun wavered again. “I…That’s not…”

“I wanted us to be enough for you to stop this and be here, with us, but maybe I didn’t do enough,” Akira told him. He lifted his hand, then put it atop the barrel. He didn’t lower it, he just rested it there. “Are you going to shoot me?”

“I…”

“What do you want to do, Goro?” Akira asked.

No one spoke for what seemed like hours, but it must have only been a few minutes. Akira gave Akechi the silence to think about it, even though he was starting to grow antsy. He thought about the persona that Akechi had summoned. He had no idea what the mystery persona’s power was – but maybe he would be dead before he had time to think about it more.

He wondered if it were really the case that Akechi could have multiple personas. Akira had felt somewhat odd, being the only person who had that ability – like there was a whole other weight that came with it. But if Akechi were to have the same…

It also left Akira with a lingering feeling that that was why they were so drawn to each other.

Finally, Akechi breathed, long and hard, and Akira came back to reality. He watched the detective shakily lower his gun and then drop it onto the ground.

Akira then watched him sink to the ground on his knees, looking exhausted. He closed his eyes, taking off his black helmet. Akira felt all of his anxiety come out of him at once, and Akira slumped down in front of him and then sat back so that he was directly in front of him with his knees up against his chest.

“I don’t know what I want anymore,” Akechi said in another soft whisper, though it may as well have been as loud and disruptive as an earthquake. Akechi wouldn’t meet Akira’s eyes, but it didn’t matter. Honestly – it was probably the best answer Akira could have hoped for at the time.

Akechi put his head in his hands, exhaling long and hard. “This is all I have wanted for…for so
A silence overtook them for a bit aside from the sounds of Akechi’s unsteady breathing. Akira watched the detective’s shoulders move up and down, remembering the time that they had gone to Mementos together alone for the first time. It seemed so long ago, and nothing had gotten any easier since then.

“This is as good a time as any for a mid-life crisis,” Akira said dryly.

Another long silence.

“I suppose this means you’ve won,” Akechi said tiredly.

“No one wins in this situation, Goro,” Akira told him. “Are you ready to talk to me?”

Akechi inhaled long and exhaled hard. “What is your proposal?”

Akira thought about that. What did he even want from Akechi? His help? But with what? “You help us take down your boss, and then at end of this, you…” Akira paused. “You give up everyone involved.” He couldn’t give Akechi false hope. He couldn’t make him think that he could get away scot-free after all of this. He had to do it, for Kioshi. For Futaba, even though it left a pit in the bottom of his stomach and made him want to vomit. “Your role too.”

Akechi lifted his head up slowly, and Akira could see the weariness in his eyes. He was tired of fighting. “And if I refuse?”

The image of Kioshi in the hospital bed flashed through Akira’s mind, and he felt his stomach turn. Akira closed his eyes briefly, pressing his fingers to the bridge of his nose. “I want to help you. I meant that. But that means you have to be ready to own up to your mistakes and your crimes. It doesn’t mean I won’t support you through it.”

Akira could see in Akechi’s eyes that he was not a fan of that suggestion. “I…need some time to consider this more,” Akechi said slowly, and Akira sighed.

“No,” he said resolutely, like a leader. Akechi stared at him. “You’ve had more than enough time to think. This person has hurt so many people, he’s manipulated you into doing his dirty work, and he probably won’t stop any time soon. I’m not letting anyone else get hurt by him, and that includes you. What do you say?”

Akira watched as an array of emotions flitted across Akechi’s face. A work of art, as Yusuke would say. He didn’t know what exactly was going through Akechi’s mind, but he hoped that it was leading up to something good.

“If you can change his heart, then…” Akechi started, then paused. “I suppose it will be inevitable that he gives up everybody’s involvement in the end regardless.” Akechi’s hands balled into fists. “More than anything, I still want to crush him. For so long, I’ve been fueled by this desire,” he said, his voice hardening. “He deserves to die.”

“You shouldn’t talk like that,” Akira said.

“If you don’t or can’t, I’ll kill him myself,” Akechi said, boring his eyes into Akira’s. Akira knew at once, with an unsettling feeling, that Akechi wasn’t lying about that.

Goro Akechi might not know what he wanted out of life, but some things were still absolute and unchangeable, Akira realized. He was still dragging himself tooth and nail out of hell, and Akira
was trying his best to help pull him up.

Akechi didn’t know what he wanted and was still ready to bloody his hands – but he didn’t want to kill Akira or hurt the Thieves and was ready to at least give them a chance to show him that this was the side he should be on. Akira would have to rely on that. “We,” Akira said after some pause. “We’re going to change his heart. I want you to be a part of this journey with his.” Then he thought about how much the two of them had been through. “After all, we’re a team. Aren’t we?”

Akira extended his hand to the detective.

“You are…truly beyond my comprehension,” Akechi breathed. After another long wait, Goro put his hand in Akira’s, and Akira expected to feel the same warmth he always did, but it just felt cold.

He used to imagine the universe being born and dying in the space between their hands, but now it just felt like two hands touching. Akira had gotten what he wanted, but at what cost?

Akira released his hand, and the two of them sat like that for a bit. Akira of course wanted to hear everything – or at least whatever it was that Akechi was ready to share, but he also felt his head start to loll as he tried to muster up the energy to speak a sentence. The entire weight of the conversation – and really, it felt like the world – suddenly seemed to fall over his eyelids and drape himself over his brain.

“What happens now?” Akechi asked. “I suppose you want to ask me some questions.”

Akira hummed a bit, and tried to force his eyes to stay open. Change his boss’s heart…? Wait, he hadn’t even asked who he was. And he needed answers about this persona. Could he see Igor? What was his real persona? And he had to tell the others…

“Yes…” Akira’s head drooped as his plethora of questions died on the edge of his tongue. He mumbled something that sounded like a sentence. “Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Akechi repeated, but his voice sounded so far away.

“It’s been a long day…” Akira said, his eyelids drooping.

“It’s quite reckless of you to fall asleep with an enemy and refuse to ask your questions now,” Akechi lightly chided, and Akira almost wanted to laugh if the entire situation wasn’t so awful.

He shook his head. “You’re not an enemy,” Akira said, and being able to speak that sentence filled him with so much emotion that he was worried it would all burst open like a river breaking through a dam. “Not anymore.” He brought his eyes to Akechi’s, and even though it was dark, he could see the way his eyes were glossy. “Let’s go home.”
Kioshi laid in bed, kind of sleeping. He dreamt that he was like Anpanman, or maybe like Spiderman. He really liked Spiderman. Or maybe he could be like Akechi-san. He really liked Akechi-san too.

His arms and legs still hurt a lot, but it made him feel better to know that he helped save someone. And his mom and dad had been getting along more every time they came to the hospital. That made him feel really good too.

He knew that he should be in pain, but as he drifted to sleep more and more, he just felt really happy. The only thing that would make it better was if he would still be able to have his birthday party.

Kioshi heard the door to his room open, and he tried to open his eyes, but he was so tired that he couldn’t do it. He heard footsteps come to a stop.

“Kioshi-kun?” It was Akechi-san! Now he really wanted to wake up. But he was so tired that he wasn’t able to do much except stir a little bit and try to form a word. It came out more like a mumble. “I’ve…brought a toy for you.” He heard Akechi-san sigh. “I-I can’t apologize enough.”

Huh? Why was he saying sorry to him?

“You…saved me. For that, I will always be grateful to you.” Kioshi wasn’t sure what meant by that. He saved the other guy, not Akechi-san. “I hope…I hope that I am able to be the person that you think I am.”

What did that mean? Kioshi wanted to ask him, but it was too hard to find the energy to wake up. He could ask him later. He thought Akechi-san was really cool and smart and kind – nothing could change that.

He’d tell him later, Kioshi thought as sleep finally overtook him. For now, Anpanman was waiting for him in his dreams.

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Ann pulled her umbrella up over her head as she hopped over a nearby puddle. The light rumbling of thunder hummed in the sky as she huddled into her umbrella a little more.

She walked slowly, careful not to bump into anyone and navigate through the array of umbrellas. Her mind was still spinning a little bit as she finally made it to Leblanc, pushing lowering her umbrella and pushing open the door.

She was greeted with a gust of warm air, and she mustered up a weary smile as she made eye contact with Ryuji, who looked up from his manga at the sound of the door opening.
“I just told him,” Sojiro said from behind the counter. “But the kid’s not here right now.”

Ann smiled kindly. “I know. I’m here to see Ryuji,” she said.

Sojiro nodded with a sly smile. “A date, huh?”

“Ugh, are you kidding me?” Ryuji said with a frown at the same time that Ann said, “Definitely not!”

Sojiro chuckled. “Kids these days.”

Ann went over to Ryuji and sat down across from him, giving him a small smile. “Hey,” she said. “How are you?”

Ryuji closed his manga, putting it down next to him. Ann noticed the way his injured leg nervously rocked up and down. He pushed a cup of coffee towards her. “Got his for ya. And I ain’t been sleeping well. Not after what Akechi told us.”

Ann sighed. “Yeah,” she said. “Same.” She took the spoon and swirled it around the cup. She replayed the moment in her mind – not that she needed to. It already took over all of her dreams and nightmares when she went to sleep. She lowered her voice, glancing over at Sojiro, who was busy reading the paper behind the counter. “I can’t believe he’s responsible for the shutdowns. And that he’s working for the guy that’s been ordering them.”

“Was,” Ryuji corrected quietly. “He said he wants to help us now. That’s what he says at least,” Ryuji said, somewhat bitterly.

Ann hummed, sitting back in the booth and leaning her head back to look at the ceiling. “That’s what he says,” she echoed. “You were really angry at him,” she said, thinking back to the way that Ryuji had gone up to Akechi and grabbed him by his shirt, ready to throttle him.

Ryuji’s palm slammed against the table, and Ann jumped, lifting her head to look at him. “It just… pisses me off! How could he do that to us? To Akira? It ain’t fair. He went runnin’ with me ‘n everything.”

“And he became friends with Shiho,” Ann whispered. “With all of us… Do you think… all of that was really fake?”

“It had to be,” Ryuji said, though he sounded uncertain himself. “What if this is part of his plan to? Pretend to be on our side forreal and then stab us in the back again.”

“But… he never really stabbed us in the back, and he could’ve, so many times…” Ann said. “He just didn’t tell us everything.”

“It’s the same!” Ryuji exclaimed, and Ann shushed him. Ryuji cleared his throat, looking around the empty café. Sojiro didn’t seem to be paying attention, from what Ann could tell. Was it really the same? Ann wasn’t sure. She wasn’t sure of much of anything at the moment.

Ann sighed. “I went home and cried for a while after he told us.”

“I went for a run around the park a few times and still felt like punching something,” Ryuji said.

Ann resisted the urge to scold him for running that much with his leg. He needed to blow off some steam, same as her. Then he held up his manga. “Picked up a new manga to read, only to find that the fuckin’ story also has some traitor in the hero’s group.”
“How does it end?” Ann asked quietly.

“He gets a tragic backstory and everyone feels bad for him, and then he sacrifices himself to help the hero’s group,” Ryuji said. He shook his head. “But it just pisses me off.”

“It’s like, he’s the exact kind of person whose heart we would change, but…maybe he changed it on his own…” Ann said unsurely. She wanted desperately to believe in Akechi, but she wasn’t sure it was possible. Ryuji sighed and kicked the leg of the table. “How do you think Akira’s doing?”

“Akira?” Ryuji repeated. “I mean, he’s the one who’s lettin’ us vote whether or not we wanna keep Akechi in the group.”

“I think he’s upset,” Ann said. “He’s really hard to read, but he really likes Akechi.” Ryuji rolled his eyes and prepared a retort, but Ann stopped him. “I’m being serious, Ryuji,” Ann said certainly. “No jokes this time.”

“Yeah, well…” Ryuji grumbled.

“What do you think? How should we vote?” Ann asked.

“Well you sound like you’re his biggest friggin’ fan, so,” Ryuji said, and Ann frowned.

“No I don’t,” she said, folding her arms across her chest. “I’m just trying to talk about this rationally.”

“Fuck rational,” Ryuji said. “The guy’s a traitor. He pretended that he wanted to be our friend and now he knows everything about us!”

“Maybe it was like that at first, but the memories we made and how we felt, that felt real,” Ann protested.

“Yeah, for us,” Ryuji shot back.

Ann felt her head start to hurt. “I don’t want to fight about this, Ryuji, why are you being so difficult?”

“Why would you say that?”

“Well he can’t kill our shadows so he’d have to do it somehow…” Ryuji continued, turning his head the other way. “Why’re we even talking about this?”

“Because we owe him this…” Ann said. “He was honest with us.”

“We owe him?”
“You two are causing a lot of commotion for my customers,” Sojiro said, walking around the counter and standing in front of their booth. Ann turned her head to look around the empty place, and Sojiro sighed. “That’s not the point. What’s got you two in such a tizzy? This one’s ready to break my table,” he said, gesturing to Ryuji.

Ryuji took a long breath. “I’m fine,” he said stubbornly.

Ann gave Sojiro a forced smile. “Sorry, Boss. We just found out that Akechi-kun was hiding something big from us, and it’s really hard.” Ryuji slumped down further into his seat, grumbling to himself. “And he’s asking us to forgive him.”

Sojiro paused thoughtfully for a moment, rubbing his chin. “So that’s why the kid was looking a little different today.”

“Huh?”

Sojiro shook his head. “Nothing. I’m sorry to hear that,” he told them sincerely.

Ann rested her head in the palm of her hand. “Hey Boss, if someone did something really bad – not just to you, but to a lot of other people, would you forgive him?”

Sojiro folded his arms across his chest. “Did he seem sincere?”

Ann shared a glance with Ryuji, whose posture had softened a bit. He scratched behind his head. “Guess so…he could be lying though. He already fooled us once.”

“Any relationship requires a bit of trust,” Sojiro told them. “If he fooled you once, then it’s up to you to decide if you think he’s worthy to be trusted again. But that doesn’t mean you can’t still be careful. You can forgive someone while still acknowledging what they did wrong.”

“Hell, I’ve done a number of things back in my day that don’t deserve any forgiveness,” Sojiro said. “If he thinks it’s worth it to earn your trust back, then he’ll show it.” The bell to the café rang as the door opened, and Sojiro nodded to them. “Hope you kids get this sorted soon,” he said as he went to take the order of the customer.

“Ryuji… I…he’s been through a lot. I’m not saying that’s an excuse, but if we push him away, then won’t that just make things worse?” Ann said.

“I dunno. I can’t think about this right now,” he said, standing abruptly.

“Ryuji!”

“I’m goin’ for a run,” he said. “I’ll see you later.” Ann called out to him again, but he ignored her and walked quickly out of the café.

Ann sighed, taking another sip of her drink. Her tears started stinging her eyes, so she quickly blinked them back. She’d played it well, but in actuality, she wasn’t any closer to a decision than he was. Everything had just gotten so complicated.

Makoto was grateful that the rain had stopped. The clouds were still blocking the sun, and by the way her hair frizzed at the ends, she could tell how humid it was, but at least there wasn’t any rain.
She didn’t know what brought her to the park – maybe she just needed to clear her head – but she found herself wandering in that direction after the others had dispersed.

She could only hope that the others would see for themselves the kind of person that Akechi was, finally, and come to the right conclusion. She hadn’t trusted him from the beginning, mostly due to what Akira had shared with her, but to be able to hear it from his mouth was the confirmation she needed.

She had considered telling her sister, but there was no positive outcome that would come from that. Sae always trusted Akechi, she thought with a slightly bitter taste in her mouth.

With a sigh, she started to make her way over to an empty bench, totally unsurprised to see it wet and covered with raindrops. She turned, then paused when she saw Yusuke in the distance, sitting on top of a table with a sketchpad.

She frowned. Was he just out here in the rain? Surely his sketchpad would have gotten wet. She walked over to where he was sitting, and, also unsurprisingly, he didn’t even notice her or make a motion to turn his head as she approached.

“Hello Yusuke,” Makoto said politely. She noticed that his hair was slightly wet, even though there was an umbrella next to him on top of the table. “How long have you been here?”

The artist turned his head at the sound of her voice, blinking rapidly a few times. “Ah. Makoto,” he said. “I only just got here myself. I found it difficult to concentrate on my art while in Akechi’s home currently,” he admitted. “So I came here to try to focus.”

“Was he home?”

“He wasn’t, but he has made no motion to speak or sway my decision in any way,” Yusuke said.

“I should hope not,” Makoto said. “How’s it going?” She said, brushing her hair back.

Yusuke tilted his blank page towards her. “This situation has created a block in my abilities,” he lamented.

“Ah. I see…” Makoto said. “What have you been thinking?” She said evenly.

“My thoughts have been clouded,” Yusuke said. “I had suspected his involvement, but I largely thought that it was unfounded.”

Makoto clicked her teeth. “I was the same. Akira…told me before I joined that he had some suspicions that Akechi-kun was going to betray him.”

“He said that?” Yusuke said. “He must have trusted you a lot.”

Makoto had never thought of it that way. “I don’t know about that. He did seem very keen to get me to help him, but…I can’t imagine why. But nevertheless, I had already joined with the notion that he wasn’t to be trusted.”

“Tell me… Does it make it hurt any less?” Yusuke asked genuinely. “I imagine that Ann and Ryuji must be out of sorts, as they had no inkling or clue.”

“And Futaba…” Makoto said. “Not because of that, but…her mother…” she said, closing her eyes tightly for a second before opening them again. “He was the black mask. I can’t imagine how she must be doing.”
“Yes,” Yusuke nodded. “I am worried that it will cause her to regress, after all of the progress that was made to help her.”

“Akira is with her,” Makoto said. “I was just messaging him. He told me not to worry about it, and that we should think for ourselves how we want to decide. But I think it’s quite clear.”

Yusuke looked down at his blank paper. “If only things were so clear. I cannot deny that he has helped me out immensely—” he started. Makoto turned to him. He couldn’t possibly be thinking of keeping him on. “But I worry that I falling into the same trap that I lived in with Madarame. I was grateful to him for much, so much so that I was willing to turn a blind eye.” He hummed. “But there is a difference between turning a blind eye and allowing someone a second chance,” Yusuke said.

“It’s hard for me to just trust him. He hasn’t done anything to truly turn earn that chance. Ann said that it was noble of him to admit it, but he should have done that from the beginning,” Makoto said. How many people had gotten hurt because of him?

“I suppose that’s true…” Yusuke said with a curt nod. “But he’s bared his soul to us. He’s been a good ally, even if it was all a facade in the beginning.”

“I-I,” Makoto faltered a bit. “The just thing to do would be to have him turn himself in immediately.” Even as she said the words, she knew that there was a high amount of corruption in the department. Was their only option really to team up with him still?

“We aren’t agents of justice,” Yusuke said, and Makoto blinked. “I have known that for quite some time. After all, we act and exist purely because justice itself doesn’t exist for those of us who do not wield power. We, of course, have a basis of right and wrong, but our moral compass is our own to create.”

Makoto stared at him. She’d never really spent much time with Yusuke, but he was much wiser than he initially let on – not just in terms of art.

“When I created my painting after our foray into Mementos, I naively thought that I had an understanding of desire after going into a person’s heart. I thought it was black and white, but reality, like art, is far more complex than that,” Yusuke said, looking ahead as the wind blew a few raindrops from the trees onto them. “Perhaps that is the reason that I cannot bring myself to fully hate Madarame. I was complicit in some of his crimes, and I sometimes wonder how far I would have gone to protect Madarame. Akechi must have been through a much tougher ordeal.”

“Sae always speaks highly of him. And I think I was actually kind of jealous of him before,” Makoto admitted. “But I’m not sure what I think about him at the moment.” She didn’t have the same experience with the others or get to know him in the same way, but she was surprised to find herself wanting to believe in him somewhere deep down. “However, from a strategic standpoint, I did consider what would happen if we turned him away. Doesn’t it almost feel like we don’t really have a choice but to accept him?”

Yusuke hummed. “Perhaps. I believe Akira has considered that as well. However, he’s still giving us the choice.”

“You mean… he probably knows that Akechi would return to his boss if we turned him away, but he wants us to be able to choose what we want, without thinking of that?” Makoto said, and Yusuke tilted his head thoughtfully. “He really is a good leader.”

“And a good friend, above all,” Yusuke said. “Sometimes I feel his ability for both compassion and
making difficult decisions is unparalleled. I am not sure I could be so level-headed.”

Makoto breathed. She had worked hard to be a leader for her fellow classmates, and even that had been a lot of pressure. As much as she wanted to be that strong, she wasn’t so sure that she could have the role that Akira played. She admired him a lot for that, and her heart stirred a bit. She cleared her throat, shaking the feeling away.

“To be honest, I don’t care much for Akechi in the same way that you all do, but for Akira’s sake, I think we owe him a fair and judicial decision,” Makoto said.

“What is it that’s said in courtrooms? Court is now in session,” Yusuke said, ad Makoto allowed herself to smile, just a little bit, albeit humorlessly.

“For the trial of Goro Akechi.”

Shiho thanked the waitress as she brought a cup of tea and set it on her table. She placed a bookmark into the book that she had borrowed from Akechi and put it down. She picked up the tea and took a sip, smiling to herself as the warmth spread through her body.

She hadn’t had much time to just sit and relax with all the extra time she had to spend in physical therapy, but moments like this made it worth it.

She was about to pick up her book again when she saw Akechi walk into the café. He walked stiffly to the counter, but put a smile on his face as he ordered. When he moved to the pick-up side, a few girls came up to him with starry looks in their eyes, and he smiled and said a few things to them before one of them held up their phone.

Shiho didn’t envy him in that moment. It must’ve been hard for him. Celebrities always needed to put up a front, even when they weren’t feeling so great. It was like wearing a mask, she thought.

Akechi was finally able to get his drink, and when he turned his head, Shiho caught his eye and waved at him.

He walked over to her with a smile that looked a lot more genuine than it did before. “Shiho,” Akechi said kindly. “How are you?”

“Good,” she said. “I just finished physical therapy so I thought I would come and do some light reading. I’ve been so absorbed in Nights in Cold Harbor that I can’t put it down,” she said, slightly embarrassed. But Akechi had the same guilty pleasure as her, so she felt a little silly for feeling embarrassed.

“Ah, I’m a little envious.”

“The killer this time is really hard to decipher,” she said with a pout, and Akechi chuckled. She peeked up at him. “It probably won’t be too hard for you, though,” she said with a smile.

“We’ll have to see. I meant to start it this week, but time’s gotten away from me. I’m here on a quick coffee break from work,” Akechi said with a weary chuckle.

Shiho tilted her head. “You work on Sundays?”

“Only sometimes. Things seemed to have piled up lately,” he said, and Shiho felt like that was something Akechi always said.
Still, something seemed off about him. It was just a weird feeling she got. “Er…I…I apologize if I’m overstepping my bounds, but are you alright?”

Akechi blinked once. “What do you mean?”

“You seem a little sad, and…burdened,” she said meekly. “I-Maybe I’m wrong. I’m sorry, I-” Shiho stopped as Akechi let out a humorless laugh.

“May I ask you something?” Akechi said, and Shiho nodded. “After your…accident, was it hard for you to learn how to live again?” Shiho furrowed her brow, and Akechi shook his head. “Forgive me. Perhaps it’s not my place to ask such things.”

“It’s alright,” Shiho said quickly. “It wasn’t that. I just…I’m not sure if I’ve quite learned the answer to that,” she admitted. “Do you have a minute to sit?” she said, and Akechi nodded, settling down across from her. She started picking at her fingernails. She had tried her best not to think of that day. “My life changed after that day, but I didn’t expect it to. I just expected it to…end.”

“Are you happy about how things turned out?”

“I’m happy that I get to see Ann, and I’m happy that Kamoshida confessed to his crimes,” Shiho admitted. “And most days, I’m happy that I’ve been given a second chance.”

“Most days?”

Shiho smiled sadly. She blinked away tears that threatened to come to the surface. “Sometimes at the end of physical therapy, I’ll just want to give up. Or I’ll tell Ann that she’s spending too much time just to take care of me. It’s like a cloud that follows me everywhere. Sometimes it rains on me, and sometimes it parts to let the sun in.”

“That’s quite poetic of you.”

“Well…that part was a line from Cold Harbor,” Shiho said with a short laugh. “I think what I’m trying to say is that I’m learning every day,” Shiho said. “About how to live again. And I’m very grateful to have someone like Ann. She’s really relentless when it comes to me. I don’t think I deserve it most days.”

Akechi got a faraway look in his eyes. “I know the feeling.”

Shiho bit the inside of her lip. “Is it…about Kurusu-san?”

Akechi cleared his throat. “It’s nothing,” he said, plastering on a smile. “I apologize for bringing up such a dreary topic.”

“Goro-kun…” she started, and Akechi paused. “It’s okay to let people in and talk to them about the dreary things,” she said, smiling fondly as she thought of her best friend. “I didn’t let Ann in. I didn’t want to burden her, but when I woke up in the hospital and saw her next to me, I realized that that was silly. If she loves me, then she would want to shoulder it with me,” she said, blushing slightly. She hoped that Akechi wouldn’t notice.

“And if they didn’t-er, don’t like what I have to say?”

Shiho inhaled deeply. “I thought about how Ann would react, if she knew some of the dark thoughts that went through my mind,” she said. “But even if she didn’t react well,” Shiho said, bringing her hand up to her heart with a soft smile. “I knew that I had to do it. Being vulnerable can be scary, but it can also be brave. I don’t regret it. And I don’t think I would regret it even if she
weren’t happy with me.”

“I see why Ann has you as a best friend,” Akechi said softly.

Shiho blinked. “I—I don’t know about that. I’ve already told you, I’m the lucky one,” she said.
“Ann always talks really highly of you too. Are you going to be okay?”

Akechi’s smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Of course.”

And she wanted to believe that that was true.

“You have a fiancé, correct?” The SIU Director stood facing the window, with his hands behind his head.

“Uh, yeah…” Naomi said, wishing that she could leave as quickly as possible. She had been excited at first to be called in by him, but now that she was there and he was talking all of this about the cognitive world and palaces – it was all a bit much for her.

“His treatments have been getting more and more expensive, I hear,” he said.

Naomi’s hands balled into light fists. “With all due respect, sir, I, uh, I don’t really like to talk about it.”

“I’ve heard from Sae Niijima and Goro Akechi that you are quite talented. In a short amount of time, you’ve made incredible strides.”

“I still haven’t found out the identity of the Phantom Thieves, though…” Naomi said. “Isn’t that like the whole reason I’m even here?” she blurted, then backtracked. “Ah, er, n-not that I want you to fire me or anything, I just—uh, let me, um, I’ll stop now.”

“Yes, but your analytical abilities have been quite useful.” The Director turned around to look at her, and she felt a chill run down her spine. “I want to give you the chance to advance and to provide even more money for your loved ones.”

Naomi’s phone rang, and she jolted up at her desk in the police station. From the glass window of her office, she could see officers mulling about, and she stared at the computer screen with her latest report halfway typed up. She looked down at her phone, frowning when she recognized the number of the hospital.

She sighed and hit ignore. The last thing she wanted to hear about was that the medical bills were overdue. She still had to fix her budget so that she could even afford it.

The Director tilted his head at her questioningly. “Aren’t you angry that the doctors haven’t been doing more and yet continue to have you pay so much?”

“Ah,” Naomi said, frustrated. “No, I’m not angry,” she said to no one in particular.

She was grateful for the knock at her door, and sat up straighter as Akechi walked through the door. “Akechi-san,” she said. She studied the detective. It had been a few days since she’d seen him at the hospital with Akira, even though she’d tried to continue bringing him food.

She would leave some outside of his door, but it was always gone when she came back to bring more, so she liked to think that that meant he was eating it. He still looked tired, and his shoulders
looked tense and his eyes looked dark, but he was up and moving, so that was something. “How are you?” She said.

Akechi smiled. “Thank you for your concern, but I’m alright.” Okay… doesn’t want to talk about it then… Naomi thought. He handed her a folder and a coffee. “I’ve brought you some coffee.”

“Oh my god I love you,” she blurted. “Er, I mean, thanks…”

Akechi chuckled a little, and she felt good about making him laugh. “I’ve also brought a report. It’s the official statement from the accident, from all parties. It seems Kobayakawa doesn’t recall walking across the street.”

“What do you think happens when someone has any sort of psychotic episode? What if I told you it was possible to induce it?” The Director asked.

“You can’t give someone a psychotic breakdown – I mean, people have triggers, but-”

“Akiyama-san, there is an entire world that I believe is important for your investigation.”

“Akiyama?” Akechi said, and Naomi blinked out of her thoughts and looked at him. “Would you like the report?”

“Honestly, I just want this coffee,” she said, nearly snatching it out of his hands in her discomfort. “I’m so tired of dealing with this case, and there’s just so much to this.”

“How so?” Akechi said.

Naomi clamped up. She wasn’t sure how much Akechi knew about the SIU Director’s theories, so she didn’t want to tell him. She had considered telling him when it was first brought up to her – but she hadn’t put it in the email and she didn’t have the courage to talk to him about it when he asked to meet in person. I mean, it sounded completely insane when she pictured herself saying it out loud.

“Nothing, I just…” It was burning inside of her, though, to talk about it with someone. “Do you remember the calling card in Kobayakawa’s office?” Akechi grimaced, but nodded his head. “I don’t think it was the Phantom Thieves. It just – the language seemed a little different, and the design, and it just goes against the modus operandi.”

“You suspect that someone placed it there?” Akechi said tensely.

“I didn’t say that,” Naomi was quick to say. “I don’t know. If someone placed it there, then that means that they have enemies. And I can’t help but think about who might be their enemies and have the capability to do such a thing.” She closed her eyes and pressed her fingers to the bridge of her nose, trying to wash her conversation with the SIU Director out of her memory and off of her skin.

“Akiyama…” Akechi said slowly. “Are you suspecting something within the police department?”

“I feel like I’m being listened to in here,” Naomi said, looking around her office for hidden cameras or something. She wouldn’t put it past any of them.

Akechi chuckled. “I can assure you, we’re quite safe in here. I am interested to hear your theory, Akiyama.”

“I-I mean, it’s nothing special,” Naomi said. “It’s not a theory either. I don’t have anything to go
off of. But truthfully, I’m worried about them… The Phantom Thieves,” she admitted. “We already confirmed they’re kids, but I don’t think they know what they’re getting into. I don’t agree with them, but I’m concerned. I’m sure they think they’re being noble, but life isn’t that easy. I wonder if they’re even aware of their own moral ambiguity.” She took a breath. “In your conversations with the SIU Director, did he ever mention the cognitive world?”

“The…cognitive world…?” Akechi’s face looked a little pale, but when he cleared his throat, he did his best to regain his composure. “Where did you hear about that?”

“You’re shitting me,” she said, sitting forward and sloshing some of her coffee up and over her cup. “Ah, crap! And ah, sorry – that was like super unprofessional,” she said, but shook her head. Her head was spinning – she didn’t have time to care about spilled coffee. “There’s no way that thing is real?”

“There has been some research into it,” Akechi said evenly, but with the way that he was standing, Naomi knew instantly that it was real.

“The Director’s been pushing for me to be involved more,” Naomi admitted.

“Has he offered you more money?” Akechi said with stiff shoulders. Naomi nodded, taking a sip of her coffee. “Akiyama, I…I think you should be careful with this.”

“Right, no worries. I think he’s kinda losing it anyway,” Naomi said, hoping that Akechi wouldn’t catch the way that she carefully avoided his eyes. She searched her brain for any kind of change of subject. “Did you get a haircut?” she blurted, and Akechi stared at her in confusion.

“I’m sorry?” he said.

Well, it wasn’t perfect, but it would have to do. “Looks nice,” she said. “I’ve been looking for a new hair stylist. Can you give me yours?”

“Akiyama, what?” Naomi said. “I’m being serious.”

Akechi studied her for what seemed like hours. She tried not to fidget under his scrutinizing stare. “Alright, I won’t push it,” Akechi finally said. “I just want to encourage you to exercise caution.”

“I always do. Mostly,” she added cheekily, and Akechi smiled. He placed the report on her desk, and then smoothed out the bottom of his coat. He nodded at her, then turned to walk outside of her office, then, naturally, she let her word vomit take over. “Er-” she said, and Akechi paused. “We sure…came a long way from that foster home, huh?” she said.

Akechi didn’t turn around, but he let out a bitter laugh. “It feels as though I’m still trapped there at times.”

Naomi nodded. “Same. I mean, it’s not exactly easy to get over the fact that my parents didn’t want me. I’m pretty sure I’m still scarred from that,” she said with a shrug.

This time, Akechi turned to face her. “If you had the chance to see them again, would you feel ill will towards them?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Naomi said, and Akechi gaped at the decisiveness in her tone. “Listen, I wish I could give you some noble answer about how I don’t care and it made me into the person I am, but hell yeah I’m pissed. Probably always will be. Going foster home to home was terrible.” She took a
deep breath. “But I just give them a big ol’ fuck you and move on with my life. Don’t wanna see them, don’t wanna think about it. I’ve got my own life now.”

“I wish we could have stayed in the same home a bit longer,” Akechi admitted, and Naomi felt her heartstrings tug. Once she had recognized him, she had wanted to have this kind of talk with him, but he was technically like her boss and it was also super awkward so she had no idea how to approach it with him. “You… were always kind to me. Perhaps my life would have been different.”

“Akechi-san…” Naomi said. Should she hug him? She kind of wanted to, but she also didn’t think that was a great idea at the moment.

“Ah. Again, I am speaking in hypotheticals,” Akechi said quietly. “Please forgive me. I’ve been quite introspective lately.”

“No, it’s-” Naomi was cut off by a brisk knock, and then the door opened as Sae walked in tersely. Naomi immediately stood, her heart-rate skyrocketing as she saw the serious look in Sae’s eyes. “Niijima-san,” she said quickly and politely. “What’s up?” She said, then instantly regretted it. “I mean… Has something happened?”

Sae opened her mouth to speak, then looked at Akechi. “Akechi, what are you doing here?” she said.

“Just delivering a report,” Akechi said, looking just like the detective Naomi had always seen on TV. He smiled. “I’m doing well and am ready to get back to work.”

Sae pursed her lips. “Don’t overwork yourself.”

“Look who’s talking.” Naomi said with a playful smile, which did not seem like the right thing to say with the way that Sae cut her eyes at Naomi. “Er… sorry?”

Sae pressed her fingers to her temple. “We have Taizo Naguri in questioning right now,” she told Naomi.


“He turned himself in for assault. Against multiple people,” Naomi said. She lazily lifted up her phone. “Quite out of the blue. I did some digging and found his name on the Phan-site.”

“You think the Phantom Thieves were involved?” Akechi asked.

“Can’t rule anything out,” Naomi said, taking a large sip of her coffee before sitting up in her chair and ruffling through the mess of papers on her desk. “Our agents of pseudo-justice strike again.”

“Would you like me to join you?” Akechi said. “I’m quite curious about this as well.”

Sae shook her head. “Akiyama and I will conduct it.”

Akechi stared at her in mild disbelief for a moment, and Naomi thought she saw something like envy flash through his eyes – but that would be silly. She was probably seeing things.

Akechi cleared his throat. “With all due respect, Sae-san,” Akechi started with a forced smile. “If it is related to the Phantom Thieves, I would like to be involved.”

“I don’t think it’s a problem,” Naomi said, and Sae turned to Naomi, which instantly made her stop talking again.
“We will conduct the initial questioning, and after you’ve caught up on the case updates, we can decide what our next steps will be,” Sae told him.

Akechi’s shoulders un-tensed as he smiled. “Ah. That is a fair point. It does feel like we’ve been at a standstill in terms of progress.”

“Let’s discuss over ramen,” Naomi declared. “I can’t do brainstorming on an empty stomach anyway.”

“Akiyama,” Sae sighed. Still, there was a bit of a smile on the corner of her mouth. “Meet me in the room in five,” she told her before walking out of Naomi’s office.

Naomi pouted and looked at Akechi. “Can you give me the secret of getting on her good side?”

Akechi just chuckled. “I think you’re already there.”

“This is it?” She said, stretching her arms. Her phone pinged again, and when she opened it, she saw an email from the hospital’s insurance department.

“Everything alright?” Akechi asked.

Naomi rubbed her eyes, thinking briefly to the SIU Director’s proposal. She shook the thought away almost as quickly as it had come. She put her phone into her pocket and picked up the file. “Just dandy. I better get going.”

The two of them walked out of the office, and as they made their way, they passed by one of the TV’s in the department. There was Masoyoshi Shido giving an empty speech, and Naomi frowned as she looked at it.

She glanced over at Akechi, who had tensed up again as he also looked at the TV. She thought for a moment. “Can I just say something, off-the-clock?” She asked. “Like, I won’t get in trouble for it?”

Akechi chuckled. “I’ve told you, Akiyama-san, I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable speaking to me because of my status. What is it?”

Naomi glanced around the office, then leaned in a little bit. “Fuck Shido, am I right?”


“Am I wrong?” She said with a shrug. “I bet you’ll feel better if you yell it out,” Naomi said pointedly, and Akechi didn’t really react. “A big ol’ fuck you and move on,” she said, smiling a bit for the both of them. “Maybe not today, but one day. Like go to the tallest building in Tokyo and just scream it out.”

Akechi looked a little uncomfortable, and Naomi thought for a moment that she might actually get in trouble. But he didn’t say anything, so she counted that as a success. “Okay, back to work mode. I never said anything,” Naomi said.

More silence passed, and when she glanced over at him, he had a thoughtful expression on his face. “Yes. I heard nothing.” And even though she was glad that he was playing along, she hoped that he still kept it in his thoughts.
Futaba hadn’t turned around from her chair in almost ten minutes, and Akira couldn’t really blame her. He glanced over at the detective, who stood rigidly in the corner of the room by the door, ready to walk out if necessary.

Futaba sniffled again. It was obvious that she had turned around so that she could cry without the others noticing, and Akira wanted to leave and give her some time, but when he’d offered, she just shook her head without speaking.

Akira glanced down at Morgana, who looked both angry and sad at the same time. Akira was certain that Morgana would claw at Akechi the first free chance that he got.

Even still, Akira was proud that Akechi had had the courage to talk to Futaba separately. As far as Akira was concerned, Futaba’s vote was the most important. He didn’t want to say it when Akechi had admitted to being the black mask and working for this conspiracy, but Futaba’s vote could null the others. If she wasn’t okay with having Akechi in the group, then Akira wasn’t going to force her to be in the same space with the person who had indirectly murdered her own mother.

“Sakura-chan,” Akechi finally said. He had switched back to calling to her formally ever since he delivered the news. He’d done that with everyone. “I-I think it’s best that I leave.”

Futaba sniffled, and shook her head. She mumbled something that Akira couldn’t understand, and he stood up from the bed so that he could walk to her. Akira saw the way that Futaba’s shoulders were shaking, and he turned to Akechi. “Can you just give us a minute?” he asked. Akechi obliged, and gave Futaba one last glance before slipping out of the room.

“You don’t have to give him a chance,” Morgana pointed out. "If it's too hard."

“I don’t know the right thing to do,” She said unsurely. She looked up at Akira with wet eyes, and as soon as they locked eyes, she stood up and wrapped her arms around him, letting the tears out in full force. “I had a feeling that it was him,” she admitted. “We already had a suspicion that he was the black mask, and when you told me to keep an eye on him, somewhere deep down I knew. But I was scared to ask you.”

“I think I was scared to ask him myself,” Akira said, and Futaba looked up at him.

“Really?”

“I don’t think I’m as brave as everyone thinks I am,” he told her. He didn’t like showing this side of him when it came to his friend and teammates, but Futaba was baring her heart, so Akira felt like he owed her the same amount of vulnerability.

“You’re supposed to be the perfect protagonist that has it all together,” she said through sniffles, and Akira could hear her trying to lighten the situation.

Akira chuckled, and he was surprised to find himself getting slightly choked up too. Maybe this whole situation really was getting to him more than he thought. Both he and Akechi were finding it difficult to hide their emotions as easily as it had been before. “Sorry to disappoint.”

“Do you think he’s being genuine?” Futaba said in a shaky voice.

Akira hesitated. “He admitted to us that he was the black mask, and he even told us the name of his boss. But I’m certain that he’s previously already told his boss who we are. There's always a small chance that he could still be playing both of us.”

“Then…maybe I shouldn’t…”
“But,” Akira cut in. "To answer your question, I do think he’s being genuine and that he wants to be better,” he said. He thought back to their discussion, and the solemn way that he declared he would kill Shido if they weren’t able to change his heart. “But he’s still got a long way to go.”

“I want to trust him because I want to believe that he can see the consequences of his actions. But no matter what you decide, I still think we should monitor the phone,” he said. “Just to be on the safe side.”

Futaba nodded against him. “I’ll search super-duper hard.” She paused for a moment. “Is this what happened in the other timeline?”

“I almost forgot you knew about that,” Akira said softly. “No, this isn’t what happened.”

“What happened with him last time?” Futaba asked, and Akira’s breath caught in his throat.

He didn’t want to tell Futaba what had happened to him. That would only make her less inclined to trust him – and for good reason. “We lost,” he settled on saying. “That’s why I’m still wary. Morgana’s been keeping me grounded.”

At the mention of his name, the cat sat up in the bed. “That’s why I still don’t trust him. But do we even really have a choice but to accept him?” Morgana pointed out. There was a knock at the door, and Morgana made a displeasing noise. “See, he can’t even wait for us to finish our talk.”

"Morgana,” Akira lightly chided. He couldn't blame Morgana for how he was feeling. The entire situation was leaving everyone out of sorts. Akira rubbed Futaba’s shoulders comfortably one more time before releasing her to get the door. When he opened it though, he was surprised to see their friends at the door, with Akechi at the center.

“I apologize for not letting you know we were on our way,” Makoto said. “We stopped by Leblanc, but Boss said that you all were here.”

“May we come in?” Yusuke asked, peeking in to ask Futaba. “We wanted to talk to all of you.”

Futaba nodded, quickly wiping her eyes. Everyone piled into Futaba’s room, with Akechi following in behind them with heavy steps. He once again stood by the door.

“Are you alright?” Ann asked Futaba worriedly, and the redhead nodded again. “Er, well, we just wanted to talk because we made a decision.” The group looked at Akechi, who had an unreadable expression on his face.

Ryuji kicked at the ground. “Obviously, we weren’t happy with you,” he said, not looking at Akechi.

“Ryuji’s right. It was a shock. It’s going to take us some time to really get past this…” Ann continued. Ryuji met Ann’s gaze, and she gave him a taut smile.

“But it wouldn’t be right for us to turn you away if you’re serious about turnin’ over a new leaf,” Ryuji finally said, and Akechi’s eyes widened in surprise.

“This trust will take some time to rebuild,” Yusuke added.

“However, we feel as though we should give you a chance to earn it again,” Makoto said evenly. “After all, your life has been hurt by this man.”

“But,” Ryuji said. He looked at all of them, then turned to Futaba. “We thought it was right to
leave the final vote up to Futaba.”

Akira didn’t realize that he had his arm around Futaba’s shoulders until he felt her shift in surprise as the others addressed her. Futaba bit her lip. “I-I…” Her voice made it clear that she was stuffed up. It nearly broke Akira’s heart. “I-It doesn’t matter where you start over. I believe that.”

She took a long, shaky breath. She stared down at the ground rather than look at Akechi directly. “But that doesn’t mean I can forgive you,” she said, her breath hitching. “Y-You…Even though it wasn’t all your fault…you still…you still did it… You didn’t even care about how your shutdowns hurt other people…” she said. Akira wondered how much she was really keeping inside.

“I…understand. It’s true that I was blinded by my own selfish goals. I will have to live with the consequences of that for a long time, and…” Akechi said with his head lowered. Akira still wasn’t sure if Akechi truly felt guilty about it, but maybe he was trying. “So I understand if you do not want me to be a part of your journey any longer.”

Futaba sniffled, and she shook her head. “No,” she said, and Akechi blinked at her in shock. “You have your own reasons for being here, just like the rest of us. And if you really are serious about taking him down, then…then you should be able to.”

Akira wouldn’t have blamed Futaba for being angry, but at that moment, Futaba was probably braver than all of them. Every day, Akira was hit with the reality that his friends were so much stronger than he was in so many different ways. Futaba had overcome so much, and she was still overcoming so much.

“I just…don’t think I can be around you for a little bit,” she added meekly.

Akechi nodded quickly. “I-I understand. So…you will allow me to continue to fight alongside you?”

Everyone turned to look at Akira, but he just lightly nudged Futaba. “It’s decided.”

Akechi stood there, frozen and watching them in a state of disbelief. Before he could say anything, Ryuji walked over and punched him hard – in the arm. “But dude, don’t ever lie to us again,” Ryuji said thickly. “I mean it.”

Ann sniffled and wiped her eyes with a soft smile. “Like ever,” she added. “We can’t get past everything just yet, but we accept you.”

Akira looked at Yusuke, who was smiling himself, and Makoto, who caught Akira’s eye and gave him a resigned look. Even Morgana seemed somewhat relieved at the whole situation.

Akechi’s shoulders looked like they were shaking as he stared at all of them.

“Say something, will ya?” Ryuji said.

Akechi’s phone pinged, and he numbly reached for it and looked at it. Then he looked at the Thieves, who regarded him curiously. “I…” he started. Then his chest heaved a little, and he shook his head. “I-I need a-a minute, I’ll be-” He didn’t finish his sentence, turning and rushing out of the door, stumbling over his own footsteps.

“Akechi-kun?” Ann said, and Akira released Futaba and rushed after the detective.

He went outside, saw that it was now drizzling a little bit, and he froze when he saw Akechi. The ace detective. Detective Prince. The cool, charismatic one with a mask on.
Akechi had his knees on the ground with both of his palms pressed flat against the ground as well. His phone was on the ground in front of him. “Goro…?” Akira said, taking a cautious step towards him.

He tiptoed until he was in front of the detective, and he saw Akechi with his eyes shut tight. Akira glanced down at his phone, uncertain of what to expect, and picked it up. It was locked, but he could see four messages on the lock screen of his phone.

**Shiho Suzui 19:37**  
*I know that you have Ann and Kurusu, but if you ever want to talk again, I'm also here for you. I hope you have a good evening.*

**Naomi Akiyama 19:39**  
*Forgot to tell you but anytime you want to talk off-the-record, I'm here. I think Nijima-san is too.*

**Naomi Akiyama 19:39**  
*She’s glaring at me. I think she knows I’m talking about her.*

**Kioshi Amano 19:39**  
*Hehe. Mom let me use her phone. I get to have my birthday party in two weeks!!! You’re coming right???(*/₀^-₀/*)*

Akira looked up from the phone, and Akechi lifted his head to look at him. His eyes were red, and Akira could see the tears brimming in them. “Goro,” Akira said, and he didn’t know what possessed him to do so, but he put his hand at the side of his neck, his thumb just barely touching his cheek.

Akechi opened his mouth to speak, but he didn’t seem to be able to form words. Instead, he just shut his eyes again. Finally, Akira realized, his walls were coming down.

Despite everything, Akira smiled wearily, even though the detective couldn’t see it. His arms felt heavy, and his heart still pounded loudly against his chest, but Akechi was finally allowing everything to hit him. Akira blinked, and he felt a single tear come down his own cheek just as the rain seemed to stop.

“Akechi-kun?” Yusuke’s voice traveled, and he looked up to see the others walking towards him. Akechi stiffened, trying to muffle himself so that he didn’t give away that he was forcing himself not to cry. His breathing was harsh and unsteady, so it didn’t take long for the others to catch on. Akira let go of him and stood up, and if the others saw his own tear, they didn’t comment on it.

“Are you crying?” Ann breathed as she looked at Akechi. Once again, Akechi wasn’t able to speak, but he couldn’t stop himself from sniffling and sucking in a large breath of air.

“Whoa…” Ryuji said.

Futaba took a shy step forward, still looking teary-eyed herself, and she moved so that she was standing in front of him. “K-Keep moving forward. Mom used to whisper that to herself when she got stressed.”

“Keep moving forward,” Makoto said. “A fitting statement.”

Akechi finally lifted his head so that he could look at Futaba, and he saw that she was extending a hand for him to take it and stand. After a second, he reached for her hand and allowed her to help him stand up on his own two feet again.
“I’m sorry,” Akechi finally said. “Please forgive me for running off like that and for such an unsightly display.”

“Unsightly?” Ann said, and Akira turned to her. He could see her crying too. “You crying means that you feel something. It sounds bad, but I’m happy about that,” she said, not even bothering to wipe her eyes. She walked over to Akechi and wrapped her arms around him, and he jumped slightly.

Futaba bit her lip again, taking a small step towards them. Akira caught wind of it, and extended his hand to her. Nervously, she took it, and he led her towards them, and he and Futaba joined in their hug.

“Aw, hell,” Ryuji said with a short, poorly-disguised cough-sniffle, and Akira heard him taking a few steps and then suddenly he could feel someone’s weight on the opposite side of him.

“An image fit for a painting,” Yusuke said, and soon another pair of arms wrapped around the group.

“Well…” Makoto said slowly.

“You guys are all saps,” Morgana said, but Akira could’ve sworn he heard a lot of emotion choking up Morgana’s voice. Another pair of arms came, and Akira felt something down by his leg, and a tail wrap around the bottom of his ankle.

There was a barrage of sniffles, and Akira didn’t know which was which, but it didn’t matter.

Whatever happened next, Akira hoped that they could get through it together. He wanted to believe, with everything in him, that things were going to change for the better. Akira felt warmth flood over him. He lifted his head up and looked at the sky. The sun had finally broken through the clouds.

And it was probably a bit conceited of him to think so, but it looked like it was shining just for them.

Chapter End Notes

Is Akechi genuine??? Will Akira and the others be able to fully trust him??? Will he really stick with the Thieves or stick to what he knows?

Decided to off-screen his confession to them because it wasn’t really about the confession but how they react to it....and boy does everyone have some rebuilding to do

Clearly there will be no more conflict and everything will go smoothly for the rest of the story (⊂⊂⊂⊂⊂)

Coming up next chapter: The Phantom Thieves have a hard time building a new normal with Akechi, Akira makes a plan for the future and defines his relationship with Akechi, Morgana and Akechi finally have it out, Akechi faces another test, and Haru enters the picture.
WHY ARE MY CHAPTERS SO LONG FFS (there was so much more plot I wanted to add to this but all the friendship got in the way lmao)

I swear I don’t mean for the friendship scenes to be so long but the characters just start going and before I know it ten pages have elapsed per scene

All of your comments continue to give me so much life. Thank you all SO much for the positive words and encouragement. I know I say it time and time again but it really does keep me going. <3

“I will work towards creating a better future for Japan and rebuild it to the great nation that it deserves to be.”

Akira frowned and turned off the TV before pulling up a chair and sitting at the booth with his friends. Ryuji sat forward, having tilted his head back to look at the TV. The tension in Akechi’s shoulders was almost impossible to miss.

“Shido should be our next target, then,” Ann said. “Right?”

Akechi shook his head. “I’ve gone through his Palace many times. As much as it frustrates me to say so, I don’t believe we’re strong enough to face him.”

“Even with all of us?” Ryuji asked.

Akira was itching to get into Shido’s palace as much as the rest of them, but if even Akechi was telling them that it wasn’t a good idea, then he would believe him. Besides, it gave him more time to think of a plan to bring Haru into the mix and help her.

“As much as I want to crush him, I don’t wish for us to walk into a death trap. It would be foolish of me to suggest otherwise,” Akechi told him, staring down into his cup.

“Should we go into Mementos and practice?” Makoto suggested.

Morgana nodded. “We’ve got a few requests piled up too. We don’t want to neglect them.”

Akira thought about Naomi, and how she was using the Phan-site to try and hone in on them. Judging by the look that Akechi gave him, he was thinking the same thing. “Perhaps a single, bigger target could look better for us,” Akechi suggested, and Morgana turned to him.

“How come?” The cat said, somewhat disdainfully. Akira stared at him, trying to relay the fact that they had to get Haru somehow. Morgana knew this already, so Akira wasn’t sure why he was questioning it now of all times.

“It’s been a while since we’ve had a larger scale target,” Akechi said. “It’s still important that we get more of the general public to believe in us. We would likely be stopped in Mementos anyway.”
“That’s a good point,” Ann agreed, and the others nodded their heads as Morgana turned his tail up but didn’t say anything.

Akira drummed his fingers against the side of his chair. This was probably the only chance he could get to naturally bring Okumura up. “There are a few big targets that have popped up,” he said nonchalantly. “How about Kunikazu Okumura?”


“I’ve heard rumors about how he treats his employees and some other terrible things about him,” Akira said. “We’d have to research him first, unless…” he drifted off and looked over at Akechi.

The detective blinked. “Kunikazu Okumura…?” He said. Then he nodded. “Yes…Yes, that could work. He is a prominent part of Shido’s group, and I can certainly attest to his crimes. Employee mistreatment, corrupt use of funds, and I…I have committed shutdowns for his benefit…” Akechi said, unable to look any of them in the eye as the group shifted a bit uncomfortably.

They were still trying to build a new normal, and were able to have mostly normal conversations until something came up that reminded them of where they stood.

Yusuke was the first to cough and speak. “Then it can be assumed that he has a Palace?”

“Most likely, though I haven’t gone into it myself,” Akechi told them.

“We should gather as much info as we can beforehand. His daughter goes to our school,” Akira pointed out. “We met her in Hawaii,” he said, gesturing to Ryuji.

Ryuji thought for a moment, then his mouth dropped. “Wait, that cute girl from before is his daughter?! Oh, dude, please, you gotta let me go with you to talk to her.”

Akira smiled and turned to Akechi. “They had a moment.”

“Ugh,” Ryuji said quickly. “When you say it like that, it sounds like you’re teasing me.”

“No no. You can come with if you want,” Akira told him. Then he got a gleam in his eye. “Maybe your striking charm and good looks will get her to tell us all of her father’s secrets.”

Ryuji threw a sugar packet at him, and Akira laughed as it hit him and then landed on the table, then turned to the others. “Ryuji and I will talk to her tomorrow.”

“So we’ll get Okumura, and then maybe by that point we’ll be strong enough to take on Shido,” Ann said hopefully. “Awesome! We’ll finally be able to help you take him down, Akechi-san,” she said with a cheerful smile, and Akira wondered how much of it was forced.

Akechi cleared his throat. “Y-Yes. It appears so… You all have my gratitude.”

“Someone’s gotta let Futaba know,” Morgana said, poking at Akira with his tail. Yet another silence fell over all of them as they tried to not look at Akechi. Akira had told Futaba that they would be meeting to discuss next steps, and she had tried her best to muster up the courage to join them, knowing that Akechi would be there. In the end, she couldn’t do it just yet, and Akira didn’t push her.

Akira tried to smile and lighten the mood. “Knowing her, she probably already heard. Right, Futaba?” he called out.
In a few seconds, he was met with a ping at his phone, and he pulled it out.

**Futaba Sakura 11:37**
:P I heard you. Okumura, right? I’ll find out all of his info.

Then she sent another message, one that Akira didn’t share with the others.

**Futaba Sakura 11:37**
I’ll be ready once we go into the metaverse, promise.

Akira nodded, even though she couldn’t see it – or maybe she could; he was never fully aware of what she was hacking into.

“We’re agreed, then?” Makoto said. “Once we get more information, we should be able to proceed.”

“Yes,” Yusuke said. “I’m feeling a bit peckish now. Akira, could you make us some curry?” he said unabashedly.

“Yusuke,” Ann chided, but she had a smile on her face. “I mean, I guess he is technically on the clock,” she pointed out. “Then I’ll have another coffee, too!”

“Ooh, and that hot chocolate minty thing you made me last time,” Ryuji declared.

“Is that all I’m good for now?” Akira said with mirth, pretending to be hurt.

Makoto shook her head at them. “You all are shameless,” she said.

Akira smiled at her. “You want a mocha latte?” he asked her, and she blushed.

“I mean…if it isn’t too much trouble.”

Ryuji turned to Akechi. “Dude, have you had the hot chocolate before? It’s insanely good.”

“Oh, I, um…I haven’t, actually,” Akechi said.

Ryuji clapped his hands together. “Make that two hot chocolate minty things. Trust me, it’s like an orgasm, but in your mouth.”

“Ryuji!” Ann sputtered, coughing loudly as Akechi also turned nearly red in the face and Makoto closed her eyes with a groan.

“What, am I wrong?” he said.

“You’re such a weirdo,” Ann said, picking up the sugar packet that Ryuji threw and tossing it back at him.

Ryuji deflected it with his hand, but when he hit it, it landed smack at Akechi’s cheek, falling onto the table afterwards. Ann’s mouth dropped, then she burst out into laughter as Akechi stared down at it like it was hot coal that had hit him.

“What, am I wrong?” he said.

“Look what you did,” Ryuji said, cracking a smile.

“That was your fault,” Ann said through her laughter. “Akechi-kun, you have full permission to throw that back at him.”
“No way, she was the one who threw it at me,” Ryuji told him. “All for saying one little thing. See what it gets me?” Ryuji said, putting his hand over his heart and pretending to be heart-broken. “Nothing but pain.”

A moment of silence passed, then Akechi allowed himself to smile a little. “The pain must be excruciating.”

“Someone gets me,” Ryuji said as Ann stuck her middle finger up at him. He flicked the sugar packet towards her again, and she blocked it with her other hand.

“I bet you can’t flick it off the table,” Ann said. She flicked it back towards them, but Ryuji didn’t have enough time to process it. Luckily, Akechi put his hand against the table and stopped it before it fell.

“Nice save,” Ryuji said with a smile. “Okay, 2v2. Me and Akechi aaaaannnnnd…”

“Wait, what?” Akechi blinked.

“Oh no, count me out,” Makoto said from the edge of the booth next to Ann. “I’m not one for these sorts of games.”

Ann looked over at Yusuke, but he looked like he was lost in thought as he had a napkin in front of him and was using a pencil to sketch something onto it. “Yuusuke?” she said in a sing-songy voice. She sighed when he didn’t answer. “No fair. Can I have Akechi-kun on my team?”

“You snooze you lose. Shouldn’t have picked that side of the booth,” Ryuji said. He nudged Akechi. “It’s your go.”

“Oh…er…okay…” Akechi said.

“He’s competitive,” Akira said as he stood up. “Watch out,” he teased.

“I am not,” Akechi said right on the heels of his statement, and Akira laughed. “I just think it’s silly to not give 100% of your effort into these sorts of activities.” This was all he wanted. Something that resembled normalcy, even if a part of him felt like they were still walking on eggshells.

He leaned over and pretended to whisper to Ann. “Ultra competitive.”

Akechi frowned (although to Akira, it looked almost like a pout) just as he flicked it, and his trajectory was almost completely off as it moved to the edge and hit Yusuke’s hand. The artist blinked out of his thoughts and looked at them.

“What just happened?” Yusuke said, confused. “Did you just hit me?”

Akira smiled as the others explained the game to him (with Akechi apologizing), and he went back to start making another pot of coffee and some curry. Morgana didn’t look very pleased as he followed Akira back behind the counter.

“What’s wrong?” Akira said to the cat, just low enough so the others couldn’t hear. Morgana didn’t say anything, but he continued to sulk as he watched Akira start to get a bunch of ingredients together. He had been acting strange ever since Akechi had confessed to everything. Akira assumed that it was because of his lingering dislike for the detective, but he wouldn’t tell Akira anything for sure.
“Very well, I will play as well,” Akira heard Yusuke say.

“Really?” Ann said excitedly. “Yes! He’s got an artist’s touch so ha.”

“That doesn’t even mean anything,” Ryuji said. “You’re just saying words.”

Morgana looked between them. “How can everyone be so…buddy-buddy with him,” he said. “I still can’t do it. He shot you, and heaven knows he could still do it.”

“Morgana,” Akira said with a sigh. Morgana was fiercely protective of him, and he would always be grateful for that. “I’m glad that you have my back, but I don’t want my past to ruin your relationship with him. How I feel about him shouldn’t impact your decisions.”

“But it does, it’s too late for that,” Morgana said. “I mean, I suggested we go to Mementos, and then he says something and everyone agrees. I’ve been here much longer than him and you guys already know you can trust me.”

Akira didn’t speak for a second. “He raised a good point,” Akira said. “Besides, we can finally get Haru to join us,” he said. “She’s an important part of our group too.”

“We could’ve found another way,” Morgana said.

Before Akira could say anything else, Akechi’s phone started ringing, and he dug into his pocket to answer it. “Yes?” He said formally. “Ah. Is that today? My apologies. I seem to have lost track of time. I’ll head down shortly.” He hung up the phone, and looked at all of them apologetically. “I’ll have to put this on hold,” he said, sounding genuinely regretful.

“No biggie,” Ryuji said. “What’s up?”

“I…forgot that I had a TV appearance schedule to talk about Kobayakawa,” Akechi said, and then the pin dropped and fully broke through their attempt at a new normal.

“Oh…” Ann said, and Akira could see the others struggling for a way to change the subject or lighten things up again like before.

“You know, I was wondering…” Makoto said cautiously. She darted her eyes to Akira and then back. “Are they going to ask about the Phantom Thieves’ involvement? There was a calling card placed there…”

“Speaking of,” Morgana said, hopping onto the counter. “That really wasn’t you, right? Because it’s better to just say it if so.”

“Morgana’s right,” Ann said with a nod. “We won’t be angry…” she said, her voice drifting off.

“No, I…It wasn’t me,” Akechi said. “I had no knowledge that such a thing would be placed there,”

The others exchanged a look. “Then we’ll believe you,” Ann said with a curt nod.

“I’m just saying, it’s awfully suspicious that you knew nothing about it,” Morgana continued.

“Morgana, he already said he didn’t do it, so he didn’t do it,” Ryuji said, even as his voice shook a little.

“You don’t have to yell at me,” Morgana shot back. “I seem to be the only one with a lick of sense.”
“It’s, it’s alright if you all don’t believe me. I have no way to prove it, after all,” Akechi said.

“I see no reason for him to lie in this situation,” Yusuke said clearly – always a voice of reason in his own way. Akechi turned to him, something like gratitude flashing across his face.

“Yusuke’s right,” Ann said. “I’m sorry, Akechi-kun. I didn’t mean to sound uncertain about it.”

“N-no, it’s, I would have the same caution if the roles were reversed,” Akechi said.

Yusuke hummed. “I think we should operate under the assumption that Shido has begun acting of his own volition.”

Akira nodded. “Agreed. And figuring out what that means if that is the case,” he said. There were too many unknowns in that situation. “He could be questioning your alliances,” he told the detective.

“I…have considered that as well,” Akechi said, his hands balling into fists. “I haven’t yet spoken to him about the calling card.”

“What’re you gonna do if he asks you to cause another shutdown?” Morgana questioned. “He’ll know something’s up for sure if you don’t do it.”

Another uncomfortable silence fell, this one feeling entirely too heavy.

“Kobayakawa suffered memory loss, so I was able to avoid another to him, but I…I haven’t…” Akechi struggled to find the right words.

“Let’s not worry about that now,” Akira said. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it,” he said.

“Right,” Ann said. “That’s another problem for another day. Let’s just focus on Okumura for now.”

“Yes, well…I should be going…” he said, and Ryuji scooted out of the booth so that Akechi could get up. “I will see you all later,” he said with somewhat of an awkward goodbye before he left the café.

“It’s like, each time I feel like things are gonna be okay again, something happens that just reminds me of everything,” Ryuji said with a groan.

“He’s trying his best,” Yusuke said. “So we should do that same.”

Ann sighed, and flicked the sugar packet in the direction of where Akechi was just sitting, and it flew into the seat. “Yeah. I don’t want to not trust him or make him feel like we don’t want him here, ‘cause I do really want him to stay with us. But every time something like that comes up, it’s like this cloud just takes over and I just feel worried and anxious.”

Makoto nodded. “That sort of anxiety is common after a situation like this, and it can’t really be helped,” she said. “Except with time.”

Time also seemed like the very thing that they didn’t really have much of. However, the others murmured in agreement. But Akira didn’t miss the way that Morgana hopped off the counter and disappeared upstairs.

“--

“You sure she’s up here?” Ryuji said as he followed Akira to the roof.
“A little birdy told me that she enjoys gardening,” Akira said. He stopped when they got to the door. “You wanna do the talking, Romeo?”

“Duh! Wait, what’re we even asking her?”

Akira smiled tautly. ‘I’ll do the talking,” he declared as Ryuji lightly punched him the arm. Truth be told, he wasn’t really sure what information he would be able to get from her. “Any info we can get out of her that will give us a clue to her dad’s palace words,” he said with a shrug. There was no way he would be able to explain knowing the words on his own, so he had to have something to work with.

The two of them went up to the roof, and sure enough, Haru Okumura was there, kneeling down in front of a tiny garden. When the door opened, she looked up in surprise, then it softened when she recognized them.

“Oh, hello,” she said kindly. “We…met in Hawaii, right? What brings you up here?”

Akira gestured to the garden. “Looks like we had the same idea.”

Her eyes widened a bit. “You’re here to tend to the garden?” She looked taken aback. “I-I thought I was the only one who enjoyed that,” she said, smiling a little. “You both enjoy it too?”

“Hell yeah, I love gardening,” Ryuji declared. Then when Akira turned to him, his shoulders slumped. “I mean…I’ve never done it or anythin’ but I figured why not?”

Haru giggled into her hand. “That’s true. It’s very calming for me,” she said, getting a forlorn look in her eyes for a second before she shook it off. “By the way, I don’t think I introduced myself. My name is Haru Okumura,” she said.

Akira and Ryuji introduced themselves, and Haru gestured to a small bag. “I was planning to plant some carrots before I head home. Would you like to join me?”

“Sure,” Akira nodded. “Just tell us what to do. Have you always been interested in gardening?”

Haru hummed a little as she brought out some gardening gloves and handed it to them. “Truth be told…It’s the only thing I’m really good at, but I also really like it,” Haru told them sheepishly.

Ryuji opened one of the packets with seeds in them. “I get that. Running was what I was good at, so I thought I’d stick with it. I was gonna become an athlete.”

“That’s right, you used to be on the track team,” Haru said with a short nod. “I heard they started up again with the old coach,” she said. “Have you joined again?”

Ryuji shook his head. “Nah. I told ‘em I’d help out, but that part of my life’s over,” he said easily.

“You don’t want to be an athlete anymore?”

Ryuji hummed. “Nah.” He shared a smile with Akira. “I mean, maybe one day, but it’d be hard,” he said gesturing to his leg.

“O-Oh. I’m sorry,” she said.

Ryuji shook his head with a grin. “Don’t worry about it. It ain’t so bad.” Haru smiled shyly, planting a few seeds in the soil. “So how’d you get into gardening?” Ryuji asked, making a face as he saw the dirt caked into his fingernails.
“Gloves, Ryuji,” Akira teased, pointing out the gloves that Haru had given them.

“Aw, shit.”

Haru chuckled softly. “I think my mother had a bit of a green thumb. One of my earliest memories is of my family gardening together.” Her smile dimmed a bit. “Maybe that’s also why I enjoy it so much. It makes me feel close to her. Well…to both of them.”

Haru had never spoken about her mother. Akira figured that she must’ve died or left when Haru was a young age, but he had no way of knowing that and there was no casual way to ask about that sort of thing. And as for her father…Akira just hoped that this would also be different. Despite being a shitty parent and corrupt businessman, he didn’t want Haru to lose her father.

“Your dad is the president of Okumura Foods, right?” Akira said nonchalantly. Haru stiffened, and Akira frowned at how she looked like she’d just retreated back into a shell of some sort.

“I…Yes…” she said slowly.

“He must be pretty busy,” Akira continued, watching how cautiously she reacted.

“I…I’m sorry, I can’t introduce you to him or anything like that”

“What?” Both Ryuji and Akira said at the same time.

Her shoulders tensed even more. “Th-That’s why you’re asking, right?”

“No way,” Ryuji said. “We don’t care about that.”

“I’m sorry,” Akira quickly said. “I was just curious is all. You must get a lot of people coming up to you because of who your father is. And with all of the scandals and rumors about the company, it must be tough,” Akira said earnestly, and Haru’s shoulders relaxed a bit.

She focused on the soil, mindlessly drawing patterns into it. “He wanted to be an astronaut once,” she said quietly.

“Huh?” Ryuji said.

“N-Nothing,” she said. “Let’s tend to the garden, shall we?” she said with a plastered smile. Akira smiled tautly. Maybe this time, they would be able to change her father’s heart and have that be the end of it. He would be behind bars, but alive.

Akira hoped that things would be that easy.

They worked in silence for a bit, only making a few comments here and there. About halfway through, Haru’s phone began to ring. She took her gloves off and pulled her phone out. When she looked at the caller ID, her face dropped as she answered the phone. “Y-Yes?” she said. Her eyes lowered to the ground. The other person on the end didn’t seem very happy, and Akira thought that the muffled voice sounded vaguely like her abusive fiancé. “Okay, I will meet you in the front right now,” she said mechanically, then hung up the phone. She couldn’t even force a smile as she looked at them. “I’m sorry. I have to go.”

“We can finish up here,” Akira said.

“Yeah, don’t worry ‘bout it. Everything okay?” Ryuji asked.

“Mm-hmm. Thank you for spending this time with me. It was nice. I-“ she looked like she wanted
to say something else, but the words died on her lips. “Have a good afternoon,” she said instantly, quickly gathering her things and darting through the rooftop door.

When she was gone, Akira leaned back, wiping his forehead. “An astronaut. That could be a clue to his palace.”

Ryuji nodded. “Yeah. She seemed really bummed. Something’s definitely goin’ on. We gotta tell the others.”

“We have to finish the gardening first,” Akira pointed out.

“Oh, come on, seriously?” Ryuji groaned, but rotating his shoulders before planting another seed.

Akira smiled, but didn’t say anything. He glanced at the door where Haru had gone through. He already felt like he knew more about her than he had last time at the start. He had been thinking it recently, but he had started to see that this second chance was about more than just getting to live this time and more than just about him and Akechi and saving the world. It was about them too. He had seen sides to them that he hadn’t paid attention to or noticed last time.

And if that were the case, then he had to make sure that he really got it right this time. For all of them.

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After they finished gardening, Ryuji had to go pick up some food for his mom, so they parted ways when they got to the train station, leaving Akira alone with his thoughts, though not for very long.

When he made it downstairs to his side of the train, he saw that there was a delay on the trains and sighed. He adjusted his bag, then started walking towards the front area of the stop when he saw none other than Akechi. He got closer to make sure and saw the detective looking at the flower memorial that had been placed there for the train accident victims from the April accident.

Akira cautiously walked over to him, then came to a stop beside him rather than tapping him on the shoulder. Akechi turned at the sudden extra person next to him with a charismatic-Detective-Prince-smile, but he relaxed it when he saw that it was Akira.

“Hey there,” Akira said with a short wave as he came to a stop beside him.

“Ah. Akira. Hello.” He glanced at the memorial. “I was on my way to the station, and I passed by a new flower shop,” he said, and Akira noticed a fresh new flower sitting on top of the others, that had slightly wilted.

“It’s nice of you to bring flowers,” Akira told him.

Akechi closed his eyes for a moment. “I’ve avoided coming here,” he admitted. “I don’t believe I did so fully consciously, but I have always gotten on on the back side of this stop.”

“How do you feel looking at it?” Akira asked, almost afraid to know the answer.

Akechi didn’t speak for a few seconds. “I’m not quite sure how to describe it. I can’t say that I feel much of anything, because I didn’t know them, but when I picture that it could have been Kioshi-kun or any of you, it…becomes difficult,” Akechi admitted. “I don’t think that is the answer you were hoping for.”
Akira gave him a minute smile. “Baby steps,” he said. Baby steps to build empathy. Was it possible?

“I suppose so. Were you able to speak with Haru?” Akechi asked.

Akira nodded. “She’s going through a lot.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. Kunikazu Okumura is a vile man,” Akechi said. “I haven’t personally dealt with him much, but I always felt repulsed at the way that he callously spoke about his daughter as a pawn. I…can relate,” he said, one hand gripping the handle of his briefcase tighter.

“We’ll help her,” Akira said. He wondered if Haru’s father was just as completely far gone as Akechi’s father seemed to be. “And then we’ll help you,” he added resolutely. Akechi looked to be at a loss for words, so Akira glanced up at the screen for upcoming subway times. It was only a couple of minutes away now.

“Hey, where are you headed anyway?” Akira finally said as the train began approaching. “I forgot, this isn’t the side that you take to go home.”

Akechi smiled rigidly. “Ah. You caught on. Yes, I have quite a bit of homework to get done, so I planned to go to Leblanc.” He shifted uncomfortably where he stood.

“Oh,” Akira said.

“Unless, you would rather I go elsewhere…?” Akechi said as the train screeched to a stop in front of them.

Akira walked onto the train and shuffled his way to a spot where he could hold onto one of the poles. He heard Akechi shuffle next to him. Akira took a deep breath as the doors closed. “Of course you can come,” Akira told him. “I’m sorry if I made it seem like you weren’t welcome.” He hadn’t even really been alone with Akechi since that day. He couldn’t blame Akechi for continually having doubts. He hadn’t exactly done much to help ease those doubts either.

“R-Right,” Akechi said. “It’s my turn to apologize. It’s hard for me to pinpoint where everyone stands. It feels sometimes like we are all just playing pretend.” His expression darkened. “I know a bit about that.”

Akira sighed. He wasn’t being a very good leader or friend at the moment. “It’s not pretend,” he told Akechi. “But we’re teenagers, and we kind of hold grudges,” he said cheekily, and Akechi got a chuckle out of that, which made Akira smile. Still, he tried to find the best way to describe it. “It’s like a broken vase that’s been put back together,” he started. “Eventually, you get to a point where you stop realizing that it’s been broken and stop paying attention to the cracks. It just takes a bit of time.”

“That was…a horrible analogy, but I think I understand,” Akechi said with a thoughtful expression.

“Ouch,” Akira smiled. “And I worked so hard on it.”

“I hope you don’t have dreams of being an author.” Akechi said with just a hint of teasing.

“Well not anymore. Here lies my narrative dreams, put to death by Goro Akechi,” Akira said in mock hurt. Then his face softened. “It’ll be fine,” told him. “We’ll be fine.” Akira hated saying things like that when he wasn’t sure if it was actually true, but maybe if he said it enough times, he could speak it into existence.
They would be fine, help Haru, stop Shido, the balance of the world would be restored, and...and then Goro Akechi would turn himself in, just like they agreed. That strange feeling settled itself in the pit of his stomach again.

When they finally got to Leblanc, Akira was surprised to see Futaba outside of her room, sitting on one of the stools and playing something on her phone. Sojiro was behind the counter wiping down the same spot that he always was. Morgana was sitting on the floor next to Futaba’s seat.

“Futaba?” Akira said.

“Ah. You’re back. Finally,” Sojiro said, but it lacked any disdain. “I told her I had to head out early, and she wanted to come and keep you company.”

“Y-You forced me outside of my room!” Futaba complained, not looking up from her phone. “Ah! Now I died. I was just about to curb stomp the boss too.” Futaba finally looked up at them, then froze when she saw Akechi, who had come to a stop next to Akira.

Sojiro just chuckled. “Maybe you can get her to help out around the café too.”

Akira caught Futaba’s eyes, which seemed to say is he staying? And he just gave her an apologetic smile. She hated being caught off-guard, and this was possibly one of the worst things to catch her off-guard with.

Sojiro wiped his hands. “And you brought company,” he said, taking off his apron and hanging it up.


“Still as formal as ever,” Sojiro said with a short shake of his head. He gathered his things and then “It’s good to see you again.” He looked between the two of them, then smiled a bit. “I’ll be back soon,” he said.

“Wait, I want to go with you, I changed my mind,” Futaba said quickly.

Sojiro raised an eyebrow. “To the bank? Last time I asked you to go with me, you told me that you’d rather ‘fight through a dozen trash mobs.’” He scratched the back of his head. “I don’t even know what that means.”

“Th-Then I’ll just go home,” Futaba said instead.

Sojiro shrugged. “That’s fine,” he said, but then he paused, looking between the three of them, finally settling on Akira. “Everything going to be okay here?” he said.

Akira carefully avoided his lingering gaze as he walked behind the counter to put down his bag and pick up an apron. “Yeah, of course.”

Sojiro looked at all of them once more before clicking his teeth and exiting the café, leaving the four of them alone.

“You didn’t bring the mask, so that’s good,” Akira said in an attempt to cut through the tension.

“Maybe I should have…” Futaba said meekly. “I’m gonna go home.”

“You don't have to,” Akechi said as he inched backwards towards the door. “You were already here. It makes the most sense for me to leave. I’ll simply work at home.”
Futaba blinked, her eyes like a deer caught in headlights. “B-But it’s like 40 minutes to go back to your house.”

“Yes, but—Wait, how do you know that?” Akechi blinked.

“Need to know,” she said quickly. Then she sighed, picking at her fingernails and staring down at the counter. “I-It’s fine, I-I don’t want you to leave because of me.”

“The same is true for me,” Akechi said. “I don’t wish to cause you discomfort.”

“Futaba, why don’t you help me whip up something to eat?” Akira said.

“I have to do manual labor too? This sounds like a violation of child labor laws.”

Akira laughed. “Come on. I’ll be here to help you,” he said, and he hoped she didn’t miss the double meaning. She pouted for a minute, then stood and went back behind the counter, hovering next to him like he was a lifeline. Akechi went to an empty booth and sat down. “Is this okay?” he asked quietly.

Futaba lightly clutched onto the sleeve of his shirt, and nodded. “I-I try not to think about it,” Futaba said. “He’s like the atoner on TV Tropes. I read about it. There’s a ton of examples of characters who have done super villain-y things but then they realize how bad it was and want to atone.”

“Does it help?” Akira said. He wanted to tell her that unfortunately this wasn’t a TV show or anime or video game, but there would be no point in that statement.

“Not really,” she admitted. “It doesn’t say anything about what I’m supposed to do. But it’s getting easier.”

Akira gave her an empathetic smile. “I know the feeling.” Then he turned to Morgana. “How’re things here?” Akira asked Morgana, who had hopped up onto the counter now that Sojiro had gone.

“Boring. How was the talk with Haru?” Morgana said, stretching out his paws.

“I’ll give details later. But it went well, I think,” Akira told him. He went over to the back area and rummaged underneath it to find a pot. Then he looked into the fridge and internally fist-pumped at seeing all the ingredients for curry.

“You’re making curry?” Morgana said.

“Yeah, wanna help?” Akira said with a cheeky grin, imagining Morgana somehow being able to cut up the vegetables.

Morgana’s eyes sparkled with mirth. “I’ll be the certified taste tester.”

Akira smiled. “I’m glad your sense of humor is back.”

“Yeah, well, don’t get used to it,” Morgana pointed out. Akira reached down and patted Morgana’s head, which the cat pretended he didn’t like, even as he discreetly leaned into it.

“Futaba, can you start the stove?” Akira asked.

“What if I burn the place down? I really shouldn’t be left to these things, my cooking skill isn’t maxed,” Futaba said, but she still walked over to the stove.
“Genius hacker taken down by stovetop. Not a bad ending,” Akira said with a nonchalant shrug, putting the ingredients down on the counter.

“Totally a bad ending,” Futaba shot back, but she was smiling a little.

“I’d play that game. The final boss is just an oven, and you have 60 minutes to make mochi.”

“Imagine ranking up tech skill points and then seeing that the final boss requires level ten cooking,” Futaba said, sounding genuinely distraught. “Talk about a troll game ending,” she added as she went to turn on the stove as Akira spread out the different ingredients.

Akira then looked over at Akechi, who looked a little out of place. He was looking down at his work, but he had that look in his eyes, like he was distracted and couldn’t concentrate. He wanted to ask him to help or something, but if Futaba wasn’t up for it, then-

“Hey, R-Robin,” Futaba said, and both Akechi and Akira turned to her in surprise. “Well, I guess I can’t call you that anymore.” She clung to Akira’s arm. “I don’t have the right skill level for this. M-maybe you can help instead.”

Akechi blinked in shock. “I…You want me to help?”

Akira turned to Futaba. “What are you-”

“He looks like a sad chibi,” Futaba said with a sigh. “And you’re here, so…I’ll be okay.” Akira couldn’t help but smile in gratitude. He didn’t deserve her, really. “He’s…a teammate, not a pariah.”

Morgana sighed long and hard in a way that made it clear that he wanted Akira to hear him. “At least he’s a decent cook,” the cat said.

“Akechi?” Futaba said. “Are you sure?”

“If you have a lot of work to do, we won’t bother you,” Akira told him. “But we can always use extra help.”

“No,” Akechi said, somewhat quickly. Then he cleared his throat. “I mean, I would be happy to help.” He closed his laptop and notebook and got up, walking over to the counter. “What do you need me to do?”

“You want to help cut up some of the vegetables, then make the coffee?” Akira said. “Most of it’s already prepped, I just have to cook it. It’s a small kitchen.”

Akechi nodded. “Of course. Thank you,” he added, and Akira didn’t know what exactly he was being thanked for, but he didn’t push it. Morgana hopped up on a chair to keep Akira some company.

A comfortable silence came over all of them as they cooked in the Leblanc kitchen, with only Morgana making a few comments here and there about wanting to taste everything as Akira stirred the curry. They didn’t need to talk about personas or Shido or the Metaverse or broken trust. Maybe that was why Akira found working at Leblanc so calming.

“Aw, come on! They totally nerfed my favorite character!” Futaba’s voice broke through the silence after a while.

“Futaba, weren’t you supposed to be doing something to help?” Morgana piped up.
“What? You guys have alllll under control here,” she said distracted, staring down at her phone, which she was holding horizontally. “They just updated the Neo Featherman game and the boss for the pyramid level is way too OP. I can’t find his weakness.”

“Oh geez,” Morgana groaned.

“It’s fine. It’s almost done anyway,” Akira said. “You want to start the coffee?” he asked Akechi, who nodded.

“Certainly. And…” he paused for a moment. “It’s ice.”

Akira almost didn’t hear Akechi’s added statement because he’d said it so quietly. Futaba peered up from her phone slowly. “Huh?”

“The…sphinx boss…is weak to ice attacks,” Akechi said slowly, his voice trained and even. He poured coffee into one of the mugs he’d laid out. “If you have the ice featherman in your party… it should be an easy battle,” he said, looking a bit embarrassed.

Futaba didn’t speak for a moment. “Y-You play this game…?” she said hesitantly.

“I…I have quite a lot of commuting that I do. I usually like to take a book to read or enjoy a nice podcast, but…well, I suppose that game is a guilty pleasure of mine,” he said, cheeks red.

Akira let out a chuckle at Akechi’s squirming from something so simple.

“W-What?”

“Nothing. It’s cute.” Akira said, unable to stop himself from saying the words out loud. He mentally cursed himself. Why had he said that? It wasn’t like he liked him like that anymore. How could he, after all that had happened between them?

Morgana made a displeased noise as Akira pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose. “I just mean that it’s unexpected.” Though he wasn’t sure why he’d said that either. It was a surprise, but not unexpected. Ever since he had started getting to know Goro Akechi the Teenager instead of the Detective Prince Goro Akechi, he had been constantly surprised by him.

“Whoa, it-it’s working!” Futaba said. “He’s getting owned now.” She closed her eyes for a moment, then took a deep breath and finally met Akechi’s eye. “Th-thanks.”

“You’re quite welcome,” Akechi said almost as awkwardly as she did.

“Let’s eat, shall we?” Akira said. “Before a slew of customers comes in.”

“Right, like always,” Morgana said sarcastically, and Akira laughed.

“It could happen,” Akira pointed out.

Suddenly, the bell to Leblanc chimed again, and Akira was about to boast to Morgana that he was right when he saw that it was just Sojiro. “Damn bank was closed,” Sojiro grumbled, shaking water out of his hair. “It’s raining out there now,” he told them. He stopped when he saw them all in the kitchen. “What’s going on here?”

“We cooked,” Akira said. He glanced cheekily at Futaba. “Most of us,” he said with a smile.

“Well let me have a taste. You brewing up some coffee too?” he said, looking at Akechi.
“I was about to start the pots right now,” Akechi told him kindly. “You’re quite welcome to have some. I hope it’s as good as it was the last time you tried it.”

Sojiro nodded. “You know, it’s been awhile since I’ve had a sit-down meal like this,” he said. He turned, then switched the café sign to CLOSED before walking over to them.

“I’m not that bad for business?” Futaba pointed out. “Are we going to go broke and have to live on the streets?”

Sojiro sighed at his adoptive daughter. “We deserve to have a night in every once in a while,” he said.

“True. I can always hack into a major bank and steal us millions of the big bucks,” Futaba said with a confidant smile as Sojiro sighed again.

“It’s hard to tell if you’re joking about these things or not,” he said warily, to which Futaba just snickered gleefully. Then he turned his attention back to Akechi. “Did you already start brewing that pot? If not we can finally have that lesson I promised you.”

“L-Lesson?” Akechi said.

“I told you before. Your coffee is good, but tastes too textbook. You want it to have your own spin,” Sojiro said. He walked back behind the counter as Akira lowered the heat on the stove and subtly gave a spoonful for Morgana to try. “I saw that,” Sojiro said without turning around. “If you keep feeding that cat human food, he’s gonna get attached. I didn’t buy cat food for nothing.”

“Oh man, Boss is really observant,” Morgana said. “Worth it though, even if it was a little too spicy,” he added.

“There’s heart in making a good cup of coffee,” Sojiro told Akechi.

The detective just blinked at him. “Heart? But…that doesn’t…how does that translate into brewing coffee?”

Akira busied himself with gathering the bowls to put the curry into as Futaba readied the rice. “Nomnomnom, I’m starving,” Futaba said.

“Does that mean I have to eat actual cat food because Boss is here?” Morgana groaned. “Can’t you convince him to give me some of this instead? Or can I give him sad eyes so he gives me real food?”

Akira smiled, leaning in to whisper. “I’ve got leftover sushi in the fridge.”

His eyes instantly widened. “Why didn’t you start with that?!”

Sojiro shook his head at Akechi. “Think of it like any art. It’s not an ingredient, it’s just something that you do. It’s not just about wanting other people to enjoy it, it’s about you enjoying the process too. It’s something people can tell with the finished product, whether you made it with heart or not. Whether it’s genuine or not.”

“Leave it to Boss to get all philosophical about coffee,” Morgana said.

“With heart…” Akechi repeated.

“I know it must sound like a load of bollocks to a detective like yourself,” Sojiro said with a short,
deep laugh mixed into it. “Think about what makes you passionate and channel that,” Sojiro said. “What makes you happy?”

Akechi looked dumbfounded for a moment. “I—I’m not sure…”

If Sojiro was caught off-guard, he didn’t show it. “Ah well. You kids are young. You’ll figure it out someday. There’s plenty of time for that. Enough talk. The curry’s gonna get cold. Let’s brew this for now.”

“Er, Sakura-san. I—I’d love to come back another time and…learn more, if that’s alright. Would you share your knowledge?”

Sojiro laughed. “My knowledge, huh? I don’t know about that, but I already told you that you’re welcome any time.”

Akechi bowed his head briefly. “Thank you,” he said, and when he lifted his head, he got that faraway look in his eyes that Akira had seen on him a few times. After a few seconds, it passed, and Akechi rubbed his head with a slightly dazed look.

Akira stared at him. He had meant to ask him about that. Something about it seemed off and it felt like something he needed to know. Akechi caught his eye, and Akira smiled briefly before turning to get the rest of the curry.

The four of them settled in a booth, with Morgana next to Akira and bemoaning having to eat cat food until Akira could give him the sushi. They talked here and there about the day and other things, with Akira just basking once more in the normalcy of it all.

It was strange – before he came to Shibuya, he would’ve hated how mundane it all was. But now, after everything had happened, he craved these moments with his friends and people close to him, where he could just be.

Futaba was the first to finish, and almost instantly went into a food coma in the span that it took the rest of them to finish. She slouched in the booth, even as Sojiro protested that she not do that, and her eyes started to shut as she dozed off.

“I should get her home,” Sojiro said.

“Go,” Akira said. “I’ll clean up.”

“You’ve been pulling your weight around here a lot,” Sojiro said. “And helping Futaba too.” Akira just shrugged. Sojiro made it seem like it was some noble act or something. Most people would do the same. “You know, the three of us used to have dinners in before Wakaba’s work kept her so busy. I’m glad we’re able to have them again,” Sojiro said as Futaba’s head tilted and she fell against Sojiro’s shoulder.

Akechi swallowed thickly. “I’m…I’m sorry,” he said.

Sojiro furrowed his brow. “For what?”

“I-I’m sorry that…you cannot have those dinners anymore,” Akechi told him.

Sojiro shook his head. “We still have the memories. And it’s like I said. I hope now that she’s doing better, we can have dinner together again. I mean, I would never have imagined her being here eating dinner with her friends a few months ago. She’s really changed,” he said, glancing down at her. “It’s…almost uncanny.”
“It’s really great,” he said, standing up to collect the empty bowls. Akira took note of Sojiro’s pensive expression as he looked at Futaba. He knew that it was probably better to just tell him that they were involved, but it was probably better to hear it from Futaba so that she could explain it herself.


“Hmmmph?” Futaba said, blinking rapidly a few times. “Mkay,” she said with a yawn. Her eyes looked only half-open as she followed Sojiro. “Later,” she said sleepily, almost bumping into the door before Sojiro stopped her.

“Have a good night you two,” Sojiro said, guiding Futaba out the door of the café.

“You don’t have to stay,” Akira told Akechi, who had picked up a couple bowls and followed Akira to the sink.

“It’s alright. It’s the least I could do,” Akechi said, and they started washing the dishes. Akira soaped and rinsed, Akechi dried, and Morgana provided his usual commentary. “Did you...have dinner with your family much?” Akechi asked. Akira turned to him, wondering where that question had come from. “I apologize if that question was out of left field...I find myself more and more curious about your life before Shibuya and how you came to be...” Akechi drifted off.

Akira didn’t speak for a bit, but when Akechi still didn’t finish his sentence, Akira raised an eyebrow and tilted his head. “Came to be...?”

Akechi looked as though whatever was hanging off of his lips frustrated him. Finally, he offered a soft smile. “Someone with so much heart,” he settled on saying, and Akira smiled at that.

“Sometimes,” he said. “It’s hard when you’re home alone most nights.” It didn’t really bother him. Not anymore.

“I wonder which is worse,” Akechi said solemnly. “Living with one’s parents and having to wonder if they will be home to spend time with you, or living alone and not having the option to begin with,” he said.

Akira grimaced. This was why he didn’t like to talk about himself. He took a breath, then flicked some of the soapy water at him so that it landed just shy of his nose. “You can’t compare the two. It won’t do you any good,” he said just as solemnly.

Akechi blinked. “Did...you flick soap onto me?” he said, ignoring Akira’s statement. “That’s a bit unfair. I don’t have anything to retaliate with,” he said, gesturing to his dried bowl and dishtowel in his hands.

“Oh, so you were planning to retaliate? I’m the king of water fights, I’ll have you know.”

“Is that so?”

“Yep. Three-time world champion.”

“I’d hate to de-throne you.”

“If the rock skipping was any indication, I don’t think I have much to worry about.”

That made Akechi fully turn to him, his face slightly pink. Akira bit the inside of his lip to stop
himself from smiling. “Th-That was entirely different. I’d never done that before. As I explained, with the right practice, I could’ve easily bested your score.”

Akira tried his best not to laugh at that – as if “water fighting” was somehow a real thing and something he’d “done before.” He just nodded, unable to stop the smile entirely. “If you say so.” Then he stopped and mustered up the most serious face he could imagine. “By the way, you’re not competitive, right?” he said, thinking back to a few days ago when they’d all been in Leblanc.

Akechi’s mouth opened, but no words came out, and he turned his head away, a little flustered as Akira laughed. “I-Nevermind.” Another moment of silence passed. Akechi peered out, watching the light drizzle outside. He exhaled deeply. “Akira…may I ask you something?” Uh oh. He didn’t like that tone. However, he nodded for the detective to continue. “Do you remember that night that I stayed over, when there was a terrible storm?”

It seemed like so long ago. Akira nodded, thinking back to their conversation and feeling that strange thing in his stomach, like clockwork. “Of course.”

Akechi fixated on the rain outside. “How…do you feel about the rain now?”

Well, how was he supposed to answer that? Like he had noted when he was on the plane back from Hawaii, his emotions all neutralized into nothing. When Akechi had shaken his hand for their deal, he had felt nothing. That didn’t change. There was still nothing. Really, there wasn’t.

“I don’t know. It’s just rain,” Akira said. The pit in his stomach felt like it was growing. It was probably the curry. Definitely the curry. “You?” he said, focusing on scrubbing a particularly stubborn stain.

There was another long silence. “Y-Yes. I…I agree. I think the same,” Akechi said, and even without looking, Akira figured that he could probably teach Akechi a few things about lying, which seemed ironic given Akechi’s alternate real-life façade and that much of the detective’s identity had been based on a lie.

Akira stopped his incessant scrubbing. He put his hands against the edge of the sink. “I still care about you,” he said, turning to look at him. They were past the analogies at this point.

Shit. It had been a mistake to look at him. Akechi had a forced smile on his face. “Forgive me. It was foolish of me to bring it up at a time like this.”

“It’s not foolish,” Akira said. “It’s just-” He struggled to find the right thing to say – if such a thing even existed. “I don’t know you,” he finally said. “The real you.” There were glimpses, here and there, and more so in this timeline than in the last one, but it had still been behind a guise of so many secrets. Then again, not that Akira was in any place to say that.

“I…think I was blinded by revenge for so long that I don’t think I quite know myself, either,” Akechi admitted quietly.

“I think I’d like to know you,” Akira said softly. The words tumbled out, but he found that he didn’t really regret that they’d spilled out of him. He ducked his head so that his hair blocked his expression. The Akechi that lived in this new normal they were creating… who was he, really?

“I’d…like to know you as well,” Akechi said, and Akira glanced up at him. He didn’t know what else he was meant to do, but maybe this was enough for now. Akira allowed himself to smile, and Akechi did the same, albeit a much more timid one.

And he was so caught up in it that he didn’t notice Akechi reaching down into the sink—
And then flicking soapy water onto him. Akira’s mouth dropped open in shock as he blinked. “I’m sorry,” Akechi said, even though he sounded more amused than apologetic. He turned away and went back to drying a spoon. “I did mean what I said, though.”

“Wow,” Akira said evenly. “The real Goro Akechi takes cheap shots. Good to know.”

Akechi laughed, full and genuine and contagiously. “Only when it comes to retaliation.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“Oh, will you?”

“Can I have my sushi now?” Morgana said – cutting into their conversation and looking at Akira with an unhappy expression on his face. Akira could read that expression from a mile away. He wasn’t going to hear the end of this for quite some time.

Akira wiped his hands against his apron, then went over to the fridge, with Morgana following behind. He pulled the sushi out of the fridge, then glanced over at Akechi, then back down to Morgana. He gestured for the cat to follow him over to the edge of the stairs, and Morgana reluctantly obliged.

Once they were far enough, Akira leaned against the wall. “Morgana.”

“I know what you’re gonna say,” Morgana sulked. “You want me to be more open. And you’re holding my sushi as ransom.”

“If you need to have it out with him, just do it,” Akira said, and Morgana looked at him in surprise. “It might be better that way. I don’t want you to feel like I’m not paying attention to how you feel,” Akira told him sincerely. “So if you need to talk to him, talk to him. Don’t force it.”

Morgana huffed. “I hate it when you get all leader-y on me, you know.”

Akira just smiled, and he watched as Morgana turned and walked over to where Akechi was finishing up the dishes. He hopped up onto a chair so that he was a little more elevated. Akira moved so that he could still see them, but didn’t get much closer. It was their battle, after all.

“Hey,” Morgana said stiffly. Akechi turned to look at him. Morgana’s eyes darted from side to side before he turned his nose up. “I just have one thing to ask you.”

“Of course,” Akechi said kindly.

“Would you have shot him?” Morgana said, and Akechi nearly dropped his towel. “Akira told me what happened in Mementos. You pointed a gun at him.” Akechi breathed long and hard, closing his eyes for a second before opening them again. “So, would you have shot him?”

“The circumstances didn’t-”

“I don’t wanna hear your formal answer. Just tell me. Do you think you could’ve pulled the trigger?”

Of course Morgana would have been upset at that. Akira shouldn’t have told him that part of it, but he had made it a point to be honest to Morgana – he’d been there for him from the start. Morgana
was the only one who knew everything that had happened in Mementos with Akechi that day.

But that was the thing - Morgana had heard about everything, but he hadn’t been there. He didn’t see or experience or feel the same things that Akira did while he was in Mementos with Akechi – so of course he’d be upset. Akira would have been just as reluctant, if he’d heard that Akechi had gone so far as to actually pull a gun out on one of the others.

“I…don’t know,” Akechi said earnestly. “I didn’t want to shoot him.”

“But you would have, if you had to,” Morgana said, throwing a glance Akira’s way.

“Y-You’re putting words in my mouth,” Akechi said. “That’s not-”

“And Shido,” Morgana interrupted. “Will you really kill him yourself if we can’t change his heart?”

“People like him shouldn’t be allowed to continue on,” Akechi said, not an ounce of doubt or discernment in his voice. Akira tried not to let it get to him. “I believe he deserves to die. Nothing can change that,” he said rigidly.

“Then you haven’t learned anything,” Morgana protested.

Akira bit his tongue, trying not to interfere. This wasn’t his fight. This wasn’t his fight. This wasn’t his-

“Perhaps not-” Akechi started, which Akira realized instantly was not what Akechi should have started with.

Morgana turned to Akira. “Come on. Can we really just let him in so easily?”

“Morgana,” Akira started. “Every single one of us is a little broken and lost, in some way.”

Morgana, stubborn as ever, shook his head. “I know that, but, it’s just-urgh, this is so frustrating.” He hopped down from the chair. “I can’t do this.” He said. Akira watched as he rushed out the front door, which Akira realized really needed to get fixed if Morgana could just push open the door like that.

The hazy memory of the last timeline flashed through his mind. There was no way that this was what would cause him to quit the team. There was no way he was that angry and upset at the situation, right? Akira started towards the door, then stopped and turned to Akechi.

The detective gestured for the door. “Go,” he told him, and Akira nodded and turned to rush out after the cat.

Akira found him not too far from the Leblanc, walking further away. At the sound of Akira’s footsteps, Morgana stopped and turned around. Morgana caught wind of Akira’s worried expression, and his gaze softened. “I’m not quitting the team or anything. I know you said…I…ran off last time,” Morgana said.

Akira nodded, feeling a bit of relief that that wasn’t the case this time, and Morgana sighed. “I just need some space. It’s getting too stuffy in there.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Akira asked lamely. He knew full well that it was something Morgana and Akechi would have to work out for themselves, but it left him with a sinking feeling of helplessness. This was what he did. He helped people, yet he couldn't do anything in this
“Turn back time again, maybe?” Morgana said, somewhat jokingly. “I know it seems dumb that I’m this upset, ‘cause it’s not like with Futaba or the others who actually got close to him.”

“If you came home and told me that Akechi pulled a gun on you, after knowing that he shot you in the past, I’d probably have the same concerns,” Akira said. “You’re allowed to feel this way.”

“He hurt someone I care about,” Morgana said as he bored his eyes into Akira’s, and Akira could feel his chest fluttering with emotion. Morgana really had become one of his best friends. “Sometimes I wish you hadn’t told me about the other timeline,” he said. “I feel like I have to be more cautious than everyone else.”

“I’m sorry,” Akira told him. “I didn’t want to burden you.”

“I know. You never do. That’s why you’re a good leader and friend. But nothing will change the fact that he also hurt a lot of people,” Morgana said.

Akira nodded. “You’re right. It won’t change.” The absolute and unchangeable thing. “That’s why if he wants to move forward, then all we can do is look forward. I’m not forgetting or pretending it never happened or skipping into the sunset with him. Believe me, I.” Akira stopped before he could admit to Morgana just how many nightmares he had had or the minutes spent in the bathroom collecting himself before coming back out with an easy smile. “I know it’s not easy. But I believe him.”

“I know. You wouldn’t have given him the option if you didn’t,” Morgana said. “I’ll be back soon. Just need some air,” he said, and Akira reluctantly let him go. He watched the cat saunter down the street until he disappeared in the night.

Akira went back to the café, and before he pushed open the door, he took a deep breath, shaking his head to rid himself of all the emotions flooding him in, and then walked inside. When he did, he saw Akechi by the sink. Akechi caught his eye when he walked in. “How is he?”

Akira grimaced and shook his head. The bathroom seemed so far away and his feet suddenly felt heavy, but he certainly didn’t want Akechi to see him like this. “I have to use the bathroom,” he said, walking swiftly into the bathroom and then locking the door behind him. He stared at himself in the mirror. He willed himself to pull it together. Maybe he needed to just let all of the emotions in, just one time, and then he would be fine. After a few seconds of this, he flushed the toilet, then counted to five before walking back out.

“What’s he?” Akechi started, and Akira paused to look at him. Futaba was right. He really did look like a sad chibi. “I-I don’t mean to cause this much tension. Perhaps it really is better if I just-”

“Goro, look at me,” he said, sighing as he moved towards him.

Akechi just shook his head. “It’s clear that everyone is trying, but I do not wish to force something that just simply isn’t possible. It most likely is not-”

Akechi stopped when he felt two arms wrap around him and a mop of black hair tickled his cheek. “…Akira…?” he said, shocked.

“Shut up.” Akira mumbled. He could feel some of the tension in his own shoulders fading, and he closed his eyes, committing the feeling to memory. “Quit blaming yourself. Morgana…he knows a lot more than the others, so it might take him a little longer.”
“A lot more…?” Akechi said, and Akira noticed that Akechi still hadn’t moved his arms or anything.

Akira wanted desperately to tell him everything. The last timeline, everything. But then he thought back to Morgana’s words. “Sometimes I wish you hadn’t told me about the other timeline.”

That’s right. He couldn’t burden the others with this. It was his cross to bear, and it had already made things difficult for Morgana. Another reason for him to keep these things inside. It wouldn’t do anyone any good.

“I tell him everything,” was all Akira said. “But that’s also a double-edged sword. He knows everything, but it was second-hand information. He didn’t get to see or feel…” Akira paused. “There’s just a lot,” he settled on saying.

“I-I see…” Akechi said. A comfortable silence came over them for a few seconds. “So, then, is the hug more for you or for me?” he said somewhat lightly, and Akira let out a humorless laugh. Then Akechi’s tone softened. “The…weight on your shoulders is still heavy, isn’t it?” he added, and Akira didn’t like the way that his words seemed to be cutting into his soul. The sheer vulnerability that came with the statement made him break the hug and turn away under the guise of going back to the counter.

“My cross to bear,” Akira said nonchalantly.

Akechi hummed. “You know, there is a Biblical verse that comes to mind. *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*”

“Are you trying to tell me that you’re Jesus?” he said in an attempt to deflect.

Akechi just smiled. “Funny. You have tried to help me realize that others are willing to share my burden, and while I still find it difficult to allow for many reasons, I find it curious why you do not seem to accept the same for yourself.”

“I’ll tell you all about it one day,” Akira said dismissively, picking at a spot in the counter. If he caught on to Akira’s deflective tone, he didn’t comment on it. “I would like that,” Akechi said. “Perhaps...over dinner someday.”

Akira froze, letting his words and the implications of it sink for a moment. He continued to pick at the same spot, allowing himself to smile a little, just small enough that Akechi probably wouldn’t have noticed it even if he were looking at him.

A new normal with the same-yet-different Akechi.

“Yeah…someday, maybe.”

Akechi decided to stay with Akira a little longer, hoping to talk to Morgana when he came back. They finished cleaning Leblanc, then went up to play a game of chess, then went back downstairs and mindlessly watched TV, but Morgana still hadn’t returned.

Akira checked his phone. “It’s late,” he said. “You don’t have to keep waiting,” he told Akechi. Then he picked up his coat. “I should go look for him again.” He knew that Morgana wasn’t quitting and hadn’t run off, but it was a little worrying that he wasn’t back yet.

“I-I’ll go with you,” Akechi said after some pause. “I don’t mind.”
Akira was about to protest, but the resolution in Akechi’s eyes made him shrug and nod. He went outside, with Akechi close behind, and then realized he had literally all of Shibuya to search. That wasn’t exactly comforting. He decided to start in the direction that Morgana had wandered off to to begin with.

As he searched, it dawned on him that maybe one of them should have stayed behind just in case Morgana wandered back through the door while he was gone looking for him.

They searched and searched, and it was only when they got to a small neighborhood road that he saw a black cat with blue eyes looking somewhat pained – and there was Haru Okumura, kneeling over him.

Akira exchanged a glance with Akechi, then the two of them rushed to where he was, near a street light.

“Morgana?” Akira said, and the cat groaned.

“I made a mistake,” Morgana said.

Haru turned to them, another look of surprise crossing her face. “Kurusu-san,” she said. “Is this your cat?”

Akira nodded tersely. “I was looking for him. What happened?”

“Humans are the woooorst,” Morgana said, clutching one of his paws.

“He looked like he was resting, and this bicyclist didn’t look where he was going and ran over his paw,” Haru said. “I was planning to bring him a vet and then home.”

“That’s really kind of you,” he said, and she stood giving him a small smile.

“I-It’s nothing. I would want someone to do the same if I lost a pet of mine.” Then she looked to Akechi. “Oh. I know you, don’t I?”

Akechi smiled politely. “I’m not sure if we’ve met. My name is Goro Akechi. He is a friend of mine, so I was helping him search for his cat.”

“Oh yes,” she said, bringing her hands together. “The famous detective. It’s nice to meet you. Haru Okumura.” Then she turned her attention back to Akira. “Would you like me to call vet? It’s late, but there are some emergency vets open. I can also bring a car.”

Akira blinked, taken aback by her sheer kindness. Again, another thing that shouldn’t have surprised him, but there he was.

“Wait, are they gonna put a needle in me or something?” Morgana said. “I don’t need a vet.”

“I think he’ll be fine. It’ll be best if we get him home,” Akira told her. “But thank you. That’s incredibly generous of you.”

Haru shook her head, her cheeks going a bit red with embarrassment. “It’s really not.” She knelt down and picked up Morgana, petting him softly. The cat purred and leaned into it.

“I like her,” Morgana said, pleased.

“He likes you,” Akira told her.
Haru smiled. “Cats are so soft and sweet. I wish I had a pet,” she said, somewhat sadly. Then her eyes crinkled with amusement. “Though, I think I would coddle and spoil him too much if that were the case.”

“There are worse things,” Akira said.

“That’s true,” she added. Then she tilted her head. “You know, this is the second time we’ve seen each other today,” Haru said with a soft laugh. “It’s a bit funny.”

Akira smiled. “Fate, maybe.”

“By the way, Okumura-san, why are you out so late?” Akechi asked.

Haru shifted uncomfortably at this. “Ah. I…I just wanted to take a walk. I do this quite often at night. It’s nice to clear my head,” she said with a forced smile. “And be out of the house.”

Akechi furrowed his brows, glancing over at Akira, who shared the detective’s expression. “Of course. Especially now that the rain has let up,” he said, and Haru nodded stiffly.

Akira hummed thoughtfully. “If you ever want a place to go, Leblanc is open at night. It’s my guardian’s café,” Akira offered. “It’s not much and it’s no Big Bang Burger, but it’s cozy.”

Haru blinked. “A café?” She said. “Yes, I’d like that. Thank you for inviting me. I think I’d like to have an option other than Big Bang Burger. I’ll stop by. Oh, right, here,” she said, walking over to him to carefully hand Morgana to him. “He probably needs to be carried home. Are you sure you don’t want a car?”

“You never carry me like this,” Morgana said, reveling in it.

“That’s okay,” Akira said. “We’ll be fine. Thanks again.”

Haru nodded. “Of course. Well, it was nice to see you again, and nice to meet you.”

“Will you be at the rooftop tomorrow?” Akira said, and she was startled for a moment.

“Ah. Not tomorrow, but the day after.”

“I’ll join you. Then we can go back to Leblanc and have some coffee,” Akira offered. “If you’re free?”

Haru regarded him curiously, but nodded slowly. “Alright. I-I don’t have much planned after that.” She petted Morgana one last time before lowering her head to them. “Well, have a good rest of your night,” she said, and the others said the same before parting ways with her.

Akira and Akechi went back in the direction of Leblanc, then rerouted as Akechi decided to go straight to the train station and Akira offered to walk with him, despite Akechi’s protests. “Wanna do some gardening?” he said to Akechi when they were far enough away.

“I don’t even go to your school, Akira.”

“As if you couldn’t just walk in, Mr. Famous Detective,” Akira teased. “I want to try and bring her on the team. If we’re taking down Okumura, I think she needs to know.”

Akechi blinked. “That’s what your plan is? To bring yet another person onto the team?” he said. “For what reason?”
Akira hummed. “I don’t know,” he said, and Akechi looked ready to facepalm. “She looks just as lost as the rest of us.”

Akechi gritted his teeth for a moment. “As I’ve said, I don’t doubt that her father has been cruel to her. I’ve also heard rumors about her…fiancé,” he said. “I will accompany you, but I don’t think we should make any rash decisions about new team members. Being lost is certainly not a strong enough reason for such a thing.” Then he paused. “Er, but of course, your call is final.”

Akira shook his head. “Long live democracy, or something like that,” he said, and Akechi smiled. He peered at Morgana in his arms. “How are you doing?”

“If I say I’m fine, I feel like you’re gonna make me walk, so I’m dying,” Morgana said with his eyes closed.

Akira chuckled. “I was worried about you.”

Morgana peeked one eye open. “I didn’t know you’d come looking for me.” He darted to Akechi. “Both of you.”

“Of course we would,” Akira said.

Akechi nodded. “Yes. I wanted to help as well. I wanted to apologize to you,” he said, and Morgana lifted his head to fully look at the detective. “I…failed to understand just how close the two of you are, and how much you may have been affected by my actions.”

Akechi took a long breath. “To answer your question, there was a voice that was telling me to just pull the trigger and be done with it. I’ve heard that voice many times. I had thought that I was beyond redemption. I still believe that I am beyond such a thing,” Akechi said earnestly, and Morgana studied him wordlessly. “But in that same moment, I heard…another voice. Much smaller, and one that…I’d never heard before.” Akechi hesitated. “It was tiny, and yet it somehow felt louder than anything I’d ever heard before.”

“What did it say?” Morgana asked.

Akechi rubbed his forehead. “You don’t have to be alone anymore,” he said, his voice cracking a bit. Akira turned to look at him, but his face betrayed nothing. He breathed a little unsteadily. “The chance to do what is right and good. I don’t know if what the Phantom Thieves are doing is what’s right and good, but I’d like to be given the chance to find out. Genuinely, this time.”

“Masayoshi Shido should rot in hell for what he’s done. I want to kill him,” Akechi said. “But–” he started, struggling for a moment. “If he will rot in a jail cell for the rest of his life instead, then I am trying to accept that perhaps that will be enough.”

Morgana hummed, and Akira wondered if Morgana was going to mention that this story also ended with Akechi in some sort of jail cell. He wondered if Sae would maybe give him a reduced sentence – he would probably be tried as an adult, but if he were to help them, then…maybe Sae and Naomi could… Akira subtly shook his head. Why was he even thinking about that?

“I’m sorry too,” Morgana finally said, and Akechi looked at him in surprise. “We have our personas because we don’t want society or the past to define us, and I keep defining you because of it, even though you’re trying to start over. You don’t really know who you are,” Morgana said, and Akechi didn’t answer. “But neither do I.”

“There is a part of me lies awake late at night thinking that perhaps there is no going back for me. It worries me that whenever I even think about Shido, it feels like I am no longer capable of
thinking rationally," Akechi admitted. Akira hadn’t known that that was going through Akechi’s mind.

Morgana sighed. “I keep wondering if I’m a monster or something bad. What if that’s the truth I end up finding?” Akechi nodded slowly. “So… I think I know how you feel. It worries me, but I’m sticking with him because even though he’s a big idiot sometimes, I feel like it’ll be okay because I have everyone with me.” Then he paused. “I guess I don’t hate you,” Morgana said, and Akechi finally let out a laugh. “But I still kinda wanna claw your eyes out,” Morgana drawled, but there was something warm in his eyes.

“He wants to claw my eyes out daily, so it’s not the worst thing,” Akira said casually as they came to a stop at the station.

Akechi smiled. “Thank you for walking with me,” he told them. “I’m glad that we were able to talk.”

“We really are dysfunctional family, aren’t we?” Morgana commented thoughtfully.

“You’re definitely a strict guardian,” Akira agreed.

“Hey!” Morgana said. “Speaking of which, shouldn’t you have gone to bed a while ago?”

“You want me to drop you?”

“You wouldn’t.”

Akechi just smiled. “I’ll see you all later,” he said, his expression looking lighter than it had all day. “Goodnight.”

They bid their goodbyes, and Akira watched Akechi disappear down the train station. You don’t have to be alone anymore. Akira certainly wasn’t alone, but he thought that maybe the words applied to him as well.

Morgana’s uninjured paw hit him right in the cheek. Akira looked down at him. “What are you zoning out for? Are you okay?” he said.

I’m curious as to why don't seem to accept the same for yourself. Akira blinked out of his thoughts, then smiled and nodded at Morgana’s question. "Yeah. Let's head back."

--

“God, this road is so bumpy,” Ryuji complained as they headed down into the depths of Mementos. Akira was planning to speak to Haru the next day, so the others agreed to go to Mementos to fulfill some requests and train so that they would be ready for the next Palace, which Akira hoped would be soon.

It had been somewhat of an uncomfortable start, what with everyone not knowing how to react to Akechi’s true Metaverse outfit. He had told them about it, of course, but it was different when they actually saw it for themselves. But Ann had made a comment about how black was a nice color on him, to which Yusuke very much disagreed, and the tension was broken.

“You’ve said that for the past fifteen minutes,” Yusuke commented, staring out the window of the passenger seat.
“We haven’t seen a shadow for fifteen minutes?!” Ryuji said.

Makoto sighed from behind the steering wheel, peering up at him in the rearview mirror. “Skull, it feels longer because you keep bringing it up.”

“Queen’s right,” Morgana said. “And it’s not like it’s any fun for me either!”

Ryuji sighed and shifted his weight for the third time in two minutes. He looked at Akira sitting next to him, then Akechi on the other side of him. “Hey, what’re you reading?”

Akechi casually looked up from his book. “Ah. It’s called *Pachinko*. It’s quite a popular novel about a Korean family that migrates to Japan,” he said. “It’s actually very riveting family saga of-”

“I shouldn’t have asked,” Ryuji groaned, as Akechi chuckled to himself and turned his attention back to his book, unfazed. He leaned against Akira. “Please save me from the boredom.”

“Maybe the Reaper will come back,” Akira said with a shrug. “You can 1v1 him.”

Ryuji punched Akira in the arm as Akira just laughed. “Aw hell no man! Why would you even say that?! I’m definitely not up for that freakshow to show up again.”

“He was quite a special foe,” Yusuke said. “If only he could stay still long enough, I would have loved to paint him.”

“Oh dude, you paint the reaper while we escape.”

“No, I would need you all to distract him so he doesn’t disrupt me in the middle of painting,” Yusuke said breezily.

“Wait, what?” Ryuji exclaimed. “Now you’ve really lost it.”

“We are a bit stronger,” Makoto commented. “We could possibly beat him now.”

“Ugh,” Ryuji said. He glanced at Akechi again. “Y’know, it’s still weird seein’ ya in your all black getup after seeing you in the Robin Hood one for so long.”

“Yes, it does feel strange to be with you all like this,” Akechi said, somewhat uncomfortably.

“It’s not as aesthetically pleasing,” Yusuke commented. “It’s actually quite dull,” he said, disappointed.

As far as negative comments could go, Akira was just glad that they didn’t feel too awkward about seeing him in his normal attire. Akira wondered if maybe Akechi would just keep his other outfit, but he had gone with his original.

“Thank you, Yusuke,” Akechi said with a soft chuckle.

And, oh *yeah*, there was still the whole two personas thing. Or, one persona? Akira wasn’t really sure, and it didn’t seem like Akechi was all that knowledgeable to it either. He had told them that Loki was his main persona, but he didn’t seem too clear about Robin Hood’s origins. But Robin Hood *was* Loki. Akira’s suspicions had been somewhat correct. Loki had the ability to shapeshift into Robin Hood – *a whole* other persona with *a whole other* set of abilities. It wasn’t two different personas, but it was at the same time. But that just opened up a whole other can of worms. Was Robin Hood an actual persona that Akira could fuse? Could Loki shapeshift into other personas? Could he actually hold multiple personas?
Did that mean he was like Akira? Did he know Igor? He hadn’t mentioned anything about Igor when he had told them the truth. Maybe Akechi thought that the others would never believe him. After all, Akira had tried to explain it when Makoto joined, but then he realized that he didn’t know how and decided against it.

Honestly, it was all a little too much for Akira to wrap his head around at the moment, and Akechi didn’t seem to have a strong grasp on it or just didn’t want to share it, so it only left them with more questions that could hopefully be answered when Akira was in the Velvet Room, if Igor decided to not be so cryptic as usual.

“Over there,” Yusuke declared, but before Yusuke could continue his statement, Ryuji had grabbed onto the seat in front of him, which just so happened to be Yusuke’s, and shook it.

“What on earth are you doing?” Yusuke said, baffled as he turned to look at him with wide eyes. “There’s a simple shadow right there.”

Akira tried his best to hide his snicker, giving Ryuji a cheeky grin when the blonde glared at him. Ryuji cleared his throat. “I, uh, yeah, duh of course.”

Akira looked at the shadow, focusing on it carefully. “It’s not strong,” he said, and he saw Akechi put his book away. “Let’s take him down.”

The shadow in question ended up being Lamia, which was perfect for Akira. He needed her to fuse another persona that he wanted to create before going into Haru’s palace, so this was going to make his life a little easier.

“Fox,” Akira called. “Use ice,” he said. The artist nodded, summing Goemon easily.

“Goemon, strike!” The bufula attack came through and Lamia instantly went down. Easy.

They surrounded the shadow as Ryuji lamented. “I didn’t even get to do anything,” he complained.

Akira smiled, then turned to Lamia. “I want you to join me,” he told the shadow. Then he shrugged confidently. “Or you die. Your choice.”

“Join you?” Lamia said cautiously. “Hmm, I don’t know.” The shadow paused. ”Y’know, before I die, I wanted ta take a trip somewhere. How ’bout you, sonny? What kinda trip do you wanna take?”

Akira really hated negotiating with shadows. He sighed, rubbing his forehead. She looked pretty gloomy at the moment, so that meant…maybe…? “A trip to hell?” he said, somewhat cautiously.

Lamia seemed to like that answer, but of course his torture didn’t get to end there. “…Um, why’re you goin’ for me, anyway? Ain’t there worse people out there? What kinda guys piss you off?”

That question came out of left field, but he was already in the home stretch. “Slow walkers?” he said, and Lamia didn’t seem to be happy about that one. Shit. As Lamia prepared to attack them again, Akira readied his team to defend, except he didn’t need to.

“Wait,” Akechi said. Akira tried to catch his eye, but Akechi didn’t meet it. “It would be wise not to attempt any erratic movements,” he told the shadow, stepping in to hopefully give him another chance. Akira didn’t really think he had the patience for it, so he was glad that the others were able to occasionally step in and help whenever he ended up saying the wrong thing.
“…Alright, alright,” Lamia said. “Hey, so what’re you doing here anyway? Are you bored?” She asked, looking at Akechi.

“I never really thought about it,” Akechi said, and Akira threw him a grateful look.

Lamia nodded again, once more pleased. Please, no more negotiating… Akira said internally. “Ah, now I remember! My real name is Lamia…” The shadow said, going on its spiel before forming into a mask of energy. As it transformed, Akira felt his head throb as he realized that he couldn’t hold anymore at the moment. “You and I are the same, mister.”

Well, that just made things more difficult. He closed his eyes and tried to quickly think about which persona he would have to be rid of before Lamia came to him—

“Nngh—”

“Crow? Dude what’s wrong?”

Akira opened his eyes just as he watched the flash of energy go towards him. He blinked, confused, and unable to fully process what was happening. Akechi, however, looked like he was in pain. He had his hands over his mask and looked like he was in physical pain.

Had…had Lamia gone towards him? Akira looked at Morgana. “What’s happening to him?”

“I-I think the persona is trying to go into him,” Morgana said with wide eyes. “I didn’t even know that he could…I-I don’t think he’s used to it.”

“Joker! More shadows incoming,” Futaba said. “This isn’t looking so good.” The second she finished her sentence, a group of shadows nearly surrounded them.

“Joker,” Yusuke said. “What do you advise?”

Akira looked over at Akechi, who had gone to his knees and was still clutching his head in pain. “Mona, can you help him?” Akira said, realizing that he probably also wouldn’t have known what to do if he didn’t have Morgana to coach him through things.

“I-I don’t know. I’ll try,” Morgana said. “B-But does that mean that he has the power of-”

“Can we discuss this later?” Makoto chimed in as she summoned a rakukaja spell over Akechi. “There are more pressing matters.”

“Oracle,” he called to Futaba. “Send in Panther.”

Ann appeared a few seconds later thanks to Futaba. She surveyed the area, then stopped when she saw Akechi on the ground in pain. “Crow!?” She said, concerned and taking a step towards him.

“We gotta take these shadows out,” Akira said, stopping her. “Mona’s with him.”

Ann gave him one more look, then nodded and turned to face the shadows. Ryuji had already done some damage to them with his physical attacks, so it was just a matter of finishing them off. With their efforts, it was easy to do, even with Morgana and Akechi out of the picture.

Just as they finished off the last of the shadows, the energy shot out of Akechi, and Lamia appeared once more amongst them.

“What a pain,” Lamia said. “Just take this and be on your way,” she said, tossing a life stone at Akira, who caught it easily. Akira took a step towards it, but it already was moving away, so Akira
instead turned his attention to Akechi as he and the others rushed towards him.

“Are you alright?” Ann said, worry laced into her voice.

Akechi rubbed his head. “Y-Yes, thank you. I didn’t mean to cause concern.”

“Dude, forget about that,” Ryuji said. “We’re just glad you’re alright. It looked like it hurt.”

For a moment, Akechi seemed to forget the situation at hand and looked entirely touched that Ryuji had said that. Then his expression changed and became more serious. “I felt that shadow-no, persona’s-presence inside of me, but it…it felt like my head was pounding.” Pounding? It wasn’t supposed to be painful. It had been easy when Akira had done it. It certainly wasn’t supposed to hurt.

“He couldn’t accept it,” Morgana said, mostly to Akira. “I-I tried to help him, but…why did it go to him in the first place if he couldn’t even accept it?”

“That means he’s definitely not like Joker then, right?” Makoto said thoughtfully. “Perhaps it was just a fluke, and the shadow would have tried to do the same to any of us if we had answered its question instead.”

“Yes,” Yusuke said. “After all, none of us have ever attempted to answer the shadow’s questioning.”

“That’s…that’s true, but…” Morgana said, still staring at Akechi with a concerned and pensive look on his face.

Akira and Akechi locked eyes for a moment, all of those questions from before flooding back to him. No, he had to talk to Igor way sooner than later. This wasn’t possible. There’s no way it was possible. Was it really possible?

Oracle’s voice came through to all of them. “So, uh, what just happened?”

Chapter End Notes

and then the reaper comes and kills them

MORGANA pls teach akechi how to be wild card

akechi’s abilities is a v important part of this story actually but you will have to wait ~quite a while~ for that to be revealed lmao sorry unfortunately you’re left like Akira: many questions with no answers

100% ready to give cinnamon roll Haru the character development she deserves

I can’t believe I originally planned to have two more scenes in this chapter LOL it ended up being massive so unfortunately the more plot-y stuff will be in the next update

Still gonna try and keep to two weeks, life is gonna be a little hectic until the end of may as I move once again and im also trying to dedicate equal time to my original story, which is still in early stages so needs lots of TLC, but if not every two weeks
than every three weeks for sure.

Coming up next chapter: Akira demands answers from Igor, Akechi suffers an identity crisis, Akira tries to recruit Haru, the Thieves infiltrate Okumura’s Palace, and Kioshi has a birthday party.

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