L’appel du vide

by Xov

Summary

Akechi Goro is alive – one of his biggest regrets is alive and standing in front of him looking like he’s ready for some highbrow sports photo shoot when what he really needs is five years intensive therapy and at least five more steps away from Akira.

No, no, no – the universe is not allowed to shove this on him so soon after it just flung him three fucking years into the past.

(Sometimes the only way to save someone is to let them save you first.)
(Huge canon divergence. Akira's past and future affect him big time.)
Chapter 1

Akira messed up – and if he could make one blanket apology for his existence, he would.

It wouldn’t change anything, but Akira messed up and he doesn’t know what the hell to do to get back on track. He’s been derailed, the tracks dismantled, his compass blown to pieces, and hell if he knows how to read the fucking stars.

Three years.

Three years erased because of one mistake. He still doesn’t really believe it, but it’s hard to pretend that it isn’t his sixteen year old face staring back at him in the mirror of Leblanc’s tiny bathroom or that Sojiro hadn’t been looking at him like he was gum stuck in his hair – very much unwanted and too damned difficult to get rid of.

Akira messed up, but he knows how to play it cool. He’s been playing it cool since a pair of handcuffs were slapped across his wrists and he was shoved face first into the back of a cop car because some drunken self-entitled asshole pointed a finger at him. He can totally play this cool, this is nothing.

He stares at his phone. It’s the early morning of April 11th, 20-fucking-16, and if yesterday is a thing that really happened, today is going to be his first day at Shujin Academy.

There is no little red app on his phone.

He chews his lip and doesn’t blink as he stares.

It’s nothing.

Still in lounge wear, he grabs his wallet and manages to climb out of his second floor window without falling and spilling his brains out on the empty street below – all in spite of his not shaking at all hands. He trips over his sweats instead, cursing as he stumbles in the direction of the train station in the darkness of the morning. He takes the train to Inokashira park and finds a spot on the bridge he knows has a phenomenal view of the sunrise.

Not that he’s looking.

His brain’s short circuiting, and he can see explosions of colors worthy of a superhero battle scene whenever he closes his eyes. His line of sight blindly follows the lethargic movement of the murky lake water and if he weren’t already shivering from the cold, he’d throw himself in to shock himself out of his shock and probably right into pneumonia, but hey – some things are worth the sacrifice.

He’s not thinking much of anything at all when a hand lands on his shoulder and he’s spinning around haphazardly, a very manly scream trapped somewhere in his throat with his heart, and once again regretting his choice of clothing as his feet catch the long ends of his sweats as he trips and nearly falls over the goddamned railing of the bridge and into the water he’d sort of just managed to convince himself not to drown himself in.

Another hand finds his other shoulder in an attempt to steady him, and Akira takes a moment to make sure his soul didn’t fly straight out of his body and into Yaldabaoth’s grabby little hands before
looking at his unintentional murderer slash savior.

He quickly takes back the savior bit as he finds himself staring at the face of a very concerned looking Akechi Goro dressed to the nines in color coordinated name brand athletic clothing. If Akira thought his brain was short circuiting earlier – he’s wrong.

*Three years.*

The reality of his situation hits him like a bag of bricks to the nuts.

Fucking three years.

*Akechi Goro* is alive – one of his biggest regrets is alive and standing in front of him looking like he’s ready for some highbrow magazine photo shoot when what he really needs is five years intensive therapy and at least five more steps away from Akira.

No, no, no – the universe is not allowed to shove this on him so soon after it just flung him *three fucking years* into the past.

“Um.” Akechi says after a moment, before blinking and hastily pulling his hands away and letting them hover in front of him as if he isn’t sure where they came from or what he’s supposed to do with them. They’re just hands, Akechi. “I’m terribly sorry about that, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Some part of Akira is aware that he’s gaping and he can only imagine the kind of face that he’s making between the incoherent thoughts sparking, yet not quite catching fire as they die in formation within the confines of his skull where his brain ought to be. Akechi kind of shuffles on his feet as his eyes dart around, and Akira is still perceptive enough to deduce that Mr. Teenage Hitman is already looking for an escape route.

“I just,” Akechi coughs into the crook of his arm, and at least he is a sanitary human being (since he’s certainly not a good one), and backs up a little. “Sorry, I thought you were someone I knew?” He tries to say, but asks instead with a short laugh. He doesn’t sound or look very sure about it. Akira would wager he’s more sure about the existence of the Loch Ness monster than he is about that sentence.

But Akira’s brain is still on the fritz and he’s still gaping, because he’s smooth as a fat cat stuck in its own door flap.

Casting aside his awkwardness and now looking genuinely concerned, Akechi takes a step closer and asks, “Are you alright?”

Akira manages to snap his jaw back up with the rest of his face as he pulls himself together with the mental equivalent of duct tape and water soluble glue.

“I – uh – blood pressure.” Akira croaks. He closes his eyes and wishes he was anywhere else when he opens them again. No such luck. He clears his throat as he avoids eye contact. “Sorry, I meant to say I have low blood pressure – takes me a minute sometimes to, uh, wake up?” He’s just making this up as he goes. He pinches the bridge of his nose and wishes for an asteroid to breach the Earth’s atmosphere and hit him square in the head.

Once again, no such luck.

“I see. Regardless, I apologize for scaring you.”

Akira waves his hand in an aimless gesture he hopes conveys ‘don’t worry about it’ as he stares at
the old wooden planks of the bridge under his feet. Akechi’s face is too real and too soon. “Don’t worry about it.” He says, just in case. He doesn’t want to be seen as rude and get shot this early in the game. He’s still banking on that asteroid. “I was thinking about jumping down anyways; really wake myself up. You saved me the trouble. Now I’m awake and won’t need to run my clothes through the wash at,” He checks the time on his phone. “5:30 in the morning.” He deadpans and blinks a few times while furrowing his brow. That was decidedly much later than he thought it was. He looked at the sky, a little offended to see the sun happily lighting the park with romantic pastel overtones in conjunction with the newly blossomed cherry trees. He freezes. “Oops.” He says.

It might have been three years, but he still remembers Sojiro opening shop every morning at 6 a.m. on the dot when he lived there.

“Is something wrong?” Akechi asks, but Akira is already making a run for it.

“Gotta go! Bye!” And it’s as good an escape as any, he supposes. Russian roulette’s a less deadly game than Akechi – and Akira’s not sure he even wants to play, but it wouldn’t be right not to try. Damn his misguided morality.

He can hear Akechi say something as he high tails it out of there and he can’t make out the words, but it sounds very confused.

He barely makes the train that would get him back to Yongen-Jaya in time and he thanks his past self for being in better shape than his 19 year old self as he very stealthily climbs the building and hurls himself through the open window. He sees Sojiro come around the corner just as he shuts the blinds. He throws himself on the bed and tries to look like he’s been sleeping all night instead of having an extended existential crisis amidst the literal ghosts of his past.

He checks his phone again. The metaverse app is nowhere to be found. His mind races but his thoughts are missing.

This isn’t nothing.

He simply accepts that he’s cursed when he sees Akechi at the station as he heads to school, looking as composed and innocent as ever. Akira takes a few steps back and decides to take the late train if only to avoid the slight possibility of Akechi recognizing him.

Someone bulldozes right into his back, nearly knocking him off his feet.

“Oof. C’mon, what the hell man – watch where you’re going.” Goddamnit Ryuji. Not that Akira isn’t happy to see him, but seriously? Now? From the corner of his eye, he can see Akechi watching them. He hopes his uniform and glasses combination is enough of a difference from his just out of bed look to make him unrecognizable. He knows this is a futile hope.

“Sorry.” Akira says. And then he says nothing, because what do you say to your best friend of three years who doesn’t even know your name? At least Akira won’t have to worry about Ryuji finding out about his limited edition video game Morgana broke last month.

Cat instincts – what’s up on the table must fall down. Preferably into pieces.
Ryuji shrugs and sighs in the exaggerated way he always does. “We’re good, dude. Just watch yourself, there are some shitty people around here.” Akira scratches the back of his head as Ryuji walks around him to find a place to wait. Akira checks his phone for the millionth time that morning to yet again find no trace of the stupid app that he’s supposed to be using pretty damned soon. He tries projecting a mental threat to Yaldabaoth before realizing that would only hurt his case.

And like keeping a constant eye on a spider on the wall just to make sure it never comes within biting or jumping range, it’s with some alarm that Akira notices Akechi missing from his spot. Akira discreetly scans the area, hoping Akechi just caught his train or saw someone else he knew or had a terrible case of the runs and is not, in fact, the suspiciously identical to Akechi person making a beeline for him.

Akira side steps behind a pillar.

Akira is stealth, stealth is Akira. They are one and the same. Akechi saw nothing.

Akechi peers around the pillar, brow raised and poorly concealed amusement plastered on his face.

Shit.

“What a coincidence.” Akechi says. “I never expected to run into you again so soon.”

Akira stares.

Akechi blinks and smiles charmingly.

Akira stares long enough that he can hear a ding notifying him that he’s earned the ‘Creep.’ achievement in the game of Life.

“Hi.” Akira finally chirps, because he’s smooth as a greased up penguin trying to climb a rock wall. He swears he used to be cool. He’s spent too much time with Futaba and Yusuke. Their combined weirdness has overthrown him.

“Hello there.” Akechi properly greets in return with all the cool that Akira used to have – but he’s all soft neutrals and false pretenses. Akira knows what he really is – and he is fire and rage and probably already plotting Akira’s untimely demise. Akechi can screw off, because Akira’s got an asteroid coming anytime now. “Sorry if I startled you again.”

“Startle? Me? No, I’m okay. Saw you coming a mile away.” Akira stands up straight as he cranes his head to very obviously scan the tracks for his train.

“Oh, well, consider my apology rescinded then.” Akechi smiles his TV smile. Akira internally calls him an asshole and sort of hopes the sentiment is conveyed through his expression, but Akechi doesn’t give away whether or not he catches it. Why is Akechi even talking to him? Akira has done literally nothing to gain anyone’s attention. “Akechi Goro.” He says, bowing slightly in greeting. Why is this happening.

Akira stares for half a beat too long before bowing in return. “Kurusu Akira.” He immediately regrets the decision to share his name when he sees something dance across Akechi’s eyes.

“Akechi repeats, contemplative. “Have we met before? Before this morning, I mean.” He’s scanning Akira with more intensity than an X-ray and Akira wouldn’t be surprised if he visited Takemi later just to find himself radioactive after this kind of invasive treatment.
“Nope.” He pops the p as he gives up hope on an asteroid caving his skull in and wishes for something less extraordinary. A volcanic eruption under his feet, maybe. “I’ve only been in Tokyo for three days. Haven’t really met anyone.” He thanks whatever gods might exist (except Yaldabaoth) when he sees his train pull in as he interrupts whatever Akechi was going to say as he points at the tracks. “That’s me. I’ll see you next time.” Never. He’ll see him never, he means to say.

Akira flees.

“Have a good day, Kurusu-san!” Akira hears from behind him.

“I won’t.” Akira mutters under his breath as he squeezes between other people in the crowd in a desperate bid to put as much distance between himself and Akechi as possible.

He doesn’t manage to get a seat on the train and his brain is still on standby, so it’s when he’s already walked halfway to Shujin, umbrella handy, he remembers he’s doing everything all wrong. He’s exhausted and a bit jittery from not sleeping all night and dealing with the unexpected fiasco known as Akechi, so he shrugs and just goes to school. He’s already messed up the timeline, might as well just roll with the punches. Yaldabaoth hasn’t even given him the app yet, meaning he’s onto him or something else is going on.

Akira goes through the motions: Kawakami bemoans her luck; He ignores the nasty looks and malicious whispers he remembers from the first time; He sits behind Ann, as beautiful as always, who smiles encouragingly at him after his shoddy introduction. Akira loves her for always giving everyone the benefit of the doubt.

He ignores the ache in his heart that no one else remembers.

He gets through the day on autopilot, gets back to Leblanc without saying a word to anyone, and sleeps clean through the afternoon and night.

He dreams of an empty velvet room and a contract with his name signed at the bottom but isn’t addressed to him. He dreams of a teenager who followed all the rules to the letter and still managed to break every last one.

Akira dreams of failure.

He wakes up early to a sense of finality settling over him as he accepts his new reality.

Akira messed up.

He’s more composed than he was the previous day, and if he catches his hand shake as he prepares breakfast for himself and Sojiro – it’s because of the early morning chill.

“Oh, you’re awake.” Sojiro says as he walks through the door, the happy ring of the door chime a jarring contrast to his aloof voice.

“Yeah, sorry I disappeared yesterday. I wasn’t feeling too great.” Akira adds a bit of salt to the pot.

“It’s fine. Just let me know next time if you’re sick – I can pick up some medicine if you need it.” He
says, and Akira smiles gratefully. He might not really like Akira just yet, but his dad instincts are strong. "Trying your hand at being the cook, I see."

Akira belatedly realizes he probably should have asked for permission to cook. He’s so used to doing whatever he pleases in the cafe, it skipped his mind entirely. "I know a thing or two about breakfast curry." Akira says. "Figured I’d return the favor, since you’ve been cooking for me everyday. I think you’ll like it."

"Confident, huh? Alright, we’ll see what you can do. If it's half as good as it smells, I might be willing to give you a few tips."

Sojiro stands no chance against Akira’s curry. Not only did Akira end up moving back into the cafe for his third year at Shujin, he worked (and occasionally crashed) there part time through first year of university when the tiny cafe started picking up some decent business. He knows all of Sojiro’s and Futaba’s favorites.

"Not bad, kid." Sojiro begrudgingly admits when the food is done. For still being pretty lukewarm (or at least not subzero) towards Akira, that’s probably the best compliment he’ll be able to get out of him. "You have potential." Akira smiles as he pushes his own food around in the bowl. He knows he should be starving, but his appetite’s not really there. "Who taught you how to cook?"

Akira shrugged. He couldn’t exactly tell the truth and Sojiro is pretty good at catching him when he spouts bullshit. "I had to learn for myself." He doesn’t notice Sojiro’s contemplation as he loses himself to memory.

"Know anything about coffee?" Sojiro asks.

Akira knows plenty about coffee, but it never hurt to visit the basics. He shrugs again. "It's made from beans?"

Sojiro chuckles as he stands and walks around the counter, pulling an apron over his head. "There’s a lot more to coffee than just the beans – finish up your food and I’ll teach you a bit about technique."

Bittersweet is the word of the day as Akira leaves for Shujin, making sure to catch the last train possible to avoid any homicidal detective princes that might be lurking about. And Akira knows he hasn’t exactly been forgotten by everyone so much as he just remembers things he really, really shouldn’t – but it feels like it.

For the first time in three years, he feels genuinely alone.

It sucks.

Morgana’s sitting on a wall staring at Akira as he trudges up the steps, and that gives him pause. It’s definitely Morgana. Akira’s been toting Morgana around with him everywhere for years to the never ending woe of his back, he wouldn’t mistake him for anything.

But that would mean -

Akira looks around as he feels some sort of pressure bearing down on him as though he’d suddenly found himself under leagues of water, pressing him down and crushing -

and it's gone.

"Kurusu-kun."
Akira looks up from where he’d crouched down in pain, arms protecting his ribs, to see Kamoshida and Ryuji hovering over him, Morgana no where to be seen.

“Dude, you alright?” Ryuji asks, crouching down with him. And yeah – Akira’s fine. Any trace of pain he felt vanished as if he hadn’t experienced it at all.

“Yeah, sorry.” He says as he stands, confused as all hell. Ryuji didn’t seem too convinced, but Kamoshida didn’t give a damn as he hid the annoyance on his face with a neutral smile.

“Well, if you’re fine, you need to get to class – both of you. I’m closing the gate.” Kamoshida says, but Akira’s not listening. He’s staring at the school.


That’d be because Akira is seeing things he definitely should not be seeing. Much like the safe rooms that existed inside of the palaces, Shujin Academy looks distorted – the large stone walls and columns of a castle flickering and blurring reality. Akira rubs his eyes when his brain refuses to process it. He’s relieved when it’s simply Shujin Academy when he opens them again. “Sorry, just – vitamin D deficiency.” Akira says, and Ryuji probably doesn’t know what that is, but it must sound good enough to him as he grins and slaps Akira’s back.

“Just sleep through class, you’ll feel better in no time.”

“Yeah, yeah – that’s yeah. I’ll do that, thanks.” Akira is militantly scanning the perimeter, checking for anything weird.

“Hey, uh, you’re that criminal record guy, right?” Ryuji asks with an incredible lack of tact. He at least seems to recognize the fact as he cringes and grins apologetically.

Akira doesn’t mind. “Yup, that’s me. Criminal mastermind right here. Kurusu Akira, nice to meet you.”

“Sakamoto Ryuji. And don’t worry, I don’t really buy into all the crap going around about you. People will say anything about anyone here.”

“I’ve noticed.” Akira smiles. “Thanks.” Ryuji’s still grinning as he rubs the back of his head. “Hey, uh, was there a cat around here a minute ago?” Akira asks.

Ryuji stiffens as his eyes dart around in his skull and he grinds his teeth. “No?” He denies, but he mutters something most certainly insulting to Morgana under his breath.

“Huh, weird. Could have sworn.” Akira says more for Ryuji’s sake than his own. Ryuji must have found his way into the metaverse without Akira, after all. He supposes that’s a good thing – Kamoshida definitely needed to be taken down, and Akira is currently as useful as a marooned plane without wheels. Now if he followed Ryuji around for a bit after school he could pretty easily get pulled into the metaverse with him and they could tear through the palace before Kamoshida could do anything to Shiho. He’d have to get Ann in there somehow too. He can probably just lure her over with the promise of chocolate lava cake or something.

It works every time.

He parts ways with Ryuji as they head to class and tries to at least start some kind of dialogue with Ann in class by asking to borrow a pencil. Turns out she doesn’t have one either and they both beseechingly turn to the overly prepared student behind Akira for help.
The bastard drags his pencil case closer to himself and hides his face behind a book.

What a dick.

Akira and Ann not so quietly commiserate together before the teacher arrives and Akira is pretty sure they are now the best of friends.

He tries to find Ryuji at lunch, but Kawakami finds him instead and has more than a few words about his lack of preparedness for class that day. After school, Ryuji is nowhere to be found and Akira most certainly does not freak out and make a safe house out of a trashcan when he sees someone wearing the same uniform as Akechi on his way back to the cafe.

It's raining when he gets to Yongen-Jaya, he doesn’t have an umbrella today, and he hates life.

Sojiro shakes his head as Akira slinks through the door, but takes pity on him with a hot bowl of curry and a fresh cup of coffee.

Akira decides he needs a plan.

Akira fails to make a plan because apparently his brain stayed back in 2019 with his real life.

He thinks about the events that led to his current predicament and casts them aside. They’re irrelevant for another couple of years, he can worry about that later. Or never, if he plays his cards right.

It's another sleepless night. His brain is running at 110%, but nothing is being processed.

Sojiro has yet to trust him with the keys to the cafe, so he finds himself once again sneaking out of his window at some unholy hour of the morning and taking a train to Inokashira Park, this time to actually watch the sunrise.

It wasn’t even a year ago when he picked up the habit. Yusuke had just splurged the little money he had on an overpriced camera he wanted to use for reference photos (and because Akira is a push over and Yusuke knew he would be fed whenever he got hungry) and reference photos apparently entailed taking the most artistically timed photos possible at the ‘golden hour’ of the day. Reference photos also apparently entailed waking Akira up at three in the morning to help Yusuke lug around 50 pounds of equipment Akira’s certain Yusuke never even used, easily satisfied with the automatic mode on his fancy DSLR camera he never even read the manual for (because art doesn’t need instruction – it is born pure and from the heart. Akira knows this isn’t true. Yusuke knows this isn’t true. Akira suspects cameras were just too complicated for his poor friend). Any attempt to explain there were, in fact, two golden hours of the day (the other in which Akira was already awake) was met with deaf ears.

There was simply no way to escape Yusuke’s machinations.

They were roommates.

But sunrises – when Yusuke was busy fiddling with the tripod and trying to remember which lens he needed or what an aperture was (– and Yusuke should really stick to painting, but whenever he managed to get a good photo, he’d light up so ridiculously bright –) Akira would relax and let the
Springtime in Inokashira Park is a favorite of Akira’s.

The sun has yet to properly reach above the swathe of trees within the park when he gets there, casting a soft yellow glow amidst the rising mist. Cherry blossoms sway with the breeze under a violet sky and blushing clouds, the falling petals reminiscent of spirits stealing their last dance before humanity can take over the day.

It’s exactly the reprieve he needs.

“It’s quite the view, isn’t it?” A light voice cleaves its way through Akira’s brain, cutting away the future he belonged to. He visibly recoils and digs his fingernails into the railing of the bridge to prevent himself from doing anything embarrassing.

Akechi, of course it's Akechi.

Wonderful.

He’s wearing a different set of athletic clothes, no less expensive looking than the last ones, and his hair is tied carelessly behind his head, long strands falling down to frame his face. And Akechi can say what he wants about the view, but Akira’s convinced he hasn’t been looking at all given how comfortably he’s set up to ogle Akira from the spot next to him on the bridge from where he’s blatantly turned away from the sunrise, his head propped up by a hand.

Akira is reminded of when Akechi used to sit at the counter in Leblanc. Languid, calm, and quiet.

Akira remembers Akechi screaming at him to just **DIE** as he tore and ripped and burned everything in sight, angry and desperate.

“Inokashira isn’t part of my usual cycling route, but I always seem to find myself here in the springtime. There’s a peace here you can’t find anywhere else in the city.” Akechi continues when Akira doesn’t. He has a placid little smile on his face Akira wishes he can believe in, but doesn’t.

Akira looks at the white knuckles of his hands where they’re still clenched against the railing and methodically forces himself to relax. He sighs and forces his eyes back to overlook the lake, instead seeing the imaginary silhouette of a gaudy ship destined to be the grave of just one. He rubs his eyes to dispel the image, bringing back the sunrise.

“If I could pick anything to be my favorite color, it would be this place.” Akira says when he’s collected himself, sees what he came for – not what he regrets. Akechi watches him for a moment longer before twisting around to try and see what Akira sees. A wistful smile draws his face and it sends a pang through Akira’s heart.

He remembers the same smile whenever he made Akechi a cup of coffee at Leblanc or whenever he’d say something stupid to get a laugh out of him, but didn’t quite succeed.

He remembers too much about Akechi. He’s the only person Akira couldn’t save – and while the others were eager to forget everything about him and move on with their lives – after a long day at the cafe, Akira would set a particular brew at a specific spot on the counter and just take a moment.

The regret hurts more than the loss.

Akira wonders what Akechi sees when he looks at the sunrise. The dawn of a new day? Or a reminder that he’s woken up yet again to his self-made hell on earth.
“I’m afraid to admit my artistic sense is limited, but even I can agree there is something special about
the sunrise here.”

“You don’t need an artistic sense to appreciate something beautiful.”

Akechi chuckles and turns back to Akira, a quirk to his lips. “I suppose you’re right. There are many
tales out there about the fiercest warriors being brought to their knees by a beautiful woman or some
incredible sight.”

“I mean, they could have been artistic warriors.” Akira says just to be pedantic.

“Ah, you’re right, of course. How thoughtless of me to merely assume otherwise.”

And Akira supposes it’s his turn to say something, but he’s never really been too great at keeping up
a casual conversation for any significant length of time in the first place and the anxiety is really
starting to settle in at the pit of his stomach. He wonders if there’s secretly an active volcano under
Inokashira Lake that wouldn’t mind going off right about now. Maybe a tornado or a water spout?

He looks to the sky. His delayed asteroid?

“It's strange, isn’t it?” Akechi says, breaking Akira out of his whatever he’s stuck in. Akechi is
obviously trying to direct the conversation somewhere.

“What is?” He takes the bait.

“This makes for the third time we’ve met in three days. In a city as large as this – it's almost
suspicious.” Akechi puts a hand under his chin and playfully scrutinizes Akira.

Akira huffs out a breath. “Oops, you caught me. I’m a huge fan – not a stalker, honest. Don’t worry;
the hair and toenail clippings are just a hobby.”

Akechi stifles a laugh with his hand. “I wasn’t worried before. Though now I suspect I’ll have to be
cautious with you.”

“I’m sure your detective training will prepare you for anything I could come up with.”

Akechi puts on an embarrassed face to hide the fact that he’s pleased. Akira knows better. “Ah, so
you do recognize me.”

Akira really wants to run away at this point, because the potential to screw everything up more than
it is already screwed up is so high its escaped Earth’s orbit. “You’re on TV a lot.” Akira says as he
nervously taps out a rhythm on his arm, switching back to simple and concise sentences.

“Hah, you’re exaggerating. I’ve only been a guest on a few shows.” Akechi deliberately moves the
hair out of his eyes as he give Akira a sheepish smile.

“You’ve been on TV so much I think your face has been permanently burned into the screen.” Akira
says as he gestures aimlessly with his hand.

“Ahh, that’s –” Whatever Akira has to say must not matter as Akechi wrangles him over slightly
so they’re both in the sights of Akechi’s camera phone. Before he even has a chance to protest, the
telltale sound of an artificial shutter is heard and the image of a very bewildered and sleep deprived
Akira next to the dashing visage of sports edition Akechi standing in front of a glorious sunrise is
staring back at him from the phone. “Okay.” Akira says in resignation. He’s not sulking, but it’s a
close thing.

“Perfect.” Akechi says as he grins at his phone. Akira supposes it's only perfect because Akechi
looks a model standing next to a member of Insomniacs Anonymous. “But, hah, I guess we should
have used your phone so you could have the picture. What’s your number? I’ll send it to you.”

“Really not necessary...” Akira mumbles under his breath, but he can tell Akechi is plotting
something and he’s a little curious so he pulls out his phone to check, because he’s gone through two
different numbers over the last year alone (thanks Futaba), and he has no idea what 16 year old
Akira’s number is. He can see Akechi’s eyes lock onto his screen, searching for who knows what –
the phantom thieves aren’t even a thing yet, so looking for the metaverse app on some random kid’s
phone probably isn’t his objective.

And that gives him pause.

The phantom thieves aren’t even a thing yet, but Akechi is unnaturally interested in Akira – someone
he renounced as being unremarkable before.

Akira looks at Akechi. He still has some silly faux smile plastered on his face, but his eyes are
focused and oddly intent.

Akira stops.

Does Akechi remember?

He doesn’t know whether to be terrified or relieved at the implication.

Because if Akechi remembers – what would his intentions be? Redemption? Or ensuring his original
plans went off without a hitch?

Akira’s breathing picks up as he assesses yet another complication – but it’s not possible, right?
Akira’s the one sent back and Akechi was dead. Akechi had been dead for 3 years – not even a
body left behind – and shit, Akira is thinking too much and Akira messed up and Akira isn’t even the
one who was supposed to go back was never supposed to go back it wasn’t his fault –

“Kurusu-san?” Akechi interrupts his silent freak out. “Are you alright?” He asks, managing to look
appropriately concerned as Akira’s eyes bug out of his head.

“That’s – I’m, uh. Number. Here.” He shoves his phone at Akechi before turning around and
covering his face with a hand, the other on his hip as he tries to control himself. He soon hears his
phone receive a message and turns back around. Akechi is still looking at his phone.

“You don’t have many contacts on your phone.” Akechi muses before he blinks and his eyes go
wide because, wow – rude much? “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it. I just added myself on
there so I couldn’t help but notice. I hope you don’t mind.”

Akira really sort of does mind, but doesn’t say anything as he takes his phone back as he stares
blankly, intent on deleting the stupid picture Akechi used as an excuse to snoop around on his phone.

“New phone.” Akira lies. He remembers deleting all of his old friends from his contacts list with
tranquil fury after his arrest when they made it clear they didn’t want anything to do with a criminal.
“They never tried to speak to him again and he never missed a single one. “New city. I have a few solid methods on how to make new friends, so I’m not too concerned about the current length of my contacts list.”

“I see.” Akechi sighs in relief when Akira doesn’t take offense. “You seem confident in your ability to make new friends. What’s your secret? I’ve never been particularly great at it myself.”

Snooping around on people’s phones isn’t a particularly great way to start a friendship Akira is certain, but doesn’t say. Neither is the pseudo-stalking Akira is certain happened in the last timeline and seems to be starting early in this one. He doesn’t say that either.

“Drop money on the floor. 100% success rate.” He says instead.

Akechi lets out a startled laugh, as if he surprised himself with actually finding something funny. “You have a very unique perspective.”

Akira shrugs and checks the time. He still has a couple minutes to waste before he needs to leave, so he risks a question before he gives into the urge to skedaddle without a second thought. “The other day – why’d you ask if we’ve met before?”

Akechi settles back against the railing and pulls a pensive face. “I wonder the same thing.” And okay, not what Akira was expecting at all. “It’s strange, isn’t it?” He asks for the second time. And yeah, it is strange. What the hell is Akechi getting at here? “I can’t help but feel as if I know you. It’s a very unsettling feeling and unusual enough that I can’t stop myself from trying to figure it out. Do you mind if we speak again sometime? Even if nothing comes of it, I still find myself oddly refreshed by our conversations.”

Akira doesn’t remind him that their conversations so far have been short, stunted, and nearly nonexistent due to Akira running for the hills at every given opportunity, but that’s probably the selling point for Akechi. Inspiring terror and dread into his unsuspecting peers has to be a thing that he’s into.

Akira obliges him as he takes a step back and nods noncommittally while pointing in a random direction with both hands. “Yeah, sure. I don’t mind.” And Akira really fucking minds because he has no idea what’s going on. “But I can’t right now. Got, uh, cafe stuff to do. Yeah. At the cafe.” Akechi should just pull out a gun and take aim now, because embarrassing doesn’t begin to describe Akira. “Bye.”

He swears he used to be cool.

He retreats and pretends not to see the amused glimmer in Akechi’s eyes.

He gets back to the cafe in good time and tries to psychically push the idea of giving Akira the keys to the cafe onto Sojiro over breakfast. It results in failure, which seems to be the running theme of the day. The theme persists when he doesn’t see Ryuji at all despite hearing everyone in school complain about him not so subtly asking everyone about Kamoshida and the volleyball team.

Akira decides to wait it out by Mishima. Ryuji is bound to make it to him eventually. Probably. Akira has plenty of faith in his friend, despite his intellectual shortcomings.

He grabs some snacks.

“Here.” Akira says, handing some sugar promoted as a drink to his poor abused friend. His eye is swollen from when he’d taken a volleyball to the face at the rally. “You look like you need it.” Mishima looks like he’s about to cry when he accepts the offering. “If you ever need someone to talk
“I really don’t have anything to talk about.” Mishima evades. “I’m just… tired today.”

Akira shrugs. “Alright.” He slurps his own drink and changes the subject. “Someday when you’re not tired you wanna go to Shinjuku with me? I’d probably end up in some very unfortunate situations if I went alone. Unfortunate situations are much more compelling with company.”

Mishima is pathetically easy to befriend after that and even after Ryuji finds them and interrogates the poor guy about Kamoshida, Mishima sends him a text that night with a list of links and things in Shinjuku they absolutely must do. Akira would bet his left kidney that most, if not all of it is illegal. He also gets Ryuji’s number, promising to let him know if he hears anything that could help.

At the very least, it’s a step in the right direction.

His eye catches Akechi’s name on his contacts list, above both Ryuji and Mishima, complete with an email address and a picture. One brown eye winks up at him from the screen and he takes a deep breath before pressing the screen down flat against the mattress. He doesn’t know the rules to the game anymore, but Akechi is definitely breaking them.

The next day is a step in the very wrong direction after he sneaks out again with the devious idea of going to the opposite end of Inokashira Park to avoid any possible interaction with Akechi to allow his brain to melt down uninterrupted while he tries to piece together some semblance of a plan.

His plan goes off with every hitch.

“Don’t tell me you actually jumped in the lake.” Akechi’s voice rings out across the cold morning in disbelief as his bike comes to a halt behind Akira.

Akira startles at his voice and twists a finger in his hair when he makes his way over. “Okay.” He agrees and Akechi doesn’t have to fake a laugh as Akira scratches the back of his head and avoids eye contact. “I regret everything.” He admits under his breath. Before Akechi can ask, he continues, “I may have also tripped over a rock.” He shakes some of the water out of his hair for emphasis. “And gotten chased out of the water by a duck.”

“A duck.”

“Or ducks, plural, as there were multiple of them.”

“You were chased out of the water by ducks.”

“I think I woke them up. I had to sacrifice the soggy remains of my toast to escape.”

“Just – why?”

“At least I had the foresight to take my socks and shoes off. Nothing in the world is worse than wet socks. Not even drowning.” He pauses thoughtfully. “Maybe drowning in bees, though.”

“Drowning in – excuse me?”

“And really, this is your fault. If you’d have been here five minutes earlier, all of this would have been prevented. Some hero you are.”

Akechi snorts. And it’s such an ugly sound Akira can’t stop the laughter bubbling in his throat when Akechi’s face scrunches up in horror at what he’s managed to produce. Akechi is dazed for a
moment as Akira laughs, but recovers quickly despite the burgeoning splay of red across his cheeks and the tips of his ears. “My apologies. I sincerely hope you can learn to forgive me.” He says with all the formality to be expected from a homicidal maniac pretending to be a civil human being. Is Akira being unfair? He doesn’t think so. Akechi is totally stalking him.

“I don’t know, I’m sort of a grudge keeper.” Akira leans towards Akechi conspiratorially and stage whispers, “It’s a personal failing of mine.” Akechi is smiling wide and by the time Akira realizes it’s a genuine Akechi is having a good time smile, Akechi has realized it too and tapers it down to his standard TV approved smile. Feeling something like disappointment, Akira passively pulls at the wet cloth stuck to his skin. Akira is willing to admit that jumping in the water may have been a mistake, but it did have the beneficial effect of waking him up so he isn’t a stammering mess at the moment. Nope, just his usual idiot self now. “I’m definitely regretting wearing jeans this morning. Wet jeans are arguably just as bad as wet socks.”

“Pneumonia is worse than either.” Akechi points out and Akira pretends not to hear as he moves to pull some sort of plant out of his hair. He stares at it for a moment before noncommittally tossing it over his shoulder. “I’m still not sure I follow why you would want to jump down there in the first place.”

“When you see a puddle on the ground after a day of rain, don’t you ever want to jump on it? Same thing here, just – bigger puddle.”

“Actually, I make it a point to avoid any and all puddles. Shoes are expensive.”

Akira purses his lips as he crosses his arms. “You’re really bringing me down right now.”

“My apologies, I’ll do my best to not ‘bring you down’ in the future.”

“I can smell it when a liar lies, Akechi.”

“Are you sure you aren’t just smelling the duckweed in your hair?”

So that’s what it’s called.

Akira points a finger at Akechi as if he’s about to argue, but clicks his mouth shut instead. He settles for shaking his finger. “This conversation isn’t over.” He says after a moment. “I need a bath.”

“You certainly do.” Akechi confirms because he is an asshole.

Akira sniffs and turns his nose up in an exaggerated motion before grabbing his shoes and sauntering away. He ruins his act when he steps on a sharp rock and spews out half a dozen curses with increasing creativity that has Akechi’s brow raising to alarming heights.

He tries to help Ryuji with his investigation that day, but gives up after the fifth person he sneezes on.

He’s lethargic and on the verge of sneezing out his brain and coughing up his internal organs the next morning, but he can’t sleep and being stuck in his empty attic is bringing his thoughts to dark places. He doesn’t want to see Akechi that morning at all, but his mind is operating at 25% and he finds himself unable to think of anywhere else to go than his usual spot.

By the time he realizes it’s the bone shattering cold that makes him feel like a corpse in the later stages of rigor mortis and that he really should have grabbed a warmer jacket, it’s too late: He stands shivering at his bridge, defiant of the elements – he’s going to enjoy his damned sunrise, okay?
He ignores the hell out of Akechi when he struts over with an overbearing not-smirk on his face that he attempts to switch to something resembling concern when Akira glowers pointedly in his direction. The faux concern incrementally melts off his face with every sneeze, revealing his amusement.

Akira adds a point to the ‘Akechi totally fucking remembers’ tally in his head, mostly out of spite, but also because Akechi has become far too comfortable far too fast with him. He supposes it could also be due to the fact that Akira is kind of incredibly pathetic and Akechi has found no reason to worry about pretenses with him.

Akira glances at Akechi’s bike after he wordlessly implies he’s not leaving when he leans all his weight against the railing and yawns.

“Don’t you need to go keep up your heart rate or whatever?” Akira asks after he wipes away the bountiful stream of tears running all over his assuredly beautiful face as the wind attacks his eyes with what must be billions of microscopic daggers. “I hear that’s important to insane people who exercise at five in the morning.” Ryuji is one of these types. Akira doesn’t understand why so many of his friends are morning people when Akira would rather go to sleep at 5 am than be alive.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were trying to get rid of me.” Akechi muses, tapping his chin. “I am trying to get rid of you. Your smarmy face is annoying and I don’t appreciate it.” Akira’s voice sounds like sandpaper under a viscous layer of expired mustard. He attempts to clear his throat, only succeeding in replacing mucous with more mucous.

Akechi seems to take minor offense to the word ‘smarmy’ in relation to his face as he tries to adjust his expression to something friendlier. “You could have stayed home and avoided me entirely, yet here you are at 5 in the morning with the insane people who like exercising.”

Akira glowers some more, but it can’t be very effective because a fresh wave of tears breaks free and his nose is definitely dripping. He rubs his hands together in an effort to stay warm when he sees his fingernails are turning a stunning shade of cobalt blue.

He eyes Akechi’s weather appropriate jacket enviously.

“I’m just trying to enjoy the sunrise, thanks.” And that would have been true, except looking at anything without squinting until he only sees a thin strip of light is agonizing. He squints with determination anyways because his only other option is to acknowledge Akechi in some form, which he has no intention of doing right now.

At least until he notices the suspicious lack of chatter.

“Somethin’ on my face?” He mumbles when he catches Akechi staring.

“Snot, mostly.” Akechi replies cheerfully. And sure, Akira walked right into that one, but he can’t stop a short laugh as he hopelessly tries to wipe down his face with his arm again.

Akechi’s grin seems brighter when Akira gives up stifling the deluge of gross leaking from his face and he does not want to even begin to analyze what that might mean.

“I need to get back to the cafe.” Akira admits when he can’t make a fist with his hand any longer. It was stupid to leave in the first place.

“Cafe?” Akechi turns the word over in his mouth as he seems to try and remember something. “Do you need help getting back? No offense, but you really don’t seem to be in the best health.”
Akira can feel his masculinity take a hit at what is essentially an offer to walk him home.

“I’m good.” He says with narrowed eyes, although Akechi probably can’t tell the difference since he’s been squinting all morning. He turns on a heel before Akechi can try to convince him otherwise and shuffles miserably back home.

Akira is decidedly very not good by the time he makes it back, and might even be incredibly very bad when he sees Sojiro standing by the entrance to the cafe, his arms crossed and his face possibly even more cross. If Akira was capable of feeling like anything other than death, the day might have gone very differently. He sees the firm line of Sojiro’s mouth move before his chest constricts and he’s unable to breathe between incessant bouts of coughing.

Out of all the opportunities for death to finally win him over, it would be because of a cold and his own idiocy.

*Always leave a place cleaner than you found it, Akira* – One of his mother’s golden rules before she broke them all herself and left him to pick up after her. He hopes someone removes his body from the alley before he ruins too many people’s day. He hopes he wakes up at home, Yusuke begging him for help carrying paints and camera equipment or Futaba setting off his alarm in the dead of night because she wants a second opinion on a new character build.

He hopes –

He hates it when people say everything works out, everything will be okay in the end, that people shouldn’t worry because everyone finds someone. He wishes he could shake them until they understand that no, people die absolutely alone everyday and no one ever cares.

…

He doesn’t know what to do.

He hopes that everything will be okay in the end.

Chapter End Notes

so I heard u guys like time travel

(That's all I've ever written. Someone free me from this addiction.)

I'm working on a few things right now so I'm probably not going to be the fastest at
updating, but there will definitely be more! Anyways, thanks for reading!

Also, I want to note that the line, "He hates it when people say everything works out, everything will be okay in the end, that people shouldn’t worry because everyone finds someone. He wishes he could shake them until they understand that no, people die absolutely alone everyday and no one ever cares." is from here: https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/4r8ybe/serious_redditors_who_work_around_death/

Only read that thread if you want to cry.
Chapter 2

The jolly chime of the door sends a jolt of awareness through the groggy half sleep that nearly consumes Akira’s consciousness. A customer. That means Sojiro will have someone to harass instead of trying to order Akira back up to his dark, lonely attic away from his current preoccupation of drooling on the teak wood counter top currently absorbing his face.

“Afternoon.” Sojiro greets, irritation bleeding through the single word. “You lost or can I get you something?” Well, he won’t be getting a reoccurring customer, that’s for sure.

“Oh, good afternoon. Um – Akira?”

Akira has half a mind to inform the customer he’s too expensive for them, except it would definitely be a lie. He’s not ashamed to admit he’s always been a cheap date.

Wait a second.

He peels his face off the counter and manages to locate his eyes which he’d earlier given up on as being lost inside his head somewhere forever.

He sees a vaguely familiar brownblue blur.

He blinks a couple times.

A slightly more in focus brownblue blur.

He squints.

Ah, it’s Akechi. *Sweater vest* Akechi.

“It’s Gorororo –”

Sojiro sighs the sigh of unadulterated murder. “Did you really have to wake him up?”

“– rororo –”

“I’m… sorry?” Confusion.

“– roro roro roro –”

“Not another syllable out of you, kid. You’re in enough trouble as it is.”

“– ro – Oh. Hi ‘kechi.” He has to mentally restrain himself from compulsively making up words to rhyme with Akechi. It doesn’t work, so he bites his tongue before Sojiro can remove it for him.

Akira eyes the knife in Sojiro’s hand with suspicion.

“Um.” Akechi is making a face. Akira is as sure as his left arm that he’s either constipated or having an aneurysm. Akira can’t feel his left arm. He hopes it’s just asleep. “Hello, Kurusu-san?” He likes being called Akira better.

“If you’re here to see this guy, look all you want, but no talking. He’s grounded, probably
contagious, and on double the amount of medication he needs to be. He’s been mumbling nonsense all morning.” Sojiro’s tone sounds like he’s debriefing a team of soldiers on a secret ops mission. And well, Akechi is pretty much a spy of the murderizing variety, so he figures it’s not too far off the mark. And so what if he took too much cold medicine? It was an accident. He thought each capsule was only 100mg. Besides, it should work twice as fast now. “Turns out he’s been sneaking out through the window at some ungodly hour of the morning doing who knows what before sneaking back in like some kind of thief in the night.”

Akira makes what he thinks is a vaguely protesting sound, but actually resembles Morgana when Akira accidentally eats all of the sushi.

“He’s been sneaking out every morning?” Akechi asks as if he’s done something genuinely outrageous like try to murder everyone.

Akira tries to say something here, but snaps his mouth shut when he notices the knife in Sojiro’s hand migrating close enough to Akira’s face to be a genuine cause for concern. The serrated blade gleams threateningly in the low lighting as it slaughters an innocent loaf of bread.

“He says he’s just been going to Inokashira Park to see the sunrise, but what sixteen year old does that?” Asks Sojiro the Nonbeliever. Akira would probably be getting better treatment if he’d just said he was out tagging walls or selling drugs because at least Sojiro would believe him.

“Well...” Akechi pulls out his phone. “While I can’t even begin to justify him sneaking out,” and wow, what a kiss up, “he’s not lying to you about going to Inokashira. I’ve run into him there on my cycling route a few times where he really is just watching the sunrise.”

Sojiro takes the phone and looks at it with a hint of surprise. “Well, I’ll be damned. I thought he was out doing something like tagging walls or selling drugs.”

Akira rolls his eyes as he drops his head back down to resume his counter-face integration ritual that was so rudely interrupted. His neck makes an alarming noise that has him mildly concerned he’ll need a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

Akechi laughs as he takes back his phone and pockets it. “I’d have him arrested myself if I saw him do anything of the sort.” And okay, at least Akira already knows Akechi is a traitor. What a jerk. Sojiro hums in approval. Also a jerk, but at least Akira likes him.

Akira coughs pathetically as he tries to melt out of existence and into the abyss, only to groan in woe at his predetermined failure.

Sojiro shakes his head as he turns to Akechi. “Kid only has a cold, but with how he acts you’d think he’s been diagnosed with three terminal illnesses all at once.”

Akira makes another pathetic noise just to be annoying. It's super effective, because Sojiro looks like he’s about ready to retire the whole cafe thing he’s got going on and become a butcher with a bread knife.

Akechi smiles like he’s in on some kind of joke that Akira isn’t. It isn’t the most annoying thing Akira’s ever seen, but it's damned close. “Many would agree that stupidity is, in fact, terminal.”

“You are –” Akira says between an agonizing cough sneeze combination “– the worst –” He almost says the word ‘friend’ here, but cuts himself off, because: One – it isn’t true; and two – he doesn’t want to give Akechi the satisfaction. Akechi spares him an indulgent smile before ignoring him completely to pay attention to Sojiro. Well, fine. Akira doesn’t want attention anyways.
“So he really goes out to watch the sunrise, huh?” Sojiro the Persistent Nonbeliever questions.

“And to harass the ducks.” Akechi the Traitor snitches with a smile.

“They harassed me.” Akira the Betrayed slurs into the table. Not that anyone’s listening.

Sojiro shakes his head and heaves out yet another sigh. Akira hopes the old man’s been taking in enough oxygen, because the amount of exhaling going on in the place is unbelievable. “I’m Sakura Sojiro, by the way. I’m the one in charge of making sure the kid doesn’t do anything too stupid this year. It's been a bad start.”

“Akechi Goro, pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“You’ve got manners. Other teenagers could learn a thing or two from you.” Sojiro says pointedly in Akira’s direction. “Have you been here before? You look familiar.”

Akira groans with gusto. Akechi’s eyes flicker over as he suppresses a grin.

“TV.” Akira says, hoping he won’t have to elaborate. His tongue feels like cotton made out of whatever the heaviest material on Earth was. Or the whole universe even. But maybe just Jupiter.

“Well?” Sojiro’s eyes brighten as he remembers. “Oh, that’s right – you’re that detective kid. If you’re here to arrest this guy, make it fast. I have somewhere I need to be tonight.” It almost sounds like he wants Akira to be arrested.

“Nothing like that, I promise.” Akechi raises a placating hand as he doles out his best sensible chuckle. “I’ve been craving some coffee and it's been a couple of days since I’ve seen Kurusu-san, so I decided to swing by and see if he was still alive while grabbing a cup.”

Akira wrinkles his nose. “Sorry to disappoint you.” He says through a layer of phlegm.

“Quiet over there. You shouldn’t even be down here spreading your germs everywhere. If any of my customers get sick – you’re never touching another coffee bean again.” Harsh. Akira imagines he could have started this timeline a tad better. Sojiro turns to Akechi. “Coffee I can do. First one’s on the house, but any after that and I’m starting a tab under the kid’s name.”

Akechi perks up almost comically as he takes a seat at the counter, the same one he always used to. Akira might have some sort of feelings about that, but the cold medication was doing an excellent job at not letting him think or feel much of anything at all.

At this rate, he’s going to find himself in a twelve step program by the end of the month.

“I think I’ve found my new spot.” The traitorous bastard says with a toothy smile.

And wait – a – darned – second.

“Did – did you just say you’re starting a tab in my name?” Akira asks, the lovely haze of his drug addled mind clearing minutely as pushes himself upwards with his elbows. The world spins a bit around him as his head tries to float off his shoulders. “That’s not what you said, right?” Sojiro exchanges glances with Akechi, who grins into his hand. “Right? Because that would be – that would be mean.” He goes ignored. Apparently Sojiro is serious about the whole ‘don’t talk to Akira because he’s grounded’ thing.

Rude.
He ignores them back because there’s no way he’s paying for Akechi’s coffee. They start up some banal small talk that he has no interest in whatsoever when he notices he has a message from Ryuji.

He expects another diatribe disguised as an update on the Kamoshida situation, much like the last two thousand angry messages from both Ryuji and Mishima over the past three days Akira received while he was forced to stay home from school. Their confrontation with Kamoshida went about as well as could be expected; they were threatened with expulsion.

Akira feels a little left out. A dangerously high fever and unlimited amounts of snot really shouldn’t take priority over bonding with friends through potential banishment from school.

With that thought he becomes mildly concerned and compulsively has to make sure the box of tissue is still next to him on the counter.

It is.

He sighs in relief and checks his messages.

Ryuji: dude, i need help with something. are you doing any better today???

Akira: Sorry, still sick. and grounded apparently. Whats up?

He prays to the autocorrect gods that nothing gets mistranslated as he presses send, because he does not have the ability to focus his eyes or the coordination to press the right letters on the tiny screen while under the overinfluence of cold medication. Especially Takemi’s personally brewed batch. He must have managed to charm her even while ill, because the stuff was potent. Admittedly, it could have been the other way around. Akira never knows with her.

Ryuji: damn that sucks. will you be at school tomorrow?? the only other people I can ask for help are ann and mishima and that would just end up all kinds of bad

Akira: Think so. Took extra medicine today so I should be fine tomorrow. Can probably hang out a bit after school before I get in too much trouble.

Ryuji: hell yeah! it shouldn't take too long. just need to stop somewhere in shibuya but the dude there is scary as hell and wont sell me anything good

Akira: Ryuji.

Ryuji: ???????

Akira: Do we need to have an intervention

Ryuji: dude

Akira: Okay. Just checking because I might and I like company.

Ryuji: dude get some sleep

Akira fights and loses against a yawn and decides that might be the best idea Ryuji ever had. Then he catches movement from the corner of his eye and remembers Mr. Murder is still sitting two seats away from him.

And staring.
Akira’s yawn snuffs itself in surprise, so he’s sitting there with what must be a very attractive hanging jaw as he gawks back. His face feels kind of numb, so he hunches over and rests his head on his hand to get his jaw back in place in what he hopes is a natural looking motion. The fact that his hand misses his face a few times in the process implies he is unsuccessful.

Akechi’s watching him like he’s his favorite slapstick comedy.

“How has school been? It was your first week, right?” Akechi asks as Akira looks around for Sojiro who seems to be missing – Sojiro is never missing and Akira desperately needs an adult. He panics a little before he hears the bathroom door.

“Oh. Bad, from what I hear.” He says slowly to properly enunciate his words, but mostly to waste some time. He taps his phone. “I missed the past few days. But I guess there’s been a lot going on.”

“Oh, right. You go to Shujin, I almost forgot.” Almost forgot, Akira’s ass. “I heard there was an attempted suicide?”

Akira frowns. He’d really been hoping to stop that from happening. “Yeah. A girl, same year as me, different class.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Akechi says. Akira follows a groove in the counter with his finger as he tries to clear a coherent path through the fog in his head. Maybe he should have stuck to Takemi’s recommended dose after all. He wasn’t expecting the Spanish Inquisition in the form of a teenage psychopath wearing a sweater vest. “Do you know the reason behind it?” Akira’s frown deepens. Akechi asks way too many questions.

Akira taps his phone again as he lays his head back down on the counter. “My classmate was on the volleyball team with her. He says the volleyball coach is abusing the students.” He stops there, and wow, Sojiro is taking way too long in the bathroom. Akira’s going to get himself in trouble without adult supervision.

He yawns and closes his eyes to make himself look innocuous. It’s a little too effective because he can feel sleep crawling back into the corners of his head.

“Isn’t that something the school board should be investigating?” Akechi asks super casually.

And because Akira has no control over his mouth, through another yawn he replies, “Mmm, the school board would probably unanimously agree that the earth is flat and the Pope is Jewish if a few yen rolled their way.” That’s how he remembers it, anyhow.

After an excessive silence, he hesitantly cracks an eye open to find Akechi studying him, which in itself isn’t unusual, but this is a different kind of studying – different from the way he already knows Akechi studies everyone he meets. Akechi is studying the heck out of him. He can feel the physical manifestation of his stare like fire ants crawling over his skin.

“...That’s a problem.” Akechi finally says, slowly and without a break in eye contact. Akira’s unsure if he’s been unwillingly recruited into some sort of staring contest, but he doesn’t blink with his one open eye regardless. “Has anyone gone to the police?” Akechi taps the table with one finger in a steady rhythm that makes Akira feel like he’s expected to answer within a certain time limit or else.

And wow, Akira’s been so busy reminding himself that Akechi is a murderous psychopath that he managed to forget he somehow has a legitimate job as an actual detective. One of the crime solving variety that he actually gets paid for because he’s good at it.

Akira’s probably going to be dead before he can even recover from his newly developed addiction to
cold meds.

Ah well, life is all about enjoying the little things.

Akira tries to ignore the ceaseless tap-tap-tap as Akechi waits for a response and instead eyes the freshly refilled cup of overpriced specialty coffee that doesn’t even come with free refills because Sojiro is a cheapskate. He pulls up the contacts list on his phone and hits Akechi’s name with unnecessary force. Akechi raises a brow as his own phone buzzes on the counter and Akira can’t suppress the twinge of annoyance when he sees the sunrise picture Akechi took of them set as Akira’s contact photo.

With a bemused smile, Akechi indulges him as he answers the call. “Hello Kurusu-san, this is a surprise. What can I do for you today?”

“Hello, detective. I need help.”

Akechi pinches his face together in a concentrated effort to look serious. “Of course. What seems to be the problem?”

“My school sucks and there’s this guy using my nonexistent money to get free refills for expensive coffee.”

A suspiciously laugh-like cough followed by feigned shock. “That’s terrible. I’ll start looking into it as soon as I finish this delicious cup of coffee I happen to be drinking right at this moment.” He takes a lengthy sip, slurping audibly for extra asshole points. Akira grinds his teeth and tries to lunge over the two chairs between them to take what is rightfully his. Akechi abandons his phone to focus his efforts on keeping the coffee out of reach, extending his arm as high as it can go with a grin on his face as Akira battles the teetering of the world as he leaves his chair for the first time in four hours.

Needless to say, Akira doesn’t exactly succeed as he first trips over his own feet and then over another chair and slams his face on Akechi’s knee as he tumbles down to the floor where he belongs.

Sojiro chooses this moment to make his return.

A sigh. “Is he dead?”

Akechi prods at him with a foot. “Unresponsive, but he appears to be breathing.”

Akira thinks he cries a little and feels vaguely nauseous as he dissolves into a boneless mess.

“What a pity.”

It's hours after Sojiro drags him back up to his room and the drugs have worn off when it hits him.

Akechi should not know about Cafe Leblanc yet.

He wakes up to a dull throbbing along his cheekbone and only a vague memory of the previous day.

He stumbles down the stairs, half dressed in his uniform, thankful when Sojiro tosses him a flu mask instead of forcing him back to bed. As much as Akira loves lounging around all day doing nothing, and honestly – it was easily his favorite pastime – he has shit to do. He watches as Sojiro carefully takes out exactly one capsule from his confiscated pill bottle and sets it on the counter next to Akira’s
preferred choice of coffee with a stern look.

Akira ducks his head as a few cringe worthy memories grace his sober mind.

“You look better today. Or at least you don’t sound like you’re wheezing through a straw.”

Akira stamps down the smartass comment nineteen year old Akira would dish out with the knowledge that Sojiro would take it in good humor.

“Thank you for taking care of me. I know I haven’t been the easiest to deal with, but I promise to make it up to you someday.”

Sojiro’s thoughtful as Akira downs the capsule with a swig of coffee.

“Listen, kid. I get that you’ve had a tough year and moving to Tokyo of all places is probably throwing you off even more, but –” Sojiro rubs the back of his neck as he contemplates what he’s going to say. “Well, never mind. Just don’t take on too much – and stay out of trouble.” Akira forgot how bad Sojiro was at the whole being encouraging thing unless it was about picking up girls. He still appreciates the sentiment, even if it turned into a near scolding towards the end. “Oh, and you owe me 1200 yen.”

What.

“What?”

Sojiro points to an itty-bitty chalkboard on the wall that Akira has never seen before with ¥1200 written on it in a neat scrawl.

“Your friend has an admirable appreciation for fine coffee.”

Akira stares flatly at the number before snapping the flu mask on over his face and retreating to his attic.

He finds Ryuji after school arguing with Ann. He’d be more specific about what, but the volume of their argument ensured everyone within three kilometers already knew in excruciating detail. Ryuji looks like he’s ready to give up on life and swan dive off a cliff with Ann still enthusiastically shouting down at his twitching corpse until her throat went raw. Akira can quite clearly hear incriminating words such as ‘metaverse’ and ‘Kamoshida’ and ‘palace’ being thrown around and he has no idea how they haven’t already been accosted by someone.

More importantly, he sees Morgana.

And Akira has priorities.

“If you’d listen for just a minute – I’m trying to tell you – Oh, Akira’s here.”

But Akira’s too busy trying to pet Morgana.

“Whoa – hey, watch where you’re touching, buddy!” Morgana hollers as he jumps out of reach behind Ann’s legs, the ridge of black fur along his spine standing on end. Akira can’t quite quell his disappointment, even though he expected as much.

“I’m going to guess that you like cats?” Ann giggles as she steps out of his way when he goes to grab Morgana again, her verbal smiting of Ryuji temporarily forgotten.

“It seems to be a one-sided love.” Akira answers dejectedly.
“I don’t want some weird guy touching me!” Morgana darts behind Ann again, his tail wrapping around her leg. “Now if it were Lady Ann...” Akira purses his lips to stop from smiling, trying not to give away the fact that he can already understand Morgana. Ryuji scoops him up while his attention is on Akira. “Hey! You’re the last person I want picking me up! I’ll take frizzy hair over you any day!”

Akira self-consciously pats down his hair. He thought he’d gotten better at taming it over the years, but he must have been fooling himself.

“Jeez.” Ryuji groans. “Here, you like cats? Take him. He needs a place to stay and we can’t keep him.” He thrusts Morgana at Akira, but Akira can see claws and knows better.

“You can’t just give me away to some random person! I’m a human being!” He squirms in Ryuji’s hold, but Ryuji has a tight grip he can’t slip through. Akira waits for it, and lo and behold – out come the teeth.

“OW! Come on, you stupid cat! I’m trying to do you a favor!”

“I am not a cat!”

“You have a friggen’ tail! What human has a tail?!”

“Lady Ann has a tail in the metaverse!”

“It's part of a costume!”

Ann fidgets and laughs nervously as Morgana and Ryuji descend into a quarrel. “Wow, Ryuji sure talks to that cat like he’s talking back, huh? What a weirdo.” She says loudly as she utilizes all of the acting skills she doesn’t have while rolling her eyes and not so subtly kicking Ryuji’s shin. Akira once again wonders how they’ve managed to get away with anything at all in the past few days.

“He can stay with me if he wants to.” Akira says when there’s a lull in the screeching as Ryuji and Morgana take a breather to glower at each other. “I usually leave the window cracked so he can come and go whenever. I’ll just leave some fish out for him so he finds his way back. Maybe he’d like sushi?” And yea, Akira might be playing it up a bit, but it's Morgana.

“Did he say sushi?”

The magic word.

The world seems a little brighter with Morgana in his bag as he and Ryuji take the train to Shibuya, Ann deciding she’d rather visit Shiho than check out some sketchy back alley shop. The pieces were starting to fall in place, even if they were a little out of order.

“So what were you and Ann arguing about earlier?” Akira can’t help but ask as Ryuji furiously texts someone. Probably still hashing it out with Ann.

“Man, what don’t we argue about?” He whines while glaring at his phone as if it told him his face looked like a pile of moldy cow shit. Which, honestly, is probably exactly along the lines of what happened. Ann really knows how to insult people when she’s motivated enough.

“So are the two of you together or something?” Akira loves messing with Ryuji and Ann, because they would be the worst couple since Romeo and Juliet, and probably end just as tragically. Or just with double the casualties and collateral damage. Or just the standard extinction-level event that seems to have the tendency to crop up every few years in Akira’s life.
“What?” Morgana shrieks from the bag, drawing a few stares.

“Hell no.” A look crosses Ryuji’s face as if he’s just seen the other side of an event horizon and lost any hope he has for the future of mankind’s continued existence. “She’s hot, but – no way.”

“Oh. You two just seem pretty close.”

“We’ve been friends since middle school, but we haven’t talked much since we started at Shujin. Different classes. Why? You’re in the same class as her, right? You interested?” Ryuji asks with a leer. Akira flutters his lashes at Ryuji behind his glasses, receiving a shoulder check for his efforts. “Interested in Ann, dude.”

“Better not be.” Akira hears Morgana mumble with no shortage of venom.

“Nah, she’s not my type.”

“Not into blondes?”

Akira adjusts his glasses. “I like them older.”

Ryuji grins. “Into the mature type, eh? I guess we have similar interests.” He laughs the universal laugh of perverts worldwide.

“Someone save me from these morons.” Morgana groans.

“Shut up, Morgana. People keep looking over here. Anyways, do you know how long you’re going to be grounded for?”

“I really don’t know. Why?”

“Sucks. I still need to talk about it with Ann and Mor – uh, with Ann, but we’re working on a way to get the truth out about Kamoshida. But with just us, it's kinda not going so great. With just one more person I really think we can pull it off.” Akira doesn’t even need to imagine how they’re doing – the amount of bickering between the three of them was already enough of a giveaway.

“I’ll help however I can. People like Kamoshida…” Akira trails off.

Ryuji casts him an uncharacteristically pensive glance. “Sorry if I’m kinda just dropping this all on you. I know you just got to the city and have your own problems, but – it’s weird, but I just feel like I can trust you?” Ryuji stretches to distract himself and grins a bit helplessly. “Sorry, like I said – it's weird.”

Akira chews his bottom lip as he’s hit with deja vu.

“Does it – does it seem like we’ve met before? Before all of this, I mean.” Akira asks, unsure if the feeling dwelling at the pit of his stomach is hope or dread. Or maybe just his lunch. The sandwich he ate seemed a bit expired, but he was starving.

Ryuji blinks in surprise. “I don’t know if it's like that, but I mean – kinda? I know we haven’t, but it sort of feels like I’ve known you for a lot longer than I have.” The train comes to a halt at their stop.

“Like I said it's –”

“ Weird.” Akira finishes for him, a grim smile in place under the flu mask. “You’re not the first person to say something like that to me. I guess I just have one of those faces.”

Ryuji shrugs with his whole body as he pulls Akira out of the train car with him. “Hell if I know.
Anyways, so this guy at the shop won’t even let me touch any of the airsoft guns or any of the badass replicas he has for sale because he thinks I’ll break them or somethin’- which is, I dunno – fuckin’ discriminatory or something? Is it because I bleach my hair? But you look like the responsible type so –”

Akira gets the guns for Ryuji with no hassle and makes it back to Leblanc with time to spare where he gets to witness Morgana play Sojiro like a fiddle as he scores himself a new home and an entire bowl of cat friendly curry just for being cute. Akira wishes he had that superpower.

All Akira gets is told to make his own food and a cup of generic coffee.

He takes his spot at the counter and nurses his drink while watching the news and it's not until he hears the familiar chime of a bell and is hit with a cool gust of air as the door swings open that he realizes he’s fallen asleep. He shivers at the sudden drop in temperature and stretches his arms over his head, fondness overwhelming him when he sees Morgana napping on the chair next to him.

Something was finally right in his new reality.

“Long day at school? You were really out of it. Your friend dropped by again, but he said he didn’t want to wake you up.” Sojiro’s attention is on the freshly washed mug in his hands.

Akira instinctively knows Sojiro is referring to Akechi, but the word friend leaves him confused and straining his memory in an attempt to figure out who else it could have been.

When Sojiro pointedly stares at the new addition on the wall, Akira is more awake than he’d been all day.

“3300 yen?” Akira doesn’t shout. He has something called composure. If his voice seems a bit loud, possibly even shrill – it's just the acoustics of the cafe, because his voice isn’t capable of such horrors. “Does he order his coffee with flakes of gold?”

Sojiro’s got a smug look on his face Akira doesn’t like and Morgana’s peering at him curiously with a single blue eye from where he’s still curled up in a ball.

“Here.” Sojiro sets the pill bottle with his meds on the counter. “You were coughing in your sleep. Oh, and there’s some leftover curry in the fridge you can have for dinner – then you should probably get some more rest.”

Akira appreciates Sojiro’s newfound consideration, really – he does, but Akira’s still too busy being offended by the absurd number written on the chalkboard. He snatches the bottle from the counter with an unnecessary flourish and vows revenge.

He’s a bit late to school the next day, but he takes solace in the fact that Ryuji is too as they nearly crash into each other at the station as they dash out of the platform. Kamoshida eyes them with disdain as they jog together to the gate, Ryuji on point.

“The hell’re you looking at?” Ryuji snarls at him, no trace of pleasantries. “We’re not that late.”

Kamoshida’s gaze slides over him and pins Akira to the spot. Whoever came up with the phrase ‘make your own luck’ has obviously never met Akira. He attracts bad luck better than a black hole attracts light.

“Kurusu, I should have figured someone with your background would end up with the likes of Sakamoto.” Kamoshida’s eerily calm, and Akira feels like a bug with its legs pulled off trapped underneath a slowly descending shoe. “With your record and the company you keep – not to
mention the string of absences you’ve already accumulated within your first week of school – Let’s just say you shouldn’t get too comfortable at Shujin Academy. I’ve warned you before, but we don’t need people like you here.”

And oh, it looks like Akira will be joining the expulsion club after all. Hooray.

“What?” Ryuji takes a step in front of Akira. “He’s been sick, you asshole!”

Akira grabs Ryuji’s bicep and pulls him past Kamoshida as he seethes. “Let it go. Something like this was bound to happen eventually.”

“Don’t tell me you’re just going to take it?” Ryuji is practically spitting fire. “You haven’t done anything wrong!”

“I have a criminal record.” Akira says humorlessly once they’re out of range. “That’s all he needs.”

“This is just – so fucked.” Ryuji tries taking a few stabilizing breaths, fails, and grabs his head with both hands while he tries not to explode. “Listen – I’m going to talk to Ann later, we have a plan to get that piece of shit to confess to everything he’s done. I think she’ll be more than alright with bringing you in on it, especially with what just happened.”

Akira follows him through the entrance, eyes cast down. This is – what Akira wanted, right? He wanted to be brought into the group, he belongs there. Ryuji – Ann – everyone else; they were his family. It’s where he needs to be.

Something feels off.

“I’ve got your back, whatever you decide.” Akira says.

He feels like he’s being watched, targeted by a spotlight so bright he can’t see it – too blinded by the glare.

“Trust me, we’re not going to let him get away with any of this.” Ryuji promises as he takes the turn to his classroom.

A suit of armor watches Akira from the end of the hall where the lush red carpeting stops. He blinks and it’s gone, replaced by the imagined image of gleaming yellow eyes and a lascivious grin.

“Tell me where is evil bred? In the heart or in the head?” He recites dramatically, reading from a well used copy of The Merchant of Venice Akira bought from some shady street vendor. Akira snatches it from his hands.

“That’s not even how it goes.”

“No, but it’s more interesting that way. More – philosophical, don’t you think?”

“I’m not really the deep thinking type.”

“Liar.” A grin.

“Didn’t you need help studying? Your exams are coming up and you still suck at math.” Akira says as he drops down on his desk chair. “You remember you’re paying me, right? To tutor you so you don’t flunk out of high school? I have bills, you know.”
He rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. I’m still paying you. I’d rather talk philosophy, though. Math will never be my strong suit, so why bother?” Akira holds his tongue. “There’s a saying my grandma used to like - ‘V tihom omute cherti vodyatsya’. Something about you reminds me of it.”

“What does it mean?”

“The literal translation? ‘It’s the still waters that are inhabited by devils’.”

“Funny. If anything, it reminds me of you.”

Laughter. “Yeah, grandma used to say that, too.”

Akira startles awake as someone knocks their hand against his desk. Long blonde hair attached to a cherubic face with a sunny smile fills his dotty vision.

“Hey, Ann.” Akira coughs to cover the crack in his voice.

She playfully twirls a strand of hair between her fingers. “Good morning!” She teases. “You were sleeping so deeply, even the teachers stopped trying to wake you up. Still feeling sick?”

“No, just a bit of a cough left. I’m fine.” Or so he thinks. “Just – I have some insanely strong cold medicine. It really knocks me out.”

Ann laughs as she stands and takes a few steps. “Alright, just figured I should wake you up since school’s out. I’ve got to meet up with Ryuji, but I’ll see you tomorrow!” She waves with her fingers as she turns on a heel, her long gait suited more for a catwalk than a classroom.

“Oh, okay. Bye.” He says, voice weary. He can feel the stares of his classmates drill into the side of his head as usual. He ignores them as he grabs his bag and leaves the room. Ann must have been trying to wake him up for longer than he thought, because most of the students were already gone. Being grounded leaves him with little choice other than going back to Leblanc to attempt to get into Sojiro’s good graces.

He decides not to linger.

Like any and all of his recent plans, he fails catastrophically when he rounds the school gate and slams into a brick wall pretending to be a bi-pedal human being. Akira’s willing to bet he could have caught himself before falling on his ass, but he seems to have a debilitating tendency for theatrics as a form of masochistic self-entertainment. Apparently the heavens must have decided it’s been too long since he’s been properly harassed by Akechi, because of course it’s Akechi standing there looking shocked, yet significantly less rattled than Akira.

Akira forgets everything that just happened as he points up at Akechi and says, “I am not paying for your gold infused coffee.” Deep breaths, deep calming breaths. Nope, no calm, just anger and vows of vengeance. “And are you made of bricks? You look about my size, but I’m pretty sure I just broke something.” Akechi covers his mouth with a hand to hide a laugh as his shoulders shake. “Call an ambulance and at least pretend to be sorry.” Akira grumbles as he falls all the way back on the ground and scowls at the sky. He wishes there were more people around to witness Akechi laughing over the body of his victim. It would help with the whole revealing him for what he really is thing Akira needs to get around to doing one of these days.

The sky is a hideous overcast gray and isn’t doing much to improve his mood. If there was ever a
time for a spontaneous flash flood – now would be it.

A hand grabs his arm and pulls his limp body off the cold cement. Akira doesn’t help at all as he sort of just dangles there.

“I’m sorry I knocked you over.” Akechi says. “I’m not sorry about the coffee. Sakura-san’s coffee is the best kept secret in all of Tokyo and he refuses to let me pay.”

“I’ll bet you didn’t even try.” Akira accuses and lets himself be pulled up when he starts to worry Akechi will get bored and drop him. Akechi smiles mysteriously and makes no attempt to refute his claim.

“You look much better today. Is your cold gone?”

“More or less. What are you doing here?” Akira doesn’t hide the suspicion in his voice. Or in his face. Or just, at all. If anything, he’s overtly suspicious of Akechi and is doing everything within his limited ability to indicate as much to anyone and anything nearby.

Akechi catches on, if the upturn of his lip means anything, and is about to answer when his eyes go wide as they catch something behind Akira.

Akira turns around.

Akira takes yet another deep breath as he blinks a few times and blindly digs around in his bag for the pill bottle he promised Sojiro he wouldn’t abuse ever again.

He mumbles, “Side effects… ‘mood changes, dizziness, confusion, hallucinations’ – that explains a lot.”

Akechi swipes the bottle from his hands. “Akira,” he says, forgetting his preference for formality, “If your school looks like a castle to you, I’m afraid to say that it has nothing to do with your medicine, because I can see it too.”

Akira wonders how everything went so wrong so fast. Then he hears Ann and Ryuji and he understands.

“Oh, shit.”

“Skull! You were supposed to make sure no one else was around before using the app!”

“You could have told me there were people nearby, Panther!”

“You didn’t even warn me you were going to use it!”

“What else did you think we were doing in that little corner? Getting busy?”

“Would you two knock it off, already?” Morgana interrupts. “This doesn’t have to be a bad thing. Look – it’s Akira, he’s not bad – and I think the other guy is a friend of his. I remember him from last night.”

Akira turns to get a better look from where he and Akechi are standing at the school gate. Ann, Ryuji, and Morgana stand a few meters away from where it looks like they emerged from a small alcove along the wall where the vending machines are, Ryuji looking ready for a post-apocalyptic war zone and Ann really abusing her sex appeal with that cat suit.

Akira is only human. At least, that’s his excuse when his eyes stray to her chest. He doesn’t even
have to pretend to be surprised about their appearance – it's been a long time since their crazy metaverse outfits were a normal occurrence for him.

“Oh, you’re right. It is Akira. I was actually going to talk to you guys about bringing him in on this anyways. So, uh, maybe it worked out?” Ryuji tries to justify himself with a sheepish grin visible under the metal skull mask on his face.

Ann punches his arm, hard, going by the expression Ryuji makes. “That doesn’t make it okay! I’m in charge of using the app from now on.”

Ryuji looks defeated.

“Um.” Akechi tries.

Morgana sighs. “I guess it’s up to me to explain everything again.”

“Cat. Talking monster cat-thing.” Akechi states blankly, pointing. Akira can’t tell if he’s acting or genuinely amazed.

“I am not a cat.” Morgana says, a bit more patiently than when he says it to Ryuji, the same Ryuji who happens to be rolling his eyes while mouthing the same exact words right behind him. Ann elbows him. “My name is Morgana, yes – the same Morgana you know in reality.” He says that specifically to Akira. “Yes – I know I look like a cat, but I’m human. Now that it's settled – That castle back there is Kamoshida’s palace. Ryuji accidentally brought you here with me and Lady Ann when he used the metaverse nav app on his phone.”

Akira wonders if that was actually supposed to make sense to anybody who didn’t already know what was going on.

“Right.” Akira says before massaging his temples. All of this would have been fine, perfect even – except for Akechi. Akechi continues to burn a hole through any and all of the half baked plans Akira’s been flitting through his mind since he found himself back in 2016. “Metaverse nav app.”

“I believe Morgana is referring to this.” Akechi says, pulling his own phone out and showing Akira the little red app.

“No way, did you already have it?” Ann asks, pressing herself to Akechi’s other side to get a good look at his phone. He seems uncomfortable with the distinct lack of distance Ann leaves between them as he leans towards Akira, making Akira uncomfortable. “I only got it after Ryuji accidentally brought me in last week.”

“Seriously? He already has it?” Ryuji asks, walking up next to Morgana.

“Well, you said you got it out of nowhere, I guess it's not unbelievable to think that there are other people like you.” Morgana rationalizes.

Ryuji scratches his head. “I mean, I guess. But who is this guy? Akira, is he your friend?”

All eyes turn to Akira. Great. No pressure. This might only be one of many deciding factors determining whether or not Akechi kills everybody or just Akira later on. No biggie.

Akira presses his glasses up his nose. “He’s my arch nemesis.” He insists. He thinks he hears one of the armored shadows in the castle trip and fall somewhere in the distance. “Until he pays for his own damned coffee. Then maybe we can be friends.”
Ann and Ryuji exchange looks.  

“They’re friends.” Morgana simplifies.

Akechi may as well be smirking as he pockets his phone, tilts his head, and raises a challenging brow with a look that tells Akira he has no intention of ever paying for another cup of coffee in his life.  

Asshole.  

“My name is Akechi Goro. I take it the two of you are,” he points at them as he says their names, “Ann and Ryuji?”

“Sakamoto Ryuji, yeah. And she’s Takamaki Ann.” Ryuji says as Ann waves. “I guess, uh, there’s a lot of explaining to do, huh? Wait, how much do you already know? Did you know about the metaverse?”

Something sharp passes through Akechi’s eyes, but Akira doubts anyone else notices it. “I’m not sure how I got the app, it just showed up on my phone one day a couple months ago and wouldn’t let me delete it. I’m not sure how I activated it, but I did end up somewhere.”

“So you have been in the metaverse before.” Morgana says.

“I suppose?” Akechi says with a pained smile. “I was nearly killed by some kind of monster, so I never tried to go back. Part of me was in denial that it even happened, but all of this is hard to ignore.” He glances at the castle before giving the three of them a curious look. “What exactly is it that you’re doing here? You said earlier you were planning on bringing Akira in? For what purpose?”

Morgana takes this as his cue. “We’re going to change Kamoshida’s heart. He’s the volleyball coach at this school and even I can tell he’s a real piece of work.”

“You mean he’s a real piece of shit.” Ann interrupts. “What he did to Shiho… What he’s doing to everyone on the volleyball team –”

“It’s unforgivable. The guy’s a complete monster. He broke my fuckin’ leg last year when he was coaching the track team just because I argued with him.” Ryuji contributes. “The principal and the teachers are doing fuck all, if anything they’re protecting him – and the police are a joke, so we’re taking it into our own hands before anyone else gets hurt. Hell, Akira’s only been here a week, he’s been sick for half of it and Kamoshida already told him he’s going to be expelled at the next board meeting!”

“What?” Ann exclaims. “He said he’s going to expel Akira?”

“Yeah! It just happened this morning! I was going to tell you guys when we were exploring the palace today. I mean, dude – you said you were on probation, right? What would happen to you if you got expelled?”

All eyes turn to Akira, yet again.

“I guess it would depend on what Kamoshida says. Shujin was the only school that accepted me after my arrest, so – If I was lucky, I’d stay on probation, get to stay in Tokyo and pick up a full-time job somewhere.” He says, suddenly exhausted. He already dealt with the weight of his rehabilitation once before, he never wanted to live through it again. “I’ve never been lucky.”

“Akira...” And Akira expects the comforting hand, expects the reassurances – his friends were
sympathetic like that. He doesn’t expect it from Akechi. “You won’t have to worry about that, if
everything you’ve all said about this Kamoshida is true – he won’t get away with what he’s done.”
Akira doesn’t expect it from Akechi, yet it’s Akechi’s hand on his shoulder, his thumb rubbing
comforting circles along the muscle on his back, his sympathetic gaze burning with determination as
he promises Akira justice.

And Akira can’t believe any of it –
– because once upon a time Akechi put a loaded gun to Akira’s head and pulled the trigger with a
smile on his face, leaving him for dead.

He finds himself leaning into the touch while trying not to think about how fucked up he is.

“That means you guys are in, right?” Ryuji asks.

“Of course they’re in.” Morgana says.

“Well – I have a lot of questions I’d like answered about your methods before we join anything.”
Akechi says as if he speaks for the both of them, but Akira’s still reeling from the chaotic emotions
fumbling around inside him, so he stays silent. “I originally came to Shujin to conduct an
investigation of my own after hearing rumors of abuse.” He glances at Akira. “But if what you’re
implying is true and Kamoshida has some form of protection – opening a case may take longer than
we actually have.”

“Wait, hold on - ‘conduct an investigation’? ‘Opening a case’? What exactly are you talking about?”
Ann asks, wincing as her brain stalls trying to find an answer on its own. “You sound like a cop.”

“Detective, actually.” Akechi corrects with a chipper smile.

There’s a few minutes of insanity as Ryuji and Ann flip their lids and seem to expect brimstone and
hellfire to rain down upon them because Akechi works in law enforcement, and then a few more
minutes are wasted because, what the hell – Akechi is a teenager who works in law enforcement? It
takes a lot of cajoling on Akechi’s part to calm them down.

Akira wonders how long he has before Sojiro double grounds him.

“Uh, I have a lot of questions too. Really – so very many questions. In fact, I have so many more
questions that I can’t ask a single one because I’m incredibly grounded and need to go. Right now.
So – how about we just all trade numbers and start a group chat?”

Akira thanks the stars he can’t see in the sky when everyone agrees, but laments his cursed existence
when Akechi follows him home, insistent on wringing everything he can out of Morgana on the way
over since texting is a bit out of the realm of his paw’s capabilities and Akechi doesn’t trust Akira to
text for Morgana verbatim, which – okay, is completely justifiable, Akira would definitely be too
lazy to type out every single word Morgana says – but he’s still a little offended.

It's after Akechi realizes he can’t talk to Morgana effectively with Sojiro standing around and he
orders the most expensive coffee available that Akira decides he’s ready to set fire to Akechi’s stupid
overgrown hair.

…He should probably figure a few things out before he does that.

When Sojiro disappears to the bathroom and Morgana finds a sunny spot by the window to nap,
Akira sees his chance. He spins the pencil in his hand over his history book as he bites his lip. He
turns his head just enough to see Akechi engrossed in something on his phone. He appears
deceptively serene with the exception of his eyes. They’re sharp and quick as they rake in every bit of information available, leaving nothing behind.

*It's the still waters that are inhabited by devils.*

Akira shakes his head to dispel the memory.

“Akechi.”

Akechi blinks away the intensity behind his eyes as he zeroes in on Akira’s face, cranking the charm up to eleven with a cheeky smile. “Having trouble with your homework? I was at the top of my class last year, so if you need any help – I’m more than able.”

Akira gives him a dry look. The extent to which Akechi is willing to show off is impressive. “I’m just reading. So unless you feel like reading to me, I don’t think there’s a whole lot you can do.”

Akechi chuckles as he sets his phone down and taps the side of his empty coffee cup with his fingernail, the *clink* of the ceramic distracting Akira. “I wouldn’t mind. History is a fascinating subject – all the folly of mankind simplified to mere lines in a textbook.” There’s a bitterness there that sets off warning flags in Akira’s head. He has a feeling pursuing that topic with Akechi would consume hours of his life. Or possibly just his entire life in one fell swoop. If Akechi’s willing to kill over a historical debate, Akira really doesn’t intend on finding out. “But anyways, did you have a question for me?”

Akira pulls his attention away from the continuous *clink clink clink* Akechi is making and can’t help but wonder if he’s doing it on purpose because he knows Akira is easily distracted.

“Uh,” *clink clink*, “Yeah, actually.” *clink*, “How’d you know where I lived?” *clink clink*, “I haven’t told anyone about Leblanc.” The clinking stops, thank Satan and his unholy legion of devils. Akechi’s observing him with half-lidded eyes and a mischievous smile, and Akira already knows he isn’t going to get a real answer out of him.

“You told me.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did; that morning at Inokashira Park when you were sick. I asked if I could help you get home and you said, ‘I’m good. Cafe Leblanc isn’t too far away’. I’m not surprised you don’t remember, you were very unwell.”

Akira knows he didn’t say that and wishes he’d taken a chair further away from Akechi, because the proximity suddenly feels like a little too much. Akechi resumes tapping his cup and Akira feels a migraine setting in as he rubs his eyes to stop them from flitting between Akechi’s hand and his face.

“Why?” Akechi asks, unfazed. “Did you think I followed you home?”

*clink*

“No,” *clink clink clink*, “Why haven’t you asked me about why I was arrested yet?”

*clink clink*

“Do you want me to?”

*clink clink clink*
“Not really.”

**clink**

“Did you think I looked you up? I certainly have the capability to find out.”

**clink clink**

“Never mind. Forget I said anything.”

**clink clink clink clink clink**

“What were you arrested, Akira?”

**CLINK CLINK CLINK**

“I said never mind.”

**CLINK**

“But now I’m curious.”

**CLINK CLINK CLINK CLINK CLINK**

Akira can’t take it anymore, he seizes Akechi’s hand and slams it on the table under his own, away from where it can make the noise that must have originated from Cthulhu’s own dimension of eldritch horror, because not even hell was this dreadful. He closes his eyes and bites the inside of his cheek as the waves of annoyance fade away with the help of some vigorous mental coaching. He opens his eyes, just for the annoyance to return tenfold.

Akechi’s grinning so wide Akira half expects his head to split off in half.

“Ooh.” Goddammit Sojiro, always coming back at the worst possible moment. “I’ll just, ah, be another minute – let you two have some time.”

Akira releases Akechi’s hand like it just caught fire and watches with unbridled horror as Akechi descends into uncontrollable silent laughter, hiding his face in the crook of his arm on the counter when he can’t stop himself.

“You’re an asshole.” Akira finally says out loud.

Akechi pulls his face away from his arm, just to laugh harder when he sees Akira’s face.

“You’re –” insert heavy breathing here. Akira doesn’t even want to know what Sojiro thinks is happening, because Akechi’s laugh is the only thing that isn’t audible. “You’re just too easy. I can’t help it. I don’t even have to do anything.”

“I’m not easy.” Akira argues. He hears Sojiro cough and run the tap a little louder than necessary from the bathroom.

Akira hates everything.

“I’m sorry. I’ll stop.” What a fucking liar. He’s pursing his lips together in an uncoordinated effort to stop himself from laughing, but the action itself seems to be having the opposite effect.

“I’m gonna go find a volcano and jump in it now. Don’t bother clearing my name from expulsion,
I’m going to sacrifice myself to some ancient volcano god in exchange for cursing you to an eternity of always having shoes a size too small.” The threat does nothing to return Akechi to normal, though he does at least seem to be in some form of physical pain.

Akira slinks off his chair and skulks outside to sit with the plants by the window. He’d like to say it's because he hates Akechi and needs a second to cool off, but it’s really because he’s having a difficult time hiding his own unwanted smile.

The door cracks open and a few seconds later finds Morgana climbing up Akira’s back, needle claws dealing permanent damage to Akira’s previously flawless skin. He’d forgotten how bad Morgana used to be with his claws.


“No. He’s making fun of me.”

“Oh.”

“Oh? Not going to try and defend me?”

“No. You do seem kind of doofy.”

“What the hell is doofy?”

“You are.”

Akira supposes he has no choice but to accept that. He pets Morgana aggressively in retribution. It's a few minutes later when Akechi follows them outside, seeming to have found his composure. It falters a little when he looks Akira in the eye.

Akira fucking dares him.

“I apologize for my, ah, unbecoming display. It won’t happen again.” It won’t happen again because Akira’s going to strand himself on a deserted island where he’ll live off of coconuts and crab legs and never have to see another living soul ever again. “You’re just – always different than I expect.”

“What do you usually expect?”

Akechi smiles demurely as he tucks a lock of hair behind his ear. “Someone who wouldn’t get duped into paying for my coffee.”

Ouch.

Akira thinks it's safe to say he lost that battle.

“I will never pay for your diamond studded coffee.”

Akechi shakes his head as he crosses his arms. “I haven’t laughed like that in… years.” He says, his smile drawing itself into something a bit more grim as he stares out at something Akira can’t see.

“Thank you.”

Akira doesn’t know what to say to that. The fact that he’s being thanked for something like that is telling on so many levels. “The others want to bring us into Kamoshida’s palace tomorrow. Will you be there?”

“Hm? Oh, I plan on it, yes. Though I have to ask, what’s your opinion on all of this? The metaverse
Akira can feel Morgana’s tail thumping against his back, also curious to hear what he has to say on the matter.

“I think there’s a lot we don’t know.” There’s an eerie sensation of wrong that’s been hovering about him for days, and he can’t tell if it’s just him – or if something fundamental in the timeline changed. Something other than Akechi, that is. “But there’s only one way to find out.”

“Well said. The unknown merits proper exploration. However, there are a few things I’m still leery on. Forcing a change of heart seems – both unjust and dangerous.”

Morgana digs his claws deeper into Akira’s shoulder. “Kamoshida is the unjust and dangerous one! We’re just fighting back the only way we can!”

Akechi hums to himself as he thinks. “I suppose so. I’d still like to hear more, but we can leave that for tomorrow.” He turns in the direction of the station. “Oh, Akira?”

Akira hesitates. “What?”

“Why were you arrested?”

Akira wonders why Akechi bothers. There’s no way he hasn’t already looked him up.

“Stole a kit kat bar from a shop.”

Akechi’s shoulders are trembling again. “Was it worth it?”

“Have you ever had a kit kat?”

“As a matter of fact, I have.”

“Fucking delicious.”

Akechi’s shaking his head as he walks away, the grin on his face evident even while facing the opposite direction. “Have a good evening, Akira.”

“See you tomorrow.”

Chapter End Notes

So this is like... the slowest moving story in the history of history, but whatever. I'm having fun. Hopefully its still managing to be entertaining for you guys. Sorry if the pacing seems off. I'm trying not to get too caught up in the details or rehash all the information everyone already knows from the game, but some things have to be gone over to keep it feeling natural. Also sorry, not sorry if it has the tendency to get super ridiculous. That's just how I write. I'll try to behave myself and stop it from maneuvering into crack territory. It'll get more serious the further I get into the plot. Angst is inevitable, but with how I've been writing it'll be a while before we get there. I'll throw in smatterings here and there, tho.

THANKS FOR THE OVERWHELMING RESPONSE. Wow, I really wasn't
expecting so many people to even read this, but I know I'm definitely not alone in my love for time travel. I'll try to respond to comments from now on. I usually do, but I caught Akira's cold and forgot that responding to comments was even a thing.

Anyways, stop me if I get too ridiculous. I don't have anyone keeping me in check, so it's up to you guys.

(p.s. if you see any formatting errors, feel free to let me know. ao3 somehow messed up copy and pasting and left a bunch of weird spaces everywhere. Not sure if I got them all.)
Akira’s cloud watching. Or rather, he’s watching for clouds because there are none in sight and the sun pelting his eyelids with ultraviolet radiation is ruining both his eyesight and any plans he might have for a short nap. He can hear Ryuji grow more impatient with the minutes in accordance to the pace at which he taps his foot against the paved ground.

“What’s taking so long? I get that Akechi’s from a different school, but we’ve been waiting forever.” Ryuji complains.

Akira yawns and covers his face with his bag.

“It's been ten minutes, Ryuji.” Ann says, preoccupied with something on her phone.

“Feels like ten hours.” He gripes. “Can’t we just head in without him?”

“No, stupid.” Morgana speaks up from under the bench Akira is lying on. “He’ll be a big help if he wasn’t lying about having a persona already. He seems smart, too.”


“Definitely full of himself.” Akira deadpans. “Ow.” He says when Ann raps a knuckle against his head.

“I think he’s nice enough; he probably just needs to warm up to us a little bit. Besides, having a detective on our side can only be a good thing! Oh, and it helps that he’s cute.”

Morgana deflates. “You think he’s cute?”

“What’s cute about him?” Ryuji throws his hands up in exasperation. “He looks like he needed a haircut six months ago!”

Ann rolls her eyes. “I wouldn’t expect you to know anything about style.”

“The hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“Did you forget about middle school already?”

“I was trendy.”

“Sure, Ryuji.”

It's another few minutes just when Akira manages to doze off a bit when Ryuji pulls him from the brink of finally being able to sleep.

“Akira, how do you know this guy anyways?”

Akira mentally restrains himself from groaning and rolling off the bench (and hopefully straight down into a sinkhole). “We met at Inokashira Park last week.” He briefs. He hopes that’s the last question about Akechi. He already spends too much time worrying about him.
“Relax.” Morgana interrupts when Ryuji gets half a word out. “He already knows about us, so it's best to do everything we can to stay on his good side – even if you don’t like him.”

“Okay, fine. You’re right. I get it. He could still try to get here a little faster. He said he was coming, right? Maybe we should text him.” Ryuji paces a little, staring at his phone.

“Jeez, what are you so antsy about today? Akechi-kun already sent Akira a message when class ended. He’ll be here soon.” Ann pats the bag hiding Akira’s face. “And you could try defending him a little. He’s your friend.”

The irony was so thick it could stab Akira in the back. Just like Akechi. “I refuse.”

“Ignore him. Akira and Akechi like to pick on each other.” Morgana tattles, but Akira envies the simplicity of the notion and wishes it were that easy.

There were only so many cards Akira could play at this point – and none of them good. Akechi owns the table they’re currently playing on, owns the deck they’re playing with – and Akira may be the world’s ultimate fool, but he’s not stupid.

Akechi can annihilate them. Ryuji, Ann, and Morgana’s fledgling powers can’t hope to compare to Akechi’s two years of rampaging though the metaverse, not to mention the connections he has in the real world. And Akira –

Akira –

Akira unclenches his hands.

All he can do for now is play along and take chances as they come along. Akechi wouldn’t let them save him last time, too proud to live with the acknowledgment of his failures. Maybe it would be different this time.

Akira desperately hopes it's different this time.

He must have dozed off while drowning in his worries, because without any warning his only protection from having to upgrade from his favored stylish glasses to legitimate prescription glasses is removed from his face, the sun reminding him of all its splendor and glory as it incinerates his eyes in their sockets when he makes the mistake of blinking them open in protest. He flinches and rolls over to escape the giant ball of fiery death in the sky and has a brief moment to behold the colorful imprint of the sun burned into his retinas before remembering he was lying on a bench.

He plunges down to greet the pavement with a complete lack of grace and an abundance of pain.

“Are you alright?” The words themselves sound like they’re laughing and Akira can almost forget that their source tried to kill him a few times in another world.

“I think I just discovered the secret of life.” Akira croaks, letting Akechi maneuver him into a sitting position as he rubs his eyes.

Morgana strolls over and gives Akechi a questioning glance. “...Is that a good or a bad thing?”

“Yes.” Akira answers as he adjusts the glasses sitting crookedly on his nose. He crosses his eyes and is a little miffed when he notices a significant scratch on one of the lens. He shares his displeasure with a flat stare as he looks between his friends, letting his sights fall on Akechi. “Do you do this on purpose?” Akira’s getting way too familiar with the floor. There’s a suspicious correlation with Akechi being in proximity.
The corner of Akechi’s mouth twitches. “I was about to ask you the same thing. I was starting to think you were clumsy.”

Akira is as graceful as a gazelle running through a field of daisies, thanks very much.

“I am – not. Not clumsy. At all.” He stammers because being in Akechi’s presence apparently reduces him to a third grader trying to explain to his teacher that he has no idea how all that glue got up his nose. “Whatever.” He slaps Akechi’s hand off his arm as he stumbles upwards and onto his feet. “Can we go now?”

“Yeah, let’s go. Maybe we’ll make it a little further today.” Ryuji says as he pulls out his phone, just for it to be snatched away by Ann, reminding him that he lost his app privileges yesterday.

“Did you get any sleep last night?” Akechi asks as he sidles up next to Akira while the blondes fight it out. “You look tired.”

Akira draws into himself in a subconscious effort to keep some distance between them, only realizing he’s doing it because he notices Akechi noticing it with frown. He clenches his teeth as he takes a deep breath, manually overriding his instinctive physiological reaction as he forces himself to relax. It's difficult, considering they’re about to step through a threshold where Akechi could wipe them from the face of reality with no one the wiser.

“I could ask you the same thing.” Akira retaliates. And it’s true – Akechi carries the bags under his eyes as if they had a 99% off sale and he was an incurable impulse buyer. For someone who aspired to always appear perfect, it was almost unnatural.

“I’ll admit – I had a lot on my mind last night.” A distant smile twists his face. Akira hates it – the smile or his face, he isn’t quite sure.

Akechi is complicated so Akira settles for hating both.

“By the way –” Akira speaks up after a pause and when he concludes Ann and Ryuji are only about halfway through their argument. Even Morgana knows it's better to just let them tire themselves out, judging by how enraptured he is by a butterfly floating overhead. “What’d you say to Boss after I went outside last night?” He gives himself a mental pat on the back when his voice stays perfectly nonchalant.

Akechi sees through his facade as he side eyes him. “I merely requested some of your time today. I figured it would help, considering you’re supposed to head home right after school.” It did help, but Akira’s not going to thank him. Akechi tilts his head and places a hand under his chin. “Although he did seem rather presumptuous about a few things. I didn’t feel the need to correct him if it meant he’d let you stay out after school.”

Akira covers his face with a hand. It was bad enough when Sojiro thought he was dating every single girl he brought back to the cafe. Now he’ll be suspicious of everyone, going by the unfortunate conversation he had that morning. A conversation he will not be trying to remember any time soon.

Akira breathes out and forces himself to focus.

Metaverse.

Kamoshida’s palace.

Not dying horribly.
Focus. Right.

“Akira, did the app ever appear on your phone?” Akechi asks, and it's a direct hit, because – no, the app didn’t show up even after he’d been brought into the metaverse.

He blinks. “Nope.” Less is more when it comes to hiding frustration.

Akechi hums as he watches Ann and Ryuji literally wrestle over who gets to press a button. “Odd. I sincerely believed you would after yesterday.”

Morgana shakes himself out of his butterfly watching stupor. “I don’t know much about the app, but if I had to guess based on what I do know – it might only appear to people who have either awoken to their persona or are very close to awakening their persona.”

“The implication being that Akira currently lacks the potential?” Akechi’s brow furrows in this weird little way that Akira thinks means he’s both surprised and way too curious.

Akira resists the compulsion to correct them and spill the truth about where the app comes from.

“I don’t know, I’m only guessing. But it's possible.” Morgana sighs. There’s an itch at the back of Akira’s thoughts that he desperately ignores. “They’re taking even longer than usual today. I’ll bring us in this time – there’s no one around so it's perfect.”

Akira closes his eyes as the subtle sensation of entering the metaverse sweeps over him, grimacing when the itch in his head evolves to lethal claws digging at the base of his skull. He’s a step behind the rest of the group as they approach and enter the looming castle through the not-so-secret entrance, Akechi filling Akira’s silence as he fires question after question, never fully satisfied with the incomplete answers Morgana has for him. Akira’s not paying attention.

It's a bit like a dream, being back in the cognitive world – being back in Kamoshida’s Palace. Everything has a quality to it that isn’t quite right – from the seamless checker patterned floor that changes colors where he steps, to the too smooth texture of the raw stone wall, to the strength of the candlelight from the overhead chandelier, somehow managing to illuminate an entire room when it should barely allow for a warm glow.

He uses his fingers to painlessly pinch out the flame of a solitary candle on a table just to watch it spontaneously relight.

“What do you think, Akira?” Ann asks.

The buzz in his head packs up and flees as his attention snaps back to his friends. Ann’s circling Akechi with a deliberate eye as she examines his new attire that must have appeared after they got inside. Akira fails to stifle a grin and Akechi’s eyes flash as if inviting him to laugh and suffer the consequences.

The bastard would probably just order even more coffee than usual. Or push him down some stairs. Akechi is an all or nothing type of guy.

“Seriously?” The ever fearless Ryuji is almost too busy laughing to get the words out of his mouth as he leans against the wall for support. “The hell is with that get up?”
“It's just what he thinks being a rebel looks like.” Morgana explains, sounding rather dubious as his ears twitch back.

Akira doesn’t know of any sort of rebel that wears something resembling the clothing of 18th century European royalty, but he also knows what Akechi’s real outfit looks like and figures he must have imagined this one up at least partially with the intention of making himself seem as nonthreatening as possible.

It worked.

Except for the mask. Akira’s confident that he could not win a headbutting contest against Akechi without extreme scarring or loss of an eye.

Ann stands with a hand on her hip as she comes to a conclusion. “It's almost too much, but you manage to make it work.” She appraises with an approving smile and a thumbs up, Ryuji trading skeptical glances with Morgana behind her. Akira himself has heard her say that an attractive person can make *anything* look good, so he doesn’t put much stock in her words.


He walks over and makes a show of appraising Akechi’s outfit – from the golden epaulettes fitted over a red cape, the gold laced buttons, the prominent A (gold, of course) embossed on the belt buckle, to the hem of his pristine white pants. “I feel a little left out.” Akira says as he ends his inspection. “Let me borrow your cape so I can fit in.”

Akechi tugs at the red cloth across his shoulders and smiles apologetically. “It seems to be sewn on.”

“Shame.” Akira sighs as he takes off his glasses to rub the superiority complex out of his eyes before he catches it.

“Whoa, hey – let me see those!” Ann swipes Akira’s glasses before she finishes her sentence, leaving Akira’s hand hanging dumbly in the air. “Whoa-ho-ooh.” She says as she leans in uncomfortably close.

“What are you doing *now*?” Ryuji asks.

“Look at his face!” Ann bounces back and points at a bewildered Akira.

Akira backs up a little while shooting Akechi a glance that can’t decide between pleading or confused and ends up defaulting to accusatory. Akechi crosses his arms and raises a mocking brow.

Useless. The travel mugs of coffee Akira packed that morning will never be known to Akechi.

“What about it?” Morgana asks, looking ready to scratch Akira’s face completely off if it means Ann will pay him attention for half a second.

“He’s been hiding a nice face under these things!” She waves them in the air to emphasize her point before shoving them on her own face. Akira has to admit, she looks better in them than he does. It must be another case of attractive people being able to look good in anything. “They’re not even real glasses!”

“He looks the same to me.” Ryuji sighs.
“Can I have them back now?” Akira goes to reach for them, just for Ann to dance away.

“Nuh-uh. I’m doing you a favor.”

“By stealing my glasses?”

“You have nice cheekbones – it's a crime to cover them up with these oversized things.”

Akira would like to point out that he is a criminal.

“I like my glasses.” He says. They were basically the only socially acceptable way of wearing a mask in public. They also lowered the ever popular ‘you look tired’ comments by about 90%. If only Akechi got the memo.

“Are we here to have a fashion show or to steal Kamoshida’s heart?” Ryuji’s done with their little interlude as he stomps forward, pushing Akira and Ann ahead towards the door. Ann hangs the glasses on her catsuit right between her cleavage.

Akira likes having hands attached to his wrists and wisely decides to surrender for the time being.

“Wait – hold up.” Morgana hops in front of them before they leave the room. “Code names! We still need to give them code names.”

“Code names?” Akechi’s amusement seems to be growing exponentially. Every time Akira looks at him, his smile seems a little wider, a little less practiced.

“Yeah. I’m Skull, she’s Panther, and he’s Mona.” Ryuji elaborates.

“We wouldn’t be proper thieves without code names.” Morgana insists.

“Aha. So you mostly pick names based on appearances.” Akechi says.

Akira has a few names he’d like to suggest for Akechi. None complimentary.

“So for you, maybe it should be some sort of bird? Your mask is kind of like a beak.” Ann chips in.

“I was thinking plague doctor more than bird.” Akira mumbles under his breath. He wonders how suspicious Akechi would be if he suggested the name ‘Black Death’. Probably very.

Akechi chuckles and ignores Akira. “Well if we’re going to go with a bird theme, I’d like to suggest ‘Crow’ for myself.” Same as last time. Akira wonders if that’s suspicious. “As for Akira...” He trails off and adopts a pensive look. Akira fidgets under the attention and moves to press his glasses up out of reflex, annoyed when his finger crashes against the bridge of his nose.

“He doesn’t have his persona yet, so maybe we should wait?” Ryuji suggests.

Morgana makes a strained noise. “There’s no way to know when that will happen, so we should come up with something now. It doesn’t have to be based on his costume.”

Ann taps a finger against her cheek as she thinks. “How about –”

“Joker.” Akechi smiles with a secret. “His code name is Joker.” He states more than suggests. The light catches his hair as he leans forward, in much the same way Ann had just minutes earlier. Too close to be comfortable. “After all, he seems to think he’s funny.”

If Akira was still on the table about whether or not he was suspicious as fuck about Akechi
remembering anything – all bets are off, because Akira is officially suspicious as fuck.

“I’m hilarious.” Akira says, focusing on keeping his breathing even and slow while wondering if Akechi’s eyes always looked so red or if it was just the lighting. He makes sure his hands are hidden in his pockets as they shake. What happens to someone who dies in the cognitive world – a place not bound by the limitations of reality? Is it really death? “You always laugh.”

Or is it a transition?

“You do have an uncanny ability to make me laugh.” Akechi admits. “Whether it’s because of you or at you is up for debate.”

Akira rakes a hand through his hair, letting it rest at the nape of his neck. “If you only laughed at me, you’d have doomed me with a code name like Jester or Clown.”

“Nothing’s been decided yet.” He says, voice playful and smooth – but it rings though Akira’s ears like a warning shot. Akechi’s eyes sweep over his face, searching for something he’s not going to find because Akira might have difficulty controlling the occasional tremor in his hand – but his face has won him many a game of poker. Akechi finally takes a step back and turns to the group with his trademark smile. “Any objections to the code name Joker?”

It’s easier to breathe without the pressure of Akechi’s eyes on him, but it’s hard to forget that he’s still on Akechi’s turf. It’s impossible to deny that Akechi seems to know something, but somehow even more impossible to believe.

Akira supposes it’s a personal flaw, because there are more red flags than at a communist parade, and he’s still in denial.

“I don’t know why, but it actually kind of suits him.” Ann says.

“Yeah, gotta say – it works.” Ryuji adds with a grin.

Morgana’s mouth is pinched and his tail swings erratically as he seems to mull something over. “That’s… Hrm, never mind. So Crow and Joker, huh? I guess this means you’re officially part of the team. Joker – you’ll have to let us handle the shadows since you don’t have a persona, so just stick behind us and keep an eye out for now. We usually try to sneak by most shadows, but that’s not always an option. We’ll try to find some easy ones to fight so you can see what we do and be prepared for later on. We’ll also get to see what Crow is capable of!”

“I won’t let you down.” Akechi smooths down his already immaculate coat as he moves to open the door to the hall.

Akira runs his hand along the smooth stone wall as they creep through the lavish hallways to hunt down some easy prey. He half expects Akechi to decimate the two pixies they find with barely a graze, but it seems as if Akechi prepared himself well, pretending to be just strong enough for the others to be impressed as he summons a much weaker Robin Hood than Akira remembers to deal a critical hit with his first attack.

There’s something ugly in Akechi’s smile after the battle. Something patronizing as he accepts the praise he’s showered in by the others. Akira turns away and stands where the pixies vanished, wondering where do they go when they die while reaching down to trail his hand along the red carpet. It’s warm and feels like fine silk, contrary to its plush appearance.

“Crazy how they just disappear like that, isn’t it?” Ryuji limps over to him, his leg already acting up. “All of this is crazy, honestly. I thought I was going insane the entire time I was in here the first day.
It didn’t help that Mona the talking cat-thing was my only company at the time. Then Ann got in a couple days later and I was too distracted by her driving me nuts to bother thinking about it anymore. It feels better with some more guys in here.”

Akira grins as he stands back up. “I’m not much help in battle, but I can try to save you from Ann when she gets too feisty.”

Ryuji has a lopsided grin. “Thanks, dude. I think she’s still pissed because I tried to keep her out of here in the beginning. I mean, this place ain’t exactly safe – I just didn’t want her to get hurt. But I’m glad she’s here now, I’d probably be dead twice over if she wasn’t.”

“Please, Skull. I’ve saved your sorry life at least ten times by now.” Ann says with a bright smile as she sneaks up from behind, ambushing Ryuji with a hip bump. “But I forgive you for being a jerk. Just don’t try to stop me again.”

“Believe me,” Ryuji blurts out. “I won’t.”

Akira hopes this means they’ve established a truce, because when they fight, something of Akira’s usually breaks.

“I have to admit,” Akechi says as he and Morgana join the rest of them. “That was quite the rush. Not nearly as bad as I remember the first shadow I ran into. I suppose I can contribute it to having a team this time around.”

“Don’t get cocky, Crow.” Morgana pipes up, taking the spot to Akira’s right. “Those were small fry. The shadows are only going to get tougher from here on out.”

Akechi looks properly chastised as he laughs awkwardly and scratches the side of his face.

“Oh, right.” Ryuji pats himself down before pulling out a pistol that was tucked into his belt. Akira recognizes it as one of the airsoft guns he helped Ryuji buy. He has to hold back a smirk when Akechi flinches as Ryuji inexpertly points the barrel at him while turning it over to Akira. “These things work like real guns in here, so if something manages to get past us, just shoot the crap out of it.”

“Thanks.” Akira says, already checking the magazine and the safety with deft hands.

“You seem unusually comfortable with guns.” Akechi observes. And pot – meet kettle.

“You seem unusually comfortable with that toy light saber you brought with you, but I wasn’t going to say anything.” Akira counters as he aims down the hall to check out the iron sights. Akechi does the thing where he coughs into his arm to hide his discomfort. Akira is now forever going to imagine him as being the type of kid that ran around hitting everything with fake swords when he was younger, sound effects and heroic monologues included. “I used to play airsoft with friends.” Akira stays ambiguous. “If you ever need something shot at, just let me know. I never miss.”

“With that kind of confidence, you’d better not.” Morgana says. Akira grins and tucks the gun in at the small of his back, making a mental note to buy or make a cheap holster and to cut a deal with Iwai on the price of ammo.

His hands itch for a dagger.

He isn’t used to hanging back and letting other people do the hard work, but he uses the opportunity to keep an eye on Akechi while they sneak behind sentries, climb up the rafters, and overall do a lot of running and jumping that leaves Akira out of breath more often than not. Akechi seems torn
between wanting to fill the void of proper leadership within the group by taking point and slowing down to keep pace with Akira between the constant glances back to make sure he’s still there.

Or just to make sure Akira isn’t about to shoot him.

Karma is real.

Akira shoots him with finger guns instead, and the look on Akechi’s face is priceless before whirling his head forward when he doesn’t know how to react.

Akira hopes he got whiplash from that.

Between the occasional potshot Akira gets to take when they can’t sneak past a shadow and the amount of loot he’s finding just all over the place, he decides that being an extra isn’t so bad. Being the leader never left him too much time to look for random crap he could bring back and sell or use, but there was nothing stopping him now.

Well, nothing except for Akechi, who swiftly picks up on his diversion and takes up a hobby of throwing whatever bit of rubbish he can find at Akira when he strays too far from the group. Akira feels like a house cat getting sprayed with water for bad behavior.

It's an easy choice to never share that imagery with Akechi. Sojiro has a few spray bottles at the cafe and he hardly needs to give anyone ideas.

He sacrifices himself to the first chair he sees when they reach a safe room.

“How are you holding up?” Morgana asks, the pitter-patter of his paws against the floor getting louder as he approaches. “You’ll get tired a bit faster than the others since you don’t have a persona, but you should be fine since you’re not fighting.” Morgana jumps onto the table, somehow smacking Akira in the face with his tail in the process.

Akira cranes his head up from where he nearly decapitated himself on the backrest of his chair. “I’m just out of shape from being sick.” He says, pulling out his travel mug. The coffee’s cold, but he used a brew that’s meant to be iced. Akira’s a pro at the whole metaverse thing, persona-wielding or not.

Ann plops down next to him, taking the opportunity to stretch her arms. “Just let us know if you ever need a break. I’ve already gotten used to having a backup gunner, so I need you to be ready for a fight!”

“She’s sayin’ that because she never manages to hit her target when she’s shooting.” Ryuji dodges the expected hand aimed at his shoulder, but not the stomp to his foot as he takes a chair.

“Shut up, you’re not any better.”

“At least I know that aiming exists.” Ryuji says. Another foot stomp. “But yeah, dude, you were right when you said you never miss. You’re usually hiding way back somewhere out of range, too. Sometimes I miss my shot when I’m right in front of them.”

Akira tries not to choke on his coffee at the forlorn expression on Ryuji’s face.

“Perhaps Joker would be less exhausted if he followed the group instead of trailing off and having to run to catch up?” Akechi sits across from Akira, sounding deceptively chipper as he stares Akira down.

Akira sinks down in his seat and moves a stack of books to block eye contact.
Morgana knocks his makeshift shield out of the way with a very unnecessary spin-kick. Akira would be upset, but he loves Morgana unconditionally and immediately forgives him for his transgression. “I’ve been keeping an eye on you, too, you know. Do I need to remind you that this place is especially dangerous to non-persona users?”

Akira knows words will not successfully defend him, so he turns over his bag. Out tumbles a number of small assorted items including but not limited to forks, spoons, knives, and candlesticks.

“I know a guy who will buy this junk off me. I figured we could use the extra yen for supplies. And, uh – I spotted some treasure chests. Just sitting a bit out of reach, harmlessly and barely hidden, begging to be looted. I opened them for you.” He says as he tosses Morgana a new slingshot and throws a few other things on the table.

“You found this stuff just sitting around? I was too stressed out about shadows to notice anything else.” Ryuji picks up one of the candlesticks shaped like a nude woman and inspects it a little too closely.

“Okay, it's killing me, I have to ask.” Ann stands up, slamming her hands down on the table. “Joker, did you get arrested for stealing?”

“Ooh, that totally makes sense!” Ryuji adds, getting caught up in the moment and also standing up. “That’s why you’re so good at the whole stealth thing! Sometimes I can’t see you when you’re right there!” Akira would like to point out that someone good at stealth would probably not get caught stealing.

“That’s just because you’re dumb.” Morgana pretends to fire his slingshot at Ryuji who ducks for cover. “I’ve never lost track of him.”

“I’ve heard from a reliable source that it was, in fact, stealing that got him arrested.” Akechi contributes, slumped over on the table with his hand holding up his chin, sly grin in place. Akira takes a long sip of his coffee. He hopes Akechi can smell it and knows what he’s missing out on, because it's fucking amazing.

“I knew it.” Ann proclaims, dropping back into her chair with a self-satisfied grin.

Akira almost goes to correct her when he notices something devastatingly important missing.

“Panther, where are my glasses?”

Ann blinks and looks down, a surprised little ‘oh’ spilling out of her mouth as she pats herself down. Akira’s never worn a catsuit, but he’s more than a little sure there’s not much space for anything to fall into. She’s starting to look a little nervous and offers a very forced laugh before changing her approach.

“Joker, you’re going to be expelled and you’re worrying about your fake glasses?” She looks very disapproving.

“You’re buying me new ones.”

“I’m buying you better ones.”

Akira gives up.
They make it a little further before calling it a day, both Ann and Morgana out of power. No healers might as well meant no progress.

He wants to run over to Shibuya and sell off the junk he’s accumulated, but Akechi decides that it’s a good day to stalk Akira and follows him home. Akira just wants to soak in the bath for several hours before passing out in bed. Or in the bath. He imagines it would be a painless death. A painless death that smells of mugwort.

“Don’t you have a job? Or homework?” Akira asks before walking into the cafe. “A social life?” He doesn’t hold the door open for him.

Akechi effortlessly worms through the door before it shuts. “Yes. All of the above. I’ll be quite busy over the next few days, so I’m afraid I won’t be able to meet up for a while. But I’m sure I’ll be able to swing by Leblanc in the evenings for my daily cup.”

“Please don’t.”

His wallet can’t handle it.

Akechi laughs as if he isn’t a vampire draining Akira of his will to live.

“Hi, Boss.” Akira grumbles as he lets Morgana jump down to beg for food. “I’ll be back down in a minute.” He adds as he uses the handrails to levy himself up the stairs to the attic, his muscles screaming in noncompliance.

His room is an accurate representation of what a post-apocalyptic hoarder’s room would look like, Akira having made no effort to clean while steadily adding his own miscellaneous piles of junk on top of the piles of junk that Sojiro left behind. Any invading zombie forces trying to get to him would surely succumb to fatal head woulds they received after the tenth time they tripped on the step ladder just chilling in the middle of the floor next to the old propane tank and old potato sack full of who-knows-what. The two hanging bulbs flicker when he dumps the contents of his bag on the couch, kicking up clumps of dust that get swallowed by his hair.

He grabs a change of clothes and resists the urge to crawl into bed and pretend he doesn’t exist anymore. He manages, if only to evade Akechi coming upstairs to find and judge him on the state of his room. He already got an earful from Morgana.

He fends off a few spider webs hanging at face height before heading downstairs.

He reaches the last step to find both Sojiro and Akechi twisting their head away from where they were watching his descent, both of them trying too hard to look like they weren’t just talking about him while he was upstairs.

Sojiro clears his throat and Akira feels a little out of his mind, because Akechi is invading his life with the tenacity of a pissed off honey badger nipping at his heels – and he still isn’t sure why.

Akira trudges over to take a seat at the counter, finding Morgana’s face lost somewhere in a deep dish of something that looks better than what Akira usually gets.

“Planning on heading over to the bathhouse?” Sojiro asks, nodding at the change of clothes draped over his bag.

“Yeah, I’ll probably be there a while. If I’m not back by the morning, comfort yourself knowing that
I died peacefully.”

Sojiro rolls his eyes. “Here.” He tosses the keys to the cafe on the counter. “I’m not going to spend the rest of the year locking you up every night. Just don’t pull any more stunts.”

“No stunts. Got it.” Akira snatches up the keys. They’re cold and familiar in his hands. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I’m doing this against my better judgment.”

“Well, you know how it is – good judgment comes from experience and experience comes from bad judgment.”

Sojiro’s face oozes his thoughts on that in bold capital letters. Akira feigns interest in the colorful magnets on the fridge. He keeps forgetting Sojiro doesn’t really like him yet.

“How do your parents deal with you?” Sojiro wonders as he turns to stir the pot on the stove.

They don’t, Akira doesn’t say.

“So,” Akechi supplies the distraction. “Why does it look like you’ve just crawled out of a tomb?” He asks, pulling a cobweb off of Akira’s jacket.

“Do you have much experience with tombs, Akechi? I thought you were a detective, not an archaeologist.”

“Ha, ha.” Akechi looks just shy of rolling his eyes, but also like he was expecting it. “Ever the joker, aren’t you?”

“Now if only he would tell real jokes instead of drive me insane...” Sojiro grumbles.

Akira seizes the opportunity. “What do you call two crows on a branch?” Blank stares. Even Morgana takes the time out of licking his empty bowl to look up. “Attempted murder.” He says when no one responds. He’s a little smug, he’ll admit. Akechi looks less than impressed, but he’s smiling while shaking his head so Akira will take that as a win.

If Akechi gets to throw the word ‘joker’ around in public, Akira’s going to respond in kind.

Sojiro chuckles a little. “Not terrible. Try again.”

Akira drums his fingers on the counter while thinking. “Relationships are a lot like algebra. You always look at your X and try to figure out Y.”

A real chuckle from Sojiro this time. Akira brightens a little and promises himself to stop giving him such a hard time. Akechi’s smiling in that quiet way that means he’s entertained, but isn’t going to stoop so low as to admit it.

“Why did the scarecrow get a promotion?”

“Why?” Sojiro asks, scooping curry out of the pot into two bowls.

“He was outstanding in his field.” Akira’s on a roll.

“Alright, alright. I think I’ve gotten my quota of jokes down for the day.” Sojiro says, still grinning.

Akira makes a noise of protest. “One more. I tried to make a friend laugh within ten puns. Sadly, no pun in ten did.”
“You know it's over when you result to puns.” Sojiro says.

“Why did the slightly blind man fall down the well? He couldn’t see that well.”

Sojiro sighs, but he’s not annoyed yet.

“My girlfriend told me I needed to stop acting like a flamingo. So I had to put my foot down.”

Sojiro turns beseechingly to Akechi. “How do you willingly deal with this?”

Akechi’s using his hand to block a grin, but Akira chooses to believe it's there to contain his uncontrollable laughter.

“Akechi thinks I’m funny.” Akira answers for him.

“Your jokes are terrible.” Morgana says, judging him from the chair next over.

“Morgana says my jokes are the best.”

“I did not. Don’t believe him, Boss.”

“I’m very impressed that you know so many off the top of your head.” Akechi says, the unstated implication being that Akechi would consider it a waste of time to bother remembering any of them. Akira refrains from bragging that he can go on for hours, because Sojiro would probably start leaving a roll of duct tape out in warning.

“It's a talent.” Akira brags a little bit, because he thinks he deserves it.

Sojiro’s demeanor is lighter than usual as he places the two bowls of curry in front of them.

Akechi’s eyes widen when he realizes the food Sojiro’s been preparing is for him. “Oh, this is –”

“Consider it a thank you for keeping this guy out of my hair today.” Sojiro says, but it lacks any bite.

And Akira might have something to say about that, but he’s too busy seeing how much food he can chew at once. Turns out that coffee isn’t enough to sustain him while spending an entire afternoon scaling the interior of a castle that exists within someone’s head.

Something seems to pass over Akechi as his expression goes blank and then immediately back to friendly. “It's been my pleasure, really. He’s very entertaining company. But thank you, nonetheless.”

Akira forces the food down his throat when chewing proves ineffective. “He threw a rock at my head.” Akira chokes out to Sojiro before draining a glass of water.

“Did he deserve it?” Sojiro asks Akechi, unconcerned.

“Oh, most definitely.” Akechi smiles the smile only a traitor can smile while winking at Akira.

Akira chokes on his water and Morgana makes everything worse when he jumps on Akira’s back to ‘help’.
He’s not sure how it happened other than that he was completely and unwittingly lured into Akechi’s well crafted trap that was made impossible to escape because Sojiro was standing right there and judging. Judging so much. He could have said no, wishes he’d have said no, but Akechi was throwing a pity party that reeled Sojiro right in and Akira would have never heard the end of it if he didn’t go along with it.

That’s his explanation for how he found himself at the bathhouse with Akechi.

If he’s learned one lesson, it’s that Akechi had no boundaries for how far he’s willing to go to be annoying.

“Never had the opportunity to go to a bathhouse, huh?” Akira says, “Always wanted to try it, but never wanted to go alone?” He sinks down as far as he can without submerging his face, grateful for the opaque water. Akira has occasionally gotten flak from others about being a bit too comfortable in the buff, but there are still some things he has no intention of sharing with potential enemies. If there’s a rule book for how to handle arch nemeses, the first rule is probably ‘DO NOT EXPOSE YOURSELF TO THEM’, capital letters and all. Maybe even a few exclamation marks. “Not even the excessive amount of mugwort in this bath can save you from yourself, Akechi.”

Akechi chuckles. “Thank you for bringing me along. Truth be told, I’ve been feeling a little worse for wear due to our trip earlier, but I can already feel my muscles starting to relax. I might make an effort to come here more often after this.”

“Please don’t.”

Akechi laughs some more before Akira decides to ignore him and enjoy his bath. However bad Akechi thinks he’s feeling has nothing on Akira, because he’s been housebound for a week and his muscles seem to have eloped with his cold. He could get get pushed down a rocky hill and the pain wouldn’t be much worse. If anything, it might be like a free massage.

He sinks a little lower into the bath. He’ll be fine if he closes his eyes for a couple minutes. The warmth of the water was a siren’s call lulling him to sleep, but he can resist.

He can’t resist.

He sits up straight after nearly taking a lungful of water, suddenly wide awake. He looks around to make sure no one saw.

Nobody’s paying attention to him, not even Akechi.

Akechi’s slumped down similar to how Akira was a moment earlier, bleary-eyed and slack jawed, an ideal candidate for death-by-drowning. Maybe Akechi hadn’t been trying to bother him. Maybe he needed this, after all.

Maybe Akira’s just being incredibly conceited when it comes to Akechi seeming to revolve all his time around him.

“What’s on your mind, Akira?” Akechi asks, not moving a muscle he doesn’t have to while getting the words out. “I’ve noticed you have a terrible habit of never saying what you mean and I’m dreadfully curious to know what really goes on in your head.” The timbre of his voice is lower than usual, quiet enough that none of the old men on the other side of the bath can hear.

“Then I guess we’re two peas in a pod, because you’re exactly the same.” Akira says.

Akechi huffs out a laugh, the corner of his lips rising. His eyelids fall down further. “There you go
“again, deflecting the subject to try and avoid the question. You’ll find I’m rather resilient if you really want to play that game.”

Akira slumps back down to his previous position and takes a long breath. The smell of mugwort is far from what Akira considers pleasant, but he’s come to associate it with relaxation and it does an excellent job of calming him down.

“What do you want to know?” He hazards. He’s closing his eyes again, but he can hear the water shifting just enough to figure that Akechi’s probably looking at him, surprised at Akira’s acquiescence.

“Ahh. That’s… well, I’d like to hear your opinion on our recent events most of all, but I don’t think this is the time or place for such a conversation.”

“No, probably not.” Akira agrees, eying the old men. “But I’m not against talking about it some other time.”

“I look forward to it.”

“Anything else?” Akira’s feeling generous.

“Yes. Other than your penchant for bad jokes and fondness for small talking animals I really don’t know much about you.”

Akira snorts. “So you’ve noticed that Morgana is my favorite.”

“Very much so. He’s the only one you’re not smart with and I find myself feeling second hand pain every time he climbs your back – those claws are not short.” Akechi sounds perturbed.

“Yeah, I need to have a talk with him about that.”

“So, Kurusu Akira – who are you?” Akechi asks.

And that’s a loaded question if he ever heard one.

“… Any chance you could narrow it down a little?”

“I suppose it wouldn’t hurt. Tell me about your family. I find it strange they’d ship you out to Tokyo to live with someone you’re not even related to and have never met before.”

Gunning straight for the personal questions the second Akira gives him the opportunity, huh? He should have figured. He considers his options. Family is an important word to Akechi, given he’s never really had one – and worse yet, was abandoned by everyone who could claim that tie to him. Akira figures with all he already knows about Akechi, it’s only fair to share his part.

“My parents are divorced. I live with my dad, but I usually spend breaks with my mom. I don’t have any brothers or sisters or cousins.” He says.

“And what about your parents? What’s their story?” Akechi asks.

“You want the abstract or the novel?”

Akechi’s lips quirk. “Abstract, please. The water is dulling my attention span.”

Akira flicks a floating piece of mugwort away from him. “It’s a stereotypical story, really. My dad’s an old salaryman; spent most of his life squirreling away his money and by the time he was set for a
comfortable retirement he realized he forgot to do anything with his life. My mom was the pretty
intern at his job. He threw around his money to charm her and *bam*, married. I was born nine months
later. She was only twenty. Around the time when I was seven she met someone and realized she
was still young, beautiful, and in the prime of her life and left my dad.

“Last I heard, she was sailing somewhere around the Bahamas thanks to the bank account of
whoever she’s dating right now. She adds me on all of her social media accounts, but it's mostly just
to send me pictures of how much fun she’s having and to remind all of her friends that she’s a mom.”

Akira cracks his eyes open and flicks the water with his fingers. “It sounds a lot worse when I say it
out loud.” He grins a little.

“Most things do.” Akechi confirms. “Are you close with your father, then?”

“You’re really trying to dig an origin story out of me, aren’t you?”

“Sorry. You’re more interesting than you give yourself credit for.”

Akira frowns at that, glancing over to find Akechi watching him with rapt attention. “Not sure what
you’ve been finding so interesting, but if you really want to know – no, I’m not really close with my
dad. He still works full-time and likes to go out with his drinking buddies afterwards. He’ll probably
keep working ‘til he drops.”

“How’d they react when you were arrested?”

Akira hates talking about himself. This is the worst. He’d rather Akechi go back to throwing stuff at
him. “My mom mostly laughed it off, saying it sounded like I was really living it up. My dad did the
whole quiet disappointment spiel, didn’t care about what really happened, just wanted it to blow over
as fast as possible so he could get back to his job.”

“And what do you mean when you say he didn’t care about ‘what really happened’?”

Akira groans. “No more personal questions. Ask me what my favorite song is or something.”

Akechi clicks his tongue, but must be able to tell that Akira’s done being compliant. “Alright then.
What’s your favorite song, Akira?”

“Hell if I know.”

Akechi huffs out another laugh before giving up. “Getting answers out of you is like pulling teeth,
isn’t it?” He rolls his neck before pausing to think about something. “But it really doesn’t bother you,
does it?”

“What?”

“That you’re not close with your family?” Akechi asks. “Going by what you’ve said, the people who
should be the most important in your life seem to treat you with indifference more often than not.
How do you handle it so well? Don’t you feel like you’re worth more than that? How aren’t you
angry?”

Akira thinks about it for a long time, squashing his gut reaction to reply offhandedly. Akechi really
isn’t afraid to ask the questions that most people try to avoid like a dark, slightly ajar closet door
whispering secret words just shy of being audible in the midnight gloom.

“I guess –” He starts. Akechi jolts a little, probably not having expected an answer. “I guess at the
"root of it –" He laughs a little. "Really, it's just –" He rubs his face. "It's not that it doesn’t bother me. Sometimes I’ll see other families and wish mine was more like theirs. I just…” And Akira belatedly figures out that this was never about him, not really. This was Akechi looking for answers about himself through Akira.

So he stops trying to explain himself and takes a chance.

"If I’ve learned anything in life, it's that you should never hand your self worth to another person. It makes you accept things you never should.”

Akechi’s no open book, but there’s something crashing and burning behind his eyes. His brow and lip twitch minutely while trying to keep a straight face before giving up and looking away, sinking a bit further down into the water.

Akira doesn’t know the first thing about what to do with an emotional Akechi, so he goes back to enjoying the water and tries not to think of anything at all.

They stay in a long time without saying a word.

It's been a week and half since he’s met Akechi for the first time in his second life.

That’s no time at all.

He wonders how things could have been the first time.

“"I wanted to thank you for your honesty earlier.” Akechi says when they part ways outside. “It was impolite of me to ask the questions that I did, especially given the short time we’ve known each other.”

Akira shrugs and wishes Akechi would drop the formal speech already. “Isn’t that why you were asking? To get to know me? You still haven’t said anything about yourself. Anything other than about what a smart and amazing detective you are, anyway.”

Akechi has a little smile on his face that he tries to hide by turning in another direction and looking at the ground. “Another time.”

“And another place, please. Bathhouses are meant to be places of solitude and contemplation.”

Akechi laughs, and it catches Akira off guard because it sounds so easy – all his other laughs are either fake or have to fight their way out of his vocal chords.

“Over coffee, then?”

“Only if you’re paying.”

Akechi makes a show of thinking about it. “I suppose I can make that sacrifice.”

“Oh, gee. What a martyr.”

Akechi’s still keeping his eyes trained on the ground, but he shifts on his feet like he’s stalling for time, like he doesn’t want to leave.

“Akechi.”

“Hm?” He finally looks up.
“What’s orange and sounds like a parrot?” Akira can feel the grin stretch across his face while Akechi looks reluctantly amused as he motions for him to continue. “A carrot.”

“Go home, Akira. You obviously need the rest. Don’t think I didn’t see you almost drown in there.”

“I’m sure just you imagined that. The heat will do that sometimes. Mirage effect or whatever.” Akira waves a flippant hand.

“Feel free to console yourself with that thought.” He turns to leave, but makes an abrupt stop. “Akira, would you mind if I ask one more question?”

“I’m getting the impression that you’d ask anyway.” And then ask five more.

Akechi turns back to face him and puts on his charming face. Akira bets he could see the sparkles if he squints hard enough. “You’re finally catching on.” He says. Akira wishes he had his glasses, because then there would be a chance that Akechi didn’t see the eye roll of the century that probably burst half the capillaries in Akira’s eyes. “Did the app appear on your phone yet?”

Akira grimaces and thumbs through his apps. “No, still not there.”

Akechi furrows his brows and glares at a trashcan with enough fervor to start a small fire. “Strange. Maybe it really doesn’t happen until a persona develops?” He’s talking under his breath, but Akira could make a profession out of eavesdropping if he so chose. He snaps his attention back to Akira. “I suppose it’s not important since we can still bring you along.”

Akira watches the shadow at his feet. “Yeah.”

Akechi’s eyes focus on him now, and he’s a little concerned that Akechi’s decided to practice his developing pyrokinetic powers on Akira’s hair. He goes to say something, but pauses and looks at Akira as if he were a cipher without a key.

“It’s late.” Akechi backtracks, cutting off whatever train of thought he was stuck in. “I’ll send the group a message when I know my availability.”

“Sure.” Akira says. Akechi’s still not leaving, just kind of standing there looking like he forgot something important and didn’t know what. Akira toes the ground, wishing he knew what he was supposed to do or at least had a better idea of what was going on. “What has 4 letters, sometimes 9 letters, but never has 5 letters.”

Akechi spares him a dry look and finally turns around. “Good night, Akira.”

“It wasn’t a question.” Akira says, raising his voice just enough for Akechi to hear it as he leaves.

He can tell the instant Akechi gets it, because there’s a hitch in his step and a slight shake of his head. Akira decides he’s done with bad jokes for at least a month. Even he has his limits. Unless Akechi does something to provoke him.

He falls asleep easily that night, but his dreams don’t let him rest.

Chapter End Notes
A more serious chapter, I think. I don't really know. Akira wasn't in panic mode this
time. There's a lot of bad jokes because I was playing Fallout 4 for a bit and my robot
butler dude knows I have a weakness for them. So I decided to inflict them upon
everyone else, too. But man, dunno why, but this chapter felt like 9,000 words of mostly
nothing while I was writing, but hopefully it was still enjoyable. btw, this was 9,000
words of a single day of Akira's life.

help.

(Oh, and I bet you guys were expecting something else from that bathhouse scene, you
pervs.)
There’s a small apartment complex a few blocks from Cafe Leblanc. Its age is apparent by the gray, peeling paint and it is more than a few shingles short of being up to code, but for a while it was Akira’s home. He misses his expensive computer and new TV. He misses his tiny room and grimy kitchen with cracked tile and crooked shelves. He even misses the cramped living area that Yusuke used as an atelier.

Apartment 311, third floor, no elevator – hauling Akira’s ancient CRT TV upstairs when he moved in was an endeavor he never intends to repeat. Throwing it out the window to be relinquished to the dump when the fuse blew a month later was its only redemption.

A young couple with a small daughter live there now, all smiles as the parents each grab a petite hand and gently swing the girl as they walk aimlessly down the alley, childish laughter garnering a few turned heads and easy grins from loiterers.

Akira lets out a long breath before ruffling his hair and kicking off the wall he was leaning against.

Morgana’s ears perk up when he realizes they’re on the move. “Going home now?” He asks, keeping pace with Akira as they walk to Leblanc.

Akira looks back at the building. Someone forgot to turn off the light in his room. He runs his thumb along the grooves of the key Sojiro entrusted him with.

“Yeah.” He lies.

The wind starts to pick up as he walks and by the time he makes it to Leblanc, there’s a hint of rain in the air.

“Welcome home.” He’s greeted with as he walks through the door. It's not Sojiro.

Mildly surprised, he looks up. “Oh. Hey.” He pauses awkwardly in the door, Morgana darting between his legs to get out of the wind. Akira can’t say he has the emotional capacity to deal with Akechi today. “I was starting to think you found someone else to steal coffee from.”

Akechi smiles in the artificial way Akira is most familiar with from before. He stirs the dregs of his coffee and Akira knows he’s a slow drinker – meaning he’s been there a while, waiting. “Sorry, you’re still my go-to guy. Hopefully you haven’t been too lonely without me these past couple days.”

Akira spares him a look before Sojiro ends a call on his phone and catches his attention. “Good, you’re back. I need to make a quick run outside – watch the cafe for me.”

There goes Akira’s plan to waste away in his room. Thanks, Futaba – thief of Sojiro’s time and attention.

Akira takes a quick glance around, just a couple of the regulars aside from Akechi. It's unlikely for anyone else to show.

“I have you covered. You might want to grab an umbrella – it smells like rain.” Akira says while
Sojiro removes his apron.

“Thanks for the warning.” He says. “That cat really goes everywhere with you, doesn’t he?” Sojiro asks as he makes the turn around the counter, petting Morgana after he meows a hello.

Akira puts on a smile, even though he’s not really feeling it. “You could say he’s my other half.”

“If I’m going to be anyone’s other half,” Morgana grumbles, “It’d be Lady Ann’s.”

“He loves me.” Akira says, going to pet Morgana – his arm receiving a bear hug with the inclusion of many claws and teeth. “It’s a complicated relationship.”

Sojiro grins and heads for the door. “I’ll be back soon.”

Akira drags himself behind the counter with heavy steps, disappointed to find all of the coffee pots empty.

“Any chance I could get a refill?” Akechi asks, swishing the remains of his coffee and startling Akira out of his reverie. Akechi’s trying to get a rise out of him, that much is obvious by the coy look on his face, but Akira has the energy level of a sloth on sedatives so he shrugs and figures he was going to make himself a cup anyways.

“Sure. Gimme a minute, there’s nothing left over.” For himself, he starts a new pot of what Sojiro considers ‘boring’ coffee, but is still fancier than anything they could get at an average restaurant. He turns his attention to the burr grinder and french press to make Akechi’s usual after grabbing some freshly roasted beans grown on a mountain somewhere in Guatemala with low acidity and blah blah blah. Akechi’s pretentious, so it makes sense that his coffee would follow suit.

He slumps over on the counter and switches his brain to standby while the coffee steeps.

Morgana places a paw on Akira’s nose. Probably revenge for all the times Akira does the equivalent to him. “Hey, pay attention. We’re talking to you.”

“Sorry. What did you say?” He rubs his eyes. “You know you’re not supposed to be on the counter.”

“Boss doesn’t have to know.”

Morgana’s going to find out pretty soon that Sojiro has a sixth sense for knowing when his paws have been in places they shouldn’t have.

“I was saying I hope the others aren’t too upset that I’ve been unavailable until tomorrow.” Akechi apparently repeats.

Akira checks the minute hand on the clock. “Don’t worry. I just think we’re all getting a little nervous. Time is running short.”

“We really need your help, too.” Morgana tells Akechi. “You have a knack for battle and tactics – we made more ground last time than we did the whole week before. I think I might sense something special about you.”

Something bitter stirs in Akira’s chest and he manages to avoid making a face only because the regulars are leaving and he’s been drilled to be a good little barista and wish them a good evening. Personally, Akira thought Akechi’s methods were a little too overkill. They could have saved a lot of energy and gotten further if they relied less on personas.
“I’m sure Akira’s horrifyingly accurate shooting was also a contribution.” Akechi says in a poor effort to be modest while managing to make Akira’s aim sound like a bad thing.

“You’re just jealous that Ryuji didn’t give you a gun.” Akira says in an attempt to seem invested in the conversation. He just wants to crawl into bed and stare at the ceiling until it cracks apart and buries him in dust and rubble.

Akechi’s grim smile is aimed at the window. “I suppose I’ll have to find one to bring next time.”

Akira hopes he doesn’t have to kill an officer to get it this time.

He pushes himself up and pours Akechi his diamond encrusted cup of liquid gold, not forgetting himself as he gets his own. He’s stirring his coffee when he hears it.

“Did you say something?” Akira asks, not trusting his ears when his head felt as heavy as a pallet of bricks.

“This is the most delicious coffee I’ve ever tasted.” Akechi says, eyes wide.

“What?” Morgana asks. “You’re joking, right? Let me try.” Akechi pulls the cup away from Morgana, because he’s a heartless monster who was never taught to share as a child. Not sharing with Morgana warranted a fine, at least.

Confused, Akira asks, “Isn’t it the same coffee you always get?”

“No, I’ve been trying a different type every time. But I think you’ve just introduced me to my flavor. Thank you.” Akechi’s excitement over a flavor of coffee is catching.

Akira wakes up a little, feels a little less dead inside.

“Oh.” He didn’t realize Akechi didn’t stumble upon it already. It’s the only type of coffee Akira remembers him taking before. He’s been making the damn cup at least once a month for nearly three years out of some form of respect for Akechi’s memory – and now the bastard’s finally getting a taste. “You’re welcome,” Akira says, kneading the back of his neck with a hand. He’s got a dumb little smile on his face he can’t really control.

He looks at Akechi just in time to catch him glance away, eyes studiously locked on a pile of stuff Akira dumped on the counter last night and forgot to take upstairs. Morgana’s eying Akechi through slits. Probably offended he didn’t get to try the coffee.

Akechi takes a sip and clears his throat, still enraptured by what seems to be a library book, his English homework, a Pyro Jack figurine he got from a gashapon machine, and various other crap. Akira has a bad habit of picking useless things up and keeping them forever.

“Are those tarot cards?” Akechi asks after the silence stretches on too long to be comfortable.

“Yup. A cute fortune teller gave them to me last night.” Akira says. Akechi’s eyes snap back to him, a little too focused. “Why? Want a reading?”

“You know how to read them?”

“Yup.” After all the time spent in the velvet room and with Chihaya, he knows a few things.

“I didn’t take you for the superstitious type.” Akechi says with an arched brow – and Akira definitely hears some condescension in his voice.
Akira’s smile widens to a weak grin. “Don’t knock it. You’re sitting next to a talking cat, divination can exist too.”

“Not a cat.” Morgana reflexively says, still Akechi-watching.

“Excellent point. Very well, then – tell me my fate, Akira.” Akechi says, gesturing out with his hand as he settles back in his chair.

Akira reaches over to grab the tarot deck he managed to swindle off of Chihaya. If he’s going to pay a small fortune for another salt stone, he’s going to get something out of it sooner rather than later.

“What kind of reading do you want?” He asks.

“There are different types?”

“Yeah, the spread depends on what you want to know. Most people our age ask about their love life, but it can be anything really. General advice, career advice, personal stuff – whatever.” Akira explains. He pulls the cards out. “Have you been struggling with anything lately? You don’t have to tell me specifics.”

“In that case, I suppose I do have something I’d like guidance for. I’ve been having difficulty figuring out what to do about a rather complicated situation.”

“Then we’ll do a complicated spread. Here, shuffle the cards while thinking about a question.” Akira says, handing over the cards to an entertained Akechi. “It helps with, uh, spiritual energy. Or something. I think.”

Morgana sniffs. “You’re not a very convincing fortune teller.”

Akira traces the symbols on the tuck case. “It’s just for fun.”

“So you don’t believe in it, after all?” Akechi asks while shuffling. “I’ll confess – I’m disappointed.”

“The past, present, and future are always in flux. Tarot is about helping people find their own answers by examining themselves through the stories the cards tell.” Akira mechanically recites through a yawn. He looks outside, wondering how long Sojiro will be. A few splatters of rainwater speckle the ground.

“How is the past in flux?” Morgana asks, genuinely curious.

“I suspect it is less about the past itself changing, but rather how you feel about it as time goes on.” Akechi answers for him, and boy does Akira wish his life were that simple. That would be great, really.

“Bingo. Alright, let me see the cards.” Akira doesn’t really remember the spread or the meaning of the cards as well as he pretends, but it’s not like his audience knows any better. He’ll do just about anything to avoid small talk, really.

Once the cards are down, he flips them over one by one.

Five cards in and Akira can’t hold in a laugh. “Are you dating or crushing on anyone right now?”

“Excuse me?” Akechi says, the pitch of his voice rising dramatically between the two words.

Akira points at the first few cards. “These ones pretty much say you’ve started something new that you expect will end well, but underneath it all you’re worried you’re letting your emotions get a hold
of you and you might ruin something you’ve been working towards for a long time. Then these ones say –” He points at the two of cups and the lovers cards, “Something you remember is encouraging your attraction to someone.” He says. At the look on Akechi’s face, he reluctantly tacks on, “Or something, I guess.”

“It would have to be the or something.” Akechi insists, before downing half his cup of coffee. Morgana’s suspicion seems to grow with the narrowing of his eyes.

Akira flips more cards. “You expect things to go well with whatever you’re currently doing, but it looks like things outside of your control are going to overwhelm you.” He flips the last two cards. “You’re afraid of losing something, of having to make a sacrifice – and the final card is pretty much a nail in the coffin saying the road you’re currently on will leave you with no closure and a sense of emptiness.”

Akechi looks less than pleased with that prediction, and then outright glum when he sees the last card Akira flipped.

He grabs the card and studies it. “What exactly does this card mean?”

“The World?” Akira says. “I got that card once.” It’s a shame he seems to have lost it somewhere on his impromptu road trip through time and space. “By itself it represents harmony between the inner and outer worlds, but as far as your story goes – it was a reversed outcome so it means you’ll almost get to where you want to be, but something will hold you back at the end.”

Akechi must not like being told he’s not going to get what he wants, because for a split second there’s a nasty line running between his brow and a curl to his upper lip.

“Is it possible for certain cards to correspond to certain people?” Akechi asks.

“Anything can relate to anything, so sure – why not? It’s all about what you think. That’s all tarot is. Unless you’re really psychic, I guess. I’m not, by the way.” Akira helpfully informs, his temporary energy boost starting to wear off. He wishes Sojiro would get back before tradition holds up and he returns at the worst possible moment. “You sure you don’t have a thing for anyone? I can do another reading for you.” He teases.

“That’s very unnecessary, thank you.” Akechi declares more than declines.

Akira feels bad for anyone Akechi might end up dating, because the amount of emotional and sexual repression they’d have to deal with is astronomical. That’s not even going into the whole ‘secretly an assassin’ bit.

Morgana must give up on whatever he’s looking for in Akechi’s face, because he jumps over to Akira. “I want a reading about my love life!”

Akira indulges him with a three card spread. They’re all reversed. He tries to think of a way to break the bad news, but Morgana’s staring at him with hopeful big blue eyes and he just doesn’t have the heart.

“What does it say? Do I have a chance with Lady Ann?” Morgana asks.

“I just want you to know that I love you.”

A cough from the door. Sojiro stands there with a wet umbrella and avoidant eyes.

Damn it Sojiro.
Akira curses whoever took the bell that was hanging in front of the door.

“I was talking to Morgana.” Akira explains, pointing at empty space – Morgana having hightailed it off the counter top and scrambled for the stairs to escape punishment. Akira’s surrounded by traitors.

“No cats on the counter – wipe it down.” Sojiro diverts. Akira glares at the stairs and then glares at Akechi who seems to be way too pleased with the situation as he drains the rest of his cup.

Akira wipes down the counter and takes refuge in the attic, wishing he had a door he could slam for dramatic effect.

He gets a message later that night.

*Thank you for the coffee today.*

He remembers a chair, nearly three years empty, as the rain falls down in sheets outside his window.

He wakes up in a train car, one of his travel mugs in a gloved hand. There’s something warm pressed to his left and what feels like a hand against his back, keeping him upright through the occasional bump on the line.

He sips his coffee.

“Have you finally rejoined us in this mortal coil?” Akira can hear Akechi drawl.

“Why are you on my train?” Akira asks into his coffee. “You don’t go to my school.”

“He’s finally alive?” Morgana ponders from somewhere over yonder.

“It’s Sunday. You weren’t answering the group chat this morning so I decided to pick you up on my way to Shujin. You’ve been very uncooperative.” Akechi answers.

Sunday. Right-o. Metaverse stuff. “What time is it?” Akira dreads the answer.

“Just about 8 in the morning.”

Akira dies a little more inside and debates jumping off the train to complete the transition once and for all. The others can probably save the world just fine without him through the power of their healthy sleeping patterns.

“Why are all of you morning people? Do you have something against sleep?” He whines.

Morgana pokes his head out of Akira’s bag. “I warned you to go to bed early last night. This is your own fault.”

“Mishima was having an existential crisis. I had to be there for him.” Akira says, head lolling on his shoulders.

“He was sending you pictures of girls in maid outfits.”
“Like I said – existential crisis. Getting expelled does strange things to vulnerable young men.” Akira says halfheartedly, wiping the sleep from his eyes. The train knocks him over a bit, and the hand on his back settles along his waist when he lurches further over to the left.

That’s about when he realizes he’s basically been melded to Akechi’s side for who knows how long.

Akira clears his throat while regaining his balance and trying to spot his dignity anywhere in the vicinity before remembering he never had any. The two girls giggling in the seats behind them (very much staring in their direction) do nothing to help. For once he wishes it were rush hour on a weekday, because everyone would be too packed together to notice or care.

He finds his feet at the bottom of his legs – go figure – and takes a spot leaning against one of the handrails. He chugs his coffee and stares out the window into the fleeting darkness of the subway, trying not to think about the black gloves on his hands he knows don’t belong to him or the yellow eyes staring back at him in the reflection of the glass. He sighs through his nose and tugs the hood of his jacket over his face as his thoughts shift to things he’d rather avoid.

The acute sensation of a particular set of eyes burn through the thin layer of polyester.

He really isn’t up for this today.

“You’ve missed a few stunning sunrises at Inokashira over the past week.” Akechi mentions offhandedly. Akira knows the topic of discussion isn’t so important to Akechi as much as getting him to talk is. Akechi’s perceptive, he can tell Akira has a bit more than sleep deprivation bogging him down. Quick to catch on, but rarely straight to the point – Akechi likes to trap people with their own words before asking the real questions.

Akira conjures up a meager smile in a halfhearted attempt to stave off any more prying. “I’m really not a morning person.”

“I’ve noticed. It’s a shame, I’d already gotten used to seeing you on my route.”

“You should try sleeping in instead. It will change your life.”

Akechi’s mouth does this weird little twist that resembles a grimace wearing a smile’s hat. “I’m afraid a few extra hours of sleep would do little to help me.”

“You might be surprised.”

“How did all the extra sleep you’ve had this past week help you?”

Akira refrains from answering. He knows where this line of questioning is going and decides to skip ahead past all the bullshit.

“Akechi, do you ever have those days where you feel like you’ve hit absolute rock bottom?”

“Of course.” Akechi answers immediately, and in a softer voice follows up with, “More often than I’d like to admit. Am I getting ahead of myself by assuming that today is one of those days for you?”

Akira turns back to his reflection, unsure of who he sees. He feels like he’s blasted straight through rock bottom and flew out the other side, just drifting through empty space away from the only home he knows, no landing in sight – just a dark empty void.

Forever.
“Eh. Just let me get my blood levels up to about 13% caffeine. I’ll be good after that.” Akira tears his eyes away from the window and throws an ill humored grin at Akechi before draining the rest of his drink.

“Akira –”

“Thanks for the gloves, by the way.” Akira interrupts, ignoring the frustrated crease of Akechi’s brow while wiggling his fingers “Not sure how I managed to forget to bring any to Tokyo with me, but it happened.”

Akechi hesitates before sighing and putting aside whatever he was going to say. “You’re welcome. I bought them for you when I was out getting supplies for today. They should help with all the climbing we do – I noticed you were having a bit of difficulty last time.”

Akira doesn’t know what to say to that – he just figured Akechi coughed them over to get him to shut up about being cold when he was still half asleep, but no – Akechi’s hands were clad in the same black leather they always were. Akira looks at the gloves a little closer. As far as he can tell, they’re identical to the ones Akechi wears on a near daily basis.

“Akechi is a really good friend, isn’t he?” Morgana peeks out of the bag. “He’s even going into the metaverse just to help you.”

Akira is at an even greater loss than when he saw Akechi alive after years of being very much not.

An embarrassed laugh. “I can’t say I’m entirely selfless. My own curiosity is a contributing factor as well. I’ve often wanted to use the app again, but I haven’t been brave enough to make the journey on my own.”

At the very least, Akira can take comfort in the familiarity of lies. He rubs his eyes while letting out a breathy laugh.

“Did I say something funny?” Akechi asks.

Akira wonders what it says about him that he’s more comfortable being lied to than being shown kindness.

“No. Morgana’s right – you’re a good friend. Thank you.” Akira says to cover the slippery slope of his thoughts before he stumbles and falls and falls and never hits ground. Akechi tucks a lock of hair behind his ear, revealing the slight dusting of pink staining his skin. Then Akira remembers – Akechi loves compliments. Akechi loves compliments to the point of willingly letting himself be manipulated by them.

“It’s nothing.” Akechi says in an effort brush it off, but his eyes meet Akira’s jaw and there’s an eagerness to his words that don’t fit their intention.

Akira feels like slime.

His careless words should never be taken with so much value, but Akechi clings to them – cherishes them until he can reach for the next good thing that drifts his way.

“Maybe after you help me with the whole getting expelled thing, you can help me clean my room.” Akira suggests in a bid to change the subject. Akechi’s expression immediately falls into a category Akira might label ‘couldn’t be convinced without multiple instances of electroconvulsive therapy’.

“I saw your…” Akechi pauses in distaste, “room – earlier. The only thing that can save it is a fire pit
and a leaf blower.” Akechi sighs. “And why is there a ladder in the middle of the floor?”

Morgana makes a concurring noise. “I’ve been trying to get him to clean everyday since I moved in. Do you want to know what his idea of dusting is? Opening the window and hoping for a breeze.”

“That only brings in more dust.” Akechi crosses his arms and looks vaguely annoyed. Akira suspects that Akechi’s a clean freak, the kind with hermetically sealed windows and a few HEPA air purifiers set up strategically around his home, because no one should be so irritated on the behalf of another person’s room. Unless Akechi is secretly his mom or something. “And really, I want to know – why is there a ladder in the middle of the floor?”

“Homemade burglary defense system.” Akira says, getting ready to chuck himself out the door as soon as the train comes to a stop. He doesn’t need Morgana and Akechi tag teaming him – this entire conversation was a mistake. He suspects Akechi must have tripped on the ladder when he was up there to earn his ire, which as far as Akira is concerned means the step-ladder has fulfilled the purpose of its creation. Akechi starts to say something probably rude and mean-spirited enough to bring a tear to Akira’s eye, but Akira is too busy squeezing himself through the two inch gap of the door as it opens. “We’d better hurry. Ryuji really hates waiting.” Akira spews out before sprinting ahead, Morgana’s complaints drowned out by the shouts of the people Akira nearly knocks over.

Akira’s out of breath by the time he makes it in front of Shujin, Akechi not far behind with barely a hair out of place.

Akechi pats his back in pity as he walks past him from where he’s doubled over. “You should exercise more often.”

Akira flips him off, because oxygen is a tad more important than snarky comebacks. Just barely.

“Akira! Goro-kun!” Ann flags them down. “Over here!” She and Ryuji are over by the vending machines, two giant bags at their feet.

“Goro-kun?” Morgana says in horror as he jumps out of Akira’s bag.

“It doesn’t feel right calling him Akechi-kun when I’m using everyone else’s names. You don’t mind, do you, Goro-kun?” Ann asks, stealing Akechi’s signature move by cranking up the charm with a cutesy little pose and a wink.

Not to be outdone, Akechi also activates charm mode featuring a convincing smile that reaches his eyes and an adorable tilt of the head. “Not at all. Feel free to call me whatever you like, Ann-chan.”

Akira feels like vomiting just looking at the two of them. He hopes this doesn’t turn into some sort of competition, because he’ll go home and let himself get expelled and sent back to juvie.

Ryuji shuffles over, throwing an arm around his shoulder. “What were you sprinting over here so fast for?”

“There was a conversation I desperately needed to escape from. Running seemed like my best bet.” Akira admits, wiping the beads of sweat from his brow.

“Say no more. I’ve been there.” Ryuji is, without a doubt, Akira’s best friend. He never needles Akira for answers or clarification and he would definitely never pester Akira to clean his goddamned room. “We, uh, brought some extra stuff today –” Ryuji says, gesturing to the duffel bags on the ground. “Figured since we have the whole day to do this we should try to make it all the way to the treasure since this is the last week we’ve got.”
Akira hums noncommittally as he side eyes the packs. They look crammed full of junk food and sports drinks. He’s going to do everything within his power to stay away from those bags, because he knows someone’s going to be demoted to pack mule when Ann or Ryuji get tired. His vote is out for Akechi.

“We’re more than halfway through the castle now.” Morgana jumps on Akira’s shoulder. “We can do this.”

“I agree.” Akechi says when he’s done exchanging charm lessons with Ann. “Since we have the whole day ahead of us, we should take care to conserve energy as we go. Last time we may have pressed ourselves too hard. What do you think? The enemies are gradually becoming more difficult. Should we prioritize evasion today and rush to the treasure or spend some time working on our abilities on easier shadows before we start to map new ground?” Akechi aims that question at Akira for some reason.

Akira chews his lip. If Akechi does remember something, then he’s probably aware that Akira was the leader of their group before. Meaning, Akechi knows Akira isn’t as stupid as he lets himself appear. Which is unfortunate, because Akechi underestimating Akira was the only reason he survived last time.

“Why are you looking at this guy for advice?” Morgana thumps his tail on Akira’s back. “I’ve seen Akira crack an egg open on the stove burner before looking for a frying pan.”

“I’m not a morning person.” Akira grinds out over his blonde friends’ laughter.

Akechi’s shoulders shake a little before he clears his throat. “Akira may be a little absent minded at times, but I think he’s much more attentive than he wants us to believe.”

Akira carves a little mental note into his brain screaming AKECHI NOTICES THINGS.

“Hrmm. I don’t see it.” And at least Morgana is honest.

“I think I can see it. He always gets the questions in class right.” Ann contributes, giving him a once over.

Akira rolls his neck, enjoying the grotesque crack that rips through the air. “I think Akechi’s right about conserving energy if we want to make it to the treasure today, but I really think I should leave the other decisions to you guys since you’re doing all of the fighting.” It’d be awfully suspicious if they started relying on him for battle advice and he knew every single enemy’s weakness and slipped up by telling them to use skills they haven’t even heard of yet. If Akechi really does somehow remember the other timeline, then Akira needs to keep letting him think that he has the run of things until Akira digs up an advantage. Any advantage. Even an itty-bitty one. Because right now his game of Russian roulette has five out of six chambers loaded and he can’t do anything other than try to keep his friends safe.

If that means letting Akechi play leader like he seems to be gunning for – fine.

“I disagree.” Akechi politely destroys any sway Akira might have on the conversation. “I think your objective view of the situation from outside the immediate battle zone gives you tactical insight that those of us fighting aren’t privy to.” Akira tries to keep his face neutral, but he woke up in a bad mood and now he’s getting irritated – and his irritation seems to be spurring Akechi on, his eyes widening in fascination at Akira’s uncharacteristic reaction.

Akira has no idea what the hell Akechi is trying to achieve with this.
Akechi continues, unblinking eyes roving over Akira’s face. “Also, I know for a fact that you have some aptitude for strategy.”

Akira lets out a long breath before relaxing and raising a brow. “What have I done to give you that impression?”

“Most of the games on your phone are things like Shogi, Go, and Poker – games that rely heavily on strategical thinking. Your scores are rather impressive as well.”

Akira downloaded those games because they were free and he gets insanely bored when he’s stuck at the cafe or school. And how does Akechi even know what games are on his phone? “How do you know what games are on my phone? Wait, no – I don’t care about that. How did you get onto my password protected phone to see the games and check my scores?”

Akechi adopts a guileless smile and an indulgent expression. “Your password is 1111.”

Akira snaps his mouth shut and decides to hate himself later.

“Dude...” Ryuji says, “That’s my password, too.”

Akira knows.

“Morons. That’s the first thing anyone would put in to try and unlock a phone.” Ann has a hand covering her face like she’s embarrassed to acknowledge their existence.

Ann’s password is 1234.

Akira doesn’t bother asking Akechi why he was snooping around on Akira’s phone in the first place. The guy has no respect for privacy whatsoever.

“Well.” Akira coughs. “Anyways, I think we should get going. We can figure out what we’re doing inside. Let’s go.”

Akira doesn’t say or do much as they stalk easy prey on the lower levels of the castle, mostly wasting time grabbing junk that might fetch a decent price from Iwai as the rest of the group warms up. Morgana, Ryuji, Ann, and Akechi are starting to look and feel like a legitimate team by the time they decide to find a safe room and rest up before progressing further.

Akira watches his shadow stretch out ahead of him as he walks, an ink stain blotch marring the unearthly pristine tile floor. Two flecks of ember yellow burn where the eyes would be.

“Akira.” A hand rests on his shoulder, the cool fabric of a white glove making him shiver when it accidentally brushes against his neck. “The safe room is this way – did you see something over there?”

Akira turns to face Akechi, and it’s too easy to forget what he is when he looks so serious and sounds so concerned.

“Sorry. Was spacing out.” Akira easily says, raking a hand through his hair before letting it settle against the sensitive spot on his neck. Akechi follows the motion with his eyes, contemplating
“Once we’re finished in the metaverse today – can we talk?” Akechi asks. “Alone.”

Well, that’s ominous.

“Could this be… a confession?” Akira mock whispers to himself to dispel his paranoia, covering his cheeks with his hands. “I’m going to blush.”

Akechi rolls his eyes and shifts his weight to one leg. “Glad to see your usual humor is back. I was starting to worry.” He guides Akira in the direction of the safe room. “I wanted to talk about the metaverse with you, since we haven’t had the chance.”

“I figured as much.” Akira says. “Though – wouldn’t it be better to talk about it with the group? Right now would be a good time since we’re taking a break.”

Akechi hesitates with a response. “The others are… much easier to understand. I already have an idea of what to expect from them.”

Akira watches the colors of his shadow stir on the floor as they reach the end of the corridor. “So I’m difficult is what you’re saying.”

“I’ve said it before – I never know what to expect from you. And you’re different when others are around – more reserved and less likely to share your thoughts unless someone singles you out. You’re the type who prefers to listen, but I want to know what you think.”

Akira stops in front of the door, the torch on the wall casting chaotic shadows down the hall as if hit by a gust of wind. Akira wonders if it could detect drama, because that timing was spot on. He grabs the door handle without pushing it down.

“You’re starting to sound like my ex-girlfriend right before she broke up with me.”

“Tsk. Tsk. Kidding, kidding. I mean, I’m not really, but yeah – kidding. I already told you I don’t mind talking about it. If you think you can squeeze more out of me when the others aren’t around, whatever. You’re probably right. I’ve always been more comfortable in one on one conversations.”

“Then does talking over dinner tonight sound alright to you?” Akechi asks, taking a step closer. Akira has difficulty taking the question seriously because he’s used that line before with the intention of dinner being a date.

“Are you paying?” The perpetually broke Akira asks.

Akechi huffs out a short laugh. “Yes, I’m paying.”

Akira has never turned down free food. He pulls out his trustworthy finger gun and gives Akechi an affirmative shot to the heart with an easy grin on his face. “Then it’s a date, Goro-kun.” He says before pushing open the bulky door to the safe room.

“See? I told you they were right outside.” Ryuji says when Akira walks through.

“Jeez, I was just about to go look for you two.” Ann says from where she in no way, shape, or form appeared to be planning to leave her spot at the table surrounded by a mountain of junk food, half a dozen wrappers already strewn across the floor. “Here, catch.” She says while throwing a pack of
rice crackers directly at Akira’s face.

“You guys sure took your time walking over here.” Morgana grumbles, narrowing his eyes at Akechi for some reason. Akira glances back in time to catch Akechi turn to the other side and cough into his arm.

Akira takes a seat, Akechi hovering behind him as he makes a face at the assortment of impending diabetes strewn everywhere.

“I’ve been thinking,” Ryuji starts off with. He receives skeptical looks from everyone in the room, but remains oblivious to the implication. “I think – we should try to get Joker a persona.”

Akira knocks away a small clearing on the table to put his feet up. “Sure. Sign me up. Where are the adoption papers?”

“We can’t just ‘get Joker a persona’, Skull.” Morgana chastises. “That’s not how it works.”

“I know – but hear me out. We all got ours when we were pissed off and in danger – what if we just found some weak shadow and let him go up against it? Maybe it will help him ‘find his inner rebel’ or whatever you said before.”

Akira figures this would be an appropriate moment for an extra large bowl of popcorn, but settles for the crackers Ann generously attacked him with.

“We are not needlessly putting Akira in danger.” Akechi says with a voice used to being obeyed. “That’s what I mean – he won’t be in danger, because we’ll all be there to back him up if something goes wrong.”

“It's the ‘if something goes wrong’ part that has me concerned.” Morgana says. “Besides, it isn’t anger or danger that brings out a persona – it's the acceptance of your own heart and the desire to rebel.”

“He should have a persona already if that were it! He’s rebelling with us against that bastard Kamoshida! I say we throw a pixie at him with you and Panther ready to heal him if he takes a hit.”

Akira enjoys the crunch of a cracker as he bites down. He probably shouldn’t have encouraged Ryuji.

“While I agree that having another persona user could only be beneficial, I don’t think forcing the matter is the way to go about this.” Akechi stands firm on his decision.

Ann passes Akira another pack of crackers as he finishes his off. “Shouldn’t this be up to Joker? Do you want to try it?” She asks Akira because she’s the only considerate one in the group.

The others all swivel their heads to stare at him, expectant. Akechi rests his hand on the back of Akira’s chair in a gesture Akira doesn’t know the meaning of, but feels rather menacing. If Akechi remembers, it would make sense that he wouldn’t want Akira to develop a persona if he’s adhering to his original plan of being a complete jackass.

Between bites, Akira says, “Honestly, I’m fine with being the backup. And you already seem to have a good handle on things without me. Besides, if we’re aiming to get to Kamoshida’s treasure today – I don’t think we should mess around with this stuff unless we have to.”

Akira can feel the waves of tension behind him dissipate as Akechi loosens his grip.
“That’s true...” Morgana says.

“Aren’t you just going along with whatever Crow says?” Ryuji groans, flopping down on the table. “You were totally on board a minute ago.”

Akira is a little taken aback, but doesn’t have time to process what exactly Ryuji means before Akechi speaks up.

“It was a bad idea to begin with. Joker’s right – we need to keep our focus on reaching the treasure today. Personally, knowing we have someone covering us with a gun and supplies is more reassuring to me than having another person at risk on the front lines.”

Ann, sensing the growing discord between Ryuji and Akechi, interrupts Ryuji before he can say anything else. “Let’s focus on the treasure for today then! Mona still needs our help finding his memories after we deal with Kamoshida, so it’s not like it’s the end of the metaverse for us.”

“Finding his memories?” Akechi asks. “How do you plan to do that?”

“That’s right, I haven’t told the two of you about that yet. I’ll explain more later, but there’s a place within the metaverse where I know I’ll find out what happened to me – why I look like this and why I can’t remember everything I should – but I can’t do it alone. That’s why I offered to help these two in the first place.” Morgana explains.

“I thought you wanted payback for getting captured and locked up?” Ryuji nitpicks.

“That, too.” Morgana admits.

Ann hands Akira another pack of crackers and an energy drink. He hunkers down further into his chair, wondering what Akechi plans on doing with them after Kamoshida’s palace collapses. Will being part of the original members of the phantom thieves awaken a change of heart within him? Or is this just a game – a bit of fun on the side while he destroys countless lives at the whim of his father’s corrupt heart.

Akira shakes his head in an attempt to shake off the thought.

It’s too soon to reach any conclusions.

They easily reach the treasure room.

Akechi may be playing down his abilities in order to fit in, but he’s still leagues above the others in terms of instinct and reflex, displaying an ease in battle that Akira didn’t develop until the last palace his original group infiltrated. He soaks up Ann’s compliments, savors Ryuji’s begrudging admiration, and treasures Morgana’s insistence that there’s something special about him as they traverse the increasingly inhospitable terrain that begins to resemble ruins more than a castle formed by perverted desires.

Maybe Akira can lure Akechi away from evil with excessive compliments?

Akira bites his cheek at the thought. He’s not Masayoshi Shido.
He makes a face at the menu in front of him at the Shibuya Diner, already knowing what he’s going
to order, but not ready to face whatever verbal trap Akechi has prepared for him today.

“So.” Akechi begins, only able to be so patient. “Now all that’s left is to send a calling card and
complete our final run to steal the treasure.”

“Yup.” Akira says, reading the same menu item description for the seventh time.

“But is this really justice?” Akechi asks, playing the morality card he loves so much. Akira squints at
the menu in hopes there might be some secret code telling him how to cure Akechi of his dramatic,
slightly sociopathic, murdering, lying tendencies. He starts stringing together every capital letter in
the menu. “Forcing someone to feel guilt – if your situation wasn’t so dire, I wouldn’t even be
considering this.”

Gee, thanks.

“If forcing someone to feel guilty is a crime, you’d better arrest Morgana and Boss because that
would make them career criminals.” Akira says. So far his code is W T M S S A D C Q G B B W T
W T – he might need Futaba’s help on this one. He wonders if Sojiro would mind if he went over to
his house to bother her. She can only ignore him for so long before losing her temper.

Akechi laughs and accidentally steps on Akira’s foot under the table. “That’s a little different from
what we’re planning to do. What we’re doing is closer to psychological reprogramming or a
lobotomy.”

“That’s kind of a drastic comparison. Morgana said that as long as Kamoshida’s shadow isn’t
harmed, he’ll be okay – just that he’ll recognize his distorted desires for what they really are and turn
himself in. I think that’s a better alternative to letting more people get hurt. Or, you know –
expelled.”

“And what if harm does befall Kamoshida’s shadow?” And oh boy, Akechi is bringing his dramatic
side to full blast. “If his shadow dies in the metaverse, he’ll die in real life. Is that something you’re
willing to risk? I’m not sure I can. I’ve sworn to fight on the side of justice – killing people is not
justice.”

Akira agrees 100%. It's a shame Akechi’s lies as easily as he breathes, because Akira really could get
behind his whole justice spiel if it were the least bit genuine. Akira wonders what Akechi wants him
to say here. Maybe if Akira tells him he doesn’t really care about knocking off some piece of shit that
contributes nothing good to society he’ll get an invitation to Akechi’s murder club?

He takes a breath. “Did you know that correctional facilities do exactly what you’re saying is
‘unjust’? Not the lobotomy part, pretty sure that’s a super bad thing – but ‘psychological
reprogramming’. Sounds kind of sketchy when you say it like that, but that’s the gist of it. They
forcibly arrest and rehabilitate people to think differently, to their definition of ‘correct’ through
mandatory therapy. I mean, a therapist can put any sort of thought into some dumb kid’s head – but
according to Morgana we can only do what the metaverse allows us to do, which is make them admit
that what they’re doing is bad. I agree that killing someone isn’t justice, but the rest of your argument
just doesn’t hold up. I can go on if you want me to, I have a lot of experience in this area.”

Akechi sat back and kicked up his feet on the booth next to Akira somewhere during the middle of
his rant, not letting a single thought show on his face. He smiles. “This is why I wanted to talk to you
alone.” Akechi says, continuing without an explanation. “I respect your point of view, especially
given your personal experience – I’ll take it into consideration. But I noticed you glossed over the
part about killing him.”
Akira sighs and takes a sip from his complimentary water. “I don’t really know what there is to say about it. Killing is bad – we should definitely avoid it.”

“And if we can’t? What if there’s an accident while stealing his treasure?” Akechi asks, tilting his head back as he watches Akira’s reaction through half-lidded eyes.

Akira closes his eyes, trying to black out the memories of his recent past, events erased from a history that no longer exists. “I guess I’d have to live with that.”

“I wonder,” Akechi muses, pulling his feet back down in order to lean in over the table, “How many times Kamoshida Suguru has told himself the exact same thing in the rare vulnerable moments when he allows a trickle of guilt to seep through his fortress walls.”

Akira watches the condensation on the outside of his cup gather and drip down in a line across the clear glass.

It’s not until the waitress takes their orders and leaves that Akechi speaks again. “I know you were arrested for assault.” He says, blunt to a fault. Akira blandly wonders if he expected him to be surprised. “I also know it was a false accusation.” Akira’s not impressed he managed to figure that out – he’s aware the paper trail on his arrest is shady as fuck. “Who framed you?”

Akira traces out a pattern on his glass. “Couldn’t figure that one out, huh?” Akira snaps, still bitter about the last question he was asked. Akechi’s fist clenches on the table.

“Akira, I want to help you.”

“Why?” Akira asks, tired of living in a past that doesn’t accept him.

Akechi grabs Akira’s hand to sucker him into looking up. “Because we’re friends.” He stumbles a little on the word as if he never had the opportunity to say it before. “And I would like to be someone you can confide in.”

A little bewildered, Akira finds himself lost for a response.

He gapes a little longer than necessary, but seeing Akechi simultaneously flustered and intent is worth it. He chews his bottom lip before choking out, “That’s… very forward of you. Did this turn into a confession after all?”

Akechi’s coloring approximates Ann’s catsuit as he releases Akira’s hand and clears his throat before trying to say something. “Please be serious. I’m not used to these sorts of conversations – I haven’t had many people in my life I could consider a friend.”

“So – not a confession?”

“Akira.”

Akira grins a little. “Akechi, I appreciate the enthusiasm – but friendship isn’t about aggressively solving all of someone’s problems. But when the day comes when I do want some help, I’ll let you know.”

Akechi sighs and rubs his neck. “I suppose that’s fair. I’m sorry if I’ve acted out of turn today.”

Akira kicks him under the table. “Liar.” He says. Akechi doesn’t deny it as he offers a tiny smirk. “Oh wait, I do have something I need help with.”
Akechi sits up straight, a serious look on his face. “What is it?”

“Do you have a fire pit and a leaf blower I can use for my room? Someone told me those are my only hope.” Akira says. Akechi lets out a long breath and lets his face speak for him. “No? Some friend you are. I guess I’ll have to hire a maid. I think Mishima knows a few places I can call.”

They fall into their usual banter, but Akira thinks Akechi notices that he’s forcing it. Neither of them bring it up. Akira knows tomorrow will be better.

Akira passes by his and Yusuke’s apartment on the way back to Leblanc again. The light in his room is still on. He wonders how life would have turned out if Akechi joined them instead of accepting his death that day, so long ago.

Would he have been arrested? Sentenced to death? Somehow manage to escape punishment entirely?

Akira wonders if after everything they went through – would they still have been able to form some sort of friendship?

He doesn’t know.

Akira pulls out the journal Sojiro gave him when he moved into the cafe and writes in it for the first time.

*Call Mitsuru.*

Chapter End Notes

Just going to say here - there’s a reason I didn’t tag Persona 3 for this story, so don’t worry if you haven’t played or completed the game. There won’t be spoilers, but I will be referencing and utilizing some of the things that happen in the overall persona universe later on. Despite the whole Mitsuru name drop, she’s going to have little impact on the things that actually happen. This story is still like 99% contained to the Persona 5 world and my own ideas.

and dudes, this chapter wasn’t funny at all, I’m sorry. That’s probably why it took me an extra week to write. I was gonna draw a short dumb comic for you guys to make up for the srsness of Mr. Depresso Akira, but I got lazy. Maybe I’ll make a little bonus chapter and post something sometime in the next week. I like dumb comics.

Thanks for reading!
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

His hair glimmers like polished bronze in the sunlight; shiny – *distracting* – but not enough to steal the attention away from a flawless face. Rounded, curious eyes sit underneath perfectly arched brows, partially obscured by a stray lock falling out of tandem from the rest of his fringe. *Red eyes,* colored in a way that reminds Akira of either aged blood or cloudy garnet depending on the mood. Even his skin shines when the light hits it just right – healthy and smooth, hinting at the dependence of skin care products that the likes of *Ann* would hesitate to splurge on. A black clad hand brushes the hair from his eyes, revealing a defined jawline leading up to -

A mole. A single flat mole sitting along the sharp edge of his jaw under his ear, almost on his neck; small – probably imperceptible to anyone not diligently scanning his face for any trace of imperfections. Akira wonders if that tiny blip of pigmented skin agonizes him whenever he looks in the mirror or if he’s accepted it as well as he accepts every fatal flaw of his own defective personality – just hidden under a shiny head of hair and behind a pretty smile to distract *distract* – because that’s just what Akechi does, the same way a magician’s sleight of hand tricks spectators – one thing draws the attention while another does all the work just beyond the tunnel vision of whoever’s paying attention to the *wrong thing.*

Akira wishes he knew what he’s supposed to be paying attention to.

Akira wishes Akechi didn’t have such a nice face.

Lips twist up in a smirk, the creak of Akira’s desk chair breaking the dull silence of the attic as Akechi strains its two back legs while pressing his foot against the desk, pushing himself further back – precariously, hazardously, and far too comfortably. Akechi would never have put himself in such a disadvantageous position around Akira before – always mimicking the impression of perfect composure, but akin to the calm of a cobra – a relaxed tension; coiled and poised to strike.

“You’re staring.” Akechi states the obvious, attention still glued to the phone in his hand – and Akira never calls him out on staring. He wonders if this is a double standard.

“With a face as pretty as yours, can you blame me?” Akira flirts because it’s an unfortunate defense mechanism he’s never been able to squash.

Akechi rivals a statue the instant the words leave Akira’s mouth, wide eyes finally leaving the screen of his phone to pan over to Akira. There’s a *thud* as the front legs of his chair hit (relatively) solid ground and a few tepid seconds pass before Akechi’s face drops and he exhales exasperation with his entire being.

“...Are you stuck?” Akechi asks, flatter than a cadaver’s electrocardiogram.

Akira jiggles his arm a little from where it's wedged between two piles of junk he haphazardly threw next to each other to reach the *other* piles of junk in his room. “...No?” That’s a lie. He’s stuck. He made the mistake of leaving his phone on top of one junk heap just for it to teeter over and get buried beneath another.

Akechi crosses his legs and looks unnecessarily judgmental.

“Okay, fine. I’m stuck. I think I have a hacksaw over in the corner by the stairs if you can grab it for
me. My arm’s a lost cause.”

Akechi sighs as he stands and walks over, content to merely loom over Akira as he tries to try to lift a portion of stupid useless crap off his arm so he can pry it out without inflicting permanent damage to himself.

“You’re helpless, aren’t you?” Akechi asks from where he’s still not helping.

“The princess of my very own castle – a little help now, please?”

Akira recovers his arm, but not his phone. He shakes out his useless limb to restore the circulation while kicking the heap of trash in annoyance. He turns a resentful eye towards Akechi. “This is your fault.”

“I’m not the hoarder. You have only yourself to blame.”

“Hey, I’m not a hoarder.” Akira defends himself, sounding disturbingly like Morgana. Akechi pointedly eyes the five overfilled trash bags. “Exactly – I’m throwing that stuff away. Hoarders have some kind of mental thing where they can’t do that.” He thinks, anyways.

“Then please – explain why you have all of this to begin with.”

Akira looks at the small collection of empty flower pots he fully intends on growing some plants in, the scraps of metal he wants to bring to Iwai’s shop so he can craft something using real tools instead of his own makeshift garbage, and the cardboard box full of old books he grabbed for 100 yen from some friendly old couple who were in the process of moving out of their house.

“I was going to use this stuff – I just never got around to it.” Akira admits. “And I don’t like throwing out stuff if it's still good for something, so it piled up a bit.” Akira supposes he let it go a little too far this time. “And most of it was already here when I moved in.” He pats the step ladder, safely propped against the wall. For now.

Akechi still doesn’t look convinced, but Akira doesn’t really give a shit, so he goes back to trying to dig his phone out. He never should have offered to play blackjack with Akechi, especially after he got manipulated into agreeing to a bet. Akira planned to ask for ¥26,500 if he won, because that’s apparently how much money Akechi has spent on coffee.

Yeah, ¥26,500 on coffee in a month. Akira doesn’t understand how it’s possible either.

“We’re still sending the calling card tomorrow, right?” Akechi asks.

Akira hopes so, because they’re starting to cut it really close. If he gets expelled, he’s going to break into wherever Akechi lives after Sojiro kicks him to the curb and sabotage everything he’s ever worked for. And probably die, but – been there, done that. He’s over it. “Not like we have much choice. We’ve got, what – five days until the board meeting?”

Akechi seems to be pondering something, going by the pensive look on his face and the inquisitive hand on his chin. Also known as Akechi’s second favorite pose.

“I apologize for having to push it back so late, there were some unforeseen events at work I had to take care of.” Akechi says, voice weary. Akira really doesn’t want to know. He doesn’t want to be reminded of things. He wants to stick his head in the sand and pretend that his clusterfuck of a life is all peaches and cherry blossoms. Pretend he isn’t floating on a deteriorating raft trapped out in open water, the great white circling him patiently waiting for its meal to finish marinating in the sun.
Akira closes his eyes as the constant itch at the back of his brain burns as he tries to figure out when he became so pathetic, when he became the type of person he used to loathe.

“By the way, last night when I dropped by – you weren’t here. Sakura-san told me that you’d picked up a part time job?”

“Yeah.” Akira very helpfully supplies as he boxes his thoughts in a steel cage and wills his phone to magically appear in his pocket. Nope, nothing.

“Where at?” Akechi presses when Akira doesn’t follow up.

“A host club in Shinjuku.” Akira answers, not disappointed with Akechi’s reaction as his eyes bug out and his arm twitches like it's stuck in some sort of limbo between wanting to strangle Akira or practice some jazz hands.

“That’s – you’re underage.” Akechi panics a little.

Akira is nineteen, thanks very much. Perfectly legal. Almost. Who cares if he has the body of a sixteen year old? The host clubs sure wouldn’t. He’d probably make extra.

Akira shrugs. “They didn’t seem to care. Why? Interested in being my client?” Akira leers at him. “Oh wait, you’re underage.” He hums in disappointment before continuing to toe through the mess that swallowed his phone.

Akechi is covering his face with a hand, but it does little to conceal the slight flush of red under his thumb. “I know that you’re kidding.” He says, quietly tacking on, “As usual.”

“Ace detective Akechi Goro, on the scene.” Akira absentmindedly announces as he finally digs out his phone that managed to fall inside of some weird box thing. “But you believed it for a second, don’t lie.”

“Only because I can honestly see you doing something so stupid.” He replies through one long sigh. “So where do you really work?”

“Beef Bowl Shop at Shibuya Central Street.” At Akechi’s prolonged stare, he asks, “What? We can’t all be detectives.”

Akechi shakes his head. “No, it's not that. Never mind.”

“Okay. Well. Can you help me bring these bags to the dumpster?”

“No.” Akechi pleasantly replies.

“You suck. Worst friend ever, 0/10. Wouldn’t even lop off my arm when I asked nicely.”

Morgana and Sojiro watch in silence as he trudges back and forth from the attic to the door, struggling to drag along two bags at a time because hell if he’s going to make the trip five times.

He intends to ignore Akechi until he goes home after that debacle, but hours later he’s still camped out at Akira’s desk working on homework. Morgana’s asleep, curled at Akira’s side where he’s, quote, ‘huddling for warmth not cuddling for comfort’ end quote. Akira’s unsure he can stave off his own slumber as its tendrils creep across his mind, suffocating his consciousness.

“Akira.” A hushed voice cracks through the sludge encasing him. Akira thinks he mumbles something in reply. “Is it okay if I stay a bit longer? I’m not sure I’ll have the willpower to finish this
paper if I leave now.”

“What time is it?” Akira manages to croak, forcing open an eye just enough to see a band of light blocked by his eyelashes.

“Almost midnight.” Akechi answers, sounding guilty.

Akira hums out a breath. “Cafe key is on the bookcase. Hide it under the blue flower pot outside after you lock up. Or sleep on the couch. Don’t care.” He throws an arm over his face to emphasize that he’s, for all intents and purposes, dead to the world.

The key is still on the bookcase in the morning and an empty bowl sits downstairs by the sink needing to be washed. Sojiro gives him some kind of look Akira returns with a nonplussed stare. Akira’s reputation is already ruined – let Sojiro’s imagination run wild until he finds a new hobby that hopefully doesn’t involve Akira’s life.

He gets several irritated messages from Akechi on the way to school, because he’d requested that Ryuji send him his final draft of the calling card before plastering it all over the school’s bulletin board like they’d planned. Which, well, Ryuji didn’t, if the picture of the calling cards plastered all over the bulletin board Ryuji sent Akechi (that Akechi subsequently sent Akira) was any indication. Akira spends what feels like the next forever reassuring Akechi that there was no way to track it back to any of them (probably), until he meets up with Ann and a very proud Ryuji.

“Akechi is displeased.” Akira says by way of greeting.

Ryuji’s grin widens. Akira would high-five him, but he’s the one stuck with all the bitching. His phone buzzes in his pocket.

“Akechi needs to loosen up.” Ryuji shrugs it off. “I’ve created a masterpiece.”

“You sure did, buddy.” Akira assures as he marks all of Akechi’s increasingly irate messages as ‘read’.

“I wouldn’t go that far.” Morgana says, peeking out of the bag. “But it’ll do. Once Kamoshida sees this, we’ll have the next day or so to steal his heart before his treasure loses its form again.”

“As long as he pays for what he’s done – oh.” Ann cuts herself off as Kamoshida stalks over, steely eyed and grinding his teeth as he reads through the message.

Akira pulls Ann and Ryuji with him, out of view. “Now we know that he’s seen it. All that’s left to do is prepare for tomorrow.” His phone buzzes again and he has to resist the urge to turn his phone off. “Or you guys do. I’m just Morgana’s taxi.”

Ann uses Ryuji as an arm rest while she lets out a giddy laugh, “That’s not true at all and you know it. But wow – this is all really happening, huh?”

“Hell yeah, it is!” Ryuji nearly hollers, Akira and Ann trying to shush him before anyone starts getting suspicious. Well – more suspicious.

Akira phone buzzes in the ringtone pattern and he sincerely regrets not turning his phone off. “Gimme a sec.” He says to his friends before accepting the call.

“It’s Akechi, isn’t it?” Ryuji not-whispers to Ann. “He’s mad at me.”

Ann flicks his ear. “He just doesn’t want any of us to get into trouble. You should have worked with
him on the card – he’s a detective so he probably knows all about this kind of thing.”

Ryuji deflates as Akira takes a few steps away, bringing the phone to his ear. “Hey, sorry. He just saw it.”

“Kamoshida?” Akechi’s tiny voice leaves the speaker. “What happened?”

“Yeah. He’s not happy. Everyone thinks it’s a prank.” Akira paces a little, eavesdropping on the gossip mongers running through the halls.

“You’re sure there’s nothing that can trace it back to any of you?”

“What’s done is done, Akechi. Let’s focus on what happens next.” Akira tries to stay ambiguous with his words as he passes by another group of rubberneckers.

“...You’re right. I suppose the card didn’t turn out as badly as I imagined it would, although it is lacking a professional touch.”

“I’ll be sure to pass that on to the artist.”

“I’ve already said as much in my messages to him, but feel free to reiterate. Although I’d have appreciated it if he’d sent me a copy last night or this morning just in case he overlooked something important.” There’s a loaded silence that Akira takes advantage of to let out an audible yawn. What sounds like a puff of air comes out of the speaker that Akira suspects is one of Akechi’s sort-of laughs. “Did you sleep well?”

“You’d know better than me.” Akira says. “I don’t even know if you slept at all. How late were you up?”

“Ah, not too much longer after you fell asleep. Thank you for lending me the couch, I hadn’t realized how far behind I was on my homework.”

“Still, you didn’t get much sleep.” Akira mutters. For all Akira knew, Akechi’s definition of ‘not too much longer’ meant he didn’t sleep at all.

“Are you worried about me?”

Akechi has no idea how spot on he is.

“Should I be?” Akira asks, pushing the glasses he still doesn’t have up his nose. He sorta just lets his hand linger over an eye in an attempt to not look stupid. It really doesn’t help.

“Are you allergic to giving straightforward answers?”

“Yes, very. Every conversation with you is a narrow escape from death with your endless questions. You’re lucky you’re not here – I’m breaking out in hives right now just for saying that.” Akira hunkers down at the window at the end of the hall.

“A hideous sight, I’m sure.”

“Fortunately, I still have my infinite charisma.”

“Try not to get ahead of yourself.” Akechi says with such a lack of excitement that Akira is genuinely insulted.

He takes a deep breath. “But yeah. I’m worried about you.” The silence from the other end of the
line lasts long enough that Akira has to check and make sure Akechi didn’t hang up on him. “You seem overworked.” Akira wonders if Akechi accidentally muted himself.

“I won’t pretend that I haven’t been under a lot of stress lately.” Akechi allows himself to say after a long pause. “But it’s nothing new. As you said, let’s focus on what happens next.”

Akira rubs his eyes. “Right.”

“But thank you.”

“For what?”

“Worrying about me.”

Way to make it weird, Akechi. “Don’t thank me. I hate worrying, it’s annoying.”

Akechi laughs. “Then I appreciate it that much more.”

“Ugh.” Akira says. “Just do me a favor and stop giving me second hand stress. Anyways, class is about to start so I have to go. I’ll see you later, Akechi.”

There’s another bout of radio silence as Akechi seems to temporarily disappear from this realm of existence. “Later it is. Try not to be too suspicious today.”

“Too late.” Akira says before ending the call and spinning on his heel, nearly turning smack dab into what appears to be a suspicious Makoto. “Um.” Shit. He’d been avoiding this. “Excuse me.” He awkwardly side steps and speed walks around her, sensing the eyes on his back as he tries not to run.

Makoto always did have a stare that could shred him to ribbons – it must have been a genetic thing rather than learned, because he’s seen her childhood photos and the ability seemed to have manifested young. And then there’s the case of her sister – and Akira shuts down his thoughts right there. He’s pretty sure Sae could eviscerate him with a stern gaze. Especially after -

Shutting down thoughts. Right. That means not thinking about being dumped by Makoto.

And oh, too late. He thought about it.

He makes it to class just on time, ignoring Kawakami’s dirty look. Ann has a question on the tip of her tongue, but postpones it as the sound of a throat clearing storms across the room, leaving a wake of silence.

The day passes without much event despite the underlying buzz of excitement surging throughout the campus and the anxiety bubbling at the pit of Akira’s stomach. He has half a mind to invite Ryuji and Ann over to the cafe, but he knows they probably need the time to prepare for tomorrow – whether mentally or by belatedly scrounging up a few supplies, he doesn’t know.

Akira kills some time at work before dragging himself back to the cafe in the evening, unsurprised to find Akechi at the counter stirring a fresh cup of coffee, the steam distorting his features into something softer. Akira blinks a few times and looks away as he approaches, ignoring the hint of a smile on Akechi’s face as he lazily waves a hello before refocusing on his drink.
“How was work?” Sojiro asks as he places a cup Akira assumes is for him in the spot next to Akechi. “They haven’t fired you yet, have they?”

Akira makes a face as he puts his bag down to let Morgana out. “I’ve never been fired from a job.” Akira says to fend off any future attacks on his employment status.

“You’re too young for that to mean anything. Although, if you’re trying to say you’ve never had a job before, I’d believe that.” Sojiro smirks as Akira grumbles irritably into his cup as he takes a seat.

“Work was fine, thanks for asking.” Akira has the benefit of picking his battles, and this one is not worth the effort.

“Ann-chan still hasn’t replaced your glasses, has she?” Akechi says from where he looks to be straining to keep his face from falling off his hand and onto the table.

Akira doesn’t dignify that with a response as he sighs and pushes away from the counter. “I’ll be right back.” He says as he heads for the stairs, needing to get out of his uniform and relax a bit before dealing with the inevitable harassment.

He’s halfway through pulling his shirt off when he hears footsteps come to an abrupt stop behind him, immediately followed by a coughing fit.

“Are you okay?” Akira asks Akechi after tossing his shirt on the floor. Akechi waves him off, half of his face still blocked by the arm he was coughing in. “Are you getting sick?” Uncertainly, he adds, “I still have some of my cold meds if you need them.”

“Thank you, no – I’m fine.” Akechi says after he seems to find his voice somewhere in the crook of his arm. “Sorry for walking in on you when you were changing.”

Akira raises a brow and shrugs, grabbing his sleep shirt from the floor next the his bed. “It's not like you haven’t seen me without a shirt on before.” Or without anything at all, if he’s going to be technical. Akechi’s the one that forced his way into the bathhouse with Akira that one time, he can’t try to pull the whole modesty thing now. He decides to leave his shirt off with the specific intent of making Akechi uncomfortable, who averts his eyes somewhere to the ceiling when Akira shimmies out of his uniform pants, leaving him in only his boxers. He takes his time stretching out the knots in his back before he yawns and falls back onto the bed, grabbing his phone.

“...Really?” Akechi asks, taking the last step up the stairs into the attic when Akira is nice and settled.

“What?” Akira asks as he exits the ridiculous amount of tabs he has open on his phone. No wonder his battery dies so fast. “Should the boxers go, too?”

“I was going to ask if you were okay when I followed you up here, but I see my concern was for nothing.” Akechi seems to be getting used to his behavior. Akira will have to up his game.

“Did I seem not okay?” Akira asks, watching Akechi from the corner of his eye as he takes a seat on the couch.

“Maybe a little off.” Akechi says.

“I might be a bit anxious.” Akira confesses.

“Understandable. Tomorrow will be quite the day no matter what happens.”

“Still debating about whether or not what we’re doing is unethical?”
Akechi breathes out through his nose as he slumps back into the lumpy cushion, the shadows under his eyes magnified by the dim overhead lighting. “Throughout history, some of the greatest good was executed by morally ambiguous people, often through dubious methods.”

“Executed… interesting choice of vocabulary.” Akira closes his eyes, a wry grin on his face.

“Ah, I didn’t mean it in the sense of it being killed off –” Akechi is quick to correct himself.

Akira’s grin widens. “I know, I know. Relax.” Akira wonders if he qualifies as a ‘greatest good’ who was nearly executed by the morally deficient Akechi. He wonders if the same thought crossed Akechi’s mind, because he has to be remembering something unpleasant as he bites the nail of his thumb, a distant look on his face.

“But – I meant it before when I said I wanted to help you. And while I’d rather do it in a lawful manner – it’s far too late to consider pursuing alternate methods now without severe ramification. That’s my fault. I had the opportunity to do things properly and I allowed myself to be drawn in by something else.”

“You don’t have to justify anything to me.”

“I do.” Akechi insists. “I want to.” Akira studies the back of his eyelids as he considers what he’s going to say, but Akechi beats him to it. “But enough of that. It wasn’t my intention to unload any of my stress onto you. I’m sorry.”

“Akechi, what’s your favorite movie genre?”

Akechi’s face scrunches up and he blinks a few times in confusion as he processes the abrupt change of subject at the speed of dog eating a spoonful of peanut butter. “I’m sorry?” Scratch that, the speed of the erosion of a hydrophobic rock at the bottom of a stagnant swamp.

“Movies. What kind of movies do you like?”

“…Adventure?”

“Okay, that’s a start.”

“Science fiction?”

“Good, good. Can’t go wrong with space.”

“May I ask why you want to know?” Akechi’s still making a face of utter incomprehension as Akira scrolls through movie times.

“You’ve had a bad day, I’ve had a bad day – do you know what people who have bad days do? They watch movies.”

“What?”

“We’re going to the movies.” Akira spells it out for him. “I made a decent amount of money today, so I can cover both of us. It’ll be our second date.”

“What?”

“You can pick what we do on the third date, but don’t think I’m the type that’ll go home with you if you try to get cheap.”
And success, Akechi is red enough to use his metaverse cape as camouflage.

“Is now really the best time to go to the movies?” Akechi asks, trying to ignore Akira’s jibes.

“When was the last time you went to see one?” Akira asks, debating between two listings. Akechi seems to be straining his memory. “Yeah, we’re going. If you can’t remember, it's been too long.”

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to prepare for tomorrow?” Akechi still isn’t sold on the idea.

“This is preparation. We’re going to go and be stupid teenagers like we’re supposed to be so that when tomorrow comes, we’re refreshed and at full strength.”

“I suppose it's hard to argue with that logic. Or lack thereof.” Akechi finally concedes with a sigh and an involuntary smile. “What movies are showing?”

“This and that.” Akira deflects while reading through the movie premises, knowing how much Akechi loves his not-answers.

“Let me see what you’re looking at.” Akechi demands, taking the few steps over to Akira.

Akira keeps his phone out of Akechi’s reach as he tries to swipe it out of his hands. “It was my idea, I’m picking.”

“I’m not sure I trust your taste in movies.” No wonder Akechi doesn’t have any friends. How he’s managed to convince the world he’s a polite, charming do-gooder just goes to show how proficient at bullshitting he is. He continues trying to grab the phone, but Akira expects this and expertly evades the grabby hands. “I just want to look. Please?” It's too late for pleasantries, asshole.

“No.” What an amazing word.

Akechi’s true nature surfaces as his eyes narrow and he pushes down on Akira’s shoulder, pinning him against the bed for better leverage as he makes another grab at the phone.

“Ow, your knee is sharp, Akechi – get off. I changed my mind, I’m not paying for you anymore. You have your own money and your own damn phone, just go to the website. Shit.” After Akechi manages to catch his wrist Akira forcefully overextends his arm and drops the phone somewhere behind his bed. He may as well consider it lost and gone forever, because the amount of dust under there is no joke.

And as if summoned by compromising situations, Sojiro appears with an ‘ahem’ and a look in his eye that tells he’s seen the face of God and found him wanting. After a startled pause, Akechi springs back in mortification, arms waving in front of him in a futile attempt to shoo away the scene Sojiro and his perverted mind must have conjured at the sight of them wrestling on the bed.

Akira blows the hair out of his face from where he’s still collapsed on the mattress in his boxers.

“I’ve set aside some food for you two downstairs.” Sojiro announces before shaking his head and backtracking down the steps.

Morgana stays at the edge of the stairs, tail wagging dangerously as he glares at Akechi with the lethality of 100 nuclear warheads. Akira is touched by Morgana’s effort to defend his long abandoned innocence from the 17 year old virgin currently hiding his face in his hands.

“So how about that movie?” Akira asks when he’s sure Akechi understands exactly what he’s been dealing with ever since the bastard started coming to the cafe and letting Sojiro think things.
Akechi smooths out his clothes and fixes his hair before directing his attention to Morgana. “That was not what it looked like.”

“You seem awfully defensive.” Morgana’s tail strikes the floor like a whip.

“Considering Akira evidently has no intention of clearing up the situation on his own, it fell into my hands. Akira, tell him what happened.”

“No one ever believes me. And you’re an asshole, so nah.” Akira scoots back, trying to reach down the side of his bed to grab his phone. He pulls his hand back up coated in dust and cat fur.

“You could at least try.”

“You underestimate my ability to give up really easily.” Akira explains as Akechi paces across the room. And jeez, it’s all fun and games to Akechi until he’s the one that looks bad. “Morgana, do you see my phone under there anywhere?”

“All I see is a portal into a universe of infinite dust bunnies.”

“With the amount of cat fur mixed in, wouldn’t it be dust kittens?”

“No, that sounds dumb.”

Akechi takes a page from Akira’s book and gives up.

Chapter End Notes

A short, hopefully fun chapter for you guys. Sorry about the long wait, my life got stupid and I discovered multiple shows on Netflix that I had to watch and have already forgotten about. I hate posting shorter chapters, but I might have to keep doing it for the next month bc my life got even stupider and I got picked for jury duty for a long murder trial. I thought I wouldn't get picked because I'm young and stupid looking, but apparently that's exactly what they wanted. Sigh. Now I have to balance working weekend nights that I don't get excused for and staying awake all day the rest of the week until about xmas time. =(  

I'll try to hash out some stuff during lunch breaks on jury duty, bc I think they're pretty long. Or I'll just end up playing Ace Attorney on the 3ds and get dismissed for shouting 'objection' every 5 minutes. I am an expert ace attorney you guys, they don't know what they've done by choosing me. I will lawyer it up all over the place.

Thanks for all the patience and awesome comments! I love hearing all the feedback and theories you guys come up with, it's a lot of fun to read through. Sorry this chapter doesn't contribute much to the actual story, lol.
They run into Ryuji skulking around on Shibuya Central Street. Judging by his location and the look on his face, Akira is confident that he’s very recently been stonewalled and shutdown (with extreme prejudice) by Iwai in yet another attempt to get a discount on the night vision goggles he’s been eying. Akira never asked what he wanted them for – his imagination conjures nothing good, and Ryuji’s plans have always surpassed his expectations in the worst possible way.

Ryuji’s eyes light up when he spots him, a grin blossoming to life before Akechi shifts into view a microsecond later.

The grin melts off faster than ice tossed into an incinerator on the surface of the sun in the middle of a solar flare; theoretical and probably having existed only within Akira’s head.

The urge to flee may as well have been written on a billboard with strobe lights attached to Ryuji’s face, going by the nervous shift of his eyes to what Akira could swear was the audible jitter of his joints. Akira tries to encourages him with a tilt of his head to book it towards the nearest alley, but it’s too late. Ace Detective Akechi’s power of observation is too keen for Ryuji to escape unscathed.

“Sakamoto-san.” Akechi says just loud enough that it would be terribly rude if Ryuji pretended not to hear. The timbre of his voice is pleasantly surprised and not at all like he’s been just shy of confessing to Akira all day long that he wants to push Ryuji into a pit of jagged spikes and venomous snakes. Akira may be exaggerating, but the number of angry text messages he has saved on his phone doesn’t lie. “I hadn’t expected to see you until tomorrow. Or hear from you for that matter, considering your phone seems to have mysteriously stopped receiving my messages.”

Ryuji’s still hunched over and has a leg pointed out in the direction he was planning on gunning it. “Uh, hey – dudes… What – A coincidence! You know, I actually have a thing I need to get to –”

“A thing.” Akechi repeats conversationally, a spark in his eye Akira often sees in Morgana’s when he allows his instincts to take over and hunts down a bug. Or occasionally even Ryuji. The guy makes himself too easy a target.

“Yes, a thing.” Ryuji says, going on the defensive.

“And what is this thing?”

“Oh. None of your business?” Ryuji tries to sound assertive, but fails splendidly. Akira tries to spare him any embarrassment by turning away and hiding his grin in a hand, but Ryuji throws him a betrayed glance and slouches down further. “Jeez, look – I’m sorry I didn’t show you the calling card before I posted it, okay? I forgot.”

“You forgot.”

“Yeah, Akechi. I forgot.”

“After reminding you multiple times the night before and that same morning – you forgot?”

“That’s what I said. I also said sorry. Nothing bad happened, right? They don’t know it was us.”
“Not yet.” Akechi informs, still bright eyed with a smile on his face.

Ryuji grinds his teeth together and seems to be working up some kind of retort, but Akira intervenes before the pot shots turn into deliberate not-so-friendly fire. “Hey, we’re going to see that new sci-fi movie that just came out last week if you want to tag along.”

Ryuji is quick to forget Akechi’s antagonization at the offer. “Ooh, the one about the aliens with the teeth and that guy in the sunglasses, right?”

“The aliens with the teeth. And sunglasses. Yeah, sounds about right.”

“Hell yeah, that movie looks badass – uh, err.” Ryuji takes a step back as Akechi taps into his own reserves of psychosis to stare down Ryuji with enough intensity to scare the rigor mortis out of the dead. Or so Akira suspects, but by the time he manages to twist his head to take a look, Akechi is staring disinterestedly at a display in a random shop window.

Akira raises a brow, drawing Akechi’s attention. Akechi returns the gesture with the addition of an indulgent smile for good measure.

Ryuji is already backpedaling away from them, an arm raised in a halfhearted farewell as he says, “Sorry, Akira – I really have to get to that thing that I definitely already had planned to do before I ran into you guys. Later!”

And like all the socks Akira has lost in the laundry, Ryuji is gone without a trace.

He blinks a few times, unable to process what could only have been the first instance of human teleportation. “You know… Ann’s already been guilt tripping him all day about the calling card. You could cut him a little bit of slack.” He tries.

“I can’t say I know what you mean.” Akechi says while examining his nails. “Although I’ll be sure to make time to visit him in prison after his arrest.” Between Akechi, Morgana, and Ann all giving Ryuji a hard time, Akira supposes it's fortunate his friend is not known for his delicate nature. “But don’t worry, I’ll make sure the rest of us have solid alibis.”

“You are… worryingly mean-spirited when you don’t get your way.” Akira sighs. “Did you know that Ann actually thinks you’re nice?”

“I am nice.” Akechi insists as if he honestly believes Akira could still be fooled, and Akira half expects him to follow up with ‘to those who deserve it’. “Is it so terrible of me for having a realistic outlook on our situation? His failure of basic compliance has put us at a disadvantage if the police ever do decide to get involved.” Akira imagines him saying, ‘And when I say us – I mean you.’

“Just – be nice.” Akira counters lamely. “Ryuji’s a good guy. He means well. He doesn’t want us to get in trouble either.”

“Never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity. Is that what you want to say?”

Akira throws his hands up and resumes the walk towards the theater. “Talking to you is giving me a headache.” He needs a good two hours of aliens and bad CGI explosions before he can spend anymore time trying to convince Akechi to do a better job at pretending not to be an asshole. He used to be so much better at it. Dying must have left a lasting impression in the worst possible way.

When they get to the ticket counter, Akira quickly thanks Akechi for buying his ticket before dashing away to the snack line. When a mildly amused Akechi catches up with him a minute later, Akira pats
his shoulder and thanks him for the soda and popcorn before dashing away to the bathroom. Just when he thinks he’s in the clear for getting a free movie night (as he watches Akechi struggle to pick up two drinks and a large popcorn from around the corner he’s hiding behind) he gets a surprise of his own in the shape of a characteristically distressed Mishima.

“Kurusu-kun, I thought that was you.” Mishima sighs, the gloom enveloping him thick enough to be considered its own habitable atmosphere. “Are you here to take your mind off of school too? Everyday just brings us closer and closer to expulsion, but it all just seems unreal. I just don’t know what to do with myself anymore. What’s the point in doing homework or studying when I’m going to be expelled next week?”

Akira isn’t prepared for Mishima today. Handling Mishima when he’s in one of his slumps requires a certain amount of patience and ability to bullshit his way through the most ridiculous of conversations, and he’s already been drained down to his mortal limits by Akechi over the course of the day.

“There’s nothing wrong with a little escapism.” Akira settles for. “What movie are you here to see?”

Mishima perks up a little. “Well, you see –” Uh oh, Akira has a general idea of where this is going. “There’s this girl I’m talking to online. And she says this new drama is her ‘favorite movie ever’, but Kurusu-kun, it’s just so bad I don’t think I can finish sitting through it. But what chance do I have with her if I can’t even stand to watch the kind of movies she likes?”

“Sounds like quite the problem.” Akechi suddenly appears and says, shoving Akira’s drink at him. “Perhaps it wasn’t meant to be?”

Mishima groans. “No, I can’t give up – I’ve had three conversations with her over messenger! Three! Most girls never even bother to reply. This is the furthest I’ve gotten!” He pauses as he belatedly notices and doubletakes the new addition to the conversation. “But if people I don’t even know are telling me it’s useless… Kurusu-kun, what should I do? You’ve dated before, right?”

Darn, there goes Akira’s brief hopes that Akechi would be the one that gets dragged into Mishima’s madness.

“Uh, I always knew the girls I’ve dated pretty well before I started dating them, so I can’t really help on that front. But I don’t think that not liking the same movies will ruin a relationship if you have other things in common.” Akira slurps his drink. “…You have other things in common, right?”

Mishima seems to sweat a little. “We’re both 16? She likes to read manga? But only shoujo. She says she hates all the other kinds. Oh! We both like festivals!”

“Everyone likes festivals.” Akechi helpfully supplies as he shoves the popcorn at Akira in an effort to make him take it.

“Argh, what do I do?” Mishima continues his spiral into despair. “Once I’m expelled I’ll never get a girl interested in me ever again! This is my only shot! It’s not like either of you could understand, you both have good looks on your side. I’m average and desperate!” Akira ignores the popcorn being pushed at him as he takes another long drink. “I might as well just give up now, I can’t watch another second of that awful movie. Maybe I’ll just join you two instead. What are you watching? It really can’t be any worse…”

Oh no, this is a recipe for disaster. Akira can already sense Akechi staring at him expectantly with an untold order to ‘solve this problem now or I’ll order all of the coffee’. 
“Mishima – you have a very attractive smile.” Both Akechi and Mishima give him identical looks of doubt.

“I do?” Mishima asks, hesitantly bringing his hands up to his face.

“The kind of smile that lights up a room.” Akira insists. “I bet any girl would fall a little bit in love with you if you practice your smile everyday and released its true potential.”

“You think so?” Mishima asks, wide eyed.

“Definitely. You’re passionate too. A killer smile combined with your passion – If I were a girl, I’d date you.”

“You would?” Mishima seems to be on the verge of tears.

“I would. So go back to your movie and watch it with a new perspective – try to see what the girl you’ve been talking to sees in it and power through it, Mishima. Learn from it. And if it doesn’t work out with this girl, it only means there’s someone better suited for you out there waiting to meet you.”

Mishima steels himself up, taking deep breaths before puffing back up and stretching his lips out in a smile that was way too much everything all at once – to say it plainly.

“You’re right, Kurusu-kun. Even if it doesn’t work out with her, even if I’m expelled and forced to work minimum wage to survive among the dregs of society – There’s someone out there for me. I know it! And you’ll be there to help me find her, right?”

“Well, I mean –”

“And don’t worry Kurusu-kun, I’ve already been looking up jobs to apply for after we get expelled. I have a few good options lined up where we should be able to raise through the ranks and make decent wages pretty quickly –”

“Oh, that’s –”

“But that’s all for later! Right now I’m going to walk back into that movie and enjoy it. Or try to, anyways.”

“That’s the spirit.” Akira smiles weakly, exhausted.

“Thank you Kurusu-kun, Kurusu-kun’s friend.” He nods at both of them before sprinting down the hallway.

“Okay.” Akira sighs.

“You’re quite the motivational speaker.” Akechi summarizes.

“I’m pretty sure I stole all of that from a TV movie.” He admits. Akechi hands him the bucket of popcorn again, which he tiredly accepts.

“He seems very fond of you.”

Akira hums a non-response as he starts to drift towards the room their movie is in. “He’s just not used to having people to talk to, I think. He’s a good friend. Just – very enthusiastic. I don’t always have the energy to keep up with him. I bet the two of you could learn a lot from each other.”

“From the little I know of him, I can’t imagine that the two of us have many similar interests.”
Akechi tries to politely reject the idea.

“You might be surprised. He’s really perceptive and resourceful. Just imagine yourself if you had absolutely no ego or confidence. And with more words. A lot more words.”

“If you’re trying to encourage me to befriend him, you’re failing.”

Akira snickers as he pushes the theater door open with his shoulder. “What happened to ‘Nice Guy’ Akechi? First you scare off Ryuji and now you reject Mishima. Are Ann and Morgana next on your list?”

“It was never my intention to be mean.” Akechi retorts, lowering his voice in the dim lit room as they navigate towards the seats in the middle. “From the very little I know about him, I simply have difficulty imagining the two of us having any sort of meaningful conversation.”

“Sounds like you suffer from a terminal lack of imagination.” Akira stage whispers as they take their seats.

Akechi frowns and grabs a handful of popcorn while changing the subject, “Did you ever have any intention of paying for your ticket tonight?”

“I forgot my wallet.”

“It’s in your pocket.”

“I forgot to put my money in my wallet.” Akira says through a mouthful of popcorn.

Akechi sighs and slumps back. “Talking to you is giving me a headache.” He mumbles.

“Thanks for the movie, Goro-kun.”

And Akechi thinks he hides the small smile playing across his face as he slumps over onto his hand, but Akira can see it tug at the corners of his mouth as the colors from the previews flicker across his face.

Akira has already seen the movie. He remembers it faintly from some other life that seems to be slipping away with each new day he wakes to. A tremor runs through his left hand as his thoughts drift to darker things, things that couldn’t be solved through excessive explosions, well timed one-liners, and the power of true love. He shoves his hand into his jacket pocket before Akechi manages to take notice and instigates another interrogation.

Akechi, Akira discovers, may be a bit of an escapist himself. His eyes rarely leave the screen once the movie begins, his drink and their shared popcorn forgotten and left alone to Akira’s mercy.

“I’ll admit,” Akechi says later, “You were right – that was refreshing. Perhaps I should put more effort into visiting the cinema in the future.”

“I’ll be happy to tag along if you keep buying my tickets.” Akira buttons his coat and pulls it tighter against him, the wind chill increasing with the departure of the sun. He thinks of Futaba and the scorching desert heat her palace exists within; the heat of her own room as her multiple computers max out their overclocked CPUs and graphics cards to run whatever insane project she felt like
“Whatever happened to you buying tickets for the both of us?” Akechi wonders.

“I was molested.”

“That is not what happened.” Akechi replies too fast, keeping his eyes locked forward.

“My once untouched skin is now forever stained with the memory of what you did to me.”

“Please stop talking.”

“I have a bruise on my ribs from where your knee pinned me against –”

“That’s quite enough, Akira.”

Akira grins and congratulates himself on a mission accomplished as Akechi’s face burns nearly imperceptibly in the harsh white glare of the street lamps and the neon lights emblazoned with shop names and product.

“I just remembered that you were rich, that’s all.” Akira changes his tune.

“I’m hardly rich.”

“Your weekly coffee allowance is more than I would make in a month.”

Akechi doesn’t manage to stifle his laugh in time, but Akira isn’t offended because he proved his point.

“I suppose that’s the difference between a full-time job and a part-time job.”

“How often do you actually work? Between school and bothering me, I don’t see how you can fit a full-time job in your schedule. And I know you do other things, too.”

“Curious about me?” Akechi asks, a coy grin in place. “You know how this works – an answer for an answer. I get to ask you something, too.”

“All you ever do is ask questions – and you only play by your rules when they suit you. Besides, sometimes a conversation can just be a conversation. No guidelines, no rules or expectations.” Akira breathes in the ozone, a sure sign of rain soon to fall. “I don’t think you even know how to have normal conversations. I bet you just sometimes accidentally stumble into them without knowing how you got there.”

“That’s not an unfair assessment.” Akechi chuckles. “Although, I do believe it’s unfair to assume any sort of dialogue with you is normal.”

“Trying to say I’m abnormal?”

“Not trying.”

“Rude.”

“I miss a lot of school.” Akechi says, and the jarring shift in topic throws Akira off before he remembers his question from earlier. “My teachers and principal accept it as long as I do well on exams, but I usually only attend school for a few hours a day if I show up at all. My teachers email me my weekly assignments and the recommended study material, and there are a few students I
borrow notes from on occasion. I generally make my own hours for work, but there are often days when my presence is required at specific times, usually when I’m working with Prosecutor Nijima Sae-san on the psychotic breakdown cases – which, ah, you should know about since those are generally what I’m broadcast on TV to talk about – and I know you’re a fan of mine.” He shoots Akira a cheeky grin, but Akira is busy dealing with the dead stop of his heart and the thread of guilt creeping into his gut at the reminder of the psychotic breaks – events that were still happening, events that Akira has had every opportunity to stop.

But something’s in the way – something is wrong –

Akechi continues, “But most of the cases I handle are much smaller than that and significantly easier to set a schedule around. I’m also willing to confess to sacrificing more sleep than I reasonably should. And no, I will not drop my morning cycling routine to get more sleep – I need to stay in shape somehow.”

Akira breaks away from the prison of his thoughts to hold up his hands in a placating gesture at Akechi’s accusatory tone. “Hey, it’s your call. It’s a bad one, but I won’t try to change your mind again.”

Akechi tones down his defensive stare when Akira doesn’t try to be a smartass. For once. “And that’s how I manage to work full-time. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“More than I expected, really. Makes me wonder how I fit into your schedule at all.”

“You don’t need much attention.” Akechi bluntly replies. “I can usually study or research while I’m at the cafe, so you’re not setting me back much.”

“I don’t need much attention… Am I a houseplant? You talk about me like I’m a houseplant. Water me once a week and be on your way.”

“I would say that’s a fairly accurate comparison.”

“I don’t know what to say to that.”

Akechi smiles like he won something. “You’re surprisingly chatty today.”

“Sorry. I guess I should go back to being a houseplant. It’s going to rain soon, so just leave me out here and don’t come back for a few weeks. I’ll be fine. Might even sprout a few leaves.”

“Akira…” Akechi hesitates.

Akira sighs before motioning for him to continue. “Is it interrogation time? What questions do you have for me now?” Questions that Akira will most definitely not want to answer, going by past experience.

“Just one. Although, I’m not sure how to ask it.”

“Maybe it's not meant to be asked.” Akira attempts. Akechi smiles as if he expected that. One of the neon shop lights behind Akechi begins to flicker as the smile degrades to something far less sure of itself.

He struggles to find the words. “The world –” He cuts himself off and grimaces. “No, maybe you’re right. Maybe it's not meant to be asked. Not just yet, anyways.”

There’s an echo of a siren wailing in Akira’s ears, and he can feel a hand tightening around his arm
in a vice grip – nails piercing his skin – trying to physically tear him away from Akechi. “The world, what?” Akira prompts against his better judgment, bewildered by his own internal recoil, unsure of where it came from.

“No, really. I don’t think now is a good time to ask. I think I’ve become a little better at reading your moods and if I ask you now, I’m not sure I’d ever get the truth from you.”

Akira blinks away the dizziness, blinks away the bizarre violet aurora of the sky that shouldn’t exist here, now, or ever, and watches the first few drops of rain bleed the street with lines of teals and reds. “What gives you that impression?”

Akechi halts their casual stroll back towards the station and appraises Akira the way an entomologist might appraise a newly discovered species of spider; unsure if it’s safe enough to get a little closer without taking proper safety precautions. Akira warily takes a step back just in case he decides to risk it.

The corner of Akechi’s lip quirks up knowingly as if Akira just confirmed all of his suspicions with that singular movement. He shakes his head before tucking a strand of hair behind his ear. “You want to be distracted today, not self-reflective. That’s what all of this is about, isn’t it? Going to the movies, the tickets and drinks, the teasing and the playing – all of this has been about something more than having a day to recharge in preparation for tomorrow. You’re avoiding something.”

A drop of rain falls on Akira’s nose. “I don’t know whatever mood you were reading on me earlier, but I can guarantee that you’ve just killed it. And you’re right about one thing.”

“Oh? And what’s that?”

“I’m never going to answer your stupid question.” Akira says.

Akechi wipes a thumb under his eye as he laughs and ducks under an awning to escape the beginnings of rain. “We’ll see about that.” He says cheerily.

Akira clicks his tongue and shakes the bit of rain out of his hair before looking out towards the direction of the station, trying to sort out the fragments of thoughts that were already being swept away like cubes of ice tossed into the rapids. Akechi was going to ask something important.

*The world –

The world, what?

He hears a familiar sound.

“Did you just take a picture of me?” Akira accuses rather than asks when he looks to see Akechi lowering his phone.

“I needed an update for your contact photo.” Akechi says. “I’ll title it, ‘Houseplant in the Rain’.”

“Oh. Great. I really needed something to remind me about that.” Akira grimaces when a fat blob of rain targets his eye. He needs his glasses back. “And delete the other picture you had of me.” Other than the raising of a brow, Akechi ignores him as he does whatever on his phone. Akira reluctantly takes the spot next to him under the awning when drops start falling down more than one at a time. He glances over to see a picture of himself. “Huh.”

“I think there may be a type of art I have a knack for, after all – what do you think? Is photography a viable career choice for me?” Akechi asks through a grin.
It is a good shot, although Akira is disinclined to compliment Akechi at the moment. In the image, Akira’s nearly a silhouette amidst the chaotic light that forms Shibuya Crossing behind him, the teals and reds of the nearest shop sign highlighting his face and clothes, reflecting off the drops of rain clinging to him. “The lighting’s good.” Akira says through his teeth.

“The lighting? You’re right, it does make the picture more interesting.” Akechi says, focusing his eyes to re-evaluate the picture.

Akira makes a face and looks between Akechi and the phone. “I think photography is not in your future.”

Akechi startles a bit at the admission, but quickly covers it with a sheepish smile. “Why do you say that? I think it’s a good shot.” Akira has talked too much today, he doesn’t feel like explaining how important the concept of light was in photography and how it would have been the first thing anyone even remotely interested in the subject would notice. “You always have this expression on your face when you’re making coffee.” Akechi says.

Wait.

“When I’m making coffee?” Akira asks and looks at the picture again. He looks vaguely pissed off. Yeah, okay. That’s probably accurate for whenever he makes Akechi’s coffee. “That’s why you took the picture?” He’s spent too much time helping Yusuke. He’s become an art snob, perpetually judging other people even when they just wanted to take a damn picture on their phone for the fun of it.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t resist.” Akechi says, but the tone of his voice is anything but apologetic.

Akira sighs through his nose and shoves his hands in his pockets. “I don’t mind.” He says. “But delete the other picture.”

Akechi side-eyes him and says nothing.

“Ready for tomorrow?” Akechi asks as they wait for the rain to die down a little.

“I’ll have your back.” For as long as they have a common goal, anyway. Their futures are fickle.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.” Akechi says with a smile that would melt duralumin.

Fortunately – Akira has fire resistance, so he doesn’t melt. Unfortunately – a good smile has always been one of his greatest weaknesses.

He spends the next several minutes waiting out the increasingly heavy downpour still frustrated with Akechi’s existence in general, still frustrated with himself for getting frustrated in the first place, and ridiculously frustrated for letting Akechi get close enough to somewhat effectively use his charm against him.

If Akira didn’t have bad luck, he wouldn’t have any at all.

It’s not much later when Akira’s night continues its descent into despair.
“Akira! Goro-kun!” Akira hears Ann’s voice somewhere in the distance. Akechi sights her first and Akira follows his vision to see Ann with her hood up, hunched over something in her arms as she sprints over to them through the rain. “I’m so happy I found you two – I didn’t know it would rain, so I don’t have an umbrella, and the stuff I bought absolutely cannot get wet. I don’t think I can make it all the way to the station like this.” She pulls down her hood and frees her hair when she makes it under the awning with them. Her hair isn’t in their usual tails, and Akira wonders if she had to take them down in order to pull her hood up. “One of you has an umbrella, right?” She asks, eyes roving over the both of them hopefully. “We can all fit together if we huddle up!”

Akira spreads his hands out wordlessly in display of all the umbrellas he doesn’t have.

“We’re stuck in the rain just like you, Ann-chan.” Akechi explains.

“Oh.” Ann says, disheartened. “Ooh.” She says again with added dramatic effect. “So all we can do is wait.”

“Akira’s jacket might be able to provide you with enough protection to make it to the station without getting your merchandise wet if you can convince him to lend it to you. I’m afraid my uniform jacket isn’t well suited for the rain, otherwise I’d offer my own.”

Akira narrows his eyes at Akechi as Ann turns to him with renewed hope.

“No.” Akira says. He really loves that word.

Ann deflates, but not for long. “I’ll buy you lunch at school tomorrow!” She tries.

“I just got over a cold. I’m not giving you my jacket in the middle of a downpour.” Akira says with finality. Maybe once upon a time she would have been able to sucker him into coughing it over with a cute smile, but he’s been dealing with her never ending shenanigans for years now.

“Fine, fine. I’ll stop asking. I don’t want you to get sick again.” She sighs as she accepts her fate of being stuck under the awning with them. “So what brings the two of you out here? Last minute preparation for tomorrow?” She asks, unable to let the silence linger for too long.

“We just left the theater.” Akechi says.

“You went to the movies without inviting me?” Ann asks, sounding hurt. Akira knows she’s playing them, but Akechi falls for it.

“Ah, it was a spur of the moment type of thing. We didn’t plan it in advance so there was no time to invite anyone – Sorry, Ann-chan.” Akechi says, sounding much more apologetic than he ever has towards Akira.

Akira rolls his eyes.

She laughs and squeezes between the two of them, looping her arms through theirs after placing her shopping bag on the ground. Akira recognizes this tactic. Ann is cold and has decided they are no longer in need of their excess body heat.

“So the two of you have been together all day?” She asks. Akira yawns, content to let them do all the talking.

“No, I have a habit of going to Akira’s cafe after work. He suggested seeing a movie as a way to ‘refresh’ ourselves for tomorrow.” Akechi details. Akira wonders how Sojiro would feel about the fact that Akechi refers to Leblanc as Akira’s cafe.
Ann’s nodding. “I wish I thought of that before I went home after school – I ended up falling asleep all afternoon. Now I’ll be awake all night. Not that I could have slept anyway.” She pulls them closer to her and grumbles under her breath, “Thinking about that creep Kamoshida pisses me off so much, I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep again until we burn that disgusting castle to ashes and brick.”

Akira wishes he knew the magical words to heal her anger, but he also knows she has better control over her emotions than the rest of them combined. Anger is a cure in itself the way Ann handles it. He envies her sometimes.

He hopes Akechi learns something from her tomorrow.

“Sorry, Goro-kun. I know you’re still on the fence about what we’re doing, but I –”

Akechi interrupts Ann. “No, there’s no reason for you to be sorry. I’ll admit I’m still reluctant to say that I’m okay with how we’re going about this, but our reasoning is sound, and our options are limited at best. And it’s hardly as if we’re planning on making a habit out of stealing hearts.” Akechi says, tacking on a chuckle to emphasize how ridiculous the idea would be.

Akira wonders if Akechi’s grand plan is as simple as convincing them not to continue meddling with people’s hearts.

Ann beams at the idea. “I don’t know, Goro-kun. It doesn’t sound like such a bad idea to me! Changing the hearts of criminals all around the world… Just imagine how many people we could save. People like Shiho…”

“I understand your feelings, Ann-chan – I do. There’s a reason I chose detective work. I strive for nothing less than bringing the criminals of the world to justice – But there are reasons why vigilantism is illegal. It may start out idealistic and well-meaning, but people are just that – people. Idealism degrades, and people become self-serving and dangerous when they convince themselves they’re serving a greater good. The justice system may at times seem hopelessly complicated or even ineffective, but I assure you – it’s far less dangerous than giving unlimited power to a group of people who feel they are above the law.”

Akira resists the urge to roll his eyes again. He really wishes Akechi believed half the things he said.

“Did you have something you wanted to say, Akira?” Akechi singles him out. Jerk. Maybe he didn’t resist his eye roll as well as he thought he did.

“Sounds like fun to me. I’ll be the world-renounced, dreaded thief of hearts and you can be the plucky detective who makes his career out of tracking me down and almost catching me each time. But don’t worry, I’ll let you catch me when I get too old to do all the climbing this stuff requires.”

“Ha, ha.” Akechi says. And Akira learns that eye rolling is apparently contagious. “Unfortunately for you, you’ve failed to take into consideration the fact that I’m the much more adept runner. Your criminal career would be short-lived at best.”

“You won’t be so smug when I’m the world-renounced, dreaded thief of hearts who has a getaway car while you’re chasing me on foot.”

Ann laughs while Akechi sighs and tries not to smile.

“But still,” Ann says, leaning over on Akira. “Maybe you’re right and it’d go bad after a while, but – is it so bad to imagine a world where criminals can’t get away with their crimes?”

Despondent, Akechi quietly answers, “No, Ann-chan. It’s not so bad.”
After another few minutes of rain-watching, they find themselves inside of the very same shop they’ve been loitering in front of.

Ann shoves a pair of glasses crookedly onto Akira’s nose.

“Hmm, nope.” She tears them off his face (taking at least a few strands of hair with them) and replaces them with another pair at the speed of Ryuji making a decision between homework or video games. “Also a no.”

Akechi hands her another pair from the stack she created while browsing around. The shop attendant is smiling amicably, but Akira has worked retail and knows she’s probably internally cursing Ann into the seventh circle of hell, given that the store closes in 20 minutes.

“Another no.”

Akira has only himself to blame for his situation. He made the mistake of asking Ann when he could expect to get a replacement for the ones she lost.

“Nooope.” Ann sings, managing to jab a finger in his eye.

Akira perks up when Akechi picks up a pair of glasses that were nearly identical to his old ones.

“Hmm. Not these ones either.” Akechi says before he even hands them over to Akira’s current tormentor, Takamaki Ann.

Akira glares and mouths ‘traitor’ when Ann is busy digging around for something she likes. Akechi widens his eyes in faux surprise with a silly smile on his face as he points to himself with a shrug as if to say, ‘Who, me?’ Akira only deepens his glare as Ann whips back around with two pairs that Akira is almost certain are just two copies of the same glasses.

She shoves both of them onto his face.

“These will have to do!” She happily announces after tossing one. “I still think you shouldn’t be hiding your face at all, but at least with these we can still see it. They’re pretty fashionable, too. Don’t you think so, Goro-kun?”

“Yes. A vast improvement from his last pair.” Akechi agrees after switching to his appraisal pose.

Akira hates them both.

Ann swipes them off his face and rushes over to the register, ducking in front of a little old lady with a bag full of items.

Akira shakes his head and helps the poor attendant put the mess of glasses back onto their shelves. Ann glides over to him a moment later, holding out the newly bought glasses as if they were some kind of ceremonial offering.

“...Thanks.” Akira says. The glasses are black rimmed on top, rimless on the bottom and have a minimalistic black and silver design on the sides.

He immediately hates them and resolves to ‘misplace’ them as quickly as possible. But Ann is waiting expectantly, so he, with every possible lack of enthusiasm within him, gently places them on his face.

He sulks the entire way back to the station.
Bonus scene:

(Earlier that day)

“Akira, what are you doing to your arm?” Akechi asks over the bowl of curry Sojiro left out for him.

Akira spares him a glance. “I think I knocked it on something. I have a bruise.” He moves his hand so Akechi can see. And indeed, what is revealed is nothing other than a slowly purpling bruise on his forearm.

“Why are you touching it?” Akechi doesn’t cringe, not exactly, but he makes some sort of expression that teeters the line between disgust and distaste. It's the face of someone who took a bite out of their freshly baked cake just to realize they misplaced the sugar with the salt.

“I don’t know, it's kind of fun to press down and see how much it hurts.” Akira explains. Akechi choking on his rice. “Are you okay?” Akira asks out of habit and less out of concern.

Akechi clears his throat a few times and looks around the room. Morgana is not so secretly spying on them from his sunny spot in the window and Sojiro’s attention is being consumed by the local news. “Akira, are you a masochist?” He asks quietly, lowering his voice in an attempt to stave off any eavesdropping.

Akira snorts. “What? Seriously?” He asks, laughing through his own words. “You’re really asking me that? Am I a masochi –” he stops abruptly and drags his attention back to the bruise, poking at it again. His concentration intensifies as he presses down with his thumb. “Huh.”

Akechi chokes on air.

Akira sits back a few moments later with the face of revelation. “I think I’ve discovered something about myself today.”

Akechi turns wide eyes to Morgana who shoots him a warning look, and then to a smirking Sojiro who flashes him a thumbs up.

Akechi’s eyes don’t leave the space in front of him until he’s out the door and down the alley.

Chapter End Notes

I'm aliiiivvveeee. Kind of. Okay, I'm perfectly fine - I just got thrown way out of sync with all the stuff I had going on and it was hard getting back on task. And I bought a bunch of video games because winter sales, so that didn't help much. I have no impulse control. I plan on going back to updating every other week, so if I seem to start slacking again, just verbally abuse me a little bit and that will probably get me to pick up the pace.

But anyways, thanks to all of you who are still reading and to everyone who has commented and left kudos - I'm always happy to see people are enjoying this and its
definitely a motivating factor to get these chapters out faster. I've been bad about replying to comments lately, but I'll try to be better, especially about answering any questions you guys have.

About this chapter: It wasn't originally going to exist, but a few of you were looking forward to seeing their 'movie date', so I wrote it anyways. At one point there were about 1-2k words of important stuff actually happening here, but it didn't fit in with the light-hearted mood of the rest of the chapter at all, so I decided to ctrl x it and move it to later in the story. So, what I'm saying is that this is basically another filler chapter. Which, uh, you could probably already tell. Since you've read it. Since this author's note is after the chapter. Yeah. Well.

ANYWAYS. Like I said, I was thrown way out of sync, so I don't feel like this chapter is up to my usual standards/style for this particular story, but I think it's still a fun chapter and I hope you enjoyed it. A lot more dialogue than I usually write for this fic. Or maybe just a lot less narration. Who knows. I'll probably do some minor stealth edits on it when I'm more confident in my writing again, but hopefully this will tide you over for now.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Akira doesn’t believe in fate. Not really.

Most depictions of fate imply a greater power – one of which, admittedly, Akira has witnessed for himself. Yaldabaoth was (is?) one of many beings (Creatures? Gods?) that exist within the dimensions parallel to the one Akira is native to. Special, perhaps in his ability to influence other worlds, but hardly the precursor to Ragnarok itself. Akira has learned that Yaldabaoth was (is is is) not the strongest, not the most threatening, and far from the most infallible deity (Demon? Spirit?) in creation.

To his credit, what Yaldabaoth might have been, however, was the most curious.

But fate – the implication of fate is always that it's something inescapable. There is only one thing in life that can’t be prevented.

If trapped in a malfunctioning atmospheric diving suit, Akira would be forced to face many situations, very quickly.

One, there’s an inquisitive shark eying him. The same rudeass shark that broke his suit and is looking like it wants to try taking another bite just to see what happens. The shark may be dubbed Akechi for the sake of convenience. Or spite. Whatever.

Two, hypothermia. The ocean is really fucking cold.

Three, oxygen. Akira has limited air, which his weak human lungs are a bit fond of and might go on strike when deprived too long.

Four, he’s sinking to the bottom of the goddamned ocean, where his body will crumple up like an old tin can under the leagues of water when his suit gives out. If he lives that long. For the sake of his hypothetical self, he hopes not.

Five, even if by some miraculous event his suit fixed itself and he managed to get back to the surface – who knows. Maybe in that time there was a nuclear war between every major power on the planet and he’s one of a dozen people left alive. Maybe there was an alien invasion. Maybe even the beginnings of the ever favored zombie apocalypse. Maybe everything’s peachy keen and he lives a long full life until a day comes where he simply never wakes up.

What Akira’s point is, if he even has one (and that’s debatable), is that if fate exists – it’s not a sentient thing that cares when or how or why Akira dies. Just that Akira does die. Fate is the action of death itself, the brief instant when something that is – is no longer. Not a creature enamored with cause and effect, not anything with its own mind – because anything that thinks, will stop.

Everything that exists is only ‘fated’ for one thing – the void.

“Did we lose him? This happens sometimes when I talk for longer than a few seconds.” Akechi drawls.

Akira’s only thinking about fate at all because Akechi is annoying and if fate as it's popularly acknowledged does exist, it apparently wanted the two of them to meet – and Akira does not
approve. He wants a refund on this fate thing. He *deserves* a refund.

“He always gets like this in class. The teachers usually have to call on him a few times or throw something at him to get his attention. Some days I think he has more chalk in his hair than hair.”

“Ann, do you want this fudge? It’s too sweet for me.”

“But I’ve eaten too much food already… Okay, I’ll just have one. Don’t want it to go to waste!”

If Akira had a piece of fudge for the number of times Ann’s ‘I’ll just have one’ turned into ‘I was only going to have one’, he’d have none because she’d eat those too.

“Dude, you haven’t blinked in a while. You alright?” Ryuji asks. Akira blinks to appease him.

“He’s in a food coma!” Morgana says between cramming his own face.

“But to think that you and Akira met like that.” Ann says to Akechi. “He never told us the details. And sometimes I forget that the two of you haven’t known each other very long.”

Akechi laughs. “Sometimes I forget, myself. Not even a month…” He seems wistful. “Ah, with how quickly we’ve become friends and how it led to all of us meeting, and our business in the metaverse – perhaps it was fate?”

Akira groans.

“Whoa, are you alright?” Morgana asks.

“I want a refund.” Akira croaks, putting his head in his hands.

“What did you eat so I can avoid it?” Ryuji asks.

Akechi pats Akira on the back in a poor display of comfort. Why he’s sitting on the couch next to Akira instead of on one of the perfectly unoccupied chairs, *Akira doesn’t know*. “If you’re feeling sick, maybe you shouldn’t eat anymore?”

“Then I guess it means he doesn’t need that slice of pie!” Ann says as she reaches over to his plate and stabs his food with a fork.

“I thought you said you were full?”

“False alarm! I’m going to celebrate our victory until I can’t move!”

And if fate does exist, Kamoshida couldn’t avoid his. With or without Akira’s influence, he did not escape his crimes.

Shujin now has a new source of gossip – Kamoshida’s arrest and the subsequent investigation. Akira doesn’t know if Akechi ‘helped’ the police when they were gathering testimony and other information in regards to his sudden confession, but much like the first time – one day Kamoshida was there and the next he wasn’t.

Akira doesn’t dream often, never has. But the days before Kamoshida showed up to admit his guilt to the school, Akira woke to nightmares of a confession interrupted by black blood and white eyes layered over by the pungent stench of gunpowder.

It’s been difficult meeting Akechi’s eye lately.
It’s been more so meeting his own in the mirror every morning.

“Before we all end up like Akira, there’s something I need to talk to everyone about.” Morgana announces, several pieces of rice stuck to his whiskers. “Now that I’ve helped you with Kamoshida – you need to help me.”

“Yeah, yeah. To find your memories, right? We already said we would help, it’s not like we changed our minds. Besides! I wouldn’t mind exploring the metaverse a little more. There are a ton of scumbags out there just like Kamoshida who could use a beat down.” Ryuji says before tearing into the flesh of the dead with his teeth. Dead cow, to be precise. Akechi clears his throat, and Ryuji shoots him an annoyed glance. “Oh, right. I forgot we have Young Master Detective Prince here.”

“I understand your frustration, but in regard to the palaces – I can’t allow this to continue.” Akechi says primly.

“Oh, you can’t allow us, huh?” Ryuji bites back.

“No. If you continue, I’ll have no choice but to turn you in to the police. Myself included for my involvement in the Kamoshida case.”

Akira figured he’d go this route. The phantom thieves can’t be an issue for his objectives if they’re not even a part of the game. He leans forward into his hand, turning his head away from Akechi. Ann is in a similar state, chewing passively on her tiramisu.

“Why don’t you turn all of us in right now if you’re so morally offended by us rightfully putting this guy in jail?” Ryuji asks, not giving up without a fight.

“I’ll admit, I was… selfish in my behavior. I wanted to help and – No, that’s not all. I was curious. I wanted to learn more about the metaverse and I let that get the better of me. But this is the end of it. I’m sorry, I know it's not what you want to hear, but the sort of power the metaverse gives us over other people does not rightfully belong in the hands of anyone. We can’t continue down this path. If you genuinely have a passion for catching criminals, might I suggest looking into detective work as a possible career?” Akechi smiles like he hasn’t been busy threatening to put them all in jail.


Ann looks troubled as she switches over to her plate of volcano cake. Morgana is silent, but his tail whips Akira in the side. Ryuji’s desperate gaze swings to Akira. Akechi, oddly enough, doesn’t even look his way as he calmly takes a sip of tea.

Akira takes a breath. “I don’t think anything will be changing Akechi’s mind tonight, Ryuji. And we still have to help Morgana – so why don’t we focus on that for now?”

Ryuji crashes back into his seat, red with anger. “Aren’t you just going along with him again?”

Oh, yeah. Make Akira the villain because he doesn’t want all of them to get arrested. He wouldn’t put it past Akechi to do exactly as he says. Or worse. Akira might have been the one he felt obligated to kill last time, but if Ryuji’s the only one giving him trouble now –

Akira tiredly rubs his face with his hands.

“Here, let me save you the trouble.” Akechi says, shooting Akira a benevolent smile that he’s sure must be laced with some type of poison. “Akira is on your side in this matter, Sakamoto-san. We’ve had a few discussions relating to this, so I’m well aware of his opinion. But the fact remains that I disagree and that I have a professional duty as a detective to properly carry out the law. A duty that I
have already bent in concession to our current circumstances, and one that I never intend to fully
break.”

Ryuji crosses his arms as the steam pours out of his ears. At the rate it's going, he’ll mummify himself
before they leave.

“But you’ll still help me, right?” Is all Morgana has to ask Akechi.

“To the best of my ability.” Akechi confirms.

That seems to satisfy Morgana. “I’ll admit, I was kind of looking forward to finding some more
 treasure and maybe making a name for ourselves as a group of real phantom thieves, but… oh well.
As long as I get my memories and body back, I’ll be fine!”

“I’m relieved. I’m aware my point of view is the unpopular opinion, but I hope you can all come to
 accept and understand it eventually.” Akechi says, keeping his sight locked on the cup in his hand.
Ryuji makes a discontent noise.

Ann sets down her cake plate. “I see where you’re coming from, Goro-kun. At least, I think I do.
But at the same time – I feel like that app was given to us for a reason. And if it's not to help
people…”

“It must be to help me, Lady Ann!” Morgana nearly shouts as he leaps up. Akira glances around to
make sure no one else in the buffet notices they have a cat.

“Some food for thought,” Akira starts, trying to give Morgana a little bit of coverage with a pillow.
“Maybe you shouldn’t be asking why the app was given to you, but who gave it to you.” He’s met
with four identical stares of surprise. “Don’t tell me you’ve never thought about it?” Akira asks.
Even Ryuji seems to forget his anger as he tries to think.

“Um, no.” Ann admits sheepishly. “I mean, I get random apps all the time on my phone. I don’t
know where any of them come from, so I didn’t really think about this one either.”

“Those apps are called malware.” Akira explains with futility after a deep breath.

“I’ve thought about it. I’ve even tried researching and tracing it back to where it came from.” Akechi
says. “Unfortunately, there’s nothing to go on. And I mean nothing.”

Akira hums to himself, caught in a staring contest with another customer who keeps glancing their
way.

“Who cares?” Ryuji sighs. “We’ve got it, so it makes sense to use it, right?”

“Nothing’s free.” Akira says. “We’re either paying a price we haven’t noticed yet or we have a
benefactor.” Of course Akira knows it's the latter, and he also knows the benefactor does not mean
well. “Just something to think about.” Akira tries to break up the sudden gloom he brought down on
them. “We should be celebrating today, right? We can argue about stuff another time. Lets forget
everything else for now and just be happy I’m not expelled.”

“Uh, it's ‘we’re’ not expelled, dude. You weren’t the only one in the deep end. Don’t forget about
me!” Ryuji corrects.

“Right, yes. We’re all overjoyed that I’m not expelled.” Akira grabs some fudge.

“Dude...”
Ann laughs and jumps up. “I’m getting another plate. Any requests?”

Akechi nets Akira’s attention while Morgana and Ryuji list off what they want her to bring back. Akechi, of course, continues staring like the creep he is.

“Akira.” Akechi says, very unnecessarily. Akira is aware of his name, thanks. “Can we talk later? After we leave the buffet.”

This never ends well for Akira. “More questions?” Akira forces himself to ask. He grabs the entire platter of fudge.

“Not exactly.” Akechi reveals. Reveals nothing, Akira should say. “And I think it’d be best if we talked alone.” He tacks on, tilting his head to get a good view of Morgana.

Morgana, Akira’s fellow chronic eavesdropper, breaks away from his other conversation and does not appear to take well to that. “What do you have to say that I can’t hear?” Morgana asks.

Akechi plasters on an embarrassed smile and runs a nervous hand through his hair. Akira thinks Akechi missed his true calling as an actor. TV drama star by day, assassin by night. He’d get his fanbase and popularity much easier that way. Akira furrows his brows.

Maybe it’s a good thing Akechi’s not an actor.

“It’s, ah, a very personal topic I’d like to discuss with Akira.” Akechi leans over Akira to say to Morgana in hushed tones. His cologne assaults Akira’s nose with undertones of spice and something pleasantly earthy.

Akira swallows the fudge in his mouth before it’s properly chewed.

“Oh. Ooh-h-h-h. Okay, I get it. I’d rather not get it, but if Akira wants to go, then fine. I’ll make myself scarce. But not that scarce! If I leave Akira alone for too long he gets into trouble. I think he might have separation anxiety.”

Akira learns that choking is surprisingly silent, so no one notices him quickly dying to death until he makes a few panicked gestures. Both Akechi and Morgana freeze up when they notice and Akira tries to glare at them to do something, but the water streaming out of his eyes is making it difficult to do much more than look like he’s dying to death.

Akira refuses to accept death from fudge. He’s got an on-call assassin on one side of him, a magical cat created in another dimension on the other, and a year full of horrifying life threatening situations in front of him. Eating fudge should not be included on that list.

His savior comes in the form of a demon with bouncy blonde hair and big blue eyes who draws her power from her zealous desire for all things sweet.

“Hiii-YAH!” Ann hollers as she uses her unoccupied hand to slam the crap out his back with almost enough force to knock him all the way forward onto the table and leave a permanent impact mark on his face.

He hacks the remainder of the fudge into his hand and continues coughing until his lungs stop trying to collapse on themselves and he can breathe almost like a functional human again.

“That was not the proper way to handle a choking person.” He could hear Akechi hiss at Ann as he relearns how to breath.
“But it worked!” Ann tuts at Akechi.

“I’ve never seen anyone turn so red before, holy shit, dude. Are you alright?”

“That’s it, you’re not allowed to eat fudge anymore!”

Akira ignores everyone and turns to Ann. He tries to get in a few normal breaths, fails, then rasps, “You have my undying love and eternal gratitude.” He coughs a little and then downs the rest of his water, almost drowning himself as he nearly chokes again. “If you ever need a fake boyfriend or husband, or a real one, doesn’t matter to me – let me know. I’ll dump or divorce whoever I’m with.” Ann laughs brightly as she swings around to her spot at the table. He gives both Morgana and Akechi a stern glare, now that he’s able to. “You two are fired.”

Morgana, for his part, looks devastated. “Fired?”

“Fired.” Akira repeats with conviction, dragging out the word. He gasps a little, because he still can’t breathe all that well. “I am literally sitting between the two of you – you were talking to each other, facing my direction.”

Akechi tries not to laugh, the piece of shit. He’s covering his face with a hand in a useless attempt to hide his true colors.

“You’re extra fired.” Akira says breathlessly, heaving while standing up and slamming the makeshift murder tool on one of the several plates they have littering the table. It’s slimy and tries to stick to his hand. He wobbles as he moves, bumping against the table as he walks away from the rest of them while the table clangs and rattles in protest.

He almost doesn’t see Masayoshi Shido when he passes in front of the elevators on his way back from the bathroom. When he does, he’s not sure the sort of face he makes, but it must not be nice because it catches the attention of Shido and the cronies flanking him. Having just survived death, he’s feeling a little reckless, so Akira rolls his eyes and walks past, muttering a barely audible ‘asshole’ when he’s close enough. He thinks about shoulder checking one of the guards, but he’s pretty sure Shido has people other than Akechi who do less than savory things for him, so he resists temptation if only to increase his lifespan by a few hours.

Shido says something probably elitist as he takes the elevator down, but Akira doesn’t care because he’s going to make him eat every word he’s ever spoken when the time comes. Again.

Damn. He’s been spending too much time with Akechi. He’s becoming a bundle of suppressed rage.

“Do you know who that was?” And think of the devil. Akechi can now be summoned by thought alone. Shit.

“Uh huh.” Akira says as Akechi grabs his arm with a yank and begins dragging him back to the table where the others look like they’re starting to pack up. And when he says pack up, he means stash all the extra food into their bags while keeping an eye out for the staff.

“Then you probably should be a little more careful about how you act around him.” Akechi very sensibly advises.

“Uh huh.” Akira repeats.

“Akira, I’m serious.”

“Yeah, if you think I’m ever going to be polite to the guy who framed me and threw me in jail, you
don’t know me so well.” The hand on his arm goes slack so he pulls himself free and keeps walking, stopping short when he doesn’t hear footsteps behind him. He spins around, finding Akechi’s face the pallor of his grandmother’s hair. Oops. “…You didn’t know.” Akira states. He blinks a few times, trying to remember if Akechi ever knew, because this reaction is the real deal. “Now you know why I didn’t tell you. Not much you can do to save me from the future Prime Minister of Japan. Sorry, hero.”

“No. No – that’s –” Akechi stammers a little.

Akira waits for something, anything at all, before giving up and walking back to the table, the luxurious carpeting crunching under his feet with every step like gritty sand. And for any way at all he could’ve chosen to feel for letting Akechi stand there like he’d just been proposed to and dumped by his one true love within the same breath; the spinner somehow lands on guilt. Not vindictive, not righteous, not even a nice neutral meh.

Guilty and little bit sorry. For what? Akira doesn’t know. His brain needs a reset button. Or just a complete transplant. He’s not even sure what’s actually in there. Could be a pair of dice and some cards rattling around in his skull.

It would explain a lot.

He reaches the table to find Ryuji and Ann giggling over something as Morgana urges them in a panicked whisper to hurry it up with the food.

Akechi’s put his face back on by the time he meets up with them, but there’s a plasticity there that Akira hasn’t seen for a while.

They make it to Yongen-Jaya Station, having parted ways with the others, when Akechi reminds him they need to talk.

“Fine.” Morgana says, jumping out of the bag. “But don’t be too long or I’ll find you. And don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!” He shouts as the doors slide shut in his face.

Akira makes a face at the doors, and then aims another one at Akechi for good measure.

Akechi’s face morphs into something more fitting of an infomercial. Akira ain’t buying whatever Akechi’s peddling.

“Whatever.” Akira says. “Where are we going?” Somewhere Sojiro can’t get the wrong impression, certainly.

“My apartment.”

Well, there goes that.

“Uh. Okay.” Akira says before deciding to leave it at that. Until he decides not to leave it at that. “Why?” He asks, dragging it out with a not-so-happy lilt at the end.

Akechi’s doing something on his phone with intense concentration which does nothing for Akira’s
state of mind. He can hear the dice in his head roll around frantically.

“I wasn’t lying earlier when I said it was personal.”

That doesn’t appease Akira at all, and he plays a mental game of 52 card pickup to try and stop himself from imagining what Akechi’s apartment will look like.

Multiple air purifiers.

Katanas soaked in the blood of his victims.

Maybe a Roomba.

The blood of his victims.

A bathroom full of hair care supplies.

His victims.

A 75 inch 4k smart TV because Akira’s still not convinced Akechi isn’t rich. (He’s pretty sure if he checked the tag on Akechi’s sweater vest, it would say 100% cashmere.)

And Akira. The victim whose blood he’ll be collecting next.

Akira ruffles his hair and pulls out his phone. It must have been on silent because he’s missed 12 messages from Ryuji in the last 5 minutes. He blinks. 13 messages. All paragraphs.

He’s bitching about Akechi, of course. Akira refrains from informing Ryuji that going ahead and being phantom thieves in secret without Akechi would not stay secret for very long. He’ll let him vent for a while first.

They exit at a station Akira’s never been to before – a residential area, not much to see, no reason to go. Until now, he guesses. They reach a well maintained modernized building that probably costs five times more than what Akira used to pay for his place.

Akechi lives in apartment 505, fifth floor, third door on the left after exiting the elevator. He opens the door to immediately reveal a Roomba trying to escape with its artificial life.

Akechi steps on it before it can make its mad dash and frowns. “This is supposed to run in the mornings, did the time reset?” He asks himself, picking it up and bringing it inside. “It’s not much, but make yourself at home.” Akechi says as he puts the Roomba on its charger. He turns around, probably to humble brag about something or other, but cuts himself off. “Oh. I see you’re already settled in.”

Akira found a kotatsu. If he’s going to be murdered today, if not by fudge, it might as well be while under a kotatsu.

“So what do you want?” Akira cuts to the chase, grabbing a peppermint from a jar while cranking up the heated blanket and looking around. Akira’s tempted to call the place empty, but he thinks the current style people are into is called minimalism so he’s not so sure. There is a TV, not 75 inches, but it is smart and probably still wider than Ann is tall.

Akechi probably needs it to check himself out in all of his ultra high definition glory.

Akechi walks around the bar counter he has in lieu of a dining table and fills an electric kettle with water. There’s a dusty coffee maker next to it, unplugged and ignored.
Akechi notices his observation. “Would you like some tea? I’d offer coffee, but I’m afraid I’ve been a bit spoiled by Leblanc and haven’t been able to bring myself to purchase the store bought type anymore.”

“You know that all the stuff at Leblanc can be bought at stores, right? We don’t magically conjure your coffee from hopes and dreams.”

“Ah, but I’d hardly have the time to learn to use the different machines and all the differences between beans and how long to steep them. And there’s something about the atmosphere of Leblanc that adds to the flavor – any coffee I’d try make here would be a pale imitation at best. A bitter disappointment to be sure.”

Akira cracks the peppermint between his teeth and chews with a dead stare aimed at Akechi. “You just like forcing me to make coffee for you.” He accuses.

Akechi smiles insincerely with wide eyes and a tilt of the head. “Well, I’ll admit that you do have a way with coffee. Don’t tell Sakura-san, but I do prefer the flavor when you make it. And if I happened to buy the appropriate items to make the same coffee here, I wouldn’t mind at all if you happened to stop by every so often to use them.” He tacks on, “And share.”

“Get lost.” says Akira, stuffing another peppermint in his mouth.

“A bit difficult in my own home, but I can try if you feel it’s necessary.” Akechi says. Akira plants his face on the wood grain of the kotatsu and wishes Morgana was there to ease his suffering. Akechi probably just didn’t want cat fur on his carpet, the bastard. “And since you seem so enamored with the peppermints, I’ll recommend some green tea – something about the combination is surprisingly invigorating.”

“Sure, whatever.” Akira waves off. “I like my tea over-steeped.” He enlightens. And then he watches Akechi’s tea making process with a deliberate meticulousness that Akechi doesn’t miss. That’s right, if he even thinks to poison the tea – Akira will know. Unless the tea leaves were already poisoned?

Akira resolves not to drink a sip.

Then, in search of katanas or guns, his eyes bounce around from the sheer curtains parted in front of a small balcony door to the unlit hall opposite the kitchen. Maybe stuffed under the couch behind him? He falls back on the carpeting to take a gander.

No weaponry of the deadly variety, but he did find a very sharp pencil and 1 yen coin. He rolls the coin over his fingers, ignoring the anxiety rapidly gaining traction inside his rib cage.

Why did Akechi bring him here?

He grabs another two peppermints as Akechi pours the tea, still in the kitchen.

“See anything interesting?” Akechi asks, exasperated, as if he didn’t do a full investigative sweep of Akira’s room and phone every chance he got. Akira now trusts his phone so little, he makes sure the camera always has a small bit of opaque tape covering it. He’s convinced himself it’s a justified precaution, because the first time Akechi noticed it he seemed thoroughly unimpressed and ripped it right off.

At the very least, Akira’s protecting himself from Futaba and her voyeuristic ways.

“Just that you might have a thing for leather.” Akira says, waggling his eyebrows while gesturing at
the couch that looked like it’d just been whisked out of a catalog, shiny and soft, the bonus smoky scent a free add-on.

Akechi keeps a straight face as he walks over with two steaming cups, setting one in front of Akira as he joins him at the kotatsu. He must decide a change of topic is in place to veer Akira off his current path of needless depravity. “That trick you’re doing with the coin – I’ve tried and never quite gotten the hang of it, myself. You must be very dexterous.” He observes. Akira waggles his eyebrows some more, eliciting the slightest tinge of red this time. Akechi opts for staring into the swirling green depths of his tea instead of giving Akira more potential ammo.

“All that piano playing my mom forced me to do when I was a kid must have been good for something, after all.” Akira says, already forgetting about his potential assassination by means of poison as he takes a swig of tea, also forgetting that it was still scalding hot.

“It’s hot.” Akechi blandly and belatedly warns as he watches Akira struggle not to spit it back out.

“Thanks.” Akira rasps, equally bland, after the tea escapes through his tear ducts. He shoves the cup as far away from him as possible on the small table. “So.” Akira starts off with when his tongue stops screaming. “You wanted to talk about something?”

Akechi makes an ambiguous noise as he taps at something on his phone. He has it at an angle so that Akira can’t see. Akira leans over. The click of an artificial shutter goes off.

“Hey.” Akira warns, leaning back and raising a hand to block his face. “I hope you got a good shot of the inside of my nose.”

“I wouldn’t say good.” Akechi says. “But that’s what you get for being nosy.”

Akira doubts he even notices his own pun, absorbed as he is in whatever he’s still looking at on the screen. Akira’s pretty sure it’s not his picture.

“You’re calling me nosy?” Akira mutters, grabbing another mint. “I bet your fingerprints are all over my phone.”

“Change your password and stop leaving it sitting around where anyone can get to it.” Is all Akechi has to say on the matter, which makes Akira even more suspicious – if he’s encouraging Akira to change his password, there must be some kind of spyware already installed on there. Plus, he’s still avoiding the question of why is Akira there?

“Is there a reason I’m here or were you just lonely?” And implicating Akechi of something always gets an immediate reaction, Akira figures out when Akechi looks away from his phone with a hard look sculpted in the lines of his eyes and mouth.

“I’m deciding how I want to go about saying something to you.” He finally says.

“Usually just saying it is the best option.”

“It’s really not.” Akechi insists, shaking his head. “I hadn’t planned on bringing this up just yet, but well, never mind. I’m not sure a good time for something like this exists, so I need to show you now.”

“Show me?”

Akechi hesitates, his gaze falling back to his phone one last time before he sets it in the middle of the
It's the metaverse nav app.

Akira knows what's coming before the syllables leave Akechi’s lips.

“Kurusu Akira.”

Akira doesn’t hear the ding notifying him that he was successfully found, doesn’t hear whatever Akechi blurts out, can barely comprehend that his lips are moving at all because suddenly he finds himself locked in a thin, glass coffin light years away in some alien universe that the rest of mankind will never know existed, confined and suffocating as he spins. He has to relearn how to breathe for the second time that day as an onslaught of vertigo bears down on him until he has to force himself to stop breathing to prevent everything he ate at the buffet from making a surprise reappearance.

He flips the phone over.

There's a tiny bird perched on Akechi’s small balcony, muffled by the glass door, but the chirp rings out with an unparalleled clarity amidst the ghost of reality he somehow exists in.

“You already knew.” Akechi notes, and he’s a whisper in the hush that already engulfs Akira’s mind.

“Of course I knew.” And he wishes he didn’t. “What are the keywords.”

“I don’t know.”

The bird sings that he’s a liar.

“Stop lying.” He grabs the phone, wincing when he sees his name and the prompt for two more keywords. His breathes out as his mind reels over words and places and - “The world.” He tries. Nothing. Something uncoils inside of him. He puts the phone back on the table and slides it away from himself. “At least I’m not that fucked up.”

“Akira, stop.”

The bird coos for Akechi to shut the hell up.

“What do you want?”

“What do I want? Why would you ask me that? Akira –”

“Because that’s who you are. You only do things that benefit yourself – so what are you getting out of this? Is this some kind of threat?” He slams his hand down on the table, the liquids in the cups slosh around as the ceramics steady themselves with a clatter.

A beat of silence. “So that’s how you see me.” He’s quiet again, and Akira can almost believe the hurt lining his voice is genuine. “No, you’re upset, so I’ll let that pass. I understand the need to lash out.”

“Upset?” Akira asks, the crack in his voice louder than a whip in the dark. “Why would you show me this if you didn’t have some reason to use it against me?”

“How many times do I have to tell you that I want to help you?” Frustration, finally an emotion Akira can realistically connect to Akechi.
“Oh, right. So you, what – want to jump in my head for a day trip, beat up some shadows – maybe tussle with my shadow a little bit? Yeah, that’ll fix me right up.”

“Akira, please. Could you give me the benefit of the doubt just this once?”

“What was it you said before? Never blame malice for something that can be explained by stupidity? Are you just stupid, then? Is that the benefit of the doubt you’re looking for?”

Akechi sighs, irritated, and looking like he’d love nothing more than to make an equally nasty comeback, but restrains himself. “Would you have preferred that I pretend I didn’t know that you have a palace, Akira? Is that really what you would want?”

Akira flinches back so far at the word ‘palace’, he has to physically remove himself from the same space as Akechi. He stands up and moves for the door, but a hand pulls him back around.

“Akira, please sit down. My intention was not to antagonize you in any way – I simply didn’t want to lie to you about this. We don’t have to do anything about it, we don’t have to talk about it – I just wanted you to know.” A hand migrates upwards and he steps closer. Too close. “That’s all. I just needed you to know that I know. And that if you want it – I’ll do my best to help you. In any way I can.”

He tries pushing away at first, but his limbs hang like blocks of cement and his muscles are live wires stitched into flesh. Akechi tightens his grip and Akira settles for shaking his head, letting it fall on the soft fabric of Akechi’s sweater. The touch anchors him, letting the waves of fear, denial, and anger pass through him instead of pull him down under into the riptide of his own madness.

“What are the keywords?” Akira asks, resigned. “Don’t tell me you didn’t try to figure them out. I’m not an idiot.” He can hear whispers of words on the edges of his mind, but they’re sparks lost in the fog. He can’t pin them down. Another language echoed within the emptiness of radio static.

A pause. Another hand uncertainly finds its way to Akira’s back, hesitating before settling there in an awkward embrace. “…I really don’t know. I won’t do you the dishonor of lying about it – I did try. I stayed up all night once just listing and looking up places that might have been the location. Leblanc, the attic, your house, the detention center you were held at, Shujin – The curiosity was burning a hole inside of me. I’m sorry.”

Akira can feel the vibration of Akechi’s voice through his clothes, the tension of his muscles, can hear the nervous waver of his words and the dryness of his throat. The hand on his shoulder drifts tentatively to just under the back of his neck.

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t care if you lie to me – except for one thing. Lie to me about anything else, but not this. Don’t go in there. I’m not – I’m not like Kamoshida. It’s not – Just don’t go in there.” He’s tired.

“I won’t.” Akechi’s quick to comply. Too quick – but Akira’s the vulnerable one here. He can’t make demands and reasonably expect them to be followed.

All he can do is hope his cognition has better password protection than his phone.

Akira slumps further down onto Akechi, putting most of his weight on him before asking, “Where’s your bathroom?”

Akechi has to clear his throat a couple times before he can answer. “Down the hall on the right.”

Akira pushes away from Akechi who releases him and springs a half-step back, hands in the air. He
glimpses Akechi wild eyed and unsure of himself before he hobbles down the hall and expels a small fortune’s worth of food into the toilet the same way it went in. Akechi stands guard at the door, not watching, but a presence nonetheless; there if required.

“Sorry.” Akira says when his stomach’s settled and he stops shaking. Akechi startles away from the wall he’d taken post at to throw him an incredulous look.

“What are you apologizing for?”

“The things I said.”

Akechi crosses his arms and breathes out. “I’ve said far worse for far less in the past. Perhaps it was deserved.”

“Deserved or not – I shouldn’t have said it.” Akira says, fixing his eyes on the sliver of light reflecting off the sink’s faucet. “I’m sorry.”

Akechi closes his eyes and kneads the back of his neck, a wistful but fond smile on his face. “I should be the one apologizing. I should have found a better way to go about this. This is on me.”

Akira hacks out a stilted laugh, still bent over the toilet. “Trust me when I say there was no good way to go about this.” He adjusts himself so that he’s sitting against the wall and wipes the sweat off his face with the sleeve of his blazer.

Akechi’s covering the bottom half of his face with a hand, thinking.

“Feel free to use the shower if you want, it should help you feel a little better. Towels are in the cabinet and I’ll leave a change of clothes for you on the other side of the door. And I think there should be a new toothbrush in one of the drawers.” He takes a step back, and Akira kind of doesn’t want to do anything except crawl in a hole and die, but he doubts Akechi would be willing to run with that since he seems to be busy playing hero. “Take as much time as you need.” He says before pulling the door shut with a neat click, his footsteps echoing from the direction Akira can only assume is his room.

Akira presses his face against the cool tile wall and tries not to think. He flinches at a memory he can’t suppress and balls his left hand into a fist before wringing it out to relieve the tension. It doesn’t work.

He feels like road kill left to rot in the sun and his reflection in the mirror doesn’t deny it, going so far as to suggest that plastic surgery may be his only viable option. His clothes are damp and not exactly spared from his body’s attempt to reject his situation by regurgitating its only proof of having lived through the day. He places all his weight on the counter and easily gives in to the idea of a shower.

As promised, he finds a folded pile of clothing placed outside the bathroom door when he’s done – a very familiar pair of black-rimmed glasses placed carefully on top. He looks at them. It’s a weary look.

“What a dick.”

Chapter End Notes

Yea, don’t get used to weekly updates my dudes. I ditched work one day and my fingers
were itching to type.

Was going to include the bits that happen right after this, but I figured this was a good spot to cut it off, so you'll get the rest at the start of the next chapter, including the harrowing tale of Akira's glasses and a whole heap of avoidance of topics that Akira doesn't want to talk about.

But anyways, thanks for reading!
Socks, Akira thinks, would have been a welcome addition to the bundle of clothes left outside the door for him.

The apartment is hardly cold, thanks to the general location of being on the fifth floor with downstairs neighbors who must very generously have their heat on since Akechi certainly didn’t – but the transition from humid bathroom to dry hardwood floor still sends a shiver up his leg. He immediately retracts his foot and watches the steamy print of his toes evaporate in the air.

There’s a weight settled somewhere just behind his forehead and brushing the wet strands of hair from his face somehow make it worse, so he does the opposite and brushes his hair forward to hide his face. He takes a step back and shuts the door, locking it. The water drips down the strands of his hair, his his jawline, his neck, and slowly soaks through the neck of the borrowed white lounge shirt. He closes his eyes and presses his head against the door, trying to force the pressure away with an opposing pressure.

The TV is on in the main room – he can hear muted voices speaking with overly pronounced words in easy to digest sentences. The news, then. No sound from the other direction, but he vaguely remembers a door opening to a darkened room and wonders if that room also has a balcony. Scaling down five stories of balconies is nothing. Nothing at all.

Significantly more preferable to the alternate option of Akechi.

But – his shoes are still at the front door. Is walking barefoot across Tokyo worth it?

Yes, Akira decides, and proceeds to do a whole lot of exactly not that. The amount of nothing he’s doing must stretch on for longer than even he’s aware, because after some time, careful footsteps make their way towards him, faltering at the other side of the door. Akira tugs the sleeves of his shirt down over his hands and waits.

The footsteps return from whence they came.

Akira breathes out in stutters and has no idea what to do.

“I’m pathetic.” He says, shakes a bit of water out of his hair, and yanks the door open.

Akechi’s sitting cross-legged on the couch, his cloak of nonchalance betrayed by the sudden stiffness in his shoulders and the thin smile he manages to slap across his face just in time.

“How are you feeling? You look a little better now.” ‘A little better’ is too generous, honestly. Akira has gone from last night’s road kill to the corpse recently dredged from the lake. “There’s a, ah, hairdryer if you want to use it.” He’s obviously trying to be friendly, but his face is saying that he had a script to follow and he accidentally veered off it and probably straight into a tree growing on the precipice of a rapidly crumbling cliff.

“No, thank you.” Akira says, wanting to pack up and leave yesterday. “I’m fine now, just tired. I think I’ll –”

“Tired?” Akechi interrupts, likely sensing his intention to make for higher ground to ride out the
storm somewhere far, far away from him. He stands up and springs for the counter. “I’ll heat some more water for tea. Is your stomach settled?”

Akira presses a hand to his temple and looks at his abandoned cup from earlier. “Did you know that without any mucus the stomach starts digesting itself? Let’s just say that nothing’s coming back up.” He eyes his shoes by the door. “I’ll sleep it off –”

“Soup.” Akechi says, and at Akira’s dubious look continues, “Soup – will help your stomach. I’ll heat some up for you.” He immediately forgets the water he was preparing to boil and opens a cupboard.

“I think it’s best if I go back to Leblanc now.”

Akechi’s still rummaging through a variety of cans and boxes, but loses the vigor he started with. He rises after a moment, can of soup in hand, and face scrunched up as he seems to turn over every possible following scenario in his head. “Could you at least stay until I’m sure you won’t have any trouble getting back? You’re still very pale. If I know you’re able to keep down a bit of food I wouldn’t be so worried.”

Akira, on pure reflex, almost jokes that a real gentlemen would offer to take him home – but he might do just that. Then not leave. The whole purpose of getting out of Akechi’s apartment was to get away from Akechi.

It’s a no-win situation as far as Akira can see given the fact that he’s not quite in the shape to craft himself a smooth escape, so he gives up and ambles back to his spot at the kotatsu, shoves the clothes he was wearing earlier inside his bag, and tries to melt himself to unconsciousness by cranking the heat up as far as it can go without burning the building down. There’s a period of silence as Akechi seems to come to terms with the fact that Akira still being in his apartment isn’t a figment of his imagination before he resumes fiddling around in the kitchen.

And then the news turns to politics, switching over to the nauseatingly familiar face and voice of the real life monster, Shido Masayoshi. As if Akira really needed to see him twice in a day. Or ever. There’s a loud thunk and clang as something falls in the kitchen, but before Akira can think to turn and look, Akechi is already swiping the TV remote from the side table and changing the channel.

Akira looks between the brightly colored suits of the Phoenix Rangers and Akechi’s thinly veiled fury as he runs a hand through his hair and sighs before remembering his guest. His shoulders hike up and he pulls at the collar of his button up. “I – really love this show.” He says in a challenging tone before spinning on a heel and power walking back to resume his mission of making Akira as uncomfortable as humanly possible.

He checks his phone out of habit, wishing he hadn’t when he sees the accumulation of unread messages from Ryuji along with a few from Ann. He falls back onto the rug and stares at the blank slate of a ceiling while pretending he doesn’t exist. He wishes Morgana was there.

His Morgana. The one who knew every pointless detail of his worthless life, the one who may have judged him a bit, but never once held a thing against him.

“Here.” A subdued voice says, shortly followed by the gentle placement of a bowl and new cup in front of him. “Give it a moment to cool off this time.”

He watches the shifting patterns of steam rise above him while Akechi brings his old cup to the kitchen as a villain’s dramatic monologue booms from the sound bar.
Just thinking about eating or drinking makes what's left of his stomach twist into itself.

“Akira.” And he should have known the silence thus far was too good to be true.

Sitting up, the scent of a salty broth assaults his nose as his eyes land on what he’s supposed to be consuming. His insides protest with helpful tips such as ‘oh god, stay away from it’, but what is left of his rationality reminds him that it’s just pre-made soup from a can. Possibly with a dash of poison, but his will to live has already been bled dry so he supposes speeding up the inevitable wouldn’t hurt.

He prods at the mystery meat floating next to some unidentifiable vegetable and has second thoughts.

“This soup sucks.” Akira says before Akechi can steer their impending conversation in a direction he knows he won’t like.

“You haven’t taken a bite.” Akechi responds with reluctant amusement.

“I can tell just by looking.”

“Then I’m sorry that my microwaving abilities aren’t up to your standards.”

“You will be.” Akira warns before he brings the safest looking thing in the bowl (a noodle) to his mouth. He has to suppress the urge to gag as it slides down his throat.

“Is that your definition of fine?” Akechi asks, one eye closed as if Akira was too much trouble to bother using both.

“Never better.” Akira swallows down the same piece of food for the second time. Akechi keeps his expression carefully neutral. “Can I go home now?”

Akechi turns his head towards the TV. “Finish the soup and I’ll help you get back.” And ugh. He should have left before Akechi regained his composure. How did he fall for such an obvious trap?

“I can make it back on my own.” He tries.

“Maybe, maybe not. But I’d rather not get a call from Sakura-san in the middle of the night asking if I know where you are, so I’ll just make sure you get there myself.” And it takes a moment, but Akira’s brain stalls when the implication settles in that Sojiro and Akechi have each other’s numbers. “Akira…” It must have stalled for too long, because that was Akechi’s ‘we need to talk’ version of his name.

“You said we didn’t have to talk about it.”

“I did.” Akechi regretfully confirms. “Although, for the record I’d like to state that I don’t believe it to be the wisest course of action.”

Akira would, for the record, like to point out that Akechi isn’t his lawyer. Or his probation officer. Or even the detective that was once assigned to his case. Similar, maybe, in the fact that they are both detectives as well as total asshats, but certainly not the same person. Unless Akechi has an alter ego of a 50 year old man with a nasty smoker’s cough and a fondness for crossword puzzles. Akira isn’t obligated to listen to his bullshittery. He glances around for crossword puzzles.

“We’re not talking about it.”

Akechi’s face transforms from carefully neutral to mildly annoyed to ‘I’ll get him next time’. Akira
pointedly looks elsewhere.

“Very well. If you’re planning on being antisocial, I suppose I’ll find a movie to watch.”

“What’s wrong with Phoenix Ranger Featherman R?” Akira asks. “I thought you loved this show. And it’s asocial, not antisocial. Antisocial is me leaving the stove on high with a bottle of cooking oil on top after I just slipped you some sleeping pills.” Akechi’s expression speaks volumes that Akira doesn’t care to read. Someone doesn’t like being corrected. Or hypothetically threatened with a grease fire while drugged. Hard to tell which.

“Well, never mind. Seems like you’re plenty chatty after all. Anything in particular you wanted to get off your chest?”

“Nope. Just waiting until you kick me out so I can leave.”

Akechi stands up. “Finish your soup.”

Akira grimaces and stares at a misshapen green thing bobbing around in his bowl. He opts for the tea instead.

Akechi taps his foot a few times before disappearing down the hall. Akira debates making a break for it, but the blanket over him seems to be working in accordance to Akechi’s will because his foot somehow gets tangled in it before he can even scoot back. He kicks his leg out a few times in a pitiful effort to free himself, but ends up getting his foot caught up in the electric cords and nearly burns his thigh on the heater instead. He goes back to glaring at his soup when he hears even footsteps on their way back to the main room. The fact that he’s losing his mind in front of the one person who could separate it from him entirely lights a dark flame of humor across his thoughts.

Akechi retakes the spot adjacent to him, setting out his laptop with only the barest glance in Akira’s direction.

Akira decides that being asocial was the right idea after all and continues to not eat his soup while watching Phoenix Red get fake punched in the face.

He wakes up to the jiggling of a lock and the awkwardly drawn out squeak of a door as someone tries to be quiet and fails, but continues anyways in a misguided and futile attempt to be considerate. Akira gropes around for his phone or Morgana. Either can provide him with the time, although Morgana would offer him the boon of not having to open his eyes for another few minutes.

When his reach finds no trace of his phone or the slumbering ball of fluff and teeth he reluctantly cracks an eye open.

“Ah, I woke you up after all. Sorry.” Sports edition Akechi says, swiping away a windswept lock of hair that had fallen out of its tie. There’s a weather induced patchy smattering of color across an otherwise clear face.

Akira takes a minute to regain his bearings. He clears his throat, not that it helps the roughness as he asks, “Were you out on your bike? This late?”

Akechi frees his hair from its confinement and ruffles out the lingering kinks while kicking off his shoes. “I did leave a bit later than I usually do under the incorrect assumption that you were going to
wake up, but I gave up waiting. I left a note on the door for you, but it seems that was unnecessary. You’re an impressively heavy sleeper.”

Akira forgoes a response in favor of rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, shoving the memory of recent conversation back into the furthest depths of his mind when it tries to gurgle forward in a panic.

“How the hell did I fall asleep?” He mumbles to himself.

“Well, you were ignoring me while watching TV one second, then the next you sort of just tipped over, unconscious.” Akechi says as he passes by. Akira makes a note to learn how to mumble more discretely. “I hope you don’t mind, but I put your clothes through the wash before I left this morning. I’ll hang them to dry in a moment.”

Akira’s relatively sure he doesn’t have much privacy left to invade outside of the confines of his uncooperative mind itself, so he grunts an unintelligible whatever, before a few specific words from Akechi’s sentence belatedly shoot a few signal flares to the front of his consciousness. “Morning?” He glances at the balcony doors. Yup, that’s the soft light of the morning sun, alright. He’s suddenly very much awake. “What time is it?”

“Nearly 8 o’clock.” Is Akechi’s succinct, careless answer.

“I have school in half an hour. Why didn’t you wake me up? Why didn’t you wake me up last night? How did I even sleep that long?” Akira searches frantically for his phone. He needs to run over to Leblanc for his uniform, then channel his inner Ryuji and acquire the power of teleportation to make it to class on time.

“I’d like to know the answer to your last question as well. And to quell your other concerns – I’ve already explained the situation to Sakura-san. Your school won’t be expecting you today.”

That stops Akira. “You’ve explained the situation?” He asks, a tendril of something foreign and dark tightening his chest. “What situation?”

Akechi finds something curious in his reaction, because he levels a studious gaze at him before answering. “That we went out to eat yesterday and you got sick afterward.”

“I’m not sick.”

“The toilet disagrees.” Akechi counters and continues before Akira can give him attitude. “But my point is that he thinks you have food poisoning. You can relax.” He doesn’t. “If I make breakfast will you eat it this time?”

“No.” Akira says, grabbing his bag. “Exams are next week – I can’t miss more school.”

“According to both Ann and Morgana you never pay attention in class. I don’t think beginning to a mere week in advance will help improve your score much.”

Akira whips around. “You are being extra obnoxious right now.”

“No, rather – I think that you’re simply more irritable than usual.”

That’s probably true, Akira internally admits. Outwardly, he says a few choice words that only prove Akechi’s point.

He ends up sitting at the counter, a bowl of rice with an egg in front of him, Akechi’s smug face visible from his side as he eats. He decides a change in tactic is necessary to hasten his escape.
“Thanks for giving me my glasses back. Even though you seem to be the reason they disappeared.” Ah, damn. He should have left it at thanks. When did he become so horrible at being nice?

“Ann-chan really did lose them. I spotted them the next time we went to Kamoshida’s palace.”

“And decided to hold onto them for safekeeping, huh?”

“It’d be more accurate to say I forgot.” Akechi says. Akira takes an oversized bite of rice to prevent himself from calling bullshit. “Do you want to know where I found them?” Akira continues chewing. “One of those pumpkin-head shadows with the lantern was wearing them.”

Akira hacks out a short laugh along with a few grains of rice. “You’re a liar.”

“I’m not.” He insists. “The rest of you were trying to reach a treasure chest that was up on some pillar when it slowly floated around a corner and right into me. It apologized for its terrible eyesight and about the useless glasses it found, tossed them to the ground, and started to drift off elsewhere.”

“Okay, sure. And then you obliterated it?”

“No. You like those ones for some reason, so I let it go.”

“They’re funny. And easy to threaten for money. And not that I believe a word you’re saying, but right after that you conveniently forgot you had my glasses until now?”

“Right after I picked up your glasses the four of you were ambushed, and then we were busy dealing with treasure rooms, calling cards, and Kamoshida. So yes, it slipped my mind.”

“And when Ann was shoving glasses on my face at the store? Still didn’t remember?”

“Oh, I definitely did by then.”

Akira drops his head. “You are full of more shit than the city’s sewage lines.”

“Pleasant imagery.” He says distastefully. “But you’re smiling.”

There’s no faster way to wipe a smile off someone’s face than to remind them that they didn’t want to.

Satisfied with that small win, Akechi seems to finally be receptive to the idea of Akira leaving after he eats. He’s two steps out the door, bag slung over his shoulder, when he remembers his clothes. He spins around to find Akechi’s stupid, smug face watching him, already knowing exactly why he stopped. He turns and speed walks to the elevator.

He makes it to Leblanc, regrettably thankful for the long sleeves, but still wishing he had his jacket.

“I thought you had food poisoning.” Is how he’s greeted when he walks into the (almost) deserted cafe.

Akira stomps his way to the stairs. “I’m fine.”

“You look pale.”

“I’m always pale.”

“Are those the other kid’s clothes?”
“I threw up on mine.” He says. Sojiro isn’t convinced and has that look on his face. The one where he’s getting ideas. Akira doesn’t care, storming upstairs just to thunder back down a moment later. “Where’s Morgana?”

“Young cat was down here for breakfast, but I haven’t seen him since.”

“He’s not my cat, he’s my friend.” Akira corrects, checking the booths. “Maybe he went looking for me? He’s probably at the school.” He messages Ann.

“I wouldn’t worry too much, he’s a smart cat. He’ll be back when he’s hungry. And speaking of school, aren’t your exams coming up?”

Akira groans and clutches his stomach. “Oh no, I think the food poisoning is back.” He says, backing up towards the stairs.

“If you’re not going to school, you’d better spend some time today studying.” Sojiro calls up as Akira exits stage left.

Akira doesn’t study and waits until after school to slink out and meet up with a noticeably cheerful Ann and an upset Morgana. He doubts the two things are related, but picks up the gloomy not-cat comforting anyways. After spending some time with Ann and giving Morgana detailed directions to Akechi’s apartment in case Akira ‘runs away’ again, he goes to work. Then he goes to his other work. And only when he’s certain Leblanc is open to neither public nor certain murderous teenage detectives does he return.

He never gave too much thought to it before – back when he really was sixteen and starving for justice within an apathetic world that only looked forward to the next big scandal they could pretend to care about for a few hours through opinionated and misinformed text posts on social media. But Mementos is an unsettling place – a literal physical manifestation of every ill thought that drifts across the mind of the citizens of Tokyo.

It used to be a mystery – a place to explore with his friends – a place to help Morgana. He knows what feeds at the bottom now, biding its time, pulling the strings.

But that’s not what concerns him.

“D’ya guys hear that?” Ryuji asks from his spot in the Morgana-van’s passenger seat next to him.

Akira takes control of the wheel to run over a weak shadow. He checks the rear view mirror, disappointed to see nothing dropped on the floor. Morgana audibly echoes his dismay with a whine.

“Hear what?” Akechi asks from behind Akira.

“The whispering!” Ryuji manages to exclaim through a whisper of his own, twisting around to stare at Akechi in disbelief. “It’s really startin’ to freak me out.”

“I’m doing my best to ignore it.” Ann says. “But if we had some music in this thing –” Ann trails off, probably in the hopes that Morgana would be able to magic up some kind of radio at her request.

“This thing happens to be me, Panther.” Morgana says from somewhere.
“Everything about this place does seem rather fitting of a scary movie. From the indiscernible voices in the howling of a distant wind, the darkness – the mystery. I half expect a ghost or a masked killer to spring out from around the next corner we make.” Akechi adds to the conversation. Akira bites his tongue hard enough to draw blood to stop himself from pointing out the very real masked killer already with them in the van.

Ryuji shrinks down into his seat. “Why’d you have to say it like that?” He hisses, eyes darting from window to window behind the metal on his face.

“Yeah…Now I don’t think I can ignore the voices.” Ann says, using her phone as a flashlight to inspect their surroundings, probably for ghosts.

“Mona, are you sure you’ll find your memories down here?” Ryuji asks.

“Positive!” Morgana says as they flatten another shadow. “We just need to keep going down!”

“No whistling of the wind, no murmur of voices carried across twisted tunnels crawling with creatures born from the depths of the world’s imagination – just the grating crunch of dirt and gravel under his shoe as he hops out of the van, Ryuji’s enthused shouts echoing down the disguised neural pathways that comprise the overarching mind of everything that was wrong with humanity.

He wonders if it's because his own mind – his heart – is elsewhere.

“‘So –’” Akechi says as they watch Ryuji trip over the tracks on the ground while chasing down yet another shadow. “What’s your opinion on this place? The, ah, collective subconscious of Tokyo, so to speak.” It's the first time Akechi has attempted to speak to him directly since he left his apartment. Akira wishes he’d held out a little longer – there are a lot of things he doesn’t want said. Things he’s unsure of how to cope with.

Akira takes in the oppressive silence of Mementos, an unmistakable warning of some sort, and says, “It makes me wonder what else is out there.”

And Akechi has questions, of course he has questions, but Akira has a gun and a shadow to shoot.

Akira manages to avoid Akechi for precisely eleven and a half hours after they take their leave of Mementos. It’s Sunday morning, a day in which he only willingly wakes up in the minutes just before noon, no earlier – and Akechi is keenly aware of this fact. Which is why Akira set his alarm for 8:00am. The plan was to wake up early and leave immediately in the case that Akechi decided to swing by for a cup and a bit of ‘socialization’.

He underestimated him.

It’s 7:30am and Ann is sitting on his back when he’d, once upon a time (three minutes ago), been in a sleep so very deep, he could pass for dead. Ryuji rifles through his desk looking for a pencil while Akechi is busy trying to single handedly set up the fold out table.
“Akira – why is there a ladder in the middle of the floor?” Ann asks as she watches Akechi fail to unlock the table legs.

“That’s my step-ladder. I never knew my real ladder.”

The response is immediate – Morgana groans while Ryuji laughs from the unexpectedness of it.

“How long have you been waiting to use that one?” Akechi sounds like he’s sighing through the sentence, his voice was whisked away on an unseen breeze.

“Since you asked me the same question.” Akira says into his pillow.

“Keep ‘em coming.” Ryuji says, going through a toolbox full of ratchets and washers.

“Please don’t encourage him. He won’t stop. We’re here to study.” Akechi warns.

Study? Akira wonders. And then asks, “Study???” He tries to emphasize his confusion with as many audible question marks he can possibly interject within the word.

“Yup! Goro-kun invited us all over here for a study day. I’m kind of glad – I haven’t been studying at all and the stress is making me want to study even less. I’ll need all the help I can get over the next few days.”

Study? The word keeps echoing meaninglessly in his head. “It’s 7:30.” Akira states with the enthusiasm of a cat thrown to sea. “No one studies at 7:30 in the morning.”

“Goro-kun said he was busy later today. And we don’t have to start right away.” Ann says uncertainly.

“I suppose –” Akechi sets his foot against the overturned table and tries to forcibly pull the leg up. “I suppose we can wait until Akira has something to eat.” The table leg does not pull up. Akechi takes a few breaths and wipes the sweat from his face. “It’s warm up here, isn’t it?” He fans himself.

They can wait until Akira eats breakfast and runs out the door never to be seen again before they start studying. He wants no part of this disaster. “It’s called an attic. Heat rises. We’re above a cafe. Do the math.”

“Someone’s grumpy this morning.” Ann says, wiggling into a more comfortable position.

And perhaps another time Akira might enjoy having a pretty girl sit on his back – but now is not that time. He rolls out from under her, landing on the floor with a thud. He spits out a clump of cat fur, picks himself up and walks over to the table Akechi can’t seem to interrogate into cooperation and pulls up the leg with nary a struggle.

Ryuji and Ann ridicule Akechi as Akira stumbles down the stairs and wordlessly begs Sojiro for food as he crawls onto a chair. Morgana follows him into the next chair over.

“Your friends are all quite the early risers, aren’t they?” Sojiro asks. Akira would be able to hear his smug grin from the International Space Station.

Akira makes a noise that might be ‘ugh’ or possibly ‘give me a straight shot of caffeine and a full bottle of whiskey.’ Sojiro must interpret it as the first, because there’s no whiskey. He reaches out for the caffeine and gets his hand smacked by a spatula.

“Sooo – We hear there’s a tab open in Akira’s name?” Ann teases as she walks down the stairs, arm
in arm with a mortified Akechi who couldn’t even do the plebeian task of set up a table. Ryuji’s still
snickering as he takes the steps down behind them.

Akira hides his head in his arms.

“Since you’re here to study, consider anything you want today on the house. But there better be
actual studying going on up there. I don’t think this kid here knows what it is.”

“Besides,” Akechi always has to say something. “I don’t think Akira’s even begun to pay off the tab
he already owes. Didn’t you pick up a job? Where’s all that money going?”

Akira tries to imagine himself somewhere far, far away. Like Antarctica. When it doesn’t work, he
reminds himself to invest in one of those overpriced noise-isolating headphones that pilots use.
They’re expensive, but cheaper than a lawyer for a murder trial.

“He bought that new TV upstairs and a cheap laptop!” Morgana snitches. It's true. He wanted a TV
that wasn’t from the Paleozoic Era so he may have splurged a little. The laptop is still a piece of shit,
but it was cheap and it has internet connection. Akira looks up to see if he has any coffee yet. He
doesn’t.

“A TV and a laptop, huh?” Ryuji echoes Morgana, catching his mistake immediately when Sojiro
sends him a puzzled look. “I mean, I saw them upstairs, so I’m guessing that’s what he bought?”

“Coffee.” Akira says, reaching out for the half emptied and likely cold pot just out of reach. His hand
meets the spatula again.

“Patience.” Sojiro says, but Akira doesn’t understand and stares balefully. “I’m under the impression
that today’s study session was a surprise?” He directs this question at Akechi.

“If I’d have let Akira know in advance, I have a feeling that he’d make a point to be missing today.
All day. Maybe even until exams were over.”

“No way. If I have to suffer – so do you.” Ryuji says, taking Akechi’s usual chair next to him. Akira
wonders how he managed to convince Ryuji into this whole mess anyways. Ann must have been
involved. “I don’t need to have high scores, I just need to pass.” That isn’t normal fear in his voice.
Akechi must have pulled some psychological horror to get Ryuji to agree to an entire study day.

A mere hour later, they’re all on their phones – living up to the non-existent attention span defined by
their generation as math problems sit half unsolved and English goes untranslated. Ryuji’s, anyways.
Ann’s English isn’t even on the table and Akira’s been “perusing” his notes for half an hour. Akira
doesn’t have any notes. No one seems to have noticed – except for Morgana, who’s eyes suggest
he’s willing to keep quiet for the later exchange of sushi.

“Oh! By the way –” Ryuji startles everyone out of their half-awareness. “Who’s Mitsuru?” He asks
Akira.

Akira takes a long sip from the 52oz travel mug full of black coffee he asked Sojiro to make on
special request, and tries to make sense of the words that Ryuji released into the air that currently
happened to occupy his room – because he certainly misheard. When the words don’t spontaneously
correct themselves in his head, he asks, “What?”

Ryuji brandishes a slip of paper Akira thought he’d tossed out a few seconds after he wrote it some
weeks ago. “Found this under your desk when I was looking for a pencil.” The short note says Call
Mitsuru. “She cute?” Ryuji asks with a leer.
“Out of my league.” Akira responds with an unerring truth that remains the same throughout every possible life he might lead within the infinite expanse of the multiverse. “She’d eat me alive.” Probably just Akira’s type, if he’s being honest. He likes to live dangerously.

He snatches the paper out of Ryuji’s hand and tears it up.

“Nice.” Ryuji says. Ann rolls her eyes and Akira is ensuring his eyes don’t even roam the quadrant of the room that Akechi has claimed as his own for the day. “Ex-girlfriend?”

Akira gets the shivers. “Ex-boss.” He says instead. “Sort of. Thought I might need a reference for getting a part-time out here, but it turns out that people will hire anyone these days.” Which are the words Sojiro used when Akira told him he got a job.

“How was she sort of your boss?” Ann asks, happy to have something to talk about that isn’t found in a textbook.

Akira answers with uneasy words. Saying a baldfaced lie to Akechi was one thing, but the others – “I tutored some kid for her. He didn’t speak any Japanese so he was having a hard time with school. I just, uh, helped him adjust for a while.”

“Wait – you were a tutor?” Ryuji asks. Akira tries to drown himself in coffee. “So you’re good at explaining stuff? I’m gonna need your help soon, cuz every time Akechi tries explaining something to me I feel like I understand it less.”

“That’s hardly my fault.” Akechi’s disembodied voice comes from Akira’s right.

“No, it just means you’re shit at explainin’ things.” Ryuji makes a face in the direction of the room that is currently an immaterial blob from Akira’s point of view. The blob makes a face back, as well as an indignant huff.

“How’d you tutor someone that didn’t know Japanese?” Ann asks.

“We both knew enough English to get by.” And oops. Akira should have known better.

“Wait – you know how to speak English?” Ann asks, predictably in English.

“No.” Akira answers in Japanese.

“You just said you did.”

“I said enough to get by.”

“Then I’m only going to talk to you in English until you’re fluent!”

Not again. Last time she decided to do this, it took Ann the better part of a year before she stopped. Akira needs more coffee. No, he needs to hook an IV of caffeine straight into his veins.

“I could use the practice, myself.” Akechi’s voice can’t possibly be saying because he’s not there. “I rarely have the opportunity to converse in it.” He must do just fine conversing with just himself and his murderous not-so-split personality, because he speaks it in fluid, unbroken sentences.

“What are they saying?” Morgana whispers to Ryuji.

“Something about…melted cheese?” He whispers back, forehead wrinkled in concentration.

“Maybe I should help Ryuji with his English first...” Ann concedes, tucking away her phone.
Eventually, even Akira (through secondhand means) ends up studying when Ryuji and Ann turn equally wretched eyes on him in a not so silent plea to help them avoid the unholy hammer of shame and remorse known as 'failing their exams'. But in the end – only Akira remains, doodling in his notebook, Morgana half asleep in his lap.

“It’s an uncanny resemblance.” The voice that couldn’t possibly be in Akira’s room doesn’t say in reference to the work of art he’s created in his eco-friendly, lined (and noteless) notebook. “Right down to the glasses that didn’t fit on its head.”

Akira hums a lazy note as he shades in the folds of a Pyro Jack’s cloak. He still doesn’t believe Akechi’s poorly crafted story about his glasses. He probably worked together with Ann on a mission to vanish them for good and then felt bad afterward.

But more likely held onto them to use as a bribe.

“You like art, don’t you?” Akechi asks, suspiciously thoughtful.

“Yeah.” He answers, trying and mostly failing to add a bit of shine to the pointy hat with a mechanical pencil.

“He speaks!” Akechi says with faux astonishment. “And here I thought you were planning to ignore me all day.”

“I haven’t been ignoring you.” Akira says, disgruntled that Akechi managed to break through his silent treatment. “I’ve just been pretending the chair you’ve been sitting in has been empty.” The look he receives suggests that Akira may have a deficiency of the mental persuasion. Which is true on at least one account, he’s woe to admit. Not that he does admit it, because he’s ignoring that too.

“Fine – I have a confession to make.” Akechi makes a face that doesn’t seem to expect much.

“You’re hideous.” A heavy silence crowds Akira.

“Excuse me?”

“I’ve been trying to be nice all this time, but I can’t do it anymore. Looking at you is painful, so I need some time for my eyes to recuperate before we can hang out again.”

“Very mature.” Akechi says.

“Wait – are you two fighting?” Morgana asks, roused from his catnap. He jumps on the table and looks appropriately worried.

“We’re not fighting.” Akira says.

“I’m not fighting.” Akechi says immediately after. “Although Akira is putting up a struggle.”

“Okay – what’s going on?” Morgana asks. “You two are acting weird.”

“What happened is I need some space, but Akechi seems to define some space as a maximum of two steps away at any given time.”

“Space is the last thing you need right now.” Akechi persists. “You’ll just lock yourself away and keep pretending that everything’s fine.”

“I think I understand what I need a little better than you do.”

“I think that you have no idea what you need, because if you did, you wouldn’t have –”
“I thought we agreed not to talk about it.”

“I never meant indefinitely. And if you were less defensive I’d be far more sympathetic.”

Akira stumbles up like he’s running out of gravity and makes for the stairs with a rash of anger that still wasn’t enough to change a thing. “Just leave me alone. I’m not hurting anyone.”

“You’re hurting yourself.” And it’s not an attack so much as the first strike of a hammer on an anvil, shaping something still too indistinct to make sense of.

“It’s none of your business.” He can’t take this place anymore. This isn’t going to work.

“You’re wrong.” Are the last words he hears before taking the stairs down two at a time, sweeping past Sojiro and out the door. He only makes it halfway across the block before he’s grabbed.

“Can’t you take a fucking hint?” Akira rips away his arm and shoves Akechi back, knowing he needs get a grip, but not knowing how. “I’m done with this. Just – stay away.”

“Hear me out? Please. Then I won’t talk about it until you want to.” And the way he just casually adds ‘until you want to’ like it’s some god-given fact that Akira’s ever going to willingly talk to him about – that.

Well, the words don’t have the intended effect.

“Oh, for the – Akira. Why do you always take everything I say and do and interpret it in the worst possible way? Honestly, I could say something about world peace and your imagination would lead you to believe I was talking about the genocide of the human race.” Akechi complains as he doubles his pace when Akira practices his disappearing act which is, obviously, still a work in progress. “Please. Just one conversation and I’ll leave it alone.”

Akira stops as Akechi catches up with him, forcing him to do an awkward shimmy to avoid crashing into his back. “Just one?” He echoes, knowing he can’t outrun the Terminator-in-training.

The tension wrought across Akechi’s frame relaxes slightly when he realizes Akira might finally be willing to compromise. “Just one.” He promises.

For all that it’s worth.

Inokashira Park on a Sunday afternoon isn’t as charming as it is in the morning. Firstly, the sun hanging smack dab in the middle of the pale blue sky chars Akira’s eyes whenever he moves them remotely upward, making any sort of appreciation for the scenery a painful process. Secondly, the scenery itself is basically inaccessible through the throngs of people everywhere. Thirdly, all of those people everywhere happen to be couples of the romantic variety.

At least the trees still smell good.

But if he catches one more sidelong glance, tentative but purposeful touch, or pink stained cheek – he’s going to take up the ancient art of black magic and curse the place to an eternity of immortal, giant mosquitoes that only target couples. Invisible giant mosquitoes.

He frowns.
If they’re invisible would that make the giant part pointless?

He settles for semi-invisible. Or occasionally invisible. Or only visible when they’re biting.

Akechi’s staring at him from the side of his eye.

“What?” Akira grunts, gleefully breaking through a young couple who were just about to hold hands, probably for the first time.

“What were you just thinking about?” He asks. “You were making an odd face.”

“Mosquitoes.” Akira replies.

Akechi narrows his eyes as he scans the area. “Are they a problem this time of year? I’ve never been bitten here, myself. Then again – I’m usually only here in the mornings when they’re not as active.” He adjusts his collar and hair so they cover more of his neck. “But if you’ve been bitten already, you may want to lodge a complaint to the park about proper pest control. It's only Spring, there should not be any of those things around yet.” He glares at the slow moving lake water as they walk over a bridge, as if daring the little bastards to wake up and try something.

Akira discerns that Akechi really does not like bugs.

“I was just thinking that there weren’t enough of them.” Akira says while ‘accidentally’ stepping on the back of some random girl’s foot just as her boyfriend seemed to gather the courage to make a move to snake an arm around her waist.

“Huh?” Akechi’s bafflement goes unheard when Akira targets another unsightly pair ahead of him about five seconds away from their first kiss. He finds himself spun around, arm looped with Akechi’s, being pulled back towards the bridge. “Please stop terrorizing the couples.”

Akira gives a small group walking towards them a cautionary glance. They walk faster.

“Love is an illusion. They’ll thank me later.”

Akechi has a headache. Akira can tell because he usually accompanies his current look with the vocalization of ‘You’re giving me a headache.’

“I sense a story behind that line of thought.” Akechi says, pulling Akira over to a recently vacated bench.

“You haven’t unlocked my love life’s backstory yet. Depending on the route you take, you can hear it during chapter 7 or 9.”

“What?”

“Huh?”

Akechi makes the face again. “Can I take your mood to mean you’re ready to talk or are you planning to distract me and run away?”

“Running away doesn’t seem to work well with you.” Despite his many, many efforts. He gestures hopelessly before dropping down on the bench and staring at his feet. “Say whatever you need to say so we can never mention it again.”

Akira expects a speech about trust and friendship, and maybe an oath to help him through the hard times and overcome his demons – something cheesy and straight out of a monologue from a
Featherman Ranger episode. Maybe even some admonishment for letting himself get to the point he’s at or some type of psychoanalysis that will try to break him down and get him to crack. Despite all his effort in playing the ‘good guy’, Akechi isn’t always consistent in his role – and he’s undoubtedly losing patience. Akira expects the worst.

Instead, a tentative hand reaches for his own, not making contact. “Your hand is shaking.” Akechi passively observes before completing his reach. His brows furrow. “You’re cold.” He murmurs while looking around, “But it’s warm out today?”

“I’m always cold.” Akira says, trying to extricate his hand from its newly acquired supermax prison. Akechi’s fingers tighten as Akira tries to pry them off one by one. “I just said I wasn’t going to run away, you know. You can let go.”

Akechi listens, to Akira’s utmost surprise. “Sorry. In response to your tendency to disappear, I suppose I may have developed a few bad habits of my own. Really, when we were exploring Kamoshida’s palace I had half a mind to put a bell on you.”

“Add a leash to that and I’d be down.” Akira suggests quite suggestively, because if they’re talking about bad habits – he’s got them aplenty.

Akechi’s immediately averts his eyes somewhere over between that tree and that other tree when his developing seventeen year old brain can’t fight the mental image Akira knowingly projected at him. “A leash is no good since you’d only use it to drag me in a hundred different directions.” Akechi tries to play off, not recognizing the amount of potential ammo he’s provided Akira with until he picks up on the glint in his eye. “Whatever you’re planning on saying – don’t.”

“First you’re desperate to get me to talk, now you don’t want me to talk – I’m getting mixed signals here.”

Akechi slides down the bench, resembling a sulking child put on time out by his mother. It’s a lonely look – Akira knows this because he was a lonely child, often put on time out.

“I bet you were a little horror when you were growing up. Like – the kid in the neighborhood who’s always screaming at the top of his lungs and acting up for attention. You probably bullied other people into giving your their lunches, too.” Akira accuses.

“I – what? Don’t be ridiculous. I was nothing like that.” Akechi claims, sitting up to better defend himself.

“No, no – I think I’m right on target. I bet you ran around with your light saber and went around trying to hack people into pieces. While screaming at the top of your lungs.”

“If I’d have known you back then I certainly would have tried to hack someone into pieces.”

“While screaming at the top of your lungs?”

“You’d be the one screaming.” Akechi says under his breath. “You’re probably the one that was the trouble-child. Not me.”

“I was an angel.”

“Does the name Lucifer ring a bell?”

“I prefer to go by Satan.” Akira finishes. Akechi shoots him a look that could dry out the Mariana Trench. “And weren’t we here to talk about something? You’d better get talking because I’m starting
to think about renting one of those boats.”

“You’d tip it over somehow.”

“I’m going to get the swan boat.”

“I’ll post the video of you capsizing the swan boat all over the internet.”

“I’ll bring Morgana, too.” Akira adds and then belatedly wonders, “Where is Morgana?”

“I asked him to stay behind at the cafe since he has the tendency to take your side on everything. Giving you backup with sharp claws is the last thing I need.”

“Akechi.” Akira tries to pull his attention back a few moments later when it seems to wander off somewhere. “If you’re waiting for me to start the conversation, you’re going to be waiting a while.” In the vein of forever, even. Akira’s supposed to be the one who doesn’t want to talk.

Akechi closes his eyes. “Over the past few days, I’ve gone over in my head exactly what I was going to say to you, found the perfect counterarguments for whatever you might say back – but I forgot all of it when you told me to leave you alone, to stay away. I never really considered the consequences of what would happen if I pushed you too far. I must seem very selfish to you.”

That one’s a no-brainer. “One of the most selfish people I’ve ever met.” Akira confirms.

Akechi laughs, but it’s short and bitter. “That’s one of the things I like about you – you’re not afraid to be honest. You’re not afraid to lie or embellish either – talking to you is fun. The past few minutes have been fun. I don’t want things to go back to how they were yesterday, but I don’t want things to stay how they were before this either. It’s really, very frustrating and finding the right path to take is proving to be difficult.”

“Well, if you were expecting me to point you in the right direction…”

Another bark of a laugh. “I have little doubt you’d show me the door out.”

Akira rakes a frustrated hand through his hair. “You always talk like you’re the only one who puts any effort into anything. I’m trying to make this work too – but you keep prodding at wounds that I haven’t even poured the peroxide over yet.”

“If I don’t prod at them, I’m worried that you’ll ignore them and let them fester.”

Akira doesn’t have much to say to that. Ignoring the new sandpaper quality to his throat, he asks, “What do you want me to say about all of this? What’s your goal here?”

“My goal. How very astute of you. You’re right, of course – I did have a bit of an ulterior motive to this conversation. You may have noticed, but I’m a bit picky with the company I keep –”

“I’ve noticed you’re an asshole, yes.”

Akechi pauses briefly to narrow his eyes. “I’m picky with the company I keep, so I don’t have much opportunity to make friends. The embarrassing truth is that you might be the first person I’ve genuinely considered a friend in a – very long time.”

“Sounds like a personal problem.”

Akechi looks like he wants to punch himself in the face. And then Akira. Yes, in that order. Also yes, Akira’s aware he’s being a dick when Akechi is trying to have a heart-to-heart. He mimes
“The problem is that you’re less trusting than a tax collector at the mafia’s door.” Akechi states with finality, taking a moment to let the words sink in. Akira fidgets and follows a line of ants with his eyes. “And while I want to be your friend, I’m not always so confident you feel the same.” He seems agitated. “You thought I was threatening you when I showed you the metaverse app with your name on it.” Akira doesn’t look up. “And afterward, you were content to pretend the whole thing never happened. Akira – that’s not good.”

Akira leans forward to rub his face in his hands, staring down past his knees. “Then what do you want me to do about it?”

“Akira.” He says with a heaviness Akira hasn’t heard since – “You need to stop pretending that you’re okay.”

Akira remembers a broken mask and a defeated voice.

He remembers the dim shimmer of a light shining from a steel barrel – and someone broken, but alive and then suddenly just lost and forgotten – and for what? Look at Akira now. A failure on at least two counts and too busy grieving the future he stole from himself to do a damned thing about it.

He doesn’t know himself anymore.

“Okay.” Akira mouths into his hands before wrapping them around the back of his neck. “Okay.” He says louder and with a tinge of something desperate. “Shit.” He can’t control his thoughts anymore, hasn’t been in control for some time – they cascade and fall and are stolen away into a place that shouldn’t exist. A place darker than a world without stars with a noxious atmosphere heavier than the sins of man – a place he knows because he’s been there, lives there, where no one – nothing – should ever be.

And he can’t seem to break away.

Chapter End Notes

Edit/update: Forgot to add this with my original post bc I was tired, but check out this comic drawn from a scene in the fic. It’s pretty dang awesome. :D
http://kagurayato10.tumblr.com/post/170205077114/hi-this-is-a-scene-that-i-take-from-a-fanfic

Update #2: turns out there are a lot of crazy good artists reading this fic! Here’s some more awesome art for you guys:
https://twitter.com/marudyne/status/964698719345152001
https://twitter.com/blue Stripe101/status/965419679165624321

you guys give me life, for reals.

This chapter tried to murder me and steal my shoes. Don’t ask.

And boy have I figured out that it is hard to be funny when your main character is depressed and actively avoiding the other main character while still trying to stay in the
realm of 'serious' fiction rather than parody.

I need to pass out now so I don't pass out at work later, so anywho - thanks for reading/kudoing/commenting! I wish I could get these chapters out faster for you, but my brain is being uncooperative.
There’s a brief moment of respite when the wind picks up in a flurry, the smoky scent of seasoned meat from nearby food stalls briefly overpowering the fragrance of spring blossoms. A few girls overlooking the water shriek when the wind bowls into them, laughing when it passes while smoothing down their skirts and plucking petals out of each others hair.

The moment is gone before Akira knows it’s there, the wave of inexplicable nostalgia crashing into him when he acknowledges the girl in the pink sweater isn’t Haru visiting during break from her overseas university, that the sneezing fit he hears isn’t accompanied by Futaba complaining that maybe nature was better appreciated from the safety of her extensively modded game of Skyrim as she pulls out yet another tissue.

“I hate this.” Akira says, knowing Akechi’s listening, watching, always playing his delicate game of cause and effect to an end Akira has yet been able to determine. “I hate being here.” He says at some point. Time has a will of its own recently, but he knows he’s been sitting there for longer than his back approves of.

“Do you want to go somewhere else?” Akechi asks after a moment. Akira doesn’t want to say that he wasn’t referring to a physical location, but he has a feeling that Akechi gets it, even if he’s not letting on.

Akira lets a breath out through his nose and runs a hand through his hair when he falls slack against the bench, looking for answers to questions he doesn’t know how to ask in the space between the clouds.

Akechi really knows how to set a trap.

It’s almost as if he heard the advice ‘kill him with kindness’ and took it a little too literally, because this sort of blunt, forceful kindness is going to leave him with severe trauma to whatever is left of his mentality.

“Did you figure them out yet?” The masochistic part of Akira asks when he’s somewhat caught up with himself. “The keywords.”

Akechi lips pinch together, eyes flickering over Akira’s face. “I told you I wouldn’t try.”

“You didn’t say that.”

“I did – at my apartment when, ah – when you –”

“When I was sobbing into your shoulder?”

“You didn’t sob – you were panicking, but you never cried.” Akechi insists as if that minor detail would detract from or make up for the lie. Akira wonders why either of them bother. “Why do you ask? Are you curious, after all?”

“I know that you are.”

“How could I not be?” Akechi asks. “If I could even begin to understand how everything looks from
your perspective, then maybe I—" He stops himself short, covering his mouth as if to stop something incriminating from tumbling out.

Akira’s paranoia kicks up some dust. Akechi very rarely lets his tongue get the better of him, but Akira’s *tired* – so he holds his breath before the debris gets caught in his lungs, before he coughs out the detritus in words that can’t be taken back.

“I don’t understand you.” Akira says while Akechi seems to be busy mentally recategorizing everything he knows in alphanumerical order.

“Do you want to understand me?” Is the honest question lobbed back at him. Akira wonders if he’s really been so ambivalent towards Akechi that he genuinely felt the question necessary.

“I’m trying to.”

“But?” Akechi asks with an intensity that Akira isn’t equipped to handle. He watches the bees dance from flower to flower above him.

But Akechi’s like a thousand piece puzzle of a whiteout blizzard that doesn’t have any definite edges – and where is Akira supposed to start? Every time he manages to connect a few pieces, it’s only been what Akechi himself has offered up – from this time and the last. Every other detail is just an indistinct shape of white on white and Akira could spend the rest of his life forcing together the shapes he thinks fit – but he could create a million different pictures and still not have the right one when he didn’t have the right pieces.

“But you’re a good actor.” Akira simplifies.

A joyless smile fixes itself to Akechi’s face. “If it were anyone else, I’d take that as a compliment.”

“But?” Akira parrots.

“But I’m trying to be myself around you.”

It would be so easy, Akira thinks as Akechi tries to hide the crack in his voice with a well timed cough to his elbow, so easy just to talk until all the garbled words in his head make sense again – tell him everything about the past, the future, the *now* – just give in. Compromise. Let him do what he wants about Shido as long as he puts an end to the rot corroding Japan from the inside out.

But –

The girl in the pink sweater slaps her friend’s arm a few times in an over zealous effort to get her attention. When the friend reluctantly turns around, pink girl whispers something in her ear and they both turn laser-focused eyes in Akira’s general direction. They both pull out their phones, looking up and down from their screen. They deliberate something before Pink yanks the friend’s arm and pulls her along in a speed walk that could power Dome Town on a holiday.

Akechi is still working on clearing the mysterious blockage in his throat when the girls stop in front of him.

“Excuse me – are you Akechi Goro?” Pink asks.

Conveniently, Akechi responds with a voice smoother than auto tune could ever hope to produce after just one more cough. He slots his TV smile in place, enchanted with an extra dash of charm for good measure. “Ah – Yes, that’s me. Have we met? I hope I’d remember if we had.”
Akira rolls his eyes as the girls try not to giggle like middle schoolers putting a love note in the popular boy’s shoe locker.

“No, we’ve seen you on TV –” “–And we follow you on –”

– And Akira could almost fall into the trap Akechi’s been obsessively setting for him, he could confide away all his secrets, his only advantage while he’s still powerless. He could live with Shido’s fall from grace by Akechi’s convoluted design, could accept Akechi’s subsequent, meticulously stolen glory – but isn’t that just it?

Power, fame, glory, attention, control – to exist at the top of a world he could shape himself –

An offer of exactly that will be made, an offer Akira once rejected. When the time came, would Akechi?

He slips away after a few more girls hurry over when they notice their friends’ disappearance, managing to make it halfway through the park before Akechi’s stalker mode reactivates and he jogs up to walk with him. Akira should have hid behind the crepe stand.

“Sorry, I had an interview recently. I always get a few people who recognize me over the next few days.” Akechi sweeps the hair out of his face and pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Don’t be sorry. A group of cute college girls – I tried to do you a favor by getting out of there. With me around, you wouldn’t have a chance of getting a date. Which university are you planning on going to next year? Maybe you can get one of them to give you a private tour of theirs.”

“If you think I would choose to spend time with them over you, I’m happy to correct you. I should have known better than to bring you to such a public place, but it’s a nice day and –”

“No need to get worked up about it. I know you need to keep your number of twitter followers up.”

“Akira –”

“Akechi.” Akira says, firm as to make a point. “Thank you for today, really – you’ve accomplished what you set out to do.” Akechi’s not convinced, going by the confused knot between his brow and the eyes trying to compel Akira to hurry up and sell his soul, already. “You wanted me to admit that I’m not okay – well, fine. I’m not okay. I haven’t been okay. I’m probably not going to be okay for a while – and you know what? That’s okay.

“How is that –”

“A lot of people aren’t okay, but they work on it. Everything will be fine in the end, so if it’s not fine, it’s not the end.”

“Quoting trite, meaningless things at me isn’t going to help your case.”

“Things which matter most must never be at the mercy of things which matter least.”

“I’m honestly beginning to worry about how much of your life you’ve spent memorizing pointless –”

“Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake.”

“I don’t understand. Are you saying I should be worried? I liked it better when you told stupid jokes.”

“What do you call a dog that does magic tricks?”
“I wasn’t trying to encourage you to tell jokes.”

“A labracadabrador.”

Akechi laughs, despite himself. “This is the most ridiculous conversation I’ve ever had in my life.” He says, mostly to himself as he shakes his head and rubs his eyes. “Please at least tell me you were serious about what we were talking about.”

“I was serious.” Akira says. “I’ll work on —” He internally weighs the words. “Being honest with myself.”

Akechi nods distractedly, likely trying to pin down the words that would make Akira be honest with more than just himself. “If you –” He bites his lip and changes his approach. “Are you headed back to Leblanc?”

“Not yet.” With how he busted out earlier, there’s no chance Sojiro and Morgana were going to let him retire peacefully without a game of 21 questions and possibly a subsequent psychological interrogation. He doubts he’d be able to hold himself together.

“Any plans?”

“No. I just need to wander for bit. Get some air, let some stress go.” Before he experiences a psychotic breakdown of the natural variety.

Akechi nods again, begrudgingly accepting both the unstated dismissal and the fact that Akira wasn’t going to spend the rest of the day crying into his shoulder for real this time. “Fair enough.” He says. “If you need anything – a place to go or someone to talk to – please call me.”

“Thanks.” He manages, brusque and wishing Akechi were so simple he could print out a label that said either ‘friend’ or ‘foe’, stick it to his forehead, and be done with it all. “I will.”

“Oh – wait.” Akechi says before Akira’s taken a step. Akira resists the instinctive flinch that tries to worm out of his pathetically insecure nervous system. “You, ah, had this in your hair.” Akechi says before pulling his arm back, a pink petal held lightly between thumb and index finger.

Akira breathes now that the small crisis blazing across his pathetically insecure nervous system is getting some rain. “Thanks.” He says again, ignoring the rhythm tap dancing against the inside of his ribcage.

“You, uh, actually have a lot of them –” Akechi gestures at the nest known as Akira’s hair with an upward curl to his lip. “I didn’t want to say anything earlier, but…”

Akira shakes out his hair, knowing he’ll be finding petals for the rest of the day anyway.

“Be grateful for your nice hair.” Akira says when he sees a few float down. “Mine has an appetite.”

“Mine requires more maintenance than I care to admit. I’m rather envious that you can wake up and pull off the messy look without any effort. I’ve known many people who have tried to no avail to imitate the style.”

The conversation withers up after that, Akira picking out a few more petals before the awkwardness sets in and they’re both shuffling on their feet. “Right. Well. See you.” Akira says, knowing from experience the easiest way to escape a situation is to literally pack up and run.
“Akira.” Akechi says at the last minute. “You’re not a bad actor yourself.”

That puts Akira on pause for a good three seconds before he wrangles a facsimile of a smile on his face. “Not as good as you.”

“That’s not necessarily a bad thing.” Akechi says, wrapping a strand of hair around his finger.

Akira looks back once as he leaves, noting Akechi hasn’t moved. He’s looking out somewhere Akira can’t follow with a concentration Akira could never match. He’s still idly playing with his hair and when his eyes snap over to Akira -

Who’s already turning his head, pretending he hadn’t looked back at all.

Ann comes to the cafe to study the next evening. Akira doesn’t mind tutoring, but the glance Sojiro shoots him when Akira shows off his barista skills is suspiciously disapproving.

“You’re not thinking about two-timing Akechi because you got in a fight, are you?” Sojiro asks, loudly, and from where he’s standing behind the counter all the way to where Akira is sitting down at the booth across from Ann.

Ann spits out her coffee and Morgana screeches from her lap, either from the coffee he’s now drenched in or the outrageous accusation, Akira doesn’t know – but he’s going with the latter, because what.

“You’re dating Goro-kun?” Ann shouts loud enough to rattle the frames on the walls. She slams her hands down on the table. “Since when?” She has a flame to her eye that Akira needs to extinguish before it’s too late.

“It has to be at least a few weeks by now.” Sojiro says before Akira can squash the issue.

“Oh my God.” Ann says, imagination already running wild. “It makes so much sense.”

“No it doesn’t, because we’re not dating.” Akira says.

“Don’t tell me you broke up?” Sojiro frowns. “He was my best customer.”

Akira thought he dodged a bullet when he got home the other night and Sojiro neglected to ask questions. If he knew Sojiro was setting down the pistol to trade in for a minigun, he would have welcomed the single shot yesterday over the hailstorm he’s facing now.

“You broke up?” Ann breaks the sound barrier.

“We couldn’t have broken up because we were never dating. And how could he be your best customer when everything he drinks and eats goes on a tab you expect me to pay?”

“Ah, about that…”

Of course, it's this very moment Akechi decides to walk in. Ann makes a noise in her throat while repeatedly slapping Akira’s shoulder. They’re not love taps.

“Um.” Akechi immediately tenses when he notices the atmosphere. He adjusts his tie. “Good evening. Am I – intercepting something?”
“Tell them we’re not dating.” Akira says while Sojiro warns, “You might want to keep a closer eye on this guy.” while Ann overshadows the both of them with, “Why didn’t you tell me you two were DATING?”

Akechi takes a second to process everything while looking ready to take a step right back out of the door and continue on like he’d never been by.

“Um.” He says again.

“Just tell them we’re not dating.” Akira repeats while Ann shakes him.

“Oh. Of course. We’re not dating.” He says.

“Oh my God, you two are so dating and Goro-kun is completely whipped.” Ann rambles, now patting Akira on the head like he’s a cat.

“I’m what?” Akechi asks, his expression divided between bemused and offended.

“Morgana.” Akira tries in a last ditch effort. “Tell her we’re not dating.”

Anxiously, Morgana’s eyes dart between everyone in the room before he lets out a very deliberate and unconvincing “Meow.”

“Cats don’t lie, Akira!” Ann exclaims.

Akechi decides the correct course of action is to ignore Ann and take his seat at the counter.

“Your usual?” Sojiro asks.

“Yes, please.”

Ann moves on to pinching Akira’s cheeks. “I just can’t believe you two didn’t tell me. You know I wouldn’t have a problem with it. I thought we were friends?”

“We couldn’t have told you because we’re not dating.” Akira finds it's difficult to talk when half his face is in the process of receiving permanent nerve damage.

“Prove it.” Is all Ann has to say.

“We’re not gay.” Akira swats her hand off his face and tries to rub down the swelling.

“Well –” Ann sneaks a glance at Akechi under her lashes. He very carefully ignores their existence. She snaps her attention back to Akira. “You know I wouldn’t judge you if you were, right?”


“I don’t believe you.” Ann says. Akira summons up his best evil eye and focuses it on Sojiro. It has the about the same effect as a slapping someone with a feather. “Let me check your phone.” Ann says after she’s already grabbed it and put in his passcode of 1111.

“Sure. Go ahead. It's not like I value my privacy or anything.” Akira gives up. He hears Akechi snort into his complementary glass of water.

Ann first scrolls through his call and message logs, disappointed when she reaches the oldest message without finding anything condemning. She then switches to his photos and looks dismayed
when she finds an album full of Morgana pictures and the occasional scenery snapshot.

She sets his phone down on the table with a sigh.

“They’re not dating.” She says, returning to her own side of the table with a boneless flop.

“They’re not?” Morgana asks.

“Their messages are too boring and Akira only has pictures of you on his phone.” Ann says, grabbing one of his paws. Akechi grins into his hand.

“Morgana’s very photogenic.” Akira defends.

“I am.” Morgana confirms, puffing out his chest.

“So are you done trying to unravel our nonexistent love affair?” Akira asks for clarification.

Ann slides her eyes back to Akechi, who’s watching them with mild amusement now that the danger seems to have passed. “I still think Goro-kun’s whipped.” She says not quite under her breath. Akechi turns away.

Akira goes back to helping Ann study, but it’s clear her mind is elsewhere so he’s not surprised when Akechi finishes his coffee and takes his leave, Ann jumps at the chance to join him on his walk to the station, claiming she’d be back the next day with Ryuji.

He receives a message a couple hours later.

**Akechi:** Sorry. I meant to ask how you were doing earlier, but Ann-chan seemed to be a little too invested in our ‘relationship’.

**Akira:** Don’t worry about it. Was she still bothering you about it on the way to the station?

**Akechi:** She’s very persistent, but it’s cleared up now. I suppose we shouldn’t have left Sakura-san to his own ideas for so long.

**Akira:** It’s your fault.

**Akechi:** I’d say we are both to blame for our mutual negligence on the matter.

**Akira:** Still your fault.

**Akechi:** If that makes you happy.

It does a little, if he’s being honest.

Ann comes back the next day, dragging Ryuji in with her. Whatever encouraged Ryuji into studying on Sunday seems to have become a distant memory within the significant span of two days as he mopes about how he’s just going to fail anyways while watching TV and popping open a bag of chips, becoming oddly motivated only when Akechi shows up for his daily cup of coffee.

Akira doesn’t care much about exams. He did the equivalent of shit on them the first time around and it didn’t affect him in the long run. Not that he’s concerned about doing poorly – he *did* tutor a second year while he was in college and his two study-impaired friends are making him re-learn all this junk for the third time now.
What Akira does care about, however, is what happens after exams.

Madarame’s face flashes across the TV while Ryuji and Ann squabble over the right way of how to solve an equation. They’re both wrong, but Akira doesn’t correct them because they’re going to be meeting Yusuke soon.

**Yusuke.**

Akira taps his pen against his chin as he watches the promotional piece for Madarame’s gallery.

But how are they going to save Yusuke and reveal Madarame’s plagiarism with Akechi playing overseer of the yet to be officially established Phantom Thieves?

Akira blinks away from the TV to find Akechi already watching him, contemplative in a way that suggests he might not be aware that he is staring. Or at least not consciously aware that Akira’s looking back. Akira lets a grin creep across his face, a trill of *something* arcing down his spine when Akechi lands back in reality, color spreading across his face like a bottle of pinot noir soaking through cream linen.

If Akechi won’t let them do what they need to do, Akira will have to trick him into it. Somehow.

Ann slaps the back of his head. “Stop flirting and help us.”

The next few days follow much the same pattern as exams come and go.

They don’t meet Yusuke.

“Something on your mind?”

Akira is in a mood, so he ignores the redundant question. They’ve spent at least a couple days against his will verifying that not only is something on Akira’s mind, but that same something has effectively set up camp and taken over. Akechi’s been true to his word so far in that he wouldn’t bring up the subject again, but Akira knows it’s only a matter of time.

But yes, Akechi, something is very much on his mind – it’s Saturday night, exams are over, and they didn’t meet Yusuke.

“He’s probably realizing he answered a question wrong on the exam today.” Morgana says.

Akira never once considered the fact that he wouldn’t meet Yusuke the same way he did before, although in hindsight he supposes it makes sense considering he hasn’t met anyone in quite the same manner.

“Hah, that’s certainly a possibility. I’ll admit to experiencing the same dread on the rare occasion.”

“I have a hard time believing you’d get an answer wrong.”

Akechi laughs, pleased at the flattery. “It doesn’t happen often.” He brags.

Why did Akira spend all of his money on that stupid TV? How is he going to get into the art gallery if he can’t afford a ticket? The gallery is scheduled for the entire week, but that doesn’t mean Yusuke is going to be there everyday. It’s not like he can loiter around the station with Ann and hope Yusuke turns up either – that’s too reliant on luck. Which he has exactly none of. Even if he did manage to track Yusuke down on his own, what would he say? Maybe he could turn the tables, stalk Yusuke, and then say that Yusuke’s beauty is *Akira’s* muse for his next nonexistent masterpiece? He wouldn’t
“How long can humans go without blinking?” Morgana asks. “Because I think he’s going for a record.”

But that wouldn’t work either – he needs to get into Madarame’s shack to expose his counterfeiting operation to convince Yusuke to work with them, and even then there’s still Akechi.

Akechi who works for Shido who gets a decent lump of money for his campaign from Madarame.

“Akira, I think Sakura-san is calling for you from outside.”

Akira blinks at the glass door to the cafe, not seeing anyone in the alley.

“Oh, you got him to blink.”

Akira frowns at the two distractions sitting across from him.

“Leave me alone, I’m thinking.” Akira says. “And get off the counter before the boss comes back and sees you.” He nudges Morgana a few times until he gives in and jumps on a chair with a sigh.

“Is something bothering you?” Akechi asks.

“You.” Akira says reflexively while pouring himself a cup of coffee. He tops it off with whipped cream since Sojiro’s not around to judge him.

But really, Akechi is the source of all his current problems. If Akira could find the magic words that would replace Akechi’s obsessive need for revenge without having to beat the snot out of him, that’d be nice. Akira’s pretty sure Akechi could wipe the floor with him right now in both the cognitive world and the real one, so fighting is off the table. If there’s some way to make a deal or come to an agreement –

“If I’m really the cause of your concern, I’ll admit to being nervous about the apparent depths of your consideration.”

Akira takes a breath.

And then he takes another breath because the way fanciful way Akechi likes to talk is grating against his eardrums and he might just be considering trying to beat him in a fight while he still has the advantage of surprise. And a kettle. It’d be a little awkward, but Akira’s pretty sure the kettle he has within arm’s reach could still do some damage. More so if he boiled the water inside of it first.

He needs to move on from these thoughts before he goes to jail for an assault he really did commit.

“Do you want to talk about something?” Akechi asks in a more serious tone.

Akira runs his fingers along the hem of his apron. “I could use some advice, maybe.” Akira admits.

Akechi wasn’t expecting that. He widens his eyes, sits a little straighter, and if happiness is equivalent to smugness – Akechi is the happiest guy in town. “I’d be happy to help, if I’m able.”

Akira almost regrets bringing it up because Akechi seems to be savoring the moment, making Akira feel like he’s lost some minor skirmish he wasn’t even aware he was involved in. “How do you get someone to admit that they’re wrong?” Akira asks.
Akechi leans forward, resting his chin on his hand. “Unfortunately, there’s no simple answer to that question.”

“Yeah, I kinda figured.”

“What’s the situation? I might be able to offer you some tips if not a solution.”

Akira would appreciate the irony of it all if it wasn’t so grim. He almost shrugs the whole thing off in the case that Akechi manages to connect the dots, but the eager look on his face is so genuine and if Akechi would take anyone’s advice, it’d probably be his own. So he says, “Someone I know is really stuck on a terrible idea and doesn’t take criticism well.” Akira’s underselling it, but saying he fears getting fake shot in the head again would only increase the odds of finding a bullet there.

“Sounds like Ryuji!” Morgana deducts. “Wait, it could be Mishima, too. Hey, you’re not talking about me, are you? I’ll have you know that I don’t have bad ideas.” Akira attempts a nose boop, but is expertly dodged.

Akechi smiles as he parses through what to say. “If possible, the best thing you can do is to find something they like more and guide them towards that path instead. It’s more effective if you can manage it while making them think it was their idea all along.”

“That’s…pretty manipulative.” Akira says.

Akechi laughs and picks up his coffee. “I don’t know if I’d call it that. It may be a little devious, sure, but unfortunately being direct is often the least viable option for many things. When confronted about something they’re doing wrong, people tend to get defensive and angry – becoming nearly impossible to reason with.” Akira has known Futaba to act in a similarly crazed way when autocorrect tries to fix words that don’t need to be fixed.

Bitterly, Akira says, “You don’t seem to have a problem being direct with me.”

Something passes through Akechi’s eyes that knocks the cheer from his grin. “Ah. True. But you’re not most people, are you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re already very self-critical, therefore more open to criticism. And despite your frequent impulsiveness – when it comes down to it, you’re remarkably logical. You’re the type of person that’s easy to talk to. Also, you’d probably see straight through any sort of manipulation, wouldn’t you?”

Akira is about ten thousand percent sure that last part was tacked on just to butter him up. “I thought you just said you wouldn’t call it manipulation?”

Akechi winces slightly, but his charming smile #3 makes a comeback, leading Akira to wonder if the whole shebang was for show to start with. “I suppose I had the word on my mind.”

“I’m back.” Sojiro announces from the entrance, throwing two kit kat bars at Akira.

“Welcome back.” Akira says, already examining his unexpected loot. “Thanks.”

“Sakura sake and…passion fruit?” Akechi asks, reading the flavors out loud.

“The kid likes the weird stuff. There was rum raisin at the shop too.” Sojiro says. Akechi wrinkles his nose. Akira breaks a piece off one and gives it to Morgana before trying some for himself. “Don’t
“Give the cat chocolate.” Sojiro nags.

“It’s just a tiny piece.” Akira says between chews. Akechi’s nose is still wrinkled.

“Not bad.” Is Morgana’s assessment. “I still like the salmon flavored one the best so far.”

Akira offers Akechi a piece, but he very politely declines. “I’ll stick to plain chocolate.”

Akira shrugs and eats it himself. “Trying something different won’t kill you.”

Akechi purses his lips, and something about the statement must have ruffled some feathers, because he snatches the unopened pack of sakura sake from the table and breaks off half for himself. Akira doesn’t know if he’s doing some sort of complex flavor analysis, but Akechi chews carefully enough to rival a bomb disposal engineer in the middle of a mine field.

Akira and Sojiro exchange glances.

“This is surprisingly sweet.” He announces when he’s finished collecting data. He grabs the other half, leaving Akira with nothing but the wrapper. “I was expecting – maybe a bitterness to it?”

“You need to stop expecting so much and learn to enjoy the experience.” Akira says, pulling the apron off when Sojiro takes his spot behind the counter.

“Heh. Wise words for a teenager. You sound like an old man.” Sojiro says. “But he’s not wrong.” He says to Akechi. “You seem like a hard worker, which is admirable, but you’re still young. Go make your mistakes while you can still get away with them. Just – don’t do anything too stupid, like this guy over here. You can be adventurous without getting arrested.”

Akira makes a face. Sojiro smirks. Morgana steals the rest of the kit kat bar from Akechi’s hand and runs upstairs.

“Aah.” Akechi says.

“You can pay the bill if I have to bring him to the vet.” Akira says.

Akechi leaves not long after, Akira joining him in the walk to the station with the intention of getting a few hours of work in for the night to maybe scrape up enough money for a ticket the next day to do something. He hasn’t come up with a plan yet, but he’ll befriend Yusuke one way or another, even if he has to promise him free food for the rest of his life.

“Are you available tomorrow?” Akechi asks along the way. Akira kicks a can on the ground and makes an indecipherable noise. “I was going to give them away, but I figured you might be interested in going. I, ah, got them from someone at work this week.” Akechi rummages through his briefcase and pulls out two tickets to Madarame’s art gallery.

“Seriously?” Akira asks. After finally resolving to beg Sojiro to cover the difference of what he could afford, the tickets were sitting less than a meter away from him the whole time.

“Right – it would be boring, wouldn’t it? I should have asked some students from the art club if they wanted –”

“What? No. I’m going.” He nabs a ticket out of Akechi’s hand.

Akechi stares at the remaining ticket. “You and Morgana – never mind. So you want to go?”

“Yeah, this guy –” Akira waves the ticket around in emphasis, “He’s been all over the news lately.
“I’ve been wanting to go see his stuff, but I’m broke.”

“Tickets aren’t too expensive.” Akechi adds, a bit unsure.

“Still more than the nothing that I have.”

Akechi’s phone buzzes before he can make a snide remark about Akira’s financial failures.

“It’s Ann-chan.” Is all he offers before directing all of his attention to his portable glowing rectangle.

“What does she want?” Akira asks when the curiosity overpowers him a few seconds later.

“We have plans to meet up tonight. She’s making sure I haven’t forgotten.”

Akira thinks the discrepancy between what Akechi says and how much Akechi is typing in response indicates a lie. Akira is an amazing lie detector, except for when he isn’t – which as far as he’s concerned is irrelevant.

“Meeting up with a pretty girl on a Saturday night – that’s how rumors get started.” Akira says.

“It’s not like that.” Akechi is quick to say, looking away from his phone to emphasize the fact.

“Is she dragging you to her photo shoots, too?” Akira asks.

“No, she just wants to chat about a few things.” Akechi says. “Although, if you wanted to do something tonight, I’m sure she wouldn’t mind meeting another time.”

Akira trails his fingers across the rusted metal of a guard rail as they walk, the station in sight. The sun’s already setting, the red sky reflecting off tinted windows of shops they pass. If he looks hard enough at his reflection, he can see blurred shapes in the background that don’t belong to any world he’s ever seen.

“Akira?”

He snaps out of his reverie. “No, sorry, not tonight. I need to work. Tell Ann I said hi.”

Akechi muses over something for an odd second as they pass through the entrance. “I will. But if you need anything –”

Akira waves him off. “I’m just going to work a few hours and watch some bad TV movies with Morgana later. Don’t worry about me.” He takes the steps down two at a time to avoid the predictable conversation, ignoring Akechi’s disapproving frown when he catches up with him.

“Hey –” Akechi starts, but with impeccable timing, his train pulls to a stop in front of them. He casts it an irritated glance. “I’ll meet you at Leblanc tomorrow.”

Akira nods and offers a jaunty wave in place of a proper farewell. He rubs the waxy material of the gallery ticket between his fingers and heads back to Leblanc before the train closes its doors.

They meet at the station the next day, Akechi looking like maybe Ann did drag him to one of her
photo shoots, but he ended up being dressed as a model instead – his sweater vest swapped out for a gray waistcoat, rolled up sleeves, hair pulled back in a deliberately casual way, tapered dress pants, and shoes so shiny Akira could see his reflection in them. No one dresses like that without expecting a compliment or two, so Akira does exactly not that and motions for Akechi to follow him once he’s been spotted exiting the train.

“Whoa, someone’s dressed up today. Looking good, Akechi!” Morgana says because he still hasn’t grasped the fact that Akechi’s ego is already big enough to support its own gravitational pull. “Akira never puts any effort into his clothes.”

“Probably because I have a grand total of two outfits that aren’t my uniform and Akechi’s decided to keep one of them at his place for safekeeping.”

“We can stop by my apartment after the gallery so you can take those back.” Akechi graciously allows, sidestepping the fact that he could have brought them with him to the cafe any day in the past two weeks.

“Maybe instead of buying that TV, you should have gone clothes shopping.”

“Maybe the one who likes to watch early morning dramas on that TV when he thinks I’m sleeping should reconsider his words.” Akira says.

Morgana ducks down in the bag. “You were dreaming. There’s no way I’d watch that stuff.”

“Uh huh.”

The cat and detective chat as they make their way through the city, Akira progressively losing himself to his own thoughts. He still believes that Akechi knows something. There’s no other explanation to why he’d make an effort to ‘befriend’ Akira, some random guy at the park, otherwise. But if he does have his memories, he’s awfully brazen to invite Akira to one of his past target’s art exhibit.

This must be some sort of power trip.

Akira’s already familiar with most of the paintings on display, having helped Yusuke go through the effort of getting in touch with Madarame’s other students when all was said and done, but he still takes the time to appreciate each one individually in between his furtive search for a tall, blue haired boy.

Akechi’s clearly not into the art scene, giving each piece a cursory glance and a brief opinion before redirecting his attention to the other people at the event. Akira’s not surprised, there are many ‘high society’ types loitering around talking loudly about Madarame and their own expansive collection of paintings they keep at their second vacation penthouse. The type of people with influence or money – the type of people that are useful to keep in a spare pocket.

Akira lets him do his thing. It gives him a bit more freedom to do his own.

He stumbles upon one of Yusuke’s earlier paintings, something dark, cold, and lonely. It’s beautiful, but Akira hates it. Hates what it represents. He supposes that’s what makes it so compelling.

“This one is very… evocative.” Akechi says, leaning in. “Haunting, even. It's incredible that paint can capture such an array of feeling. The artist –” The words stop dead in his mouth when he turns towards Akira, his eyes flitting past him and narrowing.

When Akira turns to see what managed to shut him up (for future reference), he jumps backwards
onto Akechi’s newly polished shoe and tries to calm his heart, because Yusuke is standing a hair’s breadth away, face scrunched up in concentration as he nonverbally cross-examines Akira.

“Can we help you?” Akechi asks primly, apparently upset that someone else has taken up the previously uncompetitive sport of staring at Akira.

No answer.

Yusuke tilts his head and rubs his chin.

Akechi hasn’t given up. “Your staring is making my friend uncomfortable.”

Akira shoots him a dubious look.

“What’s this weirdo's problem?” Morgana whispers, blue eyes peeping out from the bag.

“Maybe we should make up something and sneak away before he comes to his senses.” Akira says, and then whispers. “Akechi, are you feeling okay? Maybe we should go.”

“You said the loud thing silently and the silent thing out loud!” Morgana yowls.

“Pardon me.” Yusuke says after descending back from whatever plane of existence he floated off to. “When I first saw you, I felt a strange nostalgia akin to a treasured childhood memory or of a home I’ve never known. Something transient and bittersweet.” Akira forgets how to breathe. “Is it possible that we’ve met before? Perhaps a long time ago?”

Akechi takes a step forward, smiling like the professional he is. “Akira’s new to the city, there isn’t much chance you’ve ever met.”

“Hm, that name – Akira – even that feels familiar to me. Could it be possible that we’ve met in another life?”

“Is this guy nuts?” Morgana asks. Akechi looks vaguely ill under his mask of friendliness.

Yusuke chuckles to himself and continues without waiting for a response. “No, of course not, yet the feeling persists. Perhaps this is what I’ve been searching for? If I could translate this feeling to canvas –” Akira can see the exclamation mark slap Yusuke in the face as he has an epiphany. “Please model for me.”

“Huh?” Morgana screeches while Akechi gapes in a disturbed sort of astonishment. Yusuke has that effect on people who aren’t expecting him.

“Why am I hearing a cat?” Yusuke asks, momentarily distracted. He shakes his head. “Forgive me, I haven’t even properly introduced myself. My name is Kitagawa Yusuke – I’m a student of Madarame-sensei.”

“Madarame – as in the artist Madarame?” Akechi asks when he manages to reattach his jaw, gesturing towards the rest of the gallery.

“Yes. Receiving tutelage from such an inspirational man – it’s truly an honor.”

“Wait, wait – rewind back to the modeling thing.” Morgana says. “Did he say he wants Akira to model for him? This guy right here? The guy in the wrinkled shirt he picked up off the floor this morning and the hair he hasn’t brushed in a week?”

Akira shoves Morgana’s face back into the bag when Yusuke looks around in suspicion.
“Kurusu Akira.” He introduces himself. He jerks a thumb at his disgruntled companion. “He’s Akechi Goro.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both. I trust the exhibit has been to your liking? If you’d like, I’d be willing to answer any questions you might have – of course, I’d also like to persuade you to consider modeling for me. To capture a complex emotion in painting – one that is simultaneously familiar yet swathed in mystery – I feel as though I may be able to reach that potential through you.”

“He said it again, I wasn’t imagining it.” Morgana’s muffled voice drifts up. “He really wants you to model for him.”

Akechi looks like he has everything he wants to say, but every time he opens his mouth it snaps shut a microsecond later.

“Wouldn’t you rather paint him?” Akira asks, because this is maybe the best thing ever. “He’s better looking.”

Yusuke gives Akechi a cursory glance in much the same way Akechi did the paintings on display. “He’s conventionally attractive, certainly. He could perhaps be a decent source for a figure study – however, I don’t sense any of the passion I feel when looking at you. A portrait of him would be lackluster at best.”

Akira is dying. He doesn’t care about saving the world anymore, Akechi’s palpable offense at being called lackluster is as good as it gets.

He takes an elbow to the side as a red faced Akechi hisses, “Stop laughing.”

Akira takes a few unsteady breaths and looks up. “Pfft.”

Akechi crosses his arms and turns his head, blowing a lock of hair out of his face as Akira devolves back into laughter while using Akechi’s shoulder as support.

“The two of you must be good friends.” Yusuke observes, a smile playing on his lips.

Akechi doesn’t seem to be in the mood to acknowledge Yusuke at the moment, so Akira forces himself to talk in between large gulps of air. “We – actually met – kinda like this.”

“He also wanted you to model for him?” Yusuke marvels at the coincidence.

Akira manages to resist laughing at that mental image. Somehow. “No, no – he, uh. He asked me if we’d met before and then wanted to keep meeting because of how ‘unusual’ the feeling was? Is that how it went?”

“Only if you’re trying to explain it in the simplest terms.” Akechi grumbles.

“Fascinating.” Yusuke says. “That does sound remarkably similar. I would pay at least 3,000 yen to bear witness to that event for purposes of comparison.”

“I don’t think 3,000 yen will cover the cost of developing a time machine.” Akechi says.

“3,500 yen – that is as high as I will go.” Yusuke staunchly denies any further deliberation on the matter.

Akira’s not sure if he’s dead from lack of air or if he’s been dead and is finally revived – His chest and lungs hurt from laughing, and there’s a sharp knot of pain along his jaw he has to massage out
with his thumb. He’s still hanging off Akechi’s shoulder when Madarame shows up and whisks Yusuke away, leaving him with nothing but Yusuke’s name and number on a card that Akechi’s eying suspiciously –

He puts the number in his phone before the card mysteriously disappears.

All in all, the day was a success.

All in all, the day leaves him more confused than ever.

A nostalgic feeling that reminds him of a home he’s never known – a memory? Or just Yusuke being his usual eloquent self?

His thoughts are put on hold when a literal torrential downpour attempts to replace the atmosphere with water on their walk to Akechi’s apartment. Akechi kicks the door closed when they make it inside, looking about ready to either swim through the rain and up to the clouds to kick the shit out of them or curl up under a blanket with a pint of ice cream and watch some bad dramas with Morgana. Instead, he wrings the water out of his hair and grabs a few towels from the closet.

Morgana hops out from his bag, not a drop of water on him because Akira is a good cat-taxi.

“Are you hungry?” Akechi asks, words dripping in misery in much the same way the water drips from his chin.

“Starving.” Akira confirms, echoed by Morgana.

Akechi crosses his arms, the drenched white fabric of his button up pulling taut across muscle. “I’ll order something. I don’t have much here and I’m not going back out into that.” He glares at the puddle growing around his feet. “I’m going to change. Your clothes are on top of the washer.” Akechi says, pointing vaguely at the sliding doors in the kitchen.

“Hey.” Akira says before Akechi disappears down the hall. “Thanks for bringing me out today, it was fun.”

Akechi sighs, but loses the edge to his expression. “You’re welcome. You’re not seriously planning on modeling for that guy?”

Akira puts on a show of wondering about it. “Well, why not? How often do people beg to let them paint you? And he’s a student of Madarame, so he has to be good.”

“I think he’s suspicious.” Morgana contributes from under the kotatsu blanket.

Akechi makes a noise of agreement. “I think you should be careful, the whole thing is rather odd.”

“You’re just mad he didn’t think you were pretty enough.”

“That is not –”

Akira ignores him. “Maybe I can get him to do a nude painting of me.”

Silence.

“I’ll keep him busy, you delete that weirdo’s number from his phone.” Morgana says to Akechi.

“Deal.”
Sorry I'm late! I'm not sure what I've been doing this past month, but it was nothing productive!

I've been playing the animal crossing game on the phone, which is pretty fun. Not on par with the console games, but still a bit addicting with all the junk you can collect. I've also been thinking up a short little one shot type fic that I may or may not someday write about Akechi after he dies in game getting manipulated (again) by yaldy into accepting a new game + type deal by being shown how his life could be if his plans worked out. It's still Akechi/protag, bc I'm a sucker for unhealthy relationships apparently.

And I love Yusuke. Are there people who don't love Yusuke? It does not compute. Did anyone really think I wouldn't write Yusuke into wanting to paint Akira instead of Ann? Why am I not writing a protag/Yusuke fic? Maybe I will! Maybe I'll kick Akechi out of this story and make Yusuke the new love interest! (I won't). I love all the characters in p5, honestly.

And as always, thanks for all the comments and kudos! You guys are too nice to me.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The smattering of nameless stars are blotted out overhead like flecks of wet paint smeared against the veneer of space by a giant thumb. The specter of a hulking figure of something both less and so much more than shadow seeps closer. A gun lies out of reach, one bullet shy of a full magazine.

From the center of nothing he reaches out, chalky skinned beneath a splash of red and –

“You promised –”

Akira jolts awake, disoriented and out of breath. He snaps his head over to the first thing he hears – a popular singer promoting a brand of toothpaste on an oversized TV. He rubs the bit of drool from the corner of his mouth as he sits up on the couch, trying to blink away the haze of sleep.

“Bad dream?” Akechi asks from the kitchen, a towel draped over his shoulders to catch any drops from his not quite dry hair. Morgana sits on counter next to him.

Looking over the back of the couch, Akira clears his throat and hopes the cold sweat on his face isn’t noticeable. “One of the ones where you trip and wake up thinking you’re falling.” He lies.

“I’ve read that people with irregular sleeping patterns are prone to those types of dreams.” Akechi sagely informs. Akira grunts and flops back down, covering his face with a throw pillow.

“Akira either sleeps two hours or twelve hours.” Morgana tattles. “There’s no middle ground.”

Akira checks his phone. “Wrong. I was asleep for almost ten whole minutes.”

Morgana sighs like he’s the last one on the bus and only middle seats are left.

“You must have your hands full, living with him.” Akechi panders to Morgana.

“He’s bad at listening, but he always shares his food.”

Akira resumes his practice of self-suffocation by pillow.

“Are you still upset we deleted that number from your phone?” Akechi sighs, a cavalier undertone to his words. And really, who wouldn’t be mad if someone deleted personal information from their phone? Jerk.

“I was going to ask if he could do one of those overly dramatic renaissance-type portraits of me where the TV remote is just out of reach or something. It would have been amazing. I was going to put it on the wall in the café.”

“I don’t think that would fly with the boss.” Morgana says.

“I could have gotten you in it, too. Maybe in the background eating sushi.”

“I don’t want to be in your dumb painting.” Morgana lies. Akira can see straight through him – he’s just trying to act cool in front of Akechi.

Akira makes a dismissive noise and checks the fake name he saved Yusuke’s real number under.
Paranoia does pay off. He’ll message him tomorrow.

Could it be possible that we’ve met in another life?

Now that the excitement of talking to Yusuke again has passed, everything else is settling in and having a barbecue in the middle of the drought ridden corn field known as his brain. Being back in Akechi’s apartment doesn’t help, the echo of a memory he’d rather forget busy playing racquetball against the wall of his skull. He should have grabbed his clothes and left, but Akechi seems to have a way of maneuvering him into situations before he realizes its already happening.

Could it be possible that we’ve met in another life?

Akira groans and sits up, shaking out his hair. He can’t ignore it anymore – it’s hitting too close to home. He needs to know what it all means – if Yusuke remembers, if anyone remembers, and if not – why do people seem to be getting, what, some kind of deja vu? He’s almost desperate enough to ask Akechi more about it, but –

“The food should be here in about half an hour.” Akechi says from behind him, scrolling through something on his phone. The plain shirt and sweats he changed into make him look younger – like the teenager he is, rather the mini-adult he tries to be. “What?” He asks when Akira looks a little too long.


“Normal versus what?” He asks through a laugh instead of taking offense. “What do I usually look like?”

“Like someone who only drinks vitamin water.”

Akechi covers a bark of a laugh with a cough to his hand. “What if that’s the image I’m going for?”

“Akira fluffs his pillow and kicks his feet on Akechi’s lap, earning a disgruntled look when he wiggles his toes.

He wonders if it’s too late for them.

“What?” Akechi asks for the second time, tugging at his collar. It might be the first time Akira’s seen him self-conscious, always so sure of himself when dressed to his usual standards. “I don’t look that different, do I?”

“Akechi rolls his eyes and walks around the couch, shoving Akira’s feet off to take the other side for himself while flicking through channels on TV.

He figures Akechi must be the same, just – finding his makeshift comfort in all the wrong places.

Lately, Akira’s been worrying he’d do just about anything to feel a little less alone.

Akechi covers a bark of a laugh with a cough to his hand. “What if that’s the image I’m going for?”

“Then you’ve succeeded.”

Akira fluffs his pillow and kicks his feet on Akechi’s lap, earning a disgruntled look when he wiggles his toes.

He wonders if it’s too late for them.

“What?” Akechi asks for the second time, tugging at his collar. It might be the first time Akira’s seen him self-conscious, always so sure of himself when dressed to his usual standards. “I don’t look that different, do I?”

“Nah.” Akira says as Morgana jumps between them on the back of the couch, eyeing them like an overprotective father chaperoning his daughter’s first play date. The rain’s still doing its best to encourage the populace to switch out their cars for boats as it drums against the window panes, shifting Akira’s thoughts back to Yusuke. He tries to remember the last conversation he had with him in the future. “Wake me up when the food gets here.” He says before rolling on his side and closing
his eyes.

“Ah, speaking of sleep – The weather’s predicted to stay like this for the majority of the night. If you wanted to stay over to avoid it, I wouldn’t mind.”

As uncomfortable as he is in Akechi’s apartment, Akira can’t really say he feels like swimming back to Leblanc. “Sure. Don’t let me sleep in this time.”

“You can set an alarm on your phone, you know.” Morgana says, not for the first time and certainly not for the last. Akira yawns and pretends he didn’t hear anything.

Being woken up by someone ensures one thing: He’s not waking up alone.

He doesn’t manage to sleep before the food arrives, his mind weaving countless possibilities for the millionth time of what could go wrong if he told Akechi the truth, or the estrangement he’d feel if he told the others and no one believed him.

And maybe there was a time he’d take the chance, hope for the best, and maybe there still will be a time – but right now Akechi is struggling to find a comfortable spot to rest his hands without touching Akira’s feet, Morgana has successfully taken over the TV remote, and Akira – Akira will worry about it tomorrow.

Ann takes hostage of Akira’s arm and tugs him along with her when school ends the next day.

“Want to go to the mall with me?” She asks in a delayed effort to be polite as she maneuvers Akira around a group of startled first years.

“Yes, we do!” Morgana declares before Akira can open his mouth.

“Great!” Ann grins. “We need to hang out more often.”

Akira’s protests die in his throat when she says that, because he really hasn’t been the greatest friend ever since he turned 16 for the second time. “Do we have to go to the mall?” He asks instead. “I don’t have any money.”

Ann laughs. “We can just look at stuff and maybe try on some clothes.” She says this, but Akira knows she’ll buy at least three things. Or five or ten. But more accurately everything that she touches. “I mostly want to talk, if that’s okay?” She tacks on, almost hesitantly – like she wasn’t sure Akira would be interested in talking and wow if that didn’t make him feel like the worst kind of scum.

“Of course. Is everything alright? How’s Shiho doing?”

She perks up when he mentions Shiho. “Everything’s been great ever since – you know. Shiho’s getting better every day. I’ll let her know you’re thinking about her.”

“Does she even know who I am?” Akira rubs the back of his neck. He never got to know her very well even from his own time. It was hard enough keeping up with everyone between work and school and –

“I might have talked about you a little.” Ann says with a lilt to her voice and a wink.
“Only good things?”

“A little of this, a bit of that.” She teases.

“That doesn’t sound very –” He’s cut off by a curt shove that detaches him from Ann’s grip.

“Sorry, Ann – Me ‘n Akira got some stuff to do today.” Ryuji says, already pushing him out of the school’s entrance.

“Hey!” Ann protests. “I had dibs, you can’t steal him!”

“Already did. Besides, we made plans earlier – Right, Akira?” Ryuji blatantly lies with a giant grin that doesn’t fool anyone.

Ann puts her hands on her hips and leans forward to intimidate him. It doesn’t work, and he tries to swat her away, resulting in a halfhearted slapping contest that ends with Ryuji rubbing his face.

“Why do you always have to *pinch*?” He doesn’t quite screech. Akira would describe it as more of a shrill yelp. “It hurts.”

“Akira’s hanging out with *me* today.” Ann says. Ryuji looks to Akira in a last-ditch effort.

“We can all, uh, do something together?” Akira attempts. His friends look at each other balefully.

“Or not.” He sighs.

“There’s somethin’ I wanna swing by you before talkin’ to anyone else.” Ryuji says.

“That’s not sketchy at all.” Ann mutters.

“See! That’s why I need Akira to back me up first! You get all judgey when I have an idea.”

“No, I don’t! And there’s something I need to talk to Akira about too, you know! And it’s *personal*.”

“You tell me details to junk I don’t wanna hear all the time! What’s so personal only Akira can know about it?”

Akira clears his throat. “Ryuji, we can talk at Leblanc tonight if you’re not busy.” Ryuji’s never busy. And on the rare occasion when he *is* busy, he always puts extra effort into not being as busy as he should be. It’s a delicate process that he pulls off with enviable ease. “I already told Ann I’d go to the mall with her.”

Ann sticks out her tongue in victory and Ryuji scuffs his shoe against the floor.

“I guess I can wait.” He says through a grimace. “I should go for a run today anyways. Exams got me all out of shape.”

Half an hour later finds Akira sitting in a tacky couple’s cafe with dainty floral-patterned tablecloths draped over equally dainty, round tables that Akira doubts can hold two plates of food. Ann is studiously pouring over the very pink menu the waitress handed her and her eyes brighten when she finds what she’s looking for. She slaps the menu down in front of them, the force causing the table to rock back and forth on a short leg.

“So.” Ann says.

“So.” Akira echoes, drawing out the word.
“I’ve been trying to get into this place for ages. The desserts here are supposed to be the some of the best around.”

Akira looks around and has all of the doubts. The cat clock on the wall snubs him with a perpetual glare of plastic disappointment as its dusty tail swings back and forth with an unending tick tock. It kind of looks like Morgana, if he were a cursed object from a shitty horror flick. Akira can picture it in his mind – every night, the ghost of a cat appears and tells everyone to go to sleep or else. Then after they wake up in the morning, all the good food in the fridge is missing.

“They wouldn’t stop you from ordering if you came in by yourself.” Akira says.

“I know. But everyone looks at me weird. I get enough of that at school.”

Morgana peeks out. “I’ll eat here with you whenever you want, Lady Ann!”

Ann laughs. “Maybe when you’re human again.”

“It’s a da – pffhfjshg –” Morgana tries to be smooth before Akira stuffs his face back into the bag as a waitress in heels tall enough to stake a vampire takes their order. Ann proceeds to order something that sounds like death by chocolate, except worse. Maybe overkill by chocolate.

“So.” Ann says again when the waitress leaves. “Is there anything you want to talk about?”

Confused, Akira says, “I thought you wanted to talk to me about something?”

“I do, but – I figured you might have something you want to talk about, too?” Ann says. Akira shrugs and sips their complementary water supplied in one cup with two straws. The table rocks threateningly. Ann slouches back and kicks out her legs with a sigh. “Goro-kun was right, it’s hard to get you to open up.”

Akira chews on the straw. “Been gossiping about me with Akechi? He does enough of that with the boss and Morgana.”

“That’s a lie!” Morgana lies.

“He’s just worried about you.” Ann defends the last person she should bother defending. “And so am I – Sometimes you get this look in your eye and – well, I wanted you to know that you can talk to me. You’re already going through a hard time with your probation and we dragged you into our own problems without bothering to ask you about yours, so it’s the least I can do.”

Akira wants to thank her and move on with the conversation, but there’s a tightness to his chest that doesn’t let the air escape to form words. He pretends to take another sip and stares out the window after he catches the glint of blue cat eyes peeking out of his bag. The line of Ann’s mouth turns to something both sad and self-depreciating.

Akira’s glasses are pulled off his face in a familiar motion.

“And where are the glasses I bought you?” Ann asks. “Aren’t these the same glasses you had before?”

Akira resists the urge to grab them back, lest they manage to miraculously disappear from Ann’s possession yet again. “Turns out Akechi found them and decided not to tell me.” He doesn’t accuse her, but he has his suspicions of her part in it.

“Hm.” Her lips turn to a pout. “Why do you wear them if you don’t need to, anyways?”
“I like them.” Akira answers with a shrug.

“When did you start wearing them?”

“My lawyer recommended me to wear them to court when I was arrested. Something about wearing glasses makes people look less guilty he said?”

“I guess they do make you look kind of meek. Not like someone who’d commit a crime. What did you steal? Were you just shoplifting or –” Ann waits eagerly for a response.

Akira forgot he never got around to telling them what really happened. “I wasn’t arrested for theft.” He corrects.

“You weren’t?” Ann asks.

“You weren’t?” Morgana repeats. “But Akechi said –”

Akira waves them off. “I was arrested for assault.” He chews on his straw a bit before realizing he forgot some vital information. Ann’s eyes widen unusually large. “Not that I really attacked anyone.” He hastily adds.

“So, you didn’t assault someone?” Ann asks.

“That’s what he said.” Morgana helpfully contributes.

“I didn’t assault someone.” Akira confirms.

“So, you did steal something?” Ann asks.

“Sure sounds like it.” Morgana unhelpfully contributes.


“You said you didn’t attack anyone!” Ann throws her hands up.

“I didn’t!” Akira says.

“So why would you get arrested for it?” Morgana asks.

“I was framed!” Akira answers.

A pause. “Oh.”

“Yeah.” Akira says, hoping that cleared it up for them. The waitress brings over a platter of something that oozes hot fudge over other varieties of chocolate and miscellaneous heart shaped confectionery.

Ann takes a bite before sputtering, “Wait, you were framed?”

“Uh huh.” He eyes the platter as the uneven table rocks it closer to the edge.

“By who?” Ann asks.

“It doesn’t matter.”

Morgana butts in before Ann can start to argue. “Of course it matters! If you tell us who did it, we can find them in the metaverse and get them to confess the truth!”
Akira grabs the second spoon and subjects himself to the edible monstrosity in front of him.

“Morgana’s right. We could help you! Oh, but Goro-kun –” Ann bites her lip as she thinks. “He doesn’t want us changing anyone’s hearts…but if it’s for you, he might make an exception – the two of you are close, right? If you talked to him about it –”

“It’s not that simple.” Akira says, wishing it wasn’t an understatement. “And Akechi still wouldn’t agree to it anyway, so –”

“We could at least try to get him to understand.” Ann says. “Or is he trying to help you through his job?”

“Akechi is always saying he wants to help me.” Akira says. “But so far it means getting me to make him a lot of coffee and trying to get me to talk about things I don’t like talking about.”

Ann stifles a laugh just as she takes a bite, bits of chocolate flying out of her mouth.

“Put that cookie down!” She orders through a mouthful of inevitable tooth decay when Akira pulls a cookie out of the volcano of hot fudge. “I was going to eat that next.” Akira puts it back where he found it and grabs a strawberry instead. She nods in approval.

“ Didn’t you say you wanted to talk to me about something?” Akira says.

“Nothing specifically. I just wanted to get to know you better.” She says, and then tacks on, “And I needed someone to carry my shopping bags.”

“Ah, the truth is revealed.”

“ I’d carry your shopping bags if I could…” Morgana mumbles mournfully.

“Did you make Akechi go shopping with you, too?” Akira asks.

Ann’s smile stretches in a way Akira’s not sure he likes. “I might have. Why? Jealous?”

“Why would I be jealous of someone carrying your bags?”

“Ugh. Never mind.”

And under his breath, Morgana says, “I’m jealous…”

Akechi’s the first thing Akira sees when he makes it back to Leblanc after being coerced into toting around a dozen bags of ‘fashion’. He’s at his usual spot at the counter and barely has time to look up before Akira is essentially clotheslined back out through the door.

“Dibs!” Is shouted by his assailant as the arm wrapped around his neck tightens in a very convincing suggestion to speed up his backwards gait to keep pace with his captor.

Mute frustration is the last thing Akira sees before the glass door swing shuts, leaving him staring at the reflection of Ryuji manhandling him down the alley. He’s pulled over into the laundromat before Ryuji lets him go, rushing over to the door to glance around before slamming it shut.

“Alright, I don’t think we were followed.” Ryuji proudly announces as if they broke out of prison
instead of walked across the street in plain sight of the guy he was trying to avoid. “Is Morgana with you?” He asks, glancing at Akira’s bag.

Akira adjusts his clothes. “No, he likes to walk when we get to Yongen-Jaya.”

“Good. He’d probably snitch to Akechi.” Ryuji says. He slides the door open a speck and peeks out before closing it gently. “It’s always Akechi this, Akechi that with the cat. So what if his persona is so strong or his ideas are so smart. I’m the one who let Mona out of jail in the castle in the first place! He should be a little more appreciative, don’t you think?”

“You could both be a little nicer to each other, I think.” Akira says in futility.

“Anyways, you talk to Mishima a lot, right?” Ryuji asks.

“I do.” Akira confirms.

“So, you gotta know about the Phan-site, right?” He asks with a toothy grin. “Isn’t it awesome? We have a website! We’d be famous if Akechi wasn’t shuttin’ us down. And people have been leaving names of more people who need a change of heart – we’ve already got a small list goin’, like one of em’s a stalker and there are some other dudes who –” He cuts himself off to look back out the door. “What I mean is that Akechi said no more palaces, but what about the small fry that are just hanging out in Mementos? Mona said that’s where most people’s shadows would be, right? So, if we took up those requests, we’re not technically breakin’ Akechi’s stupid rules. I mean – nothing would be news worthy, but we’d still be helping people.” He jogs in place excitedly. “C’mon I know you wanna do this too. We can’t let Akechi push us around – no one made him leader.”

Of all people to pick out a technicality, Akira wasn’t expecting it to be Ryuji – but he is right. Akechi only specified that he didn’t want them to go into palaces, almost certainly to prevent them from interfering with his own projects – but he never said anything about the shadows in Mementos. It’ll piss Akechi off when he cottons on to what they’re doing, but –

“I’m in.”

“Yes!” Ryuji graces him with an enthusiastic bro-hug that was more of a slap before jumping back. “We’ll have to try just the two of us because the asshole would get suspicious if we all kept disappearin’ at the same time. And maybe when we’ve taken out a few targets and everyone can see that what we’re doing is good, Ann and Mona will be more likely to back us up and maybe Akechi will lose that stick up his –” He checks the door.

“You know Akechi is going to figure out what we’re doing right away, right?” Akira asks. “There’s no way he doesn’t already know about the Phan-site. He probably keeps tabs on everything that happens on there. And we’d need Morgana’s help to find the shadows we’re looking for. And if we did this without telling Ann, she’d –”

“Flay us alive? Yeah, I know. She’s been gettin’ a little too good with that whip. But she doesn’t stay angry for long.” Ah, the good ol’ easier to beg for forgiveness than ask for permission route. Akira is familiar with it. “Besides, she’s a shitty liar. If we told her, Akechi would figure us out in a beat.” Akira’s not sure they haven’t already been figured out. If anything, Akechi’s been waiting for exactly this to happen so he could properly put them in their place and quell any future uprisings. “Let’s talk about it more tomorrow after school, alright? I’m gettin’ paranoid knowing Akechi’s just sittin’ over there somewhere.”

“Tomorrow?” Akira asks. He was planning on trying to meet up with Yusuke tomorrow, but Ryuji’s bouncing on his feet and grinning like a fool. “Yeah, I can do tomorrow.” There’s no time limit on
Madarame yet. Yusuke’s not in trouble – Akira doesn’t have to rush it.

“Heh, I’m startin’ to really get into this metaverse stuff! We’re gonna make the Phantom Thieves the real deal!”

Akira smiles uneasily, hoping this isn’t going to backfire. Ryuji has always been an easy target, and Akechi seems to have it out for him lately.

But it’s a good test to see how close to the line Akechi will let them get before doing something about it.

Akira walks back to Leblanc and opens the door for the second time after Ryuji zips off. Akechi looks up with the slightest tinge of irritation still lingering on his face. He barely gets a word out when Akira is yanked out of the cafe yet again and pulled away in a hurried jog.

“We’re gonna go running!” Ryuji says.

“We?” Akira asks faintly. “Why ‘we’? Didn’t you go running earlier today?”

“Yeah, but now I’m all amped up for another run and you’re lookin’ kinda pale and scrawny so –”

Akechi’s not at Leblanc when Akira crawls back to it for the third time that day. He briefly wonders if that’s a good or bad sign. Morgana’s missing too, but that’s not too unusual. He’s not a house cat or even a cat at all – he can take care of himself.

He slams the lid of his laptop shut and stares at an empty message screen on his phone as he falls asleep in the early morning, the words not coming to him.

School is a reoccurring dream Akira can’t escape the next day. Familiar people, familiar words, familiar setting, but something he can’t quite pick out is off.

He knows it’s himself. He knows, but he spends the day wondering if Kawakami’s hair was always that length or if she’s recently cut it, if the desks have always been barely large enough for Morgana to squeeze into, if the door has always been so blue.

Ryuji and Mishima are standing by the staircase after school ends, staring at Mishima’s phone.

“What are you two looking at?” Ann asks as they reach the pair.

Mishima waves his phone around in a panic. “My website’s down.”

Ryuji’s grinning despite Mishima’s despair. “He says it has too many people on it.”

“That’s not exactly what I said.” Mishima says wearily. “I don’t know why, but I think I’ve been DDoS’ed.”

Akira rubs his eyes. It seems like Akechi won’t even let them look at the line he’s created, let alone get closer to it.

“It means someone’s stopping people from getting on it.” Akira spares Mishima the longer explanation.

“What?” Ryuji asks, the grin fading. “Why?”

“I don’t know.” Mishima says, anxiously ruffling his hair. “But the server stats don’t make any sense otherwise.”

“How do you stop it?” Ryuji asks.

“I don’t know if I can.” Mishima says. “I mean – I can try a few things when I get home, but…” But Mishima’s no Futaba. If someone wants his site down, there’s not too much he’s equipped to do about it.

Akira starts down the steps. “I’m not feeling too great, gonna try to get some sleep. Sorry, Ryuji. We can hang out another day.”

“Oh – yeah, dude. Don’t worry about it. We’ll keep you up to date on what’s happening, alright?”

“Thanks.” Akira says, but he already knows. Ann’s light footsteps trail behind him. “I’m just tired.” Akira explains before she can ask if he’s okay.

“You’ve been a zombie all day.” Ann says.

“He was probably up all night.” Morgana narcs.

“You got me.” Akira says, faking a grin that seems to fool Ann well enough. She punches his arm and that’s that until –

He wakes up groggy and numb. He rolls over in attempt to fall back asleep, but the shapes behind his eyes are malicious. They continue leering even as he sits up, but the palms of his hands are more than capable of squashing them from existence.

The moon hangs low and green outside his window.

He blinks and finds nothing aside from a tangle of power lines and a few stars trying to break through the light pollution.

Using only the café lighting sneaking up through cracks in the floorboards, he maneuvers himself across the room and makes for the stairs, wincing when his eyes don’t adapt quickly enough to the brightness as he descends.

Blindly stumbling into a booth, he doesn’t notice the three pairs of eyes centered on him until Sojiro asks, “Still in your uniform? You’re usually half out of it by the time you’re in the door.”

Akira locks eyes with Akechi, and for a fragment of time feels sixteen again, half expecting some comment ribbing the Phantom Thieves or something hinting at the painful undercurrent of troubled thoughts. Instead, Akechi laughs while Morgana gleefully reprimands Akira for never sleeping when he’s told, and Sojiro announces he’s going to close early, implying Akira will have to find his own dinner.

Sojiro slides Akechi a fresh cup of coffee ‘on the house’ as Morgana jumps in his lap to get a better
angle to beg for scraps of food as Sojiro wipes down the counter. Akechi corrects his posture to give Morgana all the space he wants.

Akira feels so disconnected he’s sure he could scream until he’s out of breath and no one would hear a sound.

A much too familiar voice speaks from the TV and Akira closes his eyes before he gets double vision.

“Hey, Akira! Akechi’s on TV!” Morgana says. TV Akechi laughs while real Akechi sets his coffee down with a thunk. Akira holds his breath through a wave of nausea.

“I haven’t seen this one yet.” Is all real Akechi has to say as he turns up the volume with the remote that Sojiro usually keeps a jealous guard over.

“You were there. You lived it.” Akira says, if only to prove to himself he still could.

“Yes, but viewing myself from an alternate perspective is a useful tool for improving my future interactions with the press.”

Sojiro chuckles and supplies Morgana with his long-anticipated meal. It smells spicy and unfamiliar. “You have everything down to a science, don’t you?”

“I’m still learning.” Akechi says, looking a little too pleased – the way he does when he gets something right. “My work associates have warned me about some of the things I’ve said in the past. I’m still trying to figure out the best approach to take in certain situations.”

“You’re doing alright, kid.” Sojiro says, untying his apron. “As long as you don’t let the attention get to your head and you put forward an effort to remember that the less you say, the better – you’ll be fine.”

On-screen Akechi makes a corny joke. Real life Akechi groans into his hands.

“I will be taking your advice about saying less, I think.” Akechi says. “Although in my defense – much of what I say in these talk shows are scripted.”

Sojiro responds with a smirk. “I’m heading out. Do me a favor and make sure sleeping beauty over there doesn’t pass out at the table.”

“Roger. Have a good night, Sakura-san.”

“You don’t need to call me that.” Sojiro says in a voice that plainly indicates he’s said the words before.

“Hah, sorry. Force of habit.”

Sojiro leaves and Akira feels like just another part of the cafe – out of sight, out of mind. Someone else’s problem. There was a time when Sojiro would sit down with him and employ his own brand of tough love to cheer Akira up. There was a time when Sojiro would notice something was wrong – a time that he would care.

Akira knows he only has himself to blame.

“Akira.” The screeching of a chair scraping the floor is what makes him look up. “You haven’t eaten yet, right? Neither have I. Do you want to go out and get something before calling it a night?” Akira
doesn’t have much of an appetite and iterates as much by reintroducing his face to his arm. “I’ll pay.” Akira takes a deep breath and knows his ingrained response to anything he doesn’t have to pay for is an unstoppable force of nature. All Akechi had to do in their last life was tack the word ‘free’ before the word ‘death’ on a large sign and he’d have an unwitting line up of both Akira and Yusuke, who claims a level of freeloading that exceeds anything Akira could dream of achieving.

The victorious glint in Akechi’s eye and the upwards crawl of his lip are almost deterring enough to change Akira’s mind.

“Count me out.” Morgana says, collapsed on the floor in front of an empty bowl. “I can’t move. I’ll guard the café while you’re gone.”

Akechi’s face exchanges smug for sheepishness with an alarming fluidity. “A generous offer. We shouldn’t be too long, I still have some work I need to finish up tonight.”

Without much ado, Akira finds himself sitting across from Akechi at the type of restaurant that serves a parsley leaf with a side of undeterminable sauce. Fortunately, there’s a bread basket. Unfortunately, it doesn’t seem to get refills

Akira just wants a damned burger.

“Ann-chan said this place has some highly rated dessert options.” Akechi says as he pours over the menu. Akira sighs and stares longingly at the neon-lit Big Bang Burger advertisement out the window. Akechi neatly sets the menu at the edge of the table and crosses his legs.

Akira taps out a quick rhythm before sitting back and raising a brow.

“What’s going on?” Akechi continues. “You’re quiet today.”

“I’m always quiet.” Akira says. He hasn’t had the energy for witty comebacks lately.

“Maybe I should rephrase and say that you’re alarmingly quiet today.”

Akira lives up to the observation and basks in his non-verbal bubble until the waiter takes their orders. He only breaks after Akechi seems to put a few newly acquired skill points into his ‘staring at Akira’ ability, increasing it from unnerving to nerve-wracking.

“I’m tired. I stayed up all night because Morgana wasn’t around to tell me to go to sleep. Stop reading into things.”

“Are you sure that’s it?”

Akira decides to give a little to stifle further questioning. He tries working a knot out of his shoulder. Akechi’s eyes follow the motion. “I’m homesick.” He says, not having to lie. He does want to go home. He wants to see his friends again – the friends who share his memories. He desperately wants to go back.

“But do you have a home to go back to?”

Akira presses a thumb against his temple and works his jaw to pop his ears – anything to distract himself from losing his mind in public. His shadow must be stuck on a landmine he prepared himself. And his palace – a sad little sand castle that his shadow keeps stubbornly rebuilding around him whenever someone tries to kick it down.

“Why don’t you stay at my place tonight? At least it’ll be a temporary change in scenery for you.
I’ve found that even the smallest things make a difference when it comes to such matters.” Akechi says.

“You – get homesick?” Akira asks uncertainly.

“Not so often anymore. The place that comes to mind when I think of home – it’s not around anymore. I don’t think I’ve told you, but I’ve been on my own for a while.” Akechi takes a long sip of water and idly runs his finger across the rim of his glass, seemingly disappointed when the it doesn’t turn out to be crystal. Akira wants to offer sympathy, but Akechi has used his past as a tool of manipulation before and he’s not sure this is any different. “When I was in foster care, the homesickness was worst when I had time to gain my bearings – when I had time to sit and think. I suppose now that the excitement with, ah, your expulsion has passed and you’re becoming more familiar with the city, you’re unintentionally using more time to reminisce.” Akechi flips his pensive appearance into something more playful as he winks. “Hence, your increasingly deteriorating mood.”

“Hey.” Akira rebukes and throws a piece of bread at Akechi’s face. “My mood is fine.”

“If your definition of fine is the same as ill-mannered, then perhaps so.” Another piece of bread expertly dodged. “Irritable at best.” A larger piece. “Cantankerous, even.” Akira aims an entire roll, but quickly pretends he was only going to take a bite when their server appears behind him with their food.

Akira wasn’t sure what he ordered when he randomly pointed at something that wasn’t in Japanese on the menu, but it looks like some sort of stew. Maybe beef? And Akechi –

“You got cake for dinner?” Akira asks.

“Opera cake.” Akechi specifies. “One of the main ingredients is coffee – I could use an expert’s opinion if you wanted to try a piece.”

Akira doesn’t refuse the invitation and stabs a piece with a fork. “It’s good.” Akira says while chewing.

Akechi laughs. “I’ll be sure to add that imaginative piece of praise to my blog.”

“If you want a real expert, we can call the boss over. He’ll probably take over your blog and make it all about coffee, though.” Akira wants to ask why in the world he has a blog that seems to be about food of all things – but knows better than to ask when the truth is somewhere along the lines of ‘I really like attention’.

Akira wants to ask a lot of things that he wishes he didn’t want to ask. Was Akechi happy as a child? Does he miss his mom? How long was he in the foster care system? Was he treated okay? How many places did he live before he tore his way into early adulthood?

Were they really friends?

“Are you feeling better now?” Akechi asks after they eat.

“A bit.” Akira admits, hating himself for it. He should be with his friends – Ryuji, Morgana, Ann, Mishima, Yusuke, but –

“I’m glad.” Akechi says, seeming to mean it.

Akira’s already following Akechi to the wrong train before he remembers Yongen-Jaya uses a different line. Akechi, apparently having studied the mystic art of mind reading, takes hold of Akira’s
elbow and guides him along anyways.

“I should get back to Morgana before his separation anxiety kicks in.” Akira belatedly tries to decline the earlier invitation to go to Akechi’s place.

“After how much Sakura-san fed him, I have a feeling he’s going to be incapacitated for a while longer. It’s not especially late yet – Feel free to take the couch or the kotatsu and relax for a while.”

“You know, if you want company you can just say so.” Akira says.

Akechi’s grip tightens involuntarily for a slice of a moment. “Ah, well. I will confess that I might have recently discovered that I like having someone around.”

“Ever thought about getting a roommate?”

Akechi smiles, effortlessly rolling a 20 in charisma. “Hah - what are your plans for next year? You’ll still be going to Shujin, right?”

Akira doesn’t quite stutter, but he does have to rewind the words in his head a few times to make sure he understood the implication correctly. He tries to play it off. “Does your apartment allow cats? If the boss kicks me out, I’ll be bringing Morgana with me.”

“Then I suppose it’s fortunate that Morgana isn’t a cat.”

Akira laughs for the first time that day while Akechi grins stupidly to himself until they reach his stop.

Akechi busies himself on his laptop almost as soon as they get to his apartment, so Akira busies himself with the kotatsu and TV, already knowing he’s going to fall asleep.

He wakes sometime after midnight, the artificial light of Akechi’s TV still flickering down at him, the volume next to inaudible. The remnants of uneasy dreams are plucked away from his memory as he rolls over to see Akechi sitting cross legged on the couch, hunched over his laptop, expression severe in the harsh blue glow of the screen.

“What’s wrong?” Akira asks.

His eyes are already closed, but he hears the distinct clack of a laptop lid.

“Nothing. Go back to sleep.”


“Yes, Akira?”

“You go to sleep.”

He hears a ghost of laughter and Akira doesn’t know whether Akechi listens, but it doesn’t matter because he knows he won’t remember a damned thing in the morning.
It takes two more days for Akira to build the courage to press the send button on his well-crafted and poignant message to Yusuke.

**Akira:** *Hey, this is Akira.*

He’s a wordsmith in the making.

After staring intently at his phone for a solid five minutes, he groans and drops his head on his desk. He hears the crunch of a candy bar in front of him.

“So, whatcha doing?” Ann asks. She gets a few crumbs on Akira’s desk and probably in his hair as she snaps off another piece between her teeth. And Akira – Akira doesn’t know why he sent the message during lunch. Yusuke was probably eating or painting pretty girls or something. Akira probably waited too long to send the message and Yusuke already forgot about him. “Why are you mumbling about pretty girls? You’re starting to creep me out.”

“I’m waiting for someone to message me back.” Akira says, checking his phone. Nothing. Ann seems troubled. “Did you ask someone out?”

Akira makes a face. “After how my last relationship went? No thanks.”

“Tell me about it.” Ann says. Or orders. She definitely seems a little too invested in the topic.

“I bet he was dumped.” Morgana says from the desk.

“I was dumped.” Akira confirms. “After a year and a half.”

Ann cringes. “Ouch. I’m sorry. Did she say why?”

“Did she find someone taller?” Mishima comes out of nowhere, startling Ann into dropping her chocolate on Akira’s desk. “The last girl I was talking to online found someone three centimeters taller than me.” He drops down into the desk next to Akira and wilts like a flower that gets too much sun and not enough water. “What difference does three centimeters make? He was probably lying about his height anyway. It’s not fair.” He droops further. “She was cute.”

Ann and Akira exchange glances.

“You’ll find someone better.” Akira says, reaching over to pat Mishima on the back.

“Not at this rate. I can’t even keep a website running for a week without someone kicking it down for fun.”

“Is it still down?” Ann asks.

“Yeah. I’ve asked around for some help on a few different forums, but waiting it out seems to be the consensus. Whoever’s doing it will get bored eventually, right?”

“Right.” Ann says cheerfully. “You’re just having some bad luck, that’s all.”

“Bad luck? This has to be worse than that. Maybe even *advanced* bad luck. And I haven’t told you about my exam scores yet.”

“O-oh. Is that right?” Ann asks, cheery façade failing her. Akira’s phone buzzes, but Ann snatches it first. “Who’s Tanaka?” That would be Yusuke’s fake name, Akira doesn’t say as he tries to steal his phone back. “Wow, he writes a lot. And fast. What’s this about . . . modeling? Akira, what are you
“Don’t tell Akechi.” Is the first mistake Akira makes, because Ann’s eyes burn with a fervor that screams she already has Akechi on telepathic speed dial. “He’s going to ruin my painting.”

“Hey!” Oops, Akira forgot about Morgana. “Don’t tell me you’re still talking to that art weirdo! I thought we deleted his number!”


“Whoa, since when was there a cat in there?” Mishima says.

“Morgana’s always in there.” Ann says.

“She’s a cute little cat.” Mishima reaches out. “Ow!”

“I am not a she! Or little! Or a cat!”

“Morgana’s not a girl.” Akira says. “And he’ll accept sushi in apology for the misunderstanding.”

“Sushi? Your cat has expensive taste. And Morgana is clearly a girl’s name.” Mishima says, cradling his hand.

“He’s not wrong.” Ann reluctantly agrees, much to Morgana’s dismay. Akira takes advantage of her distraction, nabs his phone, and slides out of the room like a wet dog on a freshly waxed floor. He runs to the one place in school he’s sure Ann doesn’t know exists: The Library.

He reads Yusuke’s messages a couple times before he’s able to process it, but yes – it is Yusuke, and yes – he still wants Akira to model for him.

His phone buzzes again and his messages open to a group chat with both Ann and Akechi.

**Ann**: I told him.

Akira won’t pretend he isn’t a little annoyed, but it doesn’t matter. Akechi can’t stop him from being friends with someone.

**Akira**: Traitor. I trusted you.

**Ann**: Morgana told me the whole story. I’m with them, it sounds fishy. And if you trusted me you wouldn’t have run out of the room so fast!

**Akira**: I’m getting my painting. You could have been in it too, but no.

**Ann**: I already model as a part time job, I don’t need some shady guy painting me! Btw class is going to start soon. You’re going to be late.

**Akira**: Don’t care.

**Akechi**: Akira, go to class.

**Akira**: Says the third year who probably hasn’t gone to school at all this week.

His phone keeps buzzing, but he’s already pocketing it.

“Class is starting soon.”
He would forget that the library was Makoto’s favorite spot in Shujin.

“Right. Thanks. I was just, uh, hiding. From phone thieves. They’re everywhere.” And that’s KuruSu Akira, folks. ImpressInG women one failure at a time.

Makoto seems amused in the ambivalent way that might also mean she’s ready to punch his face off. Akira spins on a heel and banishes himself from whence he came.

He’s late to class, but he’s meeting Yusuke after school – and that’s as much as he’s got planned. He’ll figure it out later. His phone buzzes one more time after he’s sat down. He ignores the group chat and checks the newest message from Ann.

Ann: Why'd your ex break up with you?

Akira doesn’t reply.

Chapter End Notes

this month sucked. I didn't have my computer for two and half weeks. I tried writing by hand for a little bit, but reading my own writing is like trying to decipher an alien language. I thought about maybe trying to write on my phone, but I'm a messy phone typist, so you'd either get a lot of sentences like this or a whole new story a la autocorrect. And at some point I was on some planes and some boats and you know who gets motion sickness when staring at a crooked line? Meeeeee! Just thinking about it is making me feel sick.

Anyway, maybe its because my month sucked, but I hate this chapter. Akira's stress levels are stressing me out and he's temporarily lost most of his sense of humor. But that's okay! Why? Because Yusuke is finally going to be a regular starting in the next chapter! (that was supposed to start this chapter, but I type too much. oops)

Also just want to say, there won't be a love triangle in this fic, but protag is human and does have residual feelings.

I know I was going to write a whole bunch of other stuff in here, but I already forgot it all, so eh. Thanks as always for all the comments/kudos, I usually love replying to comments, but this month beat me up pretty good so I didn't reply as much as I usually like to, but I hope you know that every comment I get really does make my day - so thank you for reading, and hopefully you have a much better day than Akira/Ren/Protag/whateveryounamedhiminyourgame.

Edit: btw I'm trying to get out of my bubble and I made a twitter. Somehow even being anonymous on the internet still gives me social anxiety, but I'm working on it. I have no idea what to do with a twitter, but its there and I guess I'll start following people?

username is @ranoutofgravity and it's literally an empty page, but I'll follow you guys if you're on there.
Akira’s phone goes off the way it does when Ann and Ryuji are spamming the group chat with quotes and recaps of their newest favorite show with the hopes that some poor fool will take the bait and lose several potentially productive hours of their lives watching it with them. He yawns and sits up on the couch he was slouching in, basking in the sunlight streaming in through the sheer curtains of the living room Yusuke effectively established as his own when he dumped all of his art supplies on the floor and proceeded to never move them. Akira doesn’t mind. It didn’t take long for the smell of paint, turpentine, and charcoal to be as familiar to him as the scent of fresh coffee in the morning.

Akira spots his phone on the floor over by Yusuke who’s too absorbed by whatever’s on the canvas in front of him to notice it buzzing itself towards his foot with each new message.

He rolls his eyes and yawns again. “Are they still talking about the episode where whatshername gets abducted by aliens or whatever?” As little interest as Akira has in ever actually watching it, he can’t deny it always sounds appropriately ridiculous. Okay, he kind of does want to watch it, but he’s been feigning disinterest for so long it would feel like losing to give in now. He could watch it in secret, but Morgana would find out and never let him live it down.

It simply isn’t an option, he won’t do it.

He’ll make Futaba watch it with him next weekend.

“I’m sorry?” Yusuke’s voice echoes off the empty walls and through the dust motes, falling flat and dull by the time it reaches Akira’s ears.

“You know,” Akira says, gesturing idly. “The show with –” He straightens his back when the metal folding chair he’s sitting in digs uncomfortably into his spine. Chair, not the lumpy second-hand couch they bought on the cheap from a friend of a friend of a friend.

He wakes up for the second time when he remembers that everything’s different now.

“Yes,” There are no half-finished sketches aesthetically pinned to the walls, no canvases set aside with thick globs of drying acrylic paint, no kitchen sink filled with cups of muddled water and brushes instead of dishes. “Never mind. I think I fell asleep for a minute.”

He swallows the tightness in his throat when he remembers he’s at Madarame’s shack. The shithole Yusuke was forced to live in while Madarame spent most of his time out schmoozing rich idiots into buying forged paintings so he could add another annex to the mansion he kept his mistress in.

Yusuke makes a light noise through his nose. “It’s been longer than a minute, however I wouldn’t be concerned. I managed to complete a few studies, although I’m still undecided about how I’d like to paint you.”

Akira tries to tune out the incessant flurry of disorganized thoughts and clears his throat as he walks over to Yusuke. He has a large sketchbook strapped to a clipboard open on the easel in front of him, sketches of Akira from a variety of angles littering the page. Akira especially appreciates the attention to detail in the close up of his face with the bit of drool threatening to spill out from the corner of his mouth.
“If these are just studies, I really want to see what your finished paintings look like. I bet you’re good enough to have your own gallery.” Akira says, knowing that Yusuke deserves every compliment he can get after being treated like Madarame’s personal golden goose all his life. And because it was true. Even after three years, Yusuke never failed to amaze him.

Yusuke soaks up the compliment the same way a dry sponge takes to water before shaking his head. “I still have much to learn before I would ever consider having a gallery of my own, but under Madarame-sensei’s tutelage, I imagine it wouldn’t be impossible someday.”

Akira claps Yusuke’s back. “Whenever it happens, you can count on me being there.”

“I’ll hold you to your word. If you’d like to buy a ticket in advance, I’d be willing to offer you the one-time deal of an unlimited pass to all of my future galleries for the singular price of 10,000 yen.”

Akira whistles and eyes the overt lack of muscle or fat to Yusuke’s frame. “How about free food instead? I’m not a bad cook.”

“An acceptable counter-offer.” Yusuke says. “If I could begin collecting on that immediately, it would be much appreciated.”

Akira feels something click into place and smiles as some of his nerves are put to rest.

Earlier, he moved fast after school, knowing he had a narrow window of opportunity to talk to Yusuke alone before Akechi or Morgana or even the newly traitorous Ann tried to intervene. He managed to ditch Morgana by asking him to wait with Ann while Akira was in the bathroom before booking it for the stairs, bypassing Ryuji with an apology and the promise of training with him the next day. He half expected to see Akechi waiting at the station for him, arms crossed, foot tapping – but thankfully his paranoia proved to be just that and he made it to the shack without any preamble.

It took ten minutes to work up the courage to message Yusuke that he was standing out front.

He’d been remembering the last time he’d talked to him in the future. It was in the morning. They’d agreed to meet up later at Ogikubo for ramen.

He wonders how long Yusuke waited.

“Yeah,” Akira says, thinking maybe he could finally keep his end of the arrangement. “Today’s fine.” His phone buzzes murderously on the floor. He spares it a glance before turning his attention back to Yusuke. “How does –” It keeps buzzing. “One sec.” He grabs it and internally goes over the pros and cons of answering Ann’s call.

“Hey.” He says like he didn’t dump Morgana on her and run away after suggesting they should all walk to the station together.

“Where’d you go?” She asks.

“I’m hanging out with a friend today.”

“You said you were going to hang out with me today.”

“Stop grabbing my phone out of my hand and maybe we can do something another time.”

“Goro-kun takes your phone all the time!”

“Goro is a dick and doesn’t have any friends.”
“He has friends! We’re his friends.”

“Yeah, he’s lucky we’re too nice for our own good.” Akira mumbles, hopefully unintelligibly. “Having a few friends doesn’t make him any less of a dick.”

“I’ve never seen him be anything but nice. Sure, he’s a little bossy sometimes, and maybe a little arrogant –”

“A little arrogant?”

Ann continues, “– But you’re his best friend! He can’t be that bad.”

Akira removes the phone from his ear, mouths the words best friend in bewildered offense at the phone and looks at Yusuke for unsolicited backup. He receives a curious tilt of the head in response. Good enough.

“Okay, whatever. I’m still allowed to be mad at him for deleting numbers from my phone. Why are you defending him, anyways? Akechi already knows I think he’s a shithead. I make an effort to remind him every time he gets a little too full of himself.”

Ann sighs. “Boys.” Is all she seems to have to say on the matter. “But I only called because Morgana asked me to. I’ll let him know you’re still alive.”

“Thanks. I have to go. See you tomorrow.” Akira says, hanging up after Ann gives her own farewell.

“Is something wrong?” Yusuke asks, attention on a sketchbook balanced on his knee as he whips graphite across the page in broad strokes. Akira recognizes his own face within the dramatic lines and shadows, his frustration clear by the downturn of his lips and the furrow of his brow.

Akira wants to tell Yusuke everything. He’s always been a good listener. Patient, even amidst the most trivial of matters, and willing to suspend his disbelief to the point of naivety. If there was anyone who would believe Akira about time travel, it’d be Yusuke.

But that was when Yusuke had a reason to trust Akira. They’re not at that point yet.

Akira looks out the window at a tall tree that’s long overdue for pruning, its neglected branches nearly scraping the roof of the house that it stands near for attention.

“There’s always something wrong, isn’t there?” Akira asks with a tired smile.

Yusuke appears to be of the mind to disagree before looking back at his sketch and contemplating something. “You may be right.”

Akira grabs his bag off the floor. “Let’s get some food. I’m in the mood for ramen, but –” He checks his wallet in the case someone reverse pickpocketed him and put some money in there. “Yeah, I’m broke. Leblanc’s the only option.” He chews his lip.

“Leblanc? I can’t say I’m familiar with the name. Is that a restaurant?” Yusuke asks, tucking his sketchbook under his arm as he moves for the door.

“It’s a café, but the owner makes the best curry you’ll ever have.” Akira says, reluctant to follow. “There’s one problem we’ll need to watch out for when we get there.” He checks the unread messages he’s been getting since the revelation that he was still in contact with Yusuke. None of
them were from Akechi.

“It’s sort of haunted.” Akira says, a tangle of nerves creeping up his spine like frost on a cold winter morning.

“Haunted?” Yusuke asks, raising his sketchbook. “Fascinating. I’ve never had the opportunity to sketch a ghost before.”

“He’s more of a demon really.” Akira says. “Still figuring out whether he’s trying to kill me or just annoy me into handing over my soul. I mean, I think it’s the soul thing, but he could change his mind at any time.”

“In the unfortunate event that you find yourself with no other choice than to sell your soul to this demon, would you mind making one of the terms of purchase allowing me to paint him?” Yusuke asks.

Akira’s laugh doesn’t leave his chest, but he grins as he pockets his phone, remembering Yusuke’s dismissal of Akechi at the gallery. “I have a feeling you wouldn’t want to paint him, but sure, if it makes you happy.”

“Excellent. Securing a demon as a model poses a rare opportunity.”

“Don’t worry, there’s no shortage of them where we’re going.” Akira says as they open the front door.

Madarame’s outside, scrolling through something on his phone. He looks up when he hears the door. “Ah, Yusuke. I was wondering if you were home. Is this a friend of yours?”

“Sensei, welcome home. Yes, Kurusu-san has agreed to model for me. He’s been a very cooperative subject so far.”

“I fell asleep.” Akira clarifies, trying to play nice until they get Yusuke in the metaverse. His friend is loyal to a fault. Akira would only needlessly complicate things by bringing up the truth Yusuke’s been denying.

Yusuke hums something resembling a laugh. “He stays perfectly still. It’s a skill I hope he’ll retain while he’s awake.” He says. Akira shrugs. Yusuke draws so fast, Akira’s never really had to stay still for very long when Yusuke asked him to pose before. “I’ve been invited out for curry. Is there anything you’d like me to pick up on my way back, sensei?”

Madarame smiles with all the geniality of a kindly old man who’s never had an ill thought in his life. His eyes have the shape of caring and empathy to them as they twinkle in faux affection. His act shoves Akechi’s nice guy routine in the dirt and suffocates it with used plastic wrap. “Don’t concern yourself with this old man, Yusuke. It’s rare to see you out with your friends, go have fun today. Do you need any money? I think I made a little extra this month if you wanted to buy something for yourself.”

Akira has never wanted to set someone on fire so much before.

“Thank you for your generosity, sensei, but it’s not necessary. I have enough saved to buy something if I need to.”

Akira wants to grab Madarame’s wallet, drain everything he has on lobster for Yusuke, and then introduce both the wallet and Madarame’s charred corpse to a hydraulic press.
“Perhaps when I’ve saved enough we can treat ourselves to the seafood buffet that opened downtown recently. How does that sound?”

Then Akira will eject anything leftover out of one of the airlocks in Okumura’s palace. He’s sure Akechi will help him out with all of the murder and cover up stuff since he’s been trying so hard to get on Akira’s good side.

“I look forward to it, sensei. Thank you.”

Akira has been spending way too much time with Akechi, he decides, and then tries to think less murderous thoughts. He thinks of fluffy cats. With very sharp claws and teeth that can slice human flesh like a steak knife.

Akira tunes out the high praise Yusuke lavishes Madarame with as they walk to the station. Even after he was originally exposed, Yusuke never managed to bring himself to genuinely hate the man who raised him and taught him to paint.

How Yusuke turned out is the only good thing Madarame accomplished in life.

When Leblanc is in view, Akira frowns and checks his phone again. Akechi isn’t the type of person to bombard his phone with messages like other friends who will remain unnamed but not unimplied – but Akira at least expected something condescending after Ann snitched on him earlier.

“Hey, could you wait here a minute?” Akira asks Yusuke, not waiting for a response as he jogs a step over in front of the glass door, peeking inside. It’s empty, save Sojiro, preoccupied with the TV. He waves Yusuke over.

“Welcome back.” Sojiro says as he enters, giving Yusuke a once-over as he trails in behind Akira. “You brought… a friend?” He asks with a level of doubt Akira has only ever heard from conspiracy theorists on the topic of the moon landing.

He dumps his stuff on the floor and gives him a look he hopes Sojiro translates to mean that Akira is tired of his presumptions that he runs around the city irresponsibly seducing men and women alike – then subsequently brings them to Leblanc while Sojiro was still there. Akira would at least wait until he left. He likes to think he’s a considerate person.

Yusuke bows formally and says, “It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Kitagawa Yusuke. I’ve been informed that your café supplies the best curry that I’ll ever eat.”

“Feed us.” Akira summarizes.

And as sure as the inevitability of a printer having a paper jam, Sojiro finds himself helpless against the twin stares of broke high school students and pulls out the stock pot.

Yusuke doesn’t stay long after he eats, and Akira insists that he take all of the leftovers with him even though he suspects Sojiro made extra to bring home for himself and Futaba. Sojiro must notice what’s going on because he doesn’t say anything.

“Is that kid alright?” He asks afterwards.

Akira’s still watching the door, wishing he’d asked him to stay longer.

“No.”

A pause. “You know, butting your head into other peoples’ business is what got you into all this
trouble to begin with. You should be careful.”

Akira purses his lips. “The night I was arrested,” he says, “Nothing happened to that woman. The man who called the cops left before he got too involved, but the woman stayed behind to finish giving her statement and probably went somewhere far away from the asshole who tried to force himself on her. Maybe that doesn’t mean anything to you, but it does to me.” He stands up and grabs his bag. “I’d do the same thing again.”

“Look, all I’m trying to say is –”

“I know what you’re saying.” Akira says, wishing he knew how to make everyone remember. “And you’re wrong. Add his food to my tab if it makes you feel better.”

He spends the rest of his night with his brain shut off while he single-handedly takes orders, cooks, and serves customers at the severely understaffed Beef Bowl Shop while his manager watches sitcoms in the back.

Everyone’s too apathetic.

And maybe it’s because he’s older now, but he can almost understand why.

He doesn’t want to understand.

Amends are made over the next couple days with Ann, Morgana, and Sojiro.

Sojiro knows he struck a nerve and tries to placate Akira the only way he knows – with coffee lessons and tentatively letting Akira know that he wouldn’t mind parting ways with a little extra food if Yusuke showed up again.

“Where’s your boyfriend been?” Sojiro asks on Saturday morning.

Akira drains his coffee. “Which one?” He asks. “I have so many now, it’s hard to keep up.”

“The one who appreciates fine coffee.”

“Oh, you mean the one with the crippling caffeine addiction that you’ve been enabling? He’s probably on TV somewhere. You might find him if you flip through the channels long enough.” Akira says. Sojiro flicks his forehead. “Ow. I don’t know. I don’t talk to him all the time.”

“If he’s been having a rough time at work, you should try and do something for him. He takes you out all the time.”

Akira averts his eyes and fiddles with his empty cup.

He tries messaging him in class but doesn’t get a reply even after he sees the little message received checkmark.

At Yusuke’s request, he goes back to the shack that afternoon. He eyes the locked door that Madarame keeps all of the counterfeits in as he passes by - The lock that needs to disappear. He has a few plans, but they’re all short sighted and don’t take Akechi’s potential retaliation in account.

In the time it takes for his eyes to fully open after blinking, he can see the glimmer of gold covering
“You seem troubled by something.” Yusuke deducts while Akira’s posing and mulling things over.

“Just a few things rolling around in my head that I can’t get back into place.” Akira says. “Any luck with the painting?”

“Not yet. Its an elusive feeling that I’m trying to capture. Something that instinctively feels as though I already have it without the need to chase – yet dances away the moment I try to give it form. Perhaps it is beyond my current ability to paint you the way I intend.” Yusuke says. “It’s almost disorienting, trying to visualize this nostalgia I feel when I see you, despite the fact that when I draw your face it feels as though I’ve done so hundreds of times already.”

Akira ignores the lurch of his heart and asks, “Have you had any weird dreams lately?”

Yusuke crosses his arms and brings his paintbrush wielding hand up to his chin. “Dreams?” The brush drags a line of red across his face. “I did have a dream that I was an incredibly talented dancer the other night. You were there too, if I’m remembering correctly.”

“Was I dancing?”

“Yes.”

“Was I any good?”

“Almost as good as me, if I’m required to make an estimate.” Yusuke says. Akira drops his head to his hand and laughs. He missed this. “Laughter is a fitting look for you. I’ll have to try painting that next time. That is – if you’ll allow me your continued cooperation, of course.”

“Does that mean you’re giving up for the day? You haven’t painted much.”

“I’m afraid I’ve lost grasp of my focus. Painting won’t be so forthcoming now.” Yusuke says, belatedly noticing the brush he’s been tapping against his face. He wipes at the paint with the back of his hand, smudging red across his cheek.

Akira resists the urge to clean it himself.

“I have some money today if you’re hungry. We could get something cheap at Big Bang Burger? Or we can eat at Leblanc again.”

“I wouldn’t decline a burger. Even the inexpensive foods have their own unique charm.” Yusuke says, grimacing at the red splatter of paint on his collar.

Akira doesn’t know if he’d ever describe anything about Big Bang Burger as charming, but he thinks if Akechi ever asks him for help on his food blog again, he’s going to be referring him to Yusuke. On that note –

“And by the way – if you don’t think painting me is working out, I have a friend who I think you might be interested in painting. She already has experience modelling –”
By the time Sunday rolls around, Akira still hasn’t heard from Akechi. Messaging elicits no response, Sojiro confirms he still hasn’t been by for his usual cup of coffee, and even when Ryuji asks in the group chat if they could all make a trip to Mementos soon – nothing.

Akira stares at the green call button on his phone once he’s finished a shift at the flower shop. He hates that button, but he’ll press it if he has to.

The line rings a few times before going dead.

Akira’s eye twitches.

Morgana peers down at him from the gate he jumped on. “Still no word from Akechi, huh?”

Akira clenches his teeth and sighs through his nose. “One day he’s all ‘Call me whenever you want to talk about your debilitating anxiety, Akira!’ and ‘Let me force myself into your life and steal all your time when you could be doing important things like saving the world, Akira!’, but suddenly it’s like ‘Oh, Akira’s calling, better pretend I’m dead.’ What if I was dying and wanted to tell him the name of my murderer and he just—disconnects the call?”

“Maybe you could write the murderer’s name on the floor with your blood?” Morgana suggests.

“What if I didn’t have any blood left to leave a message?”

“I think having no blood left would mean that you’re already dead.”

“I guess it doesn’t matter anyways since he’d probably be the one that killed me.”

“You could try going to his apartment?” Morgana suggests. “He can’t ignore you if you’re standing in front of the door.”

“I’m not going to stoop to his level.” Akira says through his teeth. He tries sending a nicer message.

Akira: Hey, sorry if you’re busy. Haven’t heard from you in a few days and wanted to know if you were okay.

“Maybe he’ll say something if we tell him we’re going to steal someone’s heart?” Morgana wonders.

“About that—” Akira tries to use the opportunity to bring up Madarame, but he’s interrupted by his phone.

Akechi: Can I meet you at Leblanc tonight?

That is way too short and to the point to be a message from Akechi.

Akira: You don’t have to ask. Are you okay?

Akechi: I’ll explain later.

“So, he’s coming to the café tonight?” Morgana asks, reading over his shoulder.

Akira shrugs and pretends it’s not relief that unravels the knot of stress that’s been building ever since Akechi went quiet. And if it is, it’s just because having Akechi in sight means he’s not doing anything too illegal.
Akechi shows up with a knock at the door after Leblanc closes, startling Akira into tearing a hole in his math homework with his pencil. Akira almost doesn’t recognize him at first – he’s wearing jeans and a hoodie with his hair tied back, a backpack slung over his shoulder instead of his usual briefcase. He looks identical to every college student Akira has ever met.

Akira unlocks and opens the door, Akechi tumbling in with a muttered ‘thanks’ and a smile that emphasized the hollowness of his eyes.

“What the hell happened to you?” Akira asks as Akechi goes straight for the stairs.

“Work.” Is all Akechi has to say.

Akira grabs his stuff off the counter before following him. He makes it up in time to see Akechi flopping face down on the bed.

“Are you going to sleep?” Akira asks, looking for help in the shape of Morgana and only finding an open window.

“Yes.”

“Okay, well – any reason why you’ve been ignoring all my messages?”

“You’re very distracting.” He says to the pillow.

Akira’s brows disappear under his hair. “How tired are you right now?” Akira asks.

“Extremely. In fact, let’s pretend I’m a normal person who requires sleep to survive.” Akechi says in a roundabout way of telling Akira to shut the fuck up.

“Okay, normal person.” Akira walks over and pats his head. “Don’t worry, there’s nothing special about you. Sleep well.” Akechi glares with one eye and rolls over. “By the way, I need to sleep too. That’s my bed.” Akechi scoots himself a few inches over as if expecting Akira to utilize the half foot of free space he’s made available. “…I’ll sleep on the couch. Can I have one of my pillows?” Akechi hugs the second pillow against himself. “No? Okay. I can live with excruciating neck pain, I guess.”

He wakes up the next morning with crick in his neck he can’t coax out.

“Where’d you go last night?” Akira asks Morgana over breakfast. “You’ve been out a lot lately.”

“Just scouting a few places.” Morgana says, the sudden whip of his tail telling Akira that wasn’t the whole story. “The metaverse is always changing. Sometimes I like to get a sense of things if I haven’t been there for a while.” Akira hmms over his coffee while Sojiro looks between them.

“When do you think Akechi’s going to wake up? I want to talk to him about going back into Mementos.”

Akira doesn’t know, so he rips a piece of his toast off and looks at the TV. No news about mental shutdowns or psychotic breaks, not that it does anything to help soothe his nerves.

“Akechi’s sleeping upstairs.” Akira tells Sojiro before he finds out on his own. “Just – so you know.”

Sojiro’s expression requests no further elaboration – please and thank you.

“I’ll set aside some breakfast for him.” He says with a sigh, already pulling out another plate. “I
should open a soup kitchen at this point.” He makes a show of grumbling, but the words don’t bite.

“If you want paying customers, go find Akechi’s blog and tell all of his fangirls that this is his favorite café. You could make your own blog and notify them whenever he’s here.”

Sojiro chuckles. “Not a bad idea. Having some cute girls around more often wouldn’t be too bad. But I’ll pass. I don’t want to liven things up too much around here – I’ve seen the audiences from his interviews.”

Akechi’s still asleep when Akira leaves for school. He leaves a mug of coffee out for him on the desk.

“Where’s Mona?” Ryuji asks at lunch. “I wanted to ask him some stuff about the metaverse today.”

“He stayed back at the café.” Akira says as he passively watches the Dr. Salt Neo he bought topple forward against the glass of the vending machine and refuse to fall.

“Must be nice getting to lounge around all day, every day.” Ryuji sighs before spotting Akira’s trouble. “These damned machines. I think this happens to me at least once a week. Hold up, I got you.” He says before shaking it a bit. When the drink doesn’t move, Ryuji gets a good grip on the top of it, puts a foot against the wall, and shakes with all his strength.

Death by vending machine is not an epitaph Akira wants on his grave, but it’s a close call as the hunk of glass and metal crashes forward, Ryuji and Akira scattering backwards in its wake.

“Oh, shit.” Ryuji’s voice shakes, but he’s grinning like this is the best thing to ever happen to him. He looks around for an escape route. “Let’s get outta here before anyone sees us.”


“Dude!” Ryuji says, skittering back. “Don’t sneak up on us like that, jeez. I thought you were a teacher or somethin’.”

“Did you guys break the vending machine?”

“It was like this when we found it, right Akira?”

Akira’s crouching down next to a steadily growing puddle of everything that was in the machine.

“What in the world is going on over here?” Kawakami asks as she rounds the corner. She gasps and eyes the three of them accusingly. Ryuji shuffles guiltily on his feet as he grins while Mishima holds up his hands in a silent attempt to explain he has no idea.

“It ate my 210 yen. Where do I go to get a refund?” Akira asks.

He never gets his refund.

The three of them receive a stern lecture after school from the principal on the topics of both safety and destruction of school property, but by a monumental stroke of luck manage to escape any punishment. Akira thinks it might be an attempt to stave off any rumors about vandalism – The
school’s reputation is already in the shitter because of Kamoshida, damage control was probably all they could do now.

Ryuji whistles as they walk into the light of freedom. “Worth it.” He says.

“I wasn’t even there when it happened, why’d I get in trouble?” Mishima drags his feet as they walk.

Akira has bigger problems. For example, the murderer in his bed.

He tries to decipher the messages on his phone that say they’re from Akechi but look like he let Morgana have a go at writing something. Maybe he took Morgana hostage and made him write his own ransom note?

“He-ey.” Ryuji says with a leer. “Look over there, those girls are checking us out.”

“What, really?” Mishima asks, having no sense of subtlety and turning around to look at them.

Ryuji grabs his shoulders and spins him back around.

“Man, it’s almost like you don’t know how this works.”

“How what works?” Mishima asks.

Ryuji turns to Akira for help. Akira’s too busy holding his phone upside down trying to decode cat-text.

“Dude.” Ryuji sighs in disappointment.

“I’m sorry, but – is your name Akira?” A voice he doesn’t recognize asks.

Akira looks up, ignoring Ryuji in the background elbowing Mishima and not quite whispering, “Already using first names!”

“How did you know my name?” Akira asks, ignoring her unspoken question.

Akira doesn’t even want to know, so he immediately replies, “Who’s that?”

She seems a bit confused before glancing down at her phone and looking back up, getting cut off by Ryuji before she can say anything. “Yeah, we know that snobby – I mean, our good friend Akechi. We hang out all the time!” He throws his arm around Akira’s shoulders.

“Oh! I thought so. You’re in a couple pictures on his blog.” She says, holding up her phone to reveal a photo of Akechi showing off a cup of coffee at Leblanc with Akira still in his uniform slightly blurred out in the background. The caption says, ‘My favorite place to relax after a long day of work!’

“Akechi has a blog?” Ryuji asks. “Why am I even askin’. ‘Course he has a blog.”

“He usually says where he’s at when he posts something, but he’s keeping this one a secret.” The girl continues.

“How did you know my name?” Akira asks, ignoring her unspoken question.
“He mentions you a couple times –” She scrolls down some, “On this post he says you make the best cup of coffee in Japan and on this one – he added your commentary about a cake you two ate.” And there it was – Akira’s commentary of ‘It’s good,’ written right there next to his very own name. “So, I was wondering if maybe you could tell us where this is?” She brings up the first picture again, finally getting to the point. “We know he goes there to relax, so we won’t tell anyone else! We just want to meet him, that’s all!” She gestures to her friend who’s standing away, but within earshot.

Akira’s fine joking with Sojiro about bringing Akechi’s fangirls to the café, but in reality – the application of it would be absolute hell. Akira lives at Leblanc. He’s won’t destroy his own home.

“Tch, what do you want to meet him so much for?” Ryuji asks, excitement gone now that he knows the girls only care about Akechi. “He’s an ass.”

Both girls gasp and the friend who was standing away teleports over and shoves her phone in Ryuji’s face. “Don’t talk about him that way – he’s an angel.” On the screen is a glamor shot of Akechi with several filters that Akira knows not even Akechi would debase himself with.

He snaps a picture of the picture and sends it to Akechi. If he’s holding Morgana hostage, this should be good enough blackmail material to get him back.

“He’s just a detective! What’s so damned impressive about that?” Ryuji continues to hold his ground.

“He’s the new detective prince!” Girl One says.

“He’s a genius!” Girl Two says.

“He’s already solved thousands of cases that the police couldn’t solve over the past few years!”

“He’s gorgeous!”

Ryuji gets backed up across the courtyard while Akechi is aggressively defended.

Akira gets a legible message.

**Akechi:** Please delete that.

**Akira:** Let Morgana go free and we can talk.

**Akechi:** ? He wanted to practice using the phone. We’ve decided that a tablet would be necessary if he wants to join the group chat.

**Akira:** Buy him one or I’ll make sure everyone in the world sees that picture.

**Akechi:** I refuse to give into the demands of terrorists.

Akira snaps a shot of Ryuji being harassed.

**Akira:** Your fans are the real terrorists. They found out we know you.

“Oh, come on!” Ryuji says, trying to get back over to Akira and Mishima. “You’re acting like he’s some celebrity or somethin’.”

“He is sort of a public figure.” Mishima says.

“Huh?” Ryuji’s face squishes into itself. “What do you mean?”
“Don’t you ever watch the news?” Mishima asks.

“Only when I’m tryin’ to fall asleep.”

“Akechi Goro’s a pretty popular guy right now.” Mishima explains.

**Akechi:** *Morgana told me to tell you that Ryuji should be thanking me for indirectly introducing him to girls since he wouldn’t be able to meet them on his own.*

Akira puts his phone away and tries to keep a straight face.

“I’m going – to uh,” Akira pauses when he notices the fangirls’ attention on him. “Go home now.” He finishes while stepping back. “Sorry, I’ll ask him the next time I see him if he can stop by Shujin sometime, so you can meet him.” He makes a hasty escape, but the offer must have been good enough, because he isn’t followed.

Akechi’s sitting downstairs with Sojiro when Akira gets there.

“Have you really been here all day?” Akira asks, voice as dead as his childhood.

“No. I was at the bathhouse for a while and then I went out to pick up some groceries for Sakura-san so he didn’t have to close the café.”

“Are you me? Did we switch lives? Do I have to solve crime now?” Akira asks. Akechi laughs and twirls a strand of hair around his finger. And then – “Is that my shirt?”

“Sorry, I didn’t have a clean one on me. I’ve been out of the city until last night. I didn’t think you’d mind.”

Akira makes the mistake of acknowledging Sojiro, who has surpassed smug and ascended to ‘I’ve just changed the Wi-Fi password and will never tell you what it is.’

“Where’s Morgana?”

“He said he needed some air.” Akechi says. The words don’t even phase Sojiro, who has quickly adapted to them talking to Morgana like he’s human. Akira takes a seat and stares at Sojiro until he pours him a cup of coffee. Akechi continues, “I apologize for not responding to your messages. It wasn’t a planned event and I had to give all my attention to what I was doing.”

“It was only a few days.” Akira says like he wasn’t expecting a heap of bodies to show up on the news that morning. “What kind of work do you do that takes you out of the city?”

Akechi swirls a bit of creamer into his cup. “I’m afraid I can’t say much, but I received a lead on something I’ve been looking into. It wasn’t easy, but I got what I needed.” He grins at Akira like he just spilt someone’s dirty secret to the world.

Akira really doesn’t like this.

“Sounds like it was time well spent.” Sojiro comments.
“There’s still a towering pile of work I’ll have to do before anything comes of it, but this will help me along significantly.” Akechi says, bright-eyed and with too much energy to be an act. Whatever he was doing must have been for himself, not Shido and his conspiracy.

Akira smiles like he’s happy for him.

“Why’d you come here instead of going home last night? You were exhausted.” Akira says.

Akechi leans forward and moves the hair from his eyes. It’s getting longer than he usually keeps it. “To be honest, I really wanted to wake up to a good cup of coffee. Surviving on instant coffee had me on edge.”

Akira points at Sojiro. “I told you. Crippling coffee addiction. You did this.”

Sojiro’s still smirking.

“By the way,” Akechi drawls, “What took you so long to get back home today? I can’t imagine those girls were holding you up for that long.”

“Me n’ Ryuji broke a vending machine at school.”

Sojiro groans. “Should I be expecting a phone call?”

“Probably.” Akira says.

Akechi’s shoulders hike up in silent laughter.

Morgana’s still gone when Sojiro leaves, but Akechi’s still there – lounging on the couch like he’s just won the lottery and won’t have to lift a finger for the rest of his life.

“Are you worried about Morgana?” Akechi asks, because he’s apparently wiretapped Akira’s brain.

“He’s been going out a lot.” Akira admits. “He says he’s been checking on things in the metaverse.”

Akechi asks, “You don’t believe him?”

“It’s not that I don’t believe him – I think he isn’t telling me something.”

“That’s fair, isn’t it?” Akechi asks. “You don’t tell him everything.”

Akira knows he’s outwardly referring to not telling Morgana about his palace, but the statement drops like a slap. He means something more complicated than that.

“Is that how it works?” Akira asks, every cat shaped shadow toying with his hope that Morgana was back. “Is it always going to be give a little to get a little?”

Akechi joins him at the window with a sigh. He changes the subject. “I forgot to ask earlier, but how did you do on your exams? Did all of the studying pay off?”

“I did fine. Ann and Ryuji didn’t do so bad either. Life’s the only test I seem to be failing.” He adds
that as a joke, but neither of them laugh. He twirls an unfinished lockpick in his hand. “Ah, forget it.” He says, turning away.

Akechi stops him with a grip on his shoulder. “Akira.” He says. He’s uncomfortably close.

“What?” Akira asks, focusing on a spot over his ear.

It’s getting difficult to ignore the way Akechi looks at him.

The restraining grip on his shoulder relaxes into something soft enough to be called a caress, but he doesn’t break free.

The searchlights that promote Madarame’s palace flicker in the distance from the corner of his eye.

Akechi runs his hand a little lower, rests it there a moment, then pats his arm as he smiles amicably and pulls away. “You need to stop being so hard on yourself. You really have a terrible habit of letting your mind wander off into places it shouldn’t.”

Akira takes a deep breath.

“By the way,” Akechi continues, “I heard from Sakura-san that you brought Kitagawa-san to Leblanc?”

Akira turns back to the window, hoping the cool evening air will bring back the sense to his thoughts. “Yeah. He’s a living, breathing beanpole. I think he gets too caught up in painting and forgets to eat. I don’t think that Madarame guy is helping much, either.”

“Aha, so you’re letting him paint you, after all?”

“He doesn’t know what exactly he wants to paint yet. I think he’d be better of trying to paint Ann. If she’d let him.”

“I have a hard time imagining Ann-chan sitting still for an extended amount of time.” Akechi says as he sits on the bed, grabbing Akira’s laptop.

Akira immediately pries his grubby fingers off it and puts it on a shelf at the opposite end of the room. “Leave my laptop alone.”

“I tried to figure out your password while you were at school, but it seems like you finally took my advice on something.” Akechi says.

“Go home and stop invading my privacy.” Akira says.

“Have something on there you don’t want anyone to see?”

“I’m calling the cops.”

“Ah, please don’t make me work on my day off.”

Akira throws a book at him.
When Akira should already be asleep, Morgana creeps through the window with the excuse that he got lost exploring the neighborhood.

He’s not a good liar, but Akira doesn’t press him. Not yet.

He calls it a night after he finishes the lockpick intended for the door in Madarame’s shack.

The bed doesn’t feel right anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will have some of Madarame's Palace for those of you who've been waiting for more PT shenanigans. Yusuke's definitely the most difficult character I've written so far, if only because of his tendency to direct conversations off-kilter, but I think I'm starting getting the hang of writing him.

But thanks to everyone who assured me last chapter wasn't terrible, I was just in a mood where I hated everything, so it couldn't be helped, haha.

On to some other stuff, for those of you who don't use email notifications or have trouble receiving them (like me), I made a twitter account @ranoutofgravity where I'll be posting new chapter notifications/links and maybe more stuff after I get a little more comfortable with it. Also, check out my twitter website link if anyone's interested in supporting my writing in a way that ao3 is apparently picky about so I can't post here (ty informative twitter friend).

I feel like I should remind everyone that this story will be feature huge canon divergence, so uh, yeah. There will be some huge canon divergence!

Also, I was going to sneak Haru into this chapter, but it didn't work out. :(
“Is it just me, or is it kinda quiet in this place today?” Ryuji asks from the passenger seat of the Morgana-van. He leans over to Akira’s side to see if there’s somehow a difference.

“I was thinking the same thing. It’s like someone pressed the mute button down here.” Ann says from the back next to Akechi. “Honestly, I’d take the creepy voices over this. It feels…” She struggles to find a fitting word.

“Oppressive?” Akechi contributes. “In nature, silence is often an indicator of a nearby predator. Other animals more attuned to their surroundings flee or hide when they think something dangerous is approaching. Humans generally lack the ability to hear, smell, or predict when – let’s say a bear – is just around the corner – but we’ve become attuned to other things. Such as when the crickets, frogs, or birds all shut off like a switch.”

Ryuji swivels around to talk more comfortably, chin propped up by a hand. “You think there’s somethin’ around that’s scaring shadows then? I mean, if that’s even what was making the noise in the first place. We’ve still been beating them up around here, so it’s not like they’re gone.”

Akechi laughs, his hands waving away any assumptions. “I couldn’t say. I only know that silence like this makes us uncomfortable for a reason.”

“You think maybe we’re scarin’ the shadows?” Ryuji asks, beaming as he bounces in his seat and bangs on the wall of the van. “Hey Mona! Are we the reason it got all quiet down here?”

“Don’t hit the walls. That hurts and feels really weird.” Morgana says.

“Oops. Sorry.” Ryuji drapes an arm around the back of the seat. “But is that why?”

Morgana takes a moment before saying, “No, we’re nowhere near strong enough to scare anything away.”

“Aw, c’mon. We’re getting’ pretty good, right?” Ryuji looks to Ann for backup.

“We’re a good team, but the shadows have been getting stronger the further we go. The last shadow we ran into really got in some good hits.” Ann grimaces as she massages her arm. “How far down does this place go, anyway?” She asks.

Reluctantly, Morgana says, “I’m not sure. I know there’s a bottom, but I don’t know what’s down there or how long it’ll take to get there.”

“What about you?” Ryuji asks Akira, giving a friendly shove to make sure he’s paying attention. “Where do you think all the noise went?”

Akira glances at him before checking the rearview mirror, locking eyes with Akechi for a brief second that could pass for a lifetime. His grip tightens on the steering wheel.

“Dunno.” He says, pointedly looking at the tracks in front of him. He’s still being watched.

“Not even gonna guess?” Ryuji asks.
“Akira’s the type to overthink things until he forgets what the question was.” Akechi teases.

“Shut up.” Akira says, making a purposely sharp turn that sends Ann flying on top of Akechi.

“Whoa-oh-ho.” Ryuji leers over the seat. “Do you two need some alone time back there?”

“No one’s getting any alone time anywhere in here!” Morgana screeches and goes largely ignored.

“I’m not his type.” Ann picks herself back up and readjusts her suit. “And what was that turn all about? Jeez.”

“Sorry, thought I saw something.” Akira says a little too easily. Ann didn’t fall delicately. Akechi’s face in the mirror was the real treasure of the day. Maybe even the month. He wonders if he can install a dashcam and make it happen again.

“So, what is your type?” Ryuji asks Akechi out of what must be sheer boredom. There don’t seem to be any shadows on this floor. “If Ann ain’t it then, lemme guess – wait, you’re not into those crazy fangirls, are you? I swear, in the two minutes we were talkin’ to them I saw more pictures of you than my brain could handle. A lot of those pictures didn’t look very PG-13, man.”

Akira chokes on a laugh.


“Ah, I have some – overzealous fans of my work as a detective.” Akechi explains.

“Kinda sure it isn’t your detective work they’re into, dude.”

Akechi tries to go for the bashful look, but Akira accidentally catches his eye in the mirror again and the quirk to his lip becomes decidedly smug. Narcissistic jackass. He knows what he’s doing when he smiles for the cameras.

“Wait, wait, wait – when did this happen?” Ann asks.

“Just the other day. Did you know this guy cycles? His fans do. Y’know there are shorts out there that aren’t skin tight, right?”

Akira lets Morgana take over the wheel before he crashes into something.

“They’re compression shorts. And I only wear those for my serious workouts. I prefer to dress casually for my usual rides since I have the tendency to make several stops, even though they’re less than ideal for cycling.”

“Doesn’t matter, cuz those girls had a few pics that made it look like you were about to star in a softcore porno even when you still had all your clothes on. Photoshop is a helluva thing.” Ryuji shuts down like a computer attempting a system restore to get rid of a virus.

“I want to see!” Ann says.

“Why?” Ryuji asks, brows scrunched together as he continues trying to purge his memories.

Akechi clears his throat and tries to change the subject. “Can we please talk about something else before Akira suffocates from his own laughter and drives us into a train?”

“Akira hasn’t been driving for a while now.” Morgana reveals.
“I want to see.” Ann stage whispers in Ryuji’s ear. “I’ll tell you what Goro-kun’s type is.”

Unimpressed, Akechi raises a brow and lifts his chin. “I prefer the quiet type. A little shy is okay. Intelligent – isn’t afraid to speak their mind and can hold up their end of an argument. Has their own hobbies and doesn’t feel the need to involve themselves in every aspect of my life. And as far as looks go, I’m not sure I have a type so to speak, but I do think I generally prefer dark hair.”

“Wow.” Ann says after dull second with the same enthusiasm as a cashier getting the ‘No barcode? It must be free!’ line for the hundredth time that day. “Maybe you should just date Akira.”

Ryuji snickers, blissfully unaware of the torment Akira has suffered at the hands of the running joke that now seems to be a permanent fixture in his life.

“Akechi’s too high maintenance.” Akira rejects before Sojiro somehow finds them in the middle of Mementos to share his opinion.

“High maintenance?” Akechi asks through an amiable laugh, but Akira can see the glimmer of a challenge in his eye and the stiffness to his shoulders.

“Yeah, with you it’s always ‘Akira, make me coffee. Akira, make me food. Akira, clean your room. Akira, that burger is way too high in cholesterol and you’ve already had two. Akira, sleep on the couch so I can steal your bed and your only two pillows.’”

“In case you’ve forgotten, you work at a café at which I’m a frequent customer where I happen to order things. And forgive me for trying to get you to adopt a few healthy habits. And that last one – I was really tired.”

“I bet you’d steal blankets too.”

“I would not –”

“Oh, look – we found the stairs down.” Akira cuts the conversation off before it starts to get weirder than it already was. Something uneasy stirs in his chest as he hops out onto the tracks, his foot sinking into one of the necrotic black veins that plague the upper levels of Mementos. It disintegrates under his boot, a wind he can’t feel carrying the flakes down into the same depths he intends to follow.

He kneels, pinching a bit of the remnants between gloved fingers. It crumbles like ash.

Akechi hops out of the van behind him, the clack of his heel against the floor like a gunshot in an empty room, echoing across the tunnels and through Akira’s head. A dull throb settles behind his temple.

He rises, brushing his hands off, but he’s already captured Akechi’s attention. Has probably never lost it since they all met up after school.

“That’s strange.” Akechi says, eyes tracing the vein Akira stepped on to where it spindles out from a crack in the wall. “Now that I think about it…” He trails off while observing the area. “Ah, never mind, we should continue down, shouldn’t we?” He asks, cheeky smile in place as he gestures Akira to continue ahead of him with a ridiculous bow and flourish.

Akira pretends to notice neither the wink lobbed at him after he takes the lead nor the lingering hand on his shoulder that slides down behind his neck before pulling away. Pretends there isn’t a strain on his heart like too much tension on a rusty piano wire, ready to snap and either fall flat to the ground or lash out and take someone down with him.
Pretends he doesn’t purposely match his stride to Akechi’s as they walk down the broken escalator, or that Ann isn’t watching them with the same attention she usually reserves for her front door when something she ordered online is supposed to arrive that day.

The next floor down in Mementos is one Akira recognizes. An open corridor with a gate at the end that was very much supposed to be closed until the Phantom Thieves spread their name a little bit further.

He walks unhindered to the open gate, its hinges rusted and broken as it hangs crookedly, black veins tangled around it like vines in a neglected garden, the occasional flicker of sanguine red pulsating within.

“We should wrap it up for today.” Morgana says before Akira gets the chance to peek at the other side. “I can sense stronger enemies than we’re used to further down, so we should come back when we’re at full strength and maybe with some better gear.”

Akira’s pulled back by an arm hooked around his neck.

Ryuji says, “We’ll make a trip to the airsoft shop soon and see if we can afford anything. I think we should probably be able to pick up a few new things with what we’ve found in here today.”

Akira internally mourns the impending loss of money he doesn’t even have yet.

“Could I request a new gun?” Akechi asks, gesturing at the one holstered at his hip with a sheepish grin. “This one is, ah, less than ideal for those of us who are left-handed.”

“You’ve been doin’ alright so far. You can deal with it a bit longer.” Ryuji dismisses. Ann elbows him in the gut, leaving Akira with the task of trying to keep him on his feet or find himself trapped under a pile of Ryuji.

“I’m sure we can afford to get everyone something new, right Joker?” Ann asks, but Akira knows better than to think it’s anything other than a demand.

“…Sure.” Akira says, still struggling to stand with the dead weight of Ryuji clutching his back. “But I might need some donations from anyone with a job to cover everything.”

“Sorry! I just spent all of my money on some new summer clothes.” Ann clasps her hands together and half bows in apology.

“I’m afraid my rent is coming up soon and I spent a bit more than necessary this month already – I might be able to contribute after my next paycheck?” Akechi offers while trading sly glances with Ann. They’re in on it together. Akira’s not sure what they’re gaining from keeping him in poverty, but he’ll find out and make sure they regret it.

“Sorry, man.” Ryuji hoists himself back up. “I’d help out, but I just bought some new shoes.”

“You’re all getting water guns and foam armor.” Akira deadpans before shaking Ryuji off and heading back up the way they came.

Morgana’s the last to follow, a worried frown on his face as he glances at the gate that shouldn’t be open.
Akira rummages through his wallet after foisting the loot from Mementos off on Iwai. Definitely not enough money for what everyone wants.

Iwai sits up straight, gaze locked somewhere behind Akira as he cracks his knuckles on the counter.

“Akira, what do you think about this one?” Akechi asks, carrying over a detailed replica prop of the type of sci-fi gun he seems to favor.

Akira checks the price tag and nearly swallows his tongue mid-seizure. He gently appropriates it from Akechi and carefully sets it back on the shelf, ignoring the comical fall of Akechi’s face.

Iwai’s smirking when Akira turns back to him. “Interesting friend you have there.” He remarks. Akira grabs his wallet and spares Akechi a look. He’s already examining another thing Akira wouldn’t be able to afford without a loan and a human sacrifice.

“We’re not buying anything today.” Akira says loud enough for Akechi to hear. He ignores the disappointed sigh behind him. “Unless someone wants to use their own money.” He elaborates, receiving only a click of the tongue.

“Well, if you’re not plannin’ on buying anything – scram, kids.” Iwai says, kicking back in his seat.

Akechi levels a sharp look at the shop owner, but Akira’s already waving as he makes for the door. “Thanks again, Iwai.” He calls out, dragging Akechi along by his tie before he says something that gets Akira banned from coming back.

“He could stand to be a little less rude.” Akechi says when they’re outside, tucking his tie back into his coat.

“That just how he talks. He’s a good guy.”

“His business seems to be a bit on the shady side, too.”

“If I come back here one day and find it closed down – we’re no longer friends.”

Akechi takes a step back and laughs. “I’ll keep my nose out of this one. Just for you.” He smiles with his eyes.

Akira wishes he knew what to say, but the bank of words he usually pulls his sentences from seems to diminish the more time he spends with Akechi, leaving question marks and empty spaces in their place.

It was never supposed to be this confusing. He was never supposed to get this close. Akira’s an idiot for letting it happen.

Something blue flickers just out of sight and Akira scans the bend of the alley that leads to the main street.

“What is it?” Akechi asks, scouting the area.


Akechi’s skeptical but redirects his focus to Akira. “If this was the only stop you needed to make, I was hoping we could chat while Morgana is still with Sakamoto?” As if that wasn’t suspicious enough. Ryuji basically snatched Morgana out of Akira’s bag as they were leaving.
And Akechi asking if they could talk alone always translated into 'your personal issues are annoying me, and I must yet again try to fix them because I need to counterbalance my evildoing with a hero complex’ talks.

“I was planning on picking up a shift at work.” Akira evades. He wasn’t and is in fact tired nearly to the point of exhaustion, but if it means avoiding one of Akechi’s heart to hearts – he’ll do it.

“You’re not a good liar when you’re tired.”

Damnit. If Mementos wanted to get a head start and try to swallow up the real world right now, Akira would appreciate the backup.

“Fine. I’m going to the arcade.” Akira says, walking past the hole in reality where he used to be able to find the Velvet Room.

“The arcade?” Akechi prompts, keeping in step with him. “I don’t think I’ve ever gone to one before.”

Akira doesn’t bother pointing out that he wasn’t invited, because Akechi will just activate deprived childhood mode and Akira isn’t in the mood to deal with that. At least going to the arcade will give Akira some extra time to figure out how to ditch Akechi before getting duped into going somewhere he can’t escape.

Akechi’s never been the type to blend in well to his surroundings, always doing his best to draw attention to himself from the way he walks to how he talks, and Akihabara is no different – except the people in the arcade are too busy trying to murder each other in-game to care about some pretty boy who’s on TV sometimes.

Although Akira is paying attention to the way his face twitches when the stage’s performance results on the zombie shooter they were playing pops up.

“Why is your score so much higher than mine?” Akechi asks, voice flat in a failed attempt to sound indifferent.

And the answer is because Akira has wasted dozens of hours playing this game with Ryuji, Futaba, and Makoto already, but instead he says, “Probably because you suck.”

Akechi’s mouth shuts closed with a neat click as he glares first at Akira and then at the machine in front of them. It groans with the voices of the undead.

“We’re playing again.” Akechi declares, preemptively aiming the plastic gun while waiting for the game to start back up.

The next results screen isn’t much different and Akechi looks like he took a mouthful of wasabi when he was expecting avocado. The next stage of the game, Akira probably pays more attention to Akechi than the screen.

“Fuck.” Akechi spits out when his pitiful results pop up again, looking ready to break the gun in half on his knee and storm out. He runs a hand through his hair and huffs through clenched teeth before noticing Akira pursing his lips together in a suppressed grin. A flush of red creeps up his neck as he tugs at the collar of his shirt. “Shut up.”
Akira coughs into his hand to keep the laughter in. He didn’t know Akechi had that word in his vocabulary.

“One more time.” Akechi insists. “I simply didn’t have the proper motivation to do well in the previous rounds.”

Akira decides not to enlighten him with the fact that the game would keep going until they either died or reached the end. “Sure, one more is fine.”

Akechi rolls his shoulders back and says, “Let’s make a bet on this one. Whoever loses has to do something for the winner.”

“Okay. You have to give me shared custody of your Roomba.” Akira says, refraining from patronizing him with the fact that the game was co-op and not player vs player and that he’s overreacting. He’s already been planning on stealing the Roomba when Akechi’s sleeping, might as well use this opportunity to make it an official thing. He doesn’t even bother asking Akechi what he wants, so sure he is of victory.

He regretfully accepts he’s been bamboozled a few minutes into the next round when Akechi steps on his foot and nabs the gun out of his hands while he continues shooting at the screen with his left. When Akira tries to get it back, he’s met with a glove to his face.

“You’re cheating.” Is Akira’s muffled complaint, trying to kick Akechi’s shooting arm while his face is molested by black leather.

“I don’t recall establishing any rules.” Akechi says with minor difficulty when Akira catches a wisp of his hair and pulls. “Let go of my hair, you sore loser.”

“I’m the sore loser?” Akira laughs, liberating himself from the five-fingered parasite attached to his face. He spots his gun tucked into Akechi’s coat and lunges for it, but Akechi’s already dancing out of the way as best he can within the limited range of the cables. “I changed my mind, I don’t want the Roomba anymore. I’m going to make you chop your own hair off with a butter knife.” He grabs the cords to both guns and yanks.

Akechi stumbles forward, managing to keep the grip on his gun and only grinning when Akira finally repossesses his own. Akira sees why when he turns back to the game.

YOU ARE DEAD flashes in bloody red streaks on his side of the screen, prompting him to put in another coin to continue. A coin that he doesn’t have because the cheater offered to get the change when they walked in.

He stares in abject disbelief for a horrifying moment before the turncoat’s jovial chuckle slaps the image of his impending servitude to the front of his mind.

Akechi’s health wasn’t looking so good – and if they both lose, no one wins, right?

That’s his logic as he dashes behind Backstabber Akechi and slaps a hand over the sham of a detective’s eyes and redirects his aim anywhere that isn’t a render of a decomposing human that must have been a roided pro wrestler with a goth clown motif when it was still alive. Akechi locks up for the fraction of a second before smashing the back of his head against Akira’s nose.

“Just – accept that you lost.” He grinds out, fighting Akira for control over the gun while taking a few hits in game.

“I think you broke my nose.” Akira tries to fake him out with a nasally voice.
“Hah. Like I’d fall for that.” Akechi manages to land a single headshot on the zombie boss, but it’s not dead yet. Akechi almost is, though.

“Confess that you’re a cheater and a sore loser.” Akira covers the sensor to stop the game from registering where Akechi’s aiming, but he quickly gets hip checked out of the way.

That’s about when he notices their small audience. An employee leaning on a mop pops his gum and raises a brow.

Victory music plays from the machine.

“How unfortunate. It looks like you’re not able to see how well you did if you’re dead. I guess that means I win by default!” Akechi smiles the same way someone who just spent five minutes looking for their glasses would after realizing they were on their face the whole time. In other words – infuriating. He could at least have the courtesy of looking like an asshole after that stunt.

“I am never playing video games with you ever again.”

“That’s disappointing. I’m beginning to understand why they’re so popular.”

“You can come back here anytime. By yourself.” He can terrorize some kids or something. Akira picks up his abandoned gun on the floor and puts it away properly with an unnecessary amount of force. Akechi laughs into his hand. “And you cheated, so the bet’s off.”

“We didn’t set any rules. It’s hardly my fault you didn’t take the necessary precautions.” He turns to the employee in front of the small group of people that were pretending not to listen. “Wouldn’t you agree that I won this round?”

Another pop of gum. “Sure looks like it. You shouldn’t be such a poor sport, dude.” Mop man says to Akira who suddenly finds himself under the scrutiny of five pairs of eyes.

And that’s how he finds himself at Akechi’s apartment, awaiting his doom.

“Do you have any food?” Akira asks, slamming the front door after following Akechi in. He’s not a thirteen-year-old girl, and therefore not pouting. Possibly sulking, certainly glowering, but not pouting as Akechi unjustly insinuated on the way over.

“Ah, no. Sorry. I’ve been eating out recently.” Akechi says, tossing his gloves on the counter and unbuttoning his jacket.

Akira goes straight to the fridge to verify, finding an untouched pack of vanilla yogurt and some shredded cheese. He slams the fridge door shut, satisfied with the rattle of empty shelves inside.

“So, what do you want this time?” Akira asks, hoping he sounds bored and not like he’s about to fake his own death again to spare himself whatever embarrassment Akechi plans on putting him through. Last time he lost a bet he only had to clean his room, but that was back when Akechi was far less familiar with him.

Akechi pretends to think about it. “I’ve been weighing the pros and cons of three things I could have you do.”

“Oh, great.” Akira says to an empty cupboard that used to have rice in it.

“I’m particularly fond of one idea, but I think I might eventually be able to convince you into doing that without coercing you.”
Akira peeks up from a drawer that used to have cookies in it and blinks a few times, wondering if Akechi has any idea how that sounds or if Akira’s just a pervert. Given the fact that he’s leaning against the counter with a far too innocent smile on his face while making direct eye contact, Akira suspects that he knows exactly how it sounds and that Akira has been a very, very bad influence.

He misses the days when Akechi didn’t know how to react to innuendo, let alone try to use it.

Akira resigns his mission of finding food and gets a cup of water. He could use it to splash Akechi’s face if he found himself needing to make a quick getaway.

“Sooo – what are the other two things?” Akira asks when Akechi seems to be getting his daily dose of vitamin staring-at-Akira.

Akechi toys with a strand of hair and makes a show of deliberating whether to tell him. “Well, I’d like it if you’d – hm, no. Not that one. Maybe I should have you – – I hope you’re planning on keeping that water in the glass.” He says, frowning at the cup in Akira’s hands that was absolutely not aimed in his direction whatsoever.

Akira innocuously takes a sip.

Akechi’s eyes flicker between Akira and the cup with suspicion for a spell before stepping back as if struck by an epiphany.

“You know – Mementos did wear me out quite a bit today, especially since you neglected to prepare yourself to be our backup.”

“Wow, sorry I didn’t have money to buy ammo. You could have given me some of yours – you use the same kind.”

Akechi ignores him and continues. “I have some knots in my back and shoulders that could really use a massage.”

Akira takes a longer sip of water.

“Normal or erotic?” He asks. Akechi gets slammed with the cosmic pause button as he stands there with his usual little smile and widened eyes, arm frozen midair from gesturing. Akira prepares to splash water on his face. “…that was a joke.”

Akechi’s arm swings down as if someone hit play, laughing like he’d never had an unclean thought in his life.

“Of course it was. I was simply concerned with how naturally you said it. If you’ve taken up any questionable work that I should know about –”

“Okay. You want a massage, right? Lie down so we can get this over with.” He can do massages. Akira learned how to give massages from the very best.

“Oh, I have to lie down? – uh, one moment.” He says, walking to the couch while running his thumb between the noose of his tie before pulling it off altogether. “Actually, maybe instead of a massage –”

“Just get on the couch.”

“Yessir.” Akechi says, shuts up, and sits down.
Akira makes a note to order him around more often. It’s terribly refreshing.

He’s forced to stare pointedly at Akechi before he actually lies down, but now it’s his turn to hesitate as the exceptional level of bizarre he’s found himself in flashes neon lights warning him that this was probably not the best idea. He’s given massages before, mostly to Ann and Ryuji after a day at the gym, but they’re naturally tactile people and don’t know the meaning of the word awkward with Akira.

But Akechi, in a word, is deliberate. Touch is a tool he needs to think about before using. Akira doubts he’s ever let anyone get this close to him, friend or otherwise.

And –

Akira crops and deletes the memories he has of Akechi from his past life. He really should get this over with. He lost a bet, cheating or no cheating. He won’t let Akechi lord it over him for the rest of his life.

He swings a leg over Akechi, effectively straddling him, because if he’s going to do this he might as well make it as awkward for both of them as humanly possible – Which is apparently unnecessary because the guy is already strung like a tight rope, every muscle tensed up as if stuck in a perpetual moment of fight or flight.

“Relax.” Akira says, somewhat impressed when Akechi takes a deep breath and manually overrides his nerves, silently sinking down into the couch.

Akira starts at his lower back and works up, unsurprised to find most of tension in his shoulders and neck, giving those areas some extra attention before moving on. Akechi closes his eyes and keeps his breathing slow and even – and after another minute, Akira thinks he might be ready for the real massage now that his defenses are lowered.

The response is immediate.

“Is this too much pressure?” Akira asks while using enough force to reshape cast iron.

Akechi’s breathing stutters a bit before he catches himself. “No. It’s-fine.” He lies through a wince, just as Akira hoped.

He’s starting to understand the whole revenge gimmick.

Akira proceeds to use everything he’s ever learned from Kawakami’s maid services. If he adds some extra pizzazz to the experience with what he picked up from Justine and Caroline – well, Akechi deserves it.

“Done.” Akira unceremoniously announces after dissolving every bit of muscle in his victim’s back. He hops off the couch and looks around for his bag so he can get out of there and find food. Akechi doesn’t move. “Did you see where I put my stuff?”

“Wait.” Akechi rasps with the voice of eighty-year-old smoker, still molded to the couch exactly how Akira left him. “I’ll order something to eat if you want to stay.”

“Why don’t you use that money to buy new weapons for Mementos, instead?”

“- Not part of my budget.” Akechi’s arm flops uselessly as he tries to push himself up.

Akira spots his bag in the kitchen. “Enjoy your food.” He says, hiking the bag over his shoulder.
“Let me go with you if you’re going to Leblanc. I wouldn’t mind some of Sakura-san’s curry.” Akechi says. Akira makes it to the door, suspicious when he doesn’t hear his tagalong falling off the couch in attempt to follow. What was once a sad excuse of a human being is now a sad lump of boneless flesh affixed to the couch. “I can’t feel anything.” It groans.

“Say you’ll never cheat at video games ever again.”

“I’ll never cheat at video games again.” He complies. Akira helps him sit up. His head lolls back on the couch. “I think the feeling is starting to come back to my arms.”

“Good for you. Now order me some food or I’ll leave you here with your front door open and tell a group of thugs about the safe full of cash you have under your bed.”

“I wish I had a safe full of cash.” Akechi laments.

“You could probably have one if you started cooking your own food.”

“I’ll pay you to cook for me?”

“¥5000 per meal.”

“I think I’d rather deal with the thugs.” Akechi says, pulling his phone out from where the couch attempted to consume it.

Akira stays against his better judgement, fully expecting Akechi to try and bring up some ‘real talk’, but it never comes. He knows it’s only a matter of time. There’s a Featherman marathon on TV when he presses the power button – unlikely to be a coincidence.

After a half-hearted attempt to read the second volume of The Divine Comedy, Akechi dozes off until the food arrives, although Akira is willing to bet he was pretending to be asleep while really watching Featherman. His head was angled just right to prevent Akira from seeing his eyes.

Akira almost doesn’t go back to Leblanc, but it hits him when he gets a message from Ann later that night when Akechi is legitimately sleeping, head uncomfortably angled against the arm of the couch, mouth unattractively hanging open, and cold feet pressed against Akira’s thigh.

He’s getting off track. No, he’s been off track. He’s been subconsciously going out of his way to stay off track.

And for what?

He stands up and watches as Akechi curls his legs up closer to his chest, the loss of his foot warmer unpleasant even in a state of unconsciousness.

Akira doesn’t know. Can’t see how this could possibly end well for either of them. Doesn’t know why he was brought back this far when all he needed was days, weeks, months at the most to prevent what happened. But maybe he’s wrong. Maybe the key to it all is right back where he started.

Here, where Akechi is alive.

Maybe he’s missing something.

He snaps out of his thoughts to find his hand resting over his heart, attempting to soothe an ache that can’t be reached from this dimension.
He drapes a blanket over Akechi and lowers the volume of the TV before leaving, thankful that Akechi’s door can be locked from the inside but closed from the outside so he didn’t have to wake him up. He messages Ann with a request on the way back to his attic.

Sleep doesn’t come easily that night. Morgana notices.

“You can talk to me if you want to.” He says, but only succeeds in making Akira feel guiltier.

“I don’t know what to say.” Akira admits.

“Say whatever you’re thinking.”

Akira captures Morgana’s tail and waits for a retaliation that doesn’t come. He runs his tongue across the back of his teeth and tries to listen for any sort of ambience from out the window that might distract him.

Can’t even hear a bug out there.

“What did Ryuji abduct you for?” Akira asks. Morgana’s tail moves under his hand.

“You should already know.” Morgana says.

“About the targets in Mementos, then? So, what’d you have to say about it?”

“I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to do something.”

Akira hums under his breath. “And what about going back into palaces?”

Morgana makes a conflicted noise, ears flat against his head. “I wouldn’t mind going into more palaces either.” He confesses.

“…but Akechi?” Akira sums up for him.

Morgana sighs. “Maybe we can convince him?”

“Maybe.” Akira’s still trying to figure that one out without dragging himself down. “By the way, did you notice anything weird about Mementos today?”

Morgana’s tail struggles against his grip. “Something’s happening down there.”

“You mean something in the real world that’s affecting the metaverse?”

“I don’t know.” Are Morgana’s worrying last words before he orders Akira to sleep.

Akira wishes it were that easy.

Ann sighs from his left.

Akira scrolls down the page he’s reading on his phone.

Ann sighs louder from his left.

Akira reads some more.
Ann nabs the phone out of his hand.

“Hey – we talked about this.” Akira says.

“I’m bored.” She says, handing his phone back now that she’s managed to get his attention. “How did I let you talk me into this?”

“Because I promised to spill the embarrassing details of my failed relationship?”

“Oh, right.”

“Yeah.”

A pause.

“Only if you’re comfortable with it, though!” She suddenly back peddles. Akira suspects Akechi might have suggested this change to her tactics of getting information out of Akira.

“It’s fine. I don’t mind.” It was hard to talk about before because of the simple fact that he and Makoto shared the same group of friends. “But not right now.”

Ann sighs and slumps over against him, trying not to move too much so that Morgana, asleep on her lap, didn’t wake up. “How much longer do we have to stay here?”

Akira cranes his head over to where Yusuke’s enraptured by his painting. “Probably not too long.” He says, spinning a lockpick between his fingers. “Hey, Yusuke. Is it alright if I run to the bathroom for a minute?” Yusuke doesn’t acknowledge his existence, so Akira takes it as a yes. “Be right back.” He says to Ann. She droops in her seat like a gummy bear left out in the heat.

The lock to the counterfeiting room poses no challenge, but there’s no satisfaction getting through. Just an empty sort of anger as he browses through shelves of canvases while taking a video of everything with his phone.

“Kurusu-san, this room – is – not – the…” Yusuke steps into the room in a daze, stumbling over his words. Ann follows in behind him with Morgana in her arms, unsure of what she’s walked into. Akira will make sure to apologize to her later, but he couldn’t put this off for much longer and he needed her to see first-hand what was happening. Yusuke grabs a partially finished painting. “What? What is this? Sayuri?”

“Yusuke –” He begins to say, but the sound of another door opening stops him. Madarame coming back was a necessary part of his plan, but it doesn’t stop the doubt from winding through his ribs and strangling the air from his lungs.

This could backfire so easily because of Akechi.

His plan is rushed, half-baked at best, and relies too much on optimistic assumptions and – he doesn’t care. This needs to happen. He’s been getting too complacent.

He hears footsteps. Yusuke spins to the door he’s never once seen open in all his years of living here - trembling and lost, counterfeit still in hand.

And then –

Gold.

As far as the eye can see.
Chapter End Notes

This was going to mainly be about Madarame's Palace, but as you can see stalker Akechi took over the chapter and left me with no plot advancement. Also, I need to spend a day working on some terrible puns and ridiculous metaphors/similes because they've been eluding me recently, darnit.
Akira’s plans have a running tendency to backfire in his face with much the same predictability as pouring oil on a sizzling hot frying pan.

Try to be a good person and help someone? Get arrested.

Work with someone he knows is planning to murder him? Get arrested again, tortured, and only almost murdered. He technically won that skirmish, but he’s never been able to look at a needle the same way. Or retain any of the dwindling respect for the police that still may have lingered after his first arrest. Or –

Whatever, the fact is that he’s used to bad things happening to the point where he now openly anticipated the inevitability of his own self-manufactured destruction. He couldn’t even travel back in time without his previously-deceased attempted-murderer affixing himself to him like a charismatic tick with the ever-present threat of releasing some debilitating disease he has quietly tucked away for whenever Akira starts to rebel a little too loud.

Time travel was supposed to be easy-mode. He knows the literally damned future. He’s the closest thing to being clairvoyant without being psychic – and yet –

Maybe fearing the monster in the closet was always safer than knowing what’s really in there.

Maybe the heedless courage born from ignorance is what kept Akira alive all this time. That or sheer dumb luck – and it’s evident by his current situation that he now has less of that than Mishima does of a chance of ever getting a girlfriend.

He can’t help anyone with how he is right now, can he?

Ann’s hand shoots out from behind an oversized painting leaning against the wall and drags him behind it with her and Morgana as he rounds a corner. Reflex is the only reason Akira manages to latch onto Yusuke before he hauls ass down the corridor and further into Madarame’s Palace with three giant security shadows lumbering after him with the zeal of a hungry dog locked onto the scent of the last steak in the world.

It’s a full minute after the shadows are well on their way before Ann lets out a haggard breath and hisses at Morgana. “What the hell is going on?”

“How am I supposed to know?” Morgana doesn’t quite hiss back. Only because it’s Ann. “Weren’t you the one that brought us in?”

“No! I didn’t even know there was a palace here! This is Madarame’s Palace, right? I mean, I’ve heard a few things about him, but –” She glances at Yusuke. “But what I mean is there’s no way it could have been me. And Akira doesn’t have the app so it couldn’t have been him either, right?” She asks, looking at Akira for confirmation.

Akira tries to even his breathing before answering. “Yeah, I still don’t have it –” He pulls his phone out of his pocket to find it still recording a video. He ends it and hands it over to her to clear any suspicion.
“Well, it couldn’t have been Kitagawa-kun.” Ann says uncertainly, giving his phone back after a brief glance.

Yusuke’s doubled over by Akira, still catching his breath while probably trying to velcro a few pieces of his sanity back together. “What is this place?” He asks after failing to reach his own conclusion. “What were those things? What are those clothes? What is that?” He asks, pointing as he looks between Ann and Morgana.

Akira cuts off the Q&A session before they get spotted again. “We should find a saferoom if we’re going to talk about this.”

“And we need to call Goro-kun and Ryuji for backup if we’re going to get out of here.” Ann says before finding out the hard way that inter-dimensional phone calls are a no-go.

“We might be able to get a message out from a saferoom if we’re lucky. The connection to the real world is strongest there, but we should prepare ourselves to find the way out on our own.” Morgana peeks around the edge of the painting. “I didn’t see a saferoom while we were running, so our best bet is to keep moving forward for now. We should go slow to avoid being seen – we’re not prepared for fighting our way out without our gear and our heavy hitters.”

Akira plugs up the well of bitterness that floods his chest at that comment and maneuvers Yusuke out from behind the painting before he dwells on it for too long. “Yusuke, we’ll try to explain everything when we’re somewhere safe.” He cranes his head back towards Ann and Morgana. “I can’t help you fight, but I’m still the best at sneaking around. I’ll scout ahead and let you know when it’s clear to follow. You two take care of Yusuke.”

“Okay, we’ll be counting on you!” Ann says, relieved the burden of taking the lead wasn’t on her shoulders. At the very least, her faith in Akira not getting himself killed is reassuring.

Morgana, on the other hand, seems to be conflicted but allows Akira to go ahead with a nod.

“Wait – Please, tell me one thing for now.” Yusuke says, grabbing Akira’s shoulder as he turns to leave. He searches Akira’s face with a pained grimace. “Where are we? Those creatures… before we ran, they were talking about Madarame-sensei. They called him their Lord?”

It’s incredible how quickly Akira was able to forget how intense Yusuke can get when emotional. The lines under his eyes and the disarray of his hair are stark contrasts to his usual kept appearance, giving him an air of desperation Akira hasn’t associated with him since – well, since Madarame.

Akira didn’t intend to drag him into the metaverse this way, not again.

“We’re inside of your teacher’s heart.” Morgana saves him from explaining.

Yusuke releases Akira. “Inside of his heart? I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

“This world – It’s a reflection of your teacher’s true nature. It’s how he really sees himself.” Ann tries her hand.

“This vile place?” He steps back to take better stock of their surroundings. Gilded frames imprisoning portraits of former ‘students’ dot the gold-plated walls between the gaudy décor that only emphasize the garishness of it all. “Don’t be ridiculous – Sensei is nothing like this.” He turns to Akira as if for support.

Akira holds his gaze. “I’m sorry you had to find out this way, but it’s true. You know it’s true.”
Yusuke flinches and clenches his jaw as he directs his stare to the glistening silver tile under their feet. “Why were you in that room?” Yusuke asks, voice heavy with long denied grief, still unconvinced.

Akira hears the rushed clack of heels echo from the area they escaped. “I’ll tell you everything as soon as we find a place to rest.”

Morgana was right – they find a saferoom after a few narrow areas filled with shadows on high alert. And if Yusuke was still having any doubts about Madarame, they were hopefully thrown in the trash as soon as they came upon a statue of the man leering down at them with a glinting, golden smile.

“Right.” Ann says after wheeling herself across the room on a chair, kicking herself in a circle. She tries her phone again. “I’m kinda getting a signal now. Barely. I’ll spam the group chat and hope something gets through.”

Akira checks his phone and watches the single bar of cellular connection flicker, die, and resurrect itself only to be immediately murdered. He hopes that all attempts of contact fail, if only to have a few more hours of Akechi not finding out what happened.

Not that Akira knows what happened, but it doesn’t take much to figure out it’s his fault.

“And I think it’s time we caught the new guy up on what’s going on.” Morgana says, hopping on the table in the middle of the room.

Akira takes a seat on the couch in the far back of the room and shoves his paranoia to the back of his head before the others catch on. “I’m sorry. If I didn’t go into that room, this probably wouldn’t have happened.” He says, watching Yusuke stall at the door before following him to the back with long strides and an impassive face. “I really am sorry about this – I should have talked to you about Madarame, but I didn’t think you’d listen without proof. You… really seem to idolize him.”

Yusuke crosses his arms, tapping long fingers against his sleeve as he tries to wrangle a cohesive thought into words. “The room you were in… all of those Sayuri paintings – what was that?”

“You didn’t see it, did you?” Akira asks.

“See what?”

Akira opens the video on his phone, hands it to Yusuke, and waits for the sharp intake of air.

“It’s – is that the real Sayuri? How is that possible? It was stolen from Madarame-sensei years ago.”

“It might be better to ask Madarame himself. He’s bound to be around here somewhere.” The chatty version, that is.

“Akira, why didn’t you tell us what you were planning?” Ann asks when Yusuke goes quiet. “We would have helped you.”

Akira doesn’t know how to answer that.

“I’m sorry.” He says, running his hand up and down his arm to battle the sudden itch of guilt crawling across his skin.

“Oh.” Ann says in mute surprise after a tense moment. “One of my messages went through?”

Akira honestly hadn’t expected it to work and judging by the look on Ann’s face, she hadn’t either.
“Did you tell them where we are?” Morgana asks.

“Yep! Though I doubt I’ll be getting any of their messages back. If they really did get it – let’s just hope they take it seriously.”

That shouldn’t be an issue. Ryuji’s been dying for an excuse to dive back into palaces and Akechi takes everything seriously.

“I’m going to take a quick peek around to figure out which way we’ll need to go.” Morgana says. “And if Akechi and Ryuji really do come, we should try and meet them halfway – the enemies here are strong and we’re used to fighting in larger groups.”

“That’s a good idea. If something happened to them while they were looking for us –” Ann shakes her head. “I’m sure they’ll be fine, but the faster we get out of here the better. And Goro-kun’s smart, so he should be able to figure out the keywords to get in here, right?”

“I’d be surprised if he didn’t already know.” Akira says under his breath. He clears his throat after Yusuke throws him an inquisitive look. “Morgana, do you need any help out there?”

“Don’t worry about me! I’m not going far. I just need to get a good sense of where we’re at and I’ll be back soon.”

They find themselves doubling back the way they came once Yusuke is relatively satisfied with the answers provided to him, eventually passing the forgery he dropped when they were first ambushed. A grimace of pain contorts his face as they sneak around the shadow hovering over it, but there is no spoken consideration or effort to retrieve it.

There’s a suspicious lack of shadows the further they travel, and Akira has the misfortune of finding out why after nearly breaking his shoulder while heaving open and stumbling through a set of colossal, glittering double doors.

“Akira, watch out! Dammit!” Ryuji hollers after Akira squeezes through the gap to immediately be swooped up into the air. Morgana grabs his foot in what Akira thinks must be an attempt to keep him grounded, but Morgana seems to have forgotten he weighs less than a jug of milk and only succeeds in obtaining a free flight across the room à la Koppa Tengu.

“What were you saying about being the best at sneaking?” Morgana screeches from where his claws are sinking into Akira’s calves, his tail flailing like a propeller.

Akira manages to free an arm from where it was trapped at his side and punches the winged beast in its face to little avail other than some unnecessary turbulence that drops them down a bit. “Do you see the size of those doors?” Akira calls back down. He could have been invisible and anything still would have been able to cobble together that something was responsible for pushing the doors of solid fucking gold open.

Akira catches a handful of gray feathers and yanks, the shadow holding him hostage howling as it spirals down close enough to the ground that Morgana’s tail almost becomes a bittersweet memory as Ann tries to incinerate a hammer wielding shadow that must have gotten lost on its way to an audition for Silent Hill before the series got axed.
“Fire’s no good!” Ann shouts as she rendezvouses with Ryuji. “And I don’t have any weapons! Akira, Morgana! Are you two alright?”

“Just – Peachy!” Akira says through his teeth as he struggles with his captor. He shakes his leg to prompt Morgana to jump down while they were still low. “Don’t worry about me – watch out for Yusuke!” He points him out, weaving through the chaos in the room like it was a busy grocery store rather than a warzone with at least ten shadows zipping about.

“On it!” Morgana shouts as he uses one of the tacky banners hanging from the ceiling to swing over to Yusuke in perfect time to kick a Jack Frost in the face before it gets the jump on him.

“Hey, Joker!” Ryuji calls up after swinging his bat in a large arc at Pyramid Head’s PG-13 cousin and comically missing as he loses his balance and stumbles past it into a leaf wielding shadow who was attempting to hide behind a pillar.

Akira’s a little busy playing tug-o-war with the shadow’s mask four meters in the air, but he figures he can indulge his friend since he got them all into this mess. “What?” He shouts down.

“Those things are weak to bless attacks! Crow was takin’ a bunch of ‘em outta the air earlier!” Ryuji shouts back up after kicking his tiny new friend across the room like a field goal.

“How is that supposed to help me? And where is Crow?”

“I dunno! He got swarmed earlier while I got stuck with this thing!” He ducks the hammer swung at his head and scampers backwards, hands running over his face to make sure it was still there. “And I – well I figured I should let you know, just in case! Maybe saying a prayer would help?”

Akira pauses at that and can almost swear the Koppa Tengu trying to kidnap him does too. “Am I dying?” He takes a moment to try and think if he knows any prayers anyways. He doesn’t.

“Well, you’re not lookin’ great!” Ryuji answers. And as much as Akira loves his friend, Ryuji could choose his words a little better given the situation. “Hey, it’s just an idea – since, y’know, prayers bless things? Sorry! I’d try and help, but I don’t think I could zap it without hurting you too. And I’m –” He rolls out of the way of a rampaged charge. “ – A little busy! Persona!”

He loses sight of Ryuji as his new and unreliable method of transportation flies them into a banner after Akira elbows the thing in the jugular and tries stabbing the arm tied around his waist with a lockpick, deciding his craftsmanship must need some work after watching the thin piece of scrap metal snap right in half, hit his boot, and clatter pathetically on the tile below.

He needs to start carrying around a shiv in his boot for these situations.

“Robin Hood!” Is Akechi’s distinct voice before Akira’s bathed in a white light and then – suddenly and without warning – collapsed on the floor in a tangle of limbs after Akechi valiantly tries and fails to catch him. He pushes himself up, but Akechi drags him back down as a hail of fire blazes overhead, disintegrating the Jack Frost who must have had the impure intention of permanently freezing them in a compromising situation with its trademark jolly hee ho.

A little doped on adrenaline and vertigo, Akira light-headedly pushes himself up, avoids the pointy bit of Akechi’s mask, and says, “I think I just fell for you.”

And Akechi – unappreciative of a well-timed pun – after a lengthy stare that explicitly states exactly how very-not impressed he is, rolls his eyes, rolls Akira off, and drops his precious ray gun on Akira’s chest.
“Then do me a favor and try not to let anyone else whisk you away.”

Akira has about a hundred different responses to that, and he’s sure they would all sound very cool and suave if he managed to wrap his vocal cords around the words in time, but the dizziness from being spun in the air in an impromptu waltz and then dropped like someone else’s dirty laundry catches up with him – and he’s not feeling so great. He covers his eyes before he pukes and gives Akechi a thumb up.

The floor is cold and soothing against the back of his head – and with the full group back together, Akira doesn’t have much to worry about. Other than getting trampled as he lies prone on the ground. And, of course, the Akechi dilemma. And the Yusuke situation. And he can’t forget the whole suddenly finding himself in the middle of damned palace thing that just happened maybe an hour ago? He’s not sure how long they took explaining the metaverse to Yusuke, but it must have been a while if Ryuji and Akechi were already this far.

“Skull, Panther, and Mona are almost finished with the last shadow now.” Akechi says, and Akira moves his hand off his face to double check that he was really still there, idly standing next to Akira, hand on a hip. He thought Akechi already bounced off to save the day. “I expect an explanation after this.”

Akira sighs and sits up, wishing the Koppa Tengu had flown him off to its nest to feed its hungry children. “Then you’re going to be disappointed.” He says, ignoring the eyes locked onto his every movement as he stands. “I might have been up to something, but it wasn’t this.” He gestures over to Yusuke, utterly absorbed by the fight taking place in front of him. He didn’t mean for it to happen like this.

“Did that something you were up to happen to involve exposing a certain artist for fraud?” Akechi asks like he isn’t a mind reader.

Akira rubs the back of his neck and rolls his shoulder. He landed hard. Akechi was probably feeling it too, not that’d he’d ever let it show. “Seems like you already know all about it.” He mutters, walking towards the rest of the group as they strike the final blow in an all-out attack when the shadow lurches over.

“It’s my job to know these things. And with the entire country’s eyes on Madarame’s exhibit, of course I’ve been hearing all of the rumors.”

“But not enough to do anything about it?”

“Dealing with people like Madarame is… complicated. It’s not simply a matter of finding evidence against him. There’s more to it.” Akechi stops Akira to drill in his point. “It would take time.”

Akira scoffs and brushes him off. Akechi would never do anything publicly about Madarame because he’s scared of Shido. Simple fact.

Ann throws her arms around Akira’s neck when he’s in range. “I’m so glad you’re okay! I would have done something to help but –”

“Don’t worry about it, Ann. I don’t think it was expecting me to struggle as much as I did. It didn’t know what to do with me.”

“If anyone ever claims to know what to do with you, they’re lying.” Akechi clips his shoulder as he passes, not in a particularly friendly way.

Akira ignores the sinkhole at the pit of his stomach.
In a stage whisper, Ryuji says, “Yeah, he’s been in a mood since we got here.”

Akechi grants Ryuji a withered glance before asking Yusuke, “I can tell the others are fine, but what about you? I’m under the impression that all of this came as a bit of a surprise.”

“He’s fine! I’ve been making sure nothing gets anywhere near him.” Morgana says.

Yusuke nods. “While there are many things I can’t claim to comprehend, I also can’t claim that I’ve been captured by a flying demon and dropped from midair – although it was certainly an experience to behold.” He says, oddly invigorated considering the circumstances.

Akira crosses his arms. “You better not be thinking about drawing that.”

Yusuke proceeds to look like he’s thinking about drawing that.

“Hey, uh, by the way – who is this guy?” Ryuji asks, pointing at the newest addition.

“I’m Kitagawa Yusuke. I’m a second year at Kosei High and a pupil of – ah, of Madarame.” He introduces himself like they just met on the street.

“Sakamoto Ryuji.” He waves. “Oh, but I go by Skull in here.” He quickly adds on, knocking his fist against the metal mask.

“Let’s finish the meet and greet outside before more shadows show up, please.” Akechi taps his foot on the ground and does his best to look like he isn’t recalculating his plan to keep the Phantom Thieves out of palaces for good. Potentially by murder.

“Jeez, let us have a minute. I don’t know how you aren’t tired after gettin’ chased around and then mobbed by a dozen damned shadows, but I just nearly got my head swiped off by a hammer.”

“And if we don’t move now, you may still be met with that fate.”

Ryuji fronts like he’s about to argue, but his shoulders fall, and he looks at Akira with the unspoken message of ‘how am I supposed to deal with this shit’. Akira wishes he knew.

Akira saves him the effort and pushes him towards the way out. “How far is it to the entrance?”

“Not too far so long as we can avoid the damn shadows. You guys seriously got dumped right in the middle of this place? And why the hell wasn’t I invited? I mean, I get why you didn’t tell Akechi, but c’mon.” Ryuji says.

Akechi does his best to hold his tongue by defaulting his expression to his ‘I’m vaguely amused by this’ face while likely plotting all of their sudden disappearances.

“No one was invited. It just happened.” Morgana tries to explain. Akechi hums as he trails behind Akira, unconvinced.

“But this guy is pretty twisted, isn’t he?” Ryuji continues, arms gesturing to the room they were in, to the branches twisting overhead dropping delicate flakes of gold like petals from a tree. “Thinks of his rundown shack as a museum and there’s one room that’s just packed full of paintings of people he’s stolen work from, with little placards n’ everything.” Yusuke makes a distressed noise of protest but doesn’t try to leap to his teacher’s defense. “This guy could definitely use a change of heart.”

“We’re not doing that. It’s too dangerous – for us and Madarame. Not to mention unethical.” Akechi says.
“Yeah, yeah. We’ve heard it all before. Didn’t stop you with Kamoshida, though.” Ryuji swipes away Akechi’s words with his arm.

“Last time was –”

“Okay, that’s enough you two.” Ann butts in as they reach the end of the room. “This was all an accident, we aren’t planning on doing anything, yet. Let’s get out of here, and then you can argue.”

And because they can’t catch a break, shadows manifest around them like the least fun fireworks on the planet before a gritty voice chortles, “I’m afraid this is as far as you’ll be able to go.”

Ryuji springs back in surprise, knocking Akira into Akechi, when he finds himself face to face with another hammer wielding maniac.

Behind them, the tasteless visage of vanity in human form shimmers like costume jewelry in a display case oversaturated with light.

“Sensei?” Yusuke hesitantly takes a step closer to Madarame’s shadow.

Akechi clicks his tongue but doesn’t look surprised at the interruption. “I’d advise you to let us leave now.” He warns.

The gold cloth draped over Madarame’s body gleams offensively in Akira’s eye as it catches a ray of light.

“Let you leave so soon? This place is a testament to all that I’ve achieved through years of work – and the six of you are the lucky few who will ever see it, to ever see into the mind of a true master.”

“The master of what? Stealing from your students?” Ryuji asks.

Madarame laughs. “What do students exist for, if not to help their master? They wouldn’t have reached their potential without me – therefore everything they create is mine.”

Yusuke takes another few steps closer. “Sensei – tell me this is all a lie. This isn’t you.”

Akira doesn’t want to watch, has already seen this, lived through it – but it’s different now. He watches Madarame as he gloats and sees himself. Another him, waiting for the inevitable. Waiting for his turn to showcase his failures in full to an audience that once trusted him before self-destructing in one final, terrific letdown.

He’s not naïve enough to believe that Akechi will let him be.

He wonders, if at the end of it all they’ll find him in the depths of Mementos, locked away with the others.

He consoles himself with the fact that at least there would be less gold.

A pressure against his hand drags him out of his head and back into Madarame’s. Akechi’s watching him from the corner of his eye and it takes a spell before Akira notices the gloved fingers wrapped lightly against his own, gone before he can properly react.

He doesn’t know what face he’s making as he introduces the sudden flutter of nerves in his stomach to the ever-growing sinkhole, but Akechi redirects his eyes to where they never should have left in the first place, where Akira’s should have never left – Yusuke.
“I was blind for so long – but I refuse to allow myself to be fooled any longer! You are unforgiveable!”

Akira must have lost more time than he thought to his self-pity. Yusuke has already heard enough to choose rebellion.

An awakening – the shedding of forged ideas that cloud the heart – the acceptance of hard truths and the steps that must be taken to counter the harm that has already been done to prevent further damage –

Yusuke comes into his own the same way he was always meant to – with a terrifying elegance.

Akira remembers being elated and proud of Yusuke the first time – remembers the surge of confidence within him that they were doing the right thing by freeing people from the hands of abuse by condemning the abuser.

He remembers feeling a lot of things.

And he still does. It’s still there along with a newer, healthy dash of worry, but it’s shrouded. A smokescreen or a fog that’s trying to supersede everything else with –

Absolutely nothing.

They keep the story simple after they escape the palace and consider their options.

“So that’s what happened. When I walked into the house to find Yusuke missing and my storage room broken into – I’ll admit that I feared the worst.” The real Madarame lets out a sigh of relief.

“Whoever those burglars were, they must have quickly realized I have nothing of value to them other than some old, unfinished paintings.”

Akechi crosses his arms and brings a hand to his chin. “Is that right? Besides Kitagawa’s and Kurusu’s phones, there was nothing stolen? No jewelry or loose change? Thieves often target other small electronics and medication as well.”

“I don’t take any medication and we live quite humbly here; things such as jewelry or most electronic devices are rather extravagant for my tastes. I’m sure the thieves left very disappointed.”

“I see. And you’re certain you don’t want to further the investigation? I already have a few officers on patrol looking for the persons who match Kitagawa and Kurusu’s descriptions. Dusting for prints and taking a few photos is a standard for these cases.”

“Thank you for your thoroughness in the matter, but Yusuke already said that they were wearing gloves and I’d hate to waste any more of your time. I do have private security due to the nature of my work, so I’ll certainly be taking advantage of their protection for the night – however I’m doubtful that another attempt to break in will be made.”

“You’re most likely correct.” Akechi says, turning his head to stare at Akira for a hard second before continuing – which, okay, wow. Might as well just call him out as the culprit, already. “However, it’s always prudent to remain cautious. If you see anyone suspicious outside of your house again, don’t hesitate to call us.”
“Thank you, detective. As long as Yusuke here is safe – nothing else in this old shack matters to me. Although, Yusuke, perhaps you should stay at your dorm for a few nights, just in case? The fact that they took you with them before releasing you worries me.”

Yusuke is a master of stoicism, but Akira can tell the charade is weighing on him due to the freshness of everything he’s just learned. “If you think that’s best, sensei.” Yusuke agrees. “Will you be alright on your own?”

“I may be an old man, but I can defend myself if need be.” Madarame laughs. “Kurusu-kun, I apologize that you’ve had to experience such a trauma as a guest in my home. I hope this doesn’t dissuade you from helping Yusuke with his art in the future.”

Akira wasn’t expecting to be addressed. “It’s fine. They, uh, really didn’t do much other than make sure we didn’t leave the atelier and then drag us around town for a while.” And according to the story, ditch them in an alley by a busy street. And what a shame the hoodies and flu masks they were wearing made it difficult to identify them. But hey – according to the story, their phones were stolen, so maybe that means Madarame will cough up the money to buy Yusuke a new one and then Yusuke could sell his old one for some much-needed cash.

It’s not the best cover story, but Akechi claims that much stupider things have happened. Madarame seems to buy it, which is all that really matters. Akira supposes the idea of Yusuke lying to him is such a foreign concept, it doesn’t even cross his mind to doubt it. Akechi being a well-known detective probably didn’t hurt, either.

Ann was fortunately omitted to keep everything simple. Madarame would have caught onto the lie after one word from her.

Unfortunately, escaping Madarame’s suspicion was not Akira’s primary concern. His original intention was to be very much under suspicion with video evidence of the forgeries and Madarame’s reaction to being confronted about it, which would have led to one of three things:

- Being arrested. Again. (High chance.)
- Persuading the rest of the group, Akechi included, to steal Madarame’s heart, leading to his public confession before Akira could be arrested. (Ideal outcome, medium chance.)
- And finally, Akechi arresting Madarame using Akira’s video evidence. (Extremely low, potentially nonexistent chance.)

Akechi excuses himself with an apology when they reach the station – apparently having been in the middle of a case when the chat went live. Yusuke likewise excuses himself with the very legitimate reason of needing some time to think.

Akira wishes he could excuse himself from life, but Ann hooks her arms through his and Ryuji’s and drags them with her to the Shibuya Diner.

“So, you guys for real don’t know how you got in there?” Ryuji asks while they wait for food. “I thought you were just sayin’ that because Akechi’s a snob.”

“It wasn’t us.” Morgana says. “I’ve been trying to figure out what could have triggered it, but…”

“No ideas?” Ann asks.

Morgana’s ears fall flat to his head and Akira takes a long sip of water.
“We should wait until everyone’s together to talk about it.” Morgana suggests. “We’re going to have to talk to the new guy and about what to do with Madarame. He’s a persona user now, so if he really wanted to do something about his teacher, then I doubt even Akechi could stop him from trying.”

“After what we saw – there’s no way Akechi could think that bastard doesn’t deserve to get his heart stolen, right? I mean, the guy called his students livestock.” Ryuji says, getting shushed by Ann when the volume of his voice rises too high.

“I don’t disagree, but Mona’s right, we should talk about it later. I think if anyone has a chance of changing Goro-kun’s mind, it will be Kitagawa-kun after everything we’ve seen.” Ann says. “But Akira…” And here it comes, the guilt trip for not telling them about what he was doing. “You owe me! I kept my end of the deal and modeled for Kitagawa-kun – now you need to spill.”

Akira’s thoughts are still so wrapped around Madarame, Yusuke, and Akechi, it takes an embarrassing moment to understand what she’s asking. “Are you seriously asking me about my ex right now?”

“Yep!” Ann smiles cheerfully while Ryuji shrugs helplessly at him with a pitying stare. “I’ve been waiting all day for this, getting trapped in a palace isn’t going to stop me from making you cough it up.”

“Is now really the best time?” Akira asks. He wonders if this was how everyone felt back in the original timeline when he asked them to hangout with him while they were still working on reaching the end of a palace.

“I wasn’t ready to run around the metaverse today. I’m tired. And there’s nothing more reenergizing than some good gossip!”

Akira wonders if this is any better or worse than being guilt tripped. “Okay then.” He says.

Ann waits. And waits. “Well?” She asks when he doesn’t speak up.

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk about Yusuke or yell at me for not telling you I was planning on breaking into the room in Madarame’s shack while you and Morgana were in the other room?” Akira tries.

“I do.” Morgana says. “But I can wait until we get home.”

Akira immediately makes plans to sleep very early tonight. Maybe even as soon as he steps through the café door.

“I do, too.” Ryuji says. “Why the hell didn’t you bring me along?!”

“Sorry. I promise to invite you the next time I break the law.”

“That’s more like it. You’re trainin’ with me after school for the rest of the week to make up for not tellin’ me.”

Akira smiles at the table, recognizing Ryuji’s brand of forgiveness.

“I’ll spare you since Goro-kun looked like he was already planning to lock you up for a few days when we were telling him what happened.” Ann props her head on her hands. “Right now, I just want to know why your girlfriend broke up with you.”

“I didn’t invite her to commit crime with me. She considered this a betrayal.” Akira says.
“I like her already.” Ryuji says.

Ann’s expression could drown a fish.

“Fine.” Akira pushes himself back in his seat as if he could get far enough away to avoid the question altogether. He flicks his finger against the table. “She accused me of falling for someone else.”

“Did you?” Ann asks, merciless.

Akira thinks he may have gotten more sympathy if he hadn’t pulled his stunt earlier. He takes a breath and looks at a couple at another table. They’re laughing over their words and sniping food off each other’s plates.

“Yeah.” He grips his knee to stop the bounce in his leg, but there’s not much he can do about the tightness of his throat. He reminds himself that Ann and Ryuji don’t even know Makoto before continuing. “She figured it out before I did.” Akira can think of few things worse than watching the person you love, love someone else. Even unintentionally.

But part of him felt that she fell for someone else, too. She was always, always –

“What happened after that?” Ann asks, with more sympathy than before.

Akira pats Morgana’s head as a distraction. “Nothing.”

“Nothing? What about the person you liked?”

“If you hadn’t noticed – I kind of ended up here.” Akira says, taking his glasses off to rub his eyes. Ann winces. “Sorry.”

“I wouldn’t have done anything about it anyways.”

“What? Why not?”

“Because he –” Shit. “She –” But it’s too late. Even Ryuji picked up on that.

“I knew it.” Ann says, instinctively punching Ryuji in the shoulder.

“Wait, hold up – you’re into dudes?” Ryuji asks, unphased by Ann’s excited attack.

“You should see him at Leblanc when Akechi’s there.” Morgana mutters.

Akira hides his face in his hands. He’s never had this conversation out loud before. Most of his friends figured it out last time, but never went so far as to directly confront him about it – leaving it at sly remarks and occasional teasing, probably waiting for him to start the conversation.

“Look, today’s not the best day. Can we talk about this another time?” Akira tries, eyes darting around to locate a potential escape route.

“But you said you were dating a girl?” Ryuji says, trying to piece it together out loud.

“He’s bi.” Ann educates.

“Wait.” Ryuji says again, with more urgency. “Are you dating Akechi?”
“No!”

Morgana squirms and makes a face when Akira’s patting intensifies.

“Okay, good. He’s a dick.” Ryuji says, reclining back. Ann tries to stomp on his foot, but misses, initiating a short lived game of footsie under the table.

Akira wants to ask why no one is questioning Akechi’s sexuality, but he’s not sure he wants to hear the response.

“Wait.” Ryuji says yet again, slapping his hands on the table like a beaver slapping its tail on the water at the first sign of danger. “If you were dating Akechi, you could totally convince him to let us keep stealing hearts.” He grins like he solved world hunger.

“Okay, I’m leaving.” Akira stands up. “Bye.”

“Nonono – we’ll stop talking about it.” Ann crawls over Ryuji and out of the booth to shove him back in, blocking his way out by sitting next to him. “Let’s go back to talking about why you didn’t tell us about Madarame.”

Akira sinks down in his seat and dies a little more on the inside.

Akira does train with Ryuji after school the next day, so when he sees Akechi at the Yongen-Jaya station on the way back to Leblanc, his legs are too sore to even think about trying to run away.

“We should talk.” Is all Akechi says.

Akira nods and leads the way. Akechi, of course, follows him home.

Quietly.

“Well?” Akira asks after they ascend the stairs under Sojiro’s damning stare. He watches a fly putter around on the ceiling after tossing his glasses and crashing on the bed while Akechi sits on the couch, back straight, eyes front, jaw tensed. “No interrogation?” Akira is hardly a stranger to the silent treatment, but Akechi’s bringing it to a new level of aggressive by making a point of following him around as mute as a mortally offended housewife on Valentine’s day.

“If you’re asking for one, we can start with what the hell were you thinking?” Akechi snarls.

Ooh, Akira didn’t know it was possible to fit that much contempt in a single sentence. He supposes the buildup helped. He’s felt like he’s been under the scope of a sniper rifle ever since Akechi took off the other day.

Morgana slinks downstairs with his tail between his legs, the coward.

“No, wait.” Akechi continues. “Don’t bother answering, because it’s becoming increasingly clear to me that you’re not capable of rational thought.” Yikes. Akira doesn’t remember the wedding, but it’s clear they’ve been married for about seven years now and are rapidly heading for a divorce. “What did you think was going to happen, Akira? What were you trying to achieve by getting yourself thrown back in jail?”

Akira stands up and runs both his hands through his hair. “Did you see that place? Did you hear
what Madarame said to Yusuke? How could I sit around and do nothing while my friend gets taken advantage of?"

“There’s solving a problem and then there’s being an idiot. You accomplished the latter.”

“I know.” Akira says. “I know I’m an idiot. And I’m not going to stop being an idiot, so you can either help me or –” Akira swallows the anger in his voice. “I don’t know what you want. This isn’t our decision anymore. It’s Yusuke’s.”

“Akira, my choice will always be to help you, but you’re making it incredibly difficult. You don’t talk to me and you refuse to trust anyone. As for this situation – when Kitagawa has collected his thoughts and is ready to meet with us again – my opinion hasn’t changed. Stealing Madarame’s treasure is not an option. I’ll ensure he is aware of this and offer alternate courses of action.”

“Alternate courses of action. Right. You were the one who said dealing with people like Madarame takes time. How long would Yusuke have to continue to be taken advantage of by the only person he’s ever considered a parent before these alternate courses of action pay off? If they ever do. Why does Madarame get special treatment when he’s ruined the lives and futures of all of his students?"

“He’s not getting special treatment. Justice will find him, Akira.”

“Like it found me?” Akira asks, spreading out his arms. Akechi closes his eyes. “How many people would he have to pay off before he gets to skip town and wait until the rumors die down just to come back and do it all over again? Because that is all that’s going to happen unless he gets on TV and confesses to everything himself.”

“I know your opinion of the legal system isn’t high, but, Akira – why is using the metaverse to steal hearts the better option? Taking away someone’s free will…” Akechi locks his gaze to Akira’s. “What would you think about someone deciding to steal yours?”

“Maybe I’d deserve it.” Akira says, the dryness at the back of his throat grating against the words as they claw their way out. Leblanc’s attic has never felt so stifling.

Akechi drops his head and sighs. “That’s not true.”

“What’ll it take to change your mind?” Akira forces himself to ask. “Because I know this moral high ground act you parade around isn’t how you really feel.”

“And why would you think that?” Akechi stands up. “What have I done that contradicts everything I’ve said repeatedly since we’ve met?”

“I just know.”

“You just know.” He echoes, taking a step closer. “What exactly do you think you know, Akira?”

Akira has to give Akechi credit, he really can’t tell if he’s upset or just trying to drive Akira into a corner to make some kind of a point.

“I can tell a lot about someone by how they take their coffee. And you’re the type who pretends to prefer the bitter stuff, but the reason you like my coffee better than the boss’s is because I add extra cream and sugar.”

Akechi blinks. “I – that has no relevance to what we’re discussing.” He says and then adds in a tone that combines reluctance, disbelief, and acceptance: “Wait, do you really add extra cream and sugar?”
“Yes.”

“Oh. That makes sense.”

“If you want to continue thinking it’s because I make them with love, feel free.” Akira says, wearily.

Akechi startles himself with a laugh before covering his mouth and looking out the window. “Our conversation isn’t over.” He warns, but Akira already knows that. He can still try to avoid it for as long as possible.

“I’ll change your mind.” Akira insists. “Just don’t make me resort to Ryuji’s suggestion.”

“And what sort of plan does Sakamoto have to sway me?” Akechi asks, wryly.

“Seduction.” He answers, becoming fast friends with instant regret after Akechi’s eyes affix themselves back to Akira, the ends of his lips curving up.

“Maybe he’s onto something.” He says, not even trying for subtle.

“I’ll let him know you’re open to the idea. I’m sure the two of you would look great together.” Akira diverts before Akechi gets too brave.

Akechi’s face goes from ‘Vogue photoshoot’ to ‘dog that ran face first into the sliding glass door’ as his nose crinkles up. “Not quite what I had in mind.”

“And you both love to exercise, it’s a match made in heaven.”

“If you continue down this line of thought, I may have to reconsider our friendship.”

“You and Ryuji could meet up early in the morning to go cycling, then go running together after school. And he’s better than me at video games so he can give you tips at the arcade. Akechi, it’s really –”

“I wish you’d call me Goro.” He interrupts.

Akira pauses and turns around from where he was examining his empty shelf. “I do, sometimes.” He says.

“Only when you’re teasing me.” Akechi leans against the desk.

“Does it bother you?”

Akechi’s mouth is set in a straight line. “Sometimes. You seem to use everyone else’s names rather freely. Even Kitagawa’s, whom you’ve only recently met. I didn’t mind at first, but lately –” His brows meet at the center of his face. “I can’t help but feel as though you’re using the smallest means available to distance yourself from me.”

Akira chews his lip. “You’re overthinking it. I’m just used to hearing and saying Akechi. I’ll try to get out of the habit if that’s what you want.”

“I’d like that. Also, the idea about having a cycling partner was a good one – although I’d much prefer your company over Sakamoto’s.”

“I’m never going to wake up early enough for that and I don’t have a bike.”

“I don’t go out too early on Sundays.”
“Still don’t have a bike.”

“That can be fixed.”

“Not with my money, it can’t.”

Akechi grins as he shakes his head. “Why is it so difficult to stay angry at you? I came over here to yell at you for being stupid, not this.”

“I’m very distracting.” Akira says.

Akechi doesn’t seem to recognize the words as his own as he laughs, twirling a strand of hair around his finger. “I am angry, though. Don’t let this give you the impression that I’m not.”

“No, you’ve definitely made your point. No more breaking into locked rooms for me, promise.”

“That would almost sound sincere if you didn’t have a drawer full of handmade lockpicks in your desk.” Akechi says. Akira finds sudden interest in a loose floorboard. “And aside from the fact that you acted like a complete moron with no regard for the trouble you’d be bringing the rest of us had your plan gone off as you intended – I wanted to talk to you about how you ended up in the metaverse. Are you certain it wasn’t Morgana or Ann-chan? Perhaps even Kitagawa? Both Sakamoto and myself inadvertently activated the app when we were first introduced to the metaverse. Do you think it’s possible this was a similar event?”

The only thing Akira is certain of is the unease boiling up from his gut leaving his head full of hot air and the distinct impression that he shouldn’t implicate himself any more than he already has.

“I mean, with how little we know about the metaverse – anything could be possible.”

Akechi doesn’t have a tell, but Akira knows he’s suspicious. It’s his nature to be.

“Very true.” Akechi says, taking a step closer. “However, I’d like to consider all of the possibilities. The fact that it happened so spontaneously is very concerning. Yesterday you mentioned you were taking a video of the room with the forgeries – may I have a copy of that?”

“Yeah, one sec. What are you going to use it for?” Akira asks. Without Madarame in the video, he doubts it would be too useful from a legal perspective. It would take only one person to call it out as an elaborate hoax, and that one person would be Madarame.

Akechi frowns. “I’d just like to see what happened, is all. There may be a clue as to how you found yourself in the middle of a palace.”

Akira fidgets with his phone before pressing send. “Sent. Let me know if you find anything.” He says while thinking please don’t find anything.

“I will gladly keep you up to date when you begin to do the same for me.” Akechi says, glancing at the message. Akira wonders how long everyone is going to continue guilt tripping him. Forever, probably. “And there are still many things I need to talk to you about, however my schedule is tight today.”

“Thanks for penciling me in just to make me feel bad in person.” Akira says, dropping himself back on the bed and covering his face with an arm.

“Over the phone simply doesn’t convey the same effect.”
He hears Akechi walk over to him, can almost feel the shift in the air as he stands next to him, close enough to touch.

Akira says, “Also… Thank you for helping us yesterday. In the palace and with Madarame afterwards.”

“You’re welcome.”

“And – I’m sorry,” He clears his throat. “Goro.”

“You will be.” Akechi says, lightly and with enough humor to be taken as a joke, but Akira’s sure it means Akechi’s done being patient with him.

Something that feels like static shock brushes the palm of his hand, but his fingers only succeed in grasping air. He removes the arm from over his eyes, finding his closed fist and the flat lines of Akechi’s back as he reaches the stairs.

Kaleidoscopic patterns dance across his vision when he looks out the window, and Akira can no longer tell if it's his eyes playing tricks on him or if he's lost somewhere in a world between worlds.

“Shit.”

Chapter End Notes

so this chapter got butchered a million times and it still didn't turn out how I wanted it to, but hopefully once I'm past Madarame's Palace I'll have an easier time writing since that's when I will be veering away from the canon plot stuff and can focus on other junk. My editing skills also probably sucked this chapter since I've been only vaguely coherent over the past week between overtime at work and 2 of my neighbors places catching fire (leaving me with no sleep and extreme paranoia), so feel free to point out any typos/mistakes as always.

Thanks for all of the comments/kudos! I'm really sorry I've been bad about responding to comments lately, but I really do love each one I get. I'm insanely (unhealthily) introverted (even on the internet) so sometimes the words just don't happen. I'm working on it, tho.
Chapter 14

The lurch of the world around him well after he’s stopped moving is a sure sign of either his incredible lack of fitness or the early arrival of summer as he sweats out the last remaining liquid in his body. A fine Powder of iron is probably all that’s left of his blood, speak not of other fluids.

A hand claps his back from where he’s doubled over less than a meter away from a water fountain - from beautiful liquid life - but for all his capabilities, it may as well be across a contaminated river chock-full of Starved, cannibalistic piranhas. Maybe some crocodiles chilling on the banks, just for the drama. Venomous black adders in the grass? Sure. Shit flinging monkeys in the trees? Insult to injury is his life lately, might as well add them to the scenario.

The point is, he’s ran out of run.

“Yeah, it’s a bit hot out today, huh? I’m beat too. Let’s call it a day.” Ryuji says from Akira’s left with an upbeat voice that most people reserve for the pep talk before the workout.

Akira replies with a shaky thumbs up.

Ryuji ropes Akira’s arm around his shoulder and helps him hobble over to the life-giving water fountain, which may have a suspicious taste of chlorine – but of all the ways to die, Akira will pass on dehydration. If he has a choice in the matter, he’d like to go out with some semblance of style. Collapsing into a pile of dust and brittle bones like a vampire in the sunlight simply isn’t dramatic enough today.

Ryuji’s leaning against the wall massaging his knee, waiting for Akira to stop pretending he’s a fish as he soaks his head in the sink. Akira shakes out his hair, Ryuji grinning while he fends off the drops of water flying at him.

“How’s your leg?” Akira asks, stretching his hands over his head until he can feel his spine crack back into place.

“Those stretches you told me about really seem to be helpin’. It hasn’t been gettin’ nearly as sore as it used to. Thanks, dude.” Ryuji kicks out his leg a few times. “ Been thinkin’ about trying out a brace, but, eh. I’ve had one before and it itched like hell.”

“It’s not a bad idea if you’re going to be working out more often. You probably used a cheap one last time, try out something that has good reviews.” Akira pulls off his windbreaker and ties it around his waist, immediately feeling ten degrees cooler and hating himself for not doing it sooner.

“Yeah, yeah. You’re right. I guess I’ve just been puttin’ it off because it’s a reminder that my leg’ll never be what it used to be, you know? I mean, I know there’s still the pain, but having an actual thing I have to see – I dunno, it’s different.”

Akira nods and slicks his hair back to keep it out of his eyes. “I have similar bad habits.” The small part of him that’s still convinced he’s going to wake up one day and be home has him avoiding looking in the mirror too often.

His face is too soft.
Ryuji shoves his hands in his pockets and shuffles on his feet. “Hey, uh, I know you’re close with Akechi ‘n all, and probably talk to him about stuff – but if you do ever need to talk about anything or just need to let go of some steam, I’m around. I mean you’re always helpin’ me out with the airsoft stuff and with the whole Nakaoka situation lately – and I dunno, I think –”

“Wait,” Akira interrupts. “You think I’d rather talk to Akechi than you?”

“Well, yeah. You’re always together. And Ann follows him on somethin’ and was forcing me to look at the shit he posts for a damn hour the other day – and you were in a bunch of the pictures. The dude is cheesy as hell online, by the way. I thought he was bad enough in real life, but I think I’d rather deal with the guy being a prick over whatever that was.”

Akira needs time to process this information. Ryuji continues, regardless.

“Ann says it’s something about self-promotion and I’m not part of the target audience, so I should shut up, but whatever. The guy already hates me. I can drag him a bit, right?”

“He doesn’t hate you.” Akira says, taking the spot next to Ryuji against the wall. He gets a skeptical look. “Trust me. He reserves his hatred for one person.”

“Maybe, but he sure doesn’t like me.”

Akira bites his lip as he thinks. “He… doesn’t really know how to like people. He’s never really had any friends before.”

Ryuji sinks down in a squat. “He likes you. Seems to like Mona enough. And he’s been gettin’ chummy with Ann lately.”

Akira crosses his arms. “It might be painful, but just toss him a compliment every now and then. He’ll warm up to you.”

“Compliment what?” Ryuji groans.

Akira stifles a laugh. “I don’t know, tell him his hair looks nice or something.”

“I’m not gonna lie to him, dude.”

The laugh breaks through, despite Akira’s efforts. Ryuji grins and stands back up, shoulder checking Akira and following the path back to the locker room.

Akira follows. “If you can’t do that then ask him for advice or something. Ask for some shooting tips in the metaverse and let him talk at you for five hours. You’ll be best friends.”

“Ugh, I don’t think I can do it. The guy’s already full of himself. Why’re we talkin’ ‘bout Akechi anyways?”

“You’re the one who brought him up.” Akira points out.

“My bad. Though I guess I’ve gotta ask one more thing. You ‘n Akechi…” Ryuji trails off, stopping in his tracks to grind the sole of his shoe into the concrete, the pinch of his brow suggesting he doesn’t know how to ask what he wants to.

Akira has the sinking feeling he already knows.

Akira currently has a tally of thirty-three consecutive messages from Ann that have been accumulating ever since he outed himself at the diner. They start off supportive and even genuinely
heartwarming, but Ann and subtlety are not acquainted and her side quest to hook up her friends must have a reward she can’t live without, because –

“No, we’re still not dating.” Akira says before Ryuji can ask. Again.

Ryuji spins around to face him, holding his hands up defensively with a dumb grin on his face. “Not what I was gonna ask. I believed you the first time. And I know Ann’s been buggin’ you about it, and I’m still stickin’ to the idea that he’d probably chill the fuck out a bit if you guys were –” Akira’s face must say everything for him, because Ryuji cuts himself off with a cough. “Nah, I was just gonna ask if you two were alright. Last time we were all together it was kinda tense.”

Akira traces his eyes over the line of a fence, resuming their walk at a pace slower than a funeral march.

“He stresses me out.” Akira says, using a thumb to smear a trail of water that was running down from his hair to his nose.

“Yeah?” Ryuji prompts, tentative and patient as he walks at Akira’s pace.

“Yeah.” Akira says, shoving his hand in his pocket. “Sorry.”

“The hell’re you apologizing for?” Ryuji asks with an exasperated sigh, kicking a rock off the sidewalk.

For everything, Akira thinks. For lying, for not being the leader he should be, for letting everything be thrown off course to a destination lost somewhere ahead in a fog he can’t navigate.

“I’m not the easiest friend to have, am I?” He says instead.

Ryuji surprises him with a headlock and drags him along. “You’re really stressin’ me out right now. Jeez. I’m the one who should be sayin’ that. Sometimes you look so sad and I don’t know what the hell to do so I end up doin’ nothin’. I’m the shitty friend here.”

“You’re a good friend, I’m just –”

“Alright, we’re gonna fall into a game of who’s the worst friend so let’s just cut it off right here.” Ryuji says, mussing Akira’s hair before letting him go when they reach the gym door. “How ‘bout this: We both do a better job of talkin’ to each other from now on? And if Akechi ever gives you shit, let me know so I can annoy the shit outta him.”

Akira smiles at Ryuji before diverting his eyes and fixing his hair. “I think it’d be better if you both tried to get along.”

“Tch. We’ll see. There’s somethin’ about that guy that just pisses me off. Somethin’…” Ryuji makes a frustrated noise before tearing the door open and storming through, terrifying the guy standing on the other side. “I dunno, just every time he opens his mouth I get alarms going off in my head sayin’ that I shouldn’t believe a damned word he says.”

Akira wonders if it’s something as simple as intuition. Ryuji has always trusted his instincts over logic. But if it was something more –

“But he’s different when he talks to you.” Ryuji says, stomping out Akira’s paranoid theories and replacing them with something he can’t define. Something that tightens his chest and strangles his breath.
Something that makes it hard to think.

There’s something floating outside Leblanc’s window that evening. Distinctly there, but not. A passerby walks through it, unaware of its existence.

If Akira focuses hard enough, he can see the roundness of its wings as they flutter, the polished jewels draped around its neck glimmering in the lamplight, the purple tint to its skin that shine a bold ruby red from an angle – he doesn’t think it’s anything he’s seen before. He thinks there must be a lot of things he hasn’t seen before. So much he never learned, even when other persona users found him after the Phantom Thieves were long since retired.

He should have paid more attention, asked the right questions. Maybe he wouldn’t be in this mess.

But if he had avoided all of this –

“You know, Sakura-san asked you to watch the café, not take a nap.” Akechi says, tapping Akira’s forehead with a pen.

The shadow vanishes from the window, but that doesn’t mean it’s gone. How many pockets of reality feed off the one they live in? Is what he sees restricted to the metaverse, or –

“What’s there to watch?” Akira mumbles into the counter, exhausted from yet another tirade on his destructive behavior. He’s given up defending himself. There’s no point arguing with someone who doesn’t believe in the convictions he regularly preaches. He uses his own arm as a pillow as he turns his attention to Akechi. “No one ever comes in this late. I don’t know why the boss is even coming back.” He pauses. “Why are you here this late? You already lectured me and had your coffee. Mission accomplished. Get lost, Goro.” He uses the name deliberately, still uncomfortable with how it stumbles off his tongue. He stretches his arm out on the counter and taps Akechi’s empty coffee cup.

“I had a little extra free time today, so I figured I’d stay a while longer.” He pulls the cup away from where Akira’s trying to tip it over. “Although I wouldn’t mind a refill.”

“Go make it yourself. I’m retired.”

“I hope you don’t treat all your customers like this.”

“You’re not a customer. You’re a mooch.” Akira says, closing his eyes.

Akechi laughs and Akira’s glad he can’t see it. His thoughts have been getting the better of him too often lately, and he really is a sucker for a pretty smile.

“You said earlier you went running with Sakamoto today?” Akechi asks.

“Yeah. You want to run with us next time?”

“Hah. I doubt Sakamoto would like that very much.” Akechi says, and Akira’s eyes may be closed but he can still imagine the bitter turn to his lip and the wry narrowing of eyes as he tucks a strand of hair behind his ear.

“I’d like it.” Akira says. It would be a good bonding experience. They can’t drive each other crazy if
they can’t breathe.

Leather-clad fingers tap the counter in a steady one-two-three. “Maybe the next time I have a free day, I’ll tag along. I wouldn’t mind the extra exercise.”

Akira takes that as a win. “You’ve had a lot of free days lately.”

“The few days I had at the beginning of the week were due to special circumstances, but yes – I should have some extra time off from now on. I’ve distanced myself from certain aspects of my job that were… creating conflicts with my schedule.” Akechi explains.

And Akira wonders.

He opens his eyes and pulls his hand a little closer to himself when he notices it’s still encroaching Akechi’s counter space.

Is he referring to his actual job or –

“Is it okay to do that?” Akira asks, unable to keep eye contact for long. He’s learned the hard way what hope can do to a person.

“There’s no need to be worried.” Akechi laughs, smiling like he’d been given a treat he didn’t deserve, but still greedily reaching out to keep it. “I’ve taken the appropriate measures to ensure there’s no, ah – backlash, so to speak. Although I can’t attempt to claim that I’m entirely free just yet.” He slouches forward, resting his head on his hand, fingers curling beneath an eye. “There are still a few things I’ll have to do. But that’s all in due time.” There’s something to his voice that Akira can’t put his finger on and a quirk to his lips that hide the words he doesn’t trust himself with.

“I’m glad.” Akira says if only to avoid saying nothing. “You seem happy.”

Akechi’s smile brightens, and the halo of light spilling from the lamp overhead does miracles to a face that never needed them. Akira closes his eyes again, regretful when the image follows him into the dark.

It’s difficult now – difficult to match the face of the guy sitting with him to the one who scratched himself out of Akira’s life in the most permanent of ways.

Fingers lock around his own and his breath stills, his eyes open on their own.

The hand doesn’t retreat this time.

“I think I am.” Akechi says, running a thumb over his knuckles. “Happy, that is. Or something close to it.”

And Akira wonders if he’s had it all wrong.

Akechi’s hand is warm and deceptively soft in his own, gloves abandoned at a point in time Akira can’t pinpoint. A crooked smile skews the symmetry of his face, revealing a few tired lines under his eyes.

And has Akira really been so self-centered as to not even consider that maybe –

Akechi lowers his gaze, eyes flitting to the side in an uncharacteristic show of uncertainty as he tries to shape the words in his mouth before saying them.

“Akira, I think –”
The café door opens with a chime, Sojiro lugging in four bags of groceries hooked around his arms, the plastic straining under the weight of the items inside. Morgana awakens from his slumber by the window, all displaced fur and crooked whiskers, eager to swipe the first thing that falls to the floor.

Akira jolts out of his seat as he clears his throat and adjusts his glasses, relieving some of Sojiro’s burden as he helps him restock the fridge.

His hand burns even after he’s washed it.

Akechi’s eyes don’t leave him the rest of the night.

*And Akechi stresses him out* –

“Oh, I almost forgot.” Akechi says from over his shoulder when he finally decides to take his leave, one hand on the café door’s handle. The smile from earlier still lingers, and something heavy settles in Akira’s gut.

- *because he makes it so easy to forget* –

“I’ve been hearing a few interesting things about you recently.” He pushes the door open, a gust of air ringing the bell overhead, his hair fluttering back.

- *even if it’s only for a moment, the tiniest blip of a second* –

“I wasn’t aware that I had competition.” He says, coy – but not the least bit in jest.

“What?” Akira balks, almost losing the grip on the glass in his hand. Something outside outlines him in a violet glow that highlights the red of his eyes.

“You should tell me about him sometime, the guy you liked. I like knowing what I’m up against.” He says, flashing a final smile before vanishing behind the glass.

- *it’s easy to forget what he really is.*

Maybe he never knew.

He orders coffee out of habit, despite the warm day. He twirls the steam around his finger as it cools, watching as it dances up and away, careless of gravity and other mortal constraints. He remembers a time when he could almost pretend he was the same. Careless and immortal. A shadow amongst shadows, thinking he could change the world. Save it, even.

He may have helped keep the world going for a few more years but change doesn’t happen so quickly, so readily. Mistakes were made, mistakes were repeated. Another almost-friend was lost to a bullet that never needed to be shot.

His own end was less tangible, a memory that didn’t take hold, a note jotted in the margins of a novel he’s long since lost – but he knows it happened. He wouldn’t be here otherwise. *Couldn’t* be here otherwise.
Fingers snap him out of morbid thoughts, manicured nails painted in gradients of reds and pinks under a shiny topcoat, a slim silver bracelet dangling around a delicate wrist.

“Earth to Akira.” Ann sings, leaning over the metal table. It wobbles under a short leg and Ryuji barely saves his soda in time before losing it to the cracked concrete underfoot. “What planet were you on?”

Akira shrugs, grabbing his own cup when Ann rocks the table again. The crease between Ann’s brow grows.

“Stay up too late again?” Ryuji asks, grabbing his basket of fries off the table and keeping it on his lap after shooting Ann a suspicious glance.

“He spent all night reading up mythology and legends on the computer.” Morgana says from where the basket had been a moment ago.

Akira steals one of Ryuji’s fries while he has his attention on Morgana. “They’re interesting.” Is all he offers.

“Speaking of interesting…” Ann trails off, the sides of her lips curling up in a manner that didn’t instill Akira with any desire to prompt her further. She slumps back in a pout when he aims a dead stare at her, but recovers immediately, slapping her hands on the table with all her weight and sending Morgana flying into the air. “You’ve been ignoring all my messages! You know what I want to know.”

Ryuji yawns and pulls Ann’s hair. “Give the guy a break. Where’s Akechi anyways? And that guy – Kitagawa, right? Isn’t he the one who wanted to meet up?”

“We’re early.” Akira says, stirring the foam in his coffee, not particularly inclined to drink it. The smell is off, burnt maybe, but the warmth against the palm of his hand is comforting in a way he chooses not to think about.

“And about what I was saying, Goro-kun –”

Akira groans. He just wants one conversation – just one – without the mention of Akechi Goro. Even Sojiro brings him up like there’s a legal requirement to remind Akira of Akechi’s existence every hour on the hour.

“No escaping this time.” Ann says, kicking red sneakers on his lap as if that would be able to lock him down. He unties her shoelaces just to be petty.

“Akechi had to run an errand, so he’ll be a little late.” Akira belatedly answers Ryuji’s question, a little annoyed Akechi didn’t tell the whole group. “And Yusuke’s easily distracted, so he’s probably getting swindled by a street vendor somewhere.”

“Seriously?” Ryuji asks, reaching for another fry, flummoxed when he notices half of them are already gone. “If you guys wanted some, all you had to do was ask.” He says, pushing what was left in the middle of the table.

“Don’t mind if I do.” Morgana says, snatching one and ducking under the table.

Ann grabs three, shoves them in her mouth, and talks through the mush of potatoes. “So, the other day I brought Goro-kun along with me to one of my shoots, and I overheard him talking to another model who was trying to get his number, and do you know what he told her?”
“A model was what? Why do girls like that guy so much?” Ryuji tips himself back on his chair as he grumbles, the metal creaking in protest. “I really don’t get it.” He slurps down the rest of his drink and tosses the container in the bin behind him. He tilts his head at Akira and grimaces, looking like he wants to both ask something and forget he ever wanted to ask it.

“He’s pretty.” Ann says, like that clears everything up. Akira can’t say it doesn’t. “But what I wanted to say –”

“Hey, Akira. I keep forgettin’ to ask, are people at school still givin’ you shit?” Ryuji interrupts.

“Not really. Most of them have moved on to better gossip.”

“I’ve noticed that, too.” Ann says, not discouraged that they’ve rerouted the conversation. “I’m happy they’re starting to leave you alone. But what I was saying before –”

“Have you seen that new action movie that came out?” Ryuji asks, voice magnified enough to rival a megaphone. Ann’s mouth hangs open in offense.

Akira and Morgana finish the rest of the fries as the other two squabble nonsensically while trying to talk over each other. By the time Akechi arrives, Ryuji has successfully diverted the conversation into a heated debate about whether or not hot dogs are sandwiches.

A gloved hand lands on his shoulder when Akechi reaches the table. Akira tips his head back, offering a grin. The easy smile that blossoms back at him has his gaze reeling back to the table while he pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose before occupying himself with a strand of hair as the next seat over is taken, its new occupant half-heartedly joining in on the debate.

Yusuke appears in the middle of a theoretical but involved discussion about how many eleven-year-olds Ryuji could take on in a fight.

The mood takes a shift after pleasantries. There’s anticipation in Akechi’s posture, a grim line to Yusuke’s mouth, skepticism in Ann’s demeanor as she runs a finger along the ridge of the table, and irritation in Ryuji’s forced nonchalance as he throws an arm over the back of his chair. Akira settles for running his hand through Morgana’s fur the wrong way.

“I apologize for the length of time it took me to come to a decision.” Yusuke begins, lacing his fingers together in front of him.

“Hey, no worries, man. This isn’t the sorta thing you can force yourself to figure out right away.” Ryuji says, mimicking Yusuke’s posture and leaning forward.

“Have you been okay since...?” Ann asks, gesturing with her hands in lieu of completing her question. “I mean, has Madarame said anything to you?”

“No, he seems to have taken the story we’ve given him as the truth.”

“I’ll admit I’m curious to know what you plan to do from here on out.” Akechi says.

Yusuke smooths out his hair, but his troubled expression remains. “I’ve been considering my options.” He says, slow but confident. He turns his head to look at Akechi. “And while I appreciate your offer to help, after what I’ve seen within Sensei’s heart...” He shakes his head as if to shake off a thought. “I’m sorry, but I’m unable to stand aside and wait for something that may or may not happen any longer. I’ve waited my entire life for something to change. I will accept the
consequences that come with my actions from here on out.”

Akechi’s face is carefully neutral as he listens. “So, you’ve decided to pursue the treasure within Madarame’s heart.”

“I have. My situation extends beyond the legalities of Madarame-sensei’s actions. This is about my very life itself, the lives of all the students he has used in the past.”

“It’s personal, is what you’re saying.” Akechi simplifies, leaning back and crossing his legs.

“Correct. You’ve explained to me the controversy within your group regarding the stealing of hearts and your own opinion regarding the matter. I both respect and understand your views. Nevertheless, I must ask that you allow me this one selfishness. I will not ask you to assist me, I simply request that you turn a blind eye until I’ve completed my goal. I will take responsibility for any fallout.” Yusuke says.

Whether or not this is the correct path to follow with Akechi in the group – Akira doesn’t know, but he’s never been one to back off once he’s started something. “I can’t use a persona, but I can find my way around in the metaverse. I’ll help.”

Akechi’s mask of indifference cracks as he turns a sharp stare at him. “Absolutely not.”

Akira doesn’t hide his annoyance before repeating. “I’ll help.”

“I’ll help too.” Ryuji says. “Let’s face it, Akechi. This is the best shot we’ve got at gettin’ the truth out about this guy. He’s been playing the whole world for years, there’s no way he hasn’t been coverin’ his ass.”

“Your faith in my abilities as a detective is inspiring.” Akechi says, but there’s no bite. Akira wonders if he expected this to happen. “What about you, Ann-chan? Morgana?”

Ann squirms under pressure. “I don’t think it’s safe for them to go alone.”

Morgana doesn’t have any qualms with being straightforward. “Of course I’ll go. The more time I spend in the metaverse, the more I might learn about how to get my body back.”

“I thought it was Mementos that you needed to explore?” Akechi asks.

“I have a feeling that the palaces and Mementos aren’t as unrelated as I previously thought.”

“I see. It seems that I’m outnumbered.”

“You’ve been outnumbered from the start, dude.” Ryuji says. “You spooked us with the whole ‘going to jail’ thing, but I think you’re bluffing.”

“Bluffing?” Akechi laughs. “Are you sure about that?”

Ryuji sighs with a glance in Akira’s direction. “Pretty sure, yeah. Besides, are there any laws out there saying we can’t use some weird app to go in someone’s heart and steal their treasure? I mean, come on, man. And you’ve seen for yourself what this guy is like – all the people he’s stolen art from. And look at Kitagawa! He has to live with the guy. How long would an investigation take? Weeks? Months? I wouldn’t be able to handle it, being right there and knowing what he is. How is what we’re doin’ wrong? Why wait and do things the hard way while the people around him keep suffering when we can make him confess to everything now?”
It’s the same rhetoric. The same useless back and forth Akira’s already been through in two lives. He could fall asleep already knowing the unsatisfying ending. You can’t change the mind of someone who never had an opinion in the first place.

The group breaks apart on uneven terms not much later, Ryuji gripping Akira’s shoulder with an apologetic grimace and a pointed look aimed at Akechi like Akira would know the magic words to knock him off his moral high horse and bring him down to level with the rest of them.

He does know the words. But unlike Yusuke, prepared to face the unknown consequences of his actions, Akira’s facing a known reality of pain and loss. The worst part is that he knows it’s an excuse. An empty justification for his own weakness and fear.

“Yusuke –” Akira calls before he’s out of range. He turns around, a question on his face, but a heavy presence slides in next to Akira. “I, uh, just wanted to apologize. Again. For everything.” He says.

“There’s no need.” Yusuke says. “For the first time in my life I’m thinking for myself. I should thank you, instead. I may have spent the rest of my life disillusioned and embracing a miserable lie. I should be the one to apologize for the discontent I’ve created amongst your friends.”

“You’re our friend, too.” Akira says, pulling the strap of his bag more securely up his shoulder. Morgana peeks out from the top. “The only thing we want is to make sure you’re okay, even if we don’t agree on everything. Right, Goro?” Akira asks, looking to the side.

A 10,000 yen note drifts down from the sky, vanishing into nothing before hitting the ground.

Akechi’s tired, the lines under his eyes sink a little deeper than usual. “Yes. While I haven’t given up on changing your mind, I understand your reasons. I have some contemplating of my own to do.” He sneaks a peek at Akira, dipping his head when he’s caught. “I’ll be in touch.”

Yusuke nods.

“Let’s talk.” Akira says when Yusuke vanishes into the faceless crowds of Shibuya.

“This is a rarity.” Akechi replies, eyes wide and the color of maple syrup in the sun. “Kurusu Akira, wanting to talk. What’s the occasion?”

“Don’t be a dick or you can forget about it. Let’s go.” Akira mumbles, already turning in the direction of the station, wondering if what he’s planning will be more or less painful than meeting a train head on.

There’s only one way to appeal to Akechi.

“Did you already have somewhere in mind?” Akechi asks. “It’s a nice day out, I recommend –”

“Your place.” Akira says without a glance back. “I don’t want to talk about this in public.” He needs to be somewhere Akechi feels in control, somewhere he’s comfortable enough to drop his guard. Somewhere Akira can get a feel for what he’s really thinking.

Akechi falls in line beside him as they walk, opting for silence as if words would scare Akira off. Maybe they would have, any other day, but the shadows change color under his feet and the ugliest palette of sewer green stretches across the sky.

It’s still the early afternoon, but the apartment is dark when they step through the door. Morgana jumps out of the bag, the pitter patter of paws and the jangle of keys behind Akira are magnified in the absence of light. It’s a short walk to the balcony door. Cordialities are attempted while he pulls
the curtains open to let the light in, but Akira’s preoccupied with the specter of a disastrously large meteor pressing against the atmosphere to bother.

A cold glass of water pressed to the back of his neck brings him back to reality with a hiss, Akechi’s playful smile not doing much for his nerves. He spots Morgana happily settled on the counter with a bowl of water and a can of tuna.

“I’m going to go ahead and assume that you wanted to continue trying convince me that stealing a person’s heart isn’t as terrible as I’m making it out to be?” Akechi peels the gloves off his hands and cracks the joints of his fingers.

Akira sets the glass of water down and leans against the back of the couch. “No, but while we’re on that – I want to make a deal with you.”

Akechi wears a smile that doesn’t mask the doubt lingering beneath it. “You have my attention.”

“If you help us, help Yusuke with Madarame’s Palace, I’ll get everyone to agree that it’ll be the last heart we steal. No more arguing about it, no more sneaking around each other – we’ll stick to Mementos from here on out.” Akira looks outside as a large gray cloud blocks the sun and crosses his arms. He knows it makes him look smaller. Under his breath, he adds, “Unless you change your mind later on.”

Akechi takes the few steps into Akira’s line of sight. “Let’s pretend that I agree to these terms, how could you guarantee that, for instance, Sakamoto wouldn’t simply go behind your back? I’m well aware that he’s been asking questions and snooping around on his own. You, as well. How can I be sure that you’re not lying? It’s not a particularly fair deal when I can’t be certain I’ll get my end of it.”

Akira bites down the irrational sting of anger. He’s been lying for a long time now, being called out on it shouldn’t be a surprise. He points at Morgana, quietly listening from the kitchen. “Morgana’s a bad liar. You can always ask him if you think I’ve been up to something. It’s not like I can even do anything about the metaverse on my own without a persona. And Ryuji’s a good guy. If we get him to promise to stop looking into palaces, he’ll stop.”

Akechi takes a step closer. “You’re expecting a lot of blind faith on my part. It’s a bad deal. You want my help to do something I don’t believe is right in exchange for my own peace of mind? It’s unbalanced and contradictory.”

“Then what do you want? What’ll make it an even deal?” Akira asks, voice tight. “You’ve already got the higher ground. If anyone does anything you don’t like, you can just arrest us, right?”

“No,” Akechi turns to the side. “It pains me to admit, but Sakamoto was right. I was bluffing, although I’d appreciate it if you kept that detail between us. I don’t want to arrest you and I have no intention of being arrested myself if I can avoid it. As for what I’d want…This isn’t the first time you’ve asked me that question, even if the context is a little different now.” He slides open the balcony door, the stale air of the apartment whisked away by the breeze. “You implied there was another reason you wanted to talk to me today?”

Akira knew Akechi would change the subject, cancel out whatever momentum Akira had on the subject, take the time to dissect the precise pressure points he’d need to render Akira’s attempts to persuade him useless.

He’d counted on it.
He walks over to Morgana, his back to Akechi.

“You’ve been disappearing a lot lately.” He mumbles, only loud enough for Morgana to hear. Morgana’s ears fold down, seaside blue eyes shadowed with the drop of his head. “I need to talk to you too, but I need to talk to him alone for a while first.”

Morgana’s tail leaves a wide streak of clean amidst the thin coat of dust on the counter. He makes a low whining noise before standing on all fours with a long stretch. “Fortunately for you,” he says, jumping down and heading for the balcony, “I’m in the mood for a walk.”

“This is the fifth floor.” Goro says when Morgana bounds past him. “There’s not much walking out that way.”

His reply is a scoff, an upturned nose, and a cat that isn’t a cat disappearing off the edge of the balcony.

“He’s fine.” Akira says when Akechi rushes out to look for him. “You don’t want to know some of the places I’ve seen him get to. I think he has suction cups for paws. Or a part-time job as Spiderman.”

Akechi doesn’t seem convinced, but with one final search, pushes away from the railing and steps back inside. “What exactly is it you wanted to talk about that required Morgana to jump down five stories?”

Akira grabs his water and wipes away the ring of condensation it left behind. “Don’t feel too special.” He says before taking a sip. “I’m going to talk to Morgana too, but I wanted to tell you first.” He’s looking away, tugging his blazer across his stomach in an anxious motion. He thinks of Ryuji and Ann, everyone who looks at Akechi and Akira and sees the mockery of trust they’ve built between themselves as something more.

It’s difficult to discern what’s real between them, but Akira’s beyond the point where he can afford to play it safe.

It’s time to start counting cards.

“Or, I don’t know, maybe I won’t tell anyone. It’s stupid.” He shoves his hands in his pocket, takes a few steps in the direction of the door.

“If it’s bothering you, it’s not stupid.” Akechi says, pulling him back. “You can talk to me about anything.” He says, so sincerely it makes Akira’s stomach drop right out of him. “Please talk to me.” His hands are firm around Akira’s shoulders.

Akira doesn’t have to fake the self-reproach on his face. He hates using his role as the tortured soul, but he knows Akechi lives to play hero. That naïve part of him is what Akira needs if he’s ever going to convince him of anything. He stares at a spot on the floor between their feet. “Okay. Okay, fine.” He says. He runs a hand through his hair, taking a step back. Akechi’s arms fall to his sides, expression clear of the skepticism he’d been wearing only a minute prior. “I’m going to sound crazy.”

“In my professional experience, it’s the ones who don’t sound crazy that you have to watch out for.” Akechi imparts with a smile.

Akira hates that it makes him feel better. He wonders if he should make something up instead of using the truth. He rubs his shoulder as if in consolation for the loss of Akechi’s hand.
Maybe this is a bad idea after all.

“Akira –”

“You know you never really talk about yourself. Not really. Not the important things.” Akira says in a sudden bid to forget his plan entirely. Just crumple it up and toss it in the trash can mid-report. He was going to make everything worse by doing this, exactly like his brilliant plan with Madarame. Whatever confidence he was feeling twenty seconds ago must have been a delusion, what was he thinking? He sets a pace for the balcony to call Morgana back down from whatever impossible location he ended up in. The top of a lamp post or Tokyo Tower – neither would surprise him.

Akechi follows him out, face determined, voice very, very deliberate, “If it’s you, I’d be happy to answer any questions about myself – later. You’re clearly distressed about something. Let’s focus on that first.”

Akira drums out a rhythm on the railing, wondering how long it would take to hit concrete after a tumble over the edge. He’s going to guess two seconds. It’s unbelievable how easy it is to just die in this world. He doesn’t know how anyone is still alive.

“Akira.” Akechi says, and Akira belatedly notices the flaw in his actions too late, because he is effectively trapped on the tiny balcony between a lethal drop and an occasionally lethal detective. “Whatever’s wrong, we can figure it out together.”

“Can you recommend me a good doctor for a brain transplant?” Akira asks.

“No, I’m rather fond of your brain where it is.”

“Maybe the doctor is for you.”

Akechi laughs and Akira wishes the metaverse never existed, wishes they were just two idiots trying to figure out their place in the world, their place with each other.

What a train wreck.

He was never supposed to like Akechi this much.

“Akira.” Akechi says again, softer. Akira wonders if he’s ever spoken to anyone else like this. “What’s wrong?”

It’s a good question. Or a bad one – he doesn’t know. Akira’s been trying to figure it out for a while, but he’s got a whole novel of symptoms and no diagnosis. Cancer, if he bothered to google it.

The sky is purple now and he thinks maybe he doesn’t have a choice but to tell Akechi what’s happening to him, that his world is slowly becoming more metaverse than reality.

He wonders if left alone, eventually, he’d fade away with the sunset.

In one swift movement, his glasses are pulled off his face and dangled over the side of the building between thumb and forefinger.

“Hey, that’s dangerous.” Akira says.

“Start talking or say goodbye.” Akechi says, twirling the cheap plastic in a circle.

“Littering is illegal. Drop them and I’ll call the police.”
“I am the police.” He says. Akira tuts and makes a grab for them. Akechi shoves them on his own face while sliding back, grimacing and pulling them slightly down his nose to get a look at the lenses. “Do you ever clean these?”

“I have long eyelashes, they get dirty no matter what I do. And you look like a nerd.” He says, and then amends, “Sorry, even more of a nerd.”

“I’m still waiting for you to talk.” Akechi says, pushing the glasses back up his nose. “You’re the one who wanted to.”

Akira stares for a moment, blinks, and gives up a little, letting the balcony railing support most of his weight as he stares out at a bird searching for a perch. Akechi’s using his own tactics against him, playing the idiot to lighten the mood.

“Yeah. You’re right, I did. Sorry.” He says, watching two kids down below run across the street when there’s a gap in the road. The girl pirouettes after rushing to the other side, laughing when a car blares its horn at them, her partner flipping it off as he takes his time walking across.

“You know,” Akechi says, settling in beside him, arms just shy of pressing together as they lean over the edge. The wind carries the sound of a distant chime. “I never used to spend any time here. My apartment, I mean. It was just the place I slept, I’d rarely even eat here. Then yesterday,” He grins, tucking a strand of hair behind an ear. “Yesterday, I was picking up a few groceries and after a while I realized everything in my basket were things I knew you’d like.”

Akira careens his head over to look at Akechi. He claps a hand over his mouth, chokes down his heart, and through his fingers says, “That is so embarrassing.”

Akechi’s shoulder hike up as he lets out a nervous laugh, “Is it?”

“I can’t believe you told me that, it’s so embarrassing. I am embarrassed for you. Is this what they call second hand embarrassment?”

“Is it really that weird?” Akechi asks, fidgeting with the glasses on his face. It’s been getting difficult keeping track of reality lately, but the dusting of red across Akechi’s cheeks couldn’t be mistaken.

He should look away but seeing Akechi flustered was becoming more and more of a rarity.

Akira gives into the laugh he was holding back, using Akechi’s moment of self-consciousness to snatch his glasses back. “You look ridiculous with these.” He lies, trying not to stare at the crinkle in Akechi’s nose as he tries to shape his face into something…Akira doesn’t know – less red maybe?

He’s failing.

“It’s not weird.” Akira consoles a moment later when Akechi still hasn’t managed to wrangle a convincing mask in place. “It’s nice that you thought of me. Thanks.”

Akechi is too emotionally constipated to filter out the proper words after being teased and resolves the situation with a half-hearted sulk.

“I’m still waiting.” He says.

Akira knows.

The sky is blue, not green, not purple. There are no natural disasters visible in the distance, or yen raining from the sky –
Akira takes a breath and decides whatever disaster he creates with this can’t be any worse than the one he’s already in.

“T’ve been seeing the metaverse.” He says, most of his energy going into keeping the words even. His nails bite his palms. “When I’m not in it. Glimpses here and there mostly, but some things stick around for a while.” He takes a deep breath and holds it.

He waits for something, for anything, but the mundane noise of tires on pavement, cooing of pigeons, and flap of the neighbor’s clothes hanging out to dry make him second guess whether he said anything at all.

He keeps his head down as a trickle of sweat creeps down from his hair and he moves backwards with the hope that maybe time will move in reverse with him to a point before he could even think about having this conversation with Akechi of all people.

He finds himself wrapped between two arms in an awkward hug, a clammy ear pressed to his cheek.

“Thank you for telling me.”

Akira freezes up before he relaxes, not sure he understands, but willing to accept the gesture of comfort for what it’s probably meant to be. His hands find their way around Akechi’s back.

He doesn’t realize he’s crying until his breath gives out to something wet and shuttered.

He wants to push away, go anywhere else, but there’s a soothing hand running across his back and another massaging the nape of his neck. He dries his eyes on Akechi’s sweater, a disconnected part of his brain registering the fresh scent of detergent and texture of soft cotton.

He pulls Akechi closer, crushing their bodies together into a solid line. Akechi’s heartbeat thrums against his chest and he wants desperately to ask what he could have said to keep him from death those years ago, on a ship that didn’t exist, from a time that gave up on them both. Wants to tell him he’s terrified and doesn’t know what to do.

A hand tangles itself in his hair and Akira brings his own to the curve of Akechi’s neck, sliding it up under his jaw. He feels the metal of the balcony rail digging into his back, the sun’s heat warming the back of his blazer, the firm arms holding what’s left of his tattered sanity together.

When he pulls back, he feels loss. He keeps his eyes down, pressing a flat palm against Akechi’s sternum and shivering from a puff of air against his face. He wipes his eyes with his sleeve while Akechi’s hands hover uncertainly over Akira’s arms.

“Sorry.” Akira says when he’s confident he can wrap his tongue around the words, wiping his face a little more aggressively. “I don’t know where that came from.” He tries to play off.

“I don’t mind.” Akechi says, voice low. Akira keeps a stern watch on his feet. In brazen hypocrisy, he adds, “You’ve been through a lot, you shouldn’t have to keep it in.”

Akira bites his lip and crosses his arms, missing the warmth. His mind races through an endless field of static.

A thumb runs under his eye before he’s pulled back into a gentler embrace.

“Whatever’s happening, we’ll figure it out. Everything will be alright.”

And it’s the least convincing lie he’s ever heard.
It might even be worse than hearing nothing at all.

Chapter End Notes

originally meant to go a little further into the chapter to go more into their discussion/clear a few things up about what akira's trying to achieve by finally telling akechi stuff, but this is a better cut off point, i think.

as always, feel free to point out any grammar/mistakes if you spot them!
Chapter 15

He thought he had it all. Thought the forced rehabilitation he endured pulled the scattered remains of his life out from the ashes and rekindled it into something beautiful and bright. Thought, for a while, that he’d found the one.

And maybe there was something there, briefly - the way her smile would steal the air from his lungs, the pride he felt as she grew into someone confident and, to his eyes, invincible.

It was real, but it was never love. He was sure of that when her hand let go of his for the last time and he felt relief. It wasn’t love, but his future was still vast and optimistic. There was still time.

He didn’t know the paths in front of him all converged into the same inescapable fatal funnel.

He really thought he had it all.

Now he has nothing.

“What’s on your mind?” A clink of glass accompanies a carefully calm voice as the seat on the couch next to him is taken, two cups with melting ice set down on the table in front of them.

Akira has difficulty meeting curious eyes and then Akechi’s general direction when he spots the wet patch on his shoulder. His face itches, and dry skin feels like paper pulled taut, ready to tear. He doesn’t want to talk anymore, but inevitability has him cornered.

The balcony door remains open, and Morgana’s continued absence is necessary if not particularly wanted. Akira’s chest is still tight, his breathing hoarse – and he may have started this, but he needs a little more time to recover before jumping back into the conversation that brought him here – to Akechi’s apartment, on Akechi’s couch, at Akechi’s mercy –

He turns his head and wipes a thumb across irritated, tear stained skin.

“What do you think happens when we die?” He asks.

“A morbid topic.” Akechi muses, unperturbed. Akira knows he has concerns. “But an interesting one. A well entertained one, too. In fact, I’ve recently finished reading Dante’s Inferno, which while never intended to be any sort of accurate depiction of an afterlife, certainly paints a fascinating picture. A picture that’s managed to stay relevant even in modern society.” Akechi laughs as if embarrassed. “Although I’m not trying to say I believe in heaven or hell or any sort of afterlife.”

“Nothing at all?”

Akechi directs a sightless glance to the TV. “I might have agreed to that once.”

“But not anymore?”

Akechi smiles. “Now I’ve been forced to accept that there are things far beyond the scope of my imagination.” He says. Akira keeps his head down. It’s not something he would have expected him to say. “And you? Any theories?”

Akira shrugs, hiding a grimace. “Nah.” He doubts his experience with death is the norm. And if he
dies again to find out it’s his norm, then he hopes he discovers immortality. Ignoring the significant problems he’s dealing with, even the idea of going through another two years of high school makes him want to roll under his bed and never leave.

Why three years?

He thinks of the velvet room the last time he saw it – devoid of its handlers, the room itself familiar in the sense that he knew what it was, but unfamiliar in that it wasn’t his. The details are blurry. He wasn’t there long. Time and space may not follow the same rules in whatever universe the room exists in, but the trauma of dying must not have promoted rational thought or patience.

A pillow finds itself home in Akira’s lap, immediately followed by a full head of hair as Akechi makes himself comfortable.

“You were starting to look anxious again.” Akechi explains from Akira’s lap when his brain hiccups a few times too many.

“Is this supposed to help?” Akira asks, because if he’s sure of anything at all, it’s that it’s not helping. “Shouldn’t it be the other way around?”

“When you’re anxious you have the tendency to run away. I’m merely taking measures to prevent that from happening.” He blinks up at him like this is normal behavior.

“I could shove you off.” Akira points out.

“Please don’t. I’ve had a long day, I’d rather not spend what’s left of my energy chasing you through my apartment.”

“Aha, so this is all for your benefit.”

“Well, I won’t lie and say that the idea didn’t appeal to me. But if you’d rather switch positions, I’d be more than happy to accommodate you.”

Akira thinks Akechi could most definitely stand to be a lot less confident.

He clears his throat, but his voice still rattles. “So, what were you doing earlier? Working?”

“Akira.” Akechi says, his tone delivering the message for him. Apparently, he’s done with distractions.

Akira bites his lip. “Indulge me, just a little bit longer.”

Akechi spends a mute moment considering it before closing his eyes and sighing, “Yes, I was working this morning. Believe it or not, I’m not universally loved by everyone I meet.”

“Oh, wow. You’re not?” Akira asks with the same level of surprise he has when Ann announces she forgot to bring a pencil to class. Akechi cracks an eye open in a half-hearted glare. And Akira should be used to Akechi encroaching on his personal space by now – but he’s very literally lying on him. “Who are these heathens?”

With a little more volume, Akechi continues, “A detective at the precinct apparently found a mistake on something I filed a few weeks ago and needed the corrected version before his lunch break. When I arrived to hand the papers over, he was mysteriously and suddenly missing from his desk. I had to wait for him to return.”
“Couldn’t you leave the papers there?”

“And get a call back later that he found another mistake or that they managed to disappear before he got back? No thank you. I waited for him and had him ensure everything was to his liking to prevent another hassle.”

“What a life.”

“It’s fine, I took my revenge. While I was waiting, I noticed he forgot to lock his desktop before running off to hide. I may have changed his computer’s cursor to a transparent image.” Akechi confides with a smirk.

“Whoa, hey there detective. You’re supposed to be catching criminals, not committing unspeakable crimes in the name of Satan.”

Akechi’s laugh is a surprise to them both. He hides his grin with a hand, lashes fluttering as his eyes shift indecisively between Akira and anywhere else.

“I’ll admit it was petty of me, but I’d do it again.”

“Next time screenshot the desktop, set it as the wallpaper, then hide the taskbar and icons.”

“I see you have experience in this area.”

“Only as the victim, unfortunately.”

Another laugh. Akira kills his own urge to smile.

“Though I must warn you – now that you know of my extracurricular activities, it makes you an accessory after the fact. Report me and I’ll take you down with me.”

The drop in Akira’s stomach is large enough to trigger a change in atmospheric pressure. He shivers. Akechi doesn’t know how right he is. Has no idea how much power they both have over each other. Enough power to destroy, but not enough to save. Akira doesn’t know if they’ll ever reach that point.

“Your secret’s safe with me.” Akira tries to play off with a stilted smile, pulling a strand of hair that was caught beneath his glasses.

“You know,” Akechi says after a moment. “Your secrets are safe with me, too.” Akira glances down in time to find him reaching up and gently pulling the glasses from his face for the second time that day. “Including the fact that you only wear these to hide behind them.”

And Akira’s stuck between hashing out the expected retort or covering his face. Hide the evidence of swollen eyes and harsh lines. Of the fact that he shared any secrets at all. That he had any secrets to hide.

He’s too slow, any response he might have chosen erased from time as fingers brush the same skin he wanted to shroud.

It’s too intimate. This isn’t something friends do. He knows he should pull away – but the touch is feather light and cool. He closes his eyes.

“Akira.” Akechi says again, barely a breath.

Akira breathes slow and deep through his nose, trying to control the stutter of his heart. He can’t
remember if he’s ever felt such a terrible rush of distress and guilt before. He wishes he could convince himself that’s all he feels.

The hand withdraws, but eyes don’t open. Uncertain words form in the back of his throat.

“I don’t really know what to think about you.” Akira says.

A mute pause.

“But –” A tentative voice responds, “– you do think about me?”

And Akira knows he shouldn’t encourage this.

“Yeah.” He says. Too often, he thinks.

“Well,” Akechi says, spoken so softly Akira’s not sure it was ever supposed to leave his mouth. “I can work with that.” Akira wishes the smile he finds doesn’t mean anything to him. “But first – we should talk about what’s happening to you. Though maybe it would be ideal to allow ourselves to have few minutes before we discuss it any further. I have a lot of questions. I don’t want to overwhelm you.”

His reasoning isn’t convincing and becomes even less so when whatever’s left of his posture goes slack as he sighs and sinks further into the couch and Akira’s lap, hair fanned out beneath him – basking in the moment before it vanishes forever.

Akira doesn’t know what to think about Akechi, about the patient hand that keeps finding its way into his own, the same hand that tried to kill him. He can’t trust him, but he wants to. His guard is broken, but he’s yet to see the damage.

He smooths back the brown fringe covering Akechi’s forehead, taking in the entirety of Akechi’s face for the first time. If anyone ever said Akechi wasn’t beautiful, it was a lie.

If the goal isn’t to overwhelm him, Akechi has thoroughly failed.

Akechi smiles up at him with a toothy grin that somehow makes him look even younger.

For the moment they’re just two dead kids, trying to remember how to live.

Dusk drapes the apartment in deep twilight hues and soft blue shadows.

Talking at length isn’t his best skill, preferring the visible contrast of ink on paper to sort his thoughts – precise and simple lines that provide a clarity that often gets muddled with the impromptu spoken word. Less chance of error, of things being taken out of context. Easier to backtrack and analyze, to make corrections.

Easier to lie.

Akechi’s no journal, not limited to the consumption of the written word with their misleading definitions and underlying suggestions. He’s a liar himself first and foremost and a detective second. A disastrous combination for anyone trying to hide anything from someone who’s actively looking
for whatever may be hidden.

Akira knows Akechi is looking. Hasn’t looked away once as Akira talks and talks, stumbling over unrehearsed and fragmented sentences as he recounts when he’s seen things he shouldn’t be seeing. He’s not sure he makes sense or that there’s any sense to be made of what he says but getting the words out of his head and into someone else’s feels like the first breath of fresh air after being trapped in a mold-infested room for a year.

Akechi continues to stare from the other side of the couch well after Akira’s voice runs dry, hand on chin and shoulders back. Akira lets gravity pull him back further into the couch with the hope he’ll end up like someone’s forgotten pocket change under the cushions. Akechi doesn’t blink.

“Don’t you have questions or...?” Akira waves his hand out, irritated and exhausted.

Akechi seems to realize he’s not capable of telepathic communication. “Oh, sorry. I was thinking.”

“Could you try thinking in another direction?”

“Another direction?”

“You’re staring.”

Akechi finally looks away, rubbing the back of his neck as he stands. “Sorry. It’s a bad habit.”

“Staring at me? I’ve noticed.”

“No, that’s not what I –” Akechi cuts himself off and sighs. “Well, maybe I should be more careful about that as well.” He flicks the lights on, banishing the long reaching shadows back out the windows, and heads for the balcony. “That’s how Ann-chan figured me out.” He mumbles to himself before glancing out and looking around.

“Mona will probably find me when I head out, if that’s what you’re checking for. I doubt he stuck around here unless he’s eavesdropping.”

“Ah, in that case –” He slides the glass doors closed. “You said earlier that you haven’t spoken to Morgana about any of this?”

“I haven’t.” Akira confirms.

“Any particular reason why?” Akechi asks.

Akira can feel the beginnings of a stress headache.

“No.” He says.

Akechi hums and circles back around the couch, hand glued back to his chin. “And the reason you’re talking to me about it now – scratch that.” He steps in front of Akira. “Is there a trigger for it? Does something usually happen before you see something?”

Akira shrugs. “Stress maybe?”

“How often are you stressed?” Akechi asks. Akira snorts. When isn’t he stressed? “Do you see anything now?”

“No.”
“Have you ever seen glimpses of your own palace?”

Akira crosses his arms. “I wouldn’t know.”

Akechi looks like he has something to say about that but chooses to let it go. “From the little we know about the metaverse, it’s not beyond reason to postulate that a contributing factor to why you’re seeing the metaverse is due to your connection with it.”

“If everyone with a palace was seeing the things I am, I think the psych wards around here would be overrun.”

“Potentially, yes. But I wasn’t referring to only having a palace. It’s possible that us bringing you into the metaverse is making things worse. Morgana has said that as persona users, we have defenses against the metaverse that you don’t have —”

“Yeah, against fighting shadows —”

“— but what if it’s more than that?” Akechi asks. “The sad truth is that we simply don’t know enough to determine a cause.”

“If you’re trying to say I shouldn’t go into the metaverse anymore, then I’m going to have to tell you to fuck off.”

“I figured as much, but yes, that would be my first suggestion. If you stayed out of the metaverse for a while, it would be easy enough to determine if that reduces the frequency of what you’ve been seeing.”

“Yeah, not happening. If you guys go in, I’m going with you. If that means I have to see a giant floating bank hovering over Shibuya every now and then, then that’s my problem.”

“But that isn’t the problem — is it?” Akechi asks. “It’s getting worse, that’s why you’re telling me now. You’re scared.”

Akira’s jaw clenches and he turns his head. Akechi gingerly retakes the spot at his side, leg pressed to his, hand over his wrist.

“I can help you, but you have to tell me what’s going on. This is about the incident with Madarame, isn’t it?” Akechi asks. “Akira, you’re not just seeing things anymore, are you?”

As much as he knew this would come up, he still fights the urge to rip his arm away and deny everything he’s already admitted to.

“You shouldn’t tell people you can help them when you don’t know any more than they do.”

Akechi sucks in a breath and withdraws his hand. “You’re right. I can only try to help. But at the very least I know I can help you from going through this alone.” Comforting words that only serve to further pry open the self-inflicted wound of isolation. “I think until we’ve learned more you should start staying here.”

“…I think you’re taking the ‘helping me from going through this alone’ thing a little too literally.”

“I disagree. What really happened when you found yourself in Madarame’s Palace?”

Akira lowers his eyes. “I don’t know.”

“Given the fact that you can see glimpses into the metaverse while in the real world, is it
unreasonable to suggest that you might also somehow be able to trigger entering the metaverse without the use of the app?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t try and tell me the thought never occurred to you.”

Akira stands up and paces across the room. “Look, I said I don’t know, okay? If what happened back then was because of me – or – or something else. I don’t know. I didn’t trigger anything. I wasn’t even thinking about the metaverse or palaces. I just wanted to prove to Yusuke that his teacher was a fraud.”

“And by showing him Madarame’s heart itself, you more than succeeded. Remember, the metaverse doesn’t operate on logic – it’s reigned by corrupt thoughts and desires. You wanted Kitagawa to see Madarame’s corruption. Maybe your subconscious took matters into its own hands when you doubted yourself.”

“My subconscious?” Akira repeats, staring at the shadow under his feet. Two cigarette butt eyes glare up at him from the floor. He blinks them away. “If it’s powerful enough to do that, is it still only my subconscious?”

Akechi sighs and rests his chin on his hands. “You’re thinking about it as if it’s something separate from yourself. Your subconscious is you. Your thoughts. Thinking any differently is only hurting you.” His mouth twists up into something bitter. “You can’t keep letting your thoughts control your life.”

Akira shoves his hands in his pockets and kicks at the floor. He already knows but knowing something and applying it are two separate tasks. “How?” He asks.

He doesn’t think Akechi knows either. He sits there without an answer while the silence hangs heavy around them, hands folded together in mimicry of prayer as if waiting for divine revelation to bless him with the correct words.

The words don’t come.

He pockets his phone instead of replying whenever Akechi messages him the next day. Morgana side eyes him, suspicious in his own right.

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten about you.” Akira mumbles at his desk, effectively stifling any questions. Morgana’s eyes narrow and he flicks his tail with a harrumph, but the way his ears sink tell Akira all he needs to know.

Ann hooks her arm through his when classes are over with a smile that could free the skies from a hurricane.

“I know Goro’s making you talk to me.” Akira deadpans before she gets a word out. He has a clear view of her phone from the way she likes to sit, and he could recognize Akechi’s tiny picture from outer space thanks to his primal instinct to get the hell away.

Her smile wanes, but her arm tightens like a blood pressure cuff. “He has been asking me to tell you to stop ignoring him, but that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about. I wanted to know if you
talked to him about helping Kitagawa-kun yet.”

“Why don’t you try talking to him about it yourself?” Akira grumbles. “You know disagreeing with him about something isn’t going to ruin your friendship. He likes arguing and feeling morally superior.” If Akira ever needs a makeshift tourniquet, Ann would be his first choice. He shakes his arm out of her grasp and flexes his fingers to get the blood pumping again.

Ann crosses her arms and walks with him down the stairs, feet meeting each step with a petulant stomp. “It’s more complicated than that.” She says, her sullen expression almost cartoonish as it pulls at her face. “It feels like you and Ryuji are always fighting with him about something. I don’t think he has many people he can relax around or just be a teenager with and not have to defend himself all the time. I mean he’s comfortable with you, but that’s different, obviously.”

Obviously, she says.

He feels Morgana shuffling around in his bag, but he doesn’t say anything. Surprising, considering his overwhelming desire to always have Ann’s attention.

“If he values your friendship at all then confronting him isn’t going to change anything. I’m willing to bet he knows you’re trying to keep the peace, so if you do say something it’ll have more effect than when me or Ryuji say it. Friendships aren’t something you should have to tiptoe through, Ann.”

“I know that. I know. I’m just…” She sighs, twining a blonde lock around a finger. “Does he know that?”

Akira rubs the back of his neck, eyes locked to the wood panel floor beneath his feet. “He sure doesn’t tiptoe around with me.”

“Well, yeah, but that’s –”

“Different, okay, I get it. But holding friendships to different standards isn’t healthy either. It’s one thing to have a friend you like to do certain things with that you don’t like doing with others, but having friends you don’t feel comfortable being honest about things that are important to you? Is that even a friendship?” The words are so sour in his mouth that he’s surprised Ann doesn’t flinch away from the overpowering stench of hypocrisy. “I get that you’re trying to be supportive but letting him think your friendship is something he can walk all over and take control of is only going to lead to resentment and hatred later. Think about you and Ryuji – how do you think you guys would get along if you were always playing nice?”

“Ugh, say no more.” Ann jumps in front of him with a twirl, pushing the entrance door open with her back. “We’d explode within an hour.”

Akira smiles, squinting as he steps outside only to be assaulted by the sun hanging unobstructed on a canvas of solid blue, waiting for prey. “Goro shouldn’t get special treatment because he’s new to the whole having friends thing. You’re just going to give him the wrong idea. And don’t fall for his pity parties, he’s just being an asshole and you know it.”

“He’s not that bad.” Ann says, but the way she stretches her hands out over head while biting down a grin doesn’t lend her much credence. “Sorry about bombing you with all of this. I guess I’m still figuring out how to have friends too. Shiho and Ryuji are really the only ones I’ve ever had until now.” She winces and presses her knuckles to her lips. “That’s a bit pathetic, isn’t it?”

They pass by a group of students huddled together, laughing over a video on someone’s phone. Akira sticks a hand in his bag, prodding Morgana a few times before sharp teeth latch onto a finger.
“I’ve had a lot of friends.” Akira starts, hesitant to continue. “Maybe the word friend is pushing it for some of them, but I’ve spent a lot of time with a lot of people. None of them were bad – but I’d take a single close friend I could be myself with over all the other friends in the world. You’re lucky, Ann.”

Ann gently bumps his shoulder. “That means you’re lucky too, you know.” She shifts her weight, putting most of it on Akira. He feels something lighten in his chest, but the weight of his own lies remains steady. “Wanna go do something today? I’m in the mood for some shopping and there are still a few things stuck up here I need help clearing out.” She raps the side of her head with a fist with a feigned expression of pain.

“There’s something I have to do today, but I know Goro’s free. I’d actually owe you one if you managed to get him off my back for a little bit.”

“What is it with you two today? Is it about Kitagawa-kun?”

They stop at a crosswalk, waiting for the light to change. Akira takes a long breath. “Not exactly. Though I’m working on that, too. It’s, um.” He rubs a hand up and down his wrist. “I’ve been going through some stuff.” He bites his words back with a scowl. “And he’s been trying to help, but I need more time to think about things than he does. And he thinks letting me think too much is making everything worse, so he’s probably planning to knock me out and deliver my cure with a dose of amnesia.”

Ann laughs with a roll of her eyes. “I can distract him for the day if you really need it.” She says. “But I’m also here if you want a more relaxed ear to talk to. I know Akechi is kind of a fixer.” She makes a face.

Akira nods with a stifled laugh of his own as they cross the street. “Thanks, Ann. I’m sorry I can’t take you up on that offer just yet though. I’m…” His words break off. There’s not much he’s willing to say that isn’t a lie. Ashamed. Embarrassed. Scared.

The once reliable leader of the Phantom Thieves reduced to a boy scared of his own shadow.

He’s finally able to admit it to himself, at least.

Ann doesn’t push it, opting to make a show of messaging Akechi, baiting him by claiming to have some new Akira-gossip.

Before they part ways, Ann tugs at the sleeve of his blazer. “Akira, I know you’re sick of me teasing you all the time, but why aren’t you dating Goro? He likes you, and even though you try to hide it I can tell there’s something there.”

Akira pulls away from her, remembering arms wrapped around him in the twilight, shattered masks crushed behind bulkhead doors, promises of truth and justice that served only to conceal chaos and lies.

Three years ago, Akechi Goro died. His life just ended, and the world didn’t spare a minute to mourn him. No body, no funeral, no investigation. A ghost in his own life, interviews that were never re-aired and a forgotten tie that was accidentally left behind in a pile of the Phantom Thieves’ old equipment the only proof he ever existed.

“For the same reason flowers don’t bloom in the winter.” Akira says, raising his hand in goodbye. “We wouldn’t survive.”
Ann messages him hardly an hour later with a picture of Akechi skeptically inspecting a monstrosity of a dessert in some chic bakery Akira doesn’t recognize, unaware that his picture was being taken. Beneath the image, Ann links an impressively long list of flowers that bloom in the winter.

Momentarily regretful of his word choice, he turns off his phone and looks far overhead at the dark line that forms the keel of a massive ship, the wake trailing behind it distorting the sunlight as beams haphazardly reach their way down to him through murky water, casting shimmering, everchanging shapes on the square concrete tiles that pave the way to what would have been the Diet Building if it wasn’t floating fifty meters overhead.

Morgana jumps out of the bag, and Akira breathes now that the illusion of being trapped underwater is dispelled.

“What are we doing here?” Morgana asks, the erratic swing of his tail giving away his discomfort. Akira almost feels bad, dropping the whole we need to talk spiel and then keeping him in anticipation for a whole day.

“The guy who put me in jail works here. I guess I was just feeling nostalgic.”

“Nostalgic? Wait, the guy who framed you works here?” He screeches, fur standing on end. “This building looks important.”

Akira grunts and starts to backtrack to the station.

“Hold up.” Morgana dashes in front of him. “What’s the guy’s name? We can see if he has a palace!”

“He definitely has a palace.” Akira says, blinking away a piece of plastic floating in front of his face in Shido’s polluted ocean water. “But we’ve already got the Madarame problem on our hands that Goro still hasn’t budged on.”

Morgana’s whiskers droop before he’s struck by inspiration. “We can make this one our secret side project?”

Akira hides a grin behind a cough before scooping Morgana off the floor. “Maybe we can take a look into it in the future.” He acquiesces. Hesitantly, he changes the subject, “I wanted to apologize.”

Morgana squirms in his grasp until Akira lets him climb up on his shoulder as he meanders through business men and women too distracted by their overpriced phones to care about some kid with a cat.

“For what?” Morgana asks.

“I know you already know about –” His mouth goes dry and he licks his lips, his heart beating heavy with shame. The slightest prickling of claws pierce through his jacket and his fragile sense of pride wins the battle against reason, strangling his voice.

“It’s okay.” Morgana says. “I was listening when you were talking to Lady Ann earlier. You don’t have to tell me until you’re ready to tell everyone.”

And for a moment, the stress evaporates from his body and his mind is his own again. Whole and untouched by sin, free from the conflicting need to tell his friends everything and the irrational desire to keep pretending nothing’s wrong –
It doesn’t last.

He wouldn’t be judged for having a palace. He’s always known that. There was never even a fleeting thought that Futaba was less than the rest of them for having a palace. They never held Sae’s Palace against her, despite the pain that came of it. He knows his friends would only want to help — the same way Akechi claims to.

That’s the problem.

“Morgana,” Akira picks up from where he cut himself off, determined. He swallows down his heart. “I know you know that I have a palace. If Akechi could figure it out, there’s no way you wouldn’t have. You probably knew as soon as it was clear I wasn’t going to be summoning a persona any time soon.”

A tail swings up around his neck, the white fur at the end brushing up against his face almost in consolation.

“Having a palace doesn’t mean you’re a bad person.” Morgana is quick to reassure, skipping past any pretenses that he might not have known or was unsure.

“I know.” Neither does it mean he isn’t. But if Akira can keep everyone out, no one has to find out the truth. “Thank you for not telling everyone about it.”

“I wouldn’t do that! But I have been thinking about how to bring it up to you. I guess you beat me to the punch.”

“Sorry – there’s, there’s more to it, but uh, it would probably be better if Akechi’s around before we talk anymore about it. He’s a little…” Akira trails off, struggling to find the word.

“Obsessed with you?” Morgana offers.

Akira mouths obsessed to himself, pinching the bridge of his nose with a weak laugh. “I was going more for worried or overbearing, but that works. If you could say it when he’s around, that’d be even better.”

“Gladly.” Morgana says, chin up.

When the station’s in view, Akira takes one more look back in the direction of the Diet Building, the unnatural azure shimmer in the sky pinpointing where it sits innocuously behind the other buildings, where it floats with careless disregard, destroying anything in its path, and where once upon a time it was the last place Akechi Goro was seen alive.

Akira cradles his wrist, snapping back to reality when Morgana jumps back in his bag to hide from security.

“Thanks for not making a big deal out of this.” Akira whispers on the train, forehead pressed against glass. He watches the lights of the tunnels flicker between harsh white and dim, blackened red. It looks darker than he remembers. “I’m sorry I haven’t told you everything.”

He can see a peek of bright blue from his periphery. “Don’t be. I have a few things I’ve been keeping to myself too. I’m not sure what it means, and I didn’t want to worry anyone.”

Akira remembers what he originally meant to ask Morgana and turns his attention back to him. He looks small and uncertain as he peers up. “Does it have to do with why you’ve been going to the metaverse on your own?”
Disgruntled, Morgana ducks down further. “Something’s changing.”

Akira gazes back out the window, everything in sight washed in the sickly crimson glow.

With a tiny voice, Morgana supplements, “I thought I might have been reading into it a little too much at first, but now that it’s been a while and it seems to be getting worse…”

“What is it?” Akira asks, matching Morgana’s tone.

Morgana goes silent for a moment before a single blue eye flashes with worry. “Something hungry.” The way he says it stirs something in Akira’s gut, reawakening something putrid and half-buried in his memory. “I can only sense it in Mementos, but I’m worried about what could happen if it spreads to the palaces.”

He doesn’t need to press him to know he specifically meant Akira’s palace.

“If it spreads?” Akira echoes. “That makes it sound like a disease.”

“Or an infestation.” Morgana adds.

It’s raining when they reach Shibuya Station. Thick red globs of water hit the floor like paint, oozing across the surface and filling in every crevice.

Akira thinks of dead gods and hopes that Morgana is simply more attuned to the inner workings of Mementos than he was before, that he’s only feeling the ever-increasing spread of cognitive distortion among the population.

But his dreams are soaked in an oil of havoc, drowning him in a world that’s both birthed and undone in the paradox of infinity’s end.

It takes two more days for Akechi to track Akira down. He owes Ann for providing ample distractions and Ryuji for wanting in on the fun and offering him a place to stay for a couple nights. He repaid the hospitality by whipping up some curry for Ryuji and his mother, and he couldn’t exactly make out the words Ryuji’s mother said during the sudden and unannounced competition with her son to eat as fast and as much as humanly possible, but Akira thinks he’s been adopted. Or that they’re making him adopt them. He’s unsure.

“Found you.” A cheery voice growls with an unconvincing lilt to the words.

“Oh, get your talons off me, I’m delicate.” He ineffectively swipes at the gloved hand wrapped around his arm. “But seriously, I’m working right now.” He gestures at his boss discreetly watching them over a display of yellow carnations and then at the hydrangeas he was holding.

“I wasn’t aware you worked here.” Akechi offers a smile that promises death while tightening his grip. “It’s very fortunate I happened to be in need of a bouquet.”

Akira raises a brow. “What do you need a bouquet for?”

“None of your business.” Akechi says pleasantly with an adorable tilt of his head.

Akira’s funeral probably.
Akira tries to smile back, but it doesn’t quite work out. “What type of bouquet do you want?”

“What do you recommend? I’ll trust your judgement.”

Akira frees himself from the human handcuff and turns around, setting the vase he was holding with the rest of the displays. His boss shoots him a questioning glance that he returns with a look he hopes conveys he’s about to be murdered and needs immediate rescue.

She mouths good luck and turns the other way.

Akira proceeds to create the ugliest bouquet that has ever had the privilege of existing using the flowers closest to death with absolutely no regard to shape, size, color, or sense of aesthetic. Yusuke would have a seizure. He doesn’t bother trimming anything or cutting the stems before binding everything together with floral tape and wrapping it up in bright yellow plastic.

He kind of likes it.

Several dry petals fall to the floor as he holds it out for Akechi. “That’ll be 3,500 yen.”

Surely charmed by Akira’s florist skills, Akechi hands over the exact amount required before freeing Akira from his flawless and mostly expired creation.

After taking a moment to appreciate Akira’s handiwork, the bouquet is presented back to him. “For you.” He says with a flourish. “It was arranged by someone very familiar with your tastes, so I’m sure it won’t disappoint.”

Akira sneezes, the force of it blowing a dozen petals from the bouquet to the floor.

“Smooth.” He tells Akechi, taking the flowers back. “Would you consider this a representation of our relationship?”

“Are we calling it a relationship now? I wasn’t aware we’d gotten that far yet. Did it happen before or during the three days you’ve been avoiding me?”

“I didn’t mean a relationship,” He says with emphasis, “And I told you a million times before I blocked you that I wanted a little extra time to think about things before we jump into actually doing anything.”

There’s a polite ahem from Akira’s side, making him jump. His boss looks between them with a poorly suppressed grin. “I think I’ll be able to handle the shop for the rest of the night, Kurusu-kun. We don’t usually have too many customers this late. Here’s your pay…” Akira can’t believe his ears as he’s handed his pay and shooed away by his own boss. Work is supposed to be a safe space. An Akechi-free zone.

His trust is shattered.

But more importantly, Akechi is smug and Akira hates that.

“Where’s Morgana?” Akechi asks when he collects his things.

Akira shrugs off his apron. “He likes to explore. We should wait for him somewhere – I don’t think he knows how to get around on the trains very well by himself.”

“Since you’ve apparently forgotten, I’d like to remind you that one of the major points of our conversation was to avoid letting you be alone in case something happened.”
“Nothing happened.” Akira waves a final time at his boss, leaving a trail of dead petals as he walks. “And I’ve been talking to Morgana. About stuff.”

“You told him?” Akechi asks, surprised. Akira thinks he sees a flash of disappointment.

“He already knew.” Akira corrects. “About my, the uh, the palace thing.” It’s still a struggle to say the word my and the word palace consecutively. “I think he started suspecting it before we finished Kamoshida’s Palace.”

Akechi leads the way to an unoccupied bench by the stairs out. “Given his knowledge of the metaverse and the amount of time he spends with you, I suppose it shouldn’t come as a surprise.”

“That’s what I said. I haven’t told him about the,” He gestures nonsensically. “The seeing things. I figured it’d be easier to talk to both of you at the same time instead of separately.”

Softly, Akechi remarks, “You’re getting more comfortable talking about all of this.”

Akira smooths out the wrinkles in his jeans. “Denial’s hard work and I was living there for a while. Pretending something doesn’t bother me as much as it really does is like stretching my arms after a workout.”

“That doesn’t sound healthy.” Akechi shakes his head with a wry grin. “I’ve been worried about you.”

Akira put his hands on his knees and rolls his neck. “You usually are.”

“Was avoiding me really necessary?” Akechi asks.

“Maybe for the first day, yeah. I needed to think about what you said without getting tricked into agreeing with you. Don’t look at me like that, you know how you are. And your constant messaging was annoying. I was at school and your questions were giving me an existential crisis in the middle of history. There was chalk thrown. It wasn’t funny, stop laughing.”

Akechi visibly holds himself back from saying something. After a brief mental argument, he asks, “So, from what you’ve said, everything is my fault?”

“Ryuji wanted to hang out yesterday and Ann told me she was already planning to get you and Yusuke to talk things out a little more, and then I remembered when you disappeared that one time and ignored all my messages and never even told me what that was all about so you deserved to suffer a little bit. And I wasn’t even trying to avoid you today. Waited for you to message me and everything. I don’t know what took you so long.”

Akechi visibly holds himself back from saying something. After a brief mental argument, he asks, “So, from what you’ve said, everything is my fault?”

“Yup.”

Akechi presses a palm to his eye, a resigned smile on his face. “Honestly. You say you had to disappear to stop me from tricking you, but you’re the real danger between the two of us.”

“That’s your fault for letting me talk so much.”

“You’re absolutely right. I’ll have to find a way to stop that.” He leans forward.

Akira elbows him out of his personal space with a stupid grin. “Weren’t you ready to tear my arm off a couple minutes ago?”
“I told you, letting you talk is dangerous. Besides, I bought you flowers. Would I have done that if I was angry?”

“Ah, you’re right.” Akira grabs the floral masterpiece from next to him on the bench. “This must have cost a fortune. I hope the exceptionally skilled and handsome minimum-wage part-timer who put it together got a raise.”

“If anything, it looked like he was let go.”

“His mastery of the craft was too much for his boss to handle.”

“That’s debatable.”

“Would you two stop?” Morgana howls from directly in front of them, effectively shutting the both of them up. “This is painful to listen to.”

Akira straightens up fast enough to break the sound barrier. He sets the bouquet aside. “Oh, hey. We were waiting for you. How long have you been there?”

“Too long.” Morgana groans.

Akechi’s unruffled, greeting him with his trademark smile, brushing a hand against Akira’s as he and Morgana exchange pleasantries and subtle jabs at Akira.

Akira’s heart flutters when Akechi turns that smile back to him, any irritation built up over the past few days washed away after a few minutes in his company. Akira looks up, wondering if there’s some invisible umbrella protecting them from the rain of logic that visibly soaks the ground with letters that spell out a single harrowing word:

DON’T.

Akechi offers Akira his hand to help him up when it’s time to go. He marvels a little at how unnecessary the gesture is, thinking for the millionth time that he shouldn’t encourage these things.

But he does.

Chapter End Notes

hahaha all ye of little faith, i bet you thought i was dead or something.

well, you're right. im posting this from beyond the grave. i’ve suffocated myself in ps4 sales and steam sales and then i bought a switch, so hey. i also hit a bit of a mental block with writing anything at all over the past few months, not just with this story. i’ve tried starting up multiple little things only to find failure in every word i write, so i apologize if this chapter reads a bit rough or forced. i'm working on getting back into the swing of things. But really, if you're worried i’ve lost interest, don't be. I still jot down lines and scenarios I plan on using in the story all the time, it's just been difficult getting words and lines to fit together.

Thanks to everyone who have stuck with the story for so long and thank you to all the
new readers that popped up with the last chapter! Sorry you had to find the story when I kind of fell off the rails!
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Lala once told him that sitting in the same place long enough could convince anyone that they’ve been everywhere. He thought she might have been referring to the regulars at the bar, with their surefire schemes for fortune, only to come back the next day and wash that pipe dream back down their throats and cough up a new, better plan that put all their previous inventions to shame. Sometimes he even thought she was talking about herself – always behind the counter greeting new faces that arrive with shocking news and the wildest gossip. That maybe the faces all started to become less and less unique and all the best gossip began sounding like something that already happened to whatshername a few weeks ago.

Maybe she meant both, maybe she meant neither. Akira doesn’t know and thinks that perhaps the time to ask has long since passed. Has yet to pass, whatever. All he can really guarantee is that the marble tile floor under his ass is numbing him with impending frost bite and that he’s sure he’s been sitting on it for an impossible amount of time. He’s not even sure there is an everywhere anymore. The world probably already burnt to a crisp from crashing into the sun some billion years ago as he busied himself watching the high paneled ceiling roil and break and twist in ways that inspired his stomach into rebellion. Below the ceiling isn’t any better a focal point. Too much movement even without the aid of his deteriorating vision. He looks anyway because the alternative is closing his eyes and facing a reality he doesn’t want to acknowledge.

Yusuke sprouts from the ground and shoots up, arcing his blade in a graceful curve at a lithe figure streaming through the air with the aid of an unfelt wind. The attack lacks any substantial power behind it, the drawback of inexperience, but Morgana’s slingshot aims true and rescues Yusuke from matching his supply of charcoal in appearance as the flames directed his way flicker and die. He offers a curt nod of gratitude and strikes again with more confidence, slicing the shadow back into the unstable, formless mass of repressed thoughts and emotions it was birthed from. He flicks his blade with a scoff, dislodging the remains of dissipating shadow sticking to the edges like mud.

And Yusuke’s amazing, Akira thinks. Yusuke could probably sit in the same place forever and still find something new to marvel over - to question, explore, and learn. His perception is malleable and curious, if not particularly sharp. No, not sharp, not at all like the jaded, jagged certainty of Akechi’s stare that drills holes through Akira’s skull and scrapes around his brain like a pig rooting for truffles. A conversation with Akechi is akin to brain surgery without anesthesia compared to Yusuke’s accidental armchair psychology.

Not that he’d ever tell him that. He might get ideas and Akira is a firm believer that the overall composition of his brain is just fine and probably only needs whatever the mental equivalent of a glass of water is. No drills or scalpels or any more bullets please.

Instead, he gets a hilt of a lightsaber to the head and Akechi himself immediately after.

“Damnit. Are you okay?” Akechi asks without even a thought of an apology, gasping for air as if someone took a battering ram to his chest. He struggles to prop himself back up, one ankle still hooked over Akira’s leg.

“No,” Akira says, rubbing the new bump on his forehead and trying to ignore the room orbiting around him. Ryuji frantically shouts zio! in an unintelligible stream from somewhere. The sparks are too bright to look at, and become even more so when Yusuke adopts Ryuji’s tactic, his shards of ice
reflecting and refracting and making Akira supremely grateful he’s not epileptic.

Ann stumbles over to them, looking ready to collapse on top of them both. “Ran out of batteries.” She mutters, hovering over them unsteadily. “Can’t shoot it, can’t hit it – I’m useless without my persona.”

“It’s remarkably immune to bless and curse attacks as well.” Akechi informs, still breathless, stumbling up and back onto his feet, moving his mask to wipe the sweat from his face. “It’s painful to admit, but there’s not much I can do against this one, either.”

“It landed a good hit on both of you, maybe we should sit the rest of this one out. It looks like they’re managing to chip away at it without us.”

Akechi brushes his hair back before fixing his mask back into place, content to let his silence mark his agreement.

Akira risks another look at the three still in the game. Morgana joined in on the attack, summoning whips of wind to support the lightning and ice, creating a veritable hailstorm to destroy their target. And the room. And Akira’s glasses, he surmises as broken pebbles of ice find passage in a stray gust of wind, pelting him harmlessly and melting in cold lines down his face.

“It’ll be wrapped up soon with Mona in there.” Akechi says haggardly as they haul Akira onto his feet and take temporary refuge behind a paper folding screen with Madarame’s face and signature inked on it in skilled, commercialized strokes.

The black lines of the face printed over jaundiced panels leer down at them like a jump scare still from a horror movie. Akira’s eyes find temporary solace on Ann’s unmasked face as she offers him half of her energy bar. He nearly swallows it whole, willing the metaverse to work its magic and cure his double vision. Akechi holds the last bite of his own bar out to Akira, raising a brow when it’s refused. He probably thinks Akira’s upset out their new ‘deal’. The one that got Akechi to agree to one more palace.

He’s not wrong.

Akira chews his lip and glances away, the gale of Morgana’s attack whipping his hair back and dislodging his glasses. Akechi takes a half step in front of Akira, blocking some of the wind before Morgana makes the final hit, spelling the end of battle as the paper white shadow folds over and into itself before dissolving into long, spindly strips that vanish in the air before succumbing to gravity and hitting the ground.

Ryuji jogs over to them with a bounce in his step, a runner’s high coursing through his veins. He slaps Akechi’s back, throwing him off balance as he grins and grins while delivering a loud and detailed play by play of how Akechi got knocked flat on his ass. Akechi’s eyes narrow and his lips purse and Akira thinks he might be angry, but when Ryuji mimics the noise he supposedly made, Akechi’s shoulders hike up and his eyes snap to Akira, the faintest smidge of pink dusting his skin under the mask.

He’s embarrassed.

“Just teasin’ you, man.” Ryuji concedes, playfully throwing his arm over Akechi’s shoulders and giving him a shake. “You were keepin’ the brunt of the attacks off us the whole time. We’d all of been piled up on the floor with Joker if you weren’t doin’ your thing. Thanks.”

“Yeah, thanks.” Akira mutters, hand gently prodding the tender spot on his forehead and wishing for
an entire bottle of pain killers.

“It’s nothing.” Akechi says, trying to peel Ryuji’s arm off. It sticks to him with the same tenacity of a squid’s tentacle. “I mean, you’re welcome. I was of little other use; it was the least I could do.” He accepts his fate as Ryuji’s conjoined twin and slumps into the one-armed embrace, distinctly uncomfortable, but trying not to let it show with a smile that belongs on a possessed doll.

Ann takes his other side, completing the sandwich.

“Perhaps now would be a good time for a break?” Yusuke asks Akira, reluctant, but aware the group has fallen into poor shape.

“I think we’ve passed our limit today. We should find our way out before we run into one of those things again.” Morgana says, puttering through the group to stand in the center.

“But we have to be close to the end by now. If we could go just a little further…” Yusuke tries, determination faltering when his response is the awkward shuffling of feet. He bows his head. “I apologize. You’re right. You’ve been graciously supporting and mentoring me as we’ve come this far today, I should be more considerate.”

“Don’t sweat it.” Ryuji says, detaching himself from Akechi to reach way up and muss Yusuke’s hair. “We know what it’s like. And we are gonna reach the end as soon as we can, but pushin’ ourselves so hard this soon is just gonna set us waaaay back.”

Everyone joins in on the reassurances except for Akechi. He opts to stand aside, quiet and neutral. Their eyes meet and Akechi frowns and spins away, the tassels on his shoulder guards flying up into the air for a dramatic second and Akira can at least determine that was deliberate, the diva.

Their return to the real world is uneventful.

Akira wishes he could say the same for afterwards.

A shadow looms over him as he checks the torrent of new messages flooding his phone, mostly from Mishima.

“Akira.” Yusuke says in familiar baritone as they walk to the station, Madarame’s shack a mere speck in the distance.

The prickling against the back of his head tells him that Akechi is not only listening but listening very carefully. Akira pockets his phone.

“What’s up?” He asks. “Are you going back to your dorm?”

“I was hoping I could accompany you back to Leblanc.”

Akira knows this is less than subtle code for wanting a free meal, but the rest of the group have yet to catch on to Yusuke’s mannerisms and halt their own conversations to stare not at them, but at Akechi.

“Actually, Akira and I have —”

“That’s fine.” Akira cuts Akechi off. “The boss always cooks too much, so I bet he has some leftovers if you want some.”

“I’d appreciate it. I spent most of my money preparing for the palace today. I’m going to have to
budget carefully this month.”

Akira almost wants to cry about the fact that the one person in their group who bought their own supplies is the one person who absolutely cannot afford it.

“Don’t worry about buying gear, Yusuke. We usually pick up enough junk to sell from the metaverse to cover those expenses for the group. Next time just let me know what you want. Save your money.” He doesn’t mention the part time jobs he works when he inevitably doesn’t have enough money to cover everything.

He might be a pushover.

Akechi, on the other hand, looks like he’s been pushed over. “Akira, we –”

“Relax, I need to stop by Leblanc for my stuff, remember?”

“Ah. You’re right. I did forget. In that case, would you mind saying hello to Sakura-san for me?”

“You’re not coming?”

There’s a tic in Akechi’s expression as his eyes narrow in on something imperceptible to anyone not named Akechi Goro. “I’d like to, but there’s an errand I want to take care of while I have the opportunity. Don’t worry, it won’t take long. I’ll be home by the time you make it there.”

Akira has a bad feeling, but he always has a bad feeling because times have not been particularly good, so he shoves the feeling to the back of his mind where he keeps the self-loathing and existential doubt.

Which is to say, it doesn’t go anywhere at all and he spends the entire way to Yongen-Jaya in a mild state of alarm that Akechi willingly chose something else over a free chance to stalk him.

“I’ve been wondering,” Yusuke begins when they exit the station, “Why don’t you have a persona?”

Akira reaches into his bag and runs a hand the wrong way through Morgana’s fur. He knew the question was coming.

He shrugs like the ground under his feet wasn’t crumbling away after every step. “Not everyone has the same resolve to face their own problems like you do. Can’t have a persona if you don’t accept yourself.”

“And yet you’re willing to put yourself at risk to help me with my problems?”

Akira smiles and swallows down the lies that want to escape. “That’s my coping mechanism, I guess. Can’t muster to will to help myself so I go out of my way to help someone else. What’s the word for it? Projection?”

Yusuke keeps his eyes straight ahead, but it’s clear the words disappoint him.

“You’re remarkably self-aware.” Yusuke muses. “Although I can’t presume to understand your logic. If you’re already willing to admit there’s something you need to do for yourself, they why wouldn’t you take the steps to resolve it?”

Akira still isn’t sure how to answer that one. Or rather, there isn’t a good answer. “Sometimes the cure is worse than the disease.”

At first Yusuke looks like he wants to disagree, but something clouds over his expression. “Even so,
should that prevent you from searching for another cure?”

Akira shivers as a mountain cloaked in blue frost glitters in the distance, his feet meeting the bricks of the street with the satisfying crunch of fresh snow. The air curls around his breath and he wipes the ghost of melt-water from his face, pulling his blazer tight across his chest as bumps raise his flesh.

“Sometimes, whatever route you think you’re taking –”

The earth is frozen, but the sky burns with the fires of hell ahead of him.

“…in the end, it turns out that it never really mattered.”

He wishes he could take a picture.

The past crumbles under his feet, but in the future ahead of him lies one landmark – one destination.

And no hope.

He pulls himself together by the time he knocks on Akechi’s door, a duffel bag slung across his back and two servings of curry packed neatly in a plastic bag dangling from his left hand. He doesn’t hear movement from inside the apartment and has half a mind to try calling Akechi’s phone before the door creaks open.

“I thought you’d take longer to get here.” Akechi admits while Akira’s busy fighting the sudden mental image of Akechi standing on the other side of the door, staring through the peephole, waiting and waiting for Akira to show up. It’s a funny thought until it isn’t.

Akira kicks off his shoes and dumps his bag on the couch, letting Morgana go free before peeling off the jacket he grabbed on the way out of his room. The cold followed him across the city.

“Brought us some food since I know the usual state of your kitchen.” Akira says, swinging the bag side to side before setting it down.

“I went grocery shopping last night.” Akechi defends, arm crossed and mildly offended. He gestures to the sparse countertop. His dusty old coffee machine has been replaced by a couple of very familiar contraptions.

Akira points and says, “No.”

Akechi digs up an imported bag of Blue Mountain Coffee and drops it next to his newly acquired grinder and French Press.

“No.” Akira reiterates with emphasis. “I’m not going to be your personal barista.”

“You kinda already are.” Morgana says from where he’s pawing at the food containers.

“Not by my own volition. And I’m definitely not going to be your personal at-home barista.”

“I thought you could teach me.” Akechi blatantly lies. “But thank you for the food.”

“Morgana, you already ate.” Akira says, swatting him away.
“I’m still hungry!”

“I carried you over here. it’s not possible for you to still be hungry. If you eat anymore, you’ll have to split into two cats.”

“First of all, rude. Second of all, I’m not even one –”

Akira performs the legendary and ancient technique of the nose boop, compelling Morgana to run to the other side of the room to prevent the inevitable follow up boop.

“Food should still be warm if you want to eat now.” Akira says, ignoring Morgana’s glare as he crawls to the balcony to catch the last rays of daylight.

“Perfect. We can talk while we eat.” Akechi says.

“Talk as in talk or are you starting the interrogations already.”

Akechi rolls his eyes. “It was part of the deal. As you’ve seen, I’ve already began holding up to my own end of it. Do I need to remind you what we agreed on?”

Akira doesn’t. He can recognize when he’s been scammed. Set up. Bamboozled. Akechi’s been springing this trap since their first accidental trip into the metaverse and Akira’s the dumb one who wasn’t paying attention. Akechi’s been holding their palace freedom hostage for one reason and it has nothing to do with his superior morality or sense of justice.

He’s been waiting to see how much he could sucker out of Akira when he got desperate, and Akira’s pretty damn sure Akechi believes he hit gold.

“I don’t need a refresher, thanks. I’m here, right?”

“You are.” Akechi confirms with a smile, loosening his tie. “Three days a week until we have a better understanding about what’s happening to you. Although, I’d still prefer the full week.”

“You would.” Akira mumbles. “Boss said I could stay over three days, so three days it is.” Boss didn’t actually say anything at all because Akira’s half sure he’d help Akira move into Akechi’s apartment forever as long as he agreed to continue helping out at the café after school every day. But that’s his secret. He’s surprised Akechi hasn’t questioned it. He must think Sojiro is stricter than he is.

“You could be a little more grateful.” Akechi says, taking a seat at the kotatsu, no longer boasting its accompanying blanket. Summer’s coming fast. “I’m not only setting aside my beliefs to help you, I’m putting my career at jeopardy. After Madarame confesses and the investigations into the phantom thieves begin – what do you think will happen when it’s discovered that I’m acquainted with not only a group of students that were harassed by the previous victim, but also the ward of the latest victim? If even the slightest suspicion falls upon me, the reputation – the trust I’ve built with my employers will vanish. My career will be over. My plans for university, my future – gone.”

Akira tunes him out as the melodrama persists. His errand must have been rehearsing his favorite anti-Phantom Thief speeches in the mirror. Akira takes the opposite side of the table and sets out the food.

“Listen,” Akira interrupts when Akechi begins yet another monologue about how he still believes good old-fashioned detective work is the key to the problem. “I know you’re a good detective. I believe you when you say you could pin Madarame down with his crimes. I know I’m asking a lot from you, and I wasn’t lying last week when I said we can’t do this without you. So, thank you.
Thank you for helping Yusuke.”

“I’m not doing it for him.”

Akira grinds his teeth and taps a simple rhythm of one, two, three, four on the table top as recent memories steal his focus. Memories of crumbling petals between his fingers and of crude lighting drawing disproportionate shadows across a face. Of ultimatums and lesser evils.

They walked back to Leblanc together that night, leaving a trail of dead flowers to disintegrate under the shoes of pedestrians, conflicting agendas sitting heavy at the tip of their tongues. Akira didn’t waste any time to speak, even if the words weren’t anything Akechi hadn’t heard before. Akira hoped the balance between them had shifted enough to make a difference.

“I’ll admit one thing, you are all making this exceptionally more difficult than it needs to be.” Akechi said at one point, shifting his weight from foot to foot, head down as he surveyed the gaps in the floorboard.

“Listen, Goro…” Akira tried again.

“No. I’ve already made my point clear multiple times. I’m not changing my mind. I’m not even here tonight to talk to you about going back into palaces.”

“You’re a hypocrite, what point have you made clear? You’re already involved in this. Stepping out now doesn’t absolve you of what you’ve already done. There’s no changing what we did to Kamoshida and there’s no stopping what Yusuke’s already planning to do. What’s the alternative here? Let Yusuke kill himself in the metaverse? Arrest him to stop him from stealing Madarame’s heart? How are you going to explain that to the police? Spill everything you know about the metaverse? They’re going to want proof. Then they’re going to want access to the metaverse – and if you think a few teenagers having access to the metaverse is bad, think of what the police or government could do with it. They won’t be as noble as you.”

Akechi probably had a dozen clever ways to counter each hastily delivered point, but he either didn’t have the patience to bother or recognized the futility.

“Essentially, what you want me to do is pick your interpreted lesser evil. Is that it?”

“You’ve already chosen. If you hadn’t, the rest of us would already be locked up. We need your help. You’re the strongest in the group – the smartest. Without your help, someone will get hurt.” He paused, letting Akechi soak in the flattery before continuing, “What’s one more palace?”

Akechi’s eyes flickered over to him for an odd second, face drawn in shadows. It was the wrong thing to say.

“If I agree to help, this will be it. No more palaces. Ever.”

His foot was in the door, Akira thought, ignoring the finality in his voice. His foot was in the door and Akira knows that convincing him once means he can convince him twice.

Akechi continues before giving Akira the chance to argue. “This isn’t a debate. I’m setting my terms. It’ll be this or nothing: If you want me to do something I don’t want to do, then it’s only fair that you pay me back in kind. I’m asking for everything that I recommended to you the last time we spoke. That means no more palaces and that you’ll be out of the metaverse indefinitely.”

“Wait, hold on –”
“And every time you see or hear something you shouldn’t, you’ll record it so we can track the frequency of events. No more hiding things, no more distractions or avoiding me because you need time to think. In the case of another incident that brings you into the metaverse outside of your own accord, I’m going to need your promise to remain within range of at least one of us at all times – Morgana, I’ll be leaving that primarily to you. Don’t let him sneak off on his own. And if Sakura-san isn’t opposed to the idea, I’d still suggest that you stay at my place for both the extra security in case you do somehow find yourself in the metaverse again as well as to give us some extra time to talk about what I can only presume is the source of all this. Your palace. Or rather, the origin of your palace.”

On some level, Akira admits he should have been prepared for that. The day he spilled his guts to Akechi might have been a cry for help on the surface, but Akira knew the only way he’d be able to move Akechi into helping Yusuke was by giving him something he wanted. It was naïve to think he’d be satisfied merely with being Akira’s confidant.

No, Akechi always wanted to be the hero in any way he could take it.

And Akira needs to hurry and swallow what little remains of his pride and play along.

“I’m doing this for you.” Akechi says, the bright florescent lighting of his living room not giving Akira any leeway for interpreting his expression as anything other than genuine. There are no shadows here to darken his eyes or stretch his smile into something that wasn’t. The only illusions in this apartment are the ones that Akechi understands and controls without flaw. Akira wonders just how far playing along will take him. Take them. Their destination may never change, but Akechi seems intent on dragging them both through the path littered with shards of glass.

“What kind of stupid question is that?”

“If we never met, things would be easier, wouldn’t they?”

“Do you regret meeting me?” Akechi parrots back. Akira doesn’t look up. He has many regrets – regrets about not acting sooner or smarter – but not that. Never that.

He doesn’t know he’s shaking his head until Akechi speaks again. “The first time I saw you, I knew you were going to be important somehow. I’m not sure how to explain it, but something inside of me woke up.”

The first time Akira saw Akechi, the real first time at the TV studio, he didn’t think much of him at all. Just another person to judge him, look down on him. Akira isn’t sure how he felt the second first time. Complicated, mostly. But that’s how he felt about most things these days. Bad and complicated.

He wonders which first time Akechi is talking about.

“You woke me up pretty good too, trying to push me off that bridge.”

“That is not what happened.”

“That’s how I remember it.”

“Why do you always have to turn everything into a joke?”

“Why do you always have to be so damned earnest?”
“Because you like to pick and choose what you want to hear and ignore the rest. I’m trying to limit the material you have to work with.”

A familiar weight on Akira’s hand shackles him to the table, disrupting the increasingly irritated taps of his fingers. He swallows and says, “If you want me to be honest, I think that meeting me was probably the worst luck you could get.”

“Now you’re just being dramatic. If anything, my luck has improved.”

“You know the saying the longer everything goes according to plan, the bigger the impending disaster?”

“And what plan of mine are you referring to? My retirement plan?” Akechi asks, leaning in.

“Retirement in this economy? You’re dreaming.”

“An early retirement.”

“Completely delusional.”

“And then I’d spend a few years travelling the world before settling down somewhere quiet.”

“I wouldn’t have taken you for the settling down somewhere quiet type.”

Akechi turns his head to hide a grin. “Well, you never know until you try. I’m sure I’d be able to find something to keep me busy. Besides, I’m only working so much now because I don’t have any other options. If I keep good enough company, I could see myself enjoying the quiet life. Although if you’re saying your bad luck is going to deprive me of my idyllic future, I can accept a compromise as long as it means I got to meet you.”

Akira pulls his hand, but it refuses to budge. “I didn’t know you were the type of person who would give up on something over someone you’ve only known a few months.”

“I’m not. I won’t give anything up. But even I’ve learned to accept that some things in life are only around to teach me something and get out. Whether it’s a dream – or a person… Ah, never mind. I’m straying from the point.” He withdraws his hand from Akira’s. “I only meant to say that I’ll fight to the bitter end for what I want, but sometimes fate lands the heavier punch.”

“Sounds like you need to learn how to dodge.”

“You don’t believe in fate, do you?” Akechi asks.

Akira doesn’t answer. He guesses some people take comfort in believing their life has some necessary plan that’s impossible to avoid, but for him, someone who already knows the plan…

He shrugs, pulling his hand into his lap when his fingers start to twitch again. “The whole idea is kind of terrible, don’t you think? That something out there already has our whole lives scripted out for us? Scripts exist for a purpose. Usually entertainment. My life isn’t something I can’t understand’s personal TV show.”

Akechi brushes a strand of hair behind his ear, a wry grin holding back a laugh. “That’s one way to look at it, I suppose.”

“And what would happen if someone somehow did go off script? There’s billions of people in the world. It’s probably hard to keep track of them all, even if fate is some timeless multidimensional
omniscient thing. Would it ad-lib until things go back to plan?"

Akechi shoulders shake from mirth. “Or start from scratch until it gets everything right. It’s not like we’d know any better, right?”

It takes two more trips to Madarame’s Palace to steal his heart.

The enemies become more powerful and unlike his team, Akira has no power to develop and refine. Enemies become faster, but his legs only grow heavier. A gun is a gun at the very least, but the same hit that Ryuji effortlessly defends himself against sends Akira reeling and eating extra recovery items when the others aren’t looking.

But Akechi’s looking, he always is, and somewhere along the way he stops masking the smug curl to his lip, likely reveling in his own personal victory, confirmation that yes – he is the strongest and no – Akira will never be his competition in any way that matters.

Akira knows that even without Akechi’s efforts, as things are his future will remain palaceless.

And Akira thinks as Madarame’s shadow falls to his knees in disgrace, as Yusuke looms over him with red eyes and tears dripping from his chin – if this reset of three years is fate’s way of starting from scratch to get everything right, it could only mean that somewhere early on in the original timeline, somewhere, somehow Akira went wrong.

Madarame’s shadow does not mention a persona user with a black mask.

“So, it’s finally done.” Akechi says that night, sleeves rolled up his arm as he washes rice in the sink.

Akira watches the line of muscle in his forearm flex as he works. He hums a not quite affirmative from where he’s seated at the counter, face melded to the slab of marble and arms stretched out around the sleeping form of Morgana in front of him.

“All done.” Akira corrects through a yawn, infected by Morgana’s exhaustion. “There’s still the fallout and everything that comes with it.”

“You’re right, of course.” Akechi says, setting aside the rice to soak. He dries his hands and leans back against the sink, crossing his arms. “How is Kitagawa faring?”

Akira’s eyes linger on the taut pull of Akechi’s dress shirt. Akira traded his uniform for lounge wear immediately after their arrival, but Akechi must enjoy being uncomfortable. Although it’s more likely he derives another sort of comfort from being presentable.

“It’s only been a few hours since the group split up. He probably doesn’t even know how to answer that. And if you’re worried, ask him yourself. He’d appreciate the concern, especially from you.”

“Especially from me? What makes you say that?”

Akira takes a deep breath that turns into another yawn. “Well, I mean, he knows you’re against what we did, for starters. And you still helped him.”
“Like I said, I didn’t do it for – “

“I know, I know. But you still helped him. I doubt he cares about your reasons. And he’s going to be on his own soon, like you. You could help him out with those types of things, give him some advice at least. The rest of us don’t really know anything about what he might have to do for himself. He has the school dorm to live in for now, but what about after that? Then there’s the legalities, the financial stuff – I don’t even think Yusuke’s thought any of this over yet.”

“It seems you’ve thought about it quite a bit.”

“I’m worried about him. He just found out the person who was basically his father let his mother die for personal gain. I doubt he’s in the best state of mind.”

Akechi unfolds his arms and grips the edge of counter. He makes a sympathetic noise, but Akira sees something that might be irritation tarnish his face.

“I can help him with the basics. Our situations are a little different, but I can prepare him for some of the things that are coming his way. When Madarame is arrested, given Kitagawa’s age, he may be considered old enough to take care of himself unless he proves otherwise. And if there’s anyone who could claim guardianship… Ah, well – I suppose I should be talking with him about this.”

Akira sits up, careful not to disturb Morgana’s slumber. “How long have you been doing this?” He asks.

“How long have I been doing what?” Akechi’s head tilts with the question.

Akira looks around. “This. Being by yourself.” He backtracks through all their conversations since the reset. “You’ve never even told me why you live alone.”

“Yes, I have.” Akechi insists with a chuckle, raising a brow. “Remember, I told you and –” He snaps his mouth shut hard enough for Akira to hear the clack of his teeth. “Hm. Sorry, I was mistaken. But if you really want to know, I should warn you it’s hardly an inspiring story.”

Akira commits the slip up to memory. Akechi remembers, Akira would bet his life on it. He might have to, soon enough.

“I want to know more about you.” He says.

Predictably, Akechi brightens at the interest. He manages to shift his expression into something somber before walking past Akira, gesturing for him to follow. He leads him to the bedroom, which Akira’s seen a few times over the course of his visits, but never actually stepped foot in. Not that there’s much to see. A bed is economically shoved in one corner, a desk and overstuffed bookshelf in another. A few awards hang from the walls, but with an aesthetic that screams Akechi had no idea where else to put them and figured might as well!

Akechi moves a few stacked books from the shelf to the floor and fishes out a photograph from between two serious looking law textbooks.

“This was my mother.”

Akira takes the photo.

A young woman smiles at the camera, her honey brown hair falling long past her shoulders and dark eyes that don’t betray a single thought. At her side is a much younger Akechi clutching her hand, maybe seven or eight years old, eyes wide and round and looking absolutely nowhere near the
camera, likely unaware there was a picture being taken or that a camera even existed.

“You have her smile.” Akira says. It’s not a lie, but he can’t say it’s a compliment either. It’s a smile for the public: modest and intended to attractively convey a preselected feeling instead of reflecting something real. The same smile found in every picture Akechi posts of himself to his blog.

“You think so?” Akechi asks, eyes scanning the photo for similarities.

“Yeah. But I have to ask… what’s with the little gremlin hanging off her arm?”

Akechi scowls, making a grab for the picture and missing when Akira shimmies away in time.

“If you’re going to make fun of me –”

“Looks like you weren’t born photogenic then, huh?”

“Hey.”

Akira’s teasing grin fades to a private smile as his eyes fall back to the photo.

“She passed away when I was eleven.” Akechi divulges after a beat. “Suicide.”

“I’m –”

“Save your apologies. I’ve heard them a thousand times before.” Akechi doesn’t quite snap. He drops into his desk chair, spinning himself in a lazy circle. Akira follows his advice. Wouldn’t know what to say, anyway. “And before you ask about my father, all I have to say about him is that he’s not in the picture.” He flicks the back of the photo with a grim smile. “Never was.”

It’s not often Akechi talks about himself in a way that isn’t intended to garner pity or envy, so Akira keeps quiet.

“After she passed, I decided I never wanted to rely on anyone ever again – and so here I am.” He sits back, hooking an ankle over a knee.

After another moment, Akira says, “I feel like you might have skipped a few important parts between then and now.”

Akechi raises his chin, managing to provoke the illusion of looking down at Akira from his lower elevation. “Maybe a few.” He confirms. “It’s nothing particularly novel. I was placed into the childcare system, moved between a few families and institutions, and found work as soon as I finished middle school. I left when I could afford it.”

“That couldn’t have been easy to do.”

“Getting my job? No, it wasn’t easy at all. I had to make a lot of connections and establish myself among adults who didn’t take me seriously. Many of them still don’t. But if you mean escaping the system – you’d be surprised how willing people are to relinquish responsibility of a child that isn’t their own.”

Thinking of his own parents, Akira isn’t surprised at all.

He sets the photo on the desk and slides it towards Akechi.

“Thank you for sharing this with me.”
Akechi slumps down further into his chair, eyeing the photo but not taking it. “I really did think I already told you.”

“You must tell your life story too often if you’re making that kind of mistake.”

“Well, the question of why I started working at fifteen does come up a lot. Although, I usually give people an edited version of events.” He drops a finger on his younger self’s face, tapping the photo as if to get the subject’s attention. “You’re the only one I’ve shown this picture. There were more, but my mother’s parents took everything.”

Akira grinds his teeth. That sentence spoke volumes. “You should frame it and hang it up somewhere.” He says, and Akechi blinks back his surprise. “I mean, if you want to. If it brings bad memories or something…”

“No – that is, ah, well. Maybe I should hang it up.”

“Only if you want to.” Akira winces.

Akechi stands, photo in hand. “Stop worrying. I’ve had a long time to come to terms with what happened. I’ll never be able to accept her choice or stop being angry, but I don’t hate her. I understand her better now. What she went through to keep me, how she must have felt over the years… She made the mistake of looking for happiness in the same place she lost it.” He walks back to the bookshelf and presses it in between the same two books. “I’ll have to buy a frame.”

“Hey, Goro…” Akira shoves his hands in his pockets and lets his gaze drift around the room. At Akechi’s questioning glance, he says, “I’m glad you’re here.”

Akechi looks momentarily taken aback before smiling. It’s nothing like his mother’s smile in the photograph.

“I’m glad I’m here too. I’m glad you’re here with me.”

Akira wouldn’t mind seeing more of that smile.

That worries him.

Chapter End Notes

hi friends. don't kill me pls.

Next chapter should definitely not take 5 months to update, in fact I already have part of it written! (because it was supposed to be in this chapter, but it got too long).

I was genuinely busy those first couple months, but after that I was in a perpetual bad mood and writing just wasn't happening. Don't worry about me though! I'm fine, I promise. I'm just not where I want to be in life and I'm not sure how to change that.

Thank you for all the comments, kudos - everything. You're all far too kind to me and the attention this story gets always blows me away.

For those of you who want more PT palace adventures - don't worry, you'll get several chapters of it eventually. I'm not a fan of rehashing events we already saw in the game,
so I'm definitely skimming over a lot.

Update: I've gotten a lot of amazing fanart over the year that I've been retweeting on twitter, but totally forgot to link on ao3, so here's a very belated collection of the art I've been spoiled with! (If I've somehow forgotten something, pls let me know. I'm not very organized.)

https://twitter.com/MusicalDefiance/status/1084112313135837185
https://twitter.com/marudyne/status/1084536440317493249
https://twitter.com/gorbbboy/status/1082351552969486336
https://twitter.com/midoriyaizuhugs/status/1084502876339273728
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