In the wake of his release from prison, Akira Kurusu struggles with returning to a normal life. He’s missed his friends, his Confidants, and has been looking forward to seeing them again. He wishes for nothing to have changed. In the last few weeks left before he goes home, he wants life to be the same as it ever was.

Even if he is not.
I am most definitely here to write P5 stuff, but to start with I need to practise the characters! So that's what this story's for, a chance to expand my understand of the characters, as well as writing their voices, in addition to playing around with the setting. The tone of each individual story is gonna be different, and I have to admit starting with talking to Igor is a little on the complex side, but I am determined to go through this in Arcana order so... that's how it goes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

1/31, Tuesday Evening

“My own duties end here as well. You were truly a remarkable guest.”

Lights danced within the Velvet Room, obscuring details as they melted away. Before Akira Kurusu's own eyes Igor and Lavenza, master and resident of the Velvet Room, were fading away, their last messages of farewell delivered. Such was the end of this tale.

Except...

“Is that really it?”

There was a moment, a brief pause in reality's dispersal, and a chuckle filled the world. For the short time that Akira had been exposed to the true Igor, so different to the false being Yaldabaoth had posed as, he'd already grown to recognise his voice. A flash, and though the Velvet Room was still dispersing, the table Igor rested at and the Master of the Velvet Room returned. He smiled.

“Are you not satisfied? All has been concluded – your victory already claimed. What more is there left, that you do not wish for this to end?”

“It’s...” Akira hadn't expected his words to affect anything, and so for Igor to return and inquire on them had caught him off-guard. He glanced around, the room nothing but white light, himself, and Igor at his desk. The last chance. “You're right, there's nothing left I can do but... I still wanted to ask. I still had questions about...” a wave of the Trickster's hand “everything.”

“Hm hm,” Igor tapped slender fingers upon the wooden surface of his desk, considering the young man before him. The eternal smile that played out across his face never wavered. “It is not possible in life to gain all the answers, some questions will never be resolved. Accepting that is a challenge we all must face.”

To see the face of a man who had overcome the will of a god itself fall with such light rebuke, it would serve as a reminder that he was still a youth to any human. All Igor saw was a desire for the truth. Something he had recognised so many times before.

“However,” the youth perked up immediately upon Igor's words, “there are some answers I can provide all the same. Ask what questions you may, and until the time comes that you wake and depart the Velvet Room for the final time, I will answer what I can.”
Akira was silent. This hadn't been what he expected at all. In general a complaint or expression of disapproval resulted in nothing ever changing. This though... it was so unexpected for him that he had difficulty thinking up what to say.

Yet the pressing need to say something caused him to blurt out the first thing to come to mind as his own mind rapidly attempted to figure out what he actually wanted to ask. His first question was thus:

“Is this really the end?”

If nothing else, he was not upsetting Igor with his questions – quite the opposite, the master of the Velvet Room chuckled happily to be asked such. Still, his focused gaze never wavered as he stared at and, Akira felt, through the one before him. There was another pause before the being answered.

“Of this story, yes. Of all stories? There is no true ending for that. Whether you will rise up again, and be star or player of another tale, is up to a fate that none can know. If you truly desire to find that path then embark upon a journey to discover it. The Fool Arcana will bless you on your way.”

'If you truly desire to find that path'. Akira considered those words deeply. Did he? Did he want to go back, to face off against Shadows once more, fight with his friends at his side against powers no other could stand? Part of him deeply did. Part of him had wished for this to never end. But he'd rejected that part's whispers when Yaldabaoth had offered him the deal before. Akira's eyes were set forward. On a future none could know.

As if reading his thoughts, Igor chuckled again as Akira came to that conclusion. “Good,” his smile widened, “you have truly matured under the Velvet Room's guidance, even with my unfortunate absence. It is always a pleasure to witness such growth.”

Akira's eyes narrowed. He'd had this thought before, wondering about the Velvet Room. Yaldabaoth itself remarked with surprise at the form the Velvet Room had taken, an expression which spoke of having seen it hold other forms as well.

Thus, then: “Is it always Persona users who come to the Velvet Room?”

If Akira's insight and sharpness impressed Igor, the being gave no answer to that, instead focusing on the question with a nod and a smile. His fingers steepled together as he replied. “Access to the Velvet Room is granted by a contract, and that contract defines the Wild Card you possess. As such, previous guests have also been of the Wild Card. But their truths, and their stories, are not for me to say. Perhaps you will cross paths with others in the future. I have no doubt that should that be the case, grand happenings will result of such an intersection of fates.”

Akira nodded. There were others then. Other stories and other people who had held Persona. “Is the Metaverse truly gone?”

“The Metaverse as you know it has disappeared,” Igor answered calmly, without a missed beat. “Yet the sea of human souls is eternal, and will coalesce into form again in time. How that plays into both fate and future, and who is called to respond to such an event, is a question impossible to answer.”

The sea of human souls... Akira remembered those words, often uttered by Shadows recalling their true origins. The Metaverse then, it was just an aspect. An aspect dispersed, but others had been before and others would be again. It made sense. And, in knowing that, something in him calmed.

It took a moment to figure out what.

“So my Persona are still part of me.”
Igor chuckled, thrilled with Akira's conclusion, that his concern was tied to the fate of the masks he had taken on. Yet it was clear that with that question answered, more were now brewing in the mind of the Trickster. There was something truly amusing about the way his thoughts operated, and so Igor awaited what came next. The answers he provided his thanks for this young man's aid.

“About Satanael-”

A raised hand cut Akira off, Igor's smile the same as ever. It seemed he wanted to address this immediately. Akira silently waited.

“The act of overcoming Yaldabaoth was not done by you alone, but by the combined will of the people echoing through you.” Igor spoke clearly, ensuring his words were understood. “While you do possess the Persona Satanael, which is an impressive feat indeed, should the opportunity ever arise that you manifest it again it will not be to the scale or power of before. You will be slaying no gods on your own, Trickster.”

Akira gave a smile, half-sheepish, half-amused. “Got it,” he nodded in response, “no god-slaying.”

Another moment for Akira to think, Igor awaiting the next question as the empty world around them floated in nothingness, and the young man's thoughts gathered into another query. “Does the fact I won't be able to change my Persona anymore mean anything? Those I used against Yaldabaoth, the ones at the forefront of my mind, will that affect me?”

“Oho.” Igor was pleased by this question, pleased with the depths of this young man's thoughts. Of course he had possessed nothing but time of late to consider his own nature, but to still arrive at such a conclusion, it was admirable. It showed a depth of introspection and flexibility of thought that was necessary to master the Wild Card. Truly, Yaldabaoth had sown the seeds of its own demise when choosing such a powerful Trickster to play its game.

“Though it is through the Velvet Room we provide the means to transform and exchange your Persona,” Igor went on to explain, “that is not the sole method behind their evolution – as your transfiguration of Arsene into Satanael shows. It is merely the provision of a vast, flexible, and aggressive system for redesigning your heart. The experiences you have from this day forward, the decisions you make and times you spend choosing your path, you will find those affect the masks you wear as well. Should the day come that you call upon your Persona once again, you will find that even without the Velvet Room those in your possession will have changed. Your Persona will change to reflect you, you will not change to reflect your Persona. That is the truth.”

The depth of Igor's explanation was enough that Akira could already be seen falling into thought. It would take him some time to absorb the full meaning of what the Velvet Room's Master had said. But that was fine, even that introspection would aid him in his development. Though the Trickster, Akira Kurusu, was now beyond the Velvet Room's influence, Igor still found himself pleased with leaving some seeds for growth in the youth. One last gift from the master of the Wild Card's cradle.

There was silence, Akira's thoughts racing through his mind now, looking for what was next to ask. Yet something in the air told him that the time for questions was running thin. His own body would soon awaken, and the Velvet Room would be gone. One last question, one last...

It did take some time, but finally it came to him. The one question that had haunted him. The one question that Igor could answer. A light shone in Akira's eyes as he looked up, ready to make his final query.

This had been the question he'd shoved down every time it had risen up in his mind, this past silent month in confinement. The question of fate, and validity. He had to know. Please.
“Am I... am I the Trickster because I was chosen to be? Or was I chosen because I am the Trickster?”

Everything twitched. It was like reality itself suddenly noticed itself askew, and adjusted to cover a bared thread. Igor nodded, paying no heed to the action. He did have an answer for the Trickster, but it was not one he would like to hear.

Nonetheless.

“That is a question impossible to answer. It is not that I keep such a thing from you, but that the interlinking of causality and fate are unknowable things. Are you the Trickster by choice or fate? The answer is both, and neither. My strongest recommendation would be to not let such doubts consume you, and instead focus on the results that have come about of your actions. What hands of fate or coincidence were involved, you rose above all challenges, an act carried out not by fate or coincidence but by your own will. That is the single truth which I can impart upon you.”

The fadeout, the obliterating white light, it was finally covering Igor as well. But there was still so much more to say, so much to ask. Akira called out, even as the smiling figure disappeared before his eyes.

“Wait! Did the others transform their Persona because of me or because of themselves? If Yaldabaoth chose Akechi as well was he ever in the Velvet Room? When did Yaldabaoth find me? Before Shido? After? Which came first: the Jack Frost Persona or mascot?”

There were no answers left. No-one to give them. And, as Akira's own consciousness faded as well, no-one to hear them.

When he awoke, within his cell, it was dark and silent once more. The Trickster sighed, and remained where he was, mind still full of thought.

Maybe he should have just asked if Igor knew if he'd ever be let out.

Chapter End Notes

Thus the story has begun! Well, not quite a story, a set of stories all set within a timespan in a greater story. You know how it goes. Next up is Morgana time, which will certainly be a lighter conversation than this one! I'll be trusting in those who comment to let me know when I nail, or fail to nail, the character's voices to help keep me in track, so make sure you let me know! Practise makes perfect after all!
True to Life

Chapter Summary

Akira and Morgana consider the remains of the Thieves' Tools and materials they'd used to create them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2/15, Wednesday Evening

The familiar smell of coffee-infused wood made the attic of Leblanc home, more of a home than Akira had ever known. It had felt so cold, so empty, when first he'd entered it, so many months ago. But now it was where he truly wanted to be, where he'd dreamt of coming back to so many nights over the past month and a half. He sighed in contentment, simply standing within it.

Home.

“Hey, you're not getting all sappy on me, are you?”

No other being could express such a degree of condescension so matter-of-factly, the guilty party happily sitting on the table closest to the stairwell. Akira cast his gaze over the form of the cat before him, its bright blue eyes, white paws, tail-tip and muzzle standing out against the depth of its black fur. A brief moment.

And then a light laugh.

“I'll be back to normal tomorrow.”

“Good,” Morgana hopped down to the ground, the light padding of his feet eliciting only the slightest groans from the floorboards, “it's weird seeing you like that.”

Despite his words, as Morgana passed Akira by he shifted his weight and rubbed his side against the back of Akira's leg, before wordlessly moving on to hop up on the bed. Turning to face him, Akira wore a wry smile, though didn't tease immediately. “I didn't see you today – did Futaba keep you busy?”

“She's impossible!” Morgana flopped on the bed, already reminded of the day's exertions. “She demanded I come with her to Akihabara and then spent all day staring at those blasted machines! She can't even carry me like you can, I had to keep hiding myself while watching over her! I'm not a babysitter, Akira!”

There was a banality to this, even if he was listening to what most people would see as a talking cat – though most people wouldn't even get the talking part --, and Akira relished how much this was normal to him. This was his friends just hanging out. This was Morgana complaining. This was Futaba doing her own thing. Things like this, he'd missed it.

God he'd missed it so much.
“Hey.”

Morgana's voice, for once dropping his own teasing pretence, made Akira acutely aware of himself and he raised a hand to his eyes, checking for moisture. “Sorry,” he shook his head, “tomorrow, like I said.”

Moments of vulnerability from Morgana were rare, Akira could count without much trouble the number of times Morgana had truly lowered his guard to him. The reverse, however, was not even comparable. Times Akira showed anything, any sort of weakness, Morgana struggled to recall more than one. He stared.

“Hey, I was joking about that. You don't have to push yourself to-”

“It's fine,” Akira shook his head, “All I want is for things to go back to normal. To just spend time with you all. That's all I need.”

Another quiet moment. And then the being in the form of a cat chuckled.

“You're going to get that and more you know, there's no way any of the others will let you spend even a minute alone if they can help it.”

“I'm counting on that.”

The delivery of that line was... a little more intense than Akira had planned for, and Morgana immediately fixed him with a strange look. Not really wanting to deal with that right now, Akira moved over to the workbench, idle hands shifting about tools and materials. How many nights had he sat here, under Morgana's instruction, creating tools for the Phantom Thieves? Did his hands still remember all the motions?

Without even thinking about it, Akria found himself portioning materials into groups to be used. Seems he hadn't forgotten one bit.

A heavy weight on his shoulder was Morgana leaping off of the bed and onto Akira, before taking another leap to the workbench's top, carefully positioning himself so as not to disturb any of the models resting along it. Sitting himself down, he observed the product of Akira's actions.

“Most of the Thieves' Tools only function with cognition behind them. In the real world they're barely more than junk.”

Hmm, Akira nodded in response, rifling about in a bag kept under the table, retrieving a collection of the tools that had gone unused. The storage of material that would function in the Metaverse was a strange one – food products outright disappeared outside the Metaverse and reappeared when you returned, while the numerous tools took on new forms. Cognition was a strange thing. Looking up at Morgana before him, of course that was the case. The strangest thing you could imagine.

“Yeah,” Morgana continued, “I think only the lockpicks are usable in reality, and I doubt they're even as effective here as they were in Palaces. The eternal lockpick would be the best of the bunch, but it's definitely not unbreakable here.”

Akira did have his lockpicks, and laid them out on the table, the sheen of the eternal lockpick standing out amongst the others. A lot of materials had gone into it. It had paid its keep with gusto after that however.

“So what're you gonna do?” Morgana looked Akira in the eyes, “Gonna take them with you?”
“Hmm,” Akira considered, hands still idly pushing materials here and there, “I feel like that's going to get me into trouble if I'm caught with them.”

“Could get you out of trouble too!” The black-furred being quickly took on the role of devil's advocate, “You never know. And I mean, you know how to keep things out of sight. Are you really going to get caught?”

“The last thing I need is people thinking I'm a criminal again.” Akira may have said that, but when he folded the cloth he'd lain the lockpicks upon, he didn't dispose of it. Set it at the back of the workbench for later, and turned his attention to the now defunct tools and remaining materials from the Cognitive World. Hmm.

“So what's on your mind then?” Morgana had lain down, head hanging over the edge of the workbench's top, watching Akira's motions below as the fuzzy-haired boy sat down, “going to make something?”

“Maybe...” Akira was still toying about with the pieces, taking some of the previous tools apart, combining some of the materials. There wasn't a goal yet, he was just flexing his hands and his focus. Remembering motions. There hadn't been a lot of options to keep practise in solitary.

After a few minutes of toying around, the former leader of the Phantom Thieves cut open a metallic ball, once a means of disappearing in battle, and bent some metal plates into shape, fitting them together. He smiled, holding up the rounded ball with the two triangles of metal sticking out from its top. “Look, it's you.”

“Ah!” Morgana's form being a cat's provided a significant bonus of hiding embarrassment, and so he was able to avoid expressing just how pleased he was with Akira creating something as tribute to him. “That doesn't look anything like me! Where's my natural charm? My handsome face? You could have at least given it eyes!”

Akira smiled, somehow giving Morgana the impression he could innately tell how pleased Morgana actually was. But there was no way, right? No way.

“You're right,” already caught off-guard, Morgana found himself unable to reassert dominance as Akira once more focused on the sphere, “I can do better.”

Sometimes you forgot just how deft the hands of Akira Kurusu were. How imaginative he could be when it came to solutions. How intent he was with a goal in sight. If any of the others were here, watching this, well Akira would probably be too distracted to focus. But were this scene recorded, and then shown to them, Morgana was fairly confident each would stare open-mouthed at the sight, watching Akira's hands rapidly moving across the workbench, dexterously manipulating the collection of parts and materials he had available.

Whatever future awaited this one, should it require skilled hands Akira Kurusu would be covered. Honestly, this kid.

The construction of the Morgana model was by no means slow, but it was diligent. Akira was focused, his mental picture realised with every motion of his hands. Having something to devote himself to, to focus on with the fullness of his mind so that not even a single spare thought could occur, it was an absolute delight to the young man who had just spent the last month and a half with nothing but too many thoughts he couldn't control. The slight curve of his mouth, the expression of focus on his face, it spoke happiness he hadn't tasted in too long.

This was good.
When Akira did lean back from his chair with a smile, stretching his arms and interlocking his fingers, Morgana hopped down to stand next to the model, roughly half his own size. It was impressive, honestly so, and he couldn't help but approve as he studied its features. The collar was there, though all of it was in sleek metal greys than with colour, while the face conveyed a suitable amount of charm. Surely it did not capture his full majesty, but it was a decent approximation.

“Hmm, not bad.” The hope of humankind circled round the model, before coming to a dead stop, eyes staring wide at its tail. Or around the tail. Akira, seeing this through half-closed eyes, chuckled slightly.

“I thought the phillips head screw was a good touch.”

“Th-th-this is,” Morgana was stuttering, eyes wide as he considered the modelling Akira had included, “this is utterly inappropriate!” Akira's spreading grin did nothing to mollify the indignity of the one before him. Morgana's rant continued. “I cannot believe this, how could you do something so... so... Akira!”

“Relax, Mona,” Akira's outstretched hand, reaching for Morgana's head, was batted away by a paw swipe as Morgana shoved the model, pushing it towards the edge of the workbench. Unfortunately Akira's deft hands were also quick, and he caught it neatly lifting it up into the air such that the offended party could not get at it. “You're literally the only person who'd be upset by this.”

“It's obscene! You can't show this to anyone! Oh god what if Lady Ann sees it! You can't!”

“There is no way Ann would do anything but laugh, if she even gave it any attention.”

“That's almost worse!” Morgana's back was arched, catlike traits on full display as Akira kept the model held directly in the air. “Get rid of it!”

“After all my hard effort?” Akira kept a sly grin, though internally was beginning to doubt. He'd intended it as a joke, but Morgana truly looked mortified. “I really don't think it's such a big deal.”

“It is!” Morgana insisted, narrowed eyes watching Akira's movements and preparing for a chance to pounce, “I don't walk around on... on... on display like that so why should a model! Fix it!”

There was a brief pause, a moment for doubt to sink in, before Morgana's eyes narrowed again. “Do I?”

Akira answered honestly.

“I have never and hope to never spend any amount of time inspecting your butt.”

Scandalised beyond belief, Morgana rocketed off the workbench, utterances of the word 'mirror' following his path downstairs. Akira wished him luck: the act of trying to position oneself in front of the bathroom's mirror while also contorting to check your dignity would prove difficult even with a feline body.

Honestly, turning the model over in his hands, Akira really had done a good job on this. It had been relaxing, and fulfilling. Perhaps model-building was something he could enjoy in future. Something to think about.

But still, placing it back down on the workbench, his attempt to tease Morgana had apparently pushed his friend's self-consciousness to breaking point, so that wasn't quite what he'd intended. A trace of paint and some metal threaded through the cross-head of the screw, and it was now instead a completely flat surface, not notable at all. Best to just let this go.
When Morgana did return, his recriminating gaze for Akira lasted only long enough for Akira to motion to the model. Seeing the adjustment, Morgana shook his head and muttered something under his breath, but at the very least didn't attempt to dismantle it. Victory achieved.

Akira really had wanted to show it to the others.

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The next day, when everyone came by to visit and Akira showed off the model to them, the first thing that came out of Ryuji’s mouth was “where's the butthole?”

Morgana's yowling screech must have shook the building.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so I'm most definitely not going to do EVERY chapter one per day but I at the very least wanted to get another out the day after the first, just to mix up the flavour a bit. Hopefully it worked out.

Have you ever thought about how the Thieves' Tools actually work? There's no way the majority of them actually do anything in reality. I guess that really just goes to show what an excellent sense for the Cognitive World Morgana has, to be able to create tools in reality that function as expected in the Metaverse. Great job Mona!

I've been on a huge P5 fic kick this past week, and read some really tasty post-interrogation and post-arrest comfort fics. I don't know how much I'll be delving into that topic, but certainly I'm going to acknowledge what Akira's been through as significant. What emerges as I keep going? We'll have to wait and see.

Okay, that's all on my mind right now, thanks so much for reading! If you have any thoughts on how I handle the voices of these characters, please be sure to tell me! It'll help me improve for the future. See you all for the High Priestess!
Chapter Summary

Makoto visits Leblanc with a friend in tow to talk about the future.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

2/17, Friday After School

For being out of juvenile hall, out of probation, and free of most of the rumours that had haunted him this past year (though the possessor of some new and concerningly accurate ones), Akira Kurusu was still somewhat trapped. Having missed a solid month's worth of school while imprisoned immediately caught up with him, and despite his strong grades he was struggling to keep up. Outside of that, Sojiro was demanding he work at Leblanc more days than not of late, so free afternoons and evenings were becoming something of a rarity.

It was tempting to accuse Sojiro of wanting to spend time with him and using work as an excuse, but Akira bit his tongue on that one. Firstly because Sojiro would throw Akira out on the street before admitting to possessing a single feeling about him and secondly because Akira appreciated his guardian's ploy all the same. Seeing a lot of people at once was still somewhat overwhelming, and so Akira found the screen of Leblanc helped him get used to talking and interacting with others again.

Seriously, it had only been a month and a half in juvenile hall – Futaba had isolated herself from the public for way longer and recovered faster all the same. She was incredible. Akira would tell her that, but he was biting his tongue on his own struggles as well. Not, in truth, that he didn't suspect those around him knew he was having difficulty, but they were at least doing him the kindness of not bringing it up. He just needed time.

Time and the people he cared about around him. In manageable doses.

It was a slow afternoon (when was it not) and so the sound of Leblanc's bell ringing actually caused Akira to look up in surprise. Two figures entered the shop, both girls, both wearing the outfit of Shujin Academy. It would be rude to check his phone, but Akira was sure he hadn't actually been notified of this. He'd make sure later.

Give Makoto grief about the lack of a heads-up if he truly hadn't missed the warning.

“Oh my goddddd.” With unabashed enthusiasm written across her face and carried in her voice, the other girl, the other third-year, black hair bound by a bow in a side-ponytail, Eiko Takao gawked at the cafe. “This is the most retro place ever I love it!”

“Well,” Sojiro's gaze over the two new arrivals was amused, a sidelong glanced delivered to Akira before he continued, “This is a new friend.”

“Good afternoon,” Makoto Nijima, former adviser of the Phantom Thieves, bobbed her head in greeting to owner of Leblanc, “I hope we're not imposing.”

“Not at all,” Sojiro shook his head, “although I was about to go out and grab some extra ingredients
for this evening. Is it fine if I leave you under his care?” A hand indicated Akira, who did his best to look fake-scandalised, a gesture Makoto and Sojiro had both seen too many times before. Makoto smiled and nodded.

“More than fine, thank you.”

So it was that the two Shujin third-years seated themselves in one of Leblanc's booths, and Akira Kurusu found himself preparing coffee for them. It had been a few solid months since he'd last seen Eiko, and he had to admit it was a surprise to have her show up here. Leblanc had always been the 'Phantom Thieves Hangout' spot, so his friends bringing other people in here was... not unwelcome, per se, just not something Akira was expecting.

When he asked for how Eiko took her coffee and then didn't ask Makoto, the energetic girl immediately latched onto that.

“Ohhhh, you know Makoto's coffee by heart huh? Ahhh, I wish I had a boyfriend like that.”

It was lucky the coffee hadn't been served yet, or Makoto would have choked on hers.

“Eiko!” Akira hid his grin behind the roaster as he prepared the two cups, listening in on Makoto's scandalised yell. “I told you it wasn't like that! We were pretending to date so that you'd trust us enough to let us help you.”

Fake-dating Makoto had been an experience, and resulted in a perpetually on-going rumour in Shujin, especially given how often Makoto was seen around Akira. But then Akira's entire social circle was one big “huh.” for people who paid attention. It was an eclectic mix to say the least.

Nowadays those who still scrutinised seemed more convinced they knew the reason why that was the case. It concerned Akira that some of them were dead on the money.

“Here you are,” with both cups brewed Akira placed them down before the two girls, a light smile on his face. Makoto smiled in return. Eiko fixed each of them with a piercing gaze as she attempted to figure out just what was going on here.

That glare lasted right up until she tried the cup before her.

“Ohmigod!” The word erupted out of the girl as she breathlessly stared at the cup, before raising her eyes to Akira, “if you're not dating Makoto then I'll date you, if you can make me a cup like this every day!”

This time Makoto did choke on her drink.

“Sorry,” Akira ducked his head by way of apology, “I'm already in love-” Eiko's eyes widened rapidly “-with coffee.” A loud raspberry was the conclusion of the girl's assessment of that.

“He's a tease!” She looked directly at Makoto, complaint in her tone.

“Tell me about it,” Makoto admitted between a sip, once again reigniting Eiko's 'There's something going on here'-sense. Still, she – to Makoto's thanks – focused on her coffee for the moment. It really was something. Akira hadn't lost his touch while in solitary confinement.

Makoto would tell him that later. If she brought it up while Eiko was here, the conversation would be all about that for the rest of the day. That wasn't why she'd come here. There was something else on her mind.
“Akira,” the voice of Queen, the one who could make anyone snap to attention, broke through Akira's own thoughts and he straightened up, looking over at the pair. Eiko, who had been exposed to Queen only once or twice, stared at Makoto now with a look of curiosity crossed with the slightest hint of concern. “Do you have a moment?”

“Wouldn't be game to say no,” was the answer, the barista stepping out from behind Leblanc’s counter, “how can I help?”

Makoto opened the bag she'd brought with her, placing a number of books and brochures across it. College listings. Courses. Job pathways. Akira stared at the collection. What was this for...

“University Entrance Exams were held while you were... away.”

Oh? Oh! Akira's own expression changed to shock, a rare sight to see. Usually he didn't reveal a thing. Like it was a defensive mechanism. He was still recovering from having been locked away. Makoto filed her awareness of that away for later.

“Oh shit I completely forgot, how did you do? How'd Haru do? Uh, Eiko, you were taking them too, right? How did it go?”

“It was awful!” Eiko announced cheerfully, at odds with her message. “It felt like every answer was stuck in my head but I couldn't get it out onto the paper fast enough. I nearly yelled in the middle of each!”

“Results won't be available until next month,” Makoto skipped over Eiko's cheery doom and gloom, “Haru has told me she feels confident about how her exams went. As do I.”

Akira smiled and it was a genuine and warm smile strong enough that Makoto felt her own cheeks warm at receiving it. Eiko filed her awareness of that away for later.

“Hey, good job. I mean, I knew you'd be able to do it, but it's great to hear that. Ms. Police Commissioner, it's only a matter of time now.”

“Yes,” Makoto nodded, not fazed in the least by the confidence Akira had in her. Without that confidence there would be no way Makoto could face the immense challenge of her dream. A challenge it may be, but it was one she was determined to overcome. It would be so. “And so I wanted to ask you about yours. Although you will be at a different school, your graduation is only a little over a year away as well now.”

Akira paused, standing before the booth the two girls were sitting at. Eiko looked between him and Makoto, a frown on her face. After a moment she collected her thoughts.

“Wait, waiiiiiiiiit. Akira-kun, you're not staying at Shujin? What the heck? Where are you going?”

“Oh,” Akira seemed to be roused from his thoughts by the question, nodding at Eiko in response, “no, since I'm not on probation anymore my parents want me to come back home for my third year. I'll be going back to the school I left behind to come to Shujin, out in the country.”

Eiko frowned deeper. “Do you want to?”

Mhmm. That was direct. A little too direct, a critical hit in fact, and Akira was silent for a moment too long, his face downcast just a little too much. Eiko checked Makoto, who didn't look thrilled with the topic either, before continuing on. “You should just let them know you want to stay here to finish high school!”
“Eiko...” Makoto stood up from where she was sitting, moved around Akira to sit on the same side as her friend. This allowed Akira to sit down too, who did so heavily, a sigh emerging from his mouth as he did. He was looking down.

“No this is dumb!” Eiko disapproved, putting her hands on her hips and pouting to show it. “You’ve got all these friends of yours here, right? You shouldn't have to leave them! You don't want to, right?”

Avoiding troublesome questions with smart-mouthed non-answers had been the Akira Kurusu classic for the last year without fail. Even in the interrogation, and he’d suffered greatly for his attitude then, he’d done his best to hold out. But there was something about the emptiness of solitary confinement, living by the whims of those who don't give a damn about you, that had hurt that nature.

Asked a direct question in such a manner, Akira couldn't help but answer. Makoto bit back a gasp to hear him speak so openly. That wasn't what she'd expected at all.

She might need to talk with some of the others about this.

Yeah, I don't.” Akira shook his head, eyes downcast. “I've... never been as happy as I have here. Never felt like I've belonged as much. But my parents know I'm coming back here after, once I'm graduated there's nothing stopping me from returning. They want this one last year with me and if I fight that, if I refuse to go back I... I probably won't have a home with them ever again. I don't want to leave but... I don't want to do that either. I want my family still.”

Makoto was silent. Eiko's frown twitched, the genuineness of Akira's response overwhelming her, and she sunk back into the seat and exhaled loudly, waving her hands in the air. “Ugh, that's complicated.”

“Yeah,” Akira smiled wistfully, “it's okay. I can still visit here during holidays. And it's just one year. I can survive that.”

“Just make your parents move out here instead?”

Akira laughed, and it was an honest laugh, at Eiko's suggestion. “Genius,” he replied, clearly not thinking of it as a serious answer. He must have a reason for believing they wouldn't. Makoto found herself tempted by suggesting that maybe they should all the same.

“This,” she hated, honestly, dragging the topic back to its original point because seeing Akira express himself genuinely was such a surprise to her. Maybe Eiko's directness was just what was necessary to get him to be honest. Still, Makoto shook her head, “what I came to talk to you about wasn't us, or the next year. Okay it is the next year, but it's also after that.”

Akira tilted his head, waiting for Makoto to continue. Eiko was still waving her hands, puzzling out the Kurusu Family Problem she'd now encountered.

“Akira, what are your actual plans? What university are you going to? What are you going to study? What job are you aiming towards? It's... embarrassing, but I realise I've never asked you this before, despite the fact you know my dreams and goals. But what are yours? Do you... have any?”

Wow, okay, that was direct too. Akira stared, before his eyes flickered down to consider the booklets and brochures. He opened one absently, but barely paid attention to the words or pictures. It was just for the motion.

“Politics, probably,” was the eventual response, drawing Eiko's attention back from her own
considerations. The two girls opposite him waited for Akira to continue. “I don't know, learning about the Diet under Yoshida kind of inspired me, and after the whole shit with Shido... I mean someone who actually cares trying to get a position would be good, right?”

Makoto's eyes were narrowed. She didn't seem satisfied with that answer. Akira wasn't sure why.

“Well, what do you really want? You don't sound that enthused, all things considered.”

Akira breathed out through his teeth, read like a book. He didn't know. “I don't know.” What did he want, really? The answer was... “I figured maybe I'd just skip the first round of exams. Come back to Tokyo, work at Leblanc, maybe a few other jobs, spend the year ronin then get in after that. Maybe find something that really motivates me in that time.”

Eiko seemed considerate of Akira's thoughts. Makoto was not. Hers was the stare of Queen, the one who could make a Shadow quiver under her gaze. Akira wasn't exactly intimidated, but he wasn't energised by it either. She really didn't seem happy.

“Akira you placed first in multiple exams over the past year. How you could even consider passing on your Entrance Exams is unthinkable.”

“Honestly,” Akira shook his head, “that was spite more than anything. I just... it was a little act of rebellion, showing the people who whispered about me in the halls that I was better than them. It's hard to say I'd have the same motivation back home.”

“Honesty,” Akira shook his head, “that was spite more than anything. I just... it was a little act of rebellion, showing the people who whispered about me in the halls that I was better than them. It's hard to say I'd have the same motivation back home.”

“You did not surpass every other student in your year by spite alone.”

“Well I mean, it was a decent percentage all the same.”

“Hey, uhm,” Eiko raised a hand, as if asking a question in class, “not to cut in or anything, but I don't think Akira-kun's idea is that bad. I mean, if he doesn't have something to devote himself to, just working and preparing for applying a year after may be good for him. If he can come first in exams like you said then the second round shouldn't be that stressful, that would give him a good year free.”

Now outnumbered, Makoto's frown deepened. This wasn't how she'd imagined this conversation going. Really, what she'd wanted to hear was Akira say something along the lines of “oh yes, I've always wanted to do this. And I'd be going to this University to do it.” Hearing such... indecisiveness from the leader she'd followed for the last year was... it wasn't right. She shook her head.

“And hey if worst comes to worst, you know Haru'll hire me for her eventual cafe. There's no way she'd pass up taking Sojiro's number one student.”

“Aren't you the only one working here?”

“Still.”

Makoto's hand hit the table. Eiko and Akira jumped. “Akira.” Oh, she wasn't happy at all. Akira looked somewhat sheepish, which only annoyed Makoto more. That wasn't what she wanted to see. “You can't let it go like this. You're meant for something. I know you are.”

“Well I kind of already did my thing,” Akira started, not paying attention to Eiko failing to understand his point, “you know?”

“You are not done.” Makoto forced each word out through her teeth, refusing to let Akira get away
with this. It wasn't right! “You can't just say the last year was enough and give up on the future. Not you. Not after what you've done for all of us, the way you've inspired us. I won't accept that. None of us will.”

Akira was silent.

The bell to Leblanc rang.

“Alright, I'm back, where the hell-” Sojiro, arms full of groceries, looked around the cafe for the one he'd left in charge, “Oh there you are. Stop flirting with the customers and get back behind the counter, this is a business you know.”

“Right,” Akira nodded and stood up, Makoto's glare burning even as he walked away. Eiko, sitting next to her, shuffled awkwardly in her seat. This had gotten far more genuinely real than she'd been prepared for. Honestly when Makoto had invited her to get coffee and also mentioned this was where Akira-kun worked, all Eiko had wanted to do was tease the two, regardless of whether they were actually in a relationship or not.

As it turned out, relationship or not, Makoto did care for Akira way past the point of teasing. Eiko nudged Makoto for attention.

“Uh, I think I'm going to head home – thanks for inviting me out, Makoto.”

Surprised by this, Makoto stood, Eiko pulling a note out of her bag to hand to Sojiro. The owner waved it away. “Don't worry about it, thanks for stopping by and talking to the kid, he needs the attention.”

The fact Akira did not make some clever remark in response to Sojiro's own went noticed by Sojiro and Makoto both.

When Eiko left, Makoto put notes on the counter for both drinks and adamantly refused Sojiro's insistence it was free. Akira collected them and put them in the till.

“Akira,” he looked at her and he was tired. Four days since release. It wasn't enough yet. It wasn't nearly enough. “We'll come visit again.”

“Right,” he nodded quietly, “thanks.”

Cleaning the table after the pair had left, Akira noted that all the books and brochures remained behind. Absently he flipped through them, but at least focused on the words this time.

What he wanted to do, huh...

Chapter End Notes

Okay wow. Much like Eiko, I went into this with the intention of mostly teasing Akira and Makoto. The point was for Makoto to ask Akira about his future, but things rapidly got heavier than I expected. That's what happens when you write off the cuff, I suppose, the characters do their own things and surprise you. Well this is officially a thing now.

I wonder how the future chapters will go...
Makoto's Confidant was one of my favourites in the entire game, I adored her forming friendship with Eiko. I'm glad that by the end they were still friends, and I'm happy that I got the chance to write Makoto still spending time with Eiko. Didn't put as much Eiko as I intended in this chapter, but again, it kind of got away from me.

I did a lot of googling today trying to fully understand the Japanese schooling system, when university entrance exams were and when results were made available. I'm pretty sure I got my timeline right here, but hoo boy it took some work. I don't know why it genuinely surprised me that Akira would still have school between being released and mid-march, but turns out he did! Who'd have guessed?

Did you enjoy this chapter? Do you have any thoughts on how I handled the characters' voices and if I could improve any of them? Let me know! This fic, as much as it is a chance for me to explore all these characters, is also practise for writing them in general. So your feedback is essential! Don't shy from telling me just what you think! I'm ready for it!

Next chapter, when it's time, is The Empress, Haru time! I'm a big Haru fan so I hope to do her justice, look forward to it when it's done! See you then!
Chapter Summary

Akira and Haru share a rooftop lunch.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2/18, Saturday Lunchtime

“Hey that's him right?”

“Kurusu, yeah.”

“Did you hear about how he went back to juvie?”

“It was cause he testified against Shido, right?”

“I heard he was innocent all along.”

“I heard he was the one who helped get Shido convicted.”

“... I heard he was the leader of the Phantom Thieves.”

It wasn't that much of a surprise. Not really. As much as everyone involved had attempted to keep Akira's name from getting out, as much as those campaigning for his release during his imprisonment made sure not to say his name, there were still more than enough pieces to pick up on the truth.

There was someone wrongfully imprisoned. A young man. And so many names were speaking on his behalf that attention concentrated. Pressure mounted. And cracks appeared for Sae Niijima to break through and pull Akira back out.

But back at school there was no anonymity to be found. Why'd Akira been gone for the first few weeks of school? Why was he back now, acting like nothing had happened? Why were the protests and demands for the release of that young man gone?

Rumours built. Shido was convicted just before Akira came back. What if Akira was part of that? Why was he part of that? Akira, and the rest of the Phantom Thieves, didn't even know how the next part got out, how people had known that it had been Shido who'd gotten him arrested to begin with. But once it did the pieces started falling into place. Akira was wronged by Shido. Akira took Shido down. Akira was gone from late November to early December. That was the time between the Phantom Thieves' leader's 'suicide' and Shido's confession.

“Hey,” one bright student had said after a hard day's work at the rumour mill, “Is Kurusu the leader of the Phantom Thieves?”

It was unstoppable from there. Hey it had to be Kurusu, right? He showed up at Shujin, a week later there was the calling card, two more weeks and Kamoshida confessed, give or take. Hadn't Kurusu gotten onto Kamoshida's bad side too?
Hey yeah, Sakamoto and Takamaki had to be involved too, right? All of them had been wronged. And they were all acting like the best of friends now. Thick as thieves. Thick. As. Thieves.

Who was next? Madarame? Wasn't that Kitagawa guy Madarame's last student? Couldn't you see Kurusu, and the others, hanging around Kitagawa after school now?

Niijima, the student council president, she was spending time with them too. What was she doing with a group of delinquents?

And then Okumura. At the time, people had just thought it weird. How that Kurusu had somehow formed such a group. But no-one thought further on it. No-one clued in.

Not like now.

On the other side of Akira Kurusu's release and return to Shujin Academy, all eyes were on him. The rumour would burn out, eventually, once a new story emerged to capture the minds of the people. But until then he was the target of everyone's interest.

And it was wearing him out.

The click of a door and the brisk wind of silence greeted Akira, a moment's peace obtained thanks to abilities refined by manifold hours navigating Palaces. He'd slipped past attention, deftly made his way up the staircases of Shujin without any eyes tracking him, and emerged onto the rooftop in peace. At least up here he could relax, eat a quiet lunch, and de-stress.

And yet he was not alone.

It wasn't a surprise, not truly, to see her here, to see her bronze-auburn hair gently shake as she moved from planter to planter, each rich with revitalising vegetables. Akira nodded to himself, made his way forward as he dropped his lunch atop one of the manifold desks scattered across the rooftop, and hunched down next to his friend.

He'd come here to be alone, but this was far better. He smiled.

“Hey Haru.”

“Oh!” Haru Okumura, a being who dispensed kindness, sweetness, caring and, for the unfortunate few, terror to those around her, almost jumped in surprise, Akira's silent approach having evaded her senses entirely. Distracted with her vegetables she may have been, but still, any other she would have noticed. Akira though, he was like a cat stalking its prey in all things. A talent refined through the adventures of this past year.

All of them had noticed the effects, of course. Akira, Ryuji and Ann, the three originals aside from Morgana, all displayed qualities clearly developed across multiple Palaces. It wasn’t just that their muscles had been honed by combat, or their senses had sharpened to track their opponents, it was something so much more than that. It was in their presence, in the way they tilted their heads in new environments, in the way their eyes roamed. The Phantom Thieves may be through, but those three would carry traits from those times for the rest of their lives. Such was clear.

Yusuke and Makoto were similar, but Yusuke's natural detachment and own way of thinking made it far more difficult to tell how he perceived his surroundings. He’d always been a studier of his environment anyway. Makoto, who'd been not so much transformed as set free, had become more and more Queen as time went by. The way she could take command, direct others, stand tall and undaunted, it was so natural to her. Haru, from the same year as Makoto, had difficulty comparing her to the quiet, reserved, keep-your-head-down type the Student Council President had been before.
Akira and the others had done something incredible for her. That much was obvious.

Haru herself had been with the Phantom Thieves the least, disregarding a guest who had never been one of their true number. She'd been affected too, yes, learned to move carefully, felt her body change as she swung her axe, hefted a grenade launcher to point at her foes, and been more and more sharpened as an individual. And she'd learned too, much about herself and who she was.

But the difference was still extreme. And while Ann and Ryuji never really gave much time or focus to sneaking around, Akira seemed to indulge in it. He could appear at her side whenever he wanted. He'd smile widely and say 'but of course' if Haru ever said that though. 'I'll be there for anyone as soon as they call'.

The course of these thoughts, meditation on the growth of the Phantom Thieves, took only a few moments, but those few moments were enough for Akira to notice. His smile wavered a little, and he tilted his head.

“Everything okay?”

“Ah, yes,” Haru nodded, letting none of her myriad thoughts on the Phantom Thieves take further shape, “I have just been considering my planters. Despite my best efforts, none of my underclassman have shown interest in taking up the mantle of their care. It would seem this rooftop will be experiencing a lack of greenery once I have graduated. It is a sad feeling, I must admit.”

“Mhm,” Akira cast his eyes out over the planters, thinking on the times he had come up to this rooftop, lent his hands to Haru for harvesting and replanting. Those simple moments. “I'm going to miss it too.”

“Which part?”

There was something in that question that proved itself inescapable, as if heavy steel jaws had just settled around Akira. Haru had only given him a quick look, before turning her attention back to the planters, but the look had been one that seemed to see right through him. Akira blinked.

“All of it?”

“All of it?”

“Mhm.”

It was true. Akira would miss it all. Finding the target. Pursuing their keywords. Mapping the infiltration. The heist, oh god the heist. And then the confession. When the guilty broke down and admitted their crimes. That was Akira's favourite part by far. Knowing not only that someone was being punished, but that others who saw this would fear for their own crimes as well. It sent a message, every time. 'You are not above punishment'. Too many people thought they were.

Akira wished he could have brought down them all.

“What about you?” He reversed the question on Haru, avoiding thinking about it any further, “miss fighting Shadows yet?”

Haru laughed lightly, that amused giggle that any of the Phantom Thieves found joy in eliciting. She didn't deserve what she'd gone through. None of them did, but Haru especially did not. Any of them would stand up for her. Not that it was needed, not now that her own ferocity and confidence had bloomed. But any would stand beside her in a heartbeat. That was simply how it was.

“I'll admit I do find myself missing the experience,” Haru continued to tend to the plants, hands gently tracing through the soil, “Mako-chan and I have discussed the procurement of punching bags,
however I feel it will not provide the satisfaction necessary. I will have to think.”

“Maybe join an underground fighting club?”

The moment of silent contemplation that passed after Akira made that joke immediately raised the hairs on the back of his neck.

“Hmm, no, it is probably better that I do not.”

“Uh, yeah.”

Silence returned, but it was more companionable. Akira stood, stretching, his muscles relieved to be out of the crouch he had taken on to join Haru at her side.

“Yald-” Akira clamped his mouth shut, eyes opening wide. What the hell was he saying? Why should anyone have to hear about that? Stupid. Stupid stupid stupid.

Haru was still kneeling down before the planters. She'd stopped moving. After a moment of Akira's silence, a single word came from her. “Yes?”

Akira stared. It... that was... “…it’s nothing.”

Another moment of silence. The tiniest, most imperceptible sigh from the girl before him. She continued to tend to the vegetables. “Alright.”

That was worse than if Haru had demanded he continue. To know he'd have said something, and then decided against it, did she think he didn't trust her? He did! He trusted all of his teammates with his life! Just... Akira shook his head, it was just that revealing things did not come naturally to him. He guarded and he protected and he was there for them. The inverse he'd deftly avoided this last year, hoping against hope that no-one would actually notice.

If they did, they hadn't mentioned it. Now though...

Akira sighed.

“Yaldabaoth, before I came to find you all in the Velvet Room, it tried to make a deal with me.”

Haru was silent, as if a single word might break the spell behind Akira Kurusu's confession. Akira continued. “It told me that if I wanted it, it would turn things back to how they were before. Mementos would stay. People would keep slipping into the prison. But the world wouldn't end. Instead we, the Phantom Thieves, would be the heroes. We'd be free to keep doing what we did, finding targets, taking hearts, forcing confessions. With no end in sight. Phantom Thieves forever. That was the offer.”

Haru didn't move. Her breathing was even. Her face unseen.

“I... refused, of course. I said people shouldn't live chaining themselves to something like that thing. So instead it challenged us and, well you know the rest of that.”

All of the Phantom Thieves, and all of Akira's Confidants, remembered Yaldabaoth's domain. They all remembered Satanael. To Akira's thanks, none of them had mentioned it yet, or even started acting like he himself was some almighty being. He appreciated that.

“The thing is...” here was the confession. Here was the part a voice in his head was screaming at him to keep silent about. Don't give anyone ammo. Don't give anyone a weakness they can target. If you bare your back for a second there'll be a knife in it. You must be perfect, for as soon as that slips
you'll be taken down. He hated that voice, that whisper of doubt he could never fully silence.

“The thing is...” Akira redoubled, pushing past it, overriding his own fears, “the thing is I was tempted. I thought about it, for a moment. This last year, with all of you, it was... it was the best thing that ever happened to me. I’d found people I could stand beside. I’d found something I could do. I was able to make a difference. I was able to make things better. The thought of being free to do that, for as long as I wanted, it was... tempting.”

Haru was still silent. Akira couldn't see her face, couldn't check her expression. He couldn't see her hands, couldn't look for if they were clenched or shaking. He didn't know what to do. Had he made a mistake? Oh god, why'd he say the last year was the best thing that happened to him, especially to Haru? She'd lost her father, you idiot, she'd never agree with that thought!

Akira started stammering. “Uh, Haru, I...” she was rising to her feet now, head down, hands at her side. Something was wrong. She shouldn't be this silent. Even when she turned to face him her gaze was lowered, expression unreadable. “Wait, I mean, what I should have said wa-”

And then it was all over and there were no more words that could stop her. Haru's arms wrapped around Akira's torso and her forehead settled against his chest. Stunned, Akira could only stand there lamely as he was held tight. This was the last thing he'd expected.

After a moment, warmth and redness streaked across his face. Wait, this was... “Uh, Haru, I think this might be-”

“Shut up.” Her voice was muffled from where she was resting her head, but still contained more than enough edge to silence Akira's concerns. “You deserve this.”

It was impossible, at this point, to determine whether Haru meant that this was a punishment or a reward. Quite possibly both. Akira simply stood there, arms lamely hanging at his side, as Haru held him tight. And time ticked by.

After a half minute Haru released him, stepping back, her own face somewhat flushed. She was still looking down. “I'm sorry,” she shook her head, as if trying to dislodge the warmth in her face, “that was impertinent of me.”

“What,” Akira placed a hand to one of his cheeks, feeling the burning skin beneath it. This was so out of left field he didn't know what to do. No Shadow ambush had ever come as close to leaving him this unprepared. He had no idea. “What was that... exactly?”

“It!” Haru's voice was a few octaves higher, her face now very red, “It's not right! What you went through! You've been struggling, for the past year, putting on a brave face for everyone else! You shouldn't have had to go through what you did but you did it anyway! And I just... I just... I just wanted to say: thank you!”

Akira's own face was now bright red, Haru's thanks blindsiding him even further. What was he even meant to do here? He was flying blind into completely unknown territory. He shook his face, trying to recover to familiar territory. “Haru, no, I was fine, you're the one who-”

“Please stop saying that!” Haru's demand came with a stomp of her foot, something that in a more cognitive world would have shaken the entire building. As it was, it simply created a noise. More than enough to cut Akira's speech short then and there. “We know now, we know you were saddled with all that responsibility. That you were made to act as the hero of humanity, and your success was needed to save everyone. And you did it without ever saying a word, ever revealing there was more than we thought. Because you didn't want to be treated differently. Or didn't want to saddle us with
this knowledge. Or did-” Haru hiccuped, stumbling on the word, “didn't trus-”

“Hey.” Akira's hands settled on her shoulder, the contact causing Haru to jump, her eyes raising up to meet his own. They were glistening with held back tears. Her empathy, her care for others, it was one of countless admirable traits. Akira kept his gaze focused. “You. All of you. You're the most important people in the world to me. I didn't say anything because... because I don't like saying things. I don't like opening myself up. And that's not you, that's not any of you, it's just me. Like as soon as I open my shell someone will slip a knife in. That's just... something I have, no matter who it is, no matter how much I care about them. That's just... me.”

Haru's stare had changed. Her mouth hung slightly open, the tiniest 'o' formed by her lips. She nodded, then shook her head, like she understood but did not want to accept. Her shoulders rolled, dislodging Akira's hands, and the two stood there, silent, each working through their own thoughts. Eventually Haru spoke.

“Although... you seem to have become more likely to speak your truth now than before.”

Akira sighed. “I think I'm still recovering. When I was imprisoned I-” Akira cut himself off, before shaking his head when Haru looked up at him. She looked down again, giving him this moment. He forced the words out once more. “I just, I was scared then that that was it. That it was over for me. And even though I'm out now, and everything is fine now, sometimes I still remember that feeling, the feeling like I lost everything and everyone I ever cared about.”

She understood the feeling.

“So when it hits me, I just, I can't keep the mask on. And you guys already know me so well. So you just... see right through me and I can't help but talk. I don't know when the feeling will go away for good. I don't know if it ever will.”

Haru kept her eyes down. Yet she spoke clearly all the same. “It has been five days.”

Akira laughed and it was a barking laugh that seemed aimed at himself more than any other. Haru didn't care for it. “Yeah, I should at least give it a week or two before deciding if I'm scarred for life.”

“That isn't what I meant.”

Haru's steeling tone presented a blade pointed at Akira's self-reprimand. He shut up.

“Please, Akira-kun, just... let yourself be. You know to trust us. It doesn't matter if you wear a mask or not. It doesn't matter if you admit your deepest fears or not. What matters is that you stop attacking yourself for it. Just let yourself be around us. For us. And for yourself. Please.”

Akira wavered on his feet. His mind filled up with thoughts all jamming at his mouth, none able to escape to be the singular voiced. His stomach growled.

“Oh!” When Haru looked up in surprise, a slight smile curled at her lips. She fixed Akira with a mirthful grin, “I did not realise you had come up to the rooftop to harvest your lunch!”

Akira stared blankly, before turning slightly to look at the desk upon which he’d left his own lunch sitting. Haru giggled again. “Please, go right ahead.”

When Akira sat down at the table, one of the numerous stacked chairs on the rooftop retrieved and set at it, Haru sat nearby, her lunch nowhere in sight. Akira made mention of it, but Haru insisted she’d eaten earlier. Akira wasn't entirely sure when. Through mouthfuls he considered a new topic of conversation.
“Makoto told me you felt good about how your University Entrance Exam went?”

“Oh, yes,” Haru nodded, a cheerful smile on her face, “I should be pursuing a Business Management Degree come April. In addition to working with the Okumura Company on our cafe plans.”

“And getting what you can from Leblanc, right?”

The slightest tinge appeared on Haru's cheeks, the implication that she was making use of Leblanc for selfish reasons causing an amount of embarrassment. “That’s...”

“Haru,” Akira couldn't help but laugh, seeing her reaction, “the Boss offered. He'd be thrilled for you to take some of Leblanc’s charm and share it with people, even if he'd never admit it. You're good. You're doing good. Relax.”

Haru breathed out, relaxing as ordered. “Right.” Of course. It wasn't a case of using people for her own benefit. It was those who cared about one another banding together and pooling their strengths. A relationship she hadn't experienced until joining the Phantom Thieves.

“What about you, Akira-kun?” Haru tilted her head slightly, a questioning expression forming, “Do you have any plans?”

Akira's frown, around his lunch, developed a little too quickly. Haru immediately backtracked. “Mako-chan told me about her conversation with you.”

“Ah.” Akira finished swallowing his lunch. “Right.”

The silence was almost awkward. Haru fought through it. “I... believe that you will find something you truly want to do.”

Akira smiled gently. “Thanks. I hope so too.”

“And Mako-chan wasn't mad at you for not knowing! She just... she was worried about you too—”

“I know.” Akira nodded. “She cares. She cares so much about everyone. That's just how she is.”

Haru nodded with a smile. That, indeed, was true.

Silence, but more peaceful.

“And!” Haru announced with a smile, “You will always be welcome to work at my cafe when the time comes!”

Akira smiled back, the thought of that simplicity, serving coffee with a smile to those seeking a little peace from the outside world, tempting him all the same. “Thanks Haru,” he nodded. A moment passed and his own smile twisted, just enough, for the one known as Joker to shine through. “Just as long as I don't have to care for the elephants.”

“Oh I'm sure I can hire someone to take care of that,” Haru answered with the most deadpan she could manage.

And then the two were laughing and they were just two kids spending a moment together, a moment without tension, or stress, or fear for the future.

Moments to be treasured, and never forgotten.

As it should be.
Whew, feels like these chapters are getting longer and longer! Actually I just checked and that is literally true. Well it won't be that case forever! A sensible length for each, thank you very much.

Today we got to spend some time with Haru Okumura, and while we didn't dive into her own mind as deeply as the initial plan for Spin the Wheel had been, we did get some delightful insight into the Akira I write, which surprises me even as I go. This story is as much discovering each character as it is practising them, and so I often surprise myself as I go. Part of the delight in unplanned writing, I will admit.

I've also updated the description of this fic to be a little more accurate - I swear I didn't go into this planning for it to be about Akira's mental recovery from imprisonment - and put in a new tag or two. If you can think of anything else this fic should be tagged with, please be sure to let me know!

Next up is The Emperor, and a very special boy. I'm looking forward to writing it and I hope you're looking forward to reading it. Please be sure to voice all your thoughts in comments to help me stay on top of getting these characters' voices, and I'll see you all next time! Bye-bye!
Good Eats

Chapter Summary

Yusuke Kitagawa knows better than to turn down a free meal. Or so he thought.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2/20, Monday After School

The underground walkway of Shibuya was the same as ever, filled with people making their own way through life. Crowds moved as one beast, yet were filled with isolated beings, those with no connection to the ones beside them. A herd of lonely beings. It reminded Akira, in a way, of the prison beneath Mementos. He frowned.

But that frown soon changed.

Yusuke Kitagawa, hair of deepest navy blue, head cresting the sea of people, stood alone and apart, an observer to the side of the masses. His focused gaze travelled over the crowd, picking individuals and studying features as they passed him by. It took a moment, dodging around the people, for Akira to end up before the artist, but once he did Yusuke shifted his posture and looked to his friend, the slightest smile twitching at the corners of his lips. Akira smiled more freely.

“Hey there, miss me?”

“Of course.” Yusuke's honest and genuine answer threw off Akira's entire teasing plan and his smile hitched, brain rapidly attempting to remap the conversation. Of course Yusuke's insistence on going at his own pace meant it was almost impossible to run circles around him. You never knew what angle he would strike out at next. Such was the eccentric.

“Come on,” Akira wouldn't admit to being caught off by Yusuke's reply, and Yusuke wouldn't remark on it, but he still couldn't help but suspect the artist was aware of just how effective his answer had been, “it's only been a few days since we last hung out.”

“And many months before that,” Yusuke replied simply, tone as even as can be. “I would doubt any of us could be satisfied with one or two 'hang outs'.” Akira could swear he heard the quotation marks around that as Yusuke spoke, “given the amount of time we had to wait for your release.”

Okay, now he was actually trying to embarrass him. That wasn't fair at all, Yusuke wasn't meant to be the teasing one! Why were all his friends so gooey about having Akira back he'd only been under arrest for the past seven weeks. Okay so maybe that was a good excuse, whatever! If Akira's internal pout made it to his face, Yusuke thankfully did not mention it.

“Anyway!” Akira clapped his hands, throwing off his failed attempt to tease his friend, “People watching! It's been a while, right?”

“Indeed,” Yusuke nodded simply, “The last time would have been early November, as such it has been over three months.”
Akira stared. “It wasn't that long, was it?”

“It was,” Yusuke continued to not vary his tone, discussing this with such starkness that it brokered no argument. “Once the plan to take Niijima-san's treasure went into effect, you spent all days outside of her Palace focused on preparation for that. After that you were unable to enter crowds and, once you were, the business with Mementos demanded our time.”

Akira's stare didn't slacken. The way Yusuke had just summed up the consumption of time, it was so matter-of-fact it really couldn't be questioned. But still... “Uh, sorry about that.”

This was the first thing Akira had said that successfully brokered a reaction from Yusuke, the artist's eyes widening in shock. “What are you apologising for? I do not understand.”

“Well,” Akira shuffled on his foot, suddenly realising that what he was saying was going to be incredibly stupid, “just for not being around, I guess.”

Yusuke stared, for just long enough, before turning on his foot and setting off at a march. Akira had to move quickly to keep up with him.

“Okay, okay,” he tried his best to get ahead of the tall strides Yusuke was taking, “I know I just said something super dumb, you don't have to say it. Let's just do the people watching, okay?”

Yusuke came to a stop. It was easy enough to see the crowd of people part around him, as unpredictable as his movements seemed. His eyes, all too sharp, remained focused on Akira for long enough to make Akira uncomfortable. This wasn't quite how he'd expected this to go.

“Do not make light,” Yusuke finally spoke again, an edge to his voice that Akira had rarely heard and never had directed at him, “of what you have been through, nor the amount to which we all care for you. It is insulting to yourself, and to each of us, when you denigrate yourself in such manners.”

Akira's mind was blank, white noise. He'd been rebuked for his flippancy before, but not by Yusuke. When he'd messaged his friend earlier, made plans to meet in Shibuya and just relax, Akira had been sure this would mark the return to form of the last year. Instead in only a few attempts at playing around, he'd once again incurred the annoyance of his friends. Maybe he really couldn't go back.

Akira frowned. Yusuke sighed.

“We will talk about this later.”

“You're not the first person to say that.”

“Then perhaps you should start to listen.”

Before Akira could answer further, a shift in movement at his back, followed by the sound of a zipper being pushed open, signalled Morgana sticking his head out of the bag Akira was carrying and arching himself over Akira's shoulder, his judging eyes studying the two. “Are you just going to stand around or are we actually going somewhere?”

“Ah,” Yusuke seemed surprised by the feline presence introduced to their conversation, “Good afternoon, Morgana.”

“I'm trying to give Akira the chance to talk with his friends without interruptions, but you guys are seriously holding up traffic here,” the hope of humanity lambasted them, “you should at least get out of the way.”

The two teens, now acutely aware of their presence, looked around, spotting that people passing by
were begrudgingly moving around them instead of through the pathway they were blocking. Yusuke frowned. “Perhaps we should move.” Akira nodded.

“Yeah let's go.”

Away from the crowds, up the stairs onto the streets, and the trio were at least no longer as much in the way. Akira breathed out then in, savouring the smell of Shibuya. It had been a full week now, but he was still taking the time to appreciate everything about everywhere. Reintegrating into society. As you are meant to do after a proper rehabilitation. He smiled.

Then picked up on a scent.

“Holy shit wait.”

Yusuke looked with interest as Akira took the lead – a rare thing for the leader of the Phantom Thieves to do outside of the Metaverse. It was only a few buildings away, and when Akira came to a stop Yusuke looked at him in slight confusion. The wide smile on Akira's face did not seem to fit the situation. He looked up. The red sign and yellow text of Big Bang Burger looked back at him. Akira's smile only grew.

“I need this inside of me immediately.”

Morgana, who was only half-paying attention to the situation, roused, looked, and gasped with a horrified expression – or as much of a horrified expression as one could make with the face of a cat. “No,” he stressed immediately, Akira uncaring of the opinion being voiced. “Do not.”

Akira's smile didn't waver. “I'm gonna.”

“Yusuke!” Morgana turned around in the bag to look at the artist who was surveying this scene with curiosity, “Yusuke you have to stop him! Don't let him do this!”

Unsure of what 'this' even was, Yusuke remained there. Akira turned to face him, turning Morgana to point the other way in the same motion. There was a hunger in the storm-grey eyes of the figure before Yusuke. Something Yusuke recognised in mirrors quite often himself.

“Yusuke,” even Akira's voice was layered with the need to eat, lips already wetting with saliva, “I will pay for whatever you order if you come in with me.” Yusuke immediately nodded.

“Then let us eat.”

Inside of the Big Bang Burger the smell of food was thick. Outside it had just made up the tableau of Shibuya's Central Street, surprising Yusuke that Akira had managed to pick it out and hone in upon it. But here it permeated everything, and Yusuke found his own hunger rapidly spiking. Fascinating, he had eaten a decent portion of bean sprouts that morning and yet here he was.

Akira was already at the till.

“Yusuke, what are you getting?”

Yusuke looked up, considering the listings. Combos of various forms, minute differences and less minute prices varying between them. The optimal price to value ratio was not apparent, likely by design, and so he frowned, unsure as to the best way to benefit. Eventually he nodded, and lowered his gaze. “One Big Bang burger, please.” Akira sighed.

“Yusuke, you can order more, you know – I did say I was paying. Get as much as you want.”
“That will suffice.”

Akira sighed again, shaking his head, before turning back to the girl at the till, one hand rummaging around in his pocket. “Okay, so one Big Bang burger,” he waited as the girl added the item to the register, “and I'll get a Cosmic Tower Burger.”

Immediately the girl froze, eyes bulging at Akira's order. Unsure of just what the Cosmic Tower Burger could be – he hadn't seen it listed on the menu – Yusuke watched quizzically. Inside of Akira's bag, kept out of sight while in the restaurant, Morgana groaned deeply.

“U-uhm,” the girl was stammering, clearly not prepared for the order, “I'm s-sorry sir, but th-the Cosmic Tower Burger is only a-available to those of F-First Mate-“ her words died, eyes fixated on the trio of badges Akira had fished out of his pocket. Second Mate, First Mate, Captain, the three ranks of the Big Bang Burger Challenge. She stared, open-mouthed, as Akira smiled lightly. She must be a new hire who hadn't heard of him. A lot could change in seven weeks.

“U-u-u-understood!” The girl finally regained herself enough to complete the order, Akira tapping his card to cover the costs a moment later. “T-this way to your seat, sirs!”

When Akira and Yusuke were seated, Akira's bag set towards the window and away from the aisle, the feline head of Morgana popped back out. His blue eyes were glaring at Akira. “I cannot believe, cannot believe, you are doing this again. It's like you're trying to kill yourself!”

Akira's grin didn't fade in the slightest. “Been missing this.”

“What is-” Yusuke's question was interrupted by the serving of his burger, Akira notified that preparation of his would take longer. He nodded, thanked the girl, and settled back. When Yusuke looked at him in curiosity, Akira gestured to the burger.

“Go ahead, eat.”

Yusuke shrugged and dug in.

It was nearing the end of Yusuke's burger that Akira's arrived. The table shook, prompting Yusuke to lift his eyes, and in that moment all thoughts of hunger fled his body. Forget bean sprouts, all Yusuke would need to do is see such an abomination each day to be freed of the need to eat. This was... this was...

Akira's grin was Joker's grin. The girl who'd delivered it stepped back, stopwatch in hand, clearly too intimidated to instruct Akira to begin. Yusuke stared.

“What is that?”

“It's gonna be good is what it is,” Akira rolled his shoulders, clearly mentally preparing for the mammoth undertaking before him. It was in this moment that Yusuke experienced a key feeling of thankfulness that it was only now he was learning Akira consumed these meals.

Had he been aware his leader had such poor decision making abilities prior to this date, Yusuke would have been far less able to trust him in the field.

Then his artist's sense struck.

“Hmm,” Yusuke tilted his head, “I may sketch your consumption of this. It would be a rather rare sight, and thus serve as useful material.”
Akira considered, eyes still focused on the burger. “Do you think a sketch would work? I'm not exactly going to be taking this at a slow pace.”

Yusuke hmm'd further, before retrieving his phone. “I could record it?”

“Uhh...” This was the thing that caused Akira to look away from the burger, the waitress still standing by, too concerned by this discussion to announce the start time. Those eating in nearby booths had also stopped, staring at the monstrosity that had been delivered.

“Hah!” Morgana's muffled voice, the zipper on Akira's bag open just enough that the one inside it could see his face, emerged – only discernible to the two who could understand just what he was saying. “You do have shame!”

“It's not,” Akira protested, before giving up, “Okay it's kinda shame. I just don't know about recording it.”

Yusuke frowned. “Would you eat this in front of the others?”

“Well not all of them.”

“Do you believe I would share the video if I recorded it?”

Akira sighed, a raised hand rubbing at the back of his head. “It's not that so much as once you record it, Futaba will have a copy too. And she would.”

“Ah,” Yusuke nodded, now understanding Akira's concerns, “yes there is a fifty percent chance she is listening to this conversation right now.”

As if on cue, Akira's phone buzzed. Retrieving it Akira sighed, turning it around to face Yusuke. A text from Futaba had just arrived, its contents a single line and then an image.

Futaba: @inari

The image was her raising a middle finger towards the camera.

Yusuke didn't bat an eye.

“I believe that even if I did not record it, Futaba would be able to obtain a copy from a security camera.”

Akira glanced around, spotted one, and grimaced. “Shit, yeah, you're right. Okay, I'm digging in.”

The waitress standing beside the table, silently disassociating from this scene, jolted as Akira glanced up at her. “Timer?”

“Oh!” She nodded, realising she was meant to be doing anything else but standing here, “Yes, your time starts now!”

Before she'd even stepped away, Akira was digging in, Yusuke's phone recording this grand display of gluttony. The people watching from nearby seats were silent, horrified by the show. Morgana, inside of Akira's bag, was trying not to be sick.

There was something almost gallant about it, the thought occurred to Yusuke about halfway through, watching how Akira methodically disassembled the burger. It was like there was a science to it, a single right answer Akira had developed, which allowed him to transform the burger from monstrosity to meal. The mass of food shrank dutifully, minute by minute, rare sips of the provided
drink aiding at critical, calculated times. It was stunning. Yusuke was sure he would be able to obtain *something* from this show, something he could turn into some form of art.

No matter what, time spent with Akira Kurusu was time spent seeing new sights. That was a truth which no-one could question.

Before the timer had expired, a conclusion Akira had known going into this, the burger was no more, now part of his body instead. He rolled his neck and shoulders, relaxing into his seat, pleased with the events that had just transpired. God he really had missed the outside world.

“Stunning,” Yusuke muttered, lowering his phone. Akira's buzzed again, this time a message for him.

    Futaba: Kompromat ;)
    Akira: Sigh, just add it to the pile
    Futaba: Oh you better BELIEVE

Those few who had remained in the Big Bang Burger to watch this banquet of madness remained transfixed, even with the food now gone. Just what was this kid?

“You are impossible,” Morgana's judging voice emerged from Akira's bag once more, “I cannot believe you did this again. What is *wrong* with you?”

“Hey,” Akira lazily focused an eye on the bag, “You have no idea how shitty the food in solitary was. I've earned this.”

It was at about this point that the faces of those few listening in on the conversation paled considerably, and they all immediately moved to look anywhere but at Akira. Yusuke, frowning slightly, leaned forward.

“Just what sort of food *were* you served while in confinement?”

“Yusuke do *not* get arrested just for free food.”

When the waitress did return, a distant look in her eye, she spoke with the barest hint of emotion, congratulating Akira for completing the challenge while conciliating that no true prize existed for repeat champions. Akira smiled, the gaze in his own eyes showing he expected something all the same. After a moment, the waitress stammered out that a set of Big Bang burgers would be provided.

“Excellent,” Akira nodded, turning his attention back to Yusuke, “Take as many of those as you want.”

Yusuke's eyebrows immediately ascended. “I beg your pardon?”

“They heat up really well! Go ahead!”

Yusuke stared. Considered. Looked at the waitress who appeared to be at the very end of her rope. And shook his head. “I'll pass.”

Akira shrugged. “Your loss.”

And a voice crept out of his bag.

“How are you still alive?”
I'd like to dedicate this chapter to Ophelia Dusk and their fic Futaba and Yusuke Make a Doujinshi (https://archiveofourown.org/works/11231289), which I read the evening after I'd finished/posted the Haru chapter, and was so inspired by that I was able to slam dunk this chapter in the same day in one full burst. I've not tasted that form of inspiration in writing in a while, and it was thrilling to do. As a bonus, I think it really souped this chapter up.

There's far more italics play than normal for me here, but as a rule I try to avoid ever using full capitals for anything, so italics are a replacement. I think each emphasised word hit their mark though.

Yusuke's a delight, an experience unto his own, and it was good to write him even if I didn't express as much Yusuke as I'd like. Well, there will be plenty more time in the future. This fic is still just starting my engines, getting a grasp of character voices, and feeling out my style.

As for Akira... Akira, why did you eat the burgers? Why did you do that to yourself?

Next chapter will be the Hierophant, time spent with Coffee Dad. I have no idea how that will go yet, so we'll find out when we find out. Thanks to all readers, all commentators, and look forward to the next chapter when it comes! Bye-bye!
Bitter Brew

Chapter Summary

With only a month left until he leaves Tokyo, Sojiro checks in with how Akira is holding up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2/20, Monday Evening

The last customers of Leblanc were long gone by the time Akira stumbled down the stairs, eyes blearily blinking in the light of the cafe. That the lights of the attic hadn't turned on once since the kid had gone up there that afternoon said he'd been out cold since getting home, and Sojiro smirked at the slight sway to Akira's step as he settled in at one of the counter's chairs.

"Rough day?"

"Bit off more than I can chew."

The two paused, then chuckled slightly at the exchange, Sojiro running a hand over the counter. Smooth and clean, just the way it should be. "I take it you don't need feeding tonight."

Akira quickly shook his head, before raising a hand to massage his temple. Ah yes, the post-gluttony fugue. A teenage classic.

"Morgana's still asleep," Akira glanced at the staircase, as if expecting the cat – well, not a cat per se but still a cat and argh you know what nevermind it's a cat – to descend as soon as his name was uttered. "He'll never let me live it down if he hears me admit I regret eating that burger."

"God," Sojiro shook his own head now, "tell me you didn't eat one of those ridiculous challenge burgers." Akira was silent for a moment, before a wry smile crossed his face. Sojiro groaned in advance.

"Alright, I won't tell you that."

"You are unbelievable, kid."

"One of my more loveable traits."

"Don't take pride in that being true."

Another moment. Another round of light laughter. Akira smiled and his smile was so damn honest it was off-putting. Ever since he'd been released from juvie the kid had changed – his expressions just more... well, expressive than ever. It wasn't entirely unwelcome – originally he'd been a damn enigma for what he was thinking, but it was notable. Sojiro hadn't mentioned it though. What were you meant to say? 'Wow you've been emoting a lot more since getting out of prison'? What kind of idiot would say that?
“So what's the plan for tonight?”

Akira turned his head, looking out the door of Leblanc. You couldn't really see the sky unless you were pressed right up against it, but the kid seemed satisfied with just that glance. He turned back to Sojiro and shook his head.

“Staying here, probably do some study. I've gotta keep things up and take the top spot back home if I want to keep everyone at bay.”

The first time Akira took the top spot in his year at Shujin, Sojiro had been shocked to the core. This kid, this troublemaker, had worked hard enough to get that sort of achievement? They'd spoken about it since, here and there, and Akira's admission that it was partially spite motivated had earned a genuine laugh from Sojiro. But still, that kid, he really didn't back down with regards to anything, did he? Admirable. Damn admirable.

“Top of your school and then back to Tokyo, huh?”

“You know it.”

That was a topic and a half. It hadn't been exactly a surprise when Akira had said it, when he'd told Sojiro that as soon as he'd graduated from high school he was coming back. It really shouldn't be a surprise – Akira had carved out a true place for himself here. Family. And friends.

The surprise was in how readily Akira admitted he wasn't staying with his parents. Like the question about being with them wasn't even one to him. Sojiro hadn't brought it up again since, almost intimidated by the topic. It likely wasn't an easy one for the kid to broach.

He'd spoken with the Kurusus a few times, but they had been short and clipped conversations all the same. “Is Akira doing well?” “He's not getting into trouble?” “How are his studies?” “Thank you for caring for him.” Subtle inquires had revealed that while Sojiro had fielded the occasional call, Akira had experienced far less. Had they even called him themselves once? Not that Sojiro recalled. And Akira, stubborn as he was, hadn't called them either. That wasn't healthy. But Sojiro had been unwilling to stick his nose into that affair. At first out of a general lack of interest in that familial relationship, and then awkwardness as he grew to appreciate the kid more.

Honestly, even now Sojiro didn't fully understand Akira's motivations. He'd said he was going back home, but also that he was coming back to Tokyo as soon as he could. It was confusing, and the news hadn't exactly pleased anyone. Even Akira didn't look that happy about it.

What a messed up situation that was.

“Uh, hey.” Acknowledging and understanding each other was all well and good, but part of that understanding had been that neither Akira nor Sojiro were very good at honest heartfelt discussions. There'd been a few – Sojiro still sometimes remembered that night in the church when he'd called Akira family and the kid's eyes had widened, like he'd never expected to hear those words expressed. More evidence of something off.

It really wasn't his place to pry. It wasn't anyone's. But still.

“Are you... okay, with this? With going back? You just don't seem very, uh, enthused about it is all.”

Akira sighed and it was a deep one. The kinda sigh when you've got a million things weighing you down. The kinda sigh a kid shouldn't have to give. Then again, despite being kids, Akira and his friends had already been through way more than most adults would. Still standing tall. Admirable. Damn admirable indeed.
“I just-” Akira shook his head, struggling with the words. The thoughts in your head always sounded like pale imitations when voiced. Sojiro waited, giving the kid his chance. If he wanted to talk Sojiro would listen. If he didn't want to, Sojiro would accept that. Part of being a good guardian. 'A good father' the thought surfaced in his own mind, which he grunted slightly at to chase off. Don't go getting too sappy, old man.

Akira, hearing the grunt and not knowing its origin, quickly spoke again, as if feeling compelled to speak. Sojiro felt a little bad at that one.

“It feels like there's barely a thread left between us. That if I didn't go back it would snap and they'd stop being my parents, just be strangers I once knew. After everything this last year, the thought of letting that go without trying to do anything, it feels wrong to me. I should make the effort. Even if I know I'd be happier here. That's... that's all it is.”

He should make the effort? Sojiro raised an eyebrow at that. Akira hadn't 'made the effort' this entire past year. Never sought out contact with his parents at all. Then again, his parents hadn't either. There was a saying about apples and trees. Sojiro might not have met the Kurusus, but he got the feeling he'd see similar masks to Akira's own were he to. Or at least the one Akira had worn before.

“Was the decision to try and reconnect a recent one?”

Akira jolted, expression plain. God, it was weird seeing him so readable. Sojiro had avoided listening in when Akira's friends came round, and so he hadn't actually heard the specifics, but the general feel had still made it across to him. Solitary confinement, and the fear he was there for good, had hurt the poor kid. Changed him. And it was more than obvious that Akira was both aware of and hated that change.

A cycle of blaming himself for the feelings he'd rightly had when imprisoned away, then feeling even worse for blaming himself and slipping even further down, it was outright sickening. Something had to be done.

Sojiro didn't have an idea what.

“Sorry, that was me prying too much, don't worry about it.”

“No,” Akira shook his head, refusing Sojiro's attempt to walk back the conversation, “if you're able to tell that's on me.” God what a messed up way to think. Sojiro's frown deepened considerably. If Akira noticed, he didn't seem to act on it.

“You're right, I was avoiding them all last year. I was mad. I still am, kinda. They didn't believe me. They agreed with the court order to send me away. And they didn't reach out to me. Just left me. And now when I'm free and cleared of all crimes they want me to come back home?” Akira gritted his teeth, lowering his head. He was struggling not to say something damning. If he did, Sojiro certainly wouldn't have reported it.

People have sworn for far weaker frustrations than these.

“They apologised,” the kid eventually muttered, still keeping his head down. Sojiro hadn't heard this before. He nodded, that being all he could do while his charge vented. It was all he could do. “They said they were sorry for doubting me. That they were wrong and they wanted me to come home and that they'd make it up to me. They'd be better. More trusting. More caring.”

Akira had a hand held over his face now, a choked laugh forcing its way through his fingers. Sojiro was still. There was truly nothing he could say right now. Nothing at all.
“I nearly lost it. That was the closest I came to losing my cool ever since I came here. And Sojiro? I was pissed at Shido.”

Unable to bite back his own laugh, Sojiro shook his head. “Bastard had that effect on people.”

Sojiro’s laugh helped. He could see Akira was already calming down. Something about that, that Sojiro had helped, it caused a warm feeling to brew inside of him. God, he really was getting sentimental in his old age.

... well, not that he hated it.

“I told them that in all my life I’d never been as happy as I was over the past year. They were quiet at that. I said I’d come back, and that we could try again, but I was coming back to Tokyo after high-school all the same. That this was home now.”

Home, huh? Sojiro hadn’t actually outright said Akira was welcome back at Leblanc when he was done with high-school, but it was implied all the same. He’d always have a door open for the kid. That was how family worked. Even still...

“You told them that but still want to try and reconnect?”

Akira laughed. It was a short and sharp laugh, but it wasn't laced with the usual sardonic tendency he'd taken on lately. Something a little less self-loathing. A step in the right direction, Sojiro hoped.

“Yeah, not exactly the smoothest conversation I ever had. Guess I was still too mad to think right.”

“So how'd it work out?”

“Mom and dad... they agreed they’d let me down. Said they understood if I didn't want to come back. But also that they wanted to try. That even if I had a home here, they wanted to try and make one for me too. Didn't even demand anything. Just asked me, honestly, to come back. To let them try again. And god I'm not sure what I feel. I cared for them before and they left me. But now they're apologising and asking for a chance to be better? Do I feel like I owe them? Do I just want to believe things can be good again? I don't even know.”

Akira slumped against the counter, warmth starting to tinge at his cheeks. He'd been ranting. “Ugh, sorry, I shouldn't have you put up with my crap.”

“Hey!” Sojiro's strong tone caused Akira to jolt, the older man staring at him with an annoyed glare. Immediately Akira understood. His shoulders sagged.

“Sorry, shit!” Akira slapped a hand over his mouth, frown communicated through his eyes instead. Sojiro's stare continued as Akira slowly lowered the hand again, still frowning. This kid... “People have been telling me to stop acting like I'm causing them trouble ever since I got out.” A slight grin, but there was no real heart behind it. “Been having a lot of trouble with that one.”

A sigh was all Sojiro had for that. He didn't even know where to begin with this. He'd been looking after this kid for a full year, been brought genuine happiness by his antics, yet still somehow right until he was released from juvenile hall missed just what troubles Akira himself was struggling with. It bit at Sojiro's own pride now, that he'd failed as such at being a good guardian. He'd let Futaba down until Akira and the others had saved her. He'd let Akira down too.

But thinking those thoughts wouldn't help anyone. Instead Sojiro straightened up, leaned back from the bar, and gestured to the collection of beans behind him. Akira looked quizzical. Sojiro smiled.
“Hey, why don't you try making a blend? Your design.”

If Akira had any suspicions about just what Sojiro was going to say, this was way out of the ballpark. Using the beans was natural, making mixes that were known to work expected. But the freedom of use to create whatever you wished? That wasn't normal. Experiments were expensive. A good idea could wind up wasting a decent portion of ingredients. Akira frowned. Sojiro waved his hand again.

“Come on already, it's about time you learned. I messed up all the time when starting out myself, so don't worry about it and just do it already.”

Uh, well then, if that's the case... Akira nodded, rose to his feet and donned an apron, heading behind the counter as Sojiro ceded the space to him. This was a weird one. But still... Akira looked at the jars of coffee beans, mind already whirling. He had an idea. Something to experiment with. It was out of left field, an untested mix, but worth trying, right? He'd been given free rein after all.

As Akira busied himself, preparing the first round of beans, Sojiro smirked – making sure to reset his face whenever the kid was looking at him. It was almost a spitting image of Sojiro himself in his youth, unsure but still willing to experiment. The spirit of Leblanc really had been taken on by this kid. Made Sojiro proud, damn proud. Though, of course, he'd never admit it.

“So I noticed the younger Niijima left you some reading material a few days ago.”

“Ah, yeah,” Akira nodded, mind still focused on the blend he was preparing, “she's helping me figure out what I want to do after I graduate.”

“That so?” Sojiro looked with interest, watching Akira's work. He could already take a guess at the kid's plan. Hell, what a soft touch that kid was at heart. “Sounded like you already had a plan, what with saying you're going to be top of your class then come back to Tokyo.”

Akira shrugged, setting water the boil. He wasn't entirely sure about how this would go, but Sojiro had given him the freedom to experiment. Might as well just do his best.

“I mean aside from that I don't have any grand plans yet. Not really sure what I'm doing.”

“Huh...” Sojiro raised a hand, fingers running against his chin. He seemed contemplative. “I don't know why that's surprised me, by the stories you never planned ahead once this past year either.”

The laugh Akira gave in response to that was one stunned, incensed, and amused. Damn, that one cut deep. He fixed Sojiro with a glare that the smile he wore completely offset. Sojiro chuckled.

“So rude.”

“You'll figure it out, kid.”

At that, Akira nodded and Sojiro smiled. Good, that was better.

When the coffee was ready, Akira took a sip and instantly regretted it. The look on his face immediately brought a smirk to Sojiro's own, memories of foul blends from youthful experimentation returning in full. While Akira was busy attempting to rinse his mouth out with water, Sojiro poured himself a cup as well. He tested its taste just as Akira looked back at him and froze in abject mortification.

Sojiro smiled evenly. “You've definitely done better.”
“Did the expression I made do nothing to warn you?” Akira took slow steps back towards Sojiro, as if expecting the man who had just taken a sip of the foul brew without spitting it out to suddenly transform into a demon. Wait, had that kid been fighting demons in the Metaverse? Sojiro was pretty sure he remembered mention of demons.

“You're trying to make something sweet and rich for that Ryuji kid, right? You're not going to have much luck with Blue Mountain, it'll drive out the other flavours even in small doses. Try S795 next time.”

Akira blinked, considering the beans chosen and those available. Oh, right, that was a good idea. “Damn you're good at this.”

“I should hope so!” Sojiro scoffed in response, sliding the cup back across the counter. Akira eyed it warily. “I've been at this long enough.”

It took a few more experiments from Akira to get onto the right track, and it still wasn't at the level Sojiro would serve to customers, but it was a good start. That kid had potential, the necessary creativity and drive. If nothing else, Sojiro would be happy to have him back behind the counter once the next year was up. It was going to be a lonely time for all of them until then.

The sound of a meow pulled attention to the stairs, Morgana wandering out into the cafe, eyes fixed on Akira. More meows. More conversation Sojiro couldn't tell.

“I'm going to be up a while longer,” Akira responded, “I'll do some study before bed.” A pause, more meows, and a response. “No, you know I took a nap earlier, there's no way I can sleep again that soon. It's fine, just leave it to me.” Even more meowing, god that cat had things to say. Sojiro gave it a look and it stared back at him, fully cognizant. Right, fully intelligent. Sometimes that still caught him off guard.

Life sure had taken a turn this past year, that was for sure.

“Alright,” still, he didn't hate it, “I'm going to head off.” Sojiro rose up from his chair, a hand pushing at his back to ease his muscles. “You can do more experimentation later – but only under my watch. I don't want you using too many beans all willy-nilly.”

“Got it,” Akira nodded. There was a moment's silence, contemplation obvious on the kid's face. Sojiro waited.

And when he said it, he said it with such depth of feeling that there could be no doubt it meant everything. Thanks for believing in me. Thanks for caring for me. Thanks for listening to me. Thanks for teaching me.

Thanks for everything.

“Thanks.”

“G'night kid.”

Sojiro's smile didn't fade one bit, all the way home.
Me, before this chapter: A lot of people write Akira as having a pretty strained relationship with his parents, I'd like to avoid that in my canon if I can.
Me, after this chapter: HOO BOY NEVER MIND

One of the true joys of writing off the cuff is you never quite know what will happen. As I explore my Akira Kurusu, I learn more and more things. Such is life.

This chapter was a tricky one for me to write, and I'm hoping that that fact isn't too noticeable for you all. I can't quite say what it was that stumped me, but I did feel it was a challenge to get done. I'll gauge how it went based on the feedback I receive.

Next chapter is The Lovers, our most wonderful Ann Takamaki starring. I've already got some thoughts brewing for how that chapter will go, so look forward to it when it arrives! Thanks for reading and all feedback, I appreciate it vastly. See you next time!
Chapter Summary

Akira visits one of Ann's modelling shoots and the two hang out after that.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2/22, Wednesday After School

“Ann-chan, turn your head more this way!”

“Mika-chan, stretch your leg out more!”

“Okay now hold those poses!”

Regular callouts from shoot managers stopped only for individual moments where photographers snapped rapid shots, capturing every angle of the models making their show. It was an exhausting procedure, one that demanded constant attention and realignment of self, and frankly Akira found himself getting worn down just watching it.

He had no idea how Ann could tolerate it. But she not only tolerated the role of a model but excelled, and that was the sole truth to it all. Akira smiled a little at that thought. No-one paid him any attention at all. Just the way he wanted it.

“Mika-chan, take a step back please.”

If the flash of amusement across Ann's face was noted by anyone but Akira, it went unmentioned. With a smile that most certainly did not reach her eyes Mika retreated, her attempt to take a more front-and-center position over Ann foiled. The older model was like that constantly, Akira had been told, but more often than not she never got away with it. Ann admitted to a feeling of entertainment each time Mika tried and failed to usurp her.

That was another reason Akira would never be a model, apart from having people constantly paying attention to you, being on show and demanded to appear in a certain manner at all times, and having no real control over your own appearance. Apart from all those, it was definitely the cut-throat nature of the industry. Just watching Mika try to force her way ahead was exhausting.

Akira had only been exposed to a few of Ann's modelling shoots – the majority of which took place last year. This was the first he'd been to since being released, and he had to admit it was nice, in a way, to be present yet paid no attention. The student body of Shujin was still far too interested in Akira and the truth of his situation.

“Alright we're wrapping up!”

Jolted from his thoughts by the call, Akira focused in on the group. They were debriefing, discussing the next shoot and outlining the overall theme to go with. Ann and Mika nodded, offered a few words, and then broke away as the final discussion went to management and organisers. Ann wandered over to Akira, Mika's gaze following the blonde-haired woman's steps.
“Hey!” Ann was all smiles, the lights from the shoot somehow still caught in her eyes. “Hope you weren't too bored waiting!”

“It was nice to just relax,” Akira smiled evenly back, “beats heading back to Leblanc and being behind the counter all day.”

“Well don't let Boss catch you saying that,” Ann laughed, amused simply because there was enough light in life to satisfy her. “You'd be doing extra shifts for the rest of the month if he heard you badmouthing the cafe!”

“Tell me about it,” Akira shot back, “I have to plan ahead now to get out of there. It's almost like he misses having me around or something.”

Ann smiled and it was a genuine smile, but there was still enough understanding in her face. It had only been nine days since Akira's release, and while he was seeming a lot more relaxed compared to times they'd all spent together just a few days ago, it was obvious and accepted that, at some level, he was still a little shaken up.

Ann had been at the forefront of the private discussion with the others that the best thing to do would be to just be themselves around Akira, same as always. She was sure that was what he wanted too.

“Oh Ann-senpai!” The loud drawl in Mika's voice as she approached the pair, not quite a saunter in her step but something suspicious all the same, drew enough eyes to the group. Mika was looking with wide eyes, the glint behind them obvious only to the two she was staring down. “You must be so confident bringing your boyfriend to your shoots! I feel like I'd be too distracted by bringing one, since he'd be splitting my attention from modelling and all.”

To Ann's incredible credit, she did not roll her eyes in response to that, which Akira absolutely did. Mika didn't even spare him a passing glance though. He was just a means to try and get at Ann for her. Being so unimportant really did feel incredible.

“Just a friend, Mika,” the absolute boredom in Ann's response quickly blew out the attention of those attracted by Mika's outcry, no amount of acting capable of matching how genuine the younger model's response was. Also despite how good of a model Mika herself was, her methods were more than understood by the majority now. She really didn't have a leg to stand on with these stunts. Ann stood up.

“Good work today,” an offered hand to Mika was stared at by the woman as if it were a mass of outstretched venomous snakes. Yet ultimately she extended her hand and the two shook. Ann smiled genuinely again. Mika, to her own credit, didn't flinch away like she obviously wanted to.

“Let's get going, Akira.” And scene.

The next port of call for the afternoon was a crepe store in Musashino, just north of Inokashira Park, a favoured hangout spot for the two. The majority of the trip there had been composed of Ann's amusement at Mika's attempts to one-up her that day.

“I could have sworn,” Akira had let Ann revel for long enough by the time they were making their way to the shop, “that the last time Mika had agreed to a 'fair-and-square' contest between the two of you.” Ann laughed lightly as they walked.

“I think this is part of what 'fair-and-square' means to her,” she remarked, keeping even pace as they passed by buildings and streets. “It's all a contest, so she does her best to stand out. But she's been playing the same hand for so long now that it's not working at all. Not that I'm about to give her that
Akira had never actually checked in on the depth of Ann's rivalry against Mika, the younger originally feeling some form of inspiration from the intensity of the elder, but it seemed that over the past few months some trace amounts of exhaustion with Mika's antics had slipped in. There was a key expression of delight on Ann's face when she discussed how well she was doing in their competition. A battle Akira intended to stay well clear of.

“Okay!” With the crepe shop now ahead of them, Ann redirected all of her attention away from Mika and modelling to more important matters, “What are you getting? Make sure it's something with double-cream!”

“Uh,” Akira blinked, thinking about the overwhelming cloying feeling of those overloaded crepes, “It'd just be something simple for me.”

“Nuh-uh!” Ann shook her head, intensity in her eyes, “You're eating this one for both of us! I'm trying to avoid having more than three a week right now!”

Whatever fool might remark that three a week was fairly overboard as it is, that fool was not Akira Kurusu. He nodded lightly. “I'm still getting something light.” Ann sighed and shook her head again. What a waste of good crepe eating.

As soon as the order was made though, a nice lemon crepe fitting Akira's flavour profile, Ann refused to let him eat it. “Come on let's go!” were the orders, Akira almost being dragged through the streets back towards Inokashira Park. Questions about eating the crepe were answered with 'just wait' and 'not yet', indicating some grand plan in the mind of Ann Takamaki. A grand plan Akira himself had no inkling of.

The initial request had been from Akira to Ann, the thought that he hadn't spent enough time with her yet coming to him and a message sent to her in response. Ann's reply though had been one excited; she'd proclaimed the next Wednesday to be 'perfect' and instructed Akira to come see her next modelling shoot. It was obvious to everyone involved, all two of them, that Ann had something in mind, but that something she revealed none of.

Not until the two were in the wooded depths of the park, resting upon a bench, Ann fiddling with her phone. “Right on time,” she was smiling, opening an app, “Perfect.”

And when the app opened and the call connected, when the video appeared and the girl in it smiled widely, a hand brushing black hair away from brown eyes, Ann and Akira both smiled too. Ah, so this was what was happening. He raised a hand in greeting.

“Hey Shiho.”

“Surprised?” Shiho seemed pleased with herself, smile unshakeable, “Ann's been excited about this call since she arranged it.”

“It's the first time we've hung out in forever!” Ann raised her arms to the air, victory achieved. “This is a celebration of my friends!”

It was, indeed, the first time the trio had been together in months. The last time had been on the roof of Shujin, just prior to Shiho's departure from Tokyo. It was unfair, Akira felt, that she had to move so far away, but that was what her parents had decided. So close to his own departure now, he felt greater and greater empathy for Shiho Suzui. Likely Ann had clued into that as well.

Shiho, on the other side of the video, raised a hand, a pink crepe grasped within. “Here for our crepe
“Crepe date?” He gave Ann a sidelong glance, “I should be leaving the two of you to it then, right?”

“Hey!” The punch Ann put into Akira's arm was playful at best, which was something to be thankful for. Ann could hit incredibly hard when she was of a mood to. A few unfortunate experiences with the confusion status effect in the Metaverse had taught Akira that. Shiho was laughing already.

“I'm glad.” Ann and Akira both calmed when Shiho's voice came through the call again, her smile as wide as could be. “I really was afraid Ann would be lonely when I left, but I can see she still has friends who'll keep her out of trouble.”

The snort of laughter from the two in the Tokyo park was as undignified as it was genuine. Very.

“Out of trouble?” Ann said it with incredulity, “Shiho this guy's the biggest source of trouble you can imagine! You have no idea what he gets us all wrapped up in!”

“Oh really?” Shiho leaned in to her phone, the focus aligning to her eyes, “Tell me a story?”

“Uh,” Ann's expression quickly turned guilty, Akira's own far more neutral. The two couldn't exactly turn to face each other, but a quick flick of their eyes made eye contact all the same, a rapid conversation exchanged between them in that moment alone.

Ann what the hell?
I'm sorry it just came out!
Throw her off the trail!
How?

The intense and instantaneous conversation was derailed, however, by another round of laughter from Shiho, the girl leaning back from the phone. Her smile was the same as always, truly happy. Neither Akira nor Ann could help but smile at the sight.

“It's fine,” she waved a hand, “I'm visiting for Golden Week, you can tell me the full story then.”

“You're visiting!?” Ann had leapt to her feet, pulling the phone away from where it could see her and Akira both, completely ignoring the second half of Shiho's statement. Still sitting down, Akira took a small bite of his crepe. The tartness of lemon really helped it, in his opinion.

“Yes I'm visiting!” Shiho laughed at Ann's delight, “I've been wanting to for ages! You know I've missed you, Ann.”

“I've missed you too.” The genuineness of Ann's reply was heart-warming, yet also at the same time a little awkward for Akira. Ann had invited him to this, apparently intent on spending the afternoon with two of her dearest friends, but Akira knew full well that the depth of care Ann and Shiho had for each other eclipsed anything else. He really did feel like a bit of a third wheel here.

“But still,” there was enough force in Shiho's next words to get Ann to calm down, remembering to sit back down so she could help her phone up to show her and Akira both, “you're going to tell me. You think I couldn't recognise you two from that video? Of course I could!”

Akira's poker face really did nothing for him here, given that Ann sitting right next to him presently looked as if all the blood had drained from her own. She stammered slightly, eyes wide and mouth
open. Akira sighed, and shook his head, before looking into the phone's camera directly. “Yeah,” Shiho smiled deeply at this response, “we'll give you the full story.”

Ann, not yet flabbergasted enough by this situation to miss the implication, turned to Akira with lights in her eyes. “We?” She stressed the word, hoping for Akira to confirm what he'd just said. Akira smiled and nodded himself.

“Of course I'm coming back to Tokyo for Golden Week. Nothing in the world's going to stop me from that.”

“Yes!” Ann was once more on her feet, arms raised in the air and Shiho given a sideways view of Inokashira Park. She and Akira each took a bite from their crepes unwitting of the other. Ann's celebration continued. “You'll both be back here for Golden Week!” She was almost dancing where she stood, so thrilled with this announcement. “I can't wait I can't wait!”

“Ann,” Shiho's voice came through the phone once more, reminding Ann that they were on a video call. Ann turned the phone back to face the pair.

In the end, the majority of the conversation was driven by Ann. She told Shiho about her modelling, and about Mika's escapades. She told her about the past few weeks, and the times she'd spent with her friends. The good food she'd had. The movies and shows and games she'd experienced. And about how happy everyone was that Akira had been set free.

Akira himself didn't remark much on it, but did find himself unable to help but smile when Shiho told him she'd been waiting for the good news ever since she first heard about it. He'd only ever spoken to Shiho once without Ann around, the two of them were acquaintances at best, but somehow via Ann they each found themselves feeling like close friends to the other. The depth of care for the one between them forging a bond far beyond their friendship alone.

When the topic strayed to Akira's planned return to his family home, just one month away, Shiho nodded with understanding. Despite how close, ultimately, the Prefecture she'd moved to was to Tokyo, the nature of everyday life meant visits really only could be achieved with the assistance of holidays. For Akira, who was heading even further away from the city, it would be even harder for him. It wasn't fair, each agreed, while also understanding that there really was no better option. Ann was silent for this, both out of respect for Shiho and Akira's understanding of each other in this moment, and also a quiet joy that her best friend was bonding with one of her closest friends. Golden Week was going to be incredible. She believed that with all her heart.

Alas for all, the conversation could not last forever. The demands of school life were still upon the trio, and so by the time the two crepes were done – Ann fighting off cravings for one of her own – it was time for the call to come to a close. But Golden Week was close enough, Ann reiterated, and they were all going to spend time together then. Or else. Akira and Shiho both had laughed at her declaration. A victory as far as she was concerned.

Yet when the call was closed, when it was quiet in the wooded park and only two remained, Akira was quick to observe the melancholy on Ann's face all the same. She'd always worn her heart on her sleeve, after all.

“You miss her.”

“Of course I do.”

It was a challenge to imagine. The hometown Akira had left behind, he'd just been a quiet occupant of. Sure he'd had friends back in school, but nothing even close to the intensity he felt now for his
fellows in Tokyo. And for Ann and Shiho, what they had was even more than that. Being separated from someone that important... it hurt Akira's heart enough to be leaving behind the others in a month's time.

It really was hard to imagine. But he understood all the same.

“Has she spoken about what she's doing after she graduates?”

“Not yet.”

“She'll probably come back.”

“Yeah.”

“Just like me.

“... Yeah. Yeah!” Ann looked up, eyes brighter now, a smile forming on her face. “Just a year, right? Then we'll all be back together!” And Akira smiled too. Soon enough they'd all reunite. The rest of their lives still ahead.

For Akira, one year to determine what was left between him and his family. To decide if, when he returned to Tokyo, he'd ever have interest in seeking out his parents in free time again. They truly seemed to want that to be the case. Thinking about it just made his head hurt.

He'd decide for himself when the time came. One more year. Graduation.

And everyone would be together again. Just as they should be.

“I can't wait.”

Chapter End Notes

Starting to wonder whether I should even be doing chapter summaries. They're not exactly doing anything. Hmm.

There was no way I was going to write Ann's chapter without including Shiho. I'd fight anyone for the sake of Shiho Suzui, and you can quote me on that. Will we see more Shiho in my future works? You better believe. I've got something special in mind already.

Here's an important question for you folks at home: where the hell are Shiho and Akira living at? Given the dramatic nature of Shiho's leave, it seems extremely unlikely she's anywhere still in Tokyo, or even somewhere that can easily reach Ann again. Similar is true for Akira. These kids are pretty far away.

While I've yet to commit the exact locations in my personal canon so far, I'm leaning towards the Yamanashi Prefecture for Shiho and Shiga for Akira. The ending cutscene of P5 has the group travelling with the ocean to their left, so they're going south, leading me to assume Akira's south of Tokyo. I saw someone suggest he lives in a country town between Tokyo and Nagoya - Shiga's a bit further than that, but it seemed a good location, especially for its closeness to Kyoto. Fukui (specifically Sabae) is my other idea, as Sabae is "one of the largest manufacturing centers of eyeglass frames in Japan"
and I find that thought just too fitting for Akira's hometown. Let me know your thoughts.

As for Yamanashi for Shiho, I've seen one too many fics with her in Inaba and fallen in love with the concept. That's all there is to it.

On that topic, and an opinion I could use now from you folks who might be more knowledgeable than I of Japanese Topography, where the heck is Chihaya's hometown? I've been unable to find confirmation of what accent she slips into in the Japanese translation of the game, and so all I have to go to is that she has a country accent and lives in a remote town that gets sealed off from the outside during the winter. I figured that'd be on the northside, but country accent is almost always kansai-ben which would put her on the south. I'm unsure. Give me a thought.

If it's obvious I've spent a lot of time learning about locations in Japan recently, I most definitely have. Looked up a crepe store near Inokashira and everything!

Anyway, Ann hangouts! I think the most defining line of this entire chapter is how Ann was at the forefront of saying that she and the others should be the same as always for Akira. I feel that really sums her up here. A lot more conversation between her, Akira and Shiho could have been written, but we'll see that sort of thing in the eventual future. For now I laid the groundwork of the characters and that's what I'm really here for.

Will we see more Ann in Spin the Wheel future? Oh absolutely. Look forward to the next chapter, The Chariot, and our very loud and special boy. Thanks to all readers and commentators, I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and I'll see you next time. Bye-bye!
Energy to Burn

Chapter Summary

No Shadows to fight? Full of pent-up energy? Hit the gym!

Chapter Notes

Dedicating this chapter to twitter user mangorjima who loves the trio very much and also posted an absolutely fantastic P5 comic today. Seriously, here's the link, check it out!

https://twitter.com/mangorijima/status/910329826803896320

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ryuji: yo anyone want to go hit the gym with me tonight

Makoto: Shouldn't you be studying?

Ryuji: who can study with all this energy to burn? gotta work it out first!

Ryuji: its pent-up frustration y'know

Ryuji: no shadows to beat down each week an' all

Makoto: Hm.

Makoto: I concede the point. However do not neglect your studies all the same.

Ryuji: i wont i wont its just the one night

Ryuji: so whos in?

Makoto: I, unfortunately, am busy.

Haru: There is a dinner with company board-members I am required to attend.

Yusuke: Numerous paintings require completion within the next few weeks –

Akira: I'm in

Ryuji: YES

Yusuke: as such I am afraid I must pass for this evening.

“What about you, Ann? Interested?”
“Hmmmmm, yeah okay!”

**Ann:** I’ll come too! ^_^/

**Ryuji:** hell yes

**Ryuji:** how bout you futaba?

**Futaba:** …

**Futaba:** ryuji.

**Ryuji:** it was worth askin!

**Futaba is typing…**

**Makoto:** Umm…

**Futaba is typing…**

**Makoto:** This is an above average length of time for a message.

**Futaba is typing…**

**Akira:** I can’t believe Ryuji has like a minute left to live

**Ann:** He will be missed :_;

**Akira:** Cause of death: immolated through chat app

**Futaba is typing…**

**Ryuji:** ok whatever ann akira ill see you in an hour?

**Akira:** Yep got it

**Ann:** See you then! \o/

**Futaba is typing…**

2/22, *Wednesday Evening*

At some point through whatever rant she’d been coming up with, Futaba had given up and just started flooding the group chat with pictures of sloths instead, as well as renaming everyone appropriately and changing their avatars to various sloths. It was by image number one-hundred and fifty-three that Akira, now known as Slaking, pocketed his phone. That was enough of that.

On the list of places thought of and longed to revisit during his incarceration, Protein Lovers was most certainly not up there. Solitary left enough time to exercise to burn the day, but the low quality of food when imprisoned had led to lost weight and muscle all the same. In the end Akira had become quite sedentary, just trying to hold on each day.

That being said, hitting the gym with Ryuji sounded as good a time as any, and adding Ann to the mix could only ever make things better. When Akira was packing his gym clothes back home, a
message from Futaba between sloth posts informing him Morgana was staying with her again, he found himself looking forward to this. Burning energy with friends. It was good. This was good. Simple days. Just what he'd wanted. He smiled and told Sojiro he'd be back later and off he went, ready to go. This was exactly what he wanted. By the time he arrived at the gym, Ryuji had clearly already been waiting for a couple of minutes.

“Hey,” the blonde-haired boy raised a hand, waving it slightly in greeting, “hope you've got energy to burn. I never realised how much I was relying on fightin' Shadows til we had to stop.”

“Now it's all gym-time and running,” Akira slapped his hand against Ryuji’s own as he passed by, the second turning to head after the first into the building. “Thinking about it, post-Metaverse nights were always when I slept the deepest.”

“Right?” Ryuji nodded emphatically, pleased at Akira agreeing with his point. “We had, like, the ultimate outlet. Hella miss that.”

“Everyone does,” Akira thought back to earlier conversations with Makoto and Haru, “though I think it was more for violence's sake than the exercise for some of us.”

“Hah,” Ryuji was shaking his head at that one, “you're not wrong there. Speaking of the terrifying half of our team, where's Ann at? Should we just start without her?”

“Give her a few minutes,” Akira hadn't seen any messages from Ann, the chat app muted as Futaba continued to unload every sloth image she could come across into it, but figured she couldn't be too far away. “She'd get mad if we were already going when she got here.”

Indeed, a few minutes was all it took until the other blonde member of the Phantom Thieves arrived, outfitted in her school tracksuit as usual. Ryuji’s sigh at the sight was long-suffering. Ann quickly raised a finger to flip him off.

“It does the job,” Ann stared Ryuji down as he continued to roll his eyes, “what's the problem?”

“You look like a kid going to the gym for the very first time,” Ryuji snapped back, already starting to attract a little attention from the few other patrons present at the time. “We’re trying to be regulars here, y’know?”

“Pfft whatever,” Ann seemed uninterested in taking Ryuji’s bait, walking past him to the treadmills, “are we gonna get started?” Akira followed after, a shrug being the most he could give Ryuji in response. Ryuji sighed and gave up on it.

“Yeah, sure, let’s get going.”

Once the trio actually got started though, enthusiasm picked up. Akira had been eating well (and occasionally not so well) ever since being released, and so getting back into exercise felt genuinely fulfilling. He’d visited the gym, with and without the others, multiple times over the last year to keep in shape – the act of which had paid off much faster in the Metaverse than reality – and so actually had become something of a known face around. After a little while at the treadmills with the others, taking a break Akira found himself approached by one of the personal trainers that worked there.

“Kurusu-san, it's been a while.”

“Ouda-san,” Akira nodded in return, “yeah, I’ve had a lot on.”

“Mhm,” the man nodded, “still it’s good to see you back. Still in shape, I hope?”
“Could always stand to improve.”

“That’s what I like about you, always looking forward.” Ouda nodded, pleased with Akira’s focus. The kid had gone all-out from day one, and never once backed down from pushing himself further. The real way to live, as far as the older man was concerned.

“What, getting tired?”

“The hell I am!”

Ann and Ryuji were still going strong at the treadmills, apparently now in a stamina competition between them. Or a stubbornness competition more likely – while Ann exercised less than Ryuji, the more he pushed himself the more likely it became for him to need to give his leg a rest. Ouda smirked, watching the pair go.

“Those two are quick to motivate each other.”

“Always,” Akira smiled himself, “they’re the life of the party.” Thankfully, given how loudly the two were goading one another, they missed Akira’s moment of abject sappiness. Ouda didn’t, but was distracted all the same by asking them to be just a little quieter for the sake of the other patrons. They nodded and agreed, but didn’t leave the treadmills.

“Still you’ve been missed,” Ouda fixed Akira with a wry grin, “after all not everyone who comes here is the type to go for a round or two with Ol’ Cedar, you know?”

A primal glint, unlocked by eight months of conflict in the Metaverse, flashed in Akira’s eye. “Ol’ Cedar,” he said the name with both relish and distaste, the voice of someone remembering an ancient adversary. Both Akira and Ouda’s gaze shifted, moving towards a distant corner of the gym, where a singular training dummy mocked all who entered the domain of Protein Lovers and yet feared to face it.

A Joker-like smile began to form on Akira’s face. “That arrogant bastard.”

“Same as ever!” Ouda laughed, pleased with the raw expression Kurusu was giving off. “I hope you haven’t lapsed too much since you were last here, someone has to keep that dummy’s pride in check.”

Ol’ Cedar was something of a mascot for Protein Lovers, a wooden training dummy that far more often than not was the winner of training sessions for those who brought their fists against it. Pacing yourself, controlling your movements, yet maintaining clear aggression over a set period of time, that was no easy thing, and most who took on the challenge of Ol’ Cedar burned out fast enough to prefer doing anything else. Thus the dummy remained in its arrogance, lording over those who entered Protein Lovers yet failed to surpass its test.

Akira, stubborn to a fault, had gone round after round with the dummy until it shuddered for the entire length of his assault, movements never wasted nor slowed. He was part of rare company, Ouda had told him, when Akira finished a session without feeling as if he needed to lie down and never get back up. That had been a source of a surprising amount of pride for the teen. He’d never forgotten it.

And now he was here again.

It was instinctual, the movements memorised and laced into muscles and nerves. Without even thinking of it Akira had pulled off his shirt and thrown it aside, raising his hands into position as he approached the dummy. Outside interference vanished from his senses, the entirety of his instincts
narrowed down to this one singular goal. Arm, move. Fist, clench. Strike. Redirect. Leg, kick. Balance. Strike. Strike. Rebalance. An elegant dance, endless punishment, focus on self so absolute that there was nothing else. Akira lost himself in the moment, and in doing so his mind unwound.

A face formed at the dummy’s head. The early days in solitary, before Iwai’s request had reached the necessary figures, those in charge took their time to remind Akira his life was in their hands. It was a power play, a way to beat down the one who’d made such a mockery of the police, the social order. How dare some child bite at the strong and the invulnerable?

Akira hadn’t mentioned that part, not even once. Once certain figures, motivated by underground connections, started looking out for him, the abuse had dried up. Not even a sign of it on his body by the time he was out. Only marks left in his mind.

For as much as Akira’s mask had been cracked by his own fears, he’d still bundled up some things and stashed them so far within himself that he’d never let them out. Some things that no-one needed to know.

His fists were burning.

“-kira? Hey Akira! Akira!”

Rough shaking was what it took to rouse Akira from his stupor, Ryuji practically yelling Akira’s name in his ear. Akira blinked, unsure of what was going on. Ryuji had his hands on Akira’s shoulders. Ann, a few steps back, was staring at him with wide eyes, a hand over her mouth.

Akira turned his head, looked at the dummy, and noticed the splashes of red mixed in upon its surface. His fists were laced with pain.

“Ah.”

“Dude, what was that?” Ryuji had some bandages, he was wrapping Akira’s hands without Akira even noticing. Ouda was nearby, but was focusing on making sure the others in the gym were minding their own business. Ann, hovering closer, flinched when she saw the raw skin of Akira’s knuckles. Akira was quiet.

Eventually, once the bandaging was done, he sat down at a bench, Ryuji sitting next to him, Ann standing nearby. There was silence for a bit, attention having fallen away from the group thanks to Ouda’s interference. Akira flexed his fingers beneath the bandages, and felt the pain of the raw skin beneath. That was… not a good look.

“Hey, Akira?” Ryuji and Ann both had concerned looks, which was so much the worse. Akira had lost control, in a much more concrete way than occasionally excessive expressions. He wasn’t even sure what to say. He was silent.

Ryuji sighed, and slung an arm over Akira’s shoulders. The physical contact was a surprise, and Akira’s reaction to it was too slow as Ryuji tightened his grip, Akira’s neck shifting into the crook of the blonde-haired boy’s arm. Headlock initiated.

“Jeeze,” Ryuji’s own knuckles had found the crown of Akira’s head, “and here I thought Makoto and Haru were the scary ones when they cut loose.”

“Always the quiet ones,” Ann chimed in, “every time.”

“Uh,” Akira’s struggles did nothing to free him, Ryuji’s toned arms more than capable of keeping his friend in check. The blonde-haired boy didn’t slacken his pin for a second.
“Nope, you’re getting this, nothing you can do about it.”

When Ryuji finally did release Akira, his head was raised for barely a second before a black cloth slammed into his face, Ann having pitched his discarded shirt right at him. She frowned, knowing Akira couldn’t see her face as he attempted to extract his head from the garment.

“Put your shirt back on already,” she was complaining, “it’s ridiculous you can just take it off in public and be fine about it.”

“What, jealous?” Ryuji teased as Akira sorted out the shirt, grabbing a towel to first deal with the sweat that had built up during the sparring session. Ann and Ryuji’s sniping at one another escalated.

“Why would I be jealous about- what would I even be jealous of- what the hell Ryuji?”

“Well I mean Akira gets to take off his shirt and show off and all, that’s a guy thing y’know.”

“It’s a stupid thing! If I even ditched my jacket all I’d get is people staring at me!”

“So you are jealous!”

“Shut it! You don’t know what a pain it is to have people leering at you all the time if you show even a bit of skin!”

Ouda shushed the pair as Akira finally fit his shirt back on, checking that the black-haired boy was doing fine. Akira thanked him, but was firm about not talking about it. Ouda shrugged and moved to clean the training dummy down.

“It kinda is a surprise we don’t actually.”

Akira and Ann’s stares both focused on Ryuji when he said it, a strangely thoughtful expression on his face. The two glanced at one another, before focusing back on him. Ann sighed.

“Okay, I’ll bite. What the hell are you talking about?”

“Well it’s just!” Ryuji looked up at Ann, brow furrowed, “we dealt with a lot of effing weird Shadows, y’know? They did wild things and crazy mind effects and all. But no bodyswap bullshit ever happened. I’m thinking it’s kinda lucky it didn’t, you get me?”

Ann and Akira continued to glance at each other in confusion. What the hell was Ryuji even on about?

“Why would Shadows do that?”

“Cause Shadows just do weird shit is all! In the whole entire history of us dealing with them, it’s kinda surprising not one did any bodyswap bs is all I’m saying!”

That was still a really weird conclusion to come to. Ann shook her head. “I guess I’m thankful for that?”

“That’s like,” Ryuji had built up steam, some cascade of barely formed thoughts finally taking on enough shape to emerge from him, “we’re kinda lucky that all the Shadows ever did was violence, right? It was all human unconsciousness, wasn’t it? The fact it was all violence is better than if some of the Shadows were just weirdly horny about it, yeah?”

The stare from Ann and Akira could pierce solid stone. Ryuji shrugged. “I’m just saying I’m thankful all we ever had to do was fight and not put up with some really effed up shit, okay?”
Okay, they could kind of see his point. Ann dragged out her agreement. “I guessssssssss…”

“Like,” Ryuji wasn’t dropping the point, rising to his feet and beginning to pace around. “Sure there were some horny looking Shadows and all but even they were only there for a fight. What was the worst of them, anyway? Some hot-looking girl or something?”

“Mara.” Akira name-dropped the worst offender of them all without a missed beat. Ann groaned and put her face in her hands.

“Why’d you have to remind me?”

“I’m cursed to never forget it so you’re all going down with me.”

“Okay sure,” Ryuji powered through the point, “There were some weird ones I give you that but like still overall, it was violence all the way down with the Shadows and like… lucky us I guess?”

Whatever Ryuji was trying to conclude continued to sail past Akira and Ann, the latter of which was frowning. An annoyance had resurfaced after the past few months of retirement.

“You’re trying to say we didn’t have to deal with oversexed stuff but I still had that stupid outfit,” Ann’s frown was set, “explain that.”

“That’s like…” Ryuji paused midstep, trying to answer the question. After a moment he straightened up, looking contemplative. “Your Persona I guess?”

Ann stared. “What about Hecate?”

“No, no,” Ryuji shook his head, metaphorical lightbulb having pinged above him. Akira, still quiet, was watching the discussion take place. “I’m talking about Carmen. Cause like, all of our outfits were based off of our Persona, right?”

Ann paused. Akira stared. The moments ticked by. And the pair spoke as one.

“Huh.”

Ryuji blinked. “Wait, did none of us ever think of that before?” A smirk started to form on his face.

“Morgana just called it the image of rebellion!” Ann immediately complained, blindsided by Ryuji making such a sharp observation, “I didn’t think about it after that!”

“I didn’t either!” Ryuji snapped back, “it just occurred to me now!”

“And if it’s cause of our Persona how come our outfits didn’t change when they did!” Ann didn’t seem thrilled by the possibility her Phantom Thief suit was derived from Carmen, a possibility Akira was rapidly finding himself agreeing with. The more he thought of each Thief outfit and their original Persona, the more it seemed the two were tied together. How had that never occurred to any of them before?

“Cognition.” He said it without thinking, the word that was the ultimate answer to everything in the Cognitive World emerging. Ann and Ryuji both looked at him, waiting for more. Akira nodded, sure he understood. “You got the first outfit because of your Persona, but once you had it you were cognitive that the outfit was yours. So when your Persona changed, your outfit didn’t.”

A “Huh” came from Ann and Ryuji this time. Akira had a sharp mind, it was known, but he didn’t usually wax philosophical on the Metaverse, just did what was needed to be done. Without it being
around though, it seemed he was able to invest thought on the why behind how it worked.

“Okay,” Ann turned back to face Ryuji, who was a few steps away from the benches now, “so my outfit was based off of Carmen. So why’d Carmen look like she did? Cause that definitely wasn’t me.”

“I mean it was kinda you.” Ryuji shirked back immediately when Ann’s glare intensified. Akira raised a hand to hide his smirk. “Like, personality-wise Carmen’s a good fit, yeah?” Ryuji was backing down, but at least attempted to stick to his point, “Like how Captain Kidd fit me, or Arsene fit that guy.”

“So explain the look.” Ann’s tone was daggers. Ryuji blanched. Akira concluded.

“The same as all the other Persona, right?” When Ann looked back at him, Akira continued. “So like, we got our Persona based on them fitting us, but the designs behind them, like the Shadows, is the collective unconsciousness. So the people designed our Persona which influenced our outfits, but we alone decided what Persona we got.”

Ryuji nodded emphatically, agreeing with Akira’s point. Ann stared.

And then her shoulders slumped.

“Ugh, so what, I got saddled with that bullshit because people were horny? What’s fair about that??”

In spite of himself Akira gave a smirk and raised a hand, sweeping his palm over the room as he narrated a title. “Saddled With Bullshit Because People Are Horny: The Female Experience.” Ryuji barked a laugh. Ann glared at him once, causing him to take a step back, before shaking her head at Akira with a sigh.

“You know you’re not wrong.”

“We’re puzzling out the mysteries of life tonight,” Akira smiled, much happier to be talking Metaphysics than thinking about his lapse of control earlier. “Like how violence outranks horny in the general psyche, except when it comes to screwing over women.”

“Tell me about it,” Ann shook her head, before fixing Akira with an eye. Akira straightened up his slouch a little. “Akira,” Ann addressed him with stately regality, as if bestowing a grand honour upon a subject, “thank you for only being like ten percent horny over the last year: you are a true friend.”

Shifting his grin to be more a look of surprise, Akira made sure his eyes were appropriately widened. “Um, excuse you,” his tone mock offended, “I have never been horny in my life and I resent the implication otherwise.”

Ann’s stare, unwavering, was met by Akira’s own, each intending not to be the one to break in this contest of stupidity. Behind her, making sure he caught Akira’s attention, Ryuji reached behind his back and quickly pulled his tanktop right over his head.

“You!”

The blur of Akira launching himself at the offender stunned Ann, who turned only in time to catch Akira wrapping his arms around Ryuji’s neck in a return headlock for earlier, Ryuji laughing way too much at catching him off-guard with that one. As soon as she processed what exactly had happened, Ann descended into laughter herself, one hand clutching her stomach, the other pointed at the offended Akira.
“You’re a dead man, Sakamoto,” Akira intoned as he tightened his grip, Ryuji not even trying to fight it off. Indeed the blonde’s mirth didn’t subside at all.

“Dude, no, come on this is like being grappled by the softest and gentlest of kittens you’re not winning this.” Ann’s raucous laughter reached fever-pitch.

It didn’t take long beyond that for the trio to be asked to politely leave. They were welcome to come back again in future, but for now their high-energy attitudes were creating too much noise in the gym. Sheepishly, the three agreed and headed out. Once out in Shibuya, Ryuji located a vending machine and handed out drinks.

“I wish our outfits had changed when our Persona did,” Ann sighed wistfully between sips of her own, “that would have been so cool.”

“You’d have ended up with giant spikes though,” Ryuji wasted no time bringing Ann back down, “it’d have been like Makoto’s sister’s Shadow but even worse.” Ann stuck her tongue out in return. Akira chuckled.

“Me though,” Ryuji continued on, “It woulda ruled. I would’ve had like a cool helmet with a mohawk and shit. Maybe that kick-ass cape?”

“Hey hey!” Ann capped her drink, leaning off of the wall she was resting against, “What about the others though? Like, uhhhh, Futaba! I bet her outfit wouldn’t have even changed, it just would’ve gone from green lines to glowing rainbow colours.” Ann laughed quietly, considering the look. “She would’ve been our icon.”

“Makoto’s wouldn’t change either,” Akira added in, Ryuji and Ann nodding along. “Yusuke… would he have just lost his shirt?”


“Haru’s though,” she announced after a moment, “Haru’s look would have been incredible.” Akira and Ryuji both agreed with that. Flowers and skulls, with the moon theme as well, it was astoundingly Haru and incredibly powerful.

“That would’ve kicked ass.”

“Definitely, best look.”

Finally, Ryuji and Ann’s eyes turned to Akira. He raised an eyebrow, watching the two look him up and down. Ryuji was the one to say it.

“Your outfit was badass anyway but holy shit if you themed it off of that demon lord you’d be unbeatable.”

“Yeah,” Ann nodded along, “I’m picturing it now and damn, Akira, you missed out.”

“Would’ve only lasted like a minute,” Akira shook his head with a chuckle, “Probably better I didn’t get the chance to experience it and then mourn.” The others had to agree with that.

Discussion continued, this way and that, the three checking chat in between topics to see Futaba had finally run out of sloths to post, Makoto successfully negotiating the return of everyone’s names to normal. Beyond that it was quiet though; Yusuke and Haru at the least were still busy with their own things.
“Okay,” Ryuji nodded, as if having come to a great conclusion, “hottest Persona, go.”

“Excuse me?” Ann spluttered, eyes wide staring at her fellow blonde. Ryuji met her stare without a missed beat.

“Some of them looked hella good, you have to have thought about this, it is impossible for you not to.”

“Definitely Arsene,” Akira lazily added his opinion, one which felt roughly half joke to half truth. The other two stared him down.

“Dude no,” Ryuji shook his head, “You can’t pick your own that’s like… favouritism and shit.”

“I am not down for this,” Ann shook her head at Ryuji, “No way am I enabling you.”

Ryuji’s insistence, ultimately, came to naught, Ann deflecting and avoiding allowing the topic to persist until, finally, the group broke apart for the night. Yet the wide range of their discussions followed each home, and so when on the train his phone buzzed, Akira was only somewhat surprised by the question Ryuji posed.

**Ryuji:** which persona would you bone

**Ryuji:** hard mode you cant choose your own

**Ann:** RYUJI

**Makoto:** Excuse me?

**Akira:** I can't believe he actually did it

**Akira:** the absolute madman

**Ryuji:** which persona would you bone hard mode you cant choose your own

**Futaba:** Hey I hate this

**Makoto:** What exactly were you three talking about this evening?

**Ann:** Hey! We are NOT responsible for this

**Akira:** We are MOSTLY not responsible for this

**Ann:** AKIRA!

**Akira:** I'm sorry Ann I cannot tell a lie

**Ryuji:** Which Persona Would You Bone Hard Mode You Cant Choose Your Own

**Makoto:** I refuse to even consider this question!

**Ryuji:** akira ann answers cough em up

**Ann:** There isn't an answer!

**Akira:** I demand a lawyer
Akira: Makoto I’m calling your sister

Makoto: I will hurt you, Akira.

Yusuke: I often found myself admiring the colour profile of Dionysus and wishing to study it closer.

Akira: YUSUKE

Futaba: OH MY GOD INARI

Ann: Just because you’re a gigantic pervert doesn't mean we al YUSUKE

Makoto: Yusuke...

Ryuji: HAHAHAHAHAHAHA

Futaba: this is the worst thing any of you has ever done

Akira: That’s it

Akira: I'm going back to jail

Ann: Well that is where we found Dionysus originally >:3c

Akira: ANN

Futaba: THAT'S IT

Futaba: BANNED BANNED BANNED

Futaba: YOU'RE ALL BANNED

Futaba: NONE OF YOU ARE FREE OF SIN

Futaba: I'm deleting this app from all your phones

Futaba: phantom thieves r over

And so she did.

Chapter End Notes

When writing up the summary for this chapter before beginning it, I created the line "the three wax poetic in their own stupid way" and if that doesn’t summarise a) friendship and b) this trio, then nothing does. Love these kids.

This chapter is bounded by two sets of chat, and I gotta say chatfic is a challenge to make good. I have more and more admiration for good chatfic now, and I’ve read some really good stuff in the P5 tag. There’s a long road to really nail that snappy back and forth.
The Protein Lovers gym is a funny thing for me, I 100% never noticed it was even available as a side option during my P5 playthrough, and thus never discovered I could go to it. When I did in my second playthrough it was a moment of genuine shock for me. I had to look up videos of the gym to get a feeling for it. But I did and it worked out pretty well I think.

I did a little bit of Shadow meta today, and break somewhat from what I believe might actually be the truth. I'm fairly confident that the individual Persona of people are very much influenced by those people as well, but at the same time I can still see the collective unconsciousness itself adding a lot of flavour to the mix. Like a set of traits from an individual identifies a Persona and gives it some personality, and then the rest is painted in by the general public mind. That's kinda how I see it, I feel. Either way, given Ann's frustrations with her Thief outfit, I really don't enjoy the thought that its origin is entirely inside of her own mind. So I did this instead and now it's my canon. That's the power of fanfiction!

Originally, when adding the character tags to this fic, I'd gotten my Arcana order wrong. In P5 it's Justice 8 and Strength 11. That makes next chapter something I'm sure many of you have been wondering about. Well, wonder for just a little longer. Soon you will know. Soon we'll all know.

This fic's reception has been steadily increasing, more and more people seeing and reading it, and I'm beyond thrilled by this. Making stuff that entertains others is the dream for me, so being able to share this with everyone is fantastic. Thanks so much for reading, I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and please look forward to the next one!

It's gonna be real.
True to her word, Futaba had removed the chat app from everyone's phones and refused to allow reinstallation. As such phonecalls had become more common, necessary communication pipelines between friends. No-one was entirely sure when Futaba would relent and allow them to return to the hallowed halls of the Phantom Thieves groupchat, but she didn't seem interested in being convinced when Akira had made an attempt.

To be fair, they probably deserved it. Most of them at least. Makoto had been caught as a bystander and Akira had heard, past that night, that Haru's phone had also suffered the wrath of Futaba Sakura. He wasn't entirely sure why, Futaba's only explanation being “unspeakable things”. In the end Akira decided he was better off not knowing.

It was late Saturday night when the call came through, Morgana complaining about people not knowing when it was time to sleep. Akira ignored him, checking the incoming number, before raising the phone to his ear.

“Evening Queen.”

“Joker.”

Usually spurred by Akira, there were times that each of the former Phantom Thieves would still refer to one another by their thief codename. Some treated it as simply a fun thing to do, while others used it as a way of remembering the past.

If anyone besides Akira found themselves comforted by being referred to as such they, like him, gave no sign of it.

A sigh from the line, Makoto's pace already thrown off by Akira's greeting. He smiled, Morgana's tired gaze burning into him as he refused to sleep, and threw out a lifeline.

“What's up, Makoto?”

“Do you own any formal clothing?”

Huh? Akira's smile slipped off his face, confusion the next mask donned. That was a weird question, wasn't it? Why was Makoto even asking? “Planning on taking me somewhere nice?”

The silence across the line was palpable, Akira's joking tone falling flat. He frowned. What was going on here?

“Are you able to borrow one tomorrow morning? A one-day rental shouldn't be difficult if you’d rather not make a purchase.”

Akira would give Makoto grief about her assumptions of his financial status, were it not the case that she knew it better than most. The chief strategist of the Phantom Thieves remained even now fully aware of just how many jobs Akira took on, and was right in having the confidence that a one-day suit rental was doable for him.

Even still... “What are you asking for, anyway?”
Another pause. Then another sigh. It was late enough for Makoto to be tired too, especially with the demands of university upon her. Akira waited. Eventually she spoke again.

“I'm visiting a cemetery tomorrow. I'd like you to come with me.”

Not one of Akira's guesses was even close. The wide-eyed stare he had gone unacknowledged. “Pardon?”

“Are you free?”

Akira paused, running over his mental checklist. Sundays were usually days he tried to avoid commitments. So, well, “Yeah, I am.”

“Then I'll see you tomorrow morning at Shibuya?”

“Yeah, okay, see you then.”

He heard the exhalation, the release of stress from Makoto over the line. Akira really didn't get this. But Makoto had asked all the same. If someone asked something of him, he'd try to meet their expectations. That was just who he was.

“Goodnight Akira.”

“Night Makoto.”

Morgana spent a minute complaining after the call concluded, but eventually settled back down to sleep. It took Akira longer, thoughts of what tomorrow could mean failing to take proper shape.

He'd see when the time came he supposed. That was all he could do.

2/26, Sunday Daytime

Nestled within the central district of Kasumigaseki, centre of Japan's ministry, a quiet graveyard welcomed few visitors. Makoto had told Akira none of this, greeted him once they met one another, complimented his choice in suit – she wearing the dark teal jacket she always did, unfairly in Akira's opinion despite the fact it was fancier looking than his usual wear – and instructed him which train line to board.

Indeed it wasn't until Makoto informed him that this was their stop that Akira parsed just where they were. The last time he'd been in Kasumigaseki, he'd been handing himself over to the authorities. The expression he gave Makoto at this was stressed. She insisted it was fine. And he did trust her.

But when he disembarked and looked around, Akira still shivered in the cold air of winter's last gasp.

The streets were quiet for the time of day, the path Makoto took thankfully away from the larger buildings. The two were silent, Akira less than thrilled with their location, Makoto with much on her mind. Only when they came to a stop before the open gates of the cemetery, a dry wind blowing at their backs, did Makoto speak again. There was more than a trace of Queen in her voice. It honestly only made things more uncomfortable.

“This is a private graveyard for members of the Tokyo Police Force,” Makoto spoke evenly, as if acting the tour guide, were it not for the steel underlying her words. She stepped through the entrance, the wrought iron gates creaking in response to her passage. Akira followed after, feeling the presence in the air.
It wasn't overwhelming like Mementos, like the way it was full of loose souls caught in the flow of the world. But it wasn't empty. There was something here. Maybe just the thoughts of those who'd visited over the years. Maybe just that.

Akira Kurusu might not fear ghosts, but he was careful to mind his steps all the same. No reason to upset the dead.

“So,” he dragged out the word, a few steps behind Makoto, “why so cloak and dagger about getting me here? If you just said you wanted to introduce me to your father I'd have been okay with it.”

Makoto stopped and while she didn't turn around to face Akira, he paled all the same. Okay, bad joke, bad joke. “Sorry, I'm nervous.” Shitty excuse, to be honest. Akira started calculating the best way to dodge a hit, and whether he'd be better off just taking it. Makoto sighed and continued walking.

What they came to was different to the other graves. Most were simply stones set in the ground, simple markers with simple words left behind. This was different. A statue of black stone mounted atop a solid base, a tiny plaque before it reading 'May the Lost Rest in Peace'. The statue was a simple rounded shape, like an egg, a slice cut off from its top at an angle. The sheer of its inside glittered in the morning light.

Akira looked at Makoto in confusion.

“Is this...?”

“No,” Makoto shook her head, “my father is nearby. I will be visiting him in a moment.”

Okay, now Akira was completely lost. He stared at Makoto. She sighed, and looked him directly in the eyes. The intensity of her gaze drowned everything else out.

“This is a monument,” Makoto explained, each word thudding like lead in Akira's mind as he realised just why he was here, “to those who have disappeared without cause, and those who cannot be named. Those whose lives were given up in service and yet cannot be given an individual grave. That's what this is.”

A heavy weight settled in Akira's stomach. His brain was alight with fire. Makoto couldn't help but step back at the slight curl to his lip. Akira was rarely mad. But even still! She straightened back up and maintained her own defiance, surprising Akira when he realised the two were having such a staredown. He blinked first.

“After everything we've been through,” Makoto spoke slowly and clearly, “it's unfair but there's no-one else we can go to. All we have for support is one another. And that means acting on what we believe is best.” Akira was silent, considering Makoto's words yet finding none of his own to speak. Makoto nodded. “I'll apologise as much as you want me to after this. But for now, I'm going to go see my father. Please... try to talk. That's all I'm asking you.”

When Makoto left, all Akira could do was stare at the statue, memories of another now forefront in his mind. There was a slight shake to his body separate to the cold wind. Sensations were returning, feelings left behind. It was all he could do to focus his gaze, try and extract thoughts from his mind.

Try to talk? What did he even have to say? He didn't know.

But all he could do was try.

“Hey Akechi.”
A pause, the silence of the graveyard, no others bar he and Makoto in its grounds, and Akira laughed. It wasn’t a mirthful laugh, one scornful and reminiscent of the one on his mind. Still, it was genuine. And he supposed that was enough.

“You would be,” a smirk crept across Akira’s face, imagining Akechi’s own, “so pissed at me to see me here. Standing before your grave and wearing a morose look, you’d be mortified. How dare someone mourn you, how dare someone feel bad, take your pity and shove it, that’s what you’re thinking. God...” Akira shook his head, holding a palm over his face, “Fuck you.”

The words were delivered with a venom that had stewed for months now, surprising even Akira. Yet the lid had been torn off and now tumultuous emotions, buried and suppressed, began to spill out. No going back.

No way but forward.

“God I’m pissed at you,” a snarl curled at Akira’s lips, eyes burning with a light that any Shadow would cower before, “you know that, right? I mean of course because of the murders, what you did to Haru, what you did to Futaba, holy shit don’t get me started on that. And all the deaths. Lives taken and lives ruined. I’ll never forget or forgive that.” His fists were balled, one of the more violent aspects in his heart telling him to sink a hand into the marker before him. But this was for more than just Akechi, a wiser voice silenced it, you must rely on your words alone. Words Akira released.

“But you know, somehow what pisses me off most came right at the end. It's not your shitty self-sacrifice no-one asked for, running away from facing people who wanted to save you from yourself. Hell it's not even you going completely apeshit and trying to kill us all, you've proven yourself incredibly bad at killing us by that point. No, you know what Akechi?” Akira put on a voice, a surprising impression of Akechi’s own. No-one heard it.

“'I wonder why we couldn’t have met a few years earlier,'” Akira resisted the urge to spit after the sentence, his own voice returning. “You know what? How fucking dare you say that to me? As if I'm at fault for being too slow to find you?” Now he was shaking, repressed thoughts taking shape and being flung like knives into the black stone before him. “Why did you have to say it like that, like there would have been a chance for things to be better? Fucking...” he ground a palm against an eye, trying to focus through the fury, “why do I feel like you're right? Why do I regret not doing it? Why am I standing here thinking about how I couldn't do something literally fucking impossible and beating myself up over it?”

He gave of himself to others. Partitioned himself up into neat little arcana-derived slices and handed a piece to each of his Confidants. ‘Here, this is me, and because of it I will always be there for you’. There wasn’t a day when Akira didn’t consider each of those he’d sworn himself to. A moment where on some level he wasn’t aware of one of them. Each was important. Each was worth protecting. Each meant something.

And while Yaldabaoth's ruse had been a shock, Akira had been able to conclude that relationship all the same. Neatly sever that bond, and put a bullet in the god's head as a final farewell. This though, this hadn't been a clean break. He'd given and never received. The piece of themselves that replaced that which he gave away, the Akira made up of his friends and allies, it wasn't complete. Because Goro Akechi had taken without care. And severed the bond with a blade of rust and blood.

“Dammit,” Akira stared down, fists clenched. “Dammit dammit dammit. Everything ended cleanly. Everyone safe, Shido punished, Yaldabaoth gone. Even I got out. But you and all the horrible shit you did, that's what was left. The murders and the betrayal, that's all we have left of you. So why, why goddammit, even after I knew you were going to kill me did I catch you smiling genuinely? Why'd you look happy to talk to me? Entertained watching the others bicker? Why'd you seem like
you had fun fighting Shadows? Why were there moments when you weren't faking who you were, but weren't just some murderer either? Why'd you have to show me little bits of a broken human and rub my face in the fact that I could do nothing to put them back together?"

All he did was save others. The one that got away haunted him still.

“You belong in jail,” Akira muttered it, eyes at the base of the monument. 'May the Lost Rest in Peace'. It struck Akira that Akechi was the type who would never be at peace. What a miserable conclusion. “You should have been tried. You should have been punished. But you shouldn't be dead. You shouldn't have killed yourself for us. Tried to make amends with death. That's bullshit. A shitty way out that fixes nothing. You should be in jail. But you shouldn't be dead.”

Some things were unforgivable, no form of repentance possible. But that didn't excuse you from trying. That didn't give you the right to run away.

“You'd have been so pissed,” Akira laughed but it was even hollower than before. “I'd have come to see you if they let me, convinced Sae if I had to, and you'd have taken one look at my face and walked away. Refused to even see me, or anyone. And you'd stew it in for weeks about how I came to see you and then when I came again you'd come out and tell me to fuck off and walk away again. I'd wear you down and you'd put up with me telling you how the others are and how their lives are going and you'd call me an idiot and say you didn't give a damn about them but secretly you'd be a little happy that the world wasn't completely fucked even after what you did to it.”

He could see Akechi's face so clearly, staring through the glass just as Akira had with Sae, yet the glare he'd be receiving from the prisoner would be so infuriated it would be concerning were it not so laughable. It was so easy to imagine, that bond still alive in some form. Not just one half of it, frayed at the cut and waving freely in the air.

“You hurt so many,” Akira's voice was quiet, “you did unforgivable things. But you shouldn't be dead. And even if I couldn't save you before you fell, even if you were doomed to live the rest of your life paying for what you did, I still wanted to do something. Anything. But I couldn't. And now you're dead.”

A cloud passed over the sun, muting the light, discarding the sparkle from the black stone that made up the monument. Now it was just flat, and lifeless. No ghosts. Nothing but dead rock. Dead rock and silence.

“No matter what I try to do,” Akira raised his eyes, stared the statue down, “I don't think I'll ever be able to forget what you put me through. How you tried to kill me and mine, and how you refused our attempt to save you. All of the hurt. All of the betrayal. I'll never forget it. But, call me a fool if you want, it wouldn't be the first time, I still think there was something else. Someone who regretted. Someone who wished it wasn’t this way. Someone who wanted to be saved and was drowned out by your own hate and misery. And I wish I could have saved them. I wish for that so much. Sorry.”

He turned, and looked back one last time. One last thing to say. “Goodbye.”

As Akira walked away, steps between markers for the departed, the cloud broke apart and light streamed down once more. The black stone sparkled and went unseen, Akira's back to it, eyes looking forward. Makoto was waiting for him at the gates, her own business done. She looked concerned, no trace of sternness at all to her face. Prepared for what admonishment Akira had for her. He just shook his head with a rueful smile.

“Come on, let's go eat somewhere nice. We're all dressed up for it after all.”
“Okay.”

As the two left, Makoto was the one to cast her eyes back, one last time. At the centre of the graveyard, rising up above all others, a monument to the lost, a plea that no matter where they fell they would find peace.

Yeah, she nodded, turning to watch Akira's back, she hoped that too.

Chapter End Notes

It was only when I finished the last chapter that I realised the Goro Akechi tag on this fic isn't entirely accurate, he is not here. Still there's a hefty discussion on him: do you feel it's better to leave or remove the tag? Let me know your thoughts.

This chapter was partially inspired by vivvav's Confidant Roulette (http://archiveofourown.org/works/11027139/chapters/24576108) the first ever P5 fic I read and one I enjoyed very much. Well worth reading, I recommend it. A mention of Akira having a rental suit for attending Akechi's funeral stuck with me, and helped me think up this chapter of Spin the Wheel. In my canon there wasn't quite a funeral, I'm of the opinion everything to do with Akechi was suppressed and he just quietly disappeared, but that doesn't mean his impact was lost. So this chapter addressed it.

My feelings towards Goro Akechi are vast and complex. Ultimately, he killed a lot of people, and that's never going away. That's the crux of it all. Beyond that, well, Akira said it all for me. He should be punished. But it shouldn't have ended like it did. That's the truth. Akechi as a character is someone who kept himself an enigma, hid his true nature as best he can, but I doubt he was as good at it as he thought he was. I'd all but guarantee Akira saw things beyond Akechi the detective prince or Akechi the murderer. If Akechi was aware of that at all, he would have hated it.

I could probably write a lot about Akechi, but I just did that for this chapter, so let's pay attention to one other thing before I wrap up. Makoto's right in that these kids are never going to get proper therapy for their time as Phantom Thieves, and so they have to rely on the support of one another. I'll guarantee that post-Yaldabaoth they had nightmares, twisted dreams of the battles they risked their lives on. They'd discuss it quietly and tell each other they weren't alone.

And then someone would point out Akira was probably having those nightmares too. And they'd all swear to do even more to get him out, no matter what. Ryuji would promise to tear the damn prison down if worst came to worst. No-one would tell him not to.

The next chapter, when it's done, will be of The Hermit, and that's time spent with Futaba Sakura. I don't have any plans for it yet, so I'll need to think to get something that'll flow out of my head and onto the page, but we'll see how that turns out. Please look forward to it.

In the meantime, thanks for all the wonderful comments I've received so far, they're the lifeblood of my motivation to keep creating this content for you all to enjoy. Please consider sharing this fic with a friend if you think they'd enjoy it, and leave a comment if you've got absolutely anything to say. Otherwise, I hope you enjoyed this read, and are
looking forward to what's to come.

There's still so much more left ahead.
2/27, Monday After School

Ryuji and Ann had cornered Akira at lunch, uncaring of the whispers and attention that always flared up when they were grouped together. Two weeks, a mere two weeks, and concern had transformed to annoyance, to exhaustion, to complete apathy. So what if all the rumours said they were the Phantom Thieves, it didn't really matter or mean anything. That was the state of things.

So while the people looked with interest, tried to pick up on any secret revelations, the trio abjectly ignored them. There were far more pressing matters to address.

“Dude,” Ryuji had been the first to speak, Ann nodding along in agreement, “You've gotta do something about Futaba. This is getting way outta hand.”

“It's been five days,” Ann chipped in, “it was funny at first, but she's still not letting us reinstall any chat apps. You have to convince her to let us!”

Akira sighed, all too aware. He'd spoken to Futaba about it the evening after and she'd had no interest in playing ball, insisting that they'd all get access restored 'when they've earned it'. But five days was just too much, the joke so old it was rotten. Akira nodded. “I'll see what I can do.”

And so it was that after school, rather than go to see friends or show up to one of his many jobs, Akira Kurusu found himself standing before the closed door of Leblanc. The sign on it also indicated closure, which immediately told Akira something was wrong. Sojiro's opening hours were capricious at best, but this time of the day, this time of the week, no way, something had to be really off for Leblanc to be closed now. With almost trepidation, Akira slowly opened the door.

“Selamat Sore!”

Futaba's loud greeting drowned out the sound of Leblanc's bell, her enthusiastically waving form hanging over one of the couches of the cafe. Akira smiled and raised a hand of his own, giving a less energetic greeting in return. His bag shuffled and, after a moment, Morgana hopped out, landing lightly on his feet before stalking his way up the stairs.

Sojiro, behind Leblanc's counter, had a twinkle in his eye that spelled trouble, a hand gently stroking at his beard as he watched the show unfold. But Futaba commanded the room, the sheer presence of whatever plan she had in mind so overwhelming it was impossible to ignore. As she rose up from the couch, rising to her full and intimidating four foot eleven, she paced evenly over to Akira, who dutifully cocked his head and gave a half-curious smile.

“What's up?”

With a delighted yell, raising her hands to the ceiling, Futaba made her declaration here and now.

“Let the Trials begin!”

Akira blinked. “Excuse me?”

“The First Trial!” Futaba quickly began to pull at Akira's sleeve, dragging him away from the
doorway and into the cafe proper. Sojiro, still watching, hid his chuckle behind a hand. Futaba continued on. “The Trial of Manna!”

When she did release Akira, who was just standing still trying to figure out what on earth was going on, Futaba huffed and put her hands on her hips, clearly displeased with the lacking energy in the room. Akira really did not know what to do here.

“Umm...”

“Give him a moment to get changed,” Sojiro finally spoke up, still observing the scene with an amused grin. “Best he get into regular clothes than try cooking in his school uniform.”

Futaba paused, looked Akira up and down, then nodded. “Acceptable” was her conclusion, the orange-haired girl stepping aside and ushering Akira along. Still in confusion he at least followed directions, climbing the stairs up to the attic he resided in. Morgana was already laying on the bed, not budging in the slightest at the sound of footsteps. With a sigh, Akira began to get changed.

“Do you have any idea what's going on?” He asked the black lump on his bed, the furred being in question barely deigning a flick of an ear at the sound. Given how lazily Morgana spent schooldays, it was a wonder he could still nap as long as he did and then sleep all night as well. Akira would describe it as catlike, but that would invoke a wrath he definitely didn't need from someone who had easy access to his sleeping body. Some risks were just not worth taking.

“Not a clue,” Morgana at least gave an answer, as unhelpful as it was, “But count me out. You can deal with it yourself.”

Akira frowned. Usually you couldn’t stop Morgana from sticking his nose into whatever business Akira was up to, and early last year that had devolved into a long conversation about privacy with regards to some of the hangouts Akira took part in. Yet for Morgana to willingly exclude himself from something as intriguingly unknown as this, Akira definitely suspected shenanigans. But what could he do? Futaba seemed to have an iron grip on Leblanc today. And every day. But especially today. Akira finished changing and back down the stairs he went.

“Excellent!” Futaba wasted no time pushing Akira behind the counter of Leblanc, positioning him next to Sojiro before heading back out to take a seat. The two stood there, Sojiro smirking to himself, Akira just plain confused. Once again, Futaba raised her hands to the ceiling. “The Trial of Manna!” She repeated, making as little sense as before, “Begin!”

The silent tick of a clock echoed out, Futaba staring intently at Akira, Akira looking blankly back at her. To his credit, Sojiro wasn’t taking advantage of knowing exactly what the ‘Trial of Manna’ was. If he even did. After a moment, Futaba sighed and shook her head.

“A cook-off!” She announced, pointing a finger directly at Akira, “You and Sojiro, coffee and curry, winner take all! Leblanc on the line! No holds barred beatdown! I am your judge and god, feed me!”

“Woah hey!” Sojiro had known it was a cook-off, but not the terms, “I never agreed to those terms!”

“Ehehehe,” Futaba's grin was a wicked one, no mercy present on her devilish face, “such spice is necessary for true competition. And you're not going to lose, are you Sojiro?”

There were a number of ways to elicit the nature of Joker from Akira Kurusu. Present him with an opportunity for a cutting joke. Present him with a target that requires humility. Present him with a chance to usurp a stage. All of those and more were keys to awakening a primal, competitive, viciously proud and wilful self, and all of those traits manifested at once as Sojiro attempted to
control Futaba's prodding.

If Futaba really had planned to set Akira off like this, knowing him down to every quirk of his character, that was quite terrifying indeed. But no thoughts of that form took place. Instead, with a wicked grin of his own, Akira rounded on his guardian and caretaker who seemed almost startled by the expression now facing him. This gaze was one usually reserved for Shadows beyond salvation. It was impressively intimidating.

“Sounds like fun,” Akira’s voice was dripping with competition now, the glint of victory settling in his eyes, “I mean, if I can make better coffee and curry I should be in charge, right?”

Sojiro’s own widened eyes at this quickly focused, a scowl settling on his face at having been prodded into this situation. Yet he had his own competitive nature, and Futaba and Akira had now stoked it. His stare matched Akira’s own. Futaba’s grin was endless. The battle was on.

“Alright then kid, time for a lesson you won’t soon forget!”

“Bring it on, I’m already looking forward to the rebranding. Cafe Arsene, right Futaba?”

“Yes yes,” Futaba nodded gaily, “If you win.”

Akira’s grin was wide. His glance shot at Sojiro more than enough to say it all. Whether arrogance or confidence, he made the declaration then and there.

“I’m gonna.”

So began the Trial of Manna, the quest for the greatest coffee and curry Cafe Leblanc could muster. In spite of the competition, and the pair being set against one another, Akira and Sojiro were still far too used to manning the cafe together, and easily manoeuvred around one another as they moved above. Futaba, sitting at the counter and watching the proceedings with a keen eye, never lost her grin. This was good. This was what she wanted.

Just the three of them.

“The first thing I’m doing when I take over is setting actual reliable hours.” Of course, even with the need to focus on what they were doing, there was still room for smack-talk between the two. Why wouldn’t there be? “I can’t believe you’re closed right now.”

“Some things in life take precedence,” Sojiro was chopping vegetables, the recipe he was following one he and Akira both knew. “Like teaching a young upstart some manners.”

Akira had been taught the recipes of Leblanc, he knew its coffee and curry by heart. But that was Sojiro’s domain, and if Akira attempted to make the same as Sojiro he’d lose with a crushing difference – such was the weight of experience. The only chance for success was in creativity, in taking what was currently there and adding something, a touch, a spice of his own, to exceed all imagination. It wasn’t an easy trial, but it wasn’t as if he’d never invested thought in it before. He’d just not had the chance to experiment.

Nothing like doing it live, right?

The first cup of coffee was Sojiro’s, presented to Futaba and sipped gently. Akira presented his own moments after, carefully studying Futaba’s face as she moved to try it, but the hacker girl ensured a blank look to hide her thoughts. While the two each worked on their curries, they spotted Futaba taking sips from each mug before her, never once dropping her facade. No clues, none at all.
The curry came together at a similar pace, served one after the other in the same order. Futaba tasted each, considered, but said nothing. All Sojiro and Akira could do was watch as the girl decided their fate and that of this cafe entirely. After a minute, Futaba pushed each plate back, and looked up with clear eyes and a determined expression. Internally Sojiro fretted, just a little.

“The results have been decided!” She announced, gaze flicking between the two. “Before the reveal, each of you must taste the other’s craft, that is part of the rules!”

Not that Futaba had ever given one of the rules before, but Sojiro and Akira quickly accepted it. Provided each a cup of the other’s coffee, sampled it alongside their respective curries.

It didn’t take more than a few tastes for Akira to know he wasn’t winning this. Individually he’d done well enough differing from Sojiro in a way that was still enjoyable, but Sojiro had the specific combination of his coffee and curry down to a science. Literally, thanks to one Wakaba Isshiki. Akira had been successful in pushing the coffee and curry he had made in a different direction to Sojiro’s own, but each had gone in a different direction to each other as well. The combination just wasn’t as strong. His shoulders slumped. Sojiro nodded wisely.

“Not a bad attempt kid,” his compliment was genuine, if measured. Couldn’t be too overt in his praise, or it’d just go to the kid’s head. All good things in moderation. “You’ve got a bright future ahead of you in the craft if you pursue it.”

For what it was worth, Akira did appreciate Sojiro’s words. Such were rare prizes earned. The best result possible from this contest after all.

“And the winner!” Futaba declared with grandiose fervour that did not fit the known result, “Is Akira!”

Wait what?

“What?!” Sojiro’s shocked outburst, Akira’s stunned stare, lasted only as long as it took Futaba to be overcome by her giggles, sliding right out of the seat she was on and onto the ground. She lay there, convulsing with laughter at the sight she’d just seen, as Sojiro willed his heart to stop beating so fiercely and Akira moved around the counter to help her out. That girl would be the death of him, he swore. Still, listening to her sound so delighted, Sojiro couldn’t help but smile all the same. A year ago this thought would have just been an impossible dream to him.

It was good.

“Sorry, sorry,” Futaba waved weakly as Akira helped her back up, “couldn’t resist. Sorry Akira, you got roflstomped. Leblanc stays in Sojiro’s hands for now.”

“I’ll get him next time,” Akira replied, shooting Sojiro a grin that was met with a defiant stare. Then the two chuckled, mixing in with Futaba’s own giggles. A trio of laughing folk. A family. The way it should be.

When Futaba was finally standing under her own power again she struck a pose, drawing Akira’s attention back to her. Sojiro was cleaning up now, taking care of the remains of their competition. Next was...

“The Second Trial! The Trial of Ancients!”

As Akira watched Futaba dart around, he saw her messing about with a stack of boxes set under one of Leblanc’s tables, something he’d missed before, too distracted by the contest to study. Whatever was contained in the larger ones was unknown, Futaba focusing on the smallest of them all which
she retrieved, spinning around to fix Akira with a grin. “And now we ascend!”

Then she was off, marching up the staircase, box held over her head. Akira looked to Sojiro, who gave a smile and a nod in return. “Go ahead, I'll clean up here.” Such an offer was rare enough to shake Akira, but then this entire situation was an odd one. He nodded in return and moved after Futaba, up the stairs to the attic. The next trial awaited.

Upstairs Futaba was messing about with Akira's television, the ancient CRT relic purchased on the cheap months and months ago now. Specifically Futaba was pulling out the almost equally ancient gamestation Akira had bought in the summer, making sure all the wires were untangled, leading out the controllers to rest on the ground. Morgana, who'd been woken from his nap by the sound of Futaba messing around, wandered into the scene.

“Well!” When Futaba was done she stood up with a triumphant look in her eyes, gesturing to the box she'd sat on one of the chairs pulled up to the tv, “So it begins! The challenges of our ancestors, constructed long before we were born, await us! Are you ready, Player Two?”

Following Futaba's gesture, Akira had opened the box, and Futaba took the moment to relish the look of genuine surprise on his face. Rarely did anyone catch him off-guard like this. She wished she'd had her phone out to capture the moment.

Contained inside the box were a set of six games for the system Akira owned, bringing his total up to twelve. Akira's look, equal parts shock and thanks, Futaba savoured. Good. This was good. She liked this. He deserved it all and more.

“The Second Trial!” Futaba announced again, making sure Akira was focused on her now, “We must put each game through its paces! Fight alongside me when necessary! Fight me when called to! You must overcome these challenges to succeed the Trial if you wish to keep these relics I have unearthed! Are you prepared to face your destiny?”

The smirk to Akira wasn't quite one of Joker's, but it was good all the same. It said he was ready. Each settled into a chair, Futaba taking her classic gargoyle hunch, and the games began.

Akira wasn't entirely sure how long it had taken Futaba to hunt down these games. Had she been doing so while he was in juvie? It couldn't have been recent, she'd clearly specifically targeted games with multiplayer functionality. Whether as teammates or competitors, the two sampled each game, time ticking by as Morgana sat behind them watching, offering his own opinions or advice at key intervals along the way.

The last of the six was Power Intuition 2, which Akira remarked on being surprised at the existence of only for Morgana and Futaba both to throw back in his face that he'd probably never even bothered to look up what games did exist for his system. That, unfortunately, he couldn't argue. He'd really just taken what he could get.

“You've done well keeping pace so far,” Futaba wore a focused grin as she chose one of the smallest characters in the roster, with one of the worst stat spreads of them all. Akira immediately felt great fear at the potential of the tiny foe he now faced. “But you'll never overcome me here, no matter what super secret ultra power move you have. Just try your best, you won't succeed!”

“I don't know about that,” Akira played along, a wry smirk masking his concern that Futaba was about to embarrassingly crush him, “what if I had an unbeatable move you could never overcome?”
Futaba's glare, laser-focused, scrutinised Akira's face, he doing his best to maintain a mask of innocence. After a moment, Futaba made her conclusion.

“You're bluffing.”

“What if I'm not?”

“Just try me.”

“I dunno, it might be a little too powerful. Such things shouldn't be used wildly.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I'm serious!”

“Then let's game.”

In the end, Akira didn't stand a chance. Futaba must have practised, or looked something up, because despite keeping pace with her in the other five games, Futaba had absolutely destroyed him here. Really, it was almost mortifying. Morgana had started laughing halfway through the match and wasn't stopping even after the system had been switched off.

“A victory for me is a loss for you,” Futaba eyed Akira off with a grin, “I guess that certain-kill move of yours was just all talk?”

“Just too dangerous to unleash,” Akira answered back, aware that he'd managed to paint himself into a corner with his earlier declaration. He did, actually, have something in mind, but it wasn’t something to weaponise. He'd been too hasty in saying he had such an ace up his sleeve. It wasn't right to use just for winning a videogame. Even if the prize was... oh god...

“Oh... the games...”

He really had been excited to take them back home along with the others...

“Ahaahaha,” Futaba enjoyed Akira's look of defeat, savouring her moment of standing above him, “I suppose since I have won the games are mine to do with as I wish. And so,” just one brief moment of Akira looking at Futaba like she held the executioner’s axe, “I shall bequeath them unto you.”

Akira stared in surprise once more. Futaba laughed and poked him in the side, causing him to jolt. Silly Akira, “You're the only person I know who owns that game system anyway. What would I have done with them?”

Blankly Akira nodded, twice worked over by Futaba's Trials so far. With a grin Futaba turned on the ball of her foot, marching down the staircase, one arm raised to hold a fist in the air. Her call was for Akira to follow for what came next. Morgana wandered back onto the bed.

“The Third and Final Trial! The Trial of Daedalus!”

Since becoming a Persona user, Akira's interest in mythological figures had spiked – leading to him spending quite a lot of spare time studying them, whether in books or online. Wandering after Futaba, he attempted to sleuth just what this trial would be before it was explained.

“The minotaur guy?”

“The architect and inventor!” Futaba answered back to Akira's question, focusing on aspects he hadn't thought of. Sojiro was helping Futaba lift up one of the larger boxes under a table onto it, the
crossword puzzle on the counter showing how he'd spent the time down here while they'd been upstairs.

The box in question contained a smaller plastic box atop whatever was filling it, and Futaba quickly lifted it out and opened it up. Various tools, screwdrivers and light brushes, filled the box. Futaba handed a wristband with an alligator clip attached to it to Akira, who took it with a confused glance. He wasn't quite sure what this was at all. A running theme of the night.

"Tonight!" Futaba continued the explanation as she excavated the first box's contents, revealing an old looking computer tower, "You will be assisting me with repairs! We are going to salvage this cheap junk I picked up and get it ready and working again!"

Futaba Sakura was, without question, the type of person who remained on the forefront of technology, who only worked with the best of the best. This bland-looking PC was, to Akira's uneducated eyes, an ancient piece of junk. He gave her a strange look, and a pointed question.

"Why?"

"Gotta start somewhere!" Futaba slapped a hand on Akira's back, before dealing out instructions on opening the case up, "You did a good job with that old laptop but you can always use more practise! You're going to need a real computer when you go back home, so let's get you started learning proper care and handling now!"

There wasn't really room to broker an argument that Akira did have a computer back home, Futaba was insistent he was going to have something worthwhile or she wouldn't be able to look him in the face after this. Akira half-suspected Futaba just wanted him to be using a system she had free control over.

Though, in truth, he found himself not minding that much.

Over the next hour the two salvaged various ancient computers Futaba had somehow collected, swapped parts between them, restored some while abandoning others. Futaba was direct in instructing Akira on what did what, what was needed for what, and what makes and models were the ideals to chase after. It was a lot to internalise, but after the extended building session he couldn't deny he felt like he understood more about the electronic systems.

Eventually, once the computers were packed away again, up to Futaba to deal with at a later date, she yawned. Time had ticked on, and while the two had enjoyed the evening, it was getting late. Sojiro set his newspaper down.

"Time to wrap up, you two."

"Righto," Futaba nodded, moving to the centre of the room. Once there she fixed Akira with a focused stare, one marred only by another yawn. Akira moved to stand before her, kneeling down when she instructed him to. The time for judgement was nigh.

"Akira Kurusu," Futaba dictated with an empress's grace, "you have faced my Trials with honour, and for that you are to be commended. However, only one of the three was successfully overcome. Before I pass my judgement, do you have anything you wish to say?"

Akira rose up to his feet. Futaba bit back a squeak as she suddenly had to change from looking down to up at him, a soft expression on his face. Akira nodded slowly. "Yeah, I do."

"It's been two weeks now, two weeks since I came back," Akira spoke with measured pace, managing his own emotions as he went. Genuine honesty, genuine free expression, it was a rare
thing for him. But it was important here. This, was important. Futaba's stare was one of a rabbit caught in headlights. Akira continued.

“Over those two weeks, I've spent a lot of time working at Leblanc. Because of that, whenever I wasn't working I'd gone out, to meet up with others, to revive some other jobs, to spend time fitting back into Tokyo.” If Sojiro had any thoughts about how keeping Akira working had affected the kid, he kept those to himself.

“But I realise I made a mistake,” Akira kept speaking, “spending all the time I wasn't working away. There were times we'd all got together, here or gone out, but I hadn't spent any time here and free,” his eyes locked onto Futaba's own as she stared up at him, “here with you. I'm sorry.”

She'd missed him. Obviously she had. He'd missed her, and everyone, but hadn't yet reconnected. Not properly. This night, this was the first time they'd spent this much time together, just the two of them, since Akira had come back. He really should have seen this sooner. A colossal screwup on his part.

Futaba, stunned both by Akira's honest admission and his read of her motivation, didn't have anything to say. She was on the ropes, ninety-nine percent damage, at knockout threshold. Akira's ultimate move slipped into his mind. Yeah, now would be acceptable. He bowed his head to her.

“I'll try to be a better brother from here on out.”

Behind the counter of Leblanc, Sojiro turned his face aside. “Low-blow, kid,” he muttered to himself alone.

Futaba, face gone beet-red, heart-beat spiralling out of control, turned robotically on her foot, marched out the door of Leblanc without so much as a word. The ring of the bell and slam of the door as it closed on its own caused Akira to flinch. He looked at Sojiro with a sheepish expression.

“Too much?”

Sojiro just shook his head. Damn, guess so.

“I'm wrapping up for the night too,” Sojiro didn't pass any further judgement on Akira's actions, stepping out from behind the counter and making for the door, “Don't stay up too late.” And then he too was gone, heading after his daughter on the way home. Akira, left behind in Leblanc, felt his own cheeks, far too warm. He'd thought about it a lot, directly acknowledging the familial feelings he'd developed over the past year, but doing it had still been nervewracking. And he had no idea how it had turned out.

With a sigh, he made his way back upstairs.

It was a little later, when convincing Morgana to shift so he could actually get into bed, that Akira's phone buzzed. When he picked it up, it was to see a familiar icon on the home screen, chat app finally restored. Opening it up, Akira could see one set of messages, sent just to him.

With a smile he checked it, nodded, and set the phone down, closed his eyes and settled in for the night.

This hadn't been bad.

Not bad at all.

**Futaba:** I had fun today
Futaba: Let's do it again sometime

Futaba: L... uh...

Futaba: G'night

Futaba: ... 

Futaba: thanks

Futaba: big brother

The final message was missing from the chat when Akira awoke the next morning. Something to go unmentioned, but known by just the two of them.

Not bad at all.

Chapter End Notes

There really aren't words for how thoroughly I am in the Akira and Futaba are brother and sister camp. You're not gonna pry me outta there even with a crowbar. Coffee Family for life, yo.

The brother bomb is something I struggled with right up to and including the actual delivery. I wanted the first utterance to have meaning, I've seen some really good fics where it's held off and delivered exceptionally, so putting it here despite my appreciation for it does feel a little weird. Still, I've committed, so my only hope is that the impact was good. How much of Spin the Wheel is canon to other works I might do and how much it isn't is an unknown so far, so maybe I'll approach this topic again. We'll see. We will see.

In all honesty, the most difficult part of this chapter was coming up with some good names for the Trials. Manna came in early, but Daedalus and then Ancients took some real thought. I hope they did well, fit Futaba, and gave a good impression. That's my wish for that.

The cookoff for Leblanc is inspired by one of the P5 Anthology chapters and the name Cafe Arsene is something I've seen used in other fics and appreciated. Seriously, there's so much good stuff in the P5 tag. I've been monitoring it daily since starting Spin the Wheel and that has not been a bad decision at all. It rules.

Next chapter, The Wheel of Fortune, marks the halfway mark of Spin the Wheel. I can make no guarantees to do with pace or update speed, but I do try to get a new chapter every few days, so hopefully I can stick to that over the month to come. As always, my thanks to all readers and commentors, who I will always appreciate the presence of. There's still so much more to go, so please look forward to it!

Good times await.
2/28, Tuesday Evening

Come evening the red-light district of Shinjuku lived up to its literal name – the mingling of colours from countless electronic signs and lights forming a red-pink hue that washed out over the streets, tinged the faces of all walking it, and lured the unwary astray into the grips of countless shops lining the road.

The haze was powerful, but those of strong will could push through it without fear, and so without batting an eyelid Akira Kurusu walked past hawkers advertising their bars and clubs, his intended destination all there was on his mind.

This was the first time Akira had visited Shinjuku since being released from his imprisonment; the few nights he wasn't working at Leblanc or studying – catching up on the missed weeks of school taking far more effort than he'd expected – being spent closer to home. Ohya had come by for a coffee a few days after Akira's release, but aside from saying hi and checking in, she hadn't stuck around. Clearly on the job.

Chihaya Mifune, a fortune teller of exceptional accuracy, was one of the few people Akira had yet to see since his release. It wasn't like she hadn't come to mind – Akira thought often of every last one of his Confidants – but more that life and time had conspired against him. He had, of course, contacted every last one of his Confidants after release to let them know he was okay, but there was a core difference still between that and actually seeing them.

A difference he was going to move further towards resolution tonight.

Chihaya worked outside, a simple table set up on the streetside, waiting for visitors in need of guidance against fate. Though once her readings had been solely fatalistic, a prediction without recourse, Akira had helped her change, see that fate could be altered by will. And, in one or two cases, the guiding hands of a Thief of Hearts, but there was no reason to bring that in to muddy the waters. Chihaya had embraced aiding others in overturning their fate, and in truth Akira felt a deep sense of pride in her for that.

Was it strange, to be so proud of one's elder? Despite a difference in age, Akira often found himself thinking of Chihaya as a contemporary, an equal in facing a confusing and unjust world. Well, however it may be, each had aided the other in their growth over the last year, and ultimately that was enough. The same could be said of all of Akira's Confidants in a way, after all. He thought no more on the subject.

As he rounded the corner to the street she was based on, Akira noted Chihaya was dealing with a client. An older woman sat on the chair in front of Chihaya's table, biting at her lower lip as she studied the spread of cards across it. Chihaya, Akira could tell even at this distance, was doing her best to give a motivating speech, one that seemed designed to lift the spirits of someone facing great challenges.

With the unerring accuracy of Chihaya's predictions, it could be quite demoralising to face a reading that spelled catastrophe. But such readings were able to be overcome, Akira himself proof of such a thing. He waited, at a distance, watching as Chihaya's gestures and reassurances slowly lifted the
mood of the woman before her. Eventually she stood and bowed, clearly convinced that there remained a way to chart the struggles ahead. When she passed Akira by, who'd disguised himself amongst the movement of a crowd, he saw she was wearing a smile all the same. Ready for the future no matter what. Good. The way it should be.

Chihaya really was incredible.

With the consultation complete, Chihaya took a moment to rest. The cards spread across her table she shuffled back into their deck, then leaned back herself, closing her eyes and breathing out deeply. In that moment Akira, with light yet determined step, closed the distance between the two and fit himself into the chair opposite her, plastering a wide grin across his face. The best outcome possible.

“Hey Chihaya.”

To say Chihaya jumped in her seat would be an understatement; her yelp, her expression of absolute surprise, they were beyond comical. Akira's struggle to avoid laughing through his smile came to an end when, recovering just a little, Chihaya fixed him with an extremely reproachful glare. He laughed and couldn't stop and, after a moment, Chihaya joined in. The two of them just laughing. It was good.

“Honestly,” when their laughter did subside, enough at least for Chihaya to speak again, she attempted still to lecture Akira for his stunt, “did you have to surprise me like that?”

“Well y'know,” Akira's own smile wasn't anywhere near faded, the surprise he'd inflicted more than satisfying, “I figured it was fifty-fifty I'd either surprise you or you'd say 'Hello Kurusu-san' without even opening your eyes after predicting my appearance.”

Despite how absolutely true that statement was – and Chihaya was fully aware it was – she still found her cheeks warming at the teasing. Honestly! “Speaking of,” still flustered she struggled to retake the reins of the conversation Akira had so deftly seized, “'Hey Chihaya' is way too familiar y'know! At least call me 'Chihaya-san' already!”

Akira cocked his head and gave a quizzical look, one that anyone exposed to him knew was part of his theatrics. For someone known to be so profoundly level-headed and calm in all situations, Akira Kurusu was also a relentless tease when given the slightest opportunity. Truly incorrigible.

“-san', you're sure?” It wasn't like the two didn't have some measure of closeness, it wasn't like hearing her name without an honorific from him was distressing to Chihaya. It was just a little surprising all the same. For someone usually so astoundingly polite, Akira became familiar with his allies far too quickly. “You sure you don't want me to go with 'Chihaya-chan' instead?”

“Ohhhh!” Chihaya's dagger stare did nothing to Akira, who smiled widely before bobbing his head once, an act of insincere apology.

“Sorry, sorry,” she could see the obvious sparkle in his eyes that told her he was having fun with this. That troublemaker! “Chihaya-san, I'll stick to that. Promise.”

Honestly, for any level of respect, it should be 'Mifune-san', but for some reason Chihaya couldn't bring herself to push that point. Even if she, at least, was polite enough to refer to Akira by his last name. This city had corrupted him, she was sure. He'd told her he was from a country town once before, surely he'd had proper manners back then! Yet here he was, sitting before her with that sly grin on his face like he was having the time of his life.

A Trickster indeed...
“I had wondered,” Akira straightened up in his seat when Chihaya spoke again, reading a different tone in her voice, “when you’d come by to visit. How have you been, Kurusu-san?”

There were motions to be read in Akira's response to that, the way his eyes flickered, his fingers twitched, there was something immediately uncomfortable with him. It could be the innate conflict between how he referred to Chihaya and she did to him in return, or some measure of guilt in not having visited her yet, or a true statement about his current mood. Chihaya had studied many books on reading the emotions revealed by the way people moved, and the fruit of that was apparently so strong as to allow her to see even the great Trickster's secrets.

Or perhaps he was just unable to guard himself the way he had last year, no longer that immutable and untouchable teen that never for a second showed a weakness. Chihaya frowned. He was different. Something about that troubled her.

“Ah, yeah, sorry,” Akira quickly apologised in a tone that said no jokes, no defence. He was immediately different to the way he'd been just a minute ago. “With re-adapting to life after getting out, I've ended up staying close to home a lot. It's taken a little too long to start going further afield.”

Chihaya's frown didn't let up. Was he seriously apologising to her? After all he's been through? She couldn't stand the thought. “I didn't mean it like that,” she spoke quietly, distressed by the way the conversation had gone, “you need to care for yourself.”

Sharp ears, focused on muttering beneath breath, would detect an 'easier said than done' slipping out of Akira's mouth, almost against his will. If those sharp ears heard it though, they said nothing, something he would be thankful for, in the event he had been heard.

This was far more awkward now than a conversation about the correct degree of formality between the two. Unsure of the best way past it, Chihaya attempted to focus on catching Akira up with the events of late – telling him about how her progress had been with helping others, and the dismantling of the ADP and rehabilitation of its members. The word 'rehabilitation' actually caused Akira to jolt slightly, but he shook his head when Chihaya looked at him in curiosity. Some mysteries he still held onto, it seemed.

Eventually, after finishing her recount of the past few months, Chihaya found herself considering the future. What was next for her was...

“Do you remember,” Akira's smile had returned as Chihaya spoke about herself, genuine interest and delight evident upon him at hearing she was well. He cared so much, a trait that was one of many that drew people to him. Once long ago in her readings Chihaya had determined that Akira either possessed incredible charisma or was just a natural troublemaker. These days she was sure it was both. “What I told you about the village I came from?”

“Deep in the mountains, isolated in winter,” Akira recounted quickly, his memory sharp. Chihaya nodded, satisfied with that.

“It's in Kyushu,” she expanded, Akira unsurprised by that. He'd heard her native accent slip out at times before, so it shouldn't be a surprise that he'd recognised it. “I've... been thinking about going back. N-not for good!” Akira's eyes had widened a little at that, causing Chihaya to quickly backtrack, “Just to see my family and friends again. To try and reunite with them after... everything that happened.”

Akira was frowning, far more than normal. Chihaya, distressed by that, continued to explain. “I know I said a lot of bad things happened, but still, nothing changes if you just accept things and I... I did have friends and I did have family that cared for me and I think that if I can reconnect with them I
should! I don't think it's right to throw that away just because it's scary.”

Akira's eyes were downcast, the fingers of one hand tight around the wrist of another. He was struggling with something. Chihaya didn't have a clue what.

“I... uh,” oh this was embarrassing to admit, “at one point I'd started to suspect you'd actually been sent by, uh, my parents, to find me.” Now Akira looked up, an expression of confusion on his face. It was so honest that it was clear that suspicion had been truly groundless. Chihaya shook her head, cheeks burning. “It's just you showed up one day and then you kept coming back and helping and encouraging me an' I just didn't understand why cause I'd never got kindness like that before is all so I thought that maybe ya'd been sent by my parents but I know that's not what happened an' I'm sorry I just couldn' imagine someone as kind as you coming to help someone like me an'—”

“Chihaya.” Akira's utterance of her name, again without honorific in spite of his promise damn him, cut through Chihaya's lapsing dialect rambling and silenced her immediately. She stared. He sighed, a hand rubbing the back of his incredibly fluffy hair. Seriously, it looked incredible. She was getting distracted.

“I-” Akira shook his head once, as if dislodging his own troubles from being stuck within him, “I'm leaving Tokyo.” Chihaya's eyes widened this time, her mouth opening into a tiny 'o' of shock. Akira looked downwards. “In three weeks I'm going back to my family home. I only came out to Tokyo at first because of my arrest. Now that it's been overturned, my family asked me to come back. To reconnect.” Lines of fire traced their way through Chihaya's mind as her thoughts moved faster than ever, connected all the points; Akira's expression as she spoke of going back to see her family, the experiences he must have had when being cast out, the separation and then request for reunion. ‘Oh', she thought. Oh.

“I... I see.”

“So I guess we're both facing that, right now.” Akira's usual tone was muted, energy low. This self, this lack of confidence, Chihaya had never seen it from him before. And in that moment she realised that she knew Akira Kurusu far less than he knew her. The reason he was comfortable calling her Chihaya was because he'd learned her true self and accepted her. The reason she still used Kurusu-san was because she knew nearly nothing about him. That realisation, it stung harder than she'd like.

“I-I'm sure it will go well!” Chihaya nodded, a chipperness to her voice that was somewhat manufactured. Hearing that Akira was leaving Tokyo had hurt, he was one of her closest friends and she'd find the city far lonelier without him. But still, he was facing his own challenges, and the support of those close to him was what he needed. Support she'd give. That was what she did, after all. “You're the type of person who always finds their own way, after all!”

Akira did smile at that, but it lacked his usual energy. He was stressed. Chihaya frowned, then nodded resolutely, hands resting upon the deck of cards before her. The feeling of contact with them always helped her calm. She breathed in, out, then fixed Akira with a calm and focused gaze, the kind she always gave her customers when they were struggling and afraid of what was to come. Akira's eyes flickered from hers to her hands, watching as she deftly shuffled the deck, before coming back to her face. Chihaya nodded once.

“May I?”

More than anyone else in Tokyo, and indeed all the world, Akira knew Chihaya Mifune's abilities were real. She truly could read not only the future, but the truth of the world, with the deck of the Tarot she possessed. She'd unmasked him with it, after all. He nodded in return.
“Please.”

With measured pace Chihaya dealt six cards, a hexagonal arrangement, before placing a seventh at the centre of the set. One by one she turned each over, focused gaze studying the individual, then their ties to neighbours and those further afield. There was a pause, always a pause, between the sixth and the seventh card, where Chihaya considered the shape of the whole.

Then she turned over the last card, observed it, and breathed out a sigh of relief. Fixed Akira with warm eyes and a smile. He, unaware he'd been holding his own breath, breathed out as well. That was a good sign, right?

He sure hoped so.

“You've been struggling.” She said it so easily, so matter-of-factly and surgically, that Akira didn't even stand a chance. It was only that sentence, those three words, that made him aware Chihaya had just seen his self, an act he'd given her permission to do when usually he'd always hid his truths. He hadn't even considered what this reading would mean. He stared, silent, as Chihaya nodded to herself.

“The Reversed Two of Wands,” she traced a finger from card to card, “the Nine and Five of Swords, it is clear you have been injured, in spite of your victory.” Akira was not only silent, he was still. She'd seen it all. Right down to the core. “You fear the unknown future, that the wounds you have suffered will prevent you from continuing on, and your struggle to escape that only binds you further. You hide your wounds from others but in doing so deny them to yourself, and are thus unable to heal and move on.” When Chihaya looked up, Akira had to fight not to flinch from the obvious care in her eyes. She saw the half-motion all the same. A finger raised, caught his attention, and drew his eyes back down to the cards.

“The World,” Chihaya said it with a slight trill to her voice, as if seeing the card itself was a blessing. It wasn't a surprise to Akira. He'd obtained it, after all. “It indicates your successes. That you overcame a trial beyond measure and have grown greatly for it. It is matched by the King of Wands, a leader of charisma, one who gathers the great under his banner and is respected by those who follow him. I have no doubt that such is true of you.”

Akira had been given the leadership role of the Phantom Thieves with barely an argument brokered. Morgana had thrust it upon him, likely a subconscious result of Morgana's mission to find the Trickster. Akira was the Trickster, and possessed the Wildcard, because he was chosen.

And there would never be a true answer for why he was chosen.

Yet it could not be argued that he did not lead, that he did not gather others of greatness to his side. Everyone who followed him, they were each incredible in their own special way, and he cared for them all so much that at times it hurt. A future without them wasn't something he wanted to consider, another reason his return to his family home had him hurting. Just a year. Then he'd be back and the world would be right again.

He was sure of it.

“The Reversed Five of Cups,” Chihaya spoke it clearly, broke through Akira's thoughts, commanded his attention to her, “says clearly what is needed. It is a card of loss, but one symbolising acceptance of that loss. That you have suffered is,” Chihaya's voice caught, just a moment, as the thought of what Akira had been through began to form within her, “it is unarguable. But you are able to move on. You won't be chained down by it. You can accept it and continue. That is what this means.”
Her voice was almost different when she addressed him, a light in her eyes stronger than normal. In her reading, Chihaya had seen Akira to the depth he'd grown to know her over the last year. When her hand drifted to the centre card, last of the seven, Chihaya lifted it and held it up for Akira to see. It was the least surprising of them all.

“You have suffered, and are hurt,” Chihaya spoke Akira's truest self without reserve, “and that pain has blinded you to the amazing person that you are, the amazing potential that you hold. You struggle to hide the marks upon you, rather than accept them and move on, and in doing so seal yourself from the future. This is the you that I have seen.”

It was almost like the world had gone silent, the background noise of Shinjuku's streets filtered out. Right now it was just Chihaya, Akira, and the reading. Just this one moment. Chihaya's lips twitched, a smile formed, and the noise returned. She breathed out.

“And yet,” her voice was normal again, none of the innate otherness in her reading left, “I have looked to the future and seen the Wheel of Fortune, a blessing of fate. Despite your struggle, the future is clear. You will overcome yourself, and seize the happiness you desire. In my heart of hearts I believe that. I know it will come true.”

The backdrop continued on as ever. People passed by, speaking to one another, speaking into phones, discussing their lives and their plans and their own troubles. This one moment, where Chihaya saw into Akira's heart and future, it was just them and then it was gone. Normalcy returned.

Akira blinked.

“Oh!” Chihaya seemed shocked, dropping the Fortune card she held back onto the table, “oh my.” Her face was tinged with redness but the lights of Shinjuku hid it, allowing her a moment to touch her forehead. “That was... a stronger reading than I'd planned.”

In the moment Chihaya had just spoken without considering the words, interpreted without time to think or doubt. Now past that moment she realised just what she had said, how deeply she had probed into Akira's heart and how intently she had praised him as a person. That much emotion, it wasn't normal for her readings. Was it because he was special? Or just special to her? She didn't know. Oh dear.

Akira breathed out.

“Thanks,” his tone was different again, not one guarded but neither one stressed. He seemed... relaxed? Chihaya stared. “I think I needed to hear that. Rather than tear myself up, I just need to move forward, right? Believing that I couldn't was what kept me from doing so. It seems so obvious now that I've said it.”

“Most of our troubles often do,” Chihaya spoke without missing a beat, the thought one she'd seen in countless of the books she'd read. Akira gave her a small smile. She smiled wider in return.

“Still...” turning her attention back to the cards, Chihaya flipped the Wheel of Fortune back over to be face-up, “a reading that contains both the Wheel of Fortune and The World, you're something special, Kurusu-san. Not many people have such positive energy surrounding them.”

“It's not too surprising,” Akira said it quickly, too quickly, causing Chihaya to eye him with suspicion. Akira gestured to the deck. “May I?” Unsure of just what was on Akira's mind, Chihaya nonetheless consented and stacked the cards back together, passed the deck over to Akira. As he quickly shuffled it, with quite skilled hands she noted, Chihaya considered the number of people she'd trust to hold that deck.
Just him, really.

“Okay,” Akira set the deck down on the table, between the two, freshly shuffled, “I'm going to draw a card and then you'll do the same. Then we both flip them over. Alright?”

Unsure of just what this reading could imply, Chihaya nonetheless nodded and acquiesced. Akira rested a hand atop the deck, then moved the top-most card over to the left. Chihaya repeated the same, gaining a card of her own. Looking up, she caught Akira's steady gaze, and nodded when he did.

The two flipped their cards.

For Akira, it was an unsurprising result. For Chihaya, her eyes bulged out and shock of a far deeper sense than Akira's surprise arrival earlier flowed through her. The World for him and the Wheel of Fortune for her. That was... statistically impossible. And for Akira to have been so confident in it? That was...

“I... I...”

Akira moved both cards back onto the deck and shuffled it again. A moment later he'd presented the deck and gestured to Chihaya to move the top-most card this time. She did so and he did the second. They flipped.

The Wheel of Fortune for her and The World for him. Chihaya wasn't even able to make a sound this time. No way. No way.

Akira was moving to shuffle the cards again.

“Wait!” He stopped, watching Chihaya with a light smile. He was enjoying this. She fumed. “I don't know where you learned to control the order of a deck like that, but I'll be making sure you don't do it this time. Close your eyes.”

Dutifully Akira closed his eyes, Chihaya cutting the deck and adding the two cards of the Major Arcana back into it herself. It wasn't that she doubted Akira was incredible, she'd seen what had taken place in the twisted version of Tokyo on Christmas Eve, but still, she had to test this. Because this was far too concrete and real. He couldn't control the Tarot however he wanted. Could he?

“Oh, I see!” When Akira opened his eyes again he took the deck and began to shuffle. He was so relaxed about it, almost lazily doing so, that it frustrated Chihaya. She knew fate could be changed with effort, but to control it? That was a new level of unacceptable. She wasn't ready for it.

When Akira set the deck down and moved the top-most card to the side once more, Chihaya frowned. He indicated for her to draw. She reached out.

And Chihaya cut the deck, set a slice of it aside, and instead moved the new top-most card to the side. A new draw and a change of fate. Akira's smile never wavered, even under the scrutiny of her stare. Fine then, if that was how he wanted to be she'd-

The two cards flipped over.

The same pair stared up at them. Chihaya's brain started to short-out.

“It's not,” Akira's calm voice helped, just a little, to help her start to parse reality again. She'd almost slipped away then. “Like I can control every card that comes out. It probably only works with this deck anyway because it's yours. It's just that those two are tied to the two of us.”
They... were? Chihaya had read her fate plenty of times before, and the Wheel of Fortune had been absent far more often than not. Although... in the few times her fate had been tied to Akira's, it had appeared each time. Was that really...

“You still surprise me,” she managed at last, a somewhat accusatory tone to her voice, “even after this long.”

“I'm good at that.”

Chihaya just shook her head. Akira smiled, then she smiled, and then they each laughed lightly. A Trickster to the end, Chihaya decided. Well, she didn't hate it.

In the time before Akira returned home they spoke, discussed their future trips to face their families, and their true home in Tokyo. About the year ahead and what was beyond that. Chihaya's own doubts, the concerns she did have about facing her village again, Akira relieved them, assured her that as long as she continued on she would be fine. In turn she told him the same was true, that he need only have the confidence to face tomorrow. He seemed to appreciate that.

And then it was late enough for him to leave. He stood, waved goodbye, and Chihaya felt the beginnings of absence, knowing that only a few weeks remained until he was gone for a full year. Not just her, all those Akira had gathered to his side must be hurting from that. Before he was gone, before he was out of sight, she made her way back to him to deliver one final message. Not a reading of fate or the future. Just words from Chihaya. It meant more to him than anything that came before.

“Go and spend time with the others like me, the others who would always draw the same card again and again. They'll all be waiting for you to come back. We all will.”

Surprised by this, Akira stopped, then smiled gently. “Yeah,” he nodded, “I'll be back.”

And that he knew would be true.

Chapter End Notes

When I first made the notes for what this chapter would be about, I knew I wanted to have Chihaya talk about visiting her home town. "But wait" the voice in my head said "Chihaya was treated horribly there, she wouldn't want to go back". "No," I replied, "She spoke about wanting to reconnect with a friend from the village. She's ready to face it again."

Cut to today, when I wrote this chapter, and watched a Confidant video for Chihaya to restock my knowledge. Cut to dialogue I'd never seen before, when the confession option was chosen at rank 9, but a bad choice earlier prevented romance. And Chihaya instead of reading us as confessing assumed that her parents had sent Akira to make sure she was okay, and that Akira should deliver a message to them, "I'll be home soon". That was this morning. Blew my mind.

I am bad at honorifics, which I think doesn't come as too much of a surprise. I get the feeling it's something you have to be truly culturally involved in to have a proper sense for. The fact they're used here and there in P5 makes things harder for me - I chose to use honorifics in this fic, but Akira basically refers to no-one with an honorific. Is that an english translation thing to avoid it in main character dialogue or true of the original
Japanese version as well? No idea. So I just went with what feels right, which I think is the only proper way to do these things. Hopefully I got it good enough.

Much like any other Persona fan, I know a little more about the Tarot than most people, but am still absolutely nothing compared to genuine readers of it. Still, I hope the Tarot reading I designed for Akira did well if you have the knowledge necessary to judge it. I gotta say, the King of Wands was definitely my favourite of the cards I applied to Akira, it's just such a him card. It rules.

With Chihaya's chapter complete, that's 11/22 done. Furthermore it's the last day of September for me, and I started this fic on the first. In theory, at this pace, that means I'll have finished Spin the Wheel by the end of October. That's my goal, but life comes at us fast, so we'll see how it works out.

As always, my thanks to all readers and commentors, I appreciate your presence greatly. More and more people have been mentioning Spin the Wheel lately and that's thrilling to me, my only hope is that as I continue I'm able to reach and entertain even more people! That's the goal.

Next chapter, Strength, is in the near future. It's one I've been looking forward to. I hope you look forward to it too. See you then!
3/1, Wednesday After School

The door was there the first time he passed by where it had always been before.

It had been a message from Iwai, a few days after Akira had been released, telling him to stop by. Let the owner of Untouchable, the Phantom Thieves’ favourite (and only) arms dealer, see that his shop’s best (and only) assistant was doing fine.

So Akira had made his way to Untouchable after school, taken the same path as ever, and turned into the alleyway leading to the store.

Then come to a dead stop.

As always, the entrance to the Velvet Room awaited, blue light stretching out to envelop Akira as he approached. The illusion of bars flickered across the door, yet provided no purchase to Akira’s outstretched hand. And whatever the material that made up the door itself was, it was solid and smooth. Nowhere to grip, no way to open it. Unresponsive to a push. So close, and yet so far.

It took a while for Akira to give up on the door, trying anything and everything he could think of to get it to open. He knocked and it gave no response. He threw his weight against it and it did not give. His fingers scrabbled at the edges but could find no way to force it open. In the end, the door bested him, and he was forced to give up.

But he didn’t forget it.

So whenever Akira passed by where the door remained in Shibuya, or Shinjuku, or Akihabara, he always took a second to stop and rap his knuckles against it. Yet never was there a response. Never ever.

He wasn’t even really sure why he so wanted it to open. Did he want things to not be over? For the Velvet Room to continue being necessary to him? If life was the same as the last year, the Phantom Thieves still needed, a very significant part of him wouldn’t hate that.

But he’d accepted it was over. He was trying to move on. Perhaps the door was just taunting him that he couldn’t let go, not just yet. It annoyed him.

But in the end, he adapted. After the tenth attempt it had become more tradition than anything, no real acknowledgement of the possibility of answer. Simply a moment to stop by and say hello. To the door.

Listen.

Just a little over two weeks after he’d been released and Akira was on his way to Untouchable once more. This time it wasn’t an invite, he was stopping in to see how Iwai was doing himself. Akira had taken on numerous jobs during his time in Tokyo, and he’d had to visit each to inform them of his oncoming departure. Hanasaki, at the Flower Shop, had been the most distressed, pushing a book on flower care and arrangement into Akira’s hands, insisting he practise what he could back home. His sense for flowers was too good to let go to waste, she’d told him. He’d appreciated that.
It was thoughts of the jobs he was leaving behind, and the people he’d worked for and with, that were swirling in Akira’s mind as he turned the corner into the alleyway off of Shibuya’s Central Street. So even though his eyes passed over the door, and the one standing before it, Akira still managed a few steps forward before coming to a dead stop, eyes widening rapidly.

Waiting there before that sealed entrance, Lavenza, Velvet Room attendant, looked up at Akira with a simple smile.

“Good afternoon, my Trickster.”

Back then, it was thanks to the countenance of Joker, alongside his unwavering focus on just how off the rails things presently were, that Akira had found himself immunised to a lot of the shock regarding the fusion of Caroline and Justine. He’d taken it in stride because, really, it was hardly the most messed up thing he’d seen that day. Maybe not even top five. It had been rough.

So he’d accepted Lavenza’s appearance with barely a missed step, acknowledged and worked alongside her, and that had been that. Now though, well…

Lavenza didn’t quite have the grin of Caroline, the face-covering dark glee she’d expressed when she was ready to really swing that baton. Yet neither was it the phantasmal, barely-there smile Justine would wear when approving Akira’s progress. It was somewhere in-between, as all things about Lavenza were, and translated to a simple, though exceedingly pleased, smile.

Trickster he may be, but Akira Kurusu was not above a good surprise once in a while. Something to remember.

“Have you been well?”

It was the follow-up question that jolted Akira from his state of surprise – shaking him from the myriad thoughts and questions no doubt forming in his mind. Akira Kurusu was a sharp analyst, and had the keenest raw instincts of the Phantom Thieves by far. It would not surprise Lavenza in the least if he were to ask a particularly insightful question regarding her presence here.

She could see it in his eyes, consideration as he now properly paid her attention instead of his own thoughts. He nodded, a slight smile curved at his lips, and Lavenza immediately felt her own heart lift. His smiles had been rarely won things, after all.

“It’s been a while.”

“I hope you have not been too lonely in my absence.”

“It hasn’t been easy, I’ll admit.”

“I see.”

Alongside his lack of preparedness for Lavenza’s surprising appearance this day was Akira’s general lack of understanding of Lavenza herself. Oh he knew Caroline and Justine, had grown to understand their quirks and mannerisms over the time they had spent together, and so had a strong approximation of Lavenza from imagining those two as one person, yes. But there was still a gap between imagining Lavenza’s two halves as one individual and Lavenza herself. It was all but obvious to her that Akira had come to that conclusion already. Again, a swift mind, as was necessary for the one who had saved the souls of humanity.

“Uh,” the most significant question finally appeared, the wording of which Akira had clearly been struggling with since his eyes had set upon the awaiting attendant, “so what brings you here today?”
“You sound disappointed.” He didn’t, but the opportunity to tease was one to be relished. Akira shook his head, immediately concerned that his attempt to figure out just what the hell was going on had managed to insult the girl. Lavenza laughed lightly. “It is my day off.”

Another victory over her Trickster, the one known as Akira Kurusu reduced to a blank stare. His pace had been shattered by Lavenza’s sudden appearance this day, and until he’d recovered she was enjoying every moment she could savour of his surprise.

“Oh, really?”

“Another joke.”

“Oh.”

Justine had been the one to joke, but her jokes had always been things delivered like a professional surgeon, a cutting and merciless line scoring a great mark against a target, far too often Caroline. Caroline had the more bombastic personality, but lacked the same sharp wit. Combining the two seemed to have resulted in a most relentless tease, one to outpace perhaps even the Joker himself.

Still, there was a point where it began to be less a manner of amusement and more of concern. The separation from the Velvet Room for guests was a time of victory, the conclusion of their journey one to be celebrated. Akira had remained imprisoned, victorious, yet alone. And though now he was recovering, something Lavenza could see clearly, he was still not the same as he had been before.

She sighed, and left jokes behind for the moment.

“I remembered,” Lavenza spoke, “something from before you were found. Before that false god arrived, imprisoned my master, and tore me in two.” Having been split into two people, and then merged back into one, had left Lavenza with a most deep impression. Although as a resident of the Velvet Room she was far less affected by the experience than any human would be, it was undeniable that some effects would remain. One of which was that her memories from before the separation seemed to come and go, ebbing and flowing like waves.

Akira was listening intently, his expression similar to what he had worn while Caroline and Justine assessed his progress with the challenges Lavenza had left behind. It was an incredibly familiar sight to Lavenza, who found herself inordinately pleased to see it.

“Though we had yet to know of our next guest,” she continued, “we were aware that one would soon arrive. Because of that, I had begun to think of the outside world.” Akira knew little of the Velvet Room’s residents, of the nature of attendants – the false god’s machinations stifling the bond that should have been forged between attendant and guest. Neither of Lavenza’s halves had ever been able to express, or acknowledge, their fascination with the world beyond. “Specifically, I had begun to look forward to seeing it. I had… hoped for our next guest to be willing to show me the world in which they lived.”

“Huh.” Akira clued in quickly with that statement. Lavenza was here to see the world beyond the Velvet Room’s entrance. “Is that why the door is still here?”

“Indeed,” the girl nodded, “I had asked my master to maintain the link between the Velvet Room and your world for a little longer. Just until I had taken the chance to see the world beyond.”

“I didn’t even know that was a thing you could do.”

Lavenza smiled lightly. “Normally it is not, attendants are bound to the Velvet Room after all. But we do possess the ability to travel further afield. And while ultimately we must return, I have to
admit, the stories I have been told have... inspired me to experience the world in which you live.”

There was a lot to unpack there. Lavenza’s use of the word ‘attendants’, that she had been told ‘stories’, it implied a conversation with others like her. Akira considered that quickly, but was already focusing on what was actually at hand. He gave a smile of his own.

“So would you like me to show you around?”

“Please, my Trickster.”

A slight frown creased the edges of Akira’s mouth and he shook his head for a moment, eyes focused upon the blue-clad girl. Lavenza stared back up at him, her own golden eyes intimidatingly bright.

“Let’s not use ‘Trickster’ while we’re out today,” Akira spoke after a moment, “You can just use ‘Akira’ for me, it’s fine.”

“Is it?” Lavenza considered the young man with her own curiosity, “You offer familiarity freely.”

“You think?” Akira nonchalantly dismissed Lavenza’s own thoughts, “I’d say it’s more than paid for, after everything we’ve been through.”

“Hmm,” Lavenza acknowledged the thought as, with measured step, she broke away from the blue light emanating from the entrance to the Velvet Room, the large tome she always carried dispersing into the same light as she went, “very well.”

If Akira, as he followed Lavenza out onto the main street of Shibuya, had been preparing to ask whether today was going to be a ‘ghost’ situation or not, he didn’t need to. Almost immediately he could spot the glances passerbys threw at the young girl, her blue garb more than ornate enough, her platinum-blonde hair more than striking enough, to draw attention. Okay, so she really was actually really real in the real world. Akira rubbed the back of his head and followed after her.

“So why today?”

The Velvet Room’s door had been there every day Akira had passed it by since he’d been released. It seemed for sure that the option to go out had been available to Lavenza every single day he’d been by and knocked upon it.

“I was leaving you time to spend with your fellows before I demanded some of my own,” the girl replied simply, roaming eyes studying the street, its storefronts, the signs, the people; everything she could observe Lavenza was drinking in with her sight. “I believe you needed it.”

There was something innately Morgana-ish in that statement, a degree of tone indicating superiority. Akira quickly began to wonder if that was a Velvet Room resident trait.

“I guess I can stop knocking on the door then?”

“Please,” Lavenza intoned, “It was growing unbearable.”

Akira paused. “Joke?”

“No.”

Further down the street Lavenza came to a halt, the scent of Big Bang Burger thick in the air, a constant stream of light and sound washing out from the entrance of the Gigolo Arcade, and
announcements of available products loudly broadcast from the discount store Rocinante ahead. It had been overwhelming to Akira when first he’d walked these streets, and though he’d come from a relatively quiet town, it had still been far louder than the Velvet Room. He quickly moved up beside the still Lavenza.

“Holding up okay?”

“Yes,” Lavenza’s gaze didn’t rise to consider Akira, her golden eyes still flicking from side to side, “there is simply quite… a lot out here. Even from where I stood at the entrance to the Velvet Room, I was unable to imagine such an… abundance.”

“Take it at your own pace,” Akira nodded, understanding just how much this could be, “no need to rush it.”

As if spurred to do the opposite of Akira’s words, Lavenza immediately turned on her heel, pointing herself directly at the arcade. A steady march brought her to the doors and then through as they opened up, Akira quickly following behind. At this point the day was already so far out of control that the only sensible thing for him to do was simply just roll with it.

An act he was quite experienced in, after this long.

“Ah!” Lavenza was looking this way and that, enraptured by the manifold games set within the arcade. While Akira hadn’t spent too much time in the Shibuya branch of the Gigolo Arcade, its layout was more than reminiscent enough of the branch in Akihabara that he felt confident in being able to give the full package tour to the enthralled Lavenza. For as much as one could tour an arcade.

“How wonderful,” Lavenza’s delight was infectious enough to get Akira to smile back at her when she looked up at him, enjoying her outright fascination with the mundane world in which he lived. He kept a few paces behind the girl as she approached one of the game cabinets, watching as she pushed at the buttons and frowned when they gave no response. Okay that was actually kind of cute.

“Hmm,” Lavenza looked up at Akira with a frown, “I had heard that an arcade was a place of adventure overseen by electronic spirits, but they seem unresponsive at the moment. Is there a way to wake them?”

Maintaining a neutral expression in day-to-day life had been a natural skill for Akira over the last year, but listening to Lavenza describing the arcade was really testing him. He had to bite the inside of his cheeks as he fumbled with his wallet to produce some coins.

“They take money to run.”

“Oh!” Lavenza’s eyes immediately widened, “Of course! Much like the cost of summoning a Persona, these spirits require fiscal sacrifice before they will aid you. How foolish of me to miss that.”

Akira’s outstretching hand, coins in palm, went ignored as Lavenza withdrew a small purse of her own from her skirt. Opening it up Akira caught a brief glimpse of a truly exceptional number of coins (it almost felt like more than the purse should hold?) before Lavenza had withdrawn three and begun feeding the machine.

“I didn’t think you had your own money,” he remarked, watching as the game booted up. It was a left to right run-and-gun, the mechanics of which Lavenza was attempting to figure out without ever having touched a videogame before in her life.

“Payments made to perform summoning are for the act of sacrifice, not compensation,” Lavenza
explained as she pressed the jump button over and over, seemingly pleased with that action alone, “all funding paid to the Velvet Room is available for our use as necessary.”

Akira paused. Ran some quick calculations. He’d done a lot of fusion before. So then…

“Wait, you have all the money I paid for summoning and fusion in there?”

Lavenza had decided to move her character forward, and made it roughly half a screen before the first enemy of the first level reduced the player to a series of fading pixels. She frowned.

“It is not only you,” she remarked, inserting another coin into the cabinet, “you know you are not the first after all.”

Akira’s head started spinning as he began to comprehend just how much potential money Lavenza might have. Oh. Oh wow.

“You need to press that button to shoot or they’ll always get you.”

“Oh!”

With key pointers from Akira, Lavenza did manage to, after a few more coins, make her way through the level until the first boss. After being defeated by a wave of its attacks however, the blue-clad girl seemed to grow disinterested and wandered off to study a crane game.

A handful of coins and an exceptionally ugly looking stuffed rabbit later, and Lavenza’s attention turned to the largest installation in the arcade, only just vacated by the group who had been using it. It was right next to the entrance, and featured the most flashing lights and blaring music of the entire establishment. It was also the one game Akira was far and away most familiar with.

“What is the purpose of this machine? ‘Gun About: The Super Real?’”

“That’s a popular one,” Akira watched as Lavenza picked up one of the gun-controllers, passing it from hand to hand, grip never quite right. “You aim the gun at the screen and squeeze the trigger to fire. One of my Confidants taught me how to play it.”

“Hmm.” Lavenza was continuing to mishandle the controller, eventually leading Akira to fit it into her hands himself. She seemed pleased once he had done so. “Very well then, I will attempt its trials.”

This time, with Lavenza’s hands tied up in holding onto the controller, it was up to Akira to put in the money to start the game. While he still possessed an impressive amount of savings thanks to his Phantom Thief exploits over the last year, Akira couldn’t help but feel a slight twinge of annoyance at covering the costs of someone who likely had more money than he could possibly imagine. Ah well, whatever. Once the game began, he instructed Lavenza on how to begin the game tutorial – a far kinder teacher than his own.

Being given a controller and told to ‘get shooting’ by an irate Shinya Oda when Akira had never touched the game before had been quite the harrowing experience.

“Kurusu?”

As Lavenza set her mind to learning the ropes of Gun About, Akira turned around to find another ally having entered the Shibuya arcade.

Yuuki Mishima, running a hand through blue-tinted hair, settling it from the winds outside, raised his
other hand in greeting. Akira smiled and raised a hand of his own.

“Hey Mishima.”

A tap of their wrists against each other was the greeting between the two, before Akira turned back to check how Lavenza was holding up. In opposition to Makoto’s loud enthusiasm when playing the game, Lavenza was silent and focused, like a hunter poised to spring upon its prey.

Mishima was the first to notice what was off here.

“Wait! Can you even get that score in the tutorial level?!”

Huh? Oh shit. Wow.

“Woah,” Akira raised an arm as a bar before Mishima, instructing him to keep a pace back. Lavenza's reactions weren’t just precise, they were insanely fast. As soon as a target appeared she'd already scored a perfect hit. And it was every. Single. Time. “Can’t say I saw that coming.”

When the clock on the tutorial ran out, Lavenza huffed a sigh, turning around to fix Akira with a disappointed gaze. Mishima, unsure of what the hell was going on, just stared.

“I cannot say this 'Gun About' is a very enthralling experience. I find it difficult to believe it is 'popular' as you described it.”

“That was the tutorial,” Akira managed to contain his surprise at Lavenza's incredible videogame potential, stepping over to the setup panel. Gun About had an online component, allowing those who set up accounts to be matched with other players across the internet. There was no way any single-player experience this machine could provide would entertain Lavenza. “Let me get you online and then you can try playing against another person.”

“I see,” Lavenza pursed her lips, “I suppose the key unpredictability of humanity should pose a more exciting experience.”

Mishima blinked. “Uh, what?” When Lavenza's brilliant golden eyes set upon him, he took a step back, trying his best not to stare.

“Yes?” Lavenza asked simply, Akira over at the Gun About console logging into his account for Lavenza.

“O-oh,” still unsettled by Lavenza's gaze, Mishima defaulted to what he knew. “T-that's an interesting outfit, are you cosplaying something?”

Lavenza's stare was truly something unnerving, and the teen struggled under it. The awkward moment stretched out until just before Akira returned.

“This is the garb of a Velvet Room attendant,” Lavenza finally spoke, “that is all.”

“Ah,” Mishima nodded, as if that explained everything, “right.”

“Okay,” Akira, now returned, rescued each from the other, turning Lavenza's attention back to the screen. “You just select that option there, yep you got it, and you'll be randomly matched with someone else online who's free. Hopefully that's a little more fun.”

“I see, thank you.” As soon as Akira stepped back Lavenza's eyes narrowed, focus absolute on the screen. Akira moved over to Mishima.
“She's... intense.” The other boy spoke quietly to his friend. Akira chuckled in return.

“I'm surprised too.”

“So is she like, a relative of yours?” Kurusu had never spoken much about his family to Mishima, so he wasn't really sure. There wasn't much of a resemblance, but that didn't mean as much these days. Akira looked over at Lavenza, watching her dismantling her current opponent with unerring speed and precision. He felt bad for whoever she was matched against.

“Something like that.”

“Hmmm.” A loud sigh from Lavenza drew Akira's attention, the girl setting the Gun About controller back into its holster. “I believe I am done. It seems there is quite a gap between myself and humans, who are able to enjoy such things freely.”

Some sort of strangled, questioning noise came out of Mishima, who Akira had to attempt to wave off. Lavenza wandered over to the arcade's exit. “Shall we go somewhere else?”

“Yeah,” Akira nodded, before turning back to Mishima. “Hey Mishima, I'll catch up with you later. We'll hang out some other day, okay?”

“Oh! Right!” Mishima nodded enthusiastically, broken from his bafflement at Lavenza by the promise of a future hangout with his best friend. “I'll see you later Kurusu!”

Outside of the arcade, back on the streets of Shibuya, Akira checked his phone as Lavenza wandered about. He'd received a few messages just now, and was wondering what was going on. As soon as the chat app opened though, his eyes widened in shock. Oh hell.

Shinya: Kurusu-san!
Shinya: What was that?
Shinya: Was that you?
Shinya: I've never seen a hacking program that good!
Shinya: Also why are you using hacking? You're better than that!
Shinya: If that wasn't you someone's taken your account!
Shinya: And if it was why were you doing that?
Shinya: Let me know when you get this!

“Lavenza!” The Velvet Room attendant turned back to Akira, interested by the slight tone of distress in his voice. What was on his mind? “You didn't play against someone labelled as King, did you?”

Lavenza blinked. “There were labels?” Akira sighed.

Shinya was good. Shinya was really good. But Lavenza was something else, the sort of thing a human being couldn't be in Gun About. Of all the luck for Lavenza to be paired against him. He tapped out a quick message on his phone.

Akira: I'll look into it, thanks
Shinya: I knew it wasn't you!

And that was that. Crisis averted.

It was lucky it had been here in Shibuya that Akira had met Lavenza again. If he'd been passing by Akihabara instead, and taken Lavenza to the arcade there, Shinya would be forced face-to-face with an unbeatable being. Best to spare him that experience. No-one deserved to face Lavenza in Gun
About without the screen of believing there was a hacking program in play.

“I've decided.”

Akira looked down at Lavenza, who had reached up to tug at his sleeve. Her golden eyes were focused on his, a gaze gentle yet intent.

“I would like to see a shrine before I return to the Velvet Room.”

“A shrine, huh?”

Akira didn't know a lot of the shrines in Tokyo, mostly just the biggest ones. Asakusa was about a half-hour away by train, so maybe that would work? Lavenza seemed to approve when he suggested it.

So it was the two travelled by train, Akira needing to position himself to push back the crowds and give Lavenza a little space. Though she'd done well on the streets of Shibuya, and thanks to her laser-focus been unconcerned about people around her in the arcade, inside the train was a little different. Lavenza was definitely not used to a horde of people, and Akira could tell she was uncomfortable. So he did his best to give her what room he could.

It was still a rather tough journey all the same.

Nakamise Street was no less packed than the train itself had been, yet the sheer volume of things to see, shops to stop by, occupied Lavenza's attention enough to insure herself against the crowds. As the pair made their way up the street Lavenza moved from stall to stall, often commenting on what she saw. Nothing drew her enough to buy however. Akira wondered if she was even able to take anything back to the Velvet Room with her.

Yet near the end something did capture Lavenza's full attention. Akira had been used to watching her move from stall to stall, so while she was at one scouted what others were around to introduce. It was only after a few moments without reply from Lavenza that he noticed her gaze was intent on what this stall was offering. Moving up beside her, Akira could see a collection of decorative butterfly ornaments. Huh.

“You like butterflies, don't you?” It wasn't too hard of an assumption to make, Lavenza wore a pair of butterfly hairpins already, which the stall owner was repeatedly complimenting her on while insisting another butterfly would truly complete the look. There was also the matter of the constant sightings Akira had of butterflies, Lavenza's voice echoing in his ears, but he'd never mentioned that to anyone. It seemed like something to not bring up.

Lavenza's stare didn't waver.

“Butterflies bring good luck to those of the Wild Card,” she spoke eventually, startling Akira with the information provided. Huh. “You should choose one for yourself.”

Was that so? Casting his eye over the collection, the stallkeep eagerly suggesting which would suit Akira best, he paused to consider the one that had most caught his attention. It was black with white lines, a fascinating geometric design upon it. He had to admit, it looked good. He reached out a hand towards it.

Lavenza's own, her grip surprisingly strong, settled around his wrist.

“Don't.” She intoned, the single word an almost unquestionable command. “Don't choose a black one.”
O...kay? Akira gave her a questioning look, but Lavenza simply shook her head. Probably best not to question it. Akira focused on a brilliant red instead, Lavenza nodding with a pleased expression at the choice. The stallkeep enthusiastically tried to convince Akira he needed more.

One was enough.

Beyond that, the two made their way on to the shrine, Akira affixing the butterfly to his jacket. Lavenza smiled each time she saw it, which was more than enough reward for having bought it, Akira concluded.

Though Asakusa's Shrine was one of the most known and visited in Tokyo there was still an air of solitude within it. The environment itself demanded peace and respect from those to enter, and so as Akira and Lavenza approached it they went unaccosted.

There was something truly calming in simply walking the path.

“Hmm,” Lavenza spoke evenly, eyes roving about the shrine, “there is most certainly something to this place, though I find myself unable to determine what. It differs vastly from Shadows.”

“Huh.” Akira didn't have the same depth of sense – did Morgana ever sense anything in shrines they'd visited? He'd never said so. Lavenza continued on, Akira following after.

It was the donation box that caught Lavenza's attention, luring her to its side. Akira's interest, watching her withdraw her purse and opening it up, morphed quickly into some measure of panic as Lavenza simply upended it over the box, coins pouring out like a steady river into it. The clinking of metal boomed in his ears, the sound he was sure being cast across the entire shrine and drawing all eyes to the wealthy donor. Stressed by the possibility, Akira moved to stand in a way that would best shield Lavenza from view.

It didn't really help much.

There was no way for Akira to know exactly how much Lavenza had just provided, but he was positive beyond a shadow of a doubt that if it wasn't more than he'd given in total to the Velvet Room it was very close indeed. Lavenza seemed pleased.

“Though I do not reside in this world, I would like to believe my offering will no doubt bring providence my way.”

Though he couldn't compare in the slightest, Akira made sure to leave some coins of his own as well. The only providence he needed was a quiet evening after this. Moving at her own pace, Lavenza was an exhausting being to keep up with.

“Hmm,” she was looking up now, studying the afternoon sky. It was beginning to darken, the evening oncoming. If there was a frown on Lavenza's face at the progress of time, she obscured it quickly enough for Akira not to notice. Or at least not to mention, for which she was thankful.

“I saw stalls,” she lowered her head now, looking back towards the direction of Nakamise Street, “that offered food. It would be good to eat with you, before I return.”

“Okay,” Akira nodded, silent on Lavenza's thoughts of return. Back down from the shrine, back down to the stalls lining the street still filled with people, and Lavenza, following her nose, found the source of a scent that had caught her attention earlier. She stopped before the stall, waiting for Akira to step forward.

“This one.”
It was a takoyaki stall, the owner giving a big grin at the pair. “That's a nice outfit, little lady, would you be interested in our takoyaki? They'll make you smile so wide you could eat an octopus whole!”

“Oh!” Lavenza took a step back, surprised by the proclamation. Akira shook his head and stepped up.

“It's an expression.”

The stallkeep grinned at the two, passing over the takoyaki to the pair. “This brings back some old memories,” she waved them off, “Have a good evening you two!”

It took a little bit to find somewhere to sit, the two of them relaxing as they enjoyed their food. Despite it being billed as takoyaki, the flavour was a little different than Akira had expected. Must be something special in the cooking. Lavenza stared at the package intently, but shook her head and consumed all the same. Must be okay then, Akira concluded.

The night was truly coming on now once the two were finished, purple taking more of the sky than orange. Wispy clouds trailed in the wind, chill enough to bite but not enough to force those outside to escape. Akira tugged at his jacket, but did nothing more besides that. Lavenza didn't seem uncomfortable, at least.

In the silence thoughts swirled in each of their heads, each considering the afternoon they had shared. For Lavenza, she was soon to return to the Velvet Room, this excursion her one and only. Until the next guest would arrive. For Akira, it was only a few weeks now until his return to his family home. Separated from Tokyo and all he'd come to know and love.

Each of them were already looking forward to the future beyond this day. The day they'd be free to walk the streets of Tokyo once more.

“I have sisters.” Lavenza announced it, startling Akira. He looked at her in interest, the word heavy in his head. ‘Sisters’. Others like Lavenza? Just imagining current Lavenza as an adult was enough to evoke a sense of respectful fear. Akira was unsure if he wished to meet the sisters of his guide. “They were the ones to tell me of the world outside, to put in me the desire to see it. One day... I hope to see them again and tell them of what I have seen. And of you, my Trickster.”

Despite Akira's request for Lavenza to use his name, she hadn't once. This was the first utterance of Trickster since they'd begun however, and it was in a private enough conversation. Akira didn't mention it.

“Are they somewhere else right now?”

“One left the Velvet Room,” Lavenza said it looking forward, not moving her head an inch, not looking at Akira in the slightest. “My eldest sister goes out to see her, now and again, but always returns. She never will though. Not as an attendant, at least.”

“As a guest?”

Slowly, Lavenza nodded.

“Are you hoping you'll see her then?”

Another nod.

“... I hope you do too then.”
“Thank you.”

More silence. Lavenza had withdrawn something from her skirt, playing with it in her hands, but Akira couldn't get a good look at what it was. He left the question unasked.

“We attendants,” Lavenza spoke again as the light of the afternoon continued to fade away, “bond deeply to the guests we serve. It is in our nature. And it pulls us from the Velvet Room, towards the world of humans. This day, I imagine repeating it, seeing different things, over and over, and a part of my heart soars at the thought. But... I want to remain there. To greet my sister with a smile when she arrives. Two different selfish desires pulling me in two different directions. It is difficult.”

“When she arrives again, will you go out with her to see the world?”

Lavenza was silent. Perhaps the question was one mortifying to consider for an attendant, who is part of the Velvet Room.

“If you really want then... you'll still get the chance for both. To see her and the world.”

That wasn't really something Akira could promise, but what could he promise for the future of another? Instead he chose to believe. And in believing support with all his heart. Let the bond of Strength between them allow him to help Lavenza go on. That was his desire.

The girl turned and smiled at him, but the smile was not without sadness as well.

“I hope that if I do, I am still able to see you again one day.”

Akira smiled in return.

“Just take over the Gun About scene and I'll know to come find you.”

Lavenza laughed. It was a laugh Akira hadn't heard from her before, one total and consuming. The girl clutched at her stomach, tears welling at her eyes in response to Akira's complete dismissal of the seriousness of their conversation. And yet, it had been exactly what she'd needed.

Oh, her Trickster, how kind he was. This parting would be a wound that would heal neither quickly nor cleanly. Lavenza sighed through her laughter, wiping at her eyes. She didn't know which tears were of laughter and which were of sadness.

How human, she was sure.

When she stood she had clasped in her hands a gift, one she was prepared to give to the young man Akira Kurusu, who had been brought to the Velvet Room by a fiend of the foulest order, and become a shining light for the world and for her. She would never forget him. Never ever ever.

“When I return to the Velvet Room,” she spoke clearly, Akira stilling as she affixed him with her golden gaze, “That will be it. The doorway will disappear, and I will be gone. My Trickster, I truly cannot thank you for all you have done. I will miss you dearly.”

Akira's features were soft. He nodded, a tinge of sadness to his own face. But then a thought crossed his mind and his brow wrinkled in response. Lavenza paused her farewell speech, waiting for him to speak.

“I'm... leaving Tokyo, on the twentieth.” Akira wasn't even sure if Lavenza could follow the dates in the real world, but she nodded as if she understood. He continued. “The day before, on the nineteenth, I'll be going around to see everyone one last time. It... would be good if I could say...
goodbye to you then. If you're able.”

Eighteen days. Lavenza considered now. Spent a moment.

Then nodded in return.

“I will request the door remain until then,” she announced, hands moving to her pockets. Best save this farewell gift for their true farewell then. “And on the nineteenth I will see you. For the last time.”

Akira nodded, a smile that was equal parts happiness and sadness on his face as well. A true plan to say goodbye. And delaying that for just a little longer.

Lavenza couldn't help but admit that every day more was enough to make her happy. Just... a little longer.

“Then for tonight,” she turned, eyes studying all the world was. Every person, every tree, every building, every cloud, every star. The world of humans. The world of those she loved. “Let us conclude. Will you take me back to the Velvet Room?”

Akira nodded and stood. “I will.”

It was a short journey to Akihabara, the door there as good as any. At it, Lavenza looked up at Akira with clear eyes, gentle smile.

“Good night, Akira.”

Surprised, yet pleased, Akira returned the farewell. “Until next time, Lavenza.”

And as he left, as she walked through the doorway, the same words came from each. The same goodbye on their lips.

“Until the last time.”

Chapter End Notes

This was not an easy chapter for me. I went into this chapter having known long in advance what I wanted it to be, it was going to be exactly as the title says. Then I started writing it, got two pages in, and realised I had next to no idea on how to write Lavenza. That... didn't really change over the course of this chapter, so I can only hope my attempt was good enough. You'll have to let me know.

I studied the Elizabeth "Social Link" from P3 as preparation for this chapter, as I'm sure those of you who've played P3 can immediately tell. The only other Persona game I've actually played was 4, a decade ago now, so my Persona series knowledge is actually quite lacking. I have plans to correct that, but it requires some time to be sunk that I just haven't gotten around to yet. One day.

This chapter is not only huge, it's slimmed down from the original draft. There were a number of additional events I'd wanted to include, enough so to quite possibly double the chapter's length. In the end I focused in on the moments I specifically wanted, but there certainly was more that could have been. Perhaps one day I'll be able to address that.
I'd wavered, before starting this, on making the Caroline and Justine battle canon to this Akira, having it somehow just happen in an NG run. In the end I didn't go ahead with it, so Lavenza's confession is non-canon to this story as well. I'm of two minds about whether or not I'm okay with that, it's a complicated topic, and the difficulty this chapter posed me really blew out my handling of it. It was almost too big of a bite for me to get away with, I feel.

All things considered, I still hope this chapter was enjoyable for you all. Let me know your thoughts, your feedback, and I'll take it with due consideration to heart. Lavenza is definitely now #1 for most difficult to write character for me, so I'll need to give her some attention in the future somehow. We'll see what we see.

Thanks to all readers and commentors, you're all appreciated, and I'll see you with the next one. Bye-bye!
3/2, Thursday After School

It was lucky, Akira considered as he reached out to the entrance of Untouchable, attempting to close his umbrella in the same motion, that he hadn’t told Iwai he was stopping by yesterday. The grizzled owner of the airsoft shop would have given him a serious grilling for saying he would and then skipping out, more than likely unimpressed by the excuse ‘the magic girl who lived in my subconscious wanted to spend the day exploring Tokyo’. Akira couldn’t imagine why.

Unfortunately that was the only lucky thing right now. A heavy gust of wind blew a spray of water right into Akira’s face, splattering his glasses and rinsing the rest of him, his umbrella forcibly closed by the wind pushing against it. Caught off guard Akira fell backwards, pushed open the shop’s door, and landed firmly on his ass. Ow.

Iwai, sitting behind the counter and lazily watching the empty shop, jumped up to his feet.

“The hell you doin’, kid?”

Akira just groaned and gave a wave from where he sat. “Hey Iwai.”

The weather had really worked him over. When Morgana had declined to leave the house that morning, preferring to remain curled up on Akira’s bed, he’d rolled his eyes and told the recalcitrant being that the rain wouldn’t be that bad. And it hadn’t. Cold, yeah, but a decent umbrella and minding your path made sure you avoided the worst of it.

It was the wind that had been a surprise.

The gale, tearing through the streets of Shibuya, had hammered Akira from the moment he’d emerged out of the underground. It had only been a short trip to the airsoft shop Untouchable, but in that amount of time Akira already looked like he’d been run through the washer. So maybe he’d slightly underestimated how bad it was going to be. Whoops.

“Jeeze,” grumbling, Iwai threw a towel over to Akira, watching the kid miss the catch and take it to the face instead. It settled over Akira’s head, pressing his wetted hair harder against his skull. “You look like a goddamn mess. Dry yourself off, an’ don’t go gettin’ any water anywhere else. These models’re sensitive y’know!”

A muffled “sorry” emerged from beneath the towel as Akira vigorously worked it over his head, attempting to extract as much of the rain as he could. It was stunning how just yesterday could be such a beautiful first day of spring only to be immediately followed by such miserable wind and rain.

“A heavy jacket settled over him, large enough to feel like a tent. It took a moment’s struggle for Akira’s head to poke out from underneath it. Iwai, standing over him, gave a grin.
“You’re lucky I keep extras here, you ain’t gettin’ the clothes off my back no matter what, got that?”

“Thanks.” Akira pulled the jacket around him, feeling it beginning to trap his body heat already, and finally rose back up to his feet. A streak of dampness stretched from where he’d been sitting to the doorway, his umbrella discarded and dripping on the ground. Akira looked from it, to Iwai, who was, as always, casually working his way through another lollypop. Akira gave a half-hearted grin. “Weather sucks out there.”

“Yeah no shit,” Iwai wasn’t amused by the observation, “what’d’ya think was gonna happen goin’ out there? You tryin’a catch a cold or somethin’?”

“Okay,” Akira tried to raise up a hand, but as soon as his hand emerged from the comprehensive warmth of the jacket he hissed and pulled it back in. The movement of Iwai’s eyes clearly showed he’d seen that. “In my defence,” far less impactful without a raised finger, “I was expecting the rain, it was the wind that got me.”

“Yeah’n why’d’ya let it?” Iwai wasn’t having it. This damn kid, always sticking his nose out where it was liable to get cut off. Just knowing him this past year had aged Iwai ten. Goddamn. “Soon as you felt the wind you shoulda gone right back to the trains’n got goin’.”

Akira… didn’t really have an excuse for that. He’d just assumed that for the rough half minute it would take to get to Untouchable, he’d be fine. He hadn’t been.

“…thought I could handle it,” he muttered after a moment had passed. Iwai shook his head. “Still think that?”

The kid just shrunk a little inside the oversized jacket hanging around him. Iwai sighed. “Seriously, it ain’t that important ta come visit all the damn time. Take it easy kid, you goddamn deserve it after the shit you’ve been through.”

Akira shook his head. “Visiting helps.” Iwai didn’t have much he could say in response to that. He sighed.

“So what’s up then, lookin’ for some work?” Akira’s head, the only part of him sticking out of the jacket, gave a quick nod. Iwai jerked a thumb in the direction of the backroom. “Then go grab a damn mop ‘n clean up the entrance. Some damn idiot’s gone’an soaked it with the rain.”

Another nod and Akira got moving, keeping the heavy jacket wrapped tight around him. It was a comedic sight, watching the garment move like some kind of ghost across the shop. Iwai just shook his head and sat back down behind the counter. Ten years and counting this kid had taken from him, he was sure.

Akira had always been a pretty silent worker, taking directions and seeing them out with rarely a word said. He could banter when prompted, but tended to stick to himself a lot all the same. Last year Iwai had found it a pretty respectable trait, had appreciated a kid who knew the value of keeping their mouth shut. But this time around, the few times Akira had stopped by since getting out of juvie, he’d been different.

Less silent out of nature and more silent out of jumpiness. He glanced at loud noises with concern. He could get lost in just doing something as mindless as using a mop, like he was right now, when before he’d always needed something that really took some focus to occupy him. And his banter had gone to shit.

Iwai frowned, watching Akira clean. When he’d made the request for introduction to someone from
public security, using what leverage remained from his time in the Hashiba clan, he’d gotten what he’d asked for and more. An in on juvenile hall, a way to keep an eye on the kid for as long as he’d been stuck there. And with that came a vision of just how things had been for the kid before Iwai’s request reached the proper individuals. Just what he’d been through.

He hadn’t mentioned that before, when he’d asked the kid to stop by the store. He’d intended to, but there was something uneasy in the way the kid moved, something unsteady in his gaze, that told Iwai it wasn’t the time to bring it up. He’d kept a handle on his foul mood right until he’d sent the kid home, then cursed out a storm in the safety of his own shop.

The kind of pieces of shit who’d beat a kid… he’d never forgive them. And he knew he wasn’t the only one.

During the weeks the kid had been away, his friends had been running all over the damn place doing everything they could to get him out – sworn family, Iwai knew it at a glance. Those kids would be there for one another through thick and thin, no matter what, for the rest of their lives. Warmed his heart to see that sort of thing in others. Family by blood was always a mixed bag. But family by bond? That was for life.

Anyway, point was, Iwai had entertained a few of them checking in with him now and again. First letting him know about the arrest – oh that had been a nasty surprise – and then about the efforts to prove the kid’s innocence. It had been one of the girls, the one with the fluffy hair and a manner that made Iwai think of a guillotine ready to fall, that had mentioned Akira might be in danger from those overseeing him. That had been what kicked Iwai off his ass and got him to go see Tsuda, to do whatever he could.

He hadn’t, and wouldn’t, mention that to the kid though. Those sorts of things, you just left them lie. But there was something on his mind all the same.

Iwai sighed, flicking the chewed remnants of the lollypop stick from his mouth into the trash. Akira looked over at him in curiosity.

“I’ve done some diggin’,” that was enough to get Akira’s attention, straightening up from the mopping he’d been doing. “Got some names. Couple guys who’re in charge of juvie hall back at the start of year, yeah?” And there was the momentary slip of the mask, an expression that Akira usually kept all to himself making its way out into the public. This one was new though. It wasn’t a flinch, or a fear or concern reaction at all.

No, the way his eyebrows shifted, the way his lips curled, the way there was a glint like lightning flashing in his storm-grey eyes – that was anger, pure and simple. Iwai groaned.

“Shit, kid, they really worked you over huh?”

Now Akira’s gaze shifted, off of Iwai’s face, more towards the ground. He was refitting his mask, hands tightening around the mop’s handle all the same. Such obvious body language. Comparing it to the kid who never showed a thing, who always kept his cool, it was really, really, really pissing Iwai off. If only he’d intervened earlier…

“Sorry.”

Once again Akira had been unprepared, this time the apology catching him completely flat-footed. He stared. Iwai rubbed the back of his head. Damn, this had gotten awkward fast. He shook his head.
“Look, just… I’ve still got some favours I can call in. If you want. I know it won’t make anythin’ better but-“

“Sometimes you just want them to hurt.”

Akira’s interruption silenced Iwai’s offer of less-than-legal vengeance, his wide-eyed stare matching the intent, and quite merciless, gaze coming from the kid before him. Shit.

“Uh…”

Akira shook his head. “I’ve thought about it,” he admitted freely, eyes roaming the store, making sure not to look Iwai in the face. “It’s immoral, and it helps nothing, but sometimes I imagined them suffering for what they did and I enjoyed it. So yeah, it’s tempting.”

Iwai kept silent. He’d heard that tone before but never from a kid this young. This was all kinds of messed up. Akira sighed.

“Look, don’t… don’t worry about it. You already saved me by getting someone to look out for me while I was in there. I hadn’t said thanks for that yet. Thanks, Iwai.”

Iwai blinked. “Wait, how’d you- nevermind.” The look Akira was giving Iwai was more than judgemental enough to show Akira wasn’t going to respect the question of how he knew Iwai had helped out. Of course it was obvious. Iwai just shook his head. This kid really was going to be the death of him one day.

By the time he was done catching himself after that rather intense conversation, Iwai noted Akira had finished the cleaning and returned the supplies to the backroom. The kid was testing keeping his arms out of the jacket now, slowly emerging from its warm embrace. Looks like he’d dried up quick enough after all. That was something, at least.

“Hey,” Iwai flicked open his phone, checking incoming messages, “I’m gonna be meetin’ Kaoru at the diner inna bit for a meal. Come with. My treat.”

“Uhh,” Akira turned, looking out the door of Untouchable. The rain did still seem to be going pretty sideways. “Did we forget how things were when I came in?”

“Hah!” Iwai shook his head, unconcerned by Akira’s worry, “Don’t you worry about that, you could wear one of my jackets through a blizzard’n stay toasty warm. Just keep that on you’n you’ll make it there fine, got that?”

Akira nodded. He couldn’t exactly argue that, wearing this jacket felt like being wrapped up in the toastiest of blankets. He’d have to ask Iwai where he got it from. One of these come next winter would do him a world of good.

Despite the intensity of the wind and rain, Iwai was completely correct. As he locked the door to the shop, the weather beating at his back, he didn’t flinch, simply pointed an umbrella in the direction of the elements and set off at a march, Akira a step behind. Iwai was like a weather-breaker, creating a safe zone at his back as he plowed through the storm. The Shibuya diner was a comparative distance from Untouchable to the stairs down to the underground and railway, but thanks to jacket and Iwai, Akira was far less soaked by the time he reached the diner. Impressive.

Inside the diner, Kaoru, Iwai’s adoptive son, was already waiting. By the books stacked at the table he was seated at, he’d taken advantage of the weather to get some extra study in – something Akira had done himself quite often over the last year. Great minds thought alike, it seemed. The greeting he was giving his father was interrupted when Kaoru’s eyes set upon Akira, and his face lit up with a
wide smile. He waved genuinely. “Kurusu-san, good evening!”

“Hope you don’t mind him joinin’ us,” Iwai spoke for Akira, fitting himself down into one of the diner’s seats, “Dumb kid came by and got completely soaked by the rain, I ended up takin’ pity on him and outfittin’ him with one of my spare jackets.”

“It looks good!” Kaoru addressed Akira, complimenting either him, Iwai, or both. Akira nodded and sat down as well, Kaoru stacking all of his books and papers up into neat piles and out of the way. “I was just getting hungry too, so I’m glad you were able to make it. It sure is windy today, huh?”

“You’re tellin’ me!” Iwai laughed, waving off a waitress, “Felt like it was gonna lift me off my feet on the way over.”

The waitress took the trio’s orders, Iwai laughing up a storm at Kaoru’s large serving. That kid was stocking up for the mother of all growth spurts, he was sure. Akira took comparatively less, but still more than healthy enough. Iwai was satisfied with just a good slice of steak.

Iwai hadn’t regretted inviting Akira to join him and Kaoru for dinner one bit, but it was only when Kaoru began excitedly talking to Akira about how his life was going that it occurred to Iwai just how good a decision this had been. His son seemed to idolise Akira, having immediately asked Iwai a world of questions the night after Masa’s ill-fated kidnapping attempt. Apparently Akira, standing next to Iwai and acting for all the world as if nothing was wrong, had really left an impression. And the more Kaoru wormed out of Iwai about Akira having helped out over the last few months, the more his kid seemed to appreciate every little thing he heard.

Hell, there were far worse role-models out there, Iwai himself included. He didn’t begrudge Kaoru the interest one bit.

“What about you, Kurusu-san?” Kaoru turned the topic to Akira, looking with interest at the elder teen, “Do you have any plans for the next school year?”

Akira blinked. Oh right, he’d meant to say that earlier. Been distracted. He gave a small smile and shook his head. Iwai immediately started paying more attention.

“Actually, I’m going back to my home-town in two and a half weeks.”

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“Actually, I’m going back to my home-town in two and a half weeks.”

“Hang on, what?”

Iwai’s interruption had been loud enough to attract a little attention from those around, which he apologised for while also being aware he’d distracted from the sheer disappointment that had passed over Kaoru’s face. No need to settle on that one.

“Yes,” Akira seemed a little rueful to be admitting it here, with food just on the verge of being served to them, “now that I’ve been cleared of everything my parents want me to come back home. So I’ll be doing my final year of high school there.”

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“Huh.” Iwai continued to hold the conversation, giving Kaoru time to recover his pace. He hadn’t mentioned it to Akira yet, but Kaoru had applied to Shujin Academy for his high school of choice, and had been really looking forward to spending time with Akira as his upperclassman. Missing out on that would be a stinging blow for the kid. He’d be unhappy about this news later. “Guess that means I’m going to need to find a new assistant for the shop. If you got any recommendations I’ll hear them out for your sake.”

“Thank you, Iwai-san.” Akira smiled at that one, looking thoughtful. “I’ll ask around” was all he said in response to that. With food now being served, the three at least had that to focus on. Hopefully it would give Kaoru
the time he needed to recover from this news.

Once they were done eating, Kaoru moved on to a new topic, something to distract him from thinking about how he missed out on being Akira’s high school junior. Instead he brought up a favoured topic of the last year: the Phantom Thieves, and where exactly they were now. After all, they’d disappeared after the events with Masayoshi Shido. His active theory was that if the Phantom Thieves ever appeared again, the people who’d been part of Shido’s big conspiracy would hunt them down, so they’d had to go into hiding. Akira did his best to play both ambivalent about the topic as well as interested in Kaoru’s opinion while Iwai struggled not to laugh.

There was a point where trying to be completely neutral about something ended up revealing just how much you cared all the same, and Akira was definitely passing it. Thankfully Kaoru was too enthused about the topic to notice.

It was someone else completely who eventually broke the discussion down, sticking their head into the diner to announce to the others they’d been dining with that the wind and rain had died down. Iwai took that as his cue to wrap up too.

“All right then,” he stood up, stretching from the cramped diner stall, “I’m gonna head back to the shop, do a little more work for the night. You comin’ with, kid?” Akira nodded, standing as well. Kaoru moved to gather up his belongings.

“I’ll head home then,” the younger teen announced, “thanks for tonight, dad. Kurusu-san, it was really good seeing you again. Come see us again when you visit Tokyo in the future!”

“Got it,” Akira nodded, “I’ll see you around.”

With that the group broke apart, Kaoru heading for the trains to make his way home, Akira and Iwai returning to Untouchable. The rain had reduced to the finest mist, the wind having cut off completely, so Akira didn’t have any trouble this time removing the heavy jacket once he was inside the shop. Man, it was comfy though.

“The place where you even get these,” he handed the jacket over to Iwai, “I’ve gotta get one for myself.”

“They’re a buncha counterfeits someone was tryin’ta sell in our territory way back when,” Iwai remarked matter-of-factly, “so we seized the lot n’ distributed them throughout the clan. Fakes or not, they’re damn comfy.”

Akira stared. “Wait, really?”

“Yup.”

Huh. Akira just shook his head at that and got back to work. Aside from keeping the store clean – no dust allowed at all, a trait hammered into Akira twice over by both Iwai and Futaba protecting their sensitive valuables – there were also a few guns specifically needing repair. After having worked at Untouchable this long though, such things weren’t really a challenge to Akira, who quickly disassembled and worked on them. Iwai oversaw him with a keen eye.

“You’ve got quick hands, kid,” he remarked after a while, startling Akira from the focus he’d slipped into while working. “I’ve seen your practisin’ makin’ coins disappear when you’re bored, you could go down a dangerous road if you ain’t careful.”

“I kind of already did, you know.” Iwai groaned at Akira’s quick and smart-mouthed response. Akira gave a grin before continuing his work. After a little while, Iwai broached a new topic.
“Kaoru doesn't remember,” this time Akira stopped completely, hands paused right over the half-assembled model gun. He knew exactly what this topic was. “Far as I can tell, the last he heard of the Phantom Thieves was the shit that went down with Shido. Me though, I got those memories a Christmas Eve. Kinda wish I didn't, all things considered.”

For a moment there was an almost distant look in Akira's eye, before he focused on Iwai and gave another grin instead. “Want me to start a support group?”

“Oh!” That blatant disrespect, there was the Akira who showed up when you got to know him. Iwai shook his head. “Forget about it. It's none'a my business n' I ain't gonna bug you about it.”

Akira's grin shifted, a contemplative look on his face. Whatever complexity of thoughts he was having though, he kept it to himself. As per the usual. After a moment, he gave a single word, before turning his attention back to the model gun before him.

“Thanks.”

It was an hour later that Iwai started to make the motions of closing up. Akira had been silent with his thoughts for the majority of that time, but he'd also done good work. Hopefully that was what he'd wanted out of tonight.

Still though... Iwai leaned back against the counter, watching as Akira put everything back into its proper place, something was on his mind all the same. Akira had never mentioned it before, but, now that it was relevant...

“So, your family, huh?”

It wasn't a pronounced reaction, the way Akira paused and exhaled, but it was enough for those keeping an eye on him. “Like that, huh?” If Iwai's follow-up affected Akira, he didn't react to it, at least.

“Yes,” the kid turned to Iwai, eyes just a little downcast, just a little not meeting Iwai's own. Awkward subject, it seemed. “How much did you hear, exactly, about what happened with me and Shido?”

“I heard you got in between him n' some woman, then he basically went outta his way to destroy you for standin' up to him. False assault charges n' all.”

“I did my best to be a good kid, to live a good life, do what I'm told, and the moment some... some... some asshole tries to fucking ruin me my own parents can't distance themselves fast enough? What's with that?”

Iwai was silent, not even beginning to think of something to say here. He hadn't been intending to poke whatever sleeping demons Akira was keeping, but now that he had he was damn sure not about to interrupt them. You vent when you gotta. Otherwise the eventual explosion would be far, far worse.
“And then what?” Akira wasn't even trying to rein himself in now, just letting the words pour out. He'd wanted to yell this at someone for weeks now, yet held himself back all this time. Iwai's question was finally the point at which he snapped. He'd regret it later. For now...

“Then as soon as, oh look, your son was right all along and he was framed and suffered for lies you believed, as soon as that happens and I'm a good kid again, 'Please come back home, Akira'? The hell is with that? Like I'm supposed to just forget the way they looked at me when I insisted it was all lies? Sure, they apologised, they keep saying 'we were wrong', 'we should have believed you', but what's that do for me? What's that fix a year of them not calling, not even bothering with me? How am I supposed to come back from that? What the hell am I meant to do about this?”

He was breathing heavily, ranted out for just a moment. Iwai's own frustrations were building now, sympathetic to Akira's plight. One's parents letting you down was something he knew all too well, after all.

“But you're still going back?”

Akira had said as much. He didn't seem the most thrilled about it. And he definitely had a choice, Iwai was positive of that. Hell if Akira said he wanted to stay in Tokyo but had nowhere to go, Iwai would offer to put him up himself. Not that he'd ever admit that though. Couldn't get that sappy.

Akira sighed, holding a hand over his face. He didn't want to look at Iwai right now after just having gotten so emotional. So embarrassing...

“I've seen a lot of other people's families this year;” he spoke quietly after a moment, voice emerging from behind his hand. “People who're struggling to hold on to what little they have. People who've lost nearly everything and everyone. People who have lost everything. And it's like... do I really have the right to just drop it myself? If they want to apologise, aren't I meant to forgive them? I shouldn't just throw away family because of one screw-up, no matter how big, right?”

The question was one he'd yet to actually ask someone. Iwai shook his head when Akira moved his hand to look at the man with eyes asking for an answer. He couldn't answer that. Not one bit.

“There ain't no one answer to that question, kid. You gotta find it yourself. I don't think you'd be wrong if you didn't go back. But I don't think you'd be wrong if you did n' tried either. Sorry, but ain't no-one gonna tell you what you need to hear. Only you can do that.”

Akira sighed. Exhaled and did his best to push the stress out. Ranting had helped, a little, though his face was burning now at having just acted out so emotionally. He shook his head. And knew Iwai was right.

“Yeah, I know. I just don't think I'll ever actually know which is the right choice. Giving up the next year with all of my friends and the people who became family, just to go back and try with a family I don't even know what I feel towards anymore? It's a pretty rough deal.”

“Yeah,” Iwai nodded, “It is.”

It was late. The howl of the wind, picking up again, rattled the door of Untouchable, but at least no rain was left in the air. And Akira was burned out now, having vented the sort of frustrations that made a real disaster if you let them boil for too long. Iwai wouldn't say it, but he was glad Akira trusted him enough to let loose like this. It meant something.

Damn, he really was getting sappy, huh?

“For what it's worth,” Iwai fixed Akira with a strong gaze, the teen straightening up under it
immediately, “you've done incredible things this past year. Not just the Thieves shit, the just helpin’ people stuff too. I've heard a lotta stories from a lotta people while you were locked up. So yeah. You gotta lot to be proud of. We're all proud of ya, kid.”

Akira stared, the words unexpected, more than surprising from the traditionally gruff owner of Untouchable. After a moment, a grin etched its way across his face.

“Okay but you're still paying me for tonight, right?”

“Hah!” Iwai's shocked, amused, and amusedly offended expression was more than payment enough for Akira, even before the storeowner pulled out his wallet and pushed some notes into Akira’s hands. “The balls on you kid, you're really gonna get in trouble one day actin’ like that.”

Akira just grinned. Iwai shook his head.

“Alright, that's enough’a that, clear out kid. I'm headin' home n' so are you.”

“Right,” Akira nodded, opening the door up and heading outside, immediately clutching at his jacket in the chill wind. Sooner he was underground and in the trains the better. “Thanks. I... this was good. Thanks.”

“Just make sure to come by before leavin' for good,” Iwai locked the door behind him, his heavy jacket nullifying far more of the wind than Akira's school clothing. “Don't be a stranger when you come back either.”

“Got it,” Akira nodded, “I'll see you later.”

“Alright, get outta here kid before you catch a cold or some shit.” Waving Akira off, Iwai watched as the teen beat a hasty retreat for the subway system. There he goes. Hmm.

“Ah, what the hell,” Iwai squeezed at his checks, before heading off himself, “Really am gettin’ sappy.” It was time to go. He had a kid waiting for him at home. No need to go getting hung up here.

Wind at his back, Iwai strode off through the streets of Shibuya's night, his thoughts his own.

Somehow, it felt like the shop was gonna be a little lonelier from this point on.

Chapter End Notes

As I've fallen into the pace of writing these chapters, the average length has spiralled upwards. The Igor and Morgana chapters are practically tiny now. When I made the original outline for this chapter I'd expected maybe four-five pages, instead I hit nine and a half. Ah that's how it always is. Oh well, I doubt anyone's going to complain about more content. I hope not, at least.

Iwai's got a real unique talking style, I noticed it while checking his Confidant before writing this, so made sure to include it in his dialogue. Hopefully there aren't any issues reading it, he sure does love his apostrophes though! This guy... Speaking of the Confidant, I got emotional about how much Iwai loves his son while watching it, so I definitely had to have some Kaoru time here. Kaoru's a minor character in the grand scheme of things, but he's also one of Akira's biggest fans! I'm sorry for him he didn't get the experience of being Akira's underclassman. Hopefully Ryuji and Ann pick him
up as their seniors, and Futaba his classmate.

As a shoutout to Confidant Roulette (very good fic I've linked before) and Black Star (which I could rant about for hours please just read it: http://archiveofourown.org/works/10906560) I had to make sure to throw in a line of Iwai being unnerved by Haru in here. It's just mandatory at this point. Such good stuff.

Aside from that, we got a chance to hear some more from Akira on his family situation. He's really struggling with both believing it's right to maintain his family while also just wanting nothing more than to be with the friends and family he made in Tokyo. It's a rough thing. If I were in his position I'd be extremely tempted to try and stay in Tokyo myself. We know how the game goes though. We know what conclusion Akira came to. But no-one said it had to be an easy one.

Anyway Iwai's a really good dad with a really good Confidant and I'm glad I got up to his chapter. Next up is a date with Death (neither literal), as I get ready to write Doctor Tae Takemi. That's gonna be fun. See you then!
In the past, Tae Takemi had never needed to manage bookings or appointments. The rare individuals who stumbled into her clinic were so spaced out that the thought of conflicting schedules never once occurred to her. How many people could possibly wish to see The Plague? It made things easy.

Empty, but easy. Easy to work, at least.

Change came for her from an unexpected direction. A teenager with far too much determination walked into her clinic, looked her in the eyes, and redefined her life. A year later and Tae was recording dates and times, determining free periods for those wishing to be seen by her, fielding phonecalls and wondering if she should hire an assistant. All the fault of one young man.

It really was ridiculous to think about it. She caught herself smiling absently each time she did, at odds with her usual manner.

Oh well, some things in life deserved a smile.

She’d been busy of late. The changing of the seasons – the transition from cold to hot, or hot to cold – was always far more likely to bring about sickness than the depth of winter or height of summer. People assumed far too quickly that it was time to change their manner once the season changed, despite how such things were just names put to rough slices of the year.

Unfortunately, with her newfound business, even Akira Kurusu had to wait. Tae had made the time, explicitly insisted he come see her, as soon as he could after being released from juvenile hall, but a follow-up had been and was demanded. He’d lost weight. Muscle mass. Obviously slept poorly, the bags around his eyes far worse than the year before. His psychology was somewhat different too, though Tae wasn’t a professional who could evaluate that.

On that angle, just a concerned friend. Yet even still…

He was a terrible liar, somehow. He shouldn’t be, and in some manners wasn’t. Tae had known from the beginning Akira hadn’t come to her for help with his studies. She’d had no idea he was securing medication for the Phantom Thieves. She’d known immediately that despite his even expression, he was the type to involve himself in the business of others. She’d been completely unprepared for him to do such for her.

When he’d come to see her, two days after his release, despite his best efforts to insist that his experience had simply been one of neglect, despite there being no obvious marks on his body, she’d still seen right through him. Maybe it was presumptuous of her to ask. But oh how he’d jumped and looked guiltily at her when she had.

She could still remember the moment, word for heavy word. All she had to do was close her eyes and think.

“Do you really think even without obvious bruising I can’t tell what you’ve been through?”

“I- that’s not- … Please don’t tell anyone.”
Patient confidentiality, huh? She was a professional. She would not speak against her patient’s wishes. But she would speak to her patients all the same. Tell them exactly what she thought.

Apparently such a trait was part of what made her popular amongst the locals of Yongen-Jaya. A physician who says exactly what she means? Someone to be valued. Her name spread further again.

‘Please don’t tell anyone’, how that phrase weighed heavy in her mind. That was the second time he’d said it, and he knew full well that it was. He shouldn’t even remember the first time, given the state he had been in, but clearly he did. Memories flowing from one to another, Tae experienced a vision that still made her grimace to this day.

One she’d likely never forget.

She’d come to open her clinic and someone had already been there. The coffeeshop owner from just down the road. He’d given her a look that said not a wink of sleep had been had the last night, a look so tired and pleading from someone Tae had known long enough to be gruff and unyielding that she’d immediately been taken aback.

A moment later, once her thoughts had caught up quickly enough to recall that he was the caretaker for Akira, she’d nearly lost herself then and there. But no, calm yourself, steady yourself, you didn’t become a doctor just to lose your cool the moment something went wrong. So she collected what supplies she was sure she needed and followed the man, his arms clutched out of stress, back to his house where Akira Kurusu, mercifully unconscious, was stowed away.

Such mercies didn’t last long.

She’d had just long enough to survey the damages, the part of her which could burn white-hot with fury accumulating fuel yet remaining stored within her, safe from the moment where her cool was needed, before Akira had come to.

He’d tried to sit up for her. She’d used a few choice words loaded with exactly enough venom to tell him if he dared to move he’d regret it. She hadn’t needed the threat. He looked like he was regretting just being awake. More fuel for the fire.

So she treated what she could in the moment, categorised, evaluated, and compartmentalised every injury he’d taken. Cleaned. Bandaged. Provided instruction of care.

Then had to clench her teeth and ball her fists when he’d finally spoken after it all. Asked for help appearing before the others later that day. He couldn’t seem like this to them. He had to be on his feet. He couldn’t be marked the way he was. He had to be fine. They wouldn’t be able to take seeing him like this. He couldn’t put them through that.

No matter what he had to go through himself.

Her words were slow, yet merciless. She called him a suicidal fool. He’d smiled at that before his face twitched at the pain it put him through. And he wanted to stand up on his own two feet to go and face others? The fool. The absolute fool.

He nodded, accepted the criticisms with ease. But even still.

“I can’t let them see me like this. Please don’t tell anyone.”

The click of the clinic door stirred Tae from these idle thoughts, a young man entering the room. The source of all her troubles, all her stress, and everything good that had happened in this last year. Shaking his head a little, the heavy winds of early spring tousling his unruly mess of black hair
further, Akira Kurusu gave Tae a smile and a wave.

“Takemi-san.”

A few days after New Years a ragtag bundle of kids had shown up at Tae’s clinic and told her, in plain terms, that Akira Kurusu was presently incarcerated in juvenile hall. It had been a shock to the system, a rude opening to the new year, but she’d nodded all the same. To save Akira Kurusu? Of course she’d help. She’d do everything she could.

It was only after the initial shock, the group already departing, that it occurred to Tae she’d very likely just been visited by the Phantom Thieves themselves. So young. All so young…

“Right on time.” Tae stood, moving around the lobby of her clinic to open the door to the examination room itself, a door Akira dutifully stepped through as he had so many times before. Whether to take part in a trial or simply purchase medication, he’d become used to this space. Looked for all the world as if he fit right in. As if he was a natural part of her little world.

Well, he was. That much would always be true.

“Still,” when he affixed her with a cheeky grin Tae found herself already rolling her eyes, used to the flippancy the young man displayed with anyone he trusted, “you’ve been so busy lately! No time to see your favourite guinea pig for so long?”

“And whose fault is that?” Tae’s arched eyebrow was a command that always ended with the other party quietening down, a command that didn’t seem to settle on Akira as it did for more rowdy visitors. “I could have had a quiet life if it weren’t for your meddling.”

“My apologies,” Akira seemed amused by the banter, pleased even as he sat at a chair, “I’ll be sure to make it up to you.”

At that Tae just shook her head. At first he’d been calm, collected, and quiet. Then, when he’d grown to know her, quickly Akira had become a tease, playing with words as if they were the most fascinating toys imaginable, always with a smart reply for anything said in his presence. And beyond that, in rare and unguarded moments, Tae had seen something else. Other aspects he did his best to keep hidden. Parts of Akira Kurusu he wanted no other to see.

‘Please don’t tell anyone.’

There was one thing Tae Takemi knew about Akira that he did not know she knew. He’d tried a medication designed to induce drowsiness, to help patients rest through sickness. It was part of what she was preparing for Miwa-chan, so designed for children, leaving it to take a little longer for the effects to reach the young man.

The hallucinogenic side-effects weren’t meant to be significant. Were expected. If Akira muttered anything between ingesting and unconsciousness, Tae hadn’t expected it to be much at all.

Instead she’d experienced the boy retreating from ‘shadows’, telling them to stay away. Calling for his parents to come for him. To believe him. Saying he didn’t want to be alone.

Saying how alone he felt.

That was early in their days together. Trying her best to forget, for his sake, she’d avoided anything that might provoke such effects in the future of their tests. And Akira had never shown such things again. But, professional she might be, Tae Takemi was still a human being. And in quieter, less-guarded moments, when she was at home and beyond the sight of any other, how she felt an ache in
her heart at the voice she had heard. That small voice just begging for someone to be there for him.

Anyone at all. The fire within her burned hotter.

“No cat today?”

Akira, idly tapping fingers against knees, focused on Tae when she asked, but shook his head a moment later. “He’s been spending more time at home lately,” he spoke of the feline that had always been with him the last year as if it had its own conscious thoughts, “I think spending those weeks stray made him want nothing more than to take it easy somewhere comfy.”

“Mhmm.” If Tae had any thoughts on Akira’s mental state with regards to his treatment of that cat, she didn’t voice them. Instead she focused on what mattered here and now. His recovery.

As far as the initial check-up went, things seemed positive. Akira had regained weight and muscle mass fairly quickly, almost impressively so. His heart-rate, blood-pressure, and reaction times were all perfectly normal. In fact almost everything about him was the picture of normality. As far as recovery went, it was as good as it could get. Those around him had without fail done everything they could to help Akira get back on his feet. It was good.

Yet even still…

“How have you been coping with the nightmares?”

It was a dirty trick, Tae knew it even before she said it. Yet the way Akira’s face had morphed into shock, that brief moment of pure surprise, it was something else. It only lasted a second, before he’d realigned his expression into something perfectly neutral, but that second had been enough. Tae stared at him as Akira attempted to lie to her face.

“What nightmares?”

Her narrowed eyes, her bitter gaze, the curl of her lip, Akira withered under Tae’s judgemental stare. He could face the worst of the world without missing a step, but those he’d given his trust to had the keys to his heart. Their words and actions could cut past every defence he had. He didn’t really stand a chance.

“I never told you about the nightmares,” he muttered eventually, his gaze averted. Tae sighed.

“I’m no fool,” she said it with exact and even tone, “there is no-one who would go through what you did and not be affected by it. I told you that the last time we were here. That you need to find a way to talk about this to others.”

“You also told me you weren’t a psychiatrist,” Akira wasn’t meeting Tae’s eyes, but did at least show full memory of their last discussion. “You clearly said you couldn’t do for me what you believed I needed.” Tae’s stare didn’t change. Akira had clearly phrased his words as if to imply he himself didn’t believe he needed help. How stubborn.

“That doesn’t make it impossible to tell you do need help. You can’t go on like this.”

“It’s under control.”

A snort of laughter from Tae was a rare thing to hear, but the scathing tone in it was at least still true to her. Akira didn’t seem amused by the sound of it. Tae didn’t particularly care. “I don’t understand how one person can both be so good and bad at lying, but you are living proof of that. Why do you insist on doing it even now?”
The moment of silence stretched on, Akira still refusing to meet Tae’s eyes. She didn’t like this, having to pressure him in this manner, but it was as clear as day he needed it. The type to never let another see his pain, even if it was killing him. She couldn’t stand it.

Not after everything he’d done.

Yet when Akira spoke again, the topic wasn’t the same. He was trying to escape this line of questioning, fleeing it so as not to face the subject he himself was not ready to handle. She didn’t want to let him. She wanted to maintain her pressure on it.

But what he said had rattled her enough for Akira to escape all the same. A part of her cursed at the ploy. The rest of her was just saddened.

“I’m leaving Tokyo.”

“Pardon me?”

Akira shook his head, finally looking Tae in the eyes. Ah, there it was, the dark circles under his eyes were still there. Not as rough as before, but he wasn’t sleeping perfectly every night either. It wasn’t like she hadn’t had those times either. But even still.

“My parents asked me to come back home,” Akira continued, still speaking dully, “I’m leaving the morning of the twentieth, and completing my final high school year in the town I came from.”

“I see.” There was a lot to take in on that. First and foremost on Tae’s mind was that there was no chance she’d have to introduce Akira to Miwa-chan now. That stung. The thing she’d wanted most of all was now destined to go unfulfilled. Maybe not forever, but for longer than she wished. That was raw.

Beyond that though, Akira would be beyond her reach. She’d become used to his presence: seeing him when going to Leblanc for a coffee in the afternoon; having him visit to help out around her clinic; sending him a laundry-list of complaints about how busy she was now thanks to him after a particularly stressful day – Akira Kurusu had become a vital confidant for her.

She sighed and shook her head and attempted to say something, at least, to lighten the tension now in the air. Affixed him with a small smile. “And you were my best test subject – how will I prepare new medicine now?”

A laugh forced itself out of Akira, almost against his will, rewarding Tae’s smile with one of his own. He shook his head, as if unbelieving of the response she’d chosen. Honestly…

“Only for the year,” his own response caused Tae’s eyes to widen, for her to lean back in her seat. “I’m coming back to Tokyo after I graduate. We can pick up where we left off then.”

Tae blinked. “Really?”

When Akira looked at her in surprise, she shook her head and explained. Seriously, she’d just been teasing, but…

“That’s not exactly a job most people would jump at. Taking unknown, untested medication. Is that really something… you’re still interested in?”

“I trust you,” Akira shrugged, seemingly unconcerned by the risks involved, “and it helps. Your medicines are incredible, being able to test them and so release them is important. Why wouldn’t I help with that?” She was just silent at this point now. Really, she’d only been teasing earlier… Akira
gave a grin. “You will need to pay me this time though, I’m not working for a secret menu anymore.”

“Is that so?” Tae’s focused gaze was like a laser, able to narrow in on any specific point she chose. Akira didn’t flinch under it with this topic on the table though. This he could handle. “I suppose you and your fellows aren’t in further need of restoratives, advanced painkillers, and energy boosters. However you made use of them before.”

The original deal between Tae and Akira had been almost immediately noted as a lie by her. He wasn’t in this for his studies. But he didn’t seem to be reselling the drugs either – she’d have heard about it if her special mixtures were going on the black market. So what exactly was Akira Kurusu doing? It was almost shameful that it took until Chief Oyamada’s change of heart for her to clue in. After that though, it all made sense.

All except…

“Tell me,” Tae crossed a leg over another, eyes still locked on Akira’s own, “Just how did you use my medication all the same. I’ve checked your body, the only marks on you are from November. Yet you’ve constantly been restocking through me. It doesn’t make sense at all for you to be unblemished and yet use such things.”

The medications couldn’t really fix major issues anyway. They were for holdouts and long repairs or snap relief. Akira’s usage didn’t make sense. The mystery had haunted Tae for far too long.

Akira shrugged. “We were just really confident in how good they were.”

A noise of frustration emerged from Tae in response to that, leaning forward and threading her fingers together. She wasn’t going to be satisfied with that. She had her own theories, after all.

“Christmas Eve,” she said it and saw Akira’s eyes narrow, watched as he straightened in his seat, “I saw everything. So while as a doctor it’s pathetic for me to say this, as someone with any measure of sense I have to assume that magic was involved in your… experiences, over the last year.”

Akira didn’t give much in response to that, but the slight tilt of his head was more nod than shake. Good enough. Tae continued.

“So if, for the purposes of this theoretical, magic did exist in the situations when you required my medicine, I could perhaps be convinced that they were used as supplements. Ways to heal beyond what they would outside of such a place.” Still no real reaction. Tae wasn’t backing down.

“Given that, and your lack of injuries, it would seem you and yours likely recovered fully no matter what you experienced. Would you describe that as accurate?”

There was a distinct something in the air, intensity perhaps, as Akira slowly gave the tiniest nod. Tae latched onto the confirmation like a vice.

“Then tell me, Kurusu-kun, just what the worst you people experienced and were able to pretend never happened to you was.”

Memories unbidden flooded Akira’s mind.

He saw Makoto after an ambush, clutching a hand over her mask with blood running out from beneath it, quietly repeating that she couldn’t see. He saw Ann yelling at Ryuji’s unconscious form, pumping healing magic through him to reverse the damage her own manipulated self had unleashed. He saw Yusuke failing to lift an arm, waiting patiently to be treated, flexing his fingers once healed
with a wince at the pain which didn’t seem to leave.

He saw all of his friends collapsed around him as he did his best to cut down the Shadow menacing over them, knowing there wasn't time to do anything but lash out and try to keep it back. He had to give everything, no matter the pain, or everyone would die. He couldn't stop.

He could never stop.

And he felt the press of a gun's barrel against his forehead. Sitting there in a quiet and empty interrogation room, a figure that was tied to him in no way at all the victim of that weapon, yet somehow when Akira closed his eyes he felt like he could see through its own. See the stare and the smile aimed at him as a finger squeezed the trigger.

Of the many nightmares that woke him after the interrogation, that was one of the most vivid.

Tae's stare could cut glass. Akira looked her directly in the eyes.

“Nothing major,” he said with little expression, “it was mostly just pick-me-ups to keep our energy up. Don't worry about it.”

The flames inside her boiled over.

“Idiot.” Her voice was a knife that clanged uselessly off the shell Akira had risen. “You can't seriously- after everything- you are *killing* yourself.”

His expression was completely neutral, eyes barely focused, breathing even. In contrast, Tae felt as if her body was on fire with her frustration. A less professional woman might reach out and seize Akira by the collar at this. She held back that desire.

She didn't know what he'd been through. Even if she asked he'd never tell the full story. Suggesting someone he didn't know to talk to, that wouldn't do anything either. It had been a foolish hope that there was someone who could save this fool from himself.

Now she didn't know what to do. She could cure a physical ill, understand the body well enough to prepare a counteraction against most sicknesses. But the sickness in Akira's mind wasn't just of the experiences he had gone through, it had rotten into his own nature and spawned a cancer in his personality that was slowly eating him alive. She pictured a mask of Akira's face slipping loose and there being nothing but an empty hole behind it. Her fists clenched.

Akira stood up.

“*Stop.*” She was on her own feet too, barely a step away from him, brown eyes burning with the flame that had erupted within her. Akira stopped.

She wasn't even sure what to say here. Akira's intent to avoid confronting his own trauma made it almost impossible to communicate with him. What could she even do? She didn't have the training to help another with the wounds inside their hearts and minds. All she could do was...

“You can't go on like this. Please. Tell me there is something you can do. Something any of us can do for you.” If not her then the ones who had come to see her before. His fellow Phantom Thieves. Just, someone. Anyone.

Akira struggled for a moment for an expression that was right and found nothing. He knew he was avoiding this. But he just wasn't ready. Not yet.
“Not yet.” He said what he thought and Tae stepped back, eyes wide, panic at the statement momentarily settling in. “But I will. I promise.”

Akira Kurusu had never once broken a promise. That was one of his greatest truths. If he said he would do something for another he did it. Every time. Her heartbeat began to still.

“You'd better mean that.”

“I do.”

“Then you promise you'll come back?”

“I will.”

“...okay.”

A fate Tae had never even imagined followed the day Akira Kurusu first walked into her clinic. No, even before that, the moment he first crossed paths with her at Leblanc. How was she to know that this scruffy teenager was about to save her life, give her hope beyond hope, and a future far beyond anything she'd ever imagined in her wildest dreams?

But he had and if she had to she'd do everything to save him in return. She knew she wasn't the only one who thought that way.

When Akira left, a promise to return between them, the day did not come to a close. There were still more people to see. More care to give to the residents of Yongen-Jaya. So Tae Takemi tamped down the flames stoked within her and reset her face to greet who was next.

So that she could continue on and, when Akira Kurusu returned to his home in Tokyo, the Takemi Medical Clinic would still be there to see he was well.

Her thanks never-ending.

Chapter End Notes

Aspects of my discussions of P5 with friends have bled into Spin the Wheel as I've went, Akira's line about Arsene being hot in Ryuji's chapter was inspired by some of my twitter buddies. So that our most recent discussions had been on how absolutely horrid Akira's mental state was, naturally that got into this chapter.

It's not like that wasn't the plan, I knew going into this I'd be addressing Akira's physical and mental state through the lens of Tae Takemi. I also got to explore a little big of post-interrogation Akira, which was fun as post-interrogation fics are some of my favourite P5 fics. There are some really amazing ones in the P5 tag. Well worth going looking for.

Tae wasn't the easiest character to write for, I struggled with her voice, especially near the end, but it's my hopes I still built something consistent. You'll have to let me know if any part of her was off. Overall though, I'm happy with this chapter, it came together pretty neatly for the most part. I hope you enjoy it too.

Next up is Temperance, which I expect a lot of people to have been looking forward to. To all readers and commentors I extend my thanks, as knowing you're out there inspires
me to keep going with my work. If you're looking to yell at this fic without making a full comment, catch me on my twitter (https://twitter.com/TaurusVersant) where I'll be being sad about Akira Kurusu on a daily basis. Someone protect our boy.

That's it for this one, see you next chapter! Bye-bye!
3/4, Saturday Evening

Even after a year, the density within Yongen-Jaya was still a strange thing to Akira. He was used to large houses, wide streets, clearly separated buildings. Within Yongen-Jaya though, everything was interlinked, built together, the district one living, breathing entity.

Yet while it was a strange thing still, it was by no means unwelcome. To be one single part of a whole, to be known, accepted, called on and free to call on those around you, there was a sweetness to it, a flavour Akira had never tasted before. It was through Sojiro, and working at Leblanc, that he’d started to interface with the rest of Yongen-Jaya, but as time went by he’d still spread his own wings.

The owner of the batting cage greeted him on the street. Those who saw him as an assistant to Tae always made mention of how good a job she was doing caring for the district. Shop owners knew him by name and interest. Kids playing on the street saw him as just another part of the native crowd. Adults as another youth from their home. Everyone here saw each other as part of Yongen-Jaya.

God he’d miss it when he was gone.

“You gonna start the wash or what?”

A small building attached to the front of the local bathhouse housed a multitude of coin-operated washing machines and, at this time, one teen and one cat. Akira stretched and yawned, fitting a coin into the machine before him and starting it up. Its rumbling sound soon began to echo off the walls within this cramped space. There was something comforting about this too.

“Really taking it easy tonight, huh?”

Morgana casually strode over the top of the machines, settling to enjoy the shaking of the active one as he reached it. Akira gave the sight a small smile.

“Doctor’s orders: take it easy once in a while.”

“Yeah but like you’d ever listen to someone telling you that.”

Akira gave a soft gasp, placing a hand over his heart as if Morgana’s incredibly accurate comment had hurt him deeply. Morgana’s deep blue eyes didn’t blink. Akira relented.

“Really I just felt like doing nothing. I didn’t really have the chance for that last year.”

At that admission the feline head of Morgana bobbed up and down, a nod in agreement. “That’s fine. I’m glad you’re able to choose to do that on your own.” If Akira had any smart comments to make on that – he didn’t, all his friends were getting better and better at calling him out over the last few weeks – he said nothing, distracted instead by the sudden additional presence in the cramped public laundry.

Standing in the entrance, dressed in her French maid regalia, Sadayo Kawakami stared at Akira with mouth slightly open in surprise. Akira stared back, brain furiously whirring to come up with the best
possible greeting. After a moment a smile formed and he inclined his head.

“Evening, Becky.”

“Ohhh you!” A basket dropped on the floor, the stack of clothing within it jumping slightly from the impact. Akira eyed it off, noting it looked like Kawakami’s own. So she was here to do her own laundry. Away from her home district. In her maid outfit. …why? Kawakami didn’t exactly march up to Akira, but she did move in from the entrance all the same, looking put out. Akira affixed his best innocent expression.

It didn’t endear him to her.

“Ugh,” Kawakami’s shoulders slumped, “I can’t complain, Saturday nights are the best time to do the washing after a full week. It’s not a surprise that you’re here.”

Morgana, still sitting on the active washing machine and enjoying the ride very much, gave a yowl at the exasperated teacher. She stared at him for a moment before shaking her head. Akira’s smile reformed.

“So this isn’t a surprise visit?” He cocked his head in curiosity, “Not here to see your favourite student?” There was a slight redness to Kawakami’s cheeks, but that seemed far more likely at having been caught by Akira than anything else. But caught at what? What exactly was she doing here? The teacher sighed.

“I just…” she paused, as if embarrassed, before admitting her reasons, “It’s been a while since I came out here is all. Last year you had me coming to Yongen all the time to help you out, making food or doing washing, and I kind of… got used to it. Started to enjoy visiting. I just got nostalgic is all! Is that a crime?”

Being laughed at by Akira wasn’t a common experience for Sadayo Kawakami, but she took it in stride all the same. She didn’t find herself minding all that much. Opening up one of the washing machines, she began to fill it with her own laundry.

“So you came out here to do the washing just so you could visit the district? That’s cute as hell, sensei.”

“Come on!” The teasing though, that was a bit much. For being her student, and respectful enough on school grounds, Akira still indulged far too much in play once outside the classroom. He was exhausting.

“It’s fine, I get you.” Shaking his head, Akira wore a slight and tired smile. “I know I’m going to miss being here too.”

Akira had returned to Shujin Academy on the fifteenth, two days after his release. While the rumour mill immediately latched onto this and spiralled out of control, concluding that Akira was leader of the Phantom Thieves so fast it made Kawakami’s head spin, the real shock had instead been Akira seeking her out and informing her of his future plans. Of his leaving Tokyo.

She’d had to contact Akira’s hometown high-school, provide them a character reference to assure that the returning Akira Kurusu would be a contributing member of their community. It had been a difficult conversation, one marred by an equally dismissive and judging tone from the woman she’d spoken to, apparently Akira’s first-year homeroom teacher. It seemed his exoneration hadn’t endeared him to the place he’d come from. It frustrated her significantly.

It had taken a truly disgusting amount of effort to convince the woman that Akira truly had placed
first in exams across the year, and then Kawakami had been forced to endure the rather snide insinuation that Shujin’s student body must not be that impressive to be bested so.

She’d honestly wanted to put her fist through the wall by the time the call was done.

A counselling session with Akira later that week hadn’t borne much fruit either. While Akira seemed convinced he had to go back to his family home, he didn’t seem happy about it. Outright depressed, were Kawakami to be honest. Going by the weak smile he wore now, things couldn’t have improved much since then. She sighed, starting the machine she had loaded.

“So you really are leaving?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah.”

She sighed again. Akira smirked.

“So really,” he diverted the conversation, leaning against the back wall of the room, “what’s with the maid outfit? I thought you were done with that?”

“I!” Kawakami bristled, called out in a manner she had not been expecting when she’d made the snap decision to go do her washing in Yongen-Jaya as a means to visit the district once more. “It wouldn’t be proper if someone recognised me just wandering around one of my student’s districts, especially if it was doing something as odd as the washing away from my own home. I needed a disguise!”

“Uh-huh,” Akira lazily eyed his teacher, doubt written across his face. She puffed up further.

“And besides! Can’t I wear this once in a while! I look good in it! I should be allowed to look good!”

The black cat happily resting on the active washing machine yowled something and Akira chuckled. Kawakami’s eyes narrowed. That was something to address. Akira intercepted any question she might have.

“That was the only clean clothing you had left, wasn’t it?”

“…” It was and, by the expression on his face, Akira could tell by her own. Defeated, she deflated. “I skipped laundry last week and misjudged how much I had left.” The teenage boy laughed, chattering from the cat mixing into the sound. It really felt like the both of them were laughing at her. Kawakami’s cheeks reddened further. So embarrassing.

She really hadn’t meant for things to end up this way.

“You know,” turning the tables, Kawakami fixed Akira with a steady glare, “You weren’t subtle last year at all about the cat. All of us knew you had it in your desk.”

This callout landed, Akira’s smile dropping off his face. He glanced at the cat with concern and Kawakami swore that it looked back at him with an equal, if feline, expression. That really was something she needed to ask about.

Akira pushed himself off the wall to stand up straight, though looked dishevelled all the same. Had
he really thought he’d done that good a job?

“…really?”

“Yes really!” Kawakami put her hands on her hips, exhaling in the same motion. Honestly! “It’s a cat, Akira-kun! And a noisy one at that! Also always sticking its head out of your bag when you walked around? How did you not think people would notice?”

She’d somehow done it. After so long of Akira’s teasing, relaxed nature, he finally looked appropriately shamed. Incredible.

“…no-one mentioned it.” His quiet complaint was scoffed at immediately. Unbelievable.

“You got a free pass because it was assumed looking after the cat helped you be less of a delinquent.” The cat made a rapid series of meows that Kawakami swore translated directly to ‘she’s not wrong’. Her excessive imagination seemed to be confirmed by Akira giving the cat just the sort of glare that would reply to such a statement. She shook her head to try and ignore that. “Anyway, the only reason you got to keep it with you is because some of us, me especially, argued that it was good for you. So you’d better be thankful!”

He really had been surprised by this. The amount of things that hadn’t caught him out before, the way he’d taken it in stride when first catching her as a maid, she’d thought he was unflappable. He seemed almost genuinely distressed that his attempts to keep that cat hidden had been a total failure. There was something excessively comedic about it. But still…

“…thank you, Kawakami-sensei.” When he said it like that, with such genuine emotion, she really didn’t feel like she could tease any more. That was just unfair. Unfair!

“Well, you can thank your hard work too. It was thanks to your grades that you got as much freedom as you did last year. Some of the other teachers are still mad that some ‘delinquent from the country’,” she did her best to reproduce the manner of Mr. Ushimaru to show it wasn’t her own words, “outpaced every other student. You know you’re single-handedly responsible for some very long meetings debating the best way to improve our first-year curriculum?”

Akira shook his head, a smile on his face all the same. He seemed pleased with Kawakami’s words.

“All thanks to the power of spite,” he admitted freely, “the moment people started thinking I had to be some dumb thug I knew I had to crush them in the worst possible way: academically.”

“That’s horrifying,” his teacher responded without a missed beat. “And still doesn’t explain everything. You can’t have just become the best student in your year on spite alone.”

“I’ve done a lot of reading,” Akira shrugged, summarising years of not quite social isolation but social… withdrawnness in a simple statement. “I was always decent, it was just the extra push that helped me get to the top.”

If Kawakami picked up on any of that, she chose not to say it, but Akira had determined she seemed to have a good sense for understanding her students all the same. She might know far more than he’d admit. Oh well, as long as she didn’t bring it up.

“And what about next year?” She didn’t, instead focusing on extending the topic. “I hope you continue to do your best, otherwise your old homeroom teacher is going to think I was lying when I reported on your academic success.”

“Oh no,” Akira shook his head, this time wearing an intimidating smile, “I’m going to crush it. Top
of the school, without question. You can rely on that.”

There was a pause, the only sound in the air the rumbling of their respective washing machines, before Kawakami voiced the question she was concerned to ask. “How much of that motivation is spite, exactly?”

Looking slightly put-out, Akira glanced at his cat. Kawakami had no idea why. Then the boy looked back at her and shrugged. “Probably more than anyone would like?” Her sigh was long-lasting.

“Akira-kun, I can understand your… frustrations with your hometown. The motivation to succeed to prove others wrong about you is admirable, to a point. But you still need to be doing this for you, not for them. Otherwise you’ll never truly be happy.”

Discussions of happiness were getting harder and harder each year. More and more often students seemed to develop despair of the future, believing it rigged against them, and placing less and less value on their own lives. By not believing in themselves, they didn't have to be harmed by what they saw as inevitable failure inflicted by the world. It was a terrifying world-view, moreso because she found herself having difficulty arguing against it. All she could do was tell people to do their best, a rather hollow cheer indeed.

As someone who truly did care for her students, it hurt her deeply. She wished there was something she could do.

Akira shook his head.

“I’ll be happy,” he said it in the least confident voice imaginable, one eliciting a confused expression from the woman before him. “When I graduate I can come back to Tokyo. Meet up with everyone again. And as long as we’re together I’ll be happy. That’s all I need.”

There was something immediately in that, in the understanding that Akira’s happiness was defined not by his own goals or achievements but simply by the presence of those he valued. It was sweet, but also tinted with despair. Like chocolate with the slightest brush of poison.

“If you are coming back after graduation, I assume you have a plan?” The shake of Akira’s head did not surprise her, somehow completely expected. Somehow she knew. “Akira-kun… what do you want to do?”

“You’re not the first to ask that,” Akira gave the non-answer in response, the black cat shifting off of the rattling laundry machine he was using to settle on Kawakami’s instead. She met the gaze of the creature and was positive, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that it was evaluating her. She felt incredibly unnerved by that.

“I’ll think about it,” Akira continued on. “I still have time. Even if I don’t know by the end of high-school, I can just take the next year free to work around Tokyo before applying for college after. Plenty of people who don’t get in immediately succeed the next year after.”

That was true enough, Kawakami herself had been required to advise numerous students to accept that their odds of university acceptance was low, and that they would need to dedicate themselves to a second attempt in a year’s time. But for Akira Kurusu, who took the top marks across the board, that was just…

“That’s a waste.” She said it and meant it. Akira looked at her with a quiet expression, like he couldn’t argue with her at all. She didn’t accept it. “You’re too clever, too skilled, to just go to waste like that. You need to have a path. You need to have a goal. Because you can do it. What you want
to do you can, I know you can.” She was sure he could do anything he desired. Change the world even. He had already, after all.

But Akira just sighed and seemed to shrink further. Didn’t meet her eyes. And said something that rattled her to her core.

“What if I don’t want to do anything? What if I’m just tired?”

“Too tired to live?”

She’d meant it as a biting reproach – that people needed a goal to live and work towards. Something to believe in. A purpose they desired.

But in return Akira just gave her a look and it was like a hand of ice seized around her heart. She gasped his name. Akira looked away.

“Akira-kun…”

“I just…” he shook his head, “it’s not easy. I’m trying. But it’s not easy. And I’m looking for a tomorrow but all I really believe in is the others. Being with them is all I want right now. That’s all there is.”

She was silent now, staring, a slight feeling of horror within her. The thought of losing any of her students was like a knife hovering over her, ready to plunge her back into the miserable past. But Akira, not Akira. Not him.

The cat meowed loudly and Akira laughed. “Sorry, sorry,” he apologised to it as if rebuked, “it’s okay.” When he looked up to Kawakami’s concerned expression, he just shook his head.

“I’m getting better. I think. It’s easier to talk about. To admit. Someone told me the most important thing I had to do was accept what I’ve been through. It’s slow but… I think it’s happening. I just can’t think about my future yet. Just not yet.”

What terror was in her slackened. It didn’t disappear, not fully, but some part of her heart was able to accept it. It made sense, in a truly miserable way, that Akira was so unwell after what he had been through. But if he was healing, if he was doing his best to keep going… “Please do your best,” that was all she could ask of him. “You know I will support you, as your teacher.”

Akira smiled and it was a genuine smile, small, but honest. She chose to believe in it.

“I will,” he nodded, “I’ll be sure to let you know how I go taking the top spot at my school thanks to the best teacher in Shujin.”

Okay, now he was trying to make her blush. And that sneaky smile on his face, the one she’d seen so many times before, that was more natural too. Honestly, this kid! The cat chattered something and Akira looked at it as if he’d been mortally offended.

She really should ask whether it was some sort of magical talking cat. She really didn’t want to though. Some things just weren’t worth knowing.

It was when Akira’s washing had finished, as he was piling the clothing back into a basket to take home, that he paused and looked considerate. A thought had just occurred to him. Kawakami, still waiting on her laundry to complete, caught the look and waited for him to speak.

There was a solemnness to how he stood back up, looked at her with a tense expression. Something
she hadn’t seen before. Like what was on his mind was tormenting him.

“Akira-kun?”

“Hey,” he said it and his voice was cautious, as if navigating a minefield, “this probably isn’t anything, but it occurs to me I should ask all the same.” She looked at him in curiosity. What was on his mind?

“Back on my first day at Shujin,” Akira recalled an ancient memory, being chewed out for arriving late after unknowingly stumbling into Kamoshida’s Palace, “you said something. That I shouldn’t get involved with Ryuji.” Kawakami’s eyes widened, the memory only returning thanks to Akira’s own. Oh, she had said that. Oh. Akira paced out his words.

“Could you… please take that back?”

“Of course!” She almost yelled it, nodding immediately, shamed greatly. How could she have ever been so awful once upon a time? “I was completely in the wrong, I’m so sorry.” It really did hurt to be reminded on how she had treated someone accused of being a delinquent. She hadn’t changed at all from the time she’d failed Takase-kun. It had only been Akira who’d helped her change. Become a better person.

Become the person she wanted to be.

“I really am sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Akira seemed relieved, happy that this topic had resolved so cleanly. “It was just something I couldn’t forget. But I know you don’t believe that now. Whoever has you as a teacher next year is gonna be lucky.”

“Charmer,” Kawakami smirked at Akira, secretly exceptionally pleased with the compliment. She got the feeling he could tell just how happy it made her. A loud meow echoed in the small building.

“Okay, okay,” Akira reached out a hand to the chin of the cat, who batted it away, “I get it. We can go.” He turned back to Kawakami, nodding with a smile. “I’m heading home, I’ll see you on Monday, sensei.”

“Have a good evening, Akira-kun,” Kawakami smiled back. “Thank you for keeping me company. In future, when I visit Yongen-Jaya, I’ll do so as me, not wearing any disguise.”

Akira’s grin widened. “As long as you have other clothing to wear.”

In the wake of successfully calling his teacher out, Akira took off, a stinging response from her lost in the air. Left behind, all she could do was lean back against the shaking washing machine. Honestly, that kid…

It was unbelievable how much she was going to miss him.

Chapter End Notes

There's a feeling different to anywhere else in P5 when wandering around Yongen-Jaya. It's so small, so condensed, but everything you need is there. All the shops, all the facilities, it's all packed together. You can do everything, live your entire life, just on
foot. Part of the crowd.

But it's also so dense, so packed together, that those living their lives the same way would come to recognise you. There's a closeness of community in recognising the same people each day. It really struck with me. In much the same manner I've written for Akira.

I live in a wide-open area, I have to travel to do the shopping, I know next to nothing about my neighbours. That last part is as much on me as the nature of my location, but still, it's all too clear living in somewhere like Yongen would better allow you to become part of that small community living together. It's enviable in a way. And the feeling to it is unique. I wanted to capture that by having this conversation be not only in Yongen, but in one of its smallest locations. The laundromat is so tiny. But it's a place Akira and Kawakami have both been many times over the last year. It's a good place for a conversation that's just the two of them.

Everyone's p5 protag can be different, but I'm choosing to run with the Akira that can do everything. That's achieved every milestone, maxed every confidant, conquered every test. He's my Akira and I can make him incredible if I want. You can't stop me! Following on from that, we explore just what drove him to achieve so much. And raw spite, the desire to show up those judging him, it can bring you a long way. It certainly did for him.

Back home Akira's got it rough. He was never that outgoing, stuck to himself for the most part despite some light friendships, and so the whole "assault" thing really severed the vast majority of his bonds. Even with his sentence overturned, there's some sort of stigma that a lot of more judgmental people just won't let go of, no matter how nonsensical it is. He has a long way to go to show them up. But show them up he will.

Kawakami's a good teacher and a good person. Her Confidant was exceptional. So I'm really pleased to have written this rather intimate conversation between them, guest-starring Morgana. Lately I've been writing a lot more the vision of other people looking at Akira, rather than him looking at them, which had been the original intent. I think this way is better. Lets me get further inside their heads. It's good.

Okay, that's enough ranting in the notes. Next chapter is The Devil, so get ready for some wonderful Ohya time. I've got a concept in mind, so it shouldn't be too difficult to get the chapter out in due time. I don't want to do a chapter back to back two days in a row any time though, so you'll at least have to wait two. I'm sure you all can handle that.

As always, thanks to my readers and commentors, who inspire me to keep doing my best and making content for you to enjoy. If you did enjoy, let me know, and help create that positive feedback loop for more fic. It's the good stuff. That's it for now, see you next time! Bye-bye!
Devil in the Details

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

3/5, Sunday Evening

Ohya: Heeeey
Ohya: You gotta get out more!
Ohya: I'm at Crossroads, come by already!
Ohya: I'm sure Lala-chan misses you~
Ohya: Seriously, don't keep us waiting, okay?

Akira stared down at the quintet of messages, even as he stepped through the packed streets of Shinjuku's evening. The early days of spring were volatile – easily able to unleash searing heat or freezing rain, stoked further in each direction by heavy winds. In the moments not so wild as to drive people to seek refuge, the streets of Tokyo seemed to fill up even more, everyone taking the chance to get outside. Really, he wasn't that different at all.

Though perhaps a few times he'd braved elements he really shouldn't have, and been berated by those he'd travelled to see for his foolishness. Jeeze, why'd they all have to care about him so much? Honestly...

The door to Crossroads, bar nestled in the streets of Shinjuku's red-light district, a nearby Chihaya Mifune waved to as Akira passed her by, opened as Akira pushed his hand against it. Morgana had less chosen to stay behind and more been abducted tonight by Futaba, who was taking her chance to make some memories before he and Akira left Tokyo for the year. Despite the fact Morgana would often complain come bedtime about the trials he'd been through, he always did it with a smile he couldn't help but show.

Another trait people used to compare the two together.

“Hey! You made it!”

The loud greeting came from one of only two – now three – people within the bar, Ichiko Ohya, reporter for Maiasa News, and one of Akira's Confidants from the last year. She looked the same as ever, black shirt, blue jeans, bottle slung from her waist, orange sunglasses nestled amongst black hair. And drink in hand. That was a fixture too. She took a long sip.

“Evening Akira-chan.” Lala Escargot, proprietress and most responsible person in the building by far, used a far more controlled tone, the brief wave of her arm tracing the golden colour of her kimono's sleeves through the smoke left by her cigarette. Akira waved back. Ohya, sitting at the bar, narrowed her eyes.

“What's that reaction?” Ohya huffed, setting down her glass, “Be more excited! This is his first time coming back in months and that's how you greet him? Come on!”

“Ichik-”

Before Lala could even speak up Ohya barrelled ahead, rounding on Akira. “And you!” She pointed dramatically, “how come it takes me practically calling you up to get you to come visit? You telling me you don't miss us?” With a gasp, Ohya put a hand over her chest. “Don't tell me you found
another bar? With a cuter reporter to talk to? Who is it? I'll destroy her! Give me a name!”

“Ichiko-chan!” A harsher tone from Lala snapped Ohya from her death-stare, causing her to look sheepishly at the frowning woman behind the bar. “Akira-chan has had no less than three shifts here over the last few weeks. You've just been missing each other every time.”

It took a few seconds for Lala's words to settle in, Ohya looking from her back to Akira – who nodded affirmation – then to her drink – which she took a sip of – and then back to Akira one more time. She blinked.

“Oh.”

Akira settled into the seat next to her.

“I figured I'd have just run into you,” he gave the shrug, allowing Lala to be the one to menace over Ohya when she began to push her glass between the two. “So I didn't message ahead. I'm really surprised we never did meet up.” That Akira's surprise meant he always expected Ohya to be found at the bar either flew completely over her head or went completely expected. Probably the second. She didn't miss much.

“Yeah I guess so,” somewhat shamed, Ohya flipped her sunglasses off of her head and into her hands, turning them over and over as an idle movement. “I've been working a lot lately, so haven't been here as much. Whoopsie.”

“You also avoid the busy nights,” Lala passed an oolong tea to Akira, who thanked her for it before taking a sip. He'd tried to negotiate a coffee setup in Crossroads in order to make use of his expertise, but Lala had argued the last thing any of her patrons needed was something to energise them in the evenings. Akira couldn't argue that. “You really don't like being around loud crowds when you're not on the job.”

Ohya shrugged, drinking some more from her glass. She couldn't have been at it for long before Akira had arrived, there was a distinct lack of a slur to her voice, though given the rate she'd already gone through her current drink, Akira couldn't imagine that would last long. The reporter leaned back and looked to the ceiling.

“Hmm,” she flipped open the sunglasses, poking an end of its frame at her lips, “Guess I need to spend less nights on the job.”

“You most certainly do not.” “Yeah don't do that.”

Lala and Akira's responses, given in practically the same moment, immediately had Ohya laughing up a storm, their own laughter only held back by the brief solidarity of glancing at each other as Ohya's mirth continued. Eventually she calmed, but not before taking another sip of her drink and nearly choking on it while chuckling. Lala sighed and topped it off again.

“Ichiko-chan you've been making constant and incredible strides in your work lately,” Lala was putting her foot down, “Don't you dare go back on that now.”

“Anyway,” Akira nodded, adding his thoughts in, “I'm only here for two more weeks, so don't go breaking any good habits just to see me.”

The casualness with which Akira dropped that news had Ohya stare, before a bright red flush crossed her face. She pointed accusingly at Akira as Lala began to laugh heartily. “Wait, what, wait why would that even think tha- Lala stop laughing at me!”
Akira gave a small smile and sip of his tea, incensing Ohya further. “I don't come here just to see you y'know!” Lala's laughter continued unabated.

“Ichiko-chan,” she forced out, far too amused by Akira's cutting comment, “you don't have a leg to stand on here, that boy got you good and you know it.”

Ohya's frown didn't let up, Akira's continuing casual smile jabbing at her every time she saw his face. Rude! Rude rude rude! She set her drink down, hooked her sunglasses into her shirt, and clapped her hands together once, the noise rebuking the two who had teased her. Ohya set her best glare upon Akira.

“What do you mean you're leaving in two weeks?”

“I'm heading back to my family home,” Akira shrugged, handling the topic with as little dwelling on it as possible. “Going to do my last year of schooling there before coming back to Tokyo after graduating.” Ohya's frown didn't slacken one bit.

“If you're just coming back do your last year here.”

“My family asked me to come back.”

Lala, her laughter now finished, eyed the conversation warily. “Ichiko,” she gave a warning tone, “don't hassle the poor boy.”

“No no no,” Ohya shook her head, “I don't get this. I've been to your hometown, Akira-kun. It sucked.” Akira laughed loudly at the completely accurate statement. He couldn't argue that one bit. Ohya continued her point. “There's nothing out there, the school's substandard, and the rumour-mill is pervasive. Even when I was investigating the woman who testified against you the majority of people had already convinced themselves that despite your immaculate record you had to have done it. Do you really think even after your conviction being overturned there won't be problems still? Come on!”

Lala's frown was set, ignored by Ohya's glare at Akira. He just smiled. It was honestly heart-warming that she was doing her best to convince him to stay. “And even if people accept I was always innocent, I'm already hearing more accurate rumours have made it back. It's not gonna be easy either way.”

“Exactly!” Ohya nodded, aware in an instant what 'more accurate rumours' meant. There were plenty of rumours going around Maiasa about the student who testified against Shido and his relation to the Phantom Thieves. She'd had to go out of her way to shut down some particularly interested paparazzo, the job made thankfully easier by her direct superior. That change of heart was a hell of a long-lasting thing.

Lala, keeping an eye on the conversation, said nothing. Akira got the feeling she might have her own suspicions, but she'd never explicitly said anything to him about it. He honestly preferred it that way. It was time to stop being the Phantom Thief. The less people kept talking about it to him, the better.

“Still,” he shook his head, disappointing Ohya immensely, “I said I'd go back to my parents. Sorry, you'll have to get used to drinking without me again. For the next year, at least.”

There was something truly dangerous in the way Akira used his flattering flirt-teasing to direct people away from him, Ohya immediately snapping back that she'd do just fine without him before realising that had been his plan all along. She narrowed her eyes, studying the boy sitting before her. Seventeen years old and already this clever. Already having done so much.
Their relationship really was something to value. Sticking close to him would bring her all the best news for decades to come. She was sure of that.

“Just make sure to come back when you can,” Lala interjected, giving Ohya the freedom to study her conclusion on Akira's threatening cleverness, “Most of my regulars have gotten used to seeing you around now. They're going to miss this bar's second-loveliest worker.” Akira just smiled at that one, skipping the thought of one of his traditional smartass comments. He'd never do that for her, Ohya immediately thought. By the amused look Lala gave Ohya, she could tell that was exactly the thought she'd just had.

“Anyway!” Ohya drained her drink, setting it down for Lala to fill as she turned to face Akira properly, “Let's talk about why I called you out here! I didn't get to talk to you when I visited the cafe you work at, I was real busy at the time, but now we're free so the time has come! Interview!”

She flipped open a notebook, pen at the ready, “Let's go!”

“Uhhh?” Akira glanced at Lala, who shrugged, before looking back to Ohya. “Interview?”

“Yes!” Ohya nodded enthusiastically, “You're a valuable source! Invaluable even! I've already got the title and everything! 'Inside the Juvenile Justice System: an Expose by the Falsely Imprisoned'. Pretty good, huh?”

Akira stared blankly. Ohya continued without pause.

“Usually all the stories are about how shitty adult prisons can be, but rarely are there good looks into the Juvenile Justice System. You though, you got chewn up by it without any fair process at all. And you've got great recollection, you showed that in the information you gave me last year. I figure you could outline everything, all the shitty happenings, and then I could write that up. Really blow the lid off how people treat kids when they think they won't be punished for it. It'd be a real hit!”

Akira was silent, looking forward, gaze unfocused. Recollection. The full cruelty of the Juvenile Justice System. His mind flickered between memories and trying to suppress the memories, creating white noise that filled up his brain and didn't let any proper thoughts take shape. He sat there quietly as Lala, finishing cleaning a glass, caught the look on his face.

“Akira-chan?”

“Huh?” The query broke Ohya from her train of thought as well and she glanced at Akira, before waving a hand before his eyes. “Hello? You there?”

There was a memory of a face leering at him he couldn't shut out. His heartbeat began to race as his mouth opened, short and sharp breaths necessary to keep going. He was sweating.

“Ichiko!” Lala's roar shook the building, the woman immediately thundering behind the bar to wet a cloth as fast as possible, to lean over the counter and push it against Akira's forehead. Ohya's eyes were wide, a hand over her mouth, staring at the sight in horror.

“Akira, hey!” She reached a hand out to him only to have Lala swat it away, continuing to hold the wet cloth against the young man across from them. It took a second for the sensation to start cutting through Akira's spiralling thoughts, but once he did he blinked and then immediately shot to his feet.

Shit. Shit!

“Sorry, I-”

“Sit down!” Lala had never, in all the time Akira had known her, shown that sort of anger before. Akira sat. Lala placed a glass of chill water before him. He drunk deeply and focused on it and it
alone.

“Ichiko-chan...” Lala was rounding on Ohya, who immediately bowed her head to Akira, mind burning. She'd never expected that. Not in a million years had she thought such a reaction would come from Akira Kurusu. Akira, leader of the Phantom Thieves. Akira, who faked his own death to outplay a political monster and murderer. Akira, who took in stride everything thrown at him. Akira, who'd never batted an eyelid for anything. To see this she... she...

“Fuck!” Shoving her fist into the side of the bar hurt, but it was necessary to exert just a little bit of what she was feeling. Akira stared at her, but didn't jump at the action. If he had Ohya was pretty sure Lala would have murdered her then and there. She got the feeling she wouldn't have even blamed her for it.

“I-" “Don't talk.”

Lala's orders were unquestionable, Akira shutting up immediately. She topped off the glass he was drinking from. He drained it again.

“Take your time,” Lala's voice was softer now, whatever fury might be within her kept at bay, “just relax. No need for anything else. Just drink and relax.” She kept the glass full. Akira drank.

“I'm sorry.” Ohya was still looking down at the floor, head bowed to Akira, clenched fists resting upon her knees. Any haze her drinking had been forming earlier had been wiped out in a second, ignited like the most volatile gas by her fury and gone in the wake of the explosion that had filled her with fire. She'd keep it in check. For now.

Later though. Later there would be words.

“I'm sorry.”

Akira shook his head before he'd had time to think Ohya wouldn't see it. He took another sip of the cold water that helped him stay in the moment before speaking again. “You didn't know.”

“I should have,” her fists were shaking, even while she was pushing them as hard against her knees as she could. She couldn't believe this. This bullshit. This unacceptable fuckery. How dare. How dare? “I should have been cautious. Tested the waters. A good reporter eases into risky territory, doesn't plunge head first without a single damn thought. I... I'm so sorry Akira.”

He hated this. People apologising to him. People harmed by him. Even if it was because of the harm inflicted upon him, now it was propagating out to others. He'd tried to stop that. To seal it away. But it had hurt and hurt and when Chihaya had told Akira he needed to accept what he'd been through he started trying to process it. To spend a little time, now and again, rightfully getting angry. To express emotion. To start burning it out.

But having the floodgates ripped open by a probing question was still too much. It was still too raw. Ohya wasn't wrong to apologise. But Akira hated to hear it all the same. He hated the way he was right now, even knowing it was not his fault.

Maybe knowing that was just evidence of how far he'd come already.

He struggled, drank, then handed the cloth back to Lala. It was already far too warm. She frowned and turned to wet it again. Akira spoke quiet forgiveness.

“It's okay.”
When Ohya did look up, Akira was handling a freshly wetted cloth, focusing on the glass of water Lala was keeping topped up for him. Lala gave Ohya a look and it was the kind of look that said if she ever did something like that again Lala would personally see to it her body was never found. Again, couldn’t really blame her for that.

Glancing at her glass, Ohya saw it was still empty. That was okay. So instead she turned her attention back to Akira, who was doing his best to keep it together. She owed him now. That was wrong, she owed him everything. Her life, her future, her justice, he’d saved every part of her. She was going to prove Kayo's innocence and it was thanks to Akira Kurusu alone. She’d do anything for him.

And she knew she was hardly the only person to think that way.

“A few years back,” Akira looked up at that, watching Ohya with interest. Lala kept a stern gaze, but softened it almost immediately when Ohya continued. “Kayo and I were on the trail of some corrupt dealings up north around Sōma. They were building a new port, and the rumours were that some fishy deals between the local politicians and some related builders was going on. The two of us snuck in and pretended to just be holidaying, wandering around to see the sights. Spent two weeks not even going near the coast to start getting known.”

Akira was already completely focused on watching Ohya, cloth and drink ignored. He seemed enraptured by the story she was weaving, and she couldn’t help but take some pleasure in that. Having heard this one before, Lala just kept an eye on Akira to make sure he was doing okay while cleaning around the bar.

“So the first time we went down to the existing docks, we staged an argument. It was to make some noise and see who'd get flushed out, but also to throw out some viewpoints to find out if anyone would bite. Kayo was the one advocating for bigger buildings, that the politicians should be doing more to bring in more money to the area, while I was saying they were forcing out local small businesses to appeal to mega-companies who wouldn’t help the area. We’d capped the argument with a talk about funding from the ministry of economy, where we’d then implied the two of us were scouting for that. That got some real attention.”

Rapt, Akira nodded, eyes almost shining. Ohya had never seen him this interested in anything before. With a smile she continued. “So later that day when she was drinking alone at a bar, Kayo got approached by some guys. Said they appreciated her words earlier, wanted to get her thoughts on how the new port was going. Kayo got in their good graces over the next couple of days, especially since I was starting to make noises about supporting the existing docks and helping the businesses managing it upgrade it themselves. There started to be pressure on who would get approval first for how the funding would go, me or Kayo. It forced their hand.”

Lala, wiping down a table, smiled to herself. This was one of Ohya’s favourite stories. She and Kayo had been the best of partners, a pair of brilliant troublemakers for the criminal element in politics. She’d never say it to Ichiko's ego, but the woman really was incredible.

“Anyway,” Ohya was gesticulating, shifting her sunglasses from the top of her shirt to her hair, positioning them to the side, “You remember what I said about Kayo's hairclip? The camera?” Akira nodded, remembering well the tool. It really reminded him of the sort of thieves' tools that appeared in fiction. He’d never needed such for his antics. Not then, at least. “Well Kayo managed to negotiate a meeting with the higher-ups managing the new port's construction and would you believe it, some of the local politicians showed up. Made a real case about how the support from Kayo would allow them to regain a lot of money quickly, and repay any 'loans' made out to them. Well Kayo knew the language then and talk went pretty quick to under the table dealings designed to benefit those
involved. Smalltime politicians, you’d be shocked how quickly they'd incriminate themselves once given the opportunity. Had it all in half an hour.”

Akira leaned back, smiling and nodding. Yeah, yeah?

“Turns out we'd nailed our call. The local political forces were funnelling money through companies they were in bed with and into private coffers. Costs were ‘above expectation’, meaning they’d needed more. As soon as Kayo implied that ministry funding could be negotiated spectacularly, they’d been quick to tell her a personal ‘repayment’ could be made for her assistance. She got it all. Two days later, back to Tokyo, five days later, front page. Slammed it. Our biggest win to date. It was the best.”

Ohya smiled widely, stretching her hands upwards, interlocking fingers as she did so. Akira relaxed into the bar-seat, thoroughly impressed. That was a hell of a story.

It made him think.

“We got to have a real nice dinner after that,” Ohya's reminiscence began to turn personal. “The two of us took that night off and just went out to have a good time. It... ah shit,” shocked, she wiped at her own eyes, caught off guard by the rush brought back by the memories. “I miss it.”

“Oh, Akira nodded, understanding completely, “me too.” If Lala, absentely cleaning around the bar, had any thoughts about that statement, she said nothing. She'd turned off the lights indicating the bar was open after the business earlier. No interruptions. Ohya looked at Akira with interest.

“I guess we really were similar, huh?”

“Right down to the celebration dinners.”

“Ha!” Ohya's smile was wide at that, “Well that just takes the cake! Right down to the dinners.”

Akira smiled, gently at first, but a distant look was on his face. He was considering. Then he focused on Ohya directly.

“It really is similar,” he spoke quietly, just for the two of them. “Going after people who think they can't be caught. Bringing them to justice despite whatever power and money they're using to protect themselves. The feeling of that moment, it was the best, nothing ever like it.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” Ohya nodded, sparing a quick glance to Lala who was avoiding the pair as they spoke. “I'm going to have it again. When I get justice for Kayo, she and I are going to go and get a meal together, just like old times. I've already promised her that.”

Akira's brow furrowed slightly. He was thinking. Ohya gave him a moment to hear his thoughts. Thoughts she wasn't ready for.

“Maybe that's what I should be doing then,” one of his hands curled and supported his chin, a gesture of thought similar to Sojiro's own. “Maybe I should be doing what you do. Hunting the corrupt as a reporter. Taking them down by exposing their crimes to the public. It's the best match. I could chase them. Hound them. Reveal them and watch them fall. It's doable that way.”

Something was off. The thought of Akira wanting to be a reporter should be filling her with joy, but instead a sensation of caution was blossoming within Ohya. It took until she really studied his expression, and the smile forming at his face, for her to get it. Oh that wasn't good.

“Hey-”
“I've been thinking about it a lot,” Akira ignored Ohya's attempt to speak, caught up in his own thoughts now. “How there's still so many people who think they can do whatever they want, that they're above justice just cause they've got a little bit of power. That they can do whatever they want and never be punished. Those jackasses. I can't stand them.”

She didn't exactly disagree but...

“So what if I put my money where my mouth is? What if I went after them? Captured their crimes, paraded their sins before the people? It's doable. It really is. I could keep doing it. I could keep taking them down.” He wasn't even looking at her, lost in his own vision of victory. She needed to get through to him.

“Akir-”

“The power of the press, right? We can bring the truth to the people? No matter how high up someone is, the truth is still the truth. All we have to do is get it. I could do that. I want to do that.” When he looked at her the glint in his eyes was almost terrifying. She knew now why he was leader of the Phantom Thieves. A justice as merciless as the night. “I want to crush them.”

“Hey!”

Finally, finally, her voice got through to him. Akira leaned back in surprise, shocked by the rebuke in Ohya's tone. She sighed, shaking her head. This kid... was still a kid, she supposed. That was all it was.

“That's just...” it was hard to tell this to a kid with ideals in their eyes, but he needed to know. She had to tell him this now before he really put himself in danger. “That's not how the world works, Akira-kun. You can't bite at the powerful and expect nothing in return. Kayo and I took down plenty of folks but they were still small in the end. Look what happened when we bit at Shido. Kayo's name disgraced, her mind destroyed, my career crushed and thrown aside. Reporters aren’t all powerful. Searching for the truth makes you a target. And all you need is one big win for the next time you get too close to someone with a little bit of power to be the last time. It's... respectable that you want to reveal the truth, but you can't fight everyone. It's not like what you did. We're not invulnerable and untraceable. In fact it's really easy to become a target. And... you'd get yourself in trouble too fast. You have a habit of that, you know.”

Akira stared. That sort of rebuke, he hadn't expected it all, especially after the joy of finally finding something he truly wanted to do. That wasn't... it wasn't...

“That's not fair,” it shocked Ohya to hear an almost whine in the voice of Akira Kurusu, unflappable leader of the Phantom Thieves. Really? “I finally figure out what I want to be and you tell me I can't? That's...”

“Jeeze!” Ohya stretched a hand out, pushing Akira in the shoulder, shocking him from his thoughts. “I guess you still are a kid after all, huh Akira-kun?” Akira's stare was now mingled with offence. Ohya laughed at him. “We all grow up wanting to fight the bad guys,” she had too. That's why she became what she was today. “But you can't fight everyone no matter how much you want to. You need to know your limits. Otherwise you'll just get crushed without ever being able to do a thing.”

As far as life lessons went, this was a pretty brutal one for Akira. He seemed downcast already.

“Here's the most important lesson I ever learned:” Ohya straightened up in her seat, imparting the wisdom of her life onto the teen before her. “You do stupid things alone because you forget to care for yourself. You need someone to rely on, to remind you to be smart, otherwise it'll all come
crashing down around you. I got as far as I did back then because Kayo was with me. I came back this last year because of your help. So don't go thinking of yourself by yourself, okay? That's my advice. Think about it.”

Lala, who had made her way back behind the bar sometime during that conversation, slid a fresh drink to Ohya. She took it with a smile at the proprietress.

“Whaddya think, I sounded pretty wise there, right Lala-chan?” Lala skipped dignifying her with an answer.

Akira, missing the exchange, had a thought on his mind.

Partners, huh.

“It's getting late.” The wise input of Lala shook Akira from his thoughts, checking the clock. Time did have a way of slipping in Crossroads, after all. “Akira-chan, it might be time to head home.”

“Yeah,” Akira nodded, moving to cover the cost of the drinks he'd been given before Ohya waved him off and paid it herself, “Thanks. I'll try to stop by again before I leave.”

“Make sure you do!” Ohya had already finished the drink she'd been given, the empty glass being given an eye-roll by Lala before she topped it up, “I won't accept any of this 'missed connection' bs! You tell me when you're coming by okay?”

“Right,” Akira nodded, standing up, feeling his body stretch out after the time he'd spent seated, “I'll be back. Before and after.” Ohya smiled at him. Lala smiled at him. Akira smiled back.

And when he left, closing the door behind him and seeing the two wave, he made sure to promise that to himself. Everyone he was leaving behind here, he'd be back for all of them.

He was sure of that.

And inside Crossroads, seated at the bar, Ichiko Ohya took a long drink from the glass Lala Escargot had served her. There was a moment of silence, each considering.

Then Lala asked the most pointed question on their minds.

“So you're getting those pieces of shit that managed the Juvenile Hall, right?”

“Oh yeah,” Ohya nodded with fire in her eyes, “I'm gonna fuck those bastards up.”

Chapter End Notes

Some of my favourite P5 fics have written most excellent Ohyas, drunk, rambunctious, still sharp as a nail. I, uh, didn't really get into that the way I initially hoped, understandable for the subject matter but it still bugs me. Humour's one of my weakest points in writing so it's something I definitely need to focus on improving, but it didn't come up this time around. Ah well, ah well. There'll be much more in future. I went about categorising the full list of fic concepts I have right now and... it's a lot. I'm gonna be here for a while I think. I hope you're all willing to stick it out with me though. We'll be going places. That one's for sure.
Yesterday I wrote the outline for this chapter, a 600 word summary of the events as I imagined them. The final product, a 5k word chapter, was written in a two and a half hour block today, which I'm pretty pleased with. It doesn't 1:1 match the brief of course, but that sort of thing is to be expected. It's an interesting difference, how the original chapters were more ouija board style where with a single idea I just wrote and saw what words appeared, whereas in later chapters with a narrative structure in the fic now, I write full outlines to follow. Both styles have value and I think the transition from the first, which helped me organically find my Akira, to the second, which allows me to do more complex chapters, is good. My only regret now is how short the Igor and Morgana chapters were. Ah well, ah well.

Here's a fun fact: in an official Persona 5 poll run earlier this year, Lala-chan came in first for most popular non-Confidant character. Rightfully so imo. Lala rules. Support her. On the topic of things to support, Ohya and Kayo were definitely dating. Listen, I don't make the rules here (actually I do), that's just how it is (because I say so). If we get to look in on that at all in future works, well, we'll see.

Poor Akira's still recovering from his experiences, and while recovery is happening it's not an instantaneous thing. Ohya, dear Ohya, in her enthusiasm poked an open wound. She feels extremely bad about it. Please don't blame her for it.

As always, I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Thank you for reading, double thank you if you choose to leave a comment, and please look forward to the next chapter, The Tower, and the fun times ahead. It's gonna be good. See you then.
3/6, Monday After School

There's a buzz to the streets of Akihabara unlike any other, a sensation that tells you, in quite clear terms, just what kind of place you're in. It's intoxicating.

When Akira Kurusu was sent to Tokyo, banished from his hometown by the courts, that was the first time he'd ever been to the capital of Japan. Learning the lay of the land had been a slow process – first with him sticking to only Shibuya and Yongen-Jaya, and then slowly expanding his understanding of the city with the help of his friends. Now, after a year, that understanding had grown considerably, and with it came a sense for the city and its districts.

A sense for the way each differed.

So in Ueno you could see the quiet dignity spread throughout it. In Shibuya the constant rush of people under neon signage created a haze of heat. In Shinjuku there was a passionate tension, filled with intoxicating and spiralling thoughts.

And Akihabara was one with the click and the whir – electric doors, electric signs, electric screens. The buzz of voices and the buzz of machines intermingling. People moving from place to place, carried on currents of commerce, those who knew why they were here calm navigators, those simply here to see this world dragged along by the waves.

The first time Akira had come to Akihabara it had been at Futaba's insistence, her first visit since the theft of her heart. He'd been guard and watchdog, assisting her in facing the world. It wasn't quite the most successful of ventures, but it had worked out in the end all the same. Akira was thankful for that.

Beyond that first visit, Akira had returned to Akihabara numerous times himself. He'd explored the shops, kept an eye open for anything of interest, and expanded his horizons. And, in time, forged a new bond.

Shinya Oda was the youngest of Akira’s Confidants by far, his youthful appearance only matched by Lavenza, who was not only wise beyond her years, but quite possibly older than Akira himself. The attendants of the Velvet Room were more than mysterious enough for that to be true.

In the end, what that amounted to was that there was no-one else Akira treated the way he did the young Shinya. In truth all of his Confidants he treated and cared for differently, such was simply natural, and the closest comparison could be drawn to Futaba who Akira also looked out for as an elder sibling. But Shinya was something different. Someone Akira felt a great deal of responsibility towards.

Responsibility that should never be forgotten.

He’d first met the youth when searching for a means to outplay a hacker, whose Shadow in Mementos believed itself untouchable and thus was. Yet the methods of Shinya Oda, known as the King, were superior still, and once taught Akira had crushed that impertinent cheat. Oh the others had praised him for his clever moves at the time. He’d had to remind them, again and again, these were the moves of someone else simply taught to him. Someone incredible in their own right. But
aside from some having heard of the one known as the King, no-one else had ever met Shinya, the child isolated from the majority of Akira’s Confidants. He didn’t even know how the youth had become aware of his imprisonment, although the welcoming messages that had arrived to his phone after his release showed the boy had. None of the others had explained to Akira just what they did. Seemed happy enough with their success not to have to brag.

They really did stifle his curiosity on the matter.

The point of it all was that, despite Akira having first sought out Shinya for his aid, the situation had soon reversed. The methods Shinya had taught Akira, filtered through the game of Gun About, had proved incredibly beneficial for the Phantom Thieves, true. But Akira was not so foolish as to ignore what he had done in return. Or the responsibility he had for his actions.

He’d become a confidant for Shinya himself. The boy had confessed his fears, stresses, and frustrations to Akira. Taken Akira’s advice to heart, and allowed himself to be changed by it. Youth easily imprinted on others, attempted to mould themselves to be like them. Akira had without question seen Shinya adjusting himself to copy this cool teen who knew the Phantom Thieves and was always willing to play a game. He was responsible for that.

And despite it being Shinya’s request, a plea to the Phantom Thieves to change the heart of his mother, Akira had still been the one to say they would do it. He’d made the decision based on the wish of a child. He believed it, he was convinced Shinya was right, but a child’s wishes can so easily be flavoured by beliefs that do not reflect reality. How easy would it be for a youth to believe something that was not at all the case? Something affected by context or reality they couldn’t see? Too easy.

Akira had believed it to be right, but there was a risk still. He was changing Shinya’s mother’s heart. And he had to take responsibility for that too. Both Shinya and his mother, he’d changed them both. Passively, at first, and then actively. And he was responsible for that, whether it was good or bad, right or wrong.

Not that he’d ever had that conversation with another, admitted to doubts about his own morals, no those were merely thoughts he’d dwelt on in quiet times. But still. Responsibility.

Responsibility he couldn’t see out for soon he’d be gone. A year was so long for a child. So much could happen. So much could change. And so much of that could be because of his own actions. Every last one of his Confidants had their futures changed by Akira, Shinya wasn’t unique in that retrospect. Yet somehow it was Shinya he felt like he owed the most to for changing his future.

If anything ever went wrong, it would likely trace back to Akira’s own interferences. He couldn’t allow that. Not one bit.

The doors to the Akihabara branch of the Gigolo Arcade slid open and immediately the voice of Shinya Oda reached Akira’s ears. It was not directed at him.

“No you have to aim! What are you doing? I left that one open for you! Are you even trying right now? If you just want me to do this myself then give me your controller as well, come on! Stop hesitating and start shooting already!”

Whoof, that was rough. In a lot of ways Shinya had relaxed since he’d met Akira, but when it came to playing with others he still had a tongue sharp enough to cut anyone down to size. Akira peeked around the crowd, looking for the unfortunate victim of the King’s wrath, and found himself caught somewhere between complete surprise and absolute lack of surprise at the sight of the blue-tinted hair of the one hanging his head. Oh poor Mishima. He’d really bitten off more than he could chew this
time. Akira muscled his way to the front.

“Having fun?”

“Kurusu-san!”

“Kurusu?”

Shinya and Mishima both knew the other knew Akira, the trio had met at Dome Town last year after all. Still, the way Shinya had dismissed Mishima then, it was almost surprising that he clearly had remembered enough to be unsurprised by his greeting of Akira. Akira grinned and extended a hand to each, Mishima repeating the gesture of tapping their wrists together they’d settled on. Shinya reaching up to put his fist to Akira’s own. Each seemed thrilled enough by the greeting to forget the moments before Akira’s arrival.

For a second, at least.

“Kurusu-san, you’ll play with me, right?” Shinya immediately gestured for Akira to step up, Mishima backing off and nodding to Akira in the same moment. He’d needled Shinya for a while to get a game, but been completely unprepared for the amount he was going to be trashed while playing it. Best just to be an observer after all. He really should have listened to the regulars’ warnings.

This wasn’t the first time Akira had met up with Shinya – he’d managed to spend some time with each of his available Confidants, bar one in particular, since being released. Still, the insistence and enthusiasm Shinya showed when he set up the next game for Akira to play with him spoke of the youth’s yet unfulfilled desire to spend time with Akira. He was one of the last Akira had to tell about his upcoming departure from Tokyo, and the one Akira had been most concerned about.

He was fairly sure Shinya wouldn’t take it well.

“Alright!” Shinya nodded to Akira, who grabbed one of the Gun About controllers and readied up, “Let’s play!”

The first time back at it, Akira had taken some time to warm up, a few months of separation enough to build a little rust. But he’d gotten back into the swing of things, and done well enough keeping up with the King. Today it was basically instantaneous, Akira going from zero to one-hundred in no time flat. Shinya was better, Shinya would always be better, but Akira played a good game and kept pace well enough. More than well enough for appreciative mutters to constantly circulate around the crowd watching the two go.

Word was, Akira’s keen ears picked up, while Shinya was willing to play with others, few could keep up and he’d only ever pace himself and offer kind advice to other children. Anyone old enough got the traditional King. He couldn’t help but smirk hearing that, even as he continued to shoot.

It was kind of relieving to know others went through the same trial by fire he had with the young Oda.

“Kurusu, that was incredible!”

Mishima had never actually seen Akira play before, only borne witness to the unstoppable force that was Lavenza. He’d known Akira was friends with Shinya, but not that Akira’s own skills had been properly honed by the youth. So yeah, this was his first time seeing just what his friend, the leader of the Phantom Thieves, could do. And it was eye-opening.

Yet still somewhat a little unsurprising. The thought of ‘Akira is extremely good at Gun About’ fit
naturally into his perception of Akira. He couldn’t help but nod. Yeah, that made sense, actually. Akira gave a light smile in response.

“I had a good teacher.”

“Yeah you did!” Shinya didn’t miss the conversation, or his chance to intercept and drag Akira’s attention back to him, “come on let’s play another round!” All Akira could give to Mishima was an apologetic shrug before Shinya made sure to monopolise his attention. He wasn’t about to give up this time with Kurusu-san for anyone.

It took a few more rounds of Gun About for Shinya to decide he needed a break, ceding the game installation to other players. Mishima tried to get a moment to ask Akira if he wanted to play, but was unable to as Shinya insisted on dragging Akira over to the benches as well. Poor Mishima really did look a bit downcast at that one. Akira mouthed ‘sorry’ but couldn’t do much more than that. The King demanded audience.

“So Kurusu-san!” Shinya demanded answers the moment the two were seated, ignoring the hovering Mishima trying his best to join in the conversation. “What was with that hacking program? Did you find out who took over your account last Wednesday?” Mishima blinked.

“Wednesday? Wasn’t that-“

“Yeah I did,” Akira interrupted Mishima who Shinya, thankfully, dutifully ignored. “Got everything sorted out. Thanks for letting me know.” Lying to Shinya wasn’t the most enjoyable thing, but it was a white lie in this case, the existence and raw power of Lavenza far too much for the young boy to process. Also he’d never believe Akira to begin with, even with Mishima’s testimony. This was just easier on everyone.

“Glad to hear it!” Shinya seemed pleased enough. “Still, that program really was incredible. Usually stuff that auto-detects and fires gets picked up immediately, whoever made it had to be real clever. Shame they wasted all that effort on just a videogame, right?” A choking noise this time from Mishima, hearing one of Gun About’s top players describe it as ‘just a videogame’, sounded out. Akira shrugged to Mishima. Shinya ignored him.

“So hey-“

“Oh right!” Shinya’s outburst cut off Akira’s attempt to broker the subject of his oncoming departure from Tokyo, the youth shooting up to his feet, “The game!” When Akira looked around to determine what was on Shinya’s mind, the black-haired kid shook his head. “No no, the soccer game! Some friends of mine invited me to come play with them later, it’s almost time! Kurusu-san, do you want to come with and watch me play?”

Huh, that was a new one. Akira had spent enough time with Shinya the last year to know the young boy had no real sports endeavours going on, so hearing about a soccer game, and to be honest some friends, was all new to him. It seemed the past few months while Akira had been away had done Shinya well. He smiled thinking of that. And nodded.

“Sounds good, let’s go.”

Shinya immediately moved to the exit, Akira heading after. Mishima hovered just nearby.

“Uh, Kurusu?”

“Sorry Mishima,” Akira shook his head, “Next time?”
“Right,” Mishima nodded, a little put-out at Shinya’s domination of Akira’s attention, “I’ll catch you round.”

Izumi Park was close enough by that the pair travelled by foot, Shinya breaking away to greet another crowd of elementary schoolers as soon as he arrived. A number of adults were gathered around, seemingly overseeing the game. It was a small park, not for official play in any form, but the number of parents was abnormal for it. Akira wondered what exactly this soccer game was meant to be. After a minute, Shinya came back to greet him.

“All of my friends who play in soccer teams wanted to do a practise game before the season really kicks off, and they asked me to play with them to help build full teams to play together. I’m not really that good at sports, but it’s still fun to play with them! Are you okay watching?”

“Sure,” Akira couldn’t help but smile at the enthusiasm Shinya was showing for this, something both out of his regular comfort zone as well as the opportunity to play games with kids his age. It was a pretty good sign, as far as Akira was concerned, and he was pleased to see it. When Shinya raced off to join the team distribution, Akira positioned himself somewhere nearby to the watching adults while still off to the side. This was a good enough spot to watch.

It was kind of weird that he genuinely felt good about this, just seeing the young Shinya playing with his friends. Maybe it meant his upcoming departure wouldn’t leave the youth too isolated? Maybe that. A whistle blew and the game began.

Ryuji had been the one to stoke a slight interest in soccer in Akira, showing off some recorded matches during a visit to Akira’s house last summer. Sports weren’t exactly Akira’s thing, he’d always been something of a reclusive reader in the past, but partaking with friends was different. It wasn’t so much the game as those you were with. He was good for most anything with others by his side. So when Ryuji had insisted on watching the games, Akira had studied too. It hadn’t been that bad.

From that, Akira was now able to observe Shinya as he played and actually have a good grasp on how the game was going. Immediately obvious was that Shinya, despite not being anywhere as good at soccer as he was at most videogames, was still not the type for teamplay. It wasn’t some sort of arrogance, Akira could tell that immediately, so much as just not thinking of relying on others. He didn’t look to pass when threatened by the opposing team. The calls from his allies only went noticed half the time. Sometimes he had to pull up short to avoid running into another person, forgetting there were even others there. There was a lot the boy still had to learn.

Still, despite that he was having fun. Akira could tell that. So it was fine. Shinya still had more than enough time to learn to be truly mindful of others. A dangerous outlook had been caught early and a better path had been made available to the youth. He felt responsibility, yes, but Akira didn’t think he had been wrong in doing what he had for Shinya.

Not in the least.

“You’re… Kurusu-san, right?”

It was a woman who addressed him, who drew Akira’s attention and had him turn away from the game. When he did look, immediately his own eyes widened in surprise. She was slightly shorter than he was, brown hair parted to fall heavier on her left, her gaze giving none of the venom she had the last time he saw her. Still, unmistakably the woman before Akira was Hanae Oda, Shinya’s own mother. Akira blinked.

“Oda-san.”
“Ah, you remember.” She seemed almost disappointed that Akira did. “I suppose I left a strong enough impression the last time we met.” Akira shook his head.

“You remembered me as well.”

The laugh Hanae gave was light, but lacked mirth. She seemed tired. “My Shinya talks about you so often,” her eyes flicked to the side, spotting Shinya amongst the crowd of children on the field, “it's hard to forget. He admires you. I hope you know that.”

He was fully aware of the responsibility he had to the child. “I do.” Hanae sighed, and shook her head.

“When he first started talking about how you were wrongfully arrested, I didn't know what to believe. The last time I saw you I'd been convinced that you were corrupting my son, but since then I realised it was the other way around. That you were saving him from me. Even still, it wasn't until I heard that politician campaigning for your release that I realised how wrong I had been. I'm sorry.”

Politician? It took a moment, just a short one, for Akira to realise. Ah. “Yoshida-san,” he said it and nodded, to which Hanae glanced at him. She nodded a moment after.

“Yes.”

Yoshida was the only one of his Confidants Akira had yet to see since his release. They'd exchanged messages, and spoken on the phone, but Yoshida himself was simply so busy now as a reinstated member of the Diet that he'd yet to have the time free for even a visitation – something he'd apologised to Akira multiple times for. It was fine though, they'd finally arranged a time. Soon enough they'd have a proper conversation.

Akira was desperately hoping he'd find himself through it.

“My Shinya told me about this game,” Hanae was watching the children at play, eyes focused on her son as he ran about with the others, “yet even when I asked him when and where it would be he thought nothing of it. I suppose that says much about the type of parent I have been so far. It's... quite upsetting to think about.”

Struggling to make do as a single-parent, Hanae Oda had embraced a philosophy of always fighting for everything you could get. But that attitude had been forced onto her son as well, and driven him from any kind of healthy relationship. In the end it had been Akira who had served as a person for Shinya to model himself on, someone who reached out to others in need. He'd thought about that, how this youth had imprinted himself on Akira after getting to know him, and considered the responsibilities his own actions had brought about.

If anything came of his effects upon Shinya Oda, it would be Akira's own responsibility. He'd worried about that often. Yet seeing Shinya now, playing about with others, all seemed fine and well. It relieved him. Just a little.

“There's still time.” He wouldn't say something to try and excuse Hanae, and she would have been insulted if he had. Instead he simply spoke honestly. The woman beside him found herself surprised by the wisdom this teen showed. He really was everything Shinya had said. “You just need to genuinely be there for him. Believe in him and support him. That's the most important thing for a parent to do.”

“How wise.” She didn't say it with judgement or dismissal, instead simple acceptance. She didn't know the story of this boy who had become an inspiration and hero to her son. But at least now she
knew his nature. Just as she had been told.

Kind, and just. Like the hero of a story. That was what her son had said, hyperbole she'd thought at first.

She no longer thought that at all.

“Mom?”

There was a break in the match, each child taking a moment aside to speak to those who had come to see them. Shinya had looked for Akira, spotted where he was standing, and then been stunned to see another person he knew right next to him. “Why are you here?”

Akira kept his reaction to that query to himself, but it was a pronounced one all the same. That was not a kind question at all. Hanae seemed distressed by it.

“I wanted to see you,” she spoke quietly, as if reprimanded. “I thought it would be okay.”

“It is!” Shinya asserted, realising her concern. “But, what about your job?”

“I was able to take some time,” Hanae was having trouble meeting Shinya's eyes, unprepared for the directness of this conversation. “I just wanted to come and see you play.”

There was tension between them. Akira could see it, that each was awkward around the other, still unsure of the best way to address the last year of stress before Akira had interceded on Shinya's behalf. Shinya glanced up at him, as if hoping for Akira's own advice. He smiled gently.

“It's good that your mother came out to see you.”

For a brief moment each looked at him, Shinya in contemplation, Hanae in a shocked and silent stare. Then her son turned to her and smiled. “Thanks mom, this means a lot.” The young boy was gone again after saying that, dashing back to join the others, their game resuming for the second half. It gave Hanae the chance to wipe at her eyes, a soft smile on her face. Akira kept his attention on the game before them.

“Thank you.” The words were quiet, almost whispered, but Akira heard them and nodded all the same. The two stood side by side and watched as the game continued, as Shinya Oda played about with his friends as any youth would. Good. This was good.

Akira's concerns finally faded away.

When the game did conclude, Shinya returned to the pair once more, tired but pleased. He was quick to discuss the fun he'd had, the plays he'd done well with. It's not the same as being good at games on his own, and he still preferred to play with those, but this was good too in a different way. It was good to just play with his friends.

Hanae, who had also observed the game, was the one to remark on Shinya's teamwork, and the improvements needed there. He'd been displeased with that feedback at first, but Akira's own agreement forced the young boy to accept that he had spent a lot of the game not thinking of working with those around him. Something to improve on. He nodded and accepted it.

Akira found the time to broach the subject on his mind.

“Hey, Shinya.” If Hanae had thoughts on Akira's degree of familiarity, she kept quiet as her son nodded at Akira without any complaint. Akira made his announcement. “My family asked me to
come back to my hometown for the next school year. I'm leaving Tokyo on the twentieth.”

Shinya stared. Akira could see it, the forming emotions on his face. He was distraught, and struggling not to express it. A single word found its way out of his thoughts.

“Don't.”

“Shinya,” Hanae said his name and shook her head, disapproving of the response. He looked at her and it was an unpleasantly upset look. Still unsure of their reforming relationship, his mother found herself stricken by it. Shinya turned back to Akira.

“Please don't leave, Kurusu-san. Don't go back.”

Akira smiled, but shook his head all the same. “I have to.”

“You don't!” Shinya was upset at him now, staring up at the teen. “You got sent out to Tokyo because of them to begin with right? What are they doing calling you back now? That's not right!”

He'd had those thoughts too. He'd been that angry as well. But some degree of acceptance, after talking with the others, had started to form within him. Akira didn't let go of his smile.

“Yeah,” he agreed, “They hurt me, doing that. But they've realised they were wrong. They want to apologise. To be a proper family again. So I'm going to go back and try. That's part of being a family, apologising for one's mistakes. I'm going to give them that chance. It's important that I do.”

A soft gasp came from Hanae, standing to Akira's side. His words, they resonated, aligned perfectly with her own self. She'd made mistakes she needed to apologise for. She wanted to restore the familial bond with her son. Akira Kurusu's parents, she empathised with them completely.

And by the look Akira gave her, he knew that too. Had said those words knowing how she would hear them. Now her son's hero wasn't just some kind and clever teen. He was someone incredible. She just stared at him with wide eyes. So this was Akira Kurusu.

Now she understood.

Shinya was looking down at the ground.

He understood too, Hanae could see, but it was not so easy for him to accept it. Akira had become role model and first friend, helping Shinya leave behind the cruelty of hyper-competitiveness she'd instilled in him. Losing such a person, especially for a child... She knelt down and placed her hands on Shinya's shoulders. Surprised, he looked up at her.

“Shinya,” she said it gently, enough so that he didn't look away, “will you wish Kurusu-san well while he's away?”

It took a moment for Shinya to nod, to accept the words and look up at Akira. The disappointment on his face was still clear. But he focused with dry eyes and nodded to Akira. Akira nodded back.

“You'd better come back!”

“I will.”

When the Odas did depart, it was Hanae who spoke to Akira last. Took a moment while her son talked with friends to approach the teen.

“You,” she seemed to be considering the words, searching for the best way to say what was on her
mind. “I think you saved me. I think you saved Shinya and he saved me, helped me realise just what
a terrible person I'd become. You're so young but... thank you. Thank you, Kurusu-san. Thank you
so much.”

Akira smiled. That was part of why he'd begun as a Phantom Thief after all, to save those in need.
He nodded.

“You're welcome.”

To save others, Akira considered the thought as the train taking him back home rumbled along its
tracks, yeah, that was exactly it after all.

That was what he'd always wanted to do.

Chapter End Notes

Chapters vary on whose perspectives I write from, Akira or those he interacts with. There was basically no thought from Shinya's side here, and honestly the reason for that is simply because I don't know how to get inside Shinya's head. The age-gap, it got me. He's just too young.

His youth is the driving topic of Akira's thoughts here, and a sense of responsibility for his effect upon the young Shinya. After all, Akira basically did change the course of this kid's life. For the better, he was sure, but he still did it and is responsible for it. If anything goes wrong that could very well be on him. It's good and mature of Akira to have acknowledged that.

Mishima's here again, just hanging around arcades. He's impatient for the Moon chapter but there's still Star to go first. I'm looking forward to writing Star though, Hifumi is one of my favs. You guys look forward to that too. Anyway, on the Mishima topic, it's a running theme now that those younger than him dunk on him pretty hard. Shinya trashed him in their one canon interaction. Same with Futaba. Lavenza in this fic basically unnerved and dismissed him. And now Shinya completely shut him down to take all of Akira's attention for himself. Poor Mishima. He'll get his chance for the spotlight soon enough.

As time passes, Akira is starting to deal more and more with what he's been through. Because of that, he's also finally able to start picturing the kind of person he wants to be, believing he can be someone going forward. But the picture's still fuzzy. There're people he needs to talk to in order to get a clear look at it. Where that takes him, we'll see soon enough. Look forward to it.

Okay, that's it for this chapter. Thanks to all readers, I make this for you and I hope you enjoy it. Leave a comment here, rec to a friend, or just yell at me via twitter if you'd like to say a word. Nothing makes me happier than your feedback. Aside from that, I'll be back in the near future with Hifumi's chapter. See you all then. Bye-bye!
3/8, Wednesday Evening

Akira Kurusu was not a particularly religious person. This wasn’t an uncommon trait, it wasn’t like anyone would find the thought that he didn’t give much consideration to the topic upsetting. It was just that religion had no strong bearing upon him. Such was true for countless others.

Yet it remained true that, when he entered the halls of the church in Kanda, the church where Hifumi Togo was to be found, Akira felt something all the same. Quiet dignity? The need for respect? Reverence? He wasn’t sure. Just that it was something all the same. Mostly all it amounted to was not making a lot of noise.

After a few months of battling Shadows in the Metaverse, Akira had found himself questioning how his beliefs should operate. Shadows were all too often Gods and Demons, the reason being simply due to the belief of the people. The collective consciousness enforced form upon the amorphous Shadows, painted them with the colours of deities and myths. Akira, alongside the Phantom Thieves, had seen many beings that people would have prayed to, once upon a time.

And killed them all.

It made you think.

“Oh, Akira-kun.” Hifumi was usually the one greeted first, her eyes focused on the shogi board she always had by her side, mind filled with thoughts of strategy and action. Sometimes she’d be so focused that Akira couldn’t even get her attention with a quiet greeting and, unwilling to make a scene in the church, he just sat down and waited.

Once he’d made a move on the board as Hifumi was plotting pieces and oh she’d jumped. Then lectured him heavily for interfering with her study. So that was the last time he’d done that.

This time around though, so caught up in his musing on the nature of belief versus the influence of those beliefs on the Metaverse, Akira was the one called out to. He smiled and sat down.

“Hey Hifumi.”

Akira didn’t have a habit of honorifics, which his friends had teased him about at first. A country-boy from way out near Kyoto should be the picture of respect, but as soon as Akira was comfortable around someone he was immediately on first-name basis. Some people took to it more readily than others, while some had insisted he stick to terms of respect. For him respect was being close enough to another to trust them. But it didn’t work like that for everyone, and he’d accepted that. Simply another part of who he was.

Hifumi Togo, second-year at Kosei High, a shogi player of no small measure of skill, had been stunned, perhaps equally, both by Akira’s carefree address the first time he’d used her name alone, and also by how profoundly not uncomfortable it made her. It was natural, it felt like. For someone who had suffered a degree of isolation in her life thus far, it was strange and confusing but not entirely unwelcome. Much like Akira himself had been at first.

She smiled.
“Thank you for coming.”

“Happy to help,” Akira smiled back, an easy and relaxed expression on his face. He was a man of many subtle expressions, Hifumi had learned over the last year, watching him as he deliberated each move when they played. Some days he would be relaxed, carefree, without stress. Others he would be hunched, mind clearly somewhere else, distracted by problems far greater than what rested before him. Sometimes there would be focus, unerring, like a laser, like he was dissecting the board and all possible moves. Looking for the perfect solution. Perhaps it was more that those moods were readable through his moves than his face, but Hifumi still felt like she had become something of an ‘Akira-whisperer’. It was a fun thing to imagine. The others who knew him found it difficult to believe such a person could exist, but she was confident in her conclusions. She had the gift.

She’d met Makoto Nijima in Jinbocho, a coincidence only made possible by the presence of Akira at Makoto’s side. Hifumi had spotted him and approached without even considering she might be intruding upon something, only to be reassured by the brown-haired woman that Akira was simply a friend. Akira’s introduction of one to the other had sparked an immediate interest, and they’d quickly entered a discussion on tactics that Makoto, for being a shogi novice, showed surprising understanding of.

It was more than a week after she’d finally decided to accuse Akira of being a Phantom Thief that it had occurred to her Makoto Nijima likely was one as well.

Despite their initial meeting, they hadn’t spoken much since that time. In the wake of Christmas Eve, that warped Tokyo that no-one else seemed to recall, Hifumi had sent multiple messages to Akira to make sure he was alright. He’d responded so quickly when the announcement of his ‘suicide’ at the end of November had been made, after all.

But Akira never responded to her. So she did the only thing she thought she could and travelled directly to Yongen-Jaya herself. Akira had mentioned Leblanc before, she understood that was where he was to be found.

She had not expected the company when entering the building.

Makoto was there. As soon as she saw her Hifumi had known she was right to have come. And not just Makoto. Others as well. Standing there, in the entrance to the doorway, Hifumi had looked out over six teens and known that these were the Phantom Thieves.

One in particular caught her eye.

“K-Kitagawa-kun?”

In retrospect, duh. Of course Yusuke was with the Phantom Thieves, he was the student of Madarame. Likely he was the reason they’d targeted Madarame to begin with. But oh how she’d been shocked all the same to see him.

Makoto had taken the lead, and willingly explained what she could about Akira’s imprisonment. Very little about the Phantom Thieves however. For as much as Hifumi was so incredibly, incredibly curious.

It was thanks to that meeting, and the friendship she’d seeded with Makoto before, that Hifumi had been able to help Akira. To become another point of pressure upon the system that had wrongfully imprisoned him. Never relenting until it broke. Yet from that meeting came something else as well, a renewed friendship with Makoto – the two spoke far more often now – as well as the beginnings of friendship with Yusuke Kitagawa himself. He was an eccentric, a figure more often avoided at Kosei
than not, but thanks to this initial contact Hifumi now found herself less put out by the thought of talking to him.

So sometimes she did, and he seemed to appreciate it, and it was good. She had always been something of a loner too. Thanks to Akira her life had been pulled away from the dark path her mother had been forcing her down. But a more subtle effect, realised through simple association, was the formation of new friendships. New opportunities.

There was no way she could ever fully thank him for what he did. But when she smiled at him so genuinely, and he smiled in return, somehow she was sure he knew all the same.

And it was good.

“Big game coming up soon, right?”

Akira had visited her a few times since release, and each time he’d been different. At first he’d been quiet and reserved, lacking confidence, nervous in his motions. She’d spoken to Makoto over the phone for an hour that night expressing how frustrated the sight had made her. Makoto admitted the same. Oh if only they could get their hands upon those responsible.

The second time, he’d been struggling with expression. Sometimes he laughed then caught himself and seemed displeased to have done so. Other times anger radiated out from him, the heat pricking at Hifumi’s skin, before Akira caught it and attempted to reset his mask. She’d been concerned, yes, but also somewhat afraid of just what emotions were surging within him. She hadn’t asked him to talk.

That night, she’d sent a series of texts to Yusuke expressing how much she wished she were better able to communicate to help others. He’d admitted to desiring the same.

This time, this time Akira was calm. He wasn’t hiding things, but there wasn’t anything written on his face either. Like a blank slate. Slightly empty, slightly sad, but also with the possibility of hope. It was still nothing like the Akira she had known the last year, the Akira who’d been leader of the Phantom Thieves, but it was an improvement to the Akira she’d seen since then. She hoped and prayed things would only get better for him as time went along.

“Yes,” she nodded, responding to his query. “I have been partaking in numerous tournaments and exhibition matches since my defeat last year, attempting to build myself anew. It has been… enjoyable, to be completely honest, yet also somewhat humbling. There is a long way yet for me to go.”

“You can do it,” Akira said it and meant it. Hifumi was incredible, he believed that with all his heart and she knew he did too. It warmed her own.

“Thank you.”

“Shall we play?”

“Let’s.”

The first match went smoothly enough. Akira was calm, he was relaxed, and he played as such without stress. Maintaining such a state no matter the situation was respectable, yet the lack of tension he showed led to underestimations of Hifumi’s movements. Soon enough it was time for him to concede.

“Do you hear their wailing?” Hifumi’s eyes burned with the fire of victory, staring down her vanquished foe. “Lax was your will for victory, and so the might of the Togo Kingdom has laid you
“As expected of the Heavenly Queen Togo,” Akira replied smoothly, catching Hifumi just in the moment she returned from her ‘Shogi State’, as he’d taken to calling it, to normal. She fought furiously to keep the warmth from radiating across her cheeks.

Akira was a tease, Makoto had confirmed that to Hifumi, that she was hardly the only one to suffer his true self. He was the type to flirt, but it wasn’t for gain. More that he enjoyed lavishing words upon his friends, took pleasure in bringing them happiness. Words were the gift he gave most freely, and most expertly, and numerous times he’d delivered a successful line that made Hifumi’s heart beat.

It really wasn’t fair.

“Y-you’re going to have to try harder than that,” she insisted, the brief stammer underselling her declaration. Akira gave her a look and it was exactly the type to make this even harder for her. She shook her head. “I want you to play harder than that, Akira-kun, if I’m to practise for the upcoming competition.”

That, at least, got Akira to chill a little on the attitude. That was right, he was here to help, not just play. And when Akira said he’d do something for someone he did it. He nodded, and seemed more focused.

“Second match?”

“Prepare for absolute defeat.”

This one was more exciting. Akira had bold plays, a sharp mind, and was quick to make decisions, always pushing Hifumi to think just as fast as he did. Yet still, he couldn’t control the board the way she did, and all too soon victory was once more in her grasp.

“Thunder booms in the heavens, masking the raven’s caw. The battlefield is soaked in blood and there is nothing left for you to do but drown. You are bested yet again.”

Akira frowned for a moment, staring at the board, looking for something – there was nothing, she knew it – then shook his head. “Well played,” he wasn’t teasing this time, clearly having tried his best. And he had, Hifumi had watched him grow from complete novice to an impressively adept player in only half a year. She was proud of him.

But she still wanted more.

“Perhaps you could try visualisation?”

Akira looked at her for a second, before that traditional teasing smile crossed his face. Hifumi sighed in advance. “I don’t think this board needs two Heavenly Royals duking it out.”

“It doesn’t! Have to be that!” Akira laughed at Hifumi’s rebuke, she shaking her head. “Visualisation can be anything, it’s simply to help manage multiple pieces cohesively. You used to do that anyway, didn’t you?”

Akira’s laugh stopped immediately. He was staring at Hifumi, who bit her tongue at the words she’d just spoken. She’d admit it, she had been thinking of how he led the Phantom Thieves, and tried comparing what she imagined that person to be like to the way Akira played. But it was mismatched. She was sure the Akira who played with her was not the same as the one who had changed the world.
She kind of wanted to face that one though.

Akira looked down at the board, mind surging with thought. He raised a hand.

“Give me a moment.”

Twenty pieces on his side. The King, that had to be him, as much as he wished it were not. He’d rather be a Lance, charging forth into battle without concern. But he had to be at the centre of it all, responsive to all changes, guard and guarded. The core of the Phantom Thieves.

The Lances, no, those were Haru and Ryuji. Haru was indomitable, broke through everything that stood against her. Ryuji was always charging, always on the move, always ready to lend a hand. They’d plunge into enemy territory without a second thought. So brave, so unyielding. So incredible.

The Rook, that was Ann. She charged as well, but was flexible, could sidestep a problem as easily as blow through it. She was unstoppable in her own special manner. He knew she would never let him down. The Bishop, there was Yusuke. His movements were by the beat of his own drum, less predictable, yet equally as devastating when he struck. His strength was always underestimated, yet always brought victory from defeat. He was irreplaceable.

Makoto was one of the Golden Generals, omnidisciplined, able to cover whatever was lacking in the composition of the team. She was another core of the team, able to gather and direct. She was always the one Akira knew he would pass the baton to if it became impossible for him to continue. Their second-in-command and strategist. Brilliant, and powerful. She shone.

The other… was not Futaba. Futaba was a Knight, a piece that struck from odd angles, covered others in ways no other piece could. Her partner Knight was Morgana, who similarly approached problems in a manner the others never could. They would move quick, position themselves perfectly, and ease the burden of their allies. His perfect Knights.

The last Golden General… yeah, it had to be, didn’t it? A part of him rioted against this thought, but Akira was shushing it, focusing on just what this was. This was him as leader of the Phantom Thieves, yet it was not the Phantom Thieves alone. It was everything, the entire web of connections he had built. All of them. Every last one.

This was Akechi. Powerful, intelligent, dangerous. Always a step away from Akira, always a threat to those who got too close to him, enemy and ally alike. The few times he, Akechi, and Makoto had worked together in the Metaverse… it had been victorious routs each time. The trio were monsters, and their fellow teammates had made mention as such. What could have been…

Akira shook his head and his lip curled, a slight growl emerging from him. Hifumi, watching with interest as Akira stared at the board, slapped a hand over her mouth to cover any noise of shock.

What was that? What… was that?

The two Silver Generals remained. Akira thought. Yeah, one was Mishima, who always found them targets, who rallied behind them and encouraged them to move forward. The other was Hifumi herself, their master strategist, whose tactics had passed on to Akira and Makoto both. She was behind them all, a supporter, and her keen words had carried them forward. She was part of this too.

He nodded, content.

Nine pawns remained. Akira counted names of those who had supported him. Sojiro, Chihaya, Iwai. Takemi, Kawakami, Ohya. Shinya, Yoshida. Sae. He had it. He could see it.

And just with that thought, the characters of the pieces he was watching changed. They were not the
characters of shogi, no, they were the marks of the Arcana. He could see each card engraved onto the piece. See the movements available. He could see it all, third eye open once more.

Akira looked up to Hifumi and she shivered, the stare over her one unlike any she’d seen before. It was calm, yet savage, hungry and ravenous. Like a demon that had found its next meal. Akira, no, Joker, raised a hand.

“Shall we dance?”

Hifumi Togo had played countless games of Shogi over the span of her life thus far. She’d played novices, masters, and everything in between. She’d seen strategies that had never occurred to her before and countered them, played against the depths of creativity and focus. The techniques of experts she’d memorised. The pitfalls of students she’d learned to avoid. An unfathomable wealth of knowledge dwelt within her, ready to be unleashed with every move she made.

And Hifumi Togo, in all her life, had never experienced a game like this before.

Akira Kurusu, leader of the Phantom Thieves, was inscrutable. No, more than that, he was a monster. He’d always played fairly fast before, making snap decisions that all too often were ones made well. This time he never missed a single second. Hifumi moved a piece after a few seconds of deliberation and before her hand had returned from the board Akira had already moved his. He could see it, every move, and had a strategy.

He had ten thousand strategies.

She saw an action and she pre-empted it, cut him off, prevented the movement he had intended. He immediately made another, like that was the plan all along. He was silent, her battlecries washing over him, yet focused. As if he couldn’t even hear her. He moved another piece and she just couldn’t believe it.

Every piece, every last one, was unique. Had its own pattern, its own nature, its own relation to the others. How was it that nine pawns, which moved one space forward and that was it, reeked of so much personality? Some were active explorers of the frontlines, while others posed as guards or threats. And Akira never forgot which was which. They were consistent. It was impossible.

But the pieces beyond that were what really terrified her.

The Lances, Akira tore across the battlefield with them, exchanged them for others by a guarding Rook, or Bishop, and then replaced a captured piece to tear another line from her defences. The Knights were always in the worst possible position for her, making a mess of every strategy she had to counteract. The Golden Generals were completely different – one coordinating the major pieces in the lead, while the other shadowed the King itself, annihilating everything that came too close to it as it lusted after the King’s own crown. Or so the story seemed to be. And the Silver Generals, the quietest of them all, marked a slow but steady advance. An overwhelming tide.

It was like nothing she had ever seen before.

And all the while Akira radiated that hunger and power like he was feasting for the first time in his life. Had been starving until this moment. She had to regulate her breathing for a moment each time she caught herself staring at his face.

It was an intoxicating sight.

Victory came at last, a resounding “checkmate” declared by the Togo Kingdom’s Queen, but it was a different kind of victory to any she’d claimed against Akira before. Or perhaps anyone at all. The
board was in shambles, rivers of blood bled from both armies coating the battlefield, the mountain of corpses roosted upon by monsters from the dark. She’d won but the cost had been far too great.

The greatest blow the Togo Kingdom had suffered in a long, long time.

Akira breathed out.

And that was it, the sensation was gone. His face looked almost completely different, like he was another person again, the person she’d always known. The sleeping demon within him gone back to rest. But she’d seen it now, and now she knew not only Akira Kurusu her dearest friend, but Akira Kurusu leader of the Phantom Thieves. Now she knew how he’d done what he had.

He’d done so by being far more terrifying than any opponent he’d stood against.

It was very, very impactful.

“I…” she took a moment to focus her own breathing, looking down at the mess of a shogi board before them, “that was… new.”

“Yeah,” Akira seemed slightly shaken too, resting some fingers on his wrist, checking his own heartbeat. If it was anything like Hifumi’s it was racing right now. “That, uh, was a little more engrossing than I expected.”

He almost seemed embarrassed to have shown that face to her. Hifumi shook her head.

“I liked it.”

There was no way there was going to be another game today. Not after that. The two of them both needed time to come down from that high, that intensity. It had been exhilarating and draining both, and Hifumi felt as if she would need a long rest to recover. What an experience that had been. She was already savouring it.

“I think…” she nodded, smiling quietly as she looked down at the board, “that I am ready for my upcoming matches now. There is no possibility for anyone to appear that is as terrifying as you, Akira-kun.”

Akira chuckled. “Compliment, I hope?”

“Oh yes.”

It had been an intense experience for him too, that game of shogi. Thinking of the pieces as his allies, treating the entire game as one mass plan of the Phantom Thieves, it had reawakened and reactivated all of Akira’s focus, all of his nature from that time. That game, for the length he had been part of it, Akira had felt the same as he had leading the Phantom Thieves himself. The same highs and lows directing them, searching for victory against the odds.

He’d felt truly alive in a way he hadn’t since Yaldabaoth’s fall.

“I’m glad,” Akira bowed his head and Hifumi returned the gesture, the expression of respect between two players made. Then each smiled at the other. “I got to make a really good impression before I leave.”

He’d told Hifumi about this before, that was he was returning to his family home. She’d been distressed at first, as all his friends had, but accepted his reasoning all the same. She understood giving one’s parents a second chance. Yet even still…
“I will miss you.”

“Yeah,” Akira nodded, matching the sentiment. “I’ll message, of course. Be back for holidays. And you can keep up with me via the others as well. Makoto will always hang out with you, after all.” Hifumi smiled at that. Akira had given her so much just on his own, but now his friendships had been extended to her as well.

He’d truly changed her life.

“Come back again, before you leave?”

“Of course.”

And that was how it was. Akira wished Hifumi well for her upcoming matches, and soon enough was making his way home once more. Yet while Hifumi still sat in that church, replaying the match against Joker and extracting what strategies she could, Akira had something similar yet different on his mind.

In that match he had truly lived again, tasted once more the self he wanted to be more than anything else. That self, it could be revived through other means. It wasn’t about being a Phantom Thief. And it wasn’t about shogi.

It was about him, and his, working together for one single goal.

As the train ran along its tracks, lights of the city shining against the dark of night, Akira’s mind drifted, and looked for the goal.

For who he truly wanted to be.

Chapter End Notes

Hifumi is one of my favourite characters.

Thanks to an artist friend I follow, I went into Persona 5 with a significant Haru bias. I already knew I wanted to date her in that playthrough. But I didn't know a thing about Hifumi before meeting her and her impression on me was incredibly strong. If I hadn't been preset on Haru, I would've extremely likely confessed to Hifumi instead. She rules.

You gotta admit, Hifumi was into Akira pretty quick. The starting condition to talk to her was charm 3, Hifumi had to look at you and actually think "Oh! hot boy!" to talk. And the rank 2 text was "you feel a deep bond of trust from Hifumi". Like, she gave Akira full trust extremely quick. He's the type to draw people to him, but even still she was fast. I think it's cute.

For being one of the three teen Confidants not part of the Phantom Thieves, Hifumi was far more isolated from the others than Akechi or Mishima. It's understandable, the original P5 plan had been for her to be a Phantom Thief too, but still a bit of a shame. I made sure to set her up with some friendships with the others. It's good.

So this chapter was pretty much split between Hifumi's current situation and thoughts on Akira, and Akira's own thoughts. The shogi game, I came up with the concept of matching the Thieves to pieces a few days ago, so I hope the matches feel good to you
all. I've been thinking about them a lot until write-time. The result of Akira learning that he can still be the self he enjoys being the most outside of the Metaverse, well we still have a few chapters left to see where that takes us. Next up is Moon, Mishima finally getting some uninterrupted time with Akira, so please look forward to that.

Thank you to all my readers, who I value immensely, hoping that my work entertains. If you have any comments at all, lit anything, I love to hear them, don't feel afraid to say whatever's on your mind. If you have other P5 friends to share this fic with, that's excellent too, less and less people will see it after the final chapter is done, so I'll be moving on relying on word of mouth (and my other works) to draw people's attention.

That's it for now, see you next time, bye-bye!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

3/9, Thursday After School

Mishima had sought Akira out during the day, approached him at lunch and explicitly asked if he was free that afternoon. He was, and so Akira had agreed to hang out with Mishima. It had been a while, after all.

The thing about Yuuki Mishima was just that he was always there. Always a few steps away, always a part of the backdrop. He'd been peripheral to so many of Akira's conversations on school grounds, and not to mention only a few seats away every school day, that it was easy enough to forget they rarely hung out just the two of them. It wasn't an intentional ignorance on Akira's part, just a consequence of Mishima's background presence in his day to day life. Similar in a way to Futaba's presence at Leblanc, which had resulted in a delayed proper reunion that Akira still felt a little regret at. That Futaba had been forced to orchestrate such a thing to occupy him...

Mishima had taken a little longer to get to the point. He'd hung around the arcades in Shibuya and Akihabara, knowing Akira passed them by every few days, and yet both times his friend had been occupied with others Mishima just couldn't interrupt. Because they were both terrifying.

After the second time though, Mishima's patience had finally reached enough of a breaking point that he'd directly gone up to Akira himself. It wasn't that he was mad, he understood his friend knew a lot of people and was enjoying seeming them all after his release! And he also understood that he did get to see Akira a lot more than most other people.

Just... there was still a difference between seeing and spending time with. He hadn't had that opportunity. And it bugged him.

So after much deliberation and delay, Mishima finally built up the nerve to specifically ask Akira to spend time with him. Akira had agreed without a second thought, as he did, and thrown Mishima – who'd been prepared for some form of recrimination for his selfishness – for a complete loop. Well, that was just what Akira Kurusu did, after all. Always surpassing expectations.

Another amazing thing about him.

Right now, standing outside Shibuya's arcade as he usually was, Mishima was getting cold feet. Not-not about meeting up with Akira or anything just... he'd said the arcade because that was a good place to hang out, right? But then it occurred to him that Akira was apparently some sort of games monster and anything they played would probably be pretty dull for him. And he didn't want to have picked somewhere to hang out and then have Akira get bored that'd be terrible!

So yeah, that was the struggle at the forefront of Yuuki Mishima's mind, keeping him from noticing Akira sneaking through the crowd, having spotted the pensive teen and being completely unable to resist the chance to surprise one of his friends.

In fact, so absorbed in his thoughts was Mishima, that he completely missed Akira even when he'd positioned himself directly next to him, the two standing side-by-side next to the arcade's entrance. There was a part of him, a really significant part, that wanted to wait this out, to see how long it took Mishima to notice Akira was right beside him. But Akira tempered that part because while it would
be very, very funny, it might also take quite some time. Mishima could go into deep thought spirals when he was of the mood. So instead Akira just went for the most direct approach possible.

“What's on your mind?”

“Ah!” At the very least, the very real jump Mishima made when Akira spoke out to him was satisfying enough to elicit a ‘Joker Classic’, as some of the others had taken to calling Akira’s wilder grins. Mishima just frowned in response. “You have to stop doing that already, Kurusu.”

“And miss out on everyone's expressions?” Akira smirked as he raised an arm, Mishima repeating the gesture for each to tap their wrist to the other's. Neither was entirely sure, in all honesty, how the ritual greeting came to be between them, but it was a fun gesture all the same so neither had any complaints either. “I couldn’t bear.”

“Jeeze,” Mishima rubbed his head, train of thought derailed so thoroughly it had plunged into a nearby crevice and was heading for the centre of the planet. Or something. Whatever. “Uh, I guess since we're at the arcade we can play some games? If you want?”

Akira, more than experienced in subtlety thanks to the last year, made no mention whatsoever of the fact that this was the planned meeting place, that being at the arcade was no coincidence at all. He nodded. “Sure, let's play.”

It went better than Mishima had expected, but he was expecting the earth to rupture and a hole to swallow him up on the spot so anything steeped in reality was going to be better. Akira had played at a few various games, won some bizarrely unfamiliar off-brand mascot from a crane game, and actively avoided the Gun About installation. Mishima really wanted to ask about that – since Akira was apparently an expert player? – but ended up avoiding the topic as he didn't want to risk it being a sore point for Akira. Not that he had any reason to believe it was but what if it was anyway? Couldn’t take the risk. Nope, not one bit.

So instead Mishima just threw a glance at the machine every time it was within view and eventually Akira got tired of spotting them out of the corner of his eye.

“I played a lot last year,” Akira didn't even specify the topic, which immediately told Mishima his attempt to broach it without speaking had been a success. See? Being consumed by self-doubt couldn’t stop you all the time! Right? “At first for the experience and then to keep up with Shinya. He got me to set up an account so I can play with him online, but I don't really plan on playing if not invited too.”

Mishima blinked. Akira was that good with a game he didn't feel that strongly about? “You don't like playing it?”

“I'm just tired,” Akira shrugged, the extremely real statement hanging in the air like a knife above their heads. Mishima stared. “I prefer low-intensity stuff right now is all.”

“R-right!” Mishima nodded, casting his eyes around the arcade. Like, uh... “The... Train of Life Arcade Version?” Akira just shook his head.

“I'll leave that one to you,” he sounded amused at least, “I think I'm game'd out at the moment.”

“O-oh...” That was no good, Mishima looking downcast. He'd invited Akira to hang out at the arcade but it had only been about a half hour before Akira already looked done. He didn't want this to be done yet though. Mishima looked around, searching for something, and settled his eyes upon another pair of teens sharing a packet of chips while they played. Right! “How about we go get
something to eat? Something from Big Bang Burger maybe?”

Akira looked considerate for a moment before nodding. “Sure, let's go. Morgana isn't with me today so I don't have to worry about him calling me out for not ordering the challenge burger.” Mishima had no idea at all how to address that sentence so wisely chose to just let it lie. It was for the best.

Big Bang Burger hadn't changed much at all since the death of its President, Kunikazu Okumura. In the few moments before his Mental Shutdown he'd already admitted to the conditions he'd enforced upon the company, and that had resulted in ramifications all the same, but they hadn't seemed to reach the individual chains themselves. Haru had mentioned, once or twice, her frustration with the wage plans for workers, but admitted she lacked the clout to make anything happen in that regard.

Not yet, at any rate.

Anyway, point was, Big Bang Burger was much the same as ever and no-one was really sure what to think about it. The stories of employee abuse and overwork had dried up though, which was hopefully a good sign, and people had begun eating there again. Haru insisted it was fine to support, and Akira trusted her completely. So he didn't have a problem.

That didn't stop Mishima from thinking he might.

“ Weird to be eating here, right?” He asked as the two sat at a table, waiting to be served. Akira lazily tilted his head.

“No, why?”

“ Just after…’” Mishima raised his arms, indicating around him, “everything, y’know? The whole deal?” Akira just shook his head.

“It's fine.”

“Really?”

“Yeah don't worry about it.”

“Okay then.”

Honestly Akira enjoyed the more sane meals more than the challenge burgers, there was more variety and less suffering in each. He'd taken to the challenge burger before for a few reasons, firstly the craving after a few months away, something he didn't deal with anymore, and secondly and far more importantly because it would rattle Morgana's chain something fierce. And boy it had.

He still wouldn't let Akira forget it. Another one for the receipts, Akira supposed. Whatever. Worth it.

It was when they'd both finished up eating that Akira was the one to pose a question to Mishima. The teen nodded enthusiastically at being asked.

“So how’re things going with that documentary?”

“Really good!” Mishima smiled widely. “I've been following up on the Phan-site's successes, checking in on all the people you affected. I'm planning on using it as material to show the good you all did in the world!”

Akira paused, a fry halfway to his mouth. Hold on. “When you say 'checking in on all the people we
affected’...”

“Well I can't just approach them and ask how they're doing!” Mishima continued on, eyes alight with passion for this project, “So I just make sure to keep tabs on them! See if everything’s fine! Everyone seems happier now than ever, and they're not doing bad things, so it's a great success!”

“Mishima?”

“Kurusu?”

“Are you... stalking people?”

“What?” Mishima's declaration was a little louder than the conversation up to that point, which got other people to look at the pair with annoyance. Mishima paled under their scrutiny. Akira kept his eyes on the teen's dark own. “No! I'm not!”

“Mishima are you following people around without them being aware of you?”

“Just!” Mishima stressed it, upset by the questioning, “to make sure they're okay! That they're doing fine! As long as I can be sure they're not bullying, or abusing, or doing anything illegal anymore, it's okay, right? Right?”

“Oh my god Mishima,” Akira had his face pressed into his hands, elbows on the table supporting him, “you are one-hundred percent stalking people right now.”

“I'm not a stalker!”

Before Mishima had been loud enough to annoy those in the tables next to he and Akira. This time, as he’d jumped to his feet to protest Akira's false labelling, his voice had been cast even further afield. To the point that everyone in the restaurant was now looking at him. Akira kept his face in his hands.

“Uh,” now aware that everyone was looking at him, Mishima went white as a sheet. The first thought that made its way out of his mind, 'I don't want to be here right now', immediately agreed with his fight-or-flight instincts and the teen dashed for the door. Akira, groaning, dragged himself up to his feet. Hoo boy.

“Hey,” an older patron drew Akira's attention as he passed them by, “That kid, is he...?”

“I'll sort him out,” Akira shook his head in response, “Don't worry about it.”

“Okay good man,” the patron nodded, “people need friends like you to keep them from doing stupid shit.” Akira just smiled and wearily chuckled as he left the restaurant.

Didn't he know it.

Mishima was completely absent outside, likely having fled the terrible situation he'd made for himself, and so Akira just sent him a message as he walked back towards the Shibuya Crossing. Everyone flowed in that direction, after all.

Akira: Where at?
Mishima: Miyashita

Yeah that made sense, the park to the north-east of the Shibuya Crossing was the place to go when you wanted just a little bit of space from the masses of people in the district itself. Akira set himself at a pace in the same direction.
Mishima was right by the entrance, sitting on a bench, looking down at the ground. Once more Akira just ended up beside him, though sitting this time. Mishima sighed, not raising his eyes.

“Hey Kurusu?”

“Yeah?”

“I think I was stalking people.”

Akira just leaned back in the bench. Well, at least he was self-aware to realise it. A little late but still.

“At least you can admit it.”

“It's just!” Even having admitted it, Mishima still found himself offended by this truth, “I was just trying to help! There were all those people you'd changed the hearts of and I figured that if I made sure they were living good lives it would be good proof that what you did was right!”

“I know,” Akira shook his head, appreciating on some level Mishima's dedication. He did care. Just a little too strongly. “It's only, every time you tell me about your plans for how to help, it's a case of you deciding to do something without thinking about how it looks. Like trying to hook up with those girls through the Phan-site,” Mishima choked a little and refused to meet Akira's eyes, “or that time you took the donations in our name,” now the boy was basically shrinking where he sat, “or that time you started threatening people with us to get them to play nice-”

“Okay okay!” He couldn't take it any more. Akira just sighed.

“The problem is you get these really good and big ideas and then you go and do them, and you don't double-check it with anyone. The most important thing I learned was that acting on your own like that just leads to making stupid decisions all the time. Believe me, I did too.”

Mishima was just completely beat down now. His grand plans and efforts, his intention to impress Akira with all he'd been doing, all for naught. Just like always.

“I am,” Akira made sure Mishima was looking at him before continuing, “looking forward to the documentary. I know you'll do a good job on it.” That was already enough to bring a smile back to the boy. Akira nodded to him. “Just... do me a favour. Every time you think of some cool way to make it better, imagine hearing what I'd say about it if you explained it to me first. Can you do that?”

Mishima blinked. “What, like a Kurusu tulpa?”

“A what?”

“N- nevermind.”

The silence that followed was half-awkward, but Mishima at least seemed to be contemplating and Akira wanted to leave him to that. He'd forgotten the other half of why he was more used to Mishima being a background presence than someone he constantly hung around and that was because Mishima could be a very exhausting person when he had a grand idea in mind. It wasn't terrible to want to do good, he just had a terrible method of going about it. Akira laughed to himself.

“Here I am leaving for a year and what I'm most worried about is what you'll get up to without my supervision.”

“Hey!” Mishima at least had the self-respect to be offended by that, “I'll be fine without you, you know!” Akira raised an eyebrow. “I will! Just you wait and see, when you come back to Tokyo I'm
going to have spent the whole year doing great and not screwing up at all! Count on it!”

“In that case,” Akira raised an arm, extended a wrist to Mishima, “I’m going to hold you to that.”

For a moment caught off by the gesture, Mishima raised his arm to tap their wrists again. “You can! Just wait and see!”

In a way each of the two, Akira and Mishima, had challenged the other. Akira had pushed Mishima to be more than he’d ever thought he would. Mishima had driven Akira to help manage their manager, which was a process slow-going yet fruitful. Mishima's help had been valuable over the last year. The Phan-site had been instrumental. Having to do a little curbing of the teen's... overzealousness was a fair price.

Still, as tiring as this had been, he wouldn't change it for the world. Okay, some things Akira would most certainly change had he the chance, but Mishima wasn't one of them. Not everyone had to be perfect and not everyone had to get things right the first time every time. It was okay to make mistakes, learn from them, and improve. Something he'd needed to learn as much as it seemed Mishima had.

Akira sighed and leaned back into the bench, looking to the cloudy sky. It'd be the same sky back home. But even still.

“I am going to miss this.”

Mishima nodded as well. “Yeah. This coming school-year is going to suck. Make sure you message us all the time, okay?”

“Got it,” Akira smiled, thinking of all the friends he'd hear from. Those who had become key parts of his life. “And a big party when I come back for good.”

“For sure!”

The days were ticking down now, a week and a half left. Still so much Akira wanted to do. So many people he wanted to spend time with. Mishima looked up to the sky as well.

“Just as long as we both do our best.”

“It's a promise.”

And the clouds drifted on.

Chapter End Notes

Hoo boy, Mishima.

I'm not going to pretend I didn't spend a good portion of my P5 playthrough frustrated with him at times. The noise of horror I made when he got the funding from the phan-site was just, wow. He's so bad at decisions! Bless him for wanting to do his best but also Mishima, you need someone to run these ideas of yours by. Or at least to spend some time on self-reflection to mature.

Despite it being the end of P5, characters don't become perfect immaculate figures.
They're still rough, and have flaws, and that's fine! Mishima's flaw is that his grand ideas are always far wiser sounding in his head than reality. He'll get there one day though. I'm sure that documentary will work out.

Three chapters remain now, the end approaching. Next up is Sun, our favourite Toranosuke Yoshida approaching. I'm looking forward to writing that, I've no idea how I'll handle Tora's voice but I hope to do it well. I hope you enjoy it when I do.

For now though, I'm signing off once again. Thanks to all readers, and all commentors, and please look forward to what's still to come. See you next time. Bye-bye!
3/11, Saturday After School

If he were to become a politician, to chase that idea to its logical conclusion, Akira Kurusu would have to spend day after day in Chiyoda, central ward of Tokyo and home of the National Diet. Given how, even now, he felt so uncomfortable walking its streets, that was not an easy future to imagine. His memories of this place, of the events that had taken place within it, none of them were good.

Maybe that discomfort was what was necessary for a politician to not be swept up in the arrogance of election. But that was not a topic he had the experience to address or even consider. All on his mind was that it would be far too easy for an officer with a little too much knowledge and a chip on their shoulder to pick him up off the street and that would be the end. A significant part of him really didn't want to be here.

But his wiser self said that he needed to be. And he knew that it was true.

Last of his Confidants, a politician himself, Toranosuke Yoshida had eluded Akira in the four weeks since his release. A brief phonecall at first, to congratulate Akira on his release, and then occasional messages as each intended to meet with the other once more. Yet always were there conflicts, and so rarely did Yoshida himself find the time free – as busy as the recently re-elected Dietman was – that the time Akira had remaining in Tokyo had slipped away far faster than either wished.

Although for Akira, even if time itself stopped it still wouldn't be enough.

He had nine days left. Nine days and he'd be leaving, not to return in full until his graduation was done. Oh there would be holidays, Akira knew already he'd be back in Tokyo for Golden Week, and if he couldn't negotiate at least a significant chunk of the summer break he'd be extraordinarily disappointed in himself. But the true return, the ability to live his life alongside his trusted friends and allies, that was a year away.

Even now he couldn't stand the thought.

Though at the very least, those thoughts did distract him from the uneasy feelings he had walking the streets of Chiyoda on his way to the office building he'd been told of.

Akira had made sure to have the afternoon clear, made it well known to anyone requesting him he'd be busy. The last time they'd arranged for, something at the very last minute had come up for Yoshida and cancelled their meeting, but that would not be the case this time. The man had assured him.

In all honesty Akira couldn't help but feel a little glad it had taken this long. The two had a lot to talk about, and the past four weeks had been necessary for Akira to start rebuilding his sense of self. He still wasn't, and doubted he would be, at one-hundred percent for a long time, but he was a lot better. Had processed a lot and performed a decent amount of introspection.

He was ready to at least discuss the future, and perhaps try to chart his course.

Yoshida's office was on the sixth floor of the building he'd given Akira the address of, a business
complex full of the political and politically aligned. The man had complained, privately, to Akira that he missed simply giving speeches on the streets of Shibuya, but acknowledged that as an elected member of the Diet he had responsibilities of management that demanded his time here as well. As an Independent it seemed there was a significant requirement to be firing on all cylinders at all times to maintain his pace. Akira didn't envy him.

The office building was all black carpet and black leather, glass and metal polished so keenly you could see your own reflection in it. It was artificial and stark, but the foyer to Yoshida’s own office at least had a framed painting of Tokyo Bay mounted upon a wall. It helped immensely. Akira smiled at the sight, colour amongst the colourless.

“Kurusu-san?”

It was a woman's voice, standing at the end of a corridor leading further into the office itself. Akira turned to her and she reacted quickly – widened eyes, a slight gasp, a raised hand over her mouth. Akira didn't recognise her at all.

“You're the one who was always helping Yoshida-san at his speeches last year.”

It was a statement, no accusation in her tone, and Akira nodded simply. The woman smiled. “I was always among the crowds. Yoshida-san’s message resonated with me, so when he was elected as a member of the Diet I applied to work as his assistant. In a way you are responsible for me being here – it was seeing a teenager assisting him that first made me stop and listen. So, um, thank you for that.”

Huh. Akira nodded, not entirely sure what to think. Ultimately despite also believing in Yoshida's message, the reason he'd started the assistance was due to his efforts to improve himself for the sake of the Phantom Thieves. That people had been helped as just a by-product of that, a barely related tangent, well it felt weird for them to be thanking him. Like he'd done nothing to deserve it.

“You're welcome.” But experience had taught him a lot over the last year and his response was the correct one, the woman smiling further. She stepped aside and gestured down the corridor.

“Yoshida-san will see you now.”

Yoshida's office had more personality that the rest of the complex combined – his election sash hung over a coat-rack, another artwork – same artist Akira was sure – this time of Shibuya hanging up on a wall, and a desk of genuine wood the man himself was seated at, as opposed to the plastic constructs built into the offices around.

Yoshida smiled, rising up from his desk, and extended a hand to Akira, which Akira stepped forward to shake. The first thing he said, however, was the first thing on his mind, still focused on the desk.

“How'd you get that into this office, there's no way it fit through the door.”

“Hahaha, it is good to see you as well, Kurusu-kun.” Yoshida sat, indicating for Akira to do so himself. He did, but continued to study the room, keen eye taking in the details. It was interesting seeing the steps Yoshida had taken to make it his own. “To answer your question,” the man went on to explain, “the office was undergoing a remodelling just before I moved in. I was able to make sure that before the doorway was completed those doing the work were able to bring this desk in. My home feels somewhat lonelier without it there, but as the place I always sat and thought on the right way forward, I felt it was best brought here. As an aside, I do believe it helps the room tremendously.”
“It does,” Akira nodded without a second thought, “it actually feels like there's a real person in here.”

“I could ask for no kinder praise.”

A knock at the door was answered by an 'enter' from Yoshida, the woman who had greeted Akira before stepping inside with a tray containing a pitcher and glasses. She set it down to Yoshida's thanks, before leaving once more. Akira watched the door close before turning back to the older man.

“She mentioned she'd been a fan of your speeches.”

“Ah, yes,” Yoshida nodded, “She would have recognised you after all. You provided me assistance in a most subtle way in addition to the help you gave directly. She has proven an invaluable assistant.”

Being thanked for that still felt weird. Akira told Yoshida as much. The man laughed.

“Aha, is it such a strange thing that your actions have resulted in continued good? Do you not feel that everything you did last year has not reached thousands of others by on-going effects?”

It might have, but contemplating that made Akira's head hurt. He'd been focusing on what was directly in front of him. Knock-on effects were a little out of his league. Yoshida seemed amused by the thought.

“Still,” yet when he focused on Akira he seemed dauntless, as keen of mind as could be, “How have you been, Kurusu-kun?”

“Better,” Akira answered plainly, “I've been better.” Yoshida nodded in understanding.

“You have faced trials those with decades of experience beyond your own would have broken under,” the man was fully sympathetic to Akira's struggles, “it means little I know, but you have done incredibly. I would like to make sure you know that.”

If Akira did acknowledge those words, he didn't say it out loud, continuing the discussion on. “I almost think it's best our meeting was delayed this long,” he gave a rueful smile when he said it, “I'm a lot better now than I was even a week ago.” A week ago he'd avoided a breakdown in front of Takemi only to have one before Ohya and Lala a day later. Not his best look.

“I will admit,” Yoshida wasn't sure the best way to approach Akira about his mental health however, and settled instead on trying to brighten the mood, “I was beginning to consider that perhaps I should eat at Ore no Beko each night until I ran into you again. I am glad I did not have to, too many beef bowls a week disagree with this old body of mine ahaaha.”

“You wouldn't have caught me anyway,” Akira smiled back, at least happy enough for this topic to be discussed. “I went back there a little while ago to formally quit, even though I should've been forgotten after being away so long, and the owner was in such a fuss because of staff member cancellations that he practically begged me to take the shift for double-pay. Apparently none of his hires after could keep up the way I did.”

“Oh dear,” Yoshida shook his head, “I am sure that flies in the face of all known labour laws. Well, you need not tell me whether or not you accepted.”

“Either way,” Akira chose to accept that clemency, “I'm not going back again. Of all the jobs I've been saying goodbye to, that one I will miss the least.”


"And I'm sure that says something!" The politician laughed at Akira's words, pleased at his candor. "Still, it sounds like you are preparing to focus solely on your final year of high-school. I wish you well with that."

Oh right. Akira shook his head. Yoshida looked surprised.

"It's not that. Now that I've been absolved of all my crimes, my parents requested I return to our home-town. I'm spending the next year back there, completing high-school, before returning to Tokyo after."

Each time he'd told someone that for the first time they'd looked genuinely despondent in the same way Akira himself felt. His bonds to those who lived here, they were strong, so incredibly strong, that he was sure they outpaced the bonds he had to his own family. He supposed that was part of this coming year, the intention to discover whether he even could feel the same for his parents that he felt for these people. Whether his mother and father and the house they gave him could compare in the slightest to the feeling of living at Leblanc, of sharing a meal with Sojiro and Futaba. A part of him insisted they stood no chance.

But another wanted to give them that chance all the same. The chance to apologise. If he just wanted his family, or felt it was right to offer them forgiveness, or was just still confused about the life he wanted, he still didn't know. He wasn't sure if he ever would or ever would know if this was the right choice.

But he'd made the choice now and intended to stick by it. That resolution, it seemed Yoshida could see it. He nodded in response.

"Very well, I will wish you the best with that," the man accepted Akira's determination. "And, of course, I will welcome you back to Tokyo when you return. If you wish, I will take you out for a beef bowl then. I assure you that you will not be drafted into employment under my watch." Akira just laughed at that one. Yoshida felt himself quite pleased at eliciting such a reaction.

"So you've been busy," Akira moved the topic along, "What's life been like for Dietman Toranosuke Yoshida?"

"Busy isn't the word!" Yoshida exclaimed, a hearty laugh in the same moment. "Being at the periphery of the political world for so long, you forget that the inside is like an extended and perpetual high-school, countless cliques and alliances existing between disparate groups. Not to mention that so many members seem to regress to the rational abilities of a high-schooler, present company excluded of course."

"Hah," Akira shook his head, "Don't worry about that, I'm hardly the most rational either. Still got a lot of growing to do."

"As long as you acknowledge that you're a step ahead of the majority I deal with."

"Ready for a political career already then."

Yoshida paused. Akira's grin shifted and fell, his joke skirting dangerously close to reality. The look he was getting said the question was coming now. He braced himself to try and face it.

"Kurusu-kun?"

"Yeah?"

"What are your plans for the future?"
Akira sighed. It was enough of a sigh to first concern, and then amuse Yoshida, the length of and grandstanding behind it filled with performative weight. When Akira finally ended the sigh, he fixed Yoshida with a focused look. The older man waited for the young teen's words.

"I was asked that only a few days after being released," Akira recalled the conversation with Makoto and Eiko, the memory already feeling so far in the past. He hadn't had a satisfactory answer then. He didn't now either, but at least he was ready to consider it. He continued. "I said politics as a throwaway then, just that I'd been working with you, and I figured it would be good to have someone who actually cared, unlike some asshole like Shido, sorry."

Yoshida shook his head, unconcerned by any of Akira's uncouth language. "Please, continue."

"I got chewn out for saying that though," Akira smiled, remembering Makoto's lecture. She cared and he really did appreciate her doing so. Even if at the time he'd been pretty upset by it. "Told that I didn't sound like I was that interested at all. It was true at the time, I was just saying whatever. I didn't really have it in me to be looking ahead yet."

"Understandable."

"She was right though," Akira nodded more to himself than Yoshida, "I only said it to say something, I didn't have a strong goal, or a great desire to do something in politics. I mean, you yourself told me the worst kind of people are the ones who decide to be politicians simply to be politicians, without any goals beyond that."

At that, Yoshida nodded. Akira having already reached that stage in his own consideration of the future showed that he had truly taken on every lesson Yoshida had given him. It made him proud on a profound level.

"It was... only recently," Akira's mind flashed back to a conversation in a Shinjuku bar, "that I started thinking again about what I really want to do. Who I really want to be. I'm still... dealing with my recent unemployment, and given how much I loved that 'job', it was difficult to think of something else to do."

Yoshida continued to nod, acknowledging Akira's rather forced retirement from the role of Phantom Thief. He didn't have the full story. It was probably best he never hear it. But still, it was obvious enough that their time was over. Their year come to a close.

Many would miss it. Akira Kurusu most of all.

"There's a reporter I know," Akira continued, "she used to do political investigation. It was a discussion with her that got me thinking about how just because I left one job, the goal behind it didn't have to change. I was outing the worst criminals, the ones with power and money protecting them from the law. I figured a reporter could do that too." He smiled but it quickly changed into a grimace. "Anyway she chewed me out too. Told me I couldn't be a reporter just to pick fights with people I didn't like. That was... well a little off-putting."

That was definitely something to mull on. Yoshida's nodding never stopped, even as he spoke. "Ichiko Ohya, yes?" When Akira looked at him in surprise, he simply smiled. "I enjoyed her columns on the Phantom Thieves. They seemed extremely well informed. It makes sense now, that you were her informant. You have a powerful network of contacts, Kurusu-kun."

"Yeah," Akira agreed without even needing to think. He knew full well his Confidants were the most important people in his life. "She told me the story about Sōma, have you heard of it?"
At that, Yoshida's nodding almost intensified to an irrational level. Akira had to point it out for the man to stop. He seemed a little dazed by the exaggerated movement. "The Sōma story," he said it with an almost relish, "It inspired me. Was part of what motivated me in recent years to try even harder, knowing there were others out there doing what they could to bring truth to the world. I'll admit, I was curious as to why in recent times Ohya-san's focus had changed to less... newsworthy articles. I imagine you are aware?"

Akira paused and considered. Then shook his head. "It's not for me to talk about."

"I understand."

"Anyway," Akira returned to the train of thought he was on, "That's me right now. I miss exposing the bad guys, but apparently the fact I still think of 'the bad guys' means I'm still too young. All I really want to do is make things right, but I don't know what to do to do that. Do you... have any ideas?"

He had an expression that was almost pleading for guidance, as if he trusted Yoshida to set him on the path. But Yoshida knew he could not make that decision for Akira, that this youth must find his own way. That the way he would find would be the right one. Nonetheless, advice could still be given. Yoshida thought.

"The pursuit of justice isn't a fundamentally unacceptable position," he mused, considering Akira's wishes. "I feel your struggle right now is a desire to target the countless unjust individuals of this world rather than injustice itself. Roles such as a member of the police, or a prosecutor, are options. The background of a prosecutor can also lead you back to politics if you so wish."

Being a police-officer didn't appeal to Akira in the least. That was Makoto's dream, not his. As for the other option, once followed by the other Niijima...

Akira chuckled. "I can't tell if Sae-san would congratulate me or kill me if I became a prosecutor." He didn't even know if Yoshida knew Sae. "God, what if I were prosecuting someone and she was the defense? I think I'd just die on the spot, it'd be easier." Yoshida laughed. Huh, maybe he did know her?

Still...

What if he did take on the role of prosecutor? Rise up within that sphere? Then he'd be alongside Makoto at the top, the leader and strategist of the Phantom Thieves positioned at the highest stations of law. The thought was almost obscene in its comedy.

But it was also somehow tempting.

"Either way," Yoshida took on the topic, redrawing Akira's attention from his own thoughts, "I have faith in your justice and beliefs. What you have been through, and learned from, are experiences few others can compare to. With that behind you, I truly believe no limit exists for you as long as you will it. The Prime Ministership itself, were you to desire it."

At that, Akira laughed.

"That'd just be a perfect cap on it all," he shook his head, earning a quizzical look from the man before him. He explained. "I rose up to the top of my year on the spiteful desire to prove people wrong about me, that I wasn't a thug. I'm going to take the top spot back home solely to show up everyone still thinking the worst of me even after I was proved innocent. So what if I went all the way to the end of that line and became Prime Minister? Not only did I take Shido's dream away, I..."
took it for myself in the end. The most spiteful thing I could possibly do after what he put me through. It's actually just really funny.”

Yoshida didn't laugh at it. Akira shook his head again.

“But yeah, a lot of people have been telling me I need to cool it on the spite. I'll use it to finish high-school, but I don't think the leader of the nation should be based on that. I'll pass.”

Yoshida frowned. “It doesn't have to be spite.”

There was something in his tone, disappointment maybe, that immediately silenced Akira. He blinked in surprise. Yoshida continued.

“Your motivation for justice, your belief in righting wrongs, that's not incompatible with the role of Prime Minister. It's idealistic, but we need someone idealistic and willing to struggle for those ideals in this world. And you are, you must understand, already a symbol. The campaign for your release has spread your name, as much as I avoided its use.”

That was a topic. Akira breathed out and shook his head. “Yeah, that's the other half, isn't it? If I got somewhere notable, the moment I did someone would be able to look at me and say 'oh wasn't he the Phantom Thief?' It's the worst kept secret, anyone could find out I was the one who testified against Shido, and as soon as they see that and that I was then arrested it'd all come together. Hell half of Shujin have guessed it already. That's not really going away.”

“The things we do never truly disappear,” Yoshida spoke wisely, the truth one he himself had learned, “all we must do is overcome our past. You have been cleared of all crimes. You are not a criminal in the eyes of the justice system. You will be able to stand up, if you so wish it.”

“And become a symbol,” Akira brought it back to Yoshida's earlier point. “If the guy who brought Shido down, who all the rumours say was the Phantom Thief, shoots for politics, plenty of people will just cult of personality that. And if I go after the Prime Ministership, it's going to bring that entire discussion to the front. I don't know if I'm ready for that.”

“It is certainly a road of trials, and not one any would force on you. You would have to choose on your own. I am merely offering possibilities.”

“No,” Akira shook his head, “I appreciate it. You've given me some things to think about. And been someone I could just talk to about this, put it all out there. This helped. I've been thinking a lot lately but this, just talking, helped. I think I'll know by the end of the school year.”

Yoshida nodded, pleased with that conclusion. If he had helped, then he was satisfied. Lending his aid to Akira Kurusu, who had brought him back from the edge and was, without question, the reason he was sitting in this office now, was all he could ever hope for.

“If you ever require my aid you need only ask.”

“Will.”

This discussion had helped. It really had. A concept was brewing in Akira's mind now, mixed together of all these different options, all these different ideas. He'd think on it further, refine it, and then let the relevant parties know.

But he was starting to taste the flavour of the future he desired. A taste that intoxicated.

The slightest curve of his smile was the subtle expression he'd take on when staring down a Shadow
he had the weakness to in the palm of his hands. Yoshida caught it, yet made no remark. Simply internalised that Akira Kurusu, leader of the Phantom Thieves, could likely stare down any uppity member of the political world without missing a beat.

Before he left, Akira and Yoshida agreed that Yoshida would find the time to meet him on the nineteenth, when Akira was making his rounds to see everyone one last time. This couldn't be a meeting, there simply wouldn't be the time, and Yoshida admitted he missed being out on the streets of Shibuya. He was going to find a way to be there more often, he insisted on it.

So when Akira left, bid farewell by Yoshida's assistant on the way, he left knowing there was one more meeting before the year would slip by. Before he'd return and take on the rest of his life.

He wasn't quite sure what that life would be yet, but he knew it would be with those who meant everything to him. And knowing that, that was enough.

He had a lot to think about.

Chapter End Notes

Before I wrote this chapter, I started struggling with the "did Yoshida make it into the Diet" question. I couldn't find a specific answer in the game itself, so it fell on me to decide. I was kinda agonising over it.

I also made the decision a few chapters earlier, during the Shinya chapter, and completely forgot about it. Luckily I picked the same choice again before noticing. So dumb.

Today's chapter is more dialogue focused than usual, no real actions alongside it, just Akira and Yoshida talking. Akira's been needing this, someone outside of his immediate social circle he trusts that he can discuss his current sense of self and future with. Thinking back on it, a lot of these chapters have involved Akira himself confiding in others, finally letting them take on the title of Confidant. It's funny that it's now it comes to pass. The future isn't quite decided on for him, but at least Akira's having proper thoughts now. Give it a little time and I'm sure he'll have something to say.

Spin the Wheel is almost over now, just two chapters left, Judgement and World. As I'd intended, the fic will be finished before the end of the month. What comes next? I know full well, and will tell you when the final chapter goes live. I hope that I can rely on your continued readership for my ongoing works, I've got a Lot in mind.

As always, thanks to all my readers and commentors. Have you considered leaving a comment? They're addictive for ficwriters - if not for me, go leave a comment on one of your favs by someone else rn, I promise you they'll love it even if it's just a single line "aaaaaaaa" at how much you like what they did. Stand by for the Judgement chapter, which I'm quite excited about, and I'll see you when it's live. Til then, bye-bye!
There was one thing, more than any other, on Sae Nijima's mind right now, and that thing was coffee. God she needed a coffee – more than she'd ever needed one before. And Sae Nijima had been through a lot before.

Struggling to rise up through the Public Prosecutor's Office had been hell. The long nights. The endless battles to gain a single inch. The demands that, now that she looked back on them, were clearly designed to push her out. The flailing of those intimidated by her dauntless intent, hoping to scare her away. And that wasn't even to start with the Phantom Thieves debacle. Things might have turned out for the best, but Sae was still fairly sure she'd lost a few years to the stress dealing with that had put her through.

So to look back on that, all of that, and then say “No, now is the moment when I have never needed a coffee more.” had to say a lot, right?

You'd think.

The bell of Leblanc, a cafe Sae's visits to had increased since the release of one Akira Kurusu from Juvenile Hall, rang, but no-one heard it. There was too much noise inside already.

“The hell you say you stupid cat?”

“Ryuji cut it out!”

“Stupid Inari.”

“What did I do?”

“Guys you're all being way too loud.”

“Eh whatever, no-one's come in all day, it's fine, right?”

A sharp meow emanated from the black cat Morgana, seated atop one of the chairs set at the cafe’s counter. Even unable to understand the enigmatic being, Sae could tell it was a cutting rebuke for the blonde-haired Ryuji Sakamoto.

And through this all, through the noise and the laughter and these kids just being themselves, hanging at the back of the shop and looking out over it with a quiet smile, Akira Kurusu met her eyes. Free and safe. Sae couldn't help it. She smiled back.

“Sis?”

Makoto was the second to notice, and the reactions after were immediate and pronounced – the entire group fitting themselves back into booth seats, quietening down, changing from taking up the entire cafe to a more reasonable arrangement. Still, given Sae appeared to be the only other customer, she couldn't help but feel a little bad for spoiling their fun.

They needed this. More than anyone else, these kids needed this. This time together, a chance to heal
after struggling for the sake of the world over the past year. Sae couldn't imagine going through what they did at that age. What frightening teenagers indeed...

Sae couldn't imagine going through what they did at that age. What frightening teenagers indeed...

Sojiro Sakura, proprietor of Leblanc and something of an unofficial adoptive father to the Phantom Thieves as a whole (alongside actual official adoptive father to one), gave a chuckle and indicated a seat. Sae fit herself into it neatly.

“I need something at least three times stronger than my usual,” she smiled in spite of the request, some of her stress already having been bled away just by seeing the energy and enthusiasm of this group. She'd fought to save them too. Fought and won. The greatest victory of her career. This reminder, it was enough to help her.

But she still wanted that coffee.

“Rough day, sis?”

The group were mostly quiet, though Sae could detect smaller conversations amongst them. Half still had their eyes trained on her, unsure about what to do. Sae nodded to them as Sojiro prepared the coffee behind her.

“You can keep being as you were, I don't mind.” They didn't really react to that, which honestly wasn't a surprise. As much as she'd assisted them, Sae was still an intruder amongst this social circle. They needed to be wild and free amongst themselves. She'd just have the coffee and go.

Makoto, not one to let Sae's troubles go ignored – or anyone's, truth be told – found her way onto the seat next to Sae and looked at her in concern. Sae shook her head with a smile. Honestly, what was her little sister trying to pull, being the caring one tempting out her older sister's problems? That was all backwards.

Although it wasn't like Sae had done a very good job of considering Makoto's own troubles this past year. A brief frown, which Makoto frowned at in return. The quiet discussions at the booths behind the two were being led by Haru and Akira, keeping a level of privacy to the two sisters. Those Phantom Thieves, they'd learned subtle wisdom far sooner than most people ever would. The older they got the more terrifying they'd become. Sae was convinced of that.

“It's nothing significant,” Sae shook her head one more time, the coffee Sojiro was preparing now in hand. Mhmm, that was what she needed. She could feel the heat revitalising her already. “Acting as a Defence Attorney is just surprisingly different from being a Prosecutor. There's a lot more interaction with the public, and things are far less rigid in the district courts. It can get exhausting juggling so much, especially with how ridiculous some of the personalities involved are.”

Sae took a sip of the coffee, savoured it for a moment, before grimacing and shaking her head.

“I was passing by a trial earlier and I swear I heard the lawyer in there attempting to cross-examine a parrot. I felt like I was losing my mind.”

A loud meow came from the cat sitting just next to the chair, clearly taking advantage of his stealthy demeanour to listen in on their conversation. Makoto sighed.

“I don't think the parrot is going to secretly be able to talk like you,” Akira spoke with an amused tone to his voice, the sound of Morgana arguing back adding more ambience to the cafe as Sae took another sip.

Soon enough the conversation of the group reached volume again, mostly spurred along by an argument with Morgana that Sae could only hear one half of. She'd accepted, with few reservations,
that Morgana actually could talk – after all he displayed intelligence that was clearly of human level – but it was still a strange thing to think about, that the cat meowing constantly at the others was actually communicating to them in words Sae just couldn't understand.

Though ultimately that was one of the least off-putting parts of the tale of the Phantom Thieves.

On the topic of their story, that was exactly what the group segued into. Following the conversation was difficult with Morgana constantly adding his input, but at the very least Sae was able to understand what they were saying as the group attempted to decide which of the Palaces they'd travelled through had the most annoying security to cope with.

The topic wavered, back and forth, between Shadows and Cognitive Beings, Palaces and Mementos. Ryuji started excitedly retelling the conflict with Kamoshida for all those who joined after, Ann, Morgana and Akira all offering their own thoughts as he went along. Sojiro, watching from behind the counter, sighed and shook his head.

“These kids, already reliving their glory days, they need to get out more.”

Sae laughed lightly, Makoto sitting by her side the only one able to hear this conversation as well. “They need this.”

“Yeah,” the owner of Leblanc nodded, topping up Sae's coffee of his own accord, “they do.”

It was interesting, Sae noted, listening to the stories of the Phantom Thieves. She'd only been half paying attention at first, but soon found herself actively engrossed as the group swapped the storyteller role amongst themselves. This was different to Akira's redacted tale, guarding the names of his compatriots, giving only the basic information while struggling with the drug in his veins. This story was alive, told with energy and humour and revelry. It was something special.

Sae, deep in her heart, felt thankful that, in some small way, she had been part of it.

“Sometimes,” the group were surprised to hear from her, all quieting down and looking at her when she spoke, “I can't help but wish I'd been able to help more. To go into the Metaverse and aid you. You did fine without me, I suppose I was just... a little jealous that you were able to make things right and all I could do was... just wait.”

There was a moment’s silence, thought rife amongst the Thieves. Akira was the one to speak. He looked Sae directly in the eyes.

“We almost did invite you.”

A hiss of breath emerged from Makoto but Sae, with eyes widening, paid it no mind. What did he...

“We had to leave your Palace intact,” Futaba Sakura, adoptive daughter of Sojiro, a hacker of immense ability, was the one to explain. “So while your Shadow had accepted defeat, the Palace still remained for a couple of days until it faded away. While it was up, if we'd brought you into it, you likely would have immediately faced your Shadow and gained a Persona. Then you'd be just like us!”

Sae stared. Her, almost a Phantom Thief? She'd confessed, to her own surprise, that a small part of her had desired to aid the others, but that part had been tempered by knowing it had been impossible. But now she was told it had almost come to pass? She was silent.

Akira spoke again.
“We had a debate about it, whether it was right. Ultimately we didn’t go ahead with it. Sorry.”

Sae blinked.

“No,” she shook her head, stilling her heart, “that’s okay. It was probably for the best.” Makoto, still sitting by Sae's side, was attempting to control her breathing. Sae could already tell how that debate had gone. “You don't need to tell me about the discussion.”

The group shuffled in their seats, slightly awkward once more. Sae's intrusion into their conversation had ruined their pace – while welcome as an observer, her playing the participant had been a bit much for them. Still, with her own curiously now lit...

“Still,” Sae wondered and, in wondering and exposure to the presence of Akira Kurusu – a figure who somehow teased out all the deepest thoughts of those around him without even trying –, voiced her thoughts, “I cannot imagine what my Shadow was like. The specifics were never described to me during my interrogation.” The group was still staring at her, wondering what to say. “How would you describe that other me?”

“Hot.”

All eyes widened, all heads swivelled to stare at Ryuji, who blinked in surprise at how quickly his own response had come out. The sound of a chair being pushed out from the counter gave away Makoto rising to her feet, her back to the booth the majority of the Phantom Thieves were sitting at. Ryuji immediately attempted to seek backup.

“I-I don't mean that in a weird way!” His hands were up in protest of the attention now upon him, Makoto slowly turning to face the blonde-haired individual. “It was like, objectively, like it was the point! Guys,” he turned to the others, a pleading look on his face as Death By Queen slowly approached, “back me up here. Makoto’s sister's Shadow was...”

A brief pause hung in the air, before Ann sighed and leaned back into the lounge. “Hot.”

Futaba nodded. “Super hot.”

With a Joker-like grin, Akira cast his eyes over the Nijima pair. “Dynamite.”

Yusuke leaned forward from where he sat. “I must admit she did possess a strikingly aesthetically pleasing design.”

Her shock now split between multiple Thieves, Makoto could only stand there staring over the group. Ryuji silently thanked whatever gods were above for the others bailing him out of that one.

“I'm not quite sure how to take that,” Sae, in opposition to her younger sister, was keeping good humour for this conversation, though it was affected somewhat by having a group of teens describe her, or at least another version of her, as ‘hot’. That was not something she'd ever experienced before. “Though I must admit now I wish more than ever that I could have seen her.”

“Eh, Yusuke could probably draw you a picture.”

It was stunning, really, how soon after being saved from the wrath of Queen by the others Ryuji immediately put himself back in her cross-hairs. Makoto was once more focused in upon him and he was once more attempting to shrink back into the lounge. He wasn't having any luck.

“Actually,” Yusuke's interruption saved Ryuji's life, drew all eyes to him. He had a sketchbook in his hand, and was flipping through the pages. Makoto, still doing her best to stop this from unfolding,
shook her head in distress.

“No....”

“Seriously dude?” Ryuji almost launched himself across the table to get a look at Yusuke's sketchbook, the artist closing it tight and pulling it back towards himself, “You really drew her?”

“The aesthetics within each Palace are so wildly different I would be a fool not to capture all I could from them!” Yusuke objected to the look he was being given by the others for this revelation, “I have drawn many things from many Palaces, including the Shadows we have encountered within them.”

Makoto's attempts to stop this situation from unfolding fell down around her as Sae rose up to her full height, towering over her younger sister. Rapidly losing control, Makoto could only stare at Sae and shake her head. Sae smiled.

“Sorry, Makoto, I'm invoking bigger sister privilege.”

A loud snort of amusement came from Futaba, the others all looking various forms of amused at the statement. A moment later and the declaration of “Big Sis Makoto has been outranked” emerged from the orange-haired girl.

Sae glanced at Makoto with amusement, who had been hit with far too many sucker-punches from far too many directions to be able to handle what was happening right now. “Big Sis Makoto?” She raised an eyebrow, her younger sister giving her a pleading look in response. “I'll have to remember that.”

A hand outstretched to the table that half of the group was sitting at and Yusuke handed her the sketchbook, the specific page he'd flipped to held open with his thumb. Opening it up, Sae examined the picture within.

Silence hung in the cafe's air.

“Huh.” After almost a half minute's silence Sae finally spoke, “It's been a long time since I last saw that dress.”

“No.”

The shocked expression of the group staring at Sae was amusing in and of itself, but the almost despair with which Makoto had declared that 'no' was stunning. Sae smiled lightly, handing the sketchbook back to the artist.

“It's not what you think,” Sae spoke to Makoto directly, pulling her sister back from the event horizon of utter shock at this revelation, “It's not that I ever owned or wore that dress. It wasn't mine.”

The group was completely silent, hanging on Sae's every word. No-one could believe this was happening. Makoto least of all.

“It belonged to a friend,” Sae continued, “from back in my university days. She enjoyed going out to clubs, and wore that dress when doing so.” Sae paused for a moment, recalling faded memories to the forefront of her mind. “I remember what she said, when she wore it, how she said it made her feel like she could rule the world. I envied that, in a way, and at times imagined how I would look were I the one wearing it. As it turns out, the answer is quite good.”

“Damn good,” Ryuji offered from where he was sitting. Sae glanced at him.
“That's enough of that.”

“Yes ma'am.”

Morgana made some sort of yowling comment that broke tittering laughter out of the majority of the Thieves. Makoto's shoulders slumped, the discoveries of today being almost too much for her. This was ridiculous.

“Honestly,” Sae put a hand to her chin, considering, “I haven't thought of that friend in years. Maybe I should try to reconnect with her.”

A nod from Akira, smiling at the entire scene which had played out, served as encouragement. It would be good to renew old friendships, now that Sae was free of the life that had been, in its own way, choking the life out of her.

“The tattoos are a bit much though,” Sae continued her evaluation, “I doubt they would ever suit me.”

Some sort of choking pleading noise emerged from Makoto at the even joking suggestion of her older sister being tattooed similar to her Shadow. Sae smiled and patted the top of her sister's head. That was enough teasing, it seemed.

“I appreciate your consideration while I was here,” Sae nodded to the others, reaching back to collect her bag and offer payment to Sojiro, who seemed surprised by the money emerging from her, “but it's time for me to be off. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

A chorus of “goodbyes” emerged from the group, Makoto somehow stumbling out an “I'll see you at home tonight”. With a smile Sae turned, taking her leave of Leblanc and its Phantom Thieves. That was enough of that.

As the door opened and the bell rang, a final call of “See you Bigger Sis Niijima!” emerged from Futaba. Thankfully Sae's snort of laughter was drowned out by Makoto's indignant exclamation of the hacker girl's name. The door to Leblanc closed, and Sae Niijima was on her way.

It wasn't even a question that those kids had changed her life. Saved it, really. For them, and their futures, Sae would continue on, and stand up for what was right. Stand up for justice and defend those in need.

No matter how many household pets needed to be interrogated along the way.

Chapter End Notes

Keen eyed readers might detect some slightly different vibes in this chapter compared to previous ones. It may even be possible to compare this chapter to some of the first. There's a reason for that.

I confess! This is the very first Spin the Wheel chapter I ever wrote. Back when I was first designing this fic and coming up with ideas, the "Sae visits Leblanc and they talk about her Shadow" thought came to me and I ended up plotting out this entire chapter. I couldn't let that sit, so I wrote it immediately and then sat on it as I did all the others. In that time I discovered a lot about my headcanon Akira Kurusu that certainly had no
bearing at all on this chapter, but then Akira was only slightly a part of this chapter to begin with. This is more in line with my original plan of a vignette into each Confidant, rather than, as Spin the Wheel evolved into, an exploration of Akira's recovery told through his interaction with his Confidants.

Still! I like what Spin the Wheel became, and it was always a prototype of my Persona 5 style, an exploration of characters and how I handle their personalities and voices. To be honest as I was writing the Yoshida chapter I started to think maybe I should write a new Sae chapter and post this as a oneshot, but in the end I was satisfied enough with Akira's mental state post-Yoshida that this is what I chose to put here.

Anyway! I hope you enjoyed this chapter, to be honest while it was one of the first it's also one of my favourites, I was really pleased with tying in Sae's envy theme to the design of her Shadow in the way that I did. Yoshida's chapter got a whole slew of comments which I really enjoyed, so thank you all so much for that. Comments really are the lifeblood for ficwriters I feel. Knowing we're reaching and entertaining people empowers us to keep on going!

One chapter remains. I know its title, and its contents. I'll put it up in either two or three days, and a fairly sizable author's note will celebrate its conclusion and speak of what's next. Buckle up folks, it's going to be a wild November.

As a final note, Futaba's "Big Sis Makoto" is something I myself used for Makoto multiple times over my own Persona playthrough. It never really came up before, but it's definitely a phrase I need to remember and use at relevant points. It's a goodun.

Thank you so much to all readers, I do so hope you enjoyed, and I will see you with the next one. Bye-bye!
This World of His

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

3/20, Monday Daytime

If you hold on life won’t change

As the wheels spun, as clouds swept by, sunlight played out over the water, and the van continued on, as music played a tune that resonated in all their hearts, Akira Kurusu breathed out and smiled. Around him were his friends, his confidants, the closest people in his life. Something beyond friendship or family, instrumental parts of his life. Extensions of his own self, the Akira that he was only complete with them beside him. The life he wanted to live.

“I’ve been hearing stories about a group of high-schoolers extorting local middle-schoolers, and I’m not sure what to do. Does anyone have advice?”

Haru Okumura lowered the phone she had read the message from, raising her other hand in the same motion to rest a curled finger beneath her lips. Futaba was the first to suggest an answer.

“We run ‘em over!”

“Come on!” Ann’s attempt to recriminate Futaba’s joking response to the Phan-site request was marred by the laughter in her voice, the younger girl's energetic suggestion of homicide enough to spread smiles across the majority of the former Phantom Thieves. Thoughts bounced from one individual to another, the response Haru would post constructed by the eight-fold group. A contented smile came from the auburn-haired girl as she submitted their answer, before she returned to watching the ocean to their left. Their fifth response so far.

“Well how much this helps,” Ryuji did his best to watch the ocean as well, but being on the right side of the van had to look across Akira and Yusuke both to see it. “I guess it’s all about trusting everyone to do what's right now, yeah?”

“That’s part of our social reform,” Makoto couldn’t give answers at the same speed as the others, focused on driving as she was, but still proved able to give her opinion when called upon. “Inspiring others to stand up too.”

“Yeah good point,” Ryuji nodded to that. “Gotta change the world in our own way, right?” The group at large nodded to this. Phantom Thieves no longer, but their ability to bring change was still their own. They simply had to express it.

That was a topic Akira had spent a significant amount of thought on over the past few weeks.

Onwards the van went, tracing the coast of Shizuoka’s south. Akira had left early, knowing it would be a long trip home, and so even after a few hours’ drive it had yet to reach midday. Although, having left so early meant that...

“Ohhh, I bet there’s the most incredible fish out there!”

Morgana had hopped into the back seat of the van, settling on Haru’s lap while staring out at the ocean. His mention of food set the topic in everyone’s minds, and Yusuke was quick to capitalise on the thought.
“We should stop and attempt to catch some.”

It genuinely took a moment for anyone to know what to say about that.

“Are you kidding, Inari? We’re kinda going somewhere right now!”

“It’s only sensible! One should never pass up the opportunity to harvest a meal!”

“Yusuke, we’re going to be stopping for lunch soon anyway.”

“I think it wiser we attempt to retrieve food ourselves.”

Akira gave a small smile while Ryuji bluntly shoved into the conversation.

“You ain’t got any money again huh?”

“Well, I…”

“Yusuke,” Futaba’s giggling, Ann’s shaking of her head, the quiet, judging whispers of Morgana that caused Haru to hold a hand over her mouth, quietened when Akira spoke up. Yusuke’s expression was of one chastised. Akira just smiled. “We can cover lunch.”

For as much as that had been a pattern of the last year, Yusuke still seemed somewhat concerned by the offer, even attempting to refute it with insistence that he would be able to provide for himself. It didn’t land.

“Do you even know how to fish?”

“I…”

“Hey Ryuji,” Ann leaned her head back, hair spilling over the back of the seat she was in before the other blonde, “I can’t reach Yusuke from here, get him for me?”

“Got it,” Ryuji nodded, turning to face the recalcitrant artist, who had immediately leaned even further towards the window with an offended ‘Excuse me?’. Ryuji smiled before tapping Akira’s shoulder. “Hey Akira, get him for us?”

Akira’s own smile widened, Yusuke’s narrowed eyes watching him as, without breaking eye-contact, he stretched out his right arm and tapped Makoto once. “Makoto, would you?”

“On it,” Makoto’s eyes never left the road, following its gentle path beside the sea, “Haru, if you please?”

“Of course!” Now Haru was the one to nod, Yusuke’s head whipping around to examine the backseat as everyone bar Makoto now stared at him. Haru smiled sweetly. “Mona-chan?”

Unwilling to take his eyes off of Yusuke, Akira could only see from the corner of his own as Morgana hopped off of Haru’s lap and walked across the back seat of the van, ending up before Futaba. She grinned at him and held out a hand. He set a paw in it to complete the baton pass.

“Alright!” And with that Futaba Sakura, unleashed, raised her phone up from her lap. “Presenting Yusuke Kitagawa’s Top Ten Cries for Help, in Web Search Form!”

“What!?”

“Number ten!” Futaba ignored Yusuke’s outburst, making sure she was pressed as hard against the
side of the van as she could be to keep away from his reaching for her phone. “Best flavour enhancers for bean sprouts!” A chuckle rippled across the others as Yusuke looked absolutely mortified. Futaba continued with glee written across her face. “Number nine! Minimum sleeping and eating requirements!”

Ryuji actually spent a moment looking almost genuinely concerned as he stared across at Yusuke. “Dude.”

“Number eight!” The orange-haired internet demon didn’t waste a second. “Accidentally drank paint water.”

“Yusuke!” The exclamation of shock came from at least three sources, Yusuke seeming to collapse in on himself as Futaba continued.

“It was only the one time.”

“Number seven! Tokyo edible wild mushrooms, nuts and berries! Number six! Ohh, this one’s my favourite, check this out—“

“Futaba,” Makoto rescued Yusuke from his mortification, “Can you find a good place up ahead to stop for lunch?”

A breath of relief came from the artist as Futaba nodded, saluted, and gave a hearty ‘on it!’ Akira turned to tilt his head in her direction. “Send me that list later.” The look Yusuke gave him was met with the most innocent smile Akira could possibly manage. Haru, the only other who could see it from this angle, immediately started to giggle.

“We’re by the ocean so we gotta get fish, right?” Ryuji turned around to Futaba, “Make sure it has fish.”

“Finally we agree on something!” Morgana’s yowl matched his feline form vaulting back over into the middle seat, settling between Ryuji and Akira. Ryuji stared him down.

“You sure are moving around a lot ain’tcha? Getting antsy to get out?”

“We need a break!” Morgana stared Ryuji back. “Staying cooped up in here for too long is bad for you!”

“Uh-huh,” Ryuji seemed dismissive of Morgana’s opinion. “You just need to use the crapper don’t you?”

“Ryuji!”

“You dumbass!”

“Gross!”

The calls went along the right side of the van, from front to back, chastising Ryuji’s vulgarity. He just smirked at Morgana who was staring daggers at him. Akira smiled at the scene.

“Probably best you are staying with me,” Morgana whipped around faster than should be healthy at Akira’s words, everyone else’s focus returning to him as well. He just smiled. “If you stayed in Tokyo without me around to break things up you and Ryuji would have killed each other in about a week.”
“Like I’d lose to him!”

“Like hell that cat would take me out!”

“Truly,” Yusuke observed the two with an amused eye, “your similarities make for the worst possible conflicts.”

“What similarities?!”

“Hey screw you Yusuke, Futaba what’s number six?”

“Right here!”

“Futaba!” Makoto’s voice silenced the rowdiness of the van. “Do you know where we’re heading?”

“Yep, got it planned out. Third exit.”

“Thank you.”

It was a small coastal town, taking advantage of its position to make the most of being a stopping point for those travelling between Tokyo and Nagoya. A row of shops and eateries stretched just before the beach, and so the van carrying the former Thieves came to a stop before the one Futaba had indicated. The group piled out and began to spread around.

“Restrooms just over there!”

“Thanks Futaba.”

Before long everyone had set up on benches facing the sea, various burgers, chips, and seafood purchased and spread between them. Yusuke had tried, one last time, to argue something about procuring his own food, but Akira had won him over by insisting he join them for their last meal together.

Saying it like that had quickly brought silence to the group, but it wasn’t anything they didn’t already know. Just… hearing it sucked was all.

It was a long trip out to his hometown; even if the others stayed for only a short while they’d be back in Tokyo way after dark. And there still was school tomorrow, Akira leaving just before the final week. Those few days and spring break were all he had to properly reunite with his parents before the next school year would start. Who knows how that would go, he surely didn’t.

Well, at least he had Morgana. Akira absently scratched the back of the feline’s head, a gesture Morgana only allowed some of the time, depending on his mood. He allowed it now. Maybe that was just because of the slice of fish he’d been given.

For a little bit it was quiet. The eight of them, arranged across a few benches, sat and ate, watching the ocean. They were each thinking of the future, of the year apart between them, of the few times they’d be back together in that time. And then of Akira’s true return and the absolute victory that would be for all of them. The Phantom Thieves were over, but these eight, these friends, they were eternal. That was what truly mattered.

They’d be together again. Each swore it silently, only in their own mind, yet knew the same promise was being made by those beside them. It was their truth.

It was when the food was just about done, waste thrown into bins, group considering piling back into
the van, that Akira stood up and took a few steps forward, the point where grass gave way to sand where he stopped. He spent a moment looking out at the ocean, breathe in, out, in, out, then turned back to the others, raising his head with a smile. They all fixed him with looks that said they knew he had something to say.

He did.

“You are,” he rarely spoke honestly like this, kept his own thoughts internal. In youth he’d never found himself opening up to others, always the quiet one. In adolescence he hadn’t quite isolated, but wasn’t proactive in seeking out others either. One of the quiet types in the background. When he was accused of his crime everyone just immediately assumed he’d snapped, that his silence was repression, and that a violent thug had always lurked beneath the surface. So quick to brand him. In Tokyo he’d thought he’d be nothing. Empty and alone.

That was the furthest thing from the truth. “all incredible.”

A rush of warmth followed the announcement, each of the seven before him feeling Akira’s words reach their heart. Their leader, who they’d followed into the greatest of dangers trusting in absolutely, who’d given everything for their cause and for their lives. Who cared for them so much. His smile was true and shook each to the core.

“When I came to Tokyo I thought that was it for me. That I’d just spend the year alone and miserable. That even if I got past my probation I’d always be marked for the rest of my life. At first, I wondered if I’d even be able to keep going.” Ryuji took a quick step forward but Akira shook his head, staying his friend’s approach. There was more.

“But that’s not what happened. Instead you all found me. And now I can’t imagine being without you. You’re all the most important people in the world to me. I’m,” genuine emotion. He could feel it reach his eyes as his voice cracked. “I’m really going to miss you.”

There was a moment, a brief pause as the raw feeling he’d expressed, more than most had ever seen, settled on the ones before him. Then they were upon him.

Futaba was the first to reach, arms wrapping around Akira’s torso, head burying into his chest. Ryuji and Ann hit him next, each grabbing around a shoulder. Haru somehow worked her way in between them, while Makoto and Yusuke, only slightly more reserved, formed at the outside of the group hug. Morgana wound his way around Akira’s legs. He smiled and felt warm.

“Idiot,” Ryuji was the one to say it, voice emerging without Akira being able to turn his head to look at him, “Why’ve you gotta go say it like that now I’m getting all- ah shit.” Ann sniffed loudly. Akira’s smile remained.

The emotion pile continued for a while longer until the group broke apart, but only slightly. Still close enough for any of them to be able to reach out to Akira. He looked so gentle to them. If only there was a way to keep him, to turn the van around and go back to Tokyo and not let him go.

If only.

“But I am coming back,” when he spoke again they all watched his face, all hung on his words, “and we will be together again. And… more than that…”

Now they were focused. Now they saw something. Not quite Joker, not quite the savage hunger of a hunter, but something with perhaps similar energy and drive. Something more refined. More mature.

More ready to face the world itself.
“I said it. And I meant it. You’re all incredible. And you’re all going to be incredible. That’s us. A bunch of incredible people. And that… that means something. We can make it mean something. That’s the future I want. That’s what I’ve decided to pursue.”

“You know what you want to do?” Makoto was the one to ask it, lips parted slightly. She’d asked once and Akira hadn’t been ready to discuss it, something she’d only realised after the fact. Haru had tried to reassure her that she hadn’t hurt Akira by pushing him so much on the topic, but it had still hurt her. She hadn’t meant to do so, not with him so recently released. The last thing she ever wanted was to hurt him.

Akira shook his head.

“No, what I’ll be doing, I don’t know it yet. But I’ll figure it out. Because I know why I’ll be doing it.” His eyes moved from one to the other. Focused on each. Nodded and acknowledged. “Because all of us are going to be there, in the future, and all of us can do something different. So between us all, between the eight of us, we can do anything. The world’s not perfect. We fought for it, and we made it better, but there’s a long way to go still. But we can keep going. We can keep changing it, and working together to make a difference. All of us. What I want is… for us to still call on one another, and to see how to make the future better and work together to do so. Still a team. Still together. Let’s make that the future we believe in.”

Akira had never made long speeches before. Final words to the Shadows they faced were quick and direct, lines conceived and delivered in moments. This though, this he’d been working on. His instructions by Yoshida, experience in speaking to others, they’d coalesced into a skillset now available to Akira Kurusu. A leader not only by deeds but by words.

They’d follow him to the end of the world. They had once already, after all.

Ryuji was the first to agree.

“Hell yeah! No matter what we’ll stick together and change the world! Same as we always did, right?”

“Yeah!” Ann nodded, “No way we won’t! We’ll keep on going and fight against what’s wrong, help change things for the better. You can count on us!”

“I would be a fool not to follow your path,” Yusuke smiled, watching over this scene, conceiving the title of the painting he would draw from it. ‘Road to the Future’, perhaps. “You have, without fail, always opened my eyes to more of the world. Following you I truly believe I will one day behold it in full and paint of that view. You’ll have me at your side to the end.”

Makoto moved forward, rested a hand on Akira’s shoulder. He nodded at her and smiled. She smiled back. “No matter where we go, we’ll be able to reach out to each other. No matter what happens, we’ll call on one another. Our reform, it’s not over. It’s just getting started.”

“I’m with you!” Futaba threw a fist to the sky, nodding rapidly as she did. “You can rely on the original Medjed, the great Alibaba, any day of the week! Let’s change the world!”

Haru, hands clasped together, took a moment to survey the sight. People promising to be together, to rely on one another, not for gain or loss, but simply to be together because they wished to be. That end-goal, she believed in it, but she also knew it was not that alone.

It was simply a way to bind those who truly loved one another together. A goal to live together for. Feelings of friendship, of closeness, she’d never imagined she’d be able to have. They’d found her
“We won’t back down!” She announced, the others all smiling at her as she stepped forward, “Because we can change the world! So we’ll do it together, no matter what!”

With a leap, Morgana settled on Akira’s shoulder. His blue eyes stared into Akira’s own. “I said I’m following you to become human,” he spoke in a quieter voice, but it was one all the others could still hear, “but it’s not just for that. It’s because I want to still be with you all, and I want to go into the future just like this. So yeah, let’s keep it up. And when the time comes if we’re called to, we’ll take the world again! As many times as we need to for its sake! Because that’s who the Phantom Thieves are!”

A cheer went up from the group, any observer there may be considering it strange it was the yowling of the cat at the end of their motivational speeches that elicited the reaction. But they didn’t care. They had each other. That was enough.

And when the journey ended, when Akira stood before his family home and each of the others piled onto him, insisting he keep in contact, swearing that they’d better see him again as often as he could, he knew it wasn’t the end.

This wasn’t over, they weren’t through, the future wasn’t bleak. Just a moment, a brief time apart, and they’d be together again. To face what came with heads held high.

Together forever. They knew it would be true.

And though his heart hurt as the van finally took its leave, heads and hands sticking out of every window waving at him, calling out promises to see each other again, Akira kept his smile. Because the future was just ahead.

The future they’d take as well.

And the wheel continued to turn.

Chapter End Notes

And so the tale comes to a close. Akira isn't quite sure yet what he's going to do in the future, but he knows why he wants to do it. Over the next year he'll hone in on exactly the best position to be in so that he and his seven fellows will be a force unstoppable. And they really will change the world all over again.

Originally, the title of this story was referring to Akira being in place for the last section of the game. From his release until his return to his family home, he wasn't really progressing anything, or moving towards any goals. He was just stuck in place, spinning his wheels. When Chihaya introduced the Wheel of Fortune it more changed to Akira turning towards a better future, and in the end we saw that the wheel moved on in the finale, always to the future. So it's more about spinning in place to build up enough momentum to overcome the roadblocks holding Akira back. He finally gained the power to move forward.

Unsurprisingly, it was thanks to those around him.
Spin the Wheel is now complete! I've learned a lot about all the characters in writing it, some more than others, Akira most of all. My Akira was mostly undefined, bits and pieces come from very good fics I'd read before starting this one, but still coalesced from my own mind into form. He's someone who struggles on his own after being cut out of the narrow lane he'd believed himself on in life before the events of P5 started, but rebuilt his sense of self thanks to those he could support, and in turn be supported by. Akira is held up by his interpersonal connections, and while that's going to be harder over the next year, because there's an end-goal he believes in he'll make it through. Don't worry about him. He'll be fine.

What comes next? Many more works! With November just ahead, I'm gearing up for the NaNoWriMo spirit, but not in the "do one 50k work" form. Instead I want to try and write every day without fail. That won't mean a new fic or chapter every day here, just that I'll be making forawrd-progress every time. The next fic will go live somewhere in the first few days of November, and I hope to see you all there. Look out for it, its name will be: Confidential Confessions, a Tale of Third Choices.

In the meantime, did you enjoy this fic? Let me know! Lots of people have given me feedback and I've super enjoyed it all. Consider sharing with someone else, as now no longer being updated as it is, the methods to find this fic have decreased. On the topic of my fics, if you're a fan of the style of this one and ALSO a reader of Boku no Hero Academia, consider checking out my works archive, as I've done a few BNHA fics before. Specifically the fic 'Getting to Know You' is very similar to this one, in that it's a chapter per character exploration of Class 1A. Hopefully it entertains.

Okay, I think that's it for me. Thank you to all readers, and look forward to what comes next, I am not nearly done.

We're in the for long haul.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!