into the sea

by unsungillumination

Summary

[spoilers for the whole game!]

my line falls with an empty hook,
yet fools the world.

a split second decision with long term consequences...

in the engine room, the phantom thieves leap into action in time to save akechi goro's life.
now, with one of their greatest threats holed up in the attic of cafe leblanc, each of them must take the time to try and understand this boy - neither friend nor foe - who doesn't know where he stands with even himself.
(OR: akechi goro deserves a real redemption arc and a chance to connect with each of the phantom thieves individually, whether they become friends or not. so i'm taking things into my own hands. vigilante (poetic) justice style!)

Notes

(the title and italicised lines in the summary are from a poem called "DESTERLAND" by hyam plutzik!)
Chapter Summary

the phantom thieves rescue akechi from the engine room and try to figure out what happens next.

Chapter Notes

this is the set-up chapter! from now on, each chapter will basically be each thief spending time with akechi alone, trying to help him and get to know him. like a bunch of character studies. :)

i hope you enjoy this! i've been working on it for a very long time and i'm proud of how it's turning out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

SMASH.

Precious moments trickle by after Akechi’s shot rings out, and the Phantom Thieves stand frozen. Glass shards shatter against the floor. A delicate tinkle; one that roars in their ears.

“The watertight bulkhead…”

It’s Skull who snaps into motion first, makes the connection before the announcement can finish. “No way,” he growls, and makes a mad dash for the other side of the room. “No way he gets away from us again!”

“Skull -?!”

Akechi makes a gasping sound and flinches away as Skull grabs hold of his arm, yanking him back towards the team. “C’mon,” Skull snaps. “Ain’t got time for this shit!”

Akechi twists back as he’s dragged unceremoniously across the floor, still reeling. He takes a long look at the Shadows – and at his cognitive self, who is rapidly recovering.

“– evacuate at once.”

“Come on!” yells Skull, and Akechi’s head snaps back in time to see Skull to take a running leap for the wall, which has just begun to rise.

Akechi grunts in pain, his shoulder making a nasty popping sound as Skull’s grip wrenches his arm from its socket. By instinct more than anything else, he struggles to clamber over the rapidly rising wall just behind Skull. Joker lunges forward to pull Skull over, and the others leap to help a split second behind - just as the cognitive Akechi recovers its coordination enough to raise its gun.

It fires a final shot with a frustrated scream, and Akechi howls.
But the others manage to drag him across just as the partition closes, and the Phantom Thieves tumble into an undignified heap, and Akechi loses a shoe to the hounds.

“He’s hurt,” murmurs Noir as they huddle in the central hall. Her voice wavers as she glances his way. Drowned in medicines, Akechi’s eyes are blank and his head lolling, and Skull yanks him upright by the back of his suit. “Our restoratives aren’t strong enough to heal injuries this bad… We need to hurry…”

“Someone needs to take him to the safe room until we can head back,” says Queen. She, too, looks uncertainly at Akechi. His shoulder’s been set in a haphazard sling with Skull’s necktie, the ragged wound in his side awkwardly patched with a collection of loose bandages, and Mona is trying to figure out how to stuff a lightsabre into a fanny pack.

Akechi twitches. Joker’s right glove is shoved into his mouth. He doesn’t seem to like it.

Queen continues. “The rest of us will go and unlock the door to the assembly hall.”

“I’ll take him,” says Joker. The others look at him.

“You sure that’s a good idea?” Panther asks.

Joker shrugs. “No.”

“All right,” says Fox, and turns to make for the large door.

Noir casts a long, worried look at Joker, who nods at her and cracks a small smile. It isn’t reassuring.

She turns away too, and the others trail behind.

Joker looks at Akechi, who stares back. He’s long lost the reptilian sneer; the dull intensity in his eyes now is cornered prey – livestock in a slaughterhouse – game at the wrong end of a gun – nothing left to lose.

His irises seem to shake. Vibrating with potential energy, he stands on the verge of darting all over for an exit or collapsing to the floor like an abandoned marionette.

Joker nudges him forward, tugging him to the safe room by his good arm. He complies with a lurch; trembling with something or something else.

The sea roars outside the window. Akechi spits out the glove.

“You could have done that anytime,” Joker points out, observing him quietly from the windowsill. Akechi glares, but the fuel behind his eyes is burning low.
He doesn’t say anything. Neither does Joker. But the silence that fills the space in their stead is a lapse of nothing.

Sojiro pauses, up to his arms in dish soap. Water taps steadily into the filled sink from the leaky faucet, running rivulets down the pot he’s washing. It begins to leak into his stilled gloves. He doesn’t notice.

“That’s Akechi,” he says.

“You brought a murderer into my café.”

“You brought a murderer into my café.”

“We’re bringing him into my room,” corrects Akira.

The boy sounds so tired. Sojiro shakes his head. “You want me to adopt the guy who killed –” a guilty glance at Futaba – “people?”

“Won’t even know he’s here,” says Akira.

The party is halfway up the stairs. Progress is swift as a stream trickling up a mountain, with a quarter of the enthusiasm. The student council president is muttering furiously to the cat, who meows frantically back.

The detective’s good hand is bound to the Sakamoto boy’s wrist with the cat’s collar. Blood leaks from his coat and a fancy scarf crosses his chest in a hurried attempt at a sling. There’s a sock in his mouth.

“Don’t get murder all over my floorboards,” he mutters, and Akira smiles.

Sojiro glances at Futaba, a question in his knitted brows.

“I’m cool,” she says.
“Are you?”

She shrugs. “No. But it’s cool anyway.”

She hops off the stool and trails after Akira.

Sojiro watches after them for a long moment. Then he pulls off his gloves and towels off his hands, reaching for the landline with a long-suffering sigh.

There’s room on the sofa for two. Maybe three.

Akechi stakes his claim. He holds his hand helpfully out for Ryuji to detach himself and fasten the collar roughly to the arm of the seat; inclines his head politely as Ryuji scowls and backs away to settle against the shelf. The girls crowd onto the futon. Akira hovers by the stairs. Yusuke trips over a mascot on the floor.

Dr. Takemi takes one look at Akechi when she arrives and says, “He’s been shot.”

“That all it takes to get a doctorate?” mumbles Ryuji, and Ann sticks a leg out to kick him.

Dr. Takemi casts a sharp glance at Akira. “Are you going to tell me what happened here?” she asks, and shakes her head when Akira stays silent. “Of course you’re not,” she mutters. “All right. Sock in his mouth. Tied to a chair. Dislocated shoulder and a gunshot wound to the side. Standard teenage fun.”

“He might also be in shock,” Makoto whispers, and Dr. Takemi rolls her eyes.

“Step back,” she says, and bears down on the boy with her sleeves pushed up to the elbows and a blazing determination to save a life she can’t seem to find in his eyes.

Akira clears his throat. “We should meet back here tomorrow,” he says quietly, moving closer to the others so the doctor doesn’t hear.

Makoto nods. “We’ll need to decide if our approach needs adjusting now that –” her eyes flicker briefly to Akechi slumped over on the couch; silent even after the doctor irritably discards the sock – “circumstances have – changed.”

“Not to mention that fake Akechi bastard’s still loose in the Palace,” Ryuji points out. “Too much to hope that his shot –” he jerks his head at the couch – “was enough to take down that piece of cognitive shit.”

Morgana nods. “I don’t know how cognitive beings heal wounds,” he admits. “I doubt it’s dead. It’s probably waiting for us.”

“We can take it down,” Ann enthuses. “I mean, we beat the real one.”

“I don’t know,” Haru murmurs, and glances guiltily around when a sombre shadow passes over the group. “Oh – I’m sorry – I didn’t mean to sound so down…”

Yusuke shakes his head. “No, you’re right to be cautious,” he says. “We have no idea what that monster has up his sleeve – not to mention it’s likely working with Shido’s shadow. It would be
“foolish to underestimate them.”

“Do we take Akechi with us…?” Futaba asks hesitantly, and everyone looks at her. She flushes. “I mean – I don’t want him, but he might be useful! And – I don’t just want to leave him with Sojiro…”

“That’s a good point,” says Morgana. “I hadn’t considered that.”

“No way,” Ryuji says firmly. “He’s not coming with us.”

Haru nods. “I don’t think it’s a good idea,” she says. “He could prove a danger to us – and –” She hesitates, then seems to make up her mind with a frown. “It wouldn’t feel right,” she finishes.

A vague murmur of agreement passes over the group.

Akira shakes his head. “We can decide tomorrow,” he says.

Morgana nods fervently. “What we need now is to get some sleep,” he says. “Go home and meet back here tomorrow morning.”

They glance at each other with tired eyes and nod. One by one, they file out of the attic, casting wary looks at Akechi. Dr. Takemi is still leaning over him, her brow furrowed and muttering darkly.

“Get me some water,” she snaps at Ann suddenly, who jumps with an ‘eep’ and scurries down to the sink.

Ryuji pauses by the stairs, waiting for Akira’s level gaze to land on him. He scuffs at the floorboards with his heel.

“Hey, man,” he starts, sounding guilty, but Akira shakes his head.

“Nothing to be sorry for,” he says, with a small smile. “You saved a life. Thanks, Ryuji.”

Ryuji stares. Then he laughs quietly and claps Akira on the back.

“Dunno how you do it, dude,” he says, fond, and takes his leave as Ann reappears to thrust a jug of water at the doctor with a frantic bow.

“What will you do,” and Akira and Morgana jump at the low voice they haven’t heard all evening. “What will you do when they start looking for me?”

Akira blinks slowly at him. It’s Morgana who finally answers.

“Whatever we would’ve done if you’d really died in there,” he says, and Akechi falls silent again.

In the morning, the sock makes its glorious return.

It’s Futaba’s sock. She takes a little too much pleasure shoving it into his mouth, just as she had the
night before. (To his credit, he had only spent half the train ride to Yongen gagging on it.)

He barely flinches now – opens his mouth for it with mocking obedience and a near-challenge in his polite eyes. Futaba gives him a dirty look and goes to pull off her other sock.

“That’s not really necessary,” says Makoto in a tired voice, and Futaba flings her arms in the air.

“Let me have this!”

“We have work to do,” Morgana tries, but nobody’s really paying attention. They take turns casting uncertain looks at the boy on the couch.

He looks almost no better now than he had last night, even patched up and changed into a fresh set of Akira’s sweats. Dr. Takemi had insisted Akira untie him, at least for the night. “He’s not going anywhere,” she’d said, exasperated, and gestured at the blood still seeping surreptitiously onto the sofa seat. So Morgana’s collar had gone – but Akechi had remained, just as the doctor had said, even as Akira expected to wake to an empty couch (and possibly a knife in his own chest).

But Akechi sits quietly, takes up no more space than he needs, and regards them all with doe-eyed curiosity, and the fearsome Phantom Thieves have to avert their eyes after only moments.

“Why’d you save him?” asks Ann in a hushed voice. There’s no venom to her words; only scared curiosity.

Akechi, for all his sockmouth, manages an ingratiating smile. He says something. Nobody speaks sock.

Ryuji scowls at him.

“Don’t get any funny ideas,” he says. “I didn’t do it cos I wanted you to live.”

Akechi says something else into the sock.

“You’ve done too much.” Ryuji kicks angrily at the floor. “Didja think we were really just gonna let you off like that?!”

“Ryuji,” says Akira.

“You deserve justice,” snaps Ryuji. “Real justice. Proper justice. We get to decide. They –” he nods at Akira, Futaba, and Haru – “get to decide. After everything you’ve done, you don’t get to die a hero’s death.”

“Ryuji,” says Akira again, and his voice is quiet, but the note of warning strikes a chord. Ryuji falls silent. Kicks the floor again.

Akira turns to Akechi.

“You can drop it,” he says. Akechi blinks at him. The sock falls from his mouth.

Futaba makes an enraged noise.

“Still kind?” asks Akechi. The team recoils. It’s been almost enough time to forget his voice. Not yet. “After all this time?”

Akira shakes his head.
“We aren’t your friends,” he says quietly.

“We could be,” says Akechi. Haru makes a small sound in her throat at the return of the maniacal grin. “Oh, we could be. You said it yourself. Leader.”

“He’s not your leader,” says Yusuke.

Akechi whips around.

“Aren’t I part of the team?” he drawls. “You saved me. With the power of friendship.” The sneer is ugly. Maybe uglier without the mask. Preferable still.

“You saved us,” says Makoto.

“You’re right,” Akechi whispers. “Maybe I care about you.”

“You don’t,” says Haru.

“No, I suppose I don’t.”

Akira cocks his head.

“You doubt me?” asks Akechi. He drops his voice to a purr. “Want some more alone time? A-ki-ra? Prove how much I care?” His tongue traces a grin around his lips. His hand twitches in the sling, like he’d go for his holster if he could. “I’ll show you mine, again… If you…”

Ryuji snorts. “What, if he shows you his?”

“If he wants to die,” hisses Akechi, suddenly wild, and most everyone takes an unconscious step back.

Except Akira, who takes a step forward. “You can drop it,” he says again.

Akechi’s head jerks to look down at the sock. “Are you blind as well as stupid?” he asks, smiling. “I did –”

“I meant the pretense,” says Akira.

Akechi pauses.

“Which one?” he says softly.

“We aren’t getting anywhere with this,” says Morgana crossly. “Let’s ignore him for now. We need to figure out how to go ahead with Shido.”

“I can help you with that,” says Akechi. “You took the trouble to save me. Why not bring me along?”

“You’ll kill him,” says Yusuke.


“It matters to us,” snaps Ann.

“That’s right,” says Haru. Her glare would shatter a statue, but Akechi simply turns to her with the same mild smile.

(And it might be for the best, since they aren’t sure what’s under the pleasantry – or if there’s anything at all.)

“Does it help you sleep at night?” Akechi wonders. “Perhaps you should toss and turn a little more.”

“What are you talking about?” demands Futaba, and Akechi whips around to stare at her. She manages not to shrink under his intent eye, but gives a tight nod of gratitude when Makoto reaches to squeeze her hand beneath Akira’s quilt.

“The righteous Phantom Thieves,” says Akechi quietly. His smile grows lofty. “Oh, you don’t kill. You only steal the will to live.”

“That’s not true –“

“Tell me,” says Akechi. “Are desires a bad thing?”

Makoto blinks. “Well – of course n-”

“What’s kept you going?” probes Akechi. He spins to glare at Akira, who meets his eyes steadily. “Isn’t it your justice? Where would you be without it?”

“What are you trying to say?” snaps Morgana.

“To continue with your goals. Even when others tell you it’s unjust,” muses Akechi. “How noble. Is it?”

“We’re trying to do the right thing,” insists Haru.

“So is everyone,” counters Akechi. “So was Sae-san. So am I. So is Shido. Your justice? How is it different to theirs? Mine? How can you prove that you’re right? Maybe you’ve been – distorted – all along – could you tell?”

“We don’t give a damn what you think,” Ryuji growls.

“Oh, it’s funny,” says Akechi, suddenly smiling again. “Disregarding anyone who disagrees with you? I’m sure that’s what all your targets thought of you.”

The team goes momentarily quiet.

Yusuke frowns. “That’s not the same –”

“You change the rules,” hisses Akechi, “you write the rules, so you can win. And you can win. And you can win.”

“It’s not about winning,” tries Makoto, but Akechi’s voice rises to a howl.

“It’s always about winning!” he cries. “You win so they can’t knock you down! You win so they won’t kill you! Tell me you’ve never taken a target because they disagreed with your ideals! Tell me you’ve never taken a target to settle a personal score!”

Sojiro’s annoyed voice drifts up from the ground floor: “Hey, keep it down up there!”
Akechi lowers his voice again.

“You keep your head above water,” he says, “Or you drown. Trying to keep someone else afloat. Someone who’s never cared about you.”

“That’s not –”

“Tell me more about your justice,” says Akechi, turning to prop his feet up on Akira’s sofa, “when you realise it’s only ever been about saving your own skins.”

He closes his eyes. The others stare at each other.

It’s Akira who breaks the silence. “We’ll take shifts,” he says quietly. “Watching him. Until we figure out what to do with the palace.”

Ann shifts. “Is that safe?”

“No,” says Akira. “Anyone want out?”

Nobody says anything. Akira nods. “Go home for today, then,” he says, and he sounds so tired. “We still have time to sort Shido before the election.”

“Are you going to be okay? Here, with him?” asks Futaba. They all gaze at him, concern evident in their eyes.

Akira manages to summon a cocky smile. “What’s he gonna do?” he says. “Kill me again?”

“How can you sleep?”

Akira pauses with the quilt in his hand. “Start by closing my eyes,” he says.

“Don’t be cute about it,” snarls Akechi.

“Can’t help that.” Akira puts the quilt back down and sits on the edge of the bed. “What do you mean?”

“How can you sleep? With me in the room?” Akechi tucks his knees up, as far as he can with the sling in the way. “I could kill you.”

“Probably,” says Akira. “Please don’t.” He gestures at the sleeping cat on his pillow. “Morgana would hate the blood in his fur.”

Akechi shakes his head. “You’re impossible,” he spits.

“Thank you,” says Akira. He rakes his eyes over Akechi’s curled form, still clad in his sweats. “And you can take that off.”

Akechi raises his eyebrows. “Oh,” he says, and a delicate smirk graces the corner of his mouth. “Dear.”

Akira flushes. “The mask,” he says. “You can take it off. We’ve seen you.”
“Have you?” asks Akechi.

“I think so."

Akechi leans forward.

“Tell me about him,” he says.


“What’s he –”

“Is he evil?” Akechi murmurs. His lip twists, mocking. “Is he scary? Have you seen the – the darkness within?”

Akira regards him with quiet eyes, which only seems to incense him further.

“Tell me about the real man behind the mask,” Akechi whispers. “Go on! Regale me of his villainy –”

“There’s nothing,” says Akira, and Akechi stops in his tracks.

“What?”


“…You don’t know what I want.”


“Yes.”

“Do you?” asks Akira again. “You took off your mask in the interrogation room.”


“Yeah, your manners need work.”

“So you’ve seen it now,” says Akechi. “Have you? The real me?”

Akira shakes his head. “Is there one?”

“What?”

“In the interrogation room…” Akira shakes his head. “That was another mask, wasn’t it?”

“…What?”

“And then, in the engine room,” says Akira. “A glimpse…”

“What are you talking about?” snaps Akechi, but Akira is lost somewhere in his own head.

“I can’t tell you about the real Akechi Goro,” he says. “Is there one?”

“…Kurusu.”
“Do you know him?” asks Akira. “Can you find him? I’d like to know him.”

Akechi glares at him. There’s nothing behind his eyes.

Akira sprawls himself over the futon and drags the quilt over his legs.

“I hope you can sleep, with me in the room,” he says, and closes his eyes. “Good night, Crow.”

Chapter End Notes

(i have a tendency to scribble all my meta and authorial musings into the author notes, but don't feel obligated to read these if you'd rather not!)

some notes:

- my original draft included a passage that i had to remove because i realised later that it was almost identical to in-game engine room dialogue. i was a bit miffed, but it was a nice bit of validation for my characterisation, ha.
- my passage:

  Akechi laughs, and they all cringe away from the nails tearing through the chalkboard. “Are we so different?” he croons. “Come now, Phantom Thieves. You must see it.”

  “We aren't murderers,” says Ann in a voice trembling with rage. “Don't compare us to you!”

  “So what?” snaps Akechi. “So what?”

- in game:

  Ann: We're not murderers!
  Akechi: So what!?

- the final section: basically, akira’s recognised the discrepancies in akechi’s behaviour. akechi usually keeps one mask for one occasion – evil when he needs, pleasant when he needs. and then there’s the broken non-mask that demonstrates the void of absolutely nothing underneath the masks. but since the engine room, akechi’s been flipping between them. sometimes pleasant, sometimes evil, sometimes blank. it’s inconsistency that demonstrates internal conflict and something that akira’s noticed – the mask is cracking and now he’s flipping desperately between them just to keep SOMETHING there. akechi’s trying to keep a handle on it after visibly losing it in the engine room, but he's actually finally lost his composure – doesn’t know how to keep pretending he’s okay for the first time in his memory.

- eta: i forgot to mention this, but ryuji actually is the first one in the engine room to move after the wall rises. i was pretty pleased with my intuition in making him the first to move there.
fairness

Chapter Summary

ryuji takes the first shift to convince akechi that he deserves justice in all forms.

Chapter Notes

chapter title: in all his life, fairness is something ryuji has been denied, and he's all but given up on it. after meeting akira and the phantom thieves, he's found his way to seeking it again because he recognises that he does, in fact, deserve it. being who he is, he wants others - including akechi - to understand this, too.

(chapter total is an estimate! i’m not going to even hint at a consistent per-week update schedule because i’m a disaster, but i’ll see how this goes. <3)

i hope you enjoy!

“Are you sure you’re okay to take the first shift?” asks Ann, one eyebrow raised. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re not exactly the most charismatic one here.”

“Whaddaya mean by that?!” snaps Ryuji. “I’m plenty charismatic! I’m an effin’ delight!”

“Five star charm,” mumbles Futaba, and Akira snorts.

Ryuji whirls around. “Dude, I got this,” he says earnestly. “I saved his damn life, didn’t I?! I can take him for the day.”

“‘Take him,’” echoes Yusuke, frowning. “You realise this doesn’t involve fighting him, yes?”

“Dude, you know that’s not what I meant!”

“Actually, Ryuji? With you, we can never be sure,” says Morgana, and Ryuji throws his arms in the air.

“Dude,” he repeats, with feeling. He stares beseechingly at Akira. “I mean, c’mon. Don’t you trust me?”

“I trust you,” says Akira, without hesitating. “If Ryuji says he’s got this, then he’s got this.”

“Thank you.”

“And Futaba still has the café bugged if something goes wrong,” Morgana adds. "I'm sure she'll be able to hear if Ryuji goes off the rails."

“Gee, thanks!” Ryuji glances at Futaba. “Don’t actually listen, okay? …I feel like this ain’t gonna
be fun.”

“What, so you can gossip about me?!” yelps Futaba. “No way! Now I’m definitely gonna listen in!”

“I ain’t gonna gossip!”

“That’s what a gossip would say!”

Ryuji rolls his eyes. “Look, just –” He falters. “I mean, the guy’s a snake, okay? I dunno what he’s gonna say, and I – I don’t want you to, to, I dunno. Hear something that might. I dunno.” He scuffs the floor. “Upset you.”


“Hey!” Ryuji glares at him, and then glances at Futaba. “Look, just – if I feel like somethin’ bad’s coming up, just – I’ll say, okay? So stop listening if I say so.” He pauses. “Please.”


Akira hesitates. “If something does goes wrong…”

“I know,” Ryuji sighs. “I know the plan, man! You made us go over it ten times.”

Akira hesitates again. “Make it eleven?”

Ryuji rolls his eyes. “Press the panic button on my phone to contact Futaba, she’ll jump into the Metaverse from her place and call you out for backup,” he recites. “You guys are gonna scope out the cruiser and see if you can deal with that cognitive dipshit.” He frowns. “Are you sure you can handle that? You’re gonna be down two guys.”

Akira shrugs, clearly unsatisfied with the plan. “I mean, we never have more than four on the front lines anyway,” he says.

Morgana nods. “Don’t worry. I can navigate in Futaba’s place, and we have two heavy-hitters for a reason.” He smirks, as much as a cat can smirk. “At least Yusuke has finesse.”

“Finesse my ass,” growls Ryuji. “I’m graceful as shit, you effin’ –”

“It’s a risky plan,” interrupts Makoto. “But I don’t see what other choice we have. We need someone to watch Akechi, but we can’t ignore Shido’s Palace, either.”

“We could call our other contacts,” Ann suggests half-heartedly.

Haru shakes her head. “It’s too dangerous,” she says. “Akechi is a very well-known figure in the public. And he’s too dangerous to leave with someone who isn’t experienced in the ways of the Metaverse.”

“Haru’s right,” says Morgana. “It’s gotta be one of us. And Shido’s not gonna wait for us to figure out what to do with Akechi, so we need to sort that cognitive Akechi out unless we want it to cause some serious problems for us later.”

Futaba scuffs the floor of the café with her foot. “Just be careful,” she says. “It’s gonna be hard without my expert guidance!”
“Hey, I’m a great navigator!” says Morgana, affronted. “We managed fine before you joined, you know.”

“Whatever you need to tell yourself, Mona,” sniffs Futaba, and Morgana sulks.

“So we’re agreed,” says Makoto. “We’ll leave Ryuji here to mind Akechi while we go back into Shido’s Palace.” She smiles. “I think we can do this. I mean, we managed to get all those letters of recommendation. What’s one more fight?”

“Makoto’s right!” chirps Ann. “We got this, guys! We’ll take him down, no problem.”

“Knock on wood,” murmurs Yusuke. With a nod to Ryuji, he makes for the café exit. The others turn to tail him.

Akira casts one last look at Ryuji. “Hey,” he says.

Ryuji shakes his head, impatient. “You can trust me,” he insists.


Ryuji grins. “Ha, you worried about me?”

Akira looks away. “Nah,” he says quietly, and cracks a smile. “You can handle yourself.”

“Damn right.” Ryuji holds his hand up for a high five, and Akira slaps it. “Kick ass for me.”

Akira nods. “See you later,” he says, and goes to meet the others outside.

Ryuji watches him leave before he turns to face the stairs. “Right,” he says under his breath. “Go time.”

“Well,” says Akechi. “Aren’t you going to make small talk?” He tucks one leg under the other, casual as he can appear with his good wrist once again bound to the arm of the couch. (A safety precaution – one they’d had to take, insisted Makoto, now that there was only one Phantom Thief on watch.)

(He’d vetoed Futaba’s jangly cat collar idea – “So we know where he is!” – to general disappointment.)

Ryuji doesn’t look at him. “Shut up,” he growls. He shifts to sit cross-legged on the attic floor and taps on the controller with more aggression than it warrants.

Akechi pouts. “Oh, come now,” he says. “There’s no need to be rude.”

Ryuji pauses his game. “No need to be rude?” he demands. “You tried to shoot my best friend in the face.”

“Oh, but I didn’t get to,” protests Akechi. “You Phantom Thieves made sure of that. Didn’t you?”

Ryuji shakes his head. “Just shut up, man,” he says. He presses Resume. “I don’t wanna talk to you. I’m just here to make sure you don’t pull any more shit.”
“But you did save my life, did you not?” asks Akechi. He smiles. “Could it be that, deep down, you care after all?”

“No.”

“Hmm. A thug with a heart of gold,” muses Akechi. “No wonder your leader likes you so much. I wonder, is it nice to have such a loyal goon by his side?”

“Dude, do you ever stop talking?!?” Ryuji throws his controller down in frustration. The tiny pixelated character on the screen promptly dies. “You’re gonna make me regret saving you.”

“Don’t you already?”

“Of course I don’t,” snaps Ryuji. “Dude, I’m not a monster. I don’t want you to die just cos I hate you.”

“I tried to shoot your best friend in the face,” Akechi points out.

Ryuji shifts. “Yeah,” he mutters. “But ya didn’t get to.”

Akechi smiles.

“Do you hate me?” he asks.

“You bet I do,” says Ryuji, scowling.

“Do you?”

“Dude, yes.” Ryuji looks away. “I just – I don’t get it. Your mom – your mom died when you were a kid. Right?”

“She did.”

“And that – sucks, right?”

“You are a paragon of eloquence.”

“Shut it.” Ryuji glares at him. Then he glances around the room for something he can’t see. “Futaba, stop listening,” he says, raising his voice. “I mean it.”

There’s a long pause. Ryuji shakes his head. “No idea if she did what I said,” he mutters. Then his phone buzzes.

[Futaba] FINE =A=

[Futaba] Be careful!

Ryuji smiles. “Whaddaya know,” he says. Then he glances back up at Akechi, his eyes stony again. “I don’t get it. After goin’ through something like that and seeing how much it messed you up… Why would you kill her mom?” he asks in a low voice. “And Haru’s dad?”

Akechi doesn’t respond for a moment. “Have you thought about how I complete the tasks that Shido sets for me?” he asks at last.

“You mean how you commit effin’ murder? Yeah, you do it by bein’ a damn psychopath.” Ryuji twirls a control stick absently. His recently respawned character whirls in a helpless circle and falls
Akechi smiles, placid. “I mean the method,” he says. “You know how the Metaverse works, after all.”

“I mean… Yeah.” Ryuij eyes him. “Where you goin’ with this?”

“Any distorted heart manifests into a Shadow. Those with particularly distorted hearts have Palaces. And then there’s Mementos,” says Akechi. “That’s where the majority of Shadows reside, correct?”

“…Yeah…?”

“You’ve seen my powers in action,” Akechi continues. “Psychotic breakdowns, mental shutdowns… These are the abilities I used to carry out my orders. …Do you understand?”


Akechi shrugs. “You targeted Okumura Kunikazu yourselves,” he says.

“We didn’t kill him!”

“Does it matter?” asks Akechi. “Do you ever think to check in with your targets, perchance? Do you wonder how they’re doing?” He offers Ryuji another serene smile. “How is Kamoshida Suguru doing these days?”

“What…?” Ryuji stares at him “I dunno? I don’t care about that piece of shit!”

Akechi nods. “How interesting,” he says. “As long as you know he isn’t dead, you don’t care what happens to him. Is that it?” He raises an eyebrow. “Do you ever consider what effect you might have had on their lives? They don’t seem to be in particularly good shape when they confess their sins, after all. Their mental health seems – compromised.”

“I – Look –”

Akechi leans forward. “But you don’t care,” he whispers. “You go off. You have your parties. You celebrate your victory, and ignore the people whose lives you’ve just ruined – for the sake of your – justice.”

“We’re reformin’ society,” Ryuji snaps. “Those people we targeted – they were real messed up, they’re – they’re out there hurtin’ people!”

Akechi nods again. “Yes, they are,” he says thoughtfully. “After all, they had Shadows, did they not?”

“Y-yeah! They were – We had to – to stop them…!”

“Villains,” says Akechi. “Corruption… Selfishness. They were a danger to society, so they had to be stopped.”

Ryuji eyes him, wary. “Where are you going with this?” he asks again.

Akechi smiles. “Have you thought about how I do my job yet?” he asks.

“Dude, stop being a dick!” yells Ryuji. “Just tell me what you’re talkin’ about – I don’t wanna play your stupid games!”
“Have you thought about what they have in common?” Akechi prompts. “Work through it, Sakamoto. I know you’re not as stupid as you seem.”


Akechi beams. “You figured it out,” he says, delighted. “Well done. You know about Okumura, of course. After all, you targeted him, as I said. Did you know about Wakaba Isshiki? Did you ever stop to think about how, exactly, I was able to – take care of her?”

“She had – Futaba’s mom had a –?!?”

Akechi shrugs. His voice drops. “We all have demons,” he says. “Some of us more than others. What do you think? You agreed with me – anyone whose Shadow manifests has to be stopped. And I couldn’t have stopped someone I couldn’t find.” He grins again. “We’re the same!”

“But – but –” Ryuji shakes his head desperately. “No way, man, we – we’re not like you. We’re not – we’re not killers…”

Akechi leans forward again. “It doesn’t matter,” he hisses. “Don’t pretend your goal was ever to rehabilitate. Not when you don’t care what becomes of your targets. You let them live to spare your consciences. But when all’s said and done, you rid the world of its trash and don’t stop to check the incinerator. You don’t care,” he says triumphantly, watching Ryuji begin to tremble. “What does it matter if they live or die, when the important thing is that you don’t have to deal with them anymore?”

Ryuji takes a deep breath. “Shut up,” he says in a low voice. He shifts to a squat. “Shut up. I know what you’re doing. You can’t mess with me that easy.” He raises his head to glare at Akechi. “You wanna know what the difference is between us? The real one?”

“Do tell,” purrs Akechi.

“We got morals,” growls Ryuji.

“Oh, spare me your sanctimony,” sighs Akechi, leaning back.

“I don’t give a crap what you have to say about us,” Ryuji retorts. “Yeah, we ain’t perfect. But at the end of the day, we do what we do because we wanna help people. We’re tryin’. But you? All you care about is your own stupid revenge plan.”

“You choose targets to save your own skins,” Akechi spits. “A teacher who threatened expulsion – a Mafia boss who blackmailed you – you can claim your lofty ideals, but it was all for yourselves –”

“Dude, we can’t help no-one if we’re dead!” shouts Ryuji. “Don’t be an idiot – hell yeah we gotta save our own skins! Doin’ somethin’ for yourself don’t make you selfish, it makes you human! But that’s not all we were after!” He lurches forward on his toes, crouches like he’s about to shoot across the floor in a flat-out sprint. He glares at Akechi. “At the end of the day, we kept doin’ what we were doin’ to make the world a better place and fight the injustice that kept us down in the first place. And all you wanted was to beat down on your shitty dad.” He sits back, suddenly sombre again. “And – dude – trust me… That’s somethin’ I get. But there’s more to life than kickin’ the ones who kicked you.”

Akechi snorts. “Come back when you don’t sound like a self-help book written by some washed up widow,” he snaps. “You can’t imagine the scale of this world’s corruption. Do you think taking
“down one or two criminals makes you some kind of a saint?”

“Who care about that?” demands Ryuji. “Even if we can’t fix anything, ain’t it worth a shot to make things just a little better?”

“Who cares -?! You hypocrite, you do,” Akechi says, disbelieving. “Weren’t you just a little obsessed with the idea? The famous Phantom Thieves, loved by all?”


“Being loved?”

“Yeah.” Ryuji eyes him. “You get it.”

Akechi doesn’t say anything.

“Don’t pretend,” says Ryuji. “You don’t have to say, or anythin’. But I know you get it. It’s hard not to, when you – when you grow up like we do.”

“Don’t compare yourself to me,” hisses Akechi.

Ryuji holds his hands up. “I don’t want to,” he says, irritated. “‘Sides, you did it first.” He bites his lip. “Look, you’re right. We ain’t the same. …I got a mom.”


“I do,” says Ryuji, with feeling. “I do. I’m lucky. And – man, I don’t like you at all. But I get it. I really get it. And I wish – I wish you’d had what I did, man.” He frowns at the banner on the wall. “My dad was a total piece of shit.

“I wonder what that’s like.”

“I was glad when he finally walked out,” Ryuji says in a low voice. “So mom and me didn’t have to cop his bullshit anymore. But it – it sucked. Y’know? I didn’t want my dad back, but I – I mean, I wish I’d had one.” When he looks back at Akechi, his gaze is level. “But I still had mom. And mom had me. And she never woulda left me, not for anything. And that – that made all the difference.”

“Yes, you turned out wonderfully,” mocks Akechi. “The school delinquent, unable to do anything right.”

Ryuji’s brows crease for a millisecond before he shakes his head again and actually smiles. “You know what?” he asks. “Few months ago, that woulda hurt. I woulda gotten all mad and defensive and shit. But – I kinda don’t care anymore.”

“Is that what you tell yourself?”

“Yeah,” says Ryuji. “Cos it’s true. Dude, we ain’t the same. I get that. You’re better than me. Way better. You’re smarter, and you’re stronger, and you can do just about everything I can’t.” Akechi blinks in surprise, but Ryuji charges on, unabashed by his own candor. “And – I mean, on the other end, I’ve got people around me, so I’ve been way luckier than you too. But you gotta know…” He sighs. “You’re – not the only one who figured you were a hopeless case. Uh – I mean, I thought I was a hopeless case. Not you. I mean, you thought you –”

“Stop rambling.”
“Copy that.” Ryuji rubs the back of his neck, self-conscious. “I kinda hated myself. Everyone was always lookin’ down on me, and I figured I’d never amount to anything, so there was no point really trying.” A small smile blooms on his face, seemingly without his realising it. “Then I met Akira.”

Akechi snorts. “You really are devoted to him, aren’t you?” he asks, derision thick in his voice. “Like a dog, or a particularly foolish lover.”

“I ain’t his bitch, dude,” snaps Ryuji, flushing. “He’s my best friend. I’d do anything for him. I know he’d do the same for me. And – outside of my mom, I’ve never – I’ve never had that with anyone else. He gets me. And he never gave up on me, no matter what.”

He looks away, pensive.

“It’s what I needed,” he says quietly. “Akira – I mean, the way he is – he just – lives. You know? He just lives his life, and he doesn’t give a shit about – I mean, everyone was talkin’ shit about him all the damn time and he just effin’ walked on. Just kept goin’ like he didn’t give a crap.” His eyes darken. “And – I know it hurt him. Like, deep down. But he didn’t let it keep him down.”

“How inspiring,” sneers Akechi.

“It was,” insists Ryuji, snapping his eyes back to look seriously at Akechi. “If it wasn’t for him, I dunno what woulda happened to me. He – and all the others, they – they really showed me where I was messing up.” He shifts, embarrassed. “Look, I know it sounds stupid, but it’s like I never knew how to live before I met ‘em. And – I mean, I really, really don’t like you.”

“Do you hate me?”

Ryuji hesitates for a long time.

“I guess I don’t,” he says at last, his voice low. “I want to. God, I really, really effin’ want to. But – I think, when I look at you? I see who I coulda become. Any one of us coulda turned into you. … And I can kinda see how you coulda been one of us, too.”

“I’m flattered,” says Akechi. “Can we make friendship bracelets? Hold hands around the campfire?”

Ryuji rolls his eyes. “Man, forget you,” he sighs. “You’re the worst. But, like, none of us started out perfect. And – you really screwed us over. Some of us more than others. But none of us wanna see you go down like this.” He holds Akechi’s gaze. “Akira’s one helluva guy. All the others, too. And if they’re willing to stick their necks for a guy like me? I reckon they’d be willing to help you too.”

“How kind of you,” says Akechi. “How charitable. Has it occurred to you that I don’t want your help?”

Ryuji shakes his head again. “It’s a damn process,” he mutters. “Course you don’t want it. You’re too much of an idiot.”

“You’re calling me –”

“Damn right I am,” snaps Ryuji. “Dude, you may be a genius and all, but you’re an goddamn idiot. I know you don’t want our help, but we’re damn well gonna give it to you anyway. Cos you need it. And – look we might not be the same, but I’m livin’ proof that you ain’t a hopeless case. There’s a reason I saved your life.”
“So you could have your revenge,” Akechi points out. “That’s what you said, wasn’t it?”

“I said justice,” protests Ryuji. He shrinks slightly “O-okay, yeah, I was mad, and I pretty much meant revenge when I said that, but – I – it’s not the same, and – ugh. Look. This – this doesn’t have to be the end for you, dude.”

For a long time, Akechi doesn’t speak. “You might not want to hear this,” he says at last. “But there’s no hope left for me.”


“Thank you.”

Ryuji sits back on the floor and picks up the controller. The game gives a beep as he resets the level. “But we ain’t givin’ up on you,” he says quietly. “Whether you like it or not.”

“You should have told Sakamoto not to save me.”

Akira glances at him, half-surprised. “Ryuji doesn’t answer to me,” he replies easily. “What did you talk about today?”

Akechi is silent.

After a minute, Akira shrugs and climbs onto the edge of the bed, easing himself under the sheets and being careful not to disturb the snoozing Morgana in the centre. “You know,” he says, “I think you and Ryuji could really get along.”

“He’s a thug.”

“He’s a good guy.”

Akechi smiles. “So, opposites attract?” he teases.

“Yeah,” Akira says. “Not how you mean it. You gotta know – Ryuji knows what he’s doing.”

“I hope you’ll forgive me if I don’t quite believe that.”

“He’s got his own motives for saving you.”

“And what might those be?” asks Akechi, soft as steel wool. “In your own words, if you will.”

Akira surveys him for a long moment. Akechi looks away, unable to escape the feeling that direct eye contact might give Akira too clear a window into whatever swirling, murky disaster might constitute his soul.

“The world gives up on a lot of people,” Akira says at last. "Ryuji's good at finding the ones who need another chance.”

“How’s that?”
Akira shrugs. “You see yourself in the wild,” he says. “Can you turn off the light?”

“My hand is tied to your chair.”

Akira sighs. “A kinky excuse is still an excuse,” he mutters, and scrambles out of bed to get the light.

Chapter End Notes

some things:
the things my characters say often don't reflect the truth of the situation (or my own beliefs), so, some clarification:

1. i don't know if wakaba had a shadow. i don't know much about wakaba, or the persona universe. it's not a stretch to think that wakaba's research into cognitive psience could mean she had another way of materialising in the metaverse without being distorted, or she could have been in a situation like futaba's where her distorted heart isn't malicious. this isn't something i claim to know about and it's not a headcanon i'm trying to incorporate. therefore:

2. akechi is not actually saying that she had a shadow. he's implying it. you'll notice i never made him state outright that wakaba had a shadow - he just led ryuji and led some more until ryuji reached that conclusion by himself. akechi is the only one who knows what happened, so he twists it to make a point. ryuji's an incredibly straightforward, honest person, so it's more difficult for him to fathom that. that makes it easier for akechi manipulate his perception (and also more impressive when ryuji manages to rebut it anyway).

the rest of these notes are optional!! sorry, it's long as shit - i think i'm incapable of publishing a fic without including a fuckin' study guide or some crap, ha! :)

• i tried to showcase ryuji's growth as a character and the development of one of his greatest strengths, which is also a tremendous weakness: belief in what he's doing. ryuji's conviction in his team is wholehearted and unshakeable, which allows him to proceed without doubt that they're doing the right thing. it can also lead to blindness to truth. but in this situation, it gives him a huge advantage. akechi's approach is to try and make him doubt himself and his judgement, but ryuji's determination (pigheadedness) makes him all but immune. it's confidence and assurance he picked up from finding his place beside akira.

• also, ryuji has a little crush on akira. actually, everyone in this fic has a little crush on akira. actually, everyone in this fic has a little crush on everyone. they're all very beautiful.

• ryuji's candor allows him to plainly state that akechi is better than him in many respects, and this is something that akechi can't comprehend. ryuji has confidence but no pride, which is also a great strength. their downtrodden histories have led to the development of two totally different personalities. it's weird to think about, but ryuji's former lack of self-worth led to a flippancy about other people's opinions of him, and this led to tenacity and thick skin. akechi, on the other hand, held on to the belief that he was truly worth something that others couldn't see (although don't get me wrong he absolutely still hates himself in a lot of ways oh Geez), and he allowed it to manifest into a desperation for to prove himself, making him much weaker in this regard despite being a strength in many other areas. this lets ryuji live for himself while akechi requires
validation. (not to say that having no self worth is a good thing. don't use these boys as examples, they're messes.)

find me on twitter or tumblr if you'd like to chat or support me!
compassion

Chapter Summary

ann takes the second shift in an attempt to show akechi the kindness he's been missing.

Chapter Notes

chapter title: ann is one of the most openly compassionate of the group and the one who showed the most genuine sympathy to akechi (with basically no malice in the engine room). in the earlier parts of her character arc, she didn't see the FULL value of compassion. she was never cynical about it and did value it, but did sometimes see it as a practical weakness (such as when her compassion for shiho landed her in bad situations). by the end, she comes further around to compassion as the source of her strength and passion, and it's part of what makes her so fierce.

(i’ve proofread this chapter too many times, i don't know what it says anymore but i Sure Hope It's Good)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Lady Ann…” Morgana nudges Ann’s hand with his head until she runs a hand over his head and rubs his ears. “Please be careful.”

“I'll be fine!” Ann insists, beaming around at them. “I mean, we didn’t make any progress with finding cognitive Akechi in the Palace yesterday, so… We’ve gotta keep it going, right?”

“This feels contrived,” mutters Yusuke.

Futaba nods. “I’m with Inari,” she says. “Like some fanfiction writer who needs an excuse for character development!”

“What?! Nobody else thinks like that,” retorts Ryuji. “Besides, fanfiction’s for nerds.”

“We’re getting off track,” says Morgana, annoyed. “Lady Ann offered to take today’s shift with Akechi. Ryuji, how did yesterday go?”

Ryuji shrugs. “It was fine,” he says, averting his eyes.

The team glances at each other.


“He told me to stop listening like halfway in,” adds Futaba. “I dunno what happened after that, but it sounded –”

“I said it was fine,” Ryuji snaps. “Stop talkin’ about me like I’m not even here!”
Ryuji shuffles uncomfortably. “Sorry,” he says in a low voice. “I didn’t mean –”

“Oh, no,” says Haru. She reaches to rest her hand on his elbow, and he manages not to flinch away. “I’m sorry we made you uncomfortable, Ryuji. We don’t have to talk about it anymore.”

“…S’okay.”

“And, Futaba…” Haru looks at her guiltily. “If you don’t mind, I don’t think you should listen in anymore. None of us want to risk you hearing something you – shouldn’t.”

“But what if something’s wrong?” Futaba protests.

“That’s what the panic button’s for,” says Morgana. He glances at Ryuji thoughtfully and Ryuji glances away, sullen. “I’m with Haru. It looks like things with Akechi could get personal pretty quickly.”

Futaba shoots a slightly abashed look at Ryuji too. “Okay,” she concedes. “Fine. But don’t blame me if things go south!”

Makoto shifts. “Just be careful,” she says, looking at Ann. She frowns. “We don’t know a lot about Akechi, but we can’t trust him. Are you sure you can handle it?”

“No worries,” Ann confirms. She flashes a peace sign. “Maybe this just needs a – a woman’s touch!”

Yusuke’s eyes widen. “You’re not going to try to seduce him, are you?”

“Lady Ann!” gasps Morgana. “How could y-”

“No!” Ann protests, aghast. “Of course not!” She twirls a pigtail around her fingers, looking thoughtful. “I just think – I dunno. He could do with a little kindness, that’s all.” She hesitates. “It seems to be something he’s… missing.”

“You want to show him kindness?” asks Futaba incredulously. “You know this isn’t like D&D, right? You can’t just seduce all the bosses, no matter how high your charisma stat is.”

“I told you, it’s not seduction!”

“Now, now,” Makoto chastises. “I mean, showing him some compassion… might work…?”

The others exchange uncertain glances.

“What are you sure that’s a good idea?” Haru asks hesitantly. “I don’t know that he’ll react well. He might think you’re just trying to pity him, and I can’t imagine he’ll appreciate that.”

Ann shrugs. “I mean, it’s a risk,” she falters. “But it’s worth a try, right? I mean, it’s not like we have another plan.”

Akira observes her from the corner, and she shifts uncomfortably under his quiet, immeasurably weighted gaze.

“I trust Ann,” he says.

Morgana nods. “I agree,” he says. “If Lady Ann wants to give it a try, then I support her
completely!” He hesitates. “But please be careful.”

“I will!” Ann sighs. “Look, just go, okay?! I can handle this, I promise!”

Akira nods. “We’ll be back soon,” he says, and offers her a smile. “You’ve got this.”

“I sure do!” Ann enthuses. She beams back at him. “Don’t worry. It’ll be a cakewalk in the park!”

“So…” Ann trails off. Seated stiffly on the edge of Akira’s mattress with her legs crossed, she fiddles with the toggle on her jacket. “Do you want to… talk…? About anything…?”

“No really,” Akechi replies politely.

“Are you sure?” Ann ventures. “I mean, we’ve got all afternoon… And, if you wanna talk, I’m… happy to listen…”

“Thank you,” says Akechi.


Akechi smiles indulgently.

“So do you – want to?”

“No.”

“O-okay.” Ann looks down, discouraged. “Got it.”

Akechi watches her, light curiosity in his face. “If I may ask,” he says, “what are you trying to do?”

“H-huh?” Ann glances back up at him. “What do you mean?”

“If I may ask,” he says, “what are you trying to do?”

“Is this your way of trying to help me?” asks Akechi. “Do you feel sorry for me, then?”

Ann hesitates. “Well, yeah,” she says, and winces when his face tightens. “I mean, don’t take it the wrong way. It’s not like I think you’re weak or anything. Not that I approve of what you’ve been doing, but you’re like, probably one of the most amazing people I know.”

Akechi’s face doesn’t change. “That’s very kind of you,” he says, the picture of humility. “Has it occurred to you that I don’t really care for your approval?”

Akechi scoffs. “Don’t pretend to understand me,” he says. “You’re just a small-time model. What
could you really know about me?”

“That’s not the point!” Ann slams her fists down against her knees. Akira’s bed shakes. “Look, can I tell you something?”

“I’m not really interested.”

“I don’t care.” Ann pulls her legs up onto the mattress, crossing her ankles. “Before I met the others, I never felt like I belonged anywhere. None of us did.”

“Yes, I’m familiar with your tragic story,” Akechi says, wearing his painted smile. “I have to say, it doesn’t touch me quite as much as you seem to think it will.”

“Will you stop talking!” demands Ann. “Listen, I understand, okay? …One of the reasons I like being a model is – it was – nice, you know? At the start. Just to have someone who liked me for once.”

“None of those people really know you, though,” Akechi points out. “Is their love really so valuable?”

“You’re one to talk,” Ann retorts. She watches him with a bright, vague sadness that makes him squirm. “It is nice, isn’t it?” she confides suddenly, leaning forward. “I mean, like – When no-one pays any attention to you… When all they ever do is – spread rumours, and – Well, it’s nice to suddenly be adored. By anyone.”

She manages a smile, just a couple watts too dim for her best shoot. “And it’s nice to kind of stop being a person, too,” she says in a soft voice. “When no one knows you, they don’t know that you’re not perfect. You’re just – an icon. A pretty picture.”

“It sounds awfully shallow when you put it like that,” remarks Akechi.

“Isn’t it?” asks Ann. “It is shallow. I’m shallow. So are you. Everyone is. We all want to be admired, in some way.”

“I really couldn’t care less what you think of me,” Akechi says, matter-of-factly.

“No, I know,” says Ann, and Akechi raises an eyebrow. “I’m just one person, after all, and you don’t really care about me. It doesn’t matter what I think, as me. But… I’m also a member of society. I’m one of the masses. And you don’t care about me, but… you care about us, right? You care about… You want to be… accepted…”

Akechi’s calm façade crumples slightly, a tiny crease appearing between his eyebrows. He doesn’t say anything.

Ann shifts, tentative. “Akechi…” She sighs. “You’re… not gonna want to hear this, but you’re right. I feel sorry for you.”

At once, Akechi snaps back to himself – or to whatever, to anything, to something – “I don’t need your pity –”

“Of course you don’t,” says Ann. “Nobody needs pity. That’s not really the point of it, you know? It’s just – caring about other people. …You’ve suffered so much. And I feel sorry for you, because… it’s not fair.”

“Life isn’t fair,” Akechi murmurs, tilting up his chin to stare at her with derision. “If you haven’t
already figured that out, then perhaps you ought to start filling your head with more than hair products.”

Ann rolls her eyes again. “What do you think hair products are?” she mutters. “Look, don’t you get it? It shouldn’t be that hard to figure out for someone as smart as you! I don’t pity you because you’re too weak to handle everything you’ve been through.” Her eyes, warm and calm as the sea in summer, suddenly flash into cool blue steel. “I feel sorry for you because you were strong enough, but you never should’ve had to be. And, well, you’ve done some pretty horrible things, especially to people who matter to me. But you’re a person, same as me. Same as all of them. So I care about you.”

Her gaze burns into him; a soothing balm only moments before, now cold as fire. He resists the urge to look away, blinded by the freezing warmth.

“I don’t understand why,” he says. “I don’t understand what you want from me.”

Ann shakes her head, emphatic.

“You’re still missing the point,” she says. “I don’t want anything from you. I just think you deserve more than this. And… we want to help you.”

“All of you?”

Ann hesitates, but it’s with consideration more than pause. “I think so,” she says at last. “I can’t be sure… I mean, you fucked them over pretty bad.”

“That’s fair.”

“And… I don’t wanna speak for them.” She frowns, thinking. “You never really did anything to me, personally. What you did to them hurts me, because I love them, but… I’m not them. So I can’t tell you what they’re thinking. I can’t forgive you for them.” Her eyes harden again. “But, intuitively? I don’t think any of them really want the worst for you anymore.”

“Anymore?”

“You try thinking kindly about someone who ruined your life,” Ann sighs. “I mean, you killed Futaba’s mom. You killed Haru’s dad. There’s no way they were gonna jump at the chance to be your best friend.” She hesitates again. “But… I believe in these guys. They’re – good people, and I…” She trails off, looking lost.

“You’re not sure,” observes Akechi. He offers her a sympathetic smile. “Oh, I’ve gotten under your skin.”

“I –” Ann scrunches up her face, seemingly gathering her resolve. “Look, I don’t – I don’t want to say this, but you were right to question us.” She shakes her head. “I haven’t wanted to think about it, and – I haven’t, enough – but you were right, and we’re not… as great as we maybe think we are.”

“Congratulations,” says Akechi, waving his arm in a sarcastic welcome gesture. “You’re a terrible person. Join the club.”

“No, but that’s the point,” insists Ann. “That’s my point. We aren’t perfect, even though we might have deluded ourselves into thinking we were, right? We needed – someone to make us see that, and you – I mean, thanks.”

“For telling you that your justice is nothing more than sanctimonious garbage?” asks Akechi. He
takes a mocking little bow, best he can when tied to a sofa. “Well, it was my absolute pleasure.”

Ann ignores this. “So like, maybe we made mistakes,” she concedes. “Big ones. Maybe we’ve even – even done terrible things. I don’t know. But that – I’m sure that doesn’t make us terrible people,” she says firmly. “We’re trying. We’re doing what we think is best. Maybe we’re wrong. But – the effort has to count for something. That intention to help and to do the right thing is what drives us to keep doing better. And making a mistake doesn’t mean you’re beyond hope. It’s never too late to keep learning.” She twiddles a strand of hair between her fingers. “Actually, I don’t think we ever stop.”

Akechi seems about to make a snide remark, but then he freezes and narrows his eyes. “You’re trying to teach me some inane lesson with this tale of yours,” he says, accusatory. “Thinking I might learn from your experiences if you frame them in a palatable way? Do you think I’m eight years old? If you’ve something to say, I don’t need it spoon-fed in-amidst some sickly sweet fable! What, next you’ll tell me the story of a fluffy white rabbit who killed a nation – but it was alright in the end because he said he was sorry!?”

Ann waves her hands helplessly. “I don’t know how to deal with you,” she snaps. “I’m trying to help, but – you’re not making it easy here!”

“That would be because I don’t need your help.”

Ann becomes conveniently hard of hearing again. “Look,” she says, “my point is, I can acknowledge that we’ve made mistakes, and maybe we’ve fucked up. But these guys – they’re my friends, they’re good people. I truly, truly believe that. And none of them want to ruin your life. And I might be the only one without a personal vendetta against you, but I’m not the only one who wants to show you some compassion. They’re just less obvious about it.”

“I don’t want your pity.”

“You said want that time,” Ann points out.

Akechi dissolves into a sullen silence.

Ann sighs. “I know you don’t want it,” she murmurs. She bites her lip. “And I know you don’t need it either. But I hope you don’t mind if I give it to you anyway. After all this time… You deserve a little kindness, Akechi, whether you like it or not.”

“A poor gift-giving principle,” Akechi remarks without looking at her.

“And, you know what? …You’re allowed to accept it.” She stands and takes two tentative steps towards him. He flinches. She stops. “I know you’ve spent a – really long time thinking you didn’t need anyone, so I don’t know,” she says in a low voice. “Maybe you think it’d make you weak now, to let someone be kind to you. But it doesn’t, Akechi, I promise. …You’re one of the strongest people I know. But you don’t have to do everything alone just because you can. And even you deserve a rest.”

Akechi swallows. “Takamaki,” he says, but it sounds like thorns caught in his throat. “I.”

“You don’t have to say anything if you don’t want,” says Ann. “Maybe I’m wrong, but… I think you do want things to change.” She doesn’t wait for confirmation, doesn’t force a response, just offers him a smile and pretends not to see him struggling to recover. “And if I’m right, just know that we’re all here because we want to help. Whatever you need. And I promise. It’s never too late.”
Outside the attic windows, the sun is beginning to set. Ann leans forward, elbows on her knees, looking expectant.

“I don’t have anything else to say,” says Akechi, frustrated. “Will you stop badgering me?”

“Well… How does that make you feel?” Ann presses.

Akechi scowls and visibly restrains himself from saying something snide.

Ann beams. “You didn’t tell me to shut up that time!” she encourages. “See, we’re making progress!”

“This is ridiculous,” Akechi grates. He perks up at the sound of the bell downstairs and the emergence of light conversation. “Ah – it sounds like the others have returned.”

“The others, huh?” echoes Ann. Her eyes soften as Akechi’s expression turns wary. “Oh, sorry! Thinking out loud!”

“Well, never mind that,” says Akechi hastily. He forces a charming smile. “Ah… Thank you for today.”

Ann brightens. “So it helped?” she says eagerly.

“Oh, no,” says Akechi pleasantly. “It was useless and annoying, but I appreciate the thought nonetheless.”

He watches Ann, evidently expecting her to wilt, but she just beams at him again. “Well, great!” she says, and he blinks. “You know, that’s exactly what I was trying to show you.”

“…What?”

Ann laughs at the offended befuddlement on his face. “It’s not really about what I’m doing or saying,” she says. “I just wanted to prove I care. Like, I really do. I don’t think you believed me. But sometimes that’s all you really need. Even if you’re not really helping, just taking time for someone else can be enough. It doesn’t need some kind of special goal or ulterior motive. Just… being there for them. You know?”

She smiles again as Akechi opens his mouth, speechless.

“I know you think I’m just an airhead model,” she says softly. “That’s okay. I’m kinda used to that by now.” She shrugs. “And if it helps you not to think of me as a person, that’s okay too. I don’t mind. Whatever I have to be, for you to let me help you… But I hope I can prove you wrong.”

Akechi looks at her and thinks that maybe a day will come when he’ll be used to how quickly her eyes snap from gentle to fierce. Maybe one day he’ll learn to brace for the kindness, its searing touch as painful as the scars it soothes.

Reluctantly, he says, “You might have started.” And delight transforms her face to the first light of dawn as the others begin to appear over the stairs.
“So, Akechi…” Morgana hums as Akira gets ready for bed. “How was your day?”

“It was fine,” says Akechi. “Thank you.”

“And, and, how was Lady Ann?” Morgana presses. A few feet away, Akira rolls his eyes.

Akechi raises an eyebrow. “Oh, she’s lovely,” he says, smiling. “We might be falling in love, you know.”

“Really?” wails Morgana.

“He’s winding you up, Morgana.” Akira walks over and scoops Morgana up. He lobs the cat unceremoniously onto the mattress, ignoring the offended yowl. “Glad you had fun today,” Akira tosses over his shoulder.

“You have strange friends.”

“They could be yours too,” says Akira, “for the low, low price of seven hundred and ninety-nine yen –”

“Shut up.”

“– per month. You didn’t let me finish.”

“That would be because I have no interest in anything you have to say.”

“That’s cold,” says Akira, sitting on the edge of his bed and lounging across the pile of blankets and squashing an irritated Morgana. “I spent so many months flirting with you.”

“I couldn’t tell,” sniffs Akechi.

“Thought you were flirting back.”

“Thinking isn’t your strong suit.”

“Had me fooled. You must be really good at feigning interest.”

“I do it for a living,” Akechi shoots back.

“Funny,” says Akira. He gently shoves Morgana aside (the cat promptly scrambles onto his stomach, glaring at him) and settles back against the pillow. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you really cared.”

“A good thing you know better, for once in your life.”

“I don’t know,” says Akira. “Ever think you might be fooling yourself?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I can’t help it,” says Akira. “I’m eclectic. You’re cute. I’m also cute, by the way.”

“Do you ever stop talking?” snaps Akechi.

“Yeah,” says Akira. “Do you ever stop lying to yourself?”
Akechi glares daggers, but none rise to his lips.

“Ever stop pretending you’re above caring?” asks Akira. “That’s cool if you don’t. I’m more interested in the day you stop and accept that someone else might care about you.”

“Just shut up,” Akechi whispers.

“I do,” says Akira. He yanks his blanket over his torso, dislodging Morgana and sending him tumbling off the bed with a yowl. “Since you’re up, Morgana, turn off the light?”

“I hate you,” whines Morgana, but hops up to comply with his tail in the air.

Akechi watches. “You should learn to turn that off when you come in,” he says.

“Lot of things I should learn, I know,” Akira says. “Maybe that’s a lesson you should take from me.”

(Later, when Akechi’s asleep, Morgana bats at Akira’s ear. “Stop flirting with him, you idiot,” he hisses, but Akira just yawns and rolls over, flattening him with a yelp.)

Chapter End Notes

meta (my signature notespam):

there's a distinction to make between akechi's feelings toward compassion and the views that a more tropey villain might take. it's not that akechi doesn't understand kindness or compassion for its own sake (although he doesn't necessarily see the point of it all the time). this isn't a story about a Cold Hearted Villain Learning To Love. nobody's heart grows three sizes. akechi's struggle lies first and foremost in comprehending exactly why someone would bother feeling this compassion for him. akechi can and does care about people (whether he wants to is a different story). what he doesn't get is why someone, especially someone who has seen what he is capable of firsthand and seen what is under the mask (not necessarily his "true self", but at least seen him with his masks fracturing) would care.

the way i understand akechi, he's bitter and closed off in this way because he doesn't believe that it's possible for people - "normal" people (i'm breaking the tension to bring you the mental image of akechi saying "normies") - to think that HE, not the mask he presents, is worthy of the kind of love and attention he secretly craves (secret even from himself). this isn't self-pity; it's more a reality he's come to by accepting that the acts he undertakes aren't typically considered, how you say, socially acceptable. (murder is bad.) and he doesn't know what to do with it. he's very give and take, everything has to be fair, equal and opposite reaction - if someone shows him kindness then they need something back, and he's willing to provide. so kindness for its own sake, given to HIM when he's accepted that he's not really a normal member of society, is something he kind of struggles to accept without that standard suspicion and generally feeling lost. ann
especially is impossible for him to comprehend given that she loves so fiercely and has seen him hurt her friends. so why she'd bother caring about him is a mystery.

general notes:

- ann trying to "teach akechi a lesson" hidden in a story isn't so far off the mark, even after he snaps that he's not eight years old. in a lot of ways, akechi never matured past a child. (i have more notes about this but the ao3 character counter is judging me. another time.)
- **this is important, because it's something i and a lot of my friends have to learn!**
  ann's whole point is that being pitied doesn't make you weak, it makes your friends kind. it means you're cared about. being pitied isn't about your strength as a person (at least, not always). it's often about the hardships you've had to endure and the compassion people feel for you as a result. akechi doesn't have to feel bad about being pitied, and neither does anyone else.
- "blue steel" was a model joke. i am, quite literally, the most hilarious person on earth.

goodbye.

catch me on twitter or tumblr to support me or say hi!
reality

Chapter Summary

it's yusuke's shift. his disdainful approach may be unwelcome, but it might be what akechi needs.

Chapter Notes

chapter title: yusuke is quite arrogant and prideful in his own way, and in quite a different way to what akechi is. he often acts sort of disdainful of those who he disapproves of, and his interactions with akechi in the engine room actually demonstrate this quite well. by "reality", i don't mean to say that yusuke's perspective is, in fact, the true view of reality. it's more that yusuke's bluntness offers akechi a slap in the face and a different view of a reality he takes for granted.

(this one's interesting, so i will go into more detail about the title choice in my usual end-notesspam!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I can’t believe we still haven’t caught cognitive Akechi,” says Morgana, frustrated. “We’ve been in there twice now.”

“I thought for sure it would come after us,” says Haru unhappily. “Especially when I blew up that wall…”

“Yeah, by the way? That was super unnecessary,” says Ryuji. “Like, super awesome. But super unnecessary.”

“It was cathartic,” Haru protests.

“Was getting seventeen Shadows to attack us at the same time cathartic too?!” Ryuji demands.

“We’re getting off track,” interjects Makoto. “There’s nothing we can do until it decides to show itself. We’ll just have to keep going in. Yusuke, are you happy to take today’s shift?”

“Of course,” says Yusuke. “Don’t worry. He won’t cause any problems for me.”

Ann and Ryuji exchange a glance.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay?” asks Ann.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I dunno,” says Ryuji. “I’m with Ann, I – I just get a weird feeling about you and him, that’s all.”

Yusuke frowns. “Did something happen in your time with him?” he asks. “You’ve both been
acting – strange.”

“We’re fine,” says Ann at once. “Right, Ryuji?”

“Course,” says Ryuji. “Just be careful, dude.” He winces. “Akechi’s – Well, he’s – he’s sure a guy, that’s all.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Shaddup!”

“I’m not worried,” says Akira. “Just don’t let him get to you.”

“Of course I won’t,” says Yusuke, looking slightly offended. “An artist’s soul must remain undisturbed, like the stilled water of a pond on a clear day –”

“Akechi’s pretty effin’ good at throwin’ stones,” Ryuji mutters.

“I’m sure Yusuke will be fine,” says Morgana. “We all agreed to take shifts, so we’ll just have to stick with that unless we come up with a better plan.” He looks around hopefully. “Does anyone… have one?”

“I still have the jangly collar,” volunteers Futaba.

“How would that help us here?” asks Makoto.

Futaba shrugs. “Morale boost,” she says.

“Seconded,” says Ryuji.

“Overruled,” sighs Makoto. “Come on, let’s get going.”

Akira touches Yusuke’s arm on his way out of the café. “Stay grounded,” he says.

“Of course,” says Yusuke. “Don’t worry. I have no intention of letting him under my skin.”

“No one does,” says Akira. “Remember what’s important.”

“What do you mean?” asks Yusuke, but Akira has already turned for the door.

Yusuke pauses at the top of the stairs. “Allow me to set one thing straight right away,” he says in a clipped voice. “I have no interest in speaking with you.”

Akechi raises one eyebrow. “Well, that’s rather harsh,” he says, pouting. “And here I was hoping we could braid each other’s hair and play spin the bottle.”

“Be quiet,” Yusuke instructs. “You should know: I don’t trust you, and I don’t want anything to do with you. I’m here to watch you while my teammates complete their task. That is all.”

Akechi leans back. “You should get your stories straight,” he says in a light voice. “Your friend Takamaki expended a great deal of effort yesterday, trying to convince me that you were all here
because you cared about me.”

Yusuke considers him with a disaffected glint to his eye. “She does not speak for me,” he decides.

“So you hate me?”

“No.”

“No? What is it, then?”

“I don’t hate you,” says Yusuke, “for the reasons that the others might.”

“So they do,” says Akechi.

“Perhaps. I don’t know. I don’t hate you.” Yusuke strides to the desk on the other end of the attic and sits down. He picks up a manga, left there by Akira, and turns it over in his hands to inspect the back. “You’ve done nothing to wrong me.”

“So why –”

“I don’t respect you,” says Yusuke simply, and Akechi jolts a little in surprise.

“Well, that’s rather rude,” he says finally.

Yusuke opens the manga.

“I don’t want to talk,” he says abruptly. “Don’t try anything. I’ll keep an eye on you until Akira and the others return, in silence.”

“Oh, but I’m curious now.” Akechi leans forward again. “What have I done to deserve this kind of apathy? I expected hatred, at least.”

“You expect more passion than you deserve,” says Yusuke.

“You know, I’m a little hurt,” Akechi says. “I thought we might see eye to eye.”

“I respect you, you know,” says Akechi. He smiles when Yusuke’s eyebrows jump involuntarily. “Don’t take that the wrong way. When I say respect, I do mean… As much as I can respect any of you, which admittedly isn’t much.”

“I thought you were supposed to be charismatic,” says Yusuke abruptly. “You are not doing such an admirable job of flattering me into conversation.”

Akechi smiles wider. “Well, it worked, didn’t it?” he asks. Yusuke’s brow crumples. “Come now, don’t sulk. It’s not such a nice look on a pretty face like yours.”

“Be quiet,” Yusuke advises.

Akechi leans further forward. “I thought we might reach an understanding,” he coaxes. “Come on. Don’t you want to share? You were the pupil of the great Madarame. Admired by all. And what did he do to you?”

Yusuke closes the manga.
“I see what you’re seeking,” he says coldly. “You will not receive it from me.”

“No?”

“I won’t validate your behaviour,” says Yusuke. “In fact, I couldn’t disapprove more. We are not the same.”

“Of course not,” says Akechi. “You are a simple weakling, after all. Just like the rest of them.”

“Am I?” asks Yusuke. “I have continued to live after betrayal. You have allowed it to fester, to dictate your every step. Who clings to their slights like a child?” He shakes his head. “I must admit, I’m disappointed by you. I, too, would have liked to see a kindred spirit in you. But you have not lived up to my expectations.”

Akechi blinks a few times before he remembers to close his mouth. “I don’t quite know how to respond to that,” he says.

“Good,” says Yusuke. “Can we have quiet now?”

“No, I want you to explain,” says Akechi. It’s closer to a threat now; when Yusuke looks up, Akechi’s eyes have narrowed.

Yusuke smiles.

“I’ve slighted you,” he muses. “So obvious, for one so practiced in maintaining a façade. You need to learn balance.”

“Explain,” insists Akechi.

“I have,” says Yusuke. “If you need further explanation, it is not my problem. What I have already said is sufficient.”


“How?” echoes Yusuke. “Well, why not? Do you treat those whom you do not respect with the cordiality you don’t feel they deserve?”

“What is your problem?” hisses Akechi.

“What’s yours?” Yusuke asks. “I wonder about you. How you can live a life for yourself and yourself alone, with no concern for –”

“Others?”


“I’m not an artist,” says Akechi, voice shaking, “nor a fool. Why should I chase cloudy ideals that mean nothing in the end? You look down at me for that?”

Yusuke shrugs. “I suppose it’s not just that,” he murmurs. “You’re not the only one who thinks this way.”

“Your friends –”

“Yes, they are different from me,” Yusuke concedes. He smiles. “Many think me odd, so perhaps I am. Perhaps you are the norm.”
Akechi doesn’t say anything.

“You don’t want that, either,” Yusuke observes. He shakes his head. “You see? You place so much importance on material things – approval, revenge.”

“Neither of those are material,” sneers Akechi. “You’re an idiot.”

“Not material in the usual sense.”

“The only sense!”

“I disagree,” says Yusuke. He frowns. “Well, perhaps material is the wrong word. How about… Worldly?”

“I’m not a spiritual man,” says Akechi.

“Clearly,” says Yusuke. “You live a life for yourself. That’s not… a bad thing, even if it’s not the way I choose to live.”

“Like a fool?”

“With honour,” says Yusuke. “With meaning.”

“So, just what I said.”

“Why are you alive?” asks Yusuke.

Akechi jerks back. “Goodness, that was harsh,” he says, and laughs a laugh with all the grace of nails tearing through a chalkboard. “And isn’t that the question!”

Yusuke shakes his head. “My apologies. That came out wrong. I don’t mean you shouldn’t be. I mean why? What are you here for?”

“I was put here,” says Akechi, and stops. He shakes his head. “To do the bidding of a god?”

“Is that it?” muses Yusuke. “You don’t seem sure.”

“Don’t distract me with your aimless philosophy,” snarls Akechi. “What does it matter why I’m alive? I am. Who should I live for, if not myself?”

“Not who,” says Yusuke. “What?”

“What?”

“You can live for yourself and for your values,” says Yusuke, “if you make them one and the same. What you believe – what you live for – that’s who you are. That’s why you’re here. It’s what you care about.”

“I’ll throw up if you continue this soapbox nonsense.”

“Throw up what?” Yusuke asks, impatient. “You’re empty without reason.”

“Throw up wh- Sorry, do you not eat?” snaps Akechi. “Are you so full of sanctimonious bullshit that you’ll starve yourself for a metaphor?!”

Yusuke shrugs. “I don’t eat much, no,” he says, and Akechi groans. “You wonder why I don’t
respect you. There is your answer. You have no values. You have no core. There is nothing to you but flesh and bones, and that is all you live for. Immediate desires. Petty squabbles. No ability to release and move on. I have no respect for those who live without reason.”

Akechi shakes his head.

“You’re full of crap,” he says in a low voice.

“At least I’m full of something,” Yusuke sniffs, looking mutinous. He surveys Akechi, seething on the sofa. “I seek purpose,” Yusuke says, after a moment. “That is how I live. How I create my art. I believe there is little point to a life lived for its own sake – not when there’s more to see…”

“So you disapprove of me.”

Yusuke considers. “Perhaps I’ve been harsh,” he concedes. He manages a small, wry smile. “After all, it’s not up to me to approve or disapprove of your life.”

“You’re damn right.”

“I told you… I am disappointed,” says Yusuke. “We are not the same, yes… But we are not without similarities, just as you’ve observed. And I had hoped for more than you are. My apologies.”

Akechi shakes his head. “I can’t stand you.”

“Because I look down on you?” asks Yusuke. “You can’t handle that, can you?”

“Just shut up,” says Akechi, turning away. “Shut up.”

“I wanted to,” Yusuke says crossly. “You refused.”

“Shut up!”

“No, you were right the first time,” says Yusuke. “I… We might both benefit from discussing –”

“I don’t have anything to say to you.”

“You can’t only engage in conversation when it makes you feel good,” snaps Yusuke. “You can’t avoid anything that doesn’t stroke your ego!”

“Shut! Up!” Akechi shrieks suddenly, and Yusuke flinches. “Just – shut your mouth, I don’t care –”

Something sparks in Yusuke’s eyes and he shoots to his feet, knocking the chair backwards. “I don’t care,” he says, fierce. “I don’t care what you care about. I’m not here to preserve the fragility you’ve crafted so carefully!”

“I thought you were only here to watch me!”

“Watch you! Not watch you destroy yourself!”

“I’m fine –”

“You are very clearly not,” retorts Yusuke. “How many times will you crash into a million pieces on the floor before you realise it isn’t enough to simply pour glue over the remains?!”

“What are you talking about?!”
“You think yourself strong,” scoffs Yusuke. “You turn from any that paint you otherwise and call yourself a masterpiece. Your entire life is built on lies so delicate that spun glass could shatter them. And you wonder why I don’t respect you. Justice requires truth, and you have no regard for either.”

“I don’t want to hear any of this from you!”

“You don’t want to hear this from anyone!” shouts Yusuke. “And I don’t care. You won’t survive if you hear only what you want.”

“You think I can’t take criticism?” Akechi splutters. “Do you know –”

“Yes,” says Yusuke. “I know. You are a celebrity. I’ve seen the public turn on you myself. You handled it with grace – more, actually, than I would, and more than I have. I can admire that.”

Akechi blinks. “I don’t understand you,” he says, his voice suddenly low again.

“No, you don’t,” says Yusuke. “It’s not the same thing, you know. You are so sure of yourself – sure that what you have done is right. You tell yourself there is no room for self-doubt in your heart, crowded as it is with blind arrogance and pride, and you shutter it away. You maintain your composure under fire because you are confident that the bullets are made of rubber. Freely ignored, in the face of self-assurance.” He shakes his head. “Or delusion.”

“Pardon?” asks Akechi, politely enraged.

Yusuke shakes his head again. “But my words are different,” he says. “You can’t hear what I have to say because it might make you doubt yourself. It’s easy to ignore the ones you know to be wrong. What about the ones who might have a point?”

“Stop talking.”

“What about the ones that make you examine yourself?” presses Yusuke. “What about the ones who force you to stare into the mirror instead of the airbrushed images in the magazines? Make you confront the ugliest parts of your soul, or what’s left of it?”

“SHUT UP!”

“FACE YOURSELF!” Yusuke roars. “Until you can see yourself – know yourself – how can you expect anyone to truly respect you?!”

Akechi curls, retreats into the sofa in a balled up mess, and the gentle shaking exists only to a careful eye. Yusuke’s sharp gaze flickers over him and courteously flits away.

“Madarame was like a father to me,” he says, after what feels like a long quiet. His tone is almost conversational, in contrast to the wildness that tore its way from his throat only moments before. “All I’d known, in my life.”

Akechi says nothing.

“It was because of him that I lost my mother,” Yusuke continues. “He took advantage of me. My loyalty, and my ability.” He hesitates. “I’m… sure this sounds familiar.”

Akechi says nothing.

“We are not the same,” murmurs Yusuke. “I have been far luckier. That I had a father figure to… even pretend to care for me was more fortune than you’ve had. And… I choose to believe that… If
only in fleeting moments, he truly did care.” He gazes into the floor, seeing something distant and non-existent. “I can’t… hate him. Part of me still cares for him. I – Having something tangible as these memories, it has been easier for me to move on.”

Akechi says nothing.

“I’m sorry I can’t hate him,” says Yusuke. “I know you wanted me to.”

“I don’t want anything from you,” says Akechi. Yusuke winces; the voice crawls through used sandpaper.

“I’m sorry,” Yusuke says. “I’m sorry. I don’t wish to undo Ann’s hard work. Don’t get the wrong idea. I – have been harsh.”

“Don’t bother trying to pretend like you regret any of what you’ve said.”

Yusuke shrugs. “Perhaps I don’t,” he says. “Can you believe me if I tell you I do want to help you?”

“Does it matter?” rasps Akechi. “I can’t be helped.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“I don’t give a damn what you believe.”

“You are an interesting person, Akechi,” says Yusuke. “I want to know more about you. I’d like to understand. And I want you to find – peace – as I have been seeking myself.”

Akechi presses his lips together.

Yusuke sighs. “I promised I would not let you under my skin,” he murmurs. “It seems I’ve failed, in that regard.”

Akechi allows himself a tiny, bitter smirk. “I’m quite good at that,” he says, almost lightly.

“Apparently so,” says Yusuke. “Akechi… Just because we are not the same does not mean we cannot –”

“Be friends?” Akechi mocks. “Are you serious?”

“Let me finish,” insists Yusuke. “It does not mean we cannot… take solace in each other. Learn from each other.”

“I don’t have any interest in associating with you,” Akechi breathes, eyes burning. “Leave me be.”

“Akechi –”

Akechi waves a hand at him. “Go away,” he whispers. “I don’t want – that is – I – Please.”

Yusuke bites his lip. “I hope you’ll give yourself the chance to heal,” he says. “I’ll be here, as will we all. And I hope you know… I’m not harsh because I dislike you.”

“No,” says Akechi, still facing away. “You don’t care what happens to me. I understand.” After a short pause, he murmurs, “I don’t blame you.”

Yusuke thinks a moment. “I’m not quite sure that’s true, actually,” he says.
“I don’t give a shit anyway.”

“You should already know I’m not affected by what you care about,” says Yusuke. “I won’t ask you to prove yourself to me. I’m not that self-important. But you are more than I credited you for, in my blind disdain. For that, and for the way I treated you, I apologise.”

Akechi inclines his head slightly toward Yusuke, chin pressing against his shoulder and hair falling over his face. The quiet he waits in feels almost expectant.

“I hope I’ll get a chance to see you, Akechi Goro,” Yusuke says quietly. “As the true masterpiece, and not a simple forgery.”

Akira very deliberately flicks the light off before he moves to clamber into bed. “Did you have a good day?”

“As much as you know I enjoy our little, ah… tête-à-têtes,” Akechi says, “I think I would really prefer to go straight to sleep tonight.”

Morgana makes an amused noise. “Did you have some trouble with Yusuke?” he asks.

“Not at all,” says Akechi. “I’m just tired. You understand, I’m sure.”

Akira looks at him closely. ‘Everything okay?’

“Yes, I’m fine.”

Akira’s eyes stay on him for another moment before they slide casually away. “Yusuke’s a character, huh,” he says.

“I thought you were eccentric,” Akechi remarks, seemingly before he can stop himself.

“We’re a mismatched group,” smiles Akira. “That’s why we fit together so well, I guess.”

“Is that why you’re so determined to jam me into your little jigsaw puzzle?”

Akira shrugs. “Just means you’ve got a place with us,” he says. “It’s not why we’re trying.”

“Are you going to talk all night?” asks Morgana crossly. “I thought I was actually going to get some peace for once when Akechi said he wanted to sleep.”

“Sorry,” says Akira. “Want to go downstairs?”

“No way are you kicking me out of my own room,” huffs Morgana. “Don’t worry. I’ve got built-in earmuffs.” And he covers his ears with his paws and curls up to sleep.

Akira watches him. “Adorable,” he says, then glances up at Akechi. “I’m not allowed to say that when he can hear me.”

Akechi seems to have ignored all this. “Why do you bother, then?”

“Why do we do anything?” asks Akira. “You can agree or not, but we think it’s the right thing to
do. That’s all we have to go on."

“Self-assigned duty, then?”

“Duty?” Akira shakes his head. “Guess you could put it that way, but it’s less a sense of obligation.”

“Than what?”


“Of course I can,” says Akechi. He smiles. “I’ve done my job too well, it seems. You really believe I’m a storybook villain with no capacity to understand compassion.”

Akira blinks. Then he beams. “Doesn’t matter what I think, does it?” he says. “Only matters that you can finally say it’s not true.”

Akechi stares at him for a moment before he starts to laugh. “Oh, I see,” he says. “I see! You think you’re winning – finally peeling back the layers of my famous mask?”

“You know something?” asks Akira. He reaches absently to scratch behind Morgana’s ear, and the cat makes a pleased humming sound in his sleep. “I don’t know shit. I don’t think I’m doing anything. And I’m not ‘winning’ anything. All I can do is call it like I see it.”

Akechi cocks his head. “And how’s that?” he asks softly.

Akira considers. “You seem different,” he says.

“How?”

Akira shrugs again, suddenly breezy. “Dunno,” he says.

Akechi grits his teeth. “You are impossible,” he grates.


“Impossibly obnoxious!” explodes Akechi. “Foolish, idiotic, and irritating!”

Akira taps his chin. “I like mine better,” he decides.

“Let me sleep,” snaps Akechi. “I can’t stand you.”

“You’re lying down.”

“Oh, I wish I’d really shot you.”

“You did,” Akira pouts. “Through the heart. Just then.”

“Good night.”

of all the PT, yusuke is given the most shit for being weird and eccentric (which i have my own issues with, but another time). he usually has his head in the clouds, so it might seem strange that i've posted him as the value of "reality" here. again, i'll emphasise that yusuke's view is not the objective truth. a better word is probably "disdain" (in fact that was the original chapter title). what i'm constantly going for is the concept that frequently, opposites at face value are actually parallels or reflections. yusuke's character means he seems the most dreamy and unrealistic of the gang, while akechi represents logic and cool-headedness (no matter how warped said logic is). in actuality, they're arguably equally deluded. yusuke's pride is first and foremost in his values, while akechi's is in his actions. this leads to different kinds of perfectionism and delusion. i wanted eccentric yusuke to give logical akechi that slap in the face with reality, because it's a bit of a turnabout. it's interesting too because personal gain is empirical while values are cloudy, so getting a dose of realism from a subjective and moralistic lecture is a nice juxtaposition.

i'm rambling again. the point is that "reality" here does not refer to objective truth, but to akechi facing the fact that his constructed reality is not the ONLY reality, and there are things he's made himself blind to. as morgana says in the end of the game, the world is different for everyone. the stark contrast in yusuke's and akechi's values as well as yusuke's bluntness, coupled with his disdain for akechi, means that yusuke is the perfect person to leave akechi reeling.

additional notes:

- examples of yusuke not being perfect despite how high and mighty he's being: saying stuff like "at least i'm full of something". that's super childish and doesn't even make sense! this whole conversation is a battle of two people convinced of their own realities and drowning in delusion (although yusuke is at least more aware of it since the confidant). they're good for each other, if they don't set each other on fire.
- yusuke has a real weird view of reality here, considering "revenge" and "approval" to be material and "memories" to be tangible. i think this is because he considers intangibility better saved for higher and even more nebulous concepts, like the ones he pours into his art - things like "love" and "hope". (but he's wrong because memories are Not in fact tangible and that is not how words work, yusuke!!)
- the end conversation with akira - it's not about compassion. it's about the fact that akechi's mask was LITERALLY an archetypal villain - the face, the voice, the laugh, everything. akechi probably viewed himself as "the villain" in some ways (although that's a simplification) and so he just built his persona around his perception of what that involves - that's my explanation for why his Villainous Reveal was so damn tropey. so when he rejects the idea that he's a storybook villain, he's at the very beginnings of rejecting that mask and maybe finding a self.

phew. hope you enjoyed the chapter, folks! find me on twitter or tumblr, as always. and thanks for the love. <3
understanding

Chapter Summary

makoto uses her shift to try and get to know akechi, even though he's suspicious of her real motives.

Chapter Notes

chapter title: understanding is something makoto lacked at the start of her confidant: understanding of herself and the world in particular. she tended to do things (like studying) without real understanding of why or what it was really for, and she didn't understand what was "right" to her because she didn't understand her own values. it's a huge part of her character and something makoto continually seeks and craves. this one doesn't actually need much explanation, i'm sure you'll find - the word comes up a LOT in this chapter.

(i keep forgetting to mention, but i'm foregoing the japanese honourifics in this fic. i don't have a firm enough grasp on the cultural norms to nail the nuances, and i don't want to risk sound like a total weea-noob, which is a terrible, terrible word that i made up just now patent pending.)

(also, sorry for the delay! i struggled a bit with this chapter so i was reluctant to post it at first, but it's gotta go up sometime. hope you enjoy.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I don’t like this,” says Ryuji.

Makoto sighs. “Listen, I know it’s not ideal,” she says. “But you guys will be fine without me.”

“But you’re our strategist,” Ann whines, pouting.


“I’m offended,” says Akira.

“Not that Akira isn’t a wonderful leader, of course,” Haru hurriedly volunteers. “But, I agree with Futaba. It seems risky to be without someone who knows what they’re doing.”

“I’m more offended now,” Akira offers.

Ryuji ignores him. “C’mon,” he pleads. “Look, one of us can take a double shift with Akechi or something. It ain’t right to leave you behind, not when you have such a major role! I mean, what’re we gonna do if we do run into cognitive Akechi?!”

“The way things have been progressing, that doesn’t seem likely,” Yusuke mutters. He glances up
when they all look at him. “Ah. I’m sorry for playing the defeatist. You have to admit, though, the search has not been going well.”

Morgana hums. “Isn’t that all the more reason Makoto should come with us?” he asks. “It is tactically unsound to leave our strategist behind, and it’s probably not going to do anything for our progress.”

“You’ll be okay!” Makoto insists. “You were doing well even before I joined you, right? You must have been doing something right.”

“No, I’m pretty sure that was mostly luck,” says Morgana.

“I’m sitting right here,” Akira complains.

Makoto smiles at him. “Come on, you don’t need me that badly,” she says. “I mean, we’re all good at what we do. Besides, Akira’s a great leader, and you’ll have Morgana to call the shots if need be. It’s only one day.”

Ryuji frowns. “Why do you wanna hang out with Akechi so bad?” he asks. “He stinks.”

“That’s on me,” says Morgana. “We’re not letting him go to the bathhouse a whole lot.”

“That was not my idea, by the way,” adds Akira, wrinkling his nose.

Makoto laughs, uncomfortable. “I mean, it’s only fair that I take a shift too.” She sighs and tucks some hair behind her ear. “Plus… I kind of want the chance to try and understand him,” she confesses. “Honestly, I’m curious about him.”

“Also, you seem to have some kind of jealousy thing going on,” says Futaba.

Makoto flushes. “Well, okay, that too,” she admits. “I guess I have a bit of a rivalry forming with him. You can’t blame me for wanting a turn, right?” She looks at Yusuke. “How did yesterday go?”

“It was fine,” Yusuke says stiffly, and the others exchange a look before silently dropping the issue.

“Well, okay,” says Ann reluctantly. “If you’re sure about this, then I guess we’ll leave him to you for the day.”

“If they all die in the Metaverse today, it’s on you,” Futaba adds cheerfully, and Makoto looks alarmed. “C’mon, Queen, I’m kidding! Kind of, mostly.”

“Akira won’t let anyone die,” Makoto scoffs, and peeks at Akira. “Right, Akira?”

“Tempted,” Akira mutters, but shoots her a reassuring smile anyway.

Makoto laughs again. “It’ll be fine,” she says. “I’ll see you all this evening. Good luck.”

“So,” says Makoto.

“So,” echoes Akechi. He quirks his lips. “Are you going to interrogate me now?”
Makoto shrugs. “I’m not a detective,” she says. “Or a prosecutor, for that matter.”

“Evidently,” says Akechi. His eyes gleam as he watches her. “So then, what will it be?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“It seems you all have – little plans for how to approach me,” says Akechi. “Or, maybe, how to avoid me. So what do you have up your sleeve?” He leans forward. “Will you engage me? Ignore me? Appeal to me? What is it you want from today?”

“Nothing of the sort,” says Makoto. She folds her arms. “I don’t have any special motives, Akechi. I just want to talk.”

“That’s a motive,” Akechi says.

“Wanting to stay silent would be one, too,” Makoto points out.

Akechi smiles.

“What do you want to talk about?” he asks.

Makoto considers. “I don’t know,” she says. “Shouldn’t you be telling me? I am doing this to learn more about you, after all.”

“Are you?” Akechi muses. “I’m not sure, Nijima. Don’t you think you might be seeking affirmation?”

“Excuse me?”

“Am I wrong?”

“I don’t understand what you mean,” says Makoto.

“Well, I don’t know,” says Akechi. “You’d have to tell me that yourself. Don’t you think?” He smiles at Makoto’s frustrated face. “So tell me.”

“Tell you what?” demands Makoto. “You have to know I can’t communicate with you until you start making sense.”

“Tell me about myself,” Akechi invites. “Go on. I’m damaged. Lost. Aren’t I? Why don’t you enlighten me?”

Makoto frowns.

“I’m… not sure where you’re going with this,” she says.

“Mm. Doesn’t that just drive you up the wall?”

Makoto chews on her lip. “I think it’s safe to say that you’re hurting.”

“Badly,” Akechi agrees.

“And… Maybe a little deluded,” Makoto offers. She winces. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be harsh.”

“Oh, no,” Akechi assures her. “Please, go on. Don’t hold back.”

Makoto frowns, pondering. “You think this is what you need to be happy, to finally move on…
But it’s not. Akechi…” She sighs. “You’re on the wrong path. I know you’re looking for justice. But this isn’t how to find it.”

Akechi gives her a long look. “Thank you,” he says. “You’ve really taught me something today. I feel like a changed man.”

Makoto looks exasperated. “All right,” she says tiredly. “You –”

“So, how far do you think you can get this way?” Akechi asks. “Giving your vague, well-intentioned advice to mask the fact that you mean well but know nothing? Tell me, Nijima – if you have all the answers, then what would you do?”

“Not this,” Makoto says quietly.

Akechi barks out a laugh. “Oh, that’s even worse,” he says; blends disgust and amusement into a flavour that makes Makoto flinch. “So many respect you, you know. They think you’re intelligent, capable… If only they knew you were nothing more than an idealistic simpleton.”

“All I want is to do what’s right,” Makoto begins, heated, but Akechi cuts her off.

“Isn’t that an easy answer!” he says. “Isn’t it exhausting, responding in idle catchphrases? Can you tell me what ‘the right thing’ is? What’s ‘justice’? What is it?”

“You know nobody has the answer to those questions,” Makoto snaps.

“That’s exactly my point,” Akechi snarls. “Telling me ‘there’s another way’ – ‘this isn’t just’ – ‘we’re doing the right thing’ – it’s all meaningless as a crossword filled in by an illiterate child. Smoke and mirrors to disguise the nothing and the nothing you claim to believe in.” He gives her a derisive look. “The noble Phantom Thieves, admired by all,” he says. “You don’t even know what you’re fighting for.”

“And you do?”

“That depends what you’re asking,” Akechi shoots back. “Are you asking if I know what justice is? In theory, I believe in it just as you do. But I’m willing to admit that I don’t have any more answers than you. It might not exist at all.”

“So – But if – Then how can you be so – cavalier?!”

Akechi smiles, perfectly serene. “Here’s a difference,” he says. “I don’t know what justice is, so I don’t fight for it. You want to know what I fight for? Myself. At least I know I exist, in whatever unfortunate form.”

“You call this – all of this – this is fighting for yourself?”

“What else would it be?”

“What are you really gaining?” exclaims Makoto. “How do you benefit from any of this?”

“Oh, please,” Akechi sighs. “Your inability to see a goal doesn’t make it less real. You’re not the only person around, you know.”

“I see your goal just fine,” Makoto snaps. “It’s not worth fighting for.”

“Isn’t it?” Akechi asks. “Are you in any place to tell me that, when you don’t even have a real goal of your own?”
Makoto fumes a moment longer before appearing to gather herself. “Fine,” she says at last. “Fine. I concede that we have a lot of thinking to do before we can even begin to hope to be the ‘heroes of justice’ we pretend to be.” She grits her teeth. “There’s a lot that I don’t know. But I do know you deserve better than this, and I know you can take a different path. Whether you find ‘true justice’ at the end… That’s something I can’t promise. But I’m sure it’s more than what your current path can give you.” She gazes at him, suddenly earnest and almost sad. “Stay with us. We can help you figure this out.”

Akechi gives her a long look.

“You never learn,” he says. “You don’t know who I am. You have no idea what I’ve – everything I’ve lived – you can’t possibly guess.”

“I know we can’t,” says Makoto. “You’ve been through so much, Akechi, I… I get it.”

“You don’t,” Akechi spits, and Makoto balks at the sudden venom. “You idiot – you don’t even know what you don’t know. Don’t pretend otherwise. And don’t pretend you know what’s good for me!”

There’s a long, long stretch of silence before Makoto replies.

When she finally does, her voice is low and resigned. “You’re right,” she says. “Okay. You’re right. You’ve proven your point. I don’t understand you. And maybe I never will.”

“…I’m glad you’ve finally realised.”

“But…” Makoto sighs. “I’d really like to.” She watches him, her eyes almost pleading. “You can understand that, can’t you? I mean, you were right. Even if I don’t understand you… You understand me.”

Akechi seems to scan her a moment, analysing the data like any other piece of evidence. “You’re rather obsessed with understanding,” he remarks. Makoto winces, and he continues. “You want to impress your sister. You’re jealous that I won her approval so easily. How she seems to value my opinion more than yours.” He considers. “Maybe you feel like… You can never measure up?”

Makoto’s expression turns pained. “This is exactly what I’m talking about,” she whispers. “It’s like you don’t even need to try. You’re everything I want to be, and I hate it. You can take one look at me and – and just get the measure of me, instantly.”


“Considering what?”

Akechi chews on the inside of his cheek, as though winning and losing a mental wrestling match with himself. “Your little group has somewhat of a fondness for misfits,” he says finally. “People who struggled to find a place. Who wanted to belong.”

Makoto exhales ever-so-slightly. “You relate to us, don’t you?” Then she winces. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to presume again.”

Akechi shoots her a wry look from under his eyelashes. “It doesn’t seem to be something you can help, is it?”

Makoto starts, and then huffs a slightly awkward laugh. “I guess not,” she says. “Sorry.”
Akechi quirks his lip in a tiny half-smile. “That’s all right,” he says. “In any case, you’re… actually right, this time.” He sighs. “I’m grateful to Prosecutor Niijima. For accepting me.”

“Even though you were fooling her the whole time?”

Akechi looks briefly surprised. Then he laughs. “Yes, even though I was,” he says, smiling almost impishly at Makoto. She smiles back, looking dubious. “She is… truly a great woman, and I respect her.” His expression turns wry. “I see why you care so much for her approval.”

Makoto snorts. “Maybe it’s just that I just can’t manage by myself,” she murmurs.

Akechi shrugs. “Maybe,” he says. “Is it weakness to need others? Your friends would have me believe otherwise. They’ve been quite insistent.”

“Ah,” says Makoto. “I.”

“Is it different from caring what others think about you?” asks Akechi. “Does it make you strong? Weak? Human?” He shakes his head. “Are they different…?”

Makoto gives her uncomfortable laugh again. “You’ve lost me there,” she says. “It’s a hard question, I… don’t really know how to answer.”

Akechi smiles. “My apologies,” he says. “I think you’ll agree this week has been rather chaotic. I’m afraid it’s taken its toll. I wouldn’t usually inflict my ramblings on you like that – or I’d like to think I wouldn’t, at least.”

“No, there’s no need to apologise,” says Makoto. “I mean, I wanted to talk to you. This is… good.”

Akechi nods. “I’m not sure I’m sold yet,” he says. “But we aren’t so different, you and I. You value your independence. And I’m – at least, not anymore, but – I’m not foolish enough to deny that you have strength.”

Makoto looks surprised. “Akechi, that was nice,” she says.

“It can happen. Don’t tell anyone.” When Akechi grins at her, he’s camera-ready all at once – poised, careful, not a word or expression out of place. His sudden balance throws Makoto off hers as she tries to recalculate which walls have just been thrown back up and which are still crumbling.

“My lips are sealed,” she says in reply, and his eyes sparkle like they’ve shared some secret monumental and constructed as the Colosseum. Makoto wonders if there exists a confidant in this world with a claim to a glimmer of Akechi Goro’s truth. And she wonders how many think they have.

“Niijima,” says Akechi, and Makoto snaps back to reality. “Will you give me cause to rethink?”

“Do you respect my opinion enough?” she asks, surprised.

“I suppose I’ll see,” says Akechi, and Makoto supposes that will do.

She thinks for a moment.

“I hope this won’t be insensitive,” she says.

“Be my guest,” says Akechi.
“My greatest inspiration,” says Makoto, and stops. It’s harder than she’d anticipated to speak the words aloud to this face, upturned and ready to crunch her words to quantifiable data. She pushes on. “My greatest inspiration is my father.”

Akechi’s gaze is unfahtering. When he sees her pause, expectant, he smiles and clutches a hand to his heart. “Oh, I’m sorry,” he says politely. “Am I supposed to break down now?”

Makoto laughs despite herself. “Sorry, I know you aren’t made of glass.”

“I appreciate your consideration,” says Akechi. “It’s unnecessary.”

“Understood,” says Makoto. “My father was a policeman. He was killed in the line of duty.”

She pauses again, but Akechi’s face doesn’t change. The lack of condolence is a refreshment and a relief. “His justice is what drives me, even though I… lost it for a while.” She hesitates again. “I hope I can live up to it someday. I wouldn’t be who I am without his legacy. And his strength.”

She peeks at Akechi, but he still shows no sign of interrupting. Instead, he maintains a careful attentiveness that forces her to look away.

“The inspiration he gave us, and the love we felt for him…” Makoto sets her jaw. “If that makes me weak, then I’m weak,” she says quietly. “But considering everything I’ve done with the support of people like him, whom I care about, and respect… I don’t think it makes me weak at all.”

She sighs, and looks up at the ceiling. It isn’t dark enough yet that she can see the stars. She wonders vaguely how many times Akira tumbled off the chair sticking them to the beams and decides she’d rather not know.

“I can’t tell you what to do,” she murmurs. “I can only tell you what’s worked for me. Lending my strength to others, and borrowing theirs in return… It’s made me capable of things I never could have done alone.” She looks at him again. “Do you… get it? It’s not really a matter of lacking your own strength…”

Akechi seems deep in thought. “Pooling your resources…”

“Yes,” says Makoto. “But also something more. Our bonds are the… source of our strength.”

Akechi frowns just slightly, like he’s close to piecing something together in his mind. “Can you explain that a little further?” he asks, sounding a little absent.

“Of course, if you aren’t tired of the sound of my voice.”

"Not at all."

“Put it this way,” says Makoto. “You fight harder when you have something to fight for. And harder still when that something isn’t yourself.” She curls her lip again. “It’s hard to explain, but in a way, it can be worse to let others down than it is to let yourself down. Does that… make sense?”

“I think so.” Akechi narrows his eyes. “I’m guessing you don’t mean simply because others’ lives are more important than yours.”

“Don’t worry, it’s not that sentimental,” says Makoto, amused. “Consider it this way. You don’t have control over others letting you down. It’s just disappointment from someone you were depending on.”
“That’s why I prefer not to depend on people.”

“Fair enough,” says Makoto. “The return isn’t always worth the risk. I’m often the same way. But imagine that it is worth it, for the sake of argument.”

“You don’t want them to suffer for something outside their control,” Akechi says. “Correct?”

Makoto smiles and nods. “I knew you’d get it,” she says. “So, you’re right. We’re both self-sufficient. We don’t like to rely on others. So we understand not wanting to be let down.”

Akechi looks thoughtful. “I never let Shido down.”

“That was more for you than it was for him, right?” Makoto points out. Akechi doesn’t respond, still looking lost in his head, so she continues. “I guess it’s kind of the same. But the stronger your bonds, the harder you’ll fight. When you care about someone, you don’t want to disappoint them. You want to be your best for them, and you want to keep them safe. It’s a source of inspiration like no other.” She looks down at her hands and smiles. “And they do the same for you.”

“I see.”

“It’s different from just having contacts,” Makoto adds. “It’s more tightly interwoven than that. Together, it’s like we’re more than the sum of our parts.” She winces. “That sounds cheesy…”

“Immensely,” Akechi agrees. “But I know what you mean.” He tilts his head, staring into the distance. “It’s a simple enough concept. Thank you for confirming. I already understood in theory, but – and I will make you regret it, if you share this…?”

“You have my silence.”


“It was many to one,” Makoto reasons, but Akechi shakes his head.

“You don’t reach success with excuses,” he says. “If I were as strong as I thought, I shouldn’t have had a problem no matter how many of you there were.” He winces. “You must have had something I didn’t. And there was something here – I was so sure, but I – evidence suggests otherwise.”

“Akechi…”

“Don’t take that the wrong way,” Akechi warns. “I’m not conceding defeat to you.”

“You’d be foolish to,” Makoto agrees. “I know it’s trite at this point, but you really are the strongest person we’ve ever encountered.”

“That should be a given,” Akechi sniffs. He shoots her an amused look. “Don’t go trying to butter me up, now.”

“Never,” says Makoto, grinning.

“If I’d really known the strength you had,” says Akechi, “then I would have won. So there must have been something I missed, no matter how confident I was that I understood the theory.”

“I guess some understanding can only come from experience,” says Makoto.

“I guess so,” says Akechi.
Makoto jerks backward when he smiles at her. It’s crooked; bitter and earnest all the way to his eyes, and she casts desperately back through her memory for some, any other time when Akechi Goro’s smile had been less than perfect. Any other time it reached beyond his lips and into reality.

“Niijima,” he says, and Makoto struggles to see him as he wants to be seen. “Thank you for your understanding today.”

Makoto smiles, puzzled. “I thought I didn’t understand you.”

“So did I,” says Akechi. “But, as I said, there’s a chance that I received too much credit for understanding you.”

“Can I ask you one more thing? Something I can’t seem to figure out?”

“Please.”

“You saw Shido’s Palace. You knew what he was. Even if you had your own motives… Why did you ever agree to help him?”

“…Because there’s never been anything else for me.”

Akira glances at Akechi as he folds his glasses and drops them on the windowsill. “Feel like talking tonight?”

“Actually, I think I’m rather talked out for today.”

Akira raises his eyebrows. “You and Makoto had a long chat?”

“Don’t be jealous?” Akechi offers. He smiles, suddenly teasing. “You know you’re the only one for me.”


“Shut up,” Akira growls. He casts a suspicious look at Akechi. “You seem different today.”

“Do I?” asks Akechi. “I suppose I feel different. It’s nothing I wish to discuss, though.”

“Sure,” says Akira. “But tell me something?”

“No, I’m not free for a movie tomorrow,” Akechi hums, “but if you check in with my agent, I may be able to pencil you in for –”

“Akechi,” Akira snaps.
Akechi turns his polite, questioning gaze to Akira once more. “Yes,” he says.

Akira’s cool eyes brew storms as he sweeps once over Akechi’s casual, yet respectful recline. “Good different or bad different?”

“No,” replies Akechi, “but good try. Sleep well, Kurusu.”

(Morgana nudges Akira twenty minutes later. “Wake up,” he hisses.

“I’m awake.”

“He seems so calm,” says Morgana. “Almost… normal. Do you think we’re making progress?”

Akira wrinkles his nose.

“Yeah,” he says, “but this isn’t it.”

“You don’t buy it?”

Akira shakes his head.

“Me neither,” Morgana whispers. “It doesn’t feel right. Is it a regression?”

Akira shakes his head again. “Something else,” he murmurs. “Keep watching.”

“You mean, right now?”

“I’m sleepy.”

“Geez,” complains Morgana. “You call yourself a Phantom Thief?”

“G’night,” Akira yawns, and he’s asleep before Morgana can badger him any more.)

Chapter End Notes

notespam (brace yourselves - a LOT today...):

i should start by saying i had a tough time with this chapter - it kept coming out feeling strange. different. i couldn't pinpoint why that was happening until i figured it was down to the dynamics themselves. i got confused by my own writing, because akechi is so weirdly civil and docile that i kept waiting for him to blow up. then i realised he wouldn't act that way with makoto - at least in the later section. makoto's approach is different to the others. she isn't trying to convince him or challenge him. her main problem is that she's presumptuous, which is how she starts the day: that's when you see him being contemptuous and difficult with her. but unlike the others, she accepts that she doesn't have anything to hold over him. she stops challenging him. all she wants is to understand him and answer his questions
about HER, so they can reach a mutual understanding.

Akechi and Makoto are real similar in a lot of ways (at one point in dev they were even siblings), and i think his feelings toward her are interesting. He finds her naive and simpleminded, seeing things in b&w like a child; her critical thinking skills aren't as developed as his. on the other hand she clearly has a great mind: quick-witted, organised, strategically-minded, knowledgeable, intelligent, with similar values in terms of reason and justice (sort of). maybe he sees her with untapped potential which is why he eggs her on. tentatively i'd say his interaction with her is the closest he could get to a (little?) sister figure (age notwithstanding), but it's nothing like an average person would consider a sibling since he doesn't know how to form close relationships. it's a middleground between derision/respect, mentorship/menteeship; they both have things to teach each other and he's not sure whether to respect her or not. also important to note that makoto's presumptuous nature is something akechi shares, even though he calls her out on it - he's as much seeking affirmation for his beliefs and theories as she is, coming from a similar need to understand, + arrogance.

because she's not challenging him, he has no reason to be hostile. he recognises this as a conversation he can gain from, so it operates almost as normal. but don't be fooled - he's not "healed" and he's not okay. it's just that akechi is many things - unstable, difficult, uncooperative - but he's not a brat. he won't rise to opposition that isn't there. plus, grudging as he is to admit it, his conversations with the others have blasted his world wide open. he's coming to terms with the fact that there's lots of stuff he's never actually understood. this day with makoto is the first non-hostile low-pressure situation he's been in since, so he's taking advantage to try and build his understanding just like makoto is. this is the first exchange in the fic that feels close to a proper, equal conversation. i won't say they're friends, but i think makoto and akechi are most likely to find common ground and maintain a civil relationship at this stage.

the end section: because of all this, akechi's regained a false sense of control, so he's slightly less on edge. that gives the impression of acting "normal". that's not going to last. the healing process is arduous, and there's a long way to go.

other things:

- akechi kept saying her name here. i say a lot that i feel i don't have much control over what characters say in my fics, it just pours out. but i suspect it's part of an attempt to make her feel pointed at? + a possible constant reminder of her sister, since he knows that's a point of contention between makoto and himself.
- akechi says some stuff here/makes some jokes that are harsher than his usual pleasant boy countenance. closer to the attitude he took with her at that college exam prep thing. it's the start of building his own actual personality; humour, but sardonic rather than light. there's an edge, but it's his idea of a joke.
- makoto's presumptuousness comes from the engine room - she says "killing us won't make you happy" which i think akechi wouldn't take kindly to. he doesn't strike me as the type to enjoy being told what he wants. she's a little condescending, because she likes to be in/take control of things. i think he understands that, though.
- they smile a lot here. it's not a relaxed smile. the atmosphere is teasing, a bit wary? the smile you do when you don't know what else to do.

[link to twitter] and [link to tumblr], as always!
openness

Chapter Summary

futaba surprises the team by insisting on taking a shift, but despite their reservations, this could be just the turning point they need.

Chapter Notes

chapter title: a shut-in who struggled with letting others in, futaba can see these same struggles in akechi and wants to project her experiences onto him to pull him out of what she might have become. learning to let people in and develop a support network is something they all need.

(we’ve reached the projected halfway point of the fic (chapter count still subject to change)! a bit of a turning point, this. longer chapter today and a little early to make up for being late last week!

i’m going to take an “intermission” period now so i can properly work on the rest. i’ll see you guys in a couple weeks – in the meantime, feel free to follow me on twitter and tumblr!

please note updated tags: this chapter contains brief mentions of suicide ideation. similar themes will appear later in the fic with another warning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Makoto blinks as Futaba bounces in front of her. “You want to take a shift too?”

“Of course!” Futaba enthuses. “Why not, right?”

“I just assumed you’d stay out of it, I guess,” Makoto falters. “I mean, you’re our panic button.”

“No way! It’s only fair, you know!” insists Futaba. “I can’t stay behind all the time. You gotta let me have a turn too!”

“You don’t have to do this,” says Ann, her eyebrows creased. “Really, Futaba, I can take your shift.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m okay,” says Futaba. She clenches her fists. “I… think I need this.”

“I mean, don’t kill him,” says Ryuji, but leaning against the window as casually as he is, it almost looks like he mightn’t care too much if she did. “Just be careful, okay? He’s not a nice dude.”

“I can hear you,” Akechi calls cheerfully from his couch, and the group huddles surreptitiously closer.

Morgana looks thoughtful. “I guess we could ask somebody else to be backup for today,” he says.
“What about you, Yusuke?”

“Me?” Yusuke tilts his head. “I suppose I could stand by the Diet Building in case Futaba calls for help. Why me?”

Ann giggles. “You’re the least likely to look out of place hovering around for no reason,” she says. “Since you do it all the time anyway!”

“Oh! He won’t look strange, because he always looks strange!” Haru claps her hands, delighted. “Good plan, Mona!”

Yusuke glances at Ryuji. “Should I be offended?”

“Just let it go, dude.”

Akira shifts his weight, still focused on Futaba. “Do you want me to stay?” he offers quietly.

“No way,” says Futaba. She gives them an enthusiastic double thumbs up and Yusuke yelps as she catches him in the nose with an outstretched fist. “I got this!”

The others look at her, evidently unconvinced.

“Really!” she insists, and hesitates a moment. “I know you’re all worried about me,” she says. “But that just means you’ve all got my back. And that’s - that’s how I know I can do this. I’ll be fine!”

Sojiro glances up as the group clomps down the stairs. He fixes Akira with the evil eye. To his credit, Akira doesn’t shrink.

“I don’t like you leaving Futaba up there with that guy,” Sojiro says.

Akira looks away. “Me neither,” he murmurs.

Sojiro shakes his head. “Look, I don’t know anything about this,” he says. “I let you kids do what you want. But that’s the guy who killed Wakaba. Do you really think –”

“She’ll be fine,” says Morgana loftily. “Futaba can handle him.”

Sojiro looks at him.

There’s a long, expectant pause.

Then he huffs. “Is nobody going to translate what the cat said?”

“Oh, right,” says Makoto hastily. “Um, Morgana said that Futaba can manage on her own. And I agree. She’s much more confident these days, and Akechi seems to be calming down. And, um . . .”

“I think this is something Futaba needs,” offers Haru. “Like a sort of catharsis.”

“He’s well-bound up there,” adds Yusuke. “He can’t hurt her. I’ll be standing by if she needs us to return.”

Sojiro shakes his head.
“I’ll defer to your judgement,” he mutters. “Bloody kids… I’ll keep an ear out. Anything happens to Futaba, none of you live to see tomorrow. You got that?”

Akira nods once. The movement is uncharacteristically jerky, betraying none of his usual grace. Sojiro gives him another once-over; he’s paler than normal.

“You’re nervous too, huh?” he says.

Akira looks away. “She needs this,” he says. “We trust her.”

“Maybe it’ll be good for ‘em both,” says Ryuji, clapping a hand to Akira’s back. He glances at Sojiro. “She’s got a panic button on her phone. We’ll be here in two seconds flat if she calls.”

“Yeah,” says Sojiro. “Alright. ...You kids be careful.”

“Will do, Boss.”

Akechi regards Futaba with a quiet curiosity as she gazes balefully at him from her corner of Akira’s futon.

“You seem tense,” he remarks. He cocks his head, the picture of innocence. “Am I making you uncomfortable?”

She doesn’t break her gaze. Her lip curls.

“You seemed so ready to face me,” he says. “Is it different, now that they’ve gone? Are you losing your nerve now that you’re alone with me?”

Silence.

“That’s a shame,” Akechi clucks. “Is there anything I can do to help, Futaba?”

Silence.

“It is alright if I call you that, isn’t it?”

“Do you always talk this much?” Futaba’s voice is quiet, but the vehemence behind her words is almost enough to make Akechi blink.

“Not at all,” he says softly. He offers her an ingratiating smile. “Aren’t you special.”

Futaba breathes in once, deeply.

“…I… hate you.”

“Oh! That’s fair.” Akechi leans forward. “I killed your mother, after all.”

“Y-you…”

“I took everything from you.” Akechi watches her, and the smile is cooling plastic on his face. “Who knows? If not for me, maybe you’d be with her right now. You’d have a mother. She’d probably be happy.”
“Stop it.”

“It's too bad she's dead,” says Akechi cheerfully, and Futaba balls up her fists and curls into herself.

“Shut up,” she whispers.

Akechi sits back.

“Am I too much for you to handle?” he asks, his voice thick with mock concern. “Will you call for backup?”

Futaba shakes for a moment. Then - “No,” she says, muffled by her leg. “I can handle it.”

“Don't push yourself, now.”

“I have to.” With some effort, Futaba straightens. “I’m strong enough, you know. To face you.”

“Oh, are you?”

Futaba scrunches up her face, glaring up at him over her knees. “I am,” she says. “Now.”

“You’ve undergone quite the metamorphosis, haven’t you?”

“You’re looking at my second evolution,” Futaba declares, still into her leg. “…Before I met Akira and the others, I – I was always scared. I couldn’t have done this. But now…”

“They’re not here with you now, though.” Akechi blinks at her across the room, slow and mocking. “Can you make it?”

“You don’t get it!” she says, suddenly petulant. “They’re not like - they’re not like, aimbots, or – They’re support heroes.” She draws her knees back up to her chin. “They’re not the source of my power. They’re just the reason I found it.”

“I don't play a lot of video games.”

“That’s another reason you suck.”

“Do you hate me?” asks Akechi.

Futaba nods.

“So why did you want to be here so badly?” Akechi’s eyes gleam with intrigue. “Are you going to try and hurt me?”

Futaba snorts. “We aren’t all like you,” she says. “Not everyone just murders anyone they don’t like. That’s messed up.”

“You wanted to, though,” says Akechi softly. “You wanted revenge on the person who took your mother away.”

Futaba is quiet a moment.

“I do,” she says.

“You do!” Akechi looks almost delighted.
“I do!” Futaba blinks owlishly at him. When she speaks, her voice is trembling with a feeling it can’t contain. “I wanted you to lose - everything. Everything you took from me.”

“But…?”

Futaba is quiet another moment.

“It’s already gone, isn’t it?” she says, and Akechi’s gaze doesn’t betray anything. “It’s gone. Everything. You don’t have - anyone.”

“You don’t mince words,” he says.

“I’m not making a pie,” she replies. “But - it’s almost like you don’t care.”

“That’s because I don’t,” Akechi says pleasantly, but Futaba shakes her head.

“That’s just sad,” she says. “How’d you get to be so sad?”

“I’m not sad.”

“I mean sad like pathetic.”

“...Excuse me?”

“Where d’you get off thinking that not having feelings makes you stronger?” asks Futaba. “That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard. Do you even know how weak that makes you?”

“You’re calling me weak?!”

“The only reason you shove everything aside is because you can’t handle it,” Futaba retorts. “You’re not strong just because you know how to hide from things you don’t want to see! ...Trust me, I - I know!”

Akechi blinks. “You -”

“Did you know I had a Palace?” interrupts Futaba. “It was pretty cool. All Egyptian and stuff. The final boss was my mom.”

“Your -”

“I used to be a total shut-in,” she says. “I was too scared to go outside. ...I never would’ve said any of this stuff. Especially to you.”

“Let me guess,” says Akechi derisively. “Your friends saved you.”

Futaba rolls her eyes. “Man, you’re dumb,” she says. “You really still think that having people around you makes you weak? After all this?” She leaps so suddenly to her feet that Akechi actually flinches. “You’re an idiot! It’s easy to be alone! It’s easy to sit and stew about how terrible life is and how nobody’s ever gonna understand you!”

She sinks slowly back to her perch as Akechi regains his composure. “Life is pretty terrible,” she murmurs. “But thinking you have to deal with it alone? All that proves is that you’re too weak to do anything about it.”

“Are you stupid?” hisses Akechi, and when Futaba glances up, his pleasant-boy countenance has melted entirely. “I’ve done something about it. I’ve done everything about it. And I did it - all -
alone. Because I don’t need -”

Futaba waves him off. “You don’t need anyone, blah blah,” she says. “I’m pressing X on your villainous monologue.”

“You’re - what?” Akechi shakes his head, trying to regain his footing. “Don’t interrupt -”

“X.”

“Excuse m-”

“X.”

“Let me sp-”

“Press Options to fast forward. I don’t care,” she says, leaving him to fold in on himself and stew. “I don’t care. Don’t you get it? I was the same. You don’t need anyone, because you’re strong enough to handle it on your own, and - and if you’re not, then you don’t deserve to live.” She suddenly seems to wilt. “And - and then -”

“Were you going to kill yourself?” asks Akechi in a low voice. A sneer twists his whole face. “Is that it?”

Futaba swallows. She draws her knees back up again to cover her face. She’s silent for a long while, and Akechi watches her.

“I might,” she says at last, so softly that Akechi has to lean as far forward as the binding allows him to hear her. “I might’ve done. But - I was afraid…”

“Afraid to die?”

“No. Yes. No, that’s not the point.” With a great effort, Futaba uncurls. “Afraid to leave – go outside –”

“How tragic – how awful – so you’re agoraphobic -”

“I was afraid to let anyone in,” snaps Futaba. “Don’t you get it? Don’t you see? Closing myself in never proved I was strong, because that wasn’t what I was afraid of! I wasn’t afraid of being alone! I was afraid of letting anyone in! So shutting myself in my room, avoiding the world? I wasn’t strong, you idiot! I was weak! I was weak! And so are you!” She pounds her fists against the mattress in a fury, glaring at him with fresh, raw intensity. “‘Don’t you understand?! You’re not doing everything alone because you don’t need anyone! You’re doing everything alone because you don’t know how to be with anyone, and you’re too scared to try!’ Her voice rises to a shriek and she leaps to her feet again. “You’re a COWARD!”

A worried voice drifts up from the first floor. “Are you alright up there, Futaba?”

Futaba gulps. “I’m fine,” she calls back, but her voice is wavery. She coughs. “I’m fine, Sojiro!”

She takes a deep, deep breath and turns back to Akechi. He’s staring at her.

“I hate you,” she says. “I hate you. I wanted you to suffer. But you did. And I don’t think you even know how to feel it.” She shakes her head. “It’s - no fun beating an enemy so many levels below you.”

“I -”
“You’re like a slime,” she says, with a brave attempt at her usual quirky cheer. “Like a level two slime! And even if I punch you in the face, you’re too dumb to realise it hurts.”

“Excuse me?!”

“So there’s only one thing I can do,” says Futaba. She sits back down and crosses her legs, rocking her knees and looking for all the world like a cat who’s figured out how to hack the cream.

Akechi struggles to recover his poise. “And what’s that?”

“Wait for you to get stronger,” she says, and actually grins at him. “C’mon. We’ll help you grind for XP. And once you remember how to be a person? ...I’ll punch you in the face for reals.”

Akechi blinks. And then he starts to laugh.

“Is that your roundabout way of telling me you want to help me?” he croons. “How sweet. What do they call that? Tsundere?”

“There’s nothing roundabout about it,” Futaba retorts. “And don’t use words you don’t understand!” She glares at him a moment more, then soars all at once – so rapidly that she might have gained five years in a moment. “I want to help you,” she says quietly. “Because I think if the others hadn’t found me, I might have become something like you.”

Akechi doesn’t say anything, but a light curiosity appears in his face.

Futaba shudders. “I hate you,” she says. “But no one should have to live their life as a slime. You need our help. And I’ll get my revenge. Because all the feelings you need to feel are already there. You just haven’t unlocked them yet.” She flashes a peace sign. “So, may our hearts be your guiding key!”

“I do not understand that reference.”

“Oh, you will, slime. Don’t you worry.” Futaba grins wickedly and unfolds her legs, kicking them against the edge of the bed. “So, you know what?” she says. “Ask me anything you want. You can Taunt, and you can Torment, but I’m immune to your status effects now. Cos I found my key items, and you don’t have yours yet.”

“Immune,” Akechi says flatly. “Are you?”

“Try me,” Futaba challenges.

“Allright,” says Akechi. “Tell me honestly how you feel about the effort your team is going to for the sake of your mother’s murderer.”

Futaba flinches a little, but bites her lip in steely determination. “Weird,” she decides. “It’s not… great feeling, but I guess that’s what we do. We help people. I can’t just decide not to help someone because I don’t like them, right? That’s not what a hero would do.”

“Are you a hero?”

“Sure am,” says Futaba.

“Am I a villain, then?”

“Sure are,” says Futaba, “but it’s not that easy, right?”
“I don’t know,” Akechi sniffs, petulant and patronising. “You tell me.”

“Okay,” says Futaba, ignoring his spluttering. “You’re the villain in the story. But like, the best stories aren’t black and white. You wanna play the games with that sweet gray morality. That’s the good stuff!”

“Do you see everything in terms of your video games?” Akechi snaps.

“Yep,” Futaba says promptly. “So if you’re the villain, it means we gotta fight you and defeat you and all that, right? But then after that, you get an awesome redemption arc. As long as the writers know what they’re doing, that is.” She shrugs. “But I mean, if they don’t, that’s what fanfiction is for, right?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything about this.”

“God, I have so much to teach you,” Futaba sighs. “So here’s the thing. This is your redemption arc, right here.” She thrusts a fist into the air. “The noble heroes take in the downtrodden villain! Together, they teach him – uh – like, the power of friendship, or something dumb.” She waves her hand vaguely. “I’ll let the writer figure out the specifics, I’m sure they’ve got it all figured out.” She rolls her eyes. “I mean, a villain like you? They’re probably up nights trying to figure out how to save you. But it’s worth it, right? Cos then, the villain learns. And maybe he teaches the heroes a thing or two, too.” She snickers. “The metaphor ends there for you, obviously. You’re too dumb to teach us anything.”

“Is it even worth being offended at this point?” asks Akechi, weary.

“Probably not,” admits Futaba. “But you can go ahead and do it anyway, cos it’s fun for me.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Anyway, at the end of it all?” She smiles, bright and earnest. “Everyone’s happier. Everyone learns. The villain isn’t dangerous anymore. And – there’s no reason to hate him anymore, because he wants to be better, and –” Futaba fidgets – “and you get to know him, so maybe you can even be friends. Maybe you get invested in where he’s going.”

“Hypothetically, of course,” says Akechi.

“Course,” says Futaba. “I mean, this is best case scenario. And probably a scenario where the villain didn’t kill the most beautiful hero’s mom.”

“Of course.”

“But like,” says Futaba. “Like, even if one of the heroes still kinda hates him? Or even if it’s not as good as all that? Like, even if our writer isn’t really that great, and we can’t fix everything? …Don’t you think we can still get a better ending this way?”

“A – a better ending?”

“Yeah,” says Futaba. “Yeah, you know, like – like, the bad ending is the one where you kill Akira in the interrogation room. And then another bad ending would be the one where you die in the engine room. And then, this?” She waves around the attic again. “This is the true ending. This is the one where everything we’ve learned, all of us – all of it comes to a head, and we learn about justice, and we learn about how we maybe can’t learn about justice, and – like, maybe you’re not really one of us, but you could be, and at least we can save you, y’know?”
“You already saved me,” Akechi points out. “If the bad ending is me dying in Shido’s Palace – I’m alive right now. So haven’t we avoided it?”

Futaba shrugs.

“Yeah,” she says, “but there’s a lotta ways to get a game over. Like, maybe you leave and betray us now. Maybe we don’t get through to you in time. Or maybe we all live, but we’re not as happy as we could be, and we haven’t learned everything we should.”

Akechi frowns. “This isn’t a productive way of looking at things,” he says. “Anything less than perfect – that would be unfulfilling for you?”

“It doesn’t have to be perfect,” Futaba protests. She deflates. “I know this isn’t really a game,” she says, forlorn. “I wish it was. Then – as long as we pick the right options, then we get the right ending. Roll credits. But life’s messier than that, and we could get to the end of the arc without completing the arc, and it could all be a waste.”

“Would it be?” asks Akechi. He hesitates. “I don’t know how to follow your analogy.”

“Give it a try anyway, ya noob.”

Akechi pauses, thinking. “Say you get your bad ending,” he says. “Don’t you still get – erm – experience points from that?”

Futaba rolls her eyes. “No,” she says, “because it’s game over, and you’re dead.”

“Oh.”

“Wow, you really don’t know anything,” she declares, and he sulks. “I think I get what you mean, though. I mean, you can still learn stuff if you game over. Like, how to not do that again.”

“Sure.”

“But like,” she says. “This isn’t a game, so we can’t just reload. This one time’s all we got. Even if we like, reincarnate into a New Game Plus – that’s not really us, that’s a different us.”

“You’ve lost me again.”

“Sorry,” Futaba sighs. “I’ll dumb it down. That’s what makes this so important, though. You can’t reload, you can’t start a new game – so we gotta make this count.” She sets her jaw. “If Akira and the others failed my Palace, I wouldn’t be here. If I didn’t let them in in the first place, I wouldn’t be here. So many things could’ve gone wrong. But they didn’t. Because my friends didn’t let them.”

“Are we back to this?” sighs Akechi, already looking dismissive.

“Um, yeah, cos that’s like, my whole point,” snaps Futaba. “That’s what you’re missing in this whole game thing.”

“I’m missing everything in this ‘whole game thing’, ” Akechi retorts. “I don’t play games.”

Futaba ignores him. “It’s multiplayer,” she says. “It’s a multiplayer campaign. If you play it like it’s single player, then you’ll miss everything. You won’t get where you could be, or maybe even where you should be. So you gotta – you gotta check your connection.”

“My – internet connection?”
“Your human connection, you dummy,” says Futaba. She rolls her eyes. “Not everything’s about computers, you nerd.”

“I’m the –”

“You gotta join a party before you can unlock, like, the ‘Emotions’ expansion pack,” says Futaba. “I bet that’s why you’re so weird. You’ve come all this way in life, but cos you never learned how to be close to anyone, there’s just all this really basic stuff you’re missing.” She folds her arms. “That’s where we come in! We’re inviting you to our party. We’ll let you in on the good stuff. And – and I can help you.” She gestures helplessly at him. “I mean, I’m the same. I joined late, too. I’m just as new as you are, just, I have less murder points.”

Akechi seems to be struggling to filter all this into a language he can understand. “And,” he says slowly. “They helped you to – um, unlock – stuff.”

“Sure did,” says Futaba.

“…And how was it?”

Futaba thinks a moment.

“Hardest quest in the game so far,” she says. “Best spoils in the game so far.”

“Hardest?”

Futaba fidgets. “Well, of course,” she mutters. “You don’t go most of your life as a total shut-in and suddenly become the resident genki girl. It kind of sucks. I’ve come a long way, but I’m still not maxed out, and I probably won’t be for a while.”

Akechi is silent for a moment, thinking. “But it’s worth it,” he muses.

“Yeah,” says Futaba. “Yeah. It’s worth it.”

“How can you be sure?”

Futaba cracks a smile.

“Cos if it weren’t for them I’d be dead,” she says. “And so would you. And I dunno about you, but I think it’s better to be happy than dead. Even if it’s harder.” She shrugs. “Like I said. Hardest quests give you the best spoils. It’s easy to give up. But then you never win. And what’s the point playing? If you never do any quests, or get any achievements, or interact with anything in the world? If you just like, stand there and wonder how they rendered the grass?” Futaba shakes her head. “The game doesn’t last forever anyway. Why end it early, or badly? It’s harder to get the true ending, but isn’t that why you got the game in the first place?”

“I didn’t get the game,” says Akechi.

“I know,” Futaba says. “It was a gift. Better be grateful. The trade-in credit sucks.”

“I hate you! Die!”
“Now, there’s no need for – ugh! How dare you?!”

Barely halfway through the door, the team looks at each other in alarm.

“What’s going on up there?” Ann asks Sojiro.

Sojiro shrugs, looking weary. “See for yourself,” he grouses. “Scaring off half the customers…”

Akira and Makoto glance at each other before abandoning the door and bolting for the stairs, and the others are quick to follow.

Upstairs, Akechi angrily tosses his controller down on the floor in front of him. “Again?!”

“Ha! I’m just too good!” Futaba cheers.

Morgana flops to the floor. “…You untied him?” he asks weakly.

“Are you serious?” demands Yusuke, leaning on the bannister. “You’re just playing computer games?!”

“There’s no just about it,” sniffs Futaba. “And if you must know, I was destroying him at video games.”

“Must know?” grumbles Akechi. “They didn’t ask.”

Haru shakes her head. “We thought you were fighting!”

“We were,” says Futaba cheerfully, and gestures at the screen. “I won.”

“Let’s go back to the campaign,” Akechi complains. Futaba rolls her eyes, but hops back into the menu.

“Ha! You got no hope,” says Ryuji, grinning. “The campaign on this thing’s way too hard for a beginner like you.”

“Actually, we already tried it,” says Futaba. “He nearly beat Akira’s high score on two-six.”

Akira’s eyebrows shoot into his hair. “You have to stop playing now,” he says, moving to shut off the console. Futaba grabs it away from him.

“No way! He’s way better than you!”

Akechi yelps as three large demons converge on his character. He slams the palm of his sling-free hand onto the buttons in a random panic. The demons all promptly die.

Ryuji and Akira stare at the screen, thoroughly offended.

“Okay, he has no idea what he’s doing,” clarifies Futaba. “But I swear, he’s a natural! He nearly beat me a couple times, so there’s no hope for you guys. I have a new protégé!”

Akira gazes at her with big, sad puppy eyes. Haru pats his shoulder gently.

Futaba waves a vague hand at them, already halfway through destroying a new wave of enemies. “I got this,” she says confidently. “You guys can go out again. We’re gonna do a speed-run, so we’ll be here all night.”
“This is my room,” Akira protests.

“Not anymore.”

Akira gazes helplessly around at the Phantom Thieves, who shrug at him. “You can crash at mine,” offers Ryuji, but Akira shakes his head.

“I don’t trust this,” he says. He raises his voice. “I’ll be back tonight, Futaba.”

“Ugh, you just don’t want him to beat your score!”

Akira doesn’t say anything.

Morgana frowns. “Is that really what you’re worried about?”

“No,” says Akira stubbornly. “Come on.” He turns to shuffle back down the stairs. The others trail behind him, shooting wary looks at Futaba and Akechi. Both of them have already stopped paying attention to the team.

Haru exchanges an uncertain glance with Ryuji. “At least they’re getting along?” she offers, and he just shrugs at her as they wander down after Akira.

Behind them, Futaba shoves Akechi’s character off a cliff, and he yelps again.

That night, Sojiro storms up the stairs with Akira and Morgana in tow. “Futaba,” he calls. “It’s time to go home.”

“No way!” Futaba protests. “It can’t be closing time already!”

“You’re right,” Sojiro huffs. “It was closing time an hour ago, and I’m getting tired of listening to you two yelling up here. Switch that off.”

“Akira,” Futaba pleads, turning big, sad eyes on him.

Akira immediately loses a battle with himself. “…Let them get to a save point,” he mutters to Sojiro, and Sojiro buries his face in his hands.

“Five minutes,” he says. “I’ll be waiting downstairs. No longer!”

He stomps back down again. Akira glances at the two of them, still staring intently at the screen. “That means ten,” he says, peering at the level, “but you’d better hurry, my speed-run record from here is eight.”

“I’ve done it in six,” Futaba scoffs.

“You didn’t have dead weight on you.”

“I’ll have you know I’m holding my own just fine,” Akechi declares, and dies at once. “Oh.”

“That’s fine, it’ll be easier with just me, anyway!” Futaba presses six buttons in quick succession and clears the screen, ignoring Akechi’s respawned character floating petulantly behind her as she
dashes for the finish.

Akechi drops the controller. He flexes his hand, looking regretful. “I suppose it’s back to the sofa after this,” he says, looking regretful. “It was nice to have some mobility back, if only for half a day.”

Morgana flicks his tail. “The most beautiful thing about freedom is that it’s fleeting,” he says.

“No,” says Akechi, “it’s being able to scratch your ankle without kicking yourself in the face.”

“Have you done that?” asks Morgana.

“…Of course not.”

“Finished!” shrieks Futaba, tossing her controller several feet away in triumph. “Four minutes, Akira!”

“You’re throwing off my average,” Akira sighs, and Futaba snickers at him before flying down the stairs to meet Sojiro.

Akechi stands up off the floor and stretches. “Well?” he asks, picking up the cat collar and offering Akira his hand. “Shall we?”

Akira looks at the collar.

Morgana looks at Akira.

Akira looks at the game controller.

Morgana scoots around to look at Akira more intently.

Akira looks down the stairs, where Futaba’s chattering has just faded with the last tinkle of the entry bell.

Morgana says, “Don’t do something stupid, Akira.”

Akira says, “You can stay untied, Akechi,” at the same time, and Morgana groans.

Akechi blinks. “Why?”

“Because you smell,” says Akira, turning promptly for the stairs, “and we’re going to the bathhouse.”

“Ah – um, okay. Thank you.” Akechi trails behind him. “Should I –”

“Clothes and towels are on the shelf,” Morgana sighs, looking irritated. “That idiot. He’s too soft.” He wrinkles his nose. “Although you really do smell.”

“That’s not my fault,” Akechi snaps. He drops the collar back on the sofa and leans down for the towels. “I wonder why he’s really doing this.”

“Who knows,” Morgana muses. “That guy’s hard to read. Hopefully it’s not just because he’s got a big dumb crush on you.” He balks, looking alarmed. “Uh – you didn’t hear that from me!”

“No, I’ve heard it from him plenty of times,” says Akechi, rolling his eyes. “Oh, whatever. Let’s go. I’d like to make the most of this while it lasts.”
**first, important clarification:** futaba is **wrong**. isolating yourself out of fear or similar does NOT make you weak or cowardly. she’s saying these things because she’s overcome these struggles and, free of her distortion, now sees the world/herself more clearly. she’s frustrated at the time she spent shutting herself in and hiding away because she realises what it was and what it did to her. she’s angry at herself, and at goro because she recognises that he’s doing the same and doesn’t want him to make her mistakes. the criticisms come from anger, desperation, and frustration. plus she’s still struggling with self-hatred (this shit doesn’t fix itself overnight) and is likely to blame herself for things that go wrong and choices she now regrets.

my point with this chapter was that **surrounding yourself with a support network makes you strong**, especially if it’s something you struggle with. it was NOT to say that struggling with that makes you weak, cos that’s bullshit. healing is a process; it takes time and effort, and wherever you are in that process, you’re doing just fine and there’s absolutely nothing wrong with you.

now notespam (LOTS AGAIN SORRY):

consider makoto’s chapter a temporary truce for negotiation between reps of two sides of a war: that’s how akechi views it. the atmosphere was civil but tense and carefully controlled. everything said was a choice in attempts to gain info. since it was a controlled environment in which akechi didn’t feel threatened, he started to lose the cornered prey perspective he’s had this whole time. gaining back that bit of control did a lot for his mental state. not that it’s getting healthier, more that he’s more able to function and gain back some of his confidence.

that gets torn away immediately with futaba. he starts the chapter cocky, thinking she’s weak and figuring he’ll be able to tear her down to get more control back since the “truce” is over. what he doesn’t bargain for is the fact that futaba is a strong and eccentric person with one major weak point: her trauma. the old futaba would've probably been instantly destructible by attacking that weak point, like the death star. unfortunately for akechi the new futaba was constructed by more competent space architects. that weakness still exists, but it’s not totally incapacitating anymore. futaba's able to regain her footing because she now has a support network who have put a lot of heart into helping her recover. the rest of her is stronger and unsusceptible to akechi’s games because futaba is eccentric in a similar but also vastly different way to yusuke. she’s on a whole different wavelength to most people and marches to the beat of a kazoo. whether by conscious choice, obliviousness, or apathy, she ploughs straight past all his subtle manipulations, takes things literally when she wants to, and ignores everything she doesn’t like or understand. she’ll skip past mocking subtext and sarcasm (e.g. “Do you see everything in terms of your video games?” is meant to be mocking but she takes it as a legit question) and that ends up putting akechi a foot behind because she’s acting above him. futaba is erratic and unpredictable, so it’s really difficult for him to get under her skin. it’s hard enough to keep up.

in a normal situation he’d probably put more effort into doing so, but remember that akechi has been through a HELL of a lot over the last little while. he’s tired. if makoto’s chapter was equivalent to negotiations, you can here consider him a prisoner of war, which is how he’s starting to see himself. what little control he thought he had has been ripped away
and shredded into video game analogies, and he just doesn’t have the strength to try and keep up with futaba when she makes so little sense. by no means is he defeated, but he no longer has the will to try and combat the thieves' every turn. he’s opted instead to descend into sullen quiet - easily mistaken for willing cooperation from his behaviour, but don't be fooled.

the thing with that is that when you’re quiet, you hear what people say to you. and when you can hear things, sometimes you end up listening to those things. this is the thieves’ best shot at getting through to akechi. by accidentally agreeing to hear them, akechi is for the first time really opening himself to doubt and new ideas. after almost a full week, everything they’ve done up to now has contributed to a really golden opportunity. he still has plenty of fight in him, and you'll see it. it's just difficult to stay combative when your opponent is as flighty and random as futaba, so he needs a breather. stay tuned!

other:

- akira’s feelings toward akechi are much more complicated than just “a big dumb crush”, but ya can’t blame a cat for interpreting them that way cos, y’know, that’s also probably true.
empathy

Chapter Summary

growing rapidly frustrated at their lack of progress with the cognitive akechi, the phantom thieves leave haru the final shift in the attic.

Chapter Notes

there’s little to explain of the title that isn’t (hopefully) explored in the chapter itself; suffice it to say that haru simply seeps empathy, and her sweet, genuine nature provides a balm that akechi sorely needs – she’s the only one who can say almost anything she likes and it’ll never come off as patronising or passive-aggressive. it’s part of her magic.

(my apologies for the extended delay! i’ve been struggling with some personal anxieties re: writing (and other things) and it’s been a little difficult to get the creative gears turning again. that said, throwing myself into it might help kick it off, so i’ll do my best – although i’m still a little nervous! i also can’t promise a consistent update schedule like i had for the first half of the fic, sadly. i hope you will be patient with me through all this!

i hope you’ve all had a truly wonderful start to what will hopefully be a great year, and i hope you’ll enjoy the rest of what i have to offer. <3)

(eta: now with 20% less formatting fail! my bad, guys - mobile posting is a mistake.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“This can’t take much longer,” sighs Makoto. “Surely...”

“We thought that like a week ago,” Ann moans. She’s flat on her back across one of Leblanc’s booth tables, having roused and flopped back five times already at Sojiro’s protests. He’s long since given up, retreating to the sink with a grumble and a bitter glance to his lost table every few moments. They ignore him, too tired to field his snark.

“Don’t worry,” says Haru. The smile she offers the group is brave, if a little exhausted. “We’ll have to encounter it eventually.”

“We don’t have eventually,” Ryuji snaps, but immediately shoots her an apologetic glance when she flinches. “S-sorry. Look – the deadline’s comin’ closer every day. We gotta get that bastard soon or we won’t get it at all. And then Shido gets out of all of it!”

“Relax,” Akira murmurs.

“Easy for you to say!”

“No it’s not,” Akira says.
It’s the coolest his voice has been in a while, and Ryuji shuts up, looking uncomfortable. It’s Akira’s turn to look apologetic, and he twists around and taps the back of his seat with his knuckles. Lounging atop it, Ryuji cuffs him over the head reassuringly, and when they turn back the hitch has been forgotten.

“We just have to keep trying,” Ann says, forcing energy through her voice even as the effort of speaking saps it. “Just – just a few more tries, and then, if we – if we can’t find it –”

“Then we find a plan B,” Yusuke finishes, and Ann swallows and nods. “Whatever it may be…”

“We’ll worry about that if it happens,” Makoto says, with a crease between her eyebrows which informs the room that she is most definitely worrying about it right now.

“So, the plan is to wing it,” says Futaba, legs akimbo on the floor as she leans back on one arm, reaching to scratch Morgana’s ears. “I like it.”

“I don’t,” Morgana says plaintively, resting between her knees. She hunches over to play with his cheeks and he yowls in protest.

“Whaddaya think, leader?” Ryuji asks Akira.

Akira considers. “One more try,” he decides. “Then we take Shido.”

Haru gasps. “But if we try to take him on without defeating cognitive Akechi first, they’ll surely fight together!”

“We’ll take them both,” Akira amends.

“That’s,” Makoto says, “that’s unwise, Akira.”

“Yeah,” says Akira.

Everyone looks down, discouraged.

“Eh, it’s fine,” says Ryuji. “We can take ‘em.”

Yusuke rolls his shoulders back. “And if we can’t?”

“We have to,” says Morgana. “Akira’s right. It’s our only option. We can’t keep wasting time.”

“I can’t say I’m happy about it, but yeah,” Ann sighs. “Let’s just – let’s just hope we find it today, okay?”

“I’m the only one who hasn’t taken a shift with Akechi yet,” Haru offers. “Shall I do today?”

“Hey, wait,” Ryuji objects. “Mona hasn’t got one yet. How come he doesn’t have to do Akechi time?”

“I don’t have thumbs!” Morgana complains.

“Gee, how convenient,” Ryuji sniffs.

“What does that mean?!”

“We’re low on time,” Akira cuts in. “Haru…?”
“Oh, I’ll be alright,” Haru assures him. “Don’t worry about me. Just make sure you all come back safely.”

“He’s untied up there,” says Morgana. “Unsupervised at the moment, too, now that I think about it. Is that going to be a problem?”

“Oh, yeah,” Ann sighs. “Akira had a softie moment.” Akira pouts at her, and she pouts back.

“I’m sure Haru can handle him,” says Makoto. “Do you think you’re going to need anything to help you?”

Haru thinks. “Oh, could someone strong move the table upstairs?” she asks. “I’d like it in front of the couch.”

“Sure, I can do it,” says Ryuji, hopping up. “Hey, Yusuke, gimme a hand.”

“Certainly.”

Makoto raises her eyebrows at Haru after the two boys have bounded up the stairs. “You’ve never had trouble moving that table before,” she says.

“I know,” Haru says happily, slipping behind the kitchen counter. “But I’d like this time to get started on some tea, and I thought Ryuji would care more about looking strong than I do.”

Ann shakes her head. “I can’t tell if you’re a villainess or if they’re just really predictable,” she mutters, and Haru smiles at her.

Ryuji reappears a moment later. “Done,” he announces, as Yusuke plods down behind him. “Ready to go?”

“Yeah,” says Akira, standing. “Last ride.”

Morgana flicks his tail at Haru as they straggle out the door. “Good luck,” he says.

“Oh, thank you, but you’ll need it more than me,” she replies, cheerfully arranging some teacups on a tray. “Good luck, everyone!”

She smiles at him before she begins to set down her things. It’s a sweet, courteous sort of greeting, and he responds in kind, smoothing the barbs. She works swiftly, holds herself with decorum as she busies herself about the tray, and he observes her. This girl. She is the one to watch for.

Takamaki, he thought, might have been fire. All passion, all truth, forces of love and rage on full display whenever it rose. Sakura was a weapon on a hair trigger, in danger at every moment of explosion or implosion and no knowledge of which it would be. Niijima, then, a heavy blade: hard, hard metal, not flashy, nor dramatic; strong and straightforward and seconds from slicing you in half if you gave her the word.

And Okumura…

The razor in the cream frosting of a cupcake, the dazzling ballroom over a minefield. Nothing that wasn’t impossibly sweet, unforgivably gentle, from the axe across her back to the poison on her
“Tea?” she asks him kindly, and he accepts.

For a long time, they sit and they sip in silence. Unfamiliar silence; tense and comfortable, a lounge set upon a tightrope –

(and it tightens more every moment, grows taut and thin, and it burns, for beneath the tightrope is a flood of lava, and beneath the surface of that churns a sea of sharks, and the sharks are also made of lava –)

“If you don’t mind my saying so, Akechi,” Haru says, startling him out of his ridiculous reverie, “you seem different to me now than you were at the beginning of the week.”

“Do I,” Akechi says into his tea. He smiles – or he doesn’t, but it happens anyway; an automatic process by now, a knee-jerk reaction to just about anything. “And what if I do mind?”

Haru doesn’t look surprised. She smiles back at him over the lip of her own teacup. “I suppose I could be quiet again,” she muses. “We don’t have to talk at all, if that’s what you’d prefer.”

“Just tell me what you want,” says Akechi, and Haru glances up at the weariness that seems to have infected his voice without his wanting. He clears his throat. “I don’t have –” the energy – “the patience for more games, Okumura. Tell me what you want, and just let me get it over with.”

“That’s very kind of you,” says Haru, and he raises his eyebrows at her. “But you don’t have to worry. I’m truly not after anything in particular.”

“Is that so.”

Haru lowers her voice, like the walls betray her confidence. “To tell you the truth,” she says, “I’m not so sure how to handle right now. I’m just as wrong-footed as you are - maybe even more.”

“You don’t know how to deal with me?”

“No, not at all,” says Haru. She smiles again, apologetic. “You probably expected more from me after hearing from all the others. I’m sure they all did their best. I suppose I’m a bit of an anticlimax after all that, isn’t it?” Her laugh is self-deprecating, but her gaze is steady and gentle.

Akechi sips at his tea. Haru quietly returns to her own.

“I know I ought to try harder,” she says. “But it’s difficult, when I’m not sure what I’m trying to do.”

“You’re the first.”

“I thought as much,” Haru agrees sadly. She hesitates. “I hope you’ll forgive me for this, but I think you could probably use a break from the chaos, too,” she ventures. “So if you’d like, we can just sit quietly until the others return.”

He eyes her, wary, but there’s nothing in those mousy eyes to draw suspicion from. Ordinarily, that would make her less trustworthy than ever. If she were anyone else.

He opens his mouth to accept her offer.

“What do you think of me?” he asks instead, surprising himself. Haru pauses, mid-sip. He braces himself. Quiet had sounded lovely. A welcome change of pace.
A shame, then, that it had only been offered now. When conversation seemed to drive itself for the first time and the brakes weren’t so much cut as they were contrary.

“That’s a very good question,” she says, and he recognises it as a safe response. When she sees him cock his head, she smiles and sets down the cup. “One week ago, I told you I’d never forgive you.”

“You did.”

“That hasn’t changed,” she says. “I’m sorry.”

“I understand.”

“Thank you.” Haru stirs idly at the sugar, looking troubled. “I feel very complicated right now,” she says. “It’s very strange, I - I don’t think I hate you.”

“Did you expect you would?” Akechi asks.

“Did you?” Haru replies.

“I suppose I did.”

“Yes,” says Haru, nodding thoughtfully. “Yes, I suppose I did, too. It would make sense, wouldn’t it?”

“Of course,” Akechi agrees amiably. “After all, I killed your father in cold blood and pinned the blame on you.”

Haru winces.

“How can you say things like that so easily?” she asks. Her voice carries all the bravado of an injured animal, and she won’t meet his gaze. Peering into the eyes of a murderer might taint a pure soul, painted as it may be with blood.

Akechi looks on as she squirms under his candour.

“So delicate,” he observes. “So soft. Almost breakable. Except you’re not, are you?”

“You should know.” The retort comes with a flash of absent heat. The only things licking her wounds now are crackling flames.

“Oh, I do,” he assures her. “There’s nothing fragile about that axe of yours, to be certain. But tell me, is the innocence an act or are you simply naïve enough that you can turn an eye to your – antics – and keep it all the same?”

“Stop it,” Haru says. “I don’t want to hear one more word like that out of you, do you understand?”

Akechi blinks at her, slow and languid. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” he says.

“And I don’t know what you mean by naïve,” she says, suddenly cool. She sets down her tea, heat spiralling into the air in fading swirls. “But I assure you, I’m not so naïve that I don’t know what you do. And if you’re not going to talk to me – really talk, not play this game – then I don’t want to talk to you or hear you at all.”

Akechi bows his head. “Of course,” he says apologetically. “I don’t mean to offend. It’s simply in
my nature to talk this way. I’m sure you understand.”


“Can I ask you something?” he says, rather suddenly, and she tilts her head and nods. “I remember you in battle, you know. The way your eyes gleamed as you cut down an enemy Shadow, it was like – well, I won’t say I’ve never seen it,” he says softly, and she flinches away from her reflection in his wide, innocent eyes.

“Then what would you say?” she challenges.

“I suppose I could say it’s rare to see,” he says, “in anyone who purports to have such a strong moral compass.”

Haru flushes. “I don’t know what your point is,” she says.

“I’m not sure I have one,” Akechi says, smooth and polite. “I only thought it was curious. That you might be so opposed to me, when your own bloodlust is so clearly observable. That’s all.”

Haru looks mildly startled. She laughs, as much of an automatic reaction as his own, and tucks a curl behind her ear. It springs back again at once. “That’s a rather interesting comparison to draw,” she says. “Surely you don’t mean to convince me that murdering people in cold blood is the same as fighting Shadows…?”

“Oh, it’s not an argument,” Akechi promises. “Out of simple curiosity, though, I do wonder how you’d categorise the differences.”

Haru frowns and, half in thought, murmurs, “I think it should be obvious, don’t you?”

“Do indulge me,” Akechi says. He waits a while before speaking into the cautious quiet. “Shall I guess, instead? Mm. Is it different, then, because the Shadows are evil?”

“I can already see where you’re going with this,” Haru mutters, folding into a scowl that looks as out of place on her fine features as enemy blood does on her elegant gloves.

Akechi ducks his head to her again, smile sheepish as a wolf in wool. “It’s rather harsh to say, I know,” he begins.

“Don’t!” Haru glares, angry and vulnerable. “I know my father wasn’t –” She winces. “I know. But I shouldn’t have to explain that killing people is unforgivable. No matter what they’ve done.”


“Do you?”

“No,” he says. “Can you tell me what sets them apart?”

“I – beg your pardon?”

“Human lives,” he clarifies. “What sets them apart?”

Haru frowns. “What do you mean by that?”

“Don’t you spend your time running around with that little cat of yours?” Akechi asks her. “He doesn’t seem particularly human to me.”
“Mona?” Haru looks scandalised. “M-Mona might be human! And even if he weren’t one, he might as well be one anyway!”

“Why?” Akechi wonders. “It’s curious you’re so quick to categorise him that way. Is that what makes him valuable? The possibility of being human?”

“Of course not!”

“Then what is it? Is it sentience that sets him apart? Knowing he has a life, that he’d miss it if it were lost?” Akechi asks. He shakes his head. “You’ve negotiated with enough Shadows to know they’re about the same.”

Haru hesitates. A little crease forms in her brow again.

“I suppose,” she concedes, “it’s just a little easier when you set your enemies apart from yourself –” Then her mouth forms a little ‘o’. “Oh! I’ve played your game after all.”

Akechi smiles at her. The little dancing lights of teasing guilt in his eyes are a nice touch, tagged with a mental note to ask where he had them manufactured.

“You must have been doing this all week.” Haru sighs. “You’re very good at making people doubt themselves.”


Haru says, “But this feels different,” and he quirks his eyebrows at her.

“How so?”

Haru cocks her head. “Somehow, I feel like your heart’s not in it today,” she says. “I’m not quite sure how to explain this, but it almost feels like you’re having a conversation with me.”

“As opposed to…?”

“Trying to win it,” she says, and he looks surprised.

“Is that how I normally sound?” he asks.

“Well, yes,” says Haru. “Like a game of chess and poker all at once, don’t you think? One misstep could cost you everything, so you have to convince your opponent to make it instead.”

Akechi shoots her a rueful smile. “Are you going to try to convince me that conversation isn’t winnable?”

Haru gives him a long look. “Of course I’m not,” she sighs, and picks her cup back up to take a sip of tea. It’s cooling.

Akechi makes a soft noise of comprehension. “I forget,” he says. “It comes with the territory, doesn’t it? You were the daughter of a businessman.”

“I am,” she says. “So I understand. You get the most out of the situation if you win. Is that right?”

“Perhaps.” Akechi raises his own cup from where he’s been idly cradling it in both hands, apparently having forgotten about it. “Would I be right to assume you didn’t play often?”

Haru takes another sip. “When I had to,” she replies. “Don’t you think this is better?”
“What is?”

“I think you get more if you don’t play,” she says. She shoots him a look from over her cup, and sniffs. “I suppose you’ll think I’m naïve again.”

Akechi laughs. “Sorry,” he says.

“So I think you sound different today,” she continues. “Perhaps you won that conversation we just had. But I don’t get the sense you really feel any triumph in making me reconsider.”

Akechi is quiet.

“You seem different, Akechi,” she says. “Will you tell me what’s changed?”

“Why do you care?” he asks. “I thought you could never forgive me.”

“I can’t,” she says. “But I told you it was complicated, didn’t I? I can never forgive you for what you’ve done, but that doesn’t mean a – a lifelong grudge. Oh, I can’t explain,” she sighs. “I’d love to say otherwise, but I don’t think we can ever truly be real friends.”

“More than fine.”

“But isn’t it telling I should want to say otherwise at all? I know there’s a middle ground between friends and enemies,” she says. “I think I’d like to get to know you, Akechi. I think we have a lot to explore together. Maybe we can’t be true friends, but we can find some semblance of friendship that’s – as close as we can get, under the circumstances.”

“You’ll bend your own moral code to befriend your father’s murderer,” Akechi says.

“Don’t simplify it,” she says, looking cross. “You’re much smarter than that and you know it.”

“Do you see yourself in me?” he asks.

“I wish I didn’t,” she replies. “And no. Not in you.”

“In my life.”


“Your father,” says Akechi. “And mine.”

She winces. “I hate to say it,” she says, “but there…”

Akechi watches her.

“Will you make me say it?” she asks him.

“I won’t,” he says. “Shall we return to our tea?”

Haru frowns. “There are similarities,” she relents, in a ghost of a voice. “A lot of them. Between our fathers.”

“What bothers you?” he asks her. “Poisoned roots?”

“Oh,” she says. “Oh, no, it’s not that.”

“What, then?”

“Pardon?” He understands, she knows, but she lets him stall. Offers him another moment as she goes to refill their cups.

“Poisoned roots,” she echoes at last. “Growth from something twisted and despicable – is it a struggle to survive, and to thrive, and to become anything other than withered and – and dying?”

“Is that what you think of me?”

“Is that what you think of yourself?” Haru asks. “I don’t believe in that, Akechi, I don’t believe your roots define your growth.” She sighs. “As much as I like plants, humans don’t work in quite the same way. I think it’s a good thing this time.”

“Do you like humans as much?”

“Even with plants, roots aren’t everything,” Haru says, and they both seem to file his question away. “They still need to be nurtured and taken care of while they grow. That’s what’s most important.” She giggles. “Oh, this is a silly analogy. But I’m sure you understand. I’m not upset with my father because I think he’s ruined my origins. If I go wrong, then that’s my responsibility. But that means I have the chance to go right.”

“Same as anyone else?”

“…No,” Haru admits. She smiles at him, a little wry, miserably triumphant. “Don’t worry, Akechi. I’m not that naïve. It’s true that a – difficult beginning gives you more room for error. It’s harder, especially when the influence is so big. But it’s not everything. A broken home doesn’t make for a broken person. Far from it, really. It’s a chance to prove how strong you can be, when you have to fight harder than ever just to see the sun.”

“If not the roots… Then, what is it that bothers y–”

“Because I love him,” Haru says sadly. “I love my father. It hurt me deeply to see him so far gone. I care about him, Akechi. All I ever wanted was to help him.”

There’s a long stretch of quiet before Akechi responds. “I see,” he says at last, and his words sink to the floorboards, heavier even than the thick attic air.

“I guess that’s where we diverge,” says Haru.

“I guess so,” says Akechi.

He hesitates. She lets him.

“My father,” he says. “I never –” She watches as he struggles: to find the words, to form them. “I never felt –”

“I know,” says Haru.

“What’s it like?” he asks, and if there’d been any innocence left in the child alive behind his eyes, it might have sounded plaintive. “What’s it like, to, to –”

“To care?”

“To - love, I suppose,” Akechi says. Almost says, really – in a voice that isn’t quite there; touched with disdain that’s more a replacement for something he can’t reach. “For its own sake.”
Haru hums over her cup, thinking. “It’s one of many things,” she says at last, “that are worth the pain.”

He laughs; it freezes midair and cracks in two.

“I do wonder what it’s like,” he says.

“You should,” she says softly. “It’s wonderful.”

“I needed him,” Akechi says, rasps an admission that dries his throat. “I needed to know that he – that he – needed me. Isn’t that just – the strangest co-dependency? Don’t you think?”

Haru sighs. “There’s no way for us to live that isn’t strange, I’m afraid,” she says. “Do you wonder what it might be like to have a family that truly loved you? And showed it?”

“Perhaps,” Akechi says. “I don’t think I know enough to wonder.”

She nods thoughtfully. Then she gives a sort of guilty little giggle. “Can I tell you,” she says in a hushed voice. “Can I tell you something a little shameful, Akechi?”

“Please.”

“I feel a little jealous sometimes,” she confides. “When I look at Akira and Sojiro. And even Futaba.”

Akechi’s eyebrows jump, just a little. His jaw tightens, just a bit. Then he nods, short.

“Do you? Too?”

He hesitates again. “They aren’t related,” he says.

“That makes it hurt more, don’t you think?” Haru sighs. “I’m not really bitter, he – he deserves it, you know, they all do. They deserve to find a family.”

“Don’t we?” Akechi flinches as the words tumble out before he can seal and vacuum-pack them. “I apologise for – that was inappropriate.”

“No, I should. I’m sorry,” she says. “It’s horrible of me to talk about them like this. But you’re right. We do. And I’m sorry, Akechi.”

“You already apologised.”

“No – I’m sorry you didn’t even get what I did. Akechi –” She leans across the table and he leans back, but she only rests one hand on the wood as she gazes earnestly at him. “I wonder what would have happened if things had gone differently. I’m sure the others –”

“That I could have been one of you?”

“Yes,” she says. “Yes, I think you could have.”

“Would you have liked that?”

“I think I would,” she sighs. “If it weren’t for – the way things are, I – I think I would have liked you very much, Akechi. I hope you would have liked us, too.”

“And now?” he asks. “What do you think of me?”
Haru cocks her head at him, considering.

“Actually, I’m still not sure I know,” she says. She leans back again and laughs a little. “Isn’t it funny? I hoped I’d know you a little better after speaking with you like this, but I don’t think it’s so easy to get to know you, Akechi. But that’s how you design it, isn’t it?”

Akechi chuckles. “I am sorry about that.”

“No, I don’t think you are,” she says cheerfully, “but that’s alright. We don’t have to be friends, Akechi, and maybe we can’t – but we could be. We could have been, and I think that potential is worth something, don’t you?”

Akechi seems reluctant to reply, but her gaze is soft and insistent, and he eventually murmurs, “Maybe I do.”

Haru smiles, her eyes kind. “It must be difficult,” she says. “To be kept up here with us. It must feel awful.”

“I understand why you’re doing it,” he says.

“Oh, I know you do,” she says. “You’re very clever, and we don’t have much choice, and I’m sure you understand that, too. Still, I’m sorry for the hurt it must cause you.”

“Don’t you think you’re overestimating yourselves?” he asks, polite arrogance settling back through his voice.

“By apologising?” Haru giggles. “Oh, no, I don’t think so. Not at all. You seem different, Akechi. I told you that.”

“You did,” he agrees. “Is it your doing?”

“Well, it must be,” she exclaims. “I mean, not mine. But the others. It’s alright, you know. I don’t think less of you that they got to you. It would get to anyone, being stuck in this attic with a group of –” She stops. “Oh, I don’t really know what we are to you.”

“Join the club,” he says drily, and she giggles again.

“I only mean to say I’m sorry,” she says. “If we’ve really hurt you, or – We must seem horribly hostile, keeping you locked up and interrogating you this way, but really –”

“You mean well,” he says placatingly, and she hesitates.

“I hope,” she says. “I hope, but, like you said, it’s hard to know, isn’t it? If we really do. What is ‘well’?”

“Isn’t that the question,” he murmurs, and she falls temporarily silent, and he tumbles with her.

Between them, the tea’s grown stone cold.

“It hasn’t been much fun,” he says into the long quiet, and she looks up at him in mild surprise.

“I would imagine,” she says carefully.

“I’m –” He pauses, allows a smirk to curve his lips. “I’m sure it comes as a surprise, but I’m a rather private person.”
“I would never have guessed,” she simpers, and he laughs.

“Being poked and prodded all week,” he says. This is honesty he doesn’t expect – she’s *dangerous*, in the safety she makes him feel – “And by the *Phantom Thieves*, no less – and it’s not such a good time, either – I just want to be left alone.”

She nods, sombre, and he almost hates that he doesn’t have to explain himself. “The offer still stands,” she says. “If you’d rather not talk until they come back.”

“It’s alright,” he says. “You were right. I – I don’t feel like I need to win. I think,” he adds, and hesitates, and adds again, “For once.”

“I’m glad.”

Akechi hesitates again.

“Makoto Niijima,” he says, and Haru laughs and nods.

“Yes,” she says. “She’s really something, isn’t she?”

“She was so desperate to understand me,” he says. “And it was difficult…”

“When you don’t really understand yourself, do you?” she finishes. “Or, at least not as much as you thought you did. Before.”

He squints at her. “Maybe you understand me better than she does,” he says.

“Oh, no,” she says hurriedly, “no, not at all. I’m afraid I have no idea what goes on in your head, and I think I’m happy not knowing.”

“That’s fair.” That’s gratifying.

“But it’s interesting, isn’t it?” she continues. “I don’t *think* I understand you at all. But it sort of *feels* like I might.”

“I’m… not sure what you mean.”

She tilts her head again, thinking. “Well, you don’t – Please correct me if I’m wrong, Akechi.”

“Oh, I will.”

“I feel like you don’t really want to be understood,” she says. “I feel like it bothers you when we try.”

He stiffens.

“Oh – that counted, didn’t it?” she says unhappily. “Please don’t worry, Akechi. It’s not a bad thing to be understood. It doesn’t make you simple or common. It’s –” She frowns. “Suppose you only speak a language no one else knows,” she suggests. “So if you can get through to someone, it only means you’re getting better at speaking it, and that there are people who care enough to try and learn it off you. Is that – does that make sense?”

“It’s an interesting metaphor,” Akechi says slowly. “It’s all very impractical in practice.”

“It is, isn’t it,” she says sadly. “I’m afraid that’s all we have.”
“I don’t see how it explains what you meant.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she says hastily. “Well, think of it like this, Akechi. Not a single one of us really knows how to read you. But – I think you must have realised, after this week – each one of us sees a part of ourselves in you. It’s enough to realise that even if our – our languages aren’t the same, and we can’t read yours – there’s parts of us that come from the same place. It’s enough to feel a connection, find a common ground – even if we don’t know the details, we still feel something there – and that’s enough, I think.”

She shakes her head as he struggles to digest everything she’s saying. “Nobody can ever fully understand someone else,” she says, “and some people are just more enigmatic than others, Akechi, and you do a wonderful job of it. But you can hide facts and figures, and you can hide thoughts and plans, but feelings and instincts and kinship come from the heart, and I’m afraid there’s nothing you can do about those.”

“…Okumura, I…”

“It’s empathy,” she says. “I told you then that I sympathised with you, but… That’s not really the whole truth of things, is it? Do you know what I mean?” She shoots him a rueful look. “I know you don’t want any of that, although sometimes we just can’t help but give it. But sympathy is – it’s difficult, it’s vague, when you don’t really know what someone is going through. And we don’t, well, we don’t know what you’re going through. Not at all. But we can feel something, in our hearts, and it resonates with us, and that’s why we want so badly to get through to you. We want you to feel it. Can’t you?”

She presses a hand to her chest and gazes at him until he unthinkingly does the same to his own.

“Can’t you feel it?” she asks him, pleading in her eyes. “Can’t you feel there’s something within you, in your heart, in your soul – that thrums with us? Beats with us?”

“Is that why you care?” he asks. His voice is hoarse, and she shoves the cup of cold tea at him until he picks it up and takes another sip under her watchful eyes. Her gaze is firm in a matronly, caring way he can’t recognise, a blank space in his mind that makes him want to curl into a ball or run until he can’t feel it.

“I don’t know,” she answers honestly, after she’s seen him drink. “I’m afraid it’s always going to be a little more complicated than that. But I promise –” she waits until he looks into her face again – “I promise, Akechi, nobody’s trying to win. I know we keep you locked up here, and I’m so sorry, but you’re not just some prisoner, and this isn’t a war, and we aren’t trying to beat you down until you join us or die. We aren’t. We wouldn’t.”

“What do you want?”

“I don’t know,” she says again, helpless. “How can I? This is bigger than I could ever imagine, and I’m not clever enough to understand it. I think it depends on you, Akechi – what do you want?” she asks him, and he doesn’t think she means it in a way that makes ‘getting out of this attic’ an acceptable answer.

After a long pause, she smiles at him. “I don’t really expect an answer,” she says. “Actually, I don’t even know what I’m asking. It’s hard, isn’t it?”

He only hums in response.

“I guess there are things that can’t be known, only felt,” she says. “Like a word you know but
can’t define. Like a kinship with a long-time enemy, or a connection with someone you don’t know… Or like the feeling between two people who can’t forgive each other, but who can keep moving and care about each other as if they could,” she finishes, with a hopeful glance in his direction.

He laughs, unnerved. “There’s nothing I have to forgive you for, Okumura.”

She shrugs. “If you can think that way, then maybe we’ve taken a step in the right direction,” she offers.

They fall into silence again, and neither one clambers out until the others return.

“How was –”

“Don’t,” says Akechi.

Akira blinks. “I was only going to ask how your day was,” he says, affronted.

“And I told you not to,” Akechi snarls, “or is your hearing as bad as your eyesight isn’t?”

Morgana stretches, altogether unconcerned for how baffled Akira looks. “That was a weird thing to say,” he remarks. “Not nearly as much bite as I’ve come to expect from you. And your coherence is suffering, too. You feeling okay, Akechi?”

“Oh, I’m just wonderful,” Akechi mutters. “Must we continue this charade? Ties or no, I’m a prisoner in this attic, and I’m tired of pretending otherwise. If you could stop acting like I’m nothing more than a willing conversationalist, I’m sure we’d get along much more splendidly.”

Never one to pay attention to the results of his risk analysis, Akira takes an ill-advised step toward him. “Are you –”

“I told you,” Akechi says, and Akira bites his lip and nods.

“Morgana,” he says in a low voice.

“What is it?”

“Want to spend the night at Futaba’s?”

Morgana frowns, best as a cat can frown. “Are you sure about that?” he asks. “I don’t know if it’s the best idea for you two to be locked up here alone.”

“Maybe not,” Akira agrees. “Should I walk you over?”

Morgana gives him a long look, but Akira’s eyes betray nothing – and ultimately Morgana follows the same way as trust apparently wins out. “I’ll be fine by myself,” he sighs. “Get to sleep at a reasonable hour, alright?” When Akira nods, Morgana casts an uncertain look at the couch and jumps up onto the railing with a flick of his tail. “Be careful,” he adds.

“We will.”
Akechi watches as Morgana disappears down the stairs, but says nothing.

Akira regards him quietly. “Normally you’d make some comment about me wanting to be alone up here with you,” he says.

“‘Normally,’” Akechi echoes. “Don’t pretend you know the first thing about me.”

Akira’s eyes stay on him a moment longer and he turns away, his own eyes smouldering with something or something else.

“Good night,” Akira says finally.

Akechi grants him a curt nod and nothing more as the room clicks into dark.

Chapter End Notes

notesspam (have ya missed this):

(haru is a character i struggle to get the measure of, not least because of her lack of in-game development. i took some liberties because of that. it’s my hope that you won’t find her out of character; i didn’t intentionally construct new aspects of her personality, but attempted to build on what she shows to fill some of the untapped potential i saw in her. but of course, interpretations will differ, so i hope you like her!)

haru is fascinating, because she has never hidden the fact that she is incredibly dangerous. she makes no secret of her violent streak, and she’s open with her dislike/disdain in the few situations where it exists. at the same time, she’s genuinely sweet and kind - almost naïve. it’s a juxtaposition i’ve seen in few characters and something i adore about her – she has multiple sides, so fundamentally different, and yet every one of them is 100% real. in this way, you can find her antithesis in akechi, who also has multiple sides, but each and every one is false.

this makes her the perfect character to close out this section. she’s openly dangerous, but you still can’t help but trust her. it’s so strange to me that i can see a character who could and probably would cleave me in half and still feel absolutely no fear. i can’t explain that, and the most important thing is that akechi can’t either. there’s no reason why he shouldn’t have his guard up around her, and he even explicitly takes note of that – haru’s genuineness is something to be feared, because it cloaks itself without meaning to. but even being aware of this, akechi automatically lowers his guard in this chapter.

it’s SO easy to talk to haru, because at no point does she seem to have an agenda. she’s not trying to get him to open up, to accept them, to change his mind – nothing. she just wants to sit with him and have tea. maybe talk things out, because it might be nice for the both of them. and if he doesn’t want to, then that’s okay.

for akechi, this is one of the first indications that friendship, kindness, belonging – all that kind of stuff - doesn’t have to be a battle. it doesn’t have to be won, and you’re not in it to gain. he’s been creating a false dilemma all this time – it was only “me vs them” in his head.

weirdly enough, that kind of terrifies him, because it’s so different from everything he’s ever known. when you spend your whole life fighting, it’s probably harder to put down the weapon than it is to keep swinging.

(and the ramifications of that will not go ignored in this fic.)

one last thing – i haven’t forgotten about Morgana! he doesn’t fit into this section, but
i’m not neglecting him. he'll get his chance with akechi, don’t you worry.

other:

• akechi’s little lava shark tirade demonstrates a side of him he seldom gets to show. in-game, he's seen to be easily lost in thought, but there’s little to remind us that he’s young and would normally get to have fun and be a bit silly. i think he's the creative type, and if things had gone differently and he had less reason to be focused all the time, he might have been dreamier.

• haru is, i think, the first in this fic not to try and approach akechi like they’re on even ground. she doesn't feel the need to project strength where there's none, and easily admits that she's been wrong-footed right off the bat. this gives her an advantage with akechi. he usually starts by trying to catch people off-guard; if he doesn't need to, he gets a little lost.

• haru and goro both recognise conversation as a game or an art. everyone else has been conversing with goro like that’s just what you do, but these two have this higher awareness that it’s like a game of chess. so you can kind of split this talk into two levels. imagine they're chatting while also playing chess, except the chess game is actually another level of conversation. that’s why haru mentions he’s won that section – they’re like self contained games, but there’s an underlying level of actual conversation that comes with the awareness that they’re playing at all. this interaction is therefore very different to the others, because haru may be playing goro’s game, but she’s the only one aware that there is one at all. this also allows her to abort the conversations, because she recognises that he's leading her.

• the end bit with akira: personal development doesn’t happen over one conversation! self reflection is just as important as any life changing event, and akechi hasn’t had time for that yet. he can’t process what happened because it was so absolutely unexpected, so he reverts back to his “villain” persona as a means to protect himself while he tries to sort through the information. we’ll see more of that next chapter.

[link] and [link] as always!
wild card

Chapter Summary

it's the beginning of the end.

Chapter Notes

content warning: this chapter contains mentions of suicide ideation.

DISCLAIMER: the following chapters differ from what’s come before in both format and content. they will involve issues more grounded in the real world (injury, legal consequence, etc). in light of that,

this is a work of fiction.

fanfiction. i’m a dumb kid here to have a fun time. not a professional. i’m inexperienced and make mistakes. some inconsistencies are necessary to make things work, because the p5 universe makes a whole lotta No Sense sometimes. i’ll ask you to forgive me my shortcomings and suspend disbelief where i need you to!

this fic is a personal interpretation. it's heavily simplified in comparison to reality given that it is (fan)fiction and that a person of my experience and skill is very much not equipped to tackle these issues with true depth or authority. these are serious, complex issues, and i’m like, a starfish. please do not take this work seriously in a real world context. do not use it as a frame of reference. i wrote it out of curiosity for alternate possibilities. i joke, but i don’t claim to “fix” the game. i have no end of respect for p5’s creators and even as i poke at its flaws, if this game needs fixing then that’s not up to me. nothing in my interpretation is objectively truer or better than any other. i’m happy to discuss my thoughts, but i’ve no desire or energy to argue. i strongly encourage you to form your own interpretations – i only hope you find some pleasure in reading mine.

thanks for your patience! this reads like t&c good grief but i don’t want anyone to mistake my inexperience for making light of serious issues. (i’m especially aware of this since a comment or two on previous chapters; i’m now a little paranoid of being misunderstood on issues that are even more serious than those explored prior.)

and thank you for sticking by me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

[Ryuji] What’s the plan for today?

[Ryuji] We going into the Palace? Calling card time?

[Ann] Shido’s waiting for us in there…
[Yusuke] I suppose we’re as ready as we will ever be.

[Makoto] Considering how ready I feel, that’s not a very comforting thought...

[Haru] What do you think, Akira?

[Futaba] Decide our fate, O Wise Leader!

No Palace today.

[Ryuji] Serious??

[Makoto] Are you sure?

Yeah. Take a breather.

We have time.

[Ann] Not that I’m not eager to take Shido down, but thank GOD.

[Ann] I’m SOOO tired!

[Haru] I think it’s a good idea to take a short break!

[Haru] We’ll all work much better once we’ve had time to relax and refresh!

[Yusuke] We’ll be able to attack him at full strength. Good thinking, Akira.

[Futaba] Noice! I’m gonna dress Mona up as Featherman.

Back to sleep, team.

Phantom Thieves will return tomorrow.

Akira tosses his phone back onto his bed and pulls his pillow over it. A quick glance out the window confirms that the sun’s barely up, and a similarly quick glance to the snoring couch confirms that his guest is much the same way. Situation normal. As far as ‘normal’ has had to stretch, these last few days.

Akira leans back against the wall, suddenly washed over by a wave of exhaustion. He closes his eyes. He’ll feel better after a bath, he’s sure, but first he has to will himself to stand up, and that just sounds like too much after this wreck of a week. He’s never been a morning person. Even less when morning heralds what he’s sure will be another hellish day.

If nothing else, he only hopes the others haven’t noticed. An untouchable leader makes for a boosted morale, and their faith in him, at least, is unshakeable – even if his hands aren’t. He clenches them into fists, but the tremor only becomes more pronounced.

It’ll be over soon. One way or another.

Akechi’s still snoring. Akira allows himself a second to smirk. Maybe he should record a few seconds. For posterity.
Then again, he’d like to keep his heartbeat. A groan forces itself from his throat as he forces himself to his feet, and he shakes his head. Lithe as a non-Morgana cat in the Metaverse (who really conducts himself more with the grace of some supernaturally coordinated toddler, Akira reflects fondly), he’s starting to feel like an old man in the real world.

If old men lost their youth by battling all forms of demons. He snatches up his bag from the shelf and plods down the stairs. The door tinkles, announcing his daily trek to the bathhouse.

Behind him, the snoring stops with a start.

Nothing’s changed. Do your job. Get over yourself.

Even as he holds his prize in trembling fingers, even as he tucks a new trick further up his sleeve, he hesitates.

He shouldn’t still be hesitating.

He’s slipping. It’s so easy to get distracted, now; in the chaos and uncertainty, it’s difficult to focus, and for heaven’s sake, this scrolling chatlog is merciless, even though the only thing that seems to really be happening is an unrelenting exchange of silly pictures between Sakura and Sakamato –

“What are you doing?”

– he’s home.

Akechi doesn’t turn around. He doesn’t move at all, transforming more fluidly into ice than water could hope to do. “You’ll want to go back downstairs,” he says.

He can see Akira out the corner of his eye, hovering at the top of the stairs with a bag clutched in his hand. Totally still.

“Where’s your cat?” Akechi asks. It’s so conversational. So nondescript. Akira looks so wary. It’s strange to see him on edge at all, when Akechi had grown so used to thinking his world was round.

“Not at your heels today?”

“Futaba’s. That’s my phone,” says Akira.

A flicker of a smile appears on the corner of Akechi’s mouth, so that Akira can see even from the stairs. “Observant,” he remarks. His fingers unfreeze, turning the phone over once in his palm. “As always.” His voice is light, but something seems to fracture in his eye. The fragments are sharp enough to draw blood.

Akira takes a step closer. “What are you doing?” he repeats.

Finally, Akechi inclines his head to the other boy. “I told you to go downstairs,” he says, with a new delicacy to his voice. “Or you might regret it.”
The watery light from the window behind him slips down his arm with the slight movement of his hand. Akira jerks backward as a sharp reflection flashes against his eye. “Where did you get that?”

The knife gleams along Akechi’s right wrist. He shifts, unsheathing it a little further from his sleeve. “You shouldn’t leave your home unattended, you know,” he remarks idly. “Even an early morning excursion to the bathhouse could prove - deadly.”

“I thought you were asleep.”

“We did slip into a rhythm, didn’t we?” Akechi agrees. “Complacent enough that falling into routine was enough to lull you into safety… Even when one key factor had clearly changed.” And he flexes his wrists, free and unbound.

Akira frowns. “You were untied yesterday and you didn’t try anything,” he says.

“Of course not. You’ve always been a fool.” Akechi smiles again – the slight glint to his teeth is somehow more threatening than that of the blade. “Now, go downstairs.”

Akira takes another step. “What are you doing with my phone?”

“Go downstairs!”

“You’re going into Shido’s Palace,” says Akira, and Akechi’s face contorts a little. Akira shakes his head. “You can’t go in there alone,” he says. “You’re still injured.”

“You can’t stop me,” hisses Akechi. “I’ve played your inane games for a week. I’ve had enough.”

“But we haven’t even played Dance Dance Insurgency yet.” Akira holds his hand out. “Give me the phone, Akechi.”

Akechi’s laugh escapes him like a ghost; a wisp that doesn’t match his wide, open smile. “You’re not even asking for the knife?” he wonders, gripping both tighter. “What sort of idiot are you?”

“Akechi –”

“I won’t,” Akechi spits. “If you take another step, I’ll kill you. Leave me be!”

“If you go in there alone, you’ll die,” says Akira. “After everything, Akechi – everything you’ve been through with us and everything we’ve done – you want to waste all that time? All that trouble, for the both of us?”

“I never asked you for this!” Akechi howls, and Akira flinches at the sudden volume. “I – never – asked you – to save me! I never – god damn you,” he gasps, his whole body trembling violently. “God damn you all to hell, I – didn’t want this, don’t you get it?!”

“You didn’t want our help –”

“I didn’t want to live!”

Spit flies across the room when he screams; screams in a voice that isn’t his, a voice like a knife being sharpened. Akechi’s eyes are wild, his lips curled in an ugly grimace and his breath coming in ragged gasps. He’s shaking. He won’t stop shaking.

Akira’s eyes widen.

“You’re going to kill yourself,” he says. Cold on his tongue. Dries his throat.
Akechi releases his ghostly laugh again.

“Are you going to take the knife now?” he asks, and Akira can’t understand how a voice could sound so hollow. “Will you call the police on a suicide risk? I’ll kill you before you can.”

Akira shakes his head. “No,” he says, “you’re going to kill your self. You’re going after your double.”

Akechi smirks.

“Caught on, have you?” he says in a low voice. “Shouldn’t you be grateful? You’ve not had any luck with it all week. But I will.”

“Because you know yourself…” Akira narrows his eyes. “No, that’s not right. You know Shido.”

Akechi straightens up. Everything that was there vanishes in an instant, a blank slate once more. “Perhaps you’re not so dull after all,” he says, and Akira flinches again at the return of the calm. “I know Masayoshi Shido like he’ll never know me. I know how he sees me. I know where to find myself in the depths of his ship. And you would never find me.”


“If it’s convenient for you!”

“Akechi Goro. I want to find him.” He reaches for Akechi’s face, pulls back slightly when Akechi flinches away. “Help me.”

Akechi stares at him. “You’re an idiot,” he says.

“You’re a detective, right?” Akira presses. “You can help us, Goro.”

“Akechi Goro. I want to find him.” Akechi stumbles back against the mattress, swinging the knife out with a shaking hand. Akira lurches back before the tip can catch his cheek. “Go downstairs and let me go!”

“You’re going to let it kill you,” says Akira. “You can’t die like this.”

“You – don’t get – to tell me – what I can’t do!”

“I’m sorry we saved you,” says Akira. “I’m sorry. I can’t be sorry. We need you here.”

“You should have let me die!”

“You have to live,” insists Akira. “You can.”

“Stop talking –”

“Hey,” calls a voice from the level below. The bell tinkles again as the door shuts. Akechi’s eyes widen. “Ah,” he says; says, or his lips move, though barely any sound escapes. “Your boss is here.”
Akira freezes as he hears footsteps starting up the stairs. His eyes travel down to rest on the knife pointed at his face before flickering back to the stairs. “Everything okay up there?” comes Sojiro’s voice again.

Akechi opens his mouth to hiss a warning, but Akira’s faster. “It’s fine,” he calls back. The point of the blade strokes his throat. Gentle, caressing. He doesn’t move. Doesn’t breathe. “Don’t come up.”

Akechi smiles.

“Ever the selfless fool,” he says softly.

Akira meets his gaze, level.

“If you’re going in, then I am too,” he says.

Akechi scoffs. “Don’t be an idiot,” he says. “Once we’re in the Metaverse, I’ll shoot you. No one will ever know what happened to you.”

Akira shifts his weight and tucks his hands into his pockets.

“Fine,” he says.

Akechi stares. And then he laughs, disbelieving.

“So be it,” he says, and punches the Nav.

The moment they enter the Metaverse, Akira stumbles.

“What –” he gasps, but Akechi’s foot moves from the backs of his ankles to slam down on his shoulder, knocking him to his knees. “Ngh!”

“Shut up,” hisses Akechi. He draws his gun and shoves the barrel roughly against Akira’s forehead. Akira wobbles, dangerously close to sliding down the slanted roof of the sinking building, and Akechi smiles. He flexes his left hand at his side, testing his arm without the sling, and tightens his grip on the gun with his right. “I told you I’d kill you.”

Akira swallows. “This is familiar,” he quips.

Akechi’s finger traces the trigger. “I would have preferred to savour this,” he breathes. “But at least I’ll get to experience it twice.”

“Two for the price of one.”

“As it is, you’ll be nothing more than a smear on a rooftop. Just a simple nuisance.” A smirk distorts Akechi’s calm lips. “Perhaps things are as they should be after all.”

Akira ignores the gun between his eyes, instead gazing up into Akechi’s. “Please don’t do this,” he murmurs.

“Are you begging?” Akechi whispers hoarsely. The smirk becomes a manic smile. “The fearless
leader of the Phantom Thieves,” he crows softly. “The cowardly trash you are, now? Pleading for mercy at my feet.”

Akira shakes his head, just slightly. “Not for mercy.”

“What, do you think you’re doing this for me?” Akechi’s voice rises, strangled. “For my soul? Don’t be stupid. There’s nothing left of that.”

Options flash across Akira’s eyes, and Akechi watches as he shelves them one by one. “It’s not that,” he says at last.

“Then what is it?!” Akechi demands through gritted teeth. “What do you want from me?!”

*Your friendship,* Akira’s eyes seem to say. *Your redemption,* reads the tilt to his eyebrows. But his lips say nothing, and he blinks slowly up at Akechi in silence.

Akechi tightens his grip on the gun.

“What do you want,” he repeats slowly. “Tell me what you w –”

“You know you can be more than this,” Akira says quietly. “You know you deserve more.”

“…What the hell are you talking about?”

“This can’t be all you’re here for,” says Akira. “Don’t waste your life on this, Akechi, you could be so much more if you let us –”

“Could you be any more presumptuous?” Akechi snaps. “I don’t need your fucking charity.”

“Charity? Friendship isn’t –”

“Isn’t it? Isn’t it exactly what you do?” Akechi knocks the gun a little harder against Akira’s forehead, and Akira winces. “You find someone with a sob story – boo – hoo – you ask if they want to join your little club – and you go around and you – saving people – for your justice – don’t give me that pandering crap!” And he spits and swings his foot up without warning to kick Akira hard in the gut. Akira doubles over and collapses sideways to the floor, wheezing.

“You said –” he gasps, then dissolves into coughing. “You said – we have – what you don’t…”

Akechi laughs silently. Remnant ghosts long exorcised. “Did that go to your head?” he asks softly. “I don’t want anything you have.”

“We were strong enough,” Akira manages, “stronger – to – beat you –”

Akechi kicks him again, and Akira cries out. “Never,” he hisses. “You’re – not – better than me.”

Akira shakes his head, curled into a painful ball. “No, not – not meant to be a… competition…”

“Everything’s a competition! You kill or you die –”

“Haven’t done… either one…”

“Shut up!” Akechi lunges for him, driving his knee into Akira’s stomach and pressing knuckles against his throat. He nudges the gun against Akira’s temple. “Shut your – your stupid – fucking –”

Akira coughs, seemingly more concerned with getting the words out than with breathing. “Don’t
want – to defeat you –”

“So – what? You want to help me? You want my sob story? And we can all cry on each other’s shoulders? I don’t need –”

“You can be more…” Akira gasps. Weak fingers tug at the fist against his windpipe, but his scrabbling is helpless against Akechi’s grasp. “Than… this… Listen, A–”

“I don’t care what you –”

“You’re incredible –”

“Don’t patronise me!” In his rage, Akechi loosens his grip slightly. Akira writhes beneath him, coughing and hacking.

“It was a compliment,” he says in a strangled voice.

“I don’t want them from you.”

“I know you can be more.”

Akechi glares at him in silence, wariness and uncertainty boring holes in Akira’s earnest eyes.

“You don’t have to be alone,” Akira rasps.

“Stop pretending –” Akechi’s arm shudders, as though to fling the gun sideways. Akira’s gaze flickers to it, but it doesn’t leave his temple. “Stop pretending you’re – stop th–! We aren’t friends –”

Akira nods, as far as he can with Akechi’s hand still resting on his throat. “We aren’t.”

“Why are you –”

“Potential,” says Akira. He makes an effort to sit up, but Akechi shifts his weight, and Akira grunts as he’s shoved back to the floor. “See –”

“You want to use me?” whispers Akechi. His laugh is garbled, and he pushes down on Akira’s throat again. Akira grits his teeth. “Is that it? Finally? You want my power?”

“Not about power,” Akira gasps.

“You’re so naïve… Everything’s –”

“Not about power…” Akira’s eyes flicker, but he persists. His fingers close weakly around Akechi’s wrist. “Stronger, together…”

“Just stop talking – I don’t want –”

“Please, Crow,” Akira murmurs. “We saved you for a reason.”

He lets his eyes slide closed with a small sigh. His hand thuds lightly to the floor, slipping away from Akechi’s wrist as he loosens his grip.

Akechi stares, wild and wide.

Slowly, barely, he lifts his fingers away from Akira’s throat. The gun clatters to the ground; slides a few feet down the tilted roof to rest at the edge of the water, washing gently up and down with the
quiet tide.

“Then tell me,” he whispers. “Am I ever going to find it?”

After a moment, Akira’s eyelashes flutter. Akechi falls back on his heels clumsily, watching him twitch back to himself. Keeps his face level as Akira draws in one shuddering breath after another.

“Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing,” he says in a low voice.

Akira lifts his head weakly, watching him.

“You’re trying to manipulate me,” Akechi says. “Figuring out what I want to hear, or – what you think I need. It’s the only way to progress with someone, isn’t it?” His eyes are glassy and even. “I’ve been doing it too long not to recognise when it’s being used on me.”

“You dropped the gun,” says Akira, his voice hoarse. Akechi looks away.

“I do hope you won’t read into that,” he says quietly. When he looks back, a pleasant smile has appeared over his lips. “There’s no time for reflection right now, after all. We have a job to do.” He glances over the horizon. “We’ve gotten lucky. I can see the cruiser from here – it’s headed our way, so this won’t be a hapless chase. Where the buildings aren’t close enough, we’ll have to swim.”

Akira raises one eyebrow while Akechi speaks. Beyond that, he betrays no reaction to the sudden businesslike tone, makes no move to acknowledge the light bruises flowering around his neck. They’re easy enough to ignore, like so many things are not.

“To the boat then, my dear?” he manages to quip, and almost disguises the weakness that still colours his voice.

Akechi pushes himself to his feet and extends his injured hand to Akira, pretending the disguise worked. “Don’t make me pick that gun back up, love.”

“I kind of wish you’d threatened to kill me closer to the Diet Building. This is still a really long trip.”

“If you don’t shut up, I’ll push you into the ocean.”

“Maybe this would go faster if we leapfrogged over each other.”

“I swear to god, I will push you.”

“Should we sing? Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the –”
“I can’t believe you pushed me into the ocean.”

“I can’t imagine why.”

“Which entrance are we taking?”

Akechi gazes up at the cruiser, the dark stripes shifting across his body as he moves, considering. “Central Hall,” he decides, and Joker nods.

They make their way to the safe room, and Akechi glances wryly at Joker. “Are you asking me for direction, then?” he inquires. “You are the leader, after all.”

“We’re here for you,” Joker points out. “You told me you knew where he would be.”

Akechi smiles. “Did I say that?” he asks mildly. He strolls out to the hall, and Joker follows. Then he takes a deep breath and opens his mouth.

Before he can make a sound, Joker yanks him back and slaps a hand over his mouth. “What are you doing?” he hisses. “You can’t draw attention to us. Let’s just go find him.”

Akechi shakes his head. “So you don’t understand after all,” he says softly. “You won’t find me in this Palace. I don’t have a location.”

“That’s not you in there.”

“I don’t have a location,” repeats Akechi. “I’m not anything. And I’m not anywhere. I exist – when he needs. Wherever he needs.” And without warning, he pulls out his gun and fires a single shot across the hall. “And I’m only here for me!”

The hall fills with screaming. Then the hall fills with Shadows. And it’s Akechi’s turn to grab a fistful of Joker’s coat and toss him behind cover. “Hide,” he hisses. “Be ready.”

“Crow!”

Akechi smiles faintly. “Trust me,” he says in a low voice, “since you do it so well. This is the one time it might work out for you.” And he saunters forward, and forward, and forward.

Distressed, Joker leaps to higher ground – hops between ledges in the ceiling, following from shadow as Akechi continues to advance. He watches the Shadows converge – but they all hang back, seemingly reluctant to attack. Akechi stands calmly at their focus, hands in his pockets.

“I’m here now,” he calls. “Aren’t I?”

Another figure appears suddenly, almost from nowhere. Joker tightens his grip on the ledge.

“I am,” it replies. The mild pleasantries etched across its porcelain features makes Joker nauseous, and he almost wills it to morph into the reptilian sneer from the engine room. “Have you finally stopped sending decoys?”
“They’re below my notice,” Akechi replies. “I’m here now.”

“How wonderful,” it says. It reaches for its holster. “Finally. Shall I die as myself, at last?”

“Finally,” echoes Akechi. He takes out his own gun. “At my hand, too.”

“I have one question.”

“Yes?”

Cognitive Akechi raises its gun, but then swings up and around to the corner where Joker crouches. “Did you think I wouldn’t notice your little thief in the shadows?”

Joker freezes on his perch. The Shadows around them begin to shift and growl, unsettled, but Akechi merely laughs. “Of course I didn’t,” he says. “He simply sees better from up there.”

Cognitive Akechi shakes its head in mock disappointment. “To think you would resort to relying on filth like him,” it tuts. “You really have fallen far. Shido will be disappointed in you.”

“That’s quite alright,” says Akechi politely. “After all, I’ll be dead to him soon.” He nods slightly, and Joker whips out his own gun to fire two shots into the space where Cognitive Akechi stood only a moment ago.

“Very cute,” it calls, melting into the Shadows that begin to converge on Akechi with renewed aggression, dissolving one by one into demons. “It appears I’m not quite myself at present.”

Akechi glances at Joker. “Still here. You’d better go.”

“Ten-four.” Joker takes a single moment to glance around at the horde of Shadows before launching himself into them, diving after the retreating cognitive Akechi. “More than I thought,” he calls back. “Careful.”

“You yourself.” Akechi reaches up and rips off his mask with a howl. “Megidolaon!”

The demons collectively hiss and recoil, a few of the smaller dissipating entirely as Robin Hood appears in a flash. When the blue light fades, cognitive Akechi has disappeared.

And so has Joker.

“You can’t take them all by yourself. Your shoulder still needs time to recover, and that wound –”

“When will you stop trying to tell me what I can and cannot do?” Akechi shakes his head. “We don’t have a choice. The Shadows will appear and attack as soon as you’re spotted. You need to focus on the target.”

“This is too dangerous.”

“This is dangerous?” Akechi smirks. “Don’t you remember your plan from that time I had you drugged and tried to kill you?”

Joker scowls. “Not very well,” he says pointedly, and Akechi actually laughs.
“I appreciate your concern,” he says.

“You don’t.”

“No,” agrees Akechi. “If you want to be friends, you’ll stop underestimating me.”

“I’m not. You’re not going to call me your friend no matter how many conditions I fill,” Joker counters.

Akechi smiles again. “So you do know me,” he says.

“Nope,” says Joker. He leaps across another rooftop. “Fine, you take out the Shadows. Then what?”

“I know you’re out there,” calls Joker. He twists around a pillar and dispatches another stray Shadow with a swift gunshot. “Come out and play.”

“Act like you’re searching. Keep up the theatrics; you’re good at that. But stick to the upper floors of the hall until I’m done with the floor.”

Pink sprays at his feet as he spins and skids down the bannister again. “Shall I start? Ready or not, here I come…”

“How do you know he’ll stick around?”

“I never leave my job unfinished. You’ll have until I’m dead to do yours.”

Joker glances down to the ground floor. Four left. Akechi tosses back an energy drink and summons Loki again.
“Why can’t I help you fight?”

“Idiot. We need them to think you’re chasing me around the Palace.”

“Why?”

“Use your brain, would you? You’ve been searching all week with no luck – if you’re with me, we won’t find anything. This is the only way you can help.”

“…Ah… Once you’re done with the Shadows, it’ll come back for you…”

“…and assume you’re still away searching. That’s the only reason a selfless fool like yourself would ever leave an ally to fight a mob alone, after all – isn’t it?”

“…Brilliant.”

“Yes, I know.”

Three left. Two. “Hurry up,” Joker mutters. He leaps away again to a far corner on a higher floor. He raises his voice, allowing frustration to colour his words. “Come on! Where are you?!”

“Begone!” comes the shriek from below, accompanied by the dying yowl of the final Shadow. Joker spins immediately on his heel, sprints back and launches himself over the railing. He catches hold of the bannister on the first floor before he can hit the ground and grunts, pulling himself up and behind cover.

“Any minute…”

“How will I know when you need me to go for it?”

“When it sounds like I’m dying.”

“N-ngh…” Akechi drops to his knees, drained. Empty soda bottles litter the floor around him, all traces of the final Shadows gone. “Haah… You’re back…”

Cognitive Akechi smirks and twirls the gun around its gloved fingers as it saunters back into the hall. “Of course I am,” it says.

Akechi tries to raise his voice. “J-Joker,” he calls, but it catches in his throat. “Joker…”
Cognitive Akechi sneers. “So pathetic,” it crows. “You can’t even kill yourself without his help.”

Akechi coughs. “Joker,” he tries again.

“He’s not here,” hisses cognitive Akechi. “He’s still out looking for me. Like I exist anywhere I’m not needed – like I matter anywhere else –” It cackles in delight. “Something only a fool could believe.”

Akechi’s eyes widen before they close, and he drops his head in defeat. “Go ahead, then. Kill me,” he rasps. “You’re right. This is… how it should be…”

“Hmm.” Cognitive Akechi levels the gun again with a lazy consideration. “At least you finally understand what you’re worth.”

A gunshot rings out in the empty hall. And then another, and another.

And Akechi doesn’t fall, but raises his head slowly to watch cognitive Akechi’s mouth open in surprise, turning with red blooming in its coat to face a flash of blue fire and a whirl of red and black.

Joker lowers his mask, revealing the barely contained rage in his face. “Die,” he whispers, and Arsene descends.

(And in the aftermath, if Akechi mutters that Joker had gone a little overboard with the dramatics as he staggers to the train with his weight on Akira’s shoulder, Akira only laughs and holds him a little tighter.)

Chapter End Notes

back to talk your ear off! i had SO many notes that i’ve literally had to outsource them, so please view this post if you’re interested in viewing my other thoughts. it’s very long. (nothing there is necessary to understand the chapter, just extension.) here's the crucial stuff:

first: this may be the first akira-akechi-centric chapter, but it’s not the last. i don’t plan to leave it at this by any means, don't you worry.

next: headcanon only, but i think it could be significant that the phantom thieves never ran into cognitive akechi before the engine room. they go all over the ship, backtrack multiple times, and they’re actively looking for five individuals on a very large ship and manage to find all of them, so it’s certainly possible to find people. sure, they aren’t searching for cognitive akechi, but i still think it’s interesting that you never so much as bump into it – and also interesting that it doesn’t come after you. why wouldn’t it?
taking shido’s perception of akechi into account, it’s possible that akechi differs in his cognition to his other contacts. in contrast, akechi is a tool that literally only appears when he’s needed. you wouldn’t carry a hammer around if you didn’t need it (prolly). so returning to the question: why doesn’t cognitive akechi appear at all while you’re traversing the palace, and why does it choose the moment it does to finally appear? which single variable has changed?

akechi himself, of course. cognitive akechi appears ONLY after the REAL akechi has appeared, and the first action he takes is to point a gun at akechi. “i’ll deal with the rest of you later.” the PT are afterthoughts; akechi is the real target.

combine those thoughts, and my conclusion is this: cognitive akechi isn’t a guest on the ship. cognitive akechi doesn’t exist, except for when it’s needed to complete a task. that’s why the phantom thieves can’t find it – it’s literally not there, because it's not needed to dispatch the PT. only akechi’s presence can call cognitive akechi, and he understands that in this chapter, because after their first encounter with cognitive akechi in the engine room, he’s gained more understanding of how shido views him.

next, further clarification of akehi’s plan: since cognitive akechi is how shido perceives him, it’s crucial to have an understanding both of akechi and of shido in order to formulate how it exists. operating under the generous assumption that i possess that understanding, i’ve written akechi here as also having it. akechi predicts cognitive akechi’s activity based on a mixture of knowledge on the mask he knows he's projecting and of shido’s character with what he knows about shido to figure out exactly what shido sees when he looks at him. the result is a cold and logical person who exists only to be used; with no moral qualms, no personality or will of their own, and no real knowledge or understanding of complex emotions. the perfect attack dog. in cognitive akechi’s mind, things are black and white: any person who truly relies on others (as opposed to using them) is a weakling who would sacrifice a logical strategy for the sake of sentiment and the wellbeing of others. (real) akechi realises that this is what cognitive akechi thinks of the PT – someone can only be purely logical or purely emotional, and the phantom thieves are the latter. therefore, cognitive akechi assumes the only reason joker would abandon an ally would be to chase cognitive akechi down in an attempt to save himself and akechi. cognitive akechi would assume that joker, the emotional fool that he is (and therefore having no capacity for logical thinking) would never consider leaving an ally to fight alone as part of an actual plan, since that carries great risk to the wellbeing of the ally in question and therefore wouldn’t be worth it. so actually, cognitive akechi’s fall here is down to shido’s inability to perceive the people around him as actual people rather than as simpletons and puppets; his underestimation of akechi and his inclination to see no value in people is ultimately what kills cognitive akechi and will lead to his (probable) downfall.

finally: it’s significant that akira is the one to kill cognitive akechi in this fic, as opposed akechi himself as it is in-game. i won’t explain here because it’s too long and not strictly necessary to understand the chapter. if you’re interested, i go into it in the post because it’s one of my more significant notes for this chapter. be aware that the notes i have on this are heavily themed around suicide ideation – please take care, and do take it with a grain of salt – again, i’m no psychologist. it’s all musing.

twitter here! thank you all.
For several agonising minutes after the last awkward greetings are exchanged, the only things filling the stifling attic air are tension and the dull tapping of Ryuji’s sneaker.

The fog is shattered when Makoto lends voice to a silent and sweeping displeasure. “Akira, we have to talk about what you did.”

Akira nods.

“Don’t get us wrong,” says Ann. “I mean, it’s not like we aren’t glad that you took out cognitive Akechi, we just, um,” and she falters, and stops.

“We’re supposed to be a team,” Haru says softly, and Ann shoots her a grateful look. “You can’t just go off on your own like that.”

“And like, even if you do?” adds Ryuji. “Even if you pull rank and decide that’s what you hafta do? I mean, we’d all get it, dude. But –” he holds up his phone to read from his message bank – “you can do better than this.”


Akira has the good graces to wince slightly.

“And then it’s just radio silence!” explodes Ryuji, waving the phone at Akira. “We were texting you all night – I called like five times – I mean, come on!”

“And you didn’t even tell us what soup you wanted,” Haru says unhappily. “I brought six different
“It’s good soup,” Yusuke murmurs from behind a rapidly emptying container. Haru beams at him.

“You had to know we’d be worried,” says Ann. “Come on, Akira, you’re our leader! You’re better than this…”

“Why you would do it at all escapes me,” says Yusuke. “We’ve all of us been entering the Palace for an entire week with no success. It’s a miracle that you managed it alone, but I can’t understand why you would decide this was a good idea in the first place.”

Makoto glances at her phone. “Futaba and Morgana should be here soon,” she says. She shoots a sideways look at Akira. “Did you do this on purpose? Wait for Morgana to be out of the house so you could enter the Palace alone?” She sighs. “You have to know how irresponsible that is.”

Akira nods again, expressionless.

The others exchange glances. Akira’s face has reached a frustratingly familiar balance; a careful inscrutability that makes it impossible to figure if they’re getting through to him. Short of drugging him with a truth serum, they had all long come to the infuriating realisation that there was no way of gleaning any information from their leader that he didn’t want to disclose.

(And even the serum hadn’t been proven to generate results.)

It’s Akechi who breaks the second silence, with a voice as light as a tap of a feather to a bubble. “I’m a bit surprised at you all,” he says. “For a group that places so much emphasis on teamwork, I would have thought you’d know your leader a little better than this.” He smiles. “Do you really think he would – ‘go off on his own’ – simply for the sake of it?”

Makoto frowns. “What are you implying?”

“Oh, no, I’m not implying anything,” Akechi assures her. “I thought you could use a reminder to think a little more critically, that’s all. Tell me – what do you think would provoke him to do something like this?”

“Akechi,” Akira says quietly, and Akechi glances briefly at him before looking away as though no one had spoken.

“Think about it,” he continues. “Is this something that the wise, brave leader you all so admire would choose to do of his own volition?”

“Are you sayin’ you kidnapped him?” Ryuji snaps, taking a couple steps forward. He turns a sharp glare on Akira. “Did this asshole do something to you?”

Akira shakes his head. “Akechi, stop,” he says, but Akechi still isn’t finished.

“Kidnapped is a strong word,” he sniffs. “Perhaps he’s simply – masochistic, in what I’m sure he thinks is a productive way.”

“Gross,” comes a voice from the stairs, and everyone turns to see Futaba climbing up with Morgana at her heels. “If we’re just talking about Akira’s kinks then I’m leaving.”

“No,” Akira protests while Ryuji pretends to retch behind him.

Morgana fixes Akira with a disappointed glare. “Is this what you get up to when I’m away?” he
demands. “Go gallivanting off into Palaces with someone who tried to kill you?! I’m surprised at you, Akira.” He shakes his head. “It looks like I’m going to have to tighten my supervision.”

“Then I won’t buy you any more tuna,” says Akira, looking mutinous.

Morgana gasps. “I knew you were a bad influence on him!” he yowls at Akechi.

Ignoring the resounding hissing, Akechi says, “It’s nice to see you both. Please, sit down. We’re in the middle of a pleasant conversation.”

“I don’t think you know what words mean,” Futaba remarks, but hops across the attic and perches on Ann’s knee.

Morgana curls a bit grumpily at her feet, eyes wide and alert. “Well?” he asks them both. “Are you going to explain yourselves?”

“Gladly,” Akechi begins, but Akira cuts him off.

“That’s enough,” he says in a low voice. The crackling in his eyes is enough to make Akechi stop in his tracks, much to his own surprise. “I’m sorry. I owe you all an explanation.”

“Damn right you do,” snaps Ryuji.

“I agree,” Akechi says smoothly, and Akira breathes an almost imperceptible sigh of frustration. “Everyone here deserves a defence of why you decided to save my life again, myself most of all.”

Silence. Akira stares at Akechi, a barely tipping scale of amusement and exasperation. Akechi coughs delicate smugness into his hand.

“Akira, what does he mean?” asks Makoto.

Akira sighs, looking resigned.

“He was going into Shido’s Palace,” he says. “ Alone.”

“How?” demands Morgana. “We took his phone!”

“He took mine,” says Akira.

Morgana lashes his tail. “I knew you shouldn’t have untied him!”

“Relax,” Akechi soothes. “I would have found a way to get that phone regardless.” He smiles. “It was the knife I might have struggled with.”

“What?!”

Akira presses fingers to his temples. “Futaba,” he begins.

“Already on it!” Futaba starts tugging off her socks. Akechi hastily shuts his mouth.

“He figured cognitive Akechi was only going to show up for him,” says Akira. “He was going in alone, so I went with him. He lured it out and I killed it. I didn’t have time to call any of you.” He thinks for a moment. “Also, he fought about seventy Shadows alone as bait and I fell in the ocean three times.”

Disbelieving quiet reigns for precisely two and three eighths of a second before the attic explodes.
“For real?!” Ryuji yells.

“That was so irresponsible!” Ann shrieks.

“You should know better than that!” Haru gasps, looking horrified.

“You’re leaving out an important detail,” Akechi points out, above the clamour.

Akira casts a warning look at him – an unspoken ‘don’t you dare’, the type you might give a cat before it pushes a lamp off the table.

Akechi proceeds to push the conversational lamp off the table. “The part where I threatened to murder you if you followed me, and you insisted on coming with me anyway,” he says helpfully. He shrugs when Akira glares daggers at him. “My sole interest is uncovering the truth.”

“Akira,” says Ann. “I’m going to murder you myself.”

“That’s fair.”

“You’re grounded,” says Morgana.

“On whose authority?”

“I’m telling Sojiro,” says Futaba, “and you can’t borrow my video games anymore.”

“Please don’t do that.” Akira sighs. “I’m sorry. What else could I do?”

“Not effin’ this,” Ryuji snaps, but Yusuke looks thoughtful.

“Not that I condone this course of action,” he says, “but Akira does have a point. It sounds to me that if Akira hadn’t followed him in, Akechi could well have been killed.”

Akira nods, looking grateful. “It wasn’t a good plan,” he concedes. “I didn’t have a choice.”

“Yes, you did!” Haru bursts out, and everyone looks at her with a mixture of surprise and unease. “Akira, didn’t you think it through? If things had gone wrong, you could have gotten yourself killed too!” She glances guiltily at Akechi. “Of course I don’t want Akechi to die, and – and I’m glad it went well, but – didn’t you ever think what would happen to us if we’d lost you?”

“Thank you,” says Akechi, somewhat unnecessarily. Haru looks on the verge of tears. Ryuji moves to pat her awkwardly on the back.

“I won’t let anyone walk to their own death,” Akira says stubbornly. “Not if there’s a chance in hell I can save them.”

The group dissolves into an uncomfortable quiet again.

“Is that selfishness or selflessness?” Akechi wonders aloud.

Ryuji shoots him an ugly look and growls, “Can it, Socrates.”

Morgana sighs. “I suppose that doesn’t matter now,” he says. “We have bigger fish to fry. Tuna fish,” he adds pointedly. Akira ducks his head in defeat. “We still have time before Shido’s deadline, but we can’t afford to dawdle. We need a plan.”

“Morgana’s right,” says Makoto. “We have some big decisions to make. When and how we’re
going to send the calling card, and – and –”

“And whether or not you’re going to bring me along,” Akechi suggests. Makoto swallows, and nods.

“In the meantime, we should tie Akechi back up,” says Morgana. “No offence, Akechi, but it’s clear you pose a threat.”

“None taken,” Akechi says cheerfully. “I’d do the same in your place.”

Morgana eyes him.

“While we’re at it, maybe we should tie Akira up, too,” Futaba mutters, looking mutinous. Akira jerks back, affronted. “I mean, it’s clear you pose an – an idiot.”

“She makes a good point,” mumbles Ann.

Akira sighs and holds his hands out obediently. Futaba looks at him in disbelief. “Wow, someone’s eager,” she says. “It was a joke, Anastasia Steele. I’m pissed at you. Relax.”

Akira flushes. Ryuji makes a second retching sound. “More than I wanted to know, dude,” he says, and Akira chucks a plastic spoon at him.

“That’s not the point of this meeting,” he says.

“I sure hope not. That’s the second time Akira’s kinks have come up today and I –” Futaba begins, and Akira lobs a spoon at her, too, his face burning. “I’m just saying –”

“You stop bringing them up then!” Morgana howls, covering his ears with his paws.

“We have things to discuss,” Akira insists, still red. “Let’s move on.”

Makoto clears her throat, looking embarrassed. “I think we should bring Akechi along to fight Shido,” she says. “I – I know it’s a risky position, but I’m happy to explain my case –”

“I’m with Makoto,” says Ann. Makoto blinks in surprise, but Ann just shrugs. “I feel like it’d be weird not to bring him at this point, don’t you think?”

“I agree,” says Yusuke. “Not to say that he’s one of us, necessarily, but there are things you can’t experience together without – I suppose, feeling like you should see things through to the end. Remaining at each other’s sides.”

“Everyone deserves the chance to beat up their own crappy dad,” Futaba offers.

“Amen,” says Ryuji. He makes an abrupt motion as though about to offer Akechi a fist bump before remembering himself and trying to cover it by coughing into his fist instead.

It may have worked better if his fist hadn’t been halfway across the table already. He awkwardly retracts his arm and shoves his hand into his jacket.

“I agree,” says Haru, hastily drawing attention away from Ryuji’s suffering. “I know it’s risky, but it only feels right to have him with us. He deserves to see this through to the end. That is, if you want to come,” she says, with a slightly mortified look in Akechi’s direction. He looks surprised to be acknowledged.

“You’re giving me a say?” he asks.
“It would be rather dangerous to bring you against your will,” Yusuke points out. “Not that I think there’s much chance of you siding with Shido, but you’ve proven unpredictable.” He narrows his eyes. “Still, if you are planning on betraying us again, do remember that we’ve beaten you once before.”

“No reminder needed,” Akechi says smoothly. “I’m sure I still have the scars.”

“Well?” asks Morgana. “Do you want to come? I have to admit it would give us a pretty big tactical advantage. You are strong, after all.”


“No your leader,” Akira says, examining his nails. “Do what you want.”

“Do you want me with you?” asks Akechi. Akira’s hand stills.

“You know the answer,” he says carefully. “Goes for all of us.”

“Same reason we saved you,” says Ryuji.

“It’s why we’ve kept you up here all this time,” Ann adds.

“Dedicated our time to you,” murmurs Yusuke.

“The whole reason why we keep trying to get through to you,” Makoto says.

“Even risking our lives to keep you safe, apparently,” says Morgana, with a dirty look at Akira, who coughs. “Although that bit’s still not exactly clear to some of us.”

“All of us have reasons,” Haru says quietly, “for caring what happens to you.”

“…And what might those be?”

“Good question,” says Futaba. “Wanna come with and start finding out?”

Goro looks around the attic at their faces, all turned to him. Usually so open and expressive (vulnerable and trusting and foolish) – it’s nearly impossible to read them now.

Is this… some new language? Or have I forgotten the one I know?

“I’ll come with you,” he says, “if you’ll really have me.” The atmosphere relaxes about as much as it tenses.

“Well,” says Makoto finally. Her voice crackles as it hits the charged air. “I suppose we should attend to the calling card, then.”

Futaba starts to grin. “Oh, yeah,” she says with a sinister chuckle. “I had some ideas about that.”

TAKE YOUR HEART

“YO! What is UP, everybody?! ”

?????????????????????????????????????????????????????????????????????????????????????????
“We are the ones who you all know as the Phantom Thieves.”

“And ALL of us are ALIVE AND KICKING!”

“But the shitty guys in power, they’ve been manipulating information and trying to hide the truth!”

WHAT IS THIS? WHERE’S IT COMING FROM? I dunno! We can’t switch it out! Seems we aren’t the only ones affected, either! “SOoOoOo before we appropriate our next target, we would like to first

borrow your time!”

The recent scandals of public figures isthisforreal?heyyougottaseeth —breakdowns and mental shutdowns – these weren’t caused by unknown reasons.

One man is behind every single instance
–aretheygonnanameandshame?!theyshouldbeashamedspreadinggossiplkethisiswearkidsthesedaysgotnorespectfortheirohcmonit’stimeforsomegoodgossiparoundheresopshutupwhatdoyouthinkthisisrealheyitcouldbeiwonderwhoitis

simply to satiate his own greed.”

isthisforreal?shutthethellupiwanahear “That man was afraid his crimes would be exposed, and shifted the blame on us! He even manipulated the police for that!”

thepolice?!nowaycmonasifyoudidn’tknowthere’scorruptionrampantinthiscountryitellsyait’sgonna’tothegoddar “We only steal the hearts of criminals.

But this asshole tried to dump what HE did on us! That just shows he doesn’t care about ARE THEY STUPID?! SHUT EVERYTHING DOWN! —at all!”

“The identity of that cowardly man is
jjUBA%IUYeEf%R99OTV%n#01GQeH%x%f%M@hEhs1515kAWPJ8bn%4b7pDceq%x0TNj%E$bbe#1
d6TyPMZpnsTzJmCw%xNrk%yEbP27qj47m#OgcdLA&TLvzh
I##xybVFJdp0B&hQ51m1fgz#nswRQDnZypBi@anJ@buZ55s66&4%2#hj6&gh%Fhj2
thehellitwasgettin’good!ohbloodytypicalitjustastcotcutoutrightwhenthey’regonnarevealethisname‘monwhatki

“The man behind it all is a current cabinet member, of all things.”
whoaWHOAi can’tbelieveit!areyouseriousshe’partofthegovernmentnowayuhhwhat’ditellyouthiscountry’ssrec

“Everything this guy says

is

a

LIE!

and to prove that

–heyholySHITisthathemohmygodthat’sthemthat’sthegoddamnphantomthievesareyouseriousnowayit’sthem

– LOOK!”

“As you can see, all of us are alive and kickin’!”

“I’m SURE the people investigating us can tell if this is a lie or not.”

“The criminal himself will soon confess all the crimes that he’s committed. Please look forward to it,
everyone~!” hey c'mon at least tell us who it is, are you serious they’re not even saying

You think it’s some kinda prank? Uhh, no way. Could this be real…?
DON’T BLOCK THE ROAD PEOPLE hey what’s going on?

“We're not gonna sit back and watch some crook wreck this country just 'cos of his goddamn ego.

Ain’t that right...

Leader?”

………

“Yes.

Before that happens,

we will take this country.”

Even as the streets clamour, the cool, concealed eyes filling the screen move back; turn, slightly, to acknowledge a newcomer, another mystery to join the line-up only now, an unknown unknown.

The other figures stand by in the background, silhouettes but for their glowing masks; a wary, determined energy radiating off the screens of Tokyo. But the new mask is dark even in the spotlight, nothing more than the slightest red sheen gleaming along its pointed nose to show for its shape.

Until now, his focus hasn’t moved. The white mask nods once and fades slightly into the dark at their backs.

The black mask turns his attention. Fills the screen, the air, the gaps.

“I hope you’re ready,” the cool voice croons. Slow, deliberate. “…Masayoshi Shido.”

Whispers rise to alarm; musings and speculation, identity and motive and mission as the people clamour and authorities raise the noise to lower it as the screen surrenders attention once again but for all it’s commanded by all sides, the occupants of the city squares guard it selfishly.

At a desk high above the city, a man grips his tablet tightly enough that the screen cracks down the centre of his face, just where the point of the black mask had been moments ago.

………

It’s okay when they face him.

It’s okay when the doors swing open at long last. It’s okay when they charge down the aisles with their souls at the ready.

It’s okay when he turns the barest fraction of an inch to acknowledge them, as far as they must deserve.

“I intended to dispose of him as soon as I became prime minister,” comes the sneer, at long last,
and they all
go
tense

and it’s a little hard to tell

(what with the fire and the blood
the traces of gold and malice whipping between them with the curses and the blessings
with the air, charged with electricity and misconduct, and the bullets flying and the bullets falling
between and unto but)

they might fight just a little harder today

and maybe

it’s

for

…but it doesn’t matter in any case. because the fight is won soon as it’s begun, or it isn’t, but at the
very least it seems it ought to be –

when he looks around to find other faces in this fight, besides his, beside his,

(when he turns to a bolt headed for his face, for a moment mistakes the gray barrelling against his
side for a thundercloud until Skull knocks him aside and screams in his stead –)

(when Panther screams alongside him, rage and terror as she sends a pillar of fire back the other way
and cackles as it makes contact, eyes wild as she whips around to face the both of them on the floor
and Skull whoops and pumps a weak fist in the air for her even as she drops to her knees to heal him
–)

(when Oracle shrieks in his ear to dodge, take cover, he’s going for YOU, everyone cover Crow,
someone watch out for him, distant screams of rakukaja, sukukaja, tetrakarnGETOUTOFTHEWAY
–)

… … …

a desperate rakunda and a rasped tarukaja in the aftermath

feels himself amped to eleven, to twelve, turns to Joker in a heap in the corner, whispering with
gathered remnants of lasting strength for megidolaon now, now, NOW

we’re counting on you

realises, as he summons Robin Hood –
(for once, for never, for ever)

how could there ever have been a chance of it going any other way but theirs

[Ryuji] Hey, uh… We all make it home okay? ?

[Yusuke] Yes, I’m fine.


[Futaba] Alive!

[Futaba] Tired >:C

[Haru] We can finally relax, now that it’s over at last.


[Ann] We actually… did it.

[Ryuji] You there, Leader? ?

[Ryuji] Everything okay with Mona and Akechi? ?

Yeah. Get some rest.

We can talk more tomorrow.

[Futaba] I have a question.

No, we don’t have to meet up. Texts are fine.

[Futaba] :D


[Ryuji] Same. I’m sore in places I didn’t know existed.

[Makoto] Well, you were on fire today.

[Ryuji] Hey, thanks! !

[Makoto] No, I mean, you were on fire today. Shido’s Shadow set you on fire.

[Haru] Oh, but you were also on fire figuratively, Ryuji! !

[Ryuji] Uhh, thanks? ?

Morgana says he can’t tell you guys what to do but to go to sleep.
What’s it like being micromanaged by a cat? ?

Disillusioning. Rest up.
And good work today. I’m really proud to be your leader, okay?

Aw, shucks, dude.

The feeling is mutual.

It’s an honor to be part of your team, Akira.

We love you!

Gross.

But like, same.

<3!

I know we’re all still tired, but we have to talk about what we’re going to do with Akechi now that we’re done with Shido.

You’re really texting us right now!? It’s still like, morning! !

Yes? ?

I’m not a PERSON in the morning! !

I was wondering the same about Akechi. It shouldn’t be long before Shido confesses.

I guess we can’t keep him in the attic forever.

Hey, we’re feeding and watering him! !

I’ve actually been thinking.

Call the press!

Hey, shut up! !

This is serious! !

Is it about Akechi? ?

Yeah.

Don’t take this the wrong way. I know that guy’s effed in the head.
[Ryuji] But I don’t really want to turn him in.

[Yusuke] Really? 

[Ann] Actually, I’ve kind of been thinking the same.

[Ann] I know it’s probably the right thing to do, but…

[Haru] It still doesn’t feel right, does it? 

[Ann] Yeah…

[Makoto] It would feel sort of wrong to turn him in after all of this, even though I know that doesn’t make much sense.

[Yusuke] Would it really be kinder to conceal him? We can’t give him the help he really needs.

[Yusuke] I doubt we’ve done him much true good as it is.

[Makoto] That’s a good point.

[Futaba] Sure, but like, it’s the system that let him down in the first place! !

[Ryuji] Yeah, and not just him, either.

[Ryuji] Who knows what those shitty adults’ll do with him? You know we can’t trust them.

[Ryuji] After all that stuff about second chances, what if they just eff it all up for him again? ?

[Haru] It’s true that handing him over to the authorities wouldn’t guarantee anything. But what choice do we really have? ?

[Futaba] Yeah. They suck, but it’s not like we’d be better.

[Futaba] I dunno about you guys but I kinda yelled at him a lot.

[Ryuji] Samesies.

[Futaba] =W=

[Ann] Maybe we should wait until Shido confesses and see what happens.

[Yusuke] We may not get a choice. Shido may well implicate Akechi in his confession.

[Ryuji] Oh SHIT.

[Makoto] I hadn’t even thought about that! !

[Haru] Is Akechi going to be okay with that…? ?

I suppose I’ll have to be.

[Futaba] WHO

Sorry, Kurusu’s still asleep.
[Ryuji] That idiot let you take his phone again!? !?

It was buzzing off the table.

He seems tired.

[Ann] Oh…

[Haru] He HAS been through a lot lately.

[Yusuke] Where is Morgana? ?

Watching him.

[Futaba] Good ol' Mona.

[Futaba] Hey, stop reading our conversations, you creep! !

I’m sorry. You ARE talking about me behind my back, though.

[Futaba] Stop infringing on our right to privately invade your privacy! !


[Makoto] Are you going to be okay if Shido names you? ?

Like I said, it doesn’t look like I have a choice. Besides, facing charges for my actions was something I’d expected as part of my initial plan anyway.

[Haru] Akechi…

[Haru] We’ve all said harsh things to you.

[Futaba] (he deserved it)

(I think I did deserve it.)

[Futaba] (Akechi’s better at agreeing with me than Akira let’s keep him)

[Makoto] You deserve better than this. We’re sorry for everything we’ve put you through.

Why would you apologize to me? It’s nothing I didn’t bring on myself.

[Ryuji] I mean, you’re right, but we can still feel sorry for you.

[Ryuji] Justice is justice but that doesn’t mean it’s fair. This is all kind of shit.

[Ann] Don’t freak out over being pitied, though! !

I’m not. It’s alright.

I know you mean well.

I appreciate it.
[Makoto] Akechi…

[Makoto] I know it’s been difficult, but do you think you can understand why we saved you now? ?

[Futaba] Yeah, cos like, I’ve still got questions about it, and I HELPED.

It’s hard to say. I’m not sure it’s something that can really be understood.

[Ryuji] With you on that one.

Maybe I’m starting to.

I believe there are still things about me that are unclear to you, however.

[Yusuke] That’s a bit of an understatement.

Haha. Would you like me to explain? ?

[Ann] You mean you’re willing to!? !?

I’m not sure if I can, but I do believe I owe you the effort, at least.

It somehow makes it easier to know you can’t see my face. Even more, since this phone doesn’t belong to me. Do you mind if I try?

[Futaba] Sure, but can you also just say “dickbutt” real quick from Akira’s account so I can screenshot it? ?

Dickbutt.

[Futaba] I think we should forgive him for everything

[Yusuke] What is dickbutt? ?


I could use a lot of words to describe this past week. I suppose the most appropriate would be “formative”.

[Ryuji] You sound like an effin’ TED talk. Talk human! !

Haha, sorry. I only want to make sure I’m expressing myself properly.

You have been harsh, yes, but as I said, that wasn’t without good reason. I’m happy to concede that to you.

I’m not sure where I stand with regard to most things right now.

At the very least, I can recognize the effort you’ve put into

[monkey_wave_butt.gif]

Oops
Sorry, I think I opened a GIF keyboard?

[Futaba] Yeah, Akira’s phone is really stupid.

[Yusuke] I assume that wasn’t part of your spiel.

No, that’s correct.
I want to acknowledge the effort you’ve put in. Even if it didn’t help.

[Ann] Gee, thanks!!

Haha. I only mean I don’t know if it has done.
I really do struggle to understand you all, you know. But you’ve clearly put a lot of effort into trying to help me.

In whatever strange way, it seems you do care what happens to me. I don’t really know what to do with that. You shouldn’t care, given everything I’ve done to you.

If you were to turn me in now as you were debating, I wouldn’t hold it against you.

[Ann] Thanks for saying that…

[Ann] But do you kinda get why we feel weird about it? ?

I think so.

Harsh words notwithstanding, you’ve all shown me kindness in your own ways. I know it seems idiotic that I don’t know what to do with it.

[Yusuke] It’s not. There’s plenty about you that is idiotic, but this I can understand.

Thank you?

None of you really know me, I’m sure you’ve realized.

[Haru] Yes…

Even if I wanted to, it doesn’t feel right to accept kindness that’s been directed at… A mask, I suppose.

I feel so much less like myself the more genuine you all are.

It’s frustrating.

You all seem so sure of who you are beneath your respective masks, but when I look inside myself, beyond that, it’s as though there’s nothing.

It doesn’t bother me until someone tries to see past it and I realize I’d have nothing to show them even if I wanted to.

[Makoto] And we all did try…

That’s right.
You tried so hard. You felt sorry for me.

[Futaba] That doesn’t make you weak! !

[Futaba] You’re weak because your fashion sense sucks.

You flatter me.

[Ryuji] Are you being real with us right now? ?

That’s a black and white matter for you, isn’t it? I’m afraid it’s harder for me to say.

[Haru] Do you know who you are?

I don’t.

But will you believe me if I tell you I’m doing my best to be real with you right now?

[Yusuke] Strangely, yes.

[Makoto] You say you don’t know who you are, but you’ve been SOMEONE all these years, haven’t you?

[Makoto] Surely that just becomes you after a while, doesn’t it? If you’ve never known anything else…

This isn’t some teen drama about summer jobs. It’s unfortunately not that simple.

Allow me to pose a hypothetical. Say you had a horse costume on from the exact moment of your birth.

Theoretically, of course, since that obviously wouldn’t be possible in practice.

[Yusuke] This has taken a strange turn.

[Ryuji] Yeah, thanks for clarifying that you can’t literally slam a horse mask onto a newborn effin’ baby.

[Ann] Yusuke saying something’s strange is really some flag, huh.

If you grow up that way, and that’s all you’ve ever experienced, does that make you a horse? Does it make you some strange horse–human hybrid?

Or does the faint feeling that the skin you wear isn’t yours, even if you don’t know what’s underneath, tell you enough for you to know that it’s not you?

[Futaba] Yeah… This is a really weird metaphor but I’m on board, horseman.

You’re right, of course. This is all I’ve ever known. I don’t know precisely how long I’ve been pretending or even when I figured out that I was. All I know is that it’s there, and that this – whatever this is – isn’t myself.

As to who “myself” is, I’m afraid I draw a blank.

[Ann] Well, you might not know who you are, but the effort’s worth something, right?
[Ann] We’ll help you look! 

Thank you, but that won’t be necessary. You’ve done enough.

You’ve said repeatedly that being pitied doesn’t equate to weakness. I know that, of course.

[Makoto] Do you?

Yes, I do. It’s just not that simple for me.

Pity can be very useful, so I learned to elicit it from the people I find useful. I have no objections to it as a concept, or even to receiving it.

[Ryuji] Yeah, I have some objections to that.

Please, let’s not get bogged down with moral quandaries now.

[Futaba] I say this with the UTMOST sincerity. Your face is a moral quandary

Some of the pity you gave me was of the useful variety. Recognition of my unpleasant past and circumstances isn’t unwelcome.

But pity given to me simply by virtue of who I am is far less welcome.

[Ryuji] Can you just talk normal Japanese, dude!? !?

Oh, sorry. I tend to slip into a more formal register in writing than in speech. It’s a habit from writing reports. Are you having difficulties?

[Ryuji] Dude, I’m not an idiot! I understand just fine, it’s just pissing me off! !

There’s not much I can do about that.

[Ryuji] I’m still glad we saved you and all, but you’re the worst.

Noted.

[Haru] Can you explain what you mean, Akechi?

Certainly. Let me put it this way.

I have experienced tragedy. I don’t want to be a tragedy.

Is that a fair distinction to you?

[Ann] I think I get it, actually. Like, we can feel sorry for you because you’ve had a hard time, but you’re not some charity case, right? It’s stuff that’s happened to you, it’s not YOU.

Exactly, thank you.

[Makoto] That… actually makes a lot of sense.

Should I be offended at your surprise?

[Futaba] Full offence, you’re a basket case.
[Futaba] If you make sense it’s like, what time is it, party time

[Haru] A lot of us are the same way.

[Futaba] Basket?

[Haru] Nobody wants to be a tragedy. It can be hard to distinguish the two when you’re being offered sympathy.

[Haru] I understand that well enough myself.

Can I offer my condolences when the tragedy is my doing, or is that too fake even for me?

[Haru] …

[Ann] Hey, lay off her.

[Haru] I’m sorry.

[Yusuke] Which part are you apologizing for?

That’s an excellent question.

“Having fun?”

Goro, to his credit, doesn’t outwardly flinch. Smile in place, he glances up even as the phone continues to buzz. Akira is sat on the side of his bed, hair mussed and rubbing sleep out of his eyes. “You seemed to need the rest more than you needed your phone,” Goro replies.

“These eye bags are designer, you know.” Akira winks and holds his hand out. Goro, smirking in mild resignation, throws the phone back to him. Akira catches it smoothly. “Thanks for not waking me up.”

Goro chuckles vaguely. “I had a nice chat with your friends,” he says.

“Did you,” Akira asks flatly, and unlocks his phone to scroll up. He winces. “Dickbutt, huh,” he says.

Goro makes a noncommittal sound in his throat.

“Could be worse,” says Akira. He taps something out into the chat quickly before going to tuck the phone under the pillow – carefully, so as not to disturb the snoozing Morgana who had apparently fallen asleep on guard duty. “Had fun?”

Goro makes another noncommittal sound. “Maybe it helped,” he says.

“Good,” murmurs Akira. “I’m glad.”

Goro shakes his head. “Why?” he asks – and for all the force he puts into the word, it comes out tinny and weak, like a child’s. “Why? Please. I still don’t understand. I don’t understand why you’d – put this much of yourself into caring about me.”

Akira smiles.

“Because I like you,” he says. “There’s more to it than that, of course. But at its core...”
“But why?” Goro demands again, still unable to keep the petulance out. “That’s what I don’t understand, why do you like me? Why – how could you, and why should you, after everything –?” He shakes his head. “I’m not going to change, you know,” he says.

Akira cocks his head.

“You’ve poured a lot of time and resources into – into changing me,” says Goro. “The way I see things, rehabilitating me, making me someone worth –” he frowns – “something. But whoever I am – whoever I’m not – I’m not going to become you.”

“That’s not what we want.”

Goro looks down.

“You were right,” he says in a low voice. “For a long time I didn’t think there was a real me.”

“And now?”

Goro hesitates. “I don’t know,” he says, “but I’m starting to… at least, to get a picture. Like at least there’s something to get a picture of, even if I can’t see yet...”

“A blob in the sonar,” says Akira, and Goro swallows and nods.

“But whatever it is,” he says. “I don’t think you’re going to like the shape of it.”

“How so?”

Goro shakes his head, looking resigned. “Maybe those traits aren’t me,” he says, “but they’re part of me, and I don’t think you can just remove them. I can be cruel,” he says, with a harsh laugh, “and I can be manipulative, and I’m fake. That’ll stay, even if it turns out there is something beneath the mask.”

“We all have masks,” Akira murmurs. “It only matters you don’t become one, right?”

Goro bites his lip.

“You know,” he says. “I’m fairly well-liked among the general public.”

Akira smiles. “News to me,” he says lightly. “Never heard of you.”

Goro laughs, but it’s not difficult for something empty to deflate. “Then I’m sure it won’t be news to you that none of that counts.”

Akira doesn’t say anything, just watches him in silence.

“I’m just,” says Goro, and stops. “Just,” he says again.

“Just what?”


Silence. It’s sort of unnerving how Akira barely blinks even as the sun does through his glasses.

“You have to know that,” says Goro. “So how can you say –”
“That’s not all there is,” says Akira.

“Oh, do tell.”

Akira chews his lip. “It’s not,” he starts, “that’s not what I see. When I see you.”

“What isn’t?”

“The list,” says Akira. “It’s not just a list of parts. I don’t like you because of your parts. In more ways than one,” he adds, smirking. Goro suppresses a sigh.

“Then why do you?” he asks. “Claim to, at least.”

Akira cocks his head.

“Dunno,” he says. “Dunno what the whole is, but when I look at you, that’s what I see. And it’s not just a collection of traits.”

Goro is quiet for a moment.

“More than the sum of our parts’,” he says at last, and Akira quirks an eyebrow at him. “That’s how Niijima described your little team.”

Akira purses his lips, thinking. “I like that,” he decides.

“You said you don’t know what the whole is,” says Goro. “You don’t even know who I am.”

Akira shrugs. “Does anyone? Does it matter?”

“Of course it does,” says Goro. “How can you say you like a person if you don’t –”

“– know who that person is? Because it’s not about knowing.” Akira makes a frustrated growling sound. “It’s – about feeling. Don’t –” he warns as Goro opens his mouth, “don’t dismiss that, alright? I know it sounds dumb and cliché, but that’s just how it is. Liking is a feeling, it just is, and feelings don’t always come from facts. They just don’t.”

“That’s –”

“Foolish! I know!” Akira rakes one hand through his hair, looking mutinous. “Trust me,” he says, more quietly. “I know. But you’re not an idiot, Goro, and neither am I. You know there are things in this world that you just can’t define. There’s stuff you can’t label or pin down. Things exist even when you don’t have names for them. You heard of l’appel du vide?” he asks suddenly. Goro looks surprised.

“Of course,” he answers cautiously. “Your French is… bad.”

“Mercy. The call of the void. People use it to describe that weird feeling you get when you’re standing somewhere high and that little voice in your head tells you to jump. You get that?”

“Sometimes.”

“We don’t have a word for that feeling in Japanese,” says Akira. “I don’t think English has one, either. Maybe no language does except French. Isn’t that weird? But it’s still real. It still exists, and we know it exists, because we’ve felt it. Even if you’d never heard the phrase l’appel du vide before, you could still experience it.”
Goro exhales. “I see where you’re going with this,” he says, sounding tired. “The metaphor is laboured.”

“I don’t have a whole lot to work with,” mutters Akira. “As long as you get it. You’re right. I don’t know a thing about you. Maybe it’s not possible. Maybe there’s just not a word for you yet, in any existing language.” He stops, waits until Goro finally looks him in the eye, waits for him to say something.

Goro relents. “But I’m still real,” he says heavily.

Akira nods.

“Yeah,” he says. “And it’s still real that when I’m with you, I enjoy your company. When you’re not trying to kill me,” he adds drily, and Goro snorts. “It’s still real that I feel like you belong with us. It’s still real that I like you. And I don’t know why, any more than I know why the void can’t just let me go to voicemail. But you know what I do know?”

“I have a feeling you’re about to tell me,” Goro says wearily.

Akira smiles. “I know we know dick about shit, frankly,” he says in a soft voice. “I think the biggest idiots are the ones who think the only things that exist are the ones we can know. I think you’re stupid if you think the world is logical or that things have to make sense, or that there’s any one system of classification that can define a universe. I think you’re foolish if you can really believe that feelings aren’t real, or don’t matter, just because they don’t follow our logic. Because any idiot with a heart knows they’re real. They’re there. You can feel them. And you can’t deny it,” he says firmly, “any more than you can deny that the void can call you even if you don’t know its name. And they’re important, and they count.”

He takes a deep, deep breath. “I have no idea who you are, Goro Akechi,” he says, “and it doesn’t matter, because I like you. We’ll figure out the rest or we won’t. But the best part is, all this is so intangible, so irrational, that you just can’t disprove it.”

He falls silent, looking a little worn out. Goro stares at him with a curious little quirk to his lips.

“It’s funny,” he says. “I’m fairly sure you intended to insult me and yet somehow I feel I ought to thank you for it.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Since when are you so talkative?” asks Goro. “I’ve never heard you speak that much to anyone.”

Akira shrugs again.

“Most things just speak for themselves,” he says. “Somehow with you I feel the need to be a little more explicit.”

Pause.

Eyebrow pump. Goro rolls his eyes.

“So you like me,” he says.

“Ahuh,” says Akira.

“But you don’t have any reason for it.”
“Not that I can name,” Akira says.

Goro hesitates.

“Still,” he says. “Still, even if you can’t... list anything, you – you must have some idea. Why.”

“Why?”

“Nebulous or otherwise, whether or not you can put words to them... Tell me your feelings,” says Goro. He wrinkles his nose. “That sounds so strange.”

“Yeah, like you’re fishing for a confession,” Akira muses, looking cheekily up at Goro from under long lashes. Goro blanches. “Hey, relax.”

“I’m not,” Goro protests anyway, rather weakly.

“I know. I know what you’re asking.” Akira frowns. “Kinda hard to answer.”

“Mm,” says Goro, “but it’s fair I can’t believe you until you can, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” says Akira. He shakes his head. “I like you,” he says. “I see something in you. Maybe I see me, or the rest of us. Something else, too.”

“Potential?”

“A lot of that,” says Akira, “yeah, for all sorts of things. And – for itself.”

Goro’s eyes are almost soft. “How so?”

“I guess I see the future,” says Akira. “I guess I see – like, everything, but I can’t actually see anything.”

“Everything and nothing,” Goro echoes. “How delightfully vague... and cliché.”

Akira huffs. “You really love calling me unoriginal,” he says.

“Not as much as you apparently love being it,” Goro replies cheerfully. Akira pokes his tongue out. “Are you saying you see a future... with me?”

“Are you propo–”

“I’m not proposing.”

“Aw,” says Akira. “And... Yes and no?” He shakes his head again, looking frustrated. “It’s not – I mean, I do, but it’s not about... me being with you. It’s not about me, it’s just...” He sighs. “I don’t know. Is that enough?”

“I don’t know,” says Goro. “I don’t know what I’m looking for.”

“Join the club.” Akira flops backwards on his mattress again and stares at the ceiling. “I like you,” he says, and neither he nor Goro says anything for a long while.

“You said you could see the future,” Goro says at last. Akira nods. “You said – but how can you be sure? You can’t.”

Akira makes a questioning noise.
“I told you,” says Goro. “You might not like the shape of me. At the end of all this, the real me might be someone you can’t like. Even a soft-hearted fool like you has to have limits.”

“It doesn’t matter,” says Akira.

“It does,” Goro insists. “It *does*. How can I trust you to accept me when you don’t know what you’re getting into? You’re signing a contract without reading the fine print.”

Akira snorts. “I never read the fine print.”

“Yes, and that’s going to get you killed someday.”

“You *already* tried to kill me,” Akira points out. “And I’m still here. There isn’t much worse you could show me to make me leave.”

Goro frowns. “See, this is what I don’t understand. I shot you in the face.”

“Hurt my feelings,” Akira offers.

“You shouldn’t still –”

“Enough,” Akira sighs. “I get it, I shouldn’t still like you. Maybe I shouldn’t. Will you ease up if I tell you I’m just an idiot and that’s all it is?”

“I already knew that, so no.”

Akira shrugs hopelessly. “You’d think the one person I shouldn’t befriend is my would-be murderer, but failed step one, I guess. I’m here. I care about you. If nothing else, it proves I don’t scare easy.” He reaches over and ruffles the sleeping Morgana behind the ears. It’s a miracle he hasn’t woken up through all this, as though this conversation were being orchestrated by some grand behind-the-scenes puppet master to tie the loose-flying marionette strings, and he simply had no place in it.

Goro looks pained. “You know,” he says quietly. “You’re here trying to prove to me that you like me –”

“At your request.”

“At my request,” Goro concedes. “But I don’t even want that. I don’t like promises. It means making assumptions about circumstances we aren’t in yet.”


“Akira,” says Goro.

“At this moment, I have every intention of staying with you.” Akira shrugs. “No certainty, no future. But the present counts for more than you think. Life will change, Goro, and I won’t promise you tomorrow. But I can promise you right now.” He hesitates a moment before getting up and rummaging around in his desk.

Goro leans over. “Are you picking a lock to your own things?”

“Threw away the key to make it harder for thieves,” Akira says, and extracts a familiar object from a locked box.
Goro reels back as Akira straightens up and tosses him his phone. “You –”

Akira smiles.

“This could prove a mistake in five minutes,” he says, and raises his own phone to Goro like a toast. “So here’s to right now.”

“My election is the result of every citizen’s aid. Your support warms my heart! That is why... That is exactly why... I cannot forgive myself.”

Dare to breathe.

“The reason President Okumura passed away is... I am the one who killed him.”

Clench your fists.

“I also manipulated the information that the Phantom Thieves were behind the series of incidents. The one who controlled the hearts of others and gave rise to the countless victims... is myself.”

Gritted teeth.

“It was all for my own promotion... for my own selfish gain. I’ve even used people’s lives as stepping stones in order to claim this country as my own ship.”

Whitened wrists.

“I am a true criminal that can be tried for any crime, and it still wouldn’t be enough! I will confess everything! Please, I beg everyone to pass judgment on me...”

Let it go.

“And that’s not all...”

Let it go.

“I’m sorry...”

Let it go...

“To my son. Are you out there? I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

(Shido had a son?) (Hey, who is it?) (Why’s he sorry? What’s he sorry for?)

“To everyone. Everyone who... It was me. It was all me. Nobody else. I’m sorry.”

Let it...

“If I could atone for all I’ve done with my life, I request that I be judged at once...”

... ... ...
if you follow me on twitter you will have seen me complaining about the formatting and hopefully now you see why

notespam:

the key takeaway from this chapter is akira's rant. akira is really good at the power of implication, especially because people automatically just sort of… project whatever they want to hear or see onto him, so he usually just doesn’t have to say that much. it’s different with goro. every intricacy has to be explained, every little hole has to be patched because goro overthinks and tears things apart and he’s also one of the only people who’s just… not satisfied with that explanation of why you like people. let's get real for a sec.

think about your friends. maybe this is just me, i don’t know. i could give you a list of reasons why i like any one of them. they’re kind, they’re funny, they good at school, they have good taste in music, they dress well – all true, all good, and does any of it capture the feeling of happiness i get when i’m with them? does any of it explain the weird swelling in my chest I get when I see them happy? there aren’t words for that sensation; at least, none that could categorically list why it exists. it just does. it’s astronomically unsatisfying and infinitely less so once you accept it.

i don’t know about you, but i don't usually think about it. i kind of think maybe people just don’t. but i reckon goro does now, because he’s emotionally stunted and never had friends or cared about anyone really, truly, nothing he couldn’t explain or list. and if it started happening to him, or other people started feeling it for him in a way he couldn’t ignore, he’d have questions. he’d want things explained. he’d have to come to terms with the fact that some things just don’t have explanations. at the end of the day, the love you have for your friends is something intangible, unempirical, irrational – and there are a million reasons why they’re wonderful and a million reasons why you stay, but none of those individual reasons added together could possibly fill the space they hold in your heart no matter how many of them there are. in many ways, that's what this fic is about. it takes time for goro to come to terms with the idea that some things exist but can't be separated into individual elements that together make the complete whole. i think friendship is one of those things. some things are best not overthought, unfortunately for goro.

other:

- my guy akira is goin' through some stuff. this is goro's story, so i unfortunately can't focus on akira as much, but this is really taking its toll on him which is why his behaviour is different (maybe more unfair) to usual - that's why he sends them such a short text and then passes the hell out.
- yusuke ate all the soup.
- haru's pov wrt akira's recklessness is basically, it could have gone so badly. they could BOTH have died. and in that case, akechi would have died either way. not that his life isn’t worth it, but it’s NOT, and at the very least, couldn’t akira have just saved himself considering how much they need him? this pov takes a really specific mixture of empathy and coldness that haru is perfect for. goro gets it perfectly and actually approves, which kinda hurts haru more because she actually does want him to live and
doesn’t want to be harsh or cold, she just has a calculating side that she doesn’t really want and can’t help.

- important that goro says shido's name in this version of the calling card - if you'll recall, shido told him never to use it in public. (also, he's using a voice modulator, but more to the point he's not donning his public persona with his usual pleasant voice, so people wouldn't recognise him anyway - it's amazing the range a voice has, really.)
- ryuji's point about justice: basically what's objectively "just" isn't necessarily pleasant. just because it's what he deserves doesn't mean it feels fair to him given goro's life has never really been fair at all.
- there are at least three references to high school musical 2 in this chapter.

i've absolutely missed something here but it's 2:30am and i'm going to be seeing html in my nightmares, so i'll edit tomorrow if i need to! thanks for your support as always - hit me on twitter or tumblr to support me or say hi! (my twitter handle changed!)
Chapter Summary

if he's not on the road to redemption, the tarmac, at the very least, is in sight.

Chapter Notes

some announcements:

- I've created a tumblr solely for persona! It's a space for my meta first and foremost, but all my persona related reblogs will go there, too! I made it because a surprising amount of you seemed interested in reading my longform thoughts (which I mentioned briefly in previous notes). There's no meta up there right now, but when I finally get the time to organise it, that's where it'll go, so if that's something you're interested in then you can follow me @corviids.
- My twitter @ changed again... sorry for the turbulence. :) I'm @corviid now and trying to keep it constant!
- I'm working on a spotify playlist for this fic and had wanted to share it with the publication of this chapter, but it's not done yet!! I'll keep you posted.

I'm so nervous about posting this one because I've really loved writing it and I'm anxious it's not as good as I want it to be, but hey! It's gotta go up some time and I shouldn't let my personal standards become a weakness instead of a strength. I hope you guys enjoy it, because I'm pretty fond of this chapter. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Akechi! Akechi, why have you called this press conference today?”

“Where have you been lately, Akechi? We haven’t heard from you! Are you sick?!”

“Detective Akechi! Do you have any comments on Masayoshi Shido’s recent confession?! Did you see it coming?!”

Goro holds up a hand in faux alarm and lets out his signature self-deprecating chuckle. “Please, I’m afraid you’ll have to let me get a word in edgewise if I’m going to answer your questions,” he says playfully, to scattered titters.

He sobers quickly as he takes his seat. “I’m afraid I have rather a lot to get through today,” he says, “so you’ll have to forgive me if I can’t get to everyone, okay? Even I’m not perfect – far from it, really.”

More titters, some warmly disbelieving. He smiles indulgently, but his eyes don’t lose their seriousness.

“I know you’re all curious as to why I’ve called you here today,” he says in a voice so soft he’s
almost crooning. The room leans forward, surreptitiously, unconsciously, already clinging to his words as though they’re coated in static. “It would probably be best if I began with what’s most important and worked my way backwards, don’t you think?”

He pauses again, deliberate, letting the speculative murmurs build, the tension layer. In the corner of the room, Sae Niijima raises a hand to conceal a delicate cough that doesn’t come; instead, she curls her lip in reluctant approval. Whatever else – he certainly hasn’t lost his touch, plays the room with gentle fingers, strums his vocal cords with subtle expertise.

Goro clears his throat, quite unnecessarily – his voice is still worn velvet and likely will be until it turns to ash. Sae presses her mouth into a thin line as Goro opens his again, the smile still playing on his lips like a record yet to break.

There’s sweetener on his tongue when he says, “I suppose I should start by informing you all that I am Masayoshi Shido’s son,” and Sae watches him as he closes his eyes to the erupting storm.

Two days after the confession…

Goro closes his eyes.

It’s an old habit, knowing what to shut down; when the noise felt almost cyclonic it was far easier to let it whistle past and let it sink in – easier, at least, than trying to keep his sights on the wind.

Ever a quick learner, he’d picked up early on that one of the most valuable skills he could possess was the mastery of silence, surfing the ebb and flow of conversation, knowing when his voice was unwanted.

No – that wasn’t right. Being unwanted required some degree of attention, malice required passion. Unneeded, perhaps, dismissed was more appropriate; allowed to buzz into the white noise as his voice was irritably flicked aside like a stray mosquito.

It somehow hurt more at the worst of times. At the best, it was highly convenient.

“Isn’t there anything we can do?”

“Sis said that the assembly for a case may be possible if the general public wants Shido accountable... But even that chance has been destroyed with the manipulation of the mass media.”

“Everyone's being tricked so easily! Why the hell did we risk our lives them!?"

“If Shido isn't judged by the law, everything we've done will be treated as if it never happened.”

“Moving the entire country however they wish by controlling people's cognition... This is no different than being inside a Palace...”

The words wash over him like always, when he finally slows to the tide. This conversation is not for him, not really; not when he’s not a Phantom Thief like the rest of them.

Certainly it’s applicable. He’s liable as they are – more so, even – but this is a team meeting and he’s more of a guest at this table of thieves than the boss of their café hideout. The roasting coffee wafts toward him and he takes note of it as he does the leather beneath his fingers, the palpable spice
he can almost taste in the air, the lilting conversation rising, falling, carrying him with it, and he lets it.

It’s easy, shockingly easy to absorb information when none is expected in return. He takes advantage of their fretting as they muse, of the clamour, to allow himself to fade into the sets so he might later rise to the camera. Shelve one’s pride for later reference, and being disregarded became a strength. Being underestimated became an opportunity. It was the expectations that came with success which wrought pressure – but then it was almost worth it for the chance to preen. To breathe at long last.

“Akechi?”

And the moment passes.

“Yes,” he says, and opens his eyes. The lights bring with them a pleasant haze; a dusky glow around the faces turned to attention.

“Are you alright?” Haru asks him, and he blinks slowly at her, easing himself back into the flow.

“I’m fine,” he answers, in his own time. “I’m sorry. Did I seem ill?”

“Your eyes were closed,” says Ann.

“I was thinking.”

Ryuji snorts. “You ever stop thinking, man?”

“I’m afraid not,” Goro replies. “It gets rather tiring sometimes.”

“Did you at least come up with something?” asks Yusuke.


The team perks up.

“Nothing useful at present,” Goro adds, and they wilt again.

“Lead with that next time,” Morgana grumbles. Goro offers him an unapologetic smile.

Makoto clears her throat. When Goro glances at her, she’s setting her phone back down on the table. “Sis can’t make it today,” she says gravely, like by ‘sis’ she might have meant ‘salvation’, and maybe she does. “It’s… too crazy over there right now. She’s been telling me…” She falls silent.

“What did she want to say?” Ann prompts her.

Makoto picks her phone back up to scroll through the message bank. “Like I already said, the case was denied. Sis… Sis is worried that it’s not going to end here.”

“What do you mean?” asks Yusuke.

Makoto closes her eyes. “There’s a possibility that crimes using the Metaverse will advance onto a national scale.”

Goro tries not to smile as eight alarmed faces turn to him. “There wasn’t a whole squad of hitmen if that’s what you’re worried about. It was only me,” he says lightly. “But that won’t last long. The research progressed quite well, last I heard of it. I was the only one who possessed the power
naturally, as far as I know – which, really, might not have been as far as I’d thought – but it’s not impossible to implant. There have been stories of it working before… albeit, with significant consequences.”

“What kinds of consequences?” asks Sojiro warily. Goro turns to him in mild surprise. The boss hasn’t addressed him directly in quite some time – and fair enough, from the way his eyes keep flickering over to his daughter, the daughter of Goro’s own first victim.

Goro shrugs at the question.

“I don’t have the details,” he says smoothly, “nor do I really want them. Some things are best left to the imagination, don’t you think? The end result of artificially instilling a power of the heart and mind into one who hasn’t come to it themselves… I can’t imagine it’s pretty.” Only snippets had reached his ears: experiments long passed and shut down by some branch of a multinational trading company. He thumbs at the empty holster at his waist and winces against his will.

Sojiro looks discomforted. “I see,” he says, blatantly not seeing. Goro lets it go.

“There’s more,” Makoto says. “Sis says we’re in danger because we know the truth.” Her eyes flick to the café door, though the way she flinches at herself after suggests she’d wanted not to. “It wouldn’t even be odd if they were to charge in right now.”

“This makes no effin’ sense,” Ryuji growls.

Makoto says, “She wants to ask for our help one last time,” and the stunned quiet roars in Goro’s ears.

“So,” Ann stutters after a long moment. “What… are we gonna do? Should we change the hearts of all Shido’s followers…?”

Makoto sighs. “Even if Futaba were to research all of them, it’d take time.”

“There’s too little information,” Futaba fumes, but her eyes are downcast and she shrinks into herself as though ashamed of how forlorn she’s been forced to feel.

Yusuke’s face is pained when he says, “We can only target individuals… Are we no match against the national power?”

…anything we can do? …if the general public wants… …tricked so easily! If Shido isn’t judged by the law…

Learn to master silence, because absence is as powerful, more powerful than presence, it’s about time, it’s always about time, and when you speak into the quiet, when you speak into the wait, the weight of it is unimaginable –

Goro says, “What if we had a bombshell we could control?” and curious eyes aren’t bright as hopeful ones but pinpricks are beacons in dark as well as spotlights.

Akira hasn’t spoken yet all evening, but his eyes are the sharpest to pierce him now – it’s unfair to call the question in his gaze silent, and impossible, impossible as it would be not to hear the metallic threat of a drawing blade.

“A press conference,” Goro says softly. “I may no longer be a part of Shido’s entourage, but I still have some clout. And besides, that may just give us the advantage we need. A piece unaccounted for in a larger game of strategy, if you understand my meaning.”
“Akechi,” Yusuke says. “What are you suggesting?”

Goro gives the most delicate of noncommittal gestures.

“We are the underdogs here, you realise,” he says. “But it would be a waste not to utilise the few resources we do have. I believe you have a PR manager of… sorts. A hacker, more capable than any they have at their disposal and with their information at ours – I assume you know how they manipulated your little Phansite,” he says to Futaba, who swallows once and nods.

“Akechi,” says Morgana, a warning in his voice.

“And, if you’ll forgive my self-importance,” Goro continues, side-stepping it, “a celebrity detective who’s been missing for a number of weeks now. The disappearance has been hushed, I’m quite sure. A reappearance is… much more difficult to silence.”

Ann shakes her head, looking distressed. “What are you saying?”

“I’m only posing a question,” Goro says. “What do you suppose would happen if, say, the Prime Minister of Japan had confessed to a number of crimes and implied the existence of an illegitimate son… only for said son to appear on national television to confirm, confess, and controversy? For said son to be, in fact, a well-known figure in his own right, working within the justice system? With his own respectable public following, forgive again my lack of humility, whose disappearance had been hushed by said Prime Minister’s own people?” He shrugs, delicately again. “There’s no guarantee. Only my belief, and well-founded in my not-so-humble opinion, that it would be much more difficult to silence the opinion of the public with all factors truly considered.”

Morgana says in a hushed voice, “You’re offering to turn yourself in.”

Goro smiles. “Turn myself in? he asks, dancing on eggshells, on spider-webs, on frosted bubbles. “That doesn’t quite do justice to the ceremony and parade I’ll attend to my confession, I think.”

Ryuji looks like he’s struggling to process the conversation. “You,” he starts, and cuts himself off with his own incredulous stare. “Dude. You realise what you’re saying.”

“Certainly. Some of us do think before we speak, you know.”

“The public backlash will be unbelievable,” Makoto whispers. “You’ll be ruined. And – even Sis won’t be able to save you from –”

“The justice system isn’t something I need to be saved from,” Goro says loftily. “Corruption is rampant, of course, and I’d know it well enough myself – although it is a little strange to call myself rampant,” and he allows himself a grin as the others glare at him. “I simply think it’s time to consider our priorities. Will you allow this country to fall to Shido’s people so you can shield his son from the courts?”

“You’ll go to jail, or worse,” Makoto protests, but she’s drowned out by Ryuji shooting to his feet at the same time and snapping, “Stop calling yourself his son.”

Goro offers him a demure smile. “I am his son,” he points out.

“I know that,” Ryuji spits, “but that ain’t all you are and you fucking know it.”

Everyone quiets at that. The heat in Ryuji’s eyes sinks to his cheeks and he slinks back down to his seat, drawing into himself a little.
“I always forget you can actually say it,” Futaba murmurs, and Ryuji shoots her a look that’s half challenge and half apology.

“I can handle the backlash,” Goro says after a minute. “Jail, too. Anything’s fine.”

“It’s easy to say that,” Haru murmurs. “But there’s no telling how – how much it could destroy you, Akechi. It could be more than anyone could come back from.”

“Than any celebrity could,” Goro corrects. “As a person, though, it’s… it’s the better alternative.”

“To what?” asks Morgana.

“Whatever would have happened if I’d really died in there,” Goro says, and the room falls silent again.

Eyes wide open to a silence he commands. He smiles around at them.

“Don’t worry about me,” he says softly. “This is your justice, is it not? Everyone gets what they deserves.”

Ryuji shakes his head. When he tries his voice again it’s trembling. “This isn’t what you deserve, Akechi.”

“Don’t I deserve worse?” Goro teases.

“Justice isn’t all about retribution,” Haru says. “It’s finding balance. And knowing when you need… mercy.”

“The rule of law,” Makoto muses. “Only punish those who have wronged under the law and no one else.”

“I do believe I’ve fulfilled that particular requirement.”

“But how far does it go?” asks Yusuke. “If someone’s truly seen through the fog and wishes to repent… Is it justice to go through the motions anyway? To punish one who already feels the weight of his sins on his back?”

“It’s all so much more complicated than just… just crime and punishment.” Ann’s voice is barely a whisper and it seems to take all she has to force her head up, her eyes to his. “You were… That comes from you.”

Futaba’s face is entirely unreadable when she says, “Well, I think you deserve any punishment the courts give you,” and Goro gives her a curious, almost grateful look, but she’s not done. “But the rest of it could really… ruin your life. And I don’t… want that.”

Goro blinks. “You don’t? I thought you said –”

“I know I said,” Futaba snaps, ducking under the seat back. The top of her head bobs as she shrugs, away from their eyes. “It’s just dumb, is all. It won’t change anything, so what’s the point…?”

“You seemed intent on letting me get my just desserts,” says Goro. He glances around at them again. “Many of you did, in fact.”

“Yeah,” says Ryuji. “Cos you’re an asshole. It’s just harder to want someone to seriously suffer when you’re not really mad at ‘em anymore. We’re still mad,” he adds hurriedly. “Not like we’re
jumpin’ to hold hands around the campfire and forget everythin’ you did.”

“Of course not.”

“Without the guidance of blind rage…” Yusuke murmurs. “It’s difficult to find that vindictive place again when we’re following new insights.”

“This is why you shouldn’t befriend your enemies,” Morgana mutters. “Where would we be if we started sympathising with them?”

“Hopefully somewhere better,” Akira says. It’s the first time he’s spoken today. The hush that falls on his words like a heavy curtain onstage makes Goro reflect privately that he’s not the only one present who knows the value of silence.

“It’s never a bad idea to slip yourself into someone else’s shoes,” he says lightly, “even if you don’t like that they fit.” Akira shoots him that same sharp stare and offers him a tight little nod that could shatter bricks.

Behind the counter, Sojiro huffs a sigh. “So that’s it?” he asks. “You’re turning yourself in, just like that?”

“Of course not,” Goro assures, letting affront colour his voice. “It’ll be much more work than that. A simple confession won’t suffice at this junction. It’ll be a question of impact. How high I’ll need to fall from if we’re going to break ground.” He directs his attention to Akira again. “Your team certainly has no small penchant for dramatics. I’m sure it won’t be an issue.”

“It could be your team too,” Ann offers in a small voice. Goro turns his ever-curious eyes on her. “I mean… you might as well be one of us, after all this.”

Goro’s lips part slightly – not so much in surprise as warm, quiet wonder. Then he smiles, for once, without purpose. Eyes that glint like gemstones, crackle like contained wildfire, above all remain perfectly still and clear as a rippling mirror – for once warm, reveal something within.

“Thank you,” he says gently. “But I’m not.”

“Goro,” Haru says in a voice like a torn tissue paper heart.

“It’s quite alright,” he assures her, still in his same gentle tones. “More than alright. I hope you see. I’m not one of you.” He looks at Akira. Allows a plea to join the hearth in his gaze, and Akira meets it, sits before it.

“But you could have been,” he says like an exhale to Goro’s breath.

“It makes all the difference,” Goro says softly. “Thank you for letting me share in your potential. It means something I couldn’t know.”

Makoto looks pained when she says, “I wish things could have turned out differently, Goro.”

“So do I,” says Goro. “But we play the cards we’re dealt.”

“You deserve better,” Yusuke says, “than this twisted life.” And the others nod, the first thing they’ve been certain of since he’d appeared in their midst.

Goro pauses, slightly overcome. “Perhaps,” he says, and if his voice hitches they all overlook it. “Thank you for saying so. But if it’s all the same to you, I’d like to see this life through to the end
first.”

Ryuji reels back. “You’re not –”

“Oh, no,” Goro says hastily. “No, nothing of the sort. I don’t plan to waste this time you’ve given me. I only mean – I’ve made the choices I have and I need to live with them. Take the train to the end of the tracks, if you will, before I can think about boarding another.”

“And,” Ann begins tentatively, “you will, won’t you? Board another one?”

Goro smiles at her. “Like I said, I don’t plan to waste this time,” he says. “It won’t be easy to start fresh, after all of it, but it’s the hardest quests that yield the best spoils, or so I’ve been told,” and a squeaking sound comes from Futaba’s booth.

Morgana lashes his tail. “I guess we’d better start planning this big reveal,” he says. “Hey, Akira, you should probably get in touch with Mishima and some of the others. I have a feeling we’ll need their help to pull this off.”

“Do you really think this is gonna work?” Ann asks.

“I have no idea,” Goro answers. “Either way, we might as well try. I’m sure it won’t hurt your cause.”

“It will hurt you,” Yusuke mutters.

“I’m not averse to making sacrifices,” Goro says. He hesitates. “Thank you.”

“For what?” Yusuke asks, baffled.

Goro shrugs. “Thank you,” he says again. “All of you. For everything. I hope… I won’t let you down.”

“We’re here today with a senior member of parliament! So, what are your thoughts on Prime Minister Shido’s confession?”

“Well now, I don’t think it’s right to call it a confession. Prime Minister Shido has not been in the best health as of late, and his recent words were nothing more than a reflection of that. Prime Minister Shido’s only interest is in the continued prosperity of this country, and we have no reason to shake our faith in him. We can only hope he recovers soon.”

With Akira back at school, Goro finds himself largely unsupervised for the next day. It’s strange they trust him, but stranger still that he can’t seem to find it in his heart to scorn them for it.

In any case, he’s not quite been left alone, and he’s been trying for the better part of thirty-seven minutes now to find the courage to walk downstairs and use the bathroom without engaging the boss.
Boss’s back is turned when Goro shuffles down the stairs and tries to slip unnoticed into the bathroom, but before he can lock himself in, a sharp voice jams the door.

“Oi. You trying something over there?”

Goro slowly steps back out.

“Trying to relieve myself in peace,” he says.

Sojiro snorts.

“Don’t you be smart with me,” he mutters. “Like you got a right to that mouth of yours.”

“I’m sorry,” says Goro. “May I use the bathroom?”

Sojiro sniffs. “Whatever. Soon as you’re done you come sit at the bar, alright?”

“Why?” asks Goro, baffled.

“Because I said so,” Sojiro grumbles, “and it’s about time you started answering to a grown-up around here.”

“I seem to remember my answering to a grown-up too much being what caused all this,” Goro says.

“Just go pee, kid, Christ.”

Goro closes the bathroom door.

A few minutes later, he finds himself seated at his usual place at the Leblanc counter, legs neatly folded like nothing’s changed.

Sojiro eyes him. “You wash your hands?”

“Of course,” Goro says, offended. “What do you take me for?”

Sojiro rolls his eyes. “Of course,” he mutters. “That’s where you draw the line.”

“I always made sure to wash my hands after shooting someone, too.” He reflects ruefully that Akira’s bad jokes and bad timing are apparently starting to rub off on him.

Sojiro seems to have picked up on it too, if the grumpiness with which he plonks down the coffee cup is anything to go by. “Just drink your damn coffee,” he grunts.

Goro looks startled. “I don’t have any money on me,” he tries.

“Yeah, whatever, it’s on the house.” Sojiro slouches back over to the sink and starts scrubbing at cups with more venom than the porcelain warrants.

Struggling to recalibrate, Goro says, “Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?” Sojiro shoots back. “It’s a café, isn’t it? We serve coffee.”

“To me?” Goro asks. “To your lover’s murderer?”

“Wakaba wasn’t my –” Sojiro takes a deep breath. “You always been this annoying, or is it just hindsight that gives you these goddamn devil horns?”
Goro takes a demure sip of his coffee.

The little café is quiet as it always is: the tinny commentary of the TV he hasn’t graced in weeks the only ambience, no other customers to support or disturb the establishment. Any moment now he might make some idle comment on the newscasters’ chat, Sojiro might retort back that he wasn’t listening before muttering some surprisingly insightful comment under his breath. And Goro might laugh, and Sojiro might shoot him that dubious little half-smile that somehow felt more gratifying and yet entirely distinct from any praise he could receive from his superiors. Somehow safe, warm in a markedly different way to the stoked and carefully controlled flames that came with Shido’s approval.

And… Akira might come home at any moment. And Goro might excuse himself mere minutes after, unsure if the boy’s presence chases him from his refuge or if there was simply no reason to stay when there was nothing more to wait for.

Even this small fantasy rests on falsity, he reflects now. Even then, he’d wander home to his lonely apartment in the early evening; not wondering, not even thinking, but with some dim and unconscious awareness that it all could have been so different and that he might have liked it if it had been.

“He didn’t name you in his confession,” Sojiro says when Goro’s cup is nearly empty, and Goro almost cuts himself on the shattered quiet. “Shido, I mean.”

“No, he didn’t,” Goro answers.

Sojiro makes a quiet noise of acknowledgement. “Guess even he figured it wasn’t fair to end your life over this.” He tops off Goro’s cup and moves back to the sink to start on the cooking utensils.

Goro says, “Even he?” and Sojiro doesn’t answer.

“You know,” he says, his back to Goro, “this is your chance to get out of all of it. If you don’t follow through with this little plot of yours. You could have a life.”

…What?

“And,” Goro says slowly, still desperately trying to fit this conversation into anything he knows, trying to see past Sojiro’s perpetually unreadable scowl and figure out what he’s thinking. “And you… would be alright with that?”

Sojiro makes a dismissive noise. “Well, it’s not really up to me, is it?”

“Isn’t it?” Goro asks, mystified. “Is this not personal for you?”

Sojiro finally turns to face him. “Isn’t that why it’s not my business?” he says, sounding annoyed. “There’s too much to be considered with this, and far as I see it, Shido’s the one at fault. Don’t get me wrong, you’ve made just about the worst decisions any kid could, but you aren’t mine to decide for. And I –” He stops.

“You what?” Goro asks quietly.

Sojiro hesitates. “Look,” he says. “When I think of Wakaba’s killer, all I want is for them to suffer as much as Futaba did.”

Goro nods.
“When I look at you,” Sojiro says, “I see Futaba.”

The saucer on the counter clatters as Goro flinches so badly he chokes on his coffee. Sojiro shakes his head and says, “Don’t you start breaking my things now, too. You’ve got enough to answer for as it is,” but reaches over to thump his back all the same.

“She said that too,” Goro coughs. “She said I – reminded her of her.”

Sojiro looks mutinous. “Well, I can’t say I’m happy to hear that,” he mutters, “but I said it myself, and she’s not wrong. Look,” he says, and Goro tries to stop hacking up his lungs long enough to look at him. “I’m not smart enough to deal with anything this complicated. But I do know a thing or two. Life dealt you a bad hand. But if you’re looking to repent, you’d probably be a hell of a lot more useful working at it out in the world – in this place, if you want – than rotting away in some cell. So I’m just asking. You sure this is what you want to do?”

It takes another moment for Goro to process this. “You’re offering me a job?” he finally asks in a small voice.

Sojiro rolls his eyes. “Only if you can do the job,” he warns. “You mess up a single cup and you’re outta here, justice or no justice.”

Goro manages a smile. “I’m grateful for that,” he says. “Thank you, Boss.”

“You picked up on that too, huh?” Sojiro says, the slightest tinge of pride to his voice.

“But I can’t,” Goro says. The regret colouring his voice is enough to raise Sojiro’s eyebrows. “I… I know I… And I don’t want...” He hesitates. “This is the right thing to do, I believe,” he says. “No matter the result, if I could help to... Just once in my life, I could be guided by a moral compass instead of a… treasure map.”

Sojiro sniffs.

“See, I wanna think there’s hope for you,” he says, and turns back to shuffle some bean jars on the bean jar shelf. Goro privately feels a bit of relief – he doesn’t think he could have memorised them all if he had been hired.

“Was that a test?” he asks.

Sojiro grunts. “Sure,” he says, still shuffling beans. “And you listen here, alright? This doesn’t change anything. Don’t think I’ve forgiven you for anything.”

“Of course not,” Goro says.

“But geez,” Sojiro says, and hesitates. “You’re just a kid, you know…? You’re younger than Futaba is now when you...”

Goro, unable to figure out what demands to be heard, doesn’t say anything.

Sojiro shakes his head. “You just get that bastard Shido, now,” he says, “you hear me?”

When Sojiro turns once more to look at him, Goro can finally see something in his face. Lined with age but more with steel; steel down to the hard, grim smile that fills him with the same inexplicable strength that those little glimpses of approval always had in the past.

“Of course,” Goro says. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”
“To our senior correspondent now, responding to allegations of Prime Minister Shido having an illegitimate son. What are your thoughts?”

“I think it’s nonsense, frankly. We’ve heard nothing before now of any children our Prime Minister has, and it seems impossible something like that could be hushed so completely.”

“I see! And what of the implications of his statement? Some consider it to mean he has been coercing members of his team into unsavoury actions!”

“Nonsense again. We have no reason to doubt Prime Minister Shido. Conspiracy theories and lies are the last thing we need in these troubled times. What we should be focusing on is wishing him a speedy recovery, so he can guide our fine country into the future.

“Oh, Prosecutor Niijima. We’re glad you’re here,” says Morgana as Sae steps over the threshold in the early evening. “We’ve put a lot of preparations in place already. All we really need now is to be sure that the case progresses the way we want it to.”

Sae squints at him. “He’s talking to me, isn’t he?” she mutters. “I can’t get used to that.”

“I wish we could understand him,” Sojiro grumbles. “What’s he saying? Is he bitching about me again?”

“I never did!” Morgana yowls.

“He says your goatee looks funny,” Futaba translates.

Sojiro shoots Morgana a hurt look while Morgana screeches in despair.

“Well, never mind,” Sae says hastily. “The case should go smoothly. I won’t be prosecuting it, unfortunately, but that’s not a surprise. Even if things weren’t the way they are, I likely wouldn’t be anyway. I worked with Akechi too often to convince them of my objectivity.”

“Who will be prosecuting?” Yusuke asks.

“A lower-ranking prosecutor, most likely,” Sae answers. “I presume the proxy SIU director will be doing his best to avoid any and all media attention. A high-ranking prosecutor would give the impression that this is a high-profile case.” She smiles. “Luckily, all the lower prosecutors answer to me. The proxy director can take my cases, but he can’t stop me from doing my job.”

“So what kind of case will you be building?” Ann presses.

“For starters, Akechi’s still a minor,” Sae says. “More importantly, he was even younger when all this began. Of course, it’s not in my job description to help any criminal escape liability for their actions, but… Well, I wouldn’t be doing my job properly if I didn’t account for any and all mitigating factors,” she says haughtily.
Makoto gives her sister a happy look and says, “We’ll leave the details to you, then. Just make it as controversial as possible.”

“That shouldn’t be difficult,” Sae says. She curls her lip. “To be honest, there are so many things to be considered in Akechi’s case that it would be foolish to presume under ordinary circumstances that there wouldn’t be a great deal of contention on just about every issue raised in court.” Looking irritable, she reaches up to brush some hair out of her eyes. “Of course, it would be even more foolish to presume that we’re currently proceeding under ordinary circumstances. There shouldn’t be anything easily settled in this case, but things hardly ever progress as they should do at present, do they...?”

“Good thing we have you,” says Ryuji. He hesitates. “Hey, this ain’t just about makin’ a scene, right? You’re really… working to get him a fair trial, right?”

“Precisely that,” says Sae. She furrows her brow. “I’m sorry it requires this much effort just to ensure that much. It should be a foregone conclusion in any just legal system. If I can make these proceedings as fair as they should be, I won’t need to go to any extra effort to make them controversial. It’ll be a difficult case. All I need to do is ensure they don’t suppress anything.”

“All you need to do, huh,” Futaba murmurs.

Sae gives her a tired smile. “It sounds so simple when I put it like that.”


“Sae,” says Sae, looking even more put-off than the rest of them. “You always call me Sae.”

Goro hesitates. “Of course,” he agrees. “My apologies. Sae, then. Might I talk to you for a moment?”

“Of course you can,” Sae says, still looking nonplussed. “What is it?

“Alone,” says Goro.

Sae exchanges a glance with Sojiro.

“You can use the attic,” says Sojiro, and then jerks his head at Akira. “If it’s okay with the kid,” he adds as an afterthought.

Akira nods. Goro looks at him and can’t decide if his recent silence has been characteristic or unusual.

“Let’s go, then,” says Sae, standing, and Goro follows her lead.

Upstairs, Sae claims the seat at the desk and reclines in it like an office chair. “Well?” she asks, but Goro takes his time getting comfortable on the couch, waiting for the signature frustrated tap of her heels on the floorboards. Impatience to hear elicits focus to listen.

“I’m not looking for a lighter sentence,” he says, when the tap is starting to sound like a countdown bound to an explosive.

Sae blinks. “I know you’re not,” she replies. “Telling, isn’t it?”

“Pardon?” Goro laughs, light and mirthless. “Oh. Good boy points for remorse, then, is it?”

“Not quite,” Sae says drily. “You know perfectly well that punishment for its own sake can’t be
“What is, then, Prosecutor Nijima?” Goro asks, head cocked, the picture of sweet innocence.

“Justice? Hm.” Sae gives him an unimpressed, vaguely wry look. “You know if I had an answer to that – if anyone did – well. We wouldn’t need a complex legal system, would we?”

All good humour vanishes from Goro’s face, leaving in its wake the trail of a ghost ship. “You shouldn’t be in charge of this case,” he says. “You’re too close.”

“I’m not,” Sae says. “And I’m not. I don’t believe there’s anyone who’s close enough, let alone too close. Not to this case, and not to you.”

“So, what, then?” Goro asks flatly. “I should trust you, is that it?”

“You shouldn’t do anything,” says Sae, “but you can. I’ll make sure of it this time.”

“Is there any point asking what you think of what I’m doing?” Goro says with a weary smile. “Or of me, for that matter?”

Sae’s face is inscrutable, but the slightest regret tinges her voice when she says, “You’ve been betrayed too many times, Akechi. I won’t let it happen again.”

“I’m usually the one doing the betraying,” Goro says in a voice that mightn’t be out of place in the shimmering pool of a mirage.

Sae laughs and says, “Goro, the day you can betray the system itself is the day I can finally call it even,” and then Sojiro is calling up the stairs for them to get up and get out so Leblanc can finally close for the day.

“What do you think of the claims that the Phantom Thieves ‘stole’ Prime Minister Shido’s heart?”

“Who? …Oh, those lying criminals? No, that was a con from the beginning. The Phantom Thieves are nothing more than a group of petty opportunists. There’s no truth to any of that.”

“And it’s hardly what we should be focusing on right now, is it?”

“I should think not!”

The day ticks further than it should, he knows. They’ve been drawing each second out much longer than it lasts, a clock hand pushing through freezing honey to reach its mark.

The sky is dark outside. The conference is tomorrow; will be today in less than an hour. Morgana is keeping Futaba company through the final preparations, and without him here, they’re reluctant to end the last day.
The notes that Goro is staring at are meaningless. There’s nothing left to go over that isn’t committed to his memory. He shifts on the couch and turns them over in his mind anyway.

“You’ve been in touch with your PR manager?” He knows already.

Akira doesn’t look over from his seat at the desk; just nods once. The time they have left is dwindling with each division, each attempt to make it more only cutting it down.

“Your journalist friend?”

Nod. Each moment they spend doing nothing growing increasingly more valuable; tiny gems slipping between their fingers like sparkling tears.

“And Futaba is prepared, isn’t she?”

The desk must have an awfully inflated ego by now if he were to judge by all the approval it’s getting.

Goro gives in. “You won’t look at me?”

Akira finally turns around. “I am,” he says, in his quiet voice.

“You weren’t.”

“I am now.”

“Don’t do this,” Goro snaps. Far more vehement than he needs to be, he knows, but it’s as if he’s just now becoming aware of pressing tension that’s been building around them for days. “It’s childish. If there’s a problem –” Akira’s already shaking his head. “Well, then, what?!”

Akira merely looks at him.

It shouldn’t incense him this much. But Goro’s about given up on the way things should be. This has been too long.

There’s pressure building in his chest, folding in from all sides of his body, and Goro quashes it like always. A little-known creature, the anger of the noble detective prince; a cryptid with few sightings, but miles more tangible and leagues more dangerous than any monster. Over years of slipping and choking on his own short temper he’d grown proficient at keeping it on a tight leash, but it always seemed to rear its ugly head in the moments of high stress, and each time he pushed it down it would burn a little more bitterly in his throat before it bubbled back into dormancy.

Spitting bile was something he paid dearly for, but swallowing it back is beginning to feel more and more like a volcanic implosion, some dim and dying star, and it leaves him trembling.

“You look like you want to shoot me again,” Akira observes.

Goro snaps back to himself and forces the lava to blacken, forces his jaws apart, forces the return of the gentle smile.

“Oh, sorry,” he says politely. “I was a little preoccupied, that’s all.”

“You can be mad at me,” Akira says.

“I’m not.”
Akira’s eyes seem to refocus. “You just can’t be honest,” he mutters, apparently to himself.

His eyes are so sad. Goro fights himself not to look away.

“I can’t solve the problem if you won’t tell me what it is,” he says.

“Since when are you so direct?” Akira asks. “What happened to the subterfuge?”

Goro’s smiles appear with the blink of his eyes now, although his lips barely curve. “It doesn’t work on you anyway,” he says.

Expressionless. Impossible to read. To be expected by now. Still perturbing, the broken pattern.

“In any case,” Goro continues, “that’s not actually how I prefer to operate. It’s useful when there’s no other option, which is frequently the case. However, I find it much more productive to simply be upfront where it’s viable. It’s much easier to solve a problem when all the facts are laid out in front of you, and I’m not one to fight for them when I can simply ask.”

“Doesn’t sound like you.”

“Doesn’t it?” Goro asks idly. “Maybe you don’t know me as well as you think.”

“Maybe you don’t know yourself as poorly,” says Akira.

Goro bites something back but isn’t sure what it might have been if he hadn’t restrained it. “It seems unfair you won’t be honest with me when you demand it in return,” he says instead.

“I’m not demanding anything,” Akira replies.

Yes, and I don’t know what to do with that.

“You seem pretty confident there’s a problem,” Akira adds.

“Can you really tell me there isn’t?” asks Goro. “You haven’t spoken a proper word to me in days.”

Akira cracks a tired smile. “Thought you didn’t like me talking so much,” he says.

“What gives you that impression?” Goro asks softly, and Akira shrugs. “Talk to me, will you?”

“What is there to say, Goro?” Akira says, and Goro barely knows how to react to the fresh exhaustion in his voice. “What do you want to hear?”

“You’re really asking me that?”

“Much easier to solve a problem when blah blah.”

“Have I wronged you somehow?” Goro snaps. “I’m trying to help you now, if you haven’t noticed, and I—”

“Why are you doing this?” Akira asks, and his voice is suddenly softer than its ever been. He doesn’t clarify what he means and they both know he doesn’t need to. So tired. He looks so tired.

And Goro blinks the smile away. Reaches, fumbles for an earnest mask and finds it redundant.

“Shouldn’t I be?” he inquires in answer, keeps himself light so he won’t need to balance, so he
won’t plummet from the high wire they’re thinning with each passing moment. “I thought you wanted me to atone.”

Akira looks back down at his desk. “What I want,” he murmurs.

“What do you have a better plan?”

“No,” says Akira. The smile is back, carved in porcelain and dropped on hardwood. “Sorry. Some fearless leader.”

“Fallen from grace, have you?”

“Something like that.”

Goro’s not sure if the resounding silence is companionable or uncomfortable, but he breaks it anyway, forges into what feels like it might be new ground.

“It might not be the worst thing in the world not to know,” he says. “From what I’ve learned.”

Akira slowly turns his eyes back on Goro. “To know what?”

“Anything,” Goro replies.

Akira nods, resigned. “Of course,” he says. Of course you’d use it against me. A small, sad smile starts to replace his painted face. “You can’t tell me why you’re doing it, then. Or won’t.”

“Are you asking, or asking me not to?”

Akira hesitates. “Dunno,” he says. They create a double negative in the expanse they occupy, neither used to so careful a counter as themselves. There’s a delicacy to it; like the space between words is frosted over, like the words themselves should be snow, dancing over the ice without shattering it, barely breathed or the warmth might melt it to nothing.

Goro nods.

“I don’t have a good answer,” he says.

“Will you give me a bad one?” comes the instant return, and Goro laughs.

“I suppose… What else can I do?” he murmurs. “What other choice do I have, Akira? Can you tell me that? Do you think I can live like this, knowing what I know now?”

“Like this?”

“I was ready to die,” says Goro. “I wanted to. I had to make other arrangements, I suppose, when you took it from me.”

“You’re welcome,” says Akira.

Goro hesitates. “Thank you,” he says.

Akira inclines his head. “You didn’t know what to do with this,” he suggests, and Goro meets his gaze. “And now…”

Goro’s laugh is hollow. “Isn’t it funny,” he says, his voice cracking. “Do you ever think about the world we live in? The life we’re given? It’s all rather… miraculous, don’t you think? We’ve been
given so much. It’s… beautiful, really.”

He’ll never grow used to these new and unfriendly silences, never comfortable with scrawling across an empty page in print he might not be able to read later, never content to simply let it exist in the moment it’s born. If he could only shut his eyes to what couldn’t be seen anyway.

“In theory the possibilities are endless,” he says softly. “We could be anything. We could do anything. But we aren’t.”

“We play the cards we’re dealt,” Akira says.

“It hurts,” Goro says, “feeling like they should all be the joker.”

“Too much possibility isn’t always a blessing.”

“I realise,” Goro laughs. “Yes, I know. But it’s difficult, isn’t it? To dedicate yourself to something – anything, really – when there’s a whole world of everything out there – even when you know it’s filled with an everything you can’t reach, maybe by the very laws of nature? It’s like being held in a glass box – not seeing why you can’t step outside, only seeing what you’re missing.”

“I’m too tired and stupid for your existentialism,” Akira complains.

Goro laughs again. Akira’s face has grown gentle. It might have been hard to look at if it weren’t for the comfortable haze settling into the room, somehow setting a pace all at once unfamiliar to the both of them and steadier than anything they’d ever known. The cosiness of the unreality they’ve found might be dangerous, a sweet poison, and neither has it in them to care.

“Everything and nothing,” says Akira. “The beautiful contradiction. You could do it all but you can’t. It’s all knocked away – the more you learn the less you know –”

“The more I know I know nothing,” says Goro. “And now I’m here.”

“And there’s nowhere else to go,” says Akira. “Nothing to do but this. What else can you do?”

“Everything,” says Goro.

“And nothing,” says Akira. “What a terrible answer.”

Goro smiles. “I like it too,” he says.

The sad little smile hasn’t left Akira’s face. “In another life,” he says quietly, “we could have been great rivals, or perhaps even friends.”

“I said that to you,” Goro says, surprised. Akira gives him a small nod.

Another long pause, another blankness Goro can’t read, and it’s unfamiliar in a way he can’t even judge – wrong-footed by the feeling of being wrong-footed – always, with Akira, and only with him.

He shifts sideways on the couch a little and doesn’t know if it’s an invitation, but Akira seems to. Typical.

Stay afloat. Tame the waves. Learn to hold your breath, and ride the tide, and let the current pull you any which way, for if you didn’t need to surface you would find your way to rise – but then from the foam arose the quiet boy from the station, the filthy delinquent from the attic, the smirking thief from the shadows, Akira, Joker, Akira –
and he was tossed back into the sea he’d long since mastered and found himself drowning again.

Akira is in front of him now. Standing with his hands in his pockets and weight on one leg, just like always. Goro makes himself alright with the way he has to tilt his chin up to meet the stormy gray eyes gazing down into his face; resists the urge to stand himself, to take some pointless solace in the single inch of height he has on his own reflection.

“I suppose you could call this a new life,” he says. Can’t remember the last time words had spilled through his lips with the filter raised and the calculations passed over. Can’t remember the last time his voice had felt unbound rather than charged with careful power.

Akira really looks at him now, eyes suddenly wide.

A strange and steady rhythm to drowning. Alone with his heart and the enduring beat of the untamed tide.

“I’m sorry I wouldn’t talk to you,” Akira says softly. “I’m sorry. There wasn’t a problem. I just didn’t know what to do. I don’t still.”

He can’t speak. Is it the water or the atmosphere, so delicate moments before, now so pressing and warm, that might rush into the space the moment he broke the seal and opened his mouth?

It’s so warm, for late December.

Akira sinks to the ground, slow, his gaze never leaving Goro’s face, and Goro’s eyes follow him until he’s kneeling before the couch.

But then Akira’s own eyes lower with the stale shadow that crosses his face, when some heavy emptiness crashes over him with the lethargic weight of a glacier, and he says, “I’m just scared.”

“What are you scared of?” The voice doesn’t even feel like Goro’s, but really, would he know it if it were?

“I don’t know.” A quiet desperation to the hopelessness pressing up behind Akira’s eyes. The beautiful contradiction. “It feels like we’re getting lost. There’s so much to feel.”

Every word strikes something familiar in Goro, some sense of déjà vu, things he’s never heard but only because they’ve only been lying dormant until something sparks them awake.

“I don’t know what I need to do,” Akira whispers. “I don’t know how I need to feel.”

“You’re not alone,” says Goro.

He’s leaned forward – they both have – they’re not so close, not really, but the distance crackles with a startling unimportance, charged with the fresh intent in Akira’s stare, the part to his lips. He can barely blink for the sparks that fly from his own eyelashes brushing against each other, can’t move for the electricity sweeping by his skin in lieu of air.

“Kind of wish you could tell me it’ll be alright,” Akira says, in a low chuckle. “In time. But I don’t really want that either when I know we can’t know.”

He’s buffeted by the current again and finds he can’t find his breath. Finds, worse, that he might not mind, Akira’s on his face in its absence.

They’re not so close together – or they weren’t, but it’s getting more and more difficult to gauge
the empirical fact of the matter when the sheer sensation, ethereal and heady and entirely abstract and
more tangible still, was overwhelming enough to press into his chest and further, and further again.

He isn’t sure he really hears when Akira breathes his name. Isn’t sure he really needs to.

Can’t remember pressing a shell to his ears. Can’t remember letting his vision tunnel.

The moon is high and the clock sliced to the centre.

Can’t remember when they got so close.

The final stretched moment snaps against their skin.

Goro murmurs, “I like you too, you know,” and closes his eyes to the crashing waves, allowing his
senses to wash him away.

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“Akechi! Over here, Akechi!”

It’s like breaking the surface, the way the sound rushes back in all at once. An art to dividing the
water to reach the shells, and Goro’s hands are deft. He zeroes in on the voices he needs and molds
himself to them comfortably.

“Yes,” he says, over the commotion. “Do you have a question?”

“What did Shido do to you?” calls a woman with orange goggle-like glasses over short black hair,
and Goro jerks back from the question like it’s a cattle prod, seems to struggle to regain composure
he’s never released for a moment.

“Do to me?” he asks. Even the waver in his voice is orchestrated down to the frequency. “I –
nothing. He – ah, he…”

“Were you coerced?” the woman presses. There’s a twinkle to her eye, a keenness, and Goro flails
as the target beneath her piercing voice. “Did he do something to you, Akechi? Were you
threatened?”

“N-no,” he stammers. “No, he – I, I worked under his orders, yes, but it was – please don’t
misunderstand, my actions were my own, and I –”

“That’s enough.”

And Goro glances up, startled, to see Sae leaning over him to speak into the microphone on the
desk.

“Prosecutor Niijima?” he asks, uncertain.

Sae ignores him. “Good morning, everyone,” she says. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but I can’t stand by
and allow your opinions to be coloured like this. You should know better, Akechi,” she admonishes
gently, turning to him, “than to report on a case without considering all the facts.”

“Prosecutor Niijima,” Goro tries again.
“I was against this conference,” Sae continues. “I believe Akechi is in no place to share with you any information on these proceedings when he’s far too close to them to see the truth of the matter.”

“What do you mean by that, Prosecutor Niijima?” a journalist calls.

“Everything Akechi has done was by Prime Minister Shido’s design,” Sae says. “It’s admirable that you don’t wish to evade liability, Akechi, but you mustn’t cover for him any longer. It does nobody any good.”

“Prosecutor Niijima, please,” Goro protests, his voice taking on a pleading edge. “There’s no need to shield me, I’m more than willing to take responsibility for –”

“Of course you are,” says Sae. “That’s all you’ve ever been conditioned to do. I’m not shielding anyone. As a prosecutor of the state, I’m only interested in ensuring that justice be delivered to all relevant parties to the best of my ability. And it is not in the interest of the public that you take the blame for Shido’s actions any longer, Akechi.”

“They were mine,” Goro says weakly.

“All of them were,” Sae allows. “And you were fourteen when they began.” She pauses, allowing the gasps and mutterings of the crowd to be caught by the cameras. “I can’t reveal many details until the formal trial begins, but –”

“Will the trial be publicised, Prosecutor Niijima?” the orange-goggled journalist calls again, right on cue.

Sae smiles. “Of course it will,” she says. “I’ll make sure of it. I believe matters involving the Prime Minister are of great public relevance. For now, I should make clear that while Akechi will face the courts for his actions, you mustn’t take him at his word when he is clearly neglecting to mention that he was a child when he began work under Shido, and there were various factors contributing to his –” her face contorts – “abuse and manipulation in those circumstances.”

“Prosecutor Niijima, don’t –” Goro begins, slightly despairing, but she just shakes her head at him.

“Nobody will escape consequence,” she says firmly, “but please remember the true powers at play. I –” she glances aside at the various members of the SIU beginning to press in and gesture wildly at her, and sighs a little theatrically. “I suppose I’ve said enough,” she says, sounding resigned. “Just remember to take Akechi’s words with a grain of salt. And keep an eye on this case.” She steps back as two SIU members appear at her side, and nods haughtily before leaving with them.

Goro watches her go, eyes wide, before shaking himself and looking back into the audience. He manages a nervous laugh. “I’m sorry about that,” he says in a shaky voice. “I – I’m sorry. I… Prosecutor Niijima is… I’m sorry. I plan to accept responsibility for my actions. I want you all to know that. That’s all that…”

“Akechi!” comes the cry, and Goro remembers suddenly that the journalist’s name is Ohya. “Did you want to help Shido?”

“Did I want…?” Goro asks, looking thoroughly wrong-footed. “I – no, of course – I, ah…”

“He was your father, wasn’t he? Did you want to help him?”

“No,” says Goro, “I, yes, I – I wanted to be… I wanted to be usef- to be helpful to him, but I never wanted – the things that –” He laughs again, almost as if to steady himself. “Goodness, I’m sorry. I’m all over the place today.”
“Did you say useful?” Ohya presses.

Goro swallows. “Did I? Sorry, I meant helpful. I wanted – um, not many of you know, I think, I grew up in an orphanage, so I wanted to – well, he was my father, and I – ah, I’m sorry. If you wouldn’t mind, I’d – I think I need a moment to collect myself.” But the other journalists are coming to life, surging in, and he blinks and presses back in his seat.

“You’re an orphan?”

“Akechi, you don’t have parents?”

“What happened to your mother?”

“Sorry,” Goro whispers, “sorry, I didn’t expect to bring that up today.”

“Did Shido know he was your father?”

“Did he make you do things because you’re his son?”

“Are you lonely, Akechi?”

Goro stares down at his feet. The closest cameras might pick up on the tremble, but it’s gone by the time he looks back up.

“I apologise,” he says, smooth as before. “I lost my composure. I’m alright. Please allow me to answer your questions one by one, okay?”

“What did you want, Akechi?” Ohya’s voice carries far over the buzz, and Goro looks surprised.

“What did I want?” he asks, a little nonplussed. “I wanted to be helpful to him, because he was my father – is, is my… I wanted his… approval. I never had… But the things I did are unforgivable. I didn’t want to do anything like that.” He smiles sadly. “I think that makes it worse. I knew it was wrong, but I…”

“Were you really fourteen years old, Akechi?”

“When I started? Yes,” he answers. “Yes, I was fourteen.”

“How old are you now?”

“I’m eighteen. I’m eighteen years old.”

“You spent four years doing Prime Minister Shido’s dirty work? When you were just a child?”

“Yes,” Goro whispers. “Yes, I suppose I did. I built a life for myself as well as for him. I’m so sorry.”

“What are you sorry for?”

“Everything,” Goro says. “All of it. I’ve been dishonest with you all. I’m not who you think, and I… I’m so sorry to disappoint you like this.”

“What made you come out with the truth now?” a journalist asks. “Is it just because Shido came clean?”

Goro blinks. “Oh,” he says, “I suppose it’s partly because of that, but not for – forgive me for
assuming, but I don’t believe it’s for the reason you think. Now that he’s no longer protecting himself, I don’t have to worry about what he’ll do if I reveal him. I can finally…”

“So you wanted out?” someone else asks.

“Yes,” Goro says earnestly, “oh, yes.” He hesitates. “I don’t want to make excuses. It was selfish, I… I know there’s – I’m sure there’s something I could have done if I – but I didn’t know, and I…”

“How are you feeling, Akechi?” comes a shout from the back.

“How am I feeling?” Goro echoes. “I… I can’t tell you how it’s weighed on me. Living this way for so long.” He hesitates again, and then smiles a pained smile. “So I suppose you could call it a sort of… twisted relief… that I can finally begin to repent. If you’ll let me. That I don’t have to hide it anymore, with no chance to make amends. I’m only glad that… I can really begin to live with it. Nothing can make up for what I’ve done. But if I can face justice, as I’ve insisted every criminal should, I’ll be able to breathe, no matter what’s in store for me.” His eyes darken. “No matter the price I have to pay. I welcome it.”

“What made you decide to call a public press conference, Akechi?”

“I thought it was only fair,” Goro answers. “I’ve lived in the public eye for so long now that I didn’t think it fair to my supporters to just vanish without, at least, issuing a proper explanation and apology. My life is not just my own, after all. My influence comes with a great deal of responsibility and I’ve used it shamefully, no matter the circumstances. This is the least I can do to begin to set it right.”

“Where have you been lately?” cries yet another journalist. “Did Shido do something to you?”

Goro hesitates. “The circumstances of my disappearance,” he begins, and then stops. “I think that’s best saved for the trial. It’s… complicated.”

“Criminal activity?!”

“Were you kidnapped, Akechi?!”

“Did they pay you to stay silent?”

“Please,” Goro says, “please, I want nothing more than to explain to you in full, but those details may not be mine to share, and it’s very complex… I’ll do my best to ensure it all comes to light as soon as possible over the course of the trial…”

“Why haven’t we heard from you?!”

“Tell us what happened!”

“I’d love to,” Goro says, beginning to sound slightly desperate. “I’m sorry. I can only say, it’s… Prime Minister Shido may be incapacitated right now, but he had a great many supporters and team members who – it’s very difficult to operate under –”

“Are you saying they did something?”

“What did they do?”

“Who are they?”

Goro shakes his head, looking distressed. “I can’t say,” he says, “I don’t know. I can’t share the
details of my disappearance right now but I’d only ask you to consider – forgive me, I don’t like to call myself a celebrity, but I’m certainly not an unknown. Even still, when I disappeared, very few questions were raised.”

“Are you saying they’re hushing things up?!”

“Are they hiding things from us?”

“What are you talking about, Akechi?”

“Akechi,” calls another voice. “Akechi! Does this have anything to do with the Phantom Thieves?”

Goro looks at them, eyes wide with genuine surprise. “The Phantom Thieves?” he asks. “You mean… Did they steal my heart?”

The journalist nods. A sudden still washes over the room and all eyes are suddenly fixed on him again, intent, as the noise lowers to a murmur once more.

Goro hesitates. “No,” he says. “No, they didn’t do anything like that. But I… I suppose you could say they played a hand in this.”

“What do you mean?!”

“Is this the work of the Phantom Thieves?”

“Have you changed your position on them, Akechi?!”

“Does this mean they’re real?”

“They’re real,” Goro answers. “I haven’t changed my position on their methods, no. They didn’t steal my heart.” He pauses again; looks down at his hands. Smiles. “I suppose they might have changed it nonetheless,” he says quietly. “And I’m grateful to them.”

The cameras flash as he gets up and bows to the crowd before nodding to the police to come escort him away. They keep flashing long after he’s left. The voices don’t quiet for a long time.

But across the city, in the crowded attic above a little corner café, silence reigns.

Chapter End Notes

first: i’ve altered the canonical timeline and events for reasons that will hopefully become apparent soon: GAME: 18: confession. 23: sae meets with the SIU and PT. 24: mementos infiltration. FIC: 18: confession. 20: sae meets with the SIU. she doesn't meet with the PT - i wanted her to talk to goro separately later, so makoto acts as her proxy during the evening meeting. 21: preparations. 22: press conference.

now that that's been cleared up...
hey there. i was surprised by the amount of comments last time excited to see goro battling it out with yaldabaoth, so i don't think this is what most of you were expecting. (last surprise plays in the background while i smash my keyboard to pieces) happy to catch you off guard. worried you're disappointed, but i hope you liked it. the story's been heading here since the very early stages. don't worry. still stuff to go. we're not done.

notes:

- sae's response to goro's question of justice is important. he's questioned the thieves repeatedly on what they consider "true justice" to mean and none of them have a satisfactory answer, causing them to doubt themselves. sae's answer is very similar to makoto's - "not this" - but it's distinct in an incredibly significant way. she doesn't know what true justice is, not because she doesn't know enough to answer, but because there is no answer, and recognising this is a strength rather than a weakness, borne from clarity and acceptance that these things are indefinable. i included this partially out of bitterness because i feel the judgement rank 10 "true justice" is dumb and vague and i wanted to work around it in a way that made sense to me.
- the end of goro and akira's talk is left open on purpose because i'm big on reader interpretation. word of god, though? authorial intention? sparknotes summary? they kissed. personal headcanon? they made out for a bit. "did you just make a headcanon about your own fic?" yep
- up to you to decide how honest goro is being in the press conference. i'm of the mind that goro retroactively wants out of his deal with shido, but at the time did not know enough (especially of how shido saw him) to make that call. the conference is obviously different from goro's usual media appearances - it's much messier, much less controlled, and that's all designed to give the press and public as much to discuss and speculate on as possible. when it's not so neat, they have to sort through all the information first, they have to talk about why akechi seemed so off - lengthens discussion, heightens mystery and curiosity, creates greater attention, etc, blah.

thank you as always for reading and for being so kind. i hope you're enjoying my work.<3

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