## Personality Not Included

**by Wintercreeper**

**Summary**

I'm taking one step at a time, eyes on the road so I won't stumble over little rocks or all the hurt I have caused so many people. It's been two years since Shido went down, two years since I should have been free; two years since I should have died.

Looking at Leblanc after all this time is like smiling in a house of mirrors, every reflection shows you from a different angle, an outsider would never know who's the real person and which images are only a cheap imitation of life, merely a distraction from the truth. I wore and lost so many masks behind that door, shattered mirrors and promises along the way, all the sweet words spoken have turned into lies.

Standing here feels like I finally made it home after a long walk through the rain, I'm ready to pick up the broken pieces of glass that are covering the floor and hand them over to the one person who might be able to glue them back together.
I haven't written a fanfiction since 2001 so I'm very nervous about this. I'm a Goroboy and I wish him all the best in the world but I'm so god-damn bad at writing happy endings, even though I'm dead set on doing it this time there could be... complications. This work is heavily focused on Goro and has a lot of darker themes, I will give you a warning at the start of a chapter should anything arise that might cause problems for certain people but I'm bad at this stuff so I might miss something. I try to update at least once a week and I have no idea how long this fic will be but don't worry, we'll make it through together. Tags and rating will be updated when we get to the right point but there won't be explicit smut in this work, probably no smut at all. Sorry about that but I'll give you a lot of suffering to make up for it.

Edit: Just a short notice for new readers - this fic started before the Anime came out so Ren's name is still Akira (protag's name in the Manga). Same person, different name source.

I know this street, I've been here before. There's the little shop that sells the fluffiest Cupcakes I ever had, the ones glazed with chocolate and colourful sprinkles on top. Do I have enough money to buy one on the go? It must be late, there's so little light, I can barely read the sign up ahead of me. Its letters have a faint blue glow but I can't make out what they say, it must be in a different language that no one ever told me about. People don't tell me much although they talk a lot, I think they just don't want me to know. But I want to.

I must have forgotten my wallet, there's nothing in my back pocket except for red stuff that makes a funny sound when I spread my fingers apart. It looks like cheap paint, I should wash it off, the colour isn't pretty and doesn't go well with the rest of my cloths.

Why am I here, was it to buy a Cupcake or to wash my hands? What a silly idea, I'm sure the shop is closed and I have free water at home. It's warmer there as well, out here it's way too dark and cold.

But where am I? I can't remember.

The paint has made an ugly stain on the front door, I'm sure I never said that it's allowed to do that. It's not coming off no matter how hard I rub at it with my jacket, it just spreads and looks a little lighter. I'm not sure I like it, it doesn't fit the rest of the house's colour. I can't convince it to go on its own so I leave it be, it surly knows better if it should be there or not.

“I'm home!”

An echo is flying around in the hallway but I can't make out what it says and no one is answering my greeting, it's like I'm not really here. That could be true, I wouldn't know. You can't know that you don't exist when you don't exist. It's impossible.

It shouldn't be darker in here than it is outside, it's usually much brighter and the light makes that little buzzing sound. Like the bees that always sit on the tiny yellow flowers in the backyard. I like those a lot.

Maybe it doesn't love me anymore and left me for someone else. Why is everyone leaving me? My foster parents said that I'm dumb, they were always so mean to me but they might have been right
all along, that must be the reason why no one wants to be with me. I'm so tired and my head hurts badly, I haven't slept properly in weeks. That's not good for my health, mother always told me I would die when I don't go to bed early.

My pants and shoes are splattered red as well, my hair feels sticky and gross, this colour either likes being with me or it hates me with a passion. I want it to be the first, I kinda begin to like it as well. Would Akira like it? He can have some if he wants to, there's enough for both of us. Maybe he wants to be with me if I share it with him, you share with someone you like because it makes them like you more.
I want him to like me.

There's snow in my bedroom, it's dancing in a weird way and it must be glowing, I can see it even in the dark. It makes an unpleasant sound, some kind of whooshing noise that comes and goes, it's rude to be so loud in the middle of the night.
I have to apologise to my neighbours first thing in the morning, they are always very nice to me and it often smells good when they are cooking. I wonder if they would mind if I join them for a meal or two, I could bring some apples or even a pie.
That sound is really loud.
Have I locked the door? Bad people might come in if I haven't, I don't want them to be in here.
The soup in my fridge has probably gone bad and there's nothing else to eat in there.
Why won't my body move when I tell it to? I haven't done anything to it but it just doesn't want to, I can't look at the clock if my head doesn't turn around but I shouldn't force it. You don't force others to do something they don't want to do, it's illegal, you have to respect their decision.
It must be morning already, the room is getting brighter.
Would the thieves take me to the beach? Maybe they will if I ask them nicely.

Chapter End Notes

I know what you think, `that's some weird ass writing' but I swear there's a very good reason for this so let me explain: Serious injuries usually cause a state of shock. I really hope none of you can relate to that on a personal level and of course it's different for everyone, I've pulled that stuff right out of my own private-experience-pocket mixed up with descriptions from others and tried to reframe it in a way that fits the story, only following the general feeling and thought process that most people have during such an episode of mental shock. The next chapters will be much more normal so please bear with me.
I hope you enjoyed this and are ready to suffer some more :)
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I'm uploading the second chapter more or less right after the first because I'm so busy with Christmas preparations that there isn't much time to write, and it's not going to look much better after Christmas due to New Year's Eve preparations and me not being at home from tomorrow onwards, I have no idea if and when I can update this but I try my best.
We are getting into the main story so sit down and enjoy (at least I hope you will).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The bell of Leblanc sounds exactly like I remember it, the smell of strong coffee and dusk fills my nose the moment I step into the little Cafe.
Nothing has changed, Sayuri is still in her rightful place, the TV is showing a news program with the volume turned up to an uncomfortable level; only one booth is occupied by a sad looking man in his 40s. Apart from that, there's no one in sight.
I walk the few steps to my favourite spot on the counter and sit down, careful not to strain my leg or fall right off of it. Slow and steady, one hand on the bar, I will be fine if I keep my balance.
“Welcome, what can I get you?”
Sojiro must have been in the small kitchen, I haven't even noticed him up until now and when I look up he's already right in front of me and his eyes are wide with shock.
“You are that detective kid. They said you went missing but I personally thought you were dead. Why haven't you told him that you are fine, was it too much to send a letter or make a quick call? The boy blamed himself for your disappearance, do you have any idea how much he suffered because of you?”
His tone is angry but there's something else as well, I can't pin it down; for a moment I'm afraid he might call the police.
“He has? I have to apologise, I never meant to hurt him like this, please understand that I had no other choice but to stay low until everything blew over.”
I try to give him one of the smiles that I was known for, sweet like sugar, to silence his questions before he can ask more than I'm willing to answer but I know that the times when I could easily charm my way through life are long gone, all that's left is a poor excuse of a smile and shaking hands.
The hosts says something about rising gas prices while Boss looks me over, up and down, there's something in his eyes that tells me he already knows more than I feel comfortable with, it's one of the reasons why I was always glad for his silence and distance whenever I came here to get a cup of coffee. He's sharp, much like Akira, but indifferent enough to stay out of other people's business.
“The usual?”
He turns around and starts to pick the beans before I can even answer, he keeps to himself whatever he has seen just a moment ago; then silently walks to the stairs and climbs them effortlessly.
I can still see the cat sitting on the counter, yelling at the blond-haired boy who's name I can't remember, he barks back at it aggressively. Always so loud, they were always so loud no matter if they fought or had fun, a constant string of noise. Intrusive, obnoxious, sometimes the memory keeps me awake at night, the thought what could have been if I had chosen another path, if I would have dared to add to the noise instead of playing the role of a passer-by.
It takes only a few moments before he's back behind the counter and goes to work with utmost
accuracy, the decades he spent in this place, day after day doing the same, engraved every little movement deep into his soul.

“Here is your coffee.” He hands me the cup much more cautious than one would think is reasonable, holding it still until my hand is completely wrapped around it, before he withdraws slowly.

“Is Akira at work? Or school? When does he usually come home?”

The figure before me stiffens, his hand is frozen in mid-air; my stomach turns around, tangling itself in my intestines before coming to a halt.

“The charges against him were all dropped, he moved back home a few months after you went missing. He doesn't live here anymore.”

“Oh.” Oh, it's all I can think of. It was stupid of me to assume he would stay here forever, wait for me to return, it's only natural that he would move on sooner or later.

My stomach rolls in the opposite direction, back to its original position, and violently tears out everything that stands in its way. It feels like him bleeding out on the inside.

How dumb can a person be, I wouldn't wait for my murderer to come back so why was I hoping he will? 'Stupid' repeats itself in my mind, again and again, I can't breath, I suddenly don't want to be here just for a minute longer. I have no right to stay, not when he's gone.

“Thank you for the information, please excuse me, I have to go.”

The voice I just heard belongs to me and I would give everything for it to be someone else's, the tears that threaten to fall are so obvious in it that it makes me ashamed.

I never should have come here in the first place; everything I do is a mistake, my poor judgement has never gotten better, I should have stayed in my apartment until the landlord kicks me out for good.

“Sit down, you are not going anywhere. I already called Akira, I promised him to keep you here until he arrives and I'm not afraid to tie you up. Don't challenge me.”

“I would never...” There is the faint feeling of raindrops on my hands, it's cold and burns the chapped skin, raw and open from the winter's cold and harsh December winds.

“I'm closing up, it's not like there will be much more costumers anyway. You can stay there and drink your coffee, Akira should be here in about two hours.”

There's some not quite friendly shouting in the background, the bell rings once and the TV falls silent, no more noise, no more laughter and happy chatter, it feels like the world has stopped.

It's not unpleasant.

Sojiro is mostly silent since he closed the Cafe, he sits in a booth behind me and only comes into view when it's time to refill my cup, maybe he has an additional sense that tells him when someone is running out of coffee, a special ability reserved for barista.

He said it's the same I used to drink back then but it tastes slightly different after the third cup, I sometimes drank six or seven and it never happened before, I suspect he started to serve me decaf in order to not enhance my anxiety further. The thought alone brings along a warm and fuzzy feeling, it's something I can imagine Akira would have done as well.

The light of the day has vanished and is replaced by the suffocating darkness of night, Leblanc is dimly lit but bright enough to see every important detail, the atmosphere is comforting, like a tight embrace after a nightmare.

“Sooojirooo.”

I still remember that voice so clearly, no wonder after all the weeks it screamed weaknesses and techniques right into my ear, her words forever imprinted on my mind.

There's a loud banging on the door, I completely forgot about the young hacker and that she lives close by, the possibility to run into her should have been clear as day to me and yet I never thought about it even for a second. I wish I could go back to a time when such details never had the chance to pass me by, now all I can do is keep notes of the most important points to prevent me from forgetting them in the span of an hour.

“Why is the door locked? Who's in there? I demand to be let in!”
More banging, I'm not sure if it comes from the door or if I hear my own heart, ready to burst into flames made out of fear and panic, I get up from my spot and immediately stumble, nearly falling to the ground. The only thing between me and the hard floor is Sojiro's arm, tightly wrapped around my upper body.

“Hide in the bathroom.”

He helps me up carefully and I hurry as fast as I can on shaky legs, I reach for the door-handle only to miss it two times before finally getting a hold of it. I lock the door behind me, too afraid to turn on the lights, too afraid to breath.

“What's going on, where's that person?”

“I'm alone.”

“Really? So you are telling me that the figure I've seen was a ghost? We should call some ghosthunters and make a ton of money with this, we could even make our own show like the one from America. But first we have to gather some evidence, it would be best if I install some cameras to see what's going on.”

Their voices are muffled and far away, I wonder if she's serious or mocking him for his obvious lie, it brings back memories that I rather don't want to be reminded of.

“Futaba, go home. I bring you some curry when I'm done here.”

“Are you hiding her in the bathroom? Are you ashamed of me?! Or... no...nonono please don't tell me it's my maths teacher.”

“Don't be ridiculous, a woman of her calibre wouldn't go out with an old man like me. Forget about it and go home, or do you really want to know what I'm doing in here when the Cafe is closed?”

Silence fills the air, I can taste the embarrassment on my tongue, it's thin and caustic like sodium hydroxide.

“Well... I still have a lot of homework, very important homework, and I'll try really hard to forget the images that are floating around in my head. Just tell me where I shouldn't sit... forget that, I'm out!”

The slight jingle of the bell, a door slams shut, the darkness around me and the tightness of the space I'm in inflicts the feeling that I'm buried underneath a thick layer of soil, slowly running out of air.

“Open the door, she's gone.”

Finding the lock without a source of light takes much longer than it should be and for a moment I'm full of proud when I finally manage to turn the lock and step out of my coffin, back into the warmth and comfort of the shop.

Sojiro is just standing there, looking at me in a way that suggests that he feared something might have happened to me while I was hiding away. I avert my gaze and make my way back to the spot that feels more like home than any other place on earth, climbing up and sitting down seems easier than before, maybe I'm getting used to it again.

“I have to prepare the attic, don't even try to walk out on me. The door is locked and I have the keys, you have to smash a window if you want to run away but I can promise you that he's going to track you down no matter where you go.”

“I'll wait. It would be rude to leave when he's willing to travel such a long way just to see me.”

When I turn around to smile at him it's clear that it must be even worse than the first time, he's looking at me with something like pity and it turns my blood into a sea of chemical waste, its acid flowing through my veins.

“You are a good kid. I'm glad you are not dead.”

He's gone before he can witness another pathetic display of weakness, the tears that I should have cried years ago finally decide to free themselves from their prison and spill over my hands, the counter, everywhere they can reach. I find myself unable to stop them from overpowering their fallen owner, all I can do is helplessly watch them forming a puddle in front of me.

Hate is easy to endure as long as you can hate them more, cruel words can do no harm when you learn how to be deaf, but there's nothing in this world to disarm honest compassion. Kindness always hurts the most.
Chapter End Notes

There's no Akira, only sadness.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I'm shamelessly exploiting every questionable option the game offers and I don't regret anything.

Light to medium head injuries tend to have delayed effects, it can take days, weeks, or even months for them to appear. They are due to brain swelling, oxidative stress, or inflammation.

-This has been your useless information of the day.-

The phone in my pocket hasn't made itself known for over a year, I carry it around as an oversized clock and to hide behind it whenever I have to ride the train, it gives me a plausible reason to seem busy, most of all like there are people who talk to me.

Glowing numbers tell me that it's one in the morning, I missed my medication by over an hour.

I could excuse myself to the bathroom and use the tab water to swallow it down but I would risk to choke on it and I don't have enough with me to take another one should I have to spit it out.

"Would you be so kind as to fetch me a glass of water?"

He's behind the counter in the blink of an eye, silently filling a white cup with the content of a water bottle that I recognise as the house brand from a convenience store only a few blocks away.

There's the faint sound of a conversation coming from the street in front of the shop, I can't understand what they are talking about but it sound friendly, it makes me realise that I haven't talked that much for a very long time even though Sojiro only says what's really necessary.

The glass is placed right in front of me, my host doesn't linger, he's already gone by the time I managed to fumble the small container out of my jacket-pocket and clumsily shake one of the pills right into my hand before gulping it down as fast as possible. I hate to take them in front of other people, who knows what they will think.

I still care too much about the opinion of strangers, desperately trying to maintain an images that no one but me cares about. I'm nothing more than a faceless figure in a crowd of anonymous entities and yet I always suspect them paying attention to especially me, not because I'm special, no, because they can see right through me and instinctively know what kind of person I really am.

For a short moment I consider taking the other one as well, just to calm my overactive nerves, stabilise myself and ensure that I will keep my composure no matter what might happen tonight.

Seeing Akira after such a long time is deeply terrifying but joyful as well, I knew this when I first made the plan to come here and face him after contemplating it for months on end.

That he's really coming to see me doesn't mean that he will greet me with open arms, he might have missed me at first or it was only his stupid obsession with taking care of everyone; a long time has passed and he could very well hate me by now, tired of my games; tired of me.

I'm ready to get punched, I'm ready to get screamed it, I already anticipate that he will tell me to stay away from him, to leave and vanish from the face of earth, never to be seen again.

Isn't this was should have happened anyway? What fate had decided on?

A quiet and polite knock on the door makes it clear that it's too late to pity myself, whatever I have done in the past, or haven't done, there's no longer the chance to run away from it.

I don't dare to turn around while Sojiro walks to the door and unlocks it, all I can do is sit here and stare right ahead of me, too afraid to even look in his direction.
The boldness I once had left me the moment the gunshot echoed through the air, the rest of my self-confidence followed when I woke up in my own blood.

“Take the keys and lock the door behind me.”

Shuffling, a click; then suffocating silence.

Careful hands move the stool beside me before it gets replaced by a body that is taller than I remember it being, all I can clearly see out of my peripheral is a mop of pitch black hair and what seems to be a red scarf.

“I don't even get a hug? That's cruel.”

Back then I would have laughed, we would engage in friendly banter while I plan to end his life with my own two hands just for my selfish and insane reasons, now I can't even bring myself to look him in the eye let alone humour him in a way he would appreciate.

“Please say something. Anything.”

“I missed you.”

Those words, the ones I wanted to say so often spill out of me before I have the chance to prevent them from slipping from my tongue, it's embarrassing and oh so honestly shows what has become of me.

“You stole my line.”

We sit there in silence for god knows how long while the temptation to turn my head around and finally see what he looks like, all grown up and mature, gains more and more strength the longer I wait for something to happen.

“I would make you a cup of coffee but you look like you already had more than enough.”

“It's not the coffee.”

“There should be tea somewhere, I make us one.”

He's either kind enough not to pry any further or he doesn't understand the meaning behind my words, whatever it might be I'm glad that I don't have to explain myself.

The body beside me shifts away, the present in my back isn't threatening in the least and gets quickly replaced by a person coming into view.

Cautiously, silently, he takes the last two steps and stops in front of me; I can feel his eyes are searching for something, it prompts me to look up, look at him directly for the first time.

Not much has changed, his hair seems to be a little longer but maybe I just don't remember it right, he's taller for sure, maybe taller than me, and a little bit thinner than the image I have of him deeply secured in my mind.

For a moment there's nothing, his face is blank except for a touch of sadness in his eyes, before he flashes me a honest smile that looks equally relieved and heartbroken.

“Hello.”

“I missed you.”

His voice is strained, his eyes watering, I never imagined to see this look on him when I finally gathered enough courage to come here. Now I wish I never did.

“Don't try to tell me that you had to wait for this to blow over, we both know that's a lie. Shido never said a word about you and they had no evidence of your crimes. As far as I know killing someone in a cognitive universe is not punishable by law anyway and no one was looking for you in the first place, most people couldn't even remember your name a few weeks after shit went down and their number grew larger every day. Not even Sae mentioned you without me asking her directly and all I got every damn time was an irritated look. So why?”

I'm sure I hear anger in his voice and rightly so but I can't manage to figure out if it's directed towards me or merely reflects the helplessness that he must have felt.
“I don't know. I just don't know. I wanted to but I couldn't, I was afraid and disgusted by myself, I thought that you probably don't want to see me ever again and it only got worse the more time had passed. I wanted to remember you exactly like you were when we last met, I couldn't have lived with knowing that you hate me.”

“What made you think I would? Everything I said in the engine room was true, I wanted you with us. Seeing you shut that fucking thing and hearing the gunshot was far worse than everything you have done to me before. I can live with you murdering me but I couldn't live with the possibility that you died for us. Whatever that says about me.”

A thin laughter flows through the small space, it's filled with tears worth of two years and more hurt than I can possibly imagine.

“I'm so sorry.”

“No, I am. I can see that you are being honest with me and all I do is guilt trip you into oblivion. It's just - you have no idea how frustrating the last two years have been. I knew you weren't dead, don't ask me why but I knew. Maybe I wanted to believe it, at least that's what the others said. Futaba lost your signal after the gunshot and everyone was convinced that you died but I thought that can't be the only reason to lose a signal. Maybe you were in a coma, at one point I began to hope it was all just a show that you probably planed right from the start in case that you lose against us. Seems like denial, I know that, and everyone else thought so as well. I can't complain, they were very nice at first and gave me time to come to my senses but it never happened. I kept calling Sae even after I went home and asked her if she found traces of you, she hadn't but at least she talked to me. After maybe a year she told me to stop calling and that she wouldn't give me any more information, she even admitted that there was never an official search for you to begin with and that I need professional help. I haven't spoken to her since, I felt no need to.”

His hands are grabbing the edge of the counter so hard that his nails dig into the old surface, he's shaking from toe to head, a pained expression contorts his face.

“They thought I've gone crazy. Hell, even I began to think that. Do you know how it feels when your heart is telling you one thing and your mind tells you the complete opposite? And everyone around you keeps insisting that you should see a therapist because you clearly lost touch with reality? It hurts.”

“I'm sorry I caused you so much trouble, it was selfish of me to leave you in the dark. But that's what I'm good at, right?”

“Don't give me that crap, we are long past this self-blaming bullshit. You are here, you are alive and I'm not crazy. For me that counts as a pretty good night.”

A bright and warm smile catches my attention, the same smile that used to make me feel welcome and always ignited the burning flame of hate deep inside me, fuelled by blind jealousy.

“You gonna tell me how you managed to get out or is it something that I have to imagine for the rest of my life? I can do that but my version will be much wilder than yours and it could stand between us in the future.”

I want to believe that he's implying that we will continue to see each other and not that it's simply a phrase that he would have said to everyone.

“It all happened so fast that I'm not quiet sure myself. I reached for my phone to deactivate the app, I thought that it doesn't really matter if I should pop up right in front of Shido. I would have died either way. I heard a faint voice; then a gunshot. I got winged, closed the app with my other hand and the last thing I remember is a fast approaching pavement. I clearly didn't think this through enough, while I was confident to worm my way out around Shido I hadn't anticipated to disappear in a place that had no stable counterpart in the real world.

I woke up very confused and bleeding heavily but was so out of it that I went straight to bed after somehow finding my way back home, I don't even know how I did that. My mind was clear the next morning and I patched myself up, I've done that so many times and after all the blood was washed off it didn't look too bad. I was feeling relatively fine except for a bad headache and some bursts of vertigo. Then there's a blackout of several weeks, I had obviously moved during that time
and... I should have taken that headache more seriously.”

The words I want to say are dyeing in my throat, I can't spit them out without choking on them so I settle on ominous silence that says much more than I intended to reveal.

“So you took quite the fall. Head first?”

“It seems so.”

“What did you live off of? Did you get a real job this time or was it something sinister again?”

He has this look on his face, a smug smile, eyes sharp and glistening with mischief, they are proposing a challenge. What I see is not Akira but Joker, I can't decide if the prickling in my stomach is positive or negative.

“I couldn't think of something more evil than being an assassin so I gave up on that and used my savings to get by. Interviews pay quite well when you are famous enough to attract a medium to large audience.”

The room is quiet for a moment; then his laughter fills the room and immediately changes the thick atmosphere to a much more comfortable one, I'm relieved that we are slowly going back to how we used to be.

“And what about you? Are you studying something? Doing an apprenticeship?”

My curiosity is breaking through, I can't help myself but wonder how he's spending his days, what he's doing with his life, but I can tell just by looking at him that I dove into a depth that should probably have stayed unknown.

His eyes are cast downwards, his mouth twitches, a hand finds its way to his neck and is absentmindedly scratching at it; it's so obvious that he's torn between telling me and keeping quiet.

“I can give you the friends-variant or the realistic one, which do you want?”

“Tell me both and I decide which one I want to believe.”

“Fair enough. Sojiro and the ex-thieves think that I'm about to study psychology while in truth I'm working at a bar for several months now and plan on doing that for an indefinite amount of time. I barely finished school, I mean I did but not even close to good enough for any university.”

My blood runs cold, the air I breath in is burning my lungs. Is this my fault? Did he gave up on his own life just because he couldn't save me?

“Before you think something funny, it has nothing to do with you. At least not entirely. Maybe a bit but that doesn't really matter anyway, in the end it was my own decision to let myself go. Or better put, to don't give a shit at all. There are many factors that contributed to this, you are only a small one so don't stress about it too much.”

“Then tell me what happened.”

Something is shifting inside him, I can see it clearly, his expression painted with uncertainty; he's transferring his weight from his feet to his hands that are spread out on the counter.

“I'm not sure we should have this conversation.”

“Why not?”

“Because you seem unstable.”

These simple words cut through me like broken shards of glass, I look down on my own hands and notice that they are viciously shaking. This time I can't blame it on physical disadvantages, my heart is beating so fast that it feels like I've run a marathon, the image before me is blurring. How could I miss this?

“That's a side effect of my medication, I took it right before you arrived. No, that was a lie. I don't want to lie to you anymore. You are right in your assumption but I'm used to it, I can handle it just fine so please tell me.”

“Wow, that's new. I fantasised about this moment every day but I never imagined it to go like this, it usually switched between lots of tears with dramatic declarations of undying love and you stabbing me to death. I like the first one, the last not so much. I can't say that my fantasies ever revolved around so much honesty, I'm not disappointed about that part but I'm still sour about the lack of hugs.”
“Declarations of undying love? Really? If it's so important to you then we can agree on a hug, a short one with at least 5 centimetre distance between us. And nice attempt at distracting me but I'd rather hear about what was going on that led to your current situation.”

We both chuckle, the familiarity of the conversation makes it easier to calm down and focus on the topic at hand, I missed this so much during the time we were apart, the teasing, the levity between us.

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“Deal. Where do I start.. it's a long and boring story. The charges against me were dropped thanks to the thieves, I went back home to my parents and kept in contact with the others. We talked on the phone several times per week, wrote a ton of messages every day, just normal bff stuff. I called Sae regularly to ask about you. As time went on I grew frustrated with the lack of participation from everyone, I told them to keep an eye out for you but they began to hesitate, meanwhile most of the people who's heart we've changed had confessed to every little thing they had done and were about to face the consequences. You wouldn't believe the shit that came to light, there were so many thing that we had no idea about and the sentences they would likely get were underwhelming. I went from frustrated to furious and it showed. I was disappointed, I believed in the adults around me, maybe even in society, but nothing had changed. It wasn't what I expected and wanted, this wasn't what I have fought for. I got the feeling that none of the victims really mattered, that they are all unimportant data, categorised and put away in case-files so no one had to think about them ever again. You know what I mean?”

“I do.”

“What a relieve, finally someone who understands. My parents weren't of much help either, not that it came as a surprise, I mean they had send me away after the assault charges because they were too afraid of what people might think should anyone hear about their son being a violent criminal. They took me back, sure, but that's it. No support, they didn't even ask about my time in Tokyo nor did they ever talked to me more than a few words. Whenever I came home with imperfect grades, or did anything at all, they would spent hours on giving me hell. They demanded that I find a part-time job, I did, it wasn't prestigious enough for them so they made me quit. My days were filled with fighting and screaming, often several times in a row, I don't say that I'm the poor victim, I participated as much as they did.

The ex-thieves conducted countless 'interventions', sometimes is was about my obvious depression, which I never had by the way, then it was about the aggression I was showing, maybe I'm guilty of that, and later always about you. They pressured me into finding help, a self-help group, therapists, all that stuff and I know that it was Makoto who told Sae not to answer my questions. Everyone tried to be helpful, objectively seen, but I felt let down. They wanted me to be open and honest with them but whenever I was they would start with their 'you need help' bullshit, even for voicing my opinion on something. I was angry at first, then disappointed in them. It felt like they want me to act and think in a specific way and couldn't accept that I won't deliver so I started to outright lie to them about my personal life, kept my thoughts to myself and only spoke up when I had no other choice. They weren't pleased with that either, now I was too indifferent and distant.

I moved out, got my own small place, finished school with pretty bad grades and began to work as a bartender. Things were going fine for me, I was okay with it and that's the only thing that counts. It was maybe five months ago when I got into a fight with them via group chat, it wasn't anything big when you think about it but it was enough to completely wear out my already thin patience. We made up a few weeks later, made up in the sense of me telling them that they should forget about it and move on. We don't have much contact since then.”

There is no sadness in his eyes, nothing that would reflect the painful memories and the circumstance he is in, all I see looks too close to betrayal for me to say something in their favour. “It must be hard for you without your friends, to me it always seemed like you were on the same wavelength and got along perfectly. I don't understand how it came to this.”

“Being alone isn't hard, I'm pretty used to that. I know to you it must look like I'm that super social butterfly with tons of friends but before I came to Tokyo I had zero. I used to be quiet, I even was
when we met, that's not really a trait that turns you into a people magnet. Everyone in my home town thought of me as a weirdo before I came to Tokyo and they still did when I came back. My irresistible attraction appeared out of nowhere when I first came here and vanished the moment the metaverse was gone, maybe it was Yaldabaoth's doing. Who knows.”

“Who?”
He's grimacing, his tongue was obviously quicker than his mind, there's a detail I don't know about and judging by his expression I probably shouldn't. I can't decide if I want to hear it or better leave it for another time.

“Can you ignore the last sentence? Please?”
“Agreed, but promise that you'll tell me about it when you feel ready.”

“That I can do.”
The silence between us is calming, not uncomfortable, his eyes are focused on me, body relaxed and seemingly serene. A smile creeps up on my face, I never thought we could talk like this; natural and untainted by my past actions. I have so much to say and ask, keeping all the questions in order becomes increasingly hard the later it gets, I'm afraid to take a wrong step and ruin everything.

“Have you tried to properly make up with them? I would suggest to be honest about your disappointment, about what you need and everything that only adds to your distress and discomfort.”

“Are you here to give me relationship advice? If so then there's a problem with a co-worker of mine...”

“Stop distracting, it's no use.”
I'm flashing him a smile as blinding as I can manage in my current state, not quite like it used to be but close enough to make him grin.

“Charming as ever. I thought about it but where's the point? We drifted apart, as people. It happens when you get separated and walk out into the real world to become an adult, happens all the time. Now I'm lying to you. Truth is, I just can't and I don't know if I want to try. Finding you was important to me, even Futaba said that there's the possibility that you are alive, just a small one but still, and yet none of them was really interested in it. They wanted to believe that you are dead and move on with their life, they didn't care enough about my personal view or feelings, I had to constantly defend my position and was met with the notion that I'm in the wrong. How could I dare to worry about a friend that might be in need, what a horrible person I am. I just couldn't get it, the things they said to you in the engine room and their behaviour only a year after you went missing were totally different, it crushed my trust in them. But that too might be normal when you grow up, your world view changes, you gain more life experience, meet new people and learn a thing or two on the way. They had time to think about everything we have gone through, you need a bit of distance to see clearly and judge based on logical thinking instead of emotion. Most of all, we went from being ambitious teenagers with superpowers to everyday nobody's. Of course there's a big difference between these two, I don't blame them for the way they have grown up but we all have to accept that we aren't complimenting each other well anymore.”

“So it was my fault. You said it yourself, it was mostly about your feelings concerning my disappearance.”

It hurts so much, I wish we never met, his life would be so much easier without my interference; he could have been a great therapist instead of a lonely barkeeper.

“Not at all. You were a small piece in a very big puzzle. Like I said before, I was frustrated by how all the cases turned out, frustrated by my parents actions, by my friends, frustrated by everything. I did see a therapist and it was as helpful as talking to the others. 'You have to learn how to trust, everyone is doing their best', 'society is great, just think about whatever one good thing it has done', 'you are just shaken up by your loss, you have to let go of him'. Bullshit, so much sugar-coated bullshit.
Here, I give you an example... The first person who's heart we've changed was Kamoshida who abused his students, I'm sure you remember. Now take what you know about his crimes and consider the fact that you are able to change someone without killing them. What would you have done?

“I do remember this case well, he's a pig. I would have killed him anyway.”

“Thought so. And you say that before you even know the full story. Shiho wasn't his only 'special' victim, there were three others, one of them was a first year. Barely 15 years old. He got 17 years in prison with a chance of parole after 10 because he willingly confessed to his crimes which is seen as him being remorseful, it doesn't seem to matter that the only reason he confessed was his change of heart. 10 years for that is a bad joke. How could I trust the law or society when they are pulling something like that? There wasn't even much of an outrage, most people just went along with it like it was completely fine. I regret not killing him when I had the chance to.”

When have things turned out like this? He can't be serious, not Akira of all people, the one who forgave me for trying to kill him, the only person I've ever met who cares more about everyone around him than about himself. Something has gone wrong, this must be a bad dream.

“What? Shocked about the fact that the righteous leader of the phantom thieves is a murder advocator?”

“Yes I am. There's no way I couldn't. You weren't like this back then.”

“And that's where you are wrong.”

He takes a step back, arms dangling at his sides, there's tension in his muscles and his yaw is clenched tightly. The ice underneath my feet is thin and I can't think of a way to redirect the conversion, my mind is in complete disarray.

“You can't know about it but when we first talked about changing his heart we discussed the possibility that he might die if we mess up. They asked me what I think and I answered that I couldn't care less, I was fine either way. The picture you have of me is as false as the one you tried to paint of yourself. They could have known right from the start but they only listened to me when decisions had to be made, the ones they weren't brave enough to make. Apart from that, they didn't care. They had a vision of how I am, who I am, and they wanted to stick to it no matter how often I've gone completely against it. I once told a shadow to kill himself and they still hung on to their made-up image of me. What am I supposed to do, just go along with it till the day I die? I tried to make them understand and they clearly don't want to, I guess it's easier to blame it on a loss instead of letting go of a person that never existed and take me the way I really am. What about you, can you do that or are you disappointed to find out that the perfect hero was nothing more than a misconception?”

So much hurt is residing inside of him, fear even, his hands are balled into fits. If that's true then how could I reject him? It makes my heart grow heavy that the person I thought I knew so well was an illusion, yet I'm glad that we aren't so different after all. If none of them wants to stay by his side then I gladly do it.

“I can and I will. You might not be exactly like I thought you are but that doesn't change the fact that I was intrigued by you from the very beginning and up until we parted. You speak your mind, you get the things done that others won't even touch with their fingertips. I couldn't understand the past you, or the one I assumed you were, with all your compassion for complete strangers and your do-gooder syndrome. It made me angry that you were so perfect, your skills, your charm, your morals, everything seemed so easy for you. The human incarnation of purity. It made me sick and wanting you all to myself at the same time. But now we are speaking the same language. Bitterness. It's refreshing.”

Our exchange has turned into a staring contest, I can't look away, too afraid that I miss the slightest of reactions from him; he doesn't even so much as blink.

“Shit, that was unexpectedly moving.”

The sight of him relaxing prompts me to do the same, the tension in my muscles finally releases and leaves them feeling sour, I smile at him much more insecure than I want to.
“I think we agreed on a hug, now would be the right time.”
“Sure, but remember, five centimetre distance.”
“Can we make it two?”
“Careful or I make it ten.”
“Okay, sorry.”

I'm slowly climbing down from my spot, my legs feel numb and wobbly, I probably shouldn't sit there in the future, it's just too straining. By the time it took me to get back down to even ground he's already right next to me. I'm unsure how to go about this, it's been years since I hugged someone and never in this kind of situation. Do I put my arms all around him and if so where do I put my hands? Upper back? Would that be too formal?
“You think too much.”

Something is pressing against my chest and arms are tightly wrapped around me before I can process his words, there's heavy breathing right next to my ear, his hair tickles the side of my face. He's so close, so warm. My hands must have a will of their own, I can't stop them from desperately clawing at his back, pulling him closer and closer while tears fall freely, dampening his scarf and stinging my eyes. A loud sob echoes in my ears and this time it's not my own.

Crying in unison never felt so good, mother and I did it often but it never brought me relieve, only more hurt and helplessness; the wish I could do something to stop her pain.
“What happened to those five centimetre?”
I pinch his neck, he makes a strangled noise before pulling away and rubbing at his eyes in hopes that he can erase all traces of his tears. I wish he knew how much they mean to me.
“Definitely deserved that. It's gotten pretty late, do you live close by? I walk you home.”
“We could walk, theoretically, but that's probably not a good idea considering that it's a 2 and a half hour long train ride. I wanted to come here much earlier and I actually did, kind of, but I needed three attempts to even get on the train; I panicked every time it arrived and left the station only to walk back a few minutes later. I got in on the forth try but panicked two stops later and had to get off. I spent over an hour just staring at people walking by, it's a miracle that no one called the police.”

Why am I telling him all this? I can't stop talking, if I do then we have to part, our meeting would end. I don't want to let go, he will go back home and I won't see him ever again.

“Then stay, Sojiro prepared the attic for me but I'm sure he doesn't mind you staying as well. My old bed is still here, sure it's small but there should be enough space for both of us. If you are okay with it.”
“I don't mind sharing a bed with you.”
His right hand claws at the shirt fabric over his heart, he looks at me like I turned into a unicorn. Have I said something strange?
“Must be a cardiac arrest, my heart stopped beating. You can't imagine what I would have given to make you say that to me two years ago. I mean it's not less exciting now...”
“It might not look like it but I'm still able to punch you.”
“So you're into this kind of stuff, I'll remember that.”

The same dance we always had, flirtatious words that are spoken too casual for them to be serious, paired with smiles and looks that suggest otherwise, a never-ending battle. I feel flattered and taken aback, unsure of myself and him.
“Come on, you look very tired and I haven't slept in two days. We have to sleep in our cloths and share a pillow but at least the blanket is big enough for two people.”
He's smiling at me warmly before he turns around and walks towards the stairs, I follow closely but stop in front of them. It's much higher than I remember it, there's no way that I can take them in one go; it's so embarrassing that he will see how much I'm struggling with such an easy task.
One step at a time, eyes on the floor, right leg first, left one after that, pause. I can do it, I have to.
“Do you need help?”
There's so much worry in his voice, worry and something that I want to believe is love, his outstretched hand in reach. It makes me angry, I don't need help nor pity, but I can't bring myself to hold on to the feeling when his eyes are reflecting nothing but sadness.

“I'm fine, but thank you.”

“Please be careful, I have a vague premonition of you falling down and breaking your neck. That would really ruin my day, I would be back in jail before I could say 'accident'.”

“If you are so good with premonitions then you probably have another one as well, a different variant of this 'accident' that just now became possible.”

“Uhm, I'm having it right now and it's not much better than the first one. Lets try to avoid them both.”

Concentrate, the stairs to my flat aren't that different, there might be less but they are larger, these are much better to climb. Another one, careful now, only one left.

“Nearly there.”

I know he's trying to be nice, he would never mock me for my walking incompetence but I can't help it that a part of me thinks that he's making fun of me. He was honestly worried a moment ago, he offered help, it makes no sense that he would turn around like this. Maybe he's encouraging me? That must be it. Good, rationalising is good.

“Are you okay?”

“Hm?”

Why is he making such a weird expression? Am I making a funny face? I have to keep myself together, if he figures out how problematic it will be with me then he's gone before I wake up in the morning.

“You said that out loud.”

“What?”

“Rationalising is good.”

It's so hot in here, I'm boiling in my cloths. I can feel the dusk collecting in my lungs, there's no air in the room. I feel sick, my stomach is clenching. Am I dreaming? It must be one of those nightmares, the horrible ones where he's nice at first and gets more rude the longer the dream lasts, he repeats over and over that he never liked me, that he lied to me every time we spoke. It does feel like a dream, his room is different. Is it bigger? Smaller?

“Goro, breath. Everything's fine, I was only wondering what you were thinking about. I'm afraid that you change your mind and leave during the night, rationalising can mean so many things and a lot of them wouldn't be positive for me. That's all.”

“Oh.”

I'm making a fool of myself, I have to get a grip. I'm at Leblanc, it's Friday, around 3 in the morning. I came here by train, I'm in his room, I'm okay. I'm awake, everything is okay.

“Are you good? You had a lot of stress today, anyone would feel like crap. I do, too. Lets go to sleep and talk in the morning. Do you want to sleep next to the wall? It's super cosy.”

His smiling face, he never smiled like this in my dreams. I always knew that something wasn't quite right, he was nice but the look in his eyes never matched his words. This is different. I can feel the warmth of his hand on my arm, a feather-light touch, I have to end this before I cry again.

“I take the spot next to the wall, it feels safer.”

“Okay, just wake me up if you need anything, feel unwell or.. whatever, wake me up, it's no problem.”

Walking around in this dark and nearly empty room is slightly oppressive, I can't see much but it seems that Sojiro has thrown out most of his things or maybe Akira took them with him when he went home. The old bed isn't what I would call comfortable, it makes a gruesome noise with every movement, turning around to face the wall makes it sound like someone is strangling a mouse but the prospect of sleeping with him in the same bed negates all negative aspects.

“The light downstairs is still on.”
“Yeha, it's the only light we have, turning it off seems like a bad idea. No one will know anyway.”
Another squeaky noise is accompanied by a dip in the mattress, a weight settles next to me, the warmth of a blanket follows shortly after. I can't remember the last time I slept with another person, I think it was way back when I was a child but I don't know who the person was. Maybe my mother, maybe a playmate; both options make me incredibly sad.
“The others would be so shocked if they knew that you are not only alive but in my bed, I want to take a selfie right now and post it on the group chat without saying anything. Or maybe 'we are getting married'. That's perfect! Can I do that?”
“Definitely not. I don't want to be responsible for someone's heart attack and it's rude to terrify people like this.”
“You are no fun.”
“Goodnight, Akira.”
My voice might have been too firm but he's taking it with a lot of humour, his laugh surely is the only thing on earth that I will never get tired of. From now on I will do everything to ensure that I can listen to it as much as I want.

A sudden movement startles me, a firm pressure on my back suggests that he's leaning against me, closer and closer; not even air can fit into the space between us.
It feels exactly like I always imagined it, the warmth, tender but solid contact, intimacy that isn't frightening at all, not threatening and paralysing but calming, loving.
I can't think of any other person I would be willing to deliver myself up to in such a way, it's so easy to blindly put my trust in him and believe that I won't be harmed.
The silence is lulling me to sleep, I can't keep my eyes open for much longer. I hear him inhaling deeply, his presence still seems like a dream to me; it's so warm. I could get used to this but I know I shouldn't. We live so far apart, who knows how often we can see each other let alone be so close. I wish I could go with him, just for while. It's silly, why should he want me at his place, we are not much more than acquaintances. He smells so good, I wonder what it is. I hope Sojiro won't be mad at me for staying...
Thank you all for the kudos, they always make my day! Oh, and happy new year in advance!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“That's impossible!”
“Calm down.”
“Sojiro, he's lying right?”
What is this strange noise? Voices? Where am I? There's a window beside me.. this ceiling looks different..
“It's not funny, you don't joke about something like that! Stop it!”
“I'm not joking.”
Akira? Right, I'm in Akira's old room. My back hurts so much.
“Don't. Let him sleep.”
“Let go of me asap!”
Is that Futaba's voice? Why are they fighting? I have to get up and out of here, I can't let her see me. My legs hurt as well, sitting up is impossible, the mattress underneath me makes a loud sound when I try to roll out of bed.
“Oh my god, there really is someone.”
“Told you I'm not joking.”
Is this about me? No.. did he tell her? I'm not ready for this, I can't face her, I have to leave.
Looking around immediately kills the flame of resistance, there's no possible way out of the room except for the stairs, a quick glance out of the window crushes my last hope that I can just jump and run away.
A healthy person might make it unscratched but in my current state it's much more likely that I will suffer some damage and if I hurt my back or neck any further I won't be running, or walking, ever again.
“Hello?” Hello! Come down whoever you are!”
“Stop screaming, he needs to rest.”
“I don't give a crap! You can't tell me he's alive and then expect me to sit still!”
There's no reason to wait any longer, I can't hide here forever. I rather face her down there than in this suffocating space, at least that gives me the option to run for the door in case that the situation goes out of hand.
Standing up hurts as well, my body is stiff and numb, I can barely stand up straight or lift my legs to walk. Hopefully I won't fall down the stairs and really break my neck, I already traumatised her enough with my past actions, she doesn't need more experience with watching people die.
Bend forward, stretch your back muscles as far as possible, stand up, grab your knee and pull it against your stomach. Good, now the other one.
It's moments like this when I'm glad that they forced me to see a doctor, the road to getting social benefits was long and painful and there might not be much that can be done for me but learning how do deal with all of this makes it easier to get up in the morning instead of staying in bed all day long and contemplating a way out that involves throwing away the gift of surviving.
“That's it, I'm calling the others.”
“Yes won't.”
Finally seeing Akira makes all the pain worth it, I can't allow myself to mess it up by running away from his friends. Take a deep breath, the first step is always the hardest. I've gone through worse things, much worse, this is nothing more than a possibly unpleasant conversation and I had lots of them during the last 15 years, one more won't kill me. The arguing continues but I can't understand what they are saying; Akira's voice is low and quiet, Futaba sounds frantic, here and there is a short interception from Sojiro. I can already see them standing in the middle of the small Cafe, she's turned to the side and gesticulates furiously while the one person I truly care about is standing completely still with his back turned towards me. He's not trying to calm her down, to me it seems that he's blocking the way to the attic - I see, he's trying to protect me.

“Good morning Futaba-chan.”

Our rushed meeting yesterday evening gave me no chance to look at her directly; the first thing that my eyes fall on is her hair, it's shorter than it used to be, light green streaks are reflecting the morning light that falls through the window. She has grown quite a bit, still not to an average height for her age but it does make her seem much more like a teenager than a child, her boots are adding a few centimetres on top of it. Only on second glance do I spot her shocked expression that is slowly turning into hurt, tears are forming in her eyes. The first one falls and warps my initial worry into regret. It doesn't look like she was eager to give up on me and move on, I know the look in her eyes, years full of hope and praying that never let to anything, pain that seeped into her flesh and bones. This is not the image of someone who easily moved on, it's the raw portrait of a person that couldn't.

“You.. have been alive.. the whole time... and..”

Now she's openly crying, her small body shaken by the sheer force of her sadness, standing here and watching her fall apart because of me is the most heartbreaking moment I can imagine.

“Calm down.”

“Don't tell.. me wh.. what to do!”

Why is the air in the room so thick? Akira sounds disinterested, cold even, is this still because of their fight a few months ago? He said it was a small disagreement, it shouldn't drive him away so far that he's not willing to comfort her in the slightest.

“I should have contacted you all much sooner. I'm sorry.”

“Hell.. you should be! You.. dumbass.”

She's regaining her composure little by little, a few occasional sobs find their way out between deep breaths, the shaking is slowly ceasing.

“Ima hug you and you better deal with it.”

How could I argue with that? I don't feel particularly comfortable with the prospect of such close body contact but hurting her more by refusing would be too cruel. Even for me. Slender arms are wrapped around my middle in the blink of an eye, the sudden contact causes me to stiffen, yet I put my arms around her shoulders and let her weep into my chest. Never in my life would I have dared to dream about so many people caring enough about me that they will cry their eyes out when I return, everyone I ever knew was glad to see me leave; to get rid of me as fast as possible. I caused all of them so much misery and they still care so deeply about a bastard that deserved death more than anything else.

“Ann will faint when she hears that you are here. We have to get the team together and throw a party, a... 'I lived bitch' party.”

The laughter that echoes through to room is my own, it sounds foreign to me, clear and honest. I'm so happy that I could combust right here and now.

“You are not going to call anyone. Not through phone, not in person. You'll keep this to yourself.”

Akira's yaw is clenched tightly and his eyes are narrowed, it's the same look he wore when he told me that they couldn't accept his real self.
"What? Why? There's no way I'm keeping quiet, this is big news! So big that we have to call a news station and broadcast it world-wide or at least livestream it on the internet!"

"Please don't."

"That was a joke, Akechi. Ever heard of that? It's when the corners of your mouth should turn upwards and a sound come out of your throat. So, party in the evening?"

"I'm sorry but I can't. I live pretty far away, too far to come back here on the same day."

"Then stay, you can come over to my bunker and hang out until it's time to party."

"I have to go home, I need my medication."

"Medication?"

The situation is falling apart, I'm losing control. I never meant to tell anyone about this, I spoke before I could think. A lie, I need to make something up quickly. Migraines? Would that work?

"You don't have to say anything if you don't want to."

Akira's hand wraps around my own tenderly, his soft touch and the compassion in his eyes are overwhelming.

"I don't want to answer."

Am I in the wrong? Do I even have the right to dodge her questions after she accepted me back with open arms?

"Oh.. no problem! Give me your chat-id so we can keep in contact, the party is still on the menu we just postpone it until you feel ready. I'll add you to the group chat, we might not be a clique of justice-defenders anymore but we are still a lot of pretty awesome people. And you belong there."

Her face has went from joyous to broken in an instant, the only remaining warmth in the room comes from the hand that is tightly holding on to mine.

"Thank you. I promise I won't try to back out of it, you will get your party."

"YOU will get YOUR party!"

"Of course, sorry."

I can't help but laugh, this feels so much more like spending time with genuine friends than our former meetings ever have. They were nothing more than business to me, a necessary evil that I had to endure, or at least that's what I tried to convince myself of. Fighting with them side by side, being part of a team, having so many people around me who cared about and for each other - I often wished I was more than the guy who blackmailed them into spending time with him, that a little part of them actually enjoyed my company. But even if they did, the person I've been back then was nothing more than a fake image. A carefully crafted personality made up for a single purpose; to be loved by everyone.

My life never gave me the chance to make friends and I'm not even sure if I can trust enough to do it now, but I want to. They know me better than anyone else, they know what I have done, how I can be, and if they still want me back then I won't run away from it.

"Have you thought this through? If it's what you really want then I go along with it."

"Yes I have and yes I do."

"Fine. Let's keep going."

The Sakura family gets a wave from me and a nod from Akira, he's dragging me out so fast that I can't do much apart from grabbing my jacket. I have to thank Sojiro for his hospitality, maybe I can come back here next week and make it up to him.

December has become my least favourite month, it's cold and the sharp air is hurting my face, my ears already start to burn, a sharp pain travels along the pathways of my nerves.

Akira says nothing while we walk, he lets go of my hand only for a few seconds so I can put on my jacket and immediately takes it back into his, for a quick moment I'm wonder about what the people who pass us by might think about us, if they are getting the wrong idea, but then I remember that these things no longer matter; I don't have to uphold a reputation or be careful not to upset my fans.

He seems to be deep in thoughts, his expression is grim, it's obvious that he's angry about something and that can only be me. I shouldn't have agreed to the party, maybe I shouldn't have
been so friendly with her at all, there's a lot of tension between them and it must feel like I'm taking her side. I don't want to hurt him, I already betrayed him once.

“I'm sorry.”

“What for?”

“I should have turned her down instead of reacting so positively but I can't just push them away, it's the least I can do to offer some of my time if it really means so much to them.”

“Oh, no. I'm not angry with you, I know that you had to agree. If anything then I'm irritated by the way she was acting, it goes completely against her prior stance on you. It just doesn't make sense, something's not right. I'm afraid they will cause you trouble.”

“Her reaction was very spontaneous, it would be hard to fake.”

“Yeha, that's exactly what irritates me so much. Either she's a pretty good actor or I missed something important.”

If what he told me before is true then it really is concerning, she never left the impression on me that she's easily influenced by the heat of the moment and whenever she made up her mind she stuck to it. Maybe he was overly sensitive or misinterpreted their intentions, either that or they have a pre-made plan for this situation which would mean that he's right in his assumption that I'm running into a trap. Whether or not, I own this to them.

“It seems we just have to wait and see what happens.”

A deep and long hum is the only answer I get, maybe not a direct approval but better as a disagreement. I want to cherish the time with him and not waste it on arguments that would do nothing to resolve the uncertainty of the situation.

Our interwind hands fit together perfectly, it awakes a sense of safety and happiness that I can't logically describe and maybe I don't need to. I rarely get the chance to savour a moment without thinking about its meaning or hidden dangers, being here with him is a miracle that I can't afford to taint with such paranoia.

“Should I ignore your problems or is it okay if I offer my help when I think you might need it?”

It takes me a second to notice that I'm dragging my left leg; how embarrassing.

“I'm not sure about that myself. It makes me happy that you care enough to offer it but it makes me feel weak and pathetic as well. I want to meet you on eye level, as an equal. I can't do that if I'm constantly relying on you or - when you pity me.”

“How is it pitying you when I'm trying to make your life easier and prevent you from hurting yourself? But if that's really a big problem for you then we can make an exchange out of it, I help you and you help me.”

“With what?”

His tone of voice when he said the last few words, I can already hear the incoming innuendo.

“You know, this and that. You have needs, I have needs.”

“I knew it!”

My outburst attracts the attention of every person in our general vicinity, his booming laughter draws even more eyes to us, there's no way I can hide the blush that is undoubtedly spreading across my face.

“I'm sorry if I overstep some boundaries but I missed this so much. Just tell me if it makes you feel uncomfortable, I don't want to do anything that stresses you out.”

“No, it's fine, I know you are joking. Please don't stop, I missed this probably as much as you did.”

“Good. To get back to our initial conversation, you could take care of Mona. Next week I have to work the night shift three days in a row, it doesn't make much sense to drive all the way home, sleep for two hours, and then drive back to work. I can sleep there so it would spare me a lot of stress.”

“What kind of bar gives you the option to sleep there? That sounds shady.”

“It's not a brothel if that's what you're thinking of, the owner lives directly above it and he has a spare room that I can use for free. The guests love me so he's basically funding his own business with it.”
“Are you sure it's a good idea to stay with a stranger? Or are you two friends?”
“Nothing like that but I'm not really concerned about my safety, he's an old man that can barely stay awake for longer than an hour let alone walk without help. There's no need to worry.”
“If you say so. Still, please be careful.”
“Sure thing.”

Chapter End Notes

Are you ready for some quality Mona-time? I sure as hell am.

Next up on this mess of a fanfic: Goro hates his life, Akira needs therapy, everyone needs a hug.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

I had to cut the Mona part or else I wouldn't have been able to get this chapter out, my personal life is a bit unfortunate at the moment so I had very little time to write and edit. Please forgive me, I promise to be better in the future。

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I hate train rides, being jammed together with countless people, all of them trying to fit into a space that could barely hold half of them is one of my worst social nightmares; my stomach feels more and more upset and my lungs are constricting.

Akira's chest is pressed against my back, the warmth that felt so comfortable only a few hours earlier has now become an additional burden, it's overly hot and physically demanding, his left arm holds me in a tight embrace in order to keep me on my feet.

We are stuck in the middle of the compartment, there is nothing I can hold on to, only his firm grip prevents me from stumbling into the person next to me whenever the train stops or speeds up.

I'm so glad that his balance is much better than mine, I wouldn't be here under normal circumstances, getting on a train that is so cramped is intimidating for different reasons, all of them being good enough to make me wait for the next train, or maybe the one after that. I lost so much time just by waiting for empty trains, less passengers, more space to breath.

It's nice of him to escort me, I just wish I would have thought about it a little bit longer instead of agreeing so blindly, I have no plan for this kind of situation nor can I think of something to get rid of him before we arrive at my place.

He will be disappointed, he's surely going to look down on me when he sees where I live, how I live, my tiny one-room flat is stuffed with boxes and items, I haven't cleaned properly in weeks and can't even offer him something to eat, all I have in my fridge are leftovers from two days ago and a cucumber that has seen much better days.

“That's our stop, right?”

“Yes.”

Maybe I can get away with saying goodbye in front of the station, there's really no need for him to come along further, he lives in the opposite direction and probably has to ride all the way back to Setagaya before he can get on the train to his place.

We forge ahead, a small path through the never-ending sea of people, I hold on to his jacket while he shoves a young woman out of the way with more strength than what I consider necessary, she stumbles a few steps before turning around, obviously very enraged.

“You asshole! Is this how you treat a lady?”

Akira freezes, this is not good. I have to do something, I already caused him enough problems, I can't let him get into a fight in the middle of a train station.

“I have to apologise for my friend, I was feeling quite unwell and he tried to get me out of there as fast as possible. He didn't mean to be so rude.”

My most charming and calming smile appears quicker than I would have thought, I even bow down as far as I can even though it hurts my back and makes my head spin.

“You look like I care? I'm talking to that guy, not his boy-toy.”

“Where is the lady you are talking about, is she hiding behind you? I want to apologise to her.”

He gets on his toes like he's trying to look over her shoulder, his head turning from side to side, a
dead serious expression on his face. Don't laugh, get a grip on yourself, you will only cause more trouble. “How dare you!”

The burst of laughter that escapes me so easily sets my insides on fire, only a small part of the reason is embarrassment, the much bigger piece is the sheer hilarity of her reaction, how red her face has turned, how she's trying to look intimidating; the shit eating grin the man next to me is sporting tips me over the edge. I haven't laughed this hard in years, I know it's not nice to have fun on other peoples expenses but at least I don't pretend to be a nice person, not as hard as I used to, and she deserves it anyway.

“She looks like she's about to explode, lets go before that happens. I really don't want to witness it.” He's dragging me away, one arm loosely draped over my shoulder that it still shaking with uncontrollable laughter, my sides hurt so much and I'm running out of air; this must be the best feeling a human can experience.

“So, lead the way.”

“Oh no, that's not necessary. I'm sure you want to get home before dark. Give me your number, I text you mine so we can talk about the Mona-sitting when you are back at your place.”

Blue eyes are searching my face, I nervously fumble around in my pocket to retrieve my phone and turn it on, I'm confronted with the same intense gaze that always looked right through me in the past.

“I won't judge. Actually, I'm very sure your place is a four-star hotel compared to mine.”

“One room in a rundown house isn't what I would call a hotel, it's more a doya than anything else.”

“And? I lived in a doya for three months, a home is a home and I don't care how yours looks like. I just want to be with you for a little bit longer.”

The few weeks I had to stay in one where horrible, calling that a home is either a very cruel joke or comes from someone who lost all standards. I know how I got there, being completely alone broke my neck, but he has friends and family, no matter how problematic their relationship was I'm sure they would have supported him enough to prevent him from hitting rock bottom. Then again, I really don't know much about him or the circumstances while I've been gone; the little bits of information he was willing to share are surely not the only factors that made his life so hard.

“But you said you got your own flat, how did you manage to end up in such a place?”

“Miscalculation. I had a job when I moved out of my parents house, lost it two months later, sold half of my belongings to get by but couldn't find a new job that payed well enough to afford the rent. My contract was terminated before I found a cheaper place, I had nowhere to go and ended up on the streets. Mona was really pissed about it.”

“That's so unlike you. How could you miscalculate this badly?”

“Don't know. Guess I was sophomoric, thought I had everything under control until it was too late. I honestly didn't care much about planing and keeping things in order, I took one day at a time.”

“I get what you mean, I just don't understand how it came to this. You've never been the kind of person who runs into trouble completely unprepared, all of your strategies were flawless.”

“Life isn't a palace or mementos. It's much more complicated than winning a battle or stealing a treasure, even that was only possible because a lot of brains were involved in the planning, a single person is bound to fail at times. Doesn't matter, I'm back on my feet. Can we go now? I'm freezing.”

There really is no good reason to debate this any further, I was already defeated when I allowed him to get on the train with me.

“If you insist.”

All I wish for is that my landlord isn't anywhere close by, I owe him four months of rent, he might kick me out instantly or even worse, he might think that I'm prostituting myself. I never brought anyone home, it must be very suspicious to see me entering the house in the company of a complete stranger. My neighbours won't care either way, they have enough problems of their own,
that's the only good aspect I can think of. The little side street is empty and dull as always, cloths are dangling out of several windows, a gruff looking dog that is leashed to a bicycle barks at us from the distance. You can already see that it's an upscale neighbourhood, only high income and successful people live here, like the car thief from next door who spends more time in police custody than at home, or the old man from across the street who's only income is livelihood protection that barely covers his rent and food for half of the month. Not that I'm better off, there's nothing left of my savings, Akira must already know that much just by looking around.

My hand is shaking much harder than usual, the fear of his judgement, the disgust he must feel, how far I've fallen in contrast to him, someone with a decent home even if it's small, a stable job and income. I understand if he doesn't want to stay in contact after seeing this, I'm sure he doesn't want to get this kind of attention should his co-workers or neighbours catch wind of him spending his time with a guy who lives in this district.

"Here we are. Like you can see, it really is a four-star hotel. Mould and assorted insects are included in the price, no extra charges."

Humour is the only way I know how to deal with this, crying gets you nowhere but humour takes the edges off of terrible situations, no one can make fun of you when you beat them to the punch.

"It's unique, has its own charm, I like it."

"Wait until you see the interior."

The last few steps after entering the house and crossing the small hallway are by far the hardest I've made in the last 10 or so years, the paint on the walls is falling off, the floor is dirty and I'm pretty sure I just heard a rat squeaking behind one of the doors. I pray to god that it wasn't mine. A rattling sound, the door opens slowly, revealing the room that is barely big enough to fit a small bed, something that used to be a table, a little fridge and a second-hand stove. Cardboard boxes cover most of the floor, they are holding the few remains of my former life, everything that's left of me.

White paint reflects the bit of daylight that sneaks its way through the closed shutters, I don't open them anymore, the view from my window is even more depressing than the room itself, looking outside makes it impossible to pretend that I'm not in the shittiest part of town.

Akira closes the door and looks around, his expression gives nothing away but mild curiosity, no sign of disgust so far, not that I expected anything else. His ability to contain his emotions were always top-notch, even I was envious of it.

"It's not as bad as you made it sound. Sure, it's rundown and claustrophobic but apart from that pretty decent. Mine is a bit bigger and in a less bedraggled house but it's still a nice place, I lived in worse."

"Mr. high society gave me his blessings, I feel honoured."

"Oh come on, don't be like that. I said it's nice."

Two steps are enough to cross the short distance between us, his arms find their way around me, his clear laughter lifts the dark cloud that was hanging over my head since I woke up; he's rocking us gently, a soothing and loving gesture that I appreciate more than I'm willing to admit.

"I suggest that you sit Mona at my place, who knows what he would catch from the cats in this neighbourhood."

A wonderful high-pitched cry that he makes when I pinch his ribs is even better at lifting my mood than his laughter could ever be.
homeless, all of them are single man, some are criminals but the majority are just normal people. You get one room that is very small and often a bit dirty, there's only one shared bathroom and kitchen, no identification is needed. It's the bare minimum that you need to survive, really not a nice place to live in but better than sleeping on the streets.

'Normal' residents of a doya-gai are usually on the poverty-line, they live from livelihood protection or similar low income benefits/jobs – a lot of them are either old, mentally/physically ill or severely disabled, basically everyone who's unable to be a productive member of society and there's a lot of stigma against people who live in these districts.

Stay tuned for more useless information about being broke in Japan!
Chapter 6

Thank you all so much for the comments and kudos, I'm really glad you like the story! I'm pouring my everything into it but I'm so afraid it might be too boring to read, it's made of nothing but everyday situations and talking, I understand that it's probably uninteresting to a lot of people so if just one person enjoys it then I'm more than happy!

My time is very limited at the moment but I finally finished the chapter, it's longer than the last one, I hope that it's enough of a compensation for the endless wait. I want to assure you all that I'll never abandon this fic, it's definitely going to be updated even if it takes some time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Uhm, can I flop down on your bed? I'm not sure where else to sit, the floor looks a bit... desolate.”
“Sure, and leave your shoes on. I don't have slippers, you might actually hurt yourself if you walk around barefoot.”
The various items and boxes that are covering the floor are making it hard for him to find a way to my bed, he's tiptoeing around in the same graceful and skilled way that I remember from our time in the Metaverse.
“Care to explain how you managed to stack up so much money to get by until now? Interviews might pay well but you were only a local kind-of-idol, I don't buy it that you've become a millionaire with that. Not that this – looks like a mansion or anything.”

He's gesticulating around, it would make me angry if anyone dares to speak to me in such a way but somehow it's not as bad when he does it. Maybe it's because I know that he wouldn't be so cruel to mock me like this, maybe it's just that I want to believe he wouldn't.

“I had enough for the first few months, it would have lasted longer had I not moved out of my old flat. I can't remember that time so why I did it in the first place is a mystery to me as well, I can only assume that I felt the need to go to ground. My new home was way too expensive, I kept it for about 6 months and it swallowed most of my money; I wasn't doing well mentally and physically, I lost track of my finances quite quickly.”
“And? How do you pay your bills now?”
“That depends on what you mean by bills, I have electricity but I haven't paid rent in months. It's only a matter of time before I get kicked out. I get social benefits but most of the money goes elsewhere.”
“Are you an alcoholic or something?”
“No! I – spend it on medication. The ones that I don't get from my doctor, or not in the amount that I actually need. It's complicated.”

Since when do I use this excuse? No matter how desperately I want to be honest with him, we just met and he already knows way too much, if I put even more on top of this tower it will collapse and crush me under its weight. It's better for our relationship if I keep some things to myself, there isn't a good reason for him to know anyway.
“I have time, explain.”
“Why should I? Why do you even care?”
My bed arches when he gets up, there's tension in his yaw, fire and something close to anger in his eyes, overshadowed by a touch of hurt, his body looks stiff, posed like he's ready to launch forward.
“You are the one who came looking for me, you wanted to get back in contact and now you are angry that I care about you? What exactly did you think would happen, that you apologise to me, I scream at you, and that's it? Did you plan on leaving right after easing your conscience?”

So that's what he thinks, he's as insecure and distrusting as me. I don't want to fight with him, I don't want to hurt him in any way. This might be my last chance to make things right, to be a part of his life in the future, and I'm about to waste it because I'm an idiot who's too afraid of other people's judgement.

“Of course not. I never thought you would want to keep in contact but that doesn't mean that I'm unhappy about this unexpected development. I'm sorry for being difficult, it's a very private matter that I'm not proud of.”
“Good, got it. But running away from it will make you end up on the streets, or worse, depending on what's really going on. I can't help you if you don't talk to me.”

His words are still laced with anger, frustration, it makes me furious. I don't need him to take care of me, I need no one, I'm more than fine on my own. He and his stupid compulsion to stick his nose into other people's business, that might work on his friends but he should know by now that I'm not up for it. Stay calm, keep it together, don't scream at him. He's trying to be nice and supportive, he's not attacking you nor is he implying that you can't take care of yourself. Don't put words into his mouth, focus on what he says and not what you think he means.

“I'm fine, thank you.”
“You just said that you are about to get kicked out, that doesn't sound like 'fine' to me. I can find you a new place to stay but you have to sort out your expenses, I would pay for your rent if I could but I barely make enough to afford food for both Mona and me.”

Never, I would never take his money. It's sweet of him to say that, I'm grateful for his willingness to share what little he has but I feel sick just by thinking about it. No one gives you money for free, I know that for a fact, they will demand something in return when you least expect it.

“I'm not going to let you pay for anything, I would rather die on the streets than depend on you or anyone else. I do appreciate the help, finding a flat that I can afford is nearly impossible if I don't stay in this district, which I would like to avoid.”
“Well, you could move in with me. We share a bed, I feed you pancakes in the morning, you welcome me home in a maid outfit...”

His stupid jokes, I shouldn't grin but I can't help it. He's smiling at me, taunting, charming, body posture relaxed, both hands inside his coat pockets. Let's see if I can wipe that smile off of his face.

“If that's what you want then you should have stayed with your teacher slash hostess.”
“Not bad, didn't see that one coming.”
Still smiling, what a bastard. At least his eyes are wide with surprise, I count that as a win.
“Goro, I - just want you to know that seeing you again after thinking you might be dead for two years is the best thing that happened to me in a long time, that I get another chance to be with you is more than I ever hoped for. So, now that I know where you live I can finally go back home, I'm dead tired and haven't told Mona where I am, he's probably furious by now.”
“Wait, what about 'I want to be with you a little longer'? Did you come here just to get my
“Yep. I wanted to make sure that you can't ditch me so easily, I've already seen you vanishing into thin air and I'm not going to risk that again. The chance to follow your trail is higher when I know where you live, at least that's a good place to start compared to not having a single clue about your private life.”
“Unbelievable. I give you my number, text me about the whole Mona-sitting.”
“No need, I already have it. See you soon!”

He's gone before I can say anything, what a fucking dick, he must have looked through my phone while I was asleep. I guess he always makes sure that he gets what he wants, I don't know why I expected anything else from him.

I kick off my shoes and carefully lay down on my bed, the old worn-down mattress screams in frustration while I try to find a comfortable position.

The last two days seem so unreal, like a dream that my mind has made up to make me feel better, nothing more than a sweet illusion. It was the first time we had the opportunity to be together all alone, without his friends, without someone interrupting. I never thought something like this could happen to me, that I get him all to myself, the guy who had more friends than anyone else I knew, who's phone contained more numbers than several people's combined. Every time I imagined how he must be like as an adult I've seen him in a circle of countless friends, often happily engaged, it made so much sense to me considering how social he was and how many girls were clearly smitten by him.

It's sad that none of it came true, that he ended up so isolated. So much like me. My only wish during the past years was for him to be happy, how foolish to think that anything I wish for could ever come true.

Not much light is left, the night approaches fast, turns everyday objects into freighting figures, dancing shadows and unknown fears. I feel heavy and exhausted, travelling so far is much harder than I remember it being. Only five minutes, I can rest for five minutes, I'm not going to miss anything....

..yonde iru mune no dokoka oku de..

My phone? Why is it so hot? My hand finds the small table lamp next to my bed and turns it on, the light hurts my eyes, my head is pounding viciously. I'm still wearing my jacket, that's why I'm drenched in sweat. Gross.

The ringing doesn't stop, it's quieter than it should be, the sound seems to come from every direction at once. I stumble to my feet only to hit my right knee on the table that stands way too close, getting down on the ground hurts my shoulder but at least I found my phone. It must have fallen out of my pocket and right under my bed.

An unknown number. No, I'm not picking up. Who could call me so late in the evening? I can feel my heartbeat hammering in my throat, the panic grows quickly. Wait – I forgot about Akira. Why is he calling, can't he write a simple message? My hand rings off the call before I can think about it, I don't want to talk right now. I need new cloths and a shower, everything is sticking to me, even my hair feels wet; how disgusting.

PING

Finally, he could have done that right from the start.

[Hey there sexy, it's me. Your intelligent, good looking, very charming old friend]
[I think you have the wrong number, I don't know anyone who fits this description.]
[Ouch. Did I interrupt you by something nice? Anyway, I have a favour to ask. Could you send me a selfie? Preferably in your underwear. Mona doesn't believe me that you are alive he thinks I've
gone insane]
[Tell him he's right. And I highly doubt that he needs to see me in my underwear in order to believe you.]
[Nono he does, it's the only way]
[I send you one and I'll wear as many cloths as possible.]
[
Damn, I look horrible. Maybe I can hide it with a close up, if I open the ponytail then I can cover half of my shoulders and parts of my face, the lightning should be bad enough to make the image blurry and hard to see. Just get the jacket off, wipe your face, good. That'll have to do.

IMAGE SEND
[You look beautiful with your hair let down. The ponytail is cute and all but this is really stunning, the long hair suits you well]

It's hard to tell through text but this sounds different than the rest, more sincere, open; serious. My heart grows warm yet heavy, does he really mean it or is it merely the way he speaks to everyone? You don't tell other guys that they are stunning, it's inappropriate for someone who dates women. Or is it different when you say it to a friend? Maybe it's actually normal, I should look into it to make sure that I'm not misinterpreting something.

[Thank you. What about the sitting, when and where do you expect me to show up?]
[I see, right down to business. Next week Tuesday to Thursday, I send you the coords in a sec]
[Byw Mona is dead. He literally died after seeing your photo good job you killed my cat]
[“Glad to have you back Crow” there, he threatened to bite me when I refused to send it]

I don't want to cry, not now. He's acting like I'm still part of their team, like I was a part of it to begin with, exactly like Futaba did. I don't deserve it, I wouldn't be happy if the roles were reversed, I would kill that person with my own two hands instead of opening my arms and welcome them back; they are all much better people than I could ever be.

[Please tell him “thank you”. I have to go to bed, goodnight.]

The phone is shut down before he gets the chance to reply, I can't take more of this, it doesn't matter if it's the truth or just a pretty lie, reading it is enough to bring on a burst of nausea and the need to slam my head against the nearest wall. Stupid, they are all stupid, they have always been and still are. I should go to sleep and forget that this conversation ever happened, maybe I can pretend that he send me the necessary information and nothing else, it was just a professional exchange so I can be true to my words. It's better this way.

…

Three days have past so quickly, now it's only a matter of a few hours before I can finally see him again.

I've got my medication, laptop, cloths for three days, a bottle of water, and my phone. Everything should be ready, all that's left is to actually make it to his home. Thinking about a six hour long train ride and having to change lines four times automatically leads to the idea to go back into hiding, luckily that seems a bit too extreme, at least for now. Let's see how I feel about it maybe two hours from now on, when I'm stuck between countless strangers and on the verge of vomiting because of the train's motion. Why did I agree to this again?

[Mornin' honey, I hope you slept well. I for one couldn't, I'm way too excited about the prospect of looking into your beautiful eyes]
His sickly sweet good morning message is only a small retribution for what is about to come, still, I can't help but be grateful for all the nice words and attention he's giving me, I never felt so wanted and appreciated, maybe even loved.

Love? That might be an exaggeration, he's just happy to see me and tries to show it, I shouldn't overrate it like this, it's not going to do me any good if I get lost in the thought that he might feel stronger for me than he does for his other friends, that he likes me more, that I'm special.

Who knows how long this will last, how long it will take for me to drive him away or anger him enough to turn his back on me, I don't want to be crushed by the realisation that I hung on to a dream.

It makes me scared that I could lose him so easily when I'm already attached to him, and I know that I am, he hooked me with his kindness; I'm the one to blame for all the pain that might already be waiting right around the corner.

I feel physically unwell although the trains where only moderately packed and the way from the station to his house rather short, I'm tired, hungry, and pissed off since that guy tried to hit on me.

People these days are so indecent, who would flirt with a random person while they are waiting in line to buy a coffee? And he looked much older than me, what a bloody creep, I'm just glad that I didn't freak out. It's so scary, why can't people mind their own business and quit these unwanted advances? Then again, Akira did the same basically right from the start and it never bothered me much. Maybe because he wasn't pushy, it seemed more like a teasing joke and less like something that made me worry about his motives and the potential danger he could be.

I'm standing in front of his place and stare at it for god knows how long, if someone sees me they will think that I'm planning a break-in or am about to vandalise the building; I should keep going before someone calls the cops on me.

The house looks very nice, actually it's more an apartment complex than a normal house, much like the one I used to live in back then. This is nowhere near what he described, it's neither run down nor old, I would even say it's fairly new, build around 5 years ago, and with a heavy western flare. Cream-coloured bricks, a tiny but well groomed garden next to the entrance, the soft smell of chrysanthemums fills the air, this place is certainly on the more expensive side.

None of the name tags are fainting, ripped, or missing - no wonder he's short on money, a flat in this house must cost a fortune. I understand that he doesn't want to live in a place like mine but there were several streets not too far from here that looked much cheaper and very decent as well, there's no point in paying more than you really have to.

My finger finds the right doorbell, no sound can be heard, the house is either well build or he lives on one of the upper floors in which case I hope there's an elevator and that it's functional, I'm way too tired and sour to walk more than a few steps.

“Second floor, I'm waiting!”

Jumpiness is annoying and embarrassing, my whole body flinches, I really haven't expected that, I haven't even seen the intercom. It must be hidden under the faceplate, a closer look reveals two small slits on either side of it.

Pushing through the door is so easy, it opens smoothly, soundless, the material under my hands is cold and clean, nothing feels dirty, nothing is sticky; this really is heaven compared to my place.

But why did he lie about it? Hasn't he thought about the possibility that I might visit him or does he really think that this isn't much better than the house I live in?

Even the entrance looks so nice, there's no trash nor rat noises, the paint on the walls isn't falling off and there are tiny plants next to every window, the staircase is equally clean and shining.

“Finally, you made it! I was worried, you are over an hour late and no calls were going through.” Akira, in all his glory and smugness, stands in front of his door, dressed completely in black, tight jeans, a stand-up collar shirt with a decent dark-grey pattern, the only touch of colour is a thin red
cravat made of silk. I doubt that he's all dressed up just for me, could this be his work attire?
“I know, dashing. Please don't faint in the face of such blinding beauty, I would hate for the paramedics to interrupt our reunion.”
“Sure, Mr. fancy, I'll keep it together. I missed the connecting train, that's why I'm late, and my battery died before I reached Tokyo. No need to freak out.”
“You can't blame me, I've seen you riding a train and it looked very problematic. I would have come and pick you up but considering that I have to get to work, and then work the whole night, that didn't seem like a good idea. I'm sorry.”

His overconfident smile has turned into a rueful one, shoulders slumped, eyes cast downwards. It hurts me to see him like this, it's not his fault that I have these problems so there's no need to apologise.
“It's fine, I said I wanted to help out and there's nothing you could have done to stop me. And, to be honest with you, staying in this place already feels like a vacation.”
A bright and beautiful smile spreads across his face and reaches his eyes, they are sparkling with energy, happiness, wrinkling at the corners. This is the look that I want to see on him, not the grim expression he made last week nor the sadness that seems to come and go like the ocean waves on a stormy night.
“You like it, that's great. Come in, no need to give the neighbours more fuel for their gossip.”
“What did you do?”
“Nothing, they are just envious of my good looks. Now come in, Mona is still out on his evening walk but should be back any minute. Oh, and I got you special slippers!”
My shoes aren't even completely off before a pair of fuzzy white slippers with bunny ears are dangling right in front of my face, accompanied by the most mischievous grin I've ever seen.
“They had a matching bathrobe as well, it's teasingly short and comes with a little bunny tail.”
“Did you get it for me? I would love to take a long hot shower, a comfortable robe sounds perfect. What a shame that you won't be able to see it, I guess I have no choice but to take care of myself without your help.”

I know I'm gambling with high stakes, focusing on putting the slippers on as seductively as possible makes my knees go weak, it would ruin the show if I look at him directly so I peak up slightly, the most innocent little smile on my lips; how far can I go with this?
His mouth is slightly open, eyes half closed and glossed over, he's looking straight at me and yet it's clear that he's lost inside his own fantasies. Good, notes taken.
“The balcony, I have - Mona will – excuse me for a second.”
Such a horse voice, his gait looks a bit unsteady when he walks through the short hallway and vanishes behind the corner that presumably leads to his living room, it's so hard to contain the laugh that is about the burst through.
Hell, this floor looks expensive. Dark wood, polished so you can see yourself in it, no dents, all smooth and shiny. There's a small open wardrobe made out of the same wood, a sideboard underneath it, decorated with what seems to be a glass butterfly, a blue shimmer is visible in the spots where the light hits it.
This is not what I expected after listening to him the last time we talked, someone who seemed so down, someone who talked about failures that usually lead to - someone like me. He did say he's doing good but I never thought he means it like this, I was sure it's the normal 'I'm good' talk that I regularly give to everyone.
Why hasn't he told his friends about this? I see no reason to lie, he might not be studying but he's obviously quite successful with what he does, there's nothing to be ashamed about or get criticized for. My jacket comes off easily, the heavy weight from the only expensive piece in my cabinet is finally lifted from my shoulders; it fits perfectly next to his.

I make my way through the entrance area, past an open door that seems to belong to the bathroom,
I can only catch a small glimpse at the interior and from what little I see it looks equally fancy, and right into a huge living room with a kitchen area and dining table. A black and white modern living room cabinet is standing across from a generous balcony, a flat-screen TV is hanging in the open space between the upper part of the cabinet and the low-board underneath. The leather sofa in front of it looks fairly new and so does the coffee-table, two large paintings and a framed city map are adding a touch of personality, a small bookshelf is filled to the brim with what looks like thick specialised literature. I'm curious to see what kind it is. 

The mahogany dining table reflects the light from the window, a vase with a colourful bouquet of flowers brings on a warm and domestic feeling, a floral patterned tea cup is patiently waiting for someone to hold it gently.

“Not bad, right?”

“It's – I'm speechless. Is this really your place or did you break in and only pretend that it's yours?”

“I'm hurt, of course it's mine. I said I'm doing good.”

“Yes, and you said that you barely have enough money to buy food. How on earth can you afford this? The initial payment alone must have been ridiculous.”

“Sure as hell was. The normal rent isn't much of a problem, my other expenses are. I was homeless and had two choices, crawling back to my parents or get money from somewhere. The first wasn't an option so I picked the latter.”

“Don't tell me you went to a loan shark. Was it really that bad with your parents, bad enough to take money from someone who can easily ruin your life for good?”

“Yes. I don't regret my decision, I was able to get into this place, buy furniture, cloths, and food for months. Sure, I'm a bit short on cash right now but that's going to change in four months, my loan is nearly paid off. And, isn't this impressive? Like I said, only slightly better than your place.”

“I knew it, your completely legal bartender job sure as hell isn't shady as fuck! And why are you dicking around with me, do you get off on this? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Anger often comes by suddenly, it can be triggered by all sorts of emotions, negative ones and on occasions even positive ones. In this case it's the first, I feel like he's messing around with me, he consciously lied, made me come here, and for what? To rub his success in my face?

“There's the real Goro, the one who curses and flips his shit. I hoped this would work, makes all the afford that I put into pretending worth it.”

“What? You did that to provoke me?”

“Yep, sorry. I've seen your real self in the engine room and I thought that you've learned to stop pretending but then I met you and you were still at it. Pompous, overly well-spoken, the same fucking actor that you used to be. I want the real you and if I have to force it out then fine, why not?

By the way, my job is legal. I just happen to work at a pretty popular place and the owner has a flat above the club, what I left out was that he owns the whole building. The base wage isn't that impressive but it's easy to double it, sometimes even triple. Told you the guests love me, especially the ladies, and no I don't sleep with them. I'm not good with relationships, what I'm good at is blinding and beguiling people. Big asset in my line of work. I never explicitly lied to you, keep that in mind, I only left out some information and downplayed this and that.”

“I'm seriously trying to be angry with you but I find myself oddly impressed. You fought your way back to the top, made good use of your talents, and actually built something with it. Congratulations, you are my past self.”

“I can't tell if you are being sarcastic or complimenting me.”

“Maybe both, I haven't decided yet.”

“Crow!”

A lanky black cat jumps from the balcony railing and runs towards me, wouldn't it be for the fact that it just spoke I would think it's an ordinary pet that is about to attack me for invading its
territory.
"You really are alive."
His big eyes hold as many emotions as a cat can manage, tail whipping from side to side, the small
body is trembling.
"Long time no see."
No one says a word, Mona is staring at me wide-eyed, Akira looks at him with an expression that
is hard to decipher. I'm not sure if it's positive, there's a hint of something dark, a touch of eeriness.
"Well then, I'm taking my leave. Make yourself at home, the fridge is packet with food and water,
tea and coffee are already done as well, and I made you Awayukikan. I hope you are into sweets."
"You made it yourself? That wasn't necessary but thank you, I appreciate the gesture."
"No problem, hope it's tasty. Call me if something goes wrong or you feel unwell, I can ditch my
shift and come right back."
"Don't worry, I'll be fine. Travel safe and stay out of trouble, I'm not going to bail you out of jail."
"Hey, I'm an upright citizen, haven't been in legal trouble for months. I'm off now, speak to you
later."
He's gone before I can ask what kind of legal trouble he means, the door makes a soft click
followed by the sound of keys locking it; Mona is still silently observing me, the atmosphere is
strange and uncomfortable.
"So. I help myself to some tea, do you want anything? Milk perhaps?"
"I'm good."
I smile at him despite the sinking feeling that's slowly settling inside my stomach, a heavy weight,
hot and painful, relentlessly burning its way through my body.

"Ann left a voice-mail the day after you and Akira met, she said that Futaba had showed up at her
workplace and broke down crying but refused to tell her what's going on. She thought that it might
be about a boy but Futaba insisted on her asking Akira, now she's sure that he did something
wrong."
The teacup in my hands nearly falls to the floor, I can hold on to it in the last second before its life
would shatter on the hard wooden floor.

"I hope he clarified it."
"He hasn't, he didn't react to it at all. Haru called as well and I'm sure everyone else knows about it
too, I tried to convince him to talk to them but to no avail. All he said was that he has to keep you
save even when it means to never speak to them again."
"Futaba will tell them sooner or later, there's no need to make it more complicated than it already
is."
"Don't tell me, I know that. He's way too stubborn for his own good, he made up his mind and
there's nothing I can do to change it, it's one of his most annoying traits. And – I think he might use
it as an excuse to avoid them. He wanted this for a long time, you gave him a valid reason even if it
doesn't make sense to anyone but him."
This must be about what he told me, maybe I can get some additional information from Mona, just
to be on the safe side before I form my own opinion.

„I wonder what happened that triggered this reaction, he told me about their fights and how they
make him feel but that surely isn't enough to warrant such a drastic change of heart. What I'm most
cconcerned about are the negative tendencies he's displaying. Hostility and aggression are a very
bad combination and I can see both inside him. I don't know what to make of it or how to react
whenever it's shining through, I'm not a very calm person myself and I fear I could make it worse."
Mona jumps on the kitchen counter next to me, I place the cup in front of the boiling cattle,
avoiding his burning gaze as much as I can. Something seems off, not quite right, the uneasiness inside me grows stronger. Why do I feel cornered by him? We are merely talking.

“It’s the same for me but he’s still a good guy, he took care of me all these years and made sure that I have everything I need. He sold his school books, cloths, took one bad job after another just to buy me food and pay the bills. The number of people he cares about has decreased drastically, it was a slow process and although I’ve seen it happen I couldn’t do anything, he refused to listen to me. It’s not that he made something up, he just started to judge differently, a lot harder than he used to. Some of it was justified but a lot wasn’t.”

Mona's ears are hanging low in front of him, his head is downcast, tail tightly wound around his body; his whole posture is screaming hurt and defeat. Is there something I could have done to prevent this, would it be different if I had made myself known sooner?

“I get that it must have been hard for him, I can't imagine how it must feel to be pressured and left alone by the people you thought would always be there for you. I'm still afraid that I caused all of this, he told me it's not my fault, that my disappearance was only a small drop in a sea of water; still, I can't shake the feeling that I did this to him.”

“You are very good at blaming yourself for things that have nothing to do with you, just because you've been somewhat involved doesn't mean that everything is automatically about you. Stop it. It's true that your death hit him hard, it was definitely a catalyst of some sort, a lot of things could have been, it was only a matter of time. It happened earlier because of you but it would have happened anyway, he should have gone to therapy right after Mementos was gone. That's the main problem if you ask me; what he has gone through was way too much to handle for a teenager, especially with all the stress that came after that.”

“But the others have gone through the same, I got the impression that they are fine.”

“They haven't. Akira has his own personal experiences that none of the others made. Ann is the same, she had her unique problems to deal with, she found a therapist to help her with the things Kamoshida did to her. She got help for her problems, he didn't. Not until it was already too late.”

“I'm glad she's doing better, such an experience is hard to deal with on your own. What about Akira, if it wasn't my disappearance then what was it that he couldn't cope with?”

“Oh – I don't know if I should talk about that, it's up to him if he wants you to know certain things. What I can tell you is that the interrogation took a big toll on him, a few months passed before the effects began to show clear enough to really notice them so not many people have seen it, he was already back at his parent's place and they aren't the most caring people in the world. First he had occasional panic attacks, mostly at school, then came nightmares. It wasn't too bad in the beginning, maybe two or three nightmares per week and he could go back to sleep right after waking up. The frequency increased, four times a week, five, until he had several every night. He woke up screaming or crying, that lead to him not sleeping for days which made the panic attacks worse. He couldn't concentrate, his grades dropped; people began to talk behind his back and I tell you it was nothing nice. He ditched school every few days after he had a panic attack in the middle of PE lesson, everyone was laughing about him struggling for air and nearly passing out, you really don't want to know which nickname they gave him. There's a lot more to say but you should ask him about it, I don't feel comfortable telling you without his consent. I think he got so obsessed with finding you because he needed something to hold on to, an important task that kept him going no matter how hard his day was. You became the only person he thought would really understand him, the only one who cared about him in the way he needed it, someone who wouldn't judge or reject him. I tried to be that person but I failed.”

It's strange to hear that he's battling with mental problems even though it should have been obvious to me, the way he acted when we met surely spoke for itself. This is much more serious than what I anticipated, I was still hoping he's just disillusioned and not that there are actual problems worth
of professional help. Still, something doesn't add up. Mona blames it on the interrogation and general stress while Akira blames it on his friends and society, could it be a mix of both or is he hiding his true feelings and thoughts from his cat?

“No one could have been, you did nothing wrong. Problems don't vanish just because there's someone who gives you what you want, it's never going to be enough, never going to be what you actually need. Wanting and needing are two different things, he wanted a quick fix and that's not what he needed.”
“Sounds like you are speaking from experience.”
“I do. I learned a lot during the last two years, it was painful to realise that everything I did was meaningless, revenge was my quick fix but it was never what I really needed. I wouldn't have been happy after getting what I wanted, back then I already knew that to some extent but was too afraid to admit it. I didn't know what else to do, it was all I had. Now Akira seems to be in the same position.”

It makes me sick to think about it, how stupid I was back then, how blind. My plan was the only thing that mattered to me, the one action that would solve all of my problems and yet I knew that nothing good was about to await me after everything was done. I should have seen how wrong it was, every plan that ends with hanging yourself can't be right.

“How did you change? What did you do to let go and get what you really needed?”
“A part of me still thinks that getting revenge was the right way, that I would feel better afterwards, the logical side of me knows that it's a lie; they are still fighting on a regular basis. I tried therapy and I did learn a thing or two that helps me to cope with some of my problems, I genuinely tried to work on myself as a person and how I see others as well. In the end, it failed me. I've become too rigid, too attached to what I learned about the world and the conclusions I formed based on my experiences. I'm not disappointed, accepting myself the way I am and trying my best to navigate through life as smooth as possible might have actually been what I needed all along. Who knows, maybe Akira has to fail in different ways to find out what it is that he really needs.”
“You sound way too mature, I don't like it. You are still a kid so act like one.”
“I'm pretty sure you don't really want that, just think back to our first meeting. That was me acting like a child.”
“Then stay mature, you are much more likeable when you aren't shooting people in the head.”

Oh, that. The laughter that follows is more a sign of embarrassment and cold dread than anything else, I should change the topic before it gets out of hand.

“I'm curious about the others, what are they doing? Is Futaba going to school?”
“She does and her grades are awesome! The first year was hard, she wasn't used to dealing with so many people at once but it got better after she made a few friends, they were a really big help. She's still eccentric, a lot of her schoolmates ignore her but that's probably for the best.”
“It's good to hear that she overcame her fears, I'm really happy for her.”

“Mokoto is in the middle of becoming a police officer, she's doing a great job as far as I know. Haru took over her father's business, she broke it down and rebuild it twice as good, I heard the employee satisfaction is very high and her coffee chain is popular among young adults and families; she's currently studying economics. Yusuke is a private art teacher, a very good one, he still paints in his free time and won some small prices. Ann quit modelling maybe a year ago and is now a designer for a local fashion brand, they are small and rather unknown but I'm sure that's going to change in the future. You have to take a look at their stuff, it's modern yet classic, their man's fashion is very nice as well. Ryuji works as a geriatric nurse in a little retirement home not far away from where he lives, we visited once and the old people were totally in love with him.”
“Yusuke. Blue hair? Then is the blond one Ryuji?”
“Yes - Can't you remember them?”
“Of course I can! I remember their hair colour, I just forgot their names.”
“Is that all? Only how their hair looked like?”
“Said I remember them! Aren't you listening?”

My blood is boiling in my veins, my head feels warm, swollen, pounding. It's still so hard for me to admit how broken I am, like it's not enough that I'm crazy, now even my body is betraying me, constantly causing trouble and making my life more difficult. I can't project my own insecurities onto someone else, he did nothing wrong. Slow down, even breaths, 5-4-3-2-1.

“Please forgive me, that was unjustified. I shouldn't get angry at you for asking legitimate questions, it's just – forget it. I only remember their hair colour, apart from that I have no idea how they looked like or their names. I know that the blue haired one used to paint and that he's a bit unique. The blond one was a runner, quite slow on the uptake. But that's it.”
“I accept your apology, I'm sure that it's not easy for you but most people mean no harm. It's not okay to be so aggressive.”
“You are right, I try to explain it whenever I get a bit out of control. I just wish it wouldn't happen in the first place.”
“Give yourself time, it's going to get better!”

Big eyes are gleaming with determination, I'm sure he would be smiling if his cat body was capable of doing so; still the optimistic one, at least something hasn't changed.

“Maybe, maybe not, it doesn't matter either way. I barely socialise so there aren't many opportunities to lose my temper over the topic, not that I would normally talk about it to begin with.”
“Then it's true, you are sick.”
“Excuse me? Did Akira say that? I can assure you that I'm fine, my memory might be a bit hazy but that's all.”
“Akechi, I have to tell you something but you have to promise me that you keep it a secret.”

An alarm bell goes off inside my mind, loud, obtrusive, gleaming red light fills my head. I don't want to get pulled into whatever this is, I'm tired of conspiracies, I'm tired of people using me for their games, and betraying Akira is the last thing I will do.

“You can't expect me to hide something from him, not when it's important. I don't want to start our relationships with secrets and lies, at least not on top of the ones that are already there.”
“Look, I understand. But you have to know it, Akira on the other hand absolutely shouldn't. It's only going to make the relationship with his friends more complicated. I don't say that you have to keep it to yourself forever, only until we have a decent plan for how to tackle it without causing too much damage.”
“Spill it and we'll see how it goes from there.”
“Fine. Makoto – she knew you were alive. I'm not sure why she suspected that you are the reason for Futaba's torment but she came by and talked to me. Sae had found you 13 months after you vanished and told her about it, they both decided that it would be better to keep it to themselves. Especially for Akira's sake.”
“His sake? He was devastated! What kind of friend would leave you to suffer when they have the opportunity to end it?”

This is horrendous. They call themselves his friends and yet they pull this shit? It's no wonder he's so dismissive towards them, if that's how they treated him all the time then it's only natural for him to keep his distance.
“They knew about your condition. Both thought he might do something reckless, that he would blame himself and throw his own life away to take care of you.”
“He did exactly that, he threw his life away because they kept quiet!”
“I know that! They didn't mean for it to go like this, they tried to protect him from more harm! Yes they failed, and Makoto couldn't feel any worse about it than she already does. Friends make mistakes, you know?”
“Oh, do they? They watched while he hit rock bottom and still said nothing, that it not 'making a mistake' that's saving their own asses! First they lie and then they keep quiet so they don't have to face the consequences. Nice friends you have there.”
“Are you serious? They tried to protect him not themselves, why can't you see that? It wasn't about their friendship and how it might be affected if they tell him the truth, they were worried it will make his life worse!”

Ah, they are playing the saviour card. 'We did it all for your sake', 'it was so hard to lie to you', 'we know what's good for you'. Bullshit. He was pulling away from them, there is no need to keep quiet when the person you try to protect is getting out of your reach, the only reason why people keep their mouth shut in a situation like this is to save themselves.

“Sure, believe whatever you want. I start to see what he meant, I thought he's just bitter and gloomy but this shows quite clearly how he came to his conclusions.”
“Please don't do this, Akechi. Don't feed his paranoia with your own distrust. You have no idea how hard it is for him, how miserable he is, he needs his friends and I need you to help me fix this.”
“Miserable? Are you insane? He has a fantastic job, a luxurious place to live, how is this miserable? And his friends, if you want him to make up with them then good luck, I'm not getting involved. No one needs that kind of friend, not one, especially not several of them, and you shouldn't want them anywhere near him. I advice you to think about this long and hard, I'm not going to watch you driving him into a disaster.”
“Is this how it looks like when you care about someone? You foster their warped believes just because they match up with your own?”
“I'm beginning to doubt that anyone but me really cares. The discussion is over, I have something to do so don't bother me for the next few hours.”

Chapter End Notes

It's random information time, again! My Akira lives in Nagoya and works in a (fictive) club in the station area, there are lots of fine clubs, cafés, and shops in and around the station. You need a lot of money if you want to shop there but looking around and grabbing some food in one of the restaurants is fun as well. My Goro lives in Maebashi, there's a big park, a river, shrines, and nature all around; it's a beautiful place and worth a visit.

“Awayukikan” (light snow jelly) is a dessert made with agar agar and sugar. Very easy to make, very cheap, and very refreshing – I usually make it in the summer but it's tasty no matter the season (and it's very beautiful when you decorate it with fruits, flowers, etc., just the perfect little something for every occasion). Give it a try!
I'm finally done with this chapter and my private life is getting a bit less stressful, I'm fairly confident that the next one will be out by the end of this week.

Anger is slowly but surely seeping into my whole body, what gives him the right to accuse me of projecting anything unto Akira? I have to distract myself before I explode, I don't want to fight on our first evening together, I still have to stay here for two days; if it continues like this then I'm not sure I can keep my word, being stuck here with someone who obviously tries to manipulate me just to get what he wants feels overwhelming and panic inducing.

I grab my bag and retrieve my laptop before I settle down on the kitchen table, I can feel his stare on the back of my head, those damn gleaming cat eyes that are hiding so much, I knew it from the moment he walked towards me.

A quiet thud signals his retreat, tiny footsteps are getting more and more distant before they vanish completely, leaving me in the suffocating silence of the empty flat. It might be nicer than my own, the air seemingly fresher, the spacious room much less oppressive, but the silence here is worse than I would have thought. The walls of my home are thin, you can always hear someone, everyday sounds, the conversations held next door, and if all of this fails you then there's still the outside world right in front of your window. Pedestrians, roaming dogs, laughing drunks, it's never really silent and I often find myself regretting it, wishing for a few minutes of peace and quiet, but now that I'm confronted with it I'm beginning to doubt that it would be good for me.

Surreal, the best way to describe the feeling would be surreal, like the world outside of this room has suddenly ceased to exist, making me the only living entity that's left.

I unwind the charging cable from my laptop and plug the phone in that is still patiently waiting in my jeans pocket, ready to be recharged and brought back to life.

It takes a few seconds before the laptop screen lights up, its content protected by an unnecessary password, like there could be anyone who's after it. I'm a nobody, there are no fanatic fans left, ready to invade my privacy no matter the costs, no Shido either, paranoid enough to watch my every move although I've never been a real danger to him. Maybe that's why he was so obvious, he wanted to make me believe that I hold some kind of power, something to be feared for, so I wouldn't even think about him having the upper hand. It kept me blind and made me careless, I was too naïve and self-assured to look at the whole picture, I wanted to see myself as clever and mature, more intelligent than everyone else. In the end, even the Thieves were better than me, they managed to outplay me without much of a hassle. I've always been a dumb child that lost touch with reality, no amount of positive affirmation can change that, at least I can say that I learned to live with this truth, as sad as it might be.

My eyes find their way to the desktop background, a beautiful brown-haired woman smiles at me warmly. It's the only photo I have of mother, hastily scanned before Shido ordered me to burn all of my past belongings, it would have been a disaster if anyone should have found out that I'm an orphan. I wonder if that was a lie as well, if he made me burn everything because he knew who I am right from the start, if it was merely a way to show how he thinks about me, about her, how little he cares and that he's not regretting anything. All I did, I did for her, the woman who took her own life and left a young child behind - she surely knew what happens to kids like me and yet she chose the easy way out for herself. I held on to the thought of how much she loved me but the
older I get the more I question it, sometimes so much that I wonder if she loved me at all. It could be true that no one ever wanted me, Shido didn't, she didn't, and none of my foster parents did. Maybe it's time to let go of her, to leave her behind, like she did with me.

It takes only a few clicks before her image vanishes from my view, in its place nothing more than an empty blue void, a couple of icons randomly placed, few and far between, it makes the space as incomplete and empty as I am. Is there even a chance to fill it or am I bound to remain hollow for the rest of my life?

“Akechi? Are you alright?”

The damn cat, I didn't even hear him approaching me.

“Of course, it's a nice evening.”

“Then why are you crying?”

Am I? I haven't even noticed, the hands in my lap are wet with tears, the seam of my shirt spotted with tiny dots of salty liquid. I want to run away, to get up and leave, back to my dirty little place and never take a step outside of it ever again.

“Is this because of what I said? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you. I worry about him and got angry when you refused to help me but I shouldn't have been so mean to you.”

“It's fine, I'm having a bad day, that's all. It's just too much, everything's too much, I don't know what to do. I can't help you or anyone else, I can't even help myself, I'm useless.”

“That's not true. I haven't seen Akira this happy in months, he smiled whenever you texted him back, he constantly talked about you and he was so hyped about having you here. Even the nightmares weren't as frequent, you have a such a big positive influence on his life. I want you to remember that whenever you feel bad about yourself, the trouble with his friends isn't your fault and it was wrong of me to pull you into it. Please, just be there for him, he needs a friend and he picked you for the job. Let's act in concert to make this work.”

How pathetic, a pep talk from a cat, but I guess that's how my life is; the tears are still running no matter how much I blink and rub at my eyes, I hate these damn crying spells.

A shrill and very loud noise disrupts the uncomfortable silence between us, once, twice, the ringing persist.

“Are you going to answer? There's a key in the upper drawer and you have to push the red button on the console to activate the intercom.”

“Why would I answer? I don't live here and it's late, only a creep would disturb others at this time of night.”

“You really are paranoid. Fine, I check who it is.”

He vanished through the catflap and jumps down from the balcony before I can give him a piece of my mind, this is common sense and has nothing to do with being paranoid, opening the door in the middle of the night is what gets you killed. At least it does in certain districts, the chances might be lower in an upscale one, still, there's no good reason to risk anything. Whoever it is can come back during the day, like a normal person would have done right from the start.

The street-lights are casting a feline-shaped shadow on the floor before me, he must have hurried quite a bit, his breathing is shallow and erratic.

“Open the door, it's Makoto.”

“Did you tell her that Akira isn't home?”

“She wants to talk to you, not him.”

“Oh, you two have planned this. Now I understand why I felt so uneasy.”

Sadness is like water, slowly rising, ice cold, it soaks your cloths and pulls you under, fills your lungs and steals your breath, it takes everything away from you before it claims your life. I wanted
to believe that he's sincere, that there's a chance for us to get along, even become friends - how naïve of me.

“I swear to god that I have nothing to do with this, I might have told her that you will be watching me for a few days but I had no idea that she wanted to come by!”
“If you say so.”

Does it really matter? I will never know who's lying and who's telling the truth, that's why it was so much easier to be alone, staying away from other people spares you the hassle of constantly having to question someone's words and intentions. Is this the reason why Akira distanced himself from his friends, to get some peace and quiet, maybe even freedom of mind? They are all pushing and pulling you in different directions, everyone only cares about themselves, their own wants and needs, and they couldn't care less if they should tear you apart in the process.

My finger is pressing a tiny button, static and silence is all that I'm met with. When did I walk over here? The stress is getting to me, I want this to be over and done as fast as possible.
“Akechi? Can I come in?”
Her voice sounds closer than it should be, a quick look through the fish eye shows the image of a young woman with long medium brown hair pulled into a loose French braid; she looks remarkably like her sister.
The door is already unlocked, looks like I've been busy while having a blackout. That's better than mindlessly wandering around or standing in the middle of the pavement, at least no one but a cat has seen me.

“Good evening, I'm sorry to... you look very different.”
She's staring at me wide eyed, both arms put around a small handbag, her posture somewhere between shock and alarm.
“Two years are a long time. Come in.”
I step aside and wait for her to take off her shoes, she neither opens her wool coat nor loosens the grip on her bag - I'm assuming she has some sort of weapon in there, maybe pepper spray or a taser. Do I really look like I have enough strength to hurt anyone? I can barely stand upright.
“Can we sit down for a moment? I just wanted to check on you but I wouldn't say no to a hot cup of coffee. It's a very cold evening.”
“Sure.”
The short walk through the hallway and into the kitchen is suddenly much longer than I remember it being, I pull a cup from the stand on the counter and switch the automated coffee machine to on. It makes a gruesome sound, like someone is boiling a pigeon.

I can see her out of my peripheral, she's curiously looking around while Mona silently stares at her from the kitchen table, he doesn't seem to be too happy about her visit.
“So, how have you been? It's good to see you alive and well.”
“Quit the bullshit, Mona told me everything. You knew that I survived and you know that I'm everything but well.”
“This is really embarrassing, I'm sorry. I thought it would be weird to start the conversation with this, I didn't mean to lie to you.”
“Sure. Why are you here exactly?”
“Not to threaten or arrest you if that's what you think, there are no charges against you otherwise we would have taken you into custody much earlier. I'm sure you are aware of the complicated situation with Akira, the only reason why I even know where he lives is because my sis was nice enough to look it up.”
“And that concerns me because...”
“You are right, it doesn't and I don't want to drag you into it, I know how hard you are struggling even without our teenage drama. It was a mistake to keep your survival a secret and there's nothing
I can do to change it, it's just another reason for him to dislike us and I can promise you that there are already more than enough to chose from. I'm not mad at him, none of us is, we are all very aware that we failed as friends and if I could turn back time and do it differently then I sure has hell would. Things aren't as easy as they used to be when we were younger, all of us are trying to grow up and built a life so there isn't much time to see each other or even talk regularly, it's hard to be there for everyone and don't lose sight of how they are changing. What I'm trying to say is.. I'm glad that you came back to Akira.”

Chapter End Notes

(∗´`)
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Over 50 kudos, I can't believe it! That's so much more than I thought I could ever get. Thank you all so so much, this means the world to me!

I have a very bad cold, my mind if all fuzzy and I fell asleep while prove-reading, that's why it goes up a few hours later than what I had promised. Haha, I feel horrible.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This is not what I expected.”

My mind can't come up with anything else, the smile she's flashing me looks honest, shining as well as remorseful, she's finally letting go of her bag and puts it in one of the kitchen chairs before she pulls a small envelope out of one of its pockets.

“Both my sister and I have missed the chance to be there for you when you needed us the most, please take this as an apology and let us know if you need anything. Sis has close connections to doctors and lawyers, we would be more than happy to pay for them if that helps to improve your life.”

“What's the catch? I'm sorry, I can't believe that you are just generous and want nothing in return.”

“I understand that it looks suspicious but there is no catch, I deeply regret how thinks went and I want to make up for it. I don't know what Akira told you about our relationship but we all care about him and I care about you just as much. We made a lot of mistakes, especially I, but I learned from them and want to right all the wrongs I've done. The others might still hope that Akira comes back to us and everything will be like it used to but let's be honest, we all changed and there's no going back. But maybe we can built another kind of friendship and I want you to be a part of it as well. If you want to.”

She's bowing much lower than I could without losing my balance and smashing my face on the ground. There's probably money in the envelope, I barely have anything left and it's not even the middle of the month, I'm running out of medication and haven't eaten for two days. Taking it would mean that I agree to her proposal, I would tie myself to her and be forced to at least try to get along with all of them. Sure, I do owe them a lot but am I ready to go this far? I don't really know most of them, the only time we interacted was during the infiltration of Sae's palace, that was two years ago and I have no idea how they are now. Akira doesn't want them near him then do I even have the right to chose differently? I could take the money and fake the rest, maybe even tell her later on that it's too complicated because of the tension between them. My past self would have done it without a second thought and he would have laughed about them afterward. But I'm not him, I don't want to be him ever again, I hurt so many people and ultimately myself the most.

“Thank you for your kindness but I don't know if I can live up to your expectations and be the friend you are hoping for. I neither have the experience needed for it nor am I an uncomplicated person, I know that I'm often hard to deal with. Are you sure you want that, another friend that is difficult to get on with?”

“I never thought it will be easy and I don't have a specific kind of friend in mind that I want you to be, all I hope for is that you give me the chance to get to know you and find out if we can be
friends or not. My offer for help still stands even if we decide that it's not working, these two things aren't connected at all. I've been in police training for a few months now, I gained a lot of inside into the more ugly parts of our society and I want to do something to change it. How could I do that if I don't even try to help someone I personally know?"

“So it's based on a saviour complex. Are you the new Akira of your group?”

Laughter fills the air, no anger is clouding her expression, her eyes are wrinkling at the corners – it's not fake, she's genuinely amused by my words. I'm not sure if I like or hate it.

“You clearly are something special. And, what do you say? Can we give it a try?”

I take the envelope out of her hands, it has a decent flower pattern and weights much more than I thought it would, the paper is thick, clearly made for a formal purpose.

“Okay. I hope you won't regret it.”

“And here is my sister's card, my number is on the backside. You can always call us if something comes up that you need to be taken care of by professionals. Of course you can call me just to talk or when you want to grab a cup of coffee, you don't have to wait for a problem before you contact me.”

“Speaking of coffee, the water should be heated up. I have nothing else to do so if you want..”

“That would be very nice.”

I've become soft, give me a bit of money and a few nice words and I'm as tame as a lap dog. Both items will be save in my backpack, I'm actually quite curious about the amount of money in there but I can't just open it in front of her, the least I can do is show a little bit of decency.

The coffee machine doesn't look too complicated, the green light is on so the water should be hot, one button is bigger than the others.. that has to be the start button, right?

God, that thing alone costs more than my laptop, why does a single person need such a level of luxury? To impress woman? Stroke his ego?

“Akira sat it to default, you just have to press the button in the middle and it makes a medium large cup with soft crema. The beans will last for about 10 cups, we have more in the cabinet.”

I will never get used to having a talking cat in the house, I totally forgot that he's even here and suddenly there's a voice giving me instructions. To say that it's unsettling would be an understatement, terrifying is more accurate.

One light push is enough to start the process, it's silently grinding the beans, the smell of coffee already filling the air, there's a soft vibration followed by the quiet sound of water running through its pipes and into the cup. I can imagine that it creates a very nice atmosphere when you use it first thing in the morning, you can look outside and watch the sunrise while its soothing noise and the delicious scent eases your nerves and wakes you up simultaneously. It reminds me of Leblanc.

“Here you go. Do you need milk or sugar?”

“I take it black.”

I try to carefully place the cup in front of her, my hands are unsteady and the coffee about to spill, putting my elbows on the table and slowly lowering my hands should do the trick. I'm sure it looks insane but it's much less embarrassing than spilling half of the content and having to clean it up with equal inefficiency. There, nailed it.

“Thank you. Did you learn that in rehab?”

“No, I've never been to one, I had a few hours of occupational therapy but that's it. They said it was already too late to archive 'meaningful' results and I had no money to pay for it anyway, this was the best they could do with what little they had. Believe me, this is a massive improvement compared to my prior state.”
“I know, I've seen your file.”
“How? Can anyone march in there and request personal information about random people?”

My voice is cracking, it sounds much higher than it naturally is, unclear and shaky. I should take my medication right after she's gone, I just hope it's not getting worse as long as she's here.

“Of course not, my sis did it. Akira filed a missing person report for you and that gave us a chance to work with the ward office without causing too much suspicion. They automatically register you when you apply for livelihood protecting, it took us only a couple of minutes before we knew where you are but your file included the notice that you were too disabled to provide for yourself in the future. She made something up and got a copy of your medical reports, based on it we decided to keep Akira in the dark and classify your case as confidential so no further information would be provided to him or anyone else. The official reason was 'safety concerns' because of your celebrity status. It wasn't completely legal but we had no other choice.”

“And telling him was just too much trouble? Mona already told me about it, he was distancing himself from you guys and yet you thought it would be okay to let him suffer. Sorry, that makes no sense, to me it looks like you were too afraid to admit that you fucked up.”

“Maybe that's true. I was afraid to tell him that I lied to him for months only because I was sure I knew what's best for him but the truth is, I was overwhelmed by the situation. By the time I understood that I... had 'fucked up' it was impossible to know how to go on. He was so irrational and fanatic but it looked like he was doing okay socially and academically, I wanted him to find professional help and work through his problems before I tell him that you are alive. It was obvious that he didn't see us as his friends anymore, he had nothing left but the thought of you – I was afraid you'll either turn him down and crush his last hope or take him up on his offer for selfish reasons and ruin his life.”

“You could have contacted me and I would have told you that I'll crawl back to him if that solves his problems. And I would have never accepted any kind of help from him.”

The chair she's sitting on seems to get bigger and bigger, her body sinks into the small cushion that is covering the seat.

“I was too scared to face you. I was ashamed of myself, I never even considered the possibility that you survived although Akira had been so persistent about it. I think I wanted to give up on you, it made it easier to forget about everything that went wrong and focus on our achievements, thinking about you always reminded me of our biggest failure. I couldn't stop crying when sis told me that you are registered as a resident of Maebashi and that you are seriously injured, the realisation of what I had done crushed me. I didn't know how to live with it.”

Her usual tone has become thin and strained, eyes are downcast and wet, her hands are grabbing the cup so hard that her knuckles turn white. Does Akira know how much she's hurting?

“It's not your fault, you are not responsible for my injuries nor my current condition, my stupidity got me into this. I can only blame myself and no one else but I understand your feelings, you have your heart in the right place and it would have been too much to ask of a eighteen years old to handle not only her own guilt but everyone else's problems as well. I'm sure you did what you thought would be the best for all parties involved. Just – tell me where it went wrong with Akira, what happened between you? I get the feeling that you tried to be there for him, I can't believe that you half-assed it so much that he felt let down by you.”

“I can only speak for myself but I'm sure you can apply it to the rest of the group as well. I knew Sojiro wasn't his father but I never thought about his real parents and what kind of people they could be, it's one of those things that you realistically know but never really consider. I'm ashamed to admit that it wasn't too hard to guess that they couldn't be the most supportive family
on earth considering that they send him away instead of working on his anger issues or whatever they attributed the assault to. I should have been more critical and most of all, I should have listened to him closely. I did the opposite and tried to defend their actions whenever he told us about a fight he had with them; I was sure his parents are like me sis, she has always been very strict as well. The same applies to his problems at school, we tried to relate them to our own experiences and gave him the advice we would have needed during that time, none of us looked close enough to see that his case was different. If he ever tells you that we never really listened to him then he's right, we didn't. But it's not like he's the only one we treated like this, we all did it to each other. Just look at Futaba, we forced her out of her room and basically ignored her psychological problems, we were just lucky that we haven't done more harm than good.”

“You all tried to be adults and handle your problems without outside help. I know how well that goes.”

“And you were alone, try to imagine a whole group of teenagers doing it. We all had good intentions and we cared about each others, we were just too young to do it better and we missed the right time to back out of it and involve someone more qualified than us.”

My temple starts to hurt, I can feel the muscles in the back of my head, the throbbing pain spreads all the way down to my shoulders. Speaking is much more tiring than I remember it but I can't waste this chance, I have to gather as many information as possible. Every little detail could help me to understand him better.

“Akira mentioned that you all wanted him to be a certain way and that you ignored everything that didn't fit your expectations, not only during that time but right from the start. Is that true?”

“I know what you are hinting at, we had a big fight about this topic maybe five or so months ago, he made this accusation in the group chat. He has a point but it wasn't intentional, I for one always thought he was joking whenever he said something dark or questionable, to me it was clear that it's just a part of his personality. I was shocked when he got more vocal and a lot of what he said sounded alarming, he went through a hard time and I was concerned it might be a symptom of a mental illness. I never connected it to his former 'jokes', not until he accused us of trying to manipulate him into being a person he never was.”

So that was the reason for their fight and it wasn't ill intent but miscommunication, this explains why Mona's account differs so much from what Akira believes to be true. He can't think about it objectively, he just assumes that they did it on purpose because that's what it feels like to him - I can relate to that problem.

“I have to say that everything makes much more sense now that you told me your side of the story, Akira's version had a lot of contradictions and uncertainties, I was constantly wondering if you are all lying to each other or if there's a missing piece that I couldn't find.”

“You still talk like a detective.”

“I've never been one, I'm not intelligent enough for it, that's why I had to create my own cases.”

I always had to work hard for my grades, I spent so much time with reading and researching so I would be able to compete with the adults around me. All I knew was methodically learned and rehearsed until it stuck, the only kind of intelligence I have is focused on surviving, deceiving, and getting myself to a safe place. I have street knowledge, nothing more.

“I. totally forgot about that.”

“Be thankful for it. I wish I could.”

“Do you regret killing these people?”

The look in her eyes is thoughtful, overshadowed with sadness, a hint of uneasiness is there as well. Does she want the truth or a nice lie that makes her feel better? Even I couldn't tell them apart, I'm
torn and tormented by what I have done, I lost sight of my own feelings on the matter.

“Some of them yes, some of them not so much. A couple of them definitely deserved it, most of them were just normal criminals and assholes so a nice long jail sentence would have been more appropriate. I might regret those but that depends on my mood. The only one I sincerely regret killing is Miss Isshiki, she did nothing wrong and had I known that she will die – I would have said no to Shido. Her death was my end, everything became meaningless. I was only a dumb child and had suddenly become a murderer, it didn't matter if I kept killing after I already did it once. Maybe that was the reason why he didn't tell me that shutdowns lead to death, he wanted me in exactly this position. Desperate, alone, and tainted.”

“Shido... my sis went to see him in jail, he cried and begged for you to visit him. She told him you were missing and presumably dead - she said to me that he looked heartbroken.”

My head hurts, the sound of blood rushing through my veins is enraging. Did she really had to bring this up? Is she trying to make me angry?

“Why are you telling me this? Do you really think I have the slightest bit of interest in meeting him, maybe apart from taking the chance to break his neck instead of his heart? I'm sure he's very sorry now, that he's crying his eyes out because he loves and misses me so much, but that's only thanks to your brainwashing. It's nothing else, they didn't change because they came to understand what they did wrong, they don't regret it because they feel genuine sympathy and empathy, they aren't good people and they will never be. You killed their real personality and replaced it with something more beautiful, but you killed them nonetheless – I took their body, you took their mind, you are as much murderers as I am.”

Her expression can only be described as pure terror. I told her I'm hard to deal with, people get hurt and angry whenever I open my mouth but where's the point in speaking at all if you constantly lie just to appeal to others? I no longer care if everyone dislikes or even hates me, I want to be fine with myself, it's hard enough to accept how I am even without the burden of having to make sure no one gets pissed off by me. Maybe.. I shouldn't have lashed out at her. It wasn't necessary to call her a murderer when I'm clearly the only one who fits this description, I do think that I'm not wrong per se but it was a dick move to say it like this. Why did she even have to tell me about Shido, can't she think about it for two seconds? It should have been clear that I wouldn't react well to it, no one in my position would! - I have to apologise, it's not her fault that I'm so touchy.

“You are right, it's exactly what we have done. We killed their real personality and turned them into submissive zombies driven by only one desire, atoning for their sins. We took their free will and rendered everything they say meaningless. Back then it sounded great, they confessed and went to jail, justice had been served. Now that I'm older I understand that we imprisoned an empty shell, their bodies are serving their sentences and not the person who actually committed the crimes. I think I want to forget this fact, acknowledging it means that I have to face the truth. Everything we did was pointless, we went through all of this for nothing and even took their victim's chance to get real justice.”

This evening is full of surprises, not many people would agree on being called a murderer and it's not like you can even compare our ways. Can it be considered murder when you kill someone's mind but not their body? Which one is more valuable, or are they equally important?

“I was about to apologise, it wasn't okay to call you a murderer, it's just that you threw me off balance with your 'Shido misses you' shit. I'm sure it's obvious that this is a complicated matter for me. Though I do think I'm somewhat right, I'm sorry for saying it like this. Of course it's not the same thing.”
“Don't be sorry, it's often better to give others a good dose of reality no matter if they like it or not. I shouldn't have told you about it, that alone shows how desperately I needed a reminder. You've done me a favour so, thank you.”

“This goes completely against my expectation, I was sure you'll storm out and never talk to me again. Looks like you really are good at dealing with problematic people like me. Or assholes. I'm probably both.”

“It's none of those two, you are just complex. That's a very big difference.”

She sounds like the therapists I've been to, he always insisted that I should call myself special instead of crazy, complex instead of problematic. Such beautiful words out of the mouth of someone who gets paid for being nice to you, no matter what they really think they have no choice but to powder you with fairy dust and sprinkle you with love. I wonder if she's honest or if she learned that during her training, I'm fairly sure the work of a police officer goes a lot smoother when they handle both suspects and witnesses with kid gloves. Give them the feeling that they are heard, understood, cared for, and they will trip over their lies and reveal their true selves.

“I should go, it's pretty late and I have to get up early. I think this was the first time we sat down and actually talked about something that isn't connected to either my sister's work or the infiltration of her palace. I really hope we can continue to do this, it was nice to spend time with you like.. friends.”

“It was indeed a whole other experience, I was afraid I would mess it up but we seem to get along quite fine. I can text you my number so we can stay in contact through messages, if that's okay with you.”

The silence in the room makes it hard to breath, she's looking at me like I admitted to a horrible crime and not simply asked her if she likes to text with me.

“That would be awesome! I'm sorry, I never thought you will reach out to me but I'm genuinely happy about it. Please take good care of yourself and don't forget to feed Mona, I'm sure even you couldn't get a pass for starving his cat.”

She grabs her coat and bag, winks at me, then vanishes behind the corner. The soft click of a closing door is the only sign of life that's left.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Socially inept Goro and Akira being... Akira.
I'm finally doing better and can actually write something without having to correct it 500 times because I can't remember how to spell basic words, the flu triggered a massive relapse of two of my autoimmune conditions so I fell sick right after being sick. That was fun, 10/10 would recommend.

I cut this chapter in half because I already prove-read this part and didn't want to risk it that I sit on the whole thing for even longer, I will post the other one at the end of this week.

Be prepared, this is going to be rather angsty :)

“See? I told you she's sorry and so is the rest of the group, they would never hurt each other intentionally.”

Mona's voice cuts through the silence, vibrates deep inside me; it does make sense but just because she has made mistakes and genuinely cares about him doesn't mean that it's the same for the others, they might very well be indifferent or even doing it for their own gain. Would they have worked so hard to clear him of his alleged crimes when they have no real intention to keep him as their friend, and what could they possibly get out of it? But the times were different, they were different people, how you see someone, feel about them, changes over time; bonds get broken, connections get lost in space, the past doesn't matter in this kind of situation.

“You look like there's something on your mind, how about you share it with me? Two heads are better than one.”

“It's nothing, I just try to organise all of these information, it's a lot more complicated than I thought it would be. I'm still not sure if it's a good idea to get involved but I don't have much of a choice anymore, I accepted her offer and will stand by my words. Give me some time to make sense of all of this, right now I'm a little bit overwhelmed.”

“Of course, you got thrown into a complex fight without much to work with, everyone would be confused. Even I don't fully understand it, Akira rarely talks about his feelings, I can only guess what's going on inside his head.”

“There's something I'm still thinking about, you said that he needs his friends because he's miserable. He has a nice place to stay, a wonderful job, why do you think he's not happy? Did he say that or are you assuming it based on your own feelings on the matter?”

“He didn't but he doesn't have to, I have eyes and ears. I hear when he's crying in the bathroom, I see it when he bangs his fists against the wall in senseless rage over something minor. He might not know that I do, I learned that it's better to give him space or he locks himself up in his bedroom the moment he sees me and then tries to avoid me for the next couple of days. He needs his friends, they can give him stability and the love he needs.”

Love is fickle, a nice gift with an expiration date that you can't read, the manual written in a language that you don't speak. It's not something your well-being should depend on.

“I understand your reasoning but I'm sorry to inform you that no amount of friends will help him in the long run, maybe he will feel better for a few weeks or months before he crashes down harder
than before. Love can't save him and stability is way harder to archive than you seem to think, especially with such a large group of friends that are all living their own life, you can't turn them into his babysitters. What are you expecting from them, that they stay by his side twenty-four hours? That they take care of all of his needs, are always there when he's sad or angry and that they would actually manage to calm him down? They wouldn't, it drives him away sooner than later, maybe even make his anger worse; you don't want others to take pity on you, that they smother you with affection no matter if you ask for it or not, it makes you feel like they see you as an infant, unable to care for yourself. It takes away his autonomy and free will, nothing else, love doesn't magically cure your illnesses and banishes your problems, it will only stress him out as long as he's not able to deal with himself on his own. You are holding on to false hope that is going to hurt him more than it helps.”

He's quiet, head hanging low, I obviously told him something he never considered before. My intention wasn't to discourage him from trying to be there for Akira, but the road he wants to take will lead to disaster and destruction. Friends can only do so much, even if there wasn't so much tension between them and such a great amount of distrust coming from his side, they can only give him a sense of belonging, a bit of strength to go on, but the rest is always up to the affected person. It's dangerous to think that all it takes are a couple of reassuring words and someone who's by your side, it's a mask for your problems and a blindfold for you, just because you can't see it any longer doesn't mean that it's gone, it's always behind your back, waiting for the right moment to drive a dagger through your heart.

"Then what am I supposed to do?"
"You are asking the wrong person, I barely know him. He told me that he went to therapists and that it didn't go well, apart from that I'm completely clueless. I don't know what he tried exactly, what his problems are, and what he personally wants to change. There's no point in doing anything if he himself sees no need to, compliance and the will to work hard on your problems are the basis on which therapy operates on, without it there's no chance to archive anything. It would be a waste of time for his therapist and himself.”
"You are telling me to stand by and watch him break down, I'm not going to do that. If there are no other options then I'm going to go through with my plan to fix their relationship, it's better than nothing. I might even prove you wrong, maybe it helps him more than you think right now, good friends can move mountains for you!"

Laughing, I can't stop laughing. It's so naïve, so pure, it belongs in a fairytale and not the real world with its unchangeable failures, existences that end in misery, the place where those who should love you the most are the ones who will beat you to death, and the good guys never win over the bad ones. Maybe the metaverse was our own personal fairytale, a chance to be heroes, to turn the tables and come out on top. What good has it done, how big an impact did it make on the real world? None.

"I wish I could be so innocent, you are a happy child trapped in a cat's body. I envy you, you look at the world and see hope where others see despair, possibilities when there's nothing left to choose from. You are lucky, but a dreamer. Dreams never come true, they just turn into nightmares. Be careful what you dream about.”

He stares at me intensely, I can watch the compassion and positive energy slowly draining from his eyes – I shouldn't have said that.

“Maybe Akira was right about you all along.”

The last thing I see of him is a black tail that vanishes through the cat-flap, out into the dark, I'm left alone with the silence that fills the room, mercilessly crawling into my mind.
It hurts so much that the only person I care about has to fight against himself, the one that did everything to help those around him, who risked his own life just to change the fate of others. I would have been one of them had I let him break through my walls, and in some way he did. All I ever saw when I looked at other people were faceless entities, a somebody, not a person, I would only remember them when it was beneficial to me but apart from that, I couldn't have cared less.

He was the first, and still is the only one, who isn't just a ghost in a world filled with fog but someone with a name, a face, a presence made out of light and colour. He doesn't deserve this kind of punishment, to get left behind and tossed to the side by the world, and himself; I would do everything to change it but I'm nothing more than a helpless nobody, too weak to take care of myself let alone someone else.

My laptop is still sitting on the table, the empty space is judging me from a distance. I don't know the Wi-Fi password, I'm not even sure he has internet, all I could do is sort through my notes and brood about my insecurities. Both isn't too appealing, it might be better to call it a day and get some rest before the whole disaster continues in the morning, my body hurts and I'm sick of doing nothing but bumping heads with someone.

The sofa is very small and there are no cushions or blankets, I don't think he has a guest-room so where should I sleep? Do I just look through his stuff and search until I find everything I need or am I really supposed to use the bare leather sofa? I should probably text him, Mona might know but I don't think he will be back soon, he seemed pretty pissed at me.

Retrieving my phone is more work than I'm willing to handle, the cable is stuck again, I can't pull it out – there isn't much more that could go wrong, I was late, angered Mona twice, got involved in something I never wanted to get pulled into, and totally overexerted myself.

[There are no cushions and blankets on the sofa, where do you keep that stuff? I get it myself.]

Can he answer me while he's at work? Where does he even work? Considering his uniform and the obviously high pay, it must be quite the upscale club ... maybe somewhere in Tokyo?

[Yeha I forgot to tell you, you can sleep in my bed, I changed the bedding and everything. It's warm, soft and you can imagine me lying next to you ( ▼ ̀ 3 ́)ง ơ‿ơ ]

He can't be serious, this guy is unbelievable, it's not even worth an answer and I will think about something to get revenge on him. He deserves it for all this teasing.

I'm wondering about how much of it is really just playful joking and nothing more, he could be mocking me for liking him so much, I guess I've said some stuff that could be used against me in this sort of way. Or maybe he thinks I'm gay and is making fun of me, I know he dated his teacher and some girl with long brown hair, but I don't see him as the type who would be disapproving of homosexual people. Did I left the impression that I am one? Some of my former schoolmates spread this rumour, I can still remember it quite clearly, most of the girls didn't believe it but a lot of the guys were wary of me, like I would jump them out of nowhere if they get too close. Then again, I get regularly hit on by men, there must be some sort of sign on my back that reads 'gay' in big bright letters – I don't even know what I am, I never had the time nor interest in dating and just because someone looks attractive to me doesn't mean that I'm really interested in them – or does it?

I wish I could talk about this with someone but I'm already an adult, I'm supposed to know, everyone would laugh about me for asking a question that would only be understandable when it comes from a teenager. All the others are probably in relationships or at least have been, they know what they want and how to handle it, I'm the only one who isn't even sure if he wants anything at all.

It's strange how hard I managed to fail, as a child I wasn't able to make someone love me, as a teenager I've been so different that all I ever got from peers were rude remarks and cruel laughter,
even as a celebrity I wasn't good enough to make people remember me for more than a few weeks after I vanished from magazine covers and TV shows. Now, as an adult, I fail at one of the most basic human instincts, to find a mate and build a life with them. But how am I supposed to do that when I'm too busy with being afraid of every person I meet, too busy with spending most of the time thinking about their real intentions and all the ways in which they could hurt me?

Akira is different, I can't explain why and it makes me nervous, it's so unusual that I fear I might be running into the biggest mistake I've ever made just because I was blinded by some sort of twisted longing that I can't identify. I guess nothing can ever be easy, and whenever I thought I knew what I was doing it was actually the complete opposite, I was sure there were no risks while I drove straight into a wall that I couldn't see until I crashed my car and broke every single bone in my body.

It might be time to take a risk that is so clearly visible that even I can't overlook it, maybe the wall will turn into an endless street, framed with blooming trees, swaying to and fro in the wind.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Like I promised, here's the other half of the chapter. Please be careful with this one, we are slowly getting into heavier territory and I don't want anyone to make themselves feel unwell.

There are mentions of past child abuse (not detailed and very short) as well as suicidal thinking which could be considered fairly detailed but not in the sense of graphic descriptions, it's more about the emotional aspects. You can't really skip these parts because they are essential, I couldn't find a decent way to integrate them as optional, everything I tried either sounded strange or took too much away from the plot – I'm really sorry about this.

From now on I'll try to update at least once a week, probably either Wednesday or Sunday, if I find enough time then maybe even one chapter on both days but don't quote me on that.

As always, thank you all so much for the kudos and general support, it really makes my day!

It's warm... soft... there's a scent in the air that I can't name.. it smells like home.
What time is it? The black curtains are doing a fantastic job at keeping most of the daylight at bay, it could be early morning or past lunch. I can't bring myself to really care.
Akira's bed is not only unnecessary big for one person but also unreasonable comfortable, I can feel the mattress shifting, transforming, whenever I change my position, it doesn't dip too deep and not too little, it must be very expensive if it can keep up with all of my tossing and turning.
Looking at the bedside table and wardrobe causes the strong urge to look through it, I want to see what he keeps in there, find out more about the person who's bed I'm still occupying while I ignore the quiet chirping in my mind that tells me I should get up, that this is starting to be weird.
There's a snow white desk right under the window, a laptop neatly placed in the middle, but apart from that it's empty; no snack wrappers or empty cans, no tools or random knick-knacks.
A tight knot is forming inside my throat, his whole home doesn't seem to belong to him, nothing I see screams 'Akira', it feels.. lifeless, instead of full of dancing energy and happiness like his room in Leblanc always did.

Getting up is surprisingly effortless, my back hurts a lot less like it usually would and my neck feels relaxed and warm, I can stand and walk without having to stretch my tight muscles – now I'm even more envious of him than I already was.
I leave his wardrobe alone, at least for now, and make my way to the kitchen, a cup of coffee should be able to kill the last bits of sleep that are still following me around.
Mona is nowhere to be seen, the plate I filled with cat food seems untouched, he didn't come home.
Maybe I should have said something different but I'm no longer used to methodically planing what to say and how to say it, everyone wants me to be honest and whenever I am they get frustrated and angry. I don't understand it.

The boiling pigeon sound starts the moment I hit the button, how can such an expensive machine produce this gruesome noise? I really hope the coffee is worth the terror you have to endure for
every single cup, or maybe it's just me and I should be concerned about the state of my mind. A quick glance at the glowing time display tells me that it's 11 in the morning, I missed my first dose of medication but it's still early enough to take it, I should probably start to set an alarm for the next two days so it won't happen again. I never need one at home, the man who lives in the flat across from mine gets up at 8 in the morning no matter if it's Monday or Sunday and the clamour he always makes is loud enough to wake the whole building.

My newly acquired slippers are flapping their ears with every step I take, I can't believe that anyone would think of this as sexy, it looks and feels ridiculous, something that might be fun for children but far from seductive. I do have to admit that it's kind of cute but I'll never say it out loud, Akira wouldn't let me live this down for the rest of my life – I better leave them here, I don't think he has another pair that I can wear in the bathroom and it feels wrong to used this one.

Dressing myself is much easier in a room that is as big as my whole place, without boxes and useless memories filling the space, the shiny and smooth texture of the sink, the cold tiles under my feet, and the massive mirror in front of me make me wonder if I might be dreaming. I'm living in a small and rundown place while he calls this upscale flat his own, I traded fame and money against living on the poverty line while he did the complete opposite, he's losing all of his friends while I get closer to them. It's like our roles got reversed, the thought alone makes me feel sick, the dread inside my stomach is close to emptying it violently.

I was only joking when I said that he has become my past self, up until now I haven't even notice the full scale of this situation and how right I really am about it. He needs help, I'm just not sure what someone like me could possibly do for him. I have no money, no influence on anyone, I'm still struggling to take care of myself and not drown in an endless sea of problems. The only thing I could do is call my old therapist, just because it didn't work out for me doesn't mean that he's bad at what he's doing, I did learn quite a lot of skills that help me to survive.

But how do I get Akira to give it a chance? It's hard to trust someone new when others have already left a bad impression, I know that it's a hit or miss with therapists, they are just people, some are nice and some aren't, some are good at their job and others... not so much. There's always the option to guilt trip him, I could try to insist that everything was my fault and that I would feel better if he gets help but that would mean that he's not doing it because he really wants things to change. That's exactly what I warned Mona about, it's only going to make things worse. What if he throws me out and never talks to me again? Isn't this what his friends have done as well, trying to force him into a therapy he doesn't even want? God, I'm not good at this.

I silently close the door and wander back into the kitchen, a pair of eyes that hasn't been there before is staring at me from atop the kitchen counter, it stops me dead in my tracks. He's only a cat but I can still see that he's not less disappointed in me than yesterday, I wish he could have stayed out until I had a cup of coffee, I'm not awake enough for this.

“Did Akira tell you what happened to the Metaverse?”

Ah, now we are taking that road. I ignore him in favour of getting my bag and pulling my pills out, if I have to deal with this then I'm not going to do it without them. It was a smart move to buy these little pillboxes, they eliminate the possibility to accidentally overdose something because I forgot that I already took it, and they don't look too suspicious – you could probably put candy in there as well. I swallow them all down in one go, there's no need to waste time by taking them individually like my doctor advised me to do, they all end up in the same place anyway.

“We haven't talked about it and I'm not interested in knowing. My phone got damaged when I ... I bought a new one and the app never appeared on it. It doesn't concern me anymore.”

“The Metaverse is gone. It vanished a few weeks after you went missing.”
“Good, it should have never existed in the first place.”

I spent too much time thinking about what could have been, how my life would have turned out. Would I be happier, healthier? Or would I be an addict who sells himself to random people just to get the next dose? It's stupid and useless, my life was lost the moment my mother died, everyone knows that people like me can never get back up, we are doomed to crawl on the floor until some deity has mercy on us and ends our miserable life.

“Aren’t you curious about what happened to it?”
“I said I'm not, could you please drop the topic? I don't want to think about it ever again, the only thing it did was cause harm and destruction, there's nothing more worth knowing.”
“Fine, but running away from it is not going to help you forget about everything you've done!”

That's what this is about, my crimes? Is this his way to get back at me, do I really deserve it just because I voiced my opinion? Forget, how on earth could I forget all the blood on my hands, the blood that I tried to wash away until my skin was raw and pealing, all the dirt on my body that won't come off no matter what I do. I can't breath, my eyes are burning, the throbbing in my head feels like my skull is going to split open any moment.

“Do you really think I could even if I wanted to? Just look at me, does this look like something I could forget? The pain that I live with every fucking day, the shame to depend on other people's money, the nightmares, the constant wish that I could change the past and hang myself before I ever got the chance to activate the app. It's there, it's always there, the memories, the reminders, no matter if I think about the Metaverse or not, it's not going away, it won't ever leave me alone!”

My voice sounds so loud yet so distant, I can't stop screaming, I can't stand this feeling, I want to throw something, I want to break everything in sight, tear down the walls with my own two hands just to make it stop. Please make it stop.

“Where are you going? Wait! Akechi!”

The right hand finds my shoes, the left slams the door shut, footsteps are echoing through the hallway. The blood inside my veins is burning me alive, the pressure, so much pressure, I can't stop crying, I can't stop running, my fist finds the wall, once, twice, it burns but it's not enough. Someone please make it stop.

There's just something in the back of my mind when the train comes into view, at first it's a soft pull, barely strong enough to notice it, then a gentle push behind my heart when the train approaches the platform, a quiet voice whispers words I can never seem to understand, before the pulling and pushing turns into violent shoving and dragging, the murmured syllables morph into deafening screams. It stops the moment the train comes to a halt in front of me and I catch a glimpse of myself in its windows, no invisible powers are invading my body, the voice has fallen silent.
I wonder how many of those who are standing here with me can hear it too, how many are fighting against inhuman strength that tries to throw them off balance and into the void.
Is it just me? Or is the woman in the fashionable green dress affected as well? Maybe the man who's talking on the phone, his laughter clearly audible although he stands on the other side of the platform? The child in front of me, absent-mindedly staring at the toy in his hands? Can they feel it, do they hear it?
Maybe I should have been sitting in the train that derailed because of me, maybe my foster parents should have beaten me to death instead of sparing my life every single time. The world would have been a better place without me, so many died, so many were hurt, my mother included.
She would be alive had I never been born, Akira would be happy and healthy if he never had the chance to meet me.

A guy walks into me, he says something I think might have been an apology, I ignore him like I ignore the rest of the countless people rushing past me, getting in and out of the train. It accelerates, passes me by, leaves me behind.
Chapter Notes

My muse run away and played hide and seek with me, I finally found it after two days of searching - it was hiding in the closet and refused to come out, much like Goro. Is there an award for bad jokes? If so, please vote for me.

I hope you'll enjoy this “slightly” late chapter.

Wandering through an unknown city used to elicit a sense of adventure, the drive to know more, to memorise everything for future use. Restaurants, cafes, bars, popular shops, all stored away and kept organised for the moment I need them to impress someone, to show them how mature and experienced I am - now all it does is cause fear.

I'm long past the point of no return, far away from where I should be, without my phone, without money, without my jacket, trapped in a never-ending loop of crossing the same few streets over and over again.

That's what I get from being so emotionally unstable, I ran off to god knows where and can't seem to find my way back, I don't even know the name of the street that Akira lives on so asking someone would be a waste of time.

It's cold, it's getting dark and I have nowhere to go, it reminds me of the time I had to sleep on the streets, freezing, hungry, afraid of every sound, constantly praying to a higher power but never being heard.

What a bad joke I am, I promised him to take care of Mona and managed to mess it up only one day later, I should have never contacted him – I was afraid I would drag him down with me and that's exactly what I'm doing, at least he doesn't know it yet, he will come home and find out that I not only failed at taking care of his cat but vanished a second time.

I could walk until I can't take another step, lay down somewhere on the side of the street and wait for death to finally come and get me, like it was supposed to do years ago, it shouldn't take too much time considering how cold it already is.

“Goro! You are pretty untiring for someone with a walking impairment, you are nearly at the edge of town.”

Akira is jogging towards me, his right arm is holding his ribcage, he's out of breath, hair sticking to his forehead. This can't be real, he's at work, hours away from here, I must be hallucinating – is it because I missed my medication too often? Could this be enough to cause such a strong reaction?

“What, not happy to see me? My yearning for you was so strong that I ditched my shift and ran all the way here, that you give me the cold shoulder after all the trouble I went through is pretty heartless.”

“You ran all the way here from your work? I highly doubt that.”

Why am I talking to a hallucination, do I really feel that miserable? It will make it worse, I have to ignore it, turn around and walk away, I have to calm down and get a grip on myself then it will stop on its own. It always did, I need a few hours of deep sleep and everything will be fine.

“Okay, maybe not the whole way. I took a cab and made the poor guy drive me from my work to
here and then throughout the city, I spotted you three blocks away and got off to catch up with you. Who would have thought that you take crazy detours and shortcuts that even I don't know of.”

Wait.. does that mean he's real and not an illusion? There's no way he could have known about this, I don't think Mona is able to make phone calls - or is he?

“Before you freak out, I've seen what happened. I'm not a psychic or something, just someone with trust issues and a CCTV in his living room.”

“You spied on me?!”

“Not specifically on you, it's always running. If anything then I'm spying on Mona, he's the only one who's usually at home when I'm away. I forgot to turn it off before you arrived, not that it's a bad thing, who knows what would have happened to you if I hadn't seen you fleeing from your attacker.”

“The hell are you talking about?"  
“Mona was a dick to you, I don't know what he said because there's no audio but the footage gave me a pretty good idea. The only one who's allowed to be a dick to Goro Akechi is me, everyone else will be charged with high treason and has to face the full force of the law. We can discuss the details somewhere else, somewhere warm and preferably with a cup of coffee, like my place. I call us a cab.”

I can't go back, I don't want to, but I have no right to ask for a ride home and my laptop is still in his flat, without it I won't be able to check my notes or keep track of my appointments.

“Don't make such a face, I never expected this to go well, it was more an experiment than anything else. Sure, it went downhill much quicker than I thought it would and it turned out worse, but it's not your fault. I'm the one to blame and I'm sorry, I put you through this just to confirm some of my suspicions. It was selfish. I know it's not going to make it any better but please come back to my place and let me explain, you can hate me as much as you want after I'm done talking.”

He's smiling at me, it's not the one connected to Joker, it's not confident, not cocky or seductive, hurt and sadness are bleeding from it. There's nothing he could do to drive me away, nothing that would make me hate him, he can take everything away from me and I would still stay by his side as long as he wants me to.

“Okay. I just don't know how to face Mona, if it's possible then I would like to avoid him.”

“No problem, I'll take care of it.”

The silence that follows is not a comfortable one, it's suffocating, a dull ache in the middle of my chest, a steady throbbing inside my head. I want to say something but the cold wind turns every word I could utter into sharp cold pain, trapped in my throat, ready to cut it open.

It continues on until the cab arrives, it bursts into warmth when his hand finds mine; firmly holding on to it during our ride back.

A night-drive has always been a double-edged sword for me, passing by so many people's houses, seeing the city lights casting its shadows on nameless entities wandering the streets, it's both beautiful and hard to stand, comforting and lonely at the same time – I'm both glad and disappointed when we arrive at his place, the nervousness is slowly increasing as well.

It's Mona's home, I can't let him get thrown out just because I felt hurt by what he said. The situation is messed up enough as it is.

“Don't worry, I'm not going to start a fight or kick him out, I'll ask him to give us some privacy and that's it. Please don't run away, I'm totally beat and might get a heart attack if I have to chase you again.”

“What, are you getting old already?”
His laugh creates a loud echo, it's thin and fragile, the arm he puts around my shoulder trembles slightly.

“There's no way I could find you in the dark, it was hard enough in broad daylight.”

It's fear that makes his words so heavy, unspoken truths, I can understand what he's feeling without any kind of explanation; the 'please don't leave me' is hanging in the air, never to be voiced directly.

He silently unlocks the door, I turn away from him and focus on the small flower pot in front of the window, pale red flowers that I don't know the name of are doing a rather poor job at brightening up the clinically white hallway. It looks a lot more like a hospital now that it's dark outside, the plain plant lost in this empty and lifeless space, a farewell gift that someone left by the deathbed of an acquaintance they don't really care about.

“You can come in, I send Mona on a walk.”

I take my shoes off with clammy hands, not even the warmth inside the cab managed to defrost them, and the first thing I notice when I look up is in how much disarray the room is – I'm pretty sure it wasn't like this when I left.

From there it gets worse, the living room looks a lot like a clumsy burglar had frenetically searched for something of value. The phone is lying on the floor, quietly beeping, the vase on the kitchen table is knocked over and its liquid content spilled everywhere, rhythmically dripping down and forming a small puddle on the floor; even the framed city-map on the wall is crooked.

“I have nothing to do with this.”

“Never said any different, Mona already confessed to dashing around in panic and wrecking the place while trying to come up with another plan after calling me failed.”

So he did try, I can't really explain the reason but I'm relieved to hear that he hasn't figured out how to use a telephone, I fought by his side for weeks on end, and yet it still freaks me out that he's much more human than his appearance leads you to believe. It's surreal and makes me uncomfortable.

“Sit down, I make us a cup of coffee. Just ignore the mess, I'm currently not in the mood to clean it up.”

One of the chairs is lying on the floor, I can't help but pull it back up – the cushion is wet and squishy, it feels like a sponge. Gross.

“Care to tell me what miss ex-council-president came here for?”

This isn't the right time to tell him, he's upset and clearly emotional, his expression might be neutral but the shaking of his hand when he pulls two cups out of the cupboard paints a different picture. I could make something up and hope for the best, at least until I have enough time to organise everything and find the best approach. It's just that I'm so tired of this, all of their problems could have been easily prevented had they not lied to each others for whatever greater good they imagined, and now I'm about to follow suit. I'm not a spineless puppet that solely exists for other people's convenience, I already told more lies than someone my age should have.

“She wanted to tell me that she knew I'm alive. Her sister found me a little more than a year after my disappearance and they decided to keep it to themselves.”

“I suspected as much, it's one of the reasons why I left the CCTV running. The chance that she might show up seemed pretty high to me.”

“Wait, you said you forgot to turn it off.”
“Your memory is much better than you give it credit for, I'm really impressed. Let me rephrase it, I forgot to turn it off because I never intended to do it in the first place.”

“That's – nevermind. What made you suspicious?”

“Not every policeman bows down to the Niijima sisters and I know more than one thanks to being arrested multiple times, it's unpleasant but comes with some benefits if you play your cards right. I never heard back from the station after I reported you as missing so I went there and asked but they refused to give me any information, it was clear that something was going on. I contacted someone who I thought wouldn't say no to me, he looked into it and told me that your case got classified as confidential by no other than Sae herself. The rest wasn't too hard to guess, there were only two options - either you've been alive the whole time or they found your body, in which case I would have been willing to forgive them. I'm not sure I could have handled it. Anyway, it was obviously not that so it doesn't matter. They tried to trick me, they betrayed me, whatever they claim to be the reason can't change that. Nothing is ever going to change it.”

The boiling pigeon falls silent, two steaming cups find their way to the coffee table, held by a man that looks way too tired for my liking; I reluctantly sit down next to him.

“She knows that, she won't even try to justify it to you. It was a stupid decision, an understandable one when you know all the circumstances, but she doesn't expect you to forgive her, she probably thinks that even so much as explaining it to you would only cause more harm.”

“Yeha, that's why she tries to get to me through you. It's just another thing that I suspected to happen and exactly the reason why I tried to keep them away from you, there's suddenly someone who doesn't know shit about everything and is therefore easy to manipulate. You are the perfect target.”

“Thank you for putting your trust in me, it didn't know that I'm nothing more than a brainless idiot to you who's at risk of being used as a weapon in your kindergarten fight with your friends.”

“Goro, calm down and let me explain. It's not the first time they tried to drag an unaware bystander into this and use them to influence me.”

My personal pool of anger is drying up, it leaves me with a sense of confusion. This must be another incident that he misjudged, they probably thought that a person closer to him in terms of distance would be better at providing sufficient help. I'm sure that the slight tightness in my chest has nothing to do with an unknown person being close enough with him to have at least some kind of suspected influence.

“Who was it?”

“I got together with someone, we met a few months after I moved back in with my parents. The relationship with the others was slowly going sour but it wasn't as bad as it is now so I made the mistake to introduce them to said person, only to have them use him against me shortly after.”

“Him?”

“Shit, I didn't mean to say that. Talk about bad timing. There was this guy at my school, he's a Hāfu and wasn't very popular, his classmates either ignored or directly bullied him, we met in the headteacher's office after both being called there for skipping classes. We started to talk, spent lunch breaks together, he was the only one who really listened to me, he treated me with respect and kindness - you know how it goes, it wasn't hard to fall for him. Not that it makes any difference, it obviously wasn't meant to last if the tiniest bit of trouble was more than enough for him to break up with me.”

“Oh.”

So it's in the past, there isn't someone who could disapprove of me and bring him to throw me away like trash, I still have the chance to make everything right. I never thought he would date a guy, I heard so many stories about him going out of with the most beautiful girls in Tokyo, never once did anyone say something about boys. Maybe he was just very discreet, it still is generally
frowned upon.

“This isn't how I wanted to tell you about it, just.. I'm not going to make a move on you or something.”

“It's fine, I wasn't worried about that, I'm more surprised than anything else. You only dated girls, or women if your teacher counts as well, so this is quite unexpected.”

“Well, I never really cared about gender. Women can be attractive, men can be attractive, the only reason why I never dated guys before was the very unbalanced female to male ratio in my circle of friends. And you are not - you know, disgusted or at least concerned about me tainting your purity by sitting next to you?”

“No, of course not.”

Does this mean all of his teasing wasn't merely a way to ruffle my feathers? He did say that he's not going to make a move on me, but who would admit to it in this kind of situation? There was the very real possibility that I'm grossed out by it, I could have run away in fear that I might catch whatever infection causes someone to date the same gender as them. It sounds so silly and it's sad that some people hold on to this believe even in this day and age, back then I overheard classmates discussing it after the rumours about me started to circulate. Still.. is there a chance that I'm more to him than just a friend?

“I might be imagining things but you look oddly happy about this. Is there something you want to tell me?”

There's a glint in his eyes, I pointedly turn away and reach for my coffee.

“This smug smile of yours has no business being there. It's like you said, you are imagining things.”

His laugh is clear and full of joy.

“We'll see about that.”

Chapter End Notes

Hāfu is the word for a half-Japanese person, it's not really a slur and much better than everything that was used before but can still be considered somewhat negative, the context in which it is used shows if it's meant well/neutral or as an insult. Being mixed race isn't necessarily a big problem in Japan, it greatly depends on where you live – big cities like Tokyo are usually more accepting than rural areas although it can be the opposite as well, some small communities in the countryside are friendly to everyone who's nice no matter their race, but it's generally easier to be a foreigner than half-Japanese. Don't ask me why, it doesn't make any sense to me (or any decent person) either :/
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

One day early!

I'm finally done with outlining the story, I should be able to finish it at around chapter 20 (maybe one or two more, or less). I switched my time schedule around to make room for extensive writing on one day, and editing on another, so I can probably update regularly like I promised.

I don't want to ruin the light atmosphere, force the joyous look on his face to retreat yet again, turn the warmth that has settled between us into cold distance.

Would it be too much to reach for his hand, anchor myself, and hope that he understands how much this moment means to me?

There are so many things I want to say, so much I want to ask, many secrets that are about to break through and come to light, threatening to ruin the little bit of intimacy I was able to allow myself. But this isn't about me, it shouldn't be about me, I'm only here to give back to the man who never hesitated to offer a helping hand, even to someone like me - a liar, a murderer. His murderer.

My options are very limited, all I can do is assist him in finding the help that he clearly needs, I can sympathise with some of his problems, know them in and out from personal experience, and even though I haven't found the right way to deal with all of them, I'm convinced that I can be of use.

Being there for your friends is the most essential aspect of such a relationship, it sounds so easy and should come natural, but it's so unbelievably hard for me to do – I'm neither used to take nor to give, never relied on anyone, never felt like caring about others is worth the hassle, it's the first time I genuinely want to try.

How do I start a conversation that I myself would hate to have?

“T'm really worried about you. I know it's intrusive and that I'm in no position to even ask, but.. can we talk about your problems?”

“Sure, it's not that I wasn't prepared for this anyway. It was only a matter of time before your pretty head comes up with some sneaky plan to make me spill the beans, I'm actually glad that you are so upfront about it.”

He takes a sip of his coffee, carefully leans back against the backrest, his eyes are fixed on the table in front of him; the tension in his yaw makes it obvious how uncomfortable he feels. You can never really prepare for such a conversation, there's always the possibility that you'll be confronted with something you aren't ready to talk about, maybe you will be forced to hurt the other person by telling them to stop. I have to be careful, one wrong word could be enough to drive either of us up the wall, I'm easily angered and, as far as I can tell, he isn't much better.

“What would you say are the things that you're struggling with the most, or... maybe you noticed some symptoms?”

“I get panic attacks, crying spells and have anger issues. Nightmares, sometimes racing thoughts, I'm often nervous and irritable, generally a bit jumpy - I might get occasional flashbacks but I'm not sure that's really what it is, I read about it online and it sounds a bit different.”

“You forgot trust issues. And flashbacks come in many forms, chances are that you read about the prime example that isn't even the most common but is usually used as an example. Always be wary
of what you read online, most of the information are either incomplete or inaccurate. What did your therapist say to all of this?"

"Therapists, I've seen two. Both kinda ignored it? I'm not even sure, we never really discussed it after the first few seasons, like it's either unimportant or they thought I'm exaggerating."

"I'm not a therapist so take this with a grain of salt - I noticed some unhealthy patterns in the way you process other people's words and actions, it's called distorted thinking and can be a sign of various mental disorders, some people suffer from it without otherwise being ill, in those it's usually linked to anxiety. In any case, it's something that you should take very seriously and get help for, before it takes on a life of its own."

"Personal experience?"

"Personal experience. There are some good therapy options for it, even if you aren't ready to work on anything else then at least try to learn how to handle this. It'll make your life a lot easier."

"Fine, I can do that if it's so important to you. I'm not stupid, I know that something's not right with me and as much as I want to blame everyone else, I'm aware of my own contributions. My thoughts can get so erratic and illogical, I feel attacked even when there's no reason why the person should do that, and from there it gets even crazier. Countless possible explanations start to pop up inside my head, one more negative than the last. I know it's not normal."

The hand that lies on his knee is visibly shaking, he must have noticed as well and uses it to comb through his hair before crossing his arms in front of his chest, effectively preventing further displays of nervousness. I understand how it feels, how hard it is to live with the knowledge that something's not quite right with you, always having to ask yourself if what you are experiencing is real or not, if your actions match the situation or if you are escalating a minor incidence.

"I'm trying to understand where it went wrong with your last two therapists, just to make sure that you aren't unconsciously sabotaging it - that's more common than you might think. Have you told them what happened to you over the last couple of years?"

"I never talked about anything in detail, I gave them a short, slightly tweaked version of everything. Got framed for a crime, was thrown out by my parents and had to move in with a stranger, made a lot of friends but met a lot of horrible people as well, a person I cared about went missing, moved back in with my parents, have trouble at school, have trouble with my parents, feel let down by my friends."

"Have you told them about the interrogation?"

"Yeha, I changed the culprits to some low level criminals and the location to a back-ally late at night. I thought it's better not to drag our high and mighty law enforcement into this, I still have some sense of self-preservation left."

"It sounds like you covered all the basics, that should have been enough to formulate a decent therapy plan. Have you at least talked about that, thought of a strategy, which of your problems are the most important and how to tackle them?"

"Only when 'eat healthy', 'sleep more', and 'exercise regularly' can be considered a plan. The first one jumped to random conclusions, he was dead set on blaming my problems at school for everything else and suggested to find a new one. I told him that my biggest problem at the moment were my parents but he basically ignored me, like I hadn't said anything. He wouldn't even listen when I tried to talk about a fight I had with them, he cut me off every single time and changed the topic to healthy sleeping patterns or some other bullshit. The second one actually tried to be helpful, she listened to me, never interrupted me or did something else that came off as uninterested. It was just that she didn't really get me, I said that I'm disappointed in society and she answered that I need to have faith, that there are good people as well. I talked about my friends and that I feel like they don't really care about me, she answered that everyone has their own way of caring and I just have to appreciate their afford. And when I told her about you.. she thought that it's time to let go and move on, that my attachment to you is holding me back and dragging me down. She didn't understand that it was the opposite, that I needed to believe that you are out
I can't help but wonder why my state of existence, or non-existence, was so important to him. Is it like Mona said, did he need an important task to get up in the morning? Something to distract him? Or did he feel so alone that a presumably dead person, not to mention a criminal, would have been the best company he could imagine? The urge to ask him grows stronger every second, an increasing pressure inside my lungs. The answer could turn my hope into dust, the wish for a close relationship with him into longing for death; some things might be better left unknown.

“I see. To me it sounds that the first one either wasn't very experience in dealing with adolescents or generally not the type for such problems, he followed the general strategy of positive reinforcement that is common in non-specialist talk therapy. It works well enough for someone who's stressed out, changing ones habits and taking care of yourself can have a huge impact, a healthy diet, a light workout, and a sufficient amount of sleep reduces anxiety, it makes it easier to handle tensions at work or school, it makes you feel good about yourself. It's not a wrong suggestions, but not enough for someone like you.

The second one sounds very decent and the chemistry was obviously right as well, she just didn't know how to deal with such a deep-rooted negative mindset. Did you get a diagnosis?”

“She thought I had depression but I don't agree with that. Sure, my feelings might have been pretty dark but I never had suicidal thoughts or anything, the only reason why I couldn't sleep were the nightmares, and I never deliberately tried to isolate myself. There just wasn't anyone to spend time with - apart from my boyfriend, for as long as it lasted. It wasn't depression if you ask me.”

“It changes from person to person and it's an illness with many faces, some forms present quite different from what people usually think of as depression. Maybe she was wrong, maybe she wasn't.”

“Are we playing the mental illness variant of Russian roulette?”

There's disgust and frustration written all over his face, he rubs at it with both hands and the expression is gone as fast as it came, replaced by an unmoving mask; he's still not looking at me.

“I know it's frustrating but these things take time, misdiagnoses happen, in some cases it's hard to tell symptoms apart and find the right category - it's not something that can be accurately determined just by hearing about your problems. I can't do that and therapists neither, it's just too complex, a lot of in-depth analysis and hard work is needed for that.”

“You sound more competent than both of them. Congratulations, you got the job.”

“I'm flattered, but no. I suggest that you try your luck with my former therapist, he was able to handle me so working with you shouldn't be a problem for him. That doesn't mean that I'm not ready to help you as well, I can teach you some skills that you might find helpful and I can listen to you, maybe even offer my unbiased opinion about your interpersonal problems.”

“Sounds nice apart from the 'interpersonal problems', it's easy to guess what you mean by that. You have an opinion about this mess, good, let me hear it. Let's get this over with.”

Tiredness threatens to take over, there's a hot pulsating sensation on the back of my head, my eyes are growing heavy. Running around for hours is finally taking its toll on me, I can feel every leg muscle burning under my skin, my back is screaming hysterically. I have to keep going, this is more important than my need for rest, he is more important.

“Please remember that I'm not taking sides, and I don't know all of the circumstances, it's just my personal point of view based on what I heard from both you and Makoto. They made some very unfortunate mistakes and you have every right to be angry, even she agrees with that, but I do think that their feelings for you were genuine. The help they tried to provide you with was based on honest compassion and friendship, they were just too young to see where they were going wrong. You were a large group of friends, that creates a lot of possibilities for
miscommunication and misunderstandings, especially when most of the contact happens over messages or phone. You think they tried to turn you into a different person, Makoto says they didn't even know that you weren't the person they thought you were. They perceived you differently, what you said in all seriousness seemed to them like jokes, and you do have an affinity for teasing and joking around, sometimes in inappropriate ways and situations. You say that they never really listened to you, which Makoto seems to agree with, I personally think it was more a case of not knowing any better – they did listen and reacted to it accordingly, they just didn't press on quite enough to see that you aren't telling them everything. Or am I wrong?"

“No, you aren't. There were some things that I kept to myself, but only because they never really asked, I didn't feel comfortable enough to say more after they basically jumped me with solutions before I could even finish my explanation.”

“But you do blame them for it, that's very unfair. It would have been your responsibility to make things clear, you correct people when they misunderstand you instead of letting them believe whatever they want. If you don't do that then you can't point your finger at them, they aren't mind-readers. That being said, I totally understand why you kept quiet, you were very vulnerable and young, even a lot of adults aren't courageous enough to speak up in this kind of situation. It's awkward to correct someone who's already trying to help you.”

“It is. You are right, I should have said something, I'm just angry that I even had to. They were my friends, shouldn't they be the ones making sure that they understood me right? Do I really have to say everything out loud? They should have asked, they should have noticed that what I was talking about had nothing to do with what they thought it was.”

“Let me say it again, people can't read minds. You have to be clear with what you want them to know, that's how proper conversations work - feeding them vague hints isn't enough, not for most adults and definitely not for teenagers. Makoto mentioned that one of these misunderstandings concerned your problems at school, I assume it was about bullying?”

“Bullying in the sense of everyone calling me names, then sure. Bullying like in 'let's see if we can freak out the psycho by trapping him in the classroom', then yes. Do you count shoving someone down the stairs, and then claiming that it happened because the person tried to shove someone else, as bullying? If so, then that too.”

The smile he's flashing at no one in particular is surely meant to take the edge off of this, but all it does is show me how much he was suffering, surely still is. I know the look on his face, the tone of his voice, making light of a situation that you otherwise couldn't handle, especially not when you speak about it with someone else - it helps you to keep your composure, to keep your mask in check, it's driven by the fear to lose control over the hurt that you try to hide from the world around you, and even from yourself.

“I don't even know what to say, that's horrible. I can see why your friends didn't think of something like that, this isn't the norm but a very serious case that should have been reported, some of it even to the police. These are crimes, Akira, not simple bullying.”

“Maybe.”

“Definitely. I'm not trying to put the blame on you, I just want you to understand that your perception isn't accurate and everyone involved is partly responsible for this drama. Broken trust is hard to repair no matter why it broke, you might not be able to forgive them and renew your friendship, maybe you are even right and you aren't on the same wavelength anymore, but leaving so many things unspoken, unclear and up to your imagination, isn't good for your health. You should talk to them, not right now but eventually.”

“Is 'I don't want to' legitimate enough not to do it?”

“That depends on the reason, it would be if you are over it and don't care anymore, but we both know that's no true, you are still pretty upset about it. Whatever you are afraid of, in the end there's nothing that could do more damage than what has already been done, no one forces you to forgive them and you aren't obliged to disclose anything to them. If you aren't comfortable with telling
them about your mental problems then don't do it, you can simple listen to what they have to say and leave right after – that's still better than mulling it over inside your head for the rest of your life.”

“Impressive, very impressive. You did mature a lot.”

“Hopefully that's a compliment and not a nice way of saying that I’m getting old. There's just one thing that I can't stop thinking about – why do you have a CCTV in your living room?”

“To spy on Mona. I had the feeling he might be talking to one of them behind my back, I thought it couldn't hurt to keep an eye on him while I'm at work.”

“You could have asked him instead of invading his privacy. And mine.”

“Yeha, I'm sure he would be totally honest about it. That's like asking Futaba if she hacked my phone or computer, I replace both every so often to make sure that she isn't spying on me.”

“That's... called paranoia and isn't normal, I hope you realise that.”

“Says the one who assumes that every single person on this planet is a lying bastard with ulterior motives and probably out to get him. You aren't that hard to read.”

“Fair enough, but at least I know that I have paranoia.”

“Never said that I'm unaware of my own.”

I can't help but smile when he bumps his shoulder against mine.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I guess I have to say goodbye to “Akira” and need to use “Ren” now, don't I? The thing is, I would have to revise all chapters which means spending a lot of time on it, time that I could use to write a new chapter... let's just pretend “Akira” is his middle name. Problem solved.

There's a lot of psychological stuff in this chapter, I tried to keep it casual but I'm usually really bad at it, I tend to get way too medical – please let me know if that's the case so I can fix it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

„Say, how did you get out of work? Is it going to cause you trouble?“
“Nah. I said my boyfriend had an accident and that I have to go to the hospital, my boss was very understanding and even offered to pay me regardless of my leave. I called one of my co-workers, he lives close to the bar and is always happy to take over someone's shift, and he's fine with working tomorrow as well. Like I mentioned before, you can make quite a lot of money, even in just one night.”
“I see.”

He didn't need to say boyfriend, isn't 'grandmother' or another relative the usual excuse? Seriously, this guy is constantly messing with the people around him, no wonder his friends couldn't make sense of him, it's so hard to tell if he's joking or being honest. This has to be a joke, there's no plausible explanation why he would think of us like that, we didn't do anything. We haven't talked about the topic seriously, it's all based on jokes, there isn't even a reason to talk about it at all – we haven't seen each other for two years and it's not like we've been in love back then. I'm still not sure what I felt, I liked him at first, before I knew who he was, then tried so hard to hate him, but in the end I was just confused about my own feelings. I wanted him gone, and I wanted to be with him, it was a never-ending circle of hate and... something else.

My face feels hot, I hope I'm not blushing, I'm a grown ass man, I shouldn't get embarrassed because of a dumb joke made be a guy who's as serious as a clown during work hours. Maybe it's just the fact that I'm not completely opposed to the idea, and it's not only his looks – he is a good person. Sure, he has flaws like everyone else, that might even be more alluring than the perfect being he seemed to be in the past, with his clever mind and do-gooder attitude. Meeting him again hasn't changed anything, he's as interesting and charming as he used to be, with a personality that I can really connect with. Is it wrong to think that I might like him even more now that he's imperfect and damaged like me? He was always untouchable, a walking ideal that no one could possibly compete with let alone reach. Now he's just – human. It's useless to think about it, I can be glad if he wants to keep me as a friend, I'm already bad enough at that, I don't want to imagine how hard it would be to be my partner.

“You said something about skills and that you could teach me, got anything for panic attacks? They are annoying as hell.”
“Of course. When do you usually get them?”
“At first only at school and occasionally in the middle of the night, but by now they happen
randomly. At night, during the day, at work, at home, there seems to be no pattern.”

“Can you describe how it feels for you? Panic attacks are all different, I need to know in which direction I have to look.”

“Okay – it starts with sweaty hands, I get incredibly hot, my heart is racing, I can't breath and feel like I'm about to vomit. That lasts maybe a minute, then it's all just chaos. I'm convinced that I'm going to die, I can't sit still, there's pure chaos inside my head, like some kind of bomb has gone off. And everything is kinda surreal, I'm not sure if I'm awake or dreaming... it feels like I'm stuck in a nightmare.”

“Is that how it usually is, all of these feelings at once?”

“More often than not. Sometimes it's just that I can't breath to the point of nearly passing out, I tried this exercise where you have to focus on your breathing but that made it worse.”

“I know which one you mean, you should probably stay away from all of them. They aren't for this kind of panic attack, you need to be clear enough to focus on a single function without over-observing it. I assume they are quite lengthy and tend to be like spirals? It's unbearable, gets better, and then it's unbearable again?”

“Yes, that's it! Some are short and mild, but most of them just won't go away, they come like waves, especially in the evening and during the night.”

“I'm not going to lie to you, non-situational attacks are called panic disorder and it's quite hard to get it under control, depending on the intensity and frequency you might actually need medication for it. I would suggest to try a therapy called CBT, my former therapist did it with me and it did help, maybe not as good as I hoped it would but it's better than nothing. I can lend you a book for it, just to get by until you can see a therapist, although many people are fine with just the book or an online class it might be better to have a professional by your side.”

“Sounds good, count me in.”

“Is there anything else you need immediate help with?”

“These flashbacks, if it's really that, they can be terrifying. Mainly because I feel somewhat off after them, sometimes for hours. Everything is just so unreal, I can't feel my body and there's this feeling – like something's going to harm me. I know I'm alone, I don't see or hear anything, but I'm so sure that I'll be hurt. This sounds so crazy. Am I crazy?”

“Not at all, it's called dissociation and quite common. I'm only guessing but, that you feel like you are in danger might be directly linked to the flashback if it's about a situation in which you felt like this or have directly been hurt, it's hard to calm down as long as you are dissociating. Emotional flashbacks are a thing, you could say that past feelings are bleeding into the current moment.”

“I never paid attention to that, I don't know if it only happens after certain memories or randomly. Should I keep track of that?”

“If you want to and can, it could be useful for a therapist, just make sure that you aren't triggering yourself with it. I give you something that might help you to calm down.”

Getting up is harder than I expected, my back is stiff and hurting. No matter how expensive his sofa looks, it's everything but comfortable, even the 10 years old mattress in my room is better than this.

The envelope Makoto gave to me is the thirst thing I see when I open my bag, it's still untouched, its content still a mystery – should I use whatever amount of money it holds to treat Akira to a nice dinner? He went through so much trouble just because of my stupid and overly emotional ass, I have to do something to pay him back, anything to show him my gratitude. I don't want him to think that all I do is take, that our relationship is unbalanced when it comes to how much we care about each other.

My hand finds the small item that I'm searching for easy enough, it's always in the same place, ready to be pulled out or touched in secret, a soothing companion no one has to know about. The tiny crow looks a bit ruffled up, I smooth down his feathers as best as I can, it's not much, nothing more than a cheap toy, put on sale because no customer has ever shown interest in it. I still remember how sad I felt, how cold and alone, I spent my last few yen on it and took it home with
me, if you can even call it that. One room in a doya, surrounded by people 30 to 50 years older than I am, I was constantly afraid and lonely. He kept me company when no one else would, he was there for me during some of the worst times of my life, calmed me down when reality became a lore and happiness a myth. Maybe he can be something similar to Akira, an anchor, and a friend.

The man with the big grey eyes, lovingly shining in the tungsten light, looks at me in wonder when I put the bird in his lap.

“A plush crow?”

“Yes, I think he has a nice texture. Fluffy but squishy, small enough to carry him around in a bag or pocket, and I sprayed him with lavender perfume so he smells quite nice as well. Using your senses can reduce dissociation, most people have a preferred sense, some are more into touch, others into smell or sounds. You can try visual as well, just focus on his feathers, how they look, their colour, you can count them or describe his overall appearance as detailed as possible.”

“That's... so nice of you. But I can't take this, you obviously need it for yourself.”

“I'm fine without it, just take good care of him. He means a lot to me.”

“I will. Thank you for listening to me today, I don't think anyone ever really did.”

His eyes are fixed on the small creature in his hands, he's gently patting its head, caressing its wings. He's eighteen but right now he looks more like a child, beaten up and left alone to suffer, with no one to turn to for help, no place to be, no room to breathe. The loneliness and hurt are visible in his posture, drooping head, slumped shoulders, his whole upper body seems too close to his legs; the smaller you are the less space is wasted on you, the harder it is for others to see you, less likely that someone will notice that you exist. Is this how he really feels? All the flirting, the confidence he seems to radiate, the jokes and cocky comebacks, is all of it nothing but a mask? The thought makes my stomach turn, the image before my eyes is too much like the one that I used to see every morning while getting ready for school.

“So, should we go to bed? I'm honestly happy about this, of course not about Mona bullying you, but about the opportunity to spend time with you. And sleep with you, that's the best part.”

“You mean sleep in the same bed as me. Our languages is quite precise, make proper use of it or people might get the wrong idea.”

“Is it the wrong one? Damn, and here I thought my dreams are finally coming true.”

“That depends on the type of dream, if it's about me hitting you with the nearest object I can find then I'm happy to realise it for you.”

“Right, you are into that. I never tried it before but if it's with you, why not?”

“Careful, or you'll be sleeping on the sofa.”

“I could get kicked out of the bed before we are even together... that would be a new record.”

Chapter End Notes

I know this was quite short but I'm in the middle of editing what should have been this chapter, it's much longer and took more time to correct than I thought it would, I'm already a day late for this one so it seemed better to cut it up and upload what I've already edited.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

There are a lot of chats somewhere at the beginning, it gets better after that so please bear with me.

I'm so bad at tagging, it wasn't such a big thing back when I used to write fanfiction, please let me know if I need to add something!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Fine, I give you one last chance. Get ready for bed, and you better be grateful.”

He's smiling brightly, obviously very pleased with himself, I can see the happiness radiating from him while he walks the short distance to his bathroom and closes the door soundly.

The whole situation went quite different from what I have expected, I should be here with Mona, maybe typing away at my laptop and probably pitying myself some more, I didn't thought that I would soon be sharing a bed with the man that shouldn't even been here.
I messed up, not only did I cause him trouble, I managed to drive a wedge between him and Mona, something I never intended to do, let alone wanted to happen; the cat is his only friend and I actively ruined their relationship by being emotionally unstable. It shouldn't be so hard to face some hurtful words, there was no need to get so overboard.
My inability to control my anger is one of the most annoying, and dangerous, problems that I'm still battling with, it already did so much damage and yet I can't seem to get any better at staying calm.

It always feels like my head is about to explode, the heat, the chaos, I can't think straight and just want to scream, to break something, to hurt myself, it's like I'm on some kind of destructive autopilot. I should be angry but instead I immediately rage, I hate the person who hurt me, I hate myself, the whole world, and life in general; I know I'm sick, I know I have to keep working on this, but it's so hard when there's no time to even remember why I'm overreacting, my mind is pretty good at ignoring logic, it screams much louder than reasoning ever could.

I'm not even sure if getting angry at all was justified, I know what Mona said but did I understand it right, did he hurt me intentionally or did I misjudge it? I can't lecture Akira about distorted thinking when I myself am so bad at spotting it, this mess might be totally unnecessary, born by my own fucked up mind.

“Done. Fashionable, don't you think?”

He's back much quicker than I hoped he would, spinning a few times to show of his night attire - a grey tank-top and very loose shorts. I honestly wish he would wear a bit more, I don't know where to look, and I'm afraid he will lose those pants just by walking around.

“I'm a delicious piece of candy, I know. You can have some if you want, I'll be waiting for you.”

With that he winks at me and vanishes into his bedroom. I hate to admit it, I'm definitely blushing like a thirteen years old schoolgirl that ran into her shirtless and sweaty Senpai after a PE lesson. Focus, he's messing with you, don't get lost in abstract fantasies.
I pull my toothbrush out of my bag, hastily go to the bathroom and close the door - take a deep breath, it was a long and horrible day, I'm very glad that it's about to end so well, and that doesn't even cut it. The night I spent with him in Leblanc was by far the best I ever had, the closeness, the feeling of safety, no nightmares or endless pondering. It's a miracle that I can have this again, although I wish I had the opportunity to prepare myself, it was much easier the first time, when I didn't know much about him; now I can't pretend that he's straight and would never fall for a guy, I'm unsure if it's all just fun and games or if something could actually happen between us. I wouldn't be ready for it, I'm not that kind of person, I have to stand firm in case that he does want more.

His toothpaste tastes horrible, it's like I'm chewing on sandy herbs.. it's the minty charcoal paste from Kobayashi, that explains a lot. I used the tea mint one back when I gave interviews, the taste isn't great but it does make your teeth white as fuck, I guess a bright smile is essential in his line of work as well. God, what am I even doing here, I'm just prolonging the inevitable; am I really that immature? Even if he makes a move on me, he would never do anything that I don't want, all I have to do is say no, and there isn't even a reason why he should want me, a twenty years old virgin with bats in the belfry. He's smart and good looking, financially stable, he can certainly make a much better catch than me.

I leave the door open in case that Mona comes back home and needs to use the bathroom, the lights in the living room go out with a soft click, I'm surrounded by silence, blanketed in caliginosity. Walking blindly is difficult, my sense of balance is even worse in the dark, every step unsteady, I can't orient myself, left and right no longer exist, up and down are one in the same; I'm relieved the moment my hand finds the doorknob and I can finally step back into the light.

“Glad to see you, got the feeling that you ran off again.”

“Once a day is enough for me.”

A small smile shines in the dim light, he's lying on his back, hair already tousled, the look in his eyes is gentle, fond, it turns my uneasiness into warmth and comfort.

“You don't have to be nervous, I'm not going to take advantage of you. I'm just happy that we can sleep together, I thought about this several times since our first night – I savoured it a lot.”

“Me too. I'm sorry that I'm constantly complicating everything, it's my speciality.”

I crawl into bed next to him and pull the blanket over my chest, it's warm and cozy, unfamiliar but pleasant, the light flickers before the room is cast in darkness. His hand on my head startles me for a short moment, then it starts to comb through my hair, a soothing gesture, my eyes are closed before I can try to keep them open.

“Would it be okay if I hug you close? I want to have you in my arms, just to make sure that you don't vanish while I sleep.”

“Certainly. But I won't go anywhere.”

He laughs, it's not happy but raw, pained, I can hear bitterness and fear in it; I wish I knew what he's feeling right now, what he's thinking about, what motivates the need to have physical contact in order to be assured that I'm there.

“Still.”

It's nothing more than a whisper getting lost in the cold evening air, muffled by his pillow, shared
between two souls stranded on a deserted island.
I turn around while he extents his arm and moves closer, the other one encircles me before I can lay back down, he pulls me close against his chest and hugs me tight.
He smells nice, like sea water and wind, rain during a lightning storm, soft but strong at the same time; my own arm finds its way around him, I can't help but close what little distance is left between us.
If I had one wish then it would be the chance to stay here, exactly like this, for all eternity.....
….why are the lights on? My eyelids are heavy, did I fall sleep? Hm, the light comes from the window, it seems to be morning, the air in the room is cold, I'm cold... the spot Akira should be in is empty, I'm alone. I can't picture him as an early riser so it must be quite late if he's already up. The night has yet again been a good one, not a single nightmare has found its way into my consciousness, sleeping next to him must have a magical effect on my mind, it works better than the sleeping pills that my doctor supplies me with.
Leaving the bed is a shame, the last bit of warmth is quickly lost when I sit up, my legs are a bit stiff but nothing else seems to hurt. A real blessing.
No signs of either Akira nor Mona, the living room is empty, I can't hear anything from the bathroom, the only trace that someone must have been here is that the chaos is gone, it looks like it did when I first arrived.

A small piece of paper catches my eye, the words are more scribbled than written – I'm out shopping, there's coffee on the counter.
I put it back where I found it, I'm still too sleepy to search for the dustbin, instead I grab my phone from the kitchen table and turn it on. When did I promise to attend Futaba's party? It seems like a pretty long time, maybe I should make fast work of it and finally talk to her, the longer I wait the higher will be the chance that she breaks under the pressure.
How do I keep Akira away from this, I can't do it behind his back, he would think of it as a betrayal – maybe it's better to be open with him, that I think it would be a bad idea and that I will handle it just fine without him. I hate this kind of conversation, I know it's gutless but texting him sounds so much easier, if we can't see each other then we can't get into a fight, the worst that could happen is that he gets pissed off, in this case the way home should be enough to cool him down.
Yes, that's better than having to say it straight to his face, no one likes to hear that they aren't in the right condition to talk to someone.

[Hey, I know you are busy but I thought about the promise I made to Futaba, it has been quite some time and I want it out of the way. Remember that I said you should talk to your friends but not in the near future? I still stand by that so I'm going to attend her party alone, you shouldn't get involved for now, this is meant to be a quick and casual thing, nothing serious.]
[If I remember. I stay back if you think it's for the best]

That was suspiciously easy, maybe he thought about this as well and came to the same conclusion?
I would be happy if he takes my advice so serious – I hope it will be the same when he starts therapy, you have to at least consider your therapists opinion, even when you don't necessarily agree with it.
Now comes the harder part, getting in contact with her feels much more difficult than talking to Akira, she has always been irritating to me, with her references to stuff that I never even heard about... I feel out of touch with the world whenever I talk to her.

[Hello Futaba, I hope I'm not interrupting you. I thought it might be appropriate to let you know that I haven't forgotten about the party. Thank you for being so patient.]
[∑( '✧' “”) FINALLY! Took you long enough, I'm already 50% crazy and maaayyybe acted suspicious in front of the others? But I haven't said anything, promise! I was just VERY emotional.]
[That is quite alright, I'm sorry that I put you in a bad position. You no longer have to worry about anyone finding out, I'm ready to face them. Although I still hope that we can forget about the party and switch to a brief meeting with a cup of coffee.]
[Can you send me a selfie plz?]
[Why? I'd rather not, I don't look presentable.]
[No one cares! Just send it!]

I'm still in my pyjama, my hair is unkempt and I probably look like death himself. Whatever, it's just her and not a magazine.

[IMAGE SEND]

Why did she even want it? I should have asked her before I sent it, who knows what she's up to.

[May I ask why you requested one?]

No typing, no answer. I have the sinking feeling that I made a grave mistake.

[Futaba? If you are busy then we can talk about this later.]
[God you are so impatient. Are u having fun with Akira?]
[What does this have to do with our conversation?]
[Oh, nothing. Just asking.]
[How do you even know that I'm with him?]
[Doesn't matter. Okay, done. I gave them a quick warning and added you to the group chat. U gonna log in or what?]
[I thought we were still talking about the best course of action!]
[My bad, too late.]

I can't believe she tricked me, she knows exactly what she did and why, because it's the only way to prevent me from running away, I can't now that everyone knows. Clever, presenting a photo would make it impossible to act like she made everything up, they would pester Akira until he goes mad, she knows that I won't risk that.

Stay calm, it's just a chat, nothing can happen, no one can hurt you through a phone, just click the icon and get it out of the way.

**Ann:** Really?
**Yusuke:** Is he eating enough? He looks malnourished.
**Ann:** REALLY?
**Futaba:** Tada~ I present to you : the revenant!
**Akechi:** I wasn't ready for this.
**Akechi:** Hello.
**Yusuke:** Are you eating properly?
**Futaba:** Legitimate question.
**Ann:** That's not the problem!
**Futaba:** It might be one.
**Ann:** Is it really you? This isn't some kind of gross joke?
**Akechi:** I can assure you that I am in fact me.
**Ann:** It's him!
**Futaba:** THAT makes you believe it but the photo doesn't?!
Message after message is flowing by, I can catch a glimpse of some words, parts of a sentence, it's so quick that I can no longer follow, I get thrown to the most recent one before I can even find the point on which I got lost.

**Futaba:** Are you there? Hello????
**Akechi:** Yes, I'm just not used to group chats. It's too fast.
**Futaba:** Oh, slow down everybody! Give that man a break!
**Ann:** Aren't you in a group chat with your friends?
**Akechi:** I don't have friends.
**Akechi:** And I didn't mean to disclose that.
**Yusuke:** You never had friends, if I remember correctly.
**Futaba:** Wow Inari, how sensible of you.
**Yusuke:** I didn't have friends before I met Akira, it is nothing to be ashamed about.
**Akechi:** That makes me feel so much better.
**Futaba:** Sarcasm spotted!
**Ann:** Could we get back to the topic?
**Akechi:** I would appreciate that as well.
**Ann:** You are with Akira?
**Akechi:** I'm at his place, if that's what you mean.
**Futaba:** (_ASC*)
**Yusuke:** What else could she mean?
**Futaba:** So innocent.
**Ann:** That means Akira knew before everyone else and decided not to tell us.
**Akechi:** It wasn't like this!
**Akechi:** We had no time to discuss the matter before Futaba ran into him, and more or less me. It wouldn't have been his choice to begin with, I myself wanted to wait and he's decent enough to respect other peoples wishes.
**Ann:** But why didn't you want to tell us?
**Akechi:** Are you serious? Maybe because I killed people? Maybe because I killed family members of people in your group? Maybe, just maybe, because I killed Akira?

What kind of question is that, there are countless reasons not to tell anyone, even contacting Akira was a big risk, the more people know the greater is the possibility that something goes wrong. Wait, why on earth did I type that, am I insane?

**Akechi:** I shouldn't have said that.
**Akechi:** I just realised that I confessed to being a serial killer.
**Futaba:** No worries, I gotchya. What happens in this group chat stays in this group chat.
**Ann:** But Futaba seems to be okay with it, why shouldn't the rest of us? I don't get it.
**Ann:** Except for Haru, she's the only one apart from her who was directly hurt by you.
**Akechi:** I was afraid. And I never intended to tell you, all I wanted was to see Akira.
**Futaba:** Rude.
**Akechi:** I didn't mean it like that and it's your fault that I fuck up! You played me!
**Akechi:** This is not how it was supposed to go.
**Yusuke:** It's indeed a very emotional matter and I understand your nervousness, one should not rush into such a situation completely unprepared.
**Ann:** Can we meet?
**Futaba:** YES!
Yusuke: I think the question was directed at Akechi.
Futaba: No shit, Sherlock.
Akechi: Fine by me. I'm still at Akira's place, we can meet when I'm back home.
Ann: Where do you live?
Akechi: I might have been too vague, what I meant was that we can meet somewhere after I'm back home.
Ann: Why not at your place, wouldn't that be better?
Futaba: We can meet here, the land where curry and coffee flows. Everyone knows how to get here and it's easy to reach by train. Perfect meeting spot.
Akechi: I agree.
Ann: Okay. What about Akira, is he coming as well?
Akira: I'll be there

This isn't good, I thought we agreed that it's better for everyone if he doesn't attend this meeting. I can't believe that he's going against his own words – is everyone here toying with me? If he can chat then he's probably going to see my message before it's too late to stop this. I can't let this happen.

[What the fuck are you doing?]
[Changed my mind, don't worry about it. Focus on not confessing to more crimes than you already did]

This guy is unbelievable, all I can do now is trying to keep the topic far away from him, it's a lousy tactic but better than nothing.

Ann: Hello?
Futaba: They are talking to each other, mark my words.
Akechi: You all have to promise me not to bring up your problems with Akira. We will both leave immediately if someone does.
Ann: Did he say that?
Akechi: I'm saying it and I won't compromise on this. It's either yes or no.
Futaba: I promise!
Yusuke: Of course.
Ann: I don't understand it but okay.
Ann: Wait, what about Haru, Ryuji and Makoto?
Akechi: I'm already in contact with Makoto, there's no need to involve her in this.
Ann: You are? SHE KNEW?
Akechi: I shouldn't have said that.
Futaba: You say that a lot.
Akechi: I know!
Akechi: I'm bad at this.
Yusuke: You have my sympathy, I too find it quite hard to communicate through text.
Yusuke: I prefer eye to eye conversations.
Akechi: Thank you! At least one person here gets me.
Ann: You are different than you used to be.
Akechi: Am I? I haven't noticed.
Futaba: Uuuh, his bitchy side has awoken.
Akira: Leave him be. When do you all want to meet?
Ann: I think most of us are free tomorrow.
Futaba: Sounds good to me.
Akira: No, I have to work. Today, 7 in the evening?
Ann: Do you have a part time job?
Akira: My question, yes or no
Ann: Okay.
Futaba: Yes!
Yusuke: I'm free as well.
Akira: Then it's settled
Ann: Who talks to Ryuji and Haru?
Futaba: I wouldn't count them in, they are both online since the beginning of our chat.
Akechi: You can see who's online?
Futaba: I see everything.
Akechi: And I should probably leave. See you later.

I hastily close the app and throw my phone across the room, that was the most embarrassing situation I can think of... no, maybe the Takoyaki incident was more embarrassing, but this is pretty close.
The clicking and clanging of a key ends my derailing train of thought, looks like he was already on his way back home, a little more time to myself would have been nice.
His hair is as unruly as last night, a jacket that seems way too big for him covers the hand that holds a grocery bag, he seems to be wide awake and well rested – at least one of us is obviously a morning person.

“You looked so peaceful in your sleep, I didn't have the heart to wake you up. Slept well?”
“A lot better than I do at home, not to mention that your bed is truly a dream. I would kill to have it.”
“Well, I hope not me. If you feel so comfortable in my arms then why not stay permanently? I wasn't joking, you can move in if you want, I would be thrilled.”
“That's nice of you, but no. You have no idea how hard it is to deal with me on a daily basis, you would only come to hate me much faster.”
“I doubt that, though it could be the other way around. Think about it some more, will you?”
“Whatever you want, just don't get your hopes up.”

Milk is placed on the kitchen counter, right next to what looks like cheap sushi - could it be a gift for Mona? I wonder if he's already out again or never came home to begin with, both would be horrible and I can't think of a way to defuse the situation.

“The wheels in your head are turning too fast, I can hear them grinding against each others. Don't worry about Mona, he's rarely here as long as the sun is up, it has nothing to do with yesterday. I talked to him before I went out, we are good.”
“What did he tell you? No, forget that, I don't want to know.”
“He's sorry and claims that he didn't mean to attack you with whatever he said, he was actually worried about you. Something along the lines of 'he's trying to repress his feelings'. I don't know what this is about but he tends to be clumsy with his words, a fact that caused several fights between us. There's a thin line between being direct and being hurtful, he's not very good at staying on the right side.”
“Is that so? It does make sense. I feared that this might be my fault, I know I told you to be careful when judging other people's words and action, now I must seem rather hypocritical to you.”
“Nah, you were talking from experience. That's much more valuable than an advice from someone who got their knowledge from a documentary. Want toast?”
“No, I don't eat breakfast.”
“Yeha, I can see that. It's a miracle that I didn't dream about making out with a skeleton.”
“Whatever. I still think you shouldn't come with me, there's no way that all of them will keep their promise, and it could get ugly depending on who attends the meetup. I have the feeling both Ryuji and Haru wouldn't be so nice to me, which I totally understand and respect. I'm worried that you will get into a fight with them.”
“Only if I have to, I won't let them beat you up, not even verbally. Just to get this straight, the only reason why Ryuji acts like this is his relationship with Haru, they are together for quite some time now.”
“That's... very unexpected.”
“I know it's hard to imagine, I was extremely shocked when I heard about it from Yusuke.”
“You never know when love will strike. Anyway, I really appreciate your kindness but they all have the right to be angry, they have the right to say whatever they think is necessary. I'm not running away from what I did, I rather have them vent their anger than letting them choke on it.”
“It sure as hell will turn out fine, Haru and Ryuji are so happy to see you alive that they forgot how to type. What do you think is going to happen if they show up, a heartfelt reunion? It's going to be ugly, maybe it gets violent, I'm not saying that one of them will actually assault you, but Ryuji is hot tempered and you aren't that chill either. I'm not only worried about the possibility that he might slap you – I'm worried that it's you who could lose control.”
“You are afraid I might hurt him. Maybe even kill him.”
“Not kill him, at least not intentionally. But yes.”

I'm glad that he's so honest with me, it's good to know how he feels about this, how he sees me. My past self would have denied it, insist on his innocence and self control, my current self can't do that, not when I feel the hate that filled my whole being when I fought against him in the engine room, not when I look at the images in front of my eyes, violently throwing whatever I could find at my last foster parents, not when I remember the sensation of beating against walls until my hands were bleeding.

“I'm not angry, you are probably right, just promise me that we leave immediately should they try to bring up their problems with you. It's too early to tackle that.”
“Now you are the one who's right, I'm absolutely not in the mood to continue my last conversation with them. We'll leave if necessary.”

…

Four hours can pass so quickly when you spend them in the company of someone who's easy to get along with, who brings you coffee and snacks unprompted, strokes your arm while you both laugh about an outstandingly bad drama on TV.
Maybe living with him wouldn't be so bad after all, we seem to compliment each other well; would it be a good idea for two people with similar problems to be together from morning until night, or would it end in a tragedy? We could support the other much better, and he does work quite a lot, there would still be enough periods of rest – I shouldn't think about it now, it's nearly time to get ready for the meeting with his friends.
Having to face the girl who's father I killed is intimidating, and I don't want to blame someone else for it, I did it and I never regretted it, not even for a second. He deserved what he got, he wanted to sell his daughter for financial gain, there's nothing that can justify that, nothing to lessen the severity of his action. Someone had to stop him, Shido gave me the order but I would have done it anyway, I won't hide my true feelings from her, I would tell her the truth and take the blow that I might receive for it.

“Let's call a cab, I'm too lazy to take the train, it won't be much faster but a lot more comfortable. And I pay. No objections allowed.”
He doesn't even look at me when he gets up from the sofa and walks into his bedroom, presumably to change clothes. I really want to argue about this, he already spent more than enough money because of me, but the prospect of not having to get on a train is too tempting. My legs are heavy, shaking, the ground under my feet soft like clouds, leaving the living room to get my shoes feels like travelling through snow, it's hard to move, cold and numb, the fingers that are tying the laces belong to someone else, I watch them work clumsily. It's so quiet, only the muffled sound from the refrigerator prevents me from believing that I went deaf, the air I'm breathing is stale, unmoving, it feels like fog. Where am I?

"It's going to be fine, I'm here. Breath."

There's a hand touching my cheek, grey eyes are starring into mine, I look around, shops and people are passing by quickly, I'm looking through a window – are we already in Tokyo? I must have gotten lost inside my own head, how embarrassing. He's too attentive, very few people notice when this happens, or they are too disinterested to care, I can't afford to do this in front of him, he will think that I'm completely crazy. Our ride comes to an end, he pays the driver, takes me hand, leads me through small passages, past pedestrians, past an old man who eyes us curiously, and comes to a stand in front of what must be Futaba's house.

"I'm not going anywhere and we will leave the moment you black out, even if I have to drag you all the way home. I won't take any risks."

"So you really noticed."

"Of course, it's not that hard to see. Dissociation, right? I had a lot of free time while you slept like an angel, I used it to do my homework. The night in Leblanc, when we entered the attic – it was the same look in your eyes, unfocused and distant. The first time really scared me, I thought it's just a panic attack but something seemed off, I didn't know what was going on and how to help you, I was so glad that you responded right away. You didn't this time, I kept talking to you but it did nothing."

"It's a stress response, there's nothing you can do, even my therapist couldn't find anything. It's enough to keep me safe, I always come back sooner or later."

"You can bet your nice ass that I'm keeping you save no matter what. Do you want to cancel this? We can blame it on me, I changed my mind and we got into a fight, because of that you missed your train and couldn't make it."

"No. We go in, say hi, and leave. It's easy enough."

"Obviously not."

He rings the bell, a high pitched scream comes from behind the door, it flies open and reveals a breathless Futaba, green streaked hair in a loose bun, her glasses askew.

"Ah, isn't that my favourite couple? Come on in and make yourself at home, Sojiro left the house to me for our gathering, I would say 'no adults allowed' but considering that some of us can be seen as one.. let's go with 'no one over 21 allowed'."

The hallway is small but comfortable, the warm air a welcomed change.

"Good evening, thank you for having us."

"Sure sure, I waited long enough for this, thought you two have cleared out of here and went to a foreign country just to avoid our little get-together."
A knock disrupts our little chat, it seems we made it just in time to be the first to arrive, I guess that's better than having to face them all at once.

“Inari, I told you to come half past six!”
“My apologies, I accompanied one of my students and made it earlier than expected.”

I can't help but stare at the boy in front of me, he has grown even taller, I have to look up like a small child to his parents, the colour of his hair seems more vibrant, it looks silky, his eyes are shining in the last bit of sunlight that streams through the window.

“Akechi, it's nice to see you again.”
“Same, it's nice to meet you after so long. You look beautiful. Healthy, you look healthier, that's what I wanted to say.”
“Thank you, it does make quite a difference now that I have enough money to feed myself... do you need money?”
“What? No. No! I'm fine!”
“Is that so?”

He doesn't look convinced, his eyes are narrowed, arms crossed in front of his chest, obviously trying to figure out what the problem is. I made a fool out of myself, the embarrassment redirects all the blood in my body straight to my face, I'm stammering like an idiot and can't even lie properly; why did I thought that this is a good idea?

“God. You are really here. You are alive. This is real.”

Ann is standing right behind the tall artist, both of her hands are clapped over her mouth, I can see the tears in her eyes, slowly dripping down to the floor.

“I'm so happy to see you, I still can't believe that Akira was right all along, you've been alive this whole time. You... look sick.”

It feels suffocating, too many people in such a close proximity, like there's not enough air for all of us. The door falls shut, Akira is guiding me to the living room, the larger space gives me more room to breath, the haze that threatened to fill my mind is gone in an instant. Is it really so obvious?

“Don't worry about it, I lost a bit of weight but apart from that, I'm fine.”
“You don't look fine. Is there something wrong with your neck? Your head is shaking.”
“That's – just stiff muscles, it's nothing. Futaba, can we get a cup of coffee?”

A bright smile for the young lady who's standing right next to me, an uneasy expression on her face. She probably remembers the last time we met, she knows that I'm hiding something, I hope she gets the hint and ends this conversation.

“Already on it, it's over there on the table, a simple filter coffee but a decent one. Sit down and help yourself.”

The doorbell rings, a shrill sound that fills the room, everyone is here - everyone but Haru and Ryuji. I turn to Akira who's eyeing the door intensively, I want to reach out and hold his hand but decide against it, it wouldn't do any good if they assume that I'm influencing him in some way. I can get through this on my own, I'm not that weak.
No greeting, they rush past Futaba who closes the door, looking around nervously. Haru lets go of Ryuji's hand and is up in my face in an instant, keep calm, breath, it's not hard to guess what comes next, I'm prepared, all I have to do is be honest.

"Do you regret killing my father?"
"No, I don't. I would if all he did was treat his employees like shit, but I can't forgive someone who tried to sell his own daughter to the highest bidder."
"Don't use me as an excuse for killing him, I didn't want that!"
"And I didn't care about what you wanted, I didn't do it for you or in your name. Shido wanted him dead because he gained something from it, I wanted him dead simply because he was a despicable person. Someone like him has no right to live."
"How can you say that so easily? He was my father!"
"It could have been someone else's, it just happened to be yours. I promised myself that I won't lie to you, I'm sorry if this isn't what you wanted to hear."

I see it out of the corner of my eye, Ryuji shoves Ann to the side and comes dangerously close, muscles tight, jaw clenched. I take two steps back, just to make sure that I'm out of reach in case that he tries to punch me. I've said what needed to be said, they deserve the truth, not some pretty lies, but still – I don't want to fight, not here, not ever, I don't want anyone to get hurt, and I'm not convinced that I can keep my composure if it gets physical. I might be weak compared to how I was back then, I might be handicapped in several ways, yet that wouldn't be enough to stop me from doing a lot of damage, there are too many object close by that I could grab in blind anger and use as a weapon.
I'm not stupid, I know myself, it wouldn't be the first time that this happens.

"You are a fucking asshole, someone should kill your father, see how that feels!"
"Please go ahead, I don't mind. And what about yours, wouldn't you be happy if someone had killed him? He regularly beat you, wouldn't it feel good to know that he got what he deserved?"
"You are a total nutcase!"

He takes a step closer, a sudden loud bang to my right, shards of glass are flying through the air next to the blond boy who says out loud what everyone in the room is probably thinking. My mind can't comprehend what's going on, all eyes are on Akira. Did he throw something?

"Oh sorry, it just slipped. No idea how that happened."

Why did everything turn out so horrible, where did I go wrong?

Akira looks unimpressed and innocent, Ryuji's mouth hangs open before it shuts close with an audible click, his face is contorting. I can't do anything, they are going to scream at each others, I can already feel it, electricity is dancing on my skin.

"You could have hit me with that! Are you crazy?"
"I said it slipped. Wasn't intentional."
"What the hell happened to you? It's all that psycho's fault!"

The magic word, I can see the switch flipping inside his head, the reaction of someone who had to endure this kind of insult again and again, it hurts to see him like this, it hurts that this word was directed at me – everything hurts so much. I have to do something, before the boiling anger in his eyes turns into a wildland fire.

Getting between them and putting both of my hands on Akira's chest comes natural, an automatic response, I look at him pleadingly, desperate. He puts his hands over mine, a fleeting touch, his expression softens slightly, it's reassuring enough to let go and turn around, locking eyes with the
man who's aversion I truly deserve.

“This is alright, it's fine if you are angry with me. You can hate me as much as you want, it's your right to call me whatever you want. I could cry and blame Shido for my acts of violence, I could insist that I regret everything and would never do something like this on my own accord. It's true that he was the one who turned me into a killer but I'm the one who doesn't feel remorse for every single thing I've done. I'm not a good person, maybe you are right and I'm a psycho. I surely am. It's just how it is.”

Why can't I hold myself together, I said I wouldn't cry and yet the tears are flowing freely, I feel like screaming, like running until I drop dead.
The arms that appear around my neck and pull me flush against a warm body do little to stop the onslaught of feelings and stream of tears, they might even make it worse; I don't deserve to be consoled, especially not from the guy who looked into the barrel of my gun.

“We both know that's not true, it's much more complex than that. I've seen you after Haru's father died on TV, you felt remorse. Don't say that it didn't affect you.”
“No one did anything, people like him can do whatever they want and everyone is just watching. They can sell their own children and no one says a word, no one cares. They don't care about the victims, only the money and power. Something had to be done, anything, I just wanted them to pay. Someone had to make them pay.”
“You took revenge on them because you couldn't on the people that hurt you.”

A door opens, then closes with a bang, they are both gone in the blink of an eye. What once has been a group of close confidants is now broken into little pieces, everyone is on their own, staring sadly off into space.
He lets go of me only to pull me over to the sofa and sit me down, the others follow shortly after, taking seats away from each other, none of them takes the spot next to me; I can understand why, I wouldn't come near me either.

“This was a horrible idea, we should have met somewhere else so they couldn't find us. It was clear that something like this will happen after they didn't react to the group chat.”

Ann looks defeated, her voice as tired as I feel, she's rubbing a strand of her hair between her fingers, something to keep her busy, distract her from the storm that wrecked havoc on her friends.

“It wasn't necessary, I already said to Akira that everyone should get the chance to voice their feelings no matter how negative they might be. It's the least I could do for them.”

The clinking of glass disturbs the silence, Futaba is picking up some scattered shards of whatever Akira smashed against the wall.

“You know, I was pretty angry at the beginning, I hated you for killing my mother. But after a while I began to think that there has to be more to it than meets the eye. You were a child when you killed her, only a very small amount of people at that age would be fine with committing a murder, the possibility that I ran into one of those few seemed very low to me. And then came Shido's trial, he said that he manipulated someone into killing her. I knew that this has to be it, that he probably didn't tell you that she might die. I understand Haru's reaction, her father is a completely different story…”
“Shido, he didn't tell me. I have used the ability on shadows and none of them died, I was sure it would have the same effect on humans. I didn't know that it can lead to death.”
A short laugh that drips with disbelief comes from the girl who cried in happiness about my attendance only a few minutes ago, the topic must have brought up some unpleasant memories. She looks upset, her blond hair is flaying around when she shakes her head.

"Then why didn't you leave after that? You didn't need to keep killing for him."

"Nothing mattered after my first kill, it seemed better to go through with it. I did try to get out after god knows how many victims, but he was already too powerful, he made it quite clear that I wouldn't live to see the next day. I couldn't die before I put an end to him."

"How could you live on with so much blood on your hands? That sounds impossible to me if you really regret it."

"I couldn't, I would have killed myself after taking him down. I decided on that after Miss Isshiki died."

"Then why haven't you?"

"All of my plans had failed and everything I could think of went downhill after our fight. I constantly fought against both my mind and body, I struggled to survive and nearly failed several times. It would have been easy to end it, no one would have known, no one would have cared, but being confronted with having to survive again instead of living – it showed me that I couldn't let go, that I wanted to live. I went through so much, did everything I could to survive whatever situation I was thrown into by adults, all of that would have been meaningless. They would win just because I couldn't live with the person that life has turned me into, that I have turned myself into. I guess you could say that I'm too selfish and faint-hearted to kill myself."

Clinging to Akira might not be the best option available to handle this situation but I no longer care, his warmth and solid presence is the only thing that keeps me from slipping away, my mind slowly wandering of to a quieter place, away from her, away from myself, I have to hold on to something.

He pulls me so close that I can hear his heartbeat, steadily pulsing in a strong and fast pace, the arm around my shoulder a needed support, his hand in my hair that massages slowly is all I need to calm down. The worst is over, we did it.

"It's a bit strange to see you both so close, I mean I get it that Akira is probably happy but... how long are you two in contact, a few weeks? It just seems odd to me."

"I do what a good friend should do, I comfort him. How is that strange?"

Ann sounds angrier than before... no, not angry. Insecure, or maybe hurt? I'm sure he noticed it as well, there was no need for such a provocative answer.

"For one, that looks more like snuggling than comforting. And I can't remember that you've done that for one of us, you always listened but never made physical contact. Don't get me wrong, I'm not against it or anything but – why are you so obsessed with him anyway? You spent two years doing nothing but searching for a dead guy. I'm trying to understand what happened, I want to understand you."

"Really now? Every time I have been honest with you, you told me to get help. I don't see the point in trying it over and over again, none of you can deal with the truth."

"Okay, I get it. We are the worst friends you ever had, but how I see it we aren't friends anymore, right? Try me, I'm just a random person asking you a question."

It's better to get out of here, we had more than enough confrontations for one day.

"I kept my promise, maybe we should go."

"No, she's right, it no longer matters what they think so I can be as direct as I want to be. I'm not much different from him, I can see myself in him. Who knows, maybe one more push and I would
have been the one in his place, or I would have been by his side when he killed those people, I actually regret that I wasn't there. Failing him was like I've failed myself, if there was no hope for Goro... then there was no hope for me. The thought that he made it out of this, that he's somewhere living his life, that's what kept me going. If he could do it then so could I, if he's still out there then at least someone knows how it's like to be this kind of person, someone who could understand. If he's able to keep on living, then so do I.”

This is the reason? It wasn't out of remorse for letting me die, he projected himself onto me, he sought after hope and redemption for himself through me. I can't say that I'm happy about this revelation, deep down I hoped that he did it because he liked me from the start, but I take what I can get, it's still better than the other possible reasons I can think of.

“But you are not like him, you never killed anyone... or did you?”
“I didn't and it's not about similar behaviour, it's about having the same mindset, he didn't kill out of boredom or because he liked doing it, he did it because of how he felt and thought. I can relate to that, what I mean is that I could have easily been just like him, that I didn't do what he has done comes down to pure luck. Had my life been a bit different then we would have been exactly the same.”
“No, I don't believe that. You had the chance to do what he did, you had the Metaverse as well and never used it to kill, instead you changed people's heart. That's a pretty big difference if you ask me.”
“The reason why I changed their hearts are you guys, had I been alone – I would have killed. Hell, I would have done it even with you, if you had been okay with it. You weren't, that's the only thing that stopped me.”
“Akechi was with us and killed behind our backs, you could have done the same, but you didn't. Isn't that prove enough that you are different?”

She jumped from her seat, her voice no longer quiet and hurt but loud and desperate, she's trying to find what she wants to see, unable to let go of the lie that she lived with up until now.

“I wasn't as determined as him, I wouldn't have done it on purpose. At least not back then. But it would have happened because I never cared about keeping them alive, killing them would have been much better than stealing their treasure. All I wanted was to stop them, getting rid of them entirely would have done the trick. Quick, easy, and final - sounds more effective than our method, doesn't it?”

The laugh that escapes me comes as a surprise. Does he really think that it was so simple? I can't even remember how many times I barely made it out alive, it took months before I could fight without taking more damage than I was able to inflict.

“Excuse me, it wasn't as easy as you seem to believe. Being alone is a big disadvantage, I had to fight my way through their palace, fight against them, and only then could I take them out. Can you imagine how hard that was? I got hurt more often than not, especially at the beginning. It was a blessing that you came along, you did all the work and I could sit back and watch until it was time to give them the final blow. It saved me so much time and unnecessary injuries.”
“Now that you mention it – I never thought about that before. You were an outstanding fighter, it never occurred to me that you might have been struggling even though it makes sense. Did you have healing items? You didn't use any in our fight.”
“No, I didn't know tha-”

“Shut up! Do you realise what you are talking about?! People were murdered and you are discussing ingredients like it's some kind of messed up baking contest! Akira... why are you like
this? You are not the quiet boy I fell in love with, the one who was there for me when my whole world was breaking down. You cared for me, you cared for all of us, don't tell me that was a lie.”

The tears she cries are those of someone who's dreams just shattered, crushed by reality. She was in love with him, I didn't know that. It must hurt a lot to understand that the person you felt so strongly for is nothing but a stranger, a well crafted imagination.

“It wasn't, I did care about you. About all of my friends. People are not purely good or purely evil, I've always been like this and yet I loved you guys more than you can imagine. I haven't changed, I care about Goro more than I care about myself, and he's the same, he cares about me despite being a killer. He listens to me, he's gentle when he wants to, he does what he can to support me. Everyone has good and bad sides, you are just unable to accept that.”

Chapter End Notes

Deadly fluff girl and soft rowdy boy are dear to me, it pains me that I have to hurt them for the sake of this story but it can't be helped ;_;

Do try the toothpaste I mentioned, it might taste horrible but it's pretty good, especially if you are an avid coffee or tea drinker (go for the tea mint one, it's stronger than the normal variant).
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

I know you all waited so goddamn long and I'm very sorry about that, I'm suffering from writer's block and just can't produce a chapter that I like enough to upload it. I tried to overcome it by writing short-stories but it didn't really help, this chapter is only a fraction of what I've written so far but it's the only passage that I'm happy with and I thought that might be better than not uploading at all. I will probably try to write something else alongside this, although I have little hope that it will stop the slump I seem to be in.

The desperate expression that contorts her fine features gives way to crushing sadness, she sinks back down into her seat, eyes wet with tears that she seemingly tried to suppress the entire time.

“Everyone is leaving. I haven't seen Makoto in months, Haru often doesn't even answer my messages, Ryuji is always too busy for everything. Futaba is the only one who spends time with me, no one but her and Yusuke came to my house-warming party even though I send an invite to everyone. Most of them have never met my boyfriend, I'm not even sure that they know about him because they didn't react to the photos I posted. I was hurt when you rejected me back in high school, you were the first guy I fell in love with, but I was content to be your friend and I loved you in that role as much as I would have as a boyfriend. And now you are telling me that I don't even know you, that I loved you without having a clue who you are? Everyone who's dear to me is leaving me behind, I feel like I'm the only one who still cares.”

The tears are flowing freely, she rubs at her eyes with both hands, uncontrollably sobbing, breaking down in front of me, in front of all of us. I don't know how she feels, I never experienced this kind of situation, I can't empathise with her, only sympathise, it might not be what she really needs but I can't sit here quietly, watching her wither away.

“That's not true, you do know him, your picture of him is just missing some details. I believe him when he says that he genuinely cared about you, I can attest to that as an outsider looking in. I've seen you all interact with each other back when fought together, his affection for all of you was one of the reasons why I hated him, he could have been much more successful on his own and yet he sacrificed so much solely to take care of his friends. His skills were impressive, much better than yours, he spend more time on keeping you alive and save than on making quick work of his enemies, not to mention the countless hours he invested in hanging out with every single one of you. He's still the same person you knew back then, there are just nuances to his personality that you missed up until now, that doesn't change what you have seen of him so far. If anything then it means that there's still a lot to discover about him.”

Her blue eyes have gone wide during my speech, the tears are still falling but the sobbing has died down, she seems startled, maybe even shocked, lips quivering.

“You are right. I'm so sorry for causing a scene, it hurt so much to see you two so close when all of my friends are leaving me for someone better, they have all switched me out for more interesting people and activities. And then you came along and took Akira away in a heartbeat, you get the chance to be with him and I couldn't even figure out how to talk to him without getting into another
fight. He found someone who accepts him without question, what kind of chance leaves that for me to make up with him? I'm sorry that I hit on your worst parts just to make myself feel better, I'm horrible.”
“Don't worry about it, people can say and do very ugly things while they are emotional, I won't hold it against you.”
“Thank you so much, now I can see why he likes you.”

She's flashing me a beautiful smile, one that I reciprocate with all of my heart; it makes me happy that, after all the trouble that I caused today, I was able to make someone feel better.
“Akira, would you give me another chance to be your friend?”
“We can start with being acquaintances, we will see if something comes after that.”
“Sounds great! You too, Akechi, I want to get to know you better.”

It's wonderful that I did my part in clearing the air between them, that will take a lot of pressure from his shoulders, getting involved further has never been my intention, I'm already struggling with being a relativity decent friend to Akira. I don't feel ready for the additional work it would take to split my time and attention between multiple people, it's a miracle that I can handle one; saying no would be rude, I don't want to be an asshole right after I've been so nice to her, that will make it seem like I manipulated her instead of being compassionate towards her.

“I'm.. to be frank with you, I'm unsure if I can manage that. I have no real experience with having friends, Akira is the first one I ever had, I'm still trying to figure out how this even works. I know that sounds pathetic, please don't think that it's something personal, I'm just really worried that you are about to get yourself into something that you can't deal with. I'm not an easy person.”
“I can attest to that, it's extremely hard to constantly fight against his self-hatred and all the villainisation that is going on inside his pretty head.”

I elbow the man next to me in the rips while I smile friendly at all those present, if the grunt I hear from him is anything to go by then it seems that I used enough force to get my point across sufficiently.

“Oh, I don't really mind. Everyone has some rough edges, we can take it slow. You set the pace and I follow along, wouldn't that be okay?”
“I guess? Just – cut me some slacks, I'm definitely going to mess something up, be honest when I do so I can learn from it.”
“Will do! I'm so happy, it's such a long time since I hang out with my old friends and now I even have a new one.”

Genuine happiness, smiling faces, they have grown up and yet all I see are the teenagers that I met over two years ago, full of hope and energy, their friendship a vibrating light in the darkness of the world.

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