

please don't take off my mask

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by [dirtbagtrashcat](#)

Summary

When Arsene fails to answer his call, Akira is quick to brush it off. But ace detective Akechi Goro won't be so easily deceived. Joker's lost access to his own heart, and that can only mean one thing: Kurusu Akira has a Palace.

find the fool

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Akechi has been following Kurusu into the Metaverse for far longer than those sanctimonious Phantom Thieves would like to believe. He's spent weeks of his life crouched in some unseen cranny of Mementos, watching Kurusu obliterate Shadows. Akechi has seen enough to know that the lion's share of Kurusu's Personas didn't claw their way out of his heart, like everyone else's. Kurusu catches his Personas in the wild, and tames them through sheer force of will.

For a time, Akechi found this fact more than a little alarming. Did Kurusu simply not *have* a Persona of his own? And if so, what on *earth* did that say about the state of his heart? It was bad enough for one's heart to hold two Personas warring within. But to have no true self at all? Was it possible that Kurusu was even more hollow than he was?

The first time Akechi spies Kurusu muttering over his shoulder to something that's not-quite-there, he's relieved. Kurusu *does* have a heart, even if he doesn't often call on it. But there's still far too much that he doesn't understand.

Once he's successfully finagled his way onto the team, Akechi invites his newfound "leader" to the jazz club to ask about it outright.

"Kurusu-kun," he says, conspiratorial and with just a touch of disarming impudence, "will you allow me a somewhat intrusive question?"

"For you?" Kurusu asks. "Anything."

"You're too kind," Akechi tells him simperingly. In the back of his mind, Loki pretends to vomit. "Well... Morgana tells us that our Personas express the truth that hides within our hearts. I, of course, possess only *one* true self; as do the rest of your compatriots."

Akechi leans forward and affects a thoughtful, inquisitive expression, as though his question were a whimsical philosophical inquiry and not a damning condemnation of Kurusu's underlying nature.

"How, then, did *your* heart come to possess such multitudes? Did you attain *all* your Personas through negotiation, as we've seen, or did you once Awaken in the, ah, traditional fashion?"

"That *is* intrusive," Kurusu says agreeably, and then holds his hands up before Akechi can backpedal. "It's fine," he adds. He takes a slow sip as he mulls it over. "It's just, uh... A complicated question with a complicated answer."

"My itinerary is clear," Akechi says lightly. Kurusu's eyebrow twitches.

"You're all mine tonight, huh? What an honor."

Of course it's an honor, you dull-witted, needlessly-circumspect *buffoon*.

"Not at all," Akechi titters, flapping one hand bashfully. "By all means, Kurusu-kun, you have my ear."

Kurusu looks hard at him, and then shrugs.

“I Awoke to my Persona, same as anyone else,” he says quietly, looking off into the dark of the jazz club. “I just... Don’t like to use him, I guess.”

“Don’t *like* to?”

Kurusu shrugs.

“Personas are... reflections of ourselves,” he says slowly, as though considering each word before he speaks it. “They reflect what’s in our heart. For me, that includes the people I care about.”

“Your Personas reflect *other people*?” Akechi repeats, disbelieving. Kurusu gives him another diffident shrug.

“As they exist in my heart, I guess. Not the people themselves, but -- the space I hold for them; my conception of them. That’s why I can have so many.”

“All save the first,” Akechi says, leadingly.

Kurusu shrugs.

“Your *true* Persona,” Akechi goes on, and Kurusu shrugs again.

“I don’t know about that,” he says evasively. Akechi frowns.

“You *don’t know about that*?” he asks just a shade too sharply, and then consciously softens his tone. “But it was born from the depths of your own heart, Kurusu-kun. Surely it’s the Persona that represents you in the truest sense.”

“Well,” Kurusu says, with more of that same reluctance. “I don’t know. Sometimes I think that I’m *most* myself when I’m reflecting others. I’m not sure if I even *have* a...” He bites that particular sentiment off, goes quiet for a moment. Then his mouth twists ruefully. “I talk a lot when I’m with you,” he says softly. “It’s... unusual.”

And then, leaving Akechi to grapple with that particular revelation, Kurusu stands.

“We should get to bed,” he sighs. “We’re headed to the Palace again tomorrow.”

“Will you show me your Persona?” Akechi asks impulsively.

“What,” Kurusu says wryly. “You want me to call him right here?”

“When we meet up tomorrow?” Akechi presses, not backing down. “I’d love to see him.”

Kurusu gives him another of those lingering, unreadable stares. Then he smiles.

“Sure,” he says tiredly, running a hand through his tangle of hair. “Whatever you like.”

##

But when Kurusu tries to call him, his Persona doesn’t come.

“That’s weird,” he says, frowning. “I thought I’d...”

He shakes his head, brushes it off.

“I must not have summoned him,” he says, offering Akechi a disarmingly sheepish smile. Almost

imperceptibly, Akechi's eyes narrow. He recognizes a mask sliding into place when he sees one.

"Not *summoned* him?" he repeats, his tone light and curious. "From *where*, exactly?"

"If you had as many Personas as I do," Kurusu says, with a rakish gleam that utterly fails to distract Akechi from the fact that he's avoiding the question, "You'd lose track of them, too. C'mon," he adds, with a nonchalant toss of his curls. "We've gotta catch up with the others."

Akechi finds himself glaring at Kurusu's back, squarely between his shoulder blades. It's a classic redirection tactic -- drawing Akechi's focus with a faintly-insulting joke and then briskly pivoting to other, more pressing matters. Kurusu is avoiding the subject, and he's working to keep Akechi away from it, too. Frankly, the only real insult is that Kurusu thinks it would *work* on him. Akechi has been wielding misdirection with lethal precision since grade school.

Kurusu is hiding something. Kurusu can't call his Persona, and is desperate to make sure Akechi doesn't find out. Does Kurusu distrust Akechi specifically, or is this a secret he'd keep from anyone? Akechi shelves the concern and prepares the day's disguise: a shining, glassy smile half-shadowed by the long, hooked beak of his mask.

"Of course," he says, nodding prettily, and he follows Kurusu into the casino.

##

The next day, Kurusu doesn't call them to the hideout.

It's not a problem. They've got almost three weeks left until their deadline. That's more than enough time to race through Sae-san's psyche.

The day after that, Kurusu still doesn't call them to the hideout. Akechi's not overly concerned. Kurusu does this sometimes -- indulges his whims and prioritizes social calls, or (still more mystifyingly) *rest* over their mission. Akechi can't relate, but he doesn't particularly mind, either. Over the course of their -- *acquaintanceship*, Kurusu has proven himself fairly reliable. He's earned a few idle days.

But when Kurusu doesn't call on them for an entire *week*, Akechi begins to worry.

They need to get through Sae's palace by the 19th, because that's when Akechi is due to kill him. If he can't kill Kurusu, all of his plans will be lost, and everything he's done will have been for nothing.

Did Kurusu find out about Akechi's true intentions? Impossible, Akechi thinks dismissively. He's thoroughly covered his tracks. Besides, even if Kurusu's litany of Personas confirms the boy as a deft deceiver in his own right, his pack of trained gorillas certainly isn't. If the Phantom Thieves knew the truth, they'd hardly be able to fight at Akechi's side, would they? And their expressions of dislike would certainly not be confined to the occasional passive-aggressive one-liner.

If Akechi assumes that Kurusu *hasn't* uncovered his plan, it means that something else is going on. Kurusu is hiding something from his team -- or at the very least, from his rival. He's avoiding the Metaverse, and he won't (or *can't*) call his Persona. Put all the pieces together, and what do you get?

Breathless in the dark of his apartment, Akechi pulls out his phone and pulls up the Meta-Nav.

"Kurusu Akira," he murmurs, and holds his breath.

“Candidate found,” the digitized voice hums back.

In spite of his suspicions, Akechi’s composure slips; his breath hitches in his chest. *Kurusu Akira has a Palace*. Do the others know? Does Kurusu?

Akechi spends the next four hours hunched over his phone, testing out keywords. To be perfectly honest, he’s not sure why he’s so determined to get in. What does it matter if Kurusu has a Palace? Distorted heart or no, Kurusu isn’t the type to avoid his responsibilities. Once the Phantom Thieves’ leader has satisfied his own curiosity, he’ll return to Sae’s Palace, and Akechi can kill him, right on schedule.

It must simply be his natural spirit of inquisition, then, that drives Akechi to conduct such a thorough investigation.

He already knows the location. *Tokyo* was the first thing he tried. Kurusu’s distortion, however, is proving more difficult than Akechi anticipated.

“Jailhouse,” he murmurs to his phone, and “Therapist’s office,” and “Battleground,” “Prison” and “Morgue.”

Nothing.

Akechi glances at the clock. It’s 2:45 am. He *really* can’t afford the distraction -- not now, with his plans at the brink of realization. Still. Kurusu’s Palace could hold significant strategic advantages for him. What’s the harm in learning a little more?

Kurusu-kun, he taps into his phone. *Are you available for dinner tomorrow?*

He sends it before he remembers that it’s the middle of the damned night, and realizes how that might look. *Damn*. But it’s of little import. Whatever leverage Kurusu might have on him will fade into obscurity once Akechi has successfully infiltrated his heart; and will vanish entirely when Kurusu is dead in the ground. All Akechi has to do is bide his time, and his prey will fall right into his hands.

His phone buzzes.

Up late, Mr. Detective? Kurusu asks impudently, and Akechi flushes with impotent fury. *I’m working tomorrow, unfortunately.*

Akechi’s disappointment hisses through his teeth. It’s better this way, probably. He can find his way into Kurusu’s distorted heart without help; he’s done it before, and for criminals he knew much less about. This way, he can avoid the distinct *displeasure* of the delinquent’s overly-familiar advances, and the way Akechi always finds himself saying more than he meant to.

His phone buzzes again.

But since it’s you, Kurusu purrs -- Akechi can picture just how he’d say it, every syllable drenched with provocative subtext; Kurusu does enjoy his little mind games -- *I’ll make it work. Stop by my workplace? I’ll send you the address.*

All right, Akechi replies pleasantly, thin lips drawn back to bare pointed teeth. *I’ll see you then.*

He throws his phone across his threadbare futon, and then chases after it when it buzzes one last time. It’s Kurusu, who would rather self-immolate than permit anyone else to get the last word. Akechi already knows what he’ll say, but -- like watching a traffic accident, or the helpless

twitching of an eviscerated Shadow the moment before it turns to dust -- he can't stop himself from looking. Face tight with preemptive disapproval, Akechi squints at the screen.

It's a date.

This time, his phone slides clear off the edge of his bed. When it hits the ground, Akechi can hear the screen *crack*.

Chapter End Notes

this is a bit of an experiment! inspired by the fact that it often feels like Akira's whole identity is built around fixing other people's problems & avoiding his own, and if that's not the seed of a budding Palace, idk what is.

as ever, feedback is eminently appreciated! :3

chasing shadows

Chapter Summary

Akechi visits Akira at work and gets inside his head.

Chapter Notes

(Content warning for body horror, non-violent gore) (I don't think it's that yucky but I've got a degenerative disease & my body is a horrorscape so my standards might be fucked)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Because Akechi has more decorum in his little finger than most people have in their entire body, he is not remotely ruffled by the fact that Kurusu's place of work is a drag bar.

"Are you really permitted to sell alcohol?" he asks, when he finally catches Kurusu's eye. "It's a legal infraction, surely."

"Did you invite a cop to my bar?" the proprietor rasps at him. She aims an uncharitable squint at Akechi, who gives her a beatific smile.

"Only unofficially," he says charmingly. "And I can assure you that I'd never do anything to compromise my dear friend's livelihood."

"Hmph," she huffs, but leaves it at that. "Be careful with this one, Akira," she calls over her shoulder. "He's pretty, but he smells like a liar."

"Yeah, I know," Kurusu tells her. "Thanks, Lala-san."

"It's your funeral," she says, in a show of unnerving prescience. Before Akechi can argue, she disappears behind the bar and at last, it's just the two of them.

"I'm happy to see you," Kurusu tells him. His scratchy voice is barely audible over the din of the bar.

Kurusu looks somewhat worn, but he *does* brighten slightly at the sight of Akechi. He's smiling in that subtle, enigmatic way of his, the kind where his mouth doesn't move — only recognizable by the way his dark eyes crinkle, sending creases spiderwebbing over the smooth skin of his temples.

"I have to finish clearing the bar," he adds, fidgeting with the cuff of his sleeve. "D'you mind killing time for a few?"

Of course we mind, Loki snarls. *We've got more on our schedule today than you could get through in a month, you indolent cretin.*

"Not at all," Akechi says graciously. And then slightly flirtatious, just to show Kurusu that two can

play at this game: “It’ll be a treat, watching you work.”

“Appreciate it,” Kurusu tells him, ducking his head.

Akechi only said as much to get a reaction, but he’s embarrassed to find that watching Kurusu work *is* sort of pleasurable, in a distant, strictly-professional fashion. For such a quiet boy, Kurusu manages to draw startlingly raw emotional responses from each patron that he passes. One begins sniveling to him about a breakup; another rages about some new indignity she’s weathered at work, and both are left smiling and placid in the wake of Kurusu’s soft, soothing words. When a fight starts to break out just two seats away, Akechi tenses to act, but Kurusu is faster. He defuses the situation so neatly that by the time he walks away, both instigators are holding hands under the table.

“You’re awfully popular, Kurusu-kun,” Akechi tells him when he returns, in an admiring tone that’s very nearly genuine. Akechi may have perfected the art of celebrity, but he’s yet to gain the knack for winning over a stranger face-to-face. Without the sterility of a TV screen between them, his genteel manner inspires unease as much as interest. The objects of his attention huff and shuffle and look at him sideways, like dogs that have scented blood.

“Says the guy whose name I hear on TV three times before breakfast,” Kurusu snorts, swabbing at the table between them with a sodden rag that could only hope to redistribute the filth, at best. Akechi looks at him through his lashes.

“But that’s different. As you well know. My *fans*, if you can call them that... It’s the Detective Prince they love. They don’t know the first thing about me. I suppose that no one really does.”

Opening a vein and bleeding for him, that’s what Kurusu goes for. Show him your weeping sores and he’ll drop everything to close them. Including any semblance of self-preservation instinct.

Sure enough, Kurusu leans in. “You could say the same about me,” he says softly.

“Oh, nonsense! It’s your presence that draws them, is it not?”

“Not really,” Kurusu disagrees, with another diffident shrug. “They don’t even see me, really. They just want what I can offer them.”

“And that is?” Akechi’s heart is in his fucking throat. His instincts are screaming at him to chase this thread, and his instincts rarely lead him astray.

“Whatever they need,” Kurusu shrugs, looking away. “Whatever they’re missing. It’s not something I do on purpose,” he adds, looking almost embarrassed. “I just -- it’s so *easy* to see what they need, you know? It’s all I can see sometimes.”

“Mmh.”

“So they don’t really like *me*,” Kurusu concludes. He doesn’t seem to notice that he’s flipping a martini glass around his fingers, a dizzying whirl of refracted light. “They just want me to fill in what they’re missing.”

“Like a puzzle piece?” Akechi asks, keeping his voice light. Kurusu half-smiles, half-cringes.

“More like a transplant,” he says tightly. Akechi’s face tenses for a moment -- this is a lead, a real lead, he’s sure of it -- but before he can ask anything else, Kurusu’s face clears.

“So what’d you want to talk about?” he asks smoothly. “Or was this just a social call?”

Cagy bastard, Loki growls. *He knows you're on his tail, he's trying to throw you off the scent.*

Don't be paranoid, Robin chides. *He's being friendly. You could learn something.*

“Well, it's been some time since you called for an infiltration,” Akechi says innocently. “Eight days, if my estimation is correct. To be perfectly honest, Kurusu-kun, I began to grow concerned after the first four. Are you feeling alright?”

Every so often, Kurusu gets this look in his eye: so knowing and hopeless and desperately, unfathomably sad that for just a moment, Akechi is sure he knows exactly what's coming. That some animal instinct has shown Kurusu his fate, like he can smell the rot of his own corpse on the breeze.

This is one of those moments.

Then Kurusu smiles, and Akechi can breathe again.

“I'm sorry to have worried you,” he says softly. *Maybe he'll apologize when you kill him, too*, one of the voices in Akechi's head suggests, and it takes him a moment to parse whether it's Robin or Loki before he realizes that it's just him, Akechi Goro, a real sick piece of shit if ever there's been one. “But there's no need for concern, Akechi-kun. I could get through this Palace in a day, if we had to. I just had some stuff to take care of.”

“Anything I can help you with?” Channeling Nancy Drew or someone like her, all earnest doe-eyed helpfulness. Kurusu's pretty mouth twists as he laughs, like he can see right through it.

“Nah. I clean up my own messes.”

“And everyone else's, it seems,” Akechi says wryly — speaking before thinking, for once. “All right, Kurusu-kun. If you need my help, you need only ask.”

“Thanks, Akechi,” Kurusu says, with another flicker of that all-knowing gleam. “Glad to have someone in my corner who I can trust.”

The irony might sting, for a lesser man. But Akechi already knows what he is. When you know yourself, you can never be disappointed by what you find in the recesses of your soul. After all he's seen and done, there are no more nasty surprises left to find.

Akechi grazes Kurusu's knuckles with his fingertips and gives him crocodile's smile.

“I'm here for you.”

##

Less like a puzzle piece, and more like a transplant, he scrawls in his notebook once he's safely back in his studio apartment, splayed inelegantly over the grey-beige, threadbare futon. He purses his lips and underlines *transplant* twice.

A hospital, or a surgery wing, maybe? No, that's not quite right. It's too involved, and too personal; not transactional enough to represent Kurusu's suite of services. But where else can you get a new kidney when you need one?

“A butcher shop?” he wonders aloud. “Or some manner of market? A bazaar, or the Silk Road, or... I don't know, a black market?”

Akechi flinches when a familiar digitized voice rings out from his pocket.

“Results found,” it hums. *“Beginning navigation.”*

“Wait--” he protests impotently, to no avail. The world is already twisting, color warping into that dizzying red-and-black spiral that never fails to turn his stomach.

When the swirling lines solidify, Akechi is -- still lying in his apartment, but the weight of his body feels lighter, as though someone had assaulted gravity and left it weakened and bleeding.

“Ah,” he says. “Well,” he says. “I suppose that’s that.”

Just to make certain, he calls Loki, and nods to himself when he feels the usual rush of hungry euphoria that follows. Good. He’s made it, then. He’s in Kurusu’s Palace.

He’s still in his street clothes, which is surprising, even though it really shouldn’t be. He’s already won Kurusu’s trust, hasn’t he? Poor, credulous Kurusu is too simple and too pure-hearted to sense any sinister intent behind Akechi’s glassy smiles. Still, it’s a relief to see solid evidence that Kurusu isn’t fostering any inconvenient suspicions about Akechi’s true nature.

Akechi’s apartment looks the same, but it would, wouldn’t it? Kurusu’s never had cause to enter. Why should his subconscious refurbish the place? Beyond these walls, though, the city will have transformed.

When Akechi peers out the window at the alley below, he chokes on his breath. There’s a man in a brown woolen sweater walking past. One sleeve of his sweater hangs limp and empty. It swings as he walks, sodden with blood.

Akechi briefly considers vomiting and decides against it. Instead he fixes his hair, and straightens his tie. Then he walks downstairs and steps out into the cool night air.

A woman with kind eyes smiles at Akechi as he closes the door of his apartment complex. The belly of her blue silk shirt has been torn away, along with the skin behind it. Her slender hands struggle to hold back a length of intestine which flops persistently outward, wriggling free of her grasp. A long, twisting loop of it dangles by her knees, bulbous and overstuffed and bubblegum pink, nearly tripping her with every step she takes.

“Evening,” she says, nodding. The acid tang of bile hits the back of Akechi’s throat. He swallows it and nods politely back at her.

It’s not as though he didn’t already know what to expect, he muses, sidestepping hastily to avoid colliding with a legless grade-schooler who’s hauling himself down the sidewalk with both hands. Still, he couldn’t have anticipated the sheer obscenity of it. Passersby pace purposefully forward in flagrant defiance of their deficiency: of the deep trenches gouged into their flesh; of the breeze blowing through a cage of empty ribs, nudging at a windpipe which pipes air into nothing at all.

“Excuse me,” he says politely to the nearest pedestrian, a 20-something young man who turns to point two hollow eye sockets at Akechi. “Ah,” he says, and sucks down a breath before collecting his wits. “Ah -- where should I go to get what I need?”

“You’ll want the night market,” the man says helpfully. His eye sockets crinkle when he smiles, sending pink fluid trickling from his tear ducts. “I’m headed there myself. I’ll show you the way!”

“Perfect,” Akechi tells him, his nose crinkling with distaste. “Thank you very much.”

##

Akechi's not sure how the man knows which way to go, with nothing but detached optic nerves blooming from his eyeless sockets. Nonetheless, after a few minutes of walking, the horizon fills with color. When they turn out of the alley, the streets are crowded with bright, colorful covered stalls, clustered so thick as to block out the sky.

"This is my stop," the man says amiably, nodding toward a black-and-grey stall whose masked vendor is hawking barrels of what appear to be *human eyes*. And not just any eyes, Akechi realizes with a start. Huge, direct, honest eyes whose charcoal-grey irises are near dark enough to swallow their pupils.

Akechi's guide pops a couple into place and then turns to wink at him.

"All better now," he says warmly, and he smiles, crinkling Kurusu's eyes to familiar slits. "He's got what you need, too," he says, in a comforting tone that Akechi finds inexplicably sinister. "You'll find what you're missing. You just have to go a little further in."

"Great," Akechi says flatly, and does as he's told.

##

Over the course of his career, Akechi has infiltrated a dozen Palaces. He's hit plenty of walls -- teams of armored thugs lining up to destroy him, and *literal* walls, too, locked and gated and fortified. He got past them all. But none of his experience has taught him how to prepare for *this*.

Kurusu's Palace is endless, and entirely unguarded. Nothing he sees points to the presence of any higher authority, or any focal point to pursue. Every other Palace ruler he's ever hunted down was a mythic figure roosting at the Palace's peak. Kurusu's Shadow is a ghost: intangible; immaterial; observable only through its impact on the surrounding environment.

"I'm looking for the ruler of this place," he asks again, his patience rapidly wearing thin.

"I can give you whatever you need, sir," the vendor in question -- a slender, masked Shadow in evening dress, just like all the rest -- offers helpfully.

"No," Akechi growls at it. "I need *Kurusu*. Or -- whatever you call him. Joker. Arsene. The ringleader to this *ridiculous clown show*."

"You *need* him?" the Shadow asks, and suddenly it's different: more lithe, somehow, than a moment ago. It carries its weight more evasively, shoulders slouched and spine arched. Only its face, obscured by that bone-white oval mask, doesn't change.

"I -- Kurusu-kun?" Akechi asks uneasily, but the Shadow is already vaulting over the heap of long, muscular legs piled on the counter between them.

"Goro," it purrs. "I hoped you would come."

"I--" Akechi sputters, disoriented. "You're--"

"I can fix you, you know," the Shadow croons, closing the space between them in a single elegant stride. "I'm *dying* to fix you, Goro, sometimes I can't *sleep* at night, thinking about it. I'll give you whatever you need--"

"Joker," Akechi says, more sharply than before; and now the shadow sighs and looks away.

“*That* name,” it huffs, sulking. “*That’s* someone else. He doesn’t do what I do.”

“And what is it that you do?” Akechi asks, curious in spite of himself. He can’t see anything behind the Shadow’s mask, but somehow he can *feel* it grin.

“I fix people,” it sighs, an exaltation of absolute pleasure. “I make them whole. They *need* me. They couldn’t do it without me.”

Abruptly, the Shadow reaches for Akechi. Before he has time to draw back, it cups his chin lovingly.

“What is it you need, Akechi-san? A father?”

And suddenly the Shadow is taller and squarer of jaw, with blockier shoulders, and the mask it wears belies a gruff sort of kindness.

“I’m proud of you,” it tells him brusquely, looking sheepishly away. “You’re everything I hoped you’d be, you grew up so *well*, Goro. I couldn’t have asked for a better -- no?” it cuts in, at the sight of Akechi’s frigid expression. “I was sure that’d be it... A lover, then?”

Its stance shifts slightly, bends like a bowstring as it reduces itself to a more familiar silhouette: bare shoulders sloping toward toned, muscular arms; every subtle movement an act of modern dance, all graceful, controlled sensuality.

“Do you want to be coveted?” it whispers, drawing closer and tilting its face upward till Akechi can feel hot breath on the lobe of his ear, and the nape of his neck. “I’ll worship you,” it promises, “I’ll find worth in the crease of your eyes and the folds of your fingers; it would be *easy*. I could make you happy,” and here the Shadow’s searching fingers trace their way down to the small of his back, and plunge further--

“*No*,” Akechi snarls, and flinches away as if burned. *I’m going to kill you*, Loki growls at the abominable thing, not Kurusu but not-not Kurusu either. *Two more weeks until I kill you, you idiot, you simpering fucking clown, you’re the punchline to a joke I’m not done telling, the last stepping stone on a trail paved with bones, soon there’ll be nothing left of you at all so don’t you dare fucking touch me*. “No,” Akechi says breathlessly, again, and Shadow!Kurusu steps away.

“Not that, either?” it says thoughtfully. “You were always a tricky one.”

Two cracks fracture the unbroken porcelain of the Shadow’s mask; the ceramic crumbles away around them, leaving two misshapen holes. Curious yellow eyes peer out, tracing the lines of Akechi’s face. The Shadow doesn’t blink.

The mask tilts sideways, appraising him.

“Come back when you’re ready to get what you need,” it tells him, abruptly toneless. “I can’t work with you like this, not when you’re determined to deprive yourself. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“*Excuse* me--?” Akechi starts to ask, but the life has already drained from the Shadow in front of him. Devoid of the hungry, desperate energy that so recently animated it, the creature looks at him with absolute incomprehension.

“How can I help you, sir?” it asks helpfully. Akechi snarls and calls Loki.

With a flick of his fingers, he reduces the thing to a puff of ash and an echo of pained squealing. It helps, but only a little.

“What are you even doing here?” he asks himself, savagely. “There’s nothing for you here. Go home. Go to bed. Do your job, and stop thinking about things that don’t concern you.”

Akechi goes home. He goes to bed. But he doesn’t stop thinking. When he falls asleep, he dreams of lithe, long-fingered silhouettes, and warm fingers on his cheek and his brow and the line of his collar. *What are you missing?* it asks him, and *what do you need?*

I don’t know, Akechi tells it, voiceless. *What about you?*

Chapter End Notes

oooh yall i am having fun with this one!! i think i've more or less mapped out what's to come... lmk if you're digging it so far, i am a fool goblin who subsists on praise & *boy* is positive reinforcement an effective motivator.

cheers!

meat for the slaughter

Chapter Summary

Akechi returns to Akira's Palace.

Akechi has no reason to return to Kurusu's Palace. He's got it all figured out, hasn't he? Really, there's nothing there that he didn't already know. Kurusu has a martyr complex; he obsessively puts others before himself, even at his own expense. *Especially* at his own expense. It's classic self-sabotaging *hero stuff*, neither original nor particularly interesting.

It's not as though Akechi intends to steal Kurusu's heart. The leader of the Phantom Thieves is already a formidable foe. There's no reason to make him any *more* so by helping him to unpack his neuroses.

It's not even a proper avenue to kill him -- *not now*, when Akechi's already set the stage to frame Kurusu for his crimes. He needs Kurusu to die in prison, with a bullet in his brain, so that he can reap the rewards of his capture and close the case for good.

It must simply be curiosity, then, which drives him to return to Kurusu's black market. After all, the more he sees of this place, the more he'll learn of his enemy. They say to keep your enemies close, do they not? What could be closer than vaulting through a window into Kurusu's own twisted, self-destructive heart?

"Excuse me," a faceless woman says politely when Akechi shoulders past her.

"You're excused," he snaps, already out of patience. The hideously mutilated "people" in Kurusu's Palace are all *sooo* polite, as though the world were populated by well-intended victims and not by sharks in sheep's clothing, watching and waiting for the smell of blood. After everything that Kurusu's been through, Akechi didn't figure him for such a naive, optimistic sap.

"Pardon me," he drawls to a well-dressed, white-masked vendor hawking bundles of human fingers bound together with twine. "I need to go deeper in. I'm quite *terribly* wounded. Awfully lonely, ravaged by a lifetime of abuse and neglect, etcetera etcetera. Won't you *please* direct me toward the next level, so that I can purchase a father figure and maybe a new personality and be on my way?"

"Of course, sir! Follow the flow of traffic and you'll find the source."

"How will I know it?"

"It should be quite clear, sir," it assures him. "When you smell coffee and curry, you're on the right path."

Akechi rolls his eyes as he walks away. How imaginative, he sneers at Kurusu in the privacy of his mind. So the accessway to your psyche is overlaid over the accessway to your actual, physical self? Learn to use a metaphor, why don't you?

The geography of this Tokyo is unlike the layout of the true city. Akechi would know -- he's been pacing the streets of Tokyo since he was a boy, killing time in the cold night air while his mother

entertained clients at home. The streets curve here in a way they don't in the real world; and no matter which way he turns, all roads lead back to Kurusu's night market. He supposes there's probably something behind that: Kurusu's impression that it's his job to heal all the world's wounded hearts; or the way lonely, aching strangers keep finding their way to him. Akechi's not particularly interested in the logic behind it. All that interests him is...

Hm. What is it that interests him, exactly? Is he curious about what Kurusu believes to be the solution to Akechi's own deficiencies? Does he hope to find a Shadow version of *himself* with its lying tongue torn out, ribs peeled back to bare its missing heart? Or is he here to meet Kurusu's Shadow again, and to ask it point-blank what it thinks of him? But why should he care what a dead man thinks?

He hasn't gone the right way -- hasn't even got on any trains -- but he finds himself in Yongen anyway, or something like it. He can smell coffee and spice on the breeze. Idly, Akechi wonders whether cognitive curry tastes as good as the real thing.

Leblanc looks the same as ever.

"Pardon the intrusion," he says as he enters, nodding at Kurusu's state-appointed guardian. He rolls his eyes again when Sakura turns to wave hello with a ragged, bleeding stump. His hands are nowhere to be found. Perhaps Akechi will find them in the curry.

"Ah, it's you," the proprietor greets him. "Good evening."

"How do you manage without your hands, Sakura-san?" Akechi asks him. "Do you mince the vegetables with your teeth?"

"What, these old things?" Sakura glances dismissively at his stumps. "Ah, I wasn't using them for much anyways. If I'm honest, there's no one left alive I want to touch. Best if I just -- remove the option. Cleaner that way."

"Well, if you change your mind, I know a great shop," Akechi tells him drily. "Is Kurusu upstairs?"

"He's up there," Sojiro confirms. "Though it may be a bit of a hike. Want me to pack you some dinner to go?"

"I'll pass."

##

It *is* a bit of a hike. The steps to Kurusu's attic stretch on longer than they used to -- for miles, by the look of it. Fortunately, physics in the Metaverse are what you make of them. Akechi takes the stairs eight steps at a time.

After an indeterminable span of time, he finds himself somewhere new. The walls are dingy exposed wood, like in Kurusu's unfinished hole of an apartment; and in the corner he can see that ridiculous plastic plant that Kurusu insists on watering, whether as some kind of personal joke or because he honestly hasn't noticed that there's nothing he can do for it.

Aside from the architecture, Akechi is in unmapped territory. Blades whirl and dance over sterile steel tables, shattering the eerie green light of a thousand glow-in-the-dark stick-on stars and refracting it in every direction. Mechanical drills grind through muscle and bone, spattering the walls with blood and marrow. The object of their attention? Severed limbs and bodiless organs, pink and wet and sagging over smooth, shining metal. Akechi is in a factory the scale of which he

hasn't seen since Okumura's ridiculous Palace, except that instead of shaping lengths of steel, these assembly lines are buffing and polishing Kurusu's own disembodied flesh.

As he moves forward, Akechi watches the conveyer belt on his right with lurid interest. A chute descends from the nondescript darkness above to drop one long, pale, pimpled arm onto the assembly line. It's crisscrossed with clawmarks, the scars of a hundred battles, and there's a tan line on the bicep where a sleeve shielded its shoulder from the sun.

As the limb slides past him, a gleaming metal pipe lowers a red-and-black sander toward it, buffing out the bumps and the blemishes and the unsightly gashes, along with the tender flesh beneath. When it retracts upward, the limb is all raw pink meat, smooth and seamless as silk. Another mechanical arm swoops downward to spray it with beige paint, leaving it clean and pristine.

"That's really going to help someone, you know," a familiar voice tells him. In spite of his training, Akechi flinches.

"Kurusu-kun," he says, turning to face the Shadow splayed out on a gurney to his left. "I expect that it could have helped *you*, too, would it not?"

The Shadow laughs. Akechi is not remotely surprised to see that its right arm is missing.

"That's so like you," it says fondly, as a stark white fingerbone juts from the cross-section of its shoulder. "It's every man for himself, right? Why give if you'll get nothing back? But I *do* get something back." Pink fibres stretch across the wound to coat the still-growing bone. "I get to see them walk away, whole."

"Do you?" Akechi asks, raising an eyebrow. "Even after you've given away your eyes?"

The Shadow chuckles again.

"You wouldn't understand," it tells him sadly, raising its voice slightly to be heard over the whirling bonesaw that's working its way through his other arm.

"Won't you ever run dry?" Akechi asks him. He's honestly curious. "What do you do when there's nothing more to give?" he presses. "When you've given so much that you have nothing left, even if someone really needs you?"

Through the mask, yellow eyes flash knowingly.

"This isn't hypothetical, is it?" the Shadow asks. The bottom half of its mask *cracks* open, baring a grinning maw full of half-grown sprouting teeth. "What do you need from me, Akechi-kun?"

"Nothing," he says stubbornly, as the creature flops bonelessly forward. Viscera slops from its open gut.

"I don't think that's true," it croons. The skin of its belly stretches steadily upward, sealing itself shut. "You're like me, aren't you, Akechi-kun? You need to be *needed*."

"I don't," he denies reflexively, but the Shadow is already drawing closer.

"I can see what's in your heart," it purrs. "It's my power, maybe. I can *always* see what they need, and you need *love*, Akechi-kun."

"I don't," he denies again, stiffening as its fresh new fingers -- naked muscle stretched over bone,

soft skin still creeping down its forearm -- graze his cheek.

“It’s always been transactional, hasn’t it?” it asks him, and when it looks at him, he can see that it’s weeping. “But I can give you more than that. I can give you unconditional. I fucking *love* you, Goro.”

“You love everyone,” Akechi tells him coldly. “It’s meaningless.”

“Not like I love you,” it vows. “I *see* you, Goro, and still I love you. I know what you’re going to do and I don’t *care*, Goro, it can’t change how I feel. You could fuck up a hundred times and I’d love you; you could kill me a hundred ways and I’d love you.”

“What--” Akechi sputters, knocked suddenly breathless. “What are you-- *what is that supposed to mean?*”

“It doesn’t *matter*,” the Shadow insists. “I know you’re only doing what you have to. It’s all you’ve ever known, you don’t know any other *way*. You’re just doing your best, Goro, with the tools you’ve had to make yourself, because no one else would give you--”

“And what about you?” Akechi asks sharply. His head is fucking spinning. *Does Akira* know about his plans? If he did, surely he would have closed his heart. Wouldn’t he? Shouldn’t the Palace have sounded the alarms at Akechi’s arrival, and painted him in his finest rebel’s garb? If Kurusu knew the truth, wouldn’t he perceive Akechi as a threat? “Where does that leave you?” he demands. “Bleeding out and bloodless, and for what?”

“What *about* me?” the Shadow asks him. It sounds genuinely confused. “Why would -- what does this have to do with me?”

Akechi rolls his eyes so hard he’d swear he could see his own brain.

“You’re the one *eviscerating yourself*? For fucks sake, Kurusu, do you have a death wish, or are you just an imbecile?”

The white mask tilts sideways.

“Maybe I miscalculated,” it murmurs, and for a moment, Akechi wonders if he’s got through to him. “You *need* love, but you don’t *want* it... or you won’t accept it, anyway, not now, not yet. What will make you accept it?”

Yellow eyes bore into him, searching for a weak spot. Paralyzed by the sheer force of that relentless, unwavering interest, all Akechi can do is glare back.

“Ohhh,” the Shadow sighs, shuddering with pleasure. “I see. You want to be *punished*.”

“I *what?*” Akechi echos, flabbergasted. “Don’t be absurd.”

Even as he speaks, the creature is changing. Its long, languorous limbs lengthen into something less sensual and more -- uncanny, like the distended, jointed legs of an insect.

“You want me to *hurt* you,” it purrs, and the overt threat of it raises the hair on the back of Akechi’s neck and stirs something warm and slippery in his gut. “You want me to hurt you bad enough to make you clean -- so bad that you’re the hero again, and I’m the villain.”

“I -- that’s--”

“I can do that,” it breathes, earnest and sure, like a promise; and before Akechi can even consider backing away, it *springs*.

The thing is fucking *fast*. It strikes at him with two clawed arms, whip-quick, and then again -- it's grown a few more since the last time Akechi knew what the fuck was going on -- gouging four bloody trenches through the clean white linen of his shirt.

“I need you to stop,” he says desperately, backing away.

“*But that's not what you want,*” it chitters, and lashes at him with a scorpion's tail that he'd swear wasn't there just a moment ago.

“Fine,” he snarls, bloodlust building. “*Fine, Kurusu, if that's how you want it, then -- Loki!*”

Power rockets through him: boils his blood, sets fire to his belly, fills his lungs with smoke. *God*, but he fucking loves this. Akechi loves the way Loki sets his body aflame and quiets his mind, dulls his racing thoughts to a distant hum and replaces them with simpler, more visceral needs, like *rip*, and *maim*, and *kill*. He didn't want to kill Kurusu, not yet, but this Shadow's not giving him a *choice* and if there's anything Akechi knows, *really* knows, it's how to survive.

The Shadow slashes at him again and Akechi takes the hit full in the mouth and spits blood and *laughs*. The next hit knocks him on his ass, rattling his skull so hard against a long steel table that Loki shimmers and stutters and Akechi sees stars.

“You think that's going to do it?” he cackles, licking copper-slick scarlet from his shredded lips and drawing his gun, his *real* gun, not that ridiculous pew-pew toy store trash he uses at Sae's Casino. “I don't need your *help*, I never have, *you're* the one who--”

He rolls as it swings for him again -- larger now, with longer reach, looming and endless and somehow no less spindly and fragile for it. Its pincers cleave clean through the table behind him. Akechi spits blood and glares at it, unafraid.

“I *knew* this is what you wanted,” he says, his feral grin widening. “In the end you're no better than me, are you? Just a--”

“*Melchizedek!*” a familiar voice cries, brassy and bright. A flare of radiant white blazes against the shapeshifter's smooth face and it flinches away, squealing.

“I'll be back for you,” its insectile voice buzzes at Akechi.

“Yeah, well,” he mutters, or thinks about muttering. It's hard to tell without all that blood.

“Jesus christ,” says the new voice -- comforting, steady, low. “This is why we don't infiltrate *alone*. Ugh, here, let me...”

Green-white embers flare to life an inch from Akechi's face, briefly blinding him -- but they're cold, not hot, threading mentholated cool through the ragged meat of his shredded cheek. When the spasming sunspots recede from his vision, he's staring up at dark eyes in a white mask, framed by tangled black curls.

“Kurusu,” he creaks. Joker grins at him.

“Yeah,” he says sheepishly, looking distinctly embarrassed. “That's, uh... Yeah. That's me.”

“The real one?” Akechi murmurs dizzily.

“Yeah,” Joker confirms, looking pained. “Sorry.”

“For what?”

“...For almost killing you, I guess?”

“Ha,” Akechi says tiredly. “Ha, ha.” It’s funny, because of the irony. In two weeks, when their roles are reversed, Akechi won’t apologize. Akechi will *smile*.

Joker’s mouth twists.

“Come on,” he says, peering anxiously at the darkness around them. “We gotta get out of here, okay? I’m almost out of SP.”

“S’not dangerous,” Akechi mumbles, in flagrant disregard for the blood pooling on the floor around him. Joker snorts.

“Not for you, maybe. Seriously, Crow, it’s now or never.”

For whatever reason, the ridiculous pet name -- no, Akechi corrects himself, *code* name -- does the trick. He boosts himself to his feet, wincing.

“You’re a real piece of work, you know that?” he asks Joker, who snickers.

“Yeah,” he agrees wryly. “I guess I’m figuring that out.”

like what you see?

Chapter Summary

Akechi and Akira come to an unlikely agreement.

“So, uh,” Kurusu says sheepishly. “I guess I’m trying to say that... I guess I need your help.”

“You need *my* help?” Akechi echos dubiously. The two of them are back at his studio apartment — Kurusu’s first time in his apartment, and what an occasion. Actually, now that he thinks about it, Akechi’s fairly sure that this is the first time he’s had *any* guest in his apartment. If he’d known, he might have bought a throw pillow, or maybe some posters. He suspects that his bare walls make him look like a serial killer.

“...Yeah.” Kurusu twists a lock of his hair anxiously between his fingers until it sticks out straight. It's strange to see him looking so uncertain. He's usually a pillar of assurance in every situation (or at least he affects an air of self-assurance, which amounts to the same thing).

Akechi purses his lips at him, slipping out of his jacket and hanging it on the hook on the door. “*Why*, exactly?”

Kurusu cringes. “Mind if I take a seat?”

“Be my guest.”

Kurusu sags onto the threadbare couch, stretches like a cat. It’s intrusive, and definitely not cute.

“I can’t — I don’t think I can fight it,” he confesses, visibly embarrassed. “It, um — It can’t see me, I don’t think. Or it can, and it doesn’t want to. Whatever the reason, it won’t look at me.”

“And this involves me *how*?”

“It’s a shapeshifter,” Kurusu tells him uncomfortably. “When it loses interest, it can just -- disappear into the vents, or under a door or something, where I can’t follow. I’ve tried to fight the damned thing a dozen times this week, and it’s not even like I *lost*, it’s more like it didn’t even *notice*. Halfway through something else catches its eye, or it has to go do something, and it’s just -- gone.”

Akechi stares at him.

I’m going to kill you, he thinks — not angrily or mockingly this time, but warily. *I’m going to kill you, and I’m fairly certain that you know it. So what’s your game here?*

“I don’t understand,” he says instead, interlacing his fingers and leaning delicately against the counter. “Why wouldn’t you recruit your teammates? A chosen handful, if you don’t wish to confide in the lot. They’ve fought by your side for the past year, Kurusu. Each and every one owes you a *life debt*. Surely you’d rather place your trust in them?”

“Ehh,” Kurusu says. “They, uh... No, I mean, of course they’d help,” he says defensively, as Akechi stares at him. “I just mean they... Hm.” He takes a second to consider his words. “I just

think it would... freak them out, a little. A lot. Uh. Hugely.”

“Oh, really?” Akechi deadpans. “To learn that their leader’s a self-mutilating martyr, distorting himself beyond repair? And on their behalves, no less?”

“...Yeah,” Kurusu winces. “I guess that’s about the size of it.”

“So you want *me* to help you, because I won’t fall apart when I learn that you’re a house of cards in a hurricane?”

“Yup. Plus you, you know... already know. So that makes things easy.”

Akechi squints at him in absolute incomprehension.

I am going to kill you, he almost screams. *Your Shadow knows, so you know. I’m your Judas — your own personal backstabber. A literal murderer in your midst.*

“Right,” he says levelly, instead. “And you think this course of action... Wise?”

Kurusu seems to consider it.

“Yeah,” he concludes, after a moment. “Or, I mean. I don’t really see another way.”

Akechi glares. All his genteel, meticulously curated decorum seems to have gone out the window the moment Kurusu found him bleeding out at Loki’s feet.

“And what do *I* get out of this?” he demands. As long as Kurusu’s apparently *eager* to die by his hand, he might as well get greedy.

Sure enough, Kurusu smirks.

“A sense of accomplishment, and the warm glow of having done a good deed?”

“Be serious.”

Kurusu snickers.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he says idly, fluffing his tangled curls with one hand. “If you help me out, I guess I could opt not to tell the others about your second Persona?”

The breath huffs out of him, but Akechi’s face doesn’t move an inch.

“You have a *hundred* Personas,” he says, definitely not defensively. “What’s wrong with having two?”

“Nothing,” Kurusu answers promptly. “Easily. Except that *you* kept it a secret,” he adds, slyly. “So *you* must think there’s something very wrong with it.”

Akechi stares searchingly at Kurusu as he chews that over. Splayed out on his back with his legs stretched out over the arm of the couch, looking not unlike Morgana on a hot day, Kurusu has his cell phone balanced on the tip of his finger and is spinning it idly. Akechi wishes that he could fidget. He used to fiddle with the cuffs of his sleeves, before his bastard father saw him in an interview and informed him that it "*made him look like a fairy.*" Akechi killed the habit shortly after.

Still. In moments like these, he could really use an outlet.

“Yes,” he says neutrally. “I suppose that that’s true, isn’t it?”

Kurusu grins at him, and Akechi pinches himself to keep from glaring.

“Well,” he huffs. “I suppose that I’d cleared space in my schedule to infiltrate Sae’s Palace, which we’re distinctly *not* doing.”

“Makes sense,” Kurusu agrees, nodding.

“So I suppose that I could spare the time,” he says reluctantly. He doesn’t meet Kurusu’s eyes, because he doesn’t want to see the open affection that waits there.

Why is he doing this? Well, what choice does he have? To deny Kurusu outright could provoke his suspicions, and he can’t risk that, not at such a high-stakes time--

(--except that Kurusu already knows the truth, or suspects it at the least, or is denying to himself that he suspects it. Except that Kurusu saw Loki at his shoulder and didn’t bat an eye because he knows, he knows, he already knows--)

--and anyway, what’s the harm in it? One last caper, for old times sake. They’ll make a few memories, have a few laughs, and then pull the whole thing down in fourteen days, when Goro presses the muzzle of his silencer against Kurusu’s smooth, self-sacrificing forehead and pulls the trigger.

A faint pressure on his sleeve draws his attention. It’s Kurusu, tugging at his wristcuff.

“Akechi,” he says fondly, when Akechi looks down. His dark eyes aren’t watery, like Akechi feared, but they are wide and warm and fond. “Thank you. Seriously. No matter what happens, I’ll owe you for this.”

What’s that supposed to mean, he thinks but doesn’t say.

“I should think so,” he sniffs instead, startling a laugh out of Kurusu. “Fine, then, Kurusu, since it seems you’ve got me thoroughly ensnared in this -- when shall we begin?”

###

They meet up the next day, outside of Akechi’s apartment.

“Ah, Kurusu,” he says blandly. “You look well.”

“Really?” Kurusu asks, face scrunched with doubt. Akechi takes a closer look and bites off a smirk. A far cry from his usual effortlessly-tousled elegance, Kurusu looks tired and wan. The dark circles under his eyes sag below the rims of his glasses.

“No, I suppose not,” he says crisply, startling a snort out of him. “Now. Are you prepared?”

“Let’s do it.”

Even after all this time, Akechi still closes his eyes when he steps into the Metaverse. It’s not something he’s proud of, but it’s slightly less embarrassing than vomiting onto his shoes.

When he cracks his lids again, he’s startled to find himself staring at Joker, in full Phantom Thief regalia. Akechi peers down at his own patent-leather shoes. He’s still in his street clothes.

“I don’t understand,” he says. “Is this because you’ve attacked your Shadow already?”

“No,” Kurusu admits, somewhat cringingly. “It was like this from the start.”

“*You’re* considered a threat here?”

“Well, sure,” Kurusu says, shrugging. “I *am* trying to destroy the place.”

“And I?” Akechi asks, inexplicably affronted. Kurusu smirks at him, lip curled.

“Guess I’m not afraid of you,” he drawls.

You should be, Loki roars back.

“Well, maybe you should be,” Akechi hears himself snap. *Shit*. His hand flies to his mouth. “Ah,” he adds hastily, in the face of Kurusu’s wry, tolerant smile. “Because -- we are here for the same purpose, are we not?”

“If you say so.”

Akechi’s had enough enigmatic nonsense, thank you so very much.

“Let’s get going,” he says coldly, striding forward. “We don’t have all night.”

When the two of them turn out of the alley and into the night market, Akechi realizes that Joker’s no longer walking by his side. He peers around, disoriented, only to find a dark-clad shadow darting from the shadow of one streetcart to the next.

“Aren’t you being a bit melodramatic?” Akechi asks. From his hiding place, Joker smirks.

“I don’t know,” he says, straightening up and stepping into the light. “Am I?”

The nearest vendor roars and surges toward him, vaulting over its cart and closing the distance between them in a single bound. Its mask shatters, and its fine coat and tails shred to tatters as the Shadow’s spindly form swells into that of a bloated bipedal elephant.

Akechi hesitates for only a moment before calling Robin. Together they make quick work of Girimehkala, and then Joker ducks back into hiding.

“Goodness,” Akechi says drily. “You really can’t bear to keep your own company, can you?”

“Takes one to know one.”

“Hmph.”

They move in silence for a while, with Akechi darting quick, curious glances toward his companion. What is Joker thinking? Is he *completely* uncurious about Loki? Or is he waiting for Akechi to bring it up? If so, where the fuck does he keep all that patience?

By the time they arrive at Leblanc, Akechi is at the end of his rope.

“Aren’t you going to ask about it?” he demands, exasperated past the point of exhaustion.

“About what?” Kurusu asks innocently.

“Don’t play games with me.”

Joker looks at him seriously, as though weighing his options. When he speaks again, that clownish

facade of obliviousness is gone.

“All right,” he says. “Then... Does it feel different?”

“What?” Akechi asks, flabbergasted. It’s not the question he expected.

“Having a different Persona equipped,” Kurusu clarifies. “Because mine feel different. It’s like code switching, or something -- the way different sides of you come out when you’re with different people, except from the inside out.”

“Is that how you think of it?” Akechi asks coldly, struggling to hide his disgust. He knew that Kurusu looked at the world through rose-colored lenses, but he didn’t expect to hear Joker express such shameless comfort with his own duplicitousness. ‘Code-switching,’ eh? Try *lying*.

“Well, sure,” Kurusu says easily. “Why? Do yours not feel different?”

Akechi blows air through his nose. “They feel different.”

Silence stretches between them. Then Kurusu turns to look at him again.

“So,” he says cheerfully. “D’you have a favorite?”

“That’s enough Persona talk,” Akechi snaps. Kurusu shrugs it off, a gesture that screams *suit yourself*, as though *Akechi* were the one being difficult. Akechi grinds his teeth until his jaw aches.

Why won’t Kurusu ask him outright? It would be easy. *Why do you have a second Persona, Akechi? What are you hiding from us, Akechi? What else have you been lying about, Akechi?*

Does he *really* not want to know? Or does he simply assume that every word out of Akechi’s mouth is a lie, and he’s opting out to save himself the trouble? Akechi can’t make sense of it, but that’s nothing new. He’s never been able to make sense of the things Kurusu does. Of all the foes he’s ever faced, Kurusu is the only one that Akechi still can’t read.

This time, they ascend through the slaughterhouse without incident. By the time they reach another set of rickety wooden stairs, Akechi thinks he might never eat again. After the viscera-spattered horror show he found in Kurusu’s attic, he doesn’t know *what* to expect of the next level up. How could the Palace possibly escalate its sanguine obscenity? What could be more horrifying than a living Prometheus carving away his own flesh with rapturous vigor?

Then they reach the top of the stairs, and Akechi finds out.

“Welcome, Master!” the Shadow shrills in an absurd mockery of Kurusu’s low, smoky voice, and curtsies. “I’ll help you find what you’re looking for, *nya!*”

(“Oh my god.”)

Akechi can hear sniggering from where Kurusu hides behind a stair.

“We have companions available to meet your every desire, *nya!*” the Shadow says sweetly. It looks more or less the same as the vendors he encountered in the night market, except that the coat and tails have been swapped for a ridiculous black-lace-and-velvet maid’s outfit, and there are long, curved eyelashes painted onto the smooth white surface of its mask. “Financial benefactors, test subjects, research assistants, part-timers... What are you looking for, Master?”

“I’m actually just here to browse--” Akechi starts to tell it, noticeably pained, before it cuts in

again.

“If you’re still deciding, can I recommend our boyfriend package, *nya*? We’ve got academic-achiever boyfriends, business advisor boyfriends, charming boyfriends, kind boyfriends... You look like you’ve got high standards, *nya*! But I assure you that our boys can meet them.”

“Please stop doing that,” Akechi begs openly.

“Stop doing what, *nya*?”

“Joker,” he says, flapping a hand feebly at the darkness behind him. “Please, can we just -- skip this part?”

“What,” Joker snickers, rising from the shadows like an avenging angel. “Not the boyfriend type?”

“*You*,” the Shadow snarls, but Joker is faster. He unmasks Ishtar before it can take its first step. Akechi’s so flustered and so incensed that he, too, acts before thinking.

“*Loki*,” he growls, and obliterates the love goddess with a well-aimed *Laevateinn*.

“Nice shot,” Joker purrs.

Akechi freezes. “I--”

“I have a hundred Personas, Crow,” Joker says, throwing Akechi’s own words back at him. His voice is light, but his eyes are serious, and his gaze lingers. “Why would I judge you for yours?”

Akechi tears his eyes away, heat flaring under his skin.

“We should keep moving,” he says. “If we want to secure our route.”

Kurusu doesn’t answer. He watches Akechi thoughtfully and slightly nervously, as though afraid that Akechi might at any moment turn on him, snarling and snapping like a chained dog.

Good, Akechi thinks bitterly. *You should be afraid. I could kill you right here if I wanted, and no one would ever know.*

But he doesn’t. Instead, he turns toward the darkened space ahead of them.

“Come on,” he says curtly. “We’d better hurry.”

Joker’s eyes flash (with mirth? Derision? Affection? Akechi can never tell, damn it).

“After you,” he purrs.

Akechi strides into the dark, and Kurusu follows.

the caged crow

Chapter Summary

Akechi meets his cognitive double.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

For the first time in his long history of Palace infiltration, Akechi finds himself longing for the security of his mask. He doesn't care which one. He'd happily don Robin's beak or Loki's horned helm or a damned paper bag with holes for eyes, so long as it effectively hid his face. He's not sure he can flush any redder without popping a vein.

"*Master*," the nearest maid -- Shadow -- Kurusu-thing croons, dipping into a curtsy. "Please, won't you tell me what you need? I'll do *anything*."

"For Christ's sake," he mutters, turning his face away from the shadowy corner where Kurusu hides. "Kurusu, have you no--" *shame*, he was going to say, until he noticed that Kurusu's ears have turned an even more fluorescent scarlet than his own.

"What's that?" Kurusu asks smoothly, in flagrant disregard to the possibly-life threatening redistribution of the blood in his body.

"Nothing," Akechi grumbles. Kurusu is always so comfortable in his skin; so constantly, effortlessly at ease that Akechi had forgotten how vulnerable this must be for him. Briefly, Akechi tries to imagine inviting visitors into the least-loved, most secret corners of his psyche. The thought of it makes him want to set his skin on fire.

"Sorry," he adds as an afterthought. To his relief, Kurusu doesn't ask *for what*? He just nods and keeps moving.

"How can I serve you, Master? *Don't look at me*," one of the Shadows purrs and then yowls in rapid succession, and Akechi cringes from sheer vicarious humiliation.

"Ah -- why don't you tell me this," he tells it hastily, carefully looking away from Kurusu to avoid worsening matters for them both. "Where can I find the..." Normally he would say *ruler*, but it's obvious that Kurusu's Shadow doesn't identify as *anyone's* master. "...The keeper of this place? The one who, I don't know, helps you to do your duties?"

"Oh, *him*," the maid sighs, shrugging one lean, muscular shoulder. "Bit of a creep, isn't he? You'll find him in the usual spot."

"And that is...?"

"Watching the balancing act," the maid-Shadow tells him. "He's, like, *obsessed*. I guess he thinks if he just keeps trying for long enough, he'll finally let him in? But it's *obviously* never gonna happen."

"Terrific," Akechi says, his voice clipped with impatience. "And where will I find this balancing

act?”

###

“I have... a reservation,” Kurusu announces, as they follow the maid’s directions deeper into the attic.

“Oh?” Akechi asks, voice dripping with venom. He’s overcompensating, he suspects, but he can’t seem to stop himself, not with Kurusu’s cheeks so flushed and his eyes so wild, like he’d climb out of his skin if he got the chance.

“I’m. Uh.” Kurusu shuffles his feet and shifts his weight. He flips his dagger around his fingers with one hand, and fidgets with his hair with the other.

“Spit it out,” Akechi snaps. God, but he’s really lost any semblance of self-control, hasn’t he? He didn’t think it would be so -- bizarrely *vulnerable*, traipsing through Kurusu’s subconscious mind. He was sure that being here would give him some leverage over Kurusu, and instead here he is, speaking without thinking and expressing open irritation, like he hasn’t done since he was a *child*.

“Ehh,” Kurusu mumbles, and then squares his shoulders. “I’m worried that, um--”

“*Shh*,” Akechi hisses, grabbing Kurusu by the shoulders and shoving him into a shadowy nook between two columns of splintering wood. Pressed up against Kurusu (who’s pressed up against the wall), Akechi peers around the corner toward the latest threat.

At first glance, the Shadow looks identical to the rest, but the lithe, feline grace in its stance is unmistakable. They’ve finally found it. At long last, Kurusu’s Shadow is in arm’s reach.

Akechi feels a thrill of fear at the sight of it. It’s hard to forget how easily (and how unnervingly *joyfully*) it dispatched him the last time they met. Fortunately, this time, there’s something else holding its attention. Kurusu’s Shadow is gripping the wall of some curious enclosure with both hands, pressing its smooth white mask flush against the glass.

It takes a moment for Akechi to realize that he can feel the *real* Kurusu’s breath on his neck.

“Akechi,” Joker murmurs, in a playfully flirtatious tone that does little to hide his sharp, shallow breaths. His pupils have grown so big and round that they nearly eclipse his irises. “I... never knew you felt this way,” he says mockingly.

“Shut up,” Akechi hisses in answer. “It’s right there.”

Joker follows Akechi’s gaze, and his eyes go wide. Akechi’s not sure what he expected after that. Steely resolve? Preparation for the battle to come? He certainly didn’t expect Kurusu to groan and fold downward, sliding down the wall till his butt comes to rest on his heels.

“...Joker?” Akechi whispers uncertainly.

“You didn’t see what it’s looking at, did you?” Kurusu asks miserably, from the ground.

He didn’t. It didn’t seem of particular interest. Now that Kurusu brings it up, though... Akechi peers around the corner, and finds himself staring at *himself*.

Or -- not himself exactly. This Akechi has the same sharp cheekbones, and the same luxurious mane of hair, and even the same fixedly-pleasant expression. But the real Akechi doesn’t make a habit of juggling knives.

Kurusu's cognitive Akechi stands on one leg, its foot *en pointe* like a prized ballerina's, balancing atop a perfect steel ball that teeters precariously over the edge of a dark, cavernous chasm. Its slender arms are spread wide, palms-up, for balance. On each palm (and each forearm, and both of its unrealistically-skinny biceps, and even on the crown of its head) stands a needle-sharp blade, balancing point-down on the cognition's tender flesh. Every time it shifts its weight to keep its balance, or to kick, or curtsy, or gesture theatrically toward its one-man audience, the knife-points dig in a little deeper. Akechi can see black blood streaming from each wound.

Shadow!Kurusu still hasn't noticed the infiltrators. Its smooth, featureless face is locked on cognitive Akechi's balancing act.

Cognitive Akechi, however, spots them at once. Its sharp, pointed face snaps toward them in an instant. When it meets the real Akechi's eyes, it smiles, baring a mouthful of pointed teeth. It's *crying*, Akechi realizes, a fact that inspires humiliation as much as fury. It's balancing and bleeding and smiling and *crying*.

He can't take this any longer. Akechi turns forcefully from the macabre scene and strides away, clenching and unclenching his fists. After a few minutes, he becomes aware of Joker pacing at his side, peering anxiously up at him.

"Excuse me," Akechi says tersely, aiming for pleasant and landing somewhere closer to *pissed*. "I..." he tries to say *needed some fresh air*, and fails. "Is that *really* how you think of me?" he demands instead. "As some kind of... pathetic, victimized *circus freak*?"

"That's a misinterpretation," Kurusu answers immediately. "Did he look like a victim to you? He looked straight at us. He's smarter than *my* Shadow, and *it's* supposed to be in charge of this place."

Akechi just glares at him, not letting up. After a moment, Kurusu sighs.

"I thought you'd be glad," he says unhappily. Akechi's eyebrows fly up.

"About *that* miserable thing?"

"Because he's whole," Kurusu explains. "There's nothing missing, no empty spaces. You don't need anything from me, and clearly," (in a voice heavy with irony), "it's taking a hell of a toll."

Akechi glares at him.

"And the *crying*?" he asks acidly. Kurusu looks at him, considers that.

"I guess I think you're unhappy," he answers, at last. "Am I wrong?"

Akechi gapes at him, dumbfounded. But Kurusu's not done.

"And -- I guess I must think of you as -- more self-aware than the others," he says, chewing over each word before he voices it. "I mean, look at Sojiro. I don't think he even knows how lonely he is, you know? But you... You can step away from yourself, look at your life and decide that it's--"

"That's enough."

Akechi glares at Kurusu, who stares right back, unflinching. The air between them thickens, turns taut and strange; and then the fight goes out of Akechi, and the tension dissipates.

"I suppose it's no worse than I expected," Akechi sighs at last, and watches Kurusu visibly relax.

“It’s not fun for me, either, you know,” Joker tells him, pushing up his mask with one finger -- a nervous tic that’s usually applied to his glasses. “I mean... It’s not exactly... I mean, you saw it,” he says at last, miserably.

Akechi *did* see Shadow!Kurusu, pressing itself against the glass as though attempting to pass through it.

“It can’t even *get* to him,” Joker mutters, more to himself than to Akechi. “*Obviously*. Who is it kidding? He obviously doesn’t want -- I mean, he’s not even -- *never mind*,” he hisses at last, with a look of thoroughly feline irritation. “It doesn’t matter, anyway. We’re here to fight Arsene -- my Shadow, I mean -- and, I don’t know. Steal my Treasure, or whatever.”

Akechi watches Kurusu through the corner of his eye, sharp eyes shadowed with suspicion. Then he shrugs.

“Then that’s our route secured, isn’t it?” he sighs at last. “I didn’t see any Treasure, but -- if we hope to defeat your Shadow, that’s where we’ll find him.”

“Right,” Joker agrees, brightening. “We just have to kick my ass, and we can put an end to this whole thing.”

Akechi gives him a wan smile.

“You know, Joker,” he says, pressing his fingers into his temples, “this would go a lot more smoothly if you’d simply invite the rest of your allies.”

“Yeah, well,” Joker tells him ruefully. “If I could do *that*, we probably wouldn’t be here in the first place.”

“Fair enough.”

Chapter End Notes

sorry for such a short chapter! i promise the next one will be a good deal heftier. see yall then! 🙏

what do you need?

Chapter Summary

Akira confronts his Shadow.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They take a night to prepare before returning to the Palace. Or that's what Kurusu claims, at least. Akechi suspects that really, Kurusu's just emotionally exhausted from touring a possibly-*murderous* acquaintance through the shadowy corners of his subconscious mind. And really, who could blame him? If their roles were reversed, Akechi would have killed him on sight from sheer, unbridled humiliation.

Akechi can never sleep the night before a job like this, but he goes to bed early anyway, just in case his body decides to take pity on him.

Several hours later, his phone buzzes. Akechi rolls over and squints grumpily toward it.

If it's weak to anything, it'll probably be Bless, Kurusu tells him. Akechi hisses at the brightness and thrusts the offending object away.

Another buzz.

But it'll almost definitely use Curse, so you might want to use Loki

It's none of your damned business who I use, Akechi thinks irritably. He flips his phone screen-down and flings his elbow over his eyes.

...Another buzz.

Hey, Akechi? Are you asleep?

He doesn't answer. He *should* be asleep. He would be, if he had any sort of a choice in the matter. Besides, Kurusu obviously doesn't require a response. Clearly the damned Thief intends to continue badgering him, with or without Akechi's blessing.

Another text alights on the screen.

I just wanted to say... I appreciate you doing this for me. I know it's weird, obviously, that I asked this of you, and that I won't tell the others.

A pause, longer than any before. Is that it? Of course it's *weird*. That goes without saying. Grumbling faintly, Akechi closes his eyes. His lids snap open four seconds later, when his phone buzzes again.

I trust you, I guess, enough for this at least. You can call me stupid if you want, I don't mind.

...I even kinda like it ;)

Akechi glares at his phone, incensed.

Ok, ok, I'll be serious. I just mean, I owe you for this. And I know you maybe think I'm an idiot, or that I'm taking on unnecessary risk or whatever, but.. I'm having fun with you, kind of, in spite of everything. We make a good team. And I just wanted you to know that, before everything goes back to normal.

That's it, I guess. Night, Akechi

Akechi scowls at the ceiling of his darkened room. What the hell does Kurusu expect him to make of this? Is he supposed to melt like warm butter? “*Don't worry, Kurusu, it's no trouble at all. After all, killing your Shadow will be great practice for the real thing.*” Or “*I'm having fun with you too, Kurusu-kun, you're such a great guy, I bet I'll even miss you after I put a bullet in your brain.*” Or maybe “*I don't think you're an idiot, Kurusu-kun, some days I think you're even sharper than me, and I can't fucking stand the idea that you're laughing at me.*”

Good night, Kurusu, he writes impulsively; and then, scoffing at his own display of sentiment, he moves to delete the message.

His traitorous finger hits *send* instead.

Stupid, he tells himself venomously. *Idiot.* This is all a big *game* for Kurusu, you know that, don't you? He's probably sitting there with the whole team *laughing* at you, laughing at the idea that you want to believe him when he tells you that he trusts you. The whole thing is a great big setup for a trap you're too dumb to figure out. Did you really think you'd defeat him? He's the leader of the Phantom Thieves, rakish anti-hero, beloved by all, and you're just some lonely orphan who lied so well for so long that you actually started to believe your own bullshit. It's pathetic, really. *You're* pathetic.

Snarling, Akechi silences his phone and rolls over to face the wall.

He lies awake for a long time.

###

“Morning, sunshine,” Kurusu greets him brightly, the next day.

“It's three in the afternoon,” Akechi tells him sourly.

“Hey, it's five o'clock somewhere.”

Akechi rolls his eyes, but he can feel the beginnings of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. (*I trust you,* Kurusu told him last night. The memory turns his stomach. Akechi thrusts it to the back of his mind.)

“Shall we get this show on the road?” he asks drily. Kurusu sweeps into a bow, all cartoonish gentility.

“After you.”

###

Kurusu's Shadow — *Arsene*, he called it? — is right where they left it. It doesn't turn to face them as they close in. It just stares hungrily toward Akechi's cognitive double, as though trying to bore through the glass with the force of its gaze alone.

“A-hem,” Kurusu coughs politely. His Shadow ignores him. Kurusu rolls his eyes.

“This guy, huh?” he says to Akechi, conspiratorial, and now it’s Akechi’s turn to roll his eyes.

“Hey, Arsene! *Stupid* mask! You look like the Phantom of the Opera!”

Nothing. It doesn’t even twitch. In spite of himself, Akechi snickers — and at that tiny susurration of sound, the Shadow whirls.

“*You*,” it says, staring eyelessly (but no less avidly for it). “I knew you’d come.”

“Yes, well,” Akechi sighs, watching warily as the Shadow stalks toward him.

“What’s this?” it asks, in Kurusu’s voice. “You’ve changed... You don’t want to be punished anymore, do you?” The creature sways forward, tilts its head left and then right. “You’re different than before... You need something different, too. What is it that you need?”

“To defeat you and be on my way?” Akechi suggests hopefully. The thing shakes its head.

“No, it’s not that,” it disagrees, while Kurusu snickers in the background.

Akechi shrugs. “Worth a shot.”

The Shadow surges closer, its body stretching and snapping into place like rubber.

“What *is* it?” it asks again, only inches from his face. Akechi stills his mouth, smiles rigidly, gives away nothing. “Forgiveness? That’s *closer*,” it decides, thoughtful, “but not quite right. It’s simpler than that, isn’t it?”

The Shadow swoops swiftly around him, its body warping into a spiral before coming to a stop right where it started.

“Ahh,” it hums. “It *is* simple. I see what you need,” it purrs, in a voice rich with satisfaction. Akechi flinches inward, taut muscles still as stone. He glances toward Kurusu, head tilted as though to say, *should we attack?* Kurusu shakes his head, gives him a look that says, *wait — I want to hear this*. Akechi wrinkles his nose at him, but he waits.

“*Clarity*,” the Shadow murmurs blissfully. “What you *need*, Akechi-kun, is for me to be straight with you.”

“Eh?” Akechi leans back, gobsmacked. To the right of his Shadow, all curiosity has drained from Kurusu’s face. It’s swiftly replaced with a detached sort of dread.

“You need me to be direct,” the Shadow tells him — bizarrely sensually, given the mundanity of its words. “Straight talk, no bullshit. You need me to strip away the uncertainty and make clear what I know.”

Akechi blinks at the thing, as though waiting for it to cackle and declare the whole thing a huge joke — to announce that what Akechi *really* needs is to bear witness to his own slow evisceration. But it doesn’t. It just stands there, mask tilted, gloved hands knitted together, as patient and attentive as the maids they dodged on their way in.

Akechi can’t help it. He snickers.

“Honestly?” he says, still snorting. “That would be great.”

Kurusu drops his head into his hands.

“What would you like to know?” the Shadow asks hungrily. It darts an eyeless glance toward Akechi’s cognitive double, who’s watching the scene play out with an expression of passionless, clinical fascination. “I’ll tell you anything. You want to know what I know, don’t you? Do you want me to tell you how I found out that you—”

“*Wait*,” the real Kurusu cuts in, his tone desperate. He surges forward and wedges himself into the narrow space between Akechi and his Shadow, so close that their hipbones clatter together. “Please,” he says — to Akechi, not to the Shadow, which (in spite of its utter lack of facial features) still manages to radiate an all-consuming disinterest. “Don’t just — I mean — I’ll talk, okay? I’ll answer your questions, all of them. Just — don’t go around me, okay? Let’s just fucking talk.” His voice is unusually shrill, his dark eyes pleading. “Okay?”

“All right,” Akechi says levelly, his tone cool and sure. It’s an illusion. Akechi is losing his fucking mind. “Then,” he says, and he should earn an *award* for how valiantly he manages to keep his voice from shaking. “Do you know who I am?”

Kurusu’s dark eyes meet his own.

“I do,” he answers readily. Akechi doesn’t reply. He just looks at Kurusu, waiting. After a moment, Kurusu gives him what he wants. “You’re the true culprit,” he says reluctantly, and Akechi’s blood turns to ice. “Of the mental shutdown cases. The Persona-user in the black mask.”

This can’t be happening. This is a fever dream, or some kind of waking nightmare. Akechi vacated his body hours ago; Akechi is a ghost on the breeze, watching the scene play out from a million meters overhead. *This is not happening.*

From a hundred miles away, Akechi watches his mouth open.

“And do you know what I have planned?” it asks smoothly, unflinching. “Do you know what I intend to do, in the weeks to come?”

Kurusu looks at his feet. Through the glass of its cage, cognitive Akechi smiles prettily, baring rows and rows of sharklike teeth. Black blood trickles from its lips.

“I do,” Kurusu confesses. Akechi’s face tenses, just for a second.

“Say it,” his mouth says calmly.

Kurusu doesn’t hesitate. “You’re going to kill me.”

Akechi stares at him, and Kurusu stares back. The leader of the Phantom Thieves doesn’t look angry, or betrayed, or even particularly triumphant about having beat Akechi at his own conniving game. He looks *miserable*. Behind the mask, his eyes are reddening.

Until now, Akechi floated numbly in the murky depths of his own mind, miles from his body and the feelings that swirled within it. Now, though, for the first time in a long time, he can sense the beginnings of an emotion. It takes him a moment to identify it. It’s *fury*.

Akechi glares at Kurusu.

“I’m going to *kill* you?” he asks, more than says. Kurusu hangs his head.

“Yeah,” he confirms. He scrubs roughly at his nose with the back of his wrist. “On the day we steal Sae’s heart, you’ll— that’s when you’ll do it.”

“I’m going to kill you,” Akechi says again. He’s been biting his tongue for weeks, swallowing the words that coated his gums like bile, and now that the dam has finally broke, he can’t seem to stop them flooding out. “*I’m going to kill you*, and you don’t— and you didn’t— you said that you *trust* me,” he spits, with revulsion. “*Why would you say that?*”

Kurusu shrugs wretchedly. He looks awfully young.

“Because I do, sort of,” he says, in a very small voice. “I know it’s stupid.”

“Yes, it’s fucking stupid!” Akechi snarls. “Why would you — what does that even *mean*? Why would you invite me here alone, unguarded? Do you think I’m so easily subdued? That I’m no threat to you?”

“No, of course not,” Kurusu says immediately, giving him a twisted smile that’s nearly sheepish. “We don’t even know how you do what you do. Of course you’re a threat.”

“Then *why*?”

Kurusu shrugs helplessly.

“I — it really would have fucked up the others,” he says, still smiling that stupid fucking smile. “Seeing this place; seeing me like this. But you already see me. Sometimes I think you’re the only one who does.”

“So *what*?” Akechi demands. Now that the fury has started leaking out, he can’t seem to cram it back in. “So what if I do? What good does that do you, if I want you dead?”

Kurusu hesitates. He opens his mouth, closes it, opens it again. At last, tentatively — apologetically, almost — he speaks.

“...*Do* you want me dead, though?”

Akechi draws back, outraged.

“Of course I—”

He pauses. The words won’t seem to come out.

“You’re my greatest humiliation,” he attempts. “Your defeat will be the culmination of all that I’ve planned. Of course I—”

For a second time, he chokes on the word *want*. Akechi presses his mouth into a thin line, face tight with frustration. From its birdcage, his cognitive fake is watching him. Its smile is gone, replaced by an expression of utmost curiosity.

Akechi shakes himself off like a dog and changes tracks.

“What does it matter what I want?” he demands. “I’m going to kill you just the same. Why would you bring me here, knowing that?”

Kurusu’s face has softened; taken on a heartbreaking fondness that makes Akechi want to *hurt* him.

“I guess, um,” he says quietly. “I guess I thought that maybe... I mean, it seemed like no one had ever given you the chance to be *good* before — to help someone else, someone who needed it, instead of always only looking after yourself. I guess I thought that maybe you needed that, once in

your life, at least. And if I'm dead, who's going to give it to you?"

Akechi slams a fist against the glass behind Kurusu, hard enough to leave a knot of bloody scarlet on the glass. A silver-white crack spiderwebs from the point of impact, with a sound like footprints on snow. Kurusu doesn't flinch.

"You're more stupid than I thought," Akechi hisses, as blood beads on his knuckles. "You're— How can you be so unselfish? Why are you so *determined* to neglect your own needs?"

Kurusu gives another of his trademark diffident shrugs.

"Maybe this *is* what I need," he says, with a ghost of a laugh; and Akechi *roars* at him.

"What you *need*," he snarls, wild-eyed, "is a *therapist*, you *stupid*, *self-destructive* fucking clown!"

To his shock, Kurusu bursts out laughing.

Kurusu rarely laughs out loud. His dark eyes often flash with humor; sometimes he snickers, or snorts, or (on rare occasions) squeaks out a half-swallowed sputter. But here and now, sandwiched between his soon-to-be murderer and his own repressed psyche, Kurusu *guffaws*. It's a deep, rich sound that bursts from his belly and fills the room, bending him double with the force of it. When he stands again, he's wiping tears from his eyes.

"Yeah," he says weakly, his chest still heaving with mirth. "Yeah, I guess you're probably right, huh?"

Akechi gapes at him. But before he can even *begin* to consider how to respond to that, something new catches his eye.

Throughout their confrontation, Kurusu's Shadow had pointedly ignored its other half, opting instead to look longingly between Akechi and his cognitive fake. At Kurusu's latest admission, though, its smooth white face *snaps* toward him. For the first time since they arrived in the Palace, Joker's Shadow looks straight at him.

"How can you say that," it asks softly, its tone low and menacing. Naturally, Kurusu doesn't realize that it's addressing him. It's not until Akechi nudges him warningly that Kurusu turns.

"Wait," he says, disoriented. "You're talking to *me*?"

"*How can you say that?*" it demands again, and now two thin lines form in the smooth white surface of its mask. Porcelain crumbles away to bare cruel yellow eyes, like an osprey's. "How can you be so *selfish*?"

"I'm — I didn't—" Kurusu stammers, sidestepping away, but the shapeshifter is faster. It whips around him like a slingshot, cornering him against the glass.

"How *dare* you take up so much space?" it yowls, its silhouette stretching upward till it has to stoop to avoid scraping the ceiling. "Don't you see how much they're suffering? And you want *them* to help *you*? Can't you see that they *need* you?"

Bladed arms tear through the black cloth of its coat to jut from its torso, long and bent back like a spider's legs. They catch the thin white light of the attic and refract it outward, as though they'd been pieced together from shards of glass. When the creature stretches its limbs menacingly toward its other half, Akechi can see his own face reflected in the shining steel.

I'll *make you see*," Kurusu's Shadow threatens, and it pounces.

Kurusu flips sideways, neatly dodging the hooked claws that whistle toward him.

"Anubis!" he shouts. The jackal-headed god materializes behind him, hefting its scales with cold, unfeeling precision.

"Crow," he calls to Akechi, who's still standing stock-still, his mind racing. "It's go time."

"Right," Akechi mutters, and: "Loki!"

###

It's not an easy fight. Kurusu's Shadow can change its shape to suit its needs, and to heal its wounds, too. Any damage that the duo deals is swiftly erased, rubbery skin closing over ragged wounds and limbs growing back as quickly as Loki can hack them away.

Panting, Akechi dodges a bladed foreleg and fires a shot at the creature's retreating face. A shard of ceramic chips and flies off, and the Shadow hisses like a cat under a waterhose. It darts away and strikes at him again, but its movement can't hide what Akechi's keen eyes noticed in an instant. The missing shard doesn't grow back. *The Shadow can't heal its mask.*

"Joker!" Akechi calls over his shoulder. "Target the mask!"

"Got it," growls a familiar baritone. Akechi feels a hand on his shoulder as Kurusu vaults over him to empty his clip into his Shadow's white mask.

For a moment, powdered porcelain and gunsmoke hang in the air, obscuring the thing's face. Then the smoke clears, and the creature screeches as Akechi sees the truth: there was never any face to obscure. Kurusu's Shadow *has* no face.

"Surprised?" it asks Kurusu mockingly, pirouetting away from his gleaming blade. "You shouldn't be. I'm you, after all. All flash and dazzle and nothing underneath; that's you, isn't it, *Akira-kun*? All sparkle, no substance. There's not an original thought in that head of yours, is there, prettyboy? Nothing but borrowed behaviors and a pretty face."

Kurusu stares at it, temporarily speechless.

"Didn't you ever wonder why he was so different with different people?" the Shadow asks Akechi, laughing as it fires off a series of Mudoons (which bounce off of Loki's rippling stripes to shatter against the floor). "Why he's so determined to reflect them, and make their needs his own? It's because he knows he's empty. Who is he, if not a reflection of the people around him? When he's alone, does he even *exist*?"

"What," it sneers, in the face of Akechi's rising disorientation. "You thought he helped people because he *cared* about them? It's just a distraction — smoke and mirrors, to draw the eye away from his own *deficiencies*. So long as his allies are only ever thinking of themselves, they won't slow down for long enough to notice that they're talking to themselves — that they're doing all the work alone, while he contributes *nothing*. Isn't that right, *Akira-kun*?" it purrs, its tone all-knowing and witheringly cold.

Akechi darts a nervous glance toward Kurusu. He's not sure what to expect. Will Kurusu freak out? Will he deny it? Will he run, leaving Akechi to finish this fight alone?

He definitely didn't expect Kurusu to snicker.

“It’s funny,” Kurusu says ruefully, deftly dodging another six-armed strike. “I used to be so scared that that was true. That I had no identity of my own — that I only existed in relation to other people, and if they ever found out, they’d — I don’t know. Feel deceived, or something. That just by *existing*, I was lying.”

Akechi is listening so closely that he almost forgets about Kurusu’s Shadow, till Kurusu shoves him out of the way of an incoming slash.

“But *now*?” Kurusu says breathlessly, rolling past him for a counterattack. “After all the crazy shit we’ve seen in here? I’m starting to think that being a reactive, reflective, performative thing is maybe an identity in itself, actually.”

He vaults upward from the ground, springs dagger-first toward the monster until suddenly — mid-air! — something moves through him, and Kurusu sheathes his blade. He straightens his stance and hurtles clear *through* the thing’s empty face to land neatly behind it.

“Yeah,” he tells the knot of empty air and scything limbs that quivers, bodiless, between them. His Shadow’s face is only discernible by a faint refraction of the light: a localized vacuum in evening dress. “I can’t deny that you’re me. Why would I want to?”

The air between them chimes — shudders — turn solid and strange, and the Shadow glows so bright that Akechi has to close his eyes. When he opens them again, there’s a Persona floating between them: tall and dark and grand, clad in red and black, its neck adorned with a ridiculous ruffled ascot. Two broad, feathered wings fan out from its shoulders, ink-black and rippling with oilslick iridescence. Where its face should be there is only shadow and flame in a tall top hat: *all flash, no substance*. Its glowing red maw flickers, formless. Nevertheless, it smiles.

Akechi can tell instinctively that this is Kurusu’s Persona, his *true* Persona — as true as all the rest, he supposes; but that *unlike* the others, this phantom was born from the depths of Kurusu’s hollow heart.

“Vow to me,” it tells him grandly, in a voice like brass and thunder. “I am thou; thou art I. *Call my name.*”

“Arsene,” Kurusu says. It’s a whisper, not a shout. “I won’t deny you again.”

“Thou hadst best not,” the Shadow says darkly. With a blaze of blue flame, it vanishes into Kurusu’s heaving chest, and at last, everything is still.

...But only for a moment. Before he can catch his breath, Akechi feels a familiar rumble under his feet: the telltale harbinger of a Palace’s collapse.

“Come on,” Kurusu tells him breathlessly, catching Akechi by the wrist as he bounds for the exit; and Akechi, more tired than he’s been since the day of his mother’s funeral or maybe even more exhausted than that, streaks after him.

###

Akechi thought that they might talk after that, but they don’t. They barely escape the collapsing Palace with their lives. By the time they stagger bleeding out of the alleyway and into the doorway of Akechi’s dingy apartment, Akechi’s worn ragged enough to fall asleep on his feet.

“Can I sleep here?” Kurusu asks tiredly.

“I don’t care,” Akechi answers flatly. In spite of his exhaustion, Kurusu snickers.

“Well, I want to,” he announces — somewhat grandly, as though expressing one’s desires were something to be proud of. Akechi supposes that for Kurusu, it probably is.

“Fine,” he concedes. “Whatever you want. Just lock up when you leave.”

He’s only halfway through the door when he feels a hand alight on his shoulder.

“Akechi?” Kurusu says softly.

“Yes, Kurusu-kun?”

“Thanks.”

“It’s nothing,” he says, reflexively dismissive. Then he looks back at Kurusu’s face: naked gratitude, without expectation or reservation. Akechi rolls his eyes and gives in.

“*You’re welcome*, Kurusu-kun.”

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###

The next day, Kurusu calls the team to Sae’s Casino. When Akechi arrives, he finds that the rest of the Thieves have already arrived. They’re clustered close around their leader, who’s addressing them in soft, soothing tones. Akechi hides behind a gaudy gold pillar and listens.

“I’m sorry it’s been so long,” Kurusu is saying softly. “And I’m sorry I’ve been avoiding you. I’ve been... going through some stuff.”

He pauses, as though intending to end it there. Then something seems to move through him, and he stiffens with resolve.

“And it’s not just that,” he says impulsively. “What’s waiting for me in ten days time... It’s scary,” he confesses. His face is tight, his voice small. He looks every bit the child that he is: just a teenager, afraid, alone. “I’m scared. I’m scared of what could happen.”

He looks at his feet, deeply ashamed. But before he can turn inward, that vulgar Sakomoto boy slings an arm over his shoulders.

“Running away from your problems, huh?” he says knowingly. “Never thought someone like *you* would run away.”

Kurusu looks away, aiming an apologetic smile at his own feet.

“Yeah,” he agrees, voice cracking raggedly. “I guess it’s pretty disappointing.”

“Are you kidding, bro?”

Kurusu looks up, his forehead furrowed in a rare display of uncertainty.

“It’s a *relief*,” Sakomoto continues, giving Kurusu’s shoulder a comforting squeeze. Kurusu gapes at him.

“What?”

“Ryuji’s right,” the Takamaki girl agrees, nodding so vigorously that her ridiculous pigtails bounce. “Honestly, it was kind of freaky, how confident you always were about all this scary stuff.”

“I must agree,” Kitagawa adds, nodding sagely. “Reservation and hesitation are the very essence of adversity, after all. Without fear, there is no courage; and without courage, no cause for growth.”

“I’m scared too!” Isshiki’s daughter chimes in. “Like... Basically constantly! We’re up against some *seriously* OP bosses, and not just in the Metaverse. But that’s why we have each other!”

“We’re able to weather so much because we lean on each other,” Haru says earnestly. “It’s only fair that you lean on us, too!”

“That’s right!” Morgana yowls fiercely. “I’ve got your back, leader, but that only works if you actually *let me* support you.”

“You may be our leader,” Nijiima agrees, smiling shyly. “But Akira, you’re still allowed to be human.”

Abruptly, to the visible astonishment of the whole team, Kurusu starts crying.

“I’m really scared,” he says thickly, his shoulders hunched like a vulture’s. “I’m really fucking scared, you guys, I don’t want to — if anything goes wrong I never get to see you again and I only just *found* you, and I— I—”

The Thieves fold around him like a blanket, petting and humming and making small, soothing sounds.

“Shh,” Haru says, and “I’ve got you,” Ryuji swears, and Futaba is clinging like a limpet to Kurusu’s midsection, and now Ann is crying too. Morgana twines himself around Kurusu’s shins, purring like a bike with a broken muffler, and even Yusuke gives Akira a stiff, tentative pat on the shoulder.

“We won’t let anything happen to you,” Makoto vows in a voice like steel; and Ryuji grins and nods his agreement.

“We’ve got you, bro.”

“You *guys*,” Kurusu almost wails, and pulls them in closer.

Akechi has seen enough. He leaves the Metaverse and waits outside the courthouse for a few minutes before he returns, clattering his silly plastic lightsaber against the wall on his way in.

“Apologies for my lateness, all,” he says pleasantly, with a disarmingly sheepish smile. Futaba shoots him a glare that she probably believes to be discreet. Ryuji doesn’t even try to hide his dislike.

“Not a problem, Akechi-kun,” Makoto tells him coolly. “It won’t happen again, I hope?”

“Of course,” he agrees, with that same unwavering smile. “Ah, have you all been doing some reminiscing? This *is* your last infiltration, after all.”

“Something like that,” Kurusu tells him, shooting him a melancholy (but irritatingly genuine) smile. “C’mon, guys. We’ve got a Treasure to find. One last show, yeah?” he says, and cracks his knuckles. “Let’s give them a fight they won’t forget.”

Chapter End Notes

i always dug P4's boss fights more than P5's awakenings, where you tame your Shadow by accepting the “uglier” sides of yourself that you’ve been repressing/denying. my read on what akira's been hiding from is very informed by my own identity (or lack thereof), so I’m not sure it’ll click for folks who haven't spent half their lives agonizing over whether or not they’re somehow innately deceptive? but hopefully it wasn’t totally nonsensical, at least!

PS just to clear up any potential confusion: the PTs are still scheming their sneaky cognitive-interrogation-room plot! akira doesn’t have NO self-preservation instinct — that’s part of (but only a small part of) why he stepped in to keep his shadow from telling akechi everything. still, he means it when he says that he “sort of” trusts akechi. tbh, “my” akira (as i RP’d him while playing vanilla P5 for the first time) would have believed that akechi wouldn’t be able to kill him, right up until the point where his “suicide” was reported on TV. it’s what made the betrayal hurt all the worse :(

the interrogation room

Chapter Summary

On the night before Akechi is scheduled to kill him, Akira asks his murderer out for drinks. The next day, the boys reunite in the interrogation room.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

On the morning of the day before Kurusu's murder, Akechi and Akira still haven't talked.

Akechi had rather assumed that their little venture through Kurusu's heart would change everything. After all, Kurusu knew the truth now, didn't he? Worse, Kurusu knew that *Akechi* knew that Kurusu knew the truth. How could they maintain the charade that everything was normal when Kurusu knew perfectly well that Akechi would take his life in a few days' time? How could they fight as allies, elbow to elbow or back to back, when *both* of them knew where Akechi's true loyalties lay?

Akechi half-expected the Thieves to jump on him the next time he arrived at an infiltration: to set about him guns ablazing, lighting him up with spells and bats and blades for even *thinking* about hurting their leader. He'd be ready for them, too. Kurusu may have met Loki, once or twice, but even Kurusu had seen only a fraction of his power. If it was a fight they wanted, Akechi was happy to provide one.

But the Phantom Thieves didn't attack. Day after day, the team greeted him with the same diffident politeness and passive-aggressive unease that they'd met him with from the start. Which meant that Kurusu hadn't told them what happened; or that he *had*, and they were doing an unprecedentedly cunning job of hiding it. The only one who knew the truth was Kurusu himself, and he wasn't talking.

But on the night before Akechi is scheduled to kill him, Kurusu finally reaches out.

It's 6:46 pm when Akechi's pocket hums, signaling an incoming text. Akechi doesn't get a lot of texts. His employer provides orders via terse, witheringly cold phone calls, and Sae only sends emails. Akechi scrabbles for his phone so frantically that he fumbles it and has to chase it as it skitters across the linoleum floor of his apartment.

Hey, Kurusu says. Meet me at the jazz club?

Akechi stares at it like a man drowning looks at the lifeboat he'll never reach.

I'd be glad to, he writes back, clear and concise. See you there, Kurusu-kun.

##

"I'm not going to stop you," Kurusu tells him when he arrives.

After defeating Kurusu's Shadow, Akechi thought that Kurusu could never surprise him again. Akechi was wrong. He gapes across the table, feeling increasingly unhinged.

“Why on earth not?” he demands.

“I don’t think I should have to,” Kurusu answers easily. Akechi grinds his teeth till his jaw aches.

“Stop me if you’ve heard this one before,” he says tightly, “but are you fucking *simple*?”

Kurusu snickers.

“Yeah, kinda,” he confirms, nodding amiably. “I like who I like, and I trust who I trust.”

“Why the hell would you trust *me*?” Akechi spits. “In *any* circumstances, much less *these*?”

Kurusu shrugs.

“Cause I want to,” he says, flipping his empty cocktail glass around his fingers like a flashy chef at a trashy restaurant. “No one ever trusts you to make the right choice, do they? Well, I will.”

“Even though you literally *know* that you can’t?”

“Uh huh.”

“And even though you *know* that I’ll betray that trust, because I’m *swearing* to you that I will?”

“Mhm,” Kurusu confirms, nodding. “Or I know that that’s Plan A, yes.”

“Kurusu-kun,” Akechi says blankly, fury giving way to sheer disorientation. “That’s not trust. That’s *delusion*.”

“Maybe,” Kurusu allows. “But a hopeful one!”

Akechi throws up his hands.

“You know that, in essence, you’re *consenting* to your own demise? You understand the gravity of the situation? You know that death is not *reversible*?”

Deadpan: “I am familiar with mortality, yes.”

“And *still* you insist on this -- perverse, fatalistic passivity? You would abandon your allies, and resign yourself to your fate?”

“Oh, I don’t intend to abandon my allies,” Kurusu tells him amiably. “I’m just trusting you to do the right thing so I can get back to them, safe and sound.”

“Even if I *promise* that I won’t?” Akechi asks, tight-lipped and furious. “That I’ll do the *wrong* thing, and take your life to better my own?”

“That’s right.”

Akechi glares at him. Why is Kurusu so determined to die? Didn’t they *fix* this particular perversion in that last fight the night market, when Kurusu accepted himself? If these are the terms, it could hardly even be alleged that Akechi is committing a crime. He’s simply -- meeting his commitments, as agreed, with Kurusu’s express permission. So why does he still feel so frustrated?

Kurusu flips the glass from his right hand to his left and grins his satisfaction as it continues in its flashing, gleaming arc.

“I’m gonna get another drink,” he decides aloud. “You want anything?”

“For you to grow a shred of self-preservation instinct,” Akechi growls. “And a Diet Coke.”

###

When he steps into the interrogation room, Akechi’s not exactly *surprised* to see Kurusu, who did promise that he would loyally attend the time and place of his own murder. But he’s certainly disappointed. He can’t deny that he’d hoped that Kurusu might have some last little trick up his sleeve -- some final humiliation which Akechi would tear violently from his long, strong fingers and dash on the ground till it shattered to shards; and then stomp those shards into sharp, brittle powder. But all he sees here and now is Akira: black eyes, tangled curls, wearing the same enigmatic half-smile as ever.

Akechi kills the guard first, just like his bastard father ordered. Akechi has killed before, of course. He’s taken countless lives. Why should this feel any different? Though -- admittedly, historically speaking, Akechi has only killed in the Metaverse. In the Metaverse, death happens like a Zelda game: enemies burst into wisps of black smoke and dissipate to nothing.

The guard drops like a sack of meat. Akechi doesn’t look down. He doesn’t want to see the moment when life drains from the body, reducing thinking breathing consciousness to so much cooling meat.

“I owe you for all this,” he tells Kurusu coldly, looking him straight in the eye. “Thanks.”

Kurusu just stares at him. He doesn’t look angry, or betrayed, or even particularly sad. He just looks -- blank. Akechi looks that way too, sometimes, when he hasn’t yet decided how to feel about something. He can relate.

Air hisses between his teeth. He practiced this speech for weeks, and he’s already fucking it up.

"That's right," Akechi goes on, and puts on a satisfied little smile. "You and your little friends were vital to our plan." He agonized for ages about whether to say "our" or "my," but he thought that "our" would hurt more. It would remind him that Akechi is part of a larger force, just like Kurusu is, except that Akechi's on the winning team. And it leaves the lingering implication that after Kurusu’s demise, his *little friends* might be next.

Kurusu just stares at him. His eyes are black, so black, like two holes in the middle of his face. Akechi has spent days of his life looking at those eyes. Sometimes he’s feared that he’ll fall into them, as though they carried their own localized gravitational field. Sometimes he’s hoped to. Anything would be better than standing outside, looking in.

“You could have avoided this, you know,” he finds himself saying. He’s going off-script, even after all that practice. Why would he do that? If he goes off-script, how will he transition to the part where he tells Kurusu that this is where his justice ends?

“*Why* didn’t you avoid this?” he demands, giving in. “I *told* you... I *told* you I’d do it! I told you I wouldn’t hesitate. Why would you come here to die? Why wouldn’t you stop me?”

Kurusu doesn’t answer. He won’t give him the satisfaction, Akechi supposes. Even in death, Kurusu’s determined to turn the other cheek -- to grind his own superiority in Akechi’s face, just one last time.

“You’re such a piece of work, you know that?” he says irritably. “Why would you even bother to dismantle your Palace, if you knew you were about to die? Was it all a game to you? Did you bring

me there to hurt me? To make me feel worse about what I had to do?"

Damn. Now he's gone and admitted that Kurusu's death will hurt him, in some fashion. How is he supposed to defeat Kurusu if Kurusu knows that, even as he dies, Akechi will *still* lose?

"You're such a piece of work," he snarls again. "I can't believe you'd — and even after I *warned* you — Why won't you *talk* to me, Kurusu?"

Akechi can hardly *think* straight over the deafening clamor of his own fury. Kurusu could have prevented this, and he didn't. Why didn't he? What point is he making by sticking around? Does he really believe that Akechi isn't strong enough to kill him? That Akechi is too weak to stand by his convictions? If that's the case, Kurusu will soon find out just how wrong he was.

Breathless with — hatred, probably, Akechi glares straight into Kurusu's fathomless eyes.

"Do you hate me so much that you won't even say goodbye?" he asks. He's almost pleading now. He needs Kurusu to acknowledge him, just once -- to acknowledge the intimacy they've shared, the connection they've formed. Akechi needs Kurusu to see him just *once*, and then he can say goodbye. It won't matter how Akechi felt, or what he might have wanted in the strange, hazy hours of the night. If Kurusu will speak to him one more time, it will have been enough.

Kurusu gapes at him owlishly, helplessly, like a damned useless animal. It's pointless. He won't talk.

Akechi can feel the distance yawning between them. Once Kurusu is gone, there will be no one left alive who knows that Akechi once paced through the furrows of Kurusu's unconscious mind; that Akechi once beat Kurusu's own repressed ego into submission. That Kurusu *saw* Akechi, and knew him, and still decided to trust him.

Akechi bares his teeth and *roars*.

"I *will* make you talk," he growls. "I just — need more time. I'll *make* you give me more time. Come with me," he commands, whipping his phone from his pocket. "Let's get a little privacy, shall we?" he asks menacingly, and pounds his finger against the button that will take him to the Metaverse, into a back-channel of Mementos that he's ducked into time and time again...

...except that when he does, he feels his limbs get *heavier*, not lighter; and the way the light warps is wrong, all wrong. When that damnable digitized voice announces Akechi's entrance, it's *not* to the Metaverse.

"Now returning to the real world," it chimes.

"The..." he echoes dumbly, the folds of his brain sparking. Akechi squares his jaw and grinds his teeth. He's been duped, after all. Kurusu *lied* to him. He claimed to trust him and he *lied*.

"You *bastard*," he starts to growl, fuming. "You *tricked* me, you bastard. You said you *trusted* me!" he spits, rounding on the place where the *real* Kurusu awaits him, bound and chained—

—except that the thing on the desk is not Kurusu Akira.

"Kurusu?" he says hesitantly.

The thing doesn't answer.

It's got Kurusu's mop of tangled hair, admittedly, though this creature's mane is matted flat with

blood. But the eyes are wrong: not watchful and knowing and wry like Kurusu's but glassy and sightless, focusing and unfocusing on nothing at all. The wilting thing before him has Kurusu's smooth skin, but it's mottled green-and-purple, hot blood pooling under the surface like fungal blooms. This thing has Kurusu's full lips, but they're swollen and bleeding, and its slack jaw hangs open. A cord of viscous phlegm stretches from the corner of its maw. Foamy saliva pools on the desk under its chin, soaking the side of its bloodied cheek in silvery froth.

"Kurusu?" Akechi asks again, less fiercely this time. He takes a tentative step closer. "Kurusu-kun?"

This time, it answers.

"...kechi?" the pathetic thing slurs. For once in its damnable life, it seems to recognize the danger that it's in. It whimpers and squirms away, except that its wrists are bound together and its body drained of strength. When it twists in place, it manages only to buck itself over, clattering onto its side and *slamming* its arm against the tiles and now it's *crying*, actually crying, great fat gobs of saltwater beading at the corners of its swollen eyes and trickling sideways down its face.

"Kurusu," Akechi says, in an effort to recollect his righteous anger. "I can't believe that you, ah, *deceived* me — or *attempted* to, had I not, ah..."

The thing on the ground is mewling so piteously that Akechi can barely hear himself speak. Even if all was silent, he highly doubts that this creature could comprehend his words. Kurusu's not here at all, not really. Kurusu has vacated the premises, and in his place he left this pathetic, terrified thing, leaking and wriggling and cringing at light and sound.

Staring at the battered thing before him, Akechi can't shake the feeling that he's looking at himself. When he looks down at his own pale hands, he can make out shapes swimming under the surface: whorls of yellow-green, crusted with thick scales of black blood. Akechi's mouth floods with bile.

It's not real, he chants to himself, *it's not real, you fixed it so that no one would ever hurt you again, so that no one would dare*. Still he cannot shake the feeling. He can feel panic swelling in his chest, a rush of blood in his ears, a rising din clanging against the walls of his skull — and worse, beneath it, an inexplicable rush of *fear*: the conviction that if Akechi fails to play his cards right, he'll be next. He saw the faces of Shido's handpicked interrogators on his way in: the slow, priggish satisfaction; the dull savagery in their smug, stupid eyes. Akechi has seen the same look a hundred times before.

On the ground, the Kurusu-thing's milky eyes flicker open. It seems to become briefly aware that it is on the floor and thrashes weakly, eyes rolling, in an effort to right itself. Instead it slams its bleeding elbow against the leg of the table, which sets it off on another fit of mewling. Akechi watches with revulsion.

Akechi could kill this thing. Anyone could. It would be *easy*. But — is there any victory in that? His carefully crafted speech, written and re-written and polished to perfection, would be wasted on this thing. There would be little triumph in defeating such a crawling, weeping worm as this; little to prove in laying low something that's already been so thoroughly degraded. The thing that wears Kurusu's face is already so broken, so defeated by its own rigged game that — in a way, it's like Akechi has already won.

Akechi curses under his breath.

"*Damn* you," he hisses at Kurusu — the *real* Kurusu, who's not here, and can't hear him. Then he

whips out his phone and ducks into the Metaverse, taking this miserable facsimile of Kurusu Akira with him.

###

Kurusu wakes up in the dark. He is handcuffed to a chair. He appears, at a glance, to be alone.

Akechi watches the muscles of Kurusu's bicep flex ineffectually as he attempts to move his arm. He watches Kurusu's eyes widen and then narrow as he scans the space, tracing the dark for any sign of movement. Akechi doesn't move.

After a moment, Akechi speaks.

"You tried to trick me," he says, and allows himself a small swell of satisfaction when Kurusu flinches. "You didn't really trust me at all."

Kurusu's eyes flick toward the sound, searching the shadows. Akechi can see the chair shift in place as Kurusu's legs strain against their bonds.

"Well," Kurusu says, his voice hoarse and scratchy. "You did promise that you'd kill me."

He sounds — disoriented, mostly, but also faintly *amused*, of all things. Akechi's lips draw back from his teeth.

"And *you* said—" he starts to say, and then snarls. "Why did you say that?" he demands. He doesn't feel the need to clarify. Kurusu knows what he means.

Kurusu almost smirks.

"Well, when we found out what you were planning, we had to be ready, whether you meant it or not," he admits, his voice still slightly slurred from whatever cocktail of drugs the SIU is calling a *truth serum* these days. "But I hoped that you didn't. I felt a connection, you know?"

Invisible in the dark, Akechi can feel heat rise under his skin.

"I certainly don't," he says coldly.

From somewhere underfoot, a high, nasal note cuts through the quiet, and then weaves itself into another. The pitches denature as they echo against the walls, producing an unnervingly discordant hum.

"What is that?" Kurusu asks, suddenly wary. Akechi huffs out a breath.

"Alarm," he tells him tersely. "The casino's on high alert."

"Sae's casino?"

"Do you know another?"

Kurusu squints into the shadows, searching for some sign of Akechi.

"You took me here?" he says, his eyes focusing and unfocusing as he becomes gradually more awake. "...from the interrogation room," he realizes aloud.

"Yes," Akechi says curtly.

Kurusu takes that in.

“You saved me?” he asks after a moment, sounding faintly surprised. Akechi grimaces.

“No,” he says emphatically, and means it. “I just needed more time. It — wasn’t right,” and in his mind’s eye he can see Akira drugged out of his mind, head lolling and eyes rolling, drooling and vacant.

Kurusu takes that in too.

“Are you going to kill me?” he asks solemnly.

“Do you think that I won’t?” Akechi spits. Kurusu thinks it over.

“No,” he says eventually. “I know you could.”

From below, wailing alarms are joined by pounding feet.

“Where’s the fire?” Kurusu asks amiably. Akechi knows that Kurusu can’t see him — it’s by design, for heaven’s sake — but he glares at him anyway.

“They’re looking for me,” he says irritably. Kurusu looks surprised.

“What? Why? Who’s they?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Akechi snaps. “My employer’s men. *I* showed them the way in, you know,” he says, inexplicably defensive.

“Sure.”

“But now I’m — unaccounted for,” Akechi says, in the same flat, impatient tone. “For now.”

“Snuck out, huh?” Akechi can see Kurusu eyeing his hiding place, looking infuriatingly hopeful. “Brother, I been there.”

“Will you be serious?” Akechi demands.

“Would it help?”

Akechi doesn’t answer.

A silence which, in other circumstances, might have been companionable stretches between them. Then Joker clears his throat.

“I figure you’re still thinking all this over,” he says amiably. “And, might I add, no hurry. But I might go ahead and talk out loud about what *I* think, just to give you — another perspective.”

He pauses, as though waiting for Akechi to either consent or tongue-lash him into silence. Akechi does neither. He’s thinking.

“The way I figure,” Kurusu begins, and pauses again before carrying on. “The people you work for... They don’t seem like the forgiving type.”

“They are not,” Akechi agrees tersely

“Sort of seem like the type that would want to — what’s the expression? *Nip the problem in the*

bud? Can that be right?” he adds, under his breath.

Akechi snorts.

“That’s not inaccurate,” he confirms. Kurusu nods, recollecting his assurance.

“I’m no expert,” he drawls. “But to *my* inexperienced eye, it seems like the safest thing would be to stay away from the whole operation, and maybe even, ah — form some new tactical alliances. Just for practical, you know, security reasons.”

“Do you ever stop joking?” Akechi snaps. “Are you physically incapable of saying what you mean?”

Joker’s mouth twists into a pout.

“I always say what I mean,” he says sullenly. “What, you want me to tell you I’m scared? Of course I’m scared. But I’m — sobering up, and unlike those fucking cops, you don’t have a stupid smile in your voice, like you’re—” He huffs air out his nose, and then shrugs. “I don’t know,” he says defensively. “I’m — on the up and up, you know?”

Akechi rolls his eyes.

“I could still kill you,” he says, as though trying the concept on for size. “I could invent any excuse for the delay, so long as I returned with your head. I could resume my plans as intended.”

“Sure,” Kurusu says agreeably. “But... do you want to?”

Akechi growls at him.

“I’m not fucking with you,” Kurusu clarifies hastily. “I just mean, are you doing what you want, or are you just doing — what you used to want, or thought that you’d want, or promised yourself that you’d want, when the time came? In my experience,” he adds, closing his eyes and affecting a sage expression, “from moment to moment, it is typically best to do what you want.”

Akechi glares at him, but he can’t suppress the smile that’s crept onto his face, unbidden. In company with his narrowed brows, Akechi suspects that it makes him look somewhat deranged. Fortunately for everyone involved, he’s still shrouded by darkness.

“You would allege,” he drawls, “that the primary driver of your day-to-day decision-making is — reflexive, unthinking desire?”

“Is it so surprising?” Kurusu asks, batting his eyelashes. Akechi actually snorts.

“*No*,” he says emphatically, startling even himself. “It is not.” He closes his eyes, huffs air through his nose. “But — no matter what might be *prudent*, Kurusu-kun, it’s far too late for me to consider — alternative trajectories. After all that’s happened, how could I—”

“You haven’t done anything yet,” Kurusu says quickly; and when Akechi looks to him with dread in his eyes, he corrects himself even more hastily. “—*to me*. Or to the team as a whole, since we assembled, at least. And—” He hesitates. “Ugh,” he mutters, “there’s no way you won’t take this the worst possible way but I am *begging* you to know that I respect you to hell and back—”

“Spit it out,” Akechi snaps. Kurusu nods.

“We know you’ve done things you’re not proud of,” he says quietly, in what may be the *literal*

understatement of the century. “But... We all have. We know what it’s like, being used as a means to an end by some shitty adult.”

Akechi cringes. His voice pained, he observes: “I believe my circumstances to be a bit more—”

“—more complicated,” Kurusu agrees instantly, “oh my god, of course, yeah, I am *not* saying you shouldn’t be freaked out because yeah, *yikes*, but — right now, at least,” he says, slowing his pace and softening his tone, “the whole team *has* to agree that we could use all the help we can get. *Especially* the help of someone who knows the face of our enemy. Besides,” he says daringly. “I have a hunch that we may have a common enemy.”

Akechi bares his teeth.

“I’m not sure that *you* could rightly consider him an enemy,” he says curtly, with contempt. “Considering the fact that you don’t even know your enemy’s *name*. All these months of fighting, and all you’ve done is play into his hand.”

“So it’s a he,” Kurusu says cunningly, undeterred. Akechi sighs.

“Very good,” he sneers. “You’ve narrowed it down to *half of the population*. In ten years time, you may have learned the color of your enemy’s eyes. Or, as is far more likely, you’ll be dead by then.”

“Hey,” Kurusu protests, “I think we’ll have his blood type by then, at *least*. Ehh?”

Akechi snickers to himself. In the ensuing quiet, Kurusu speaks again.

“Akechi-kun,” he says softly. “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again. *It doesn’t have to be like this*. The Phantom Thieves have never denied someone a second chance. And — if you don’t trust them,” he says pleadingly, “then trust *me*. They could all agree to kill you, and I’d still smuggle you to safety. I’ll go to bat for you, Akechi. You just have to trust me.”

Akechi snorts, equal parts amusement and self-contempt. His father was right: Akechi really *is* pathetic. Even with Kurusu bound and drugged and Akechi standing across the room, strong and lithe and armed to the teeth, *still* Kurusu has the upper hand. *Damn* him.

“Akechi-kun,” Kurusu says again. “Please. Just give me a name, and you’ll have done more for the team than I ever did. What better road to redemption is there than that? *Please*, Akechi,” he begs openly. “I’ll protect you. I swear.”

Akechi almost laughs. Kurusu can’t protect him. No one can. Not from Shido, who treats the police like his own kennel of loyal hounds; who dances through the legal system, leaving a trail of bloody carnage in his wake, and who always, *always* twists away unscathed. Still. If there’s anyone who could spar with Shido and come out on top, it’s the universe’s golden boy, Kurusu Akira, who invited his own *murderer* into the depths of his unconscious mind and walked away stronger than before.

“His name,” Akechi says — barely audible, an echo of a whisper of a breath — “is Masayoshi Shido.”

He waits for Kurusu to cut in, but Kurusu only listens. Akechi sucks air through his teeth and continues.

“He’s the mastermind behind the mental shutdown cases,” he says quietly. “And he’s my father.”

This time, Kurusu’s mouth twists.

“Parents, huh?” he says — genuine sympathy swathed in layers of ironic detachment. “We’ll take him down,” he adds, with newfound sincerity. “I swear it, Akechi-kun. Whatever it takes.”

“If you say so,” Akechi sighs, and steps into the light. When he hefts his blade, Kuruusu doesn’t flinch. His lashes don’t even flicker when Akechi drives his sword, point-down, toward Kuruusu’s chest, neatly cleaving through the ropes that bind him.

“Don’t get the wrong idea,” Akechi adds. “I’m *not* joining your little team. I’m only — leaving Shido’s. Or rethinking my strategy, at the least. *For now.*”

“And who could ask for more?” Kuruusu says expansively. “Don’t worry, Akechi-kun. I’ll be out of your hair as soon as I can stand up without barfing.”

“And won’t that be nice for you,” Akechi growls, slipping a hand under Kuruusu’s shoulders to keep the other boy from toppling over.

“No,” Kuruusu denies flatly. He sounds sad, and rather small. “It really won’t.”

Akechi grits his teeth, but he doesn’t pull away. He can feel the weight of Kuruusu’s body against his palm, warm and lean and surprisingly light and infuriatingly, *delusionally* trusting.

“You really shouldn’t trust me,” Akechi mutters. He can feel the heat of Kuruusu’s skin even through his gloves.

“Yeah, you keep saying that,” Kuruusu says, swaying on his feet. “I do, though. And look how far it’s got me!”

Akechi doesn’t dignify that with a response. Instead he huffs irritably and guides his rival forward, out of the shadows and into the light.

Chapter End Notes

aahhhhh i REALLY hope that this felt in-character and not like i was just taking an easy out just to keep my boys together! my honest belief is that on the day he "killed" akira, akechi was strung together with spiderwebs and chewing gum and that it would not have taken much to shake him from his course of action -- all we needed was a few minor shifts in circumstance (slightly more direct communication, slightly greater mutual understanding, etc etc) to force him to confront some of the inconsistencies in "his justice" & to push him into changing tracks. but let me know if you think it worked or didn't! i'm open to being wrong heh

just one more chapter after this one, and it'll probably be more of an epilogue than a formal update -- just a nice shiny ribbon to wrap up this lil series!

Afterward

Chapter Summary

Akechi changes course.

Chapter Notes

surprise! the fandom's grimmest holiday did so much psychic damage that i found myself compelled to (finally) put a ribbon on this series. it's a 2/2 gift from me to.... well, me, mostly, but i hope u like it too!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Okay,” Kurusu says calmly. “I’m gonna tell you everything, but you have to *promise* not to freak out.”

He’s speaking to his cell phone, and to the very impatient Phantom Thieves listening on the other end. By now, somehow, he and Akechi have made their way back to Leblanc. Kurusu made his excuses to his (visibly distraught) guardian while Akechi loitered in the doorway, warily scanning the street, until Sojiro sighed and sent them both to bed. (“You can explain properly once you’ve got some rest,” he told them gruffly.)

Akechi could certainly use some rest.

They trekked (on foot!) the entire way from the courthouse to Yongen before leaving the Metaverse. Of course, Shido's goons were waiting to ambush them in both realities. But at least in the Metaverse, Joker and Crow are relatively well-equipped to fend off a private army.

Even in the Metaverse, neither felt particularly up for the trek. Metaverse magic can’t heal wounds left by reality, so Kurusu wasn’t just swaying from the drugs still in his system. He was also badly bruised, and bloodied, and probably concussed. Akechi had no such excuse. *Physically*, he was fine. But Akechi just jumped off a track that he spent almost half his life building and, in the process, flung himself into the fathomless depths of *wholly* uncharted territory, so Akechi is— He’s — He’s doing his best, okay?

As though reading his mind, Kurusu darts a worried glance toward him. Akechi doesn’t look back. He sits stiff as a board on Kurusu’s narrow bench, staring fixedly at the Featherman figure on the bookshelf across the way. He wouldn’t have figured Kurusu for a Featherman fan but, to be fair, he *also* hadn’t anticipated that Kurusu would ask his murderer to run away with him, so. Akechi is taking this night one revelation at a time.

“So?” Kurusu asks his phone, sounding exhausted. “Do you promise?”

Presumably his teammates promise, because Kurusu heaves a sigh.

“Cool. I’m not feeling so hot, so I’m gonna keep this short. I guess the short version is... the plan

didn't shake out? Because Akechi didn't kill me, he, um. Saved me."

Akechi doesn't need to hear this. He doesn't even *want* to hear this. He's got more important matters to tend to. Matters like: How will Shido go about tarnishing his reputation, now that he's shown his true colors? And, how is he supposed to assemble a new identity without leveraging Shido's connections? And, what if Shido planted a tracker on his phone?

That last one seems comparatively manageable. Akechi pulls his phone out of his pocket and crushes it under his heel. Just to be safe, he pads downstairs and douses the shards in the sink.

When he looks up, he's surprised to find Kurusu waiting in the doorway, nodding at something that someone on the phone must be saying. Perhaps he's concerned about Akechi trying to drown himself in the mop bucket. He needn't worry. Akechi would never allow himself to die through undignified, unhygienic means.

He follows Kurusu upstairs.

Kurusu's dingy attic is bitterly cold and leaves little splinters under Akechi's skin whenever he brushes against the walls, and it is nonetheless a thousand times more hospitable than Akechi's abandoned apartment. Though it wouldn't particularly matter if it wasn't. It's not as though Akechi has any alternative. Where else would he go? Who else would have him? Only a self-destructive wretch like Kurusu would ever invite him to stay. Only a hopeless, helpless hero with a martyr complex the size of a city block would keep something like Akechi around by *choice*

What will Akechi do now? He doesn't know. Where will he stay? He doesn't know. Kurusu wants to help him take down Shido, and he's— That sounds, fine. It sounds fine. It may be the *only* thing that sounds fine. But what does Kurusu expect him to do from here? Just... hide here, in this attic, until Shido's dead in the ground? How is Akechi supposed to pick up the pieces of his shattered life? He didn't even like his life when it was still intact.

A metallic *clunk* draws his ear: Kurusu's phone, slipping from his hand and onto the floor. The phone call must have ended.

Akechi glances up.

Kurusu looks... Well, he looks like shit, obviously. But that's mostly the dried blood and the yellow-green bruises blooming under his skin and the huge purple hollows ringing his eyes. But he also looks strangely diminished. Not just battered and wrung out, but *smaller*, somehow, like his skin is contracting around him.

"Are you alright," Akechi says mechanically.

Kurusu jerks upright. "Huh? Oh. Sorry. I'm fine."

Akechi's eyes narrow. He may not be of particularly sound mind, but he still knows when he's being lied to. Ordinarily, he might make some pithy comment about how no one in history who claimed to be fine has ever actually been fine, or something to that effect. But Akechi is so, so tired. The best he can manage is, "Don't *lie*," in a pitiful sort of mumble.

Kurusu looks startled, and then inexplicably pleased. "Sorry. I'm— I mean, I'm not amazing, but... Honestly, all things considered, this was pretty much the best case scenario."

Mostly on autopilot, Akechi scowls at him.

"You should never have executed a plan whose most optimal outcome involved you being

incarcerated and interrogated,” he accuses. To his surprise, he’s met with a strangled laugh.

“Haha!” Kurusu yelps, before clapping a hand over his mouth. “Sorry. Uh. I think I actually agree?”

Akechi glares and straightens up, unfolding from the bench and stomping forward to hold a finger in front of Kurusu’s face.

“Don’t move your head,” he commands. “Track it with your eyes.”

Kurusu’s eyes follow his finger easily enough. Akechi swipes the fallen cell phone from the ground and flicks on the flashlight, pointing it at Kurusu’s face and watching closely. At least Kurusu’s pupils seem to be contracting correctly.

“Do you feel nauseous?” he asks sharply. “Dizzy?”

“Uhh.” Kurusu snorts. “I mean, yes? But I think it’s the drugs.”

Heat flares in Akechi’s gut; climbs his windpipe and claws at his throat.

“They shouldn’t have *drugged* you,” he snarls, lips peeling back from his teeth. “It’s not—”

No. Akechi already knows that the justice system is broken. That isn’t news. He shouldn’t let it affect him like this. He takes a breath, lets it out.

“I apologize,” he says calmly. “However, to be safe, we shouldn’t let you fall asleep until the dizziness subsides. If you’re concussed, losing consciousness could be deadly.”

When he looks down, Kurusu is gazing up at him, not smirking or smiling but just *staring*, eyes shining with what looks deceptively like devotion. Akechi flinches back and turns coldly away before stomping back to his bench.

He shouldn’t *be* here. He was never supposed to be here. Akechi was on one path, and Kurusu was on another. They were never meant to *join forces*. How did he get here? Where did he go wrong?

...It was that damned Palace. Kurusu’s, not Sae’s. Akechi was never supposed to see his rival so vulnerable; he was never meant to delve into the recesses of Kurusu’s unconscious mind. It was violating, intrusive, *wrong*. He was never supposed to see how weak Kurusu really was.

“Kurusu,” he says, on impulse.

Kurusu cocks his head. “Akechi?”

“Why did you do that?” Akechi’s tone is meticulously neutral, giving nothing away. “Invite me to your Palace, and only me?”

“Haven’t I already answered that?” Kurusu heaves a sigh, stretching out on his mattress. “I couldn’t let them see that. My friends... They had no idea what I was really like. It would’ve hurt them, and destabilized us, when I needed us to be rock solid.”

“It’s not enough,” Akechi says. He knows he sounds petulant, but it *isn’t*. If Kurusu was simply worried about the emotional stability of the team, he could have handpicked a few of his most discreet, restrained allies: Okumura, for instance, or Nijjima, whose convictions would only grow stronger for having been trusted with such a secret. “Is that the only reason?”

Immediately, he regrets it. What is he asking for, anyway? What is he hoping to hear? *No, Akechi-*

kun, not really. It was all an elaborate ruse, just a convenient excuse to get closer to you. He opens his mouth to say *never mind*, but Kurusu is already answering.

“No,” Kurusu sighs, “not really. I guess it was mostly an excuse to get closer to you.”

Akechi chokes on his next breath and has to spend a few minutes bent over his lap, hacking up phlegm. When he sits up, he’s white-faced from more than just oxygen deprivation.

Kurusu blinks at him.

“Why are you acting so surprised?” he asks, nonplussed. “Didn’t I already confess?”

Akechi’s eyes bulge. “In what fashion did you *confess*?”

“You know,” Kurusu says vaguely, shrugging one shoulder. “Environmentally? Or, like, architecturally. Contextually?”

Akechi is still gasping. “You— *Architecturally*?”

“I mean. Yeah?” Kurusu’s mouth twitches, ticks up in an embarrassed smile. “You were the center of my whole Palace? I’m pretty sure you were my Treasure? My Shadow was literally stalking you full-time like it was his job?”

Akechi gapes at him, speechless.

“Are you seriously telling me you didn’t catch that?” Kurusu’s grin turns mocking. “Aren’t you supposed to be a detective?”

Akechi’s no less boggled than he was a moment ago, but the blow to his ego is finally enough to jumpstart his frontal lobe.

“That’s hardly relevant,” he snaps. “I — There are a dozen reasons why you might have fixated on me. Namely, your anticipation of your *imminent demise* by *my hand*. Does that ring any bells? Or had you forgotten that I intended to *murder* you?”

“Aw, Akechi,” Kurusu says, hand-over-heart.

Akechi shoots him a disoriented glare. “What *now*?”

“You used the past tense,” Kurusu tells him, looking like Akechi just surprised him with a home-cooked meal. “You never did that before. You’re really not planning to kill me anymore, are you?”

“*You assumed that was still on the table*?” Akechi demands, wild-eyed. “You offered me sanctuary under the premise that I might thank you with a *knife in your back*?”

“No, I was pretty sure you’d use a gun,” Kurusu says calmly. “You don’t strike me as a knife guy. And *definitely* not in the back. You’d look me in the—”

“What the hell is *wrong* with you?” Akechi snarls. “Didn’t we already fix this?”

“Sorry, sorry,” Kurusu snickers. “I’m probably 60% messing with you.”

“Which leaves 40% of you that just invited his *murderer* to *run away with him*,” Akechi hisses, lips peeling back from his teeth. Kurusu meets his snarl with a winning smile.

“Hey, that’s less than half!”

“Wonderful,” Akechi grits out. “You must be very proud.”

Kurusu’s grin widens. “You know, I really am.”

The leader of the Phantom Thieves lays back and stretches, wincing where his mattress presses on a bruise.

“Aaanyway,” he yawns, “you don’t have to worry. It’s not like I *want* to die. I just... I don’t know. I couldn’t just leave you there.”

“You *assuredly* could.”

“Yeah, I guess I could,” Kurusu agrees, unbothered. “But I’m not sure I could’ve lived with that, after. Because of the whole, uh, ‘obsessed with you’ thing.”

Akechi’s world has officially spun out of orbit. He shoots Kurusu a venomous glare, feeling abruptly, irrevocably certain that he’s misinterpreting things. Of course Kurusu doesn’t— Kurusu is just talking about an ordinary, people-pleaser’s obsession; an obsession with healing things that are broken. Kurusu doesn’t *like* Akechi, he just wants to fix him.

“I can assure you that I don’t require anyone’s *charity*,” he spits. “And I’m *certainly* not so broken as to—”

“Sorry,” Kurusu cuts in. “I think you got the wrong idea. I don’t want to fix you or anything. I *guess* I don’t hate the idea of you needing me,” he admits, “but I’m working on that. No, I just, um, like you. Uh.” For the first time since that day at the Palace, Akechi can see Kurusu’s ears reddening. “...Romantically.”

Akechi.exe has stopped working. Akechi has stopped fucking *breathing*. It’s just— It’s too much too fast, *much* too much too fast. This morning he was preparing to take Kurusu’s life. It’s been months since he indulged any childish fantasies about— Any absurd, naive delusions about—

Because someone like Kurusu could never like someone like Akechi. Kurusu is the universe’s favorite son, a perfect, golden hero chosen for a perfect, golden life, and Akechi is just — something in his way. A temporary obstruction, to slow Kurusu’s climb and make his inevitable triumph shine all the brighter. Kurusu is warmth, he’s charm, he’s dizzying, *breathhtaking* beauty; Kurusu is everything good and Akechi is—

“Hey,” Kurusu says, in a voice that makes clear that it’s not the first time he’s said it. “Hey, Akechi. *Akechi*.”

Akechi’s eyelids flick open. It’s still dark. At some point, he must have covered his eyes with his hands. He closes his lids and presses down with both palms, hard enough to spatter the dark behind his eyes with blooms of white and red.

Distantly, he becomes aware of a hand on his shoulder, its touch so featherlight he’s not entirely sure that it’s really there at all, or if it’s only another pathetic delusion.

“I’m sorry,” Kurusu is murmuring, from a long way away. “I shouldn’t have said anything, I basically just kidnapped you, of course this would freak you out. I’m sorry, Akechi, I wouldn’t — *fuck* — I’d rather die than freak you out, I *swear* I’m not trying to make things weird. If you want to stay somewhere else, we can—”

Ah. Kurusu is worried about *him*. Which means Akechi is being a burden again.

“No,” he manages to mutter, terse but clear.

“...No?”

“No,” he says again, and removes his hands from his eyes. His palms feel strangely wet. “Ah... Give me a moment.”

“Of course,” Kurusu says at once, flitting to his feet, but Akechi isn’t ready for the space between them to expand again, not after having Kurusu so close. Without slowing to think, he catches Kurusu by the wrist and pulls him back onto the bench.

“Oh,” Kurusu mumbles, startled. “Uh. I’ll just... be here, then.”

“Yes.” Simple sentences, that’s the ticket. One syllable at a time. Even Akechi couldn’t fuck up one simple syllable.

Akechi pulls in a breath. He lets it out. For good measure, he takes a few more.

“You... like me,” he says flatly.

“...Yeah.”

“Romantically.”

“Uh.” Kurusu stifles a snort. “Yeah.”

Akechi tries that on for size, to see if it fits. It doesn’t. It doesn’t make any sense. It’s not just irrational, it’s a physical impossibility.

“You’re lying?” he tries. “To... distract me from the collapse of my life’s work?”

This time Kurusu outright snickers. “Uh. *No.*”

“Or you’re — mirroring?” Akechi guesses. “That practice of yours, where you, ah, reflect whatever the viewer desires, in order to—”

“No,” Kurusu disagrees again. “I never did that with you. I didn’t think you’d let me.”

“I wouldn’t.”

A quiet chuckle. “Yeah, that’s what I figured.”

Akechi chances a glance at Kurusu for just long enough to see hope sparking in those fathomless, void-dark eyes before he has to tear his gaze away.

“This is all wrong,” he mutters into his palms. “This is completely... I tried to kill you, do you remember that? From, oh, I don’t know, perhaps *two hours ago*?”

“I do remember that,” Kurusu confirms. “I did not forget in the two minutes since the last time you asked.”

“It’s... masochism?” Akechi hazards. “You’re trying to punish yourself? Like in your Palace?”

Kurusu takes a second to consider it. Akechi waits patiently and tries to remember how to breathe.

“I really don’t think so,” Kurusu decides at last. “I liked you before I knew you were gonna kill me.”

And I definitely didn't like knowing that you wanted to kill me.”

“I didn't want to kill you,” Akechi says automatically, and then has to close his eyes against the radiance of Kurusu's smile. But he can't close his ears to the warmth in Kurusu's voice.

“I know,” Kurusu says, excruciatingly fond. “Even when I thought you were going to, I still couldn't think that you *wanted* to. I just meant—”

“I know.” Akechi can't hear that right now. He can't process *any* of this. He prepared for this night for so long and it's all gone wrong, it's all happening *wrong*, so why isn't he more upset?

He thinks about Kurusu, bloodied, battered, whimpering. He thinks about Joker, smirking, eyes glittering with impossible knowledge. He thinks about Akira, exhausted but honest, inviting Akechi into his heart even knowing how much it would hurt. Akira, shaking his hand. Taking his hand. Taking him out. Following him to the jazz club, leaning across the table to whisper in his ear. Following him into Mementos; fighting back to back. Following him home. Falling asleep on his couch. The way his hair falls over his face when he sleeps, and his mouth hangs slightly open. Heartbreakingly vulnerable. Painfully soft.

“I don't know if I can—” Akechi hesitates. No. This is too much too fast. “I can't accept your feelings,” he mumbles. “I— Nothing is going the way I expected; there's so much I haven't—”

He looks up. It's a mistake. Kurusu's expression is a blow to the gut, all taut, pained resignation.

“*No*—” Akechi says, reflexive, and before he can stop himself, he catches Akira's hand. “You — misunderstand. I'm asking you to. Say it again.”

He can see Kurusu's face in the corner of his eye: wondering, disbelieving. “I'll say it as many times as you—”

“*No*,” Akechi gasps, panicked this time, “not — *now*, I meant — Maybe in a month, if I'm not dead. I just... Everything I've worked for, I'm — I don't know how I'm supposed to—”

“Can I touch you?” Akira asks abruptly, with startling urgency. “Not in a weird way. Sorry. I just mean— Can I—”

“Yes,” Akechi whispers, helpless to say otherwise.

And then Kurusu's arms are closing around him, hands clutching the back of his shirt, fingers pressing bruises into his ribs, so solid and warm and *real* that Akechi can almost believe that this is really happening: that he's here, with Kurusu, safe; that he didn't ruin Kurusu the way he ruins everything else.

“Sorry,” Kurusu breathes into his ear, so close that Akechi can feel his breath ghost over his neck. “I shouldn't have said anything, I just *really* thought you already knew. I can wait. Forever, if you like. I didn't bring you here because I wanted anything. I just. Wanted you to be okay.”

Akechi knows that he should say something. *Don't apologize, you self-sacrificing simpleton; I'm the one who ought to apologize. You aren't scaring me. You aren't even upsetting me. I don't know if I'm capable of— It's been years since there was anything good inside me at all, but if I could feel something simple and good, something that wasn't already irreparably poisoned, it would be for—*

But it's too much, too fast, too vulnerable. Akechi spent the past two months preparing to lose Kurusu. He spent the past two months preparing to wipe Kurusu out of existence with his own two hands, and this is, this is the *exact opposite* of that, so how could he *possibly* keep up? Instead he

wraps his arms around Kurusu's shoulders and squeezes. Then he remembers that Kurusu is heavily, *brutally* bruised and loosens his grip, turning to press his forehead into the crook of Kurusu's neck.

Tomorrow, Akechi will confront Kurusu's comrades. Tomorrow he'll have to tell the truth about Shido; about his past, and what he really is. Tomorrow Akechi will have to choose a new fate, and chart a new path, but here and now, tonight, there's nothing that anyone needs from him, and no one that he's disappointing.

Akechi isn't supposed to be here, but he *is*. Kurusu isn't supposed to be alive but he's warm in Akechi's arms, and vital, every breath an impossible miracle. Akechi is beyond redemption; anyone who sees his true self should flinch away in revulsion, but Kurusu saw him and he didn't look away.

"I'm glad you're not dead," Akechi says quietly, instead of... everything else.

Kurusu sputters a breathless laugh.

"Yeah," he agrees. "Me too."

Chapter End Notes

sorry we didn't get some kind of triumphant culmination of mutual feelings! the feelings are decidedly mutual, i just feel that akechi would find this change in course overwhelming to the point of paralysis; and i think finding out (on the same night!!!) that his favorite human / crush / greatest humiliation / murder victim considers him to be worthy of love would be the last straw on the poor kid's crumbling psyche. end of day i'll always defer to what feels true to the character! hope it was satisfying regardless :)

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