

## you've got me seeing through different eyes

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## you've got me seeing through different eyes

by [futuresoon](#)

### Summary

"I wonder," Akechi says, conversationally, "if I'm even capable of saying no to you, now."

### Notes

Title from "As Long As You're Mine" from Wicked.

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

On February 3rd, Akira spends the entire day in the attic, reading the group chat talk about what a great day they're all having. He doesn't feel very much. Sojiro brings him up some curry and offers to listen to any problems he might have, implying, with a wink, that they might be romantic in nature; Akira thanks him and eats most of the curry and doesn't take him up on it. He just keeps reading the chat. He doesn't say anything in it himself.

That night, though. Akechi calls him. Akira picks up almost immediately, but even here, he can't think of anything to say.

"Having a good day?" Akechi asks, after a bit of silence.

"I," Akira says, and, "Yeah." And that's all he can manage.

"I suppose it'll be nothing but good days, from now on," Akechi says. There aren't any particular emotions in his voice.

“I suppose,” Akira echoes.

The silence stretches.

“I want to see you,” Akira blurts out.

Akechi laughs, a little. “Yes,” he says, his voice a bit distant. “That’s rather the point of this, isn’t it.”

“Morgana’s out,” Akira says. Out where, he isn’t sure; out doing something Morgana’s always wanted to do, probably. “You could come over. If you wanted.”

“You made it pretty clear that it doesn’t matter what I want,” Akechi says. He doesn’t sound upset. Just...resigned.

“Don’t put it like that,” Akira says, suddenly defensive. It was the right choice. It *was*.

“How should I put it, then? You were only thinking of my best interests when you put me under Maruki’s control, after I told you I would rather die than let that happen?”

“I didn’t *want* you to die,” Akira says. “I’m not going to apologize for that.”

“And it’s all about you, isn’t it,” Akechi says.

Akira swallows. “Can you just come over?” he asks.

“I wonder,” Akechi says, conversationally, “if I’m even capable of saying no to you, now.”

Akira’s eyes widen. “Of course you can,” he says hastily. “You don’t have to come. Or, or see me again, even, if you don’t want to.” The idea of never seeing Akechi again, after what he’s done, fills him with a sick dread; but the idea that Akechi might not have a choice in the matter is much, much worse.

“It’s funny, really,” Akechi says. He sounds calm, almost detached. “I do want to see you. But I genuinely can’t tell if that’s because I really do want to or because *you* want me to.”

Akira sits down heavily on the couch. He doesn’t know what to say. He doesn’t know what to do.

He thinks, very hard, *I want Akechi to be able to do whatever he wants*. But he doesn’t know if that’s how it works.

“Maybe you should stay where you are, then,” Akira says, and he’s a little impressed he’s keeping his voice steady.

Akechi makes a noncommittal sound. “But if I do that, is it because *that’s* what you want now?” he asks.

Akira’s fingers dig into his jeans. “I don’t know,” he says, a little helplessly.

Akechi sighs. “It’s all very philosophical,” he says. “Which came first, the desire or the mind control?”

*Desire?* Akira almost asks, before he says, “It’s not mind control.”

“It’s *something*,” Akechi says, finally sounding exasperated. “This conversation is going nowhere.”

Akira breathes. Bites his lip. Thinks, horribly, as hard as he can, *I want Akechi to come here. The way I'll be the happiest is if Akechi comes here.*

He doesn't have to put much effort into that.

"I think it's best if I stay here after all," Akechi says. "Goodnight, Joker."

Akira doesn't say, *no, the fact that you can say that now means that if you want to come it really is you that wants it.* It'll all just go in circles. But he feels better now, anyway. "Goodnight," he echoes.

Akechi hangs up.

Akira exhales a long breath, drops his head against the back of the couch. Stares at the ceiling.

Thinks, *it'll be okay. Nothing's controlling him. I'll talk to him later and it'll be fine. I made the right choice. Everything's fine.*

Everything's fine.

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On February 5th, Akechi shows up at Leblanc.

He doesn't text beforehand; he just appears in the evening, while Akira's washing dishes. Akira doesn't even know he's there until Sojiro says, "Hey, kid, come on in," and then nudges Akira, grins, says, "I can handle the rest."

Akechi's still wearing that same coat and scarf he's been wearing since December. Akira wonders if it'd be weird to say it looks good on him.

He nods at Sojiro and takes a seat at the counter. Not the same one he usually does. Is there a reason for that? Is he doing it to prove he can choose his actions? Or is it completely meaningless?

Akira dries his hands. Walks over behind the counter. Stands, for a few seconds, waits for Akechi to say something.

"Have you had dinner yet?" Sojiro asks. "Akira helped out today, if you've never tried his cooking. Still can't hold a candle to mine, but never underestimate the personal touch."

"Just coffee, thank you," Akechi says. He folds his hands on the counter and looks Akira in the eye. "I could use the pick-me-up," he says.

Sojiro waves Akira towards the siphon. "Go on, strut your stuff," he says. "I'll get out of your way." And he exits the café, leaving them alone.

Akira just makes a cup of coffee the way he always does.

Akechi takes the cup and sips at it. He doesn't remark on the taste, or the temperature, or anything, or give any indication at all what he thinks about it.

"How're you feeling?" Akira asks, once the silence stretches so long he can't stand it anymore.

"Fine," Akechi says. "I always feel fine now."

Akira doesn't.

“I’d like to think it’s better than how I usually felt,” Akechi says. He swirls his drink, looks at it. “It’s not as if I ever *enjoyed* being unhappy. But I was unhappy for my own reasons, not anyone else’s. Whatever I felt, it was always mine.”

*You wouldn’t feel anything at all if you were dead*, Akira doesn’t say.

Akechi looks up at Akira. “How do *you* feel, oh savior of us all?” he asks.

Akira swallows. “Fine,” he says.

Akechi gives him a look that reads *yeah, sure*.

“Have you been reading the group chat?” Akira asks suddenly, desperate to bring the conversation to a different topic. “Everyone’s meeting here tomorrow. They’d like to see you.”

“Yes, they certainly were oddly accepting of my presence, this past month,” Akechi says.

Akira feels cold. “That was real,” he says. “Maruki wasn’t affecting them, they really were okay with you.”

Akechi sips his coffee. “Just like I really was there,” he says.

Which--isn’t wrong, but--

Akira can’t let himself go down that path. There’s too many rabbit holes as it is.

“My point is, you should come,” Akira says. “It’s...it’s easier when everyone else is around. You don’t have to think as much.”

He spent today and yesterday with the others, in various combinations; everyone chatting and laughing and sharing fun stories about all the wonderful things they’ve been doing lately. And it was nice, seeing all of them so happy. It would’ve been even nicer if Akechi was there. Perfect, even, maybe.

Akechi studies him. “Do you *want* me to come?” he asks.

“...I want you to be yourself,” Akira says. “If that means you don’t want to be with us, that’s fine.” *Us*. Who is he fooling. Not Akechi, certainly.

Akechi sets his cup down on the counter. “Tell me something, Joker,” he says. “What do *you* think would happen if I decided to leave Tokyo and never see you again?”

“...I don’t know,” Akira says, hesitantly. “I hope you’d be able to.” But he also hopes he won’t try.

“Do you really?” Akechi asks. His eyes are very sharp, all of a sudden. “Is there no part of you at all that wishes I would stay here forever, unquestioning, a happy member of your little group who always wanted whatever you wanted?”

Akira can’t say no, can he.

When Akira doesn’t answer, Akechi gives a soft laugh. “I’m not even sure why I came here tonight,” he says. “To spend time with you? I used to like doing that. But based on what I know of myself, I ought to be mad at you. And yet here I am.”

“If you want to leave--” Akira starts.

Akechi makes a dismissive gesture. “We’ve been over that one. Neither of us can tell if the reason I want anything is because you do, and even if you *say* you want something to be my decision, you can’t guarantee you don’t subconsciously want whatever option benefits you the most. You’re not as selfless as you think you are.”

Akira doesn’t really think he’s selfless at all, these days.

“So.” Akechi stands up, takes out his wallet, drops a few coins on the counter. “Let’s try a little experiment. I’ll leave for a week, and if I come back any earlier, it’s because you want me to. Does that sound good?”

It doesn’t, actually. But Akira’s gone weeks without seeing Akechi before. He can handle it. “Yeah,” he says. “Okay.”

Akechi nods. “All right, then,” he says. “I’ll see you in a week, Joker. Unless I don’t.” And he walks out the door.

Akira braces himself against the bar. He feels...he doesn’t know what he feels.

He feels *fine*, he tells himself. It’s just a week. And then it’ll prove definitively that Akechi doesn’t have to worry about anything, and it’ll be great, and Akechi will--well, it doesn’t matter. Akechi will do whatever he wants.

Two days later, Akira gets a text.

**Akechi:** I do find myself missing you. But that’s not that odd.

**Akira:** Did you miss me before?

**Akechi:** Sometimes. I used to think about you quite a bit. But I also thought about murdering you quite a bit, so perhaps it’s best that I take a less obsessive approach now.

**Akira:** I don’t mind whatever you think about me

Akechi takes a while to respond.

**Akechi:** It’s nice of you to say that. But it’s not really true. Anyway, that’s enough for now.

Two days after that, he gets another one.

**Akechi:** I didn’t actually leave the city. I’m still in my apartment. Grocery deliveries are very efficient.

**Akira:** Are you doing okay?

**Akechi:** A bit bored. Nothing I can’t handle.

The typing bubbles appear, then disappear, then appear again, then disappear for a while longer.

**Akechi:** How are you?

**Akira:** I’m doing well. Everyone’s asking when you’re going to come back

**Akechi:** What did you tell them, anyway?

**Akira:** I said you were on a work trip. Makoto’s worried it’ll impact your entrance exams

**Akechi:** I suspect I could get into any college I wanted. Of course, that was true beforehand, too.

Akira finds himself smiling. It’s a nice, ordinary conversation.

**Akira:** I hope you go to one nearby

Akechi doesn't respond. Akira could kick himself.

Two days after that, on the sixth day, Akechi calls.

"Are you busy?" he asks, as soon as Akira answers the phone. It catches Akira off-guard; he wasn't expecting anything. Hoping, maybe, and also not hoping. But not expecting.

"No," Akira says. "I'm just studying. At Leblanc." School feels easier, now, but studying is still important, he tells himself.

Akechi makes a noncommittal sound. "Would it be all right if I came over?" he asks.

Akira's pulse rises, just a little. "Um," he says. "It hasn't been a week yet."

"Six days, a week, whatever," Akechi says dismissively. "It turns out spending a week in my apartment is extremely boring, actually. And it's not like I'm feeling some overpowering urge to see you. If you said you were busy, I'd stay home."

Akira wants to say no. Akira wants to say that the experiment was for a week, and they shouldn't break it. Akira wants to say that the idea of Akechi deciding to come back early after all scares him.

Akira says, "Okay."

"All right," Akechi says. His voice sounds a little lighter. "I'll see you soon."

"Yeah," Akira says, and hangs up, and sits down on the couch, and stares at the wall.

Akechi arrives a while later.

Sojiro calls up from downstairs, "You've got a visitor!" and Akira manages to get off the couch before he sees Akechi walking up the stairs without any prelude. Akechi waves, and smiles a little.

"Pardon the intrusion," Akechi says. "Don't feel as if I couldn't wait to see you; it's just more efficient to come up here straight away."

That doesn't calm Akira's nerves. "Hello," he says, a little awkwardly. He rubs the back of his neck.

Akechi looks around. "I take it Morgana isn't here?" he asks.

"Morgana's out a lot," Akira says. Which he does feel good about, probably--it's good that Morgana can go wherever he wants now. It never seemed fair that he was mostly limited by Akira. So it's good that Morgana's free, and it's good that Morgana isn't here, now, specifically.

Akechi nods. "That's good to hear," he says. "It's a sensitive conversation, I wouldn't want him to overhear it."

"Right," Akira says. That's not actually why he thought it was good that Morgana wasn't here. But it's a better reason. A reason that doesn't make him feel bad for thinking about it.

"So," Akechi says. "I think the experiment was a success, more or less."

"More or less?" Akira asks, though of course he knows why.

"I suppose it could be argued that six days is, technically, less than a week," Akechi says drily.

“But I don’t feel any different from how I did at the start. That’s what’s important, really.”

“I guess so,” Akira says.

“I wouldn’t say I feel completely confident about it, just yet,” Akechi says, and Akira suddenly feels profoundly relieved, even though that’s not really the result he was hoping for. Or was it?

“But it weighs on my mind less.”

That’s good. Akira tells himself that’s good.

Akira suddenly realizes he doesn’t know why Akechi is here, exactly. This could’ve been a phone call. Even texts. Akechi doesn’t have a real reason to say it in person.

“Well then.” Akechi pauses. “I suppose that’s it.”

“Are you hungry?” Akira blurts out, because if there’s no reason for Akechi to be here, then he’s just going to leave, and--Akira doesn’t want that.

Akechi raises his eyebrows. “Perhaps a little,” he says. “Are you offering?”

“Yeah, just--let me ask Sojiro,” Akira says, and doesn’t quite rush downstairs. Sojiro looks up at him when he arrives.

“Can I use the kitchen?” Akira asks.

Sojiro gives a slow grin. “Go ahead,” he says.

Akira doesn’t think about it, just says, “Thanks,” and calls back up, “Come on down,” and heads into the kitchen to wash his hands.

Akechi takes a seat at a booth. Most of the ingredients are already chopped, and the spices are already mixed into various blends; Akira doesn’t experiment, just does it almost on automatic. Mixes it all together, simmers, waits. Glances over at the booth. Akechi smiles at him and gives a little wave. Akira swallows.

When it’s done, he brings over two plates, sits across from him. Akechi takes a bite, and smiles again, says, “This is delicious. You must have practiced quite a bit.”

Normally Akira’s happy when his friends compliment his cooking; normally he’s happy when Akechi compliments him. He doesn’t feel happy right now, though. Just uneasy, nervous, standing at the edge of a cliff and waiting for it to crumble underneath him. “Yeah,” he says. “I’m glad you like it.”

While Akechi eats, he forces himself to have some too. It doesn’t really taste like anything to him.

“I’ve been reading the group chat,” Akechi says, eventually. “I really should participate in it more. They’re not that bad, really.” He makes a slight face. “Well, I’m not especially fond of Sakamoto. But the others are nice.”

Akira grasps onto that little bit of dissatisfaction--surely if this was a perfect world where Akechi was exactly what he wanted him to be, he’d like *all* of Akira’s friends, wouldn’t he? So this is a good sign. Ending the experiment early wasn’t great, but--but this is still a good sign.

“We’re all going to the movies tomorrow,” Akira says, impulsively. “You should come too. If you want.”

“Mm. Perhaps. I’ve got some work to catch up on.” Which is another good sign. See, it’s not so bad. Akira’s worried over nothing.

They finish their meal, or at least Akechi finishes his and Akira manages to eat most of his, and then there’s no other legitimate excuse for Akechi to stay, so he says goodbye, waves, leaves. Akira goes back to the attic and slumps on the couch and thinks.

That went well. Better than he thought. Akechi seemed happy, but not *too* happy; it was like one of their conversations before the arrest, polite but friendly, pleasant. Granted, it wasn’t really like their January conversations, where Akechi’s words and smile sharpened and every admission of contentment felt like a victory, but that’s fine. That’ll come back when Akechi eases into things more.

Akira doesn’t think about how the polite friendliness was always a lie, and the real Akechi wasn’t like that at all.

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The next morning, Akira gets a text.

**Akechi:** Are you doing anything tonight? I’d like to see you.

Finally, butterflies for normal reasons.

**Akira:** No I’m free. Is there somewhere you wanna go?

**Akechi:** Not in particular. Leblanc will do.

**Akira:** Okay then come by whenever

**Akechi:** Looking forward to it. :)

Akira drops the phone on his bed and puts a hand over his face, trying to somehow stop the burning through sheer force of will.

Morgana looks up from the couch and says, sleepily, “What’s up?”

“Nothing, it’s fine,” Akira says from behind his hand. Morgana probably doesn’t believe him, but whatever.

He could try to weigh the odds of whether or not this is a good thing--a smiley is out of character, but really how does he know what Akechi’s like when he’s genuinely in a good mood, it’s not like he’s seen it a lot--but that’s exhausting and painful and this *feels* good, anyway. And yesterday proved things are basically fine, he’s pretty sure.

He goes through school almost on autopilot, barely paying attention to whatever the teachers are saying, though it’s not like tests are very important these days anyway. The others ask him why he’s so distracted, and he says it’s a secret; they pester him about it more, but give up when he says he’ll probably tell them eventually. He just doesn’t want everyone to know yet. There might not even *be* anything yet. It’s entirely possible he’s overreacting and Akechi’s just in a good mood for some reason.

...don’t think about it.

The afternoon comes and passes and Akira paces in the attic, unsure if he should wait downstairs. Eventually, he does go down--just in time to hear the bell jingle and see the door open, Akechi walking inside.



“Good evening, Boss,” he says pleasantly, nodding to Sojiro. He’s not wearing the scarf today, for some reason.

“Evening,” Sojiro says, smiling as he looks up from the crossword behind the counter. No customers tonight. “You’ve been coming by a lot lately, huh?”

Akechi smiles. “I’m just drawn here, I suppose,” he says.

He waves at Akira, heads straight for the stairs. Akira can hear Sojiro chuckle as they both walk into the attic.

Akechi looks around the unkempt, barely-cleaned space. “You know, I find myself growing more attached to this room,” he says. “It’s got a certain lived-in aesthetic.”

“Yeah, I like it here too,” Akira says, grateful for the conversation opener; he would’ve just stood around awkwardly otherwise. “It kinda feels more like home than my parents’ house does, to be honest.” And he probably won’t have to go back there--don’t think about it.

Akechi smiles, and it’s much less polite than the one he gave Sojiro. “Of course, right now its greatest charm is that you’re in it,” he says.

Akira tries to imagine himself saying something smooth and clever and attractive. But he can’t think of anything, so he just gives a grin that he hopes isn’t too awkward and rubs the back of his neck.

“Well, that’s enough pretense, don’t you think?” Akechi says, and walks right up to him, grabs his face with both hands, kisses him.

It’s--it’s a lot more enthusiastic than Akira was expecting, right off the bat, but he’s not going to complain. He hastily takes his glasses off, puts them in his pocket. Closes his eyes, wraps his arms around Akechi’s back. Parts his lips.

Akechi’s tongue slips right in. It’s hot and wet and soft and kinda messy, and every lingering anxiety of Akira’s gets pushed away in favor of only thinking about this. One of Akechi’s hands slides down his back, grabs his ass; Akira flinches, and Akechi somehow gives a slight laugh despite his mouth being busy.

Abruptly, Akira realizes Akechi’s walking him backwards, and then the back of his knee collides with the couch, and then he’s pushed down onto it, and then Akechi’s on top of him, and the whole world narrows down to just their bodies.

Akechi separates long enough to pull his coat off and fling it on the floor. Then he returns his attention to Akira’s mouth, aggressive, messy kisses, and pushes up Akira’s shirt with one hand, nips a bruise onto Akira’s neck, presses their hips together, it’s all so *much*--

It’s too much. Akira feels dizzy, overwhelmed. He *wanted* this, but--but--“Hold on,” he gasps, while Akechi’s lips are still at his neck. “Um, wait, just--”

Akechi pulls back. His eyebrows knit together in apparent concern. “Are you okay?” he asks, sounding genuinely worried.

“Yeah, just--” Akira pulls himself out from under him, shifts into a sitting position, leans over his knees a little. Breathes in, out. “It’s just a lot,” he says.

Akechi sits back. “I thought you’d like that,” he says. “I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s fine,” Akira says. Breathes in, out. Feels a little calmer, though not much. “You didn’t know, it’s okay.”

“Still.” Akechi frowns. “I don’t wish to cause you any discomfort. We can stop for a while, if you like.”

In, out. “Yeah, okay,” Akira says.

They sit in silence for a few moments.

Eventually, Akechi says, “I never told you this, but I didn’t really want to kill you, back then.”

Akira looks up. As distraction tactics go, that’s--effective. “Well, you definitely acted like it,” he says.

Akechi gives a faint smile. “I’m a very good actor. I thought you were fascinating, I wanted to know you better--but Shido was very insistent, and I gave in. My behavior at his Palace was more due to frustration with my own actions than anything else.”

“I mean, I didn’t really blame you for it,” Akira says awkwardly. “You, uh, had a lot going on.”

Akechi shakes his head. “I shouldn’t have let myself get swept up in his plans,” he says. “I even tried to convince him, once, but he wouldn’t listen. I could have saved you so much pain if I just held my ground.”

Akira’s unsure how to tell someone you don’t mind that they’re a murderer. “Uh, okay,” he says.

“So many times, I wished I could tell you the truth,” Akechi says. “I felt terrible about it, I really did. From now on, I’m going to do whatever I can to help repair all the suffering he caused. And I’m so, so grateful you’re allowing me back into your life despite all the mistakes I’ve made.” He smiles.

It looks exactly like the way he used to smile on TV.

Akira feels very cold, all of a sudden.

He wants to not think about it but he *can’t*. He can’t brush off that nothing about this feels right; the Akechi of January, the one who seemed much more like whoever Akechi actually was underneath the artifice, didn’t act like this at all. Akechi’s not cruel but he’s not *nice*, either, and this--this isn’t him.

And the worst thought squirms into his brain: did Akechi even feel this way about him, before?

How much can actualization change? How much of a person can be rewritten?

“What’s wrong?” Akechi asks, far too gently. “You seem troubled.”

Akira struggles to find something, anything, to say. “I’m--I’m sorry,” he manages. “This isn’t anything about you, I promise, I just--need some space. It’s not your fault. Can you go? I’ll text you later.”

“Of course,” Akechi says. He sounds so *concerned*. “I hope you feel better soon. Goodnight.” And he gets up, leans down, brushes his lips against Akira’s forehead, smiles like plastic, and leaves.

Akira puts his head in his hands and tries very hard not to let his thoughts spiral.

Okay. He needs to--what can he even do here? He can't force his subconscious to not want something; but a pleasant, self-effacing Akechi isn't what he wants, either. Maybe it's not possible to get what he wants; maybe there's just no way the original Akechi could like him that way, and the new one has to be altered to fit. That can't be true, can it? He doesn't *know*.

Then it hits him with a jolt, and he almost curses himself for not thinking of it earlier: can't he just call Maruki?

He still has Maruki's number. He doesn't actually know if Maruki still has that phone, or would answer messages, or even needs a phone at all, but there's got to be *some* way to contact him. Maruki wants to help him. It's not helpful to leave Akira high and dry.

Akira pulls out his phone, opens the messaging app. Sees Maruki's final messages to him. Swallows, and starts to type.

**Akira:** I need to talk to you.

The answer comes almost instantly.

**Maruki:** Of course. Like this, or should we meet in person?

**Akira:** In person would be better.

**Maruki:** All right. I can be at Leblanc tomorrow?

**Akira:** Okay.

**Maruki:** I'll see you then.

Akira didn't think he would see Maruki again. That Maruki, content with his gift to the world, would sit back somewhere and appreciate it all in silence, the sole keeper of the mausoleum of the old reality. Except for Akira and Akechi, of course. Well--it occurs to him, with a sick, creeping feeling, that even Akechi might forget, soon.

But never mind all that. He'll talk to Maruki tomorrow, and then--everything will be better. Probably. Somehow.

He goes to bed telling himself that everything will be better.

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Maruki doesn't show up until that evening. There are no customers; Sojiro closed early a few minutes ago, citing a promise to go see a movie with Futaba and Wakaba. It feels so similar to the last time Akira saw him. But this time, there won't be anyone else dropping in.

Maruki is all smiles when he sits at the booth. "Good evening, Kurusu-kun," he says. "What can I do for you?"

Straight to the point. Akira steadies himself. "How much influence do I have over Akechi?" he asks.

Maruki blinks. "What do you mean?" he asks.

"Last night he kissed me," Akira says.

Maruki smiles. "Congratulations," he says, and looks like he means it.

Akira grits his teeth. "No, that's not--I don't know if he *wanted* to. If you made him to make me happy, how can I tell if anything he does is what the real Akechi would've done or if it's just

because it's something *I* want?"

Maruki makes a thoughtful noise. "That's an interesting philosophical question, but you don't have to worry about it," he says. "I wouldn't force something like that on anyone, even a cognitive being. That's not the kind of world I want. His feelings for you, whatever they are, are genuine. It's just easier for him to act on them, now."

Akira slumps in his seat, exhales. A weight disappears from his shoulders. That's so *simple*. He should have asked Maruki about it earlier.

But. That's not all, is it.

Akira takes a deep breath. "There's more," he says. "Last night I got a little overwhelmed and he was really nice to me about it, and then he talked to me about how sorry he was for all the stuff he was involved with, and he made it sound like he hadn't wanted to do any of it. And he was so *polite*. He was acting like a normal good person and it was *weird*."

"I...would've thought you *wanted* him to be a good person?" Maruki says, cocking his head a little and looking surprised.

"I want him to be *himself*," Akira says firmly. "I don't *care* that he's done bad stuff and is kind of a jerk sometimes. I want him to be better than he was but I don't want him to be *perfect*, that's not *him*."

"Oh, well, if that's all, I can edit some things," Maruki says mildly. "If you'd be happier with a grumpier version, I can do that for you."

Akira feels sick. "You can't *edit* people," he says.

Maruki gives a soft, gentle smile. "Not everyone, that's true," he says. "But he's one of my creations, so changing him is easy. Just say the word. That's what I've been doing, anyway; I apologize if it caused you any pain. I really did mean to give you a type you'd enjoy."

Akira puts his head in his hands. There's a thick sludge in his chest, weighing down his words.

"This is what you wanted, Kurusu-kun," Maruki says, not unkindly. "This Goro Akechi is more important to you than anyone else. It only makes sense you'd want him to be the version you like the most."

It *does* make sense. That's why he called Maruki here in the first place; he's not happy, and he wants something to be different.

But that's not what he meant, is it? He wants the *real* Akechi. That's his point.

But the real Akechi is dead. This is the only one he can get.

And this one can be whatever he wants him to be.

Akira feels like he's going to vomit.

"You don't have to make the decision now," Maruki says. He pauses. "Tell you what. It'll be faster if you don't have to call me every time. You're a powerful Persona user yourself; I can share a little of my abilities with you."

Akira raises his head.

“Just with Akechi, you understand,” Maruki says. He gives a small laugh. “I can’t have you interfering with everyone else’s happiness, after all. But he’s here for you, so I don’t mind giving you direct control.”

Akira stares. He’s too sick to speak.

Maruki reaches across the table. Puts a hand on his shoulder.

Nothing really changes that he can see. But a part of his mind shifts, brightens. And he feels like-- something *is* different, inside him.

“It’s actually pretty easy, once you get used to it,” Maruki says with a smile. “I’m sure you’ll get the hang of it in no time.”

“This isn’t what I meant,” Akira says thickly. “I just want him to be like he was.”

The expression on Maruki’s face would be patronizing if it didn’t seem so genuine. “And now you can do that,” he says. “You can make him exactly like he used to be, down to the last detail. If you’d prefer it if he didn’t have feelings for you, you can do that too. It’s all up to you.”

Akira dredges out some words from the heavy morass of his mind. “Please leave,” he says.

Maruki nods. “All right,” he says, standing up. “If you have any more questions, please don’t hesitate to ask. But any good therapist knows when a patient is ready to stand on their own feet.”

Akira doesn’t watch Maruki leave. He hears the bell jingle, and then everything is silent.

This doesn’t feel better. This feels so much worse. He can’t foist responsibility onto Maruki anymore--whatever happens is because of *him*. How can he be expected to know what the right decision is?

Well. He did already make one decision, so. Perhaps this is just another one.

After a while, Akira takes out his phone again. Stares at it. Types out a message.

Akechi responds immediately, like there’s no greater priority.

Akira confirms tomorrow, turns his phone off, and feels his head fill up with sludge.

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“Given the date, I thought about bringing flowers,” Akechi says when he arrives, wearing that same plastic smile. “But you didn’t mention specific plans for the evening, so I wasn’t sure.”

The date? Oh. That’s right, school was full of chocolate and giggles today. Ann, Makoto, and Haru even brought some to share. It tasted pretty good, probably. But Akira couldn’t stop thinking about tonight, barely processed the rest of the day at all.

Akira gives as much of a smile as he can manage in return. “That’s fine,” he says. “I just wanted to talk, anyway.”

“Well, here I am,” Akechi says pleasantly. “What did you want to talk about?”

Akira takes a deep breath. Maruki didn’t give him instructions, but--it doesn’t really feel like it needs those. It’s not complicated. He reaches inside of himself, and--just kind of shifts something. It feels a little bit like changing a mask.

Akechi's eyes go a little unfocused. He stumbles, catches himself on the edge of the counter. Puts a hand to his head. Then looks at Akira, and--his eyes regain focus. They turn *sharp*.

"What did you *do*," Akechi snarls, crossing back to Akira, grabbing him by the shirt collar and pushing him against the wall with a *thud*.

"I didn't *know*," Akira says, his voice ringing with desperation. "I swear I didn't know that would happen to you, I wanted to *stop* it--"

Akechi gives a rough bark of a laugh. "How can I believe that," he says. "You wanted this bullshit world even after I *told* you I'd rather die, how can I believe *anything* you say?"

Akira grabs hold of one of Akechi's arms, tries to push back, break free, but Akechi's grip is like iron. "I wanted to change you back, I asked Maruki and he gave me the power to do it, I swear I won't use it again!" he cries out.

"But you *can* use it again," Akechi says roughly. "You can make me whatever you want, whenever you want, and I can't stop you." His voice, his face, his movements--it's all like in Shido's Palace, but less frenzied, less unhinged, and yet just as intense. Just as filled with raw, visceral hatred. "Do you even remember *why* I didn't want this world? A prison is still a prison even if the jailer thinks he *loves me*."

And suddenly, Akira has a vision of the future. An endless stretch of Akechi hating him, immediately leaving him for good because Akira is more dangerous to him than any Shadow. Akechi will never trust him again. Akechi will always be furious and bitter and *gone*, and it will be Akira's fault.

Dread shoots up his spine, fills his brain; he can't let that happen. He *can't*. Not when he's done so much to the world just for the sake of having Akechi at his side.

Akechi stops, and maybe he sees something in Akira's face, because now there's fear in his; the anger is wiped away and replaced with something that makes Akira's chest hurt. "Akira, *please*," he starts, and it almost sounds like he's begging, he looks so, so scared--

And Akira reaches inside himself and *twists*, and Akechi goes silent.

A second passes. Akechi's face smooths out. He blinks, a few times, and smiles. Lets go of Akira, takes a step back.

"Well, that was dramatic," he says pleasantly. "Thanks for putting a stop to it. It really was very disgraceful of me."

Akira stares. Swallows. "I," he starts, and then he doesn't know how to finish the thought. He sits down heavily at a booth, buries his head in his arms.

He feels Akechi sit next to him. Rest a hand on top of his. "It's all right," Akechi says, and his voice is *so* gentle, *so* understanding. "It's for the best. I would've hated living like that."

*But it still would've been you*, Akira doesn't say. *This isn't you*.

But the previous version wasn't really him either, was it.

Akechi's dead. This is just...an imitation, really. Something created for the sole purpose of giving Akira an Akechi he could save.

So does it matter, really? What it's like? This was never Akechi to begin with. It *can't* be an exact replica. Trying to shape it into one is only hurting him, and this is a world where nothing hurts.

Everything's supposed to be easier, here. The real Akechi could never have been easy.

But this one is.

And besides. Just choosing this world in the first place was proof that Akira doesn't *really* care about the entirety of Akechi, wasn't it? Just the parts he wants. Not everything.

The easier, milder Akechi--the one who can love him openly and trust him without reservation and was only ever a victim of other people's crimes--wouldn't blame him for choosing this world. Is happy that he did, even.

Plastic smiles are still smiles.

Akira raises his head. Looks at Akechi's content, friendly face.

"Yeah," he says. "Sorry to do that to you."

"Oh, it's no trouble," Akechi says. "You were just a little confused. I understand."

Akira straightens up in his seat. "I said I didn't have any plans, but actually, you wanna get dinner somewhere? I bet someplace still has a free table." And probably there's a flower stand along the way; probably a chocolate shop giving out free samples.

Akechi smiles wide and false and beautiful. "I'd be delighted, Akira," he says.

Everyone is. All the time, forever.

Akira stands up, takes Akechi's hand. The world's full of nice couples; they look just like one.

And maybe it wouldn't even be so bad, if neither them knew they'd ever been anything different.

Because Akira still doesn't feel...great, right now. He can't pretend he didn't know what he was doing. Somehow he knows that Akechi's last real expression will always be waiting for him in the back of his mind; the guilt over what he's done both to the world and to Akechi is never going to go away. What good are all his decisions if he can't even appreciate them? If a happy world and a happy Akechi only leave him feeling cold and empty?

But there's an easy solution to that, isn't there. He doesn't even really have to think about it. It's always been there, waiting patiently for him to use it.

The last thing Akira Kurusu truly does is squeeze Akechi's hand.

They walk outside, hand in hand, and when the flower stand owner cheerfully offers a discount for such a happy couple, Akira grins and says, "Thanks. Being with him's just so comfortable, you know?"

And he means every word.

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