

Akiza's eyes blazed with newfound determination. Her teeth grit together as she made a sweeping motion with the rapier in her hand, cutting through the air. Behind her and to the right, just around the corner, she knew Morgana was in a heated battle with the captain in scarlet armor atop its pegasus, and could hear the clanking of metal as their weapons clashed. In front, the knights had collected themselves again - a squadron of four at the lead with two more coming down the stone on the other side.

One from in front charged recklessly, moving forward with their blade raised overhead. With speed she'd never known, Akiza planted one foot forward and dashed off the slick stone, precision and grace guiding every movement. Her rapier lifted, singing through the air as it was brought forward and back, once, twice, jabbing through the knight's exposed elbow joint and beneath its arm, spewing black ichor that pooled into the floor.

When did I learn how to do all this...? Akiza thought.

This has always been your gift, Julie answered. **Speed. Precision. Grace.**

My power...

The knight reeled back, while the rest of the squadron stepped forward to take its place. Two swords swung in from the left, the knights' shields covering each other infuriatingly well.

"Julie!" Her Persona answered the call, wind racing through Akiza's ear as her other self dashed forward and caught both incoming blows with her own elongated blade. Akiza crouched, springing up and planting both feet on the unprepared knights' shields, taking advantage of their tight formation and pivoting to stab her rapier down an opening in the right-most knight's helmet. The thing howled, and she dug in, carving through its neck when she kicked off onto the wall.

She felt *limitless*. Her speed was boundless, and she only had to *push*. Akiza tucked her legs in and kicked off again towards the first knight, who'd only just finished recovering, and jammed her sword through its head. Together they landed hard, Akiza in a crouch while the knight clattered helplessly to the ground, dissolving soon after.

Standing, she eyed the two knights who were still turning around to catch up. Akiza tightened her grip on the handle and brought it up as a fist against her heart, blade poised skyward. She extended a finger forward in judgement.

"Ravage them!"

One of Julie's hands planted over her own heart, other palm facing out in much the same pose, and from it poured a stream of red and white. A feeling like fingernails on a chalkboard made manifest peeled through the air in a wavy pattern that raced toward their targets. The knights shuddered and convulsed as the light penetrated their armor entirely, coming out on the other

end as mist that lifted upwards before disappearing. In the blink of an eye, both knights dissolved to nothing.

Ann took the opportunity to bring Ryuji farther away from the bend, taking cover while Morgana was still being pushed back. Their ally had lost enough ground that Akiza could finally see the fight for herself. His Persona managed to bat aside a swipe from the captain's lance, but the knight's arm only pulled back and pushed forward again in an instant, piercing the black-clad swordsman's chest. Morgana howled, knocked back in tandem with his Persona.

"Morgana!" Akiza shouted. Soon the two knights on the drawbridge would be charging down their side. It was impossible to leave Ryuji and Ann undefended, but there had to be *some* way to help, right?

"Heh, keep your eyes forward, newbie. I can handle myself." Morgana drew himself up, wincing as he waved a cutlass taller than he was around. "Witness my resolve! ZORRO!"

Wind whipped itself into existence, a visible force tinted green that pulled *hard* down the hall. The pegasus' hooves scraped against the cobblestone, unable to find purchase, while Morgana smirked, his Persona gone. The captain grunted, taking hold of the reins and pulling back. The beast rose off the ground, neighing as it reared back before slamming down again, wings as unfurled as possible in the hall.

Morgana fixed his eyes ahead, cutlass held low and steady in both paws while the enraged pegasus charged forward; and when the reins were jerked back again, prompting it to take flight, Morgana leapt in the air with it, scoring a black gash along the creature's belly as it passed. Pained as it was, the pegasus managed to take flight regardless, beginning to swoop through the wide room.

"Man, this is not good," Ryuji grunted, being helped up by Ann. "I've gotta--" He took a step forward, strain visible. There was a flash of those blue flames, there and gone again in an instant, leaving Ryuji to hiss in pain and fall back into Ann's arms.

"Stop that! You've done enough," Ann hushed him, pulling them away into the now empty hall, both still peeking around the corner to watch.

Turning ahead again, Akiza watched as the two knights stopped, holding their ground just ahead of the drawbridge. The captain was in the process of turning through the air in order to come around for a charge. Akiza bit the bottom of her lip, brow furrowed. The small sound of Morgana's steps plinked along until they caught up to her.

"Morgana, do you know anything that might help us here?" Akiza said quickly.

He scowled. "That knight and its pegasus are obviously just one Shadow. Any damage to either will help us get rid of it faster. And..." His eyes glowed golden for a moment. "I can tell they're weak to lightning. You used curse magic earlier, do you know any lightning too?"

Far ahead, the pegasus had finished turning and began to pick up speed, charging through the air and angling towards them.

"No. Ryuji does, but..." she shook her head. "You don't either?"

"Just wind," he nodded.

The captain's lance raised as it passed over the other two knights, and the pegasus hit the ground at full gallop, the thunderous sound bouncing off the walls. They were forty feet out when Akiza yelled out a command.

"Grab onto me!" To his credit, Morgana didn't hesitate. He hopped onto her back, looping an arm around her neck to keep hold. Time seemed to slow down as she leapt off the path entirely, hanging over the raging waters beneath and barely managing to vacate the space where hooves trampled by and an angled out lance would have doubtless skewered them. Her free arm shot out to the side. "JULIE!"

With pleasure.

In a flash her Persona appeared again, both of them taking hold of each others' arms in turn, and for the briefest of moments, they defied gravity. Julie pulled Akiza along and swung both of them around in a half-circle, tossing her and Morgana back onto the path before disappearing again. If it were possible, Akiza would have liked more time to still her heart, but there was no such thing.

"Smooth moves," Morgana praised, dropping from her back once they landed. It would be a little while before the captain could make another pass, and she wondered if he'd fall for the same trick twice. Her eyes scanned rapidly for something to use, an advantage to press, the way she always had in fights when she was younger. The barely swinging cages in the air caught her eye, drawbridge chains not far away. Her mind reeled as she traced a route and made a decision. Akiza pointed forward, to the two knights still blocking the bridge.

"I need to get to that bridge. I have an idea, but I'll need your help. Can I count on you?"

"Of course! What kind of thief do you take me for?"

Despite everything, Akiza smiled. "We'll have to be fast," and sprinted ahead, Morgana hot on her tail. He called on Zorro again, and more of that green wind ripped between the knights, buffeting them to the side and breaking up their formation. Either Morgana's cutlass was sharper

than she'd thought, or he was a lot stronger than he'd let on, because somehow the blade cleaved straight through the knight on the right *and* its armor, leaving only wisps of black behind.

What did he say? Akiza wondered. *This place is based off cognition?*

She didn't have time to apply the thought, though, instead whipping her leg forward once she'd caught up, positioned directly to the side of the thoroughly off-center knight, and put all of her weight into the motion. Boot met shield, and the knight's sabatons failed to find purchase before it was sent reeling off the edge and into the raging waters beneath.

Breathing hard, Akiza broke into a run one last time, feeling the burn in her legs as every effort was beginning to catch up. Setting a foot down on the railing of the bridge, eyes on the draw-chain, she spoke again. "On my signal, I need you to give me a burst of wind that will lift me up."

"What's the signal?" Morgana asked, tone serious.

"You'll know," was all she could say before leaping off the side and taking hold of the chain, climbing the length until it felt possible to leap over to the cage. It was probably ten feet away horizontally, and a fair bit more than that vertically, though gravity would take care of that part pretty fast. The drawbridge chains were way too tight to swing on, but at least that meant they'd provide a fair bit of resistance when she jumped off.

On the other end of the long passage, the captain had finally finished slowing down enough to start turning around.

Akiza leapt. She heard Ann and Ryuji shout. Gravity caught up in exactly the way she thought it would, and her hands grabbed at the edge of the cage. It began to swing, chain creaking as it moved, but the added grip of her gloves and newfound strength were enough to help pull herself up. Her footing at the top was uncertain-- the bars weren't thick enough to stand on without placing her feet across two at a time, and she needed to wrap an arm around the chain to keep herself steady.

Something clicked with her, and not a moment too soon.

Cognition... I just have to think it?

She took a breath, and heard the pegasus' charge as it started to pick up speed. It wouldn't be long now.

Stand tall, darling. Make your challenge. Let them hear it.

The cage would rock regardless. The walls of this place weren't hers to change. But her footing? The projection of her voice? Those were *her* tools. *She* was in control of those things.

"I won't let you hurt them any more!"

The captain roared. Akiza let go of the chain and took a measured pose, perfectly balanced. Steely grey eyes leveled themselves at the captain's, rapier pointed out, while the Shadow leveled its own lance. As the distance closed itself, forty feet out, thirty, twenty, she bent her knees and *leapt* into the air, directly into the beast's path.

"NOW!"

Morgana's wind was harsh, but shot her up quickly. Akiza twisted midair, the blade of the rapier taken into her free hand and hooked out flat in front of the knight's chest to catch on. She jerked forward through the air as the blade dug into her palm, able to fight against the wind after a moment and kick her legs down, finding some purchase on the pegasus' back.

The blade wasn't enough to pierce the knight's armor, so the Shadow took this opportunity to jerk an elbow back, heavy metal slamming into her side. Akiza hissed but grit her teeth, eyes watering, and held on.

"Julie! Bring us down!"

At once, her Persona appeared again, arms wrapped around the captain's sides just as her own were. From one of her palms *poured* curses, streaming directly into the captain's crimson armor and escaping through any number of openings. Being in such close proximity with the effect, Akiza could feel her bones rattling, unpleasant and sickening. She had no *idea* what it must have been doing to the Shadow itself.

The captain screamed, an incoherent, grotesque sound that began to gutter out almost as soon as it had begun. Akiza could feel the Shadow becoming less solid under her by the second, and somehow she'd failed to plan for this part. As they diverted course, zooming towards a wall, there wasn't a single convenient cage or chain to hop off onto.

"Oh, damn," Akiza muttered. Julie disappeared, and she tucked herself in, abandoning ship and bringing her arms and legs up in front to try and break the fall somehow. Fortunately, the moment of impact wasn't nearly so harsh as it could have been as another gust of Morgana's wind managed to slow her down before hitting the wall, and then catch her entirely before she hit the ground. As soon as it disappeared, Akiza fell the last few inches with an unceremonious "oof."

A duel well fought. I commend you on your first victory of many.

The not-cat responsible for making sure none of her bones were broken came running up, panting slightly, and looked less than happy as she gingerly sat up.

“What the heck was that!?” he began, making animated gestures. “If I’d known your plan was to throw yourself over a pit twice in a row, I wouldn’t have said yes!”

“You didn’t say anything bad the first time I jumped over a pit,” she countered. “I even had you with me that time.”

“You weren’t jumping directly at a high-level Shadow the first time!” Morgana harrumphed as Ann and Ryuji rushed over to her, the boy limping slightly. Ann’s face was a blend of incredulous, furious, and excited as she stomped towards Akiza.

“I *just* got done telling you to stop being so reckless, and the second you get superpowers, you decide to start pulling stunts like that?” She crossed her arms, tapping her foot impatiently even while she offered Akiza a hand to get up.

Akiza could only shrug sheepishly, accepting the help and then slipping her rapier into the sheath on her hip. “I just... I dunno, it’s like I went on autopilot. You guys were in danger, and the only thought in my head was how I could keep you two safe. Everything else just kinda... went out the window.” Ryuji, caught up now, nodded vigorously.

“Yeah, that’s exactly what it was like for me! It’s like, you kinda laser in on one thing, and your body just *knows* how to make that happen.” Ann sighed, appearing to grudgingly accept those answers.

“Fine, okay.” Her frown flickered, melting into a small smile. “Thanks for protecting me. We’d probably be dead if it weren’t for you two.”

“Oh, you smiled,” Ryuji said earnestly. It took Ann a moment to process the remark, a finger touching where the smile had been.

“... Oh. Yeah, I guess I did. Is that weird?” she asked.

“Nah. I just, you know, hadn’t seen it in a while.”

It felt like a moment where awkwardness should have been, but instead Ryuji was wearing a warm, sweet smile that was completely unlike all the grins he’d had before. Akiza touched one of her cheeks.

Cute...

The sound of someone clearing their throat drew everyone’s eyes down, where an incensed Morgana had his paws on his hips.

"If you three are done making eyes at each other, can we focus on getting out of this Palace?" The students all promptly looked in different directions at that, becoming intensely interested in literally anything besides meeting each others' gazes.

Morgana huffed and set off towards the door he'd indicated before, holding out a paw at the same time. Wispy green energy coalesced around Ryuji and Akiza, completely different from the wind magic they'd seen earlier. It was a rush of energy that didn't take away all the pain, but went a hell of a long way in making it easier to move, and stopped her minor bleeding. Ryuji stood up straighter, no longer leaning on his good leg, and rolled a shoulder as Morgana spoke again. "It's through this way. Keep your voices down and let me take point. Black hair, you bring up the rear."

They hurried after him, Akiza stopping briefly to pick up her miraculously unharmed glasses.

Beyond the doors was a tall, cylindrical room with a massive spiral staircase, just like the one they'd come down before arriving at the dungeons. Mercifully, it was free of Shadows. As they climbed the steps, Ryuji piped up with a question.

"Hey, how come she gets to keep her cool outfit but I lost mine and passed out?"

"Probably because of the nature of her awakening," Morgana hazarded. "If the catalyst for yours was something like 'I need to get them out of here,' then it's only natural that your burst of energy would run out as soon as that was done. But if hers were something like 'I need to keep them safe,' then hers will probably hold until you're all to safety."

"That sounds like what I was thinking, yeah," Akiza said. "I don't feel as powerful now as I did a few minutes ago, but still more than normal."

After another minute of climbing, Morgana stopped them outside a great door part-way up the staircase.

"It's through here," he whispered. The door was pushed open ever so gently - only barely enough to allow them to look into the room beyond. It was some kind of sitting room, with a table and some chairs as the center-piece. Racks of barrels were arranged along the far wall, and there were a set of open windows above that. Compared to where they'd just been, the decor here was much more in line with the rest of the castle.

A single knight guarded the room.

"Okay, as my last 'thank you' for busting me out, I'm gonna teach you guys one more thing about Palaces," whispered Morgana. He gathered the three of them into a huddle farther away from the door. "If you unmask a Shadow, it removes them from the Palace's network. If they

can't communicate, they can't call out for reinforcements, and it will take much longer for the Palace to notice anything's missing. Unmasking them also reveals a Shadow's true form, which can be either weaker or stronger than its masked form. For low-level grunts like these, they'll almost always be weaker."

He looked to Akiza. "You're gonna take it by surprise and pull its mask off. Then we defeat its true form and you guys can leave through the windows."

"What about you?" Ann asked. "Aren't you coming too?"

Morgana shook his head. "My investigation of this Palace still isn't complete. I need to stay here and fully explore the place so I can figure out how to fix it."

"Fix it?" Ryuji piped up. "How do you fix a place like *this*?"

"By making it disappear. I-It's not important, you three just need to leave before you get hurt worse than I can heal. Are you ready to do this?" He turned to Akiza, who nodded. "Good. You know what to do, so go for it."

Akiza sidled up to the door again, peeking out into the room. Just near the door was a tall chair she could hide behind, out of the knight's field of vision and much closer to it. With speed and guile she nudged the door open just enough to slip through, immediately grateful that the thing hadn't squeaked when she pushed.

Like clockwork, Akiza thought. When the knight came close enough to her position, dashed forward, using the table as a footstool to get on top of the hunched Shadow's back and grip its mask in one hand. The metal came free with minimal resistance, showering the area in the same black that wounding them had, before it evaporated and a new form took the knight's place. A tiny pixie in a blue leotard.

"Hey, what's the big deal!?" It cried, dashing towards Akiza. She sidestepped its charge as the door opened fully and the other three rushed in, Ryuji grabbing a poker from the nearby fireplace and brandishing it like his missing pipe. Almost humiliatingly, for all their previous ability, neither could manage to land a hit on the thing. Ryuji swung wildly, clanging against the table a few times while Akiza tried to predict where it'd go, but the pixie kept just barely getting away, firing little needles of light that stung more and more with each passing hit.

"I can't hit this freakin' thing!" Ryuji cried after a particularly close miss. They worked together to try and back it into a corner, only for it to fly over both their heads and, coincidentally, right next to Ann.

The blonde screamed and, acting on complete instinct, clocked the pixie directly with her fist. It dropped from the air, crumpling to the floor. The other three boggled at her for a moment as she shook her hand, shrugging and grinning sheepishly.

A groaning noise from the pixie returned their attention to the matter at hand, and Akiza aimed her rapier at the Shadow, ready to strike, before it cried out.

“W-wait! Hang on, don’t kill me! Let me come with you?”

“Come with me?” she asked, furrowing her brow. “What do you--” Her question was cut off as the pixie began dissolving into bluish-white light, forming the shape of a mask just like Akiza’s own. It flew onto her face, merging with the one already there, and she felt an odd tingling sensation rush through her.

The Persona known as Pixie resided within her now, alongside Julie.

Akiza indicated that she was fine, leading Ann and Ryuji to relax, if only somewhat. Morgana, meanwhile, frowned before fixing her with an intense gaze.

“Change of plans,” he said. “I’m sticking with you guys. She has a special power, beyond that of a normal Persona user. I’ll explain later, but for now, we can get out of here.” He dashed over to the shelves beneath the window, scurrying up them as the teens followed suit.

“Hey, Ryuji, gimme a boost,” Ann said. He obliged, locking his fingers together and squatting down to let her plant a foot there before hoisting her to where she could grab the ledge and haul herself up. He coughed, turning his gaze away with a red-flushed face as he realized the position he was in once Akiza went up as well. Grabbing his arms, the girls hauled him up, and all four dropped quietly out the other side of the window. The courtyard they had come in through was mercifully unguarded, and the drawbridge had at some point been lowered. Sticking to the shadows just in case, they scurried out of the Palace and back into reality.

Stumbling out into the alleyway was a strange experience. Akiza found herself looking down at her Shujin uniform, feeling both empty for not having her outfit on and also strangely full, in a sense. She could sense Julie within her, and Pixie to a lesser extent.

I am a part of you, my darling, Julie filled in. **Accepting me has moved you towards a more whole state of being.**

How do you mean? She dusted herself off, checking to make sure everything was still in place.

Awakening your power was but the first step of your journey. As you grow, so too will your powers. I will be with you, my dear. The dance has only just begun.

Akiza felt Julie’s presence shrink away, still with her, but dormant, ready to answer when called. A clamoring from behind made her turn around, watching Ryuji and Ann stumble over each

other as they fell out of the Palace, narrowly avoiding landing in a heap in the puddle beneath them. Ryuji shook his head, working his shoulder muscles to relieve the ache.

“Man, it feels so weird to be back in the real world. How long were we in there for?”

“Looks like...” Ann scrunched up her face looking at her phone. “Six minutes? There’s no way...”

“Time moves differently in the Metaverse,” chirped a voice from below them. “Hours in there might only be minutes out here. And from what I can tell you weren’t in there all that long anyways.”

The students locked gazes before tracking their eyes slowly down to their feet.

Sitting proudly on the dry patch of concrete was a black cat with white markings and a yellow collar adorning its neck.

Akiza was the first to speak up.

“So, uh, about the whole ‘not a cat’ thing...”

“Still not a cat!” Morgana interjected, cutting her off. “This is the most convenient form I have to disguise myself with in the real world. I’m coming with you to make sure you don’t do anything reckless.” With that, he leapt up towards Akiza, grabbing onto her skirt with his claws before hauling himself up and around to her shoulder, despite her cries of protest.

“Hey, this is brand new! Get your claws out of it!” Ann and Ryuji merely giggled at her plight, observing the self-satisfied kitty perched atop her shoulder.

“Hate to break it to you Morgana, but you can’t exactly come to school with us. They don’t really let cats in there.” He cocked his head, ears flopping slightly.

“School? I don’t know what that is.”

Ryuji stared at him. “W-what do you mean, ya don’t know what school is!? It’s like, the one thing everybody has to do! It sucks!” Morgana merely scratched behind his ear in response.

“Sounds boring. But, I suppose I’ll go if I have to. I’ll hide in here!” He dove into Akiza’s school bag, again to her protest before she gave up, deciding that she must be stuck with this talking cat now.

“Oh, crap!” Ann jumped, looking at her phone again. “Homeroom starts in two minutes, we gotta go!” Morgana yelped as Akiza shoved him down into the bag, zipping it almost closed and dashing down the alleyway after Ann and Ryuji.

The girls had quickly exchanged contact info with Ryuji before hurrying into Shujin, Ann having kindly offered to show Akiza the guidance office. The fact that both girls were in the same class was an added bonus that made her smile a little wider as Kawakami walked them to the classroom. The teacher had Akiza stand at the front of the room before proceedings began. Akiza, meanwhile, found her gaze focused on a boy with dark blue hair sitting near the front, face covered in bruises and bandages. He was looking down and away from everything, like he was trying his best to fade from view.

“Okay, class,” Kawakami began, voice just as uninterested as the last time they had met. “Today I’d like to introduce a transfer student, Akiza Kurusu. Please say something to the class.”

Akiza chewed the inside of her cheek, gaze flitting around the room. She *hated* being put on the spot like this. Briefly locking eyes with Ann helped set her at ease.

“Hi there,” she said simply, with an easygoing smile. “It’s nice to meet you all.”

“Your seat will be the empty one near the window. The people nearby her will need to share their textbooks for today.” Akiza heard a general murmur through the room as she moved to her seat, directly behind Ann.

“...seems quiet, but I bet she loses it when she gets mad...”

“...*did* get arrested for assault...”

“...can’t believe they put her in our class...”

Her best efforts to tune them out were proving ineffective. Ann flashed a sympathetic smile as Akiza passed by, which she returned. It only seemed to add to the whispers, though.

“Wait, do those two know each other?”

“Ugh, I *knew* Takamaki swung that way. So gross.”

“Does this mean she’s cheating on Mr. Kamoshida?”

“I mean, this *is* Takamaki...”

Akiza grimaced. Sadly, it didn’t surprise her that the other girl attracted rumors like that. Bright blonde hair and good looks were magnets for insinuation and lies. Still, one of those whispers nagged at her.

Is Ann close with Kamoshida...?

Thinking back to the palace, the man had mentioned something about her 'finally embracing his invitations'. But, Ann had *also* grabbed her to use as a disguise and avoid an encounter with him.

A pit of dread settled in her stomach as she considered that this 'relationship' might not be entirely voluntary on Ann's part. What had Morgana said? Palaces were shaped by the way their rulers viewed the world? If Kamoshida was the king of his castle, and the castle represented the school, and the guards had mentioned a 'Princess Ann'...

Akiza's train of thought kept chugging along, arriving at conclusion after conclusion that only made her more concerned as they kept fitting into logical places. The whispers about her were only a little upsetting by comparison.

Class was the furthest thing from her mind that morning, and the lunch bell was a blessed relief. Ann turned to her immediately.

"Grab lunch with me?" Her head tilted to one side just slightly, and that same little smile graced her lips. Akiza was all too eager to accept.

"Y-yeah, thanks." She walked with Ann, following her to a secluded part of the courtyard, out of sight from most students near some vending machines.

"Ryuji's gonna meet with us in a bit. What do you want?" Ann asked, standing at the machine and keying in something for herself.

"Oh, no, I'll get something myself, you don't have to--" she was cut off as Ann passed her a bottle of fruit juice.

"It's not much, but it's a little bit of a thanks for earlier." That little smile popped up again, and Akiza had the sense that it was probably being held down by something. After a moment of picking at the bag of chips she'd grabbed from the machine, Akiza spoke up.

"Hey, so... Sorry if this is a sore subject, but I couldn't help hearing people talk when we got to class. Is something going on with you and Kamoshida?"

Ann's whole body tensed for a moment, then loosened again. "It's..." she sighed. "He's been... *interested* in me for a while now. He always offers to drive me to school if he sees me walking. That's why I asked you to help me hide. I *hate* that he makes me have to dodge around like this, and I hate the rumors. I can't believe people think I'd actually go out with a creep like him..."

Akiza merely listened, not sure what to say, or sure if she should say anything at all.

“He’s the school’s volleyball coach, and my best friend is in a starting position on the team this semester, so I can’t really say no to him. I couldn’t bear to see Shiho lose her starting position, but I just...”

“You don’t like him having this power over both of you?” Akiza offered. Ann nodded.

“Yeah, something like that. It makes me feel like I’m some sort of object, y’know? Everyone thinks I’m some slut because of my looks and because of Kamoshida. Shiho is the only real friend I have at this school who doesn’t see me like that.” She shrugged, taking a sip of her drink. “Well, she was my only friend, I guess.” She nudged Akiza to punctuate her sentence, and the two girls shared a bashful grin as Ryuji rounded the corner.

“Sup,” he greeted, plopping himself down on the bench opposite them. “Almost had a run in with Kamoshida, but I think the coast is clear, we just gotta keep our voices down. I swear, that bastard hasn’t looked at me like that since track...” At that, there came a rustling from Akiza’s bag, and Morgana’s head popped out.

“Thank goodness, I can breathe! It’s so stuffy in here,” he complained. “So, it sounds like you two are having a rough time with this Kamoshida guy?”

“More’n just us,” Ryuji grumbled. “He makes life suck for way too many people at this school. And no matter what he does, the other teachers won’t do anything about him, just ‘cause he’s some olympic medalist.”

“He gives the school a good reputation,” Ann added. “So they don’t wanna risk driving away their bigshot athletics coach.”

“And do you have any proof you could use against him?” Morgana cocked his head. It wasn’t a sarcastic question, just a genuine inquiry. Ann sighed dejectedly.

“Nothing concrete, no. He just... implies a lot of stuff around me, and I keep having to dodge his advances.” Ryuji, for his money, was more animated.

“Nothin’ that’d stick. He goddamn broke my leg the last time I tried to confront him, that’s why I fell down in the Palace. He called it self-defense so I got in trouble for it. Then he broke up the track team just to rub salt in the wound.”

Morgana thought for a long moment, Akiza watching his feline face scrunch up in contemplating before he spoke again.

“... I might have an idea of how we can change that.” Ann and Ryuji’s responses were mixed; Ryuji furrowed his brow in confusion, while Ann’s eyebrows shot up in disbelief. “That Palace is shaped by his cognition -- the way he imagines the world, subconsciously. If he’s hurting people in the real world...”

"Then he'd be hurting the fake versions of them in the Palace," Akiza finished. Morgana nodded proudly.

"Ohhh, like those prisoners you guys told me about! So all of them are, like, based on real people? Then if we find out who they are, we can confront 'em about it out here and get some real dirt on him!" Ryuji's face lit up, shark's grin splitting his face.

"And maybe more than that," Morgana clarified. "I'm not a hundred percent sure yet, but I'm thinking there might even be more we can do with the Palace. I'll need to scout around the place, though."

"I didn't catch anyone besides Daiki-san..." she said, quietly. "So, what you're saying is we need to go back to that castle." Ann put her chin in her hand, thinking. After a moment, she looked up, face steeled in determination. "Let's do it. I can't let a chance like this pass me by."

"Uh, are ya sure that's a good idea?" Ryuji awkwardly scratched the back of his head. Akiza piped up as well, for the first time in a few minutes.

"You're the only one of us that can't fight. I'd be worried about you getting hurt." Ann shook her head, fixing Akiza with a stern gaze. Her sapphire eyes had turned hard as diamonds.

"I don't care. I've been putting up with his bullshit for too long. I'm coming with you, and you can't stop me."

"You wouldn't have to be entirely defenseless, though." Morgana sat in a way Akiza was already beginning to understand meant 'listen to me.' "The Metaverse being rooted in cognition would give us a lot of advantages. For instance, if we were to bring realistic enough fake weapons in, as long as the Shadows think they're real, they'll work like they are." He butted his head against Akiza's knee as if to indicate her. "Your rapier was as basic as they come, since your awakening just sorta cobbled it together. But if you brought in a physical object, it'd be *much* stronger."

"Yoooo, could we bring in, like, fake guns?" Ryuji was leaning forward, one leg bouncing in excitement, eyes wide. "I know this airsoft place in Shibuya that sells *super* realistic stuff. If we had Personas *and* guns, we'd be unstoppable!"

"Do you know *how* to shoot a gun, Ryuji?" Ann folded her arms, frowning at him. He scratched his head again.

"W-well, uh, not... not specifically, no, but how hard can it be? People do it on TV all the time! A-and it's like Morgana said, it's all about cognition, right? So, like, as long as we act like we know what we're doing, it'll work!" He looked to Morgana with an almost pleading expression, like he was praying that he'd actually understood correctly. Morgana sighed, ears dropping.

“That’s... a crude explanation, but not a *wrong* one. If the Shadows think your gun will fire when you pull the trigger, it will. Ryuji’s idea is solid, you should go stock up so that everybody has a ranged weapon. Including Ann, so she can defend herself if need be.”

“That’s the plan, then,” Akiza decided, looking each of her companions in the eye. “Tomorrow after school, we get geared up, then head back here to investigate the castle. Time passes slower in there, so we won’t be gone too long. Any objections?” Ann and Ryuji met her gaze with firm agreement.

“No question.”

“We’re gonna take this bastard down.”

The second half of the school day passed uneventfully. Morgana had taken to hiding in the storage space under her desk, curled up in the back to avoid detection. All the while, Akiza could only think about what she was getting herself into.

Between the supernatural powers she and Ryuji had shown, plus the existence of the otherworld of the Metaverse, she had to conclude that the dream she’d had that first night was no dream. Igor and Lavenza, they’d called themselves, and they sure sounded like they knew what was going on. She cursed herself for not having asked how to return to the Velvet Room, or how to contact them. Then again, she’d mostly been in shock for that entire visit.

The final bell of the day snapped her out of her contemplation. Morgana scampered back into her bag as she stood, Ann bidding her goodbye, explaining that she was going to see Shiho. Akiza didn’t begrudge her; from what she’d surmised, Shiho sounded like she was in a rough spot. Still, it hurt her a little in a way she couldn’t quite pinpoint to watch Ann walk out of the classroom without her. Before she could leave for the train station, she was stopped by Kawakami.

“Kurusu, I need to talk to you for a second.” Akiza’s mental hackles went up instantly. Did she suspect something already? They hadn’t even been late to class. Perhaps she’d caught sight of Morgana at some point?”

“Um, sure. Is something wrong, Ms. Kawakami?” Despite her internal semi-panic, her voice was moderated and even as always. Lying came almost as easily to Akiza as breathing. Kawakami sighed, looking put-upon as always.

“I saw that you were hanging around with Sakamoto at lunch. I’m warning you not to get too involved with him. He has... something of a reputation around here, and with all the rumors going around regarding your transfer, it wouldn’t be good to get caught up in even more trouble.” Before Akiza could answer, Kawakami was already off, leaving her to stand there in confusion.

Ryuji had a good head on his shoulders, even if he didn't come across as the smartest person in the room. As she was about to round the corner and head down the stairs, she heard a familiar voice. She stopped, leaning casually against the wall and pretending to look at something on her phone.

"I do not foresee it being an issue. The potential gains from this strategy far outweigh the risks." The principal, Akiza recognized, was walking up the stairs and facing away from her. Alongside him was a tall man, with muscular arms and a square jaw.

"But it's already showing signs of being an issue," said the taller man. Akiza bit the inside of her lip, frowning.

That's the same voice as the king, she thought. This must be Kamoshida...

"I simply don't understand why you allowed that transfer student to attend Shujin. First day, and already associating with Sakamoto. A student with a criminal record, and the culprit of an assault cause no less?" He put his hands on his hips, shaking his head. "At this rate, it'll be pointless how much I contribute to this school."

Akiza's eyebrow twitched, and she mentally admonished herself for letting it get to her.

"Now, don't be like that," the principal fretted. "This school depends on you, Kamoshida-kun! You are our star! Still, a steady build-up behind such brilliance can only help us. Think of the goodwill that will come our way when we can report that we have successfully rehabilitated a problem child like that? Not to mention how progressive we will seem."

She clenched her teeth together, fingernails of her free hand digging into her palm.

"Your troubles never seem to end, do they principal Kobayakawa?" Kamoshida chuckled. "Alright, I understand. I'll continue to do my best to answer your expectations, of course."

The dark-haired girl let out a shaky breath, forcing herself to relax as the two men parted ways. They seemed not to have noticed her.

At last, your quarry has been sighted. They make no effort to conceal their motives.

Julie's voice in her head startled her briefly as she proceeded down the stairs. *They make me sick, the both of them. All they care about is reputation. Is that all I am to them? A resource, volatile enough to cost them their reputation, but risky enough to boost their image if I behave?*

It seems that way, chérie. Remember this anger. It will guide your blade when you need it.

She felt Julie fade into the background again. The presence of someone else in her head was... strange, to say the least. She felt herself growing accustomed to it already, however, as she rode the train back to Leblanc.