

Some small part of Akiza had expected getting home to somehow become just as difficult as getting to school had been, but she was thankful to be proven wrong.

Morgana, half-leaning out of Akiza's bag with paws on her shoulder, had helped to formulate a plan to convince Sojiro to let her 'keep' him on the way back. Before arriving at the cafe, she set the bag down and let him hop out near Sojiro's house.

"See you soon," she waved, walking away.

When Akiza stepped through the door to Leblanc, Sojiro was working the grinder in the back. The smell of coffee and curry was fresh, and a few young adults had taken up the bar, talking loudly.

Sojiro had already complained openly about customers a couple times after they'd left in front of her before, so she decided not to add onto anything and just gave a short "I'm back," and got out of the way, heading towards the stairs. For some reason that seemed to surprise the man, but he wasn't in a position to do much more than nod anyways.

The day passed surprisingly fast. For how tired she thought she'd be, taking the cleaning step by step had given her the momentum she needed to keep going. Beneath all the clutter in her room, she'd discovered an impressively well-tooled workbench, and whatever wasn't garbage she tucked away in the small storage area across from the stairs.

Akiza let out a breath, clapping the dust of her hands and placing them on her hips with a smile. The space was finally clean, and only *mostly* looked like an attic. The bare bulbs hanging from the rafters would need some kind of fixture hanging on them eventually, and there wasn't much to do in the space, but it was... nice. Working on a space, and being able to call it hers just felt... nice.

Steps sounded on the stairs, and Sojiro's head poked out. "I'm gonna close up in a sec. You need to use the shower?"

"Yes, thank you!" Akiza chirped, picking up her bag of essentials from its shelf.

"You're in a good mood today, huh?" Sojiro commented as she followed him out the door of the cafe. "School went well then?" She smiled again, taking in a deep breath. She could almost *feel* Julie humming just beneath her skin, and the confidence the Persona filled her with was intoxicating.

"It did! I even made a couple friends." She hummed. "And, there's something nice about a new beginning, even if it's not for the best reasons."

“Well, look at you go, making friends already,” the words seemed to automatically leave his mouth, before he spared her a glance, then turned his attention to the gate of the house. His voice dropped some. “Just, uh, make sure you don’t get mixed up in a bad crowd, alright? That’d be the last thing I need.”

“Don’t worry. They’re good people.” The statement was firm, and positive.

Altogether their exchange had been, Akiza felt, equal parts truth and lies by omission. As much as she hadn’t met Ryuji and Ann under conventional circumstances, they still *had* met, and she was grateful for it. On some level she had simply expected to simply ghost through her year at Shujin, making no real friends and trying to get by unnoticed.

Now she had a friend in her own class.

Even the rumors swirling around her were better than expected, focusing on her criminal record rather than the infinitely worse alternative.

Sojiro let her into the house without needing to clean up this time, and to her delight, after two days she didn’t feel the need to shave her legs.

Akiza and Morgana’s plan worked flawlessly. As they exited Sojiro’s house, Morgana had come ambling around the corner, cocking his head and playing up the ‘cutesy stray cat’ vibe as hard as possible. He’d even gone as far as to trot over to Akiza and butt his head against her shins. Sojiro had folded under exactly zero pressure, allowing Morgana to live with Akiza on the assumption that needing to care for a pet would keep her on her best behavior.

Presently, Akiza padded up to the attic, having already changed into her sleeping clothes, and set her bag on the same shelf again. Morgana had already made himself comfortable at the foot of her bed.

“Gotta say, this place isn’t exactly... glamorous. I’d have thought you were squatting in some abandoned building if I hadn’t seen the cafe downstairs.”

Akiza scoffed, sitting down on the bed and plugging her phone in to charge. “Well excuse me, your imperial majesty, for not having been sent to a five-star hotel as my probation housing.” The not-cat let out a single laugh, and Akiza was struck for the first time at how strange it was to watch a cat’s face emote like a human’s. Or, really, to be talking to a cat at all. She had to put aside all those thoughts for now though.

“I didn’t say I didn’t like it, you know.” Morgana shifted his position, sitting up to face her. “It’s got a cozy feel to it. Plus, living above a cafe? Perfect for a dashing rogue like yourself.”

“C’mon, me? A dashing rogue? *Clearly* I’m a daring duelist. You saw the rapier.” Akiza chuckled as she settled the comforter around her legs before sighing. “So, I have a few questions.”

“Only a few?” Morgana chirped, tilting his head.

“Maybe more. We’ll get to it.” She adjusted, bringing her knees up. “So, what made you change your mind about following me after we left the Palace? And, I guess, why me at all?” The black-and-white cat hopped down from the bed, pacing in a circle as he thought.

“... Your power is unique.” He looked up again after deciding on an answer he liked enough. “On top of having a strong Persona of your own, you can take Shadows into yourself and make them yours. People can’t normally have multiple Personas *period*. That, plus your combat ability makes me optimistic about being able to take down Kamoshida.”

Akiza hummed. There was probably more to Morgana than she’d be able to pick up on for a while. “You said you were investigating the Palace, right? What were you looking for, exactly?”

“Trying to confirm a theory, mostly. I think I’m onto something, but I’ll need to get a better look around when we go back. If I’m right, we might have a real opportunity to do some good.”

“Right. You said something like that earlier, too. How did you even get into the Palace in the first place though? It’s not like you... have a phone?” It felt like a stupid question before she’d even finished, but if there were other ways to get to places like that, it was probably worth asking.

“Uh, no, I don’t have a phone,” he answered. “I was already in the Metaverse, so I just found a way in there.”

“Are you from there, then? The Metaverse, I mean.”

Morgana paused, almost frowning.

“I... don’t know. Not exactly, anyways. I know I was born in the Metaverse, but I can’t remember where, or who created me.” The cat looked back up at her, determination in his feline eyes.

“That’s why I was investigating the Metaverse. If I’m gonna find out who I am, it’s gonna be in there.”

Akiza considered everything so far. Reading a cat was different to reading a person, and she didn’t really have a good bead on him yet anyways. Instinct told her he *probably* wasn’t lying and, so far, it all seemed pretty straight-forward, which was surprising given how easy it would have been to not say anything at all, or just make up something else that was completely believably unbelievable.

“And,” he continued. “I think we both have a better shot at getting what we want if we stick together. You wanna take down Kamoshida, and I wanna know who I am. So if you agree to shelter me, I’ll teach you how to make tools for infiltrations. Deal?”

“... Tools?” Akiza tilted her head, blindsided by the change in direction.

“Lockpicks, smoke bombs, that kind of thing. They’ll come in handy as we explore more of the Palace,” he paused, tail swishing in what was probably anticipation. “So, do we have a deal or not?”

The dark-haired girl extended a hand to the side, patting a spot at her side, which Morgana leapt to quickly. “Deal.”

He actually *meowed* with excitement, and eagerly placed his paw in her hand and shook.

The soft notes of a piano filled her ears, and Akiza awoke to the unearthly air of a place she barely knew.

Sitting up took effort, but it gave her time to remember everything that had been said two nights ago. For how real it felt, Akiza wondered if the Velvet Room actually existed somewhere, despite Igor’s words. There was a weight in her pocket, which she felt to be the keyring Lavenza had given her. Again, there were no words until she got up, and began to step towards the open door of her cell.

“Welcome back,” Lavenza smiled softly. “You’ve had an eventful day, hm?”

“*Indeed*,” Igor supplied, still sitting at that desk, rolling a hand casually in her direction. Akiza wondered if he ever got up. The man leaned onto his elbows, a long finger pointed upwards. “It would seem your contract has been signed as predicted, and in return you have awoken to a rather rare power.”

“Personas, you mean?” Akiza walked into the open. The air felt different somehow out there. It was easier to think, maybe? Definitely less claustrophobic, at any rate.

“The very same,” he began. “And one more ability. It is among the most unique of gifts, available only to one such as yourself.” The man paused, and smiled without malice. “A time of considerable change is upon you, and though it is not without its dangers both mundane and magical, you are determined to manifest as the truest form of yourself. There is a truth in your heart, and it is one you know well. This potential for change, both within yourself and for others, has earned you the title of ‘Wild Card’.”

“Personas are the strength of heart,” Lavenza elaborated. “The greater the understanding is between yourself and others, the stronger your Personas will become. *My* task is to manifest those bonds as power - available to be assigned and used however you see fit.”

I’m a ‘Wild Card’ in this game, then... Akiza thought. “I’m not sure I understand... are you saying *I’m* the reason Ryuji got his own Persona? Or, is he a Wild Card too?”

Igor gestured subtly. “As you already know, the power of Persona is not unique to you. The precise workings of the heart, and more, I believe, will become clear to you in time. There are those who have been robbed of their place to belong, and in having already formed a partnership with others so similarly burdened, I have come to possess faith you will be able to arrive at your own answers.”

Such specific phrasing...

It was hard to tell where the line between what they’d be willing to answer and what they wouldn’t - or couldn’t - was. So Akiza turned her attention to a more immediate concern. She could still feel Julie within her, even here. But, she could also feel Pixie. Julie *was* her, in a way, she knew. Was Pixie not? The other Persona had to be, to be a part of her in the same way, didn’t it? Akiza tilted her head towards Lavenza. “What about the other Persona I have, the one I picked up in the Palace?”

Lavenza began to turn through the pages of her book. Akiza was close enough to make out diagrams, and what were probably words beside them, although they weren’t in any language she knew. “The Persona Pixie belongs to... No, there’s no need to complicate things just yet.”

She closed the book, then looked up. “Suffice to say, part of your gift as a Wild Card is the ability to understand others. From the sea of human souls, there are many who would fight by your side, and though Pixie is not *your* Persona, it is one of the many you are capable of housing, and will remain among the myriad you may possess at any time.”

Igor nodded once, and Akiza could feel the same distortion from before beginning to set in. “Well said. And with that, I believe our business for the night is concluded. Continue devoting yourself to your journey, and we will meet again soon enough.”

Akiza could just barely hear Lavenza over her alarm. “Until next time, Trickster.”

“...until next time.” she managed.

After waking up, Akiza realized two things in sequence. The first was that she was grateful going to the Velvet Room had nothing to do with her being sick before (for as mixed a bag as that was), and that she was also grateful to not be sick at all that morning. The second was that she had once again forgotten to ask how to get back to the Velvet Room.

Cursing didn't really change anything, since it sounded like these meetings only happened on *their* schedule, but still, it helped at least a little.

The whole thing mattered less after a breakfast of coffee and curry courtesy of Sojiro, which still surprised her to see, and probably would for a while to come. During breakfast, Akiza managed to scroll through a few primers on airsoft guns on her phone. From the way Ryuji had described the place, it sounded like an enthusiast shop, and she wasn't one for being caught out not knowing what she was talking about.

Not a single piece of that forward thinking saved her, however, when she arrived at school, and managed to trip on the first stair of the school building. Akiza let out a yelp, and was halfway to the pavement before a hand caught her wrist, hoisting her back to her feet. She stumbled, shaking her head before a cheery voice piped up next to her.

"Oh, I'm sorry to have grabbed you so suddenly! It's just, you know, you had tripped and I was right there and I just sort of leaped without thinking--"

"Hey, hey, slow down! It's okay, I think I'm supposed to be the one, apologizing--? Er, no, I mean, neither of us are supposed to be... apologizing?" Akiza's eyes fell onto the girl who had helped her, also dressed in the Shujin uniform. The redhead (almost cherry-colored, even) was shorter than her, hair tied back into a ponytail by a bright red ribbon. The other girl jittered with nervous energy for a moment before calming down, suddenly looking far more composed than her voice led on.

"Oh, maybe, but it's no trouble at all! You're a Shujin student too, after all. I merely did what I could. You're a second-year, correct?" She looked down at Akiza's lapel, noting the little "2" pinned there. "I'm a first-year myself, and I couldn't just let my senpai hurt herself!" It was like a never-ending combo, and Akiza felt like she may as well have still been falling.

"Ah. Well, um, thank you! I, ah, really appreciate it."

"Of course! I need to be getting to class, so, please excuse me!" With that, the girl bowed courteously and hurried into the building.

It wasn't until lunch-time that Akiza realized she hadn't managed to get the cherry-haired girl's name. She paused halfway through a bite. "...Why am I so bad at asking follow-up questions?" Ann asked what that was about, but Akiza dismissed it. It didn't seem that important.

Akiza, Ryuji, Ann, and Morgana idled near the entrance to a side street of Shibuya's main drag to establish their plan. The students took turns changing out of their uniforms in the station to avoid drawing any unnecessary attention, and Akiza whispered thanks to any gods listening that the underground mall had gender-neutral bathrooms.

Ryuji spoke up first when they got back together. "Okay, so, the guy behind the counter is kinda rough-lookin', and I hear he's not super friendly to casuals. How much do we know about airsoft guns?" Morgana, half out of Akiza's bag and leaning his front paws on her shoulder, groaned at his question.

"*Seriously?* We came here specifically to buy guns and you don't even know the first thing about them!? What kind of operation do you think we're *running here?*"

"Hey, easy, it's fine." Akiza quickly defused the situation, seeing Ryuji rise to Morgana's comment, scratching behind Morgan's ears and earning a purr as she spoke. "I did a little bit of research this morning, so just let me talk to him. Plus, I'm good at lying in case I have to."

Ann's arms were crossed. "Are you sure? We can't exactly go somewhere else if we screw up here. There's probably not a lot other airsoft shops in Japan that'd sell to students."

"Remember how I covered for you yesterday morning?" Akiza's grin was a self-satisfied curve across her face. "Trust me, I can lie." Ann nodded, breathing deeply.

"Okay. I trust you." She gave that little smile again, and all the smug melted off Akiza's grin.

"Wait, what am I doing?" Morgana asked.

"Oh, right. You..." Akiza frowned. "Should probably stay in the bag. Once we're established customers, I don't think he'll care about us bringing a cat around, but for now, just stay in the bag." Morgana frowned. "Please?"

She didn't know a cat could look so put-upon. "Alright. But I want to be a part of things like this, alright?"

"Of course." Akiza scratched the definitely-not-a-cat behind the ears some more, which continued to work surprisingly well, and then only mostly zipped up the bag.

A moment later, she pushed open the door of 'Untouchable'.

The store's interior was lit exactly well enough by a few fluorescent lights. Shelves were packed close together, leaving little wiggle room but giving plenty to look at, and the lack of natural light made the space feel even tighter. It wasn't just guns that were on display, but jackets and

helmets and survival kits too. Akiza wondered if making sure none of it could be looked at under good lighting helped make any sales.

Behind the counter was a surly looking man with gray hair and matching eyes that were mostly covered by the brim of his hat. Stubble crawled across his jaw, and along the side of his neck was a simple tattoo of a lizard. It almost felt right, seeing what was probably the owner of a place like this, with his boots propped up on the counter. The man kept looking at his magazine, and was either real good at pretending not to have noticed them, or genuinely hadn't cared.

Akiza made space for the others, then spent a moment gathering herself before approaching the counter. She knocked on the glass counter/case-top once, smiled politely as the man's eyes flicked up to her, and started her search for all the little tells.

"Hi there," she began, tone straight-forward and just a little cheery. "We heard this store was the place to go for realistic stuff. Got any recommendations?"

The man's brow tightened, and there was a little twitch at the corner of his lip. Somewhere between annoyed and curious, maybe?

"... Realistic, huh? You a collector? Don't get many women comin' into my shop."

Akiza heard Ann shuffle behind her, and hoped the blonde wasn't already getting anxious.

Oh god, please just let me handle th--

"We're enthusiasts!" Ann blurted out. "Our normal place hasn't been getting good stuff in lately, s-so, we're looking to branch out!"

Fuck.

"What she *means* is," Akiza cut in, before he could respond to Ann's stilted acting voice. "We were told you were the best in terms of authenticity. We wanna see if we were told right."

The owner's gaze shifted back to her, holding for a moment before breaking into a grin. Maybe he was just eager to cut a deal, but the smile suddenly felt shockingly genuine.

"Well why didn't you say so? I'm always glad to help out some fresh faces." He set his magazine aside, standing up in front of them, and it was then that Akiza was struck by how *tall* the guy was. Easily four or five inches on her, she guessed. "We gotta lay down some ground rules before that, though. First, don't go pointin' em at people. Keep 'em in a bag if you're outside. And," he added, shifting his gaze between the three of them. "Don't let the fuzz catch wind of you havin' em. Don't need 'em comin' around here."

"Don't worry about that!" Ryuji slung his arm over Akiza's shoulder, and despite her immense frustration at them ignoring her instructions, the friendly gesture overrode that, and pulled a begrudging smile onto her face. "We hate the cops!"

Please.

"...Right." The owner stared at Ryuji, and she could *feel* the blond's awkwardness pouring off him without even looking. He turned his gaze back to Akiza. "I'll go get the beginner selection. You three sit tight." As the shopkeep left into the store's backroom, Ryuji pulled away from Akiza, nudging her with his elbow and speaking in a hushed tone.

"Nice going! You totally convinced him!"

"Yeah, you are *really* good at this," added Ann. "Sorry for, uh, jumping in back there. This guy's pretty intimidating, so I just kinda freaked..."

"Don't worry about it," Akiza said with an easy smile. "We got there, didn't we?"

Almost immediately after saying that, Akiza wondered if the owner might have heard all that through a hidden camera, but it seemed to not matter at all when he actually came back with a binder full of laminated papers and a small case.

The three of them huddled around it, and he pulled the case open to reveal a replica handgun made of a dark, reflective material. He offered it handle-first to Akiza, who took it carefully in one hand. The fake firearm was heavier than it looked, and if it weren't right in front of her, she could have easily mistaken it for a real gun.

"Is this weighted?" She asked, feeling the way it sat in her hand. Her fingers curled around the grip, index finger resting naturally away from the trigger. The man nodded.

"That's right. Makes it feel more real. Cheap fakes are just plastic, but my stuff's higher quality than that."

"I can tell," she said appreciatively, setting the gun back into its case.

"So, uh, what else you got? Besides pistols?" Ryuji looked up to the man, who opened up the binder; full of page after page of images of replicas. Her knowledge didn't stretch very far, but to her they looked as real as any of the props she'd seen on movies and TV. Ryuji and Ann started talking to each other about their options while Akiza's eyes drifted past the owner's shoulder.

"... You sell slingshots?" One eyebrow quirked as she eyed the tools hanging up on the wall. He gave a single, short laugh.

"Yeah, I sell a few models. Medieval reenactors love that kinda stuff. Why, you interested?"

Akiza grinned, thinking of a certain not-cat in her bag.

Akiza, Ann, and Ryuji sat atop the discarded desks on the school rooftop, shouldering their bags stuffed with replica firearms. Akiza's pistol sat in her bag next to Morgana's slingshot, while Ryuji and Ann had sprung for a shotgun and a submachine gun. Akiza, Ryuji, and Morgana had also picked up a new rapier, baseball bat, and saber respectively; carried in the kind of tubes couriers used, courtesy of Untouchable's owner.

Morgana stood at their feet, eyeing them up.

"You three ready to do this? Remember, it's your lives on the line in there. Don't do anything reckless, follow my lead, and you'll be okay."

"We *gotcha*, don't worry about us!" Ryuji waved it off, practically vibrating with excitement. Akiza would be lying if she denied being excited as well, and was practically itching to feel that power coursing through her again.

Careful, chérie.

Don't worry. I know what this power's for.

"I'm ready," Ann voiced, full of determination. The fingers gripping the strap of her bag were white-knuckled. "We have to do this."

Akiza met each of their gazes, phone in hand, and nodded once. She tapped the sole option: *Castle of Lust*, and the world warped around them. Ripples pulsed across her vision, and before long they were standing at the castle's drawbridge again.

Guess we always start here, then...

Akiza sucked in a breath, grinning as the power returned, and smiled a little wider at her 'rebel attire'. The new rapier sat comfortably in a sheath on her hip, while a holster had automatically appeared to house her handgun on the other hip.

"Man, I forgot how good this feels!" Ryuji stretched, and Akiza's eyes couldn't help but be drawn to the form-fitting nature of his leathers for a moment. She shook her head, refocusing as Ann looked over her SMG.

"This thing feels even *realer* now..." The blonde marveled as she hefted it in her hands, testing the aim.

“That’s because as far as the Metaverse is concerned, it is.” Morgana piped up from below, not even bothering to test his new equipment. “Be mindful of your ammo. We only come in with a set amount, and we won’t be able to restock in here.”

“So don’t fire unless you know you’re gonna land the shot,” Akiza reinforced, stretching out and getting ready. “Sounds like a plan. Are we getting in the same way we got out?”

“That’s right. Keep your wits about you. We don’t know what’s hidden in the depths of this place yet. Mm, and one more thing.” Morgana drew himself up, and regarded Ryuji in particular. “The other day, that Kamoshida guy gave you an unusual look, right?”

“Uh, yeah,” he answered. “Why, s’t that bad?”

“It could be. Remember, a Palace is a manifestation of the Ruler’s subconscious. If we keep causing trouble without avoiding notice, and *especially* if we end up in a direct confrontation the way you three did, he could start to recognize you as threats in the real world too.”

Ann frowned. “So we just have to get really good at all the stealth stuff before that happens?”

Morgana’s serious expression turned almost instantly into an excited grin. “So long as you follow my lead, you’ll be experts in no time. But even *with* all my tricks under your belts, there’s still something every thief should have...”

They all leaned in.

“Code names!”

“Code names?” Ryuji repeated, suddenly sharing in that excitement. “Oh, oh, I wanna be something badass! Like, Pirate, or Head-Smasher!”

Ann sighed. “Can it really be a code name if it’s just what you are? We’re supposed to be, like, undercover, right?”

Akiza pointed a finger. “And Head-Smasher’s way too long anyways. Er, not to bring down the enthusiasm.”

“The girls are right,” Morgana piled in. “Think of your code name as a symbol, in the same way your Persona is.”

“How about Skull?” Ann smiled an entirely warm smile. “After that thick head of yours? It goes twice as far now, too.” She pointed to the mask.

“Skull, huh?” He tested the name, nodding afterwards. “Skull. Yeah, that kicks enough ass.”

“What about you?” Akiza turned to Morgana.

“Well... what do you think it should be? Mine isn’t as important.”

“Well, it can’t be ‘cat’,” she teased. He put both paws on his hips.

“Ugh, come on, take this seriously.”

“I am being serious.”

Ryuji racked the bat along his shoulders with one hand. “How about, uh, Scarf? Or Bandana? You know, like your mask.” Morgana huffed.

“Three syllables is still too long.”

Ryuji frowned. “Then *you* come up with a one syllable word,” he said, pronouncing it ‘syl-able’.

“Forget it, we’ll come back to it,” Akiza defused. “We should definitely come up with one for Ann, since she doesn’t even have a mask or anything yet.”

“Oh!” She put both hands out. “I’ve been thinking about that. How about Clover?” She turned around, and pointed a painted thumb at the symbol on her hoodie. “At least, until I get a cool outfit like yours.”

“I like it!” Morgana chirped.

Wait, but that’s two syllables too. “Then for me... I think you can call me Joker,” her smile was wide, lips thin. “I *am* a Wild Card, after all.”

The others seemed to like it, but Morgana’s expression became sort of... mixed. Whatever it was disappeared quickly, though. It took a lot longer than anyone really liked to get a code name Morgana could agree with, and eventually they settled on Mona, not that she could remember exactly *how* they got there, just that the name wasn’t too long, and only barely related to him.

In the end, Morgana-- *Mona*, delivered a briefing again to get them back into the right mood. And when he took the lead, they followed with wordless glances, Clover putting up her hood in the place of a mask, and the four of them set off to begin their next infiltration.

Just like before, besides the exits and entrances, the dungeons almost weren’t guarded at all. Past a certain point, there weren’t even any Shadows guarding the doors.

“Kamoshida has no reason to believe that the prisoners already here can escape,” Mona had explained. “So why would he need to guard the place?”

Joker found herself oddly at home with the idea of holding Shadows at gunpoint. Mona had walked them through a holdup at one point, preying on a Shadow far from any possible allies. She had unmasked the thing and quickly subdued the Jack-o’-Lantern that emerged from it, pressing the muzzle of her handgun to its pumpkin head, and to her credit it only took a few seconds to banish the almost cartoonish idea of splattered pumpkin before getting serious again.

The Shadow had given up the directions to the deep dungeons easily, before being assimilated into Joker’s mask just like Pixie had.

“Yeesh, you were *scary* good at that,” Skull said as they pressed onwards. “You were like, stone-cold! ‘Tell us how to get further down or I’ll kill you right now’ is like, action movie shit!”

Joker flushed red, rubbing the back of her neck with her free hand. “I-It was just an act. I honestly don’t know where all that came from, it just... sorta happened.”

“Well, you’re certainly good at running holdups,” chirped Mona from ahead of them. “You looked like an old pro.”

“Hey, don’t call a girl old!” Clover’s voice was indignant, but her teasing grin belied the joke. Joker smiled, both at the joke *and* at the other girl’s intention. Mona merely harrumphed and peeked around the corner before beckoning them to follow as he scampered down the hallway.

The doorway ahead of them seemed to almost *wobble* as Joker looked at it, becoming slightly see-through every so often. Looking straight at it filled the edges of her vision with a kind of static, and she found herself shaking her head to clear it away.

“What *is* this thing?” She wondered aloud as Mona pushed the door open.

“It’s a safe room! Come inside, check it out!”

True to its name, the safe room carried an almost potently relaxing atmosphere. Despite how hard she’d had to think about replacing real names with code names, it felt safe to say otherwise here. The moment they’d settled in, it was as if a weight had been lifted off their shoulders.

Morgana’s explanation for why that was, and why the room occasionally waved over to looking like a classroom again, was brief and to the point. In short, it was a place where Shadows wouldn’t think to look, and they were free to rest.

Ann exhaled a prayer of thanks, setting her SMG down and fanning her hair out again before taking a seat. "Thank god, I SO need a break right now." The other two teens mumbled an agreement while taking up seats across the table. Akiza pushed her mask up to her forehead as she glanced at Morgana.

"So, how're we doing?"

"Not too bad," Morgana hummed. "We're nearly to the dungeons again, so we can head out after a few minutes of rest."

"Ugh, I'm freakin' starving!" Ryuji pivoted to straddle the bench, stretching his right leg out across the surface and massaging his calf. He flashed Akiza that proud grin again before digging into his pockets. "Good thing I brought snacks!" The blond flung his hands onto the table between them, placing down four slightly-squished granola bars, a packet of roasted nuts, and a crumpled pocky box. Ann quirked an eyebrow at him.

"Okay, first question. You brought food? Second question, why *this* food?" Ryuji pushed his mask up his forehead, folding his arms and *harrumph*-ing.

"I-I brought stuff that's good for keeping your energy up! Like, the stuff I used for track practice! That's good, right?" He turned his eyes to Akiza, seemingly searching for some kind of agreement that she simply didn't know how to provide. Thankfully, Morgana piped up.

"He's right, actually." The creature reached for one of the granola bars, trying in vain to fumble open its seal with his paws. "This is another way that cognition affects the Metaverse. Because you think this stuff helps give you energy, it does." He devolved into growling noises then, having managed to pin the bar between his paws and attempting to rip the top off with his teeth. Akiza couldn't help grinning. It would have been easy enough for anyone to help him, but Morgana hadn't asked. There was probably some pride on the line.

Just like a cat... Akiza thought, grabbing one of the remaining bars and taking a bite for herself.

"... huh." With every bite, she could *feel* the energy returning to her. The taste hadn't changed at all, chocolate and salty, but somehow eating just one bar had felt as good as taking an hour-long nap. Going by the grin on his face, Ryuji was having the same experience.

"Ha! I was right! They *do* help!" He tossed the wrapper onto the table and folded his arms, and it was hard not to laugh a little at how triumphant he looked. Luckily, no one seemed to take offense. Ann was curiously picking at the pack of peanuts, and Morgana had finally succeeded in ripping the granola bar open, at the cost of mangling the poor thing even further.

"I'm not getting much here," Ann remarked. "Is it just the granola bars?"

"It's probably because you don't have a Persona," Morgana wiped a smudge of chocolate off the corner of his mouth while explaining. "Personas use a certain type of energy that non-Persona users can't normally access. It'd be impossible for me to tell you what *all* the stuff you could bring in here would do, but Ryuji's line of thinking will go a long way in keeping us prepared for anything the Metaverse can throw at us. Medicine follows a similar example too. Painkillers can even close up wounds in here, so we should stock up on some before our next mission. Healing magic isn't a fix-all."

"Add it to the list," Akiza noted, flicking over to the growing document on her phone. "Stockpile medication for extradimensional stealth missions. Man, city life is weird."

That earned her a chuckle from the blondes at the table.

"So, you're from the country then?" Ann leaned her elbow on the table, catching her chin and tilting her head to one side. "What brought you to Tokyo?"

Akiza hesitated for a brief instant before she spoke.

"Yeah. I'm from a little town way out in the sticks. Like, 'one gas station in the whole town' little." She wondered if her breathing was noticeable. "As for the transfer... I needed a change of scenery. Some stuff went down that it was best I got away from."

"Is it about the rumors of you havin' a criminal record?" Ryuji's question was innocent. Six eyes fixed on her.

Deflect, or tell them the truth? One was definitely easier...

Do you trust them, chérie?

"...Yeah. It's all bullshit, though." Her gaze fixed on a knot in the wood of the table as she recounted the story. The cries for help, the intervention, the assault charge, and the false testimony. The words came easier than she ever thought they could. Ryuji and Ann looked scandalized, and the former spoke first.

"And your parents just threw you under the bus and sent you off on your own? What the hell!" He slammed his fist on the table, eliciting a yelp from Morgana and causing him to jump. "That's such bullshit!"

"Ryuji's right, I can't believe they just believed the cops! Parents are supposed to stick up for their kids! Ugh..." Ann sighed, taking in a deep breath to steady herself. "Well, join the Shujin rumor mill, I guess. Sorry to have to welcome you." The three of them shared another laugh, and Akiza felt the smile on her face reaching up to her eyes.

"Hey, misery loves company. I'd rather be here than in jail." She managed.

Ryuji snorted, clapping her on the shoulder. "Well, we're glad to have ya. You ain't alone at that school as long as I'm around."

"That goes for me, too," Ann chirped. "We got your back, so don't let the rumors get to you."

Akiza's smile widened further, and she let out another laugh.

"Thanks, guys."

The remainder of the expedition had been relatively uneventful. Morgana's assumption that the deep dungeons wouldn't be heavily guarded either was correct, and they faced minimal resistance working their way deeper in. Ryuji and Ann worked together to list off names of the captives, and Akiza dutifully took them down for later. Save one brief mishap with Ann sending out a panicked spray of her SMG, the infiltration went off without a hitch, and by the time they emerged, it was nearly five o'clock.

"Damn, we were in there longer than I thought we'd be." Ryuji arched his back, feeling a few satisfying pops as they debriefed on the rooftop. "So, what's the plan now?"

"You know these students better than I do," Akiza put forward. "I'll send the list to the group chat so you can plan out who you want to talk to tomorrow. The volleyball rally's taking up most of the afternoon, so we'll have some time to look around for potential victims."

"Some of these guys used to be on the track team, right? Ryuji, do you wanna try them?" Ann looked up from her phone at him, but the blond shook his head.

"Proolly not," he said resignedly. "Most of 'em still think of me as the guy who ruined the track team. They probably wouldn't talk to me if I tried."

"From what I understand, the track team breakup happened a while ago." Morgana was perched atop the HVAC unit next to the desks, flopped over and lounging in the sun. "The abuse of the volleyball team is ongoing though, right? We should focus on them."

"I think Morgana's right," Akiza said, then turned to Ann. "Do you know any of Suzui-san's teammates? Maybe they know what's going on."

Ann frowned. "Not really. Plus, we didn't see any of the girls' volleyball team in those dungeons. It was all guys."

Ryuji grimaced. "...D'you think it has something to do with that 'playroom' shit Kamoshida was talkin' about the first time we met him?" Akiza grimaced at the memory too, and she saw Ann do the same.

"Is he assaulting the girls' volleyball team?" Ann's voice was barely above a whisper. The background noise of students still hanging out beneath them felt downright oppressive in that moment. Akiza's mouth set to a hard line.

"If he is, that's all the more reason to put a stop to his bullshit as soon as we can." She turned to Ann, meeting her troubled gaze with her own steel. "Do you think Suzui-san would know?"

"M-maybe," Ann answered after a moment, unsure of the words leaving her mouth. Or maybe, just afraid of the implications if they were true. "I can try to ask her tomorrow."

"That's the plan, then." Morgana hopped down onto the desk between the three of them, stretching out his legs. "Ann and Akiza investigate the girls team through Suzui, while Ryuji checks out the boys team. We reconvene after school to compare our findings and make our next move accordingly."

Akiza's eyes moved between her companions. Ann and Ryuji's faces were painted with troubled expressions. Ann was fiddling with the end of her pigtail in one hand and chewing on her lip, while Ryuji stared at the desk with enough force to burn a hole through it, leg bouncing restlessly.

"Hey," Akiza said, getting their attention again. "I know it's tough to think about the stuff Kamoshida's getting away with, but that's why we have to put a stop to it. We'll get through this, together, and make everyone's lives at this school better. Right?" She placed one hand in the center of the desk between them, raising her eyebrows with the question. The blondes stared at her for a moment before Ryuji put his hand in.

"Yeah. For everyone this bastard ever stepped on." Ann put her hand in soon after.

"Count me in for sure. We're gonna get that proof and nail him to the wall."

"We're in agreement, then." Morgana placed a paw atop the others' hands, and the four of them shared confident grins, impossible to hide their excited determination.

"Let's give him hell." Akiza pushed her hand down, and the others followed suit, pulling theirs up and away with smiles on their faces.

Like a real team, Akiza thought.