

Our Revels

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/11838468) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/11838468>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Persona 5
Relationship:	Kurusu Akira/Nijijima Makoto
Character:	Kurusu Akira , Nijijima Makoto , Morgana (Persona 5) , Takamaki Ann , Okumura Haru
Stats:	Published: 2017-08-18 Chapters: 3/? Words: 10811

Our Revels

by [PixieRed](#)

Summary

After successfully stealing Okumura's heart, the Phantom Thieves face a new type of palace.

On Hiatus until after Makoto's Lies is done.

Crossposted from ffnet.

Chapter 1

Morgana trotted through the alleys of Yongen-jaya, his feet lightly treading fence tops and window sills. This late at night there were few lights from the buildings. The ward was instead cast in the glow of the moon. Akira had long since gone to sleep, resting up for the big group party the following day. It had been a while since Morgana had last gone exploring in Yongen-jaya. He rarely indulged, thinking the act too "cat"-like, but this night he felt the overwhelming urge.

"Here kitty kitty kitty." A man's voice was calling.

Hmph, thought Morgana, continuing to lightly pad along a fence. *As if I would respond to that.*

"Here kitty kitty kitty." The voice called again. Morgana refused to acknowledge it.

After a pause, the voice spoke again. "I know how you can become human."

Morgana stopped and looked up, his eyes glowing in the moonlight and his ears twitching, attempting to locate the voice's owner.

"Here kitty kitty kitty."

Fireworks punctuated the Phantom Thieves' party at Destinyland. Akira watched as the colors lit his friends' happy faces. Ryuji, Ann, and Futaba had really gotten into the Land of Dreams, wearing festive headbands and fighting like kids. Makoto and Yusuke both seemed to be mesmerized by the sights. Haru seemed to be enjoying playing host, though the party was in her honor. Even Morgana, who had been acting strange as of late, was enjoying the festivities.

"Hey, isn't it almost time?" Ann checked her phone. "You know, for the press conference."

The rest of the Phantom Thieves followed suit, taking out their own phones to watch Haru's father's change of heart. The elder Okumura admitted to the working conditions throughout the Okumura conglomerate and took full responsibility. He also admitted to requesting hits on competitors. While the media had long been aware of the simmering labor scandal, the use of such aggressive tactics was new information. The press bombarded Okumura with questions.

The Phantom Thieves stared into their phones, flummoxed.

"It looks like Okumura didn't know who he was contracting," Morgana frowned.

"Awww, this means we're back to square one!" Ryuji was clearly frustrated.

"Worse yet," said Makoto. "This is going to drive whoever *is* behind the shutdowns to change their tactics."

Each student looked down across the remains of their dinner.

"Oh! We should still celebrate," Makoto said quickly. "Conditions are going to improve for numerous workers... and I'm really relieved for Haru."

"Thank you," Haru said meekly.

"Aw yeah, we did good," said Ryuji. He held up his phone. "The Phan-Site is already buzzin' with our success. Look how popular we are now. Just cuz we don't got a lead on the mental shutdowns,

doesn't mean we can't help people."

"Definitely!" Haru smiled.

"We should give the Phan-Site a few days to stabilize, then see if it has any leads," said Makoto.

Akira nodded in agreement. "In the mean time, Futaba, can you look into whoever Okumura could have been contracting?"

"Mmmm, I've been trying, but maybe this is the plot point I need to level up!"

Just then, a large amount of popping interrupted the group. The grand finale of the fireworks show had begun. The Phantom Thieves looked up as bursts of color and light took over the sky. Akira looked over at Makoto and watched the different hues light her face. He lingered a little too long as she noticed, turning towards him. Her expression was momentarily questioning, but soon became a reassuring smile before returning to the firework display.

The Phantom Thieves adjourned shortly thereafter. Individual black cars, each attended by a driver in a suit, were waiting for them in the park's large horseshoe entranceway. Haru really lived in a different world than the rest of them.

As Akira moved to get into one of the cars, he felt a tug at his sleeve. It was Haru.

"I know this wasn't the ideal outcome," Haru said, looking down and to the side before turning to him. "But it really meant a lot to me. I have my father and my future back. So, thank you, both of you."

With that, Haru kissed Akira on the cheek and Morgana on his forehead. She smiled sweetly and then rushed off to her own private car. Akira stared for a moment, placing his hand on his cheek.

"Attention class, we have a new transfer student," Ms. Kawakami stood at the front of the classroom next to a boy in a Shujin uniform. His long black hair was tied in a ponytail at the nape of his neck with a gold ribbon. The boy had an confident, yet easy-going smile and wore his jacket open over the standard white turtleneck.

"I'm Kurusu Jin, nice to meet you," the student bowed politely.

The class immediately started murmuring.

"Kurusu? Do you think they're related? They look similar."

"Why is he transferring so late in the year?"

"Look at his eyes. Is he a foreigner?"

"Right before midterms? Bad luck."

"He looks like Kurusu with better hair."

Upon hearing the last comment, Akira toyed with the lock of hair that hung between his eyes. The new student was either gifted with straight hair or used a lot of product.

"That's not the only difference," Morgana offered. "He also doesn't need glasses and is taller than you."

Akira frowned at the cat. Ann turned and looked at him, her question obvious on her face. Akira shrugged.

"That's enough," Ms. Kawakami quieted the class. She turned to Kurusu Jin. "Why don't you take that open seat over there, next to Takamaki-san."

Turning to Ann as he took his seat, the new student smiled even more charmingly. He took her hand into his and kissed her finger tips. Ann seemed to be taken aback by his forwardness. The rest of the class burst into chatter again.

"Oh of course it's always Takamaki."

"His funeral."

"I'm not giving up!"

The transfer student then turned to Akira. "It seems we have the same name, so please call me Jin."

"He's not afraid of Kurusu?"

"He's so weird!"

"I'm still not giving up!"

"I said that's enough," Ms. Kawakami reiterated, louder. "Now everyone turn to page 347..."

"Each class needs to fill out this form as confirmation of their festival activity," Makoto told her fellow student council members. "Check if the class representatives are still here. If not, place the form in their homeroom teacher's box. Wada, you do the first years. Hasegawa, you do the third years. I'll take the second years."

"Wouldn't it make more sense for me to do the second years?" asked Hasegawa, being a second year herself.

"This is a great chance to introduce yourself to the third year teachers," Makoto's smile communicated that Hasegawa would be sorry if she pressed it further.

The three students exited the student council office. Wada and Hasegawa took off immediately. Makoto paused for a moment, overhearing the students gossiping in the hallway. News of the transfer student had spread fast and rumors even faster. Some were sure he was a relative of Akira's, sent to keep him out of further trouble. Some claimed he had princess-carried Ann off during lunch. Some suggested he was from an exotic European country. Some were sure the Kurusu family had something to do with the yakuza. Absolutely no one suggested he was just some regular guy with the same family name.

"Maaa-Kooo-Chan~" Haru snuck up behind Makoto, poking both sides of her waist.

"Kyaa!"

"You're so cute!" Haru giggled and then looked at the print-outs Makoto was holding. "Whatcha doing?"

"These are forms for the school festival," Makoto tried to brush off her earlier lack of grace. "I need to take these to the second year representatives."

"I see," said Haru. "I'll come with. I want to see the new transfer student."

Haru followed Makoto to the second floor. Makoto had planned to quickly handle class 2-A first, but Haru stopped at the 2-B windows, looking in.

"He really does look like Akira," Haru said excitedly. "Though... he looks more like Akira does in the Metaverse."

Makoto looked through the window. Haru was right. The new student had that same air of confidence that Akira only let show among Phantom Thieves.

"Come on, let's go in and say hi!" Haru's enthusiasm was infectious. It was a wonder she could put on such a face given her father was likely facing conspiracy charges. Makoto sighed and pulled the class 2-B form from her stack.

When Makoto and Haru entered the room, the class representative was discussing class policies with the transfer student. Akira and Ann were still in their seats. Ryuji had joined them, sitting across from Ann. He was already wearing his gym uniform, having started running with the track team on occasion, though not joining them as he prioritized his work with the Phantom Thieves.

"He seems suspicious," Ryuji said, his eyes falling on the transfer student.

"Shhhh," said Ann.

"Hey Makoto, Haru," Ryuji noticed the third years first. "Come to see the transfer student?"

"I'm here on student council business." "Yes." Makoto and Haru spoke simultaneously.

Haru turned to Akira. "Are you sure you're not related?"

Akira pinched the bridge of his nose and appeared to be thinking for a moment before shaking his head.

"Ah Akira, Ann, are these your friends?" the transfer student approached them. "I'm Kurusu Jin—please call me Jin."

As Jin reached for Makoto's hand, Akira put his own hand on the new student's forearm. "That's a little out of place here."

Makoto looked at Akira curiously before turning to Jin. "I'm Niijima Makoto. I'm president of the student council. Welcome to Shujin Academy."

"Thank you," Jin smiled. He was charming as described.

"You'll have to pardon me, I need to speak with Watanabe-san," Makoto excused herself. As she walked across the classroom, she overheard Haru and Ryuji introducing themselves. A few girls in the class were looking on. The new student was certainly flashy, but something made Makoto feel uneasy. Why was he so interested in them?

The next few days passed rather uneventfully at school with the new normal of Jin taking every opportunity to chat with Ann. Akira was surprised that Ann didn't tell Jin to go away. All this time, had she kept the boys at bay with a standoffish look alone?

With no pressing palace concerns, Akira was able to catch up on errands like gun maintenance and infiltration tool crafting, not to mention studying for exams. Morgana had been going out a lot at

night recently, to the point of sleeping through the day and skipping school, allowing Akira to stay up later than he would normally.

When school let out for the day, Akira headed to the library to exchange books. The hallways were busier than usual with students preparing for the school festival. Akira navigated the crowd, coming to a halt as a group of students carried what looked like a large set piece from the practice building towards the 2-C classroom.

As Akira waited, he noticed an odd shadow on the floor. It looked a bit like a cat. He looked up, wondering if Morgana had followed him to school after all. To Akira's knowledge, Morgana hadn't ridden the trains by himself before, but it wouldn't be a challenge for the Phantom Thief cat.

"Mrow," a cat, very similar to Morgana, stood on all fours on the outer ledge of the hallway window. When their eyes met, Akira felt like time had stopped.

"Hey, don't just space out!" Ann called out. Akira turned towards her. She was wearing a red and white gingham maid uniform and carrying a tray with five omelette rice dishes, each adorned with a ketchup heart. In the background, he heard several of Ann's regulars calling for her.

"Ann-chan! My tea is getting cold!"

"Ann-chan! It's my birthday so give me lots of love!"

Akira brought a white-gloved hand to the bridge of his nose. He had really zoned out there. He looked towards his section, a set of dainty white-clothed tables among many. His princesses didn't seem to be wanting. That was a relief.

The cafe was huge, spanning several floors, each requiring several maids and butlers. Rouge walls were accented with gold moulding. Velvety red carpet covered the floors. Tables wrapped around the perimeter of each floor with a view into a giant open atrium, lined by gold-leafed metal railings.

Ann and Yusuke's sections were crowded as always with all types and ages. Haru, clad in red with white polka dots, was pouring coffee for one of her customers. She attracted coffee connoisseurs and those looking for a quiet place to work or read.

"If you have so much free time," Ann said in a teasing voice. "Go tell Makoto a customer is requesting her."

"Really, who?" Akira looked over the railing towards entrance way, several floors down.

Ann motioned with her head. "The one standing perfectly straight."

Akira squinted as much as his monocle would allow. The customer seemed rather ordinary, but Akira decided he didn't like him.

"Well?" Ann coaxed him.

"Where is Makoto?"

"She's in the office, doing the books." With that, Ann skipped off, somehow keeping the tray stable. Her fans were growing impatient.

Akira checked on his princesses once again before turning towards the office to look for Makoto.

Futaba waited nervously by the counter for her omurice order from the kitchen. She shifted her

balance from one striped over-the-knee sock to the next and held the large brown tray in front of her red maid uniform. She internally hoped the omurice would never come and she wouldn't have to go back out there.

Despite his tightly tailored jacket and restrictive high-necked shirt and tie, Yusuke was moving at lightning pace, wielding the ketchup bottle with speed and precision, not letting a drop go to waste. Fanciful and intricate hearts of ketchup along with sometimes elegant and sometimes bold calligraphy covered the omurice dishes on his trays. Similar work was done in chocolate and jam for the desserts. Futaba felt even more inadequate. All her hearts came out shaky and misshapen.

Stupid Inari, she thought.

"Aw man, I got a Yusuke order ahead of me," Ryuji noted as he walked in the service area and surveyed the tickets hanging above the counter. Even in butler attire he slouched and bowed his legs. "Give me a break."

"Y-you can go ahead of me!" Futaba offered.

"Oh no, you're not hidin' behind me," said Ryuji. "The floor manager will have my ass if I help you shirk your fans."

"I don't want to go out there!" Futaba whined.

"You should cherish your fans," Yusuke said as he flourished the ketchup bottle. "After all, Ryuji doesn't have any."

"I do so have fans!"

"Oh? Then where are they?"

"I don't want fans!" Futaba brought the tray up in front of her face. She felt her heart beat faster and faster. She started to breath quickly. Every thought of going back onto the floor made it worse. She slid down the wall behind her until she was sitting. It was getting harder and harder to breath.

Yusuke and Ryuji both stopped what they were doing and turned towards her. Futaba wished she could just disappear.

"Come on, it's okay, it's okay," Ryuji spoke uncharacteristically softly as he got down on one knee to speak with her. "It'll be fine. We're all out there with you."

"I don't want to go. I don't want to go. I don't want to go." Futaba put the tray against her forehead, hiding from Yusuke, Ryuji, and the rest of the world. She was on the verge of tears. Why had she taken this job in the first place? It was stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. It made no sense! She would never take a job like this.

She would never take a job like this...

Futaba dropped the tray from her head and looked up at Yusuke and Ryuji. "Guys... this isn't real."

For a brief moment, Futaba's goggles appeared on her face. Her eyes darted around the display before it faded. "We're in a palace."

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

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

Akira entered the floor manager's office, a spacious but dimly lit room in contrast to the rest of the cafe. Makoto was sitting at the floor manager's desk, pencil in one hand, working on a thick ledger. She seemed to be lost in work, not noticing him. He took a moment to admire her, wearing a simple red maid outfit with a lace up front and black tights.

"Isn't this the floor manager's job?" Akira said casually as we walked up to the Makoto. He smiled as she was visibly startled. He walked around to Makoto's side of the desk and hopped up, sitting next to the ledger, facing her, his legs dangling.

"Well... if you want something done right..." Makoto started, briefly frowning at the large book of numbers before turning to Akira and smiling. "By the way, you'll be happy to know you placed third on our floor last month, behind Ann and Yusuke."

"It must be the monocle."

"I don't think it was the monocle."

Akira considered pressing the issue but thought better of it. "So how many more do I need to beat Yusuke?"

Makoto almost started saying something several times. She looked like she was having difficulty choosing her words. Akira decided to let her off the hook. "I see. Bad luck to be on the same floor as the cafe's top butler."

"Actually..." Makoto smiled apologetically. "The cafe's top butler is Akechi Goro up on floor eight."

Akira grimaced. Of course.

"So I'm guessing you didn't come in here just to check on your stats."

Akira thought about telling Makoto about her waiting customer, but decided the stiff could wait a little longer. He leaned a little closer to Makoto, grinning. "No, I came here to see you."

Makoto turned to him at full attention, a soft blush spreading on her cheeks. "S-stop teasing me. I'm not one of your princesses."

"So it's okay if I mean it then?"

Makoto stared at him, her eyes searching his, her lips parted slightly, as if preparing to ask a question that never came. Akira looked for any sign of an answer, becoming very aware of the sounds of blood and adrenaline coursing through him. He reached to her, first brushing a stray hair behind her ear and then letting his hand linger on her cheek, her warmth permeating through his glove. She didn't pull back. He ran his hand along her jawline, tilting her face towards him as he leaned in closer and-

"Guys! Something's not right!" Ryuji burst into the floor office, Yusuke and Futaba behind him. "What are you doing?"

"P-Practicing!" Makoto had somehow managed to jump out of her chair and land a meter away. Her face was flush. Akira felt an uncomfortable knot form in his chest. How was he supposed to interpret that?

Turning to the others, Akira quickly changed the subject. "What's wrong?"

"None of this is real," Yusuke stated calmly.

"What do you mean?"

"This! This whole thing," Ryuji started. "We don't work at a maid and butler cafe. We never have. Just look at this place. It doesn't even make any sense."

"What...?" Makoto brought her fingers to her forehead.

"Think about it," said Yusuke. "When did we start working here? Why did we take these jobs? How is it we all work together? Why does a maid cafe of this size exist?"

"How did we ever convince Futuba to do this?" Ryuji added. Futuba nodded vigorously.

Akira searched his memory for answers, but every time he felt a hint of a clue, it never materialized. His head hurt. Everything had felt so real but the more he searched, the more the world around him seemed off, fake. They were right, this wasn't real.

"Then..." Makoto seemed to have come to the conclusion at the same time.

"This is a palace," said Futuba.

"I-I don't remember us..." Makoto was still holding her head.

"Neither do we," said Ryuji. "The last thing I remember was running with the track team."

"I was working on a painting," said Yusuke.

"Then how did we get here?" asked Akira. The last thing he remembered was needing to get to the school library. He felt there was something else, but it wasn't coming to him.

"And why were we..." Makoto started, reddening again. After a pause, she continued. "It was like we were playing to someone else's scenario. Like our own hearts were being changed..."

The looping thread in Akira's consciousness, that he had almost kissed Makoto, came to the forefront. What had he been thinking? He couldn't pursue Makoto. He had thought through this before. One, she probably would punch him, really hard. Two, it was too great a risk to the Phantom Thieves dynamic, whether it was successful or not. The team had been operating from one crisis to the next. They had to be at the top of their game.

Makoto began pacing back and forth, the mary janes of her maid uniform thumping softly on the carpet. "Why are we in these costumes... even after realizing this is a palace? Who's palace is this?"

"We don't know," said Futuba.

"It may be that this palace represents a stronger distortion than we've ever dealt with," Makoto continued to pace. "Or, this could be the changed tactics of the enemy. Either way, there is a strong likelihood the one in the black mask is here—drawn in like we were or the cause of it. We need to be careful. Where's Mona? He may have some idea of what this is."

"Necronomicon doesn't pick him up near here. He might be on another floor," said Futaba.

"Let's get Panther and Noir first," said Akira. "Then we look for Mona and the source of this palace."

Haru hummed to herself softly as she walked around her tables holding her latest pot of coffee. Fortunately, her customers seemed to find her musical additions endearing, despite the fact they came to read the news, chat amongst themselves, and work on their laptops. She was feeling particularly proud because the brew was created from beans she had raised from the soil up. Seeing her customers breathe in the aroma and smile was particularly gratifying.

Ann, a section over, was a whirlwind of activity, somehow maintaining the demands of her ever increasing popularity. Haru preferred her more mellow customers, even if it meant she would never rank above third on the floor. Still, Haru could tell it was a special day for Ann. Her friend from modeling, Mika, was visiting and Ann clearly appreciated her show of support.

Akira and the others approached Ann. It was strange, didn't they need to be tending to their own sections? They looked somewhat grim and whatever they were saying to Ann was clearly upsetting her. Haru wondered if she should join the group.

"Haru-chan! I must have another cup!"

"Certainly Master!" Haru glided over to her customer. She would have to see what that was all about later.

After checking on a few more customers and starting another pot of coffee brewing, Haru looked over to Ann's section. They were still talking, right in front of the customers too. Haru bit her lip, if the floor manager were to see this, what would he say?

Ann's expression changed from confused to shocked. Haru rubbed her eyes. It looked like Mika and a few of the other customers in the section faded away. Had she just imagined it? That couldn't have happened. She felt pressure building in her temples. She must have been seeing things.

Soon, the group came over to Haru's section.

"Everyone," said Haru trepidatiously. "What are you doing? In front of the customers..."

"There are no customers," said Akira. "This isn't real."

"What?"

"The customers, our jobs, the cafe—all of it. This is a palace."

"A palace?" The way Akira seemed to use that word seemed familiar. She laughed nervously. "What are you talking about? We're plainly at a cafe. We're all in uniform. You should get back to your sections. Your fans are waiting."

"No Haru ...or rather, Noir," Akira looked her in the eye, his expression dead serious. "Can you tell me why you took this job? When you started?"

Noir... that named seemed familiar too. Haru brushed it aside. She spoke adamantly. "I've always wanted to have a cafe. I've been cultivating coffee beans for this very purpose. The atmosphere here... I created this."

"Look at the rest of the cafe. Does this match your atmosphere?"

Haru compared her section, a cozy coffee shop, to the pink and gold of the rest of the cafe. It was strange. Hadn't she wanted a corner shop? No. No, it was fine. "You're free to do what you want with your own sections. My customers enjoy mine."

"What are all of you doing!?" It was the floor manager, an older man in a classic butler outfit. "Get back to work."

"A shadow!" Futaba shouted. Haru thought she saw a red pair of goggles appear on her for a second.

The floor manager leaned backwards, arching in a way no human should be able to do. He burst into an inky mess of black and red before re-forming as a monster, a fire-breathing man with missing forearms and shins. The monster floated in the air, shooting fire at her friends. Haru screamed as Yusuke was sent flying toward the wall.

"Wanna try that on me?" Ann leaped into the monster's line of sight, suddenly brandishing a whip. She taunted the monster and lashed at him.

Not knowing what to do, Haru ran over to Yusuke. Makoto did the same.

"Johanna!" Makoto called. An ethereal blue motorcycle sped in from nowhere and Makoto hopped upon it. Swirls of white encircled Yusuke.

"Makoto! Your skirt!" Haru exclaimed.

"Huh? ...Oh!" Makoto pulled her skirt down, the motorcycle disappeared beneath her. She landed on her bottom with a thud.

Haru crawled over to where Makoto had landed and whispered. "I don't think anyone saw. ...what's happening?"

"We've been trying to tell you. This is a palace. Shadows attack us here."

Yusuke groaned, rising to his feet. Makoto hopped up, standing in front of him. "Don't. Let us handle it. He'll fry you."

Makoto ran off to join the others, giant spiky knuckles having appeared on her hands. The next time her motorcycle showed up, she seemed to have figured out how to sit on it in a skirt. Ryuji was swinging at the monster with a giant bat. Akira seemed to be summoning monsters of his own and with them all manner of magic. Futaba stood off to the side, near the railing. A UFO hovered behind her in the atrium.

Haru held her head. Nothing made sense and everything hurt. She winced seeing her friends taking a beating from the monster. Suddenly, she realized no one was taking care of the customers! She scanned the room for them, expecting to see frightened faces... instead, none of them acknowledged what was going on at all.

It was because they weren't real.

A few more of the customers, Haru's favorites, faded away. Resolved, she held out her arm, the handle of a giant hammer appearing in her hand. She walked towards the battle.

"Milady!" Circular shields appeared before all of her friends.

"Welcome back Noir!" Ann shouted with a smile.

Haru nodded in acknowledgement and readied her hammer.

The Phantom Thieves exited the cafe, having traversed from the fifth floor where they started to the ground. Futaba had been unable to locate Morgana so far, meaning he was either on one of the upper floors or had not entered the palace at all.

"It looks like we can return to the real world from here," said Futaba.

"I rather not leave without Mona," said Akira.

"Do you hear that?" asked Haru.

"What?"

"Nothing," Haru smiled. "No birds. No insects. There's nothing."

"That's normal for a palace."

"Indeed... but maybe that's why Mona isn't here. Whatever cognition drew us here wasn't considering cats. He might not be here at all."

"If we leave, can we get back inside?" asked Ann.

"Unlikely," said Yusuke. "We don't know whose palace this is."

"We may need to start negotiating with shadows to find out," said Akira. "Whoever it is doesn't yet see us as a threat. "

"Shouldn't we have turned back into our normal clothes at least?" asked Ryuji. He tugged at his collar. "I hate this thing."

"Indeed, it's strange that we still have not, even after battling the floor manager. We must be facing a very strong cognition," said Makoto. She turned to Akira in full advisor mode. "Taking on this palace will be extremely rough on you Joker. Without Mona, you'll have to cover bless, curse, and wind alone. We're also lacking in healing capabilities, armor, ammunition, and supplies."

"I know, but we can't risk leaving Mona."

Makoto smiled. "I would prefer to search for Mona as well."

"Me too," said Ryuji. The rest of the Phantom Thieves indicated agreement.

"Good," said Akira. "We'll take a short rest and then take on the rest of this palace."

While the others rested, Akira intended to visit the Velvet Room. Usually he was able to enter near the entrances to palaces. He hadn't noticed the blue barred door when the group had walked outside. He looked around again, spotting it to the left of the cafe's grand entrance. He stepped inside.

"Welcome to the Velvet Room." The bars. The chains. The smirk of the long nosed man. The otherworldly gaze of twin golden eyes. Feeling a stronger sensation of vertigo than normal, Akira closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Hey! Inmate!" Caroline's voice broke through Akira's thoughts. "Don't just stand there. State your

business."

"The palace-" Akira began.

"Yes, an interesting turn of events," Igor stated. "A palace you did not enter of your own will."

Akira had questions, but did not interrupt. He had long since learned that Igor rarely answered. Akira was in luck however, as cryptic as he may be, Igor had just confirmed that the team's appearance in the palace was not an accident as Kamoshida's palace had been.

"...A force overpowering your own spirit of rebellion," Igor continued. "This too may aid with your rehabilitation."

One thing that wasn't too different about this palace was that the enemies seemed to get harder the further the Phantom Thieves progressed. At the same time, the stronger shadows were more likely to mention information about the palace's owner in passing. Ann held her submachine gun steadily at the defeated shadow, a learned looking man encased in icy green crystal. As he retreated, he spoke. "Why must you disobey poor Fujita-chan?"

"That pretty much confirms it," said Ann. "This palace must belong to Fujita Nanoha, the television star."

"She's so cute!" said Ryuji excitedly.

Ann found herself feeling annoyed. "She won't be cute if we have to face her shadow."

"But, I don't remember her bein' in the top ten on the Phan-Site. I would've remember'd."

"We'll have to investigate this further in the real world," said Makoto. "What if she's not doing anything wrong?"

"We won't know until we get out of here," said Akira. "Any sign of Mona?"

Futaba shook her head no.

The group approached the stairway to the next floor, hiding behind one of the tables before proceeding.

"It looks like there's another floor manager there," said Haru. "I don't see a way to sneak up on him."

"He's strong," warned Futaba.

"Another one so soon? Aw, come on," whined Ryuji.

"We don't have a choice," said Akira. "Let's go."

The floor manager transformed into a pool of water, a nude woman with large elf ears and blond hair taking shape from it.

"Stay back Panther!" Makoto called to her. Ann dodged the spikes of ice the shadow sent flying her way. She hated to be out of the action, but she didn't want to hold back the team either. She took a position against the railing, not too far from Futaba.

The shadow continued to unleash massive ice attacks. Akira and the others were being pushed back.

"They're gonna need some help!" Futaba's goggles appeared on her face. She raised her arms, fiddling with screens only she could see.

Just then, another spray of icy was sent forth from the shadow. A particularly large spike made it through the others, headed right for Futaba.

"Oracle, get down!" Ann leapt toward Futaba, pushing the small girl out of the way. She was just a moment too late for herself though, the ice spike clipping her side. Carmen wailed inside her. Jolted, Ann spun in midair, sending her over the seventh floor railing. She heard her teammates yelling her code name as she fell... and one, louder than them all, yelling her real one. On hearing that voice, she felt a small twinge of regret.

Surprisingly, to Ann at least, she did not hit the ground. Instead, a warm wind halted her fall. She soon found herself back on the fifth floor, in the arms of a man in a gold mask.

"Ann, are you hurt?" The voice was familiar. The new student. Jin.

"Jin! What are you doing here?"

"Saving a beautiful woman," he smiled.

"Oh. Right. Thanks," Ann began to disentangle herself from his arms as he helped her to the ground. Once righted on the floor, Ann had a closer look at him. He wore a tuxedo and gold gloves. His mask resembled the top half of the drama mask of comedy, with laughing eyes and the ends of golden ties hanging from holes at the temple. Behind him, his persona lingered, a mischievous-looking elf with horns, clad in a sheath of animal skins and leaves. Her eyes returned to his face, finding him smiling at her gently. She felt her cheeks warm. She didn't know what to say.

The Phantom Thieves came running down the stairs. Ryuji was first, bounding several steps at a time. Akira was not far behind him. The two passed right by them in their hurry down the next flight.

"Guys! Wait! She's right here!" shouted Futaba as she reached the fifth floor. "She's okay!"

Haru ran up to Ann and squeezed her. "Oh my goodness An—Panther! I was so worried!"

"Panther?" asked Jin.

"I don't think there's much point in code names when we're dressed like this," said Ann, holding out the ends of her maid skirt.

"Who's this?" asked Yusuke as Akira and Ryuji caught up with the group.

"Kurusu Jin," the transfer student bowed slightly. "I'm Ann's classmate."

"How did you get here?" Makoto began interrogating him. "Why are you dressed like that?"

"I don't know and I don't know," Jin responded. "One moment I was at school, the next moment I was here. The outfit seems to come with Puck."

"Puck?"

"This little guy, right here," Jin motioned to the elf.

"And where did you and this Puck meet?" Makoto continued. Ann felt a little uneasy about Makoto's tone, given the guy had just saved her life.

"This may be hard to believe, but a few weeks ago I found myself in a spaceship filled with demons—much like the ones here. Puck saved me," Jin looked as embarrassed as someone behind a mask could. His expression then turned serious. "Now, Miss President, I think I deserve some answers from you. How did *you* get here? Why are *you* dressed like that?"

"My answers are the same as yours," Makoto dodged.

"We can escort you to the exit if you'd like," Akira changed the subject.

"Why haven't you left?" Jin asked.

"I'm looking for my lost cat."

"Seriously?" Jin chuckled. "This gets curiouser all the time."

"Look," said Ryuji, not hiding his annoyance. "You're new at this. Do you want our help gettin' out of here or not?"

"I rather stay by Ann."

"This is really dangerous," said Haru. "It would be better if—"

"All the more reason to stay by Ann."

"How does this not bother you?" Makoto whispered to Ann as the conversation went in circles.

Ann shrugged. "I've talked to him in class. He seems sincere and he's not stopping me from doing anything."

"Well we need to move."

"Then let's take him with us. We need more wind support anyway."

Having already once cleared the lower floors of shadows and dealt with the floor managers, the group made good pace back to the seventh floor. Makoto kept her attention on Jin. It was strange that he wore a mask while the rest of them didn't. It was also strange that he was so adept at using both his persona and his rapier though he claimed to have only awakened to the ability recently.

Makoto was thankful however to take some of the burden off of Akira. She had noticed their leader sway a bit after their battle with the seventh floor manager. He would never admit to being tired, especially when they were still searching for Morgana, but Makoto had learned to look for the signs. At the very least, Jin was letting Akira conserve energy. Morgana had once mentioned to her that Akira seemed to attract persona users at the most convenient times. The entire team had been assembled that way. Was gaining a wind user right when Morgana went missing another facet of this?

Like Zorro, Puck possessed powerful wind magic. However, unlike Zorro, Puck had no healing capabilities, meaning it was up to Akira and Makoto herself, and to a lesser extent Ann. Instead, and perhaps to no surprise, Puck could inflict a variety of conditions on his victims—sleep, confusion, charm. Though she had seen Akira, Ann, and even Yusuke use these abilities to good effect in battle, having a relative unknown wield them was unsettling. After all, the Phantom Thieves had experienced a mass confusion event upon entering the palace.

Makoto thought back to the way Akira had leaned into her, so close she could feel the warmth of his

breath, as if he was going to... No. She shook her head. It didn't matter. He wasn't being himself. She had to focus.

The Phantom Thieves ascended the staircase to the eighth floor. Based on the map they had found at the entrance, they were getting close to having explored the entire palace. If they didn't find Morgana, they would have to hope he was still in the real world. Like the floors before it, the eighth floor was inhabited by maids, butlers, and patrons. The key was that some of the maids and butlers were shadows. Makoto thought for a moment—was this why they had ended up in the palace? Had their personas been summoned like shadows?

Akira seemed to be focusing on an area opposite the staircase. Makoto followed his gaze over the atrium. Akechi.

"Well, I guess that confirms it," said Ryuji. The Phantom Thieves had suspected Akechi could enter the Metaverse since long before Makoto had joined. That made him the number one suspect for the one in black that Kaneshiro had warned them about, though that was before they had met Jin.

"Is he aware?" Ann asked.

"Doesn't seem to be," said Ryuji. "Look at him tendin' to all those girls."

"No mask either," said Futaba.

"We can't just leave him here," said Akira.

"We should be careful," said Makoto.

Akira nodded.

Walking around the floor served a dual purpose of allowing Futaba to confirm her assessment that Morgana wasn't on the eighth floor either.

Akechi looked up at the group as they approached. "Ah, I thought you might be here... Phantom Thieves."

The group was poor at hiding their shock. Makoto frowned. She should have prepared them before they walked over. Akechi was no doubt learning much from their body language, expressions, and soon, words. Makoto tried to get ahead of it in as terse a manner as possible. "You knew?"

"I suspected for a long time, but was only able to prove it once I saw you outside of the Okumura Foods headquarters. If my cell phone worked here, I would show you the nice photos I have of Kitagawa-san and Takamaki-san vanishing into thin air."

"I staked out the building," Akechi continued. "The next time, I was caught up with you and found myself in that strange sci-fi world. After seeing you fight, I was able to meet my Robin and do the same."

"So why haven't you turned us in?" Yusuke asked.

"Because while you've declared some of your crimes, I'm still not certain whether you're behind the psychotic breakdowns. In fact, it seems less and less likely you are."

"We're not! Taking down that guy is our priority too!" Ryuji was hot-blooded as always. Makoto cringed internally. Giving Akechi anything to work with was risky.

"Is that so?" Akechi brought his hand to his chin and looked down. After a moment, he looked straight at Akira. "I propose a deal. We search for the source of the psychotic breakdowns together. Once the perpetrator is caught, you will disband the Phantom Thieves. In return, I'll keep this quiet."

Makoto stepped in line with Akira. "We don't have much choice."

"I accept," Akira's expression was unwavering. For a second, Makoto thought she saw his butler uniform fade and his Phantom Thief attire appear.

"Splendid!" Akechi flashed an earnest-looking smile which slowly fell back to his regular air of all-knowing. "But don't think for a moment you aren't suspects."

The statement hung in the air.

"Why're you still servin' tea?" Ryuji asked incredulously, breaking the tension. The group looked down and noticed Akechi was still holding a teapot.

"Ah," the soft smile Akechi traded on appeared. "This is a long way from the exit. I thought I would blend in until I could be assured of my safe retreat. It's convenient you came by."

"How did you get here?" asked Makoto.

"I just found myself here. I thought it was your doing."

"You didn't think you worked here?" Ryuji asked. Makoto cringed internally, again. It was hard to set traps with Ryuji around.

"Well, yes, at the very beginning but there were so many oddities it quickly became *obvious* it wasn't real." Akechi certainly had a way of making people feel inferior.

"Let's go, we've lingered too long," said Akira.

The group ascended to the ninth floor. Akechi expressed some confusion but seemed all the more amused when they told him they were searching for a cat. Morgana wasn't to be found on the ninth floor either. Finally, they ascended to the penthouse, a much smaller suite sitting on only one side of the building. Morgana wasn't there either and neither was Fujita Nanoha. However, the amorphous form of a treasure was present.

It was strange. Instead of being the softly undulating iridescent form like the previous palaces, this treasure reverberated at a much higher frequency, seeming to form spikes. The colors seemed brighter. Something was off, just like the rest of the palace.

"I hope Mona is okay," Haru's worried voice interrupted Makoto's thoughts. "He would be so happy we secured an infiltration route."

"I hope so too."

Chapter End Notes

The shadows in this palace are from other games and did not appear in Persona 5. Can you recognize them?

Chapter 3

The Phantom Thieves, along with Akechi Goro and Kurusu Jin, found themselves in Suidobashi upon exiting the palace. Akira immediately checked his bag. Still no sign of Morgana. The group decided to head directly to Cafe LeBlanc to look for him.

Once on the train, Ann explained the basics of the Metaverse to Jin and Akechi, at Jin's request. Haru sat with them, eager to confirm her recently gained knowledge. Both of the new persona users were curiously fast learners. Ann seemed to be enjoying herself at least.

Ryuji, Yusuke, and Futaba were off in another corner of the car. Ryuji seemed to be teasing Futaba about her brief stint working at a maid cafe, much to the girl's consternation. Akira couldn't tell if Yusuke was doing the same or was just playing straight man by accident.

Watching the buildings go by, Akira wished the train could move faster. Makoto approached him, standing quietly beside him for a few minutes before speaking. "Rest for now, at least."

While his instinct was to argue, Akira knew Makoto was right. He took a seat near the others.

"How did you survive on your own inside my father's palace?" Haru asked Jin and Akechi, seeming to focus on Jin.

"Robin didn't have much trouble with the enemies," said Akechi. "Maybe you thinned them out for us?"

"Puck put most of the shadows to sleep," said Jin.

"That's amazing you found it so easy," said Haru. "I needed a lot of help from Morgana. I still do."

"I'd be happy to help as well. We can learn together," Jin smiled kindly. "Though it was sheer luck that got me past the toughest ones."

"Oh?"

"They looked mostly human in form but covered completely in black, one with blue stripes and the other with white. They were strong and could summon other shadows."

"How did you beat them?"

"I didn't. Puck is very good at dodging. Then everything started shaking and I escaped in the chaos. I wonder what kind those were."

Akira shared a knowing look with Makoto. The one in black had been in Okumura's palace the night they stole the treasure. Would they have run into him and his persona had Jin not first?

When the group arrived at Yongen-jaya, Akira rushed through the station and the streets. He murmured a short greeting as he entered LeBlanc, proceeding directly up the stairs. He barely heard Sojiro mutter in the background. "Teenagers."

Morgana was laying in Akira's bed, curled up and napping contently. Akira nearly collapsed on the floor right there, he was so relieved. The burden of carrying the team down and back up the maid cafe seemed to hit him all at once.

"Hey you stupid cat, we were worried!" Ryuji was the second to make it up the stairs.

"I'm not a cat." Morgana slowly opened his eyes and got to his feet. He stretched his back, his front legs extended out before him, very much like a cat.

"Morgana! Thank goodness!" Haru said, arriving with the others.

"What's going on?" Morgana sat, his tail slowly undulating.

"Did that cat just speak?" Jin asked, pointing at Morgana.

"Interesting," said Akechi, his eyes narrowing slightly.

"What are they doing here?" asked Morgana.

"It seems many explanations are in order," said Akechi.

The group explained Morgana's role in the Phantom Thieves to Akechi and Jin. Then they explained the days' activities in the cafe palace to Morgana.

"This is strange," said Morgana. "What do we know about Fujita Nanoha?"

"She's a television actress," said Akechi.

"Have you ever met her?" asked Makoto.

"No, I have not."

"I was able to dig her up on the Phan-Site," said Ryuji. "Someone complainin' that she's stuck up and treats the staffers on her drama like her personal servants."

"That would fit with the palace," said Yusuke.

"This seems like small beans though. We've dealt with more twisted desires in Mementos."

"Hmm," said Morgana. "You said her treasure looked different—more chaotic. Maybe something happened to her recently that caused her desires to go into overdrive. Overdrive desires led to overdrive distortion led to overdrive palace."

"What could cause such a thing? We haven't seen this even with traumatic life events," said Ann.

"I don't know."

The group fell silent.

"Has anyone here met Fujita-san?" asked Makoto.

No one spoke up.

"It seems not," said Yusuke. "Why are you asking?"

"We all played into her scenario, but some of the details, like Haru's dream in having a coffee shop, Fujita-san wouldn't know."

"Perhaps whatever drew you in also co-opted some of your own cognition," said Morgana. "The distortion was strong with Haru where the cognitions were able to work together but weak with Futaba where they weren't."

Akira immediately looked at Makoto to find she had also turned to face him. Just as quickly he

turned away. Had her reaction in the palace been due to his cognition? Did she know? Did the others know?

"It's no so much fun having your heart changed," Akechi mused.

"This is different," said Akira.

"Is it?"

"We steal their distorted desires. What they do after that is up to them. No amount of stealing desires would make Futaba or Ryuji choose to work at a maid cafe," Akira suppressed a grin. He had verbally sparred with Akechi before, but the threat of being found out had always hung over the conversation. With the Phantom Thieves identities and methods out in the open, they could have a real discussion.

"What if you stole their desire not to work at a maid cafe?"

"Such things don't manifest as treasures."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"The only difference between your distorted desires and the desire not to work at a maid cafe seems to be in your own value judgement."

"My judgement? Or the judgement of the Metaverse itself?"

"That may be worse. We don't know whose judgement governs the Metaverse."

"Argh, can you guys knock it off? My head hurts," Ryuji interrupted.

Akechi gave Ryuji an expression indicating he was merely tolerating him. He then turned back to Akira. "Another time then."

Akira nodded.

"We have an infiltration route, should we send a calling card?" asked Yusuke.

"Let's get more confirmation of Fujita-san's distorted desires," said Akira.

"But how?" asked Haru.

"I may be able to get a modeling gig scheduled at the same production company," Ann volunteered. "Or maybe a small walk-on role. No telling when though."

"I haven't been getting many speaking requests lately," said Akechi. "However, I'm recognized enough there that I should be able to walk freely in the building."

Akira appreciated that Akechi's plan was the better option, but did not want to rely solely on the ace detective's information, nor was he comfortable sending anyone alone with him. "How many people do you think you could take with you?"

"Two wouldn't be a problem."

"Okumura Foods is probably a sponsor of the studio, so Haru also has a reason to be there."

"Okay!" Haru said cheerfully.

"So it's Ann and Haru then?" Akechi asked.

Akira nodded.

"Can you take one more?" asked Makoto. "I would like to go as well."

Akira stiffened, but recognized Makoto was being shrewd. She was also probably concerned for the others. Three would be safer than two and she had put Akechi in a position where it would be hard to say no.

"Very well then," Akechi spoke to Ann, Haru, and Makoto. "We'll meet at Suidobashi station after school tomorrow."

Most of the group departed shortly thereafter, with Futaba and Makoto staying behind. It was a big enough departing group to not arouse suspicions while still letting half the group discuss things without Akechi or Jin.

"They're gone," said Akira as he ascended the stairs up to his room, having seen the others out. Futaba was laying on her stomach on Akira's bed, playing with Morgana who looked less than thrilled. Makoto was examining the claw machine prizes atop the hutch of his desk.

"What was Akechi's persona like?" asked Morgana.

"Robin Hood," reported Makoto. "A shining armor with a cape and emblem. He uses both bless and curse magic. This is the first we've seen beside Joker who can do that."

"Mmm, but it doesn't sound like the strong shadows Jin described."

"If Jin is telling the truth. He was the only one who retained his mask in the palace."

"Could it be because he was already dressed like a butler?" asked Futaba.

"Maybe, but we know for a fact his persona can confuse shadows. What would happen if that skill was used on Fujita-san's shadow?"

"Most palace owners have been resistant to such tactics," said Akira.

"True. If only we had more information."

"Information is my specialty," grinned Futaba. "I've been preparing a little something for quite some time. I just have to get my hands on Akechi's phone."

"We could lift it," said Akira.

"He'd notice," said Makoto. "We have to make it seem natural. How much time will it take?"

"I can do it pretty quickly," said Futaba.

"Then we'll look for an opening, a group photo or something," said Akira. "Can we also do this for Jin?"

"It would seem awfully suspicious if we came up with excuses to get both of their phones," said Makoto. "But if the option presents itself..."

"Got it," said Futaba.

Futaba went home with Sojiro shortly thereafter and Akira walked Makoto to the station. They spoke little, both being tired from the afternoon's surprise palace activities. Time passed differently in the Metaverse, meaning they had spent a day's worth of energy in a relatively short span of real time. Akira had long since become comfortable enough with his team to spend time together without needing constant conversation, but there was still the matter of what happened in the palace to address.

"Makoto..." Akira began as they approached the platform. He planned to wait for the train with her. "About the palace..."

"Hmm?" Makoto looked up at him, her eyes not completely opening.

This was a bad idea. Akira reminded himself about the team dynamic, about not making things awkward. It could wait.

"Nevermind... it's nothing. Just... message me when you get home, alright?"

Ann was surprised how quickly Makoto and Haru arrived at her classroom after school. They needed to meet up with Akechi in Suidobashi and Makoto *was* a bit of a task master, but Ann had barely had the chance to think about gathering her things. She started shoving her supplies in her bag. "J-just a moment."

"Someone's anxious," Haru teased.

"I just want to beat the rush," said Makoto.

"Be careful, okay?" Akira was looking Makoto in the eyes. The team advisor nodded sharply.

Having finished packing, Ann got up from her seat. Just as she was turning to leave with the others, Jin spoke to her. "Ann, wait."

Ann turned around. He was holding a wrapped gift.

"This is for you," Jin said. "A get well present, for yesterday."

"Diarampph" Makoto started to speak but Haru clamped a hand over mouth and dragged her towards the door.

"T-thanks," said Ann. "Can I open it?"

"Please."

Inside the box was a collection of sweets from Patisserie Fantome, a popular bakery where items often sold out early in the morning. Ann couldn't wait to try them. "My favorite! How did you know?"

Jin looked genuinely happy at her excitement. His eyes briefly wandered in the direction of Haru. "I asked a friend."

Ann put one of the bite-size confectionaries in her mouth and smiled widely, the treat bulging from inside one of her cheeks. She let out a high-pitched sound of contentment and waved a goodbye to Jin as she caught up with Makoto and Haru.

"The look on your face!" Haru exclaimed as the girls headed towards the Shujin Academy gates and Aoyama-Itchome station. "It was like when Morgana sees treasure."

"These are *really* good," said Ann, her words coming out garbled as she let the sugary goodness melt in her mouth. She held the box out. "Try one."

Haru gladly indulged while Makoto made a "pass" motion with her hand. "I'm watching my weight."

"You're so lucky Ann!" Haru enjoyed the treat. "He's a romantic."

"He's coming on too strong. You barely know him," said Makoto. "He's *suspicious*."

"Oh, you wouldn't like it if a boy you liked did the same for you?" Haru asked sweetly. Makoto was silent for a moment and then blushed. "Ah! I see you turning pink. Makoto has someone she likes!"

"I-I was just thinking how *embarrassing* it would be i-if someone made a grandiose gesture like that." Makoto had turned away from the other two girls.

Ann put another sweet into her mouth. Normally she would be skeptical of any boy bearing gifts, but something about Jin's enthusiasm, earnestness, and all around *weirdness* eased her worries. Without the usual warning signs, it was kind of fun to be treated special. At least Jin did his homework. Ann had been at fault for the death of many flowers in her life, which seemed to be more about what the confessor imagined in his fantasies and less about what would actually please her.

By the time they were on the train, Makoto and Haru's fairy godmother-style bickering had died down. Ann smiled. It was good to have supportive friends. It made it all the easier to ignore the some of the less friendly girls in her class.

Akechi was waiting for them on the platform when they arrived. "Shall we?"

The group returned to the studio they had found themselves in front of when they exited Fujita's palace. Ryuji had confirmed the studio produced the drama Fujita was starring in. They were likely in the right place.

"Ah Akechi-kun, I didn't know you were filming today," the receptionist was all smiles. Though Akechi's popularity had tanked as the Phantom Thieves' rose, he still had ardent supporters.

"Not as of yet, but my friend Takamaki Ann was considering a few jobs here, so I offered to give her a tour. She's with the Kaneko Agency," Akechi motioned to Ann. As a budding actress, she had to be impressed with how easily he lied. She just wished he had warned them what the story was going to be ahead of time. He leaned over the receptionist's desk, closer to the receptionist, as he spoke. "I hope this won't be any trouble for you."

"Oh," the receptionist blushed. "If it's you, I'm sure it won't be a problem. Let me print out the visitor badges."

"Wonderful!" Akechi smiled. "I'm also here with Okumura Haru, of the Okumura Foods group, and Nijima Makoto, my assistant."

Akechi motioned to the other girls as well, a satisfied smile appearing on his face as he turned toward Makoto. The student council president appeared to be struggling to contain a sour expression. Ann clenched her jaw into a smile so as not to laugh at her.

The receptionist finished printing out the badges, clasping them and their lanyards in both hands.

Akechi covered her hands in his and looked at her directly and smiled. "I really appreciate this Yumi-san."

Akechi led the group into the building, heading towards the set where Fujita Nanoha's drama, *Lilac Story*, regularly filmed. On the way, they were overtaken by a young man carrying what looked like a very heavy case, easily the size of the suitcases they had taken to Hawaii. Sweat beaded around the man's temples. His gait was halting and unsure. A few steps later and he fell to his knees, panting.

"Are you alright?!" Haru ran over to him.

"I'll be fine." He waved her off and started to push himself to his feet.

"You should rest! Hmm... where can I get some water?"

"No! I have to get this to Nanoha-chan as quickly as possible!"

"Ah. Are you a production assistant on *Lilac Story*?" Akechi asked.

"No... I have a small role in *Four Brothers High School*."

"Then why are you doing this?"

"Are you kidding?" the young actor looked at Akechi incredulously. "You guys must be new here. Nanoha-chan is the president's daughter. If you don't do as she tells you, your career is over! If you want to keep acting, don't cross her."

The man took off, dragging the large case behind him.

"Well," said Akechi. "Things are certainly more widespread than we thought. 'Fujita' must be a stage name."

"It's tough enough to break into this industry," Ann said. "To be blacklisted like that would be heart-breaking."

The group continued on, eventually making their way to the set of *Lilac Story*. Fujita was filming. She was indeed very pretty. Looking at her, Ann felt like she needed to step up her own game. Fujita seemed perfectly sweet on the set, matching the image of her portrayed in the press. However, Ann noticed that anything Fujita asked for from anyone was delivered promptly. Furthermore, Fujita used cue cards rather than memorizing her lines, odd for someone in a high profile role.

Suddenly another young woman rushed into the room. Based on her outfit, she seemed to be one of the production staff. She looked like she was about to cry. Fujita stopped the scene short to address the woman. "Ah Harada-san, do you have it?"

"N-no, sorry Nanoha-chan, I waited all day but they were sold out," Harada bowed deeply and stated her words loudly.

"Oh," Fujita looked sad. "They were limited to today only too. Did you not leave early enough?"

"They wouldn't let us line up until six... and then it was a mob. I'm so sorry Nanoha-chan. Please forgive me."

As the group watched the scene unfold, one of the other staffers standing near Ann and the others spoke under her breath. "Poor Harada-san. She'll be gone by morning."

"I hear her mother's sick," said another staffer. "She'll need to change careers. Sakai-san hasn't been

able to get a position at the other studios."

"I wish I could transfer, but even that..."

"Why doesn't she just hire other people to do this stuff for her?" whispered Haru.

"Because she doesn't have to," the staffer said bitterly.

With ten people, even the large storage area Akira and Sakura-san had fashioned into a bedroom was going to seem cramped, especially when two of those people weren't exactly friends. Makoto understood they really didn't have much choice when it came to Akechi, but still had misgivings about Jin. Every one of the Phantom Thieves, with maybe the exception of Akira and Morgana, had entered the Metaverse when they had some stake in the palace distortion. Jin had no connection to Okumura.

"But if Jin *isn't* our enemy, having more persona users would make fighting shadows easier," said Morgana. "And it sounds like he's seen the one in black before, that's useful."

"The keyword there is *if*," Makoto argued back.

"Let's take him with us," Akira decided. "At least we can keep an eye on him."

Makoto considered mentioning the difficulty of keeping watch of both Akechi and Jin at the same time, but didn't want to argue Akira's decision. He didn't speak lightly. "Okay."

Akira messaged Jin, Akechi, and the rest of the Phantom Thieves to meet. Over the next half an hour, the other students entered Cafe LeBlanc. Futaba was first, living close by and not attending classes. Yusuke was last, likely having gotten distracted on the way over.

"Our first order of business," Makoto's student council president tone slipped out. "Kurusu Jin: we've explained how we operate. Do you want to join the Phantom Thieves?"

"If you'll have me," Jin answered immediately.

"There's no need to rush to a decision. It's dangerous-"

"And morally questionable," Akechi interrupted. Makoto decided not to rise to his baiting.

"It will be less dangerous with a group that has my back," said Jin. "Next time I suddenly enter a palace, someone will come looking for me."

"We don't know if this phenomenon will repeat," said Makoto.

"Anyway, I'm happy to experience a little danger to protect Ann."

Makoto spotted Ryuji in the corner making a fake vomiting gesture, simulating his finger going down his throat. She coughed to suppress a smile. "Well then, with that settled, the next matter is Fujita Nanoha. Yesterday we observed several people at the studio running errands for her. They claimed they were doing it under the threat of being blacklisted. We learned Fujita-san is the daughter of the studio president."

"So," said Yusuke. "She complains to her father about someone and they're punished for it?"

"Exactly."

"Destroying the careers of others..." Yusuke had a grim expression. Many artists had suffered a similar fate due to his mentor, Madarame.

"So we were right," said Ryuji. "She sees everyone as servants."

"It's strange we didn't see evidence of mistreating them in the palace," said Yusuke.

"Mm... but we were all afraid of the floor managers, even before we knew they were shadows," said Haru.

"That fits what we saw at the studio," said Ann. "Fujita-san is seems very kind in person, but all the employees were on edge."

"Any objections to stealing Fujita-san's treasure?" asked Makoto.

"Only my blanket objection to the Phantom Thieves," said Akechi. No one else said anything.

"Let's send a calling card then," said Akira. "We don't know what the palace may *do*. We need to take care of it quickly."

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