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**Persona Chaos Butterfly**

by [OhtaSuzuke](http://archiveofourown.org/users/OhtaSuzuke)
Tatsumi Port Island...this place isn't bad. Sure, he'd been living here for only a few months, but then again he was used to his life changing over and over again because of his parents' busy careers. This time, however, his world had been turned upside down.

Only that afternoon, Souji Seta had been released from Tatsumi Memorial Hospital, with no clue of what had happened to his parents, and still trying to reel from it. Just a few months ago, he felt happy that, while leaving behind all his friends back in Inaba, all of who he had formed deep and unbreakable bonds, he would be seeing his parents for the first time in just under a year.

And a heartwarming reunion it was for the silver-haired teenager. The night he arrived home, Souji surprised his mother by enveloping her in a big, warm hug, repeating the process with his father before talking long into the night about many things, enjoying dinner in their company as they caught up with one another.

Time had passed and Souji enrolled in Gekkoukan High for his senior year. The school was much better in terms of infrastructure, but he couldn't shake the odd feeling he had about this place. Even though he had visited this place once during Yasogami High's annual - sorry, biannual school trip, the mixed feeling of familiarity and déjà vu was a lot stronger now. Despite that, he had no problems studying, consistently maintaining his grades.

But then, summer came and the accident happened.

On a rainy night, the Seta family made their way home from dining outside. A drunk driver in a large pickup truck had been speeding prior, running past the red light of the intersection just as their much smaller car passed through.

When Souji regained consciousness, he was lying on a hospital bed. According to a police officer,
he was the sole person the paramedics found inside the wreckage of the car, with a gash on his forehead and a broken arm. His parents were never found, no traces of blood on their seats despite the fact that it was impossible for anyone to survive that kind of crash unscathed.

Souji couldn't really remember the rest of that night, or much of the following days, fading in and out of consciousness...until the call from Uncle Dojima came. The police in charge of the case had called him, informing the countryside detective of the situation, and Dojima immediately offered to take Souji in for as long as he needed, and the teenager was deeply grateful for it.

Everything had been taken care of by Dojima over the phone. All Souji needed now was paperwork from school so he could be transferred back to Inaba. Tomorrow, he'll pick up the papers and hopefully board the train the day after. His uncle already purchased the ticket for him in advance.

As he walked home - going against doctor's orders to take a taxi - Souji wondered if any of his friends knew anything about the accident that supposedly claimed his parents. They probably didn't, since Dojima is a sensible man and had mostly likely figured that he wouldn't be able to handle any of his friends in his current state. He'd have to thank him when he arrives in Inaba. With a sigh, the silverette gazed at the sky - the sun was beginning to set. The sight comforted him a lot. It brought back memories, deeply buried memories from when he used to live in Port Island all those years ago as toddler. His parents were always busy, but they made time for him. Besides, he was never alone because there was always somebody who would play with him...

'Why am I even thinking about them now? It's been so long...' Souji shook his head, frowning. This was something he never told anyone about, not even his girlfriend, Yukiko. 'Well, we did live here once...'

Souji was pulled out of his nostalgia trip when all of a sudden, his surroundings changed. The sky turned greenish-black and the setting sun was replaced by a full moon emitting an eerie, yellow glow. "What the hell?!" Shaking off the shock, he frantically looked around. The street he was walking on was crowded, but now, instead of people, coffins stood in their place. "What's going on here?!" A sudden rush of adrenaline started pumping through his veins. Not too far from where he stood, three creatures with humanoid figures in samurai armor loomed over what looked to be two bodies. '"Shadows...'

Before the Shadows could come any closer, Souji quickly withdrew a Smart Bomb (made into a key chain as a souvenir from one of his ventures in the TV World) from his jacket pocket and threw it at the monsters. The Almighty spell's impact blew the Shadows back, without hitting the humans thankfully, giving the silverette enough time to check up on them.

As he ran towards them, he got a better at the two people on the ground. Both were male: One was pretty tall, almost as tall as his friend Kanji. He wore a maroon pea coat, a black beanie, black pants and brown leather boots. His hair was slightly long and dark brown in colour. The other was a bit shorter than he was, and more slender. He had dark blue hair and wore the uniform of Gekkoukan High, the only difference being the red armband around his left arm, which said ‘SEES’ embroidered in black.

"Hey? Hey!" Souji called, shaking the blue-haired teen. "Are you okay? Answer me!"

With a soft moan, the blue-haired young man opened his eyes. They were storm blue-grey. "Ugh... My head... What happened?" he mumbled, uncoordinatedly trying to get up. As Souji helped him with his bearings, he noticed the other guy also trying to get up. "Huh? Is that you, Shinjiro-senpai?!"
"Dammit, that hurt… I feel all stiff…" the tall guy muttered as he rotated his shoulder. When he heard his name being called, he immediately looked at Souji’s direction, recognizing the blue-haired guy. "What the…? Minato?! The hell are you doing here?"

‘Minato?’ Souji stared at said person more than necessary. ‘I -I know that name! And his voice… sounds so familiar…’

"Might as well ask you the same question since the last time I checked, we were both dead…” Minato brushed the dirt off his jacket, spotting the Shadows trying to get back up."What the…? Shadows! This atmosphere…the Dark Hour’s back? What’s going on here?!”

‘Dark Hour? And what's with him saying they were dead?’ Souji slightly began to panic, but his leadership and fighting skills enabled him to keep calm. ‘This just keeps getting more and more confusing…’

"Save questions for later," the one called Shinjiro said, nudging his chin at the enemy. "Looks like those guys want to get their asses kicked. You got your Evoker?"

"Of course..." Minato replied, calmly sliding his hands into his pants pocket. Then he noticed Souji. ‘This guy...he looks familiar somehow. Do I know him?'

The more they stared at each other, feelings of familiarity began to surface. ‘Is it possible? Could it really be him…?’

"Hey!" Shinjiro shouted, snapping them out of their trances. "Stop zoning out!"

"R-Right…” Minato mumbled apologetically, and turned to Souji. "I'm sorry. I'll tell you everything later. But for now, can you fight?"

"I'm...I'm not sure..." Souji hesitantly answered, knowing that he’s unable to summon his Persona out in the real world. Plus he didn’t have a weapon in hand.

"You have a Persona, right?” Minato quickly cut off his thoughts and self-doubt. "You must have, if you can still function during the Dark Hour. Can you summon it?"

Feeling bewildered and slightly dumbfounded, Souji opened his mouth but no words came out. Not only did this guy know about Personas, but expected him to summon his? It had been only about a few months since he last did it, but that was in the TV World. In that slight moment of doubt, a voice spoke within him. "I am thou… Thou art I… The time has come… Open thy eyes and call forth what is within..."

The samurai Shadows were closing in on them. A small, blue light appeared in Souji's right hand before a card materialized. It was blank. ‘This sensation…’ Pure, raw power coursed through his veins, a grin forming on his lips. "Per...so...na..." He shattered the card within his palm. "IZANAGI!"

A naginata-wielding Persona in a long, black trench coat and white mask appeared before them, charging at the nearest Shadow and slashing it cleanly in two.

Shinjiro was in disbelief. "No shit...he can summon his Persona without an Evoker!?” He noticed the other two Shadows readying their katanas to attack. "Heads up!"

Minato swiftly evaded the attack by jumping to one side, but it took Souji a little slower to dodge. Unfortunately, the Shadows’ physical attack knocked him back, very hard, causing him to collide into a mailbox by the street. The pain of his barely-healed broken arm shot through his whole
being. ‘Ugh.......Crap, this can't be the end!’ he thought, trying to shake off the dizziness. He felt helpless. He needed Rise. He needed Yosuke. He needed everyone, especially Yukiko. He felt panic and desperation at the thought of his beloved girlfriend, knowing full well she would not have wanted him to die when she isn’t around. Wait, what is he thinking… she wouldn't want him to die at all! His thoughts were cut short when he saw the Shadows charging up to attack again. He narrowly dodged the next one, but they just kept on coming. The pain had gotten so bad, he was unable to focus enough to summon Izanagi again, leaving him wide-open. ‘This is it…’ he thought, too fatigued to get up. ‘It’s all over, and it hasn't even started…’

The sound of gunshots and chains unlocking was heard, followed by shouts.

"Orpheus! Maragi!"

"Castor! Blade of Fury!"

The combination of fire magic and slash attacks seem to work well against the Shadows, causing them back off. Minato and Shinjiro bought enough time to get close to Souji and help him up. "Are you okay?" the former asked.

"Yeah…” Souji winced as his arm ached and bleed. He swore he could feel blood dripping down his forehead.

"This ain't good...gotta get ya out of here," Shinjiro said. Frantically looking for a way out, his gaze landed on the Shadows. "Talk about some tough bastards...any ideas on how to get rid of them?"

"They're strong against physical attacks, but they can't repel it…” Minato observed.

"They seem…to be weak against fire… a stronger fire attack…might work…” Souji panted, trying to find a strong fire-based Persona in his psyche. He held out a palm and a glowing blue card materialized, spinning softly. "Mada…"

"Agi-skilled, huh?" An idea popped into Minato’s head. "Senpai, hit them hard. We'll handle the rest."

Shinjiro raised an eyebrow at that, noticing how Souji’s face screwed up like Minato’s when changing Personas. "Don't tell me this kid can also use more than one Persona like you can. Tch, whatever, let's get this over with."

Minato looked at Souji, who in turn nodded as well. As they both readied their Evokers, Souji couldn't help but find it strange that they were pointing what looked like guns to their heads.

"Here goes! Castor! Heat Wave!"

"Mada! Maragidyne!"

"Surt! Maragidyne!"

The remaining Shadows didn't stand a chance against their onslaught, reduced to a cloud of black smoke that then dissolved in the air.

"Well…I guess that's that," Shinjiro concluded, rotating his shoulder again. "Damn, I'm sore all over."

"You're telling me…” Minato sighed, doing the same. "My muscles are all aching. Then again, we haven't used our bodies in like what? Two years…?"
Souji only stared at them, just plain confused. He let out a groan when his wounds started taking their toll on him. "Ngh..." he grunted, resting his body against a lamp post.

The other two turned their attention to the silver-haired teen. "Hey, you okay?" Shinjiro asked.

"Yeah... Luckily I didn't break my arm again..." Souji said, wincing as he pressed hard against a bleeding wound.

"Hold on." Minato readied his Evoker again. "Melchizedek!"

A mechanical-looking angel appeared, casting a soft violet light that enveloped them for a few seconds. Any cuts and bruises immediately started healing, and Souji's bleeding began to cease, his arm finally stopped hurting. "That's a lot better..." He smiled at Minato. "Thanks."

"No problem." The blue-haired student smiled back at him. Just as the Dark Hour happened, the sky slowly started turning back to normal and the eerie moon nowhere to be seen. "The Dark Hour is ending. We should get out of here fast. I seriously don't want to handle people's shocked expression at the damage caused by our fight."

"I'm with ya, but where do we go?" Shinjiro asked.

"Let's go to my place," Souji suggested. "I live not far from here."

Minato nodded. "Good idea. Lead the way."

As the Dark Hour ended, the trio quickly ran off, leaving several passersby confused at the damage caused by a battle that no one witnessed.

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Soon enough, they reached the apartment where Souji's family lived. "And I thought I'd seen everything after what went down in Inaba..." he mumbled loudly as he plopped down in the couch. He turned to his two odd companions. "Uhh... Please, make yourselves comfortable."

Minato and Shinjiro took his offer and sat on the opposite couch. An awkward silence echoed throughout the living room, until Minato decided to take action. "Well, I suppose we owe each other some explanations, so might as well start with the introductions," he began. "I'm Minato Arisato."

"Name's Shinjiro Aragaki," the beanie-wearing man said flatly.

Souji gave a short bow with his head. "Nice to meet you both. I'm Souji. Souji Seta."

Minato's eyes went wide. "Souji... Seta... So it is you!" Shinjiro had never seen the blue-haired boy radiate such surprise and joy as a genuine smile formed on his face. "Wow, I barely recognized you, Banchou-kun!"

The familiar smile and pet name stirred up memories, causing Souji to smile as well. "I knew you were familiar..." His eyes turned misty. "It's been a long time... Aniki."

Minato got up from his seat to gently hug him, being mindful of Souji's injured arm. "Too long if you ask me..." he said, breaking off the hug. "You were just a toddler the last time I saw you!"

"I know... I tried to get a hold of you over the years, but my parents kept moving all across the country over and over because of their work..."
Seeing that he was the odd one out, Shinjiro decided to butt in before they wasted any more time babbling nonsense. "Hey!" he snapped, interrupting the two of their nostalgia. "Sorry to interject, but mind explaining to me what the hell are you two talking about?"

"Oh, sorry, Senpai." Minato rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "You see, Banchou – I mean...Souji-kun and I have known each other ever since we were little kids. Our parents went to college together and were good friends. In fact, it was his family who found me after the car accident on the Moonlight Bridge."

"You mean the one that happened on the day Aigis sealed that thing inside you?" Shinjiro asked incredulously.

"Yup. That one."

Now it was Souji's turn to be confused. "Umm...I'm gonna take a wild guess. Is that somehow related with you guys knowing about Personas and Shadows?"

"More or less..." Minato sighed. "You have the power of the Wild Card as well, I see. So I assume what happened to you in Inaba is also related to Shadows."

It was Souji’s turn to sigh. "Yeah... It's a long story."

"So is ours," Shinjiro said. "We got all night. You can start first...after I make us some coffee."

Seated in the Seta family’s living room over mugs of strong, black coffee, Souji began narrating the story of his adventures in Inaba. The fog, the murders, the TV World, his friends' personal Shadows, how they gained their Personas, the final battle with Izanami - he continued on until he felt he had covered everything possible.

"So that's how you can summon your Persona without an Evoker..." Shinjiro whistled.

"Evoker? Ya mean that gun like thing? That's just..." Souji trailed off.

"Crazy? Yeah, I know. Blame Aki and Kirijo for that."

Souji raised an eyebrow, still confused. Minato laughed at that. "Don't worry. I'll explain."

With Shinjiro's help, he told Souji about their own adventures with SEES, the Dark Hour, Tartarus, the twelve Full Moon Shadows, the battle with Strega, including the one where Shinjiro died, Death being sealed within Minato, The Fall, the battle against Nyx, and finally him becoming the Great Seal.

".....And that's how we got here," Shinjiro finished off Minato's explanation, expecting Souji to be shocked. He was partly right as the silverette appeared a little surprised, yet thoughtful after hearing their story.

"You two are probably wondering why I don't seem as shocked about your return to this world," Souji started before Shinjiro could ask. "While I am curious to as why and how you guys came back from the dead apparently, my friends and I witnessed our own... miracle as well."

"Go on," Minato urged.

"The TV World contains places that are created from the victims' mind and...my cousin was one of the victims we had to rescue. The only difference is that she was a six year-old kid."
Shinjiro put the pieces together. "So with someone that young, the effects of that world is harsher on her?"

"Yes, that's right. Her name is Nanako, and she was forced to stay in the hospital for a long time. At first, we all thought she would get better after we took her out of there. But then...she took a turn for the worst." Souji closed his eyes at the memory, reliving the pain, sadness, and anger when he and his team thought they had lost her.

Sensing his friend’s sadness, Minato switched to sit beside him and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. Souji snapped out it, giving him a grateful smile. "She survived, or rather, came back to life, thanks to one of my friends, which is why I wasn't that surprised to hear of your story," he continued. "The Seal part worries me though. I mean, if you were released from the Seal. Doesn't that mean this Nyx being might try to wipe out all life on Earth again?"

"To be honest, I don't know..." Minato said thoughtfully. "The Great Seal was made from my soul. If it was broken, then I wouldn't be alive now. And there's the mystery regarding Shinjiro-senpai's return as well."

"Tch, I'm about as lost as you two," Shinjiro said.

"Hmm...if only I can get a hold of those two again, maybe we could get some answers..." Souji wondered out loud.

"Two?" Minato asked. "One of them wouldn't happen to be named Igor, would it?"

Souji smirked. "I should've known. As a Wild Card, of course you'd be familiar with the Velvet Room."

"So, that's the guy who was helping you out with your multiple Personas?" Shinjiro asked. "I've always wondered about that."

"That's him alright," Souji replied. "If there's anyone who can give us any info, it's Igor. That said, I don't know how we can get in contact with the Velvet Room in Port Island."

"There used to be a door to it in the alley next to Pauwlonia Mall's police box," Minato said. He began digging into his pockets. "Good. I still got my Velvet Key."

Souji took out a glowing blue key from his own pocket. "I got mine, too." He checked the clock. "Shoot, it's almost midnight."

The two SEES members quickly ran to the window and looked outside. As the clock struck midnight...nothing happened.

"Huh? No Dark Hour? Man, things are more screwed up than ever," Shinjiro sighed.

"In a way, that's a good thing. No Shadows roaming around and no Tartarus either. For now, at least," Minato stated, letting out a breath he had been holding. "And we did experience the Dark Hour before midnight today so it might be related to that, strange as it is."

"It's possible..." Souji yawned widely. "Sorry, but I'm beat."

"You aren't the only one," Shinjiro said, covering his own yawn.

"Yeah... I'm tired myself," Minato agreed, stretching his arms.
"You can stay here tonight if you want," the silverette offered. "Tomorrow morning, we'll head out to the Velvet Room and see if Igor knows anything about what's going on."

"Yeah, that's a good start," Minato said. "Thanks, Souji-kun."

"No problem. Be right back." Souji left the room to get some pillows and blankets.

Shinjiro leaned by the window, crossing his arms. "Hey Minato, think that kid know Aki and the others?"

"I'm not sure, Senpai. Except for Ken and Koromaru, everybody else must have graduated by now. Even Junpei." The blue-haired teen took off his school jacket and hung it on a hook. "But we can try looking for them tomorrow."

"Got a point there." Shinjiro took off his pea coat and beanie, folded them neatly and placed them on the coffee table. "No point thinking about that now. Let's call it a night and get some rest."

They silently agreed just as Souji returned with two sets of pillows and blankets. "Here. If you need anything else, just let me know."

"Thanks." Minato and Shinjiro took one each and made themselves comfortable on the sofas.

After wishing them good night, Souji headed for his room. So much has happened today that he could barely believe it. Despite the mystery of his parents’ whereabouts, he was glad to meet an old friend again. However, that meeting also brought several questions to mind, and he couldn't help but feel that he was about to embark on yet another Journey. As he drifted off to sleep, all he could hope was that this one would not be related to murders and death like his last one.

Was he dreaming? He felt like he hadn't done that in ages. The scenery was all too familiar - Naganaki Shrine at night. Shinjiro would often come here in the evenings to walk Koro-chan by himself, or that one time with Minato.

However, instead of his blue-haired team leader, an auburn-haired girl sat next to him as they watched Koromaru playfully run around the shrine. She looked up to smile at him, her ruby red eyes sparkling with something he couldn't quite read, but for some odd reason felt very comfortable around her. Her laughter was very sweet, something that he wouldn't mind listening to everyday.

The girl suddenly frowned, eyes sad and lonely. Instinctively, Shinjiro wrapped an arm around her shoulders, muttering something about the cold. She looked up at him again, gasping softly, but then she smiled again, her cheeks turning a light shade of pink as her eyes twinkled with happiness. Shinjiro couldn't help but smile himself, his own face burning.

She then rested her head on his shoulder, and he felt at peace. He closed his eyes and they simply remained like that.

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Shinjiro woke up with a jolt. His eyes wondered around, trying to get his bearings straight, only to see Minato sleeping soundly on the opposite couch. He took out a silver pocket watch from his pants pocket and checked the time. 5:00 AM. 'What the hell was that dream all about...? Who was that girl?' Shaking his head in confusion, he took another glance at his watch. There was a huge dent in the back. 'Why do I feel like I'm missing something important? Shit... Am I going crazy
Ruffling his hair in frustration, he tried to get back to sleep. However, he couldn't get the mysterious girl from his dream out of his mind. Little did he know that this girl would be connected to him, as well as the two Wild Cards.

Chapter End Notes

Just as I mentioned in the A/N above, this fic was reposted from Fanfiction.net with permission. As some of you might already know, Fanfiction.net is blocked in certain countries. As far as I know, AO3 is still accessible, and that is the main reason we decided to repost here.

More chapters will be following soon.
The Velvet Room Siblings

Chapter Summary

After a personal tragedy, Souji's life is turned upside down when he meets two long-lost friends and experience the return of the Dark Hour. Together with the other Wild Cards, SEES and the Investigation Team, they must get to the bottom of this mystery before all is lost. The strings of fate are connected by the trail of butterflies.

When Souji woke up the following morning, Minato and Shinjiro were already awake, chatting in the living room. "Morning, Aniki, Shinjiro-san," he greeted, covering a yawn.

"Morning, Souji-kun," Minato replied. Shinjiro only gave him a silent nod. "How's your arm?"

"Better." Souji started rubbing it. "I just changed the bandages."

"That's good. I hope it heals soon."

"Hey, you guys hungry?" Souji asked, heading to the kitchen. "I'll make us some breakfast."

Shinjiro raised an eyebrow. "With your arm like that? Aren't you pushing yourself a little too hard?"

"It's no trouble. I mean…truth be told I never tried cooking with only one arm…"

"In that case, better not take chances." Shinjiro stood up and walked towards him. "Just tell me where the ingredients are and I'll do the rest."

"Eh? No, seriously, I can handle it," Souji protested, surprised at the offer.

Shinjiro crossed his arms, expression serious as he stared hard at the silverette. "How do you expect that arm of yours to heal if you keep putting strain on it? If you don't eat healthily and get enough rest, you'll definitely get sick."

Minato chuckled, knowing it was useless to get into an argument with his senpai right now. "It's okay, Souji-kun. Shinjiro-senpai may not look it, but he is a great cook. Your kitchen is in good hands."

Having heard that, Souji gave up and told Shinjiro where to find everything. The former delinquent rolled up his sleeves. "Right, I'll get to work."

While the food was getting prepared, Minato and Souji started chatting. "So…you're attending Gekkoukan now?"

"Yeah. But I'll be transferred to my previous school in Inaba after summer vacation. I don’t really have a reason to stay here." Souji suddenly remembered something. "Oh, crap, I almost forgot! I'm supposed to go to school today and get the papers my uncle asked for my transfer. I'm sorry, Aniki, but would it be too troublesome for you and Shinjiro-san to accompany me after our visit to the Velvet Room?"
Minato couldn’t help the grin from appearing on his face. "That’s no problem at all. In fact, Senpai and I were gonna ask you about checking out Gekkoukan. My team and I used to study there, and I’m pretty sure they all graduated by now, but at least we might be able to find out how they’ve been doing."

"Actually, I heard rumors that a group of former students are planning to hold a small gathering at the school gate today. Maybe someone you guys know will be there?"

"It’s worth investigating," Minato decided. He turned his gaze outside the window. "I miss them…"

"I’m sure they miss you too, and Shinjiro-san as well," Souji pointed out. "I mean…I haven’t seen my friends from Inaba in months and I miss them like hell. Even though your friends knew you died, but deep down it doesn’t stop them from missing you."

"I guess so…" Minato closed his eyes. His thoughts drifted to a particular girl. ‘Yukari…will you ever forgive me for leaving you?’

"Hey, Minato." Shinjiro’s voice snapped him out of his thoughts. "Breakfast’s ready. Set the table, will ya?"

"Oh, sure…"

As the three Persona-users quietly ate their breakfast, each one got lost in their own thoughts. Minato’s floated between Yukari and the mystery of his return. Shinjiro’s was about the girl he saw in his dream. Souji’s were about his parents and his friends in Inaba.

Once they had finished cleaning up, they immediately headed out to Paulownia Mall. When they arrived in front of the fountain, Souji stopped walking.

"What is it?" Minato asked.

"I don’t mean any disrespect, but…you do know that very few people can even see the door that leads to the Velvet Room, right? I’m not sure if Shinjiro-san can enter."

Minato sighed and rubbed his head. "Oh yeah…I forgot about that part…"

Shinjiro shrugged. "We won’t know until we try. Where is this door?"

"It’s in the alley beside the police box," Minato replied. "Let’s go."

They were about to enter said alley when a policeman in a suit stopped them. "Excuse me." His attention was focused on Souji. "Souji? Souji Seta?"

Minato and Shinjiro were caught off guard at their exchange, and not just to the policeman’s title and appearance. "That’s right. I see you’re recovering just fine." The older man noticed Souji’s two companions and gave them a small smile. "Ah, Aragaki and Arisato…it’s been a while, hasn’t it?"

"K-Kurosawa-san…H-hi…" Minato stuttered, looking a bit uncomfortable. 'Crap, how are we gonna explain that we’re alive after being considered dead for over two years?'

"So you finally woke up from your coma, and Aragaki is done with his rehabilitation?" Detective
Kurosawa asked. He then smirked at their confused faces. "I was promoted to detective about a year ago, if that's what you're wondering."

His first statement confused not only Minato and Shinjiro, but Souji as well. Thinking fast, Minato looked at his friends and mouthed 'play along'. They both agreed silently. "Congratulations on your promotion. To answer your question, I woke up yesterday and by a stroke of luck, met Shinjiro-senpai and Souji-kun as we were released from the hospital around the same time. Souji-kun is an old friend of mine."

"I see..." Detective Kurosawa nodded. "Then I guess your uncle won't need to worry about you until you go back to Inaba. I've known these two young men for a while so I can assure him that you are with good companions."

"My uncle has contacted you?" Souji asked.

"Just a few hours ago. He wanted details regarding the car accident. Unfortunately the only thing I can reveal to you about the investigation is that it has uncovered nothing so far."

"Oh..." Souji frowned, eyes darkening. "I see. Thank you for your help." He bowed respectfully.

Detective Kurosawa curtly returned the bow and entered the police box.

The atmosphere became a little tense. "Okay...anyone mind telling me what the hell that was all about?" Shinjiro asked, keeping his voice low so only Minato could hear.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Minato replied, concern growing in his voice. "Souji-kun..."

"Let's go." Souji walked briskly towards the alley without turning around.

"Something's up," Shinjiro confirmed.

"I know. C'mon, he doesn't seem to be ready to talk about it."

Silently agreeing, Shinjiro followed the Wild Cards into the alley. Much to his surprise, he could actually see a blue, glowing door there. "Okay...I don't remember ever seeing that here..."

"If you can see the door, then that means you can enter the Velvet Room," Souji said, readying his Velvet Key. "Aniki?"

"Time to get some answers." Minato said, raising his own key.

The blue door began to glow brighter and brighter. Not knowing what to expect, Shinjiro could only brace himself. Minato's and Souji's hearts were pounding, wondering just how much the once familiar and soothing room had changed.

The Velvet Room was entirely different from what the two of them remembered. The room was, of course, covered in blue. Wall to wall, floor to ceiling; it was all blue. Various shades of mysterious blue. It wasn’t an elevator or a limousine, just a cubic room. To their right, there was a small velvet-lined mini stage, with nothing more than a grand piano and an antique standing microphone. A crystal chandelier hung at the center of the ceiling. Glowing geometric patterns decorated the edges of the wall where it met the ceiling.

They then focused their attention to the center of the room. A blue coffee table was paired with a wide, black couch suitable for three guests to sit at a time. Across the opposite side, sitting in a regal chair, was none other than Igor, a grin as big as his nose plastered on his face.
Four people stood on either side of him; two on his left and two on his right. The first one they noticed was a woman who sported short, bob-cut white hair and glowing, yellow eyes, wearing a blue dress and hat of an elevator attendant; the second was a slightly taller woman with similar colored hair and eyes, only her hair was longer. She wore a blue dress like that of a secretary; the third one was a man, taller than both women with the same yellow eyes. He kept his white hair short. His blue uniform was also that of an elevator attendant.

However, it was the fourth one that attracted Shinjiro and Minato's attention the most. A girl about their age, with black hair, pale skin and red eyes. Her mechanical body was entirely black, save for her right arm which was white. Her head adorned a strange red and gold visor, its the patterns matching the strange metallic skirt around her waist. She wielded a rod-like weapon.

"Welcome to - or rather...welcome back to the Velvet Room, my dear young men," Igor greeted in his enigmatic fashion. "It has been unprecedented for a previous guest to return to the Velvet Room once their challenge has been met and have fulfilled their contract, let alone two wielders of the Wild Card ability to meet. But it would seem that Fate is not yet done with you," He gestured a gnarly, gloved hand at Shinjiro, "and with your friend here as well."

"That much we're already aware of," Souji answered politely, not expecting a straight answer from Igor.

"Ah! Forgive my manners. Allow me to introduce my three assistants: Elizabeth, Margaret and Theodore." The old man gestured to the blue-clad trio. "Like myself, they are also residents of this Velvet Room."

Elizabeth and Margaret smiled at Minato and Souji respectively. The two returned their smiles as well. It was Theodore who spoke first. "My name is Theodore, but you can call me Theo. It's such an honor to meet the two young men who had accomplished so many brave deeds, with whom my sisters have become so fond of as well."

"Your sisters?" Minato and Souji asked in unison. Shinjiro only stared at them, confused.

"Please excuse our little brother." Margaret said in a crisp warning tone, clearly aiming it at Theodore, who briefly flinched. Despite the seriousness in her voice, there was a small hint of mischievousness as well. "He can be quite blunt sometimes."

"He easily gets worked up, which causes him to run off his mouth sometimes," Elizabeth giggled. "However, I can understand his excitement regarding this encounter."

"Now I remember..." Souji said suddenly. "When Margaret and I battled, she told me about her sister who left the Velvet Room looking for a way to release the soul of a blue-haired boy that became a seal to protect mankind from destruction. Back then, I had no idea she was talking about you, Aniki."

Minato gawked at Elizabeth, who in turn bowed slightly. "But if the Great Seal was broken, shouldn't I be dead? My soul broken to pieces?"

"Not necessarily. The Seal wasn't broken, but something slipped through, causing something to change and your soul to be released, which allowed it to be teleported to the human realm," a sudden voice said. It was the dark haired girl. "About a month after your sacrifice, your friends discovered something unimaginable relating to your death and their pasts. They also discovered the sacrifice you made which resulted in your death. From there, they fought a being known as Erebus, who was created by the thoughts of humans wanting to end their life, and defeated it. But they figured out that Erebus cannot be destroyed and would return one day, to try and break
through your seal to reach Nyx, therefore unleashing the Fall once again."

Minato was shocked at what he just heard. His friends, the former SEES members, had ventured into some unknown place to discover the reason behind his death, but that brought another question up. "How do you know about that? Clearly you're not a denizen of the Velvet room, are you?"

"No, I'm not. And the reason I know about what happened is because –"

"Because you were there when it happened, weren't you?" Shinjiro interjected. "You're Metis, Aigis' sister."

Metis eyes widened in surprise, but she didn't deny it. "Yes, I'm Metis, and Aigis is my sister." She stared at Shinjiro for a short while. "I remember you. Out of my sister's friends, you and that girl, Fuuka-san, were the least hostile towards me…"

"Not surprising, after the way you attacked everybody in the dorm so suddenly. It's no wonder Aki and the others didn't trust you that much at first–" he stopped, surprised at what he even said without thinking. "Wait a minute…how can I know you if by the time that happened, I was supposed to be dead?!"

"I… I don't know…"

"Okay, this is getting more confusing…" Minato said.

"You said it, Aniki," Souji sighed.

Metis stepped closer and gave them both a long look. "You…you two have the same power my sister had."

"Huh? You mean Aigis has the power of the Wild Card?" Souji wondered, trying to fit in the piece of information with Minato's story, but came up with a blank.

"For a brief period out of necessity, one might say." Igor said, drawing their attention once more. He explained to them about when Aigis inherited Orpheus and Minato's power of the Wild Card, how that led to SEES' journey into the Abyss of Time and well as Metis' creation.

"So she's like Teddie," Souji blurted out.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Metis asked.

"One of my friends in Inaba was originally a Shadow who awakened to human emotions, learned to speak our language and became friendly towards humans, taking a bear-like appearance so that people would like him upon meeting him. Teddie eventually took a human form so that he could be with me and my friends outside of the TV World. After gaining a personality and losing his Shadow mask, he received his own Persona. From what I know, Shadows arise from human emotions. You said you were actually the physical manifestation of Aigis' emotions, separated from her after she wished to return to being fully machine to escape the emotional burden of losing Aniki. During your journey, you developed your own personality and gained your own Persona, both born from your resolve to protect your sister. That also explains how you possess knowledge about the places and entities related to Shadows. It's similar to how Teddie just knows about the TV World. The two of you are the same regarding that sense."

"I see."
"There's just one thing I don’t get," Minato said. "After the fight with Erebus, you said both of you reconciled and Metis returned into Aigis, or something like that. You being here now means that something happened to Aigis?"

"Do not worry. She is still herself. Her emotions as well as her psyche are the still the same since she found her answer to life," Elizabeth replied. "However, your release from the Seal caused the power that was with her to return back to you. That release caused Metis to become a whole individual and reached the Velvet Room sometime ago. Around the same time you and your friend returned to your world."

"When the Seal was broken and your soul released, Shadows leaked from it, leading to the phenomena you call 'The Dark Hour' to return. The Shadows sensed your power and chased after you both," Margaret continued. "That's what led to the fateful meeting that brought the three of you together."

"While we are still unsure of what caused your Seal to be attacked, it seems to be interested in meddling with both worlds," Igor stated. "It'll take the power of several bonds to defeat whatever is behind this new threat."

"Mhm, it makes sense now," Minato said. "So I guess this means we'll be starting another journey, huh?"

"Yes," Souji had quickly grasped the flow of information and pieced it all together. "We'll be forming a new contract, correct?"

"Oho! You are fast thinkers, boys," Igor spoke again, his grin even broader than before. "You are, in fact, correct. As for this new threat, you must never forget the bonds you both have created, as well as the new ones you will create and reforge."

Minato frowned. "The bonds we have created...you mean my friends, but I don't know where they are." He turned to Shinjiro, who just shook his head.

"And mine are back in Inaba," Souji said.

Igor grinned, seemingly enjoying himself. "As you three were brought together by Fate, then Fate shall also bring your friends together. How that may be brought about, we'll just have to see, won't we?"

"Right…" Shinjiro said skeptically.

"By the way, what did you mean when you said 'new bonds that will be created and reforged'?" Minato asked.

"Allow me to explain," Theodore said, excited to finally be able to speak. "There's a third wielder of the Wild Card who was also guest of this room as well."

"And quite a remarkable guest she is," Igor chuckled. "She is also aware of this threat so she will try to contact you sometime in the near future."

"And how will we find her?" Souji asked.

"You will recognize her when the time comes. After all, she has strong ties with you both, wielders of the Wild Card," Igor turned to look at Shinjiro, "as well as with your friend here."

"Huh? Me?"
"Only those who are bound to a contract may enter the Velvet Room. However, any being with a strong ego or high spiritual sensitivity might be able to reach this place. I believe this seems to be your case as well, as it may be related to you being alive."

"Hmmm..." Shinjiro crossed his arms, thinking hard.

"Now then, time marches on in your world. Do not worry, you will see your friends again very soon, and your answers will become clearer. I shall let you figure out the rest of your New Journey. Until next time..."

The room began to grow fainter and fainter, the three young men once again found themselves in the mall's alley. Only this time, Metis was there with them.

"Huh? What are you doing here?" Shinjiro asked.

"I told you that I'm not a resident of the Velvet Room so I'll be going with you three from now on," Metis replied. "I want to find my sister. You guys are gonna go look for her, right?"

"Well, we are planning to gather info on her and the others' whereabouts. I don't see any problem with you coming along with us," Minato stated, smiling at her. "Besides, I know Aigis will be very happy to see you again."

Metis was so overjoyed that her smile almost split her face. "Thank you, Minato-san! I'll do everything I can to help you guys!"

He couldn't help but laugh. "Wow, you sure sound like her." The sound of broken chains rang through his mind as familiar card flashed, a surge of power resonating through his soul.

*Thou art I...and I am thou...

*Thou hast established a new bond...

*Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Aeon arcana.*

'The Aeon arcana, huh? I thought I had already mastered that social link, but I guess there's still more to learn about Aigis... and now Metis too.'

Souji smiled as well. Metis had a childlike air about her that reminded him of Nanako. "So it's settled then. Now we need to find some leads as to where your friends might be."

Shinjiro quirked an eyebrow at Souji. "Didn't you say you needed to pick up some papers at school or something?"

"Oh yeah, I almost forgot! Let's head to Gekkoukan. Maybe we'll find something there."

As the small group made their way towards the private learning institution, they discussed their current situation.

"A few things have become clearer, but honestly I'm just left with more questions. However, I'm intrigued by this third wielder of the Wild Card," Minato said.

"Since Igor referred to this person as a she, I guess it's safe to assume it's a girl," Souji stated.

"And from what he said about my sister no longer having that power, I guess that rules her out as a possible person," Metis added. "But what did he mean by that person having strong ties with you
"Someone we both know well and somehow connected to Shinjiro-san…I can't recall anyone that fits that profile. What do you think, Shinjiro-san?"

Shinjiro remained quiet, trying to make sense of what he just heard in the Velvet Room. "Honestly...I'm still trying to sort out what that weird guy was saying," he finally said.

"That's kind of natural. What he talks about seems to make no sense at all at first, so you really have to pay close attention," Minato said. "It takes a while to get used to."

"Well, he did say his role is simply to assist us, so I guess he can't give us straight answers or else he'd be interfering...too...much..." Souji trailed off, looking around. "Uh-oh..."

"What's wrong?" Metis asked.

"Don't look now, but a lot of people are staring at us."

The silverette was right. The group of four was attracting a lot of attention. "Why are they looking at us?" she asked curiously.

"I think I know..." Minato said, sweatdropping. He tried to shield Metis from view. The android was clueless, but not for very long. "Huh? Me?!"

"A robot girl is not exactly something common," Shinjiro said.

"At this rate, there'll be a lot more commotion by the time we get to school," Souji said. "What do we do?"

"Tch..." Shinjiro took off his coat and draped it over her shoulders. "Hope you don't overheat."

"Hmm...not exactly an ideal camouflage for me, but it'll have to work for now," Metis said, buttoning the coat on.

"Good thing you always drag that pea coat around with you, Senpai," Minato laughed, amused at his current predicament. "But seriously, how can you wear that thing in the middle of summer? It's scorching hot today."

"Whatever," Shinjiro grunted.

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Luckily for the them, the rest of their trip towards Gekkoukan High was uneventful.

"So this is a 'school'..." Metis said in awe as she stared at the entrance gates. "It's huge!"

"Yeah..." Minato said with a nostalgic look. "It's just the same as I remember..."

"Good thing they're holding summer classes or I'd have to wait until September for my transfer," Souji said. "I'll quickly head to the faculty office get the papers. I'll be back soon."

"Okay. We'll hang around the main gate to see if that rumor you heard is for real."

Souji ran ahead into the building. The rest stood there in silence, waiting for him to come back.
Fifteen minutes passed and nothing happened. Minato was half glad, half disappointed. A part of him wanted to meet his old schoolmates, but another part was afraid of how they would react to seeing him alive again. It was really conflicting.

Finally, after another fifteen minutes, Souji returned. "Sorry about the holdup. I ran into Edogawa-sensei as I was leaving the faculty office." He rolled his eyes. "He kept lecturing me about magic and stuff. I swear I don't know what's worse: his lectures or his potions."

"I know what you mean," Minato said glumly. A small part of him was glad that the eccentric school nurse hadn't changed. “Good thing that was the only lecture you received."

Souji noticed his frown. "So no one came?"

Minato shook his head. "I guess it was just a silly rumor after all…"

"I'm really sorry, Aniki. I was really hoping someone would show up."

"It isn't your fault…" the blue-haired teen gave him a forced smile. "I'm sure we'll discover something along the way. Come on, let's get goi–" Just as he turned around to leave, something short bumped into him, or rather someone.

"Ow! Oh my gosh, I'm sorry!" A rather nervous female voice squeaked. "I'm so clumsy!"

"H-Hey, no worries. I wasn't looking where I was going either." Minato attempted to calm the person down, and got a good look at who he bumped into – a long-haired girl wearing glasses. "Ch-Chihiro-san?!"

The flusterd girl looked up at him with a mix of shock and joy. "M-Minato-senpai?! Is… is that you?!"

For the first time in a while, he smiled, surprised to see how much Chihiro had changed in these past years, still unsure about how she would react to his return.

"You…you finally woke up from your coma!" she cheered, eyes brimming with tears as she hugged him. "It's a miracle!"

'Again with the coma thing…I guess I'll just have to play along with that for now,' he thought, lightly returning her embrace.

Souji and Metis smiled. Shinjiro snorted and looked the other way. Chihiro finally broke the hug when she noticed them. "Oh, hello. Are you Minato-senpai's friends?"

The silverette nodded. "That’s right, we are. Oh, now I remember you!" He pointed at her. "You were the student council president back when a group of students from Yasogami High came here on a school trip last year."

Chihiro blushed. "Y-yes…I think I remember you too. No wonder you seem familiar."

"For some reason I always thought you'd end up becoming president," Minato smiled. "Congratulations."

Chihiro blushed harder. "T-Thank you…"

The commotion around them suddenly picked up. "Dude, it's Minato!" a voice exclaimed. The next thing they knew, the blunette was surrounded by people.
"Kenji…Rio-san…Kazushi…Yuko…Hidetoshi-san…Keisuke-senpai…Nozomi-kun…"

"Man, now this is something I didn't see coming. Of all places to see you, it had to be in school!" Kenji cheered, slinging an arm over his friend’s shoulder in an enthusiastic half-hug. "I was complaining about missing a date to come to this meeting, but now I'm glad I did."

"Slacking as ever, huh? Some things never change," Minato chuckled. "It's great to see you all. How have you guys been?"

Each person in the group told Minato what they've been doing since graduation: Kenji is currently attending acting school in order to improve his comedic skills, had stopped trying to date older women and now dating Rio, his childhood friend, who is currently studying to become a tennis instructor. Kazushi's knee healed completely and is considered as one of the best athletes in his university's kendo team. Yuko is studying to become a P.E. teacher and dating Kazushi, much to Minato's everlasting surprise and amusement. Keisuke managed to enter medical school, although his passion for photography still remained strong. Hidetoshi is studying to become a professor. Nozomi is now a renowned food critic and had appeared in several cooking and traveling magazines. Chihiro just graduated, but she plans to become a novel writer and was already admitted into a good college.

"So how have you been, Minato-kun? When did you get out of the hospital?" Yuko asked.

"I'm doing well, thanks. Just got released yesterday," he lied. He really didn't want to explain to them what really happened. He then pointed to Souji and the others. "They were released with me on the same day."

Hidetoshi studied Shinjiro from top to bottom. "You're Aragaki-san, right? The guy who was shot trying to protect a kid from a madman and barely survived."

Shinjiro didn’t want to comment on anything, but recalling what had happened with Detective Kurosawa, he shrugged. "Pretty much…"

"I must say you were really lucky to have survived that. From what I heard, that shot would've been fatal had it been anyone else," Keisuke stated. "Even so, it's no wonder you were in coma for months and was going through serious rehabilitation until recently due to the severity of your injuries. Your recovery is astounding though!"

"Yeah, I guess…" Shinjiro said, rubbing the back of his head. The annoyance of being surrounded by too many people started to make him itch, but he stood his ground.

"So, Minato-kun, what brings you to school in summer?" Nozomi asked. "You intend to resume your studies?"

"I actually came with Souji-kun so he could pick up some papers. He's being transferred to another school. And...I was wondering if I'd run into some familiar faces here."

"Like Yukari-san and your other dorm mates?" Rio asked. At the mention of her name, Minato blushed faintly, making the long-haired girl laugh. "I knew it! Well, you're in luck. Chihiro-chan keeps in contact with Kirijo-senpai quite often, so she might know where they are."

"Oh, yes. Kirijo-senpai helped me a lot when I was the student council president. After she and Sanada-senpai graduated, the dorm you guys lived in was closed down. There were rumors about a redevelopment project, but it never really took off. It reopened after Takeba-senpai and your former dorm mates entered college. My guess is it was the only dorm in town that allowed pets, and the
closest to the college they attend to." She stopped talking for a while, trying to remember some recent information. "But I don't think they're in Port Island at the moment. Kirijo-senpai said she and her friends were going on a trip this summer. I think they left this morning...or was it yesterday?"

"Do you know where they went? Is my sister Aigis with them?" Metis suddenly asked, gaining weird and curious stares from everybody.

"Please excuse her," Souji interjected quickly. "She’s an amnesic girl we met in the hospital. It was by chance we found out she is Aigis' younger sister."

‘Nice save, Souji-kun!’ Minato thought. "Yeah, she regained her memories after she saw some photos of Aigis I had on my phone."

"Oh, I see. Well, I believe she’s travelling with the others as well. And the place they went is a little town in the country… I think it's called Inaba," Chihiro said.

"Hey, I know about that place!" Kazushi said. "It was on the news a few months ago. Something about bizarre murders and stuff, and freaky weather."

‘You don't know the half of it…’ Souji added silently.

"The tennis team, Yuko and Kazu-kun stayed there during our fellowship. Remember Minato-kun? That was before your big match. Of course, that was a long time before all that crazy stuff happened," Rio stated, hugging Kenji’s arm. "Kirijo-senpai and the others are probably staying at the Amagi Inn. That place is pretty ritzy."

"That’s the place Souji-kun is transferring to," Minato said. “He’s staying with his uncle there.”

"Oh, that reminds me. I gotta phone him soon and tell him I’ve got the papers for the transfer."

"Then I guess we’re done here. We should get going too," Minato said, looking back at his dear friends. "It’s wonderful to see you guys again. Thanks everybody, for all your help."

"Don't mention it, man. It was great seeing you too," Kenji grinned and winked. "Oh, and don't worry. We'll keep your return a secret from Yukari-san and the others. We don't wanna spoil the surprise."

"Thanks, Kenji. See you guys some other time."

The group waved and uttered collective goodbyes to Minato and his friends. After they left and were out of sight, the former Gekkoukan students exchanged glances. "Well, I must say it's been one surprise after another, huh?" Hidetoshi said. "Although I still think we should have told them that she also awakened from her coma."

"Hey, you remember what she asked us when we met her on our way here, didn't you? Keep it a surprise from Minato-kun and the others," Rio reiterated.

"Yeah, I know they'll probably be shocked when they finally meet her, but hey, isn't that part of the fun too?" Keisuke added with a grin.

The others nodded in agreement and left their former school grounds, talking about high school memories, happy to have met old friends again.

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"Well, that went better than I expected," Minato said as the group walked down the street. "Although I still don't know why everybody kept thinking I was just in a coma and Shinjiro-senpai survived getting shot. That’s nothing like how I remembered it."

"Maybe it has to do with the Great Seal being damaged?" Metis suggested. "It seems like everybody who developed bonds with you had their memories altered or something."

"Who knows? Not even that could be covered up by Mitsuru's family," Shinjiro said. "I'm starting to understand what you meant by that Igor guy not making sense at first. He said that Fate will bring our friends and Souji's friends together like it brought us together. Who would've thought they'd go to Inaba of all places?"

"I'm surprised as well, but that makes things more convenient for us in a way," Souji said. "What's the plan now, Aniki?"

"First, let's head to the dorm. I still have my key. Hopefully Mitsuru-senpai didn't change the locks," Minato said. "If my guess is right, they left Shinjiro-senpai's and my room intact. So we might as well pack our stuff for the trip, and get some more proper clothes for Metis."

"How? Knowing the girls, they all probably locked their rooms before leaving," Shinjiro stated.

"I know how to get in to my sister's room," Metis mentioned quietly. "She taught me once."

"That should work. After we're done packing and getting ready, we head for Souji-kun's place," Minato planned out. "He can get his stuff ready and we’ll order the tickets for Inaba."

Souji looked confused. "Huh? My place? But…"

Minato shrugged, like it was no trouble at all. "You still haven't packed your things to move back to Inaba, and your arm is hurt so you're gonna need some help. Besides, it'll be easier if we go to the train station all together." Truth be told, he didn't want to leave Souji alone by himself.

Souji acquiesced. "Good idea..." He wouldn't admit out loud that he didn't want to be alone either. "Thanks, Aniki..."

"Fine by me. Let's get going," Shinjiro said.

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Iwatodai Dorm, Lounge...

"Ah, I never thought I'd be so happy to see this place again," Minato said as he and the others walked into the dorm's lounge. "Looks like things hadn't change much here in the two years."

"Maybe it's just me, but the atmosphere is different from when I was here last time," Metis said. "I don't know how to describe it. It feels... peaceful."

"Probably because back then everybody was still trying to come to terms with the aftermath of the battle against Nyx and-" Shinjiro furrowed his brows, growling in frustration at yet another memory he didn’t recall experiencing. "Dammit, how do I keep knowing this stuff?!"

"No point worrying about that now, Shinjiro-san," Souji said. "It's likely we'll find the answers to that as we uncover more about this new threat we heard about. Maybe your friends know something as well."
"Souji-kun is right. For now, we should focus on what we do know," Minato declared. "I'm gonna check out my old room. With a bit of luck, my stuff should still be there...or somewhere." He wiped the sweat off his forehead. "Might as well take a shower to cool off, too. Man, summer is as brutal as I remember. You should do the same, Senpai."

"I guess…" Shiniro agreed, though still somewhat restless.

Minato turned to Metis. "You said you know how to get into Aigis' room right, right? So you should have no problem picking out something to wear. Oh, and try to find a bag big enough to guard your weapon. We don't want to raise any suspicions."

"Okay. Should...should I wear something my sister would in the summer?"

“Good idea. Just make sure it covers your arms and legs. That way you won't attract any unwanted attention." Minato then turned to Souji. "Make yourself at home, Souji-kun. We won't take long."

The other three went upstairs, leaving the silver-haired young man alone, so he took his time to browse the area. "It's kinda funny that this place reminds me of our 'special headquarters' back in Inaba," he mumbled to himself, a faint smile forming as he recalled the afternoons he spent with his friends at Junes' food court, thinking and working hard to solve the mystery. His smile then turned into a frown. Too caught up with the all things that happened recently, he nearly forgot about what might have happened to his parents. Now that he's alone, the memory hit full force. ‘Dammit, not now…’ Tears suddenly welled up. ‘I can't cry now…’

Souji didn't know how long he stood there, just fighting back tears. He snapped back to reality when he suddenly heard footsteps, quickly wiping his tears away before anyone could see. Minato came down first, in t-shirt and jeans. He was soon followed by Shinjiro, now in a dark sleeveless t-shirt under an open, button-up black shirt and jeans, his trademark beanie still on his head. Each carried a duffel bag filled with clothes.

"Phew, now that's better! Good thing they still kept all my stuff," the blunette said. Souji remained silent. "Banchou-kun, is something wrong?"

"N-No…" Souji stammered, his back facing them. "Just looking around…"

Minato knew he was lying, but decided that now isn't the best time to ask about what was troubling him. "If you say so."

"I'm ready!" They heard Metis calling as she skipped down the stairs.

The boys turned to face her. She was wearing Aigis' winter school uniforms, holding a cylindrical-shaped bag. "H-how do I look?" she uneasily asked. "Is this camouflage appropriate?"

"It looks pretty good on you," Minato complimented. "Yukari and the others would probably say you look cute in this. I'm sure Aigis would like it too."

Metis smiled and blushed. "Thank you, Minato-san!"

"This solves one problem," Shinjiro said, slinging his bag over his shoulder. "Can't believe they even kept our weapons...but transporting my axe in a bag will definitely cause suspicion."

"They probably thought it was the best way to honor your memories," Souji stated. “You don’t have to worry about your weapon. We can have it delivered to Inaba if you want, or buy you a new one at Master Daidara’s metalworks.”
"I guess you're right. I can still carry my sword around in my shinai case though, so that won’t be a problem," Minato said. "Let's get going, then. Anyone up for some takoyaki on the way back?"

"I'm cool with that. Haven't had those in a while," Shinjiro mused.

"I'm in too," Souji said. "The takoyaki opposite the Iwatodai Station are the best ones I’ve had yet."

"What's 'takoyaki'?" Metis asked curiously.

"Hm…I guess showing is easier than explaining," Minato said, opening the door. "Let's go."

They made their way to Souji's apartment after a quick stop at Octopia for a snack.

By the time the group of four arrived at Souji's apartment, it was already evening. Souji was exhausted, but he still needed to finish packing his stuff for tomorrow's trip back to Inaba. It had been one exciting event after another for the silver-haired teen ever since the accident.

The first miracle was Minato, his long lost friend and brother figure, literally appearing out of nowhere, tagged along by a guy named Shinjiro Aragaki. Then they got attacked by Shadows, only for Minato to exhibit the same Wild Card powers like he possessed, and Shinjiro being a Persona-user himself. If that wasn't enough, when they went to the Velvet Room for explanations, they stumbled across yet another interesting character – Metis, an android girl with the power of Persona. For a guy who was recently released from the hospital waiting for his transfer back to Inaba, it was a little too much to process.

On the other hand, he really couldn't complain. Minato was still the friendly, big brother figure since they were children. He noticed that something was wrong with him, but didn't bring up, hoping that he would open up when the time is right. His friends were nice people as well. Shinjiro had that intimidating look and 'badass' attitude, but he's an excellent cook and didn't seem bothered to help out in the kitchen. Metis was awkward at first, but she slowly warmed up to them. Perhaps because Minato was close to her 'sister', Aigis, and both he and Souji had the power of the Wild Card like Aigis did. As for Shinjiro, they shared the same Hierophant arcana, and oddly enough, seem to know each other. As confusing as it was at this moment, they couldn't figure out that mystery for now.

Despite enjoying their company, Souji couldn't help but feel the loss of his parents. There were no proof of their deaths, but there was no sign of them being alive either. It was driving him crazy! He needed to find the truth, but where to start?

As he was mulling about in his room, a soft voice called out to him. "Banchou-kun?" A hand gently rested on his shoulder.

Souji turned to see the storm grey-blue eyes he knew so well. "Yeah, Aniki? Something wrong?"

"You're crying," Minato pointed out gently.

Seeing how sensitive and concerned his friend was being, Souji felt an onslaught of relief. The dam holding his tears back just burst. He hated being this emotional and unbalanced around another person, but if he's going to be like that anyway, then he was glad that it was with Minato.

His brother figure was at his side in an instant, gently easing him to sit on his desk chair, one hand patting his back in a soothing gesture. "Hey, everything's going to be ok… Don't worry. I'm here…"
Even as tears spilled down his cheeks, Souji gave him a small grin. "Heh, you haven't changed one bit..." He covered his eyes. "... Damnit! I miss them!"

His words were just whispers, but Minato heard him anyway. "It's about your parents, isn't it?" After all, it didn't take a genius to figure it out.

Souji buried his face into Minato's shoulder, soaking his t-shirt with his tears as he sobbed quietly, like a lost little boy.

Minato held him as he cried, rubbing his back gently with one hand as his little brother grieved and cried himself out. It was all he could do, and he'd gladly do it for him.

After Souji had no more tears to cry, he pulled away from Minato and sniffled quietly. His eyes were a bit puffed up, rubbing the back of his head in embarrassment at the large wet spot he'd caused. "Sorry about that..."

Minato looked down at his damp shirt, shrugging it off with a grin. "Nah, don't worry about it. Looks like you needed a good cry." The silverette yawned suddenly, exhausted from the long day's events. "And you need sleep too, no doubt. Let me help you finish up packing."

Souji was grateful. "Thanks, Aniki."

"Hey, that's what big brothers are for, right, Banchou-kun?"

As he helped Souji with his things, Shinjiro and Metis watched them from the door of his room. "So… Souji-san's sad because his family is gone?" Metis asked quietly.

"Looks like it, but it's not confirmed yet, so there’s still hope," Shinjiro said. "Can't butt in on his problems now. If he wants to talk, he'll come talking."

"I see…" Metis said thoughtfully. "I… I think… I can understand how he feels…"

Shinjiro raised an eyebrow at that. "You do? I’m guessing you’re missing Aigis a lot, huh?"

"How did you know?"

"Beats the hell outta me. The way ya talk about her gives that impression, I guess. You really dislike being alone."

Metis nodded. "Do you… do you think she will be happy to see me again?"

"Can't see why not. After all, you are her sister. It doesn't matter if you were born from her emotions or whatever the heck Souji said."

"Thank you, Shinjiro-san."

Shinjiro shrugged it off, heading to the kitchen. "No big deal. Let's get some rest. It’s already late and I doubt we’ll be leaving tonight anyway. I’ll fix up some dinner."

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Early the next morning, they freshened up and left for the train station immediately after breakfast. Souji also received a phone call from Dojima earlier and informed him that along with his transfer papers, he would be bringing three friends with him to Inaba. This way, the detective wouldn't be surprised upon meeting them, and prepare the house for visitors.
As they waited for the train to arrive, Shinjiro took his time to look around... until someone caught his eye – the girl who looked just like the one he saw in his dream. She seemed to be waiting for the same train he and the others were taking. She suddenly perked up and stared at him, giving a small smile and wave. ‘It's her! So she wasn't a dream after all…’

He was about to walk up to her and demand answers when Minato called out to him, tinkering with his MP3 player. "Hey Senpai, is something wrong?"

"N-nah…it's nothing," Shinjiro replied. When he turned his gaze back to where the girl was standing before, she was already gone. ‘Shit! Not again… am I seeing things now?’

Their train arrived shortly after. As the Persona-users boarded, none of them noticed an auburn-haired girl entering the same coach as they were in, only from another door at the back.

‘This is gonna be a very interesting summer...’ she thought, smiling as she put on a pair of red headphones and turned on her own MP3 player - the same model and brand as a certain blunette’s. ‘Right Aniki, Banchou-kun?’
Meeting of Persona-Users

While Minato, Shinjiro, Metis and Souji were still in Tatsumi Port Island gathering information about the former SEES' whereabouts, a train just arrived at Yasoinaba Station.

A group of young adults gathered around the train door as the announcement came on. "We have arrived at Yasoinaba…Yasoinaba Station."

An elegant, young woman with a head of red hair looked around the station as she exited the train. "We finally arrived. What a charming little place this is."

One by one, the group members disembarked the train: A young woman with light blue hair tied in a braid. A slightly taller young woman with blonde hair wearing a large hair band. A brown-haired pre-teen. An athletic young man with silver hair and a devilishly handsome face. A young woman with shoulder-length brown hair and bright, intelligent eyes. Lastly, a young man easily depicted as a joker, wearing a baseball cap, goatee and a mischievous grin.

"Yasoinaba Station. It’s smaller than I thought," the red-head, Mitsuru Kirijo, commented.

"It may be small, but some weird stuff happened around here," the joker, Junpei Iori said, grinning widely.

"I swear, Junpei, if you hadn't showed us that website, I'd say it was just some silly paranormal rumor," the brunette, Yukari Takeba, scolded.

"Hey, I know ya don't like ghost stories, Yuka-tan, but even you gotta agree that this whole stuff sounds way too similar to what we experienced back in high school."

"Got a point there…" the handsome young man, Akihiko Sanada, stated. "So, what's the plan now, Mitsuru?"

Mitsuru flicked her hair back. "After we leave our belongings at the Amagi Inn, let's take a look around town. I've made arrangements with the inn's manager and her daughter agreed to be our tour guide."

"That's convenient. Hopefully we'll find some useful information," the young woman with braids, Fuuka Yamagishi, agreed. Suddenly she remembered something. "Oh, shouldn't we release Koromaru now?"

"I'll get him," the pre-teen, Ken Amada, volunteered. He ran up to a dog carrier near a pile of their luggage and swung open the door. "Here, Koro, come on out!"

Out bounded a white dog. He wore a white, sleeveless dog tunic with two small wings sewn onto the back. His deep, red eyes looked around curiously, nose sniffing everywhere.

"I'm sorry you had to travel in that thing, Koromaru. Forgive me?" Mitsuru implored, bending down slightly and extending her palm to him.

Koromaru nuzzled her hand, panting excitedly, tail wagging. "Koromaru-san is saying: 'I understand. Don't worry about it,'" the blonde girl, Aigis, translated.

"If we're all set here, let's get going!" Junpei cheered enthusiastically.
The group headed out to catch the bus to the inn. Aigis stared at the sky with a distant look in her eyes.

"Hey Aigis," Yukari called. "You okay?"

"Oh, yes… I'm fine, Yukari-san." Aigis then sighed melancholically. "For some reason, I've been thinking a lot about them lately...about him...and her..."

Yukari was silent at first. Aigis had become one of her closest friends after the whole Abyss of Time thing, so she knew that every now and then Aigis missed not only Minato, but Metis too, as she was the closest thing to a family the android will ever have, despite the fact that Metis was 'born' from her very own emotions. "I know. I miss them too. But don't forget...you're not alone, okay?"

"Thank you, Yukari-san."

"Don't mention it," Yukari smiled gently. "Now, c'mon, the others are waiting."

The tagged along behind the rest of their friends, never leaving each other’s side.

Yukiko walked slowly towards the bus stop, lost in her thoughts. According to her mother, she was supposed to meet up with a group of college students from Tatsumi Port Island, who will be staying at her family’s inn, and tour them around Inaba. To be honest, she didn't mind such a task. They weren't much older than her so making conversation shouldn't be too hard. She also asked Chie and her other friends for help, and they agreed.

'They're from Port Island...the same place Souji-kun is now. I wonder how he's doing?' she thought worriedly. 'It's not like him to ignore my emails or anyone else's. Of course, he might just be busy because of school. Well, my situation isn't any different so…'

"Yo, Senpai!" A rough yet friendly voice snapped her out of her thoughts.

Yukiko turned around, putting on a smile as Kanji Tatsumi and Naoto Shirogane walked up to her. "Good day, Yukiko-senpai," Naoto greeted.

"Oh, Kanji-kun…Naoto-kun. Hello." She bowed slightly, returning the greeting. "Thank you for coming."

"S’no big deal," Kanji shrugged. "So, where are Chie-senpai and the others?"

"Chie went to get Rise-chan, since she said she had to help her grandmother at the tofu shop first. Yosuke-kun said he and Teddie will catch up with us as soon as their work at Junes is over." The raven haired girl checked her watch. "Kirijo-san's group should be arriving soon. Shall we go on ahead?"

"Yes, let's," the Detective Prince replied. Kanji nodded.

The three high schoolers headed to the bus stop. Ten minutes of waiting later, the bus with Mitsuru and her friends arrived.

There was some commotion as the group from the city unloaded their luggage. Finally, a tall, elegant woman approached them. "Excuse me, are you Amagi-san?" Mitsuru asked as she addressed Yukiko. She was easy to spot as she was the only one wearing a pink kimono.
Yukiko bowed with a confident smile. "I am Yukiko Amagi. Please, just call me Yukiko. You must be Kirijo-san." She gestured to Kanji and Naoto, who bowed as well. "These are my friends, Kanji Tatsumi and Naoto Shirogane. I hope you and your friends won't mind, but I asked them to help me with the tour. The others should be arriving soon."

"The more the merrier!" Junpei grinned. Koromaru barked, wagging his tail happily.

Kanji couldn't help but smile when he saw the Shiba Inu and his fluffy, white fur. "H-hey, that's a cute dog… C-can I pet him?"


Koromaru trotted up to the tall teen, who dropped down on one knee to his level. The dog nuzzled Kanji’s hand, showing acceptance. "Wow, nice fur, so soft and fuzzy..." Kanji praised, scratching the canine behind the ears, a spot he loved to be scratched. "And his doggie shirt is pretty well made, too. I mean, the wings are neatly sewn and it’s pretty comfy for him to run and play around in. The design–"

Yukari was amazed at the details he was describing. "Wow, Kanji-kun. You sure know so much about clothes."

"W-well, my Ma runs a textile shop and I k-kinda help out there..."

"Kanji-kun is really good at sewing, having grown up in that kind of environment. He also teaches others how to make the stuff he loves, like dolls," Naoto continued for him, much to his surprise and embarrassment. "He's quite good at it, actually."

"N-Naoto!"

"I think that's pretty cool, Kanji-san," Ken said. "You can make stuff that no one else can."

Kanji turned a little red at the praise, but he's glad nonetheless. "Thanks, kid. You guys are welcome to drop by our store later. I can show you some of my stuff there."

"We would like that very much, Kanji-san," Aigis said.

"Starting with the tour, where would you like to –" Yukiko's opening discussion was cut off by a familiar holler.

"Yukiko!" Chie shouted as she and Rise ran up to them. "Whoa, they're here already?!"

"Wow, talk about a cool-looking group," Rise said excitedly. "Hi there! I'm Rise Kujikawa."

"Rise…no way!" Junpei exclaimed, rubbing his eyes. "I must be dreaming…you're Risette? The super idol?! Sweet! You're even cuter in person!"

Rise giggled. "Thank you!"

"You can always count on Rise-chan to get all the attention," Chie said amusedly. "Oh, I'm Chie Satonaka by the way. Nice to meet you guys." She began looking around for someone. "Hey, where are Yosuke and Teddie? I thought they’d be here already."

"TED, GET YOUR HANDS OFF MY FACE! I CAN'T SEE WHERE I'M GOING!"

"STOP!" Another voice yelled. "YOSUKE, STOP THIS THING!"
They turned towards the voices and saw two teenage boys riding a bike heading towards them, and it seems to be out of control.

Mitsuru was confused. "What in the world…?"

"It's coming straight at us! Look out!" Akihiko warned, grabbing her arm to pull her out of harm's way. Everybody quickly got out of the rogue bike's way as it zipped past them.

Chie sweatdropped when the bike and its riders crashed into some trash cans. "Ugh… I had to ask…"

"You know them?" Yukari asked incredulously.

"That's Yosuke and Teddie." The martial artist rolled her eyes. "I don't know why Yosuke keeps using that bicycle, 'cuz he always end up crashing it."

"H-hey!" Yosuke shouted, rolling around while stuck inside a trash can. "Help! Someone!"

"Please, someone save meeeeee!" Teddie whined, also in the same predicament.

"Umm…maybe we should help them?" Fuuka wondered.

With Akihiko and Kanji's help, the two of them were saved. "Phew…that was a close call. Thanks for the help, everyone!" Yosuke said. "Oh, you guys must be the ones Yukiko told me about. I'm Yosuke Hanamura, and this little troublemaker is Teddie."

"Are you okay, Yosuke-senpai? Teddie?" Naoto asked. "Why were you riding in tandem? You know that's illegal."

"I'm fine, Nao-chan. Thanks for caring about me," Teddie answered, ignoring her last question with a dazzling smile and added sparkles. "Can't say the same about Yosuke though…"

"Shut it!" Yosuke growled. "It's your fault we even crashed in the first place! No thanks to you busting up my scooter, now you gotta ruin my bicycle too?!"

Teddie whimpered in fear. "But Yosuke, my roller skates were missing a wheel. How was I supposed to get here in time without transport?"

"You're lucky we weren't arrested, you little-"

"Hey, take it easy on the little guy," Yukari interjected. "It was an accident. And he said he's sorry."

Teddie's face lit up as he stared at her from top to bottom. "My, my, what a nice and pretty girl you are. You're bear-y nice to Teddie-"

"Bear-y?" She raised a sceptical eyebrow. "Geez, and I thought Junpei's jokes were lame."

"Right…? HEY!" Junpei shouted in protest.

Everybody laughed at the exchange except for Aigis, who glared at the blonde boy for some reason.

"Hm? Aigis, is something wrong?" Mitsuru asked, noticing her strange behavior.

"Him…" The blonde girl pointed at Teddie. "He…he is not human…"
Everybody immediately stopped laughing. Aigis continued. "He's not a human, but I sense that he is not dangerous either. He is a Shadow...with a Persona."

The Investigation Team was at a loss of words, and so were the former SEES. "W-what?! H-how did she find out? I mean, what do you know about Shadows and Personas?!" Naoto demanded. She wondered how their well-kept secret was discovered so easily.

Junpei grinned like an idiot. "Like I mentioned before, this place is perfect for our vacation."

"Wait, so you guys are Persona-users?" Rise asked, surprised yet very curious.

"That's right," Akihiko replied, eyes shifty. "Look, this is not the best place talk about it. You guys know where we can discuss this?"

"What about our special headquarters?" Chie suggested. "It's the only place I can think of."

"That will work just perfectly," Mitsuru declared. "Please lead the way."

------------------------------------------

Junes' Food Court...

"So, this is your special headquarters?" Junpei asked as they gathered around a few joined tables to accommodate their large group.

"What did you expect?" Chie retorted. "Some sort of high tech, top-secret facility?"

"Meh... sort of."

After they introduced themselves to each other, the atmosphere was no longer awkward.

"Alright, let's get this started," Yosuke announced, turning to Mitsuru. "You guys are also Persona-users, right?"

She shook her head. "That's partially accurate. We can no longer summon ours."

"Yeah, when the Shadows disappeared from this world two years ago, we lost the ability to summon our Personas," Yukari said.

Yukiko perked up at her statement. "Wait, did you say 'this world'? You guys could summon your Personas in this world?"

"We used our Personas in an alternate dimension parallel to this one. Well, kind of. It's...hard to explain," Fuuka said.

"Our school was, for one reason or another, 'cursed', and transformed into a gigantic tower called Tartarus at midnight every night. Its sole purpose was to usher in the bringer of death, Nyx," Mitsuru continued. "Our Personas could be summoned in our world because we never left our world."

"A giant tower..." Kanji whistled. "Damn...that must have been something to see."

"Shadows in this world?!" Teddie demanded. "That's not possible. Shadows can't exist in this world!"

"They don't exist long, mind you. They could only leave the tower every full moon, and
occasionally a few strays would wonder the streets."

Teddie shook his head vehemently. "But how? They shouldn't-"

"Their situation was different, Teddie," Naoto interjected, trying to calm him down. "The Shadows manifested in our world during their time, whereas we enter the Shadows' world." She turned to Mitsuru. "How long was this tower around for?"

"The school would only transform into the tower for a duration of one hour every midnight."

"I get it." Naoto held her chin pensively. "If Shadows really can't stay in our world for long, that explains why Tartarus would go away after the Dark Hour ended."

"Guys, this is all really interesting. But let's hear them out first, yeah?" Rise suggested. "Speculations can wait."

Mitsuru began her story. "For one hour every night, the world would shut down. We called this the Dark Hour. Only those with the potential to host a Persona could function during this time, and electronic equipment would cease functioning. I was the first person in the area to successfully control a Persona in order to fight a Shadow."

Akihiko leaned forward. "Mitsuru and I were the first two people who decided to explore Tartarus. Along with a friend named Shinjiro, we started an investigation team called SEES. Specialized Extracurricular Execution Squad. We were devoted to discovering why Tartarus appeared, and to see if we could put a stop to the Dark Hour."

Yukari spoke up next. "Eventually, every full moon brought out a monstrously powerful Shadow that would leave Tartarus and wreak havoc on the city. We took it upon ourselves to destroy these Shadows before more people got hurt. Unfortunately, some people had already fallen ill because Shadows fed off their minds. They developed what we call ‘Apathy Syndrome’, a condition where the victims were awake but couldn’t feel or think for themselves…remaining alive, but lifeless at the same time. Many rumors started out because of this widespread condition, but only we knew the truth. Every time we defeated a large Shadow, the number of victims would dwindle, but they would increase again as the next full moon approached."

Fuuka's hands fidgeted nervously as she spoke. "Unfortunately, we didn't realize that by destroying the 12 large Shadows, we were actually rejoining them into one entity. Eventually, we defeated all the large Shadows, but another problem presented itself – because of our actions, mankind was going to die."

Aigis stepped forward to continue. "I was originally created to battle Shadows, specifically one large Shadow represented by Death, the 13th Arcana. I was defeated and reconstructed, but only reactivated a few years ago. After we defeated the last of the large shadows, Death reappeared before us in a false image. We discovered this fallacy and faced him head on, but he disappeared before we could defeat him. He claimed that he would return on New Year's Eve with a decision for us; either we could have our memories erased and die with the rest of the world peacefully, or continue to retain our memories and suffer the fear of knowing that the end was coming in thirty days. Either way, the world would end on January 31st."

Junpei's voice joined suddenly, as he didn't make any movements to let anyone know he was going to speak. "Problem was, we didn't like those choices. So we fought our way to the top of Tartarus, and on January 31st, faced the representation of Nyx, the entity formed of mankind's desire to end all suffering through death. In any case, we kicked his ass, but he had one last trick up his sleeve. He summoned, like…the moon or something, and the world was really almost over. But…"
The entire table went silent.

"But what…?" Chie demanded, leaning on the edge of her seat.

Everyone who had spoken turned to look at Aigis. She smiled sadly. "But our squad leader sacrificed his life to seal away Nyx and block out the desires for destruction of mankind. He single-handedly stopped Nyx and saved the world. All he needed was our thoughts of him and our unstoppable wills."

The Inaba group remained speechless. Yukiko couldn't believe her ears. Everything they just said lined up somehow with their own incident.

"But that wasn't the end of it," Ken voiced, breaking the silence. "We were about to go our separate ways, when the day started repeating itself. Because of our involvement in Nyx's defeat, we've been tied to the Desert of Time. For some reason, Aigis was granted the same special powers as our squad leader, and we had to dive into the desert to defeat the actual embodiment of mankind's desire to die. You see, when our leader sacrificed himself, he established a physical barrier that our desires were constantly beating against. It was strong and solid, but was already beginning to crack just a few weeks later. We saw a lot about each other in that desert, and after everything was said and done, it was us versus the will of mankind to die, that became a huge monster called Erebus."

"I assume that you guys won, right?" Kanji asked. Ken nodded.

"So then, what's your story?" Akihiko asked.

"I can retell the story," Naoto volunteered.

"That would probably be best. We can fill in the parts you missed," Yukiko said.

Naoto delved into their story of the Inaba murders, the world inside the television, and the eventual confrontation with mankind's desires to hide the unwanted truth in a dense fog. Yosuke interjected in between about their confrontation with their Shadow selves. The embarrassing stories were left out, but the failure in capturing the correct criminal was included, which led to the worsening fog leaking into their world, threatening to change every living being into Shadows. Even Teddie's origin was recollected, which shocked the other team.

Finally, Naoto told the story of Izanami, and how their own team leader squared off against the original goddess of Japan one-on-one, with only the thoughts of those who supported him. When she spoke of this, everyone around the table became somber. The connection between the two people was undeniable - both had been exceptions to the Persona rule, and both had faced off against the will of man and won.

"So what happened to your leader?" Yukari asked.

"He moved back with his parents," Chie said. "He's actually living in Port Island now."

Yukari gazed at the ground, expression bitter.

"It's been almost three years, and yet we still wish he would come back to us," Aigis added. "When I inherited his power of multiple Personas, we worried that I would die as well. While I didn't, from that day on, I promised myself to do whatever I can to ease his burden."

Yosuke scratched the back of his head nervously. "Well, I hate to say it, but what's done is done. We can't live in the past, right?"
"You're exactly right," Mitsuru admitted. "However…it's just very difficult to let the death of two of your best friends go."

"T-two?" Yukiko asked.

"Remember Shinjiro, who helped us start SEES?" Akihiko looked away. "Yeah…he…"

Silence. Again.

"Well!" Rise smacked the table and stood up quickly, a bright grin on her face. "Enough of this mopey stuff! Collectively, we've saved the world how many times? We should go do something fun for a change!"

"What about the TV World?" Chie suggested. "Their reason for using their Personas is gone, but ours still exists. Maybe we can show them? And maybe they'll be able to summon theirs as well."

"And now, since it's so beautiful there, it'll be a real treat for everybody!" Yukiko added.

"Sounds like a plan!" Yosuke said. He was interrupted when his cell phone rang. "Oh, excuse me for a sec." He picked up the call. "Hanamura speaking. Oh, hi Dojima-san. What? Sure, of course we can! That's no trouble at all. Okay, we'll be there tomorrow. No problem. See ya." He hung up. "That was Dojima-san, our leader's uncle. He asked us to look after his daughter, Nanako-chan, for him tomorrow. Said he has some business to take care of out of town."

"In that case, let's bring Nana-chan with us tomorrow!" Teddie suggested. "I promised her I'd show her that place, now that it's not dangerous for her anymore, and play with her lots!"

The former SEES members felt a tingle of excitement at the idea. "Very well, then. We agree," Mitsuru said. "We shall meet up tomorrow and proceed to this place together."

"Okay then. It's a date!" Teddie exclaimed, lightening everyone's mood.

"Wow, time flies…." Rise said, looking at the sunset. "I gotta go home. I promised Grandma I'd help her close the tofu shop."

"I must be leaving as well. Grampa is expecting me for dinner," Naoto said, standing up.

"Hey, Naoto…i-if ya don't mind, 'll go with ya…" Kanji offered, a faint blush on his face.

She was surprised, but agreed to it with a smile. "Thank you, Kanji-kun."

"I'll take Mitsuru-san and the others back to the inn," Yukiko said. "Where shall we meet up tomorrow?"

"In front of Daidara's at the Shopping District," Yosuke said. "We probably won't be needing it, but y'know what they say, better safe than sorry."

As they said their farewells, Yukiko escorted her guests back to the Amagi Inn. That had been quite the gathering of people. Each one had a story, and each one had a reason for fighting. In the morning, they would enter the TV World once again. Not as people searching for answers, but as people who already know the answers, and are merely seeking a good time.

'I wish Souji-kun was here to see this. I'm sure he would have liked to meet Mitsuru-san and the others…' Yukiko thought to herself. 'As soon as possible, I'll tell him everything.'
The next day, everybody save for Yosuke and Teddie, stood in front of Daidara's Metalworks.

"Where are Yosuke-kun and Teddie-kun?" Fuuka asked.

"They went pick up Nanako-chan," Yukiko replied. "They should be arriving soon."

"Yo!" Speak of the devil. Yosuke walked up to them, a cute little girl by his side.

"Um…are you sure it's a good idea bring her with us?" Ken asked uneasily.

"Don't worry. If anything comes up, I'll protect Nana-chan!" Teddie exclaimed from behind Yosuke.

They didn't recognise him at first, but after hearing his voice, everybody laughed a little. They were surprised to see him suited in his infamous blue bear costume. Adorned in red and white pajamas, the bear was still a sight to behold.

"Nice outfit!" Junpei cracked a grin. "Dude, you're right. He looks so fluffy! Hey, Teddie, can I pet you?"

Teddie's glass eyes narrowed dangerously, proving that his 'costume' was more than just a costume. "No."

"Aw," Yukari whined. "What about me?" she asked, striking an innocent pose.

Red flooded the cheeks of Teddie's bear face. "I-if I say yes, will you let me score with you?"

Her eyes flashed in anger, innocence gone from her face and voice. "What? 'Score'? Oh man, that was terrible."

"That's Teddie alright," Yosuke sighed, rolling his eyes. "Dude, watch what you're saying. Nanako-chan's right here!"

"He's funny," the girl giggled. She remembered her manners and bowed politely. "Hello. I'm Nanako Dojima. Are you Teddie's new friends?"

"Yeah…sort of..." Akihiko said. There was something about the little elementary school girl that reminded him strongly of his late sister, Miki. He turned to Kanji and Naoto, concern in his eyes. "Hey, are you guys sure about bringing a kid along?"

"Plenty sure. That's why we came here first," Kanji said, pointing his thumb to the shop behind him.

"Uh…what's this place again?" Junpei asked.

"A metal workshop. The owner here crafts armors and weapons from all different sorts of materials," Naoto explained. "While we don't think it'll be necessary, it's definitely safer if everybody is properly equipped before we head out for the TV World."

"A metalworks huh? Well, we did bring our Evokers with us, but of course they might not be enough in case we run into something..."

"What's an Evoker? Some kind of gun?" Kanji asked spontaneously.

The former SEES members looked at each other uneasily. "Well, yeah..." Ken started. "It only looks like one, but-"
"We point these Evokers to our heads to summon our Personas," Akihiko said, and with that, he pulled out his own to show their new friends what he meant.

Rise was the first to speak up. "That's not a real one, right? It just seems so..."

"Emo, crazy, demented?" Junpei prompted. "Yeah we all figured that, but--" He was cut off by a smack from Yukari. "OW!"

"Junpei, don't run off your mouth like an idiot! Guys, don't mind him. He just likes to say whatever's on his mind."

"It is a wise idea to equip ourselves before our exploration, though," Aigis said.

"Agreed. Let's get inside and see if we can find any suitable weapons," Mitsuru suggested.

After some browsing around, some of them came out of the shop with new weapons and armor.

"So you guys hide armors and weapons underneath your school uniforms, too?" Chie asked as they made their way back to Junes.

"It's the best way not to draw attention," Fuuka replied. "Now that we've graduated high school, it feels strange if we were to walk around wearing our school uniforms."

"You guys aren't from this town, so I would recommend wearing normal clothes over your armor," Rise pointed out. "That way, people won't get too suspicious."

"True. That's not such a bad idea," Ken said.

"Right, now that we're set, next stop...Junes!" Yosuke said.

"So how exactly does this work?" Yukari asked Rise as the party of sixteen moved through Junes' electronics department.

"It's a hugely involved process. Everyone has to go through it," Rise enlightened them with an air of dignity about her. "Each person stands directly in front of the television, and then we step right through."

The elder of the two Lovers raised an eyebrow, amused. "You're not very funny, you know."

The pop idol gave them a signature Risette wink. "Hey, gotta make do with what you got."

Yosuke and Teddie were the first to reach the large television screen set up as the main display in the electronics department. This television was almost a relic to the Investigation Team. It was their gateway to saving those who had been thrown into the world up until last March.

"During our investigations, we would follow our leader into this specific TV," Chie told Junpei. "He moved back home just a few months ago. We all miss him, though."

"Hey, Teddie, did you bring them?" Yosuke asked. The bear grinned and revealed a plastic bag from behind his back.

The group was a chaotic mess of conversation as they gathered around the single television screen.

"Okay, then. Everyone should pay attention over here," Yosuke announced. The group quieted
down and their eyes all fell on Yosuke, who stood directly in front of the screen. Teddie stood directly to his left, with a goofy grin on his face. "Teddie, if you would be so kind."

The Junes mascot moved towards Nanako, reaching into the plastic bag and pulling out a pair of pink child glasses, which he then handed to her. While he was busy passing the rest of the glasses around, Yosuke began to speak. "Well, uh, we don't really think the glasses will be necessary, but we want to cover all our bases. Kind of a just-in-case situation. The atmosphere on the other side is harsh for humans because of the fog, so you might feel sick or tired if you're not used to it. Take your glasses from Teddie before we proceed."

"That's kinda like exploring Tartarus during the Dark Hour," Fuuka stated, studying her oval, half-rimmed glasses. "The atmosphere made it easy for one to feel sick or fatigued until they become adapted to it."

"So we'll probably have no problem there," Akihiko pointed out, confident of his stamina.

Yosuke nodded in approval. "That's cool, then. Alright, everyone, gather 'round. Time to show you guys how we do things around here." Their attention was focused on him and the large screen behind him. The third-year student swiveled around and reached out a hand to hover over the smooth screen of the television. "Those of us who have a Persona can still access this world, but I don't know about any of you guys, so go ahead and pair up as best you can. Now, check this out." He used his index finger and touched the screen. A series of ripples traveled out from the tip of his finger, as if he'd dropped a pebble into a lake's surface. When he pulled his finger away, the ripples stopped.

Gasps of excitement and awe spread throughout the group. Nanako, already donned on her kiddie pink glasses, clapped and laughed.

"Our TV sure doesn't do that," Junpei remarked.

"May I test something?" Mitsuru asked. "You say that it's your potential to wield Personas which allows you to traverse the two worlds. Perhaps we can also do so, because we have the potential to carry them as well."

"A logical conclusion," Naoto observed. "Senpai, let her touch the screen."

Yosuke stepped away as Mitsuru sidled her way next to it. She reached out and gingerly touched the screen. From the point of contact, a ripple traversed the screen's surface, exactly as it had done under Yosuke's touch. There was a second wave of awe and excitement throughout the crowd.

"Sweet!" Junpei cheered. "So we can do it too, because we used to have Personas?"

"It appears that way, anyway." Mitsuru replied. "I'm satisfied. Everyone, please stay together. We don't know what's going to happen on the other side."

Nanako moved forward. "Let's go! Let's go!" she squealed with laughter.

"Nana-chan, Ken and Koromaru can go with me first," Teddie suggested.

Yosuke ushered them to go ahead, and the four youngsters moved up to stand abreast in front of the television. Koromaru leapt into Ken's arms as he stood next to Teddie, who held both Ken's and Nanako's hands. "One," Teddie started, "two, three!" He leapt forward, pulling Ken, Nanako and Koromaru along with him. Three of them let out shouts of excitement as their bodies contacted the screen, swallowing them as if they were sinking through a vertical wall of water. Ripples crashed like ocean waves, never leaving the two-dimensional plane, but traversing the screen violently as
such a disturbance interrupted its peace. In an instance, Teddie, Nanako, Ken, and Koromaru were gone, much to the amazement of the college students.

"Next!" Yosuke called.

Rise stepped up with Yukari. The scanner grinned and leapt forward with an excited cry, followed quickly by Yukari, who shouted in surprise as they plummeted through the screen's surface.

Shortly after that, Kanji and Junpei stood next to each other, supporting cocky grins. They simply leapt forward, both without a word, and entered the screen simultaneously, leaving the group smaller than before.

"I'll go next," Yukiko proclaimed. Mitsuru decided to go with her, standing confidently next to her with arms crossed. The two of them looked almost regal in their reflections in the screen, before letting out girlish yells of excitement – not screams, of course, but mere exclamations of adrenaline – as they leapt into the screen as well.

Chie and Fuuka were next. The martial artist wannabe smiled widely and let out a whoop of excitement as she grabbed the other scanner's hand and leapt forward. Chie yelled in excitement and Fuuka screamed in protest. Soon, they were both gone.

Naoto nodded to Yosuke and moved to face the screen next. Aigis stood beside her. The two of them, silent as a grave, calmly stepped forward, allowing the rippling screen to envelope them much more delicately than the previous pairs. In just so many seconds, they, too, were gone, leaving only Yosuke and Akihiko.

"This is quite the way to travel," Akihiko remarked as he and Yosuke moved up next to each other.

"It's great! Only thing is, every television is connected to a different location. And there's no way out once you're in. Only Teddie can make an exit," Yosuke said. He saw Akihiko's worried expression and laughed. "Remember, Teddie's on our side. We've gone into this world so many times it'd be impossible to count! Now let's go join the others."

Akihiko nodded and faced the screen as confidently as he knew how. With a push of fear and anticipation, the boxer leapt forward alongside his high school chaperone, slipping through the dark screen into a world of white.

Moments later, Yosuke held out his hand, which Akihiko graciously took. Pulling him to his feet, the brunette had to laugh a little. "Sorry 'bout that first step, man. It's a bit of a dozy."

"No kidding," the boxer chuckled to himself. "I'm afraid my pride will remember that one for a while." He looked around. "What is this place? A studio?"

"Think of it as an entrance hall." Yosuke took leadership role once more. "Okay, guys, follow me." They followed him through the parallel world up to a certain point. When they reached, everyone took their time to soak in the view before them. The world inside the television was nothing less than picturesque: Beautiful mountain ranges and waterfalls cascaded across the horizon. Clear lakes reflecting the perfect blue sky. Gigantic fields of gorgeous wildflowers bloomed unnaturally close together, forming a carpet of various colors.

This world no longer even remotely resembled the dreary, fog-filled world that the Investigation Team knew so well. Under their leader's guidance, they had finally rid both worlds of the terrible fog that was threatening to meld realities together. Now, this world truly reflected that which it was supposed to – the human heart. The heart was a strong entity, shared by all, yet unique to each
individual. This world represented that unity, and that individuality, in its absolute splendor.

Teddie beamed. "There's no fog around. Guess we won't need the glasses!"

"Anyway, now that we're here, what do you guys want to do?" Chie asked casually.

"You say that like it's not the most beautiful landscape ever," Ken replied, his eyes wide and brimming with excitement. He was gazing at every direction, trying to take in as much of the scenery around him as possible and committing it into memory.

"Oh, it's beautiful alright, but it's not something we haven't seen before," Yukiko told him. "Ever been to the mountains in your dreams? Or gone deep-lake diving? Or maybe you went frolicking through a field of flowers with a crush? Where do you think those images come from, Ken-kun?"

Junpei looked around in astonishment, then back at Yukiko. "Wait, are you kidding me? This place is where our dreams come from?"

"That's not entirely true," Naoto answered with a shake of her head. "More accurately, this place is formed from our dreams. This world reflects the human heart in the majority."

"It's so pretty," Nanako said in awe. "Even if I don’t remember, it wasn’t like this at all."

Yosuke felt a slight sting in heart. Despite her having forgotten the memory of being kidnapped and trapped here, the same couldn’t be said about her emotional experience. "Well Nanako-chan, this is just what your big brother helped make this place like it is now."

A tiny gasp escaped the girl. "Big Bro made this place so pretty?"

"Yup. And all of us helped. Even you!" Chie added.

"Even me?" Nanako was in sheer ecstasy now, her eyes alight with wonder.

"Yep, Nana-chan! Thanks to you and everybody's hard work, Sensei did this!" Teddie said.

Junpei raised an eyebrow. "Sensei?"

"That's how Teddie calls our leader, Souji-senpai," Naoto explained. "He really admires and looks up to him."

"Your leader sounds like a great person," Aigis said. Her thoughts drifted back to Minato as she placed a hand on her chest and closed her eyes. Without realizing, an eerie blue-black smoke started lifting from the ground around her.

"Aigis?!" Yukari shouted startled, drawing everybody's attention.

"She… She's summoning her Persona!" Fuuka gasped.

A sound similar to shattering glass was heard. A silhouette formed above Aigis, who looked up and stared, rather surprised at first. Floating above her was an outline of a humanoid male with a mechanical body, holding something that resembled a harp. But then the outer layers became mosaics, its form beginning to change. The figure then became much clearer - a metallic circumference surrounded what appears to be a woman in a white robe. When the transformation completed, she now wore a Roman battle helm, holding a lance and shield.

"Athena…"
The goddess of strategic warfare looked down at her, smiling gently before vanishing into thin air. Aigis smiled too, then sank to her knees, panting hard.

"Aigis!" Yukari cried, kneeling by her side. "You okay?"

"Yes… I'm okay, Yukari-san… Just…a little fatigued…" She got up with Yukari's help. "But, my Persona…"

"It changed…" Fuuka concluded for her. "Not only has her original Persona returned, but she doesn't seem to be able to use multiple Personas anymore. I mean, I don't sense them within her."

"Huh? What do you mean?" Kanji asked, confused.

"Remember when we said that Aigis-san obtained the same power as our former leader? When that happened, her Persona, Athena, transformed into the initial Persona of our leader," Ken explained. "But, if her persona changed back to its original self, then that means she no longer has that power. I wonder why."

"Maybe that power is no longer needed," Aigis said, wistfully staring at the sky. "Things change, for better or for worse. It's a part of life."

"Perhaps. At any rate, it looks like we're able to summon our Personas in this world," Akihiko stated, clenching his fists in excitement.

"Since you guys did something similar a few years back, seems like this place lets you do it again." Yosuke reached into his pocket and pulled out a card containing the image of Susano-O, his Persona. "We're used to having these things appear with us when we enter here."

"Appear? Then, they don't travel with you to the real world when you leave?" Mitsuru inquired.

Naoto shook her head. "No, I'm afraid they do not. We are unable to summon ours in the real world."

Rise sighed. "Which is a bummer, 'cause that'd totally be useful. It'll be so awesome if I could sense people's locations just like I could in here, and telepathically communicate with them."

Fuuka gasped, surprised. "What? You can sense people too, Rise-chan?"

"Yep! I'm like Teddie, but more accurate. His Persona is more battle-oriented than mine though, which is fine since I'm not the fighting type anyway. He helps fight off Shadows with the others and I give analytical support from a distance."

Akihiko chuckled. "Wow, Mitsuru, this is starting to sound really familiar."

"I agree," said the red-headed beauty. "There are too many correlations between our groups to be mere coincidence. In my experience, such gatherings are formed in the ways that they are for a reason."

"It’s nice to think about it that way, that's for sure," Chie agreed. "Without that thought, we might not have been able to save Naoto-kun, Kubo, or Nanako-chan, since Rise-chan was the one who pin-pointed their locations."

"By the way, I remember you guys saying something about using cards to summon your Personas," Yukari said. "But how do you summon them?"
"Hey, Yukiko, you have your fan on you, right?"

Yukiko drew an ougi from her waistband. "Are you asking for a demonstration?"

Chie nodded. Yukiko elegantly opened her fan. A glowing blue card materialized in front of her, floating and spinning around. As she twirled like a dancer, Yukiko used the edge of the fan to slice cleanly through her card, which immediately cut into two pieces, then disappeared in a puff of light and smoke. "Come, Amaterasu!" The air above the raven-haired girl shimmered, and a physical body appeared – a female silhouette with wing-like protrusions resembling sakura petals. Tied to her wrists were shield-like accessories in the shape of sakura blossoms, her right hand holding a katana while the other held its sheath, her body glowing brightly. The sun goddess bowed its faceless head at the group, then disappeared in a flash of light as quickly as she had appeared. The card reappeared in Yukiko's hand, completely mended.

"Wow!" Nanako clapped. "So pretty!"

Mitsuru was in awe. "Did you say 'Amaterasu' when you summoned it?"

"Yes. Our Personas are named after gods and entities of various myth and legends, fables, and stories. We don't know why, though. They just presented themselves to us as such."

The red-head sighed and shook her head, placing a hand against her temple, suddenly becoming very tired. "Another quality we seem to share. Will the correlations ever cease?"

"So, are you guys gonna try summoning your Personas or what?" Kanji asked.

Junpei turned ecstatic. "Hell yeah! I haven't seen Trismegistus in ages. He probably forgot about me by now!"

"It'll be nice to try it out." Akihiko pulled out his Evoker. "Do you think it will work?"

"Not if you question if it will or not," Teddie replied simply. "It's your Persona, after all. It's part of you. If you don't believe it will appear, then it unmistakably will fail. That's how it works, after all."

Akihiko lips set in a firm line as the grip on his Evoker tightened. "Alright, then. Let's do this. Caesar, show yourself, for old time's sake!" He pointed the muzzle of the gun-shaped object to his head, closing his eyes as he pulled the trigger, creating a noise similar to shattering glass. He grunted as his face contorted in discomfort, forehead slightly sweating as an eerie blue-black smoke lifted from the ground around him. A large, silver Roman warrior appeared overhead, a grand sword in one hand and a globe in the other. He lifted his sword high into the air in triumph before disappearing in a flash of light. The silver-haired young man fell to one knee, panting.

"Akihiko!" Mitsuru gasped, rushing over to help him. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah...I'm fine..." he answered between gasps.

"That was definitely Caesar," Yukari observed. "Akihiko-senpai summoned his Persona!"

"It feels just like the first time I used my Evoker." He got up with Mitsuru's help. "I'm tired just from that tiny summoning."

"That's understandable. It's been over 2 years since we've last summoned them," Fuuka noted. "I think it's only natural that we'd feel a bit of fatigue."
"The same happened to Ai-chan, so it kind of makes sense, huh?" Junpei added.

"Don’t forget, we also haven’t experienced a suppressing atmosphere like the Dark Hour in a long time," Ken commented. "We’ll just need to get used to it again."

"That was so cool!" Nanako cheered ecstatically, cuddling Koromaru.

Everyone was surprised when they remembered that Nanako was still present. The little girl yawned and rubbed one eye. Koromaru whimpered slightly and rubbed his head against her chest. She smiled at him, softly petting his head.

"Nanako-chan's getting tired. It's getting late," Yukiko said worriedly. "We should leave now. We can come back tomorrow."

"I say we call it a day, too. We’ll definitely return, and be more prepared to enjoy this place," Mitsuru declared. "How does a picnic sound?"

Nanako immediately started bouncing up and down, still latched onto Koromaru. "A picnic! A picnic! Yay! We can bring boxed lunches!"

"That's a great idea, Nanako-chan! I'll make a whole bunch of them for everyone," Chie said with a confident grin.

Yosuke's stomach did a somersault. "Uhhh…Chie? That may not be the best idea."

"Hey, I've been practicing!" She raised a fist in defiant vigor. "I'll have you know that Yukiko and I have been studying under the inn's head chef for weeks! I'll show you!"

"Fine, fine, but only make it for yourself. I might just take a bite if it's that important to you."

"Hmph!" Chie turned her back to him, cheeks pink.

Rise giggled. "Yukiko-senpai, Naoto-kun, let's make another cake!"

"What about our group, Mitsuru-senpai?" Yukari asked. "Mind ordering in some sushi?"

Junpei's ears perked up immediately. "Did I hear someone say 'sushi'? Because I think I heard someone say sushi!"

Koromaru barked and wagged his tail in happiness, licking Nanako on the face repeatedly. She giggled because it tickled.

Chie stood up tall as an air of invigoration appeared about her. "All right! Once we get home, we’ll be preparing for a grand picnic feast!"

Once everyone decided what to bring tomorrow, they headed back to the Entrance Hall.

Junpei looked around for an exit. "Uh…so how do we get out, exactly?"

Teddie grinned and waved his arm. A large, triple-stacked set of televisions appeared in a comedic puff of smoke. "Just go through these! Don't worry, they automatically take you back to where we entered. Oh, and when you get back to the inn, don't go through the televisions, or any other TV screen for that matter. I dunno where they lead, and I won't be here to let anyone back out."

Taking the warning to heart, the former SEES members nodded in understanding.
One by one, they left the blissful environment behind in order to properly prepare for the next day's banquet. Being last as always, Teddie looked around and sighed happily at the peaceful scenery that had become of his world, before leaping through the televisions. Whether it was his own excitement over the idea of a picnic with such a huge group of people, or just absentmindedness, the stack of televisions remained.

Scrtch… scrtch…

The coast was clear. It's safe to come out.

From behind rocks, trees, and even from inside the lake, dark masses appeared. They oozed and slithered, their strange, goo-like bodies pulling themselves along. There were only a handful of them, and they were highly cautious towards the strange stack of televisions standing in their utopia. They knew who those people were. They are, after all, Shadows – embodiments of the hearts of man. The connection between the hearts of mankind allowed them to understand the identities of every single human who had been there. The Shadows weren't crazy enough to confront such powerful humans.

…But this new structure, this triple-stacked television set… It's just as they've been told.

Now that was an open invitation.
Chapter Summary

After a personal tragedy, Souji's life is turned upside down when he meets two long-lost friends and experience the return of the Dark Hour. Together with other Wild Cards, SEES and the Investigation Team, they must get to the bottom of this mystery before all is lost. The strings of fate are connected by the trail of butterflies.

The train carriage the four were in on their way to Inaba was oddly empty. Except for one other person who sat a few seats at the back, they were pretty much alone. Each one was lost in their own thoughts, though Minato, who sat beside Souji, kept looking at him every now then.

The silverette continued to stare out the window at the passing countryside, just like he had done last year when he took the train to Inaba for the first time. He felt a heavy weight in his heart, and considered his options before making a choice. "It was a car crash..." he began.

Minato, Metis and Shinjiro turned towards him, but they didn't say anything. They just waited for him to continue.

"The accident Detective Kurosawa was talking about. It happened nearly a month ago, I think. My memory's a little fuzzy from the shock and concussion, or so I've been told." Souji's voice was now monotonous as he recited the tragic event. Minato shifted closer to his friend, lightly put one hand on his knee, as a reminder to the other that he's right there, if he needed him. Shinjiro and Metis continued to listen, not saying a word. None of them were aware that the person at the back, a girl, shifted a little closer and started listening in as well.

"We were heading home from dining outside. My dad's idea, actually. I remember it was raining pretty hard that night. I was in the back seat talking with them about trivial stuff like school and such..." Souji broke off for a bit, drawing in a shaky breath. He reached for Minato's hand to ground himself. His gray eyes closed in recollection, and other than the hand he held onto, was disconnected from everyone's presence.

Minato felt his heart break. He could only imagine what had to come next.

"All I remember then was a loud noise and a strong impact, and a very bright light shining in my face. Everything went black, and I don't know how long I was unconscious after that. When I came to, I was already in the hospital. The nurses told me what happened." A tear threatened to leak out from his clenched eyes. "My mother was driving...I think the traffic light was green...but some stupid, drunk-ass driver in a pick-up truck - one of those American models - ran the red light, colliding head-on with our car. The police caught the guy. He was still passed out from the crash with only minor injuries, a severe concussion and a whiplash at most." His grip on Minato's hand tightened, his posture hunched in grief as he continued to recount the events of that night. "When I asked about my parents, they simply turned away. That's when a police officer walked into my room. He told me I was the sole person paramedics found inside the car...or what was left of it...and that it was a miracle I survived that crash with only a broken arm, a mild concussion and a gash on my forehead. But when I asked about my parents again, he simply said they couldn't find their bodies or their blood in the car. Something about the impact might've been so strong that it threw them out, but nothing was found until then..."
Minato felt a little like crying himself. "Souji-kun..."

"There was nothing more they could do, except to keep looking for them...nothing at all. The officer gave me a moment, since...well..." He shrugged stiffly. "Everything else got a little hazy after that."

Minato remained silent beside his childhood friend, watching as more tears slowly leak out from the corners of Souji's tightly shut eyes. To be told that your parents were missing and possibly dead in that way; that had to be the worst way to find out, and he was at a loss on how to help. The closest thing in comparison was his own family's death over 10 years ago. So he did what he had done last night, and pulled Souji to his shoulder in another comforting embrace. He would do anything for his friend, his brother.

Metis almost burst into tears, even though she barely knew Souji. She seem to be a very emotional individual for an android. The loneliness in his voice reminded her of her own.

Shinjiro tried to not show his emotions. Sure, he had been an orphan ever since he could remember, but Souji's story made his stomach tie in a knot; something that had not happened since Akihiko's sister, Miki (who was also like a little sister to him) died in that fire back in 1999. His sensitive ears picked up the sound of quiet sniffles, and he angled his head to see who it is, but he couldn't really identify the person. At least he could tell it was a girl. 'Why is she crying? Is she...is she lonely...?'

Minato failed to notice the girl since he was still comforting his friend. When Souji finally stopped crying, Minato eased him to lean back in his seat, trying to take a look at his face. Souji's eyes were half closed, tear tracks visible on his cheeks. He looked so sad, so lost, that Minato couldn't stand it. "I realize it hurts a lot right now, but everything's going to be okay. I'm here with you, and I'll take care of you." He gently rubbed Souji's arm, giving him a reassuring smile. "You're not alone. Don't forget that."

Metis and Shinjiro nodded in assurance. Souji could finally smile, despite the sadness, and wiped his tears. He used to hate being so emotional, so out of control, so in touch with his emotions! Before arriving in Inaba, he had perfected his aloof front and distance himself from everything and everyone around him, because once his parents announced that they would be moving again, he could no longer feel hurt. But meeting Uncle Dojima, Nanako, Yukiko, Yosuke, Chie and the others, changed him. Everyone he met in Inaba became precious to him. Being with his big brother once again helped him realize that there are still more people he could open up to.

"Feel any better? Sometimes it helps talking about stuff like this," Minato said quietly.

"Actually, I do feel better. Thanks for listening, Aniki. Thanks to you guys too, Shinjiro-san and Metis-san."

"It's no big deal," Shinjiro said, leaning back against his seat. "Guess ya really need to let that out."

"It's okay to still feel sad, but as long as you remember that there are other people looking out for you, you'll be okay," Metis said.

"Metis is right," Minato assured. "So, take your time, okay?"

Souji nodded. His eyes felt heavy, his heart a bit numb, as fatigue weighed down on him. Minato yawned suddenly as well.

"Go ahead and rest," Shinjiro told them. "There's still time until we reach our destination."
"We'll wake you up when we arrive," Metis added.

The two boys closed their eyes. These past two days, while eventful, was also stressful. They were more than ready for at least a short moment of restful sleep.

The scenery was fuzzy as Minato and Souji looked around. There was fog everywhere. Trying to see past the haze, the only thing barely visible was the green grass under their bare, tiny feet. Wait a minute…tiny?

Rustling noises could be heard nearby, and light footsteps on the grass was approaching them. They turned around to see a little girl with auburn hair. "Aniki, Banchou-kun! There you are!" she cheered, happy to see them.

Minato and Souji could tell she was smiling, but her face... they could not clearly see it. It was out of focus.

"Aniki? Why are you and Banchou-kun crying?" the girl questioned sadly. "I'm here with you guys...don't cry..."

The boys instinctively hugged the little girl tightly, who in turn hugged them back. She began humming a soft melody that sounded like a lullaby.

The children laid down on the grass together, holding hand as they drifted off to sleep.

The Wild Cards woke up with a jolt, surprising their travelling companions. "Are you two alright?" Metis asked, confused by their behavior.

Souji locked eyes with Minato, wanting to ask him about the dream, but the blunette quickly shook his head, silently telling him to wait until they were alone to discuss it.

"You two had a nightmare or something?" Shinjiro asked. "We're about to reach our stop, so maybe you'll get to rest better when you get to your uncle's house."

Minato adjusted his headphone wires that got tangled when he dozed off. Souji yawned, stretching his shoulder muscles as the train pulled to a stop. The group of four got off their seats, grabbed their bags and exited the train, all without noticing the auburn-haired girl following them from a distance.

While the train wasn't full, Yasoinaba station was a little crowded for some reason. They stood by a pillar - Minato and Souji in the middle - in order to wait it out until the crowd start to decrease before moving on so they wouldn't lose sight of each other. At first, they didn't notice the girl weaving between people, working her way towards Shinjiro. When he finally spotted her, he remained motionless, not taking his eyes off her hoping that she wouldn't vanish like their previous meeting.

Eventually her presence caught Souji's attention. 'Who is she? Do I know her?' he thought. She smiled warmly at him, as if she’s trying to comfort him. 'That smile… I've seen it before…'

Looking up from his phone, Minato noticed her as well. 'She's...' He also continued to stare as she got closer and closer.
"Huh? Hey, is something wrong?" Metis asked her companions. The girl finally stood in front of them. "Who are you?" she blurted.

Again, she simply smiled. All of a sudden, she began hugging both Minato and Souji simultaneously, much to their surprise that they didn't know how to react.

Shinjiro couldn't help feel a slight pang of jealousy in his gut. 'Lucky bastards...I hope they - wait, what the hell? Why am I feeling jealous?!' He felt immediate relief when she broke off the hug. While Minato and Souji were still stunned, she snuck over to him and gave him a kiss on the cheek before running off giggling, vanishing into the crowd.

Souji gathered enough wits to try and stop her. "H-hey! Wait!" But she was long gone. "That girl..."

Metis become even more confused, especially by the girl's behavior. "What was that all about?" She turned to her three companions. "Hey, why are your faces red? Is it because of the heat?"

The guys exchanged embarrassed glances. "Umm...that girl caught us off guard. I mean, the way she-" Minato crossed his arms in thought. "Is she someone you know, Senpai?"

The former delinquent gently touched his cheek that had been kissed. "Part of me is confused as hell, but another part feels like I know her..." He released a frustrated groan. "Damn, I don't get this at all!"

"She acted like she knew us really well. As if she's really...close...to us..." Suddenly it hit him. "That's it! The Wild Card!"

"Of course!" Souji finally understood. "According to Igor, the third wielder is a girl who has strong ties to me, Aniki and Shinjiro-san. That explains her behavior, although it doesn't explain how she knows us. On the other hand, I can't help but feel happy seeing her..."

"But if she's so close to you, why did she run off like that?" Metis questioned.

"That, I don't know. But it might have to do with why we don't know who she is." Minato sighed, scratching his head. "First things first, we need to find Yukari and the others, and explain to them the entire situation."

"Yeah, after that we can try to find out more about her," Souji added. "Inaba is a small town, so it won't be that hard if we get everybody's help."

"Fine," Shinjiro grumbled. 'Next time I see her, I'm gonna give her a piece of my mind! Then again...it felt...kinda nice the way she kissed me...' He held back a frustrated growl. 'Gah! What the hell is wrong with me?!'

"Come on, guys. My uncle must be waiting for us already," Souji prompted. He picked up his bag and walked towards the station exit.

Minato and others soon followed after him. The auburn-headed girl watched them from behind another pillar, smiling. 'Aniki and Banchou-kun haven't changed one bit. And neither has Shinjiro-senpai...' she giggled to herself.

Ryotaro Dojima waited for his nephew in front of the station, smoking a cigarette as he leaned against the front of his car. He looked at the station entrance, catching sight of him and the three
friends he mentioned in their phone conversation. He hurried over to help them with their bags.

Souji greeted his uncle. "Good to see you again."

"Hey. Glad to see you're recovering well," the detective said, patting the boy’s shoulder, before addressing the rest. "I'm Ryotaro Dojima. You're the ones that he told me about, right?"

"Yes sir," Minato replied. "I'm Minato Arisato, and this is Shinjiro Aragaki and Metis."

Dojima stared long and hard at Minato's face, who didn't know how to react to that. "You're that kid Souji used to play with all the time when he was little...aren't you?"

The blue-haired boy was even more confused. "Huh? How did you-"

"I'm a detective. A good memory is part of the job. Your folks were pretty close friends with my sister and her husband."

"Y-yeah..." Minato trailed off, unsure of what to say next.

"Does anyone know I'm here yet?" Souji suddenly blurted.

Dojima shook his head. "No. I haven't told anyone, but I think Nanako made a guess. Don't worry, she won't say anything to ruin the surprise. I figured that you'd want to tell your friends whenever you feel that you're ready. I'm just having them watch over her since I don't want to leave her alone after her...ordeal. They should be dropping her home by the time we get there."

Souji still felt a little nervous to approach his friends, but he understood his uncle's concerns for his daughter, especially after her kidnapping and illness. She had only been in the TV World for a few days, but it severely jeopardized her health afterwards. He couldn't fault him for taking extra precautions. "I understand. I'll always be happy to see Nanako, but I'm not yet ready for the others."

"Figured as much. Don't worry. If we do run into them, I'll come up with something."

"Thank, uncle."

Dojima helped them pile everything into the car with Minato and Shinjiro's help. Everyone got in and the detective pulled away from the station. He glanced at his nephew in the passenger seat. "I know it's hard, and I miss them too, but you'll always have family here. Remember, I told you before that you're more like a younger brother to me. I don't want you to forget that."

Souji managed a weak smile. "I know."

The car ride was blissfully quiet. Dojima avoided most of the areas his nephew frequented, instead taking a more roundabout route to his home. It wasn't until they pulled into his driveway that he spoke again. "Keep your heads down. Looks like they're here."

Doing as he says, Souji and the others took a peek out the window and saw a group of teenagers approaching the entrance of the house. Apparently, they're about to drop Nanako off. Souji easily recognized some of them as his friends, but not so with the rest. "Aniki, aren't those...?"

"Yeah, it's them..." Minato couldn't help but smile, even tearing up a little. Shinjiro grinned. Metis could barely contain her excitement.

The older man got off and approached them, most likely to give thanks for looking after his
daughter, and to distract them from finding out about the passengers in his car. A few minutes of goodbyes later, they finally left. "Talk about a group," Dojima chuckled at Minato. "You and Souji have a knack for befriending people."

"It's a little more complicated than that, Dojima-san."

Souji was last to exit the car when he saw, or thought he saw, the strange girl they encountered at Yasoinaba Station earlier, strolling down the street. 'Isn't that…?'

Minato called out to him. "Souji-kun, come on. Your bag isn't walking by itself, you know."

"Huh?" He snapped out of his daze. "Sorry Aniki, I just thought I saw someone I knew. Must've been my imagination…" He took his belongings inside, Metis following him from behind.

"Arisato," Dojima called the blunette.

"Yes, Dojima-san?"

"How...how's he holding up?" the detective asked, expression concerned.

"Truth to be told, I'd say he's still grieving about the car accident, but still trying to put up a brave face."

"Can't blame the kid for feeling that way…" Dojima sighed. "But he's a bit better compared to the last time we talked. I have to thank you and your friends for looking after him."

"It's no big deal," Shinjiro said. "He's a nice guy."

Dojima hauled the last bag out of the trunk. "Yeah, he really is. Come on, let's get inside."

As they opened the door to the house and took off their shoes, Nanako came running around the corner with a bright smile on her small face. "Dad! Welcome home!" She paused at seeing Souji there, luggage by his feet and a downcast look in his eyes. She rushed up to him, throwing her arms around his waist. Her cousin dropped down to her level and hugged her tightly.

"Big Bro! You're back!" she said excitedly. When he didn't say anything, she grew solemn. "Did...did something bad happen?"

Tears pricked in Souji’s eyes, and he nodded into her small shoulder. "Yeah, something happened…"

Just at that moment, Minato and his friends walked in, only to face the depressing sight in front of them. Dojima stood there, looking away from his nephew hugging Nanako, as though afraid to lose her, and his grief was almost tangible in the small living room, thick and oppressive.

Nanako looked up, noticing people she didn't recognize as Souji let go of her and got to his feet, surreptitiously wiping away his tears. "Um... Hello..." she greeted shyly.

"Nanako, these are some of his friends from the city," Dojima explained. "They’ll be staying here tonight."

Minato made the first move. "Hi there. I'm Minato. You must be Souji-kun's little sister, Nanako-chan." He held out a hand as he bent down a little to make eye contact. "He told me a lot about you, but he didn't say you were this cute."

Nanako blushed at the compliment. "Thanks! Are you Big Bro's friend?"
"Yep. Souji-kun and I have been friends ever since we were about your age. He's like a little brother to me."

The little girl's eyes opened wide, shining excitedly. "So, you're Big Bro's big bro?"

Minato chuckled at her wording. It was so adorable! "Yeah, it's something like that."

Souji's mood lightened up at Minato's easygoing attitude with children, and Nanako's thrilled expression upon meeting him. "Nanako, these are Aniki's friends Shinjiro-san and Metis-san. They're also from Port Island," he said, introducing the other two.

"Hey," Shinjiro said as nicely as he could, hoping not to intimidate her.

"Hello!" Metis greeted.

Nanako politely bowed to them, but she kept staring a little longer at Metis. "Um… Metis-san?"

"Yes?"

"Do you have a sister?"

The android's eyes went wide. "Y-yes… yes, I do."

"I knew it!" Nanako smiled happily. "Her name is Aigis, right?"

"Yes, that's my sister!"

"How did you know, Nanako?" Souji asked.

"She's one of Teddie's new friends!" She pointed to Metis' red ribbon on the uniform she was wearing. "And that ribbon looks just like the one Aigis-san was wearing."

"I see," Metis smiled softly, gently caressing the ribbon. "Sister…"

"As soon as we get the chance, we'll go see them," Minato told her. "I promise."

"They'll be at Junes tomorrow," Nanako told them. "We were going to have a picnic, but Dad asked them to wait a few days. I guess he wants Big Bro and you guys to join them."

Souji smirked at his uncle, sadness forgotten. "That was pretty nice of you, uncle."

"Heh, thought it'd do you some good," Dojima smirked back. "Especially because you'll be able to hang out with your friends, specifically the Amagi girl."

His nephew blushed fiercely, making Dojima laugh heartily. Minato chuckled at their exchange. The silverette had briefly told him about Yukiko, the girl who had captivated his heart.

"Dad…" Nanako tugged her father's shirt, yawning. "I'm sleepy…"

"Oh, that's right…" He picked up his daughter. "You guys must be tired as well. There's another couch in Souji's room and an extra futon in Nanako's room."

"Metis can sleep with me," Nanako giggled sleepily. "It's be a sleepover!"

Metis smiled. "A sleepover…sounds really fun."

"Alright, then. Time for bed," Dojima told them. "I'm going to go tuck her in, so make yourselves
comfortable. G'night."

The three nodded and Dojima took the girls to his daughter’s room.

"Your uncle is quite the fellow, huh?" Minato said.

"Yeah, He may look and talk tough, but he's reliable," Souji said, yawning widely.

"Alright you two, I don't know about you, but I'm ready to get some rest," Shinjiro said. "Minato can use the couch in your room. I'll just crash on this one."

"That works for me just fine. Good night, Senpai."

"Good night, Shinjiro-san."

"Night."

Minato and Souji grabbed their bags and headed upstairs. The room was exactly as Souji remembered leaving it, albeit colder. The futon was still in the corner, out of the way of the dresser and desk. Dojima probably had Nanako clean the space a little. The rest of his belongings and a few other items that could not be easily transported in a suitcase had already been packed up and shipped here, and the detective replaced the cheap metal bookshelf for a bigger, stable, wooden bookcase.

With a small sigh, he dropped the duffel bag he'd been carrying on the floor and sank onto the couch, eyes closed. His thoughts once again decided to replay the latest events - the car crash, the unexpected meeting with Minato, the trip to the Velvet Room, the dream on the train and the strange girl they met at the station. There was so much stuff he still didn't understand, and he still needed to face his friends regarding his sudden return. Even though Minato and the others had helped him deal with a big part of his grief, he still felt nervous about facing them. He just hoped that they didn't flip out about why he hadn't told them about his return sooner, and Yukiko wasn't worried too much or got angry for not answering her emails.

Minato closed the door, looking at Souji with concern. "Go get ready for bed, Banchou-kun. You look ready to pass out."

With a weak nod, Souji wearily rose from the couch and started digging through his bag for some comfortable clothes, Minato doing the same. While rummaging, he pulled out something he didn't expect to see - a framed photo. He didn't even remember packing it in. "This picture..." he whispered. "I thought I lost it."

The blunette's eyes widened when he saw what was on the photo. His parents and Souji's parents standing side by side, in front of them three toddlers - a small boy with dark, silver hair in the middle, to his right was a slightly taller boy with blue hair, and to his left a little girl with brown hair. Everybody wore yukatas and big, happy smiles. "After all these years, I've forgotten about this photo..." he said softly. "We took it in 1999... during the summer festival, right?"

Souji smiled fondly at the memory. "Yeah. My parents took the day off from work just so our families are able to go to the festival together. Playing games...eating cotton candy...trying to catch goldfish..."

"Don't forget about the fireworks," Minato grinned. "We got scared at the noise, but we couldn't take our eyes off them."

"Shooting stars trying to return to the sky. She used to say that's what fireworks are." Souji
caressed the little girl's face in the picture. "Aniki, that dream we had on the train... and the girl we saw at the station. Do you think she might be...?"

"Under normal circumstances, I'd say that's impossible..." Minato gazed out the window, deep in thought. "But since things are hardly normal when it comes to us, I can't entirely rule out that possibility. For now, let's keep this between the two of us."

"Agreed." The silverette placed the photo in his desk drawer. "Let's go to sleep. Something tells me we'll be having a really busy day tomorrow."

They brushed their teeth and got ready for bed. Souji slipped into his futon and Minato lied down on the couch, both sighing as sleep descended almost immediately.

They were back in the Velvet Room. Igor was waiting for them, like he always is. Elizabeth, Margaret and Theodore stood next to the small, strange man, and welcomed them with a small bow.

However, to their surprise, the auburn-haired girl they saw before was also there, sitting between them, smiling if she expected to meet them there.

Before they could ask her anything, Igor spoke up. "Welcome back. I have summoned you here within your dreams, so please do not worry. However, we came across information that I feel we should inform you at once."

"This threat that has appeared...its actions are creating a large rift between the Shadow's world and your reality," Elizabeth said, fisting her gloved hands by her side. "This rift is causing a shift in the balance that keeps both worlds in check."

"What does that mean?" Minato asked.

"The balance of the two worlds is essential to each other's survival, meaning that should one be destroyed, the other will follow," Margaret explained calmly. "The balance needs to be restored, or your world will destroy itself, despite your efforts to allow humanity to live according to its own will and by humanity's choice alone."

"So we have to defeat this threat to restore the balance?" Souji asked.

"And to accomplish that, the Wild Cards must work together?" the girl added.

Igor smiled that creepy smile of his. "Correct. You will find a way, and we will most certainly assist in any way that we can. I have very little desire for my own existence to cease."

"Can you tell us what we should be aware of the effects of this rift? What signs should we look out for?" Minato inquired.

"Things will start out small and harmless." Theodore said. "Odd lights and shapes, especially around spiritual or ancient places. Anything and everything that would be considered as out of the ordinary are likely to happen. The severity might worsen as time progresses, until, possibly, you'll be trapped in a hellish nightmare."

‘Well, that's very reassuring...' the three Wild Cards thought sarcastically.

Igor took over again. "So this is where the mystery truly begins. Where did that threat come from?
What lies ahead for everyone?"

The three guests looked back and forth at each other, for they were thinking the same thing: ‘Stop with the damn questions already!’ That said, they couldn't argue because Igor has a point. All of these questions needed answers, and they were the only ones who could do it. No, they had their friends, and they would answer it together.

Once he could sense that the Wild Cards' minds were set on the right track, Igor spoke once again. "Now, I must remind you that this mystery should not overshadow your lives. Enjoy your time with your friends, cultivate your bonds, make memories. When the time comes, your adventure shall begin. As always, my services for fusing Personas are available, and you can access your Persona Compendiums through my assistants."

Minato and Souji looked at Elizabeth and Margaret respectively. "No more requests?" they asked in unison.

The two sisters blushed slightly. Theodore tried to suppress a chuckle (he failed).

"No, it's alright," said Elizabeth.

"Yes, no more requests," replied Margaret.

"Now my children," started Igor. "Let us not dwell on your precious time any longer. Until then, pleasant dreams."

A feeling of weightlessness and darkness consumed them as they drifted off into true slumber.

The next morning, Minato and Souji were awakened by Nanako knocking on the door. "Big Bro, Aniki! Breakfast's ready!"

"We're coming…!" Souji replied with a yawn. He checked his alarm clock. "Ten A.M?! We really slept in…"

The two friends washed up and changed before heading downstairs, where they were greeted by an amusing scene.

Metis and Nanako were at the coffee table; the little girl teaching Metis the right way to eat fried eggs. Dojima sat at the dining table, drinking coffee while reading the morning paper. Shinjiro just finished preparing a late breakfast.

"Oh, you two are finally up," Dojima said casually. He was probably on his day off, since he wasn't in a hurry like always. "Looks like you two really needed the rest. How's your arm, Souji?"

"It's getting better. Some cuts haven't fully healed, though." Souji rubbed his arm. He wasn’t planning on telling his uncle that those cuts were gained while fighting Shadows. "I'll change the bandages again after breakfast."

Dojima nodded and resumed reading his paper. "Oh, by the way, since today is my day off, I'm taking Nanako to Junes to buy some groceries in the afternoon. After you're done unpacking I can give you guys a ride there. Your friends will probably be there too."

"That'd be wonderful. Thank you, Dojima-san," Minato said, grateful for the offer.
"Don't mention it. Now you two sit down and eat something."

Breakfast was soon finished, with everybody praising Shinjiro's cooking. Metis helped Nanako with the dishes and a few other chores, while the three boys went to Souji's room. Minato and Shinjiro offered to help him unpack his stuff.

After getting his bandages changed, Souji unpacked his clothes while Minato helped him with the more personal items he had brought from his apartment. His desk and shelves were soon filled with mementoes his parents brought back from their various trips and excursions, and photos of their families on the drawer. Shinjiro was arranging all the books and DVD collection Souji had collected in the past year on the bookcase. Everyone did their best to turn his room into a comfortable living space.

Once they finished in silent agreement, they headed downstairs to prepare for lunch. Nanako and Metis were playing cards, while Dojima watched TV. It was rather amusing to see the android and little girl play, as they couldn't tell who was having more fun. After lunch, they headed to Junes. Dojima took his daughter to the groceries department, leaving Souji to lead the other three to the food court, where he heard that his friends were already gathered. All they could hope for was that the reunion wouldn't cause too much commotion.

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At the food court…

"This is your special headquarters?" Metis asked as the group sat down. "I thought it was more like the dorm."

"We make do with what we have. Besides, this is the only place we could gather without anyone getting suspicious, and closest to the TV World entrance," Souji explained. "My friends and I usually hang out at the third table on the left, and I'm sure they're over there with your friends right now. I'll go ahead and make sure everybody is there, and call you guys when they're ready."

"Got'cha," Minato said, before putting on his earphones and turned on his MP3 player.

Souji left and headed for the usual spot. He had to grin when he saw that his hunch was correct. The two groups of Persona-users were hanging out together, chatting about the abilities of each other's Persona or trivial, everyday things. Everybody was having an overall good time.

"By the way, Rise-chan, Nanako-chan will be coming to see us today, right?" He heard a light blue-haired girl ask.

"I'm not sure, Fuuka-san." That would be Rise. "Dojima-san said he and Nanako-chan were gonna go shopping for groceries today, so maybe she'll come over after they're done, but I don't know."

"You think my Nana-chan won't come to see me? That won't do at all!" He had to grin at Teddie's drama. Some things never change.

Souji slowly approached the distracted group. They had yet to notice him. "Actually…" Several heads whipped around, eyes widening comically slow. "Nanako's not the one visiting you today."

"SENPAI!" Rise and Naoto cried, colliding into him for bone-crushing hugs, knocking the air out of him. He barely managed to stay on his feet from the onslaught, despite his injured arm's protest.

"Talk about a warm reception…" he thought.
"SENSEI!" Teddie squealed, joining in. His weight really did topple over the teetering silverette.

'Okay, I spoke too soon…' Souji blinked up at the sky, casting his smile at the three people on top of him. He was now stuck on his back, narrowly missed hitting a table on his way down. His arm was going to feel that for sure, but he was so happy that he didn't care.

"Come on, let Senpai breathe! You can maul him later!" Kanji warned gruffly, as he and Yosuke pulled the girls and Teddie off, giving him room to breathe again.

"Dude, you sure know how to make a surprise!" Yosuke grinned as he helped his best friend back to his feet. They high-fived. "Nice to see ya again, partner."

Souji grinned back. "Same here, buddy."

"When did you get back? Why didn't you tell us you were coming?" Chie demanded, bouncing on the balls of her feet in excitement.

"I just got back yesterday. If I had told you guys, it wouldn't be a surprise anymore." He then caught sight of Yukiko, watching him from afar, cheeks red and a warm smile. Everyone parted as he made his way to her. "Hey…” he started, embarrassment creeping up his cheeks. “I'm sorry I didn't answer your emails. Some stuff happened and-"

Yukiko shushed him by gently placing her index finger over his lips. "I understand. I'm just glad you're alright. And I'm glad you're here…with me…” she said softly.

He kissed the tip of her finger and took the hand that belonged to it in his, giving it an affectionate squeeze, silently telling her he felt the same way. Their fingers interlocked, as well as their gazes, happy to be in each other's company again.

The others hesitantly looked away to give the couple their privacy, sensing the deep connection the two possessed between each other. It was a little bit awkward, yes, but they were happy for them nonetheless.

While Souji began making small talk with his team, the former SEES watched them from a distance, expressions melancholy. The way their leader held himself, cool and aloof at first glance, his calm demeanor and quiet voice, yet there was a warm, trusting and friendly aura around him, an unshakable and confident determination that strongly, no, fiercely reminded them so much of Minato they almost stopped breathing.

Souji noticed the other group and gave them a friendly smile. "Oh, hello there." He gave a short bow. "Pleased to meet you all. I'm Souji Seta."

"Yo! What's up, dude?" Junpei grinned. "I'm-

Souji raised one hand to interrupt. "Junpei Iori, right?" To their surprise, he continued, addressing each and every one respectively. "Let's see…Mitsuru Kirijo, Akihiko Sanada, Fuuka Yamagishi, Ken Amada, Koromaru, Aigis and Yukari Takeba. Did I get everyone's names right?"

Teddie gaped in admiration. "Wow, Sensei, you can read minds?!"

"How do you know who we are?" Mitsuru asked, eyes narrowing slightly.

"Some friends of yours from Port Island came with me on my trip," Souji said casually.

Yukari raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Friends?"
“Yep! Might as well let them do the explanations.” He turned towards an area of hidden tables. "Hey Aniki, guys, get over here!"

Everyone looked at each other in confusion...until they heard someone talking back. "Tch, easier said than done. He already dozed off. Must be those damn earphones..."

It was the former SEES members' turns to be surprised. They have not heard that voice in years, and didn't think they could hear it ever again.

"That voice..." Ken gasped. "No way!"

Koromaru started barking excitedly, his tail wagging happily. "Are you sure about that, Koromaru-san?" Aigis asked incredulously.

"Huh? You can understand dogs, Aigis?" Chie asked. "And what is Koro-chan saying?"

"He is saying that he smells a dear friend's scent, and that voice we just heard really belongs to him."

"A dear friend...?" Akihiko's eyes widened even more. "You gotta be kidding me..."

"Jeez, Aki, you look like you saw a ghost," the voice said, a hint of amusement in it as the owner got closer to them. When he finally revealed himself, their eyes bugged wider than normally possible. However, no one was more shocked than Akihiko and Ken.

"S-Shinji?" The boxer was at a loss for words. "Is...is that you?!"

Shinjiro stood right in front of them, reveling in their shock and surprise. Mitsuru and her kouhais remained speechless, mouth gaping like fishes. "Hey... Been a while, huh?" he greeted, a small smirk forming on his lips. "You guys seem to be doing well."

No one dared to speak until Koromaru walked up to him. The white dog sniffed him a few times and then let out happy barks running around in circles. Shinjiro dropped down to one knee and rubbed his head. "Hey, boy. How've ya been, Koro?" The dog licked his face repeatedly without mercy. "Yeah, I'm glad to see you too."

"Oh my...it is Shinjiro-senpai!" Fuuka cried, eyes teary. "And Koro-chan proved it!"

"Dude, he's alive! That's awesome!" Junpei exclaimed in a mix of disbelief and joy.

Ken shyly walked up to Shinjiro. His eyes were brimming with tears. "S-Shinjiro-san...I...I..." he stuttered, trying to muster up his courage.

The taller of the two leaned in closer, showing a rare yet warm smile. "If it's about saying you're sorry, save it kid. Already forgave you a long time ago." He placed a large hand on Ken's head, gently ruffling the brown locks. "Now, will you just forgive yourself already?"

Ken's eyes widened, glassy with tears. "Shinjiro-san..." He could no longer hold them back, and buried his face into Shinjiro's chest, wrapped his arms around him, and sobbed loudly. "Thank...you...!"

The confusion was still on everybody's faces, but the heartwarming scene brought a smile to each and every one.

Akihiko then approached Shinjiro. "Heh, never thought I'd see that soft side of yours, Shinji."
"Keep the wisecracks to yourself, Aki."

After Ken let go of him, the childhood friends bumped their fists together. "Welcome back," Akihiko said with a sincere smile.

"Thanks. Glad to be here." Shinjiro's smile didn't last long when he noticed Teddie staring at him curiously. "Huh? What's with him?"

"Hmmm...he doesn't look like a ghost..." the blonde boy stated, poking Shinjiro's arm a few times. "He's solid and I can't see through him..."

His teammates' eyes widened in alarm. "Teddie!" Yosuke hissed. "Cut that out!"

"But Yosuke, it's true~" Teddie whined. "He's one of the guys from Ai-chan's story, right?"

"W-well, yeah...that maybe true. But that doesn't mean you can go and invade his personal space!"

"Nah, don't sweat it," Shinjiro told them. "Kinda expected something like this to happen."

"Expected?" Mitsuru said. "Shinjiro, does that mean...?"

"Yup. It's exactly what you're thinking. Don't ask me how I got back because my guess is as good as yours. One minute, I felt like I was sleeping, next thing I know I bumped into Souji."

Everybody turned to Souji, who smiled sheepishly. "That was pretty much what happened when we met. But before you guys ask anymore questions, I think Aniki can explain things better."

"Aniki? Who are you talking about?" Yukari wondered. She gasped when a thought crossed her mind. "Wait...don't tell me..."

"All I can say is that you're really important to him, Yukari-san." He and Shinjiro exchanged nods. "Aniki, you can come out now. And bring her too. I think she's too shy to come out on her own," he called to the same direction Shinjiro came from before.

"Okay, Souji-kun..." A soft yawn replied. "We're coming..."

Unable to speak, the former SEES members could only stare at the two newcomers when they revealed themselves. Yukari was the first to find her voice again. "M-Minato-kun!? Metis?!"

At that moment, time stood still: Two clusters standing on opposite sides, facing each other. Minato, Shinjiro and Metis staring back at their former teammates. From the sidelines, the Investigation Team looked on, staying completely silent.

Minato grinned at them, the slight breeze blowing his blue bangs back and forth. 'It feels like forever since I last saw them...'

It took a while before anyone spoke again. As if he knew it was his time to chime in, Junpei spoke. "Dude...are you...are you guys for real?" Just like that, the tension melted away. Everyone immediately lightened up, waiting anxiously to get some answers.

Minato chuckled. Leave it up to Junpei to lighten things up. "Yes, it's really me. And that goes for Metis and Shinjiro-senpai too."

"But, how is this possible?" Mitsuru said. "We...we were there when you-"

Akihiko cut her off. "First Shinji, and now you and Metis appear out of the blue."
"This is just so hard to believe…" Ken mumbled.

Their leader held up a hand, and everyone immediately stopped talking. "I know this is a big shock to you guys. Trust me, it's a big shock for me as well. I'll keep it short; something has broken through my seal, releasing my soul." Leave it to Minato to say so little, yet so much at the same time.

As if the shock of his return didn't shake them enough, that new statement brought back the confusion, shock and fear.

"How is that possible? Nyx has returned?!" Fuuka cried out.

"Wait, what?!" Chie yelled. "You mean the world is gonna end?!"

Almost everyone was close to completely panicking. Luckily, the lunch hour crowd had dispersed immensely, so no one was there to stare at the commotion.

"Please, stay calm, everybody!" Metis pleaded. "The Great Seal is still intact, so Erebus can't reach Nyx even if he's at full power. Don't forget, mankind's wish for death was built over during countless centuries, so I don't think it'll be strong enough to break through so easily only two years after its defeat."

"Metis…" Aigis said, having calmed down. "You...you're right…"

"Sister…" Of all the people here, she had been eager to see Aigis the most. Now that they finally found each other, she had no idea what to say.

The blonde walked up to her, gently adjusting Metis' ribbon on her former uniform. "You…changed. And yet, you didn't." She smiled. "I missed you…"

"You…missed me?"

"I missed hearing your voice. I missed having you around. Even though you were always with me….I think I missed talking with you the most."

Metis couldn't contain her tears as she hugged Aigis tightly, crying out of happiness. "I missed you so much, Sister. I want to talk with you more…I want to spend more time with you…but most of all, I wanted us to live like real sisters...together."

Aigis reciprocated the hug. "I know…I know… I'm so happy…” A few tears of joy began running down her cheeks. "You're here...Minato-san and Shinjiro-san are here too. I don't care how illogical or impossible this may seem...I'm just happy things are the way they are now."

"Dudes, I don't remember seeing Ai-chan this happy," Junpei grinned, fighting off the need to cry. "By the way, is it just me, or does Metis kinda act a bit like Aigis now?"

"Now that you mentioned it, Iori, you seem to be right," Mitsuru agreed. "I'd say that they have gained personality traits from each other over the course of their separation."

"That's not really surprising, if you consider that Metis was born from Aigis' emotions," Akihiko said.

"Eh? She was born from Ai-chan's emotions?" Teddie gasped. "So Metty-chan…is like me?"

“In a way, that's correct, Teddie.” Souji replied, patting the blonde's head. “She was born from
Aigis' emotions, but she gained her own personality and a Persona shortly after. While she's not exactly a Shadow, you and Metis do share similar origins."

"Awesome!" The blonde boy cheered, happily jumping up and down.

"You're right about him, Souji-kun," Minato chuckled. "This little guy is really funny."

"Souji-kun..." Yukari repeated softly. This has to be the first time she heard Minato calling a guy that way. Not even Junpei, his best friend, was addressed with so much affection.

Her voice didn't go unheard by Minato. Time seemed to stop as they stared into each other's eyes. Minato also conveyed sadness and guilt for not being there for her these past two years.

Yukari blushed the longer they stared, her mind frantic. 'W-why am I blushing? I know I love him...I guess I still do, but we thought he died...Now he's back....which should be impossible! This is all too confusing...'

Luckily, he sensed her inner turmoil, so he gently took her hand in his. "I know things are confusing now, and what I'm about to say will probably sound weird, but-" He pulled her into a comforting hug. "I missed you, Yukari."

That was all it took for the pretty brunette to smile and shed tears. "I missed you too... Minato-kun..." After what felt like an eternity, she finally got to hug the man she loved.

Souji sighed as he wrapped an arm around Yukiko's waist. The black-haired girl looked on, smiling gently "I'm happy for Aniki and Yukari-san. And I'm glad to be back here with you."

"Yeah. Me too."

As much as Mitsuru hated to interrupt the blossful reunion, there are questions that needed answers. And she wasn't the only one wondering. "Seta, right? You seem to be a long time acquaintance of our leader. Care to explain to us how the two of you know each other?"

Souji let go of Yukiko and Minato did the same with Yukari. "Of course," the former replied. He gestured for everyone to take a seat, smiling as Yukiko placed herself beside him on his left, while Minato and Yukari sat to his right.

Minato started first. "My parents and Souji-kun's were long time friends, having attended the same college and majoring in science and psychology. Since both couples married and had children between a short time period, Souji-kun and I pretty much grew up together. Since I'm two years older, he calls me Aniki."

"Due to our parents' careers they had a very limited circle of friends, so we usually spend the day playing with each other," Souji continued. "Holidays, vacations, outings...our families usually did all that together."

"Until 1999..." Minato stared at the ground, fists clenched. The memory of the car accident would always hurt.

Aigis immediately felt the sting of guilt, and it showed in her expression. Seeing that, Minato shook his head. "What happened to them was not your fault, Aigis. Please don't blame yourself for it."

"I know..." she whispered. Despite his assurance, it wasn't something that she could let go so easily.
"On the night of the great explosion, my family was crossing the Moonlight Bridge. The Dark Hour manifested and we got into an accident. Shortly after that, I met Aigis for the first time. I suppose you guys already know what happened next right?"

Yosuke and the others nodded.

"Hey, you don't need to go through that part if it makes you feel uncomfortable," Kanji said.

"Thank you for your concern." He then turned to Souji. "Souji-kun?"

"I'll continue from here. As fate would have it, after the Dark Hour ended in that night, my parents and I were also crossing the same bridge. Once my parents realized who was involved in that accident, they called for help. I still remember how sad they were when they heard about Aniki's parents. We'd visit him in the hospital every day until his wounds healed and was sent to live with distant relatives. After that, my parents got transferred to another city because of work and I never saw him again. Until three days ago..."

"So, how exactly did you run into Minato and Shinji?" Akihiko asked.

"That's...the hard part to explain..." Souji scratched his head before retelling the events.

Everyone listened intently to their explanation. Shinjiro and Metis also helped to chip in extra details.

"So, there's another person, a girl, who has the same power you two have?" Junpei asked.

"And she's here in Inaba?" Chie added.

"We have strong reasons to believe so," Souji said.

"How do you guys know all that?" Yosuke asked.

Minato was a little hesitant to answer that. "Someone I've known since I first joined SEES, who Souji-kun also knows, told us...?" He felt a little embarassed at that half-assed explanation.

"Do you mean....the Velvet Room?" Aigis said softly.

"That's right! Silly me...I forgot Metis told us you've been in that place," he chuckled.

"Excuse me, but what is this 'Velvet Room' that you speak of?" Naoto asked. "You speak as if it is a place that cannot be reached so easily."

"Let me put this way: the Velvet Room is a place located between the conscious and the subconscious," Minato explained. "Very few people are allowed to enter, but only those with a contract can do so at free will."

"Wait, there's something wrong here," Yosuke commented. "Where is this room exactly? We never saw Souji leave into a place nobody knew of."

"That's a little hard to explain. Remember the corner in the TV World entrance hall I always go to?"

"Yeah, what about-" Yosuke stopped talking halfway, before he realized what he meant. "Wait, are you telling me that...?"

"Exactly. You probably saw me just standing there, but I really was in the Velvet Room at those
times. My mind was anyway…"

"So out of all of us, only you can go in, Senpai?" Rise pouted. "That's too bad. I wonder what it
looks like."

"You can always ask Teddie. He was in there once.

"Wait, I have?" Teddie asked. "When did that happen?"

"Remember the blue room you found when you got lost at the start of December? That's the one.
Incidentally, Igor told me that no normal Shadow could enter it, but a being with a strong ego
might."

"Really? Then that means…I'm a bear-y special bear! Yay! Go me!" Teddie did a little victory
dance, wiggling his butt.

"Oh great…" Yosuke groaned, knowing he would hear Teddie repeat this for the rest of the day;
and likely for a very long time.

"You've also met a resident of that place once," Souji continued.

"A resident…? Wait, Margaret?! She's a resident?" Chie gasped.

At Souji's nod, the rest of his friend cried in shock. They recalled the time Souji faced her all by
himself before they went after Izanami, and only found out what he had in mind when the battle
had already started. It was an intense fight, but Souji forbade them to interfere. Eventually he won,
but the close calls along the way almost gave them multiple heart attacks. When questioned about
his motives and Margaret's identity, he simply answered that she was someone he knew, who was
seeking answers. And so, he helped her. He also told them he was searching for his own answer in
that battle: to prove to himself he had what it took to find the truth. That didn't stop Yukiko from
slapping him for worrying her before kissing him, though.

"Dude…that's crazy…" Kanji groaned. "She really gave Senpai a run for his money that day…"

"If she is anything like her sister Elizabeth, I can imagine that," Minato said, recalling his own duel
with the younger Velvet Room sister. His victory had been a narrow one on the night before the
confrontation with Nyx. He needed to prove to himself that he could lead his friends to victory. Of
course, Yukari lashed him with a scolding for fighting solo, before hugging him and crying out of
concern. "They pack quite a punch…"

"No kidding…" Souji grinned sheepishly. "We kinda went off tangent there, so let's get back on
topic."

"About this new threat you mentioned, you said it was meddling with both worlds," Mitsuru
prompted. "Please elaborate on that."

"As far as we know, its actions are effecting the Shadow world and this one, disturbing the
balance, and the affects will gradually show up." Souji explained. "We haven't been out much
since we got here, so I have to ask; have any of you seen anything…strange recently? Even
remotely out of the ordinary, no matter how silly it may be."

Everyone started to think, recalling anything from memory that fits the description.

"Anything?" Minato prompted.
Yukiko started fidgeting her fingers. "U-um…"

Souji looked at her, frowning slightly at her sudden nervousness. "What is it, Yukiko?"

"Um, well… I've only seen it once, in the hot springs at the inn. It was getting late, so I thought I only imagined it, but I did see some odd lights the other night. Like how the old myths and legends talk about lost souls." Her eyes shimmereed with excitement, just like all the times she heard a ghost story. "There were only a couple, and they disappeared quickly enough, but the rest of the staff at the inn had seen them as well."

Her friends sweatdropped at her reaction.

"I-I've seen those too!" Fuuka suddenly said, "On the first night we arrived! I…I didn't say anything before because I thought I was just too tired from the trip…"

"I…I kinda think…I saw those too…" Yukari shivered quietly, feeling goosebumps rise at the idea of seeing ghosts.

"That's the start, then," Minato pointed out.

"It also means that soon enough, we'll probably see changes on the other side as well," Souji said. "I'd like you all to keep an eye out for anything out of the ordinary, and please let us know about anything you see or hear."

"You got it, Sensei!" Teddie grinned, eager to help out his friends. "I'll try my very best!"

"Thanks, Teddie."

"Y-yeah, we c-can do that!" Chie exclaimed in fake cheer.

"Count me in too, dude!" Junpei said. "I'm always up for some action!"

"Heh, I could use some extra training," Akihiko smirked. "I'm in!"

The others agreed to it as well.

"Very well then, it's decided. We'll work on our strategy as more unusual sightings are detected. Venturing into the other side should provide more information as well as a way to train ourselves in case we need to fight," Mitsuru decided.

"Right! We'll get to the bottom of this mystery," Minato said.

"Together!" Souji added.

Everybody stood up. "YEAH!" they cheered in unison. The two groups were now merged into one, determined to work together to find the truth and protect their world from harm.

"Oh, all that talk reminds me about the summer festival at Tatsuhime Shrine, which is coming up pretty soon," Yosuke recalled. "You guys think something might appear there?"

"It’s possible. Spiritual places seem to be more sensitive to things like that," Minato said. "What do you think, Souji-kun?"

"Maybe~" Before he could continue, Souji pressed a hand to his temple. Flashes of images flooded his brain: *He saw himself as a young boy, watching the fireworks display during the festival...and he was not alone. Two other children held both his hands...Minato and another girl...* The images
disappeared as soon as it came, and he was overwhelmed with dizziness. His arms turned weak and his vision became shaky.


Without warning, he collapsed. Minato and Yosuke quickly reacted and grabbed him before he could hit the ground.

"H-hey? Are you okay?!" Chie gasped.

"Senpai!" Naoto and Rise cried.

Kanji started to panic when Souji remained motionless. "Senpai! C'mon Senpai, you gotta get up!"

"Sensei! Sensei!" Teddie called frantically.

Souji groaned weakly. "Quiet down, guys. I'm okay…I just...feel a little faint…" He tried steadying himself, but his body still felt heavy.

"Help me sit him down," Minato told Yosuke and Kanji. "Someone, please go get him some water."

"I'll get it!" Rise volunteered. She quickly made a dash to the nearest drinks counter.

Carefully, the boys sat Souji on one of their empty seats, while Yukiko supported his side.

Rise quickly returned with a glass of water. "Here you go, Senpai. Drink this, you'll feel better."

He took the glass and downed a few gulps. "Thanks, Rise…"

"How are you feeling, Souji-kun?" Yukiko asked softly.

"I'm fine now, Yukiko. Thanks..." Though he said that, the silverette kept his eyes closed until the dizziness stopped. "I'm sorry I scared you guys."

"It seems that your body has not fully readapted to Inaba's heat, Souji-san," Aigis told him. "My sensors tell me your temperature is higher than what a human body should normally be."

"What does that mean?" Teddie asked, worried and confused. "Is something wrong with Sensei?"

"She means that Souji-kun just had a minor heatstroke due to the summer heat, Teddie-kun," Fuuka explained to calm the bear down.

"Big surprise. Dude's wearing a black jacket in summer!" Junpei said. "Take that off man, you'll feel a lot better."

Souji involuntary flinched at the suggestion. His injured arm was still bandaged up, and he's pretty sure some of the wounds reopened when his friends knocked to the ground. The sight of blood would definitely freak them out, and force him to tell them about his parents.

"Senpai, you're hiding something from us, aren't you?" Naoto questioned, staring him down. "You're favoring only one arm, and it's against good common sense to wear this kind of clothing in the middle of summer. And even if you wanted to wear long sleeves, the material of your jacket is wrong for this type of weather."

"It was foolish of me to try and deceive a detective," Souji sighed in defeat. "Fine, you win…"
Carefully, he removed his jacket, his fully bandaged left arm visible. Some fresh blood stains could be seen seeping through. As he expected, his friends were shocked at the sight.

"W-what happened to your arm?!" Chie wondered loudly.

"Someone did this to you, Senpai?! I'm gonna crush them!" Kanji growled. He looked ready to beat the crap out of whoever had harmed his leader.

"Guys, calm down," Souji ordered. "It's okay. My arm's already healed. The blood is from a few cuts I got fighting Shadows when I bumped into Aniki and Shinjiro-san. I think they reopened when I greeted you guys." As his words sank in, the others settled themselves around the table. He sighed, not really wanting to talk about the accident.

"Something happened to you, didn't it? That's the reason you didn't answer to anyone's emails?" Yukiko asked, giving her boyfriend's hand a soft squeeze.

Despite not wanting to, Souji told them about the accident, giving them the bare facts. Everyone, including the ones who didn't know Souji that well, were saddened by the news.

With a choked sob, Yukiko hugged him tightly in an attempt to comfort him.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" Chie looked like she was about to cry, like Rise and Teddie were doing. Fuuka was also on the verges of tears.

"How are you holding up, Senpai? I know that the loss of both parents is always hard and difficult to deal with, even at the best of times." Naoto's soft concern reminded him that she too, had lost her parents, albeit when she was much younger.

"Actually, if it wasn't for Aniki and his friends, I'd probably still be a wreck right now," Souji said. "Besides, I'm not alone, so I'll be okay."

"That's right! We've got your back, so if you need anything, you know you can rely on us, partner!" Yosuke grinned, slapping his back.

"I know. Thanks, guys."

The rest of the day was spent with everyone chatting about past memories. As late evening approached, they heard Nanako's giggling getting closer, and Souji could make out the distinct tones of his uncle's voice as well.

Then they saw the cheerful girl walking towards them, her little arms wrapped around a shopping bag, vegetables poking out the top, with her father right behind her carrying the rest of the obvious shopping. Her face lit up at the sight of all of Souji's and Minato's friends. "All of Big Bro and Aniki's friends are here! Are you visiting that place today?"

"Sorry Nanako-chan, maybe next time," Yukiko said, rising to her feet. "We were just talking with your big brother."

Nanako pouted for a minute as she thought about it. "Okay, I guess. But you promise to play with me again, right?"

Koromaru barked in response. "Koromaru-san says he'll love to play with you again anytime, Nanako-chan," Aigis translated for the Shiba Inu. "My sister and I will play with you as well."

Metis smiled brightly. "Let's play a different game next time."
Teddie leapt to his feet, veritable sparkles dazzling everyone. "Of course, my Nana-chan! I'll come back really soon, and we'll go play lots together with Ai-chan, Metty-chan, and Koro-chan too!"

Nanako's smile only grew wider. Souji caught the amused look on his uncle's face. Turning his smile into a teasing grin earned him a mock-scowl from Dojima in return. "Okay, thanks for checking up on him, but I'm taking him back home now," the detective said. His grin belied the bluntness of his words. He then turned to Minato, Shinjiro and Metis. "The three of you are probably gonna need better accommodations from now on."

"Accommodations?" Mitsuru approached Yukiko. "Amagi, would it be too troublesome for you to arrange for Arisato and Aragaki to stay with the boys, and for Metis to stay with me and the girls?"

"Not at all, Mitsuru-san," Yukiko said. "I'll personally take care of it."

"Sweet! That means me and my buddy here-" Junpei caught Minato and swung an arm around his shoulders, "can catch up on what's been happening by taking a dip in the great hot springs of Amagi Inn! The guys are welcomed to join in, too!"

Unlike before, Minato didn't even try to escape the jokester's hold by mumbling about personal space. 'Typical Junpei. He never misses a chance to lighten up the situation,' he thought.

"Uh, I don't think the hot springs is good for Koro-chan," Ken pointed out.

Junpei looked crestfallen. "Dude, why do you have to ruin the fun?"

"Junpei, I'm sure that he's tired, but we can all do that some other time," Yukari said with a laugh.

"Rest sounds good and all," Minato agreed. "But I'd like to hear more about how you guys have been doing."

"Umm...we'll be sleeping in the same room?" Metis asked. "Like a sleepover?"

Aigis smiled, and Yukari giggled. "Of course, silly. I'm sure you and Aigis have a lot to talk about. Which reminds me, we'll have to go shopping for new clothes for you soon."

"If you need some help, count us in," Rise offered, glancing at Naoto. "We were thinking about taking Naoto-kun shopping for some cute summer outfits."

The Detective Prince blushed furiously. "R-Rise-san!? I told you that I have no interest in-"

"Aw, c'mon, it'll be fun! Oh, I know! We'll make our first stop at Kanji's shop, and ask his mother about a yukata for you to wear at the festival." The perky idol grinned mischievously at Kanji. "I bet Kanji-kun would like to see you wearing one~" she sang.

"Wha- HEY!" Kanji protested, face turning red as a chilli pepper. Naoto blushed as well, though not intensely.

Everybody laughed at their exchange. Souji chuckled; it's good to be back. "Alright, enough teasing, guys. Let's call it a day. We can talk more tomorrow."

And with that, they went their separate ways, failing to notice a certain auburn-haired girl observing them this whole time. With a small giggle, she skipped off, longing for the time to experience the same feeling of reunion Souji and Minato had earlier. Despite some issues that still didn't make any sense, things were looking up.
Chapter Summary

After a personal tragedy, Souji's life is turned upside down when he meets two long-lost friends and experience the return of the Dark Hour. Together with other Wild Cards, SEES and the Investigation Team, they must get to the bottom of this mystery before all is lost. The strings of fate are connected by the trail of butterflies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Amagi Inn, late at night…

Shinjiro remained awake, staring out the window. He woke up after having another dream about the unknown girl. In the dream, they were at Hakagure with Akihiko, eating ramen together and having an overall good time. Letting out a deep sigh, he glanced at the others. They were fast asleep; or so he thought.

"Still awake? Man, don't you ever get any sleep?" Akihiko asked as he sat next to him.

"Actually, I've gotten more sleep these past days than in years." Shinjiro's sight zoomed in on Minato, sleeping soundly a few feet away from them, completely covered in blankets. "He's the one who needs it more."

"Guess being a seal is tiresome, huh?" Akihiko said in a jokingly manner. "You know…he's changed. And so did you."

His best friend raised an eyebrow. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Think about it. Minato's usually quiet, reserved and not one to express his emotions. But now he's lively, talkative even. And you-" Akihiko smirked. "Well, you still look and act like a jerk, but now you're more like how you used to be when we started SEES with Mitsuru."

Shinjiro playfully punched him on the shoulder. "Yeah, right..." he sighed, and returned staring out the window. "I do feel different. And Minato - it's just a guess - but it's probably because Souji is around."

"Got a point there. Souji is the closest person to a family he still has." Akihiko crossed his arms, deep in thought. "They're so much alike. I wonder if it's got anything to do with their Wild Card ability."

"I highly doubt it."

"And what makes you so sure about it?"

Shinjiro remained silent at first, reflecting about the mysterious girl from his dreams. "Because the other Wild Card doesn't act like them that much," he finally replied.

"What?!” Akihiko almost shouted his surprise. "You mean you know who she is?"
"Yes - and no. Look, you’re probably gonna think I’m crazy, but...do you remember an auburn-haired girl with red eyes, who would walk Koromaru to Naganaki Shrine with me? Or eat ramen with either of us at Hakagure?"

The boxer gave his friend an odd look at first, but then recalled something. "You mean a girl with barrettes in her hair and an MP3 player just like Minato's, only red?"

Now Shinjiro was the one surprised. "That's her!"

"No wonder I got a weird feeling about her…"

"Huh? You're saying you saw her?! When?"

"Yesterday, after we dropped off Nanako-chan at her her house. It all happened too fast." Akihiko held his head, trying to remember details. "She appeared out of nowhere, on our way back. She just smiled at us, and then walked away without a word. When we got here, I asked Mitsuru about it, and she told me she had a feeling she knew that girl, like she'd been in the dorm before..."

"The dorm? But only members of SEES are allowed to be there!"

"Don't I know that already? That's the weird part..." Akihiko held his chin, brows drawn together. "When I saw her, the first thing that came to my mind was her hanging out in the lounge, chatting with everybody, including you. And you kinda looked like you...enjoyed talking with her."

Shinjiro turned silent. If what Akihiko said is true, it could explain his mixed feelings for her. But...if she was part of SEES, why couldn't they remember her? "Tch. The more I think about it, the more messed up things get!" he muttered, running a hand through his shaggy hair.

"Yeah, I know. At least we know she's here in Inaba, so locating her and figuring out who she is shouldn't take long. Not to mention Minato and Souji seem to have an idea on who she might be," Akihiko pointed out, patting Shinjiro's shoulder. "Don't think too hard about it, Shinji."

"Whatever..." It felt good to talk with his childhood friend about stuff without arguing for a change. "By the way, how are things going with you and Mitsuru?"

"What the-" The former golden boy's cheeks turned bright red. "What are you talking about?!"

"Don't play dumb with me, Aki. I can tell you two have gotten closer," Shinjiro grinned slyly. "I knew it. You always had a crush on her since the moment you laid eyes on her. But I never thought you'd muster the guts to ask her out."

"S-s-shut up!" Akihiko stuttered. He immediately covered his mouth just in case he got too loud, and looked around to make sure the others were still asleep. His expression turned serious. "Tch! Fine, fine! I admit it! We've been going out for a while. Happy now?!!"

"Yes."

Akihiko really wanted to punch that smug look away. "Look, don't even think about telling this to anyone else! Especially Junpei!" he hissed. "Mitsuru will have me executed if anyone finds out!"

"Man, you two are dating and she can still scare the shit out of you with her executions? That's just precious."

"Shut. Up!"
Shinjiro chuckled, getting a kick out of teasing his friend. Akihiko glared at him, but the seriousness didn't last long. They chatted about trivial things until they fell asleep again.

A secluded room somewhere in Amagi Inn…

A certain auburn-haired girl with red eyes watched the moonlit sky from her window, holding a rabbit plush toy with a worn-out dog collar around its abdomen like a makeshift belt.

“What a pretty night…” She gazed at the stars. “This may be a small room, but it has a great view. Who would’ve thought all that money from part-time jobs and dungeon grinding would come in handy. It covered traveling and inn expenses just fine, but I’m still lonely in here…”

She cuddled the plushy closer to her chest. “I wonder what Aniki and the others are dreaming about…? I bet it’s something nice,” she giggled to herself, as if having a conversation with her doll. “Banchou-kun must be dreaming about his friends here. Aniki and Yukari-chan must be dreaming about each other…they're so cute. Akihiko-senpai and Mitsuru-senpai as well. Junpei-kun is either dreaming about Chidori or ramen. Fuuka-chan might be dreaming about creating a super complex computer device. What about Ken-kun? That's easy! He's certainly dreaming about Phoenix Ranger Featherman R! Aigis and Metis… that's a tricky one. Maybe they’re dreaming about their new life together? Koro-chan must be dreaming about the shrine back home, and Shinjiro-sen-” She stopped talking for a second, a faint blush creeping up her cheeks. “N-nah… Senpai's probably thinking about cooking, or playing with Koro-chan…”

A huge yawn made its way out of her mouth, teardrops forming at the edge of her eyes. “Maybe… I’ll be dreaming about him tonight…” she mumbled, settling in her futon. “I should get some rest. It feels like tomorrow is gonna be quite a busy day.” As she succumbed to sleep, she smiled. “Good night, Aniki… good night, Banchou-kun… good night, Shinjiro-senpai…”

The next day, Souji dropped off Nanako at her friend's house and headed for Amagi Inn immediately after breakfast. Yukiko contacted him last night and asked him to see her before they went to meet up with the others to go look for the unknown girl. Since he longed for some time with her, he agreed.

As he walked, the silverette tried to figure out the mystery of the Wild Card girl. There was something familiar about her. Both he and Minato felt it, but the only explanation he could come up with was completely improbable. But then again, he had seen the impossible happen several times since he arrived Inaba, so he shouldn't discard that theory for the time being.

When he arrived, Yukiko was already waiting for him in her trademark pink kimono. "Morning Yukiko," he greeted her.

"Good morning." She returned his smile. "Thanks for coming."

"Anything for you." He kissed her forehead. "I really wanted to see you anyway."

The young woman blushed a deep red. "You really like embarrassing me, huh?" She reached up and caressed his cheek. "But, that's one of the things I love about you. You're so nice to me."

Souji grinned."I try." He wasn't wearing a jacket today, so the bandages were visible. He rubbed his arm to rid of the itchiness the bandages caused him.
Yukiko frowned slightly at that. "How's your arm?"

"The cuts are closing slowly, but steadily. It gets a little sore every now and then, though. The doctor said it could be because of the fracture not fully healed yet, especially after changing environments."

"I see..." Yukiko headed to a small cupboard behind the counter, looking over vases and bottles in search of something. "Please, sit down. I've got some medicine to help you."

Souji was a little confused at her request, but did as told. Instead of taking a seat on the available lounge sofas, he sat by the open veranda facing the Zen garden. He immediately felt relaxed at the sound of running water and 'clunk' of the shishi-odoshi.

Shortly after, Yukiko returned a tray containing new bandages, a small bowl filled with water, a clean cloth, and a vial of ointment. The 'medicine' was actually water from the hot springs kept in a bottle mixed with several herbs from the garden. "Can you take those off?" she asked softly as she dipped the cloth in the water.

"Sure..." He gingerly removed the dirty bandages, placing them aside. He was glad the cuts didn't start bleeding again.

"This may sting a bit," she warned. At his okay, she gently started cleaning the cuts, being careful not to hurt him any further. She then carefully poured a bit of the ointment on his arm, gently massaging it with a ritual sense in her movements.

Souji blushed at the intimate touch, as Yukiko finished wrapping up his arm. "How exactly does this help, may I ask?" he asked, trying to disguise his warm face by playing with the bandages.

"Don't mess with it!" she scolded lightly, returning everything back to the cupboard. She threw the soiled bandages in the rubbish bin. "The ointment will take care of the wounds and the pain. Your body will heal itself."

"Thanks, Yukiko." He continued staring at the garden, until he felt her presence beside him again. "So, how are Aniki and his friends doing?"

"After we returned, Minato-san and his friends stayed up talking until really late. They all sounded so happy together, especially Yukari-san. She must've missed him terribly these past two years. I...I can't even imagine how she felt..." She looked up at Souji, her eyes glistening. "If anything like that happened to you...I...I..."

He held her close. "I know, Yukiko...I know..." he whispered in her ear. "I'm here now."

The young couple had no idea how long they stayed like that, but were suddenly brought back to reality when they heard Minato's voice. "Oh, Souji-kun, you're here already?"

Quickly they broke off the hug, just in case there were other nosey guests around. "Good morning Aniki, Yukari-san!" Souji greeted, helping Yukiko get up as well. He noticed the other couple holding hands.

Minato chuckled softly and Yukari giggled. "Just be glad it was us who found you two, not Junpei. You wouldn’t hear the end of it," the latter said.

"I'm pretty sure it can't be worse than the time Rise and the others finally found out about me and Yukiko dating." Souji rolled his eyes at the memory. The team had caught them kissing behind a mound of broken TVs after a training run in the TV World. Until then, their relationship had been a
secret. Before anyone could make a bigger fuss about it, he casted a really serious glare at them, almost bringing out one of his more intimidating Personas. They got the hint and quickly dropped the subject, making a break for the exit.

"I bet their reaction was priceless," Minato laughed.

"After Souji-kun scared them off, yes!" Yukiko giggled, trying to suppress an incoming laughing fit.

"Come on, it's almost time to go meet the others."

"O-oh? Is it time already? Let me go get changed." Yukiko quickly left for her room. Ten minutes late, she came back wearing her casual summer clothes. "Sorry for the wait."

"No worries. That was pretty quick. By the way, Yukiko-chan, don’t you get tired of walking around in a kimono all day?" Yukari asked curiously.

"I was pretty much raised to wear one, so I'm used to it. Do you like to wear one, Takeba-san?"

"Please, just call me Yukari. Yeah, I do, but only for special occasions."

Minato and Souji looked at each other, and then the girls.

Souji shot his girlfriend a playful grin. "I could stare at you in a kimono all day, Yukiko."

"Yeah, you should wear one more often," Minato told Yukari.

This earned them a swift smack to the head, which ended up with the four of them laughing.

The two groups gathered at Junes to discuss their next course of action. Souji and Minato described to their friends what the girl looked like and their run in with her at the Yasoinaba Station, without mentioning her behavior towards them and Shinjiro because of obvious reasons. In return, Akihiko told them about meeting the same girl after they left Nanako at the Dojima residence. Needless to say, the former SEES were surprised at the girl's friendly attitude and cheerful disposition towards them.

"Dude, this is so weird. I had a déjà vu moment when I saw her." Junpei took off his cap and scratched his head. "Like I knew her from somewhere, but couldn't figure out where."

"The plot thickens," Souji said. "I don't think she would simply act the way she did if she weren't acquainted with you all."

"Then this means that girl not only have ties with me, Shinjiro-senpai and Souji-kun, but to every member of SEES as well," Minato said.

"I believe the fastest way to gather information about unusual sightings and the whereabouts of the other Wild Card wielder would be splitting up into several parties and searching around town," Naoto suggested.

"In that case, we should pair off in small groups and start exploring!" Teddie said, his eyes shining at the ‘pair off’ part.

As soon as he said that, Souji, Yosuke and Kanji glared at him. "What?" Teddie asked naïvely.
"This ain't gonna be like last year's summer festival, is it Ted?" Kanji growled, his glare becoming even more menacing.

The blonde boy however, shook it off and continued to spill out his plan. "Friends reunited, emotions tied up, the memories of everyone's past...the atmosphere of love is upon us!"

The rest of the Investigation Team shook their heads, a few of them face-palming. Minato and his friends however, were very amused. "Hey, is he like this all the time?" Junpei asked.

"Sadly, yes..." Yosuke answered with a sigh.

"At any rate, he does have a point. If we split up we'll have a better chance of finding something useful," Mitsuru said in her no-nonsense manner.

After much discussion, their plans were as follow: Split into smaller search parties and find information, meet at Aiya's Diner for lunch and to pool their sources, then a visit to the TV World for some training.

Everyone went off in their own group. Rise and Teddie went with Aegis, Metis, Koromaru and Ken; Yosuke and Chie with Fuuka and Junpei; Kanji and Naoto headed off with Mitsuru, Akihiko and Shinjiro. That only left Minato, Yukari, Souji and Yukiko.

"Am I the only one who thinks they paired us up like this on purpose?" Minato wondered, amused at their current situation.

"Personally, I don't mind," Souji said. "While we search for clues, we can catch up with each other."

"That's fine by me," Yukiko said. "I'm more interested in hearing about you two."

The older couple blushed. "Well..." Yukari started, "it would be nice to hear about you two as well."

Souji and Yukiko immediately turned the same shade of red as the other two. They headed to the shopping district, chatting and laughing.

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Junes...

"Ken-kun, you are just too cute~!" Rise's outburst of energy brought a smile to everyone's faces, and a bright shade of red to Ken's. "You're sooooo~ mature for your age, not like someone else I know." She sent a playful glare at Teddie's direction.

"Aww c'mon Rise-chan, I can be mature too!" Teddie refuted, sending more his sparkly charm her way.

"Oh sure, like when you try to compete with Kanji on who eats more Topsicles?"

"It was a challenge!" he huffed. "Real men don't back away from a challenge! That's what Yosuke told me anyway..."

The duo's hyper attitude lightened everyone's mood, but for some reason, Metis felt uncomfortable, constantly adjusting the summer dress Yukari had let her borrow, playing around with the red ribbon that now held her hair back instead of her visor.
Having escaped Rise's embarrassing praises, Ken was the first to notice her trouble. "Metis-san, are you okay? You've been quiet this whole time."

"I...I never apologized to you or the others, did I, Ken-san?"

Teddie, Rise and Aigis became silent, focusing on their conversation.

"Apologize? For what?"

"For what I did when I first met you all. I was really...mean..." Metis stared at the ground, toeing the pavement with Fuuka's borrowed shoes. "And now, you treat me so nicely. Fuuka-san and Mitsuru-san talk with me about all sort of stuff, trying to teach me about anything I ask. Yukari-san gave me this pretty dress and ribbon. Akihiko-san and Junpei-san talk to me like I had always been part of the group, and you and Koromaru-san are also really nice..."

"I won't lie, you really did give us quite a scare back then. But we weren't exactly nice to you, either," Ken said. "You gave us a reason to distrust you, but we also gave you a reason to dislike us. In the end, we realized you weren't a bad person, just like you realized we weren't bad either."

Metis was touched by his answer. Ken continued. "I'm not exactly the best person to say this, but you simply acted like a lost child, trying to protect what mattered the most to you, that being Aigis-san. Thinking back on it, your actions did protect her."

"Really?" Metis then turned to Aigis. "Is that true, Sister?"

"What Ken-san says is true. Recalling the incident, you reminded me of several things that meant a lot to me that I had forgotten. In a way, your actions did prevent my death. The death of my heart, to be exact."

The dark-haired was in disbelief. "Even after all the trouble I cause to you and your friends?"

Ken smiled. "Everything pretty much started from a misunderstanding. I made that mistake with Shinjiro-san, and he forgave me. I think Akihiko-san and the others will agree with me when I say that all of us have forgiven you for what transgressed that day."

Koromaru barked in agreement. Metis red eyes widened in surprise. "H-huh? Are you sure about that Koromaru-san? You're saying that you agree with Ken-san, and that I shouldn't refer to you and the others as my sister's friends, but my friends because that's what you are?"

Koromaru barked and panted excitedly, as if telling her that she was right. "See? Koro-chan agrees with me, so you don't need to worry about it," Ken assured her. "We're friends now, right?"

Metis beamed. "Right! Thanks, Ken-san, Koromaru-san!" She hugged them both. The Shiba Inu simply enjoyed the affection, but the young teenager blushed at the close contact.

"Wowee! Metty-chan understands Koro-chan just like Ai-chan does," Teddie exclaimed. "You two are really smart!"

"Of course they're smart, silly. They're sisters," Rise said. "If you ever need any help about clothes or anything else, Metis, you can ask me. I have some outfits that will look sooooo~ cute on you!"

"I'll remember that, Rise-san. Thank you."

The group continued to socialize and gather info until they had to meet up with the others.
Shopping District, North Area…

Naoto was talking on her cell phone with the secretary of the Shirogane Estate. "I see...thank you for the information, Yakushiji-san. Please, only tell Grampa this information if he questions about it. I don't want to concern him for now. I understand...Yes, I'll be careful. Thank you." She hung up. "According to Yakushiji-san, there are a few sightings of ghosts and spirits at the Estate at night," she reiterated, her usual hat pulled down in front of her dark blue eyes. "A superstitious person would fault that to the burial of our deceased family members on home grounds whenever possible, to keep them closer to home."

"So does your grandpa know about this or not?" Kanji asked.

"He's currently on a business trip as his services are required in another city. He doesn't know about it at the moment. Of course, when he returns he'll most likely notice this strange phenomenon."

"Don't worry about it. With you and Senpai on the case, we'll get to the bottom of this in no time!" Kanji grinned, fisting the air. "If any detective can solve this, it's you, Naoto."

The young detective admired his confidence in her. After Souji had left Inaba, she often hung out with the taller teen, who in turn started acting less shy towards her. Even so, she wasn't used to being praised by men about her sleuthing abilities.

"Ah, you work as a detective, yes?" Mitsuru asked, breaking the awkwardness. "And it's connected to your family history too? I guess we have something in common."

"Detective, huh? I'm hoping to become one someday," Akihiko said.

"Naoto knows a lot about tinkering with mechanical stuff too," Kanji added, much to her surprise. "She once whipped up a little robot with a secret stash inside to store candy for Nanako-chan. It even got a detective badge on it that flashes!"

"K-Kanji-kun..!" Naoto stuttered, looking particularly cute with her red face. She continued to pull down her cap lower and lower; she still wasn't the most social one.

"There's no need to be shy about your skills, Shirogane," said Shinjiro. She peeked at him from underneath her cap. "If ya got a talent that can help people or make them happy, you should be proud of it, no matter what it is."

Mitsuru, Akihiko and Kanji gave her assuring nods.

Naoto began to warm up to her new friends, asking each of them to tell her and Kanji more about themselves, and vice versa. For the first time in a while, the young detective smiled.

Samegawa Flood Plain…

"Whoa, check those out!" Chie exclaimed, pointing at the riverbed.

Yosuke, Junpei and Fuuka did so and caught a very brief glimpse of sparkling light floating above the Samegawa River, before it disappeared.
Junpei had to rub his eyes to be sure. "What was that?"

"I think those were water spirits," Fuuka replied. "It's almost like they're playing with the fish in this river."

"Man, it's just like what Souji described," Yosuke said. "But why are those things appearing here in our world if something is happening on the other side?"

"The concept of nature spirits and ghosts were originally created by humans, to try to explain strange and mysterious phenomena they couldn't explain through logical thought," Fuuka explained. "You said that the other side represents a collective of mankind's heart, so the disturbance on the other side might have to do with why these supernatural things are able to manifest in our world."

"I'm guessing that's also the reason our Personas are based on stuff from history, myths and legends?" Chie asked.

"I think so, Chie-chan. A Persona is a physical form of your personality, and since history, myths and legends resonate very strongly with human thoughts, it makes sense they would take such forms."

"Speaking of which, you guys told us you had to accept your Shadows to get your Personas, right?" Junpei asked. "What's that like?"

"Not a pleasant experience, that's for sure," Yosuke said, his voice mixed with depression and a forced laugh. "Long story short, you need to accept the darkest side of yourself. The negative, suppressed emotions then take form of a Shadow, and that isn't easy to admit, let alone accept. It also usually leaves you pretty drained afterwards."

"Kinda reminds me of the first time I used my Evoker," Junpei reminisced. "It scared the hell outta me. When I'm holding it, I kept thinking 'I gotta stop being a kid so I can really be a hero and do something important!' and stuff. Man, I was beat after that. Maybe that's why we can summon our Persona when we use those."

"The method differs, but the outcome's still the same," Chie said. "But I still think you guys' method is still harsher than ours."

"Eh, ya get used to it eventually, but it's still nutty. So, what are we doing after this?"

Although they didn't find much in terms of their investigation, they had a lot to talk about.

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Shopping District, near the bus stop…

Minato's group was interrupted in the middle of their conversation by two male voices.

"Yo, it's Souji! He's back!"

"For real? Nice!"

Souji and Yukiko immediately recognized them. The grinning faces of Kou Ichijo and Daisuke Nagase were fast approaching them.

Daisuke was at his side instantly, slapping his back enthusiastically in greeting. "Dude, you never
told us you were coming back so soon!"

"Hey! Don't knock him over, you lug!" Kou scolded, shoving the soccer player away.

Souji grinned at their antics. How he missed these two idiots. "To be perfectly honest, I wasn't expecting to be back so soon, but stuff happened." He shrugged, not bothering to go into the details. "And here I am."

"I see…" Kou contemplated to pry, but now isn’t the time. He briefly studied Yukari and Minato. "Oh, hi there, I'm Kou Ichijo. Lumpy here is Daisuke."

"Daisuke Nagase. Nice to meet ya!" Daisuke greeted. "You two friends of theirs?"

"I'm Minato Arisato and this is my girlfriend, Yukari Takeba. While I met Yukiko-san just recently, Souji-kun and I go way back."

“So you’re like Kou and me!”

Minato sweatdropped at the comparison. "If you mean childhood friends, then yes."

"So Souji, are you coming back to the basketball team this season?" Kou asked.

The silverette shrugged again; he hadn't really decided on anything. "I don't know yet. I'm still getting settled."

"That's cool. The season doesn't start for another two weeks after the break is over, so take your time."

Souji nodded. "Sounds good." He was about to make a joke about Daisuke, but realized immediately that whatever is going on was serious when soccer player nudged his friend to start talking.

"So uhh…I know you have a sharp sense when it comes to weird things, so you're the only one we can talk to," Kou nervously said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“What do you mean?”

"Remember when we visited that fancy school in Port Island last year? I heard you saying that you had an odd feeling about that place, like something serious had gone down there," Daisuke continued. "So Kou and I did some digging, and it turned out there were several cases of a strange illness that hit there around three years ago. People called it 'Apathy Syndrome'. And they were pretty much like the cases of illness caused by that funky fog back in December last year. A freaky cult about the end of the world was involved too. And according to the site we found, there are way too many similarities for it to be a coincidence."

"Must be the same paranormal site Junpei showed us," Yukari told to her boyfriend. "He found a site that was gathering information about strange events. People falling ill suddenly, rumors spreading around about the end of the world, and the increase in fog. That's what gave Mitsuru-senpai the idea to come here for the summer and gather information."

"Must be how you guys came to know about the Midnight Channel," Souji said, to which Yukari nodded in confirmation.

"It is similar to the Dark Hour when you think about it," Minato stated thoughtfully. When he saw Kou, Daisuke, and their confused expressions, he continued. "Yukari, a group of friends and I,
were there during the events you mentioned, so we're aware of what you're talking about."

"In any case, you might be able to give some input," Kou suggested. "Souji, you were involved
with what went down here last year, weren't you? You knew most of the people who disappeared,
or had some kind of interaction with with those who were killed. I started putting it together when
your cousin, Nanako-chan, went missing." His statement alarmed Yukiko and Souji, though they
tried hard not to show it. Kou raised a hand to forestall anything they were about to say. "But then,
the murders and disappearances stopped, and everyone turned out okay, so I didn't bother saying
anything."

"If you figured out that we were connected to the cases, what's stopping anyone else from doing the
same?" Yukiko asked worriedly.

Daisuke shook his head. "Because only Kou and I know all of you as a group. Souji and Yosuke
both came from the city, it's only natural they become fast friends. You and Chie have been best
friends since you were kids, and were in the same class, so of course you'd know each other. Kanji
Tatsumi is seen as a thug turning his life around by taking you—" he pointed to Souji's direction, "as
a mentor and role model."

Kou continued where Daisuke left off. "Rise Kujikawa lives with her grandma above the tofu shop,
and neighbours with Tatsumi's shop. Both are places where people go to often, not to mention she's
taken quite a liking to you. Your friend Teddie lives with Yosuke and works at Junes, a place you
guys usually hang out. Naoto Shirogane knows you through your uncle. And because you're so
popular at school, with all the clubs you joined, the part-time jobs you took, and the fact you're a
genius to boot...well, all the connections leading to you seemed coincidental at best."

"Hey man, you don't have to say anything about the case if you don't want to. You're our pal, so we
know you're not doing anything nasty."

Souji gave them a weak smile, his relief obvious. "I don't think I have the words to explain what
happened, and I don't think you'll believe me even if I tried."

"No problem," Kou said. "Okay, since we went off tangent, I haven't told you yet."

"Told me what?"

"I'm not sure if you heard anything yet, but I've been seeing some pretty weird things around the
Ichijo Estate. It's kind of cool, but still weird. My family has been in Inaba for a long time,
generations even, so the estate we live in is old. Some of the trees in the back gardens have been
there, untouched, for at least a few hundred years...probably more. It's only been in the last day or
two, but at night, I've been seeing some lights. They look like floating balls of white fire, drifting
around without a breeze."

"He even brought me by last night to check it out, and I saw them too. It freaked the shit out of
me!" Daisuke cut in.

Kou rolled his eyes. "Thanks for pointing out that extra detail, numbskull."

"Anytime!" Daisuke grinned.

"Anyway, I've also seen some shadowy figures in the koi ponds, when nothing's there."

Souji tapped his index finger on his chin, as he thought of Igor's warnings and Yukiko's story
about the mysterious lights at the inn. This was definitely another sign.
"It's the supernatural. Ghost lights and spirits. The walls between our world and the other world are being damaged, affecting both. This is bad..." Minato said, expression serious. "It is probably related to what happened in Port Island three years ago, including the incidents last year."

Neither Kou nor Daisuke responded right away, stunned. They certainly hadn't expected this!

"I need you guys to please keep your eyes and ears open for anything out of the ordinary. I've been warned that this could escalate from the harmless ghost lights to something worse. We don't know why yet." Souji knew he was taking a huge risk by telling his fellow athletes even this much of the truth, but since they had come to him in the first place, he's willing to take that risk.

Kou tiredly rubbed at his eyes. "Dude, this is some heavy shit you're involved in now."

Souji grinned. "Heh, you're telling me."

"Why?" Daisuke asked.

Yukari blinked at him. "Huh? Why what?"

"Why you guys? No offense, but what's so special about you guys?"

Souji took a moment to collect his words. "We have found our true selves, and sought out the truth from the very beginning, overcoming all obstacles in our path. We freed ourselves from the fog of deceit and ignorance, seeking that truth, and not even gods could stop us."

Yukiko smiled weakly at his carefully chosen words, appreciating the subtlety that gave the guys across from them no details of the hardships they had endured. She gently squeezed his hand. Minato and Yukari also smiled, as the same could be said about what they and the rest of SEES had gone through.

"That was smooth, my friend," Kou said with a grin. "You didn't say a word of a lie, but you didn't give us anything either. Okay, I won't ask again, until you're ready to tell us."

"We're gonna trust you on that one," Daisuke added.

"Thanks, guys."

Kou then turned to Yukiko. "Oh, by the way, how's Chie-san doing? She's still training with Yosuke in the afternoons?"

"Chie? Oh, she's doing fine. And yes, she and Yosuke-kun train together nearly every day."

"I...see..."

Souji sent a look to Kou, concerned about his unrequited crush on Chie. Kou caught on, returning a smile. "It's cool, man."

"Hey, we gotta jet. We're supposed to meet up with Ai and Yumi to see some movies in Okina," Daisuke interjected. "They call it a...what was that? Oh yeah, a double date!"

Souji was amused. "Yumi and Ai? You guys are going out with them?"

"Nice going, doofus!" Kou smacked his friend, blushing hard. "Why did you let that slip?!"

Daisuke shrugged it off. "What? It's true though! After you left, Kou decided to join the student council with Yumi, and they became good friends. As for me and Ai, we started talking one day
when I decided to help the team put away the equipment after basketball practice. She turned out to be really nice. She and Yumi are also good friends with Ayane. In fact, she and Naoki were gonna join us, but she had band practice and he had to help at his parent's liquor shop. That guy is really trying hard to help out his folks, so we stop by to check on him every now and then. He and Ayane are really hard workers, so it's no wonder they got a lot closer."

"Okay, enough with the love life bulletin, man," Kou grumbled, his face a deeper shade of red. "If Yumi-san or the others found out you blurted the whole thing, we'll be in so much trouble! But then again, they'll be happy to know Souji's back in town. We should go eat at Aiya's to celebrate."

"That'll be great," Souji said. "You guys have fun, and give my regards to Ai and Yumi."

"Sure thing, man. We'll see you around," Daisuke said, waving back and forth. "Basketball team this year. Think about it!" Kou reminded one last time, and left for the train station.

The four Persona-users were finally alone.

"Quite a duo they are," Yukari chuckled.

Minato grinned. "Kinda reminds me of Kenji and Kazushi's relationship."

"I sure didn't see that coming, though," Souji pondered, still digesting the details of that conversation.

"Do you think anyone else has made the connections?" Yukiko asked softly.

Her boyfriend shrugged. "Dunno. Uncle had his suspicions, kept trying to interrogate me every so often. But after we saved Nanako, I think he stopped caring."

"I'd say this was a success," Minato concluded. "We got more information."

"Which reminds me..." Souji turned to his girlfriend. "Since when did Yosuke and Chie start training together?"

Yukiko giggled. "I was gonna tell you. After you left, Chie was upset that she had no one to train with. Rise-chan, Naoto-kun and I tried to help, but it's too hard for us to keep up with her. Kanji-kun and Teddie tried too, but after a few times, they were too scared to spar with her anymore," she explained. "Finally, Yosuke-kun offered. He said it was a good way to get rid of boredom, and with his knives safely sheathed, he can fight without having to worry about hurting her. In return, Chie helps him out at Junes whenever she can. Personally, I think they are both enjoying each others' company."

"Are those two going out?" asked Yukari.

"No, they're just good friends, but after this, who knows," replied Souji, trying hard to suppress a grin, and failing miserably. "Gotta talk with Yosuke about that later."

Yukiko pounced on that. "I knew it! You wanted them to be closer!" She pretended to pout. "Why did you never tell me?"

"Because you of all people can't keep a secret from Chie. Then my secret matchmaking plan would be ruined," he teased back, lifting her from behind and lightly swinging around in circles.
"Souji-kun, stop it or I'll get sick!" she giggled. Souji's hold was tickling her mid-section.

"Sorry, sorry." He put her back down.

Yukiko circled her arms around him. "I never said you could stop holding me, you know." They continued talking and bantering in soft tones, Souji never letting go of her waist.

Minato and Yukari looked on. "Hey, was I ever like that?" the blunette asked.

"No, you were quiet and just held my hand most of the time," Yukari answered, cheeks turning pink. "But...I liked it."

That being said, Minato pulled her into a warm hug. "Like this?" he asked, kissing her cheek.

"Yeah... just like that. Don't ever let go, okay?"

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Around noon, the two groups gathered in front of Aiya's Diner. The sun was high and their stomachs were growling. They made a quick stop at Daidara's for a while to check out any new weapons the old man had forged.

"I don't know about you guys, but I'm starving!" Chie announced, her stomach easily growling the loudest.


She was surprised by his kind offer, but accepted it nonetheless. Who was she to deny free food? Souji and Yukiko exchanged secret smiles.

Once the lunch crowd began to subside, the Persona-users waited outside for a while, so that enough seats could be emptied and they all could fit inside.

"Let's think of what to order and discuss what we uncovered around town," Minato suggested, browsing the menu mounted beside the restaurant entrance. "I think I'll stick to ramen. I haven't had that in a while."

"In that case, you'll enjoy Aiya's ramen, Minato-san," Naoto said. "It's a little spicy, but that's what makes it good."

Junpei poked his head in and saw that there were enough seats for everybody. "Alright, let's go in!" he declared.

Koromaru however, sat on his hind legs, whimpering and looking rather sad. "What's wrong, boy?"

Rise realized what was wrong. "Oh, the restaurant owner has a strict policy that pets are not allowed in the restaurant..." She gave Koromaru an apologetic look. "I'm so sorry, Koro-chan. I completely forgot about it."

Everyone was at a loss on what to do. Koromaru barked a few times. "He's saying he's used to this, so please don't apologize," Aigis translated.

"What should we do?" Teddie asked.

An elderly man with glasses and a small moustache stepped out of the restaurant. "While I can't
allow dogs in here, I can make something special for your little friend." It was Mr. Aiya, the head cook and owner. "Would that be acceptable, little pooch?"

Koromaru barked happily. "Very well, I promise it'll be delicious." Mr. Aiya then turned to Kanji. "Ah, Kanji-chan, I was looking for you."

Kanji bristled at the name. "Huh? What is it? And how many times do I have to tell you not to call me that, old man?"

Mr. Aiya didn't take heed to Kanji's language. "Would you deliver some spices to your mother? It's a little token of my appreciation for those adorable little dolls of me, my wife and my daughter you made."

"Fine..it's not like you listened when I told you they were free of charge..." Kanji mumbled in embarrassment. "Hey, Koro-chan, why don't you go and wait near Ma's store? Once Mr. Aiya gets everything ready, I'll bring ya lunch."

Koromaru nodded and ran off. "Reliable fella, huh?" Shinjiro remarked.

"Kanji may be a little rough around the edges, but he's a nice guy," Souji said. "He's someone you can always count on."

"Kinda reminds me of someone I know," Minato grinned at Shinjiro, who smirked back at him. "Okay, guys. Let's get in."

----------------------------------------------------------------------------

Koromaru sat near the Tatsumi Textiles entrance, diligently waiting for the others like he was told to.

"Koro-chan?"

Koromaru's ears perked up, recognizing the voice. He turned his head to find himself staring at a girl. His ears perked up and his tail started to wag rapidly.

She wore an orange cutsew blouse, a light pink top underneath, pleated white skirt and white sandals. She carried a long, cylindrical object wrapped in cloth in one hand, and a paper plate with a few steak skewers in the other, and calmly walked up to him. "You're here all by yourself?" she asked softly, kneeling down to pet him.

Her presence soothed Koromaru, so he didn't mind her touching him. He tail wagged faster. "I see. So the others are eating at a nearby restaurant and you're waiting here." Then she had an idea. "Wanna come with me? I've got some steak skewers from a place called Souzai Daigaku for lunch. We can share."

She smiled at Koromaru's concerned expression. "Don't worry, we'll be back before the others are done. Besides, I just wanna check out the shrine. It's not like the one back home, but you feel happy in places like that, right?"

Koromaru barked happily, running in circles around her. "Hehe, you're always so full of energy, Koro-chan!" she giggled. "Let's go!"

They headed to Tatsuhime Shrine side by side.

----------------------------------------------------------------------------
Souji shared a table with Minato, Yukiko, Yosuke, Chie and Yukari. "So, the sightings started a few nights ago?" he questioned once everyone finished eating.

"Apparently, yes," Mitsuru replied from the counter. Akihiko and Shinjiro, who were seated beside her, nodded in affirmation.

"According to the rumors, they started on the same night you encountered Minato-senpai and Shinjiro-senpai," Naoto added.

"That means they are related to the attack on my seal," Minato said, slurping the last bit of his ramen. "Ghost lights, nature spirits…soon enough they won't be limited to woods, holy areas and ancient homes."

Junpei turned around from his seat to join in. "By the way, how long have you guys known to watch for these signs?" he asked, having finished his food in record time.

"We were first informed the day before the train ride here," Souji said. "About the specifics, we got them a few days ago."

"This is happening a bit fast, isn't it?" Chie asked, sounding worried.

"A little. But we're still safe. For now at least…"

"Somehow, that's not very reassuring," Yukari sighed.

"I get the feeling this will going on for a while, maybe a few weeks before it starts getting bad for real," Minato stated without much emotion in his voice.

Yosuke frowned. "Like Yukari-san said, not very reassuring."

"With a bit of luck, we'll find the other Wild Card before things get out of hand," Souji said, changing the subject. "Speaking of which, did you guys find anything about her?"

"Well, according to what we heard, a few people saw her walking around town," Rise reported. "Some people said she was seen around the shrine and the shopping district earlier."

"We've been to the shopping district the entire morning, but we didn't see her," Kanji pointed out. "We also checked out the shrine, but there was no one there."

"Maybe she's looking for us too?" Teddie asked, sounding hopeful.

"Who knows…" Shinjiro said absentmindedly, staring out the window. For the past few hours, visions of the girl were becoming a lot clearer in his mind. From trivial things like talking in the dorm's lounge to fighting the toughest and meanest Shadows in Tartarus; they did it all together. And the more these images came, the faster his heart would beat and his cheeks would warm up every time he thought about her. He still couldn't pinpoint the feeling though.

"Now that you mentioned it, while we were walking around looking for her, I sort of started remembering more things," Akihiko said. "Mostly casual stuff, but I'm pretty sure she fought with us in Tartarus too."

"Yeah, I remember that too. I think she was a field leader, just like Minato-san," Ken added, biting into a meat bun. "But her weapon was different… it was similar to my spear, but with a longer edged blade rather than a pointy one."
"I believe the name for that weapon is 'naginata', Ken-san. Instead of piercing, it's an effective slashing weapon," Aigis said. "I also recalled something important about her. I feel...I feel like I've met her before meeting everybody in Yakushima..."

"Even before that trip? But the only possible time for that to happen was..." Yukari trailed off, and looked at her boyfriend, who was deep in thought.

"Hmm...she has ties to us, and yet she doesn't directly come to us..." Minato closed his eyes. "And now all these memories...I also recall the memories you guys mentioned, although they're still kinda blurry."

"Maybe it has to do with the Great Seal being attacked and those strange sightings?" Chie blurted. Everybody simultaneously turned to look at her. "M-Maybe not..."

"No, wait! Chie-chan, you might be right. I can't help but think that these events are related as to why we don't remember how we know her," Fuuka said.

"It looks like all the memories related to this girl are still awakening," Metis said. "I can't say for sure why that's happening, but I can feel that not only my sister, but all of you have a really close bond with her. But...I don't know why you can't remember her in the first place."

"You might be onto something here, Metis," Minato said. "I do have a theory, but until I get more evidence to back it up, I can only speculate."

Silence befell the group as everybody finished eating, trying to figure out about what he meant by that. Yukiko then spoke up. "Why don't we take another look at the shopping district and Tatsuhime shrine after lunch?" she suggested. "We might run into her this time."

"Great idea, Yukiko," Souji said. "And even if we don't see her, our 'friend' at the shrine might know something."

Junpei raised an eyebrow. "Friend?"

"Excuse me for interrupting you." Mr. Aiya walked up to them, holding two bags. "Here's the special order for your little friend. And these are the spices for your mom, Kanji-chan."

Kanji grumbled softly as he took the bags. "Cool. Thanks, old man. I'm gonna take these to Ma and check up on Koro-chan. Be back ASAP, Senpai."

"If you see anything odd, let us know at once."

"Gotcha!"

Kanji headed back to his house, surprised to find Koromaru missing. "Huh? Where did he go?"

After looking around and spotting no signs of the canine, he started to panic. "Aw man, Senpai is gonna have my ass if anything happens to him!"

His mother walked out of the shop. "What's wrong, Kanji?" she asked gently.

"Hey Ma, here's the spices from Mr. Aiya." He hastily handed her the bag. "Did ya see a white dog wearing doggie clothes with wings around here? He belongs to one of Senpai's friends."

Mrs. Tatsumi thought for a bit. "Oh, yes! He walked off with a girl towards the shrine a few
minutes ago. He seems quite happy with her. In fact, she visited our shop earlier."

"She has? What for?"

"She was asking about one of your friends. I believe it was Souji-kun. She said she's a friend of his from the city."

"A friend of Senpai's?" It didn't take long for Kanji to put everything together. "It's gotta be the girl we're looking for! No wonder Koro-chan left with her. Thanks, Ma! I'm gonna go tell her where to find Senpai right away!" He bolted off to the shrine.

Mrs. Tatsumi smiled and went back inside.

At the shrine…

Kanji reached the top of the steps, and saw both of them seated in front of the offertory box, sharing steak skewers. He quietly hid behind some bushes and listened in.

"The meat is kinda tough, but they do taste great," the girl said, giving the last bit of a skewer to Koromaru. "Don't you think so, Koro-chan?"

Koromaru devoured the meat, staring at her with adoring eyes. "Maybe when the others get their memories back, we can all eat together…" she said in melancholy. Kanji had never seen anyone look so lonely.

The Shiba Inu whimpered and rubbed his head against her leg. "Thanks, Koro-chan. I know they're looking for me, but until they remember who I am, I can't simply walk up to them and talk. It'd be too weird. Most likely Minato and Souji-kun already remember, but the others…" She looked at her wristwatch, gently caressing the leather strap with affection. "Well, maybe Shinjiro-senpai remembers me too…"

Koromaru barked twice and licked her face. "You think he does too?" She scratched his chin. "Then maybe he does after all. I wonder why you got your memories back earlier than everyone else, though…"

Kanji remained confused as he watched the girl rub Koromaru's belly, giggling at how the white dog rolled on his back in pleasure. Clearly she held Koromaru and the members of SEES very dearly, but what did she mean by them not remembering her? 'The hell, I'm not gonna find out anything by just watching. Gotta man up and talk to her!' he thought, face set in determination. Carefully, he came out of his hiding place. "Y-yo…" he said as nicely as he could, keeping his expression neutral.

Koromaru's nose went in the air, tail wagging faster this time. "Hey, Koro-chan. Looks like you're having fun." Kanji grinned and brought out the package containing the promised treat. "Got ya the beef bowl I promised." He took them out and presented it to an elated Shiba Inu.

The girl's smile got wider. "That's really nice of you," she said, watching Koromaru scarf down the bowl of meat. "You didn't need to be shy and watched us from afar, though."

"Wha-? Y-you knew I was there the whole time?" Kanji nearly shouted, feeling bad since he pretty much spied on them. "Uh…I…I'm sorry I was spying on you guys…"

"No harm done." She stood up and smoothed down her skirt. "You were just checking up on Koro-
chan. So, what's your name?"

"K-Kanji Tatsumi," he replied, his tense posture relaxing. This girl was oddly easy to talk to, just like Senpai.

"Nice to meet'cha, Kanji-kun." She held out her hand. "I'm Minako. Minako Arisato."

"D-did you just say 'Arisato'? Then...you're related to Minato-san...-kun...Minato-senpai?"

Minako giggled at his confusion with honorifics. "Something like that~" she said vaguely. "Sorry, but I can't say how I'm related to him. Not yet."

"Guess you won't say how you know Souji-senpai either."

She nodded. "Would it be too much to ask of you to keep my name a secret?" she asked. "I don't mind if you told them we've met. It's just that I'll explain everything once I'm sure the others remember me."

"Uh, yeah, sure. I can do that, no problem..." Kanji rubbed the back of his head, curious at such a request.

"Thanks, Kanji-kun!" Minako smiled gratefully. If Souji could trust him, then so would she.

Suddenly, Koromaru started to growl. The sudden change in his behavior alarmed Minako, and looked up at the direction he's staring at. "Hey, look!" She pointed at the lanterns hanging at the entrance of the shrine gate. They were lighting themselves, which is strange enough, but that wasn't what caught the young woman's attention.

"Holy crap! Blue fire!" Kanji swore, eyes wide as he took in the sight of eerie blue flames that were currently flickering inside each paper lantern.

"I've got a bad feeling about this..." Minako narrowed her eyes as she quickly reached for her sheath.

Back at Aiya...

"Man, Kanji is sure taking his time..." Yosuke complained as they waited for him to return.

"He's probably playing with Koro-chan, senpai," Rise giggled. "You know how he feels about cute things. He'll show up soon."

Minato felt a shiver running down his spine. "Did you feel that?" he asked Souji.

"Yeah." They stood up simultaneously, surprising the others.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Chie asked.

Minato narrowed his eyes, shifting them left and right. "Something's up."

Just as he finished that sentence, the lights went dark. All people present, save from the Persona-users, turned into coffins. The glasses of water on the table turned into blood.

"The Dark Hour!" Fuuka gasped.
"This this is not good!" Teddie said, voice shaking. "There are Shadows nearby!"

"Just like when I bumped with Aniki and Shinjiro-san," Souji said.

They heard a howl followed by a loud bang. "Koromaru!" Shinjiro shouted. He quickly unwrapped his newly purchased axe.

"It came from the nearby shrine," Aigis said, readying her guns.

Naoto drew her gun. "Kanji-kun must be there too. We must hurry!"

"Get ready, everybody!" Minato took out his brand new one-handed sword. "Souji-kun?"

"Ready when you are, Aniki. Let's go!"

The Persona-users arrived at the bottom of the shrine entrance and encountered a terrible scene: Kanji sprawled on the floor in front of one of the empty shop lots, a huge bruise on his forehead. Shielding him were Koromaru and Minako, injured but still able to fight. Minako's hair was in disarray, covering half of her face. They were surrounded by five huge bodybuilder-like Shadows, and they mean business.

"Kanji-kun!" Naoto shouted. She remained calm and collected, but her eyes clearly said she was worried.

Minako noticed them and smiled. "Thank goodness they're here..." she whispered to Koromaru, relieved that backup had arrived.

"Oi, you guys okay?!" Minato shouted to her, concern in his voice.

"Yeah, we're okay, but Kanji-kun got hit on the head! He's out cold!" Minako saw the way the Shadows were glaring at them. "Careful! These guys can reflect physical attacks!"

"Well, that makes things a tad harder..." Souji muttered. "Rise, can you detect those guys' weakness?"

The former idol summoned Kanzeon. "I think so, but it might take some time, Senpai."

Minato asks the same of Fuuka. "I'll help Rise-chan. You guys be careful." She quickly summoned Juno.

The Shadows began their attack. Minato quickly took action by giving out orders. "Alright, here's the plan: Souji-kun and I will attack first to draw those Shadows away from the others."

"Naoto, I want you, Chie and Teddie to protect Kanji, Koromaru and the girl as soon as the path is clear for you to move," Souji told his team. "Yukiko, Yosuke, you cover us and and buy time for Rise and Fuuka-san to do their thing."

"Aigis, I need you, Metis and Ken on support," Minato said to own team. "The rest are at the front with us."

Their teammates gave various signals of agreement. "Everybody knows what to do? Let's go!" Souji said. He made the first move by summoning a tarot card. "Alilat! Mabufudyne!"

The ice attack only hit four out of five Shadows, but it was enough to fully draw their attention
away from the injured party.

"Alright, my turn!" Minato drew his Evoker, twirling it around his finger before pulling the trigger. "Cu Chulainn! Magarudyne!"

A strong gust of wind surrounded the Shadows, picking up the ice shards from Alilat's attack, slicing the Shadows for additional damage.

Mitsuru was impressed at their teamwork. "Impressive combination. Shall we try it?"

Akihiko smirked. "You bet!" They both pulled out their Evokers.

"Artemisia!"

"Caesar!"

Ice blocks materialized before the Shadows. Bolts of thunder shattered them, unleashing a vicious storm of ice shards that attacked the Shadows, causing mid-heavy damage.

"Good going, Aki!" Shinjiro teased the boxer. "Never knew you guys could come up with an attack like that."

Akihiko shot his friend a dirty look, but Mitsuru didn't seem to understand what he meant. "Focus, you two!" she scolded.

The attack angered their enemies. They roared and tried to punch the Persona-users, but they easily dodged. Naoto and Aigis’ group finally got their opening and made their way to help the fallen fighters.

"Are you guys okay?" Chie asked as she and Aigis helped Minako get back on her feet. Ken and Metis approached Koromaru, while Naoto and Teddie checked on Kanji.

"Yeah… I'm okay…" Minako panted, trying to steady herself. "Please, heal Kanji-kun and Korochan first. They need it more than I do."

"No worries, your one and only bear will make you feel all better!" Teddie cheered, donned in his bear suit and clawed glove. "Kamui!" His healing spell acted quickly, but for some reason it didn't completely heal them.

"H-huh? I don't get it. A spell of that calibre is supposed to heal all wounds," Ken pointed out.

"It appears those wounds are more severe than we thought," Metis said, holding Koromaru on her lap. "We might have to use it more than once for it to work."

"In that case, I'll assist Teddie-san as well," Aigis offered. "Ken-san, we'll be needing your help. Metis, I need you, Chie-san and Naoto-san to cover us."

Ken took out his Evoker. "Understood. Kala-Nemi!"

"Gotcha, Aigis!" Chie said, already leaping into action. "Suzuka Gongen!"

"I've got it handled," Metis said. "Psyché!"

"Leave it to me," Naoto said quietly, readying her gun. She remained close to Kanji, ready to give her all to protect him. "Yamato Takeru!"
Back to the others, they were still tangling with the Shadows. It was tough, but the two Wild Cards and former seniors of Gekkoukan managed to dish out enough damage while evading attacks at the same time.

"Looks like these guys will need to get wacked harder before they get the hint!" Junpei groaned, mentally ordering Trimsmagestis to land another drop kick.

Yosuke narrowly dodged an arm swing. "I'm open to ideas!"

"Hey, Yukiko-chan, are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Yukari asked her fellow healer, a sneaky grin on her lips.

Yukiko grinned back. "Yeah, let's do this!"

Yukari readied her Evoker while Yukiko armed her fan.

"Isis!"

"Amaterasu!"

The exploding fire attack from Yukiko's Persona set two Shadows ablaze, and Yukari's wind spell helped fanned the flames, increasing the destructive power of their attacks so much that it burned the Shadows, leaving only a heap of ash.

"Whoa! Nice combo, Yuka-tan. Pretty hot, too!" Junpei whistled, impressed by their teamwork.

"Hey, Yosuke, fancy a combo of our own?"

Yosuke smirked. "You're on!" He summoned his card. "Go, Susano-O!"

"Trismegistus! Time to rock!"

Like the girls' attack, the combination of fire and wind magic turned out to be really effective, destroying another two Shadows. "Alright!" Junpei cheered. "Only one more to go!"

The front liners turned their attention to the last Shadow standing. Cornered, it started building up energy for an attack.

Shinjiro narrowed his eyes. "What the hell is it doing?"

Rise gasped. "It's using Power Charge!" she shouted, loud enough for everyone to hear.

"It's going to attack you!" Fuuka added. "Please defend yourselves!"

The Persona-users tried their best to defend themselves, but there was only so much they could do without armor. The last Gigas unleashed a powerful strike attack that hit everybody twice, including the support team who were looking after the fallen fighters, and sent them backwards in several directions.

"Gah...Akasha Arts...this is not good..." Souji panted as he got back on his feet, and proceeded to help Yukiko. "Is everybody okay?" he asked.

"Ngh...I think so..." Minato groaned. Despite the pain, he helped Yukari to stand up. Then something caught his eye. "Oh no..."

Minako had been knocked a few feet away from the support group, trying to push herself off the
ground. She found herself facing the last Shadow...and it was ready for another attack.

"No...NO!" Shinjiro shouted. His instincts kicked in, and immediately lunged at the Shadow with his axe.

Completely defenseless, Minako closed her eyes and waited for the blow, raising her arms in front of her face as a desperate attempt to protect herself. But the attack never came. "Huh?" Slowly, Minako opened her eyes and gasped; she was staring at the back of a tall figure in a maroon pea coat. "Senpai!?"

Shinjiro had blocked the blow using his axe, and he was using all his strength to push the Shadow away from her. "I'll be damned if you think you can lay a single finger on her, asshole!" he growled menacingly. The Shadow stumbled, startled at the human’s display of strength. Shinjiro swung his axe at the Shadow again, missing on purpose. "Back off!"

Once the Gigas was far away enough from Minako, he pulled out his Evoker.

"Shinjiro, wait! It repels physical attacks!" Mitsuru warned him.

Souji, however, guessed correctly at what he had in mind. "Shinjiro-san, aim for the ground under its feet!"

With a smirk, Shinjiro pulled the trigger. "Castor! God's Hand!" The powerful single strike attack caused the ground beneath the Shadow to explode, knocking it down.

Minako stared in awe. "That was amazing, Senpai!" That is, until she felt her arm ache. "Ow..." she whimpered softly, gently rubbing the giant bruise. Koromaru walked up to her, licking her face to comfort her. "Koro-chan...thanks." She hugged him in return.

Shinjiro turned around and knelt down to check on them. "You two okay?"

"Yeah..." She smiled weakly. "Thanks for saving me, Senpai."

The young man's cheeks heated up. "N-no problem..." he mumbled, shyly scratching his cheek. He got back up and turned around, so that Minako couldn’t see his increasing blush. "I’ll take care of that Shadow for you. Just sit tight." With that, he ran back into the fray.

Back to the Shadow, it was still trying to get back on his feet. Minato and Souji didn't waste this opportunity. "Time for an All-Out attack!"

Their comrades, except for the fallen fighters and the support team, attacked the remaining Gigas all at once and proceeded to beat the crap out of it. While that was going on, Koromaru sniffed the air, picking up an odd scent and saw something sneaking into the shrine entrance. He decided to follow it, a curious Minako close behind him.

Aigis froze mid-attack, looking around. "Huh?"

"What's wrong, Sister?" Metis asked.

"My sensors picked up something, but I don't see anything odd around here."

"I don't smell anything odd either," Teddie informed her. "Don't worry, Ai-chan, nothing's gonna sneak up on us with me around!"

The combined attacks knocked the Shadow into a lamp post on the side of the street. The light bulb
from the lamp post shattered and fell from the impact, sparks of electricity sprinkling on the Shadow. It wasn't such a big deal, but the Gigas' semi-erratic behaviour after coming in contact with the sparks clued in a few of the Persona-users. Specifically the Wild Cards, Yosuke, Akihiko and Ken.

"That's it!" Yosuke yelled.

Akihiko and Ken ran to the frontlines. "We got this!"

"Ceasar..."

"Kala-Nemi..."

"ZIODYNE!"

That did the trick. The Shadow disappeared in a puff of black smoke, and all seemed calm for the moment as the Dark Hour started to disappear. Until...

"Huh? Koro-chan? Koro-chan!" Yukari called out worriedly. "Guys, Koromaru's gone!"

Shinjiro also realized something. "Damn it! She's gone too!"

Now everyone became very worried. "But...they were here just a second ago!" Fuuka said.

"Where could they be? I mean, they simply couldn't vanish into thin air...right?" Junpei asked, not really expecting an answer.

They heard a rough groan coming from the below, and everybody's attention was turned to Kanji, who finally regained consciousness. "S-Senpai...Koro-chan..." he mumbled drowsily.

"We've got to get him to a hospital," Naoto said.

Kanji grabbed her arm. "No...no hospital..." he pleaded. "Please..."

"But Kanji-kun...your wounds..." Chie tried to argue.

"If I go to the hospital...Ma will find out..." he panted, struggling to stay awake. "I don't wanna worry...her..."

Souji gently placed a hand on his shoulder. "I understand. Don't worry, I won't tell your mom. You just take it easy, okay?"

"T-thanks...Senpai..." Kanji passed out again. Shinjiro and Akihiko helped transfer him on a secluded bench beside Souzai Daigaku.

The rest of them gathered around, keeping their voices low. "What's the plan now, partner?" Yosuke asked.

"Those Shadows came with the Dark Hour with the clear intent to attack us, just like when I met Aniki and Shinjiro-san. Our best bet is to go in the TV and search for them while Kanji rests for a bit." He turned to the young detective. "Naoto, I'm leaving him under your care."

Naoto was stunned at Souji's decision, but she agreed since she didn't want to leave Kanji alone. "I understand."

"Metis and I will stay with Naoto-san to make sure nothing happens to her and Kanji-san," Aigis
volunteered.

"I'll stay with them too," Ken added. "If he wakes up, I'll let you know at once."

"Good idea, Ken," Minato said. "No time to lose, guys. Let's get going!"

They ran off in the direction of Junes, hoping they would be able to find the missing dog and girl.

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Inside the TV World...

"This is not a good sign…" Souji said as he adjusted his glasses to better see in the now fog-filled world. "This is almost as bad as when we started investigating this place. Aniki, you and the others okay?"

"No worries, we can see through the fog, thanks to these glasses," Minato replied, adjusting the new pair of glasses Teddie gave him and Shinjiro before they entered the portal. "This oppressive atmosphere is just like Tartarus. No wonder Shadows roam this place."

"If the fog is back, does that mean the changes started in this world too?" Yukiko asked.

"I'm afraid so. It's probably related to why the Shadows got hostile again," Mitsuru pointed out.

"That was bound to happen sooner or later, I suppose…" Akihiko said. He looked at Fuuka. "Any signs of them yet?"

"Negative. I'm not picking up their presence in this world," she said softly.

"Neither am I," Rise frowned. "All I sense is Shadows. And they seem to be more agitated than usual."

"This can't be good…" Yosuke turned to Teddie. "What about you? Your nose is picking up anything?"

"I'm sniffing and sniffing, but I'm not picking up Koro-chan's or another girl's smell in here." He looked like he was about to cry. "I'm sorry, Sensei."

The silverette patted the blue bear softly. "It's okay, Teddie. Shadows attack anyone who wander into this place because they're comfortable in their clouded delusions and despised any source of truth, seeing that minimal change would make them go berserk." He took in more of the surroundings. "But after Izanami-no Okami was defeated and the fog of deceit lift from mankind's heart, that temptation was gone and the Shadows have apparently become relatively peaceful...until now. This new menace is trying to shroud mankind's heart into a fog of deceit and nihilism. What it intends to do with it is what worries me…"

Shinjiro growled to himself, not caring about anything else. He hated feeling so helpless. 'Where are you?'

"So, they weren't captured by the Shadows?" Junpei asked, his face lighting up in relief.

"I guess it's safe to assume that for now," Minato said.

"What should we do then, Souji-kun?" Chie asked.

"Let's head back," Souji decided. "If Kanji's already awake, maybe he can tell us something that
could be helpful."

Minato nodded. "Yeah, let's go."

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Back at the shopping district…

Naoto sighed. She gently caressed Kanji's hair as his head rested on her lap. Aigis, Metis and Ken stayed next to the bench she sat on, all of them quiet. "Kanji-kun…"

"I hope Minato-san and the others found them…" Metis said quietly.

"With Fuuka-san and Rise-san helping them scan the area, I'm sure they'll find them, Metis-san," Ken said, smiling assuringly.

Kanji stirred, catching the attention of the others. "Ughh…my head…" he muttered, eyes fluttering open only to see Naoto's concerned blue ones staring right back at him. "H-huh?! Naoto?!"

She smiled gently. "Thank goodness you came to."

Kanji tried to sit up, startled and blushing like mad, but his head hurt too much and ended up lying back down on Naoto's soft lap. "Ngh…" He pressed a hand on his forehead, applying pressure between his eyes.

Naoto grabbed his shoulders and forced him to stay still. "Kanji-kun, please! Don't strain yourself." She too was blushing, but her concern about his wellbeing helped to distract her from such thoughts...for now.

Without resisting much, Kanji did as he was told. He pushed away the voices in his head telling him to enjoy his current situation. "What…happened?" he finally asked.

"You passed out after the Shadows attacked," Metis answered.

"Shadows…!" Luckily, Naoto still held him down. "What happened to Koro-chan? And the girl? Are they okay?!"

"Kanji-san, please stay calm," Aigis told him. "They…they're currently missing. Minato-san and Souji-san are leading the others to look for them in the TV World."

"It's my fault…" Kanji said quietly.

"Don't blame yourself, Kanji-kun." Naoto gently combed her fingers through his hair. "No one could predict this would happen."

He wanted to retort, but thought better of it and knew it was pointless to argue with with her. Besides, he was so comfortable in his current position, despite feeling he could have a nosebleed at any moment.

"We should tell Souji-senpai that Kanji-kun has woken up," Naoto said.

Ken stood up. "I'll go to Junes to let them know."

"Okay, Ken-san. We'll stay here to make sure nothing happens," Metis said.

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Back at Junes, the Persona-users just returned to the electronics department when they heard Ken's voice. "Minato-san! Akihiko-san!" he shouted, running up to them.

"Yo, Ken. What is it?" Akihiko asked.

"Naoto-san…asked me to….find you guys…" the pre-teen panted, trying to regain his breath. "It's Kanji-san…he woke up!"

Rise let out a sigh of relief. "He did? Thank goodness…" She liked to tease Kanji a lot, but only because she cared a big deal about him.

"That's great news! Aniki, guys, let's go see him. Maybe he can give us some more information."

They headed back to the shopping district.

Upon getting there, they found Aigis and Metis standing next to the bench Kanji was lying on, his head still resting on Naoto's lap. They looked comfortable in each other's company.

"Yo Kanji!" Yosuke greeted, a shit-eating grin on his face. "Looks like you're in good hands."

"Huh?!" Snapped out of his bliss, Kanji quickly sat up, because he'd be damned if he was at the teasing mercy of Yosuke Hanamura, only to feel disoriented. "Nghh…"

Naoto glared at her upperclassman. "Yosuke-senpai, may I ask you not to make Kanji-kun agitated?" She held his shoulders to help him steady himself. "As you can see, he's still recovering."

"Sorry, sorry," Yosuke apologized, not really wanting to anger the young detective. "How are ya feeling, Kanji?"

"To be honest, like someone dropped a bag full of bricks on my head. You guys find her and Korochan yet?"

"They're not in the TV, but we still don't know where they are," Minato said. "But we think you might be able to help."

"Kanji, I need you to tell us what happened," Souji demanded.

The bleached blonde closed his eyes and tried to remember. "I…I went home to check on Korochan, but he wasn't there. Ma told me he had followed a girl to the shrine, so I went after them. When I got there, she was sharing steak skewers with him. He...he looked really happy to see her, like they'd been friends forever."

"Did you talk to her?" Akihiko asked.

"Yeah…she said she's related to Minato-senpai and Souji-senpai, but she said she couldn't say how yet," he said slowly, careful with his words.

"Did she tell you her name?" Rise asked.

"Yeah, but I can't say it…"

"Why not?" Chie questioned.

"I can't…" Now he's avoiding eye contact. "She asked me not to."
"Asked you?" Junpei said. "But-

Unable to take it anymore, Kanji stood up. "I just can't, damn it! She's not ready to deal with any of you guys!" he shouted, catching everybody off guard. "You guys hardly remember her! Do you have any idea how she feels about that?!"

The former SEES members exchanged guilty looks as his words sank in. "Y-you're right..." Mitsuru frowned. "We do hold her dearly and yet, we still don't remember who she is."

Kanji let out a shaky breath. The sudden outburst made him feel dizzy. "Kanji-kun, please, sit down," Naoto gently told him as she placed a hand on his shoulder. "Don't strain yourself too much."

"She...she looked really lonely when she played with Koromaru..." he said quietly as the young detective forced him to sit down. "She said something about Koro-chan remembering her before everybody else, and that Minato-senpai, Souji-senpai and Shinjiro-san probably remembered her by now too."

Shinjiro closed his eyes, feeling a pang in his heart. Now he was more worried than ever. 'Dammit. Where are you..? Minako...'

Minato placed a hand on Kanji's shoulder. "It's okay. If she asked you not to tell us her name, then she has her reasons. Can you tell us how you guys got attacked by those Shadows?"

Kanji closed his eyes to recollect his memories. "It all started when the lamps at the shrine got lit by some creepy blue fire. Next thing I know, the sky got dark and all hell broke loose.

Flashback...

Minako, Kanji and Koromaru were now facing two body-builder Shadows that emerged from behind the trees. "What the hell? Shadows, here!?"

"So the Dark Hour really is back! We must find the others!" Minako said, pulling her naginata out. Koromaru growled, baring his fangs.

"Senpai and the others should still be at Aiya's," Kanji said. "We might bump into them along the way."

"Let's go!" Just as they got to the steps of the shrine, another huge Gigas Shadow came out of nowhere and charged towards them at high speed. Before Minako had time to react, the Shadow knocked her down the stairs of the shrine and closed in on her.

"Don't you dare! Persona!!" shouted Kanji. A glowing blue card appeared before him and he crushed it with his hand, summoning Rokuten Maoh. The Demon King zapped the Shadow, knocking it away from her. Koromaru howled and summoned Cerberus, casting Mudoon on the downed Shadow, instantly wiping it out.

Kanji rushed up to her, offering her a hand. "Hey, Minako-senpai, are you okay?"

"Ughh...I think so," she groaned, taking his hand, struggling to get back on her feet. "Thanks for saving me Kanji-kun, Koro-chan." She gratefully petted Koromaru.

"Come on, let's go find the others!" They rushed to the direction of the restaurant when yet
another Shadow jumped out from the bushes, intending to ram them with full force.

"Look out!" Kanji shoved both Minako and Koromaru out of the way. All of them were hit, but Kanji took the hardest and sent flying into the wall of an empty shop lot across the street, leaving a huge dent.

Seeing her new friend hurt, Minako scrambled to her feet. "Kanji-kun! Kanji-kun, you okay?!" she shouted, rushing to his side.

Kanji groaned before he blacked out. The last thing he heard was Minako calling out to him, and Koromaru's panicked barks.

...Flashback end

"I blacked out. I'm sorry Senpai...I really messed up…"

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Kanji," Souji said softly. "None of us expected this to happen."

"B-but I…!

"If you weren't around, they might not even be alive," Minato reminded him. "I'm really grateful for you looking after them. Thank you."

Kanji became silent.

"If the Shadows didn't take Koro-chan and that girl, where could have they gone?" Chie wondered.

"Let's stop and think for a minute," Akihiko said. "They vanished around the time before we figured out the Shadow's weakness, right? So, if they left, it was while we were taking down the last one."

"Yeah, that makes sense," Yukari said. Then she recalled something. "Hey, Aigis, didn't you say your sensors picked up something strange while we were fighting?"

"Oh, yes! I briefly detected the presence of a life form in the area," Aigis replied. She held her chin as she recalled the information from her memory. "It wasn't a human presence, though."

"Wait, didn't you guys say that no one could be awake during the Dark Hour unless they have a Persona?" Yosuke inquired.

Mitsuru answered his question. "Yes and no. There are a few that can remain awake during the Dark hour without the potential. But that’s a rare occurrence."

"A non-human life form without a Persona, yet capable of being fully functional during the Dark Hour…" Minato pondered. "Souji-kun, didn't you mention a friend who lived in the shrine?"

Souji's eyes widened and he snapped his fingers. "Of course! They're at the shrine or somewhere not far from there. Come on!"

They sprinted off to Tatsuhime Shrine, followed by their friends.

Tatsuhime Shrine...

Minako sat next to Koromaru in a secluded area not far from the shrine, and an odd looking fox
who wore a red apron. In the fox’s jaws were a bunch of leaves.

"These leaves are supposed to help heal our injuries?" she asked Fox, who yipped in response. "Okay, might as well try them out." She took one of the leaves and pressed it softly on her bruised arm. The pain slowly subsided until it was no longer aching. "Wow, it works wonders!" She then turned her attention to Koromaru. "Okay, Koro-chan, let's fix you up."

Koromaru looked at her other injuries in concern. "Oh, don't worry. I'll patch myself up after I'm done with you."

The Shiba Inu relented and let Minako tend to his wounds. The fox watched them silently. "Just one more leaf..." she said, neatly wrapping his front leg with bandages. "There...that should do it. How are you feeling, Koro-chan?"

Koromaru stood up and walked slowly, showing her that he no longer felt pain in his leg. He wagged his tail and barked happily.

Minako turned to Fox. "I can't thank you enough for your help. Koro-chan and I would've been in a mess. Thank you."

Fox yipped. Minako smiled, gently petting the intelligent animal's head. She picked up an ema plaque and started writing something on it. "Can you deliver this to Souji-kun when he and the others arrive?"

Fox nodded and carefully picked up the ema between her jaws. "Thanks." Minako scratched the fox's neck in gratitude, before looking at Koromaru. "The others should be getting here soon, so you should be okay. I gotta go. I'm not really ready to face them."

Koromaru whined sadly. Minako gave him a reassuring scratch behind the ear. "I'm gonna come check on you and Kanji-kun in the evening. I promise." She looked at the fox. "I'll leave the rest up to you."

The fox nodded, indicating she understood her. She gently grabbed her skirt in her muzzle, tugging her closer to the shrine building.

Koromaru followed, crouching down beside Minako as their new furry friend nudged three pups from the makeshift burrow beneath the steps.

Minako's heart instantly melted.

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When the group of Persona-users arrived at the shrine, they spotted Koromaru and three little fox cubs playing with him. One was biting his ear, the second lazily slumped on his back, and the third one tried to catch his tail as Koromaru wagged it back and forth.

The girls' hearts softened instantly. "Awww~!" they cooed.

Shinjiro cracked a small grin as Koromaru walked up to them. The three little pups followed him close behind. "Heh, whad'ya know? Looks like ya got some new friends, huh, boy?"

"Are you okay, Koro-chan?" Fuuka asked, concerned at seeing Koromaru's bandaged paw.

Koromaru panted and showed them his paw.
"Who bandaged your paw?" Yukari asked. "Is it that girl?"

With a bark, the white dog confirmed what they were wondering about. Ken looked around. "She's not here anymore…"

"Looks like she left before we got here," Mitsuru sighed.

"At least we’re sure she's okay," Souji said, turning his attention to the little pups. He and Minato knelt down. "Hey, little guys."

"These guys are pretty cute," Minato said, picking one up as another nuzzled his knee. Souji grinned, lightly scratching of the third fox cub's ears.

"Where did those little guys come from, anyway?" Junpei asked.

A sharp yip rang out in the eerie quiet, effectively catching their attention. A familiar large fox, scarred and wearing the red apron of the shrine, leaped from the roof and bounded over to them.

Souji grinned. "Fox!" he exclaimed, coming face-to-face with the intelligent creature. He petted her head. "I should've guessed!"

"That explains why her babies are out here," Yukiko said.

"You guys know this fox?" Akihiko asked.

"Yeah. She's a friend of ours," Souji answered. "Back then, this place was really run down. Fox had made this shrine her home, and she became concerned with the dilapidated state of this place. She believed that if people's wishes written on the ema were granted, more visitors would come and pray, and become more prosperous. In return for helping her fulfill those wishes, she agreed to help heal us in the TV World, which she also has the ability to enter."


Everybody turned to Metis and then at the Fox, who yipped again. "They protected my home and my family. The least I could do for them was to help with their wounds," Aigis translated.

The fox nodded and picked a mouthful of leaves, walking up to Kanji. "Huh, those are for me?" he asked her. She dropped the leaves at his feet. He dropped to one knee and pet her in gratitude. "Thanks a lot."

Naoto and Rise helped him use the leaves on his injuries. Fox then picked up an ema plaque and nudged it into Souji's hand. "Hm? What's this?" He read the message on the ema. "Aniki, check this out!"

Minato read it too. "It's a message," he gasped. "From her!"

Immediately, their friends gathered around the two Wild Cards. Minato read the message out loud:

"Dear Aniki and Banchou-kun,
With the flap of a butterfly's wings, everything changes.
In the midst of chaos, a path appears,
Search for the Butterfly Effect and your mind will understand what your hearts already know so well. Our bond once forgotten by time will become stronger than ever.
I'm sorry I worried you guys. Please let Shinjiro-senpai and the others know that I'm okay."
I'll be seeing you soon. Please take care.
Love you all.

P/S: By the way, could you give Koro-chan a little treat? He gave his beef bowl to Fox's pups. Thanks."

Silence fell as everybody soaked up what the message had said.

"Butterfly effect?" Chie finally broke the silence. "What's that?"

"The butterfly effect is a metaphor that encapsulates the concept of sensitive dependence on initial conditions in chaos theory, namely that small differences in the initial condition of a dynamical system may produce large variations in the long term behavior of the system," Aigis said. "It's also a common trope in fiction when presenting scenarios involving time travel and with 'what if' scenarios where one storyline diverges at the moment of a seemingly minor event resulting in two significantly different outcomes."

"What?" Teddie looked lost, not really getting what Aigis had said.

"It means that one simple thing could create a whole chain of events that can lead to something entirely different," Naoto explained. "It can also mean that one alteration of events will lead to the exact same event, but with a possible different outcome."

"And what does that have to do with her?" Junpei asked.

"Everything, Junpei…" Minato held the ema to his chest. He smiled. "There's no more doubt in my mind. I know who she is."

"Minato-kun?" Yukari called softly.

"It's okay, guys. Next time we see her, everything will be clear." He and Souji exchanged knowing looks.

Though no one knew exactly what he meant, they did not dare question them, as they had a feeling those two would say no more.

Shinjiro closed his eyes and crossed his arms. ‘You'd better not run away next time we meet. Do you have any idea how worried I am about you? Then again, I did worry you like hell back then, so I guess it's fair.’

"I can't thank you enough for helping me and Aniki's friends. If anything happens here that makes you feel uncomfortable, you're more than welcome to bring your little ones over by my house," Souji told the fox. "Besides, Nanako would love to have you around."

"As for you, you were one brave dog today, so you deserve a really good treat, Koro-chan," Minato said.

Koromaru barked happily and ran around Minato. Everybody smiled.

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Junes Food Court…

Shinjiro put down a grilled steak for Koromaru to eat. "There ya go, Koro."

"You deserved it, so eat up!" Fuuka added.
Koromaru barked twice, wagged his tail and started devouring.

"Well, despite everything that's happened, I'd say things turned out better than expected," Minato said.

"Agreed. We uncovered some good info, we got some training done, and now we're certain about the identity of other Wild Card," Souji added. "And we're all safe, too."

"N-Naoto, you don't have to do this, y'know..." Kanji stuttered, his face a deep shade of red as Naoto spoon fed him some chocolate chip mint ice-cream. "I'm okay now...honest!"

"B-be quiet, Kanji-kun!" She was looking at the floor, her hat pulled down, but her blush still visible. "The cold should help numb the pain. Unless you p-prefer the hospital..."

Kanji didn't have a choice and did as he was told, ignoring the soft snickers that reached his ears.

"Awww~ they're so cute!" Yukari giggled.

Yosuke crossed his arms, grinning like an idiot. "Too bad Naoto's completely oblivious to Kanji's crush on her," he whispered to Junpei.

"And Kanji-kun's too shy to do anything about it," Chie told Fuuka.

"Well, he did improve a lot from last year, though," Rise pointed out. "At least he can hold a conversation with her now."

"They'll come to terms to how they feel for each other sooner or later," Mitsuru said, closing her eyes with a small smile. "I know from experience."

Akihiko coughed to cover his embarassment. Shinjiro let out a snort of laughter, earning a glare from his childhood friend.

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That evening...

"How are you feeling, Koromaru-san?" Metis asked as she and Aigis walked the Shiba Inu around the neighborhood.

Koromaru barked twice in response. Metis smiled and nodded. "I see. I'm glad you're fine now," she said.

Aigis smiled proudly at her sister. "You're a fast learner, Metis. Koromaru-san is very happy, now that someone else understands what he is saying and help him express himself better."

"I'm glad he feels that way. Now I feel like I really belong somewhere, not only with you, but also with your - I mean, our friends."

"Yo! Aigis-senpai, Metis-senpai!" Kanji's voice's called them. They turned around and saw him and Naoto walking up to them.

Naoto bowed. "Good evening."

"Oh, Kanji-san, Naoto-san, good evening," Aigis said. "How are you feeling now?"

"Much better!" Kanji said, rubbing his forehead. "Fox's leaves helped out big time. What about
you, Koro-chan?"

Koromaru wagged his tail and showed them his healed paw. "Glad to hear that." Kanji ruffled his fur. "You're so cute and fluffy!"

"But, Kanji-san, shouldn't you be resting?" Metis asked.

Naoto rolled her eyes. "I've told him that several times, but he wouldn't listen."

"I'm gonna get some sleep after I walk Naoto home," Kanji said. "Things are gettin' weird around here, so better safe than sorry, y'know…" He blushed some more. "S'not like I think she can't look after yourself. It's just that I'd feel a lot better if I'm sure she's okay."

Naoto was slightly taken aback by his concern towards her. "I-I appreciate your concern, Kanji-kun..." She gave him a small smile. "Thank you."

"N-no p-prob." A sudden breeze passed by, picking up Metis' ribbon along the way. "Oh no!" she gasped as she ran after her flying ribbon. Aigis and the others followed.

"Please, stop!" she begged. She was still chasing the ribbon until someone else caught it.

A certain red-eyed girl held the ribbon in her hands. "This ribbon is yours, right? Here, let me help you." Minako helped tie the ribbon back in Metis' hair. "There you go!"

"T-thank you."

Minako winked at her. "You're welcome. I'm a friend of Aigis', and soon I hope to be your friend too."

"My friend..." Metis couldn't help but smile at how friendly and genuinely nice she is. "Sure. I'd love to be your friend too!"

Time stood still as a card and a familiar voice echoed in Minako's head. 'Aeon arcana, huh? She is Aigis' little sister, after all.'

"Metis!" Aigis called out. They had finally caught up with her. "You..."

"Hi, Aigis, guys." Minako waved. "Glad you're all okay."

"Yo, Senpai!" Kanji greeted, while Koromaru rubbed himself against her legs. "Glad you're okay too."

"Thanks, Kanji-kun." She petted Koromaru before turning around to leave. "Well, I gotta go. I'll talk to you guys later."

Aigis noticed Minako's bandaged arm and leg. "Wait, please!" she cried. There was urgency in her voice. "Your injuries...!"

Minako smiled softly. "Don't worry, Aigis. I'm okay now." She hugged her, catching the android off guard. "Tomorrow, okay? I'll tell you guys everything tomorrow."

Aigis sighed, somehow knowing that Minako wouldn't say anymore. "I understand," she finally said as Minako let go of her.
"Sorry for worrying you and the others, but I needed to be sure of some things." The red-eyed girl's expression was apologetic. "Please, let Minato-kun and Souji-kun know that I'll meet you guys at Samegawa flood plain tomorrow morning."

"We'll inform them," Naoto said. "I assure you."

"Thanks, Naoto-chan." Minako winked at both Naoto and Kanji. "You take care of Kanji-kun now, okay?"

The high school juniors exchanged embarrassed glances. They looked back at Minako only to find her long gone.

"She's really something, huh?" Minato said as he and Souji rounded a corner and walked up to them.

Aigis was surprised. "Minato-san...Souji-san too. What are you doing here?"

"After you and Metis left with Koromaru for a walk, I saw her leaving the inn following you," Minato explained. "So I called up Souji-kun and we followed her here."

"I guess she wanted to check up on Koromaru and Kanji to make sure they're okay after what happened," Souji added.

"Senpai," Naoto started, still flustered about Minako's remark about her and Kanji. She didn’t dare look up at her upperclassman, hoping that he wouldn’t notice her red face. "That girl said she'll reveal everything tomorrow morning at Samegawa flood plain."

"I see. Thanks, Naoto. We'll let everybody know and we'll meet her there tomorrow." He turned to Minato. "Looks like the pieces are all falling in place, huh, Aniki?"

"Yeah. Soon, it'll all become clear," Minato said, looking up at the moon.

As they split up for their homes, Minako watched them leave. 'Yes, Aniki. Soon everything will become clear.' She hummed happily as she walked away. 'I can't wait!'

Chapter End Notes

I apologise that this came late. Work and life happened.
Chapter Summary

After a personal tragedy, Souji's life is turned upside down when he meets two long-lost friends and experience the return of the Dark Hour. Together with other Wild Cards, SEES and the Investigation Team, they must get to the bottom of this mystery before all is lost. The strings of fate are connected by the trail of butterflies.

The next morning, Souji woke up early. Despite the battle which had occurred the previous day, he managed to sleep peacefully through the night. He took a shower, got dressed, changed his bandages and prodded to the kitchen to make his family breakfast. 'My family...' he repeated in his head. It sounded sweet, but at the same time left a bitter aftertaste. 'What the hell are you thinking, Seta?' He scolded himself, shaking his head violently to remove the depressing thoughts. 'Unlike Aniki, at least you still have a family right? They're willing to take you in, so be grateful, you damn idiot!'

Souji took a deep breath, stood straight, and entered the kitchen. Nanako had refilled the fridge with groceries the other day, so he had a lot of ingredients to work with. There were eggs, green vegetables, red peppers and the leftover rice from yesterday's dinner. He chuckled lightly. "I'm sure Nanako will be happy with today's breakfast menu."

Nanako could smell the delicious aroma as soon she woke up, a huge smile appearing on her face. She quickly got up and rushed to the bathroom to shower, hardly able to contain her excitement. After getting ready, she ran to the kitchen. "Big Bro!" she shouted, engulfing her cousin in a huge bear hug.

"Whoa! Easy there Nanako," Souji laughed. "Don't make me drop the food." He carried three plates of omelet fried rice to the dining table. "Mind setting the table while I make us some tea?"

"Sure thing, Big Bro!"

As the two of them were finishing up, Dojima came downstairs. He greeted his daughter like usual, but there was a slight pause when he saw his nephew in the kitchen. "Good morning, Souji. It's good to see you up nice and early."

"Oh, good morning Uncle. I had a good night's rest," Souji said, grinning like nothing was wrong with the world.

Dojima couldn't help but smile. He's honestly happy that his nephew was coping well after the tragedy, so he decided to ignore the nagging feeling he had since he returned from work last night.

Nanako made happy noises as she consumed her breakfast. It had been months since she ate something her big brother cooked. "Big Bro's cooking is the best!" she exclaimed, earning a grunt of agreement from her father and a proud smile from Souji.

"Say, have you two heard anything about the shrine and shopping district? I got a report from the guys at the station saying mass vandalism occurred there," Dojima said, starting up a conversation. "But the funny thing is, it just happened and there were no witnesses."
"Really? It just happened?" Nanako inquired, eyes lighting up with curiosity.

"That's what the report said. I'm pretty sure a lamp post and a shop's outer wall didn't get busted up like that without some sort of vehicular accident. No one saw or heard anything…” Dojima trailed off when he saw Souji flinch a little, before the teen shoved more fried rice into his mouth.

He would have missed it if he wasn't paying attention.

Despite his calm exterior, Souji was panicking on the inside. He recognized the tone his uncle was about to use; the one for initiating an interrogation with either criminals or with Souji himself. So he decided to feign ignorance and play it cool. "Nope, haven't heard about it."

The edges of Dojima's mouth turned downwards. "Are you sure about that? I heard from people who were there that they saw you, your friends and Arisato's group eating at Aiya's Diner just before the sudden destruction occurred."

‘Oh shit, he's onto me!’ Souji thought. ‘Calm down! No one but us Persona-users know about the Dark Hour, at least that's what Aniki said…’

He put down his spoon. "Uncle, just because we were there doesn't mean we saw what happened. They do have security footages, right?" Minato had told him the other day that during the Dark Hour, any electrical or electronic devices remain inactive, so he didn't have to worry about security cameras recording their battle with Shadows.

Dojima's gazed into Souji's storm grey eyes, the same color as his own. The teen's stare was firm, no signs of hesitation or difference in blinking pattern, no shifting his gaze elsewhere, and his body language was solid. Souji was holding his ground and Dojima knew it.

The silverette had been through this before and he would endure it again. His uncle was getting suspicious and he knew what that might result to - a trip to the police station, separated from his friends and interrogated in a dimly lit room. But he would never forgive himself if his uncle or little cousin got in danger like last time. The memories of Dojima wounded badly in that car accident after the chase with Namatame, and Nanako who almost died in the hospital, hurt too much. Deep in his heart, Souji knew that neither Minato nor his friends could save him if he were to lose his family again.

Nanako looked back and forth between her father and Souji. "Are you two fighting?" she asked sadly.

Finally Dojima broke his stare and softened his tone. "No we weren't, Nanako. I was just asking him something. Finish your breakfast."

"O-okay…”

Souji mentally sighed. At least his uncle was dropping the subject, even if it was temporary. He glanced at the clock hanging on the wall. His eyes bulged, and polished his plate as fast as he could.

"What's the hurry?" Dojima asked, raising an eyebrow.

"My friends and I were supposed to meet Aniki and his friends at the Samegawa today. I can't be late!" Souji quickly finished his meal and went to get ready.

"See you later, Big Bro!"
"Take care of yourself out there."

"Sure! Bye, Uncle. Bye, Nanako!"

As soon as Souji left, Nanako helped clean up. She and Souji had an agreement that if one cooks, the other one has to do the dishes. Dojima went upstairs to get ready for work.

They finished at the same time. Dojima was locking the door and Nanako stood beside the car, waiting for her father, when she saw someone trying to hide behind a nearby tree. Feeling brave, Nanako slowly approached the person.

"Um…hello there," she shyly greeted the mysterious person.

An older girl stuck her head out from her hiding place. "I was that obvious, huh?" she chuckled, much to Nanako's confusion.

"You must be new in town. I've never seen you before," Nanako said.

"Yup, I just arrived here. Good guess," the teenager said, and stepped out into the open.

She was about Souji's age, with chestnut-brown hair tied in a messy ponytail. She wore an orange cutsew top, white skirt and white sandals. Her complexion was fair and flawless, despite wearing next to no make-up. She carried something long and cylindrical, like a pole, wrapped in cloth and tied with string. The little girl noticed the MP3 player around her neck was red, just like the color of her eyes. From Nanako's perspective, she's quite pretty.

"Does Souji-kun live here?"

Nanako gasped. "How do you know Big Bro?"

"I'm his friend from the city. My name is Minako." She held out her hand for a handshake. "Minako Arisato."

The little girl liked Minako instantly. The way she smiled and the friendliness she displayed made Nanako feel all warm and fuzzy inside. There also something about the way she carried herself that reminded Nanako strongly of her Big Bro and Aniki.

"My name is Nanako. I'm his cousin. Nice to meet you!" Nanako beamed, her cheeks burning up as she returned the handshake.

Dojima approached his daughter and touched her shoulder. "Nanako, what did I tell you about talking to strangers?"

"Relax, Dad. This is Minako, Big Bro's friend from the city!"

Minako greeted Dojima with a respectful bow. "Good morning. You must be Souji-kun's uncle. It's a pleasure to meet you!"

"That's right. I'm Ryotaro Dojima. Nice to meet you, too. If you're looking for Souji, he just left a few minutes ago."

Minako pouted when she heard this. She wanted to check up on him to make sure he was alright. During yesterday's battle, she noticed that he already had injuries before all of them fought the Shadows to save her. So before she went ahead to meet everyone, she wanted to see how well Souji was doing to ease her worries.
Dojima stared hard at Minako. "Wait a minute...I recognize you! You're the little girl Souji and Minato used to play with when they were kids."

The young woman smiled. "So you remember me. I'm surprised that you still do."

"I'm a detective, it's part of the job." The detective chuckled, having used that line for the second time. "I remember what my sister used to call you three. The Troublemaking Trio. How could I forget the way she complained about you guys?"

"So are you like Big Bro's big sister?" Nanako asked.

Minako giggled. "That's right. Souji-kun used to call me 'Aneki', just like he how calls Minato 'Aniki'." She then glanced at her watch and gasped. "Oh no, I'm going to be late to meet them!"

Dojima furrowed his eyebrows. "Wait a minute...are you the one who they're supposed to meet at Samegawa?"

"Actually, yes." Minako twisted the hem of her skirt nervously. "I wanted to meet him back in Tatsumi Port Island, but I was released from the hospital a bit later than he did. So I came to Inaba, but we keep missing each other. See, I missed him again by a few minutes. I was hoping he'd walk with me there," she sighed.

Nanako tugged her father's shirt to get his attention. "Dad, can we give Aneki a ride to Samegawa? Please~?" she pleaded.

The older man was surprised at this. His daughter was unusually shy around people whom she barely knew, and now she wanted him to give a ride to a girl she just met? To add to his surprise, Nanako stood beside Minako and grabbed her hand, as if she didn't want to let go.

"Please, Dad?" Nanako begged again.

"Alright, alright," Dojima relented, giving in to his only child's request. "It's on the way to the shopping district anyway. Just make sure Souji sends you to Miwa-chan's house after that, okay?"

Nanako's smile brightened. "Okay!"

"Thank you, Dojima-san!" Minako said, bowing again.

"Get in. I'm almost late for work anyway."

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**About the same time...**

Souji ran into Kanji, Rise and Naoto on his way to Samegawa flood plain. It was a bit cold for summer mornings, but this wasn't unusual in rural Inaba.

Kanji wanted to press his luck for one last time. "Can't you at least tell me who she is, Senpai? I promise I won't tell anyone else, not even Minato-senpai."

"Nice try, Kanji."

"But - "

"You're going to have to wait like everybody else," Souji said, folding his arms against his chest. "Just because she's a Wild Card like me doesn't mean I understand the entire situation just yet."
"We'll know more when we meet her."

"Patience is a virtue, Kanji-kun," Naoto reminded him.

Shoulders slumped, Kanji frowned dejectedly. "It's not that bad, Kanji. We just have to wait until we get there!"

"I'm just worried about her, okay!" he mumbled, a bit flustered. "She did get hurt pretty bad..."

"Speak for yourself. You were the one who got knocked out. It would have been worse if Naoto-kun weren't there to take care of you~" Rise teased.

The young detective and the seamster's son turned different shades of red as the young idol's laughter echoed in the morning air. Souji chuckled at their antics as he lead the way. Once they arrived at the riverside, the others were already there. 'Yukiko must have brought them here after Aniki relayed the message.'

They were greeted by a peaceful, yet amusing scene:

At the fishing dock, Minato and Yosuke had their headphones on, and were comparing notes about their favorite music.

Under the tree where Souji and Chie often trained, the martial-arts enthusiast was showing off the new moves she learned from the latest kung-fu movie to Akihiko, who in turn gave her tips on how to land a devastating blow to the opponent.

Yukiko seem to be in a deep discussion with Mitsuru on the bench. Close by, Yukari and Fuuka were gossiping, seated on the stairs that connected the riverside to the flood plain.

Junpei and Teddie were tutoring young Ken about the fine art of flirting, using both Aigis and Metis as 'target practice'. Souji noticed how uncomfortable the pre-teen was during the entire ordeal as Teddie threw sparkles everywhere. Aigis scowled at Teddie and Metis giggled at something funny Junpei said.

At the farthest end of the riverside, Shinjiro was seated on a huge rock, staring out at nothing. His hand was absentmindedly rubbing Koromaru's head as the white dog stared intently at the fish swimming in the river.

It was Yukiko who noticed her boyfriend's presence and went to greet him. "Oh, Souji-kun. You're finally here." She gave him a brief hug and Souji entwined his fingers with hers. Everyone stopped what they were doing and gathered around the young couple.

The silverette apologized for his tardiness. "Sorry guys. My uncle was interrogating me during breakfast. Turns out he's in charge of investigating the damage we caused at the shrine and the shopping district." He then sighed. "As usual, I turned up on the top of his suspect list."

"We don't need to worry about that. Anyone without the potential could not have witnessed our battle," Mitsuru stated nonchalantly.

"You don't understand," Yosuke interjected, shaking his head. "The last time Dojima-san stuck his nose in our investigation, it ended up pretty badly. Because he was indirectly involved, Nanako-chan was dragged into the whole mess."

"Dojima-san ended up in the hospital," Chie added. "And we almost lost Nanako-chan too..."
"He'll just connect the dots, like the previous time," Naoto said. "During the murder investigations, he made all the correct assumptions but still withheld arresting Souji-senpai because he was under his care. I'm not sure what he will do this time though. He’s relentless when pursuing a lead." She then explained about her part of the investigation and the results she obtained when she was called in for assistance. "The police weren't happy with me, and kicked me out. We had to be extra vigilant that no one caught on to our investigation."

"That's right. We had to rely on the rumor mill to cover our asses, especially from Dojima-san," Kanji said. "It's a good thing that the school was pretty much a source for gossip, and it helped cover our trail."

The former SEES members pondered over Kanji's statement. Even if they did end up damaging public property during their battles with the full moon Shadows back in 2009, the Kirijo Group was there to cover up for them. Officer Kurosawa also did his part so that their activities remained a secret. They had wide access to weapons and technology the Kirijo Group had to offer, while the Investigation Team had to rely on their wits and limited resources in order to get the job done. Minato's respect for his childhood friend increased tenfold - being a leader in that kind of situation must not have been easy.

"Hey, aren't you guys seriously forgetting something?" Shinjiro grumbled, breaking the silence. "What the hell are we even doing here this early in the morning anyway?"

Everyone snapped out of their thoughts.

"Oh, that's right. There was a reason Souji-kun and I called you guys here," Minato said, rubbing the back of his head. "We're supposed to meet the other Wild Card. She said she'll explain everything to us."

Shinjiro forgot to be angry. "Really?" He noticed the eagerness in his voice just in time to cover it with an awkward cough.

"So where is she?" Ken asked. "We haven't seen anyone here but us."

They heard car sounds somewhere nearby. "Hm?" Metis looked ahead down the road, her robotic eyes handy for long-distance vision. "Isn't that... Dojima-san's vehicle?!"

A white car slowed down and parked in the designated area. Indeed it was Dojima's car. Souji flinched; this couldn't be a good sign. Sensing his nervousness, Minato acted fast. "Play it cool, guys," he told everybody. "Just play it cool." Everybody nodded and remained silent.

Dojima got out of the car and surveyed his surroundings. He was followed by Nanako, who waved at them with a huge smile. "Hi, Big Bro!" She went to the back seat as the door opened. "They're here!"

A slim hand reached out for Nanako's. "Thanks, Nanako-chan." A young woman stepped out, her bright smile catching everybody off guard. They were expecting her, yes, but not like this.

"Hey, guys! Sorry I'm late," Minako said apologetically, holding Nanako's hand. She approached Souji and Minato with a grin. "We keep missing each other by seconds, huh? Good thing your uncle and cousin gave me a ride here."

Despite the confusing situation, Minato and Souji greeted her with open arms. "Yeah. Glad you finally caught up with us," Minato said teasingly.

"About time too," Souji chuckled.
"You guys haven't changed either!" Minako giggled.

As the three of them laughed and joked with each other, their friends watched on, still confused.

Shinjiro stared at her, smiling like she didn't have a care in the world. When he finally found his voice again, it only came out as a hoarse whisper. "You..."

Minako heard him anyway. "Hey, Senpai." Her red eyes met his brown-grey ones, cheeks dusted a deep pink.

Her voice and smile did strange things to his head and heart. ‘This feeling...’

Minako and Shinjiro continued to stare at each other, conveying their emotions through their gazes, ignoring their surroundings. For them, it felt like an eternity as the world around them faded.

The moment was cut off when the three Wild Cards suddenly felt something coming... something evil. ‘Oh God, no. Please! Not here...not now!’

The sky turned dark and the eerie full moon appeared. The Persona-users were obviously startled, but what surprised them most was that neither Nanako nor Dojima were changed into coffins.

"What the hell is going on?" Dojima yelled.

Nanako clutched onto Minako's arm. "I'm scared..."

"What the hell?!" Yosuke gasped. "What's going on?"

Minato's eyes widened. "No way..."

Yukari froze as she reached a sudden realization. "They weren't transmogrified?! But that means - "

"They were targeted by the Shadows!" Mitsuru concluded. There was a tinge of fear in her voice.

Before Dojima could ask what they were talking about, several huge knight-like Shadows appeared before them.

"Hell Knights!" Fuuka gasped. The Shadows charged at them with full force. "Be careful! They're going to attack!"

"Everybody, scatter!!" Souji ordered as he grabbed his uncle by the arm and made a run for it. No one needed to be told twice, immediately running in several directions. Minako and Teddie quickly grabbed one of Nanako's hands each to lead her away from danger.

"Souji, what are those things?! What's going on?!" Dojima asked, irritation clearly in his voice.

"Sorry Uncle, no time to explain! Please, just trust me for now."

Dojima growled. His detective intuition went into overdrive. He never truly believed his nephew's story about some ‘other world’, Shadows and what-not, about how they were connected to the murders and the kidnappings. Even after he and his friends rescued Nanako and put the real culprit behind bars. But now, seeing these strange creatures and how Souji and his friends handled themselves with his own eyes, he finally put everything together: The strange items Souji kept purchasing from that dubious shopping channel every Sunday, the mysterious injuries he claimed to be from playing sports at school, or goofing around with the kids at the daycare as a part-timer. All of it finally made sense. Every word he said was the truth. They had gone through all that danger to save lives. To save Nanako.
"Souji-kun, look out!!" Yukiko called out to him.

Souji looked behind and froze. A Hell Knight was heading for him and his uncle, ready to skewer them with a Vile Assault attack! Without any time to block or counter, he shoved his uncle aside and stood in its way.

Dojima watched in horror as his nephew pushed him out of harm's way, only to put himself in danger. The look of defiance on Souji's face rivaled his own. He snapped out of his stupor just in time as his police training kicked in. He whipped out his gun and fired an entire round at the Shadow. "Don't you dare hurt my family!" he roared.

Six shots rang through the air as the bullets pierced armor, causing medium damage to the Shadow knight. It screeched in pain as black goo oozed from its wounds. The horse bucked in response, trying to throw off its rider. The Shadow lost focus, therefore the intended attack never made it to Souji as it was stopped in its tracks. Unfortunately, one of the bullets ricocheted back and grazed Dojima's right shoulder.

Seeing his uncle hiss in pain and on his knees almost caused Souji to panic. "Uncle, are you alright?"

"It's just a small flesh wound. Don't worry about it," the older man grunted.

"I'll heal it for you, just – "

"Souji-kun, look out!" Minato warned from somewhere behind him.

The Hell Knight managed to control its horse once more and prepared for another attack. Even though Shadows do not have faces to show emotion, the roar it was letting out indicated that it was royally pissed at the person who shot it.

"Senpai, its gathering energy for a Power Charge!" Rise informed him. "You need to guard yourself, and fast!"

The silverette cursed softly, furiously searching his Personae arsenal for a suitable one to block physical attacks.

A glowing blue card materialized in his hand as he stood directly in front of his uncle. Dojima winced again, and before he could open his mouth to scold Souji, the boy had beaten him to it. "Don't worry, just stay down. I'll protect you for sure this time."

There was nothing Dojima could say to counter that.

After screaming out a battle cry, the Hell Knight reeled back its lance and charged once again.

Souji crushed the card in his palm. "Siegfried!"

A warrior clad in ancient Germanic armor appeared before him, readying his sword and shield for a fight. Souji mentally ordered his Persona to defend. Siegfried lifted his shield just in time to block the lance, taking full brunt of the assault. Siegfried's shield was tough, but the charged attack was a tad too strong. Souji gritted his teeth as he tried to stand his ground and protect his guardian.

The sound of chains unlocking echoed behind him. "Skadi, Niflheim!"

The air around them turned cold as the Snowshoe Goddess appeared above Souji and Dojima. The Hell Knight and its horse were encased in a huge pillar of ice and became still.
Souji dismissed Siegfried as he collapsed on his knees, exhausted and out of breath. Minato and Yukiko rushed to his aid.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Persona-users scattered around the flood plain, where they saw the entire river had turned into blood. They were pondering over the difficulty of battle as they hadn't prepared for this, and the area was too small for them to fight all at once.

"Fuuka, are you done scanning?" Akihiko asked the SEES analytic support, wrapping some athletic tape around his hands.

"All I know for now is that these Shadows are strong against physical attacks. I just need a little more time to find its weakness," Fuuka said.

"Don't do anything rash, Akihiko," Mitsuru warned him. Despite her cold tone, she was worried for his safety, knowing what a hothead he is.

"I can always use Megidolaon, but that would cause too much damage to the surroundings," Naoto said, assessing the situation. "That would spell trouble for us if this place is torn apart beyond recognition."

"So we can't just use any spells willy-nilly either," Yosuke complained. "This Dark Hour is becoming a pain in the ass!"

The only ones who brought their weapons were Yukiko, Aigis and Naoto, because theirs were the easiest to conceal. Rise had yet to finish scanning, so going for an offense was too risky.

Nanako squirmed in Minako and Teddie's hold. "Dad! Big Bro!" she yelled. Her eyes were filled with tears when she saw both her father and Big Bro on the ground, defenseless. She was worried and scared, and wanted to be by their side right now! With the strength that she didn't know she possessed, Nanako forcefully yanked herself out of their grasps and ran towards her family.

"Nanako-chan, wait! Come back!" Minako screamed, and chased after her. The little girl was fast!

"Nana-chan!" Teddie cried in dismay, trying to catch up.

Nanako was too distracted to listen. All she could think about right now was being with her father, and for Souji to hug and comfort her. She didn't see nor hear the Ziodyne aimed for her, casted by another Hell Knight that suddenly appeared within the vicinity.

The others did, including Souji and Dojima but they were too far away to do anything about it.

"NANAKO!"

They could only stare helplessly as the thunder got closer and closer to its target. But before it could do so, a figure zoomed past and shielded the little girl with its body.

"Teddie?!" Nanako cried.

The amount of pain he felt from the direct hit was unbearable. Without his bear suit to block some of the damage, Teddie let out an anguished, ear-splitting scream and collapsed on the ground.

"TEDDIE!" his teammates screamed.

Akihiko and Shinjiro wasted no time attacking the Hell Knight to divert its attention away from the others.
“Be on the lookout for more!” Mitsuru ordered the rest.

Souji forgot his pain and exhaustion, rushing to Teddie's side as his cousin ran into her father's embrace. He was followed by Minato, Yosuke and Yukiko.

The silverette fell on his knees beside the blonde, who was barely conscious. Worry and sadness were evident in his grey eyes as he looked into Teddie's blue ones. "Teddie… why…? Why did you take that direct hit?" His voice choked. "Everyone knows your Persona is weak to electricity…you could have died!"

"I know, Sensei…" Teddie coughed. "But I made a promise didn't I? In the hospital, before I disappeared…I promised you…and myself…that I would always protect Nana-chan." He looked like a mess; his clothes were charred beyond recognition and there were burn marks all over his fair skin.

"You idiot!" Yosuke scolded, “Think before jumping in, dumbass!” He wasn't angry, but worried. The bear could be a handful, yes, but life was never boring with him around. His parents loved him so much they 'adopted' him into their household, giving him the name of Kumada 'Teddie' Hanamura and enrolled him in Yasogami High, where the blonde surprisingly scored well enough to be in the same year as Kanji, Rise and Naoto in the admissions exam. Needless to say, school became quite interesting.

"It's okay, Teddie. Thanks for protecting her. You can rest now," Souji told the little blonde, but deep inside he could feel his anger rising. He got up and faced Yukiko. "Please heal him, and make sure he doesn't pass out." It wasn't a request, it was an order.

"I understand. I'll do everything I can," Yukiko answered. She summoned Amaterasu and began healing their friend.

Minato felt the same as Souji. Anyone who hurt his friends must be severely punished. The grip on his Evoker tightened.

Since the Ziodyne spell wasn't successful, the Hell Knight opted for a physical attack instead. It slipped past Shinjirou and Akihiko down the slope, and charged at the two Wild Cards. The other one which Minato trapped in the ice pillar had broken free, and closed in as well.

Before the boys could do anything, a Persona with a man's body and the head and wings of an eagle appeared and casted Magarudyne on the two Shadows. The gust was so powerful, it tore the Shadows' bodies into tiny pieces, and soon dissolved in the air.

"What the…" Souji said, flabbergasted.

"Who…Garuda…how?" Minato stuttered. They looked at each other in confusion.

Footsteps were heard approaching behind them and they turned around to see who it was: the girl in the orange cutsew blouse.

‘Oh right, I forgot there's another Wild Card here...’ Souji and Minato thought at the same time.

"Guys, I sense more Shadows heading our way," Rise warned them through telepathy. "There are about three of them!"

And sure enough, three more Hell Knights appeared from the other side of the river, straight towards the Wild Cards.
Minako took the challenge head on. "Bring it!" she hissed. Her crimson eyes burned with pure fury as she swung her naginata around, ready for action. "Of all the places, of all the times! They had to show up here and now?! I've waited for so long to meet you guys, and it had to be ruined by Shadows! I'll make sure they pay!"

The venom dripping from her voice caused Minato and Souji to shiver, and those within hearing distance shuddered.

"I finished scanning!" Fuuka's voice rang out. Everyone perked up and paid extra attention. "They reflect electricity, and are strong against physical attacks. And their weakness is wind!"

Without delay, Souji sprang into leader mode. "Kanji! Guard Yukiko while she's healing Teddie."

"But Senpai, you know I can kick their asses better than the next guy!"

"Don't argue with me. Your Persona has immunity to electricity, making you the logical choice to shield them. Besides, you haven't fully recovered from your head injury and I don't want you pushing yourself too much."

Seeing no flaw in his argument, Kanji relented. "Alright Senpai. I'm trusting you on this!" He stood in front of Yukiko, anticipating any attack to come their way. At this point those with healing abilities joined in to heal Teddie's various wounds. Yosuke acted as a lookout to make sure nothing would creep up on them.

The Hell Knights spotted their original targets, and made a beeline for them.

"NOT SO FAST!" Minako yelled, standing in their way. Her reflexes were remarkable as she dodged two consecutive Ziodyne spells. She placed her Evoker at her temple and pulled the trigger. "Norn, Panta Rhei!"

A marble white figure with three beautiful maidens holding a large clock appeared, casting a powerful gust of wind, even stronger than a Garudyne. One of the Shadows was hit and its remains dissipated in the air, just like the previous one.

"Don't think I'm not letting you off easy!" The murderous glint in her eyes had the other Persona-users shaking in fear.

Souji and Minato sighed; at least her bipolar tendencies haven't changed as long as they had known her.

"Don't just stand there!" She barked at the two. "Help me out here!" It was more of a demand than a request.

Souji chuckled at her. "I kinda missed your bossiness, you know that?" Another card materialized in his hand as it spun around slowly. "Aniki?"

"Whenever you two are ready," Minato said, grinning as he readied his Evoker.

"Norn…"

"Odin…"

"Norn…"

"PANTA RHEI!"
The three separate wind spells began to merge, creating an extremely powerful tornado. The two Hell Knights didn't stand a chance as they were sucked into the swirling vortex. The tornado was spinning violently, the wind and various pieces of shrapnel it picked up slicing them to shreds. It rose higher and higher from the ground and scattered the remains of the Shadows into the dark sky.

The trio stopped their attack and fell on their hands and knees, panting heavily.

"And that's that!" Junpei cheered. "Just remind me to never piss them off…"

Meanwhile, Ken casted a healing spell to cure any external injuries on Dojima and Nanako. Teddie seemed a little better, but he was still dazed.

"Umm...guys, you might want to get ready for another battle," Rise said nervously. She hadn't dismissed Kanzeon yet and was still scanning the area. "I sense a huge group of Shadows coming this way!"


Shinjiro and Kanji started swearing profanities. Koromaru growled loudly, baring his fangs.

"Start scanning for their weaknesses immediately!" Minato ordered, slightly out of breath. "If we let them escape into town they might cause a lot of damage."

"Aniki is right," Souji groaned, shakily getting back on his feet. "They're looking for us. Might as well give them what they want."

Kanji perked up at his senpai's statement and pumped a fist into the air. "You said it, Senpai!"

Minako giggled weakly and mimicked Kanji. "Yeah!"

"Heads up!" Naoto warned, readying her revolver. She never goes anywhere without it now. "It looks like they got here early."

Just as Rise said, a huge group consisting about thirty Halberie-type Shadows flocked towards them. Immediately the Persona-users were overwhelmed.

"Dammit, when did Shadow groups get this huge?" Yosuke complained, Susano-O blowing some away with Garudyne. "We can't exactly fend them off without weapons!"

Two Shadows tried to sneak up on the support team. Luckily, Koromaru was paying attention and howled upon spotting them, summoning Cerberus to roast them with Maragidyne.

"Atta boy, Koromaru!" Ken praised. He summoned Kala-Nemi for a follow-up attack.

Akihiko tried punching one, but to no avail. "Stay still, will ya?!" He had much more luck when Caeser was summoned to attack.

Minako drew her Evoker once more. "Okay Eurydice, time to show why you're the Mistress of Melodies!" She pulled the trigger.

A figure similar to Minato's Orpheus materialized above her. Unlike Orpheus' silver, she sported long brown hair, a golden torso instead of platinum, and the lyre she carried as a weapon was heart-shaped in structure.

Yukari was bewildered. "That Persona...looks just like Minato-kun's!" she gasped.
"The missing piece of the puzzle," Minato grinned, summoning Orpheus.

"Like there was any doubt by now, Aniki," Souji smirked as he summoned Izanagi.

"Ready? **Swift Strike!**"

"**Assault Dive!**"

"**Cleave!**"

Upon receiving orders, their Personas attacked. Eurydice's hit three while Orpheus and Izanagi's finished off two more.

Aigis shot at the other Shadows, but they kept dodging. "Elusive targets…"

"They're quite tenacious as well," Naoto grumbled as she missed her shots.

"**They have a very high evasion rate,**" Rise informed. "**They don't have any weakness, but no specific resistance either.**"

"That makes things more difficult," Metis said, trying to strike another without much luck.

"Stay down, ya little bastard!" Shinjiro grew frustrated as he couldn't hit a single Shadow. His feelings were echoed by the other fighters.

"Relax, I've got what we need right here," Minako said with a cocky little grin.

Minato raised an eyebrow. "What are you thinking?"

"Hit them with an Almighty spell. Not as strong as Megidolaon, but I think it'll take care of these loudmouths just fine without damaging the area."

Souji smirked. "I like where this is going. If we focus our power to summon a single Persona rather than as separate entities, even a minor spell can still do significant damage."

"Very well, count me in!" Minato said. He turned to address the others. "All of you, stand back! We're taking them down with a single shot!"

The rest of the Persona-users stopped what they were doing. At first they were confused at why their leaders were telling them to back off, but when they heard 'a single shot,' they understood immediately and ran as far as they could without losing sight of their leaders. Shinjiro and Akihiko acted as human crutches to help Dojima move, Yosuke carried Teddie on his back, and Ken led Nanako out of harm's way.

Standing in a circle facing each other, Minato, Souji and Minako closed their eyes and started to focus. Slowly they released their spiritual energy and began to focus on one Persona in their psyche. They then began to merge their energies as the twins readied their Evokers while a tarot card formed in Souji's hand.

"**Alice…**"

The rest of the team watched in awe as the usual eerie, bluish smoke appearing at their leaders’ feet began to merge. A creepy childish giggle reached their ears and they shivered as a Persona, taking the form of a pale little English girl with blonde hair and a blue dress, appeared in the center of the Wild Cards; the child demon, Alice.
The Hableries were frantically surrounding them, attracted by their spiritual energy. They got closer and closer, until -

"MEGIDOLA!"

The blonde little girl spun around cutely and pointed a finger to the sky. A huge orb of purple energy appeared above the Shadows. It exploded and sent out a massive shockwave, decimating them in an instant. The sudden burst of energy almost knocked the rest of the humans off their feet.

The Wild Cards stood still, waiting for more enemies to come. As sudden as it appeared, the Dark Hour ended. They were safe...for now. With a heavy sigh, they and slumped to the ground, out of breath.

"Okay...remind me...not to...try that again... anytime soon..." Minako panted.

"I'll...keep note...of that..." Minato wheezed.

"No...kidding..." Souji added.

They exchanged looks and burst into laughter, relieved that the battle was over and their friends safe.

"That was wicked, Senpai!" Kanji exclaimed in awe. "You guys okay?"

"Yeah...just out of breath..." Souji said as Yukiko and Kanji helped him up. "Everybody okay?"

"No problem-o!" Junpei grinned as he and Yukari helped Minato up. Beside him, Shinjiro and Metis helped Minako stand. "Quite a show you guys put on, huh?"

"Don't expect an encore anytime soon, Junpei-kun," Minako giggled. "That can really take a lot out of you."

"You can say that again," Minato said.

"That can really take - "

"Not literally, silly." He shushed her by placing two fingers on her lips.

Minako swatted his hand away and stuck out her tongue at him. They started laughing again. It was an unusual sight for the SEES members, seeing their leader so happy.

Souji on the other hand, shifted his gaze to his left. Yosuke had put Teddie down once the danger was over. He looked a lot better after being healed multiple times.

Nanako and Dojima also approached him. Teddie smiled at her. "Are you okay, Nana-chan?"

Nanako hugged him tightly. "Teddie..." She looked like she was about to cry as he weakly hugged her back.

"Thanks for looking out for her, Teddie," Dojima said. "You have my gratitude."

The blonde then felt a hand patting his head. He looked up. "Sensei?"

"You were really brave, Teddie. I'm so proud of you," Souji told him.

Teddie blushed at being praised by the person he admired most. "I feel all fuzzy inside~ Like I had
Yosuke rolled his eyes. "Well, at least we know he's gonna be okay. He's already talking about food."

The rest of the Investigation Team laughed at that.

Nanako let go of Teddie and hugged Souji's mid-section. "Big Bro!" There was a mix of relief and happiness in her voice.

"There, there Nanako. It's okay." He hugged her tightly.

"The monsters are gone. They'll never bother you again, Nanako-chan," Minako said.

"That's right. And if they do come back, we'll teach them a lesson they'll never forget!" Minato added, giving her a cheeky grin.

Nanako beamed. "Okay!"

Dojima couldn't take this anymore, and raised his voice. The suspense was too much. "Souji..." he started, using his interrogative tone. "Tell me what's going on. Now!"

Having expected this, Souji gestured for everyone to sit down on the grassy field, Minato and Minako on either side of him. He took in a deep breath. "Those things? They're not normal; you could see that. They're called Shadows, beasts created from the collective human unconscious." He looked at Dojima directly in the eyes, daring his uncle to contradict him. "I know you had your suspicions last year, about how my friends and I were connected to the serial murders. Well, you were right. What I told you about being able to enter the TV and the world inside it was real, and that's where the killings were taking place. Adachi shoved the first two victims into the TV himself, and convinced Namatame that he would be saving them if he sheltered them in there, his first ‘rescue’ being Yukiko. It's entirely convoluted, and full of manipulation on Adachi's part. But that's the truth."

Dojima shook his head. "That makes no sense. That's...that's impossible."

"The TV was only a portal, a connection made by Izanami-no Okami, and the world inside is the representation of people's hearts. We travelled there to rescue the victims, risking our lives to protect those around us, to protect our friends. Yukiko, Kanji, Rise, Naoto and Nanako would all be dead if Yosuke, Chie and I hadn't found our way inside the TV, met Teddie and discovered the means to fight those monsters which were killing the victims," Souji spoke calmly, legs crossed and hands on his knees.

Dojima could not hear a word of a lie in anything his nephew was saying. "But if those 'Shadows' are from that other world, then how did they...?"

"That's the fault of a phenomena known as the Dark Hour." It was Minato's turn to explain. "During the Dark Hour, the outside world is totally altered into what we experienced just now. The buildings, the night sky, as well as the moon become a sickly green color, while bodies of water turn crimson. Puddles akin to blood pools will form in random surfaces as well, and all electrical appliances will cease to function. Normal humans will transmogrify into coffins and become oblivious to what is happening."

Minako continued. "Shadows become active during the Dark Hour and will attempt to lure humans out of their coffins in order to feed on their psyches. Once devoured, the person contracts a condition called 'Apathy Syndrome.' Those affected will suffer from debilitating levels of apathy."

When it strikes, the inflicted will collapse in a heap wherever they happen to be and become unable to move, feed, or care for themselves. If an ordinary human survives the Dark Hour without being attacked by a Shadow, their memories would be erased instead. Of course, there are rare cases of people that are able to remain awake during the Dark Hour without having the power we do.”

"Only those with the potential to invoke a Persona are able to stay fully active during the Dark Hour and resist Shadow attacks," Souji said. "We who have that power, are the only ones who can destroy Shadows."

"Persona? Those creatures you summoned What are they?"

"It is said that a Persona is our alter ego or our inner self. I mentioned before that the world inside the TV is the manifestation of what is inside the hearts and minds of people. So it's only natural that our Personas reflect our hearts and true selves." He then gestured to Minato, Minako and himself. "The three of us have a unique ability known as 'Wild Card'. We can summon and carry multiple Personae and switch them at will during battles."

Silence.

Dojima closed his eyes, trying to soak what Souji and his friends just told him. Feeling that the information was too much, he let out a frustrated sigh and rubbed his temples. "So, what happens now?"

"Now? Nothing's changed. I will still fight, just like I always have since coming here. We will get to the bottom of what's effecting the balance of our world, with the help of our friends and the Personas that we wield." Souji eyes lit with determination. "Now that your eyes have been opened to the truth, you can help us on the public side of things. Since your wounds are healed, you can go take Nanako to her friend's house and get back to your job like you always do, or you can deny everything I've just said and have me arrested. You'll doom us all if you choose to do the latter."

Dojima glared darkly at his nephew. "Great endorsement of the faith you have in me, Souji. Thanks."

"Sure thing," Souji grinned at his uncle impudently. It disappeared a second later, replaced by a frown. "But seriously, I don't want you or Nanako to be involved in this, so..."

Dojima stood up, hanging his jacket over his shoulder. "I won't get in your way, since you guys are the only ones that can do anything about this mess. But...I want you to promise me one thing," he said with a stern expression. "Take care of yourself, okay?"

Souji stood up as well. "Of course, Uncle. I promise."

Dojima extended a hand to his daughter. "Let's go. I'm gonna be late for work."

"Big Bro, I'll see you later?"

"Of course." He gave her head a gentle pat. "I'll see you at home. I promise I'll make you something delicious for dinner, okay?"

"Yay!" Nanako then hugged both Minato and Minako. "Bye, Aniki! Bye, Aneki! Let's play together next time!"

"Sure, Nanako-chan!" Minato and Minako said in unison. "See you soon!"

Nanako also bid the other Persona-users farewell before both father and daughter left.
Minako smiled happily. "That ended well."

Shinjiro crossed his arms. "You don't plan to run away again, do you?"

She shook her head. "Nah, I'm done running away. There's no more need for that."

Shinjiro, despite himself, returned her smile. "Is that so?"

"Yep! Oh, I almost forgot one thing." She turned around to hug the male Wild Cards like she had done at the station. This time however, Minato and Souji returned her embrace, smiling so wide that their eyes closed.

This surprised everyone. For some reason, Yukari, Yukiko and Shinjiro didn't feel jealous at all. However, the same couldn't be said about Rise. "Wait a minute!" she pouted. "Just what is your relationship with Senpai?!!"

Minako gave her a sheepish smile and then at the two Wild Cards. "Should I tell them, or do you want to tell them?" she asked. "I mean, I have no problems explaining, but I think the shock could be a little too much."

"I think it'll be better if Aniki starts first," Souji replied. "Then we can take turns."

"I don't mind." Minato took a deep breath. "Guys, this here is Minako Arisato…” He nudged her forward. "My twin sister."

The silence that followed superceded the silence that was brought on when the former SEES members found out about his return. Pendamonium was about to break loose.

"WHAAAAAT?!!"

The girl in questioned giggled. "I'm Minako Arisato. Minato's younger twin and Souji-kun's surrogate big sister. Nice to meet you!"

Junpei's jaw dropped. "You gotta be kidding me! You have a sister?!!"

"That explains everything..." Aigis suddenly said. "The strange feeling I got when I saw you. How Metis acknowledged you as someone important to me. You...you were that other child!"

"Other child?" Mitsuru questioned.

"A memory of mine only Aigis knows about," Minato said. "When she sealed Death, she did it on two children that had survived a nearby car crash. However..." His expression grew dark. "One of the children passed away due to the wounds inflicted by the accident shortly after that."

"P-p-passed away?!" Chie gasped, holding her chest. "S-so..."

"I'm not a ghost, Chie-chan. There's no need to freak out," Minako told her, sweatdropping. "Let me put it this way. Have you guys ever heard about a theory that world-altering events can lead to the creation of alternate realities?"

Almost everyone nodded. "When the Dark hour was created, our reality was split into two with similar sequences of events," Minato continued. "The only difference during that night was that in one reality, Minako was the one who passed away, while in the other it was me who died."

"From that point on, the chain of events happened equally for both realities," Souji picked up from where Minato had left off. "From both Aniki and Aneki joining SEES until the formation of the
Great Seal. The only significant change that happened was regarding Shinjiro-san.

Shinjiro visibly turned a little pale. "You mean...the time Minako found my pocket watch, and it deflected the gunshot that otherwise would have sent me to the grave?" he asked incredulously.

Beside him, Minako's face was slowly turning red.

"Well, yeah. But there's more to it," Minato said. "You created a really solid bond with my sister in that reality. A bond that literally saved your life."

"Are you talking about Castor?"

"Yes, you probably felt that, didn't you, Senpai? By bonding with Minako, Castor's violent tendencies were greatly reduced during our battles in Tartarus. You see, Personas thrive on emotional bonds with others. Initially, Castor was unstable because you were inexperienced. But after the accident with Ken's mom, your Persona would often go out of control until you had to resort to taking suppressents because you cut off all emotional ties with people and secluded yourself. Have you noticed that you didn't need to depend on those pills as much as before whenever you're around her? And the time you spent in the hospital during your coma and recuperation helped you detox, so you no longer need that junk."

Shinjiro stood motionless, stunned.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait!" Junpei interjected. "So what you're saying is...Mina-tan is actually Shinjiro-senpai's girlfriend?!" he blurted out.

Both people in question were now blushing madly.

Minato sweatdropped. "Yes, Junpei, that's one way to put things..."

Before they could throttle the capped jokester, Akihiko cut in. "That explains how Shinji came back, but it still doesn't explain why the two of you are alive in the same reality."

"Let's just say we have Souji-kun and his friends to thank for that," Minako said.

"Huh? Us? How did we do that?" Yosuke questioned.

"You defeated Izanami-no Okami, and lifted the fog of deceit from mankind's heart," Minato explained. "With the elimination of the fog, humanity is no longer blinded by its own lies and illusions, including the illusion that death of humanity equals salvation. Therefore, part of the power that kept Erebus strong is lessened to a huge degree, so the power needed for the Great Seal to contain him lessened."

"With the end of the Dark Hour and the fog lifted, the two realities could finally merge together," Souji continued. "It also means that the seals created by both Aniki and Aneki seperatly, is now fused into a single Great Seal."

"Once the Seal merges, only half of mine and half of Aniki's soul is needed, and made it possible for us, and in some way for Metis, to return! But somehow...things went wrong. Something from that side of Erebus leaked into this side."

"It explains what caused the Dark Hour to appear at random times," Mitsuru concluded.

"And the fog to cover the other side," Naoto added.
"Yes. But, I don't know what it is, and neither does Theo."

"Theo?" Ken asked.


"That's right. He and his sisters found me and Metis after I was released and took us to the Velvet Room," said Minako. "Metis was unconscious, so that's the reason she didn't see me or know who I am. They would have done the same to Aniki and Shinjiro-senpai if Souji-kun hadn't run into them and the Shadows hadn't attacked them. They told me what they knew about the new threat, so I set out to find you guys."

"That explains all but one thing. Why couldn't we remember you from the start, Minako-chan?" Yukari asked.

"I think it's a side effect of the reality merging process. My memories also changed. Instead of remembering things from when only I was alive, I also remember Aniki being alive and we faced everything together. I think past events have changed because of this as well."

"Maybe...maybe that's how things are supposed be," Shinjiro said.

The mood surrounding the group uplifted. "Definitely! Things are much better now that both Minako-chan and Minato-kun are with us," Fuuka said.

Minako let out a sob. "You guys have no idea how much I wanted to be with you all!"

Her twin was quick to pat her head. "There there. We're together now. At long last."

Yukari was the first to wrap Minako in a warm embrace, followed by Fuuka, Mitsuru, Aigis and Metis. Koromaru rubbed his head against her leg. Under Minato's supervision, Junpei was allowed to hug her, followed by Ken. Akihiko affectionately ruffled her hair. Shinjiro just stood there, awkwardly not knowing what to do.

"Hey, you guys are part of the team too! Join us!" Minako called out to them.

"Huh? A-are you sure?" Yukiko asked.

"Yukiko-chan! Don't tell me you don't remember me from the Gekkoukan High tennis team? We came for the fellowship with your school three years ago. Oh, you must have been in middle school back then. I admit, you changed quite a bit from when I last saw you, but I must say, long hair sure looks good on you. Souji-kun found a nice girl for himself."

Yukiko and Souji blushed. "Aneki!" he protested.

"It's true, Souji-kun! Just like Aniki and Yukari-chan. I'm glad my brother is in love with my best friend. They were meant for each other!"

Now it was Yukari's turn to blush. "M-M-Minako!"

Minato rolled his eyes at his sister's childishness.

"Snrk...Hehe...Ahahahaha!" Yukiko burst into laughter, earning raised eyebrows from the city dwellers.

"Here we go again..." Chie sighed. "I'm surprised, though. Yukiko hasn't had a laughing fit in a
while."

"Now that things have settled down, a little laughter isn't so bad," Yosuke grinned. "So partner, what's the plan now?"

"Now we rest and recover. We’ll meet tomorrow for some training in the TV."

"Now that our team is complete, we've got to find out who or what is behind the Dark Hour and the fog's return," Minato said.

"And stop them for good!" Minako added. "You guys with us?"

"YEAH!"

As the others chatted and discussed, Shinjiro gestured to Minako. With a silent nod, they walked away holding hands while their friends were distracted.

"Hey, where are Minako-san and Shinjiro-san?" Ken asked when he noticed that the two were gone. "They were here just a minute ago."

"Don't worry about them, Ken-kun. Those two probably went to a place where they can talk in private," Yukari replied. "I think they have a lot to talk about."

Shinjiro led Minako to Tatsuhime Shrine.

"Gotta love shrines…it brings a feeling of peace," Minako said as they stood in front of the offertory box.

Shinjiro agreed with her, though he was unsure of what to do next.

The young woman started to fidget beside him. "Umm…Senpai?" She blushed adorably. "M-may I…?"

He understood what she wanted from him. "C'mere..." he said, gently pulling her into a hug.

Minako smiled into his coat, inhaling his warmth. "This is even better than a dream..." She choked back a sob. "It’s real."

"Come on, please don't cry..."

"I'm sorry. I...I know I promised I wouldn't..." Minako gripped him tighter, afraid to lose him again. "But I'm so happy! You're here...with me. I missed you so much."

"I missed you too." Shinjiro kissed the top of her head. "I can't believe I forgot all about you...again! But in my dreams, all I saw was you. Your laughter, your tears, your kindness, your smile. You were all I could think about."

"Senpai..." The smile she gave him was brilliant. "I love you!"

"Minako..." Shinjiro cupped her cheek as he stared into her ruby red eyes. "I...I love you too." He pressed his lips against her soft, warm ones and kissed her passionately. She was caught off guard at first, but quickly reciprocated. They conveyed all their pent up feelings for each other through the kiss, not holding anything back.
After a while, they broke off for air.

"Senpai? Will...will you stay with me...with Aniki, Akihiko, Ken...all of us?"

"I ain't letting go of you ever again." Shinjiro pulled her into a fierce hug, but not enough to crush her. "I'm not gonna lose you again. We'll fight for our future together, alongside the others."

Minako rested her head on his chest, feeling content. "Thank you, Senpai."

Shinjiro held Minako, his one and only love, closer to him. For the first time in ages, he felt at peace. 'This is my reason to live. Aki, Ken, Souji, Minato and the others...we'll fight together and I'm gonna protect them for sure this time. No way in hell I'm gonna screw up again!'

As he hardened his resolve, Shinjiro felt a rush of energy course through his body. Castor appeared above him and started to glow brightly. He stared wide-eyed as his Persona transformed from a metallic horse and its rider into a large winged horse with glittering wings, silver fur, and a brown mane. Adorning its body was red and black samurai armor pieces protecting its body and wings.

His new Persona's name easily came to his lips. "Pegasus..." The mythical horse vanished as sudden as it appeared.

Minako felt it too. "Your new resolve has awakened a new Persona. Congrats, Senpai!"

Shinjiro smirked. "Heh, so I got a bit stronger." He let that meaning sink in.

They continued to hold each other, catching up on lost time.

At the temple entrance, Minato and Souji looked on. They had come to check on their sister and sensed the change in Shinjiro's persona.

"I'm happy for Aneki and Shinjiro-san," Souji said.

"Me too. He's helped her. Probably much more than she's helped him," Minato said. "I haven't seen her this open, or smile that bright since the night before..." His voice lowered an octave. "...before our parents died."

Souji placed a hand on Minato's shoulder as a comforting gesture.

Minato quickly regained his composure. "Hmph, he probably knows what he'll be facing if he ever hurts her, so I'll keep quiet for now." He walked away with his hands in his pockets. "C'mon, Banchou-kun. Yukari and Yukiko-san are waiting for us. I don't think those two are coming back to the inn anytime soon."

The next day...

Before they went to meet up with their friends, Souji took the twins to the hill overlooking the town of Inaba at their request. It was one of his favorite places, and perfect for them to have some time to talk in private.

It was a nice day out, too. All of the pressures they felt, their worries and fears seem to melt away under the warm heat of the sun, drifting along the gentle summer breeze.

Souji sighed wistfully, a contented smile gracing his lips. He felt better than he had in a while. But even with his current good mood, he knew it couldn't last forever. However, that wasn't going to
stop him and his childhood friends/pseudo siblings from enjoying it while it lasted.

At the top of the hill, Minato leaned against the fence, taking in the view as he listened to his music. His foot was tapping to the unheard beat. Minako sat underneath the gazebo, also listening to her music, humming a soft, upbeat melody.

Souji smiled. His pseudo siblings always loved music, and he was glad that hadn't changed. He wondered if they played any instruments so they could form a band.

Minako turned her MP3 off and went to join her twin. "Wow, this view is great!" she said, enjoying the morning breeze. "You can see the entire town from here."

"It's quiet and secluded, too," Minato said, taking his headphones off. "I can see why you like this place, Banchou-kun."

"I like coming here, either with my friends or to work at the daycare. Inaba has plenty of peaceful places, but this is definitely one of my favorites."

"Speaking of friends, tell us more about Yukiko-chan and your team, Banchou-kun," Minako suggested. "They all seem like wonderful people."

"Fine, but only if you guys tell me more about your friends. After all you've been through, they must mean a lot to you."

Minako giggled. "Now, where do we start…?"

They first talked about their fellow team members and how they came to meet, and then proceed to small talk about inconsequential things, enjoying each other's company and the scenery around them.

They were so absorbed with their conversation that they failed to notice someone else making their way up to where the three teens were.

"Minato-san! Minako-san!"

They saw Aigis and Metis approaching them. "Hi guys!" Minako greeted. "Are you enjoying exploring Inaba together?"

"Yes!" Metis said with a huge smile. "Everything is so different from Port Island."

"Everything we see here is a truly invigorating experience for us," Aigis added. "Souji-san, I must thank you for suggesting several places for us to explore."

"Don't mention it," Souji said. "You guys should come here when the daycare is on. The kids here love to meet new people."

"Daycare? Nanako-chan told me it's when parents bring their children for caretakers to look after them while they're occupied with other activities, right?" Metis asked. "Sounds interesting. Can we do that, Sister?"

"I don't see why not. Children are always nice to watch."

"Oh, I found this while my sister and I were exploring. Teddie-san told me you really liked these, so we thought you should have it."

Souji took the small item Metis handed him. It was a paper crane made from light blue paper with
white butterflies printed on it. "Wow…this is really well made." He enjoyed making paper cranes and origami because they made nice gifts, but receiving one made him feel special. "Thanks, both of you. I really appreciate this."

Metis smiled warmly at him. Souji could feel a bond forming with the younger android sister as a strange card flashed in his mind; it was a bird holding a staff, heralding something to come. Then the familiar voice rang in his ears.

*Thou art I… And I am thou…*  
*Thou hast established a new bond…*  
*It brings thee closer to the truth…*  
*Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Aeon Arcana…*

"It's time to go," Aigis said. "The others are expecting us."

"You two go on ahead and tell them we'll be there shortly," Minato said. "It's just...really nice here."

The android sisters understood, and went on to their destination.

"The Aeon arcana…” Souji said out loud, after those two had gone. “What do you guys know about it?”

“The Aeon represents time, especially the changes dictated by the times. It addresses finality and destruction as well as liberation, hope and redemption. The Aeon demands honesty and sincerity. Facing the Aeon uncovers lies and corruption,” Minato explained. “It’s a rare type of arcana, only found in few Tarot decks replacing the Judgement.”


“True. To find and to understand oneself. The true understanding of the circle of life, of growing and fading…” Souji murmured. “Aigis-san had learned it, and is now helping Metis-san understand while she herself goes through new experiences…”

As he reflected on that, he remembered someone in his life with a familiar experience. A girl with fair skin, black hair reaching the end of her nape and eyes as green as the forests surrounding Inaba. Her face was slightly made-up with eye-shadow and pink lipstick. She wore a sleeveless white shirt, a short black necktie, a checkered short skirt held up by a fancy golden buckle resembling a heart with wings. Additionally, she wore funky accessories and carried a blue bag, matching her blue newsboy cap with a engraved with a golden 'V'. ‘Marie…now I understand the meaning of her arcana. It really does fit her. What became of her? She wasn’t at the Velvet Room when we went to visit. Maybe…maybe she found her answer and left like Elizabeth and Theodore did. I hope I’ll get to see her again someday.’

Minako gently flicked his forehead. “Watcha thinking about, Banchou-kun?”

“Oh, just a friend of mine. Her name is Marie. She used to hang out in the Velvet Room and assisted Margaret. Sometimes she would ask me to show her around Inaba and Okina,” he said. “I just...find it odd that she isn’t there anymore.”

“I’m sure you’ll meet her again soon,” Minato assured him. “Your bond with her will certainly bring you together one day.”

“You think so?”
“Of course! Like we met up with our school friends, you’ll certainly find Marie-chan again. It’s a small world after all, so you’ll never know what life has in store for you,” Minako said.

"Yup. Life is a never ending cycle so we all learn something every day," Minato concluded. "Shall we go?"

Minako and Souji nodded. The girl placed herself in the middle and hooked her arms with her brothers, pulling them along in her boisterous fashion.

Something flashed in their minds. It was a card, but this one was different from any card they have seen - a young genderless figure surrounded by an angel, a bull, an eagle, and a lion. The familiar voice echoed in their heads.

_Thou art I... And I am thou..._
_Thou hast established a new bond..._
_Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the World Arcana..._

"The World," Souji said. "The arcana that is a representation of the world, the totality of it, a symbol of fulfillment, wholeness, and harmony."

"Guess we established the Wild Card social link," Minako giggled.

"True." Minato chuckled shortly before turning serious. "But it also means it's time for us to visit Igor and the Velvet Room. We need more information."

They agreed and walked away to meet their friends.

Nor far, a shady figure was hiding, watching their every move.

"So, there are three little Fools now?" They snickered evilly. "Soon enough they'll learn that they can't stop the end of the world."

Silently, it vanished into the shadows.
Return of The Fool - Part 1

Chapter Summary

After a personal tragedy, Souji's life is turned upside down when he meets two long-lost friends and experience the return of the Dark Hour. Together with SEES and the Investigation Team, they must get to the bottom of this mystery before all is lost. The strings of fate are connected by the trail of butterflies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Velvet Room…

"Welcome back, my children," Igor greeted. His smile seemed bigger than usual today. The Velvet siblings looked to be in a good mood as well. "I see you've made some progress in your quest since our last meeting."

Minato bowed his head slightly in greeting. "Indeed Igor," he said. "But now we request your advice again."

"Of course, I am always willing to assist my guests." The old man's creepy grin never vanished from his face. With a flick of his hand, a stack of glowing tarot cards appeared. Two cards separated from the deck and placed themselves on the table. "Shall I read your fortune?"

The Wild Cards nodded.

"Let's see…" With another wave of his hand, the first card flipped open. "The imminent future is represented by the Devil in the upright position. It means that you must to look beyond superficial appearances and go deeper into the truth and meaning of your situation. Remember that when you're feeling restrained, you always hold the keys to your own freedom."

Igor waved his hand again and the other card flipped. "Ah, the future beyond that is indicated by the card of The Hanged Man in the upright position. This card represents self-sacrifice and paradoxes. Very interesting indeed…" he hummed to himself. "It seems that the three of you will reach a crossroads of sorts, meaning that choices must be made, as well as sacrifices. Look at things in a new and different way...perhaps there you can find your answer."

The long-nosed man waved his hand one final time and the cards vanished from the table. "That is all I can tell you for now. The rest...is up to you."

"That is pretty vague and general, but we gotta make do with what we've got…" Minako said, trying not to let the disappointment in her voice slip. "But there's something else we'd like to ask. About The World arcana."

"As you already know by now, the bonds you create with others are what shape your world," Margaret started. "Through the bonds with others, The World channels its powers into your initial Persona and awaken their true power."

Minato finally understood the meaning behind the awakening of his most powerful Persona. "Their
true power…as in Orpheus Telos?"

"And Eurydice Telos…"

"Izanagi-no-Okami…"

Theodore cleared his throat before elaborating. "Correct. While that power can be only used by a Wild Card during a decisive situation, by forging a social link of The World, the three of you can recreate it."

"The power that the three of you wield is as vast as The World itself. The possibilities that your power as The Fool brings are infinite," Elizabeth added. "You shall be able to unlock new Personas, and attain even greater power should you strengthen the bonds you share with each other."

Their guests smiled at each other. The bond they shared since they were kids remained strong as ever, but they know there is always room for improvement. After all, they had spent over ten years apart. While some things never changed, it benefited them to learn new things together.

"Now my children, time marches on in your world. As soon as we come across any valuable information, I shall summon you back here," Igor said. "Feel free to use my Fusion services, and talk with my assistants to check on your Compendiums."

And that they did. After updating some information on their Personas and talked about a few trivialities with the assistants, they left the Velvet Room to meet up with their friends at Junes.

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TV World Entrance...

"Are you sure you want to go dungeon crawling in there?" Rise complained, pulling an expression of disgust. That particular dungeon wasn’t one of her favorites, as it brought back memories of a sadistic teenager.

Since everyone was free that day, Minato had suggested that they all go for a training run in the TV World. As expected, Akihiko was the loudest one to express his enthusiasm. The others however, agreed to do so since they needed to be prepared should the Dark Hour decided to strike.

"Why not?" Yukari inquired.

Junpei grinned. "That place is like Tartarus, right? It’s just a Shadow nest. Nothing we can’t handle without a cutie like you as support."

"Quit whining, Rise-chan," Chie scolded. "We need a place to train where the Shadows are strong, but not too strong that they’ll overwhelm us." She balled her hands on her hips. "And Kubo's dungeon happens to be just that."

"We haven’t had the need to use our powers within these past couple of years. With that much time in between, our skills are bound to get rusty," Mitsuru said, examining the blade of her rapier. "We just got lucky the previous two times."

Rise stared at her feet, somewhat uncomfortable. Obviously the Investigation Team never told the others about their embarrassing revelations when they had to face their Shadows selves, and so far none of the outsiders had a chance to step into the dungeons of their own making.
“I’m sorry about this, Rise. But Chie and Mitsuru-san are right. We have to train,” Souji said calmly, giving her a reassuring smile. “Besides, that is the only place that wasn’t made by any of us. Think of it as neutral territory.”

The young scanner finally calmed down at that piece of logic, but her frown remained slightly.

“You said something about a copy-cat murderer in your story. We will be going to a place created by him?” Metis asked.

“Yup, that’s the one. But I have to warn you, your eyes will be sore by the time we reach the end,” Yosuke chuckled. “I couldn’t even look at a computer screen or play video games for a month after we caught him.”

The Port Islanders wondered what he meant by that.

“Oh, before I forget,” Teddie spoke up. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a pair of oval glasses with metallic red rims. “These are for you, Mina-chan!”

Minako thanked Teddie and put her glasses on. “Whoa, this is so cool. It’s like the fog doesn’t even exist!” she exclaimed. “Now that I can see, fighting will be a lot easier. What are you guys waiting for? Let’s go!” She pumped a fist in the air enthusiastically. Her cheerfulness was so infectious, even Rise smiled.

When they reached the entrance of Void Quest, Fuuka finally understood what Yosuke meant by his earlier statement. The bright, neon colors and blinking pixels threatened to blind her as she adjusted her eyesight. “M-my eyes…” she grimaced. “This is just as bad as that one block in Tartarus with the disco theme!”

Junpei was ecstatic, jumping up and down like a child on sugar-high. “Awesome! We’re going to be actual heroes in an actual video game! Will there be a princess at the end of the journey?” The class clown then struck a cheesy pose with his baseball bat as the others tried hard not to laugh at his ridiculousness. His excitement was cut short when Akihiko smacked him, and given death glares by Shinjiro and Mitsuru. Ken just shook his head, letting out a disappointed sigh.

Yukari turned to the twins – who had stars in their eyes – with disapproval. She knew they were just as bad as Junpei when it comes to video games.

Souji cleared his throat loudly to get everyone’s attention. “So here’s the plan. Since we have two scanner-type Persona-users, we will divide ourselves into two groups. The rest will stay with Rise and Fuuka-san to guard them. And I also need at least two people with healing skills to stay back and take care of Teddie.” He checked on the human Shadow, who was supported upright by Yosuke and Kanji. The silverette didn’t want to bring him at first, but then again nobody else could make an exit out of the TV World.

Teddie could hear the hesitance in Souji’s voice. He looked up to him and smiled. “Don’t worry Sensei. I promise I won’t fight or do anything but rest.”

“I’ll stay with him, Souji-kun,” Yukiko chipped in. “You know you can count on me.”

“Thanks Yukiko. Yosuke, Chie and Naoto, you guys are with me. Aniki, can I borrow Ken for my group?”

Minato nodded. “Go ahead. I’ll take Akihiko-senpai –“

“Yes!” Akihiko whooped. Shinjiro rolled his eyes.
“– Metis, Koro-chan and Mitsuru-senpai. And maybe Junpei too. I don’t want him causing trouble for the scanners.”

“Hey, I resent that!” came Junpei’s reply, but he was happy to be chosen nonetheless.

Minako frowned, puffing her cheeks a little. “Hey, what about me?” she whined.

“Aneki, like I said before someone has to stay out here and protect Rise and Fuuka-san. You will be the leader,” Souji told her. “Remember, this is the Shadow’s domain. They can come and attack anytime and anywhere, so it’s best to have a leader that can give orders, just in case.”

“Fine~” she pouted. “Yukari-chan and Aigis can help with Teddie’s healing session while we do nothing and wait for you guys.” She leaned against a pixellated tree, arms crossed. If possible, her pout got longer.

Her brothers sweatdropped.

“Souji-kun, you should go ahead of us since you guys are more used to this place,” Minato suggested. "We’ll be needing some time to catch up."

“You got a point there. Come on guys,” Souji said, gesturing his chosen group mates inside. A few minutes after that, Minato and his small group entered the dungeon as well.

Souji couldn’t help but feel as if they were being watched, but it didn’t deter him from their training. He focused on helping Ken familiarize himself with the TV World, but was reluctant to tell his friends about the strange feeling, so he decided to ignore it until he reached a solid conclusion. As of now, they were surrounded by Shadows, the Strength Beetles, and they weren’t very pleased with intruders.

“Watch out, partner!” Yosuke warned.

Souji dodged a Bufudyne spell from one of the Strength Beetles. He quickly switched his equipped Persona to Isis in order to restore his stamina by absorbing the flurry of ice attacks. Chie managed to land a critical hit on one and flipped it on its back, but they were still outnumbered.

“They’re tough…” Ken panted. He was starting to feel the strain of battle as he clutched his spear tightly.

Yosuke slashed off an antenna from one of the oversized insects. “Is it just me, or did the size of the Shadows in this place just got bigger?”

Souji didn’t know how to answer that. He would be a fool not to notice it, but right now that wasn’t his concern - making it out alive was. “Rise, have you got a lock on their weakness yet?”

“Just got it!” her voice rang in his head. “They’re weak to Darkness, but be careful because they reflect everything else.”

“Time to up the ante,” Souji grinned as a new card formed in his hand. “I need you guys to stay back, especially you, Ken.”

The others backed away.

“Nebiros, Mamudoon!”
A tall, thin male in a red cape appeared, his face and body painted black and white. His fingers manipulated a voodoo string doll, chanting softly in a mysterious language. A glowing purple seal appeared on the floor underneath the giant beetles. In a blink of an eye, most of the Shadows were wiped out in an instant. Nebiros’ intimidating aura paralyzed the rest of the insects with Fear.

Now it was easy for them to land multiple critical attacks, flipping the oversized bugs on their backs.

“Time for an All-Out Attack!”

The only things left behind after they were done were the shiny shells from the Shadows’ corpses. “We sell these to Old Man Daidara,” Yosuke told Ken. “He sees them as rare materials and uses it to forge new weapons or create armor for us. That’s where the money really comes in handy.”

Rise’s voice echoed in their heads once more. “Good job, guys. The stairs to the last floor is somewhere nearby, and I don’t sense anymore Shadows around there either.”

“Can you tell me the status of Aniki and his team?” Souji asked.

“Oh, that…I almost forgot to tell you!” Rise sounded excited for some reason. “Fuuka-senpai and I discovered that we can do a cross-communication between teams. Do you know what this means?!”

Her teammates weren’t sure they wanted to know. Given her nosy personality, they couldn't tell if this was a good or bad thing. “Uh…and what would that be, Rise-chan?” Yosuke asked hesitantly.

“It means that I can share information with the other teams without intruding in her ‘network’. This also means that we can help two teams communicate directly with each other. Want to give it a try?”

Souji was skeptical at first, but curious nonetheless. “Sure, give it your best shot.” There was a slight sound of buzzing static for a few seconds, and then Minato’s voice could be heard clearly in his head. “Banchou-kun, is that you?” he inquired. “Fuuka said you wanted to talk to me.”

Ignoring the weird feeling he felt earlier, Souji shook his head, hoping that his pseudo brother wouldn’t be able to read his thoughts. “Yeah, it’s me. Where are you and how is your team faring?”

“According to Mitsuru-senpai, we’re on the eighth floor. And I gotta tell you, the Shadows here are tough. Good thing Rise-chan is helping Fuuka with the scanning.”

“Yeah, I noticed. Listen, my team is on the ninth floor. We’ll rendezvous on the tenth.”

“Fine by me. Oh before I forget, Junpei wanted to open one of the treasure chests earlier, but something didn’t feel right so I forbade him from doing so. What was that about?”

“Oh, that. You’re lucky you didn’t open it, or else The Reaper would have jump out and attack you.”

“Yikes! And I’m guessing only Wild Cards and the scanners can detect his presence, right? Anyway, we’ll meet you up there. Gotta go…there’s another group of Shadows begging to have their asses kicked.” Minato broke off the connection.

A shiver ran up Souji’s spine, so he turned around to look behind him. But all he could see was a dark corridor.
Chie snapped him out of it. “You alright there, Leader?” she asked.

“No…it’s nothing. Nothing at all…”

Meanwhile, Minako continued to brood as she and the rest waited outside of the dungeon. Behind her, Yukiko, Aigis and Yukari were using their healing spells to heal Teddie’s remaining wounds, being careful not to exert themselves. Yesterday, Souji and Yosuke took him to the hospital for a check-up on Mitsuru’s insistence. The doctor was surprised when he didn’t find anything but a few minor burns after they told him that Teddie had been ‘electrocuted’. However, he could not find anything else as the x-ray photos were still blurry no matter how many were taken, therefore making the diagnosis inconclusive. But Teddie managed to convince everyone that he feels fine.

The bear suddenly sat up straight, swiveling his head with his nose in the air, sniffing furiously. He then shrugged when he found nothing out of the ordinary.

Shinjiro was on the lookout, adjusting his glasses every now and then as he isn’t used to wearing one. He could have sworn something was sneaking around behind a few bushes made entirely of green pixel blocks. But then again, it could have just been a trick of the fog, so he remained passive until whatever it is decided to attack.

Kanji was pacing back and forth on the bridge crossing the moat. At least, that’s what he was doing before a Shadow ambushed him. His string of curses alerted the rest to his plight.

“Kanji-kun!” Minako and Yukiko shouted in alarm.

“Soul Dancers!” Teddie gasped, scrambling to stand. It took him a while in his bulky bear suit.

Kanji kicked the Shadow away to create some distance between them. “Damn you…” he growled, surrounded by three pairs of Dancers. He held up his metal plate to block a slash attack.

Shinjiro came to his rescue and summoned Pegasus. “Akasha Arts!”

The strike attack took out one of them, and managed heavy damage to the rest. He swung his axe at another, and hacked it to pieces. Kanji followed Shinjiro’s example and pounded the remaining Shadow to oblivion.

Yukiko took out her ougi from her belt. “Teddie, can you scan them for us?” she asked. “We can’t bother Rise-chan and Fuuka-san since they’re providing support for the teams inside.” The scanners remained motionless, focused on their tasks at hand.

“I promised Sensei I wouldn’t fight, but he didn’t say anything about scanning,” the bear said with a cheeky grin. He turned to Minako. “Ready when you are, Mina-chan!”

Minako swung her naginata. “They don’t seem to have resistance to physical attacks,” she observed. “Kanji-kun, Senpai, keep hitting them with physical attacks until Teddie-kun can find their weakness!” As soon as she said that, they were surrounded by six more Dancers.

Yukari shot two with her arrows. “They just keep coming, don’t they?” she grumbled, nocking another one into her bow.

“My sensors must be malfunctioning…” Aigis grumbled, shooting ammo from her fingers. “I couldn’t detect their presence much earlier. Could it be because of this fog?”
Instead of a physical attack, Yukiko opted to blast the Shadows with fire. She scorched three, but it wasn’t powerful enough to kill them. “Could the properties of the fog have changed?” she wondered.

“Guys, I’ve got it! They don’t have any weaknesses, but no resistance either,” Teddie said, dancing a little at his victory. “I wish I can tell you more but my scanning abilities aren’t as great as Rise-chan’s.”

Minako grinned. “That’s more than enough. Okay, here’s what we do,” she said, entering leader mode. “Just concentrate on keeping them away from our scanners. Once we get them far enough, I’ll attack them all at once, so make sure you get out of my range by then.”

The others nodded, and scrambled to different directions. Yukiko used her flames to discourage the Shadows from getting too close, while Yukari blasted them away with wind. Kanji and Shinjiro preferred brute force, punching and kicking their way through. Minako slashed them with her naginata, Aigis close by as her backup.

When the Dancers were far enough to Minako’s satisfaction, she signaled the others to get out of the way as she readied her Evoker. “I summon you, Cybele!”

A voluptuous woman with long horns holding two curvy daggers floated above Minako, smiling sultrily. She crossed her daggers above her head as a shower of arrows fell from the sky. It pierced the defenseless Dancers multiple times, until they weren’t moving anymore.

“I don’t sense any more Shadows,” Teddie informed them, sighing with relief. ‘But what was that smell earlier…before those Shadows attacked?’ the bear thought to himself.

When they had enough of battling Shadows, the gang took a small break at the Entrance Hall. They were either sitting or sprawled across the floor in exhaustion. After consuming some of the Fox’s leaves (they had to pay her 120,563 yen to be exact) they felt somewhat better after their wounds were healed.

“Alright guys, let’s call it a day. I’m beat!” Chie exclaimed. “I wonder what’s for dinner. I hope its beef sukiyaki!” She drooled a little at the thought of her favorite food group.

Yukiko broke into small laughing fits at her best friend’s longing expression. “But Chie…” she giggled. “You bullied Yosuke-kun into buying you a beef bowl and beef croquettes earlier…” More giggles. “At this rate, you’re going to turn into a meat head!” There was no stopping her after that.

A slight blush stained Chie’s cheeks. “Hey!”

“Oh my poor wallet…” Yosuke said, not even hiding the sarcasm, his amused grin making Chie even madder.

Everyone, including the usually serious Mitsuru, laughed at Yukiko’s joke. “I never knew there was another person who is as serious about beef bowls as Akihiko,” she said, covering her mouth in a ladylike manner, trying to contain her laughter. “I didn’t expect it to be a woman, though.”

“So Satonaka is just a female version of Aki,” Shinjiro snickered, followed by Junpei’s hoots of laughter.

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?!” This time it was Akihiko’s turn to blush. More bouts of
giggles and light teasing ensued at the former boxing champion’s expense.

However, Souji didn’t join in the laughter. The uneasy feeling of being watched reared its ugly head once again, stronger this time. He had a similar feeling during the murder investigations, but he couldn’t pinpoint what it was, causing his anxiety to increase. All he knew is that they had to get out of here, and fast.

Naoto noticed her upperclassman’s discomfort, silently approaching him. “Senpai, what’s the matter? You seem to be out of it.”

Souji nearly jumped out of his skin. “Oh, it’s just you Naoto.” He let out a long sigh. “Sorry, it’s just that I get this feeling of being watched. And the weird thing is…it feels familiar somehow.”

Naoto frowned after he said that.

“What’s that?” Kanji interrupted in his usually rough and loud voice. Unlike the others, he didn’t have a death wish for teasing Chie because her bite was worse than her bark, so he caught on their conversation. “You sayin’ someone’s spying on us?!” The entrance hall became silent after his outburst and now had their eyes on Souji.

“What do you mean, it feels familiar?” Naoto questioned, her dark blue eyes narrowing slightly.

Souji’s grey eyes hardened. “I don’t know, okay. It just does!” he groused, frustrated that he couldn’t explain properly.

“Souji-kun, what’s wrong?” Minako asked again in a soft voice, placing a hand on his arm to comfort him.

“We just need to get out of here…NOW!” he snapped, standing abruptly. He picked up his sword and tied it to his belt, took off his fingerless gloves and roughly stuffed them into one of his pockets. “I need each and every one of you to head straight home after we get out of here, got it? I have a bad feeling about this.” His frown had yet to disappear, expression tense as he headed for the stack of televisions.

Rise got distressed when she saw him like that. “Senpai, do you need me to scan – eep!” She immediately shut up and hid behind Kanji after he shot her a very serious glare. Teddie, who was already healed completely, didn’t waste any time to make an exit as the others hastily packed their equipment. Even Shinjiro felt a bit intimidated by that.

The twins were extremely bothered by this, but they didn’t dare ask any more questions. They have long learned to trust their instincts, no matter how baseless they might be, especially when their Wild Card abilities made them much more sensitive to their subconscious. Souji’s wasn’t any different. All of them exited the TV World without another word.

Once outside, it was already late in the evening. Souji walked halfway with the rest of the gang before they had to split up to head to their own homes. He wasn’t worried about Yukiko as she was heading back to the inn with the rest of SEES, and Chie lived close to her. Teddie lived with Yosuke so he didn’t bother with them. He reminded both Kanji and Rise to accompany Naoto to her house before heading to their own homes at the shopping district – together.

While walking down the street that leads to his own house, Souji got a feeling that he was being followed. But every time he turned around, nobody was there. Cursing softly, he quickened his pace. He swiveled his head around once more, and saw somebody’s shadow slither behind a wall. Now he’s convinced!
Damn it, first in the TV World now out here in the real world,’ he growled inwardly. ‘I have to lose it quick before it can catch me by surprise.’ In order to not raise any alarms. Souji walked calmly, his pace steady at first. As soon as he reached a corner, he made a sharp turn and sprinted as fast as he could before taking another random turn. The sounds of rapid footsteps were distinctly heard somewhere behind him. He managed to leap high enough and stealthily climb a wall that was a bit taller than Kanji and landed on the other side. He remained low, heart beating fast. He heard the shuffling of feet on the other side, pacing for a few seconds before giving up and ran in another direction.

After staying quiet for a few more minutes, Souji was sure that the stalker lost his trail, but to be on the safe side he decided to cut through a few of the neighbors’ back gardens and take an alternative route to his house. He was careful not to let anybody see him, using the shadows and silhouettes to his advantage.

The sun was beginning to set when he finally arrived at his uncle’s house, making sure no one was following him. Just to be safe, he cut through Nanako's small garden and climbed the stone fence, entering through the sliding door instead of the main entrance. The house was quiet and dark - nobody was home. He tip-toed to his room, took a quick shower and changed into fresh, clean clothes.

Dojima and Nanako arrived when Souji came downstairs. His cousin was happy and bouncy as usual when she saw him, and rushed to the kitchen to unpack their dinner. He turned to his uncle, but the older man avoided his gaze, his face held a grim expression as if bearing dead weight on his shoulders. In Souji’s experience, that meant something unpleasant happened at work. And if he predicted correctly, Dojima will accompany his meal with a few cans of beer or sometime after that.

Nanako was happily watching a quiz show, occasionally singing the Junes theme song when the commercial popped up, while her father silently ate, not even attempting a conversation. Souji didn’t mind the silence, but his uncle’s behavior was worrying. After dinner, he helped his cousin with her homework before tucking her in. He found Dojima smoking in the living room when he came down, the sliding door to the back yard wide open. A few cans of strong beer were on the table in front of him. “Souji, come here. I need to talk to you,” Dojima called out in a solemn tone, cracking one can open. After the Dark Hour incident, his uncle did not interrogate him again. However, something was bothering the police detective, and he intended to find out what it was.

Dojima took a long swig of beer as Souji seated himself beside him. He felt his nerves loosened a bit before dropping the bad news.

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The Amagi Inn, late at night…

The female SEES members invited Yukiko to hang out with them in the lounge. For once, Yukiko wasn’t busy that night and obliged to their request. They chattered about everything and anything that wasn’t Shadow related, occasionally apologizing to the other guests for all the noise they were making, and giggling afterwards. Koromaru rested his head on Minako’s lap as she scratched him behind the ears. He wagged his tail in euphoria.

“We should invite Chie-chan, Rise-chan and Naoto-kun to join us sometime,” Fuuka suggested.

“Oooh, a slumber party! I’m all up for that!” Yukari chimed in.

“That would be fun,” Mitsuru nodded with a smile. “Of course, after Minako moved into our room,
it’s been like one every night.”

“So you admit that you enjoy brushing each other’s hairs and talking about girl stuff with us before bedtime, right Senpai?” Minako teased.

“I don’t think Chie and Naoto-kun would want to do those kinds of activities with us,” Yukiko said, sweatdropping a little.

“The last time I came here was with the Tennis Club. We ended up telling ghost stories until we fell asleep,” Minako said, giggling at the memory. “You should have seen how scared Yuko-chan was. But I felt sorrier for her boyfriend, Kazushi-kun. She almost choked the poor guy to death because she hugged him so tightly from fright.”

Yukiko smiled at the crimson-eyed girl. “Ooohh, were the stories that scary? Have you heard about the one where - ”

“Umm...can we do that some other time?” Yukari interjected, shivering a little. “You know…with all this talk of spirits and ghost fire after what we experienced, we should be more careful!”

“Is that what people call ‘jinxing it’?” Metis inquired, tilting her head slightly. “What exactly does it mean?”

Fuuka decided to answer that. “Well Metis-chan, to jinx something means that the unlucky situation that we do not want to happen will come true if they speak about or even mention it.”

Metis looked at her in a confused manner. “It seems illogical that anything bad can happen just by mentioning it...though I do believe we should take extra precautions during the Summer Festival.”

“That’s right. Speaking of that, the summer festival is just around the corner. Have you guys prepared your yukata for the festivities?” Yukiko asked, her mood brightening. The atmosphere shifted from almost gloomy to a cheerful one.

“That sure would be a sight to see!” said a distant masculine voice.

The girls turned to the direction of the hallway that led to the hot springs. The guys have just returned from their bath, clad in the standard inn yukata, towels on their shoulders and hair still wet. Junpei was grinning like an idiot again, minus his baseball cap. “I’m trusting that you lovely ladies will be wearing your yukata for the festival. I can’t wait to see it!”

Yukari frowned. “And what makes you think that I’m going with you, Stupei? Obviously I’m going with Minato-kun.” Taking that as his cue, Minato claimed the seat beside her.

“You make it sound like I haven’t been to a summer festival with a girl before!” Junpei pouted. “For your information, I went to one at the shrine back home with Mina-tan,” he stated proudly, blissfully unaware of the death glare Shinjiro threw at him. Akihiko and Ken sweatdropped.

“That was three years ago,” Yukari snorted.

Following Minato’s example, the other guys took their seats to join in the conversation. Akihiko sat on the armrest beside Mitsuru, Ken between Fuuka and Aigis, Shinjiro claimed the one beside Minako and took over scratching Koromaru. Before Junpei could blink, all the seats were already occupied. “Hey, where the hell am I supposed to sit?”

“Don’t sweat it, Junpei-kun. You can just sit on the floor with Koro-chan!” Minako chirped.
“Mina-tan, that’s not funny!”

Shinjiro snatched the remote on the small end table and turned on the television, hoping to drown out Junpei’s annoying voice. The late night news came on.

“- We have received urgent news from the Ayanagi Police Department that a dangerous criminal by the name of Tohru Adachi has escaped from a maximum security prison, and is currently on the loose. According to prison security, there were no signs of forced break out nor were there any witnesses to his escape. Anyone with any information regarding this criminal, do not hesitate to contact your local authorities or dial the emergency hotline listed below - ”

Yukiko started to tremble and felt weak in the knees when she heard the news. She tried to steady her shaking body, but her actions were noticed by the others.

“Oi, you alright?” Shinjiro asked gruffly.

Minako became worried. “Yukiko-chan…?”

The raven-haired girl stood up, and pointed a shaky finger towards the television screen. It was showing a recent picture of Adachi, most likely taken while he was in prison. He still looked the same, except his hair had grown a bit longer. However, the arrogant smirk on his face and the evil glint in his dark eyes gave Yukiko the chills. “That man...he was the real culprit behind last year’s murders, the one we put behind bars!”

Everyone’s eyes went wide as they turned to the television again.

“It’s here, in this very lounge, where he pushed that TV announcer into the other side and left her to die just because she rejected him.”

“No way…” Ken said under his breath.

A sudden thought clicked in Minako’s head. She grabbed her brother’s arm, looking at him straight in the eyes. “Aniki, could this be what Banchou-kun was feeling earlier?”

“No doubt about it!” Minato said. He got to his feet, took out his cellphone and dialed Souji’s number which had already put on speed dial. After ten ring tones, the call went to voicemail. Cursing under his breath, Minato tried again, but no avail. “Why isn’t he picking up?” he grumbled. His twin looked on, nervously twisting and turning the fabric of her night shirt.

By now everyone started to crowd around Minato, looking concerned. Shinjiro tried to calm his girlfriend down by holding her hand. ‘They’re ice-cold. She must be very worried,’ he thought, rubbing his thumb on her palm to comfort her.

Bells and whistles were ringing in Yukiko’s head when her own cellphone rang. At first she wanted to ignore it, but Yukiko knew from experience that any calls coming in this late had to be an emergency. She took it out from her pocket and looked at the caller ID; Chie. “Chie, what happened?” she demanded.

“I don’t know if I should tell you this, but Yosuke called me earlier to call you. He said he tried to reach Souji-kun after watching the news but he didn’t pick up, so he tried his house line but nobody answered, which is weird because usually Dojima-san or Nanako-chan would pick up. What the heck is going on here?”

“I don’t know, Chie. I know as much as you do right now. Minato-san is trying to reach him too, but so far he’s not picking up.”
“Yosuke said that he’ll get Naoto and Teddie to go to his house and check on them. Can you do me a favor and call up Rise-chan and Kanji-kun? I’ll meet you at the inn soon.”

“Alright Chie, I’ll do that. Please be careful on your way here.” Yukiko immediately dialed Kanji’s number. After a few ring tones, Kanji’s gruff voice answered.

“Yukiko-senpai, I’ve been trying to reach you. What the hell –”

“Kanji-kun, I need you and Rise-chan to get ready. We’re going to Souji-kun’s house,” Yukiko interjected, leaving no room for argument. “I think he and his family are in danger!”

There was a short silence on the other end before Kanji said, “I’ll tell Rise to get ready and sneak out before Ma notices. Damn it, this whole mess is getting more and more screwed up!” She ignored his cursing and hung up.

“Yukiko-chan, what did they say about Souji-kun?” Minako demanded.

Yukiko bit her bottom lip. “Yosuke-kun, Teddie and Naoto-kun are on their way to his house right now. Chie is on her way here. We’ll meet up with Kanji-kun and Rise-chan after that.”

The tension in the air was thick, so Mitsuru decided to cut through it. “Then we should go get ready. If Seta and his family are in danger, then we will set out for his residence after Satonaka gets here,” she said in a cool, crisp tone.

“Damn it, even Nanako-chan is involved. We have to hurry!” Junpei prompted, serious for once. The others nodded and headed to their rooms to prepare for a potential battle.

Dojima Residence…

When Yosuke, Teddie and Naoto reached Dojima’s house, the first thing they noticed was that the house was dark. Not even the front lights were on.

Naoto took out her cellphone and dialed Dojima’s number. After a few more tries, nobody picked up. ‘Never a good sign…’ Red flags were popping up everywhere in the young detective’s mind. She handed Yosuke and Teddie a flashlight each. “We’re going to have to search the premises. Be careful not to contaminate the scene.”

“I wish Koro-chan was here. He’d be able to sniff out the entire place,” Teddie mumbled, sticking close to Yosuke. He never really liked the dark.

“Dude, give me some space. I can’t move around with you clinging on me like that,” Yosuke stated, trying to shake off Teddie who was hugging his right arm as if his life depended on it.

Naoto ignored their bickering and pointed her flashlight to the front door. There were neither signs of forced entry nor any indication that the lock had been tampered with. She put on a pair of latex gloves and began to poke and prod the door. It was locked.

She flashed the light to the ground under the front windows. No mess or markings of any kind. “No signs of invasion either...” Naoto said, talking to herself.

“Hey Naoto, there are some footprints back here!” Yosuke said loudly. The young detective made her way to the garden where her upperclassman was standing. She looked down on the ground where he pointed his flashlight. The soil wasn’t very soft, but Naoto could spot the almost
distinctive pattern of a shoe print.

“Yosuke-senpai, your shoe size is almost the same with Souji-senpai’s, right?”

“Yeah. What about it?” he asked.

“Just making a comparison. Put one foot beside this shoe print please.”

Yosuke obeyed. Teddie stood behind him, wondering what in the world Naoto wanted with Yosuke’s foot. She compared the size, using her thumb and middle finger as a ruler. “It’s close enough,” she mused, then turned her attention to the wall. “Give me a boost!”

“Why?” Teddie asked, unable to contain his curiosity.

“I need to confirm something,” she simply said. Yosuke entwined his fingers and boosted her up. Teddie helped by supporting her other foot for better balance.

With the help of the flashlight, Naoto was able to prove that someone had indeed climbed over the wall; there were small clumps of dirt which shouldn’t have been there in the first place. “Okay, you can put me down now,” she ordered.

After she got down, Naoto took out a small notebook and began to scribble in it. “This is strange…” she muttered, talking to herself again. “If that shoe print belongs to Souji-senpai, why did he climb over the wall like a thief instead of using the front entrance?”

Her thoughts were cut short when the rest of the Investigation Team arrived with SEES. The expression on every single person was grim.

“I take it you must have seen the news,” Naoto said, snapping her notebook shut. “And I must say even I couldn’t have predicted this outcome.”

“Bastard must have broken out during the Dark Hour,” Kanji growled. “There’s no other explanation.”

Minato stood in front of his team, with Minako beside him. “Have you tried calling Dojima-san's workplace? Or any other places he frequents?” the former asked, his tone calm despite the worry evident in his eyes.

“No, I have not. I will try that first before we break in. Koromaru-san, please be prepared to sniff out any clues,” Naoto told their doggy teammate. He barked twice in response. The ace detective took out her cellphone again, this time dialing the police station.

Kanji screwed up his face in disgust. He never did trust cops in general, the exception being Dojima and Naoto. Akihiko noticed this and hid a snicker despite the tense atmosphere.

“Did Dojima-san try to interrogate him again?” Minako spoke next, talking mostly to herself.

“Damn it, I should have seen this coming when he was acting weird in the TV World. I should have pried it out of him!”

“Aniki…”
“Minato-kun…” Yukari said softly.

“Stop blaming yourself, Minato. Nobody saw this coming,” Shinjiro reprimanded lightly. “All we can do now is try to figure out where Souji, Dojima-san and Nanako-chan are, and maybe find out more about this Adachi guy.”

“Senpai…”

“He’s right, guys. Shirogane, what else you got?” Akihiko added. Even though he hadn’t earned his badge yet, the former boxing champ had been training for these types of situations.

Naoto reported her findings, earning nods every now and then. “And if I didn’t know any better, I think he was avoiding someone,” she concluded. “There were no signs of forced entry, even through the back door, and Souji-senpai doesn’t strike me as one to sneak into his own house. He’s the type to face things head on.” Everyone agreed on that fact. Koromaru barked a few times before sniffing the dirt around the wall.

“Koromaru-san says that he can smell slight traces of Souji-san, and he can trace where he had been after we left the other side,” Metis translated.

“We can talk while we walk,” Mitsuru said. Shuffling of feet followed Koromaru as he began to sniff Souji’s trail.

“So tell me, what was this Adachi guy like?” Minako asked, curious about her little brother’s former nemesis.

“Asshole,” Kanji said unapologetically.

“Thinks the frickin’ world revolves around him,” Yosuke said, crossing his arms against his chest.

“That creep was manipulative. He sent us round in circles just for his own fun!” Chie spat, anger starting to bubble inside of her.

“He tampered with evidence given his position in the police force. It is foolish to assume that he’s stupid,” Naoto said coolly, but the loathing was there.

“Before he transformed into Ame-no-Sagiri, Adachi tried to dodge the blame saying it wasn’t his fault that Namatame kidnapped and threw us in the TV. He just loves playing mind games,” Yukiko said sourly.

“I must say he was a really good actor,” Rise said. “Playing the bumbling, goofy cop but in reality he was enjoying the twisted game he created, watching us play it.”

Junpei wrinkled his nose in disgust. “Reminds me of that bastard Ikutsuki.” The SEES members’ expressions tightened.

After a few twists and turns in the neighborhood, Koromaru began to growl softly when he stopped at the crossroad where they had separated earlier that day. Aigis translated this time. “He says that this is where Souji-san’s scent is mixed with another smell…the scent of an enemy.”

“So I was right…he was being followed,” Naoto concluded. “That explains the unusual route Senpai took to get home, and sneaking into his own house. I taught him myself on how to lose a tail when being followed.” She exchanged knowing glances with Akihiko. “Let’s head back to his house. There may be some clues we missed inside.”
Teddie began to shiver, the blood draining from his face. “Guys, I just had a thought…” the blonde mumbled. “What kind of torture is Adachi putting Sensei through? After what happened, I’m sure he hates Nana-chan and her dad too!” Tears were bursting out of his eyes like a leaky pipe.

“Dude, don’t say stuff like that! You’ll jinx it!” Yosuke scolded.

Minako placed a hand on the little blonde’s shoulder before patting his head. “Teddie-kun, don’t let those thoughts control your emotions. We’re going to do everything we can to get them back,” she said gently. “Besides, Souji-kun is a strong person, and smart too. Just have faith in him.”

“You…you’re right, Mina-chan,” Teddie sniffled, wiping his tears with his sleeve. “Sensei is strong! He can endure anything!” Minako smiled at him, easing her own anxiousness.

Akihiko cleared his throat to break up the moment. “Let’s go guys. The more we waste time, the longer Souji and his family spends with Adachi.”

There was no arguing with that logic. The gang picked up their pace and headed back to the Dojima Residence.

Back at Dojima’s house…

“Is this even legal?” Junpei asked, looking around nervously every now and then. It was silently annoying Shinjiro, and he would have smacked his head in if Minako wasn’t clutching his arm.

“Don’t sweat it Junpei,” Akihiko said, holding Naoto’s flashlight for her while she picked the lock with her detective tools. “The only thing we have to worry about is any of us doing this other than Naoto. She’s a pro.”

As Naoto fumbled with the lock, she blushed at his praise. Within seconds the door was unlocked and she slid the door open. “Wait here,” she told the others, taking out her revolver. “I’ll make sure the coast is clear before any of you can come in.” Kanji was about to protest, but Akihiko gave him a warning stare. He understood the former delinquent’s worry, but like it or not they had to follow procedure.

“Please be careful Naoto-chan,” Minako said worriedly.

Naoto nodded and readied her revolver, switching on the mini-flashlight in her wristwatch. A few agonizing minutes later, she emerged from the door and gave the all clear.

Minato stopped everyone from moving forward. “Wait! All of us can’t go in, it’s a small house,” he said. “I’ll just be my sister, Naoto, Akihiko-senpai, Koromaru and probably Yosuke. The rest of you keep watch out here.”

Yukiko looked annoyed. “Why him?” she demanded, not wanting to be left out, especially if her boyfriend was concerned.

Minako comforted her. “Please Yukiko-chan, just be patient. You’re not the only one that’s worried.”

As the six of them entered the house, the other thirteen remained outside.

They searched everywhere, including Dojima’s room, but they didn’t find anything out of the ordinary. The last place to be searched was Souji’s room; what caught Naoto’s interest was the
lingering smell of citrus. There was a small pile of colored paper on Souji’s working table, where he liked to fold origami cranes. Beside that pile was a stray piece of paper. She picked it up and examined it. It wasn’t anything unusual, and it felt a bit thick to be used for origami. After Naoto sniffed it she dashed to the kitchen, much to the surprise of the group.

“Did you find anything?” Minato asked as the others followed her.

The Detective Prince remained quiet. She turned on the stove and held the paper above the flame.

“Whoa, wait a minute!” Yosuke yelled. “You’re going to burn our only clue!”

“Relax Hanamura. Just watch and learn,” Akihiko scolded.

“I knew I recognized this…and to think he’d use the same trick, most probably because he didn’t have enough time to think up a more complicated clue,” Naoto said, holding up the paper for everyone to see. There was a messy drawing of a sun and a few squiggles with burnt edges on them. “Invisible ink. He used lemon juice to write on the paper, just like the clue he helped me figure out in one of my minor cases.”

Yosuke squinted his eyes to make out the writing. “Oh come on, partner…” he huffed. “Your handwriting is much better than mine. You can do better than this crap!”

The twins exchanged knowing glances. “This sure brings back memories, right Aniki?” Minako smiled.

“Yeah, you said it…” Minato replied, studying the message. “When we were five, Minako and I taught Souji-kun how to draw and write to the best of our abilities. So we up our own alphabets. I can’t believe he still remembers it.”

“This looks like a pinwheel to me,” Minako deciphered. She held her chin and pouted, thinking. “What does he mean by ‘sun’ and ‘pinwheel’? What is he referring to?”

Her twin looked around the room and spotted a framed photograph, the one when they were toddlers at the summer festival with their parents. He smiled. “I think I know…” Minato picked it up and opened the back of the frame. A folded piece of paper fell out. “Bingo!”

“A letter! What does it say, Aniki?”

Minato unfolded the paper and began to read:

“Dear Aniki, Aneki and friends,

Sorry I couldn’t call and tell you guys this directly. My uncle’s superiors ordered him to take me and Nanako to an undisclosed location, after they heard that Adachi escaped. They didn’t want to take any chances knowing how involved Uncle was in the murder cases. Even he doesn’t know where we’re going and any type of outside communication is forbidden. I didn’t want to leave at first, but I had to think of Nanako. I hope you understand. Other than that, I think it was Adachi who was spying on us during our training run in TV World, and followed me afterwards. For what reason, I don’t know…

Can you guys do me a favour? Don’t bother looking for me. Please take care of yourselves and each other. I’ll try to contact you soon. That I can promise.

P/S: Could you guys go to the Velvet Room on my behalf? We still have a mystery to solve, y’know. And please tell Yukiko I’m really sorry I worried her. Thanks!”
After reading, Minato folded the letter and placed it in his breast pocket. “Well, at least we now know he isn’t kidnapped and tortured.” He felt some relief, running his hand through his hair again.

“Let’s go tell the others,” Akihiko suggested. They cleaned the place up a bit before Naoto locked the doors.

As they left for the inn, Naoto reiterated their findings and the contents of the letter to the others. Yukiko and Teddie exhaled in relief, knowing that all three of them were safe, and far away from Adachi.

“Witness protection…” Ken mumbled under his breath. “This is even bigger than I thought it would be.”

“So what now?” Rise asked. “What do we do without Senpai?”

“We go back and rest,” Minako answered. “And wait for Souji-kun to contact us.”

“And the only thing we can do,” Minato added. “We find Adachi.”

Undisclosed location, Okina City…

Souji was pacing back and forth in their hotel room. He knew it was only temporary, and there were cops guarding the vicinity, but he felt restless nonetheless. Looking at the bed where Nanako slept, he exhaled the breath he was holding a bit loudly.

“Calm down, Souji,” Dojima demanded. “You’ll wake her. Just go to sleep.” He was sitting on the couch by the window, nursing a can of beer.

“Sorry…nervous habit.”

“I know you’re worried about your friends, but not getting enough rest will help nobody.”

“I’m just wondering if this is the right choice. All I know is that I’m Adachi’s prime target, and by being away from them will keep them safe,” Souji explained. “But my gut says otherwise. I… I don’t know how to describe it to you,” he sighed, defeated.

Dojima was beginning to wonder if the boy was really his nephew instead of his son. The only family resemblance was their eye color, and as far as he observed, Souji didn’t inherit any of his sister’s traits or quirks. But in terms of personality, gut instinct and stubbornness, the boy could possibly replace him one day. “Look, I was going to tell you about this tomorrow…” Dojima said, massaging his forehead. “But I guess it can’t be helped.”

The older man gestured Souji to sit beside him on the couch, and he obeyed. “I’m going to say this once, so listen up.” His voice then lowered to a whisper. “We're not forced by law to be here. It's just a suggestion by my higher ups as a precaution, as well for Nanako's safety. That said, I’m going to help you sneak out of this place tomorrow after lunch, during their change of shift. You’re going to wear a disguise, and catch the train back to Yasoinaba.”

Souji was stunned. He tried to speak, but he was rendered speechless by his uncle’s idea.

“I know it sounds crazy, but I trust you to take care of yourself. Like I said before, you and your friends are the only ones who can stop this nonsense. Adachi is by no means a normal criminal,
and from what I’ve seen you guys can do we need unconventional means to apprehend him.”

“Uncle, I don’t know what to say…”

“I was told to stay here for the next two days. But I know your friends need you, so I’ll cover for you and focus on protecting Nanako. Just promise me you’ll stay low until I come back.”

“Yeah, I promise. I can’t thank you enough.”

Dojima then held his nephew’s shoulders firmly, and gave him a warm gaze. “Now go to bed. You look like you’re about to drop.”

The next day…

Just like Dojima promised, Souji managed to sneak out of their hiding place with his help and took a cab to Okina Station. He was wearing a red checkered shirt and a thin cotton t-shirt underneath, baggy cargo pants, sneakers and a cap to cover his unique silver hair. He also wore a pair of sunglasses to reduce the likelihood of getting recognized, and tried his best to stay out of plain sight.

‘I can’t believe I have to spy on my own friends,’ he grumbled inwardly. ‘Now all I have to do is try to contact them without blowing my cover.’

Souji made his way to a public phone after reaching Yasoinaba Station and dialed Minato’s number.

“Hello…?” came Minato’s voice.

“Aniki, it’s me.”

On the other end of the line, Minato almost fell off his seat. He was lounging by the koi pond alone, trying to collect his thoughts and ponder over what their next course of action would be. “Banchou-kun, where the hell are you?!” he hissed softly.

“I can’t tell you. I promised my uncle I’d stay low until he returns in another two days.”

“Why?!”

“I’m Adachi’s main target. If I stay away from you guys he’ll likely leave you alone to come after me.”

Minato felt his anger bubbling inside. “What kind of stupid logic is that? You’re not the only one involved in his capture, remember?!”

“Anyway…” Souji said, trying to change the topic. “Please watch each other’s backs. I gotta go.”

“Banchou-kun, wait –”

The line went silent. Minato is now determined to catch Adachi even more, just so his little brother wouldn’t have to carry this burden alone. He turned around to find Minako staring at him, looking like she was about to cry. ‘When did she get here?’

“That was Banchou-kun wasn’t it? What is he thinking, playing bait like that?” she whispered sadly.
Sometimes Minato didn’t really have to explain everything to make his sister understand. It’s a connection they share by being twins; they can communicate their thoughts and feelings to each other without words. The serious look in his eyes told her everything she needed to know.

“Let’s go to the Velvet Room. We have to find Adachi before he gets to Banchou-kun first.”

As they were about to leave the inn, they ran into Shinjiro. He raised an eyebrow at them. “Where are you two going?”

“The Velvet Room, to see Igor,” Minako answered, playing with the hem of her blouse. She frowned, staring at the floor. “Um…Souji-kun called Aniki from a public phone. He said he was okay, but…”

It unsettled Shinjiro to see her looking so down, so he offered to go with them. Minato didn’t object, and texted Mitsuru that they were heading out.

The three of them arrived at the shopping district about twenty minutes later. It wasn’t crowded, but after the news about Adachi’s escape came out the streets were quieter than usual. The twins took out their Velvet Keys and entered.

“Welcome to the Velvet Room, my dear guests,” Igor greeted. “It has been a while.”

Minato, Minako and Shinjiro took their seats in front of the eccentric old man. The first thing they noticed was the lack of assistants.

“My younger siblings are away for the moment, investigating the leak in the Great Seal,” Margaret’s answered, sitting herself beside her master. “Now, how may we assist you?”

Shinjiro remained silent as the twins retold Igor and Margaret about everything that has happened after the last time they were summoned, including why Souji wasn’t with them. He still didn’t understand the inner workings of the mysterious blue room, but came to respect it as an integral part in the destiny of the Wild Cards.

The eldest Velvet sibling closed her eyes for a moment, and reopened them. “I am sorry to say that we have not found anything regarding to the threat. My research also came up empty, which is one of the reasons why I sent Elizabeth and Theodore out to investigate.”

“But fear not,” Igor said. He waved his left hand, and the stack of glowing blue cards on the coffee table floated above them in a circular pattern. They arranged themselves into three rows on the table in an orderly fashion, facing down. “Let us shed some light on this, shall we?”

With another wave of his hand, a card on the bottom row is flipped upwards, showing the reversed picture of a tower being struck by lightning. “Interesting,” Igor mused. “The first card indicates the past, represented by the Inverse Tower. This means that whatever catastrophe and obstacles you three have encountered in the past is still effecting what is happening today, most likely something similar in nature. You must take note however, that I mean this in the most general of terms. It is something you have to figure out for yourselves.” He flipped another card in the middle row. It showed the picture of a crescent moon, with a howling coyote and a crayfish swimming in the water. “Ah, the Moon. It means that whatever you are facing now is not what it seems. It represents illusions, confusion and hidden things. Quite a mystery we have in our hands here. And now, the last card…” A card on the top row flipped over, showing the picture of a golden wheel. “Now this is intriguing. The Wheel of Fortune may represent many things; luck, chance, or good
fortune. However, the cards are telling me that you will have a fateful encounter somewhere in your future. With who, I cannot say.”

Margaret noticed the look of disappointment on the twins’ faces. “I am sorry that we cannot tell you more. But please be assured that we will contact you when any information turns up,” she said.

The three of them left the blue room. They walked past Madam Shiroku’s shop when Minako’s stomach started to grumble loudly. She blushed a dark crimson when the guys turned to focus on her. “S-sorry, I didn’t have much of an appetite d-during breakfast so I didn’t eat m-much,” she stuttered.

Shinjiro grinned. At least some things never change. “What am I going to do with you?” he sighed. He grabbed her hand and pulled her toward Aiya’s Diner. “Come on, let’s get you something to eat before you pass out.”

“Good idea, Senpai. We can meet the rest there to discuss our plan of action,” Minato added. They talked a bit about Igor’s tarot reading, pondering over what it could mean.

As they were passing in front of the shrine, Minato began to get an uneasy feeling, as if they were being watched. He observed his surroundings. His eyes settled on a lone delivery truck parked in front of the vacant shops. Without warning, the vehicle roared to life and tried to run them over!

“LOOK OUT!!!!” Minato yelled, leaping out of the way.

Shinjiro acted on reflex. He grabbed Minako and pulled her to the side opposite of Minato, causing both of them to land in the shrubs growing at the foothill of the shrine.

The screech of tires alerted Souji, who was sitting in front of the offertory box. The Fox and her cubs were also startled and gave him confusing looks. “What was that?” he whispered to himself. He got up and went to see what the ruckus was all about. To his horror, Souji saw a delivery truck trying to run the twins and Shinjiro over, and Adachi was behind the wheel! He was afraid that this would happen; Adachi hurting his friends to lure him out instead.

Having failed to hit the two Wild Cards, Adachi reversed and doubled back, wanting to have another go. Minato was busy picking himself up to notice the vehicle facing his way. Seeing how much danger his friends were in, Souji sprinted down the shrine steps and what he did next was on pure impulse.

“OI ADACHI!” he shouted, running across the street. “AREN’T YOU LOOKING FOR ME?!!”

The distraction worked, because the former cop heard him and turned his head to his direction. Souji could make out the evil smirk he gave him from behind the wheel. Without wasting a second, Adachi hit the accelerator, intending to flatten the silverette.

Souji made a run for it. He sprinted down the road and turned a sharp corner, buying him some time because Adachi was driving too fast and missed the turn. But the bastards was persistent, and soon enough was hot on Souji’s heels again. By now he was close to the residential area, and there would be more places to hide.

The chase went on for a while, but it was taking a toll on him. Souji could feel his stamina depleting, his lungs and legs were burning as he tried to get away. Despite the effort, he was failing and his vision began to blur. ‘No…but I’m so close…’

Adachi was relentless. No matter how many sharp turns his target made, he still managed to chase him down. He spotted him and accelerated, vaguely acknowledging the sounds of police sirens
behind him.

The youngest Wild Card was about to pass out before he felt somebody yank his shirt collar and pulled him to the side. The person threw his right arm across their shoulder and supported his weight, dragging him to a nearby alley behind a row of houses. The sirens were getting closer and the police cars came to view. Adachi was forced to give up and drive away if he didn’t want to get caught.

Having felt his head become clearer, Souji lifted his head to get a good look at his savior. Before he could do so, his rescuer gently put him down and ran away. All he saw was a long yellow scarf as the figure jumped over a fence.

Moments later, Minato, Minako and Shinjiro, along with Kanji and Rise arrived where Souji was sitting, still trying to catch his breath.

Minato and Kanji helped him stand up. “Senpai, are you okay?” Rise asked, on the verge of tears. She saw the whole thing from her grandmother’s shop and called the police. Kanji also heard the commotion from the textile shop. Unlike Rise, he came to check it out because he thought the motorcycle gang had returned.

“I’m fine Rise, thanks for asking. Although I could use a drink,” Souji joked, trying to smile.

Minako dropped to her knees and engulfed him in a bear hug. “You idiot! He almost killed you! And where have you been hiding?!” she scolded, failing to hold back her tears.

“Come on, Minako. We can do this later,” Shinjiro reasoned, trying to peel her away from the silverette. “Souji is tired, and as far as I know he shouldn’t be here. Let’s get him to the inn and patch him up.”

“Yeah, Senpai’s right. For the next few days he’s going to have to stay us. We can inform the others later,” Minato said.

During the walk to the inn - after assuring Kanji and Rise that Souji will be fine - Minato reiterated what Igor had told them during their visit to the Velvet Room. In retun, Souji told them what he saw in the alleyway.

The twins stiffened in response, and exchanged surprised expressions. ‘It couldn’t be ‘him’…’ they thought at the same time. ‘Could it?’

Chapter End Notes

A few changes were made after rereading this chapter over and over again. But as promised before, it doesn’t change the overall plot of the entire story. Sorry this took so long to come out. My country’s general election and office workload have held me back for months.
Chapter Summary

After a personal tragedy, Souji's life is turned upside down. He meets two long-lost friends and experience the return of the Dark Hour. Together with the Wild Cards, SEES and the Investigation Team, they must get to the bottom of this mystery before all is lost. The strings of fate are connected by a trail of butterflies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Souji felt refreshed as he woke up from his late nap, rising from the futon that Minato had let him sleep on. The sky had already turned dark. According to the clock on the wall, he missed dinner by an hour.

His stomach growled. Unfortunately this place wasn’t his home, so he couldn’t just waltz into the kitchen to make himself a snack.

As if the heavens heard his wish, Shinjiro entered the room carrying a tray. The smell of food filled the room, causing Souji's stomach to groan even louder.

Shinjiro smirked. “You gonna eat or what?”

Souji sat himself at the table in the middle of the room. He sniffed cautiously. “One question. Did Yukiko make this?”

“No, I did. Minako insisted. Why?”

“No reason.” Souji sighed in relief, focusing on the food in front of him: a bowl of white rice, vegetable stir-fry, tofu and a small pot of herbal chicken soup. Without wasting any time, he polished off the entire tray in a matter of minutes, burping rather loudly at the end.

“You really are like their little brother, aren’t you?” Shinjiro commented, surprised at how much the younger teen could eat. It did make him happy that he wasn’t a picky eater. “I swear you guys have black holes for stomachs.”

“I’d like to see you work up an appetite after getting chased by a maniac who tried to kill you,” Souji remarked sarcastically. “Thanks for the food. It’s delicious.”

“Don’t mention it,” Shinjiro said. He began to clear the table. “Go and freshen yourself up. Mitsuru booked some kind of conference room and called everyone in for a meeting. You better head there soon.” With that, he left the room.

Souji immediately went to the bathroom to wash his face. He changed the bandages, pleased the cut was healing nicely despite the stress his body had gone through. After putting on his disguise, he left for his next destination. As he walked, he replayed the dialogue he had with the twins after the incident that evening.

Flashback...
Shinjiro and the twins managed to sneak Souji into the room where the male SEES members were staying without raising any suspicion. Fortunately, nobody recognized Souji in his disguise and they hadn’t run into Yukiko.

Minato turned to his upperclassman after helping Souji sit down. “Senpai, can you go find the others and tell them what happened?”

Shinjiro nodded. “Feel free to borrow some of my clothes for the time being,” he told Souji. Once he left, Minako knelt beside him with a serious expression on her face and placed a hand on his forehead to check his temperature.

“Aneki, I’m not sick,” Souji protested. His pseudo sister ignored him as she cupped his face with both hands to look for other indications of injuries or sickness. Minato smirked beside her.

After a few minutes of inspection, Minako gave a satisfied nod. She pointed an index finger to his face. “As punishment for making us worry, you’re buying me some Aiya ramen after we catch this Adachi guy,” she decreed. “And some steak skewers too.”

Sweatdrops formed above the other two's heads. ‘Is that what she was after this entire time?’ they thought simultaneously.

“Speaking of what happened…” Souji started, “you two seem to know the guy who saved me. Who is he exactly?”

The twins looked at each other, unsure of how to start. Minako nudged her brother, requesting him to speak first.

“Remember what I told you about the Death Shadow that Aigis sealed inside us?” Minato said, earning a nod from Souji. “Well, after being trapped for ten years inside us, he gained a human form and developed emotions. We became good friends, although Aigis tried her hardest to keep him away from us. After finding out about his role in the bringing of The Fall, he was unwilling to go through with it.”

“He didn’t have a choice though, because he himself was unable to stop it,” Minako continued. “But after developing emotions, he gave us two choices - kill him, lose our memories of the Dark Hour and postpone The Fall...or face Nyx head on.”

Souji hummed his understanding. “But I don’t understand. From what you guys told me, you already defeated her.”

“That’s what I thought. When you think about it logically, the guy that saved you shouldn’t even exist anymore after Nyx’s defeat, since they became one with each other.” Minato sighed in frustration, pinching the skin between his eyebrows. “Unfortunately, things are never logical when Shadows are involved.”

“Igor did say that the obstacles we faced in our past are still effecting what we’re facing today,” Minako added. “If that’s the case, then this new threat is causing a bigger rift in the balance of worlds than we thought. His return is proof of that.”

The trio went silent, thinking about what they just discussed. Souji decided not to press the issue any further. His eyelids were becoming heavy, the fatigue from the chase finally started kicking in.

“Go change into something more comfortable Souji-kun,” Minako ordered when she saw him yawn widely. “Then you can take a nap.”
“Sleep on my futon,” her twin offered. “We’ll ask Yukiko-san for an extra one tonight. You won’t be going anywhere soon.”

...End Flashback

Souji was greeted by his team when he arrived. Yukiko engulfed him in a bone-crushing hug, lightly scolding him after. Teddie came next, and left a big wet stain on his shirt. His other teammates breathed a sigh of relief at seeing him safe and sound. They worried after Shinjiro told everyone what had happened earlier.

Kanji handed him a small duffel bag. "Here ya go, Senpai. Yosuke-senpai and I brought some of your clothes from your house before we came here. We also got some toiletries in there since you’re staying here for a few days.”

“Thanks guys,” Souji said, taking the bag. “So, did I miss anything while I was asleep?”

“Please take your seats everyone,” Mitsuru ordered in a brisk tone. “I called for this meeting tonight because we need to discuss how we are going to apprehend Adachi. Since he is still on the loose, we can’t afford to wait any longer.”

“And he made his point clear today that he wanted Souji-senpai out of the picture,” Naoto added. “We now have a motive. But the reason behind it is still unknown.”

Akihiko snorted beside Mitsuru. “He must have figured Souji would try to come back even if he is put under protection. I must admit this guy is quite bold, attacking one of our own to try and lure him out. Pretty damn risky if you ask me.”

“Which is why we must not let that happen again,” Mitsuru concluded. Everyone in the room silently agreed.

“Wait a minute,” Yosuke interjected. “The cops are already aware that he’s in Inaba.”

Chie’s eyes widened in realization. “Then shouldn’t they catch him by now? I mean, they are on high alert after news of him escaping came out.”

Naoto whipped out a folder from her bag. “I took the liberty of copying the police report after I heard about what happened,” she stated, passing it to Akihiko. “We watched the prime time news while you were asleep, Senpai,” she told Souji. “After the car chase, Adachi mysteriously disappeared when the vehicle he was driving crashed on the side of the road.”

A short pause ensued as the Investigation Team looked to their leader. Souji’s face remained expressionless as he tried to process the information.

“Hmm…it says here that the only thing they found in the truck was a flat screen television,” Akihiko read out the report. He flipped through a few of the crime scene photos and his eyes went wide. “It looks like this screen is big enough to fit him through, don’t you think?” He passed the photo to Naoto.

“Yes, I agree,” Naoto said after studying the picture. Her expression turned dark as her eyes narrowed. “There are two possibilities for the use of this television. The obvious one is that he used this to escape the police out of desperation when he was cornered. And the other one…”

“Is to throw Souji-san or any of us into the other side,” Ken finished for her. The silence was almost deafening.
Kanji grimaced. “Shit, it’s like with Namatame all over again.”

Souji calmly stood up. “If he did jump in, then there is only one place he could be.”

“That accursed dungeon of his…” Yosuke hissed, looking at the floor now.

“We have no choice but to go in,” Yukiko said. “Who knows what will happen if we leave him there to do God-knows-what.”

“This may be pointless…” Souji said a bit hesistantly. “But I need you all to look out for the Midnight Channel tonight, even though the weather report says that it's not going to rain.” He held up a hand when his team started to protest. “I know that was all Izanami’s doing, but we need to make sure.”

Minato decided to add his own input. “It’s just merely to get rid of any doubts. As long as Adachi is still on the loose, we can’t focus on solving the mystery of the new threat if there are other distractions.”

“And don’t worry. He won’t be able to get out unless I make an exit,” Teddie reminded them.

“Then it’s decided. We leave for Junes early tomorrow, so be sure to get enough rest. Who knows how long we’ll be in there, so let's make sure to also bring extra supplies,” Minako told them. After a few more discussions on what to bring the next day, the Inaba Persona-users said goodbye to their leader before heading out for their own homes.

Just like Souji had ordered, they stayed up to watch the Midnight Channel. The SEES members remained confused, even after Souji’s explanation, as they stared at a blank television screen, waiting for the clock to strike twelve. When it finally did, the screen remained black. It didn’t glow nor did any images appear. Neither Souji nor his teammates told anyone what had actually appeared on the show back when it was active.

“Huh, that was a letdown,” Junpei snorted. “And I was super excited to see what this Midnight Channel fuss was all about.”

“Shut up, Iori,” Shinjiro grunted. He lied down on his futon and buried himself under the covers. “Go to sleep already. We got a busy day tomorrow.”

Akihiko yawned loudly and stretched. “Can’t argue with that. Gotta get in gear to kick some Shadow butt!” Even without looking, he could tell his best friend was rolling his eyes at him.

Ken snuggled with Koromaru in his own futon. Junpei shrugged and got into his.

Souji could breathe easy that night, knowing that there was no more Midnight Channel. He followed Shinjiro’s example and tried to get to sleep.

"We'll pull through this, Banchou-kun," Minato whispered. "Together."

Souji nodded. With the combination of SEES and the Investigation Team, they’re going to take down Adachi once and for all. Piece of cake, right?

Piano melody and singing…it felt nostalgic.

"Welcome back, my children." Igor's voice called out to them. "Once again, I have summoned you
in your dreams, so do not be alarmed."

Slowly, the three Wild Cards opened their eyes. They were back in the Velvet Room, but something had changed. There were an addition of three people on the stage.

Playing the grand piano was a man with slickly tied black hair in a midnight blue suit, his eyes blindfolded. Next to him, a soprano singer in a shimmery, sleek blue dress sang a non-stop aria. Her black hair was fashioned dramatically, matching her makeup and butterfly pin accessory. In addition to her oddity, she covered her ears while she sang. At the farthest edge of the stage, a lone artist worked on an easel. He had long black hair covered by a beanie, similar to Shinjiro's. He wore casual black clothes under a long coat, sunglasses covering his eyes.

"Wow, this room gets more crowded each time we visit," Minako commented. "Who are they?"

"These, Master Minako, are old friends of Master Igor," Theodore explained.

"Friends?" Minato questioned. "So they are also residents of the Velvet Room?"

"The Velvet Room is inseparable from the destiny of its invited guests," Margaret said. "The shape of the room and its residents are selected by our master, based on the number of guests and their destiny."

"In short, they will also be playing a role in your journey," Elizabeth added.

Igor pointed to the stage. "Go ahead and talk to them. Their knowledge shall prove valuable to your quest."

They approached the piano player and the soprano singer first.

"Greetings, I am Nameless. The piano player who opens the closed doors of the heart..." he said, fingers smoothly pressing the keys without missing a note. He stared at the trio, who squirmed under his intense gaze despite his eyes being covered. "The you I know and the you that you know...are these two the same?"

The soprano singer went next. "~I am Belladonna~" she sang. "~I sing for those who challenge the monster known as oneself~"

Lastly, the artist spoke up. "I am the Demon Artist. I am the artist who draws the gods and demons that dwell within people's hearts." He showed them what he was painting; a set of blank tarot cards. "Tarot cards are models of the heart. And the heart...controls a person's fate."

The cards materialized before them, landing perfectly in each Wild Card's palm. What was once empty now had symbols on them: suits of cups, pentacles, wands and swords. "Are these cards from the Minor Arcana?" Souji asked.

"Correct, young one," Nameless said. "While a Persona is aligned under a certain major arcana, the minor arcana cards the Demon Artist paints can be used to improve a particular skill of one Persona."

"~On your journey, blank cards you will find~" Belladonna sang. "~Bring these to us and by combining my song, Nameless' melody and the Demon Artist's painting we'll create the Minor Arcana cards~"

"However, you must choose wisely on which persona you use the cards on," the Demon Artist warned. "Once you've used a card, it will vanish."
The three teenagers smiled. This was probably part of the power unleashed by the World Arcana. "Alright, these will sure come in handy. Thanks!" Minato turned to Igor. "Before we go back, can we study these?"

"Of course, young man. Go ahead."

They studied the cards. "Let's see... In tarot, the Suit of Cups is related to the element of Water, situations and events mostly related to emotions. It's also related to spiritual and religious matters," Minako started. "So, these cards must boost healing spells."

"Yes, I agree. The Suit of Wands is related to the element of Fire, emotions like passion, ambition and desire, but also anger and violence," Minato continued. "Therefore, these cards must boost elemental spells."

"The Suit of Pentacles relate to the Earthly elements, the accumulation of wealth, health, luck, and physical prosperity, but also misfortune, ill health, or poverty," Souji said. "So that must mean these cards boost the accuracy of status altering spells."

"And the last set...the Suit of Swords relates to Air, an element of nobility and military matters. Those concepts are linked to power, authority, and strength, but also responsibility, suffering and violence," Minato concluded. "That means these cards boost physical attack spells."

"This is so cool!" Minako tried to stifle a squeal, then quickly turned serious. "But we can't get cocky."

"You're right, Aneki. Adachi is a formidable enemy, and treacherous as well as dangerous."

"True, but we have a few tricks in our sleeves ourselves," Minato said. "Let's set our game plan."

After some debating, the three split the cards evenly among themselves and used a few on their closest Personas: Orpheus, Eurydice, Izanagi, not to mention a few others as well.

"Are you set now?" Igor asked. They nodded. "Now then, allow me to let you get the rest you need. Pleasant dreams."

As the Velvet Room grew fainter, the three Wild Cards finally fell into a deep slumber.

Rise and Fuuka summoned Kanzeon and Juno as soon they entered the TV World. Teddie sniffed the air around them. "He’s definitely here. His stench is stronger than last time."

“I can sense a huge buildup of power, but somehow the fog is messing with my readings,” Fuuka said disappointedly.

Teddie tried to cheer her up. “Don’t worry about it, Fuuka-chan. Rise-chan’s Persona is much more suited for locating people in this world, while yours is better at analysing Shadows, that’s all.”

Fuuka blushed a light shade of pink. “Thank you, Teddie-kun.”

“Do you detect anything in his dungeon, Rise?” Souji asked. He secured his katana on his waist and put on his fingerless gloves. The others also checked their weapons and putting on armour. Mitsuru divided the healing items and passed them around.

“Yeah, but you’re not going to like this,” Rise said as she dismissed Kanzeon. “The amount of
power I sensed coming from his dungeon is insane! It’s on a very different level from the last time we fought him, and it seems to have expanded. Because of that, large amounts of Shadows are flocking there as well.”

Her teammates were surprised. How was it possible for Adachi to get so strong in a matter of months, especially when he was locked up in jail? That was the question which lingered in their minds.

“We don’t have time for this crap!” Kanji growled, punching his palm with a fist. “We kicked his ass last time, and we’ll do it again. Like hell I’m going to forgive him for trying to kill Senpai!”

His statement snapped his friends out of their inner musings. “Y-yeah, he’s right,” Yosuke mumbled, regaining his composure. “So what’s the plan? Are we going to split up like last time?”

The leaders paused. They thought for a moment before giving each other knowing looks. “I don’t think that’s wise,” Minato said. “For all we know, Adachi is expecting us and has set up an ambush somewhere. It’s best to stick in one group.”

“But there is a problem with that strategy,” Minako cut in. “Rise-chan said that there are a greater number of Shadows. Shouldn’t we assign certain groups to fight and certain groups for protection and back-up? I mean, it’s not that we’ll be splitting up or anything…”

Minato was deep in thought, tapping his chin for a moment. “You’re right, Minako. Let’s discuss this some more before we proceed.”

“And we still don’t know if the layout has gone through any changes. We haven’t set foot in that place since the last time we beat him,” Souji informed. “One thing we do know, he is much stronger this time, so we need to be extra careful.”

Nobody argued with that. About half an hour of discussing and debating, they were divided into two sub-groups; each sub-group with their own scanner, front line and backup. The backup team’s main duty was to protect the scanners and assist the front line with anything that they need.

In Fuuka’s sub-group, the front line consisted of Minato, Yukari, Junpei, Metis, Kanji and Chie as the front line. Aigis, Teddie and Naoto as their backup. Rise’s sub-group had Minako, Souji, Yosuke, Mitsuru, Shinjiro and Ken in the front line with Yukiko, Akihiko and Koromaru as backup.

“Is everyone ready?” Teddie asked, earning grins and nods. As usual, he was leading the way. “Let’s go!”

No matter how many times they had come here, the Investigation Team still shivered at the sight of the place created by the late Mayumi Yamano. A small room with a single bed and working desk surrounded by blood-splattered walls sent chills up their spines. If that wasn’t enough, posters of enka singer Misuzu Hiiragi with her head ripped out and the noose in the middle of the room could turn any cheerful person into a depressed wreck.

“What kind of screwed-up setting is this?” Junpei asked, his voice shaken with nervousness. As he looked around the small room, his face slowly turned green.

Mitsuru was shivering, but it wasn’t from the cold. “I agree Iori. This is very disturbing.”

Fuuka felt faint. She had never seen anything like this before. Yes, the Dark Hour was and still is disturbing. However, being in a room that was created by a deranged mindset and deep, twisted emotions was an entirely different experience altogether. She could only hope that someone as
They gathered in front of the entrance that led to Magatsu Inaba. Even without Rise and Fuuka to tell them, everyone could feel the pressure of spiritual energy that emitted from the vortex. It made them a little sick to the stomach as they entered one by one.

Inside was a whole lot creepier than Yamano’s room. The sky was a moonless, bloody red. Dark clouds hung above them, occasionally spitting out lightning even though it wasn’t raining. It was still a twisted version of Inaba, only the roads were wider and the buildings were taller. Strange shapes and silhouettes appeared whenever the lightning illuminated the tall buildings, as if they were solid and slithering around, waiting to pounce on them should the Persona-users become careless.

The usually bubbly Minako clutched Shinjiro’s arm even tighter, drawing herself closer to him. His blush increased as the space between them decreased. “Th-this place...I don't like it...” She nearly screamed when something brushed against her leg, only to find Koromaru attempting to comfort her.

“Y-y-you said it Minako-chan,” Yukari shivered, clutching to her best friend’s brother in the same manner.

Even the usually stoic Naoto gravitated slowly towards Kanji, despite trying to put up an exterior of indifference. Mitsuru was also the same, except that she grabbed a fistful of Akihiko’s red sweater vest.

“It can’t get any more disturbing than this,” Yosuke muttered sourly. “I swear if we survive this, I am never going to complain about another dungeon again. Ever!”

Chie smacked his arm. “Don’t say it like it’s cursed, you idiot!”

“Knock it off, guys!” Souji commanded. “Rise, Fuuka-san, can you tell us anything about how big this place is, and how many floors?” The scanners summoned their Personas. A few minutes later, they dismissed them. “Well?”

Rise was first to report. “Like I said before, the whole place has expanded. Which also means that there are more floors to get to the top, where Adachi is waiting for us.”

“I also sense strong Shadows here,” Fuuka added. “According to the data I shared with Rise-chan, they seem to have evolved, and are different compared to the ones you fought before. We’re going to have to redouble our efforts in order to scan their properties.”

Souji thanked them both. “Alright, that’s a good thing to know. Remember, stick close to the group,” he reminded everyone. “And if you guys notice anything odd, anything at all, don’t hesitate to tell us.”

They made twists and turns and met with dead ends. The temperature around them seemed to drop the deeper they went. When the stairs were spotted up ahead, the teenagers cheered for joy, but were short lived when Shadows ambushed them. The amount of them in a group have also increased - instead of the usual five, they doubled in number. There were three species of Shadows in this particular cluster, all of which the Investigation Team were familiar with; four Eagle-types with pearl-colored masks, five Magus-types with red and pink stripes, and a blue and yellow Rexy.

“Be careful, everyone. Those are Magus-type Shadows of the Magician arcana. Don’t attack them with spells until I can find a weakness!” Fuuka ordered.
“The Eagle-types are of the Empress arcana,” Rise informed. “They’ll most likely use ice attacks, so brace yourselves. And be extra careful with the Rexy, I sense it can use Megidola!”

Minako and Souji didn’t want to take any chances. They had to get rid of the Rexy before it decides to cast any form of Almighty spell. “Aneki and I will get rid of the Rexy. You guys handle the rest,” Souji told his team.

“Don’t cast too many spells unless you’re absolutely sure it can cause enough damage,” Minako said. “We need to save our strength to take down Adachi.”

Mitsuru summoned Artemesia to counter a Mabufula spell from an Eagle that was headed for Akihiko and Yukiko. When the rest of the Eagles were distracted, Shinjiro attacked them with his axe and Yosuke managed to slash a few. Ken had the advantage of long reach because of his weapon, plus he had grown a few inches taller over the past years. Akihiko helped them by casting Marakunda to lower their defenses.

“Banchou-kun, I’ve never seen these types in Tartarus before. What affinity does it have?” Minako asked her little brother, already in her battle stance.

“I would say from experience that they like to use Darkness and Almighty spells, plus some of them can reflect physical attacks,” he answered. “They are a bit unpredictable, but we won’t know until we try.” A blue card materialized in his right hand. “Pyro Jack, Agilaol!”

A floating ghost with a pumpkin head holding a lantern appeared after Souji crushed his card. “Hee-ho!” He blasted the Rexy with a medium fire spell and cackled before disappearing. However, the Rexy did not waver from the attack.

Minako understood what Souji was trying to do - hit the Shadow with weaker elemental attacks as to not drain their energy and hope one of them hit a bullseye. She grinned. “Two can play at that game!” She placed her Evoker to her temple and pulled the trigger. “Oberon, Zionga!”

The King of Fairies fluttered his butterfly wings, brandishing his rapier at the Shadow and casted the thunder spell. The Rexy shrieked and fell to the ground, twitching. “Bingo!”

Souji grinned. “All-out attack?”

“We’ll wipe the floor with them!” The two Wild Cards slashed the defenseless Rexy until there was nothing recognizable of its corpse.

“Nice guess, Minako-senpai!” Rise said. “And I have the results! The Eagles are weak to fire, so burn them to a crisp!”

Yukiko stepped up. “Yosuke-kun, cover my post,” she told him. “Stand back, Koromaru and I will take them down all at once!”

Yosuke obliged and took his place as Rise’s guard.

The fire-casters casted Maragidyne on the Shadows simultaneously in a tornado of flames. Just like the Rexy, they let out an shrill shriek as they landed in a messy heap, trying to put out their scorching feathers.

Shinjiro cracked his knuckles, a wicked gleam in his eyes. “I’ve been waiting for this…”

“Indeed,” Mitsuru grinned, readying her rapier.
“You don’t plan on having all the fun now, do you?” Akihiko questioned playfully, his eyes containing the same wicked gleam. The former Gekkoukan seniors rushed for the downed Shadows, punching, hacking and slashing like there was no tomorrow.

Meanwhile in Minato’s team, everyone was focused on physical attacks for the time being. Aegis casted Masukukaja on her team mates for extra speed to dodge the Magus’ spells.

It didn’t take long for Fuuka to complete her analysis. “Please be careful, these Shadows nullify ice, wind, thunder, darkness and reflect fire. Other than that they don’t have any weaknesses.”

Minato furrowed his eyebrows, trying to think of a plan. ‘If casting spells is useless, then we’re going to have to use physical force,’ he thought. His eyes fell on Chie, Kanji and Metis. ‘Although I don’t think that would be a problem.’

“Alright guys, you heard her,” Minato said out loud. “The front line will focus on multiple-hit physical attacks. We can’t waste anymore time!”

Chie summoned Suzuka Gongen and casted Power Charge on herself, grinning like a maniac. “I have just the thing…and they’re starting to piss me off too.”

“Uh-oh…” Kanji gulped and started to sweat.

Junpei noticed the bleach blonde’s discomfort and quirked an eyebrow. “What’s wrong, dude?”

“We have to get as far away from her as possible, if we want to live…” Kanji ended his sentence ominously. He backed away and hid behind Juno.

Before Junpei could open his mouth to ask what he meant, Naoto pulled him, Minato and Metis behind Juno too. Yukari and Aegis were already there “Don’t question it too much. Just watch.”

Aegis was intrigued by their behavior. ‘What is it that they are scared of?’ She looked at Minato questioningly, but he only shrugged and continued to watch.

The swirl of blue smoke appeared at Chie’s feet as she summoned her Persona once more. “Agneyastra!”

Meteors rained out of nowhere, bombarding the Shadows below. The impact crushed them instantly, not giving them a chance to defend themselves. It was a terrifying sight to behold.

The SEES members’ knees shook. Never in their lives have they encountered such destruction. Any of Shinjiro’s physical attacks had more restraint than this! When all the debris had settled down, Chie emerged from the dust cloud unscathed with a triumphant smirk on her face. “Beat that!”

“Was that necessary, Chie?” Souji’s voice emerged from behind them. Minako and the rest of SEES were shaken, obviously stunned by the impact. “That was overkill. Don’t waste your energy on such attacks next time,” he gently chided.

Chie was about to retort that her fighting style was perfectly fine when a maniacal laughter echoed throughout the skies.

"Hahaha! So you guys really did follow me here.”

“Adachi…” Minato growled.
“Talk about déjà vu,” Yosuke muttered.

“So you passed the first trap that I set up for you. But I guess that was still pretty easy, huh? Would have made my job easier if one of you died though…”

Kanji was triggered. “What the hell do you want this time, bastard?!?” he shouted to the sky.

“Geez, you gotta learn when to stop yelling…friggin’ punk. Oh well, if you want answers, you’re just going to have to catch me. Later losers.”

“Ignore him guys,” Souji interrupted before anybody else loses their cool. “Let’s just focus on getting to the top.”

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Fighting Shadows got a lot easier after they perfected their coordination and teamwork. The Shadows on every floor got stronger too.

It was on the third floor that Adachi’s voice popped out once more. “Oh man, this is much more fun than I thought it would be. If I’d known there were other Persona-users out there I would’ve thrown you guys in too.”

‘Ignore him, ignore him, ignore him…’ they chanted in their heads over and over as they tried to find the next set of stairs.

“I’m not surprised you have dog on your team though, if those from this godforsaken town have a bear. Some Janes mascot you are. Oh well, if he turns out just as useless, you can make stew out of both of them, am I right?”

An unmistakable growl escaped Teddie’s throat. Souji had to grab the collar of his bear suit and hold him back to prevent him from going ballistic. Koromaru wasn’t fazed since he was…well…a dog.

“So you guys play babysitter too. That kid must have been some piece of work to end up with you guys if you ask me. A weakling like him can’t possibly wield a Persona or protect anyone. Must be fun to play pretend without anyone to scold him. Tch, loser…”

Ken was normally good at ignoring what other people thought of him. To be honest he couldn’t care less. But something about this Adachi person pushed all the right buttons, and he could feel his anger rising. He was about to retaliate when Shinjiro squeezed his shoulder.

“Don’t let him get to you, kid,” he said. “You’re better than that.” That was all it took for Ken to calm down.

They fought their way to the fifth floor when Adachi decided to bother them again. “I’m so jealous of you guys. So many pretty girls in your team, especially the ones from Port Island. You gotta have nice things to look at when you’re stuck in this hellhole, am I right?”

The men of SEES tensed up at his insinuation.

“Especially the one in the pink sweater…you got some super nice legs. It’s a waste for a pretty face like yours to be going to college. Quit studying your ass off and become a model or something. You have no idea how much guys are willing to pay for a picture of you in a bathing
A vein in Yukari’s forehead threatened to burst. “Why that little…” she seethed. She was used to Junpei’s teasing, as perverted as he is he never made fun of her using sexual harassment. Her anger was about to explode until Yukiko gently squeezed her hand.

“Don’t take anything he says seriously,” the raven-haired healer said. “Adachi is too shallow to see anything beyond that. I’m sure Minato-san agrees with me.”

“Yeah...yeah, you’re right Yukiko-chan.” Yukari calmed down and returned the gesture. “Thanks.”

On the other hand, Minato was fuming on the inside. He knew what guys said about his girlfriend behind her back, especially during their time in high school together. Hearing a criminal implying sexual innuendos right to his face however, was a different story. ‘I can’t wait to make him suffer for saying that!’ he thought, adding that to his motivation.

It didn’t look like Adachi was about to stop. “And that elegant little redhead...acting so high and mighty like she owns everything. I hate bitches like you...always stomping around and looking down on people. You’re lucky you were born pretty, otherwise no guy would want to tap ya’.”

Mitsuru blushed, not out of embarrassment but of rage. Never in her life had she been insulted like this before. ‘I’ll execute him! I’ll definitely execute him!’

Akihiko was thinking along the same lines. ‘Wait till I get my hands on him...’ His grey eyes hardened. ‘How dare he say things like that about her?! I never saw Mitsuru in that way, ever!’

“And the girl with the ponytail, another Wild Card I presume? If you are anything like Souji, then you must have a ton of guys drooling all over you. I know this quaint little maid café in Okina City where they hire brats like you. With a nice body like that, you’ll have no problem fitting into those skimpy maid outfits and earn a lot of tips.”

Minako was feeling very uncomfortable. She knew Adachi was watching from somewhere, but she can’t help but feel like he was undressing her with his eyes. A shiver ran up her spine and she began to rub her arms to get rid of that weird feeling.

This didn’t go unnoticed by Shinjiro, who pulled her close and attempted to shield her with his larger form. “Don’t listen to that asshole,” he told her. “He’s just running his mouth because he’s got nothing else to do.” But in his mind, he was already imagining how he would break every bone in the bastard’s body and punching his face in for making such salacious comments about his girl, and probably putting weird thoughts into that idiot Junpei’s head.

Said idiot had a mixed expression of disgust and anger on his face. Sure, Junpei often joked around (inserting a dirty joke here and there) with the girls, but even he had higher standards than that.

"Of course, I couldn't forget the little one with blue hair. Quiet and petite, so fragile and pretty...a docile, weak minded little girl she must be, no?"

Fuuka barely held back an angry gasp. Sure, she was small and not physically strong, but she was far from being weak minded.

"Oh, and there are two dolls here too? Now I’ve seen everything... Why do you try so hard to be like humans? Even if you look and act like one, you'll never truly be a real one. And humanity by and large suck! I can think of a million better uses for two good-looking dummies like you."
"Sister, can I crush his skull?" Metis asked sharply, voice laced with venom.

"He's not worth the trouble," Aigis replied coldly. "He'll be getting what's coming at him soon enough."

Adachi laughed. He was having a blast. "And last, but not least, the four hotties from Nowheresville: the kung fu maniac that's more of a boy than a girl, the inn princess that can't do a thing on her own, the artificial and superficial pop star and the self-conscious and arrogant detective princess. You know, your pretty faces and nice figures could get you all really far if you kept you damn mouths shut!"

A dark formidable aura surrounded the Inaba girls. 'He's so dead!'

The guys almost lost it. Each one of them held the girls dear, and none of them could stand such crap from a deranged, depraved sicko! 'I'm beating the shit out of that asshole!'

Rise snapped out of it when Kanzeon found something. “Ah, we’re close to the stairs!” Her announcement cut off any murderous intentions. “It's around here somewhere... Aha! There it is!”

Everyone rushed to climb, trying not to push or shove each other before they reached the sixth floor. The sound of clapping could be heard in the distance.

“Oh my, what a persistent bunch. I must congratulate you for making it this far though, it’s been a while since I had this much fun. Prison was so~ boring ~ ”

Junpei exasperatedly threw his arms in the air. “Does that guy ever shut up?!!”

Adachi snickered. “It's been fun and all, but you know what? Shouldn't Souji come after me alone? After all, I did try to kill him…”

“Don’t listen to that prick, partner,” Yosuke said through gritted teeth. “Like we’re gonna fall for his stupid tricks.”

“There are a few more reasons why he should come after me alone. Have you guys forgotten? Because Namatame listened to me, it resulted in your precious Nanako-chan falling sick. She almost died, remember? And that dad of hers...who knows what could've happened had Nanako-chan kicked the bucket...”

The tension in the air got thicker as the expression on the faces of the Investigation Team tightened. How could they forget? If it wasn’t for Souji and his cool head, they would have committed murder by throwing Namatame into the TV.

“Now I wonder who could have sent those Shadows after my former boss and his little brat a few days ago...? I mean, it's not like I have the power to control who the Shadows target...or do I?” He laughed maniacally.

Souji snapped, but Minato and Minako acted quickly by grabbing his arms. “Calm down!” Minato demanded. “He’s trying to rile you up to go after him alone. Don’t fall for it!”

“Aniki is right, Souji-kun. Don’t let it get to your head!” Minako pleaded.

“Is that a 'No' then? Wow, you're heartless! Oh well, watching you guys fight is a lot more entertaining anyways. Who knows, some of you might die and you’ll just make my day." Adachi
remained quiet after that.

Chie’s cheeks flushed as she stomped the ground angrily. “Ooh…he just makes me so mad!”

“Calm down, Satonaka. Remember the first rule of combat: ‘Always keep a level head’,” Akihiko reminded her.

“That’s strange,” Fuuka said. “I don’t detect other Shadows on this floor.”

“Strange is right. Something’s definately fishy,” Rise agreed. “There are so many Shadows in this place, but not a single one here. I wonder why?”

“Who the hell cares? It’ll be worth it if I can imprint my fist in that ugly face of his!” Kanji scoffed. Shinjiro growled in agreement.

Souji finally cooled down and regained his composure. “Let’s go guys. Make sure to keep your guard up. We’re dealing with Adachi here, so it’s all part of his game.”

After taking a few more turns, they arrived at a huge opening that was completely covered with yellow police tape. Junpei and Souji took out their swords and slashed them away, until a stairway was revealed. Before they could set foot on it, a black gust of wind blew them over. It was so strong it knocked everyone off their feet. They shielded their eyes from the dust and remained low until it died down.

Curses and groans were heard as everyone tried to regain their bearings.

“What in the world was that?” Mitsuru asked as she was helped to her feet by Akihiko.

“That certainly took us by surprise,” Naoto said, dusting off her uniform.

Once they recovered, Yukiko noticed that they were missing somebody. “Wait a minute…where’s Souji-kun?!”

Shinjiro started to panic. "What the - Hey, where the heck is Minako?!"

Minato was about to tell everyone to calm down before gunshots were heard, and that sure as hell wasn’t from an Evoker. He paled two shades as the memories flashed through his vision: Shinjiro shot by Takaya in the alleyway behind Port Island Station, and Junpei in front of Tartarus' entrance by the same person. Because his memories had already fused with Minako’s, he could feel twice the devastating emotions that came with it, and he never wanted to go through that again for both their sakes. Anger and panic pierced his gut as he rushed up the stairs.

He could only hope they weren’t too late.

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Souji groaned as he slowly opened his eyes. He immediately closed them again when an immense headache hit, so he tried to shift his body to a more comfortable position. “Where...am I?” He tried to move, but then discovered that his body was aching as well. Gritting his teeth, he gathered all his strength to fully opening his eyes, blinking a few times to adjust to the light.

“So, you’re finally awake,” a voice sneered nearby. “It wouldn’t be fun if I continued while you were still unconscious.”

The silverette tensed. He recognized that voice! “Adachi…” he growled, trying to push himself up
but grunted in dismay to find that his hands were handcuffed. As he became more aware of his surroundings, Souji felt something wet seeping through his bandages - his wounds had reopened. He could feel his head start to bleed as well.

Adachi was twirling a gun in his hand. “Don’t give me such a face, Souji-kun,” he said in a fake, sweet tone. “Malice doesn’t quite suit your handsome features.”

Souji furiously brainstormed ways on how to escape. He looked around, trying to spot anything familiar, but all he saw were the tall buildings and red sky. Even his sword was out of his reach.

“Don’t waste your time trying to to escape,” Adachi added. “I made sure your friends are busy fighting Shadows while I keep you here. No use resisting.” He cocked the gun in Souji’s face, grinning evilly. “I’m going to have so much fun torturing you before I finish you off.”

“Go to hell!” Souji spat, rage shooting from his eyes.

Furious, Adachi kicked Souji in the stomach. The silverette doubled over from the pain, his breaths becoming short wheezes. Adachi then grabbed a fist-full of his hair and pressed the muzzle of the gun under his chin. “Of course, we can make this quick if you want, but I’m not gonna do that.” He let go, leaving Souji to fall in a messy heap. “The one thing I had in prison was all the time in the world. Just imagine, all that time to think about how to make you suffer...”

The pain slowly subsided as Souji tried to filter out Adachi’s ramblings. Before he could pull himself together, the former cop grabbed his neck and lifted him up. ‘When the hell did he get this strong?’ The thought lingered in the back of his mind as he fought against the pain of his nemesis crushing his windpipe, and fingernails digging through his skin, too weak to fight back.

“You of all people should know how much I hate to get my hands dirty.” Adachi grinning evilly. He gripped Souji’s injured arm and squeezed it hard, earning him a scream from the teen. “There’s a first time for everything though. After I’m done with you, the twins will be next.” He threw him on the ground, pulled out his gun once more and aimed it at Souji’s leg.

The sound of chains shattering was heard. “Yatagarasu, Garula!”

Before he could comprehend what was going on, Adachi was violently blown away.

Souji saw Yatagarasu hovering above. The three-legged crow casted Diarama, and he could feel his pain receding even if his wounds weren’t fully healed. His strength returned as he managed to smile at his saviour. “Aneki, I’m so glad to see you.”

“Likewise, Banchou-kun!” Minako giggled. She helped him stand.

“How did you get here?”

“When that black gust thingy attacked us, I noticed that it was aiming for you specifically. So I acted on instinct and grabbed onto you. It must have pulled me in,” she explained. “Now first things first, we have to get you out of those cuffs.” She grabbed her naginata.

Souji got the hint, and lowered his cuffed wrists on a small boulder nearby. He made sure the chains connecting the cuffs were taut as possible. His pseudo sister tested her swings before bringing the blade down with all her strength. After a few strikes, she let out a victorious cry when the chains snapped in two.

Basking in her success, Minako was not aware of Adachi trying to sneak up behind her.
But Souji did. “Behind you!”

On reflex, the young woman swung her naginata blade as she whirled around. Adachi’s scream of pain indicated that she had drawn blood. Her sweet personality did a one-eighty as she narrowed her eyes dangerously at their enemy. “Hurt my little brother again and I swear I'll murder you ruthlessly!”

“Damn you!” Adachi clutched his bleeding hand, backing away outside of Minako’s range for fear of getting slashed again.

It was Souji’s turn to grin. “Serves you right for looking down on her. You always did like to underestimate women. Whatever you tried with Miss Yamano and Saki-senpai isn’t going to work on her,” he said, clutching his sore stomach.

A lopsided smirk appeared on Adachi’s face. He picked up his gun that was lying near his feet and aimed it at the two Wild Cards. “Is that so? How much do you want to wager on that?”

Acting on instinct, Souji shot up and shoved Minako aside with his entire body. He heard the bullet whiz past his left ear after Adachi pulled the trigger. Both of them landed on the ground, limbs tangled but otherwise they were fine.

Voices could be heard in the distance, shouting their names. The cavalry was finally here!

The former cop cursed again as the rest of the Persona-users, led by Minato, got closer and closer. He readied his gun and pointed it at Minako who was helping Souji get up. “Come any closer and I’ll shoot both of them!” he threatened.

The team stopped in their tracks, worry evident on their faces. Minato’s grip on his sword tightened until his knuckles were almost white. He regretted not having a ranged weapon.

Fortunately for him, Naoto did. She aimed her revolver at Adachi. "Don't even think about it!” she warned.

“Adachi, you don’t have to do this!” Yosuke said, attempting to negotiate with the madman. “I mean, there must be a better way to settle this.”

“Y-yeah! Let’s talk about this!” Chie added nervously.

“You seriously think that’s gonna work, kid?” Adachi laughed, never taking his eyes off his targets. “How can I miss a great opportunity to get rid of two Wild Cards with one bullet? I originally wanted to exterminate Dojima’s brat first, but why waste this chance?” The index finger of his uninjured hand twitched on the trigger.

Shinjiro and Yukiko stood frozen in their places, not daring to speak. Mitsuru and Akihiko were no better, taking the threat very seriously.

A heavy aura of darkness emanated from Minato. His eyes were downcast, covered by his blue bangs. “Let. Them. Go!” His voice was barely audible, but those near him could tell something big was about to happen. They slowly backed away.

“And what can you do, brat?” Adachi snickered, his finger slowly squeezing the trigger.

Fear and nervousness shut down Minako and Souji’s ability to think. Unable to bear it, she closed her eyes as she tried to support an injured Souji.
The tension and emotional turmoil was too much for Minato to handle. He snapped. Blue-black smoke appeared at his feet as a masculine-shaped Persona clad in black materialized above him. Its appearance and essence embodied Death. The blue-haired teen lifted his head and narrowed his eyes at Adachi, gaze full of intense anger. He pointed at his enemy. “THANATOS, ATTACK!”

Thanatos roared to the sky and lunged. He moved so fast that Adachi wasn’t able to even blink when the Persona sent him flying. A sickening crunch was heard in the distance.

Everyone was shaken. “Holy crap, what was that?!” Yosuke exclaimed, covered in cold sweat.

Yukari’s knees trembled, the same goes to the rest of her friends. “That was Thanatos, one of Minato and Minako’s strongest Personas. I’ve never seen him this mad before!”

The Investigation Team was instantly reminded of the time when they were about to throw Namatame into the TV at the hospital. They had experienced brief moments of their leader's annoyances before, but never explosive anger. It was something they never wanted to see again if they could help it. If Minato’s anger could rival his, they didn’t want to know how Minako would fare, as they had gotten a small sample from their previous battle.

“But…but how did he summon without his Evoker?” Akihiko asked. "He's never done that before."

“Strong emotions and desperation tend to do that,” Fuuka answered. “Threatening his family must have caused him to snap and lose his emotional control.”

Minato almost fell to his knees after Thanatos disappeared, but he didn’t succumb to it and stumbled to where his siblings were, ignoring the shock of his teammates. He engulfed them in a tight embrace.

Relieved beyond measure, Souji and Minako melted into the hug. “Aniki, we’re so glad that you’re alright,” the silverette said.

Minato choked back a sob. “I’ll be damned if I lose you guys again!”

His sister however, let out a small one. “Aniki…” she whimpered, returning the hug.

The shuffling of feet could be heard closing in the distance, followed by cackling. Adachi fumbled towards them, clutching his ribs, an evil grin on his face once again. His eyes fell on the Wild Cards. “It looks like Lady Luck is on my side today,” he said, pointing his gun at them. “Instead of two Wild Cards, another one falls on my lap, making it three.” He chuckled at Minato’s attempt to shield his family. “Since you’re volunteering, I’m happy to oblige.”

Halfway through squeezing the trigger, the sound of shattering chains filled the air once more.

“Garudyne!”

“Garudyne!”

“Agidyne!”

The combination of wind and fire created a tornado of flames, fueled by the rage of Shinjiro, Yukari and Yukiko. The moving inferno swallowed Adachi and carried him far away from the team. The three of them then proceeded to check on their respective lover.

“Oh man, Adachi would have gotten lighter punishment if he didn’t manage to piss those three off,” Junpei commented to Kanji and Naoto, his voice dropping down to a whisper.
Teddie was glad that his Sensei was fine. "Yup, love makes you do crazy things!" he chirped.

"Souji-kun, I’m so glad you’re alright!" Yukiko wailed as she pulled her boyfriend in a tight hug, only letting him go when he groaned in pain. "O-oh my goodness, I’m so sorry! You’re injured again. Here, let me heal that for you!"

Yukiko was in the right mind to slap Minato, but instead she buried her face in his chest and cried softly. "You idiot! That maniac almost shot you!" she scolded, weakly hitting his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and whispered words of comfort.

Shinjiro scanned his girlfriend for any injuries and gave a satisfied grunt when he found none. He wasn’t about to get all sappy like the other two, especially in front of this many people. Minako giggled at his act.

Rise was about to tease Shinjiro for being a tsundere when her senses tingled - Kanzeon was trying to tell her something. She quickly summoned her and gasped loudly, catching everyone's attention. Ken was the first to ask. "What’s wrong, Rise-san?"

The teen idol’s knees began to shake. "Guys, prepare for battle now. I sense a huge group of Shadows starting to gather here. And Adachi…I think we really, really pissed him off this time."

No sooner did she say that, the wind started to pick up speed. They had to shield their eyes from the dust and sand, wondering what in the world was going on. When the gust died down, they were shocked to find Adachi floating before them, Magatsu Izanagi by his side.

"What the hell?" Shinjiro said, clutching his weapon tighter. "He survived our combined attack?!" Everyone’s eyes were wide as plates, just as shocked as he was.

Despite his clothes being worse for wear, the criminal didn’t look like he was injured at all. He laughed hysterically at the Persona users’ reaction. "Your pathetic magic didn’t do shit to me. I’m not the same as before!" As if to demonstrate, a burst of black gust erupted from the ground, pushing the group of teenagers backwards.

"This power, it’s insanely different from what he was before!" Rise said, clutching onto Akihiko so she wouldn't be blown away.

"Is that his Persona?" Mitsuru inquired, curious about the floating figure beside Adachi. "It looks suspiciously like the one Seta has."

"Does it really matter?" Akihiko grimaced, trying to stabilize himself. "We’re going to beat him regardless."

Rise turned to her team leader. "Senpai, what about those group of Shadows? They’re starting to gather here because of him."

It didn't take long for Souji to come up with a plan. "Yosuke and Yukiko, you two are with me. The rest of you will hold off the hoard of Shadows," he ordered his team. "Rise, you’ll be our support."

"If you’re going in that direction, I’m going to need Mitsuru-senpai on this one," Minato stated, and gave his sister a look which translated as “Anything else?"

Minako shook her head. “I agree, Aniki.” She turned to the rest of the team. “The seven of us will handle Adachi. Fuuka-chan, you’ll be helping to support the others.”
“Roger!” Fuuka replied enthusiastically.

As they separated, the small team which consisted of the three Wild Cards, Yosuke, Yukiko and Mitsuru closed in on Adachi. Rise stayed close to Fuuka and summoned Kanzeon, zeroing her focus on gathering information about Adachi.

The bigger group braced themselves as hordes and hordes of shadows emerged, all of different types and sizes. Fuuka was frantically scanning. "Bambino, Okina, Twins, Phantom… All I can tell for now is that they're not resistant against physical attacks."

"Heh, that'll do for now," Akihiko said, punching the air as warmed up his footwork. "We strike them hard until we find a more effective way to deal with them. Yukari, Ken, you two are on healing duty and long range support. I can hit them with debuff spells from time to time to save us some trouble."

"Got it, Akihiko-san!" Ken said. Yukari readied her arrows.

Instead of being the reckless one this time, Junpei surprised his team by casting Marakukaja on everyone first before attacking. "An extra boost of armor!" he said with a grin.

"An intelligent idea, Junpei-san," Aigis said. "Then I will help as well. Matarukaja!" A warm, orange glow enveloped everyone on the offense team. Once the spell was casted, they instantly felt stronger.

Kanji and Chie were the first ones to land an attack.

"Vile Assault!"

"Heatwave!"

The group of Okina Shadows that were hit screamed their last cry at the duo's combined attack.

"Maziodyne!"

"Bufudyne!"

"Torrent Shot!"

"God's Hand!"

"Mabufudyne!"

A flurry of magic and physical attacks rained on the Shadows, but there were also a lot of near hits and misses.

One of the Phantom-type Shadows got ready to cast Mabufudyne. Luckily, Aigis thought fast. "Masukukaja!"

Their speed and ability to evade kicked up a notch and they managed to dodge out of harm's way. Unfortunately, a few of them did get injured by the ice shards, but was instantly healed by Ken and Yukari.

Despite their efforts, the Shadows just kept on coming. "Tough bastards…gonna need something bigger to take them out at once," Shinjiro grunted. But he had an idea. "Okay, Pegasus, show me what you're made of. Evil Smile!" The giant, winged horse emitted an eerie blue aura that covered
several Shadows. Thanks to Aigis’ buffer spell, the accuracy of the hit increased. The targeted group of Shadows were instantly trembling in fear. "Bull's eye…” Shinjiro grinned. Intimidation had its perks. "Now! Ghastly Wail!"

A terrifying shriek echoed across the field, reducing the panicked Shadows into puddles of black ooze.

Bigger Shadows such as Minatours, Jotuns and Machines however, required a different, much more aggressive tactic. Metis and Aigis nodded at each other. "Activating Orgia Mode!" The sisters unlocked their limiters and proceeded to land multiple hits with Athena’s physical attacks and Psyche's ice and wind magic. They soon overheated and rendered immobile in order to cool down.

The Bambino Shadows that survived the onslaught tried to take out the androids, only to be burnt to a crisp by a Maragidyne courtesy of Koromaru.

"Time to stop fooling around." Naoto drew her revolver. She focused on a group Shadows that were much further from her teammates. "Megidolaon!" Despite being blown to dust, more Shadows emerged to take their place. It was endless. Undeterred, she persisted with the Almighty spells, but soon became tired and nearly collapsed on the ground if Kanji hadn’t caught her.

"They just keep coming!" Teddie said, almost panicking as more and more Shadows keep popping up.

"I just hope Minato-kun and the others are doing better than us…” Yukari murmured as she went to heal another teammate.

“Alright guys, here’s the plan. Minako, Souji-kun and myself will handle the offense. Mitsuru-senpai, I need you to be our distant attacker and hit Adachi with charged-up ice spells whenever you get the chance,” Minato gave out orders as they ran towards their main enemy.

“Understood,” Mitsuru replied.

Souji addressed his own orders to Yosuke and Yukiko. “Yosuke, I’m afraid you’re going to have to multitask on this one. Yukiko, focus on healing unless you think it’s necessary to attack.”

“Got it!” they replied simultaneously.

Adachi’s grin grew wider when the Persona-users finally faced him. He clapped his hands. “I’ll congratulate you at least for making it this far. As your reward, I’m going to fight you at full strength.” Magatsu Izanagi began to glow as he gathered energy for an attack.

The Wild Cards readied their stances, and prepared to summon their Persona. Mitsuru and Yosuke did the same, the latter acting first. “Masukukaja!”

A bright orange light engulfed them, making their bodies lighter and faster. Thanks to that, they managed to dodge being sliced to shreds by a Vorpal Blade attack. The Wild Cards grinned; now was the perfect time to reciprocate. They weren’t going to hold back either.

“Sraosha, Ziodyne!”

“Vishnu, Ziodyne!”
“Loki, Garudyne!”

The combination hit their target dead center thanks to Yosuke’s buffer spell. When the debris cleared, they were shocked to see both Magatsu Izanagi and Adachi uninjured.

The trio gasped. “What the…?”

“This can’t be…” Yosuke murmured in disbelief, his grip on his knives tightening.

Rise’s voice echoed in their heads. “This energy reading...it’s something that I’ve never seen before. He still has the same set of skills, but something’s not right,” she reported. “All I can tell is that his resistance has gotten higher...significantly higher.”

Minato grit his teeth. “Then we’re going to have to keep bombarding him until he breaks. Make sure to power up your next attack!”

Souji and Minato casted Power Charge on themselves while Mitsuru and Minako did the same with Mind Charge.

“Are you guys finished yet?” Adachi asked in a bored tone. “I hate waiting you know.” He waved his hand and Magatsu Izanagi charged towards Souji, ready to slash him with his naginata. The teen managed to block the attack with his katana. The impact sent him flying backwards, but he managed to land on his feet in a crouching position.

‘Damnit, even his strength has increased. Thank goodness I powered up my body or else I wouldn’t be able to hold it back.’ He remembered Adachi’s vice-grip when he was choking him, and it made perfect sense. The corrupted Persona lunged at him again, but this time he came prepared. “Help me, Yoshitsune!”

A samurai in red armor appeared at his master’s call, blocking the attack with his double daggers. Magatsu Izanagi striked again, and Yoshitsune parried it with his own. The others couldn’t help but stare in awe; it was like watching a legendary battle of ancient Japan.

Minato gestured for his sister and Mitsuru to attack Magatsu Izanagi while he was preoccupied.

“Masakado, Tempest Slash!”

“Vishnu, Ziodyne!”

“Bufudyne!”

Mitsuru’s giant ice block trapped MAgatsu Izanagi in one place, while Minako’s thunder spell struck him and the ice block, cutting him with the ice shards. Minato’s power charged Tempest Slash hit twice. The onslaught of powered-up attacks seemed to have an effect as Magatsu Izanagi let out a high-pitched cry. Not far, Adachi groaned in pain as well - some of Mitsuru’s ice shards hit him as collateral damage and now he was bleeding everywhere.

“Now you people are starting to piss me off!” Adachi growled, his voice strained with anger and annoyance. He didn't remain in pain for very long as his cuts started to heal at an extremely fast rate.

“What the…he didn’t even cast a healing spell?!” Yukiko said, shocked.

“It’s a passive-type high-speed recovery. He didn’t have this skill last time, I swear!” Rise informed. “No wonder he wasn’t badly hurt when he was fried earlier.”
“Even Shinjiro’s regenerative abilities aren’t that high,” Mitsuru said, slightly shaking. “How is this even possible?”

Adachi laughed again. “I told you I was serious, didn’t I? Now the fun really begins!” A strong gale blew a cloud of dust around them, impairing their vision.

Minato cursed. “This isn’t good. Even with our Persona’s abilities, we can’t hit what we can’t see!”

Before they could say anything else, something hit them from behind. The six of them fell on the ground, hard. No matter how many times they got up and tried to fight back, they kept getting hit by attacks they couldn’t see, leaving them hurt and confused. And Adachi’s mocking laughter wasn’t making it any easier.

Frustrated, Yosuke summoned Susano-O and casted Magarudyne in several different directions, being careful not to hit his teammates. Some of the dust cloud dissipated, and the air around them turned clearer. Encouraged by this, he repeated his actions until their surroundings were visible. By the time he was done, Yosuke panted heavily.

The Wild Card users were too injured to stand up. Luckily, Yukiko immediately healed them and herself, aided by Mitsuru.

“Thanks Yukiko,” Souji panted, standing up once more. “Good thinking, Yosuke. You can take it easy now. We’ll handle it from here.”

Minako’s red eyes flashed with anger. “Now I’m pissed!” she seethed, gripping her Evoker tightly.

“Calm down Minako. We need to rethink our strategy,” Minato said. “His regeneration ability is the real problem here. The question is, how do we get rid of it?”

“Rise-chan said it’s his Persona’s new ability. If we get rid of his Persona, and then he can’t heal himself anymore,” she reasoned. “But we have to do it fast, or else there won’t be any point injuring him.”

“She’s right Aniki,” Souji agreed. “Not only that, we’re going to have to power up our attacks constantly to counter his high resistance.” He gave Yosuke a look, which his best friend understood.

Yosuke nodded. He summoned his Persona using his remaining energy. “Masukukaja!”

“Let’s do this!”

The trio ran in three different directions, charging their attacks along the way. They took turns slashing Magatsu Izanagi with their weapons, their speed almost doubled thanks to Yosuke. Yukiko and Mitsuru were on stand-by to heal any of their injuries.

Every time Magatsu Izanagi looked like he was about to heal, they hit him relentlessly using their strongest physical attacks.

“Yoshitsune, Hassou Tobi!”

“Helel, Primal Force!”

“Micheal, Heaven's Blade!”
But no matter how hard they tried, Magatsu Izanagi and Adachi weren’t fazed at all. Despite being healed constantly by Yukiko and Mitsuru, their strength and stamina were beginning to wear thin.

Souji was already on his knees, supporting his body upright with his katana. “Damn it! At this rate we’re only tiring ourselves out even more!”

“Banchou-kun is right. I don’t think we have a choice but to use ‘that’ again,” Minako panted, leaning on her naginata.

Minato cursed under his breath, but he knew both of them were right. “It is pretty risky, but if it means we can get rid of him, then I don’t care if we pass out after this.” But the prospect of letting loose pulled a grin on his lips. “Banchou-kun, have you ever heard of ‘Fusion Raid’?”

The silverette looked confused. “Uh, what’s that? Never heard of it before.”

“By summoning two Personas at the same time, we can unleash a special attack. However, only selected pairs can be used to create Fusion Raid. It’s super powerful and the effects are much more potent compared to normal spells, even the powerful ones,” Minako explained. “We’re thinking of casting Shadow Hound by combining Scathatch and Cu Chulainn, but if you have a Persona of the same mythology, then I think we can amplify the damage caused.”

“We’re about to test the power of The World,” Minato said. “Are ya’ ready, Banchou-kun?”

A blue card floated on Souji’s palm. “I think I can handle it,” he smirked. “And I have just the Persona. Whenever you guys are ready.”

Not far, Adachi cracked his neck and looked at them with a bored expression. “Giving up already?” he asked mockingly. They did not respond. “Oh well, I had fun while it lasted. Prepare to die!” Magatsu Izanagi was poised in his stance, ready to release a much deadlier attack.

But they beat him to it. The Wild Cards merged their energies as they called out to their Personas.

“Scathach…”

“Cu Chulainn…”

“Setanta…”

The three prominent figures of Irish myth appeared and started to growl…

“SHADOW HOUND!”

Time seemed to slow down, but in reality, it took only a fraction of a second. Magatsu Izanagi was swallowed up by an explosion before he could even move. It was so powerful, the ground shook and became unsteady, even destroying the Shadows that the other Persona-users were fighting. When the shaking calmed down, the corrupted Persona was pretty beaten up, but just like before started to heal himself automatically.

Before he could start however, a few more explosions engulfed him. No matter which direction he went to try and escape, the explosions would always catch up. Unable to withstand the injuries caused, Magatsu Izanagi let out an ear-splitting shriek. His body started to disintegrate slowly, leaving an orb of glowing light which must have been his core. After a few seconds of just floating there, the orb also disintegrated.

The strain of unleashing such a powerful combo finally took a toll on the leaders as they become
lightheaded and their vision blurred. They fell to the ground in an unceremonious fashion and almost passed out, floating between consciousness and unconsciousness.

Distinct voices of their teammates could be heard approaching them.

“What the hell was that?!” Junpei hollered, similar cacophony of questions followed by the rest of the Investigation Team and SEES.

“What happened here?” Akihiko questioned, making a beeline for Mitsuru.

“Sensei!” Teddie cried, running towards his leader’s prone form. He was followed by Yukiko, Yosuke and the rest of the Investigation Team.

Shinjiro was already kneeling beside Minako. He gently picked her up and cradled her. “You idiot!” he whisper-scolded in her ear. “Don’t ever scare me like that again! Did you know how worried I was?”

Yukari felt Minato’s pulse and sighed with relief. “Why is this moron so good at scaring me? Twice in one day!” she complained half-heartedly, her eyes glazed with tears. Koromaru approached her and licked her face to comfort her.

“I don’t think they had a choice,” Rise said, interrupting their conversations. She turned to Fuuka. “You should have seen the amount of power Adachi had. I’ve never seen Senpai struggle in a fight like that before. It was an entirely new level, even for him.”

“Speaking of Adachi…” Akihiko trailed off. His eyes scanned the area before him and found the fugitive curled in a ball not far away.

“Ugh…my head,” said fugitive groaned, clutching his head. “What the hell happened?” He looked up and found himself surrounded by angry Persona-users. “Why are you looking at me like that?” he stuttered, eyes wide.

Kanji lifted Adachi off his feet by his shirt collar and gave him a murderous stare. “Don’t pretend to fake innocence, you little weasel. You were about to kill our Senpai and we’re gonna make you pay!”

“Tone it down, you big oaf!” Adachi choked, dropping his act as he tried to break free of Kanji’s iron grip. “And I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Kanji shook him harder.

“Kanji-kun, stop it!” Naoto demanded. “I don’t think he’s lying.”

Yosuke pulled a face. “And what makes you so sure?”

“I agree with Naoto-san,” Aigis said. “His vital signs do not indicate that he is lying. Although he is distressed and confused, he is not lying.” Metis nodded her confirmation.

“Let’s just hear him out,” Naoto said calmly. “Something about all this doesn’t add up nor does it make sense, and we need more information.” She turned to the annoyed man on the floor, having dropped by Kanji. “Adachi-san, how did you even manage to break out of prison?”

“I… I don’t remember much,” he answered, taking in large gulps of air. “All I remember was the sky turning green in the middle of the day and everyone turning into coffins. I remembered being confused about it, but then this dark figure appeared in my cell and told me he would help me
escape if I succumb to my deepest, darkest desires and I could finally have my revenge. Everything was a blur after that."

Naoto frowned, deep in thought. “And why did you target Souji-senpai first instead of the twins?”

“I’m not sure myself. Sometimes there would be voices in my head telling me to go after him specifically. They said that he’s still recovering from a car accident and that made him the weakest of the three and the easiest to get rid of.”

The ace detective stared at him for some time before taking out a pair of handcuffs. “Let’s restrain him for now. I don’t think he has anything to add. We should get out of here and send those three to the hospital.”

“And just like Sensei would say: ‘Let’s just think about this for now’,;” Teddie quoted, trying to brighten the moody atmosphere.

While Akihiko helped Naoto keep an eye on Adachi, Junpei helped Yukari lift Minato and slung his arms around their shoulders. Yosuke and Yukiko did the same with Souji. Shinjiro carried Minako bridal-style.

Having heard bits of the conversation and confirmed that their friends were safe, the leaders finally surrendered into unconsciousness.

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Inaba Municipal Hospital…

As soon as they got back to the real world, Naoto called the police to pick Adachi up while Mitsuru called the paramedics to take the three Wild Cards to the hospital.

It was already late evening when the Persona-users gathered at the narrow hallway in front of the trio's room, anxiously waiting for news. Their leaders weren't allowed any visitors for the time being. Mitsuru, with her family connections, and Naoto using her ties to the Police department and representing Detective Dojima, managed to have a talk with the doctors.

The silence was unbearable, especially for Yukari, Yukiko and Shinjiro.

"Sensei is gonna be okay…right?" Teddie asked, breaking the silence.

"The doctors should be able to help them, Teddie-kun," Fuuka said.

"We just have to believe in them and wait for them to recover," Rise added. "Then we'll be partying in no time!"

"I guess… but what about that Adachi guy?" Junpei asked.

"Shirogane said he'll be taken to a prisional hospital for treatment and then straight back to a solitary cell," Akihiko answered.

Kanji slammed a fist against his palm. "He won't be able to get near Senpai again. If he does, I'm taking him down!"

"I doubt he'd have the nerve to do that after the beating he got," Ken said. "Something bothers me, though. Adachi mentioned someone breaking him out of prison. This means that whoever is altering the balance between both worlds must have also released him, and used him in an attempt
to get rid of Souji-san as well as Minato-san and Minako-san."

"I think you're right, Ken-kun. But why use Adachi? And why target them?" Chie asked.

"Souji is our leader, the strongest among us. The same applies to Minato-san and Minako-san. Without them..." Yosuke paused, not liking this line of thought. "Without them, our teams would simply fall apart." His expression turned grim. "And it wouldn't be hard for Adachi to get rid of all of us without our leaders in the way."

Everybody in the room shuddered. He had a point; they wouldn't stand a chance against a powered-up Adachi without their leaders' special abilities.

"Our enemy is striking harder," Aigis said. "We must remain vigilant."

"Until Souji-san and the twins recover, they'll be vulnerable," Metis added. "We must protect them at all costs."

Everyone was in unanimous agreement. A few minutes later, Mitsuru and Naoto returned. Yukari, Yukiko and Shinjiro stood up at the same time. "Well?!" they demanded. "Did they find out anything?"

"The doctors believe they're only exhausted, but they can't say anything definite until they run some tests on them," Naoto answered. "They decided it would be for the best that they rest here and stay in observation for tonight, especially Souji-senpai because of his prior involvement in a vehicular accident."

"Tomorrow they'll run a thorough examination, to make sure they don't suffer any internal injuries from battle," Mitsuru added. "Should everything be okay, they'll be released in the afternoon, a day before Dojima-san and Nanako-chan comes home." Everybody sighed in relief. "By the way..." she continued. "Just for tonight, the doctor will only allow one person to visit per patient." She smiled gently at Yukari, Yukiko and Shinjiro. "Go and see them."

Both Yukiko and Yukari said a quick "Thank you!" before dashing into the ward room. Shinjiro gave Mitsuru a curt nod and a muttered, inaudible "Thanks..." before he followed after them.

The Wild Cards were sleeping soundly on individual beds. Their minors scraps and cuts had been patched up, and luckily for them the worst of their injuries had been dealt with in the TV World. They had peaceful expressions on their faces.

Yukari approached Minato, gently touching his hand. "You really gave me a scare back there. Thank goodness you're safe." She kissed his cheek. "Sleep well, okay?"

Yukiko seated herself carefully on the edge of Souji's bed. "Souji-kun, you're so reckless at times," she scolded softly, gently pushing back his bangs. "But you always pull through when we need you." She kissed his forehead. "Sweet dreams."

Shinjiro didn't outright display his affection out of habit, but since they were in a closed-off room and the girls too preoccupied with their own boyfriends, he made an exception. "You're a real piece of work, worrying me like that." He gently caressed Minako's cheek. "But I guess that's why I fell for you, Minako." He kissed her forehead. "Rest up, okay? You deserve it."

A sharp knock on the door indicated that time was up. They were reluctant to leave, but promised they would come again the next day. The smiles on their sleeping counterparts' faces broadened a bit.
Souji woke up startled. He could have sworn someone was watching him and the twins while they were sleeping. He looked around the dark room, relieved to find nobody else in the room. Wiping the sweat from his forehead, he hoped that he wasn't becoming paranoid with all the things that happened today.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to wake you up."

He nearly fell off his bed. He just confirmed no one was there! He turned to the twins, but they were both fast asleep. "W-Who's there?" he asked quietly.

"Over here. By the window."

There was only one window in the room, and it was open. A person was sitting on the windowsill.

The moonlight illuminated the figure. It was a young man, about the same age as himself. He had midnight black hair and blue eyes. He wore a white shirt with black suspenders, black pants and leather shoes. However, one detail caught Souji's eye - the long, yellow scarf around his neck.

"Sorry I scared you," the stranger said with a gentle smile. "I just came to check up on you guys."

"It's you… You're the guy that saved me the other day," Souji said.

"Yep! Glad you remember me." He walked up to him. "Oh, where are my manners? I'm Ryoji Mochizuki." He held out his hand for a handshake. "Nice to meet you."

Souji awkwardly reciprocated the gesture. "Uh…I'm Souji Seta. Nice to meet you too, Ryoji-san. Um…thanks for saving me."

A broad smile appeared on Ryoji's face. It was almost blinding. "Don't mention it, Souji-kun! I'm just glad you're okay." He then turned his attention to the twins. His eyes softened. "Minato-kun… Minako-chan… I'm so glad they're doing well."

"So you really do know them. But - "

"How did I return?" Ryoji completed his question. "I'm not sure myself…" He frowned, gently touching his chest. "There's this voice at the back of my mind that keeps telling me I could have another chance to live as a human if I help you guys. It's also what my heart tells me to do."

"Ryoji-san…"

Ryoji patted him on the head. "Hey, don't worry about me, Souji-kun. I'm gonna be okay!" he assured the silverette. "I have to look into some stuff before I can finally reveal myself to them. In the meantime, can I ask you for a favour?"

Souji cocked his head to the side. "Sure. I guess…"

"Please, take care of them," Ryoji requested, his gaze never leaving the twins. "I know you are the sole family they have left, so please protect each other."

"That's already a given. They're also very important to you, huh?" Souji smiled. "You can count on me."

Ryoji's blinding grin only got brighter. "Thanks, Souji-kun!" He climbed out the window, standing on the ledge. Two pairs of black, feathery wings appeared on his back. "I'll see you some other
time. Take care!" As he leapt off, his wings spread out and he flew away, vanishing into the moonlit sky.

Souji could only stare in awe. "You guys sure have some interesting friends…" he mumbled at his pseudo siblings. A soft smile crossed his face when one of them let out a soft snore. A yawn escaped his mouth. "I should talk with them tomorrow…"

With that in mind, Souji settled himself in and resumed his slumber.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for waiting patiently for this chapter. I will try my best to answer any questions you have unless the question or answer involves spoilers for future chapters.

And I'm super hyped for PQ2: New Cinema Labyrinth!!!
Chapter Summary

After a personal tragedy, Souji's life is turned upside down. He meets two long-lost friends and experience the return of the Dark Hour. Together with the Wild Cards, SEES and the Investigation Team, they must get to the bottom of this mystery before all is lost. The strings of fate are connected by a trail of butterflies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_Late night, Amagi Inn…_

Minato, Minako and Souji were taken to the hospital yesterday, drained after the vicious battle against Adachi. Fortunately, they were only exhausted from using too much of their spiritual power, and would be spending only one night in the hospital to rest, run a few blood exams in the morning and be released in the afternoon once the doctor gives clearance.

Junpei sighed. He couldn't drift off to sleep no matter how tired and sore he was after fending off a hoard of Shadows. He still couldn't shake off his anger at Adachi for trying to gun their leaders down, and the fear he saw in Minato's eyes when he almost lost his family. He wouldn't blame him for acting rashly. Witnessing someone whom you deeply care for getting hurt was hard, let alone relive the trauma. Just like Shinjiro, he himself had been shot by the same psychopath. It was a by a miracle he survived and lived to fight another day.

A red-headed miracle named Chidori.

Chidori… the girl he was truly and madly in love with. He used to pride himself as a goofball womanizer in high school, but she's the only girl who really cemented a place in his heart, even if she does not remember him after her revival. That didn't stop Junpei from visiting her everyday when she was hospitalized. He even asked Mitsuru (begged her, really) to get Chidori a place in a prestigious art school after her release.

Before summer vacation and their planned trip to Inaba, he would visit her every single day to check out her new drawings or to simply chat. Chidori seemed to appreciate his visits, calling him her 'strange funny friend'.

Of course, he would love to be more than friends, but knows he should take things slowly. Her health was still fragile after all she had gone through, and he didn't want her to exert herself just to regain back those memories. He still had her old sketchbook in his posession, filled with drawings of him and one photo taken with the two of them together. When the time was right, he'd show it to her and maybe, just maybe, she'll remember.

_I should phone her tomorrow…'_ he thought, tossing and turning in his futon. 'I haven't called her since I got here, what with all the things happening. It wouldn't hurt to check up on her.' He finally got comfortable enough to drift off to sleep.
Unknown location...

White walls everywhere. Everything was white, but the ground was covered in flowers of all colours and sizes. Some parts of the walls had murals and art painted on them.

'Is this a dream? How did I get here anyway?'

As the girl dressed in white explored her surroundings, she felt an odd sensation of comfort, like it was something she had been searching for for a long the time. Despite the foggy atmosphere and the weird, black creatures she spotted every now and then - which she avoided out of instinct - she felt at peace. It didn't make sense, but right now she could care less about logic or common sense. The world that she originated from was chaotic enough as it is.

A sudden thought crossed her mind: Maybe...maybe in this place, she'll finally meet the kind, warm person from her dreams.

"I wish he's here with me. He's always been so supportive...encouraging me to find that person," she whispered to herself as she moved forward. "Junpei..."

Morning, Amagi Inn...

After breakfast, Junpei headed for the courtyard. Once he was sure he's alone, he picked up his cellphone and dialed the number of the dorm Chidori stayed in.

"Hello?" came a female voice from the other line.

"Uh... Hi. This is Junpei Iori. Is Chidori Yoshino there?"

"Oh, that weirdo again..." Chidori's roommate said, rather annoyed. Junpei could feel her scowl between their distance.

"If you're looking for her, she's not home. And I don't know when she's coming back."

Junpei began to worry. "What do you mean? Did something happened to her?!"

"Like I know or care. Last time I saw that gothic loli, she was standing in front of a television at an electronics shop on our way home from grocery shopping, staring at it like a zombie. Next thing I know, she's gone. Jerk...she should have helped me carry the heavy stuff before disappearing like -" 

He cut her off. "When was that?!" he demanded.

"Huh? Almost noon, I guess. Two or three days ago...whatever."

Junpei paled. That was around the same time the Dark Hour appeared, the same day Minako rejoined the group. "Did you call the police?"

"Why should I? That girl is such a weirdo, scribbling in her sketchbook or muttering junk about meeting someone from her dreams. No one's gonna miss her or care about her anyway. The cops'll agree with me. Just drop it, will ya?"

"I care about her, you stupid bitch!" Junpei yelled, furiously hanging up. It took all of his willpower not to throw his phone into the koi pond. 'Damn it! What if she fell into the TV when the Dark Hour hit? But she doesn't have her Persona anymore...is something like that even possible?' His thoughts kept going in circles as his heart beat amplified in speed. "Wait, what if she
was targeted by Shadows like Dojima-san and Nanako-ch...
"Sorry about that, dude. I'm kinda in a rush." Junpei said, rubbing his bruised bottom while trying to act cool. "And Ted's here too. What are you guys doing here?"

"We just came from the hospital after visiting Sensei," Teddie reported. "So we wanted to tell Yuki-chan and the others that the doctor said they can be released in the afternoon."

"Really? That's great!" Junpei cheered. It didn't last however, when he turned serious again. As he stared hard at the two visitors, he grinned as the metaphorical lightbulb of inspiration lit above his head. "Hey Yosuke, can I ask you and Teddie for a favor?"

The rollercoaster of emotions displayed on Junpei's face was a cause for concern and suspicion. "Uh…sure…what is it?" Yosuke asked hesitantly.

Fuuka sighed. She knew where this was heading, but there was no other way around it.

Junpei looked around for anybody listening in. Satisfied that there weren't, he whispered "Let's go to Junes. I need you guys' help."

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**Junes' Food court…**

"Say what?!" Yosuke said a loud voice. "A girl got sucked into the TV?!"

"Dude! Shhhhhhtttt!" Junpei shushed him. "And yes. Piecing together what I heard from Chidori's dorm mate and what Fuuka's friend told her, I'm sure she ended up in the TV."

"But how? Neither me, Rise-chan or Fuuka-chan sensed her while we were there," Teddie said.

"Chidori's former Persona, Medea, had the ability to conceal others' presences by emitting life energy," Fuuka explained. "Adachi's presence in the TV World could also have overlapped hers because of his power, not to mention the amount of Shadows at the time."

"Former? What happened to her?" Yosuke asked.

Junpei lowered his head and began to explain. "She... Chidori was part of a group of rogue Persona-users called Strega. They more than once tried to stop us from ending the Dark Hour. We met by chance during summer, before I found out she was a part of Strega. During the time she was in the hospital under SEES's custody, we got to know each other better. Chidori's different...not only from the rest of Strega, but from other girls too. Not just her looks or how she dresses, but everything about her is different. She doesn't care about little annoyances like broken nails, or what other people say about her. She's not indecisive, either. She actually knows what she wants to do and exactly how she intends to do it. Something you don't find in girls very often..." He turned silent for a few seconds. The event of that fateful night was still hard to recall. "One night, she broke out of the hospital with the help of her teammates. When we finally encountered her and fought to bring her back, their bastard of a leader... shot me..."

Teddie and Yosuke gasped.

"Chidori pushed away her loyalties to Strega and attempted to heal Junpei-kun using Spring of Life, another ability of her Persona that allowed her to heal other life forms, in exchange for her own life energy," Fuuka continued. "She managed to heal him, but the price she had to pay was too great. She succumbed to her death, but not before confessing her love."

Yosuke's stomach clenched. Teddie stared at Junpei with wide, teary eyes.
"It was thanks to her Persona and sacrifice that Hermes evolved into Trismegistus," Junpei said. "Some months later, we don't know how, but she came back to life! The flowers beside her hospital bed that she often revived during the days I'd visit her were placed on her body as a tribute. According to Mitsuru-senpai's explanation, the life force she used apparently returned to her, and she lived. But in return, she has no memory of the events prior to her Persona's awakening."

"She still has faint memories of Junpei-kun, but we don't know for sure when or if she'll ever remember what happened," Fuuka concluded.

"That's why I need you guys to come with me to the TV World. With Fuuka's help, we can find her!" The determination in Junpei's eyes were unmistakable. "I can't put anyone else in danger because I'm the one who's supposed to protect her. Minato, Minako and Souji are still recovering, but…" His fists clenched. "I'm not strong enough, I can't do this alone… so… So please... help me!"

Yosuke sighed, but it wasn't in annoyance. "She doesn't remember you, yet she means the world to you. You really love her, huh? I think I can relate to that."

Teddie looked at him sadly. "Yosuke…"

Fuuka and Junpei looked at each other with confused expressions. The brunette sighed. "Remember what we told you about Saki Konishi, the second murder victim in our investigation? Well, I… I kinda liked her, but… I never got to tell her."

"You liked her? But I thought you had the hots for Chie," Junpei blurted.

Yosuke blushed. "A-Anyway… Saki-senpai was the main reason I was so determined to find the killer. But it was Souji who helped me deal with those feelings later. In fact, it was the first time I actually saw him get really angry at someone."

…Flashback…

It had been a tiresome day, so the duo decided head to Junes for a quick bite to eat.

"So, whatcha gonna get today?" Yosuke asked.

Before Souji could reply, two female seniors walked up to them. The silverette recognized them as The Snotty One and The Gaudy One who often nagged his friend because he's the son of Junes' manager, thinking he could pull some strings for them.

"Hey, Hanamura!" The Gaudy One called. She was angry for some reason.

"…What is it, today?" Yosuke sighed, trying not to sound annoyed.

"How come Kazumi can take the day off and we can't?" she demanded.

"Huh?"

"We told you before! We can't work weekends!" The Snotty One whined. "So when we refused, they said they were going to fire us! I don't get this!"

"Hey, I talked to the manager…" Yosuke started. "Senpai… have you been taking absences without leave lately?"

"I-I just forgot to come!" was The Gaudy One's lame excuse, but then she changed the subject. "Besides, that's not the point! What are you gonna do about this?! I have a date that day!"
"How come you're favoring Kazumi, huh?!" her friend accused him. "You were like that with Saki, too!"

"What?"

"Don't try to hide it! We all know!" The Gaudy One accused. "You liked Saki and treated her special!"

Yosuke said nothing at first. "...I don't think Saki-senpai has anything to do with this subject," he finally said.

"Yeah, it does!" she snapped. "You told the other workers to take it easy on Saki, didn't you? You think you can do anything just because you're the manager's son!?"

"So it's Kazumi now that's Saki's dead!? Don't even bother, she has a boyfriend," The Snotty One said in a spiteful tone. "Don't you get it?! Saki didn't like you! We heard so from her! She may have acted that way, but..."

As the girls started to badmouth Saki. Yosuke closed his eyes tightly, trying to remain professional.

Souji had enough. These two were always pestering his friend, and he knew this wasn't the first time they said nasty things about Saki-senpai. Even if she wasn't a saint, it didn't change the fact that Saki-senpai died a horrible death and doesn't deserve to be talked about so poorly, especially in front of a still-grieving Yosuke. He heard enough from his Shadow to understand how the brunette was feeling.

The silverette stood up and slapped the table loudly, drawing everybody's attention towards him. "WILL YOU TWO JUST SHUT UP!"

Yosuke gasped in surprise, if not a little scared. His best friend was known for his calm and collected demeanor. "Souji..."

"Wha-Who are you?" The Snotty One stammered. "You shut up!"

Yosuke could not tolerate it any longer. "You're the ones who should shut up!" he yelled to their shocked faces. "What do you know about Saki-senpai!? She didn't do things half-assed like you! She looked lazy, but she worked hard! She talked bad, but she was good inside! So she hated me? I knew that! She's not here anymore! I'm left behind!" He took a deep breath and looked away. "...Just leave me alone."

The Gaudy One gawked at him. "Wh-What the heck...?" she finally stammered.

"...Let's go..." Her friend pulled her away.

After they were no longer seen, Yosuke still didn't say anything. He let out a long sigh. "I just blurted out a buncha crap, huh?"

"If you ask me, they deserved it." Souji's expression softened. "Besides, you were just upset."

"N-No, I was just..." Yosuke covered his eyes. "Damn...another pathetic display from Yosuke, huh?" Souji shook his head and gave him an understanding smile. "Thanks, though." He gave Souji a sheepish smile. "Hearing you say that stuff to them... It made me happy."

"Don't mention it."
Yosuke sighed again. "I don't want to... I really don't want to, but I'll go talk with Dad. At this rate, those two are gonna quit. I should tell him and apologize." He started walking towards the office, but stopped mid-way. "I don't know. What do I want to do? I don't get it...even though it's my own future." He sighed again. "Sorry, but I'll see you later..."

"Take care... Partner..." Souji said as he saw him off.

A few days later, he asked Souji to come with him to the Samegawa riverbed. He looked tormented, so Souji agreed.

They wandered for some time by the riverside. When Yosuke suddenly stopped, Souji could see that his friend was holding something.

"I found this. It's a print club sticker I took with Saki-senpai..." he said. "When I first got here, she insisted on taking it." He stared at the flowing river. "Back then...somewhere inside me, I thought I was above this place. A lot of people saw me as the enemy, because Junes was going to ruin the shopping district. But, when I met her, she told me 'Parents are parents. You're you...'. Even if she didn't really mean it...it made me happy. Because of her, I started to think maybe this town wasn't all that bad..."

Yosuke's eyes began tearing up. "But then -"

"She died?" Souji finished the sentence as gently as he could.

Yosuke winced. "Why...? Why did she... have to... die?" His anger was unmissable. "It pisses me off! It makes me mad! I wanted to talk with her more! I wanted to get to know her better! But..." He started sobbing. "She's... not here anymore."

"Yosuke..."

"Souji...I get it now...I wanted to forget about Saki-senpai. How she's not here anymore. I wanted to forget that... I was living a boring life in the middle of nowhere. When the murders started, I got excited. I thought there was finally a point to me being in Inaba! I thought I could forget Senpai was gone... and the fact I was such a loser. I jumped at the murders and never once thought about what I was doing. I...didn't even take the first step." Tears fell down his face. "I'm sorry...Saki-senpai," he sobbed. "I'm sorry, Souji..."

Souji placed a friendly hand on his shoulder. "Don't apologize," he said with a gentle smile.

Yosuke gaped at him, his eyes red. "But...I got you involved with the case, and all I did was run away from myself..."

His friend only shook his head, the gentle smile never waning.

"But I think I'm awake now. I need to get over the fact that Saki-senpai isn't coming back. That when this case ends, I'll have nowhere to run... and I won't have changed. You made me realize that." Souji still remained silent, his support unwavering. "Souji...I think I'm all cried out."

"It'll be okay," Souji said. To prove his point, he moved into Yosuke's personal space and gave him a hug.

The brunette was surprised, but didn't fight against it. "You dumbass! That's for girls..." he complained half-heartedly before the waterworks started up again. "It hurts, dammit..."

The two friends remained by each others' side until Yosuke stopped crying. Souji then walked him
home, after making sure he'd be okay.

...End flashback...

Yosuke gazed at the horizon. "That day, I realized how much I cherished the people I met. Souji, Chie, Teddie, everybody. Even if I'm not strong enough, I want to protect those dear to me with the power I do have."

Junpei stared at him, slack jawed. "Yosuke..."

Fuuka was at a loss for words. "Yosuke-kun..."

Yosuke regained his peppy demeanor and gave them an encouraging smile. "You still have a chance with her, right?" he said to Junpei. "We're not here to play hero, so let's go find her, get out of there in time and get her home before Souji and the others notice we're gone."

"Yosuke..." Teddie began tearing up, eyes wide in admiration. "You're so brave! And smart too!" he added that last bit.

"Thanks Teddie. I try. So what do you guys say?"

Junpei bowed in gratitude. "Thanks, dude! You're one heck of a guy." He turned to Fuuka. "You're with us?"

She nodded. "Of course, Junpei-kun. Let's go."

The four made their way to the electronics department.

Inside the TV World...

Once they got to the Entrance Hall, Fuuka summoned Juno and started scanning.

"Since you both know her well, we shouldn't have trouble locating her," Yosuke stated. "Rise-chan and Teddie often needed to learn more about the person in question before they could track them down."

"I found her!" Fuuka exclaimed after a few minutes of searching. She pointed to a certain direction after dismissing Juno. "That way. She's not too far, thank goodness."

"Great! Let's move out, guys!" Junpei exclaimed, broadsword in hand.

"You got it, Junpei!" Teddie said, his clawed glove already set.

They walked for about twenty minutes until they reached the entrance of a huge building. It looked like the front of a hospital. Instead of boring white paint, the walls sported drawings of dream-like motifs and bright colors. Flowers of all sizes, colors and species covered the grounds.

"Wow, this place is really beautiful!" Fuuka said in awe.

"But a hospital?" Junpei looked around, confused. "Why this of all places?"

"This place was created from Chidori-chan's heart. This means that the many feelings she had kept well-hidden came into being in the form of this place," Teddie said. "Maybe even feelings she herself isn't aware of."
Junpei frowned. "The best times we spent together were in the hospital. Maybe that's why?" he wondered.

"Fuuka-san, can you tell us how big this place is?" Yosuke asked.

"From my initial scan, I think it has four floors," Fuuka said. "There are several Shadows in the area, but they don't seem to be as strong as the ones from Adachi's dungeon."

"Good, that'll make things easier," Yosuke said. "But before we go in, we need a game plan."

"I agree," Junpei said. "So far, we've got wind, fire and physical attacks taken care of for the front lines." He turned to Teddie. "The Ted-meister can help us with ice and healing magic if we need it. You'll also be protecting Fuuka while she's doing her job."

"Aye-aye!" Teddie made a little salute. 

Junpei adjusted his baseball cap and readied his sword. "Alright, let's do this!"

The others nodded and they walked in.

On the inside, it looked nothing like a hospital. The place of Chidori's imagination and hidden feelings had conjured up an indoor garden from paradise. The drawings on the hallway walls were bright, every corner bloomed with flowers of various species, and the doors were decorated with carvings of exquisite taste. It was like they were walking through a dream. But even so, it felt empty. It lacked something that they couldn't place.

Halfway through the first corridor, a young woman's voice floated through the air. "My funny friend came to visit me yesterday. I was so happy. We talked about a lot of things, and I even showed him my latest masterpiece. The smile he gave me was worth the hard work I put into it. But why does it hurt when I see him smile like that? And why does it seem so familiar, like a faraway dream?"

"Hey, that's Chidori's voice!" Junpei exclaimed. "Does that mean she's nearby?"

Yosuke shook his head. "I doubt it. What we're hearing is her memories, or her subconscious thoughts. This often happens when somebody is trapped in this world."

"Last week something strange occurred. In the middle of the day, the sky turned green and the full moon appeared. How is this possible? What really shocked me was that the people around me suddenly tuned into coffins. I'm supposed to be scared, right? Then how come I'm not afraid? Why does this seem familiar somehow, like someone is calling out to me...I remember the flowers he gave me, they're starting to wilt...I can't seem to put my finger on it though. This is so confusing it's making my head hurt..."

"It would seem that the memories before her 'death' are waking up slowly," Fuuka said. "But I don't know what will happen to her if she regains all her memories in her current state."

"She was so fragile, especially after she woke up." Junpei's voice shook, not wanting to think of that possible outcome. "We have to save her no matter what!" His eyes burned with determination, and charged forward.

Yosuke was right behind him. "Dude, wait up! Don't go running around like that! You'll never know when – "
Before he could finish his sentence, a small group of Shadows pounced on Junpei from the corridor on his left. He swung his broadsword just in time to block an attack. The Shadows came into full view when he backed away. There were three of them; one looked like a baby crawling on the ground on all fours, its skin a mossy green with a bright yellow flower growing out of its head. The other two looked like rag dolls from Hell, with sharp teeth and claws despite the cute red dresses they were wearing.

Fuuka wasted no time in analyzing.

"Leave this to me!" Teddie said confidently. "**Mabufudyne!**" Three ice blocks appeared and trapped the Shadows, completely immobilizing them. It didn't last long when the two ragdoll Shadows melted the ice, and made their way to the four.

"Okay, I think it's safe to assume that those doll things use fire," Junpei gulped. "Fuuka, are ya done yet?"

"Almost. Just distract it a bit longer."

Since Yosuke was faster and more agile, he successfully dodged the fire spells casted by the dolls. When one of them tried to swipe him with its claws, he ducked and slashed its mid-section open. He smirked in satisfaction when it screeched in pain, staining the red dress with black goo instead of stuffing. He then used his critical attack and gutted another the other one.

"Out of the way!" Junpei shouted, placing his Evoker at his temple. Yosuke heard the warning and used Garudyne to propel himself into the air, evading another swipe from the Shadow's deadly claws and landed safely ten feet away.

Once the other Magician was at a safe distance, Junpei pulled the trigger. "**Vorpal Blade!**" The multiple slash attack hit all three Shadows, causing heavy damage.

Fuuka finished her analysis. "I now know their weaknesses! The Dolls are weak to wind and light, and the Bambino is weak to thunder!"

"Leave those to me!" Yosuke grinned. "**Magarudyne!**" Because the Shadows were already weakened by Trismegistus, Susano-O obliterated them with his powerful gust.

"That was close!" Junpei panted, his hands on his knees. That didn't last long as his enthusiasm returned. "Alright, onto the next floor!"

Fuuka didn't inform them exactly how big the dungeon was. There were so many corridors and hallways, like a giant maze. In some parts of the maze, the odor of antiseptic and chemicals wafted through the hallways, dominating their sense of smell just like in real hospital.

They all noticed that the Shadows here have a similar theme - children's toys. So far, they encountered killer clown puppets with blowpipes that shot poisonous arrows, alphabet blocks which behaved like the Dice-type Shadows, and vicious teddy bears who nullified physical attacks (Yosuke made a lame pun directed at Teddie which had the human Shadow annoyed). One would think that being toys, they should burn easily with Junpei's fire. But as with all things Shadow-related, common logic doesn't quite apply here.

"Alright, now I'm beginning to regret not bringing the others..." Yosuke complained as they finished off another group of Shadows. "We seriously didn't think this through. How the hell are we supposed to defeat Shadows that are weak to electricity when we don't have any thunder skills, and nullifies the rest?!"
"I agree with Yosuke," Teddie said, panting hard. "We should head back."

Junpei shot them a glare. "So you're saying we should chicken out and leave Chidori here to suffer? Over my dead body!"

Yosuke wanted to throttle him, but he also empathized strongly with his fellow Magician. Stubbornness was really hard to break though when their leaders weren't here to help. All he could do now was hope for a Shadow to knock some sense into that thick skull of his.

The journey to find the next set of stairs was long and frustrating. Not only navigating the maze was a pain in the ass, fighting Shadows also started to wear them out and their supplies were running thin. By the time they found it, they were gasping for breath. Junpei was already climbing said stairs, much to Yosuke and Teddie's dismay.

"We have to be extra careful here," Fuuka said softly as she scanned the floor before they moved any further. "The Shadows here are different from the ones down below."

Yosuke sighed. "And how big is it this time?"

"Pretty much like the last one," she answered. "I do sense a much stronger presence in the middle. I have a bad feeling about this..."

A look of horror and worry crossed Teddie's face. "Most probably a guardian," he said. "We should really head back. I don't think we're strong enough to fight this thing on our own. Besides, we're tired enough as it is."

"Teddie-kun is right," Fuuka said. "Junpei-kun, I know you're worried about her, but we can't help her if we get defeated ourselves."

Junpei remained stubborn. "I'm not giving up until I know Chidori is safe!" He charged forth once more, only to be ambushed...again. This time, there were five of them; three Cupids and two Tables.

"Be careful! The Cupids are weak to thunder and nullify wind, and the Tables reflect magic attacks. Don't let your guard down!" Fuuka warned.

Yosuke's patience was wearing thin, muttering a string of curses as he kept missing the cheeky Cupids, who dodged his attacks effortlessly and shot him with their arrows. He threw the kunais at them, hoping it would damage their wings but missed, and became more irritable when one Cupid casted Makajam on him, rendering him unable to use Susano-O’s magic. Teddie couldn't help because he was busy trying to freeze the elusive Shadows but was unsuccessful, annoyed at the Shadow's taunting as his magic did not effect it.

Junpei wasn't faring so well either. His fatigue was the main reason he couldn't dish out as much damage as he wanted to. One of the Tables successfully dodged his sword and tripped the baseball cap-wearer, sending him sprawling on the floor. The Shadows started to swarm him to take advantage of his vulnerable position.

What came next wasn't what any of them expected. A girl with short, brown hair appeared in front of him and spiral kicked the Shadow, sending it flying. Another guy with light, silver hair pounded the other Table with his fists so fast and furiously until there was nothing but splintered wood afterwards.

In Yosuke and Teddie's case, they were saved when a dark purple seal glowed beneath the Cupids, engulfing them in a darkness spell. They were too dumbfounded to say anything before the caster
wagged his tail and licked Yosuke in the face.

Once the three of them regained their composure and slowly stood up, they didn't expect what came next either: Yosuke received a punch in the gut, Teddie got a karate chop to the head, and Junpei was kicked in the shins. All three of them keeled over in pain.

"What do you have to say for yourselves?" a girl's stern voice scolded. Junpei felt someone pull his ear and he was face to face with none other than Minako Arisato herself, and she wasn't pleased.

"Do you know how many ways you could have been killed just now?" Minato questioned, glaring at Teddie with his arms crossed.

"I expected better from you Yosuke," Souji scolded, towering over his best friend. "You of all people have a lot more sense than this!"

Teddie shivered under the intense gazes of the Wild Cards. "B-b-but Sensei, we c-can explain…"

Yosuke wanted to say something but the mute spell hadn't worn off, so he communicated the only way he could by moving his hands and mouth like a pantomime. Ken had to hold back his giggles by covering his mouth with his palms. Souji too would have laughed if he wasn't so angry. He threw his friend a bottle of Mouth Wash and patiently waited for an explanation.

"Mina-tan, let go!" Junpei whined, tears threatening to spill. "We can explain so please let go!"

He winced and rubbed his red ear to soothe the pain when Minako finally released him. She tapped her foot impatiently as he tried to get a hold of himself. Before he could say anything, Chidori's voice filled the air once more.

"I met a strange boy today. He was wearing a cap and had a goatee, and he seems to be my age. He looked bored, judging from the way he kept pacing in front of the movie theatre, saying something about summer vacation ending too soon. He then apologized to me for standing in my line of vision. It was weird, usually people just walk away from me but I never really cared about what they think. He stayed for a while to ask me what I was drawing. It was actually pretty sweet..."

Everyone was surprised. The SEES girls blushed a little and whispered amongst themselves, looking at Junpei and pointing at him.

"What the hell…" Shinjiro muttered. "That's Yoshino's voice, wasn't it?"

Ken perked up. "Yoshino? As in Chidori Yoshino?"

"What's going on here?" Akihiko demanded.

Fuuka told them the whole story; about Chidori's disappearance, Junpei's suspicion, her conversation with Natsuki and their meeting with Yosuke and Teddie.

"So even without the power of Persona, a person can enter this place during the Dark Hour without aid. Then that means there's an overlap between worlds precisely at that time," Naoto concluded, earning nods of agreement from everybody.

"Who's this Chidori person?" Rise asked.
"Junpei's girlfriend," Minato answered. "Or, she used to be before she lost her memories." He then told the Investigation Team about Chidori and her role in Strega, including how she sacrificed her life to save Junpei's and how she was brought back to life. Light sobs were heard amongst the Inaba girls after Minato finished his story.

"That...that was so sad and beautiful at the same time," Yukiko sniffled. "If only there was a happier ending."

Fuuka approached Rise. "I'm so glad you brought everyone in time, Rise-chan. I didn't know how long we were going to last in here."

Rise smiled at her through watery eyes. "No problem, Fuuka-chan."

Junpei couldn't believe his ears. The teal-haired girl had sold them out! "Fuuka, how come these guys know we're here? I thought we promised not to tell anyone!"

"I texted Rise-chan before we entered the TV," Fuuka said. "I'm sorry, Junpei-kun. You have to admit that your plan was pretty reckless. We could have died."

Souji sighed. He couldn't stay mad at Yosuke now that he understood why he wanted to help Junpei after listening to Minato's story, so he'd let this go. He reached out a hand to help his buddy stand up. "Come on, let's get this over with and rescue Yoshino-san."

Yosuke accepted his hand and got to his feet. "Yeah," he said, grinning sheepishly. "I deserved that though." Then his expression turned worried when he noticed the slightly dark circles under Souji's eyes. He turned to the twins and sure enough, both were rather pale and looked exhausted. "Are you sure you're up for this, partner? You don't look so good..."

Souji simply grinned. "Hey, I may not be 100% but I can still fight. You guys owe us big time after this though."

Minako sent a sweet smile with hidden intentions to her own wing man. "That's right, Junpei-kun, you owe us. I want you to treat me and my brothers to grilled steak and ramen after we're done ~ "

Junpei inwardly cried for his wallet; he wasn't going to have enough spending money after this.

Mitsuru had a different opinion about their entire situation. "You three may be the leaders, but you are still in no condition to battle. I suggest you hold back while we do the rest of the fighting."

The Wild Cards couldn't agree to that, but they willingly let the others fight the small fries on their behalf. Minato volunteered to be the main leader under Mitsuru's supervision since Souji's arm wasn't completely healed, and Shinjiro wasn't about to let Minako go to the frontlines until she was fully recovered.

Fighting Shadows became a lot easier with the entire gang on board. Thanks to Fuuka's scanning, Rise managed to update her Shadow database. It didn't take long to find the door hiding the next staircase. It was huge, like a castle's gate. It was adorned with carved flowers and leaves, painted in exquisite, rich colors. Despite its beauty, the strong stench of the hospital was unmistakable, a strong reminder of where they are.

"The guardian is just behind there," Rise said. "Are you ready?"

Kanji cracked his knuckles. "What do you think's gonna happen?" he asked rhetorically.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Fuuka said. "But if we want to rescue Chidori-chan, we'll have to
proceed."

Before they went in, they discussed and chose who would be going into battle, since everyone couldn't fight all at once. Minato took Yukari, Akihiko, Aigis and Koromaru in his team for good measure. The rest would stay out of their way to take care of Yosuke, Junpei and Teddie, and also fight off any Shadow that tried to disturb them.

Instead of a hospital room like they expected, they were now standing in front of Port Island monorail station. Everything was covered by fog, but they could make out a few shops in the distance; Raflessia, the movie theatre and the outdoor café. Despite the lack of light, flowers of different colors were blooming everywhere.

"This is where Chidori and I first met," Junpei said. "Although I don't remember all the flowers."

"Chidori-san must have held this place close to her heart, even if she doesn't remember its significance," Ken supplied. "Is it possible that all of these are her suppressed memories?"

Before anyone else could add something to that theory, a loud shriek could be heard and the ground started to shake a little. A figure appeared before them; it was distinguishably female, tall, and lanky, and she wore what looked like a red and black jumpsuit with yellow markings. She was holding a dagger in one hand, and a bowl of fire in the other. Her head and face was a sheep's skull and her hair was made of the legendary Golden Fleece.

"No way!" Junpei breathed. "It's Medea! How is this even possible?"

"Just like last time, I couldn't sense her presence that well," Fuuka said. "This is one of her unique abilities, and her most troublesome."

Rise summoned Kanzeon. "Fuuka-chan, I don't think that's a Persona. It's a Shadow that takes the form of Medea."

"Of course, that makes perfect sense," Souji said, snapping his fingers. "Ken was right. This dungeon is made up of her suppressed memories, but since her Persona fused with Junpei-san's then only thing that this place can create is a copy."

Minato stepped up and took his place as leader. "Alright guys, my team and I will take her on. Just make sure Junpei doesn't get in my way, or other Shadows for that matter. Fuuka, you're on support." Yukari, Aigis, Akihiko, and Koromaru stayed while the rest backed away.

Wasting no time, Minato gave out orders. "Koro, I need you to block any fire and darkness spells Shadow Medea will throw at us. Me, Aigis and Akihiko-senpai are on full assault. Yukari will multitask on long range attacks and healing. Understood?"

"Roger!"

"Arf!"

"Good. We're going to rescue Chidori no matter what it takes."

Shadow Medea attacked first by casting Maragidyne, which Koromaru thought fast and casted Masukukaja on his teammates. They successfully dodged the attack, giving them the opening they were waiting for.

"Dionysus, Zodyne!"
"Ziodyne!"

"God's Hand!"

The triple onslaught worked very well. Shadow Medea took heavy damage. But she wasn't about to give up easily, because the fire in her bowl glowed a bit brighter when she casted a debuff spell. They felt unusually weak after that.

"Guys, defend yourselves. She's charging her next attack. It's going to cause a lot of damage!" Fuuka warned.

"Shit!" Akihiko cursed.

"Aigis, quick! Increase our defense!" Minato ordered.

Aigis casted Marakukaja, a few seconds before Shadow Medea released a powered up Maragidyne. For once, Akihiko was glad that Minato put Mitsuru out of the fight. Koromaru managed to protect their blue-haired leader from getting burned while the rest evaded the attack by a hair's breadth. Yukari healed them all immediately.

"Time to finish this," Minato said firmly. "Norn, Panta Rhei!"

Yukari joined in. "Garudyne!"

The wind spell worked well against Shadow Medea, but she still had a few tricks up her sleeves. The flowers around them began to shrivel up and die as she sucked their life force and fixed her wounds.

"Tch! Just like Yoshino," Akihiko said, readying his stance. "What are we supposed to do now, Leader?"

"Just because those flowers helped heal her doesn't mean she's completely fine," Minato said. "We're just going to have to attack her relentlessly until she's beaten. Show no mercy!"

Shadow Medea didn't stand a chance when everyone blasted her with a combination of wind and thunder after Aigis buffed up their strength. By the time they were done, the Shadow and the flowers around them disintegrated into ash and smoke. The stairs to the next floor was revealed to be the escalator to the monorail station.

After the battle, Minato went to check up on Junpei, Yosuke and Teddie. They were doing much better after consuming some of the Fox's leaves which Souji had brought, and healed by Yukiko. Rise was not far, scanning the next floor for Shadows or any other strong enemies. After a few minutes of rest, she reported that the next floor had nothing but normal Shadows, although she did feel a much stronger presence on the top floor.

They navigated halfway through the third floor when Chidori's voice could be heard again, but this time accompanied by the voices of others which none of them recognized.

"Mister, why didn't Aya-chan and Tora-kun come home last night? What happened?"

A man's deep voice answered, "It is none of your concern, Yoshino. Go to bed like a good little girl and stop asking unnecessary questions."

"But the orphanage keeps getting emptier and emptier by the day. Where did everybody go?"
"Don't make me punish you again, you insolent brat! Go the bed!"

A woman's voice came this time. "It is time for the testing. Where is the remaining female subject?"

"Please, I don't want to go through there again. It hurts so much! Let me go!" Chidori continued to cry, kicking and screaming.

"You will do as you are told, girl!" The sound of a hard slap followed.

"Kirijo-sama and Ikutsuki-san will be most pleased with the experiment. Three children have made it this far, but the losses will be worth it if they survive the next phase."

"Excellent. With the administration of the drugs, they will be able to control their power once the whole thing is complete."

No words could be used to describe the looks on SEES' faces, especially the ones on Mitsuru, Junpei, Shinjiro and Minako. As if he could read his twin's mind, Minato also wore the same expression as her.

"More memories that she doesn't remember…" Junpei said, trying to hold back his anger. "She told me she couldn't remember much from her childhood, except being surrounded by white."

Akihiko couldn't stand it anymore when Mitsuru's shoulders shook, trying to keep her expression under control even though she wanted to cry. But he held back, knowing that she wanted to keep their relationship a secret. However, seeing her in this fragile state was unacceptable. So he comforted her like he would a friend, and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "It's not your fault. You and your father were never at fault in this. Please don't blame yourself."

"I know, but I just can't help it!" Mitsuru said, her voice muffled behind her hands. "It's...it's just too much...and I know there's still more to uncover of these crimes!"

Shinjiro snorted softly at his friend's public display of affection, but caught himself when he thought of Minako. Just like those Strega freaks, he took the same damn pills for the exact same reasons. One time, he was forced to take it in front of Minako when his coughing went out of control. It felt like a knife stabbed him in the heart when he saw her expression of pain. But because she understood, she kept his sickness a secret from the others. He would have to make it up to her one of these days.

The Investigation Team was at a loss on what to do. Souji had a vague sense of what was going on from what the twins had told him, and he's going to pry more details later. For now, they had to move fast if they wanted to rescue Chidori. "Come on guys. We have to hurry!" he prompted, leading the way. Mitsuru hastily regained her composure and followed.

Fighting their way through even more nightmarish-looking toys, they finally found the stairs to the top floor. They stopped to assess their situation and plan their next step.

"I sense two Shadows up there," Fuuka said. "It feels familiar, but at the same time different."

"The energy readings are like Shadow Medea's," Rise reported. "Most likely something her memories created, but it's stronger this time."

Souji was still not allowed to battle, so the twins took their roles as field leaders. They slowly ascended the stairs.
Just like the second floor, they were standing in the middle of the square in front of Port Island monorail station. However, instead of daytime, it was the Dark Hour. Chidori was chained to a lamp post not far away, but what had SEES really agitated were the two figures guarding her. One was tall and bone skinny, deathly pale and wasn't wearing a shirt, showing off the tattoos on his body. He had long, white, wavy hair and was holding a long-barreled revolver. The other one was slightly shorter and wore glasses, holding a suitcase in one hand and tossing a ball in the other. He had cropped blue hair and looked like a nerd. Both of them had the trademark Shadow’s golden eyes, grinning maliciously at the Persona-users.

"Damn it, what is that hippie Jesus and the cyber freak doing here?" Shinjiro said through gritted teeth. The scars on his chest began to throb at the sight of the gun.

"These are Chidori's memories, remember?" Ken said, readying his spear. "It will be a pleasure to take them out for a second time."

Minato took charge. "We'll divide into two groups for each Shadow. Aigis, Metis, Mitsuru-senpai and Ken are with me." He turned to his sister and gave her a nod. "You take the second group. Your call."

"I'll take Kanji-kun and Yukari-chan," Minako said. She then turned to Shinjiro and Junpei, biting her bottom lip. "I want to know if you two can handle this?" she asked them seriously.

Shinjiro merely cracked his knuckles. "Are you kidding me? After that bastard shot me and put you through hell, I'm more than ready to kick his ass!"

"I don't care if he's already dead, as long as I get to do the honors this time," Junpei said, determination burning in his eyes.

"Souji-kun, I need you and the others to get Chidori to safety once we create an opening," Minato told his surrogate brother. "These guys aren't going to give in without a fight."

"Just like with Shadow Medea, they still have the same properties when they were alive," Fuuka reported. "Please be careful. They're still dangerous."

Minato zeroed in on Shadow Jin and attempted to slash him. Aigis joined him by shooting ammo from her fingers. Shadow Jin evaded both attacks successfully. While running, he pulled a grenade out of his pocket, pulled the safety pin with his teeth and threw it at Minato. Aigis summoned Athena just in time to protect him with her shield.

"Bufudyne!"

Mitsuru and Metis trapped Shadow Jin in a giant ice block, and Ken took the opportunity add more damage. "Ziodyne!" His thunder spell struck the ice block with the Shadow inside it, causing medium damage.

Furious, Shadow Jin summoned his Persona, Moros, and aimed an Agidyne at Mitsuru.

"I expected that!" Mitsuru said. "I summon thee. Bufudyne!" The ice attack neutralized the fire spell before it could reach and hurt her. She then proceeded to slash him repeatedly.

Just like in their previous battle with Jin, he would target his opponent's weaknesses and use it to his advantage. Minato had to act fast. "Odin, Thunder Reign!" It didn't miss, much to his relief.
Shadow Jin was paralyzed after getting hit, and Minato didn't waste any time by ordering an All-Out Attack, causing heavy damage.

Meanwhile, Minako and her team were busy fighting Shadow Takaya and his Persona, Hypnos. They didn't have trouble taking a swing at the hippie when he paused to cast Mind Charge. The only problem was when he casted elemental or almighty spells on them, it would cause a lot of damage to the surroundings. Fearing for her friends and Chidori's safety, Minako attacked him relentlessly with power charged physical attacks. Shinjiro and Junpei weren't holding back either. Kanji didn't like Shadow Takaya the moment he set eyes on him and fought with all his might.

"Chi You, Primal Force!"

"God's Hand!"

"Vile Assault!"

The triple combo of heavy physical attacks was devastating to Shadow Takaya to say the least. It managed to piss him off enough to distract his attention away from Chidori. Minako was pleased when she saw from the corner of her eye that Souji and the others managed to free Chidori and take her away to a safe distance.

"You'll pay for what you did to her, damnit!" Junpei hollered. "Agidyne!"

Yukari wasn't about to be left behind. "Garudyne!" Her wind spell boosted Junpei's fire. They attacked him again and again until he was burnt to a crisp, back up by a flurry of physical attacks.

Minato and his team defeated Shadow Jin about the same time. Both teams made their way to Souji and the rest, where they were guarding a sleeping Chidori.

"Is she alright?!" Junpei asked frantically.

"I think she's just exhausted because of the fog," Yukiko said. She rummaged through their bag of supplies, took out a packet of Revival Beads and popped one into Chidori's mouth.

Chidori began to stir a few moments later. Her dark brown eyes blinked rapidly, trying to make out the faces in the fog. Chie kindly took off her glasses and placed them on the red-head's face. "There, much better!" she said, smiling.

As Chidori looked at every single person around her, she smiled when she saw one familiar face; Junpei's. A tiny blush made its way to her cheeks when he kneeled beside her.

"Chidori, are you okay?" Junpei asked, taking her hands in his.

"I'm fine Junpei. I knew you'd come for me."

His face turned red as a ripe tomato. "O-of course. I did promise I'd protect you, didn't I? Not that you'd remember..."

"Of course I remember, silly. You told me that at the hospital, where you would visit me everyday after school."

If Junpei's eyes could open up any wider, they did at this point. "Wait, what? You remember that?"

"I remember everything, including all of you...and Tartarus..." she said the last word in almost a whisper. She then looked at the faces of the Investigation Team. "I don't recognise any of you,
Mitsuru was now stroking her chin thoughtfully. "This is fascinating. After we defeated the Shadows of those two, she regained every memory that happened during the Dark Hour back in 2009."

"But how come she didn't get a Persona after we defeated the Shadows?" Rise inquired.

"It could be because Yoshino-san relinquished Medea to Junpei-san. And Izanami is no longer here to reawaken her Shadow, if she still has it that is," Souji answered. "The ones we fought were merely her suppressed memories."

"That's right," Teddie interjected. "The nature of this place is to reveal a person's heart. I guess once we defeated her inner demons, Chidori-chan's memories were reawakened easily. Then again, you said she used to have a Persona, though that might not mean anything."

"This is fine and all, but can we please get out of here?" Chie said, interrupting everyone's thoughts. "We should probably take her to the hospital anyway."

"I agree," Naoto said. "We should take every precaution to ensure that Yoshino-san is in a stable state."

Junpei vigilantly stayed by Chidori's side until they made it to the Entrance Hall. Yosuke helped lead Chie by holding her hand so she wouldn't fall behind. After they exited the TV World, Junpei took Chidori to the hospital, accompanied by Mitsuru and Akihiko.

The rest decided to head back home after having a meal at the food court - at Yosuke, Teddie and Junpei's expenses, naturally.

Chie jogged on her way back home, distracted by her thoughts. She was glad things turned out well, and though she was a little angry at Yosuke for being so reckless and dragging everybody into that mess, she couldn't really stay mad at him once she knew his reasons. If only he could get over Saki-senpai's death and realize that she cares about him more than just a friend...

However, she didn't expecting to see him sitting near the river, staring blankly at the water. For a minute, Chie simply stood and watched him. His headphones were over his ears, and assumed he had music blasting on like usual.

A light breeze passed by and ruffled his hair around the headphones and she found herself staring much longer than intended. She sighed. 'I can't believe I fell for an idiot like him. Does that make me an idiot too?" Even though he seemed to be sulking with his knees pulled up to his chest, he managed to look handsome.

Chie dared to take a few steps closer. "Yosuke?"

There was no response. 'Figures...’ 'She rolled her eyes. She was about four or five feet away from him, just barely able to see the frame of his face – it was narrow without being skimpy, and masculine without being creepy for her tastes.

Again, she sighed. 'I suppose now is as good a time as ever.'

"Um, Yosuke, I know you're probably not listening at all, but I just thought you should know- " She froze when she saw him move, fiddling with his MP3 player before resuming his staring contest with the water.
Chie let out a breath of relief before continuing. "Well, I-I know what you're thinking, and I'm not being a wimp for not actually saying this to your face, it's just… nerve-wracking to have to face my feelings like this because I... I do like your company." She laughed nervously. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that... I like you, Yosuke... and I have for a while. You're an idiot, but you can be smart sometimes. You're so loyal, too. But you were, are, and always will be too preoccupied with Saki Konishi to pay me any mind at all, so it's alright..." It hurt her immensely to say this, but she knew it was true. Looking at Yosuke again, she bit her lip. 'The unattainable guy... for me, at least. He's not even listening, anyway... Why do I even bother saying the first thing that pops into my mind?'

Turning on her heel, she walked away for a few paces when a voice broke the silence. "You really think that, Chie?"

She gave a squeak and whirled around to see Yosuke, headphones off and around his neck, standing and facing her. He looked perplexed.

"What the?! W-w-were you listening to that whole thing...?!

Yosuke rubbed his neck, scuffing his shoe against the ground. "Well, let's just say I never had any music playing..."

Scowling, Chie stormed up to him and punched his shoulder harshly. He let out a wail of pain. "Ow, what the hell, Chie?!" He rubbed his shoulder, glaring at her. "What was that for?!"

"You could have said something instead of making me look like a moron!"

"I didn't know that you wanted my input!"

"D-does it hurt that much? Jeez, I'm sorry... I guess I don't know my own strength." She moved her hand to massage his shoulder, but it ended up right on top of his. Both third-year students blushed.

"N-now will you answer my question?" Yosuke asked in a low voice.

Chie blinked. "What?"

"Do you really think that I'm still yearning after Saki-senpai?"

Chie tried looking at many places; the ground, the grass, the river, his shoulder, their hands, anywhere but his eyes. She soon realized that when they were this close, eye contact was actually the least awkward. "Well, y-yeah, I guess..." Her cheeks warmed.

Yosuke sat down. "Chie..." he started, patting the grass beside him as an invitation. She opted to sit next to him, beside the shoulder that was in pain. "While it may be true that I did have a huge crush on Saki-senpai for a little while, I...I came to realize that the feeling wasn't mutual. I had always suspected it, so it wasn't too difficult to get over her. Especially after what went on in her dungeon before I fought my Shadow." He scratched his cheek in embarrassment. "Besides, if it weren't for a certain girl, I'd probably still be visiting her grave on a daily basis..."

That piqued her interest. "You like someone? Who is it?"

Yosuke looked at the other direction. "She was never someone I'd even think about falling for, like ever. But one day, she ran off ahead of the rest of us and I was really worried about her, so I did everything I could to get to her and make sure she didn't get hurt. And while Saki-senpai caused me emotional grief for some time, this girl definitely causes more physical pain on a constant basis..." He continued to tend to his shoulder, even though it didn't hurt that much anymore.
Looking over at Chie, he could see her gears ticking. His eyes widened upon realizing what he had just said, so he quickly moved the conversation forward. "B-but enough about that! It's getting late and we both should be going home. I don't wanna get you in trouble." Standing quickly, he made a run for the stairs. "I'll see you tomorrow!"

Chie raced after him. "Wait!"

He turned around to face her. "Y-yeah?"

She gave him a sudden kiss on the cheek, causing the pair to go scarlet. "T-thanks…"

"N-no problem…"

"Oh, and Yosuke?"

"Yeah?" Their voices were nearing whispers.

"I'm glad that our feelings are mutual," Chie smiled, her blush growing darker.

Yosuke smiled and leaned down to capture her lips in a quick, sweet kiss. "Me too, Chie. Me too…"

Not too far, a certain silverette and a raven-haired girl watched them from behind a tree with pleased smiles, glad that their best friends had finally realized their love for each other.

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Inaba Municipal Hospital, evening…

After thorough tests on Mitsuru's insistence, the doctor didn't find anything wrong with Chidori, only that she was exhausted. He prescribed her multivitamins and told her to get some extra rest.

"That went surprisingly well," Akihiko said, relieved the whole ordeal was over. "The only problem is, where she will stay for the night."

"Indeed. I guess she will have to stay at the inn with us for the time being," Mitsuru said to Chidori. "But you will have to sleep in a single room. Ours is crowded right now."

Junpei held up one of Chidori's hands. "Ya hear that, Chidorin? She's gonna let you stay with us!"

"B-but, I don't want to burden you!" she protested, eyes wide. Then she looked annoyed, slapping Junpei's arm. "I told you not to call me that!"

Mitsuru's expression softened. "Please, I insist. It's the least I can do for you right now." The guilt of having Chidori suffer under her family's brutal experiments was still eating at her.

Not having the energy to argue, Chidori reluctantly followed Junpei and the two seniors to Amagi Inn. Junpei wouldn't stop chattering the whole way, at one point Akihiko had to smack him because it was getting on his nerves.

Chidori's nervousness ebbed away at the hilarity of it all. Despite regaining the bad memories that she would rather forget, all of that didn't matter as long as she was by her beloved's side. It was those bad memories that reunited them, after all.

They were greeted by the rest of SEES including Souji and Yukiko. After Mitsuru and Akihiko explained the situation, Yukiko left to take care of Chidori's room arrangements.
After dinner, the girls practically dragged the gothic lolita to their room, much to Junpei's displeasure. The guys didn't bother to stop them since they weren't exactly thrilled to be involved in the dreaded 'girl talk'.

"So Chidori, how long will you be staying here for?" Yukari asked. She and the rest of the girls were already changed into their sleepwear.

"I don't know," Chidori answered. "Mitsuru-san told me I have to leave soon because she doesn't want me to be in danger. You guys are still fighting Shadows, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I guess she does have a point," Fuuka said. "You'll have to stay away from televisions whenever the Dark Hour occurs though, so there's that."

"Then stay until the Summer Festival is over," Minako suggested. "I'm pretty sure Junpei-kun wants to spend more time with you, and why not have some fun while you're at it?"

At the mention of the festivals, the girls got excited and began to talk about their plans for the summer, what games they would play and food they wanted to eat. Girl talk ensued right after shopping, clothes and gossip.

Yukiko poked her head in. "Excuse me guys, Yoshino-san's room is ready."

They were a little disappointed that their 'girl time' had to end so soon, but they understood Chidori's need to rest. Minako and Yukari were more than happy to loan her some of their clothes and even offered to help her get settled in.

After helping Chidori, Yukari had a sudden idea. "Hey, let's take a quick dip in the hot springs before bed. It's been a long day, and I could use some relaxation."

Minako brightened at that. "Why not? I don't feel sleepy right now anyway." The two girls took all their necessary bathing items and head for the hot springs.

It wasn't long before Yukari felt sleepy and she was ready to hit the sack. Minako decided to take a short walk in the garden before doing so, still clad in a yukata. Her hair was let down for it to dry faster.

An almost-full moon was out tonight, and illuminated the garden with its pale light, but not as bright. Fireflies were dancing among the trees and bushes around the koi pond, adding an extra touch to the atmosphere. Minako felt her worries melting away as she stared at the beautiful scenery.

Footsteps could be heard somewhere behind her. She turned around and saw Shinjiro walking towards her. He was wearing his usual black turtleneck and pants, without his peacoat and beanie for once.

"Hey," he greeted, standing beside her.

"Senpai, how did you know I was here?"

"I saw you walk out of the hot springs with Takeba after Aki challenged me to a ping-pong game earlier…that guy doesn't know when to quit," he groaned, rubbing the back of his head. "It went on for a while because your brothers decided to join in. Goddammit, are they competitive."

She giggled a little before staring at the koi swimming in the pond, admiring how their scales glittered like jewels under the moonlight.
Shinjiro couldn't take his eyes off her. 'She's gorgeous,' he thought. It was rare to see her hair let down like this, and he preferred it like that. The moonlight was shining down on her face at all the right angles, making her look more like an ethereal being than human. He started to doubt himself, wondering why he deserved to be in her presence.

"Senpai, is there anything wrong? You're awfully quiet," she asked, breaking his thoughts.

He blushed. 'Crap, I hope she didn't catch me staring at her!' The last thing he needed was to be labeled as a lecher. "I…uhh…I was just thinking about something, that's all," he finally answered. It was true in a way, as he remembered the monologue he had when they listened in on Chidori's memories of her childhood back in the TV World.

"What kind of stuff?"

"I was just thinking about how to make it up to you." Shinjiro promised himself there and then that he won't lie to her anymore. "For saving me from myself and staying by my side even after all the things I've done, after all I put you through," he cupped her right cheek. "Three years worth of time, I swear I'll make it up to you…and to the others as well."

"Senpai…"

Shinjiro chuckled lightly at the honorific. "You don't have to call me that, you know." He paused for a bit. "Shinji is fine. And only because it's you."

Minako's entire face turned crimson, which he found to be cute. "B-b-b-but…"

He now had his hands out of his pockets and held her face with both, silencing her with a kiss. Shinjiro knew this was out of character for him, but because they were alone, and only in front of her that he could let his guard down this much and expose all his emotions. When he pulled away, her face was burning. Feeling proud of himself, Shinjiro decided to tease her some more. "By the way, you look hot in a yukata. I can't wait for the summer festival," he whispered in her ear.

Minako let out a squeak and bury her face in Shinjiro's chest, the only thing she could do to cover her embarrassment at the moment. "Mou...Shinji!" she whined. Her shyness didn't last long as she let out a giggle. "The guys aren't going to let you live this down, you know…"

"I don't care," he said, wrapping his arms around her. "As long as I get to stay with you."

They stayed like that for a while, watching the fireflies. When Minako didn't move or make a sound, Shinjiro realized that she had just fallen asleep in his arms. 'Only you…' His chest felt light as he picked her up and headed back inside the inn.

"Hey, have you guys noticed how Junpei didn't make a single perverted comment to us last night?" Yukari questioned the SEES girls over breakfast the next morning. They invited Yukiko to join them, which she gladly accepted. It was rare for her to have breakfast with friends, so she very much enjoyed the company.

Fuuka put down her chopsticks, and looked deep in thought. "Now that you mention it, he was rather quiet." She then waved her hand as if to brush the statement aside. "No way, that can't be. He's Junpei-kun, always loud and noisy."

"That can't be right," Minako said. "Not a day passes by without him making one dirty joke."

"He and Yosuke-kun are very much alike. But the only person he's like that with is Chie…"
Yukiko commented. She gasped when the other girls turned sharply to look at her.

"That's it!" they cried out in unison, but quickly quieted down when they were shushed by the waitresses.

A group couple walked in. "Good morning, ladies!" Junpei greeted politely. Chidori was right beside him, and they were holding hands. "Don't wait up for us. We're heading out to Junes."

"Bye!" Chidori waved.

The girls snickered behind their backs when the two of them left the inn. Yukari cleared her throat and stated "I rest my case. He's officially whipped! Now let's focus on another topic. Minako-chan, why was Shinjiro-senpai carrying you back to our room last night?" She grinned when her best friend's face turned cherry red.

"N-n-none of your b-b-business!" Minako shrieked, ignoring another reprimand from a waitress. Girlish laughter ensued at her expense.

A group of familiar guys entered just as it died down. "Good morning. You girls look like you're having fun," Minato greeted. The girls scooted over to let the guys join them.

"Mind sharing with us?" Souji asked. He noticed Minako's red face and concluded that the other girls were making fun of his surrogate sister.

Shinjiro greeted his girlfriend with a smile as he took a seat beside her, but it was replaced with a scowl when the other girls stared at him, as if expecting something. He didn't like it one bit. "What?!!" he demanded.

"Nothing," Yukari said sweetly, resting her chin on interlaced fingers. "Just some friendly interrogation is all." The other girls smirked at her statement.

Not wanting her boyfriend to go ballistic in public, Minako hastily changed the subject to Dojima and Nanako's return to Inaba, turning the awkward mood cheerful once again.

Chidori wanted to buy some art supplies and basic clothing since she didn't have anything but the clothes on her back. She wore a pair of jeans and a white blouse which Yukari and Minako let her borrow. Her long red hair was tied up in a high ponytail with a cute butterfly clip on the right.

This change of style was entirely new for Junpei. He never saw her in anything but that white Lolita dress and the dagger headband she used to wear. She was cute in that get-up but this… She looked stunning! All he could do was stare at her while she browsed the aisles of the stationary department.

After shopping, the two of them went to the food court to rest. As he paid for their drinks, the smell of grilled steak caught his nose. He cringed when he remembered just how much his friends ate the day before, and how thin his wallet had become. Luckily, there was still enough to buy him and Chidori a decent meal on their date. *Technically, this can be considered a date, right?* he thought sheepishly.

They walked pass the Samegawa flood plain before heading back. Chidori was so entranced by the beautiful scenery, she decided to stop at the gazebo and use the new items she bought to paint a picture.

Again, Junpei was mesmerized. *If only she realizes how pretty she is right now...* he sighed
mentally.

Halfway through her painting, Chidori put down her work and decided to speak up. "You've been staring at me the whole day, you know."

"Huh, what's that?" Junpei said, blinking dumbly. If Yukari and Minako were here, they would have made fun of how stupid he looked right now.

"Is there something wrong with my face, or what I'm wearing?"

"What? No way!" Junpei scoffed. "What gives you that idea?"

"It's just that I'm not used to wearing these kind of clothing," she admitted shyly, looking at the ground. "Do I look weird, Junpei?"

Junpei took off his cap and scratched his head, trying to find the right words. "Uhh... no, you're not weird at all, Chidori. You actually look good wearing normal clothes. It's refreshing."

Chidori's pale cheeks turned a healthy shade of pink. "You think so? Everybody just calls me a freak, and I don't think I can fit in anywhere..."

"I don't think you're a freak, and neither do the other," Junpei assured her. He remembered the conversation with Chidori's dorm mate on the phone yesterday, and frowned. "But you are different than other girls. I guess that's why I'm attracted to you in the first place," he added.

"Really?"

"Yeah!"

"Are you sure you didn't pick that line out of a movie?" Chidori teased, the edge of her lips tugged upwards into a sweet smile.

"Hey, I resent that!" Junpei retorted playfully. He began to fantasize about seeing that smile every day when he wakes up in the morning. 'I'd be the luckiest guy in the universe!'

Chidori returned to painting her picture, not minding that Junpei was staring at her again with that goofy grin on his face.

Surprisingly, he was the first to speak up when she finished. "You know... about what you said earlier. You don't have to worry about fitting in anywhere," he said.

"Why do you say that?" Chidori questioned, looking at him with curiosity.

"Do you remember when you sacrificed yourself for me, and how Medea fused with Hermes and created Trismegistus?" Chidori nodded. "Then that's your answer right there. You have and always will belong here." Junpei touched his chest above his heart. "You're a part of me now, Chidori. Don't worry about what others think."

Stunned, she just kept quiet.

"I don't think the others blame you for what happened, either. I'm sure Mina-tan, Yuka-tan, and the whole gang already accepted you as our friend. So, whatever it is that you're having trouble with, we'll try our best to help. Don't forget that." He gave her a huge and sincere smile.

He was disappointed when Chidori's reaction was the opposite of what he expected. Instead of the clichéd doe-like eyes staring at him with admiration, the red-head was laughing so hard she was
clutching her stomach. "Haha...I never thought...hehe...that you'd be the one...hehe...t-to say something so wise...hahaha...!"

"Chidori...you're mean!" Junpei pouted. Suddenly he felt a soft pressure on his right cheek, and turned a bright crimson when he realized that Chidori had just kissed him.

Said girl was blushing as well. It was obvious she had never done it before and hid her face behind her hands. 'I can't believe I just did that!' she repeated in her head again and again.

Junpei began to feel bold. "Y'know, I just realized something. You've probably never had your first kiss, right?"

"Wh-what are you t-talking about?" Chidori stuttered, feeling very small all of a sudden.

Junpei was a winner when it came to recklessness, so naturally the next thing he did was on pure impulse. He bent down and captured Chidori's lips with his. The gothic lolita gasped in surprise, unsure of how to react next. She was a bit disappointed when he finally pulled away, though.

"There, I took your first kiss and you took mine," the cap-wearing teen smiled. "Now we're even."

"You idiot..." Chidori chided, but smiling at the same time. "I love you."

He gently bumped his forehead with hers. "I love you too, Chidorin."

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Nanako was sweeping the front of her house. She was so happy to be back home, even if she was only away for three days. She missed her big brother terribly as well, so she couldn't wait for him to come back. Dojima even decided to buy them a special sushi dinner, so when Souji returns, it'll be a pleasant family reunion.

"Lovely day today," a boy's greeted her. "The sky is so beautiful and the sun feels so nice."

Nanako looked around, trying to find the voice's owner. She saw him resting his body against a nearby tree, staring at the sky. It was young boy around her age with a very pale complexion, short faded black hair and bright blue eyes with a mole under his left eye. He was wearing black-and-white striped pajamas and sandals.

"Hello?" Nanako called.

"Oh, hi!" He smiled at her. Nanako immediately got the impression that he was lonely. "Sorry if I startled you. I was just admiring the sky. I haven't seen such a beautiful day in a long time."

"Oh, are you new here? I've never seen you before."

"...Yes... I've just moved here..." the boy said a bit hesitantly. "This place is so different from where I came from." He became silent and was no longer smiling.

Nanako had a feeling that he probably didn't have many friends back at his previous place. Just like how her big brother used to be. "Do you...do you want to play with me?" she asked shyly. "He looks like a jailbird, with stripy pajamas," she thought.

The boy nodded to himself, with a finality that was a bit too much for a child simply agreeing to a session of play. "Okay!"

Nanako smiled and grabbed his hand. "C'mon! Let's go!"
The boy was surprised at the sudden gesture, but felt warm inside as she took him to the playground nearby. They played tag, hide and seek, hopscotch, all sort of games. Nanako was enjoying herself, but the boy seemed to be having fun like there would be no tomorrow.

When the sun started to set, Nanako frowned. "I have to go home…it's getting dark. Dad and Big Bro should be back soon."

The boy wore a similar expression. "Me too… My… brother… is probably waiting for me," he said. "Can I… can I see you again?"

"Of course!" Nanako beamed. "Oh by the way, my name's Nanako. What's your name?"

He gave a tiny smile. "My name is… Pharos." He bowed, took Nanako's hand and gave it a light kiss. "We're gonna be great friends, Nanako-chan."

Nanako blushed at the gesture. "Sure, Pharos-kun!"

They parted ways for the day.

Chapter End Notes

Junpei likes to give nicknames to the people he often teases, especially Yukari and Chidori. In the English localization, he calls Yukari "Yuka-tan" and Chidori "Chidorita". But I like to stick to the Japanese version, which he uses "Yukari-cchi" and "Chidorin" respectively.
Minako hummed to the music of her MP3 player as she walked Koromaru to the shrine. He was whining about it earlier and an adorable look was all it took for her to cave in. 'Maybe I'll stop by Aiya's later to get some food for Aniki, or maybe steak skewers? Mou~ why are all the food in this place so tasty?' she grumbled to herself, trying to focus on the walk.

Koromaru shot up to the shrine the moment they arrived at the stairs. Minako sighed and followed him. When they reached the top, someone else beat them to it. "Kanji-kun, what are you doing here?" she smiled at the sight of the former delinquent.

Kanji snapped out of his trance. "Huh…what?" He stared at her dumbly. It seemed that he didn't notice their presence and was staring out at nothing, his expression troubled.

The auburn-haired girl sat beside him in front of the offertory box. "You seem to have a lot on your mind. Care to share?"

Koromaru was sniffing around the shrine, getting used to the place. He barked a few times and ran around the area. The Fox and her cubs heard his barking and came out of their hiding place. Soon enough, the little ones were chasing Koromaru in a game of tag, under the watchful eye of their mother.

Kanji smiled at the scene. "Just thinkin' about stuff. Nothin' important," he answered. Y

"You know," Minako started, staring at the clouds. "The summer festival is just a few days away. I'm really excited to see what the countryside has to offer. It's been a long time since I've been to one, after all."

"Well, it used to be a lot of fun. Last year's murder cases freaked everybody out so it wasn't that exciting."

"Really? Then I hope this year's will be a blast!" She beamed excitedly. "So tell me, who are you going with? It's an unspoken rule that nobody but Yukari-chan is going with Aniki, and Junpei-kun will spend some time with Chidori before she returns to Iwatodai."

The young man's cheeks turned a light shade of pink. "None of yer business," he retorted, looking away.

Minako's devious mind had an idea of who he was thinking about. She carefully laid out a trap to get him to confess. "Hey, can I ask you for a favor?"

He wasn't paying attention to her that much, continuing to obsess over his thoughts. "Yeah, sure. What is it?"

"I need you to help me with Shinji's yukata. He hates any kind of gathering, and I know for a fact that he doesn't own one, so I was wondering if you can help me talk him into it since you're a guy and all, and you do make pretty cute outfits."

The unusual request caught his attention. "Eh, that's it?" He raised a thin, pierced eyebrow. "Just...make him a yukata?"
"Yeah, if it's not too much trouble." Wait for it… "In exchange, you can ask him for some advice on how to ask Naoto-chan out!"

Kanji choked on his own spit, face exploding with different types of colors. He had been found out.

Taking pity on the junior, Minako slapped his back harshly to help clear out his airway. "Oh come on, Kanji-kun. There's no need to be embarrassed. You were kinda easy to read," she said amusingly.

"B-but…what if she rejects me?"

"You worry too much. Why don't you just man up and ask her first?"

"I c-can't…"

"Kanji-kun, as cute and endearing as I find your shyness towards her, you can't stay like this forever." Minako patted his back softly. "You better ask her soon before somebody else does." She stood up and walked down the stairs. "I'm heading to Souzai Daigaku for a snack. Can you watch over Koro-chan for a while? Thanks!" She skipped off without waiting for a reply.

Kanji continued to wallow in self-pity. She wasn't the first to tell him that; Souji-senpai already told him the same thing.

…Flashback…

Kanji dejectedly walked down the school hallway after the bell rang. Lately, he had been hearing rumours about Naoto and Senpai. The other students had seen them talking and spending time together after classes, gossiping about it non-stop. At first, he thought nothing of it. Naoto recently joined the team, so Senpai must be trying to befriend her to get her to be more comfortable with the team, the same thing Senpai had done for him.

As the rumors escalated, he started to notice how much Senpai and Naoto had in common: they were both very intelligent, quick witted, and loved to read. No wonder they clicked so well. The thought only made Kanji depressed. There was no way in Hell he could compete with Senpai, the most popular guy in school. Girls flocked him like ants around a lump of sugar. While Kanji Tatsumi… he was feared, and people gave him odd looks about his hobbies.

"Kanji?"

Startled, he spun around and was face-to-face with the last person he wanted to see at that moment. "Yo…Senpai…" he greeted weakly.

"You look troubled. Is something bothering you?"

"'S no big deal," Kanji lied. A part of him wanted to confront Senpai about the rumours, but the other part just wanted to get far away as possible.

Souji was unconvinced. "You're a poor liar." He crossed his arms, expression stern. "Let's go to the riverbed. We can talk there without being bothered."

The freshman sighed in defeat. When Senpai used that tone of voice, there was no use talking him out of it.

They walked side-by-side to the Samegawa plains in silence. He avoided Souji's gaze, so the silverette decided to make the first move. "You heard about the rumors, haven't you?"
Kanji stopped dead for a moment before looking away. "S'bout you and Naoto?"

Souji sighed. "You start hanging out with a girl and people are already saying the two of us have something going on. Same thing happened when I befriended Chie, Yukiko, Rise, Yumi, Ayane. Don't even get me started with Ai..." He sounded annoyed. "How immature can people get?"

Kanji felt bad for Senpai. 'Guess being a popular dude is not all fun and games. I mean, he pretty much became the biggest target for all of school's gossip.'

"And no. I'm not interested in Naoto in the sense of pursing a relationship with her if that's what you're wondering. I'm glad that we have a lot in common, but I see her more as a dear friend, like a sister if you will. I'm just trying to get to know her better, learn more about the new member of our team, help her feel like she belongs here. Next thing I know, I got involved in another case she's working on."

"Another case?"

"Naoto was challenged by someone called 'The Phantom Thief.' He stole something from the Shirogane Estate and challenged her to recover it. He had someone deliver the first letter to me so I'd deliver it to her. She didn't want to involve the others on this, but since I knew about it I decided to aid her as a good way to get to know her better. She won't be happy if she finds out I told you this, so please don't speak a word of this to her."

Kanji scratched his head. "Uh... Sure, Senpai. I can do that. But...why are you telling me this?"

Souji placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'm telling you this because out of everyone else, you deserve to know the most. You like her, even back when everyone thought she was a guy. I don't want to hurt your feelings because of petty rumours."

Kanji felt a huge weight lifted off his shoulders. 'He was afraid we'd stop bein' friends for good because of that. He even took the trouble to come clean with me.' A huge grin plastered on his face, blushing at the same time for being found out. "I know we're good friends and all, but I didn't think you cared about me that much..."

"Kanji, you have no idea just how important all of you are to me. I couldn't handle losing even one of you," Souji said. "Ever since I arrived in Inaba, I made friendships I'll treasure for the rest of my life, something I haven't felt in a long time. And I'm not gonna let some stupid rumour ruin any of that."

His respect for Senpai just increased ten, no, a millionfold, but he was still curious. "So, if Naoto ain't your type... D-Does that mean you're dating someone?"

Souji blinked at the question. Kanji could've sworn that for a fraction of a second, Senpai's cheeks turned pink. "I...well...uh, yes," he admitted. "But I promised her I would keep our relationship secret until she's ready. She felt that it would interfere with the team's dynamics if we announced it too early."

'So it's one of the girls from the team!' Kanji nodded. "Well, I gotta respect that. Congrats anyway, Senpai."

"Thanks," Souji sighed in relief. "So...while we're still on the topic, you plan to ask her out anytime soon?"

All of a sudden, Kanji froze. His last experience with girls had been traumatic - not only he was knocked out cold by Chie during the camping trip, they left him to sleep beside Hanako! She
cuddled him in her sleep, smooshed between her breasts. It didn’t make him feel any better when
the next day, she walked up to him, seemingly embarrassed. The others came to the conclusion the
she was going to confess her feelings and hid behind a tree to continue their snooping.

Instead, Hanako ended up telling him that he wasn’t her type, apologized, and then left, flat out
rejecting him.

As if reading his mind, Souji gave his kouhai a sympathetic smile. "It's not like what happened
during the camping trip will happen again this time."

A depressed aura materialized around Kanji. "I can't. And it's my own damn fault anyway..." His
fists clenched. "Being as blunt as I am, I shoulda been able to tell it to her face." He let out a bitter
laugh. "Kinda funny how I can fight things that'd make guys in the military shit their pants with no
problem, but I can't talk to one girl..."

"You won't know if you don't try. And if you wait too long, someone else will ask her out in your
place."

"Easy for you to say. You ain't afraid of anything, and you manage to keep your cool through every
damn thing that happens to ya. Dammit Senpai, how am I supposed to be like you?"

"Don't be like me. Be yourself."

"Do it my way, huh? Well, that takes some pressure off. But...I still don't really know what I'm
doing."

"You're overthinking it."

"Heh, I might be."

"Take it slow. Get to know her better. Be honest with yourself, and think about how she'd feel if
you're not being honest with her." Souji patted his back. "That's the best advice I can give you."

"Thanks, Senpai. I'll try my best!"

"You're welcome. Now, I don't know about you, but I'm feeling like having a Topsicle. How about
we grab one on the way home?"

Kanji's eyes brightened up. "Hell yeah!" The two friends headed out to Madam Shiroku's store for
some tasty treats.

Two days later, he and the others caught Souji and Yukiko kissing after a training session. It was
awkward, and Souji had scared them into silence. But Kanji was happy for his upperclassmen,
relieved that he still had a chance with Naoto...if he ever manage to get over his shyness, that is.

...End Flashback...

"Do it my way, huh...?" Kanji muttered to Koromaru, who was licking his hand. "Might as well
give it a try..."

Northern Shopping District...

Kanji was in luck when he bumped into Shinjiro on his way to Aiya's Diner for a late snack,
despite his mother's warning that it would ruin his appetite for dinner. They decided to sit together
"This place isn't bad," Shinjiro commented. "I can see why a lot of people enjoy eating here. The aroma alone is enough to entice anyone passing by."

"The old man's a friendly guy, too. It's good for business," Kanji chuckled. He continued to tell him about the special menus and his current school life. Shinjiro didn't have a lot to add since his life wasn't that interesting.

They ate in silence once their food arrived. Kanji enthusiastically dug into his chicken leek stir fry and beef ramen, but his brain was furiously thinking up a plan on how to bring up the dreaded topic of the yukata. They had some tea to wash down the meal.

Kanji cleared his throat. "Say, uhh…I bumped into Minako-senpai earlier when she was out walking Koro-chan. Then she asked me for a favor. Said it had something to do with the summer festival."

The other delinquent 'hmmm'ed in disinterest while sipping his tea.

"And kinda ordered me to make you a yukata to wear to the festival."

Shinjiro did a spit take, some of the tea dribbling down his chin and onto his maroon pea coat. "Say what?!" he spluttered, grabbing a napkin to wipe his mouth. "She wants me to wear what?!"

"Dude, don't ask me. It's a favor."

"I don't want to! The weird outfits she made me wear in Tartarus was torture enough."

Kanji quirked a brow. 'She must have him totally whipped to be able to make him take off that damn coat,' he thought. 'But then again, she is pretty scary when she's mad…' A sneer made its way to the corner of his mouth.

Shinjiro's eyes narrowed dangerously. "What the hell is so funny?"

"You might not want to piss her off by passing this up," Kanji shrugged. "Face it, your girlfriend is scary shit compared to any Shadow I've ever fought." He watched in silent amusement as Shinjiro pondered over his statement, then let out a heavy, depressed sigh. 'Yup, he's totally whipped.'

And that was how both of them ended up in Tatsumi Textiles.

Kanji held a measuring tape in his hands and a pencil wedged at the back of his ear. He measured Shinjiro's arms, legs, chest circumference, the length of his back and a few other places, pausing in between to write them down in a small notebook. Shinjiro just stood still with a scowl on his face. He wasn't pleased when Kanji made him take off his coat either. Earlier, Mrs. Tatsumi suggested for her son to take Shinjiro to the back because he was scaring the other customers.

"So…uh…how do like our small town?" Kanji said, attempting to start a conversation as he slipped the tape around Shinjiro's neck.

"It's nice, lots of fresh air," he grunted in response.

Silence fell between them after that. 'Screw it! I better ask him now before I lose my chance,' Kanji groaned internally. "H-hey…I was wondering…how did you manage to ask Minako-senpai out…three years ago was it?" he said slowly, trying his best not to offend the other guy.
The blush on Shinjiro's face intensified. "Th-that's a private question, moron! Besides, it's none of your damn business!"

"Hey, Minako-senpai said that I can ask you for advice so I'm asking, asshole!"

"She said what?! I don't give advice!"

The two of them started to swear at each other, all that was missing were the punches and kicks. Both were harshly reprimanded by Mrs. Tatsumi who then whacked their heads with a yardstick. They were saved when a customer in front called for her.

"Why would she tell you to ask me in the first place?" Shinjiro groaned, rubbing his sore head. "I'm not good at that kind of shit."

Kanji sighed miserably. "I want Naoto to go to the festival with me, but I'm too scared to ask her," he finally admitted, looking at the floor. "When I ran into Minako-senpai earlier, she said you can help me. That's why I want to know how you managed to ask her out in the first place, and maybe get some pointers. Face it, guys like us...don't have any luck with girls."

Finally understanding the context, Shinjiro gave him a look of sympathy. "I didn't ask Minako out. The little runt wouldn't stop pestering me the moment I rejoined SEES, so I finally gave in and we went out to Hagakure. Most of the time, she practically dragged me to go out and eat," he ranted, but his voice softened as he continued. "After that, we kinda spent more time with each other. I guess I started to realize my feelings for her when she managed to persuade me to cook a feast for the entire dorm. Of all the people who could talk me into it, it had to be her. I didn't want to do it, but...it just happened, okay? The only dates we ever gone to was walking Koro to the shrine or eating ramen."

Kanji listened in silence.

"The first place I took her to of my own free will was the alley behind Port Island Station, the place where I got shot. Not exactly romantic, is it?" Shinjiro laughed bitterly. "I didn't want to become someone important in her life at first, but before I knew it she became a part of mine. She was the one who confessed to me, not the other way around. Sometimes I still wonder what a great girl like her sees in a guy like me."

A lump formed in Kanji's throat. "Then what should I do?"

"Just be yourself. I'm pretty sure Shirogane knows when you're being dishonest with her," Shinjiro answered, looking at him straight in the eye. "Ignore the petty thoughts and focus on the important stuff, not 'what ifs' and you'll do fine. I learned that the hard way." He touched his chest, the place where Takaya's bullets went through him.

A ghost of a smile formed on Kanji's lips. "Th-thanks, Aragaki-san. I sort of needed to hear that."

"Good. Then let's get this thing done and over with."

After Kanji was done measuring, he took Shinjiro to the front to pick out the fabric for his custom-made yukata. Rise came in just in time when the two were starting to bicker over what color the garment should be.

"What are you two fighting about?" the teen idol asked, cocking her head to one side in a curious manner.

"Rise, what the hell are you doing here?" Kanji grumbled.
"I came to bring some silken tofu for your mom. Grandma made it especially for her." She shoved a small package under his nose. "Now answer my question already!"

"Urgh…fine! Minako-senpai wants me to make a yukata for her boyfriend here. Happy now?"

"Then why were you two fighting?" she repeated her question, hands on her hips.

Her tall classmate was in the right mind to strangle her if she wasn't his friend. Shinjiro glared at her in annoyance, but the girl simply brushed it off.

"I asked him what color he wanted his yukata to be. Idiot here says he doesn't care, which makes my job a hell of a lot harder," Kanji said, jerking a thumb at Shinjiro.

"Watch it, dickhead!"

Before the two of them went for each other's throats, Rise interrupted them. "Let me help. I am good at this kind of thing after all." She eyed Shinjiro from top to bottom, and circled around him twice, even as far as to order him to remove his beanie. She turned to Kanji after she was done. "I'd go with dark blue, almost black color for the yukata, and silver for the obi. Keep it plain and simple, clean-cut, and he'll do just fine."

Rise helped even helped look for the right fabric with a subtle texture, and after ten minutes they were done. All Kanji had to do now was sew the entire outfit together. Rise stayed for a while to give Mrs. Tatsumi her silken tofu before heading home.

The sun was starting to set when they finally finished. "It's late. I'll try and finish this up before the day of the festival. You should head back," Kanji suggested. "And thanks for earlier…about…you know…"

"Whatever," Shinjiro replied, walking out from the shop. Not before glaring hard at Kanji. "And don't you dare mention this to anyone, got it?"

Earlier, Amagi Inn…

It was a beautiful summer evening. The twins were hanging out at the inn's Japanese garden by the koi pond, chatting about the recent events.

"I'm still kinda curious why he's back. From what Banchou-kun told us, not even he knows how that happened…but seems determined to help," Minako said.

"I know, it's a mystery alright" her brother said, recalling the conversation they had with Souji while still in the hospital, before they were informed of Junpei and Yosuke's recklessness.

"I wonder what he's trying to do..." Minako closed her eyes in thought. Clutched in her hands was a ring. "There's so much we don't know about."

Minato smiled softly at his twin and patted her head. "There there, sis. We'll figure things out soon enough," he said. "So far, the Dark Hour hadn't manifested itself lately, so things might stay calm for a while. The summer festival is just around the corner, so we should enjoy it."

Minako smiled back at her brother, pocketing the ring. "You're right, Aniki. I can't wait for it! I even got Kanji-kun to make a yukata for Shinji!"

He chuckled at the thought. "You gonna make him wear one? Jeez…"
"Why not? Me and the girls are gonna wear it anyways, so why don't you and Banchou-kun wear one too? For old times' sake?" She giggled. "Yukari-chan and Yukiko-chan would love that for sure. Oh! Oh! Even better! Why don't all the guys wear yukatas?"

Minato blinked at the suggestion, blushing faintly. "That's...a nice change of pace, but...how am I supposed to convince the rest?"

His sister smiled mischievously. "You're very convincing, and so is Banchou-kun. You'll think of something, just like how you convinced the girls to wear maid outfits in Tartarus."

"Why don't you convince them? You managed to make them wear those butler outfits more times than I can count!"

"No can do. Us girls are going shopping at Okina tomorrow. We're even taking Nanako-chan with us. Banchou-kun is taking you guys fishing tomorrow, right? That should do the trick just nicely."

Minato sighed in defeat. There was no arguing with her. One thing's for sure, he and the guys are sure to have a field day.

The next morning, the SEES girls headed off to Yasoinaba Station to wait for the girls from the Investigation Team. They arrived with Nanako and boarded the train, but momentarily stopped to kick Teddie off. He was stalking them earlier but his plans were foiled by Souji, who dragged him along with Yosuke's help for their planned fishing trip.

Nanako was enjoying the view from the window while the older girls chatted.

"Really, that bear has some nerve to follow us like that!" Chie huffed, crossing her arms against her chest. "What part of 'girls only' does he not understand?"

"It's just like that time with the school trip. He followed us all the way to Port Island," Rise told Fuuka. "Senpai almost got in trouble because he refused to leave. I think he has some sort of obsession with Senpai back then."

"That's just creepy," Yukari said. "But then again, Aigis was no different with the twins."

"That was before I regained my memories of Death," Aigis answered. "It was, and still is, my duty to protect them."

"I agree, Sister," Metis added, beaming at her. Yukari sweatdropped.

"Enough about that!" Minako interjected. "Let's focus on our shopping trip! I can't wait to see what sort of stuff that's available there."

From there, the girls discussed about what to buy - dresses, skirts, blouses and accessories that would match with their outfits. Even Mitsuru, who usually depend on her personal stylists to choose her clothes for her, added some of her opinion. Chie seemed a bit uncomfortable, but joined in. The only one really squirming was Naoto.

Rise noticed this and decided to pull her into the conversation. "Naoto-kun, what's wrong? You've been quiet all morning."

Naoto fidgeted in her seat. "Err...I just feel...a little out of place. Why did I have to come along again?"
"C'mon Naoto-chan, don't be such a spoil sport!" Minako patted her back. "It's always fun to try on clothes, especially ones you'd never wear in public. Just to see how you'd look in them."

"And because you don't have any girly clothes," Rise answered simply. "You wanted to borrow some of mine but they didn't fit, remember?"

…Flashback…

Naoto was in Rise's room, with the latter's invitation. She insisted that Naoto tried something feminine in order to win the heart of a certain 'white-haired punk' or something along those lines. Needless to say, the young detective blushed, confirming the teen idol's suspicion. Which lead to Naoto browsing through Rise's wardrobe, and Rise watching over her with a smirk on her face.

"We'll start with something simple," the idol started. She pulled out an aquamarine summer dress with a white ribbon around the waistline. "Try this one on for size."

"Sh-should I really wear this?" Naoto eyed the garment while wrinkling her nose. The question was more of an excuse to delay the inevitable.

"Naoto-kun, this is what girls usually wear during the summer. Stop wasting your breath talking and put it on already!"

Knowing Rise's stubbornness when she doesn't get what she wants, the detective sighed heavily and took the dress from her hands. She wasn't comfortable stripping in front of other people, so she went to change in the bathroom.

Rise waited patiently, but Naoto was taking too much time. 'Jeez… how long does it take to get changed into a summer dress?' she thought irritably. Not one for respecting a friend's personal space, she pushed open the bathroom door to find Naoto already dressed in the blue outfit. "What's taking so long? Do you need any help?" she demanded.

"Rise-san…I can't breathe," Naoto said, her voice a little strained, her face red. "Are your clothes always this tight?"

"Huh, what are you talking about? Aren't we about the same...size...?" It didn't take long for Rise to understand Naoto's predicament. The way her breasts were stretching the fabric was pretty obvious. In addition to that, there were bandages in the sink, confirming what Rise saw on their health examination results last year was neither a fluke nor a misprint. The steam from the Amagi Inn hot springs might have obscured her perception of their actual size as well.

…End flashback…

They finally arrived at Okina. Rise wasted no time dragging the others to her favorite shops. The SEES girls couldn't believe the bargains that could be found here, and squealed excitedly when one of them found something they particularly liked. They had a blast choosing clothes from the racks and trying them on in the changing rooms.

"Yukari-chan, how do I look?" Minako asked, twirling around as she stepped out of the booth. She was trying on a denim skirt which flattered her slim legs and an orange halter top with a red heart in the center. On her feet was a pair of purple ballerina flats she found moments ago.

"Aneki, you look really pretty!" Nanako praised.

"Something seems to be missing…" Yukari mused. She wasn't about to tell her best friend that she was showing off too much skin, and was pretty sure that if Shinjiro saw his girlfriend wearing that
in public he would give her one long, ear-bleeding lecture. Not wanting to deal with that consequence, Yukari grabbed cropped cardigan to cover her shoulders. It went surprisingly well together. "Wow, this combination suits you, Minako. The skirt looks especially nice on you!"

In another booth, Rise was trying to persuade Naoto to come out of the dressing room she was in. "Naoto-kun, I'm going to count to three before I ask one of the sales girls to force the door open!" she threatened.

Naoto timidly opened the door and revealed herself. Rise had chosen a female version of her detective outfit - a dark blue school skirt paired with a turquoise collared t-shirt with rolled-up sleeves, and black boots. A short red necktie added color to the attire, making Naoto look more feminine but not losing any of her crime-solving appeal.

Yukiko and Chie were speechless. They had never seen her in a casual skirt before (her school uniform didn't count). Mitsuru nodded her approval and Nanako clapped. Unbeknownst to Naoto, Rise took out her phone and snapped a picture. 'Kanji-kun is going to have a major nosebleed when he sees this!' she smirked evilly.

Aigis and Metis tried every combination they could find. Some worked, but some were just outright silly. Minako insisted that Mitsuru tried something out of her comfort zone like jeans, miniskirts and tube tops. The other girls got a bit jealous when she pulled off every single garment she tried on to perfection.

Yukari and Rise made it their mission to give every girl in their group a makeover. Even little Nanako wasn't spared. After trying out clothes, they went window shopping. They went a bit over their budget when they found a store that sold the cutest hairpins, rings and necklaces in almost every shape and color.

"Hey, girls, what do you think of this?" Chie asked, pointing to a fake flower that was pinned above her right ear.

Naoto studied it for a bit. "It is simple, yet feminine."

"Quite charming, Chie-chan," Yukari said.

"Thanks, I really like it." Chie took it off. "It's not too girly and it's cute. I'll wear it for the festival."

"Hey Naoto-kun, do you ever do anything with your hair?" Yukiko asked.

The detective shook her head. "No, not really."

"Try this," Yukiko pulled off Naoto's hat and put a headband in its place. She held up a small mirror and Naoto stood transfixed by her reflection. The headband was dark blue with a small bow to one side. It wasn't overly girly or frilly, yet it transformed her from being mistaken as a boy to, to actually looking like a girl. 'Amazing...who would have thought such a slight change could make such the difference.'

"Do you like it?" Rise asked.

"Uh...oh yeah... I think I do." "You know, you can be feminine without the frills, lace and makeup," Yukiko said. "Sometimes subtle is better."

"Yeah...I think I can see that now," Naoto said, removing the headband and putting her hat back.
"Good!" Yukari said with a grin. "You just have to take it one step at a time."

Once the other girls were busy browsing again, Naoto took another look at the headband. 'One step at a time...I can do that.' She ran the pad of her fingers along the smooth satin covering the hard frame.

Minako bought Nanako a Featherman R hairpin and a bead bracelet with colors of the rainbow. "Anything for my little sister," she said, ruffling Nanako's hair. This earned her a hug from the little girl. After another hour of looking at shoes, they stopped for lunch at an outdoor café.

"I'm so exhausted..." Chie complained, slamming her head on the table. "My feet are killing me, and I don't think I can look at another pair of new shoes without wanting to punch somebody."

"This is why I don't shop," Naoto said sourly, glaring at her drink. "I can't wrap my mind around the whole concept of looking through things, trying them on and not buying them in the end. It's ridiculous!"

"Oh please. You guys had as much fun as the rest of us," Rise chided, sucking on the straw in her tall glass of fruit juice. "Isn't that right, Nanako-chan? It's important to spend some quality time with girls only."

Nanako giggled. "Yeah!"

"Please let us go home after this," Chie grumbled.

"That would not be possible at the moment," Aigis cut in. "I still haven't had the chance to purchase a yukata for my sister."

"That reminds me, I wanted to get one for Ken-kun as well," Fuuka said. "He'd look so cute in one, don't you think?"

"Fuuka, aren't you going to get one for Hiiraga-senpai too?" Yukari teased. "Don't think I don't know about your relationship. Minato-kun has had his suspicions for a long time you know." She grinned widely when Minako stared at her with disbelief.

Fuuka blushed, hiding her face behind her hands. It was against her nature to think violent thoughts, but when she gets back to the inn she was going to have a stern talk with their blue-haired leader and his big mouth. "Nanako-chan, do you want to help me find a yukata for Ken-kun?!" she asked a bit too quickly, trying to change the subject.

"I don't mind," Nanako said. "It's gonna be a lot of fun!"

"I can't believe Aniki never told me that Fuuka is dating the president of the photography club!" Minako whined. "Oh well, I'm not against it. Hiiraga-senpai is a decent guy. He helped me and Junpei-kun with that secret photo business, so I support you wholeheartedly, Fuuka-chan! You should get him a souvenir."

"Speaking of relationships..." Yukiko interjected. "Chie and Yosuke-kun became an official couple as of yesterday. Souji-kun was right all along, as usual."

Chie went bright red. "Don't rub it in my face, Yukiko. You're the one who had the hots for Souji in the beginning, but you were just too shy to admit it."

Rise grinned. "Yosuke-senpai, huh? Never saw that coming. All she does is kick him whenever he does something stupid. Sure, he's rather clumsy and not much to look at, but I'll admit he's got
street smarts and a decent sense of humor. Chie-senpai however is hot-tempered, impatient and violent. They argue all the time. How is that gonna work?"

Mitsuru smiled, a mysterious twinkle in her eyes. "Just because they seem like opposites doesn't mean they're not compatible, Kujikawa. My parents were brought together by an arranged marriage, but they somehow made it work. Those two will figure it out, as long as they feel strongly for each other."

Chie's blush got deeper, but she couldn't help herself from admiring the red-head's words.

"Junpei and Hanamura-san do have a lot in common," Chidori said. "But those same qualities is what I love about Junpei. He's always patient with me, and cheers me up when I'm sad. Just because he isn't book smart only means that his strengths lies elsewhere. I guess what I'm saying is that he sees me differently than other people, and that makes me feel special." She scratched her chin shyly, cheeks a healthy pink.

"You changed him too, Chidori. Now we don't have to worry about him being a total pervert anymore," Minako added, earning laughs from the other girls. She then turned to Yukari. "So what made you choose my brother, Yukari-chan?"

"W-well…I was kind of attracted to him when you guys first joined SEES," Yukari stammered, playing with her fingers. "My first impression of him was the mysterious, loner type, but we had a lot in common because of our pasts. I guess my feelings for him grew after the trip to Yakushima. When I yelled at him for no reason, he was nothing but understanding, and I thought my heart would burst when he hugged me on the beach. After that I would get jealous when he spends time with other girls from the clubs, since it wasn't just me who found him to be charming…" She stole a quick glance at Mitsuru and Fuuka. "I was so happy when he asked me out on Christmas Eve."

"I feel the same way with Souji-kun," Yukiko admitted. "Even though I know I'm boring him, he still wants to spend time with me. I admit that I feel inadequate standing next to him. He just seems so…perfect. Excellent grades, good looks, and he can cook! But soon I realized that's not the case. He always put others before himself, ignoring his health sometimes. And he's a bit of a hothead, but I guess that runs in the family. He...he just has a big heart, and wants to help everybody. Even now, I can tell that not being able to get through to Adachi is one of his biggest regrets."

"Big Bro snores sometimes when he sleeps," Nanako supplied suddenly. Then she covered her mouth as if she just blurted out top secret information.

Yukiko chuckled. "Yeah, I kind of figured that out during last year's camping trip," she said, patting her on the head. "Besides, girl talk isn't fun without digging the little secrets about our boyfriends, right?"

"What about you, Minako-chan? Don't you have anything to say about Shinjiro-senpai?" Yukari questioned. "When he rejoined SEES, I had my doubts about him. He was always withdrawn and doesn't like to hang out with us much. I mean, everyone in the dorm was practically scared of him except for you and Akihiko-senpai. Oh, and Koro-chan too."

"I must say I was surprised when you managed to persuade him to cook for the entire dorm," Mitsuru said, looking pleased. "Shinjiro is well-known for his stubbornness and foul mouth, so something like that was quite out of character for him."

Minako looked at the ground and fiddled with her thumbs. "I…I asked him out to dinner the night he moved in because he looked so…lonely. Despite his gruff exterior, I felt that he was hiding a lot of pain. We got talking, and little by little I was falling for him. He has a soft spot for animals, and
often feeds the strays living in the alleyways. Even though he gives a bad first impression, he really
does care about us, in his own way. Being by his side, I feel safe and warm. He's just that kind of
guy." A big, goofy smile adorned her face as she caressed the leather watch on her wrist.

The older girls sighed dreamily. Nanako giggled at their antics, but is glad that her Aneki is happy.

"Uh…umm…I sort of have a confession to make," Mitsuru said shyly a moment later, fidgeting in
her seat. "Since we're all talking about relationships, I don't want to be left behind." She doesn't
normally participate in such activities, but after befriending Yukari, things changed. The other girls
snapped out of their reveries to pay attention to the young heiress. "The truth is…Akihiko and I
have been seeing other each since high school and made it official after we graduated. It was my
decision to keep it a secret from you all."

Silence.

"She finally admits it!" Minako cheered, jumping up from her seat.

Fuuka and Yukari looked at each other sheepishly. "We kind of knew about that for a long time,
Senpai," the latter admitted. "It was difficult to ignore the looks you two give each other at the
dorm."

"I knew Akihiko-senpai had a thing for you, but he probably didn't confess earlier because he's too
shy," Fuuka added. "It would have made his life in high school a lot easier though. No girl in
school had the guts to go against the Student Council president."

"The sexual tension between you two was difficult to ignore," Aigis said. "My sensors would pick
up an increase in body heat and high concentration of pheromones whenever the both of you are
close to each other."

"I noticed that too," Metis said.

"Aigis, do you mind?!" Minako hissed, covering Nanako's ears. The little girl looked confused as
she tried to understand what the others were talking about.

Mitsuru's mouth hung open slightly, a bright blush staining her cheeks. She couldn't believe what
she was hearing!

"You two were pretty obvious," Rise supplied. "He looks at you differently compared to other girls.
I don't even think he looks at other girls properly."

"Your body language indicates that the two of you have mutual attraction for each other," Naoto
smiled. "I am happy for the both of you."

"We didn't say anything should we offend you. I'm sorry," Yukiko apologized.

"Every tough guy has a soft side," Chie smirked. "Speaking of tough guys…how's your progress
with Kanji, Naoto-kun? Surely something about that guy attracts you in a way."

The Detective Prince choked on her drink. She coughed out the remains of liquid from her lungs
before answering the question with another question. "What are you insinuating, Chie-senpai?"

"You guys have been hanging out a lot lately, and I often see you hanging out at his mother's shop
after school. Rise tells me you sometime stay for dinner when your gramps is out of town."

Naoto gave Rise the stink-eye, which she pretended to ignore. "That was only one time!" Naoto
protested. "I just wanted to get to know him better! Kanji-kun is a lot smarter than what you guys give him credit for."

**Now** Rise was interested. "Please tell, Naoto-kun. We would love to hear from you how smart Kanji-kun is," she smiled sweetly, her voice saccharine.

Seeing all the girls looking at her expectantly, Naoto knew she didn't have a choice. "K-Kanji-kun. He...he has something, how would you call it...? Ah, yes, an eye for detail," she started, her cheeks getting warmer by the second. "And no, I'm not referring to the elaborate dolls that he crafts or the detailed dress he once made. He may not be the most intelligent, and rather impulsive in his actions, but he usually notices that something is not right before everybody else." She pulled her hat down, trying to disguise her increasing blush. "For example...before Minako-senpai joined us, Kanji-kun mentioned how lonely was, and quick to point out her fear of not being remembered by her friends. He was also adamant on keeping his word to her when questioned about her identity. His loyalty and devotion to the ones he cares about is quite remarkable." She sunk her head lower, trying not to face the others girls who fell silent. That was definitely not the reaction Naoto expected. She expected them to giggle at her or tease her.

Minako was the first to break the silence. "Wow, now that you mentioned it, you're right. He was really nice to me that time." She smiled softly. "You really like him, huh Naoto-chan?"

Naoto's eyes widened, her entire face was red. "S-Senpai?!

"Perhaps you yourself don't realize it, but the way you talk about Kanji-kun and the look in your eyes... they all express that you have feelings for him," Minako explained. "You're probably confused about it, because you've never experienced it or gave much thought to it." Her smile grew wider, eyes looking distant. "He's just like Shinji. Rough on the outside, but warm and kind and caring on the inside."

The SEES girls took a sharp intake of breath. Minako snapped out of her little daydream and looked at them, confused. "Eh...what is it?"

"You called Senpai 'Shinji'," Yukari smirked teasingly. "So you got to the next base in your relationship, huh?"

"Only Akihiko-senpai is allowed to call him that, because they were childhood friends," Fuuka explained to the other girls. And then she smiled. "Congratulations, Minako-chan!"

Rise smirked devilishly. "Speaking of Shinjiro-san, I saw him arguing with Kanji-kun at his mother's shop yesterday. They looked like two dogs about to fight over a piece of meat. Turns out, they were arguing over what color the fabric of his custom-made yukata should be, by orders of Minako-senpai."

"Let me guess," Chie said, rolling her eyes. "You interfered and helped."

"Of course I did. His mother told me they scared away a few customers earlier because both were cussing like sailors." The others sweatdropped. "Anyway, I helped pick out the color. I'm sure you're gonna like the results." She winked at Minako.

Mitsuru's jaw hung open in disbelief. *First the dorm feast, and now a yukata,*' she thought. *Shinjiro, just how smitten are you?* She made a mental note to bring a camera to capture this soon-to-be precious moment.

"Oh don't worry about Shinji, guys. He's not the only guy wearing a yukata to the festival," Minako
said. "I convinced Aniki and Souji-kun to wear one too. For old time's sake."

Yukiko and Yukari blushed. They were already imagining their boyfriends in the garment, and the image wasn't disappointing.

"If that's the case, then I shall purchase one for Akihiko as well," Mitsuru stated. "Why don't you help me choose the color, Kujikawa?"

"I'd love to," Rise said. "Fashion is my expertise after all."

"Count me in as well!" Chidori giggled.

Soon, their food arrived. The girls happily gossiped and chattered. Naoto ate quietly, reflecting what Minako told her. 'What if I do have feelings for Kanji-kun? And Kanji-kun? Does he feel anything for me…? What should I do?'

After their meal, the girls continued to their final shopping destination. They arrived at a shop specializing in yukatas, and it looks like business was booming because the festive season was near. Discounts were abundant, and they were having a blast choosing what patterns and colors that would suit their beloveds. Metis felt a bit more independent as she chose a yukata for herself, with a little help from her sister.

As Fuuka was busy choosing one for Ken, her cellphone rang. She flipped it open and smiled to herself - her best friend Natsuki Moriyama just sent her a text message. It said: "Wishing you a great summer. Have a great time at the festival, and don't forget to enjoy yourself!"

Rise noticed her fellow scanner's smile. Curious, she went over to ask her about it. "What have you got there, Fuuka-san?"

"Oh, my friend Natsuki just wished me a great time at the Summer Festival. She moved away during our junior year, but we try our best to keep in touch with each other."

"That's nice."

"Want to see her picture?" Fuuka pressed a few more buttons on her phone and a picture of Fuuka and Natsuki standing beside the persimmon tree at Gekkoukan High came on screen. Both were smiling. Rise looked intently at Natsuki's picture before she burst out laughing, confusing Fuuka in the process. "Is there something wrong, Rise-chan?" she asked worriedly.

"S-sorry about that Fuuka-san," Rise said, taking a big breath to calm herself. "Nothing is wrong with her. It's just that her uniform reminds me of what Yosuke-senpai wore during the cross-dressing pageant."

"Why on earth did he do that?" Minako interrupted as she walked towards the two, Yukari following her.

Rise gave them a sly smile and took out her own cellphone. She pulled out the secret pictures she took when they were posing on stage and displayed them on her screen. "Yosuke-senpai and Teddie were the idiots who started it all. Teddie begged him to sign us up for last year's beauty pageant," she explained. "When we found out about it, we took revenge by signing the guys up for the cross-dressing pageant. I took their pictures for future blackmail in case they try to do anything stupid."

Minako and Yukari sweatdropped at her bluntness.
Minako took Rise's phone and scanned the pictures one by one. She had to laugh out loud at the ridiculousness of it all, and Yukari was right there with her. Kanji and Yosuke looked...interesting...to say the least. Teddie was much too pretty for his own good, although Minako thought that her persona Alice was much cuter.

Thanks to the small commotion, the other girls surrounded them, curious to know what's going on. They had the same reaction when Rise explained it to them once more.

"I don't think Tatsumi did Marilyn Monroe any justice," Mitsuru commented as she looked at the pictures. Rise pouted at that, since she was the one who dressed him.

"But I must say my baby bro looks cute in that getup," Minako giggled. "It suits him...in a way. I wonder who helped him get dressed."

Yukiko blushed. "That would be me." She sighed dreamily. "He was even so brave to admit that he was only doing that for the girl he liked. It was so sweet..."

"You did an awesome job! The wooden sword was a nice touch," Minako praised her. "Although I don't think he'll be happy that we know all this."

"Don't worry about it," Yukari scoffed. "If they're embarrassed, we can always tell them about the outfits you and Minato-kun made our guys wear in Tartarus."

Minako's eyes brightened. "Including the one of Shinji in the butler outfit and Ken-kun in the Shirt of Chivalry?!" At Yukari's nod, she barely held back a squeal. "Yay! I can't wait to tell you guys about it!"

"Tell them about what?" Nanako asked as she approached them. In her hands was a red boy's yukata with minimal black and yellow geometrical prints.

"Oh, it's about their yukata!" Minako answered hastily. She didn't want Nanako to blow their secret to her cousin. "Yukiko-chan and I were thinking about what color might suit Souji-kun. I see you've picked one for Ken-kun." She pointed to the outfit Nanako was holding. "That pattern suits him."

"Thanks! It reminded me of Red Hawk from Phoenix Ranger Featherman R."

"He'll like that. Ken-kun might not admit it out loud, but he's a huge fan of the series," Minako told her. "You two should go to the festival together."

"Okay! That sounds fun!" The little girl missed the gleam in her Aneki's eyes.

"Should I remind everyone what time it is?" Naoto said in an impatient tone. "We promised Dojima-san that we would be back with Nanako-chan by four. We have another hour left."

Rise pouted again. "But I don't see you pick out anything for Kanji!" she accused.

Naoto held up a bag. "I already have. You were too busy to help me."

Wasting no time, Rise pounced on it. "Ooh...a sleeveless black yukata with a white obi. It's plain yet punkish at the same time."

"What does that even mean?" Naoto asked, exasperated. She snatched back the outfit and put it back inside the bag. "You should all hurry or else we'll miss the train and break curfew."
At that statement, the girls rushed around the store, and came out just in time with their new purchases. Mitsuru offered to pay for all of them before they hurried off to the train station.

Samegawa Riverbed…

It was warm, but not unbearably hot at Samegawa river, making it a perfect day for fishing. Souji managed to borrow some extra fishing rods and various types of fishbait from the old man who had taught him the skill so his friends could join him.

"It's pretty easy actually. Just set the bait on the hook, aim and throw it in the water. The fishes will want to poke the bait at first, so you just wait for them to nibble. When you feel a bite, that's when you reel it in," Souji explained. "Oh, but don't reel it too fast or too hard, or else the line will snap and the fish will get away."

"Heh, sounds pretty easy," Junpei said, trying his luck. Five minutes later, he grew impatient. "Gah! What's taking it so long?!

Akihiko smacked him on the head, annoyed. "Pipe down, Junpei. Things like these take patience."

Suddenly there was a tug on Junpei's line. "Oh yeah! I've got one!" he shouted excitedly as he reeled it in. "And it's huge!"

After a brief struggle, Junpei finally brought his 'catch' out of the water - an empty, crushed soda can. "You've gotta be kidding me…" He hung his head in disappointment while the other guys laughed at him.

"Don't worry, Junpei-san. That often happens on the first tries," Souji reassured him.

There was a tug on another lure. "Hey, I think I've got something!" Ken said, pulling his fishing rod. "Ngh…! I think it's stuck between the rocks!"

"Wait, Ken, let me help you with that." Minato went to help the youngest member of the team. "Here goes nothing!"

They tugged and reeled with their all their strength, until a large Inaba Trout splashed out of the water. "Wow, that's a big one!" Yosuke exclaimed.

"I got it!" Teddie yelled, trying to get the fish into a net. He was successful, but tripped over a sleeping Kanji, causing the fish to hit the delinquent in the face, and it bounced back into the river.

Kanji got up, started. "Huh?! What gives?!" he shouted, shoving Teddie off him. "The hell… Teddie, get off me!"

"Aww…it got away…" Teddie pouted, ignoring Kanji's complaints, who grumbled some more and continued his nap.

"It's okay, Teddie-san," Ken said. "I still can't believe I've almost caught a fish that big!"

"You did even better than me when I first tried fishing, Ken," Souji said. "The girls will be impressed for sure."

A blush adorned the young teenager's cheeks. "Really? Thanks, Souji-san."

Silence fell once again as they waited for another bite. After ten minutes, Junpei became restless...
once more and decided to start a conversation. "So Souji, my man... Aside from fishing what else do you do during your free time?" he asked. "No offense man, but this is the boonies."

"None taken. To answer your question, I really like to read. I've got several books I bought during my first stay here. Like 'The Man's Life' series and 'The Timid Teacher' series. Those are my favorites."

"They sound really interesting, Souji-san," Ken said.

"They really are. If any of you guys are interested, I can lend them to you later."

Junpei laughed loudly. "Dude, you're such a nerd!"

"Should I remind you of your grades, Junpei?" Minato interjected with a smirk. Junpei glared at him while the others snickered. "If you had paid more attention in class, I wouldn't have to whisper the answers to you all the time."

Souji covered his mouth to stifle another laugh. "What?!!" Junpei shouted, cheeks reddening in embarrassment.

"Aniki, you kinda remind me of Kou. When I first met him and Daisuke, he told me that he was responsible for Daisuke's grades since they were eight."

Minato chuckled. "Those two are that close? They must be fun to hang around with."

"Who are they?" Ken asked.

"Other friends I made at school. Kou is the captain of Yasogami High basketball team, and Daisuke is the captain for the soccer team. We get along pretty well, and so does Yosuke. I'll introduce you guys sometime, and maybe challenge you to a match."

Akihiko smirked. "Sounds like my kind of thing. What else do you do around here?"

"I also did a few part-time jobs," Souji continued. "Like working at the daycare or tutoring. I find folding paper cranes to be pretty relaxing."

The former athlete looked at him oddly. "Paper cranes?"

"It started out as charity work, but it sorta grew on me. There's an old belief that if one folds a thousand paper cranes, their greatest wish will come true..."

'I wonder what Banchou-kun's wish is?' Minato thought.

"Man, you got no life..." Junpei whined.

"Hey, that is my life. Of course, that's what I do when I'm not hanging out with my friends," Souji said. "If I have free time in the evenings, I also like to build plastic models. Aniki and Shinjiro-san probably saw a few of them on the shelf in my room."

Shinjiro raised a curious eyebrow. "You made those? Looks like it takes a lot of work."

"Not really. It's all about patience. I'm looking for a Phoenix Ranger Featherman R model to work on this summer. I heard they're really challenging with lots of pieces."

"You might be in luck. Some new models are arriving this week, and from what I hear, it's the latest ones," Yosuke said.
"They have the new Phoenix Ranger Featherman R figures?!" Ken nearly shouted. One could see his eyes gleaming with excitement. Realizing his outburst, he blushed. "Uh… I-I mean…"

The guys chuckled as Ken blushed harder. Minato ruffled his hair. "It's okay, Ken. No need to be embarrassed," he said with a gentle smile. "We still like Featherman even at our age, right guys?"

The others grinned sheepishly at that. "Classics never get old," Junpei finally said.

"R-really?"

"You bet! Sentai series are enjoyed by people regardless their age. Even Nanako likes to watch it," Souji said. Then he had an idea. "When I get the model, why don't you and Koromaru come over to my place to help me work on it? Nanako would love to have you over."

Koromaru barked happily, wagging his tail. Ken nodded, his face still warm. "S-sure, Souji-san. Thank you."

The silverette smiled at the boy. Ken shared several similarities with Nanako, he noticed. They were both mature and responsible despite their young age, but very lonely. Losing their mothers early in life must have effected them very strongly. He decided to change the subject to draw attention away from them. "So, I told you guys about my myself. Ken here likes Phoenix Ranger Featherman R, collecting action figures and mangas. Your turn."

Minato rubbed the back of his head. "It's no secret to any of you that I really enjoy music," he said, pointing to his MP3 player. "I also like taking photos, one of the reasons I joined the Photography Club in school. I do a little part-time jobs here and there, and once in a while I try my hands at cooking and experimenting in the kitchen. I also really like video games. RPGs, fighting games, racing, you name it."

"Tell me about it, dude. You'd always beat me and Kenji whenever we go to the arcade." Junpei said. "And I thought I was hooked on those."

"Years of practice. Minako and I didn't have any friends aside from Souji-kun. After we moved away, we only had each other, so we'd spend a lot of time playing video games. Honestly, she's my best rival yet."

"That explains why Mina-tan owned me most of the time!" Junpei groaned. "There goes my manliness for losing to a girl."

The blunette chuckled. "Yes, my sister is almost as bad as me when it comes to games. While we're still on topic, it's your turn now, Junpei."

Junpei grinned, always ready to talk about himself. "I really dig video games, but baseball is my true passion. I even got a scholarship after making it into my college baseball team." He then sighed. "Too bad that means I gotta be really careful with my grades now."

"But you've made this far didn't you? You can pull it off, Junpei-san," Yosuke said.

"Thanks, dude. You're up, by the way."

"Huh? Me?!" Yosuke blinked. "Yeah, well...like Minato-san, I really like games and music." He pointed to the headphones around his neck. "When I'm not slaving away at Junes, I really love to ride around on my motorcycle. The wind in my face when I pick up speed feels great. Makes me feel free, and here in Inaba you can get pretty much anywhere with one. And bikes are also a good alternative."
"When you don't crash it into trash cans, that is~" Teddie sang in an annoying tune, causing the others to snort with laughter.

"Shut up, Ted! I only crashed because you panicked and covered my eyes!" Yosuke growled, but calmed down soon enough. "You guys might probably find it weird, but I also like to break dance."

"Break dance? Why that?" Shinjiro asked as he threw another lure into the water.

"Once we started fighting Shadows, I figured I needed something else to make myself more useful in battle. Since my Persona specializes in speed and I always listen to quick-paced music, I decided to try break dancing to improve my agility and the next thing I know, I'm enjoying it."

Akihiko was impressed. "You found a way to train your body by dancing. No wonder you're so fast and able to dodge many attacks. That's pretty amazing if you ask me."

Yosuke rubbed the back of his head, surprised at the compliment. "Wow, thanks Akihiko-san. So, what do you do?"

"Me? Physical training is what I'm all about! Boxing, jogging, working out at the gym, that sort of stuff," Akihiko stated proudly, ignoring Shinjiro rolling his eyes. "Of course, if you wanna train your body you gotta train your mind too, so I do a little reading every now and then. In fact, I think I'm gonna take up on your offer to borrow those 'Man's Life' series, Souji."

"Sure, I'll lend them to you. I can guarantee that you'll like them."

"If they can make him take a break from those protein crap he chugs down, I'll be really surprised," Shinjiro muttered sarcastically.

"Shut up, Shinji!"

"Honestly, Aki, I don't know why you take those in the first place. They taste like shit. Besides, with all the beef bowls you eat, you get more than enough protein in your diet. I mean, it wouldn't kill you if you threw more vegetables into the mix every once in a while." Junpei's snickers caught his ear. "If you got something to say, Iori, say it to my face! And, just for the record, you should really lay off the instant ramen."

The cap-wearing teen just shrugged and turned back his focus on fishing, pissing Shinjiro off in the process.

Yosuke and Teddie only blinked in confusion while Minato, Ken and Souji laughed.

"Shinjiro-senpai is into cooking, guys. And he worries about everybody's eating habits," Minato explained. "You might call him the team's nutritionist, but he's more like a picky grandmother if you ask me."

"And he's a great cook too," Souji added. "I think he cooks way better than I do."

Teddie's and Yosuke's eyes widened in disbelief. Souji's cooking skills are considered legendary among their team. To know that there was someone whom he acknowledged to have superior skills than himself, was unthinkable.

"Tch..." Shinjiro scoffed, trying to focus on fishing and hoping that nobody suggests anything stupid like organizing a cooking competition or the sort.

Koromaru started whining, pawing at Ken's legs. "What is it, Koro?" he asked.
The Shiba Inu lied on the ground with his belly up. Shinjiro smirked, knowing what he wanted. "Okay boy, you win," he conceded, putting his rod aside before giving Koromaru a nice belly rub. Koromaru panted in pleasure, enjoying the affection.

"As you can see, Shinjiro-senpai is also quite good with animals," Minato chuckled. "Koro-chan really enjoys belly rubs. He especially likes it when Minako brushes his fur."

"Almost as much as he likes it when people take him for walks to the shrine," Shinjiro added, scratching the dog behind his ears.

"My turn now!" Teddie crowed, effectively catching their attention. The blonde ignored their annoyed scowls at his direction. "Let's see…I like eating Topsicles! They're so yummy! Oh, and playing with Nana-chan and giving balloons to the kids at Junes! It's so much fun!"

"Well, those are mostly harmless hobbies…" Minato said.

"And my most favorite thing in the world is to be a hot stud and score with the ladies!" Teddie continued shamelessly. In fact, he actually seemed proud of it.

Everyone sweatdropped. 'Dear God, please don't tell me I'm dealing with another Ryoji here…' Minato mentally face-palmed.

"Please, whatever you guys do, don't give him any flirting tips," Yosuke said, pinching between his brows. "He's already as bad as it is now."

"Kanji?" Yosuke stepped closer to examine the bleached blonde. He was asleep. "For crying out loud, he's been sleeping the whole time?!!"

"Kanji-san does look tired," Ken pointed out. "I wonder if he was up all night or something."


Kanji's eyes slowly fluttered open, but he was still semi-conscious. "Huh?! Ma, leave me alone!" he grunted, then turned to his other side. "Can't ya see I'm busy finishing Shinjiro-san's yukata for the festival…" An audible snore was heard moments later.
Shinjiro's eyes widened. Their secret had been blown so carelessly. Without thinking, he gave Kanji a hard kick on the legs. "Dumbass! You had to go and spill it out, didn't you?!"

Groaning in pain, Kanji was now fully awake. "What's the big idea?!" He shot his assailant the most scathing glare he could muster. "It ain't my fault your girlfriend asked me to do it, dickhead!"

In no time they were in each other's faces, growling like mad beasts. They looked more intimidating because of their towering statures. Before things turned nasty, Minato and Souji interfered and pulled them away from each other.

"Okay you two, no fighting!" Minato warned. "And no swearing!" he added as an afterthought.

"You heard Aniki. Cut it out, both of you!" Souji demanded.

The two eventually cooled down, much to the others' relief. Kanji and Shinjiro were known for their short temper and brute force, so a fight between the two was the last thing they wanted to happen.

"Dude, I can't believe this! Tough guy Shinjiro-senpai is gonna wear a yukata for the festival!?" Junpei burst into laughter. "All because Mina-tan asked him to! Man, you're totally whipped!"

Akihiko snorted, trying to hold back his own laughter. "So much for your badass reputation, Shinji."

Embarrassed, Shinjiro looked away. "Shut up, you morons..."

Feeling sympathy for their upperclassman, Souji and Minato exchanged glances and nodded to each other. Here goes...

"I wouldn't be laughing if I were you guys..." Minato started.

"Oh, yeah? Why not?" Junpei questioned.

"Because Aniki and I are gonna wear yukatas for the festival as well," Souji answered, much to the others' surprise. "It was Aneki's idea. We agreed it'll be a great way to honor the times we had as kids, and to create more memories together."

"And - " Minato smirked, crossing his arms with finality. "Minako said she's gonna convince the girls to get yukatas for all of you. You wouldn't want to go against their wishes now, would you?"

Their friends exchanged nervous glances with each other. Shinjiro and Kanji hung their heads in defeat. There was simply no way to win against the girls.

"Oh well, that doesn't sound so bad." Good ol' Yosuke, trying to see the positive in a complicated situation. "At least it won't be like the school festival last year."

"You had to bring that up?! That was you's and Teddie's fault, Senpai!" Kanji groaned, shuddering at the memory.

Teddie started drooling. "Oh, but it was so fun! And we got to see the girls in swimsuits!" His eyes had a glassy, faraway look in them. "Well, except for Nao-chan, but still, it was great!"

"I still hold the two of you responsible," Souji said. "You shouldn't have signed them up for that beauty pageant without their permission. Thanks to you idiots, we had to do 'that'!"

The SEES guys became curious. Minato recalled Souji mentioning an incident he and his friends
had gone through during the cultural festival, but was too embarrassed to give details.

"I admit it was almost worth all the trouble," Yosuke sighed. "Just remind me to never cross-dress again." He gasped and covered his mouth. "Oh, damnit!"

"Yosuke!" Souji hissed.

"Cross-dressing?!" the others shouted their surprise.

"Don't remind me of that, man!" Kanji bemoaned. "That's enough to get a guy scarred for life!"

"I'm sorry!" The next second Yosuke was on the ground on all fours, a dark, depressed aura surrounding him. "My innocence...ruined for life..."

"Look on the bright side, guys. At least no one took photos…" Souji said, trying to cheer them up.

"Rise-chan did!" Teddie chimed. "I saw it on her cellphone. She said she was saving them for something called 'blackmail'. How can mail be black?"

Yosuke grabbed him by the collar of his shirt. "She did?! And why the hell you didn't erase them!?" he yelled, shaking the little blonde.

"R-Rise-chan paid me t-two Topsicles to keep it secret!" There were swirlies in his eyes as he got dizzy from all the shaking.

Kanji groaned in disappointment. "Just two Topsicles? That's pretty damn pathetic of you, Ted."

"And I thought I could leave that behind…" Souji sighed, depressed.

Minato tried to comfort his younger brother. Akihiko and Shinjiro had the decency not to laugh at their predicament. Ken also tried not to laugh, but he had to cover his mouth with his hands to hide his mirth.

Junpei on the other hand, was laughing so hard that tears were leaking from his eyes. "You guys are a real piece of work! I bet you weren't even that good looking!"

"I got first place!" the blonde stated proudly. "And I got to be a judge in the Miss Yasogami Beauty Pageant!"

"Why else did you think the girls had to wear swimsuits in the contest?" Yosuke said, shaking his head. "That was probably the only good thing that came out of it."

Junpei's eyes glazed over. "Oh yeah! Seeing the girls in swimsuits is a once in a lifetime opportunity…" He recalled how beautiful the girls were during their trip to Yakushima and daydreamed about Chidori wearing a bikini.

"Junpei..." Minato growled warningly.

"And there he goes again," Akihiko sighed. "Yukatas aren't a bad idea. We can handle it. It's only once a year, after all."

"Speaking of girls, a little birdie told me that you and Chie finally hooked up together, Yosuke." Junpei grinned at his fellow Magician. "About time!"

Yosuke nearly choked on the soda he was drinking. Souji gave him a few pats on the back. "W-What?! Who told you that?!" he spluttered.
"Souji here." Junpei jerked a thumb at the silverette. "He and Yukiko knew it all along."

"You damn matchmaker! If Chie finds out everybody knows about us, she'll Galactic Punt me to hell!" He punched Souji on the shoulder. His best friend winced in pain, and Yosuke realized that he accidentally hit his injured arm. "Oh crap! Sorry about that, partner!"

"It's okay. Just don't do it again," Souji reassured him as he rubbed his shoulder. "But honestly, everyone kinda knew you and Chie would get together eventually. Yukiko and I just gave you a little push. You're both as bad about realizing your feelings as each other."

Yosuke blushed, looking away. "That's... somewhat true. If you and Yukiko hadn't encouraged me and Chie to hang out together when everyone else was busy, we would have probably missed our chance."

"From what I can see, Satonaka isn't the demure, ladylike type," Akihiko said. "What made you like her in the first place?"

"Chie is a tomboy, I won't deny that. But she manages to stay feminine. She has a short temper and one hell of a kick, but her upbeat and bright personality always cheers me up without even trying. Even if her deductions sounded outrageous at times, she hit the nail right on the head. Her intuition is quite sharp."

"A handy trait to have, especially if she wants to join the police force after graduation," Souji added.

"She makes you feel special. Like a winner. I can so relate to that," Junpei said. "Kinda like Chidori. Despite everything that's happened and me being a complete goofball, she's still understanding and compassionate towards me. She's so mature sometimes I have to wonder what she sees in me."

"I guess that's what people call 'opposites attract', Junpei-san," Ken said. "You changed her for the better and she in turn did the same for you."

"Heh, that's true!" Junpei ruffled the kid's hair. "So, now that you've grown a little, you got a crush on someone?" He waggled his eyebrows suggestively. "Like Nanako-chan?"

Ken almost dropped his fishing rod in surprise. "H-huh? W-What are you talking about?!" His cheeks turned bright pink.

"C'mon, buddy, don't think I didn't notice how hard you were trying to protect her when the Shadows attacked that day, or how worried you were when she, Souji and her dad were taken in that witness protection program because of that A-hole Adachi." He started to nudge Ken playfully.

The other guys sweatdropped at Junpei's teasing. But Ken's reaction to it was a bit surprising to Shinjiro and Akihiko; he used to be so aloof with girls other than Minako.

"I-I...I just wanted to make sure Nanako-chan would be okay..." Ken mumbled, blushing harder. "From what Yosuke-san and the others told us, she had gone through a lot of hardships. Losing a parent, remaining lonely, growing up before her time... I can relate to that." He turned his gaze to the river. "Maybe...maybe I'm being overprotective because I know how she feels."

Akihiko and Shinjiro couldn't help the surge of protective instinct. As mature as Ken is, he's still a kid. Without thinking they put a hand on Ken's shoulders. He nodded at them with a small smile. "Don't worry about me, guys. I'm fine...really!"
Then Souji had an idea. "Ken, why don't you and Koromaru go to the festival with Nanako?" he suggested. "Get to know each other better. Have fun and be a kid for once. You might even meet other kids as well. I know two kids who can be good friends with you."

Koromaru barked twice, excited at the prospect. Ken stared at the silver-haired high schooler in disbelief. "A-are you sure about that, Souji-san?"

"There's only one condition!" Teddie interrupted, looking serious for once, before he smiled. "Take good care of Nana-chan and have lots and lots of fun with her, okay?"

Ken's serious face slowly began to brighten. "Of course, Teddie-san." He turned to Souji. "Thank you."

Souji nodded. Shinjiro and Akihiko exchanged smirks of approval. Yosuke and Kanji stared at their leader in disbelief; they knew how overprotective he was of Nanako ever since she got out of the hospital. Now he's giving his blessings for Ken to take Nanako out on a...date? It sure sounded that way, and Ken was pretty good-looking for a middle-schooler. Shaking their heads, they tried not to think too much about it.

"Yeah, better enjoy while she's still a kid. I just hope that when Nanako-chan grows up she doesn't grow a temper like Yukari-chi's." Junpei said without thinking. The last comment earned him a whack from Minato. "Ow! What was that for?!"

"For being a loudmouth. That's basically the only reason she gets angry at you." Minato was annoyed, and he showed it. "Yukari may have her flaws, but she's got a good heart and cares deeply for her friends."

"Dude, chill out. I was just joking. No need to get all offended," Junpei pouted, rubbing the spot where he was smacked.

"S-sorry..." Minato pulled back. "I think I'm still a little jumpy at what that criminal said about her..."

"It's cool, dude. I'd be pissed if that bastard messed with my girl too. Anyway..." He smoothly segued to another topic. "It never occurred to me before, but how did you two start dating?"

Minato blushed. "When we first met at the dorm, she was highly suspicious of me and Minako. But she's a completely different person at school. It was her beauty and cheery disposition that drew my attention, pretty much like the other guys in school. Before the trip to Yakushima, we didn't hang out much. But during that trip, I started to understand her better, her feelings, what she was going through..." He recalled how he embraced her and comforted her under the moonlight. It took all of his courage to make the first move, but it paid off. He looked at his MP3 player strap she had given to him as a gift. "During the typhoon I came down with the flu. She looked after me while Shinjiro-senpai was busy taking care of Minako. She was very caring and attentive, a side that she doesn't show other guys, a side only I know about. That sort of sealed the deal."

"I can relate to that," Souji said. He fingered the charm his girlfriend had given him inside his pants pocket. "Yukiko has both beauty and smarts, but she doesn't let it get to her head. She's kind, caring and very determined. When she sets her mind on something, she doesn't give up easily. She used to be quite reserved before her kidnapping, but after we rescued and befriended her, she became much livelier. Her laughing fits were unusual at first, but over time I come to find them quite endearing."

"Heh ~ nice!" Junpei then turned to Akihiko. "So, Akihiko-san, what do you have to say about Mitsuru-senpai?"
Akihiko’s face turned as red as his shirt. "W-what?!" He shot a glare at Shinjiro, as if blaming him for the spilled secret. His best friend just rolled his eyes and ignored him.

"You and Senpai tried so hard to keep your relationship secret, but it turned out kinda obvious," Minato told him. "Besides, my sister and I always thought you two would end up together. We even had our own bet as to when that would happen."

"Who won?" Ken asked curiously.

"Neither. We couldn't produce any solid proof that they confessed or went out on a date. Minako tried to stalk them a few times to one up me on finding evidence, but gave up because she didn't want to risk getting mistaken for one of Akihiko-senpai’s fangirls." A few of them sweatdropped at the last part.

"We also noticed how you tried to comfort Mitsuru-san when we ventured into Yoshino-san's dungeon," Souji said. "The connection you shared was pretty evident."

Akihiko sighed in defeat as Shinjiro snickered. The former athlete couldn't believe he and Mitsuru had been discovered so easily. "Fine, I admit it. We've been going out since the end of high school." His blush turned a shade darker. "Mitsuru...she's really beautiful, intelligent and strong. Not only in battle, but on the inside as well. She tried her hardest to shoulder the burden of her family's mistakes alone, and picked herself up and emerged stronger than before after what happened to her father." He grinned at Minato. "I guess I have to thank you, as well as Minako and Yukari, for being there for her and helping her to open up."

"Always glad to help, Senpai." Minato turned to Shinjiro. "So Senpai, how did you fall for my sister?"

Shinjiro grunted, but he knew he wouldn't be able to avoid that topic forever. "I'm not really sure who fell for who first. Minako can be quite a handful when you're not around to help. Too damn bossy, not to mention stubborn as hell. But she was the first girl to ever try to get to really know me. Like, to actually take some time out of her busy day-to-day life to sit down and talk. I used to think she chose me as the favorite target for her to pester, and that used to annoy me. But as I got to know her better, she's not what I expected. She's kind and compassionate, always greeting everyone with a warm smile, trying to help them no matter what problems they might have. And she...she understands..." he finished vaguely, gripping his silver pocket watch inside his coat pocket, silently recalling how Minako had found it for him. "Plus, she is pretty damn cute..." he mumbled in a whisper, but Akihiko heard him anyway and snickered. He shot him a scathing glare.

The other guys started to lightly tease him. Souji noticed Kanji has been quiet for a while. "Kanji? You okay?"

"Yeah...just thinking..."

"About Naoto?" Yosuke teased.

Kanji glared at him. "Damn right! You guys kept talking 'bout your girlfriends and it just makes me wonder...why do I like Naoto? Sure, she's really smart, she's got guts, and she's pretty tough, but at the same time she's so small and cute, especially when she's wearing the school uniform..." He gazed at his hand and clenched it tightly. "When Naoto first approached me and tried to talk to me, she didn't let rumors or crap about me bother her or scare her, even if it was only because of her detective work. It felt nice, talking to someone my age for once."

"If you really like her that much then stop being a wuss and talk to her already," Shinjiro snarkily
"Or are you still in doubt that you liked her because you thought she was a guy?" Yosuke teased.

"Yosuke, knock it off!" Souji scolded. "We all agreed that joke isn't funny anymore."

Kanji growled as his blush darkened. He was really pissed. "This is your damn fault!" He threw a punch towards Yosuke, but his reflexes were quicker and he managed to dodge just in time. This caused him to trip on a rock and mess with his trajectory. Instead the punch landed on Shinjiro.

Now in pain, the tall brunette lost his cool. "Okay asshole, you asked for it!" he roared, lunging at Kanji. In no time both guys were exchanging punches and kicks.

"Oh shit..." Yosuke muttered, backing away from the raging males. Teddie hid behind Souji.

The silverette sighed. As usual, Yosuke just had to make the wrong comment and worsen the situation. "Where is Chie when you need her?" he groaned.

Back to the fight, they were still exchanging blows. Shinjiro sent an uppercut aiming for Kanji's jaw. Being an experienced street-fighter, Kanji evaded it with ease. He put up a defensive stance as both of them circled each other.

"Hmph! Not bad for a cowardly pussy," Shinjiro mocked. He was a bit surprised at the younger teen's strength and dexterity.

That punch earlier hurt, damnit!

"I've been beating up a bunch of leathered-up pansies on motorbikes since middle school," Kanji huffed. "What makes you any different?"

"Me? A few gang members here and there." Shinjiro wiped the blood from his bleeding lip. "You can't even confess to a girl."

"Says the guy who had to be confessed to. Who's the coward now?"

They snapped and charged at each other again. This time, Shinjiro's fist made contact with Kanji's gut, the latter groaning in pain. Kanji retaliated in turn, sending swift kicks to the older teen. Both of them did not notice that they were inching closer and closer to the water.

Akihiko watched in amazement at the fight. It was quite rare, almost never, to see someone go head-to-head with his childhood friend. The highschool junior was rough around the edges, but Akihiko could see that he had tremendous potential as a fighter. 'Is there someway I can get him to train as a professional?' he mused to himself.

"Senpai, don't just stand there. We have to stop them!" Minato cried, his fishing pole forgotten.

"Kanji, stop this at once!" Souji commanded. Seeing that his underclassman was too preoccupied to listen, he had no choice but to jump in. "Yosuke, since you started this, you're going to help me whether you like it or not."

"I know, I know..." Yosuke sighed. He wished that he had kept his big mouth shut.

Minato and Akihiko waited for an opening before trying to subdue the fighting guys. If they were lucky, none of them should end up in the hospital.

When Shinjiro landed a hit on Kanji's face, causing the junior to back away, Minato and Akihiko took the opportunity to grab each of Shinjiro's arms to pull him back. Souji and Yosuke did the
same with Kanji.

Even with their human restraints, both males were too in the heat of the fight to care. They tried to pry themselves away from their captors.

"Aki, let go damn it!" Shinjiro shouted, his fists itching to hit Kanji one last time.

"Let me at 'im, Senpai!" Kanji growled. He dragged his senpais with him as he stepped towards Shinjiro.

Junpei knew he would regret this later, but stepped forward to help Minato hold Shinjiro's arm anyway. His sudden intervention caused the blue-haired leader to lose his footing in the struggle and slam his body against Shinjiro, causing the senior to lose his balance. Akihiko and Junpei also went down because Shinjiro grabbed their shirt collars as he teetered backwards. A loud splash could be heard as the four of them fell into the river.

The same domino effect happened to the other struggling group when Teddie jumped into the fray and latched himself on Kanji's legs, making it the second loud splash to be heard in a day.

Minato gasped for breath as he emerged from the water, his wet blue bangs covering his eyes.

"Ack, it's cold!" Junpei sputtered.

Yosuke was...having a dramatic flashback. "It's the camping trip all over again…! Noooooo!"

Souji sneezed. "Just my luck…"

"Way to go, Shinji..." Akihiko said in a sarcastic tone. "Now we're all soaked!"

"I'm cold!" Teddie whined, shivering.

Shinjiro and Kanji were still glaring daggers at each other...until they heard a small sneeze from the shore. "Huh?" It also caught the others' attention.

Ken and Koromaru were still standing on their fishing spot, but both of them were soaked. Even though they didn't interfere with the fight, they had also gotten wet because of the collateral splashes.

"... You scared the fish away..." the boy muttered before sneezing again. There was a mix of disappointment and annoyance in his voice. Koromaru whined, upset because of his sudden bath as well as the quarrel.

"..." Kanji and Shinjiro looked at the kid and dog, and then at themselves. They were feeling pretty stupid right about now.

The other guys exchanged worried glances. Just when they thought things couldn't get any worse...

Girls' giggles and laughter could be heard from the flood plain. "Aniki! Souji-kun!" Minako's voice called, and it was getting closer.

'Oh, shi-!' The Wild Cards turned to their friends. "Quick! Get out of the water! Now!"

The teenagers hurried to get to shore, shivering. There was no time for a cover-up as the girls approached them, chatting happily while carrying several shopping bags.
"Hey, guys!" Yukari greeted them with a smile. It quickly disappeared when she noticed something was off. "Huh? What happened here?"

"Umm…why are you all wet?" Fuuka asked.

"And why are Kanji's and Shinjiro-san's faces have bruises on them?" Rise asked curiously. It was an easy guess to make, though.

"And most importantly, why are Ken-kun and Koro-chan soaked in the middle of the day?" Minako demanded, tapping her foot.

"Were you fighting?" Nanako asked softly, upset by the whole thing. She pressed herself closer to her Aneki.

No longer smiling, the other girls glared dangerously at the boys. "Well? What do you have to say for yourselves?" Chie asked.

'Crap…' They couldn't even think of an excuse or cover story.

Surprisingly, Shinjiro stepped up. "It was my fault," he admitted calmly. "Tatsumi and I…we were having a friendly spar. I got carried away with it, and sort of knocked Aki and the guys into the water."

Seeing him boldly taking the blame for himself, Kanji decided to do the same. "Yeah, I got a little too excited too. I'm as much to blame as he is," he turned to Ken and Koromaru. "So… uh… Sorry 'bout ruining the fishing trip, guys… 'Specially for you two, Ken, Koro-chan…"

"I'm sorry too," Shinjiro said. "We'll make it up to you, somehow. Promise."

Koromaru barked and shook the water off his fur, spraying some of it on the girls. "He's saying he doesn't like to take a bath so suddenly," Metis translated. Koromaru scratched his neck with his hind leg. "But…he forgives you both."

Despite his shivering, Ken smiled at the two. "Apologies accepted," he said before letting out another sneeze.

Nanako's face brightened at his change of mood. "Bless you, Ken-kun!" she said, offering him a handkerchief.

"Thanks, Nanako-chan." Ken reached out for the handkerchief. Their hands touched by accident, causing both of them to blush simultaneously. Good thing no one noticed this.

"Okay, I'll let it slide this time, but I'm holding onto your word to make it up to them," Minako said, crossing her arms in warning. Her expression softened and she made her way to the youngest team members. "C'mon, Ken-kun. Let's get you and Koro-chan dried before you catch a cold."

In no time, the girls were surrounding them too, asking Ken if he was feeling well and if he'd like to drink something warm or take a hot bath once they returned to the inn. 'I guess at times like these, being a kid is not that bad at all…' the boy thought with a small smile. He was enjoying the attention.

The guys could only watch jealously. "But what about us?!" Junpei whined. "We got soaked too! And it wasn't even our fault!"

"Don't complain, Junpei," Minato muttered. "It could've been a lot worse. At least the girls aren't
beating us up."

"Which reminds me..." Souji smacked Yosuke behind his head. "This is your fault!"

"I know! I know! Don't remind me!" Yosuke grumbled, rubbing the sore spot. "Jeez..."

"By the way..." Minako interjected, a wide smile on her face. "We got some yukatas for you! I'm sure you'll like them but they'll probably need some minor alterations."

"I can handle that, Minako-senpai," Kanji offered. "Just bring them over to Ma's store tomorrow and I'll have them done by lunchtime."

"Are you sure about that, Kanji-kun?" she asked. "You already did a lot for me. I don't wanna give you any more work than you can handle."

Kanji brushed off her worries. "It'll be a piece of cake. No need to worry and no charge for it at all!" he said confidently, but in his mind he knew he had bitten off more than he could chew. 'I really got my work cut out for me this time...'

"That's really thoughtful of you, Tatsumi. But I must insist on paying you for your services," Mitsuru said. "Including for Shinjiro's yukata, of course."

He couldn't say no to that. The money could really help his mother's business. "Thanks a lot, Mitsuru-san!" He gave her a deep bow.

"Well, if that's how things are gonna be, I'll help you," Minato offered. "After all, I didn't join the Fashion Club in high school for nothing."

"Great idea, Aniki! I'll help too!" Minako chimed in. "Oh, it brings back so many memories!"

"What, you two know how to sew too?"

"We learned it from Bebe, a French foreign exchange student we met during high school," Minato explained. "He's a cheery, kind fellow who loves fashion design and everything about the Japanese culture."

"It was so fun helping him make a kimono. Bebe-kun is such a sweet friend," Minako said. "I should ask Rio-chan for his email the next time I call her. He must be worried if we haven't written to him in a long time, right Aniki?" She noticed Shinjiro looking away, scowling at no one and nothing. She giggled. 'You look so cute when you're jealous, Shinji.'

"C'mon guys," Souji said. "We had quite a day today. We better head back before any of us catch a cold."

It was rather awkward walking back with a group of guys who were dripping wet. The townsfolk who saw them made no fuss of it. It was pretty obvious what had happened to them.

Naoto and Kanji were at the back, walking closely but not talking to each other. The young detective found herself staring up a Kanji when he wasn't paying attention to her, reflecting on what had happened today. 'I must figure this out. About me. About Kanji-kun. About...us.'

Kanji took quick glimpses of Naoto when she looked away. 'She looks prettier than usual...’ he complimented silently. The day after tomorrow, during the festival...I'll finally confess what I really feel for her. I ain't gonna be a wuss anymore!'
We all know that men like to gossip just as much, if not more, than women. This is our interpretation of that with the Persona 3 & Persona 4 boys.
Festival Fun

After the splashing incident, the boys went back home to change into dry clothes.

Souji invited Ken and Minato to Junes that evening to look for the new Featherman R model. Nanako would be coming along as well; the Dojima household had run out of groceries and the patriarch had to work late that night. Shinjiro decided to tag along because he might benefit from a shopping trip. Koromaru wagged his tail happily, trotting beside them.

The SEES girls however, wanted some time to themselves, while the guys wanted to rest excluding Junpei, who wanted to keep Chidori company. Minako wanted some pastries though, and asked her twin to get some for her.

Minato, Shinjiro, Ken and Koromaru left for the Dojima residence after they informed the rest where they were going. Souji and Nanako were already waiting when the four of them arrived. Koromaru guarded the house while they were away.

The small group headed to the toy department first, under the models section. Souji browsed through the new stock that Yosuke mentioned earlier with Ken. The pre-teen was babbling on excitedly about the awesome adventures of the Featherman Team in the latest episodes. "And then Red Hawk infiltrated the secret base on his own, even though Black Condor had warned him about the booby traps the enemy had set up before hand. He was half-way of rescuing the hostages when Blue Swan suddenly - "

Souji listened with a smile. He was hit with a wave of nostalgia as he remembered watching the sentai series with the twins back when they were kids, and later mimicking the moves when they played at the park in the evenings.

Minato accompanied Nanako to look at the other toys on display, and trailing behind them was reluctant Shinjiro. The blue-haired teen chuckled at how his senpai was trying hard to keep his expression neutral as not to scare the other children away. He knew Shinjiro was impatiently waiting for them to finish and head to the grocery department.

Back to Ken and Souji, their eyes settled on one particular Mecha model that had already been assembled, standing proud and tall, surrounded by smaller gashapon models from the Featherman series in a display case. The two of them pressed their noses against the Perspex, as if they expected to ghost through and touch the object of their desire.

"C-can we get that one, Souji-san?" Ken asked in a shaky voice. It had to be one of the coolest things he had ever seen.

"Of course we can, Ken. Hell, I can't wait to get started!"

They then frantically looked for the model on the shelves, and high-fived each other when Souji grabbed the last one. When the duo informed the others that were about to buy it, Ken made a hand gesture to Minato and Shinjiro, demanding them to pay up.

'Wow, Ken must want this so badly,' Minato thought, sweatdropping as he pulled some money from his wallet. 'I've never seen him look so serious yet happy at the same time.'

Shinjiro groaned a little before taking out his own wallet. He silently vowed to never go fishing with the guys again.
Ken's eyes were shining after they finally made the purchase. "Souji-san, you're going to teach me how to put this together right?" He gazed at the box lovingly. The rather expensive item was made affordable thanks to three guys pooling their money in.

Behind him, Nanako giggled at his antics.

"Of course, Ken. We'll get started once we get back to my house," Souji answered. "I still have the tools in my room."

Lastly and finally, they headed to the grocery department. Shinjiro sauntered off on his own when they got there.

"Don't mind him," Minato said as the others gave him questioning looks behind his back. "He's just used to doing his own thing. We'll see him later."

"Let's see..." Souji took out a shopping list from his pocket and scanned the contents. "We need eggs, rice, milk, bread, some chicken, vegetables... Oh, and Uncle just ran out of his favorite pickled radish. Anything to add, Nanako?" he asked his little cousin.

"Can we get some chocolate too?"

"Sure, why not?" he playfully ruffled her hair. "If we hurry, I can make everyone a quick snack for everyone before Aniki and the others have to head back to the inn."

Minato helped Souji choose the vegetables while Ken accompanied Nanako to get the bread, milk and eggs.

Minato nudged his pseudo brother and jutted his chin at the young pair. "Hey, don't you think those two look cute together? I'm starting to think that Nanako-chan is developing a crush on our little Ken."

Souji rolled his eyes. "What are you, a girl?" he scoffed. But then he stopped to think about what Minato just said. He looked over to his little cousin and for the first time, noticed the blush that stained her cheeks. The expression on her face was the same one she made whenever she showed affection to either him or her father, trying to get their attention. Despite trying to lean away from embarrassment of being too close, her focus on Ken never deviated. He already knew what the young Persona-user felt about his cousin after his confession during their fishing trip, he just didn't expect Nanako to develop certain feelings for the kid. "Oh hell no..."

"A little jealous are we?" Minato smirked. "I understand though. When Minako started paying more attention to Shinjiro-senpai, I was livid. Face it, he's not the kind of guy I would want hanging around her, and I was afraid she'd choose him over me. The feeling passed as I got to know Senpai a little better, though."

"B-b-but...what about their age difference?!" Souji was slightly panicking. "I mean, is that even normal?"

"Relax Banchou-kun. Little girls develop crushes on older guys all the time. It's part of growing up. And if I remember correctly, you told me that she wanted to marry you when she got older."

The younger of the two blushed. "Sh-shut up! I'm not jealous!" he retorted defensively.

"It's only a phase," Minato said. "I'm pretty sure it'll pass soon enough." He gave Souji a reassuring pat on the back before continuing with their shopping. They made a last detour to the pastry section.
Shinjiro was already waiting for them in front of the cashier counter with a scowl on his face. In his arms was a grocery bag filled with his own stuff, and another filled with canned dog food. They left, satisfied at getting what they needed.

Dojima still wasn't home when they got back. After Souji and Nanako put away the groceries, Shinjiro approached the silverette. "Hey, can I borrow your kitchen for a while?"

"What for?" Souji inquired.

"Remember what I said about making it up to the kids and Koromaru? I was thinking of cooking them dinner. That is, if you'll let me."

"Of course, Shinjiro-san. I was wondering what you were up to back at Junes. Earlier, I was thinking about making some sandwiches for you guys, but since you're offering dinner who am I to refuse." At his consent, Shinjiro plopped his grocery bag on the kitchen counter. He took out a few meat cutlets, herbs and spices, and some root vegetables. Souji took a look at the ingredients and concluded that dinner was either going to be some sort of hotpot or a stew dish. "There's some broth in the fridge if you're interested," he offered. "And red cooking wine in the cabinets. I'll be upstairs if you need any help." He gestured for Ken to follow him up to his room along with their newly acquired robot model.

Minato sat with Nanako and Koromaru in front of the television, watching a quiz show with them.

In Souji's room, he sat with Ken at his working table. They gave the instructions and model plan a once over before taking out the parts. "Wow, there are so many pieces in here," Ken commented. "At this point it's difficult to see how all of this will become like the picture on the box."

"Like I said before, it takes patience and a lot of diligence. It took me about five days to get the Brahmin Armor together, and more than that with the Agni. But most importantly, you have to follow the instructions very carefully, since you are kind of new at this." Souji began tutoring him on how to use the tools to cut the pieces out of their frames, and the correct techniques on gluing them together.

Ken was a very patient and attentive student. They started small, with the plastic model's left leg. Even for that part alone, there were more than five pieces to be put together.

Souji watched the boy work, trying to pry the pieces out, correcting him once in a while. He snickered softly when Ken stuck out his tongue as he focused on his task. After about an hour, a soft knock on the door could be heard.

"Ken-kun, Big Bro…" Nanako stuck her head in, cheeks bright pink. "Shinjiro-san said dinner is ready."

"Thanks Nanako-chan!" Ken said, looking away from the plastic pieces. He gave her a grateful smile. "We'll be down in a bit."

Nanako gave a soft squeak of embarrassment and left. Souji frowned. 'Wait, why did she greet Ken first instead of me?' was his first thought, and it bothered him. Not immensely, but close enough. Then he mentally slapped himself. 'Idiot, don't get jealous over such a small matter! Aniki said that this little crush of hers is natural. It's not like Ken is going to be my future brother-in-law… right?' Somehow, he wasn't convinced.

The silverette had guessed right earlier - Shinjiro did make stew. In addition to that, he grilled some steaks for Koromaru - the only way to make it up to a dog was to feed them prime cuts of
meat. He then sliced the steak into smaller pieces, mixing them with the dog food in a bowl. Minato helped set up the table.

Once everything was laid out, Shinjiro placed the dog bowl on the floor beside the table. Koromaru sniffed the air before barking excitedly, wolfing down the beefy goodness without pause. Ken and Nanako stared at the food on the table, mouths slightly watering. There was the beef stew, along with some rice and cucumber salad.

"I saved some for your dad, Nanako," Souji said. "What are we waiting for? Let's eat!"

As Nanako was reaching for a fork, her fingers brushed against Ken's, who was also reaching for it. The little girl's entire face became red, and Ken's cheeks turned a pink tinge, but only for a moment.

The older guys saw this. Two of them smirked knowingly, but Souji sighed. He didn't want to express his disapproval out loud, so he remained quiet. As they ate, he mulled through his thoughts. 'It's not like I don't like Ken. In fact, I like him very much. He's mature and responsible, and very much a gentleman. I can trust him to protect Nanako. Ugh! I wouldn't be having this conversation with myself if Nanako is a little older.'

"Souji-san," Ken interrupted his train of thought. "Do you mind if I come here again tomorrow? I want to learn more about putting that model together, if that's okay with you."

Souji gulped, nervous all of a sudden. 'Maybe Aniki was right. I should give Ken a chance and get to know him better before I give in to these negative feelings. We are a team after all,' he thought. "Sure. Why don't you come over after the fitting session at Kanji's place? We'll have plenty of time after that," he said. "Oh, that reminds me. I did promise I'd lend you some of my books. I'll give them to you before you head back."

"Thanks a lot, Souji-san!"

After dinner, Souji and Ken helped clean up while the others watched TV. Nanako played with Koromaru. Dojima could be back any minute now, so they had to make their leave. Nanako surprised Shinjiro by giving him a hug before he went. "Thanks for the delicious meal, Shinjiro-san," she said, smiling up at him. "You may look scary, but you're really nice!"

The beanie-wearing man was taken aback by her honesty. "Uhh... thanks."

"Why do you think Aneki likes him so much?" Souji grinned teasingly, ruffling her hair. "Come on, you gotta help me fold the laundry before your dad gets back."

"Thanks for the books, Souji-san!" Ken said, clutching a few of the Timid Teacher volumes to his chest. "I can't wait to start reading them."

Minato and Shinjiro waved them goodbye after Koromaru finished licking Nanako's face.

The next morning, Minako, Aegis, Metis and all the guys gathered at Tatsumi Textiles. Kanji greeted them with him normal "S'up?" as his mother served them tea. It was a rarity to see a huge group coming to her shop and she was happy that her son had made such great friends.

"My, my, it's good to see you again. Kanji told me that you boys will be wearing yukatas to the festival," she said, smiling at them. "Oh dear, this brings back good memories I had with my late husband. And there will be fireworks again this year. It makes the event so much livelier."
Minako's eyes were shining. "Really? I love fireworks. I haven't seen it in quite a while!"

The others continued their small talk with Mrs. Tatsumi as Kanji took the twins to the back room, where they would be working until lunch time to adjust the yukatas. The guys were fitted one by one, with Kanji and Minato taking the measurements while Minako wrote them down. There wasn't a lot that needed to be mended since Aigis and Rise had a good eye for detail when choosing out their sizes.

"This is my first time wearing such a beautiful garment," Metis said as she modeled her yukata. "And I'm excited to see this 'fireworks' display that you were talking about earlier."

"It's really beautiful," Minako said, sticking in a few pins along the bottom hem. "There's something about fireworks that lets out your inner child. It's a wonderful feeling!"

After the fitting session was done, those who weren't involved with the yukatas left the shop. As soon as they were far enough, Yosuke swiveled around to face his friends. "Guys, I need to ask you for a really huge favor!"

"Uh-oh, I know that tone..." Souji grimaced. "You need our help at Junes, don't you?" There were one of two things Yosuke would beg him for - the other one being a last-minute cram session before exams.

The brunette's eyes shined with tears of happiness. "Buddy, I knew you'd understand! That place is seriously understaffed because many of the part-timers are still away on vacation. I'd really appreciate it if you guys can lend a hand." He gave them one of the cutest puppy-dog faces Souji had ever seen him make. "I'll even pay you guys more than what the normal part-timers earn. What do you say?"

"Sorry, partner. I can't help you today. I kind of promised Ken that I'd help him with the Featherman robot model. Maybe some other time," Souji hoped that his best friend wouldn't be too disappointed. There was no way he could refuse Yosuke when he's this desperate. "Knowing you, you already roped in Chie for this. What do you need help for anyway?"

Yosuke sighed and rubbed the back if his head. "Just restocking the shelves and rearranging an entire aisle for a sale event, and then I'll be free for the entire day tomorrow. Dad can be such a slave-driver sometimes," he grumbled.

"Why not?" Shinjiro shrugged. "I don't have anything to do anyway, and I could really use the money."

"That doesn't sound so hard," Junpei said. "Count me in, dude!"

Metis didn't want to pass up an opportunity to experience 'the joys of earning a living', and volunteered herself. Aigis also agreed to help.

"The more the merrier, right?" Akihiko added. "I wonder if the other girls are willing to help."

After making a few calls, none of the other girls were available that day. Fuuka and Yukari wanted to focus on their college assignments, Mitsuru had a teleconference to attend, Yukiko and Rise were helping with their respective family businesses, and Naoto was busy with minor cases over at the Shirogane Estate.

Yosuke couldn't be more relieved. "Thank you so much, guys! I really appreciate this!"
The sound of sewing machines and the snipping of cloth could be heard in the textile shop. Kanji and the twins were kept busy, as there was still a long way to go before they could take a break.

They were interrupted when a middle-aged man in a black suit entered their working room. He was holding an expensive-looking paper bag.

"Hey, I know you," Kanji said. "You're Yakushiji-san, the secretary for the Shirogane Estate. What are you doing here?"

The man bowed politely. "I have come to deliver something which Naoto-sama might need. Her grandfather received this from one of his business associates as a gift to her, but sadly it doesn't fit," Yakushiji explained. "I heard that you are adjusting yukatas for your friends to wear tomorrow, so I was hoping you can add this one into the pile as well."

"We still have time for one more," Minato said. "But we can't do it without knowing her measurements."

"Do not fear. I took liberty of having those as well." Yakushiji took out a folded piece of paper from his breast pocket and handed it to Kanji. "I am sure you are able to adjust her new yukata with this information." He bowed to them once more and left.

Kanji's hands were shaking as he held the piece of paper. 'Holy crap, I'm holding the measurements of Naoto Shirogane in my hands...' He began to sweat as his imagination started to run wild. He felt something leak from his nose and snapped out of it. "Minako-senpai, c-can you do the adjusting on N-Naoto's yukata? I d-don't think I c-can..." he stuttered, handing the paper to Minako. He looked away as the twins eyed him curiously.

"I don't mind," Minako said, taking the unopened piece of paper. She took out the yukata from the bag and gasped. "Oh my, this is so lovely. The cloth itself must have cost a fortune. Naoto-chan is so lucky to get to wear something like this!" The silk fabric was a dark shade of azure, decorated with intricate patterns of yellow and pink flowers.

"Kanji, do you have a problem with women's clothing?" Minato asked. It was strange to see him behaving this way.

The bleached blonde didn't say anything and went to the bathroom. The sooner he could get to focus on work, the better it was for his sanity.

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**Dojima Residence, Souji's room...**

It was anything but quiet in here.

"Ken, wait! That part is meant to go on the head, not the torso!"

"Ah! Souji-san, what should I do?!"

"Take them apart before the glue dries!"

Ken pried the wrongly connected parts away, his fingers a sticky mess from the adhesive. The small room reeked of chemicals and was making his head spin, hence the mistakes he was unintentionally making.
"Let's take a break," Souji said finally. He pried the windows wider so that the smell doesn't suffocate them both.

Ken went to the bathroom to wash his hands. When he came back, he stared at the collection of plastic models on his bookshelf in awe. "How do you find the time to do all this?" he asked, sitting back down with his mentor. "The models, part-time jobs, studying, fighting Shadows, making friends. I'm pretty sure our leaders did the same back then, but I always wondered how they did it."

Souji contemplated his answer. "Hmm…time management, I guess. Sometimes it isn't good to just focus on one aspect of your life. I believe that creating variety can contribute to strength, even if it can get a little hectic," he answered. "It keeps things interesting amidst the responsibilities that come with being a team leader, and having friends to help always makes it easier to bear with."

"That sounds rather complicated," Ken said. "Back in Iwatodai, I didn't have many friends my age. I preferred to be alone, but being with the team changed that. After what happened with Shinjiro-san, I…I don't ever want to be like that again!"

Souji smiled. There was probably a lot more that Ken didn't want to say. "Hey, don't sweat it," he ruffled the boy's head. "Making friends doesn't hard have to be hard. Just be you. You're unique, Ken. No one can replace you."

"Th-thanks a lot, Souji-san." Ken smiled bashfully. "No wonder Nanako-chan looks up to you. I wish I had an amazing older brother."

Souji's chest swelled with pride, feeling a connection with the boy. A faint voice echoed at the back of his mind.

Thou art I… And I am thou…
Thou hast established a new bond…
It brings thee closer to the truth…
Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Justice Arcana…

'Another Justice social link,' Souji thought. 'I guess that makes sense. Nanako and Ken do have a lot in common.' A knock on the door was heard. "Come in."

Nanako poked her head in once more. "Big Bro, Ken-kun, its lunch time!" She entered the room after Souji nodded his head. "I made sandwiches!" She wanted to place the platter of sandwiches on the working table, but it was too cluttered, so she put it on his study desk instead.

"Thanks a lot, Nanako-chan!" Ken beamed at her, making the little girl blush.

"I…I should b-be g-g-going now," the girl stuttered, facing away from Ken so he couldn't see her red face. "Koro-chan will get lonely again." She darted out of the room before the boys could say anything.

Ken took the platter and passed it to Souji, not before taking a sandwich for himself. "That was nice of her," he said, sinking his teeth into it. "Oh, tuna. My favorite!"

Souji bit into his sandwich, when a sudden thought occurred to him. 'Hold it…! Nanako and Ken are both of the Justice Arcana. Does that mean they're compatible as partners?' He refrained from slamming his head on the table when he remembered that Ken would be accompanying his cousin to the festival. It stung more when he also remembered it was his idea in the first place. 'Shit…'
"Gah! I'm beat..." Junpei groaned, fanning himself with his cap. "I didn't know restocking could be so tiring..."

"'Cmon, Junpei, it wasn't that bad." Akihiko said, a satisfied smile on his face. "Though I'm surprised at how much weightlifting you guys end up doing while working here."

"It's even worse during a sale," Yosuke sighed. He chugged down a can of TaP soda. "Again guys, I can't thank you all enough for all the help. You have no idea how much you saved my butt today!"

"How about you start thanking us by buying lunch?" Chie smirked. "I'm hungry!"

Usually he would nag her for only caring about food, but Yosuke simply kissed her forehead. "Fine." He smiled at her. "Do you want a grilled steak? Or maybe something else?"

Chie looked away, blushing madly. That's been happening a lot whenever he treated her like a girl. The others chuckled.

"Love is in the air~!" Teddie sang. "And it's not even festival day yet!"

"Which reminds me..." Yosuke turned to glare at the blonde boy, pointing to his face. "You better behave yourself this year or I'm knocking the stuffing out of you!"

"How mean of you, Yosuke!" the tiny blonde whined, sticking his tongue out. "I'm always good! That's why the ladies love me, unlike you!"

Everyone else stared at the bickering pair with interest. "What happened last year, anyway?" Shinjiro asked Chie.

She rolled her eyes. "Teddie tricked Yosuke and the guys into letting him go out with me, Yukiko and Rise-chan at the festival, which sucked by the way. How they fell for it is beyond me."

"Hey, it was Kanji who fell for it!" Yosuke protested. "This stupid bear ran off with you three before Souji and I could do anything about it!" He was ignored by his girlfriend.

The other guys began glaring at Teddie - they definitely didn't want him trying to have his way with their girls.

"W-What?! I promised Sensei I'd be a good bear, didn't I? It's not my fault everybody has a date, but not...poor...Teddie..." Tears started pouring from his eyes, flowing faster at every word. "I don't wanna spend the festival all alone!"

Feeling bad for him, Metis and Aigis patted his furry head. "Don't be sad, Teddie-san," Metis said softly. "We'll go to the festival with you. Right, Sister?"

At Aigis' nod, Teddie's face brightened up like a Christmas tree. The tears dried up instantly "Oh, Ai-chan, Metis-chan... Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" he squealed. "We'll have the bestest night ever!"

"Of course, Teddie-san. You can help me teach Metis how to enjoy a festival."
"I am an expert about festivals!" Teddie stated proudly. "There are lots of yummy treats and so many fun games! We'll have a blast!"

As Teddie chatted with the android sisters, the others let out a sigh of relief. "With Ai-chan and Metis keeping him busy, I think we'll be able to enjoy ourselves," Junpei chuckled.

"Rise-chan will probably keep an eye on him too, but you can never be too careful with Teddie," Chie said. Her stomach began to growl loudly, drawing all eyes towards her. She blushed at that, feeling embarrassed. "Ehehehe…"

"Wow, you really are hungry, huh?" Yosuke chortled. "C'mon guys, let's have some lunch. We can talk about tomorrow's plans later."

Akihiko's eyes widened in realization. "Right. I wonder if they got any beef bowls here…" Beside him, Shinjiro rolled his eyes.

**Back at Tatsumi Textiles…**

It was almost time for lunch, and Kanji and the twins were nearly done. All that's left were the finishing touches to Naoto's yukata and they could finally go eat. As Minato was helping his sister with it, a loud and shrill voice interrupted them.

"Kanji! Kanjiiiiii…where are youuuuu~?" It was Rise. She nonchalantly barged into their working area.

Kanji came out of the storage room, holding a pile of scrap cloth. "Rise, what the hell? How many times do I have to tell ya to wait for me at the front if you want something?!" He gave her a look of utmost annoyance.

"But it's more fun this way," his classmate pouted cutely. "Grandma sent me off early to do some errands for her. I came by to check up on you."

"Why would I need checking up on?" he sighed. It was tiring to keep up with her sometimes.

Rise stuck her tongue out playfully. "Oh Kanji, you're so silly. Why don't you just admit that you're lonely without me?"

"Like hell I am!"

The twins have stopped working to watch the two high school juniors interact with each other. It was rather funny seeing them bicker over the most trivial things, much like Junpei and Yukari's arguments back at the dorm.

"Besides, I have something to show you!" Rise chirped, taking out her cell phone.

Kanji exhaled loudly. "Fine, but you gotta leave after this alright? We're kinda busy here if you can't tell-" As soon as he laid eyes on the phone screen, his nose started bleeding. He made a mad dash to the bathroom, causing the twins to look at Rise questionably.

"Umm…Rise-chan? What exactly did you show him?" Minako asked.

The teen idol giggled. "Kanji is so much fun to tease. It's a picture of Naoto-kun when we were out clothes shopping yesterday. See?" Indeed, it was Naoto on the screen, wearing the feminine version of her detective outfit. She looked absolutely adorable without her hat, and the blush on her
cheeks made her look even cuter. No wonder Kanji couldn't resist.

The twins sweatdropped. 'So this is what Kanji-kun has to endure everyday?' Minako thought sympathetically.

'It certainly doesn't help that her family's shop is only a few blocks from here,' Minato thought. "No wonder he didn't want to adjust Naoto's yukata just now. I bet he'd pass out just from knowing her measurements alone," he mused.

What the blunette didn't expect next was his sister wearing the same devious smirk as Rise. "That was priceless!" she exclaimed. "I can't wait to see how he'll react when he sees Naoto-chan in an actual yukata. Rise-chan, bring a video camera tomorrow. We can't miss this!" Both of them proceeded to cackle evilly.

'Girls...' Minato rolled his eyes. "If you're done hatching plans about tormenting Kanji, I'm off to have lunch," he said, heading towards the front entrance. "Man, I'm starving."

"Ah, Aniki, wait for me! I want fried rice with chicken...and steak skewers!" Minako cried, chasing after her brother.

Rise skipped off to do her errands, satisfied that she got her wanted reaction from Kanji moments ago. She wouldn't be surprised if he was shouting curses at her right now as he washed his nose from all that blood.

After lunch, the Arisato twins went back to the Tatsumi's shop to check up on Kanji. They found the younger teen working on another yukata, but it was small; too small to fit on a child. The anatomy of the garment was a little off, too.

"Hey Kanji-kun, wat'cha doing?" Minako asked curiously.

"Huh? Oh, this? So uhh...remember the promise I made to Koro-chan, Ken and Nanako-chan after the fishing trip fiasco?" At the their nod, he grinned. "Well, I made this for Koro-chan!"

"A yukata for a dog? That's unusual, but brilliant!" Minato said, impressed as he took a closer look at the yukata. The color schemes were almost similar to Cerberus'. "Now Koromaru will be able to fully join in on the festivities."

"Great thinking, Kanji-kun!" Minako praised him.

Kanji rubbed the back of his neck that turned a shade of darker red. "Aw hell... it was nothing! I also finished up Ken and Nanako-chan's gifts." He pointed at two dolls on an adjacent table. One resembled Red Hawk from Phoenix Ranger Featherman R and the other was a doll of Nanako's TV heroine, Magical Detective Loveline. They were...very elaborate.

"Wow, how did you make them so fast?"

"I worked on them last night," Kanji said. "Koro-chan's yukata wasn't hard to put together as there's a lot of leftover material in the back."

"They look so awesome. The kids are gonna love it!" Minako giggled, picking up the Loveline doll. "This is so cute!"

Minato chuckled. "Yeah, you even got Loveline's outfit details right including magnifying glass and puppy. We missed out a lot during our coma. I wonder if there's any manga or DVD of it..." At
his sister's amused look, he shrugged. "Don't mind me. Just some random rambling."

"Whatever you say, Aniki," Minako giggled again before checking her watch. "Wow, look at the time. We should go and pick up Ken-kun and Koro-chan at Souji-kun's place."

"Already? Well okay then, let's go." Minato turned to Kanji. "Wanna come with us?"

"Sure! I can't wait to give these to them!" Kanji said. "I sure hope they like it."

"I'm positive they will, Kanji-kun," Minako reassured him. "C'mon, let's go."

They made their way to the Dojima Residence. Nanako was tending to the vegetable garden while Ken playing with Koromaru nearby. Souji was on the other side of the house, feeding a stray cat. The twins smiled; the silverette had a way with animals, even though his parents didn't allow him to own a pet, it didn't stop him from feeding them and caring for them.

Nanako spotted them first. "Aneki! Aniki!" She ran up to them, wrapping them in a big hug.

"Hey Nanako-chan," Minato greeted, ruffling her hair. "Having fun with Ken and Koro-chan?"

"Uh-huh!"

The twins glanced at the garden. They hadn't noticed before, but it was really taken good care of. Fresh leaves and blossoms sprouted everywhere. "Wow, Nanako-chan, this is a really beautiful garden!" Minako said. "You did this all by yourself?"

"No. Big Bro helps me, and Dad too!" Nanako beamed. "The flowers looks so pretty during spring! And a lot of really cute bugs come visit the garden!"

"You like bugs, Nanako-chan?" Minako asked, tilting his head in amusement.

"Yeah! They're so cute! I like grasshoppers, beetles, ladybugs, butterflies…" She listed down her favorite bugs by ticking her fingers. "Big Bro helped me catch a few bugs at the shrine for my school's 'Show and Tell' once."

Minako's eyes comically widened. "We like bugs too!" she said. "If you want, we can go bug hunting with you, Nanako-chan!"

"That's right. And we can help with the garden too whenever we stop by," Minato added. "I bet it'll make a great home for lots of cute bugs."

"Really?!" Nanako grinned radiantly. "Yay! Thanks Aniki! Thanks Aneki!"

A card flashed in their minds’ eye and a voice echoed:

Thou art I… And I am thou…
Thou hast established a new bond…
Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Justice Arcana…

'A new Justice social link? Makes sense, seeing how Ken and Nanako-chan have a lot in common.' Minato chuckled silently. 'Maybe they are meant for each other… Banchou-kun won't be pleased.' He turned to his sister, who must have thought the same as she tickled Nanako playfully.

Souji calmly walked up to them, followed by Ken and Koromaru. "Hi guys," he greeted. "You already done with the yukatas?"
"Yep. Things get done faster when we work together," Minako answered. "Kanji-kun even got to work on a little something for these three."

"Something?" Ken asked curiously. "What is it?"

Kanji snapped out of his little trance, tearing his gaze away from a group of birds perched on the telephone cables. "Huh? Oh yeah…" He pulled out the dolls from his bag and handed them to Ken and Nanako. "I uhh...I hope it makes up for the…y'know…yesterday."

Silence fell over the two kids as they stared in awe at their gifts. Never had they seen such beautiful and detailed dolls.

"Wow, she looks perfect! Loveline is so cute!" Nanako squealed, squeezing her doll tightly to her chest before hugging Kanji. "Thank you, Kanji-nii! I love it!"

Ken's eyes were sparkling as he checked out his doll. "This is so awesome! This Red Hawk is way better than the figurines at Junes!" He bowed to tall blonde. "Kanji-san, I…! Thank you so much!"

Kanji blushed, but felt relieved that they liked his gifts. "You're welcome, guys." He patted both kids on their heads as the three Wild Cards looked on, nodding in approval.

Koromaru panted, sitting on his haunches waiting patiently for his gift. Kanji kneeled in front of the Shiba Inu to make eye contact. "I've got something for you too." He pulled the doggie yukata out from his bag. "You can use this when you join us at the festival." The pooch sniffed the yukata a few times before running around him, barking his little head off.

"I think Koro-chan really likes it, Kanji-kun," Minako giggled.

"Really?" He was answered with a good lick on the face. "Heh. You're welcome, boy." He rubbed his face in Koromaru's soft fur, the dog letting him do it for once.

"I gotta hand it to you, Kanji. Nobody can make something like that other than you," Souji praised. "You must've worked really hard on them."

"Aw, shucks! Thanks, Senpai. I just felt awful about yesterday so I really wanted to make it up to them."

"And you accomplished that with flying colors. Just look at them. They're ecstatic."

The older teenagers watched on as the kids were showing off their gifts to each other while Koromaru pranced around them.

The next day, early afternoon…

Kanji walked down the street, nervous as hell. He sort of expected Naoto's secretary to pick up her yukata, but the man never showed up. Now it was up to him to deliver the outfit to her before she headed to the Amagi Inn to meet up with the rest of the girls. And he still had to meet up with the guys at Souji's place in order to get ready himself.

'Oh man oh man...what am I gonna do?' he thought nervously. 'What if she asks me about it? What if she thinks I know her measurements?! She's gonna think I'm a perv like Yosuke-senpai!'

Not too far from there, Naoto was also walking down the opposite side of same street. She was wondering how she would explain to the girls about her missing yukata. She had told them that she
had one - a gift from one of her grandfather's clients - but now she couldn't find it. She dreaded to imagine what sort of lecture she would be getting from Rise if she went to the festival without one.

'How ironic. One year ago, I would not care about such trivial things as attending a festival. But now, I'm rather look forward to it...' she thought with a wry smile. Perhaps this is what Souji-senpai meant back then.'

...Flashback...

Souji and Naoto were browsing in the Yomenaido, looking for new books to read. Things had been quiet after Adachi was caught and put behind bars, so now they could focus on other things.

The young detective let out a frustrated sigh, catching the silverette's attention. "Something bothering you?" he asked.

"Yes. The new detective novel I'm waiting for hasn't arrived yet," she replied, sounding disappointed. "Without it and no cases to work on, I'm pretty much left with nothing to do."

"You can always hang out with me and the others," Souji replied, giving her a 'isn't-that-kinda-obvious?' stare.

Naoto thought about it. "I don't want to bother the others. They are probably busy with their own activities. And you - " She paused a while. "You'll be leaving soon."

Souji frowned. He didn't like bringing up the subject of his departure.

Having realized what she just said, Naoto looked away. "I apologize for bringing that topic up, Senpai," she stuttered. "I... I should go."

Before he could stop her, Naoto was already walking away. "Oh boy..." he sighed, tailing her.

The hill overlooking town...

Naoto was sitting at one of her favorite places in all of Inaba, lost in thought. "What Senpai said just now...it sounds a bit like what Grampa told me before he transferred me to Yasogami High."

She sighed and continued to stare at the scenery from on top of the tree, scowling. "Hanging out...making friends...those things are irrelevant in the life of a hard-boiled detective."

"I wouldn't say that if I were you," said a voice from below.

She was pulled out of her reverie, and looked down to find her silver-haired upperclassman waving at her. She climbed down from her perch and landed with both feet on the ground. "Senpai, why did you follow me here?" she questioned, not pleased at being stalked.

He chuckled at her insinuation. She seemed to have forgotten that it was her who taught him how to be inconspicuous when following a suspect. "You looked upset when you left the book store. Maybe you want to talk about it?"

"There is nothing to talk about."

"Is that how you truly feel?" Souji didn't waste time getting straight to the point. "About friends being irrelevant in the life of a detective?" He then grinned. "Naoto, you really have to loosen up a little. You'll end up more socially awkward than you already are. Now that would be a real inconvenience to the work of a detective."
The young detective blushed and covered her mouth. "Did I just say that out loud?"

Souji’s features softened as he looked at her. "Naoto, I mean it. I think your grandfather sent you here for a reason; to make friends and live like a normal teenager. No one can truly live in solitude." He paused for a while to let the words sink in. "Your Shadow said that she hated being lonely, and want to be accepted. How can you be accepted if you don't have people who want to accept you in the first place? You just have to give them a chance to do so."

"That wasn't me talking!" Naoto protested. Whenever she had these kinds of conversations with Souji, she knew she could never win.

"Deny it all you want, Naoto," Souji said, his voice hardening. "A Shadow may be the dark side of a person, but one thing they cannot do is lie about the individual they originated from."

She stayed silent, but deep inside she was shocked. The truth hit her like a sledgehammer in full momentum, and realized that all of the things her Shadow had said, the part about her being lonely, stung the most. She could no longer refute what her senpai had pointed out. "Then what should I do...?" She stared at the ground, her lips forming a frustrated line.

"Why don't you get to know Kanji a bit better? Spend more time with him," the silverette suggested.

"Why him?" Now Naoto was curious. Of their entire team, why did he pick Kanji?

"He's just as socially awkward as you are, and desperately looking for acceptance. He may not seem so to you, but I've seen his Shadow. You two could work it out together. It won't hurt to try, and both of you have nothing to lose by doing so."

Naoto crossed her arms and closed her eyes in thought. Rise and Teddie were too rambunctious for her liking, and difficult to keep up with when not supervised; Yosuke, Chie and Yukiko were easier to talk to, but they didn't have that much in common yet. Plus they were her upperclassmen, so that made it a bit awkward in itself. That only left Kanji as the most logical choice to start getting closer to the others.

"Very well...I suppose it could be a good start," she relented. "Thank you for your advice, Senpai."

Souji smiled. "Hey, that's what friends are for, Naoto."

"What friends are for..." The warm feeling inside Naoto started to expand. 'I think it'll be a good experience for me.'

…End flashback…

Following Souji's advice, Naoto tried communicating with Kanji more – helping him study, hanging out at his mother's shop, letting him walk her home after school. It started out rather awkward, due to Kanji's and her own shyness, but over time she came to enjoy his company.

Simultaneously, she felt more comfortable with hanging out with the others, even though Souji was no longer with them. She also noticed that Kanji was becoming more comfortable around her presence, chatting smoothly with her and not blushing as much as he used to whenever she was in close proximity.

Naoto was so busy with her own thoughts, she failed to notice that she was in a collision course with someone until she crashed into them. "Ow...!" No thanks to her small stature, she was knocked down to the ground, landing on her backside. "My apologies! I wasn't paying attention to
Where I was going and - "

"Naoto?"

The young detective's eyes widened in surprise when she recognized the voice, and stared up at the owner. "Kanji-kun? What are you doing here? I thought you were going to meet the other guys at Souji-senpai's residence."

Kanji started blushing. He wasn't expecting to bump into Naoto (a.k.a his crush, a.k.a the biggest mystery of his young life) of all people on his way to her place. "W-well...I was...b-b-but...I had to d-deliver this f-first." He held out a paper bag and handed it to her. "H-here..."

Naoto blinked confused as she peered inside. She gasped in surprise when she recognized it as her missing yukata. "H-how did you...?"

"Y-your Gramps asked Y-Yakushiji-san to take it to Ma's shop for adjustments..." he stuttered, face redder than tomato paste.

"Adjustments? Oh that's right, I've never worn it before, so I wouldn't know if it fit me or not..." She froze, blushing just as hard. "W-wait a minute...you c-couldn't have d-done that without knowing m-m-my..."

"Yakushiji-san wrote it down on a piece of paper...b-b-but I didn't read them, I swear!" he blurted out. "I-I know you don't like guys knowing that sort of stuff 'bout you so I asked Minako-senpai to do the adjustments for me! I swear! You can ask her or Minato-senpai if you don't believe me!"

"Kanji-kun, calm down!" He would have continuedrambling on if Naoto hadn't interjected. "I believe you."

"W-Wha...? Y-you do?"

"Of course. You have no reason to lie to me," she answered. 'He's such a gentleman for not looking at my measurements...' She willed her blush to go away, and smiled at him. "It was really thoughtful of you to do that, Kanji-kun. Thank you."

His heart was pounding a mile a minute, but it calmed down in no time, relieved that Naoto wasn't mad at him. "Y-you're welcome."

"Well, I must get going. I don't want to keep the girls waiting. I'll see you at the festival." She turned around to walk away.

"Naoto! Wait!" Kanji grabbed her wrist, fully aware that his nose could burst at any moment. 'It's now or never!'

Startled, she looked up at him. "What is it, Kanji-kun?"

"Th-there's something...I've been meaning to t-tell you." Kanji tried his best to avoid eye contact. "I-It's really important..."

"Something important?" Now Naoto was curious. "What is it?"

He instantly started to sweat bullets as his heart began beating very fast. He had to give the young detective an answer and he could not mess this up, but still nothing came out of his mouth. 'Aw, come on, Kanji, you idiot! Say something!' he internally scolded himself. The tall teen then gave a very deep sigh. Now was the time to be a man! "Naoto...you know our Shadows came from a part
of us that we want to deny, right?"

She raised an eyebrow in confusion. "Yes. What about it?"

His went pale at the memories of his kidnapping, the sauna and his Shadow, but kept his ground. "You see, m-my Shadow was created because of my f-fear of rejection."

Naoto's eyes widened slightly. "Fear of...rejection?"

"Yeah, I was always afraid of being rejected because of my hobbies."

"Your hobbies? I don't see anything wrong with them."

Kanji sighed. "Yeah, about that... I like to sew and bake and other activities that girls are supposed to like," he said. "They always made fun of me because of it. But the guys...they were a little bit more tolerant, but didn't fully accept me either."

"Really? I thought it would be the other way around."

"I know. Anyway, I met someone... and for some reason..." He hesitated a bit, but soldiered on. "For some reason, I feel attracted to that person. I suddenly started to question myself, havin' doubts about bein' a dude. I think that's what created my whacked up Shadow."

"I see."

"And do you know who that person is?"

'Is?' Naoto wondered. "Who?" she quizzed.

Kanji took a deep breath. He couldn't backtrack no matter how much he wanted to. His lips started shaking before he nervously spoke out his statement. "It's you..."

Naoto's eyes bugged out to its fullest.

"That's right, Naoto." Kanji then made a bold move and held her free hand. "Whether I thought you were a man or a woman, it didn't change the fact that I had feelings for you. Feelings I never felt for anyone else."

The young girl looked stunned at this. Kanji didn't think he ever saw anyone go so pale. He let out a deep sigh. "Listen, Naoto. This is a very hard thing for me to do so I am going to say this once. I. Love. You!" He then quickly shut his eyes as if expecting to get hit or something. Much to his surprise, he felt better...much better. Better than he had ever felt in his life, as if a giant boulder had been lifted off his shoulders. That didn't stop his face from nearly exploding though.

Naoto, on the other hand, couldn't believe her ears. She had a lot of female admirers confess their love to her but never a man, and from Kanji Tatsumi of all people. Then again, that would explain why he acted shyly around her, and why he didn't judge her for her interests in robots and action series, or her talent for crafting detective gizmos. Suddenly all the puzzle pieces fell in place; they did have much more in common than she thought, and Souji knew it. That was the reason he encouraged her to start hanging out with Kanji first. "Is... Is that true, Kanji-kun?" she asked in a surprisingly high-pitched voice. "Do you...?"

"Yes, Naoto. I do." The muscles in his face began to relax as he breathed out a relieved sigh.

The awkward silence between the two was almost unbearable. Neither of them noticed the sky
turning dark.

The hand that he was holding squeezed back. Kanji slowly opened his eyes halfway only for them to widen when the distance between him and Naoto decreased, her face a deep shade of pink.

"Kanji-kun, thank you. You must be the first boy to ever confess his love to me," she said, having lost the masculinity in her voice.

"Naoto..."

"Kanji-kun..."

He did not know if he leaned down or if she leaned up or both, but the space between their faces was decreasing to the point their lips were almost touching.

Sudden hissing sounds snapped both teenagers back to reality. To their horror, the Dark Hour had already manifested and about fifteen rogue Shadows were approaching. Most of them were DNA strands formed in a humanoid shape, but leading them from the distance was a giant Mecha armed with a broadsword.

Kanji was pissed. 'Aw, shit! I was so close!'

Naoto narrowed her eyes. "We're outnumbered!" She drew her revolver, anger burning brightly in her dark blue orbs.

"Damn Shadows! I'm taking them down!" Kanji roared, but something didn't feel right. "Shit! I don't have a weapon!"

"You use blunt objects for weapons, right? Try using that!" She pointed to a trash can's lid before she shot at one of the Gene Shadows who was trying to sneak up on them.

"Great idea!" He made a run for it, punching two Shadows out of his way before grabbing the lid and smacking a third one away from him. "Now you're gonna get it!" He whacked the Shadow again, causing heavy damage. The lid was bent in half, rendering it useless. He picked up another one.

Naoto shot her last bullet, but refilling would take some time. Then she recalled a vital piece of information. "Kanji-kun, if I'm not mistaken, these Gene Shadows have a particular weakness to wind or electricity. Try hitting those ones over there!" she shouted, pointing to a group consisting of five wobbling DNAs.

Kanji obliged. He summoned his card, hoping that he wouldn't miss his targets. He whacked it with the trashcan lid. "Maziodyne!"

Luckily for them, the Shadows fell on their butts and writhed on the ground after getting electrocuted.

"Tch, there are too many of them. If we keep this up then the surrounding area will get damaged," Naoto said. "There's no telling how many Transmogrified people will get hurt!"

"The flood plains ain't that far. Let's go!" Kanji grabbed her wrist and they made a run for it to a more unpopulated area. The Shadows quickly followed behind.

"They're gaining on us!" Naoto yelled, looking back. Despite their wobbly bodies, these particular Shadows were quite agile.
"Keep running!" the blonde shouted. "We're almost there!"

One of the Shadows stretched out its arm out, hitting Naoto on the ankle. She tripped and fell flat on her face. "Ooof!"

"Naoto!" Kanji ran back to help her up.

"I'm okay!" she assured him as she got to her feet. But the Shadows were getting too close!

"Damn, those guys are stubborn!" Thanks to long muscular legs, Kanji was faster at running, so he ended up hoisting Naoto up by the waist and tucking her under his arm, without awareness of the actions he was performing.

"K-Kanji-kun, put me down! I can run on my own!" she protested, blushing madly at their situation.

Kanji grinned like a madman when they finally reached their destination. However, when he realized what he was doing, he quickly put Naoto down. "S-sorry..." he mumbled. Naoto nodded her thanks, and readied her gun.

The Shadows were still hot on their trail. After finding out about their foes' weakness, he wasn't about to waste this chance; he casted Mazidyne multiple times to incapacitate the Shadows, and Naoto took them out with Vorseal Blade. She wasn't paying attention when a stray Gene attempted to hit her from behind. Fortunately, Kanji did. "Naoto, duck!" he hollered. Instinctively, the young detective dodged and curled into a ball. He threw the trashcan lid like a Frisbee with all of his strength, effectively slicing the Shadow into two.

Just when they thought they were in the clear, a loud hissing noise could be heard. The giant robot was slowly making its way in their direction, the clunking of its gears could be heard miles away.

"Damn it, we don't have enough energy to fight that thing as it is..." Kanji said, panting heavily.

"I have a few health restoring items with me, but I doubt it will last us long enough," Naoto said. "From past experience, we're going to have an extremely difficult time with that thing without Souji-senpai's help."

Kanji cursed under his breath. If only there was a way...the thought of Souji gave him an idea. "Hey Naoto, remember that combo attack Senpai did with the twins? If we can combine our two strongest attacks then..."

"Are you sure, Kanji-kun? Even with a charged up Megidolaon there's no guarantee that it will take out that thing in one hit, plus it will obliterate everything around here. We can't risk it."

"We have no choice but to try! All we have to do is be in sync. That's what our leaders did."

"In sync...harmony..." Naoto smiled to herself. Then at him. "Alright, I think I got it. Let's do this, Kanji-kun!"

As they both summoned their Personas, Kanji concentrated his energy for a Primal Force while Naoto casted Mind Charge on herself. Then he stood behind Naoto, grasping her hands that were on her revolver. They both blushed furiously, but the situation at hand prevented them from delving into the warm feeling.

"Just concentrate it into my attack," Kanji whispered. As both of them merged their energies, a glowing blue card appeared, floating and spinning in front of them. Naoto aimed her revolver at the
card, just as the Mecha Shadow finished charging and gearing up for a strike attack. "On three…"

They didn't bother to start from one. "THREE!" Naoto pulled the trigger and shot the card, summoning their Personas.

Rokuten Maoh pointed his weapon at the enemy as Yamato Takeru hovered above his head, gloved hands glowing with purple light. When they released their attack, a huge beam of purple energy shot out from the tip of the demon king's staff. It blew a clean hole straight through the giant robot, and in a matter of seconds it disintegrated into ashes, blown away by the wind.

Shocked and relieved, both of them fell on their knees, panting hard. Now they understood why Minato, Souji and Minako were completely worn out after a Fusion Raid.

Naoto grinned. "That was some quick thinking. Thanks to your pierce attack, I was able to focus a Megidolaon for one enemy instead of having it explode all over the place," she theorized, feeling rather proud of her explanation. "And it also overrides any physical or elemental advantage the enemy had. A perfect combination."

"Looks like we make a good team after all," Kanji said. Then he started to blush, because he was still holding Naoto in an intimate manner. "Uh…"

Naoto blushed as well, but wasn't against the intimate contact. "We really do, Kanji-kun," she said, turning around to wrap her arms around his torso.

The former delinquent's eyes were wider than saucers, but he then smiled and returned the hug. It was rather awkward, because Naoto was pint-sized compared to himself, but…it felt right, and that was all that mattered.

As the Dark Hour faded, their eyes met and their faces grew closer. This time, nothing was going to interrupt them…

"Kanji! Naoto!" Souji shouted as he and the others rushed towards the flood plains. Needless to say, the leader of the Investigation Team became worried about his two friends when the Dark Hour appeared so suddenly, and it only got worse when Rise and Fuuka informed them that a huge group of Shadows were in the same area as those two. "Dammit, where are they?"

"I'm sure they're safe," Minako tried to reassure him. "Naoto-chan is a smart girl, and Kanji-kun's pretty tough. As long as they're together, they'll be okay."

The group was surprised when out of the blue, a huge purple beam of energy shot across the dark sky. "Whoa, what was that?!" Junpei shouted in awe.

"I don't know, but it sure looked powerful!" Teddie exclaimed.

"Fuuka, are we getting any closer?" Minato asked.

"Yes, but this is strange…" Fuuka reported. "The Shadows… just vanished. I'm not sensing any of them anymore."

"Not even the big one is around," Rise added. "How can that be? Those are especially difficult to get rid of."

The Persona-users were straight up confused. Souji sighed and kept running. He could only hope that Kanji and Naoto had beaten the Shadows and were unharmed. The others followed close
behind.

"There they are!" Chie shouted, pointing out two figures ahead of them.

As the gang got closer, the Dark Hour vanished and they could clearly make out the figures of their missing teammates. Souji was about to call them again when he realized...the delinquent and the detective were hugging, and more astonishingly, KISSING! Everyone stared in surprise and amusement - Minato, Souji and Shinjiro smirked proudly, Minako and Rise were both struggling not to squeal in delight, the others girls were giggling and the rest were staring blankly.

Finally, the pair broke up the kiss and stared at each other, smiling and elated. They were snapped out of their trance when they heard a clicking sound and a bright flash.

"Got it!" Rise squealed, holding out her cell phone triumphantly. "You two looked so cute kissing like that!" She began to sing. "Kanji and Naoto, sitting in a tree ~ K-I-S-S-I-N-G ~ "

"RISE!" Kanji and Naoto began chasing after the teen idol, who was giggling like crazy and waving the 'scandalous' picture around for all to see.

Souji rolled his eyes, but deep inside he was happy that his friends were safe, and most importantly, understood their feelings for each other. "Okay, that's enough now," he ordered. Rise hid behind him to protect herself from the newly formed couple. "And Rise, stop teasing them."

"You two okay?" Minato asked.

"Yes... just minor injuries and a little fatigue..." Naoto panted, trying to regain her composure. Her face was completely red.

"Yeah, yeah... just a scratch here and there..." Kanji huffed, still embarrassed.

"Thank goodness you're safe," Yukiko said with a warm smile.

"By the way, good job clearing out all those Shadows," Akihiko said.

"Yeah. When Rise-chan and Fuuka-chan told us about them, we got worried and left Chidori and Fox with Nanako-chan before rushing here as fast as we could," Minako said. "How did you do it, anyway?"

Kanji grinned. "It was piece of cake, really. Just needed a bit of teamwork."

"A little?" Yosuke nudged his ribs, a teasing grin in place, "You mean you finally manned up and asked her out to the festival, right?"

Naoto scowled in annoyance and embarrassment. Kanji on the other hand, slowly turned to face his comrade, who still held that damned smile on his face, "Hey Senpai, do you know what my shoe size is?"

Yosuke was taken aback, grin falling from his face, replaced by a cautious hesitance. "Uh... no. What is it?"

"Thirty-five centimeters."

"And why is that relevant to this conversation?"

"So that you know just how much of my foot is about to get relocated up your ass if you don't get the hell outta my face!"
Yosuke's face twitched before he scuttled away fast as he could. "Okay guys..." He waved his hands in a dismissive gesture, voice about four octaves higher than usual, "Let's head back. I think I need a shower before heading to the festival. We sure could use some freshening up, huh?"

The others laughed. Kanji gave a smirk of satisfaction and turned to Naoto, silently asking her about the festival. The detective prince smiled and nodded. 'Yes, I'll go with you.'

The shrine was lit up by hundreds of stringed lanterns in all shapes and sizes. Children were running everywhere, either holding balloons, cotton candy, or paper lanterns of various cartoon characters hanging from a stick. The atmosphere was buzzing with excitement and laughter. For SEES and the Investigation Team, it was a nice change of pace from all the battles. Although the sun had yet to set, the temperature was cooling down, the bright sky tinged with orange and pink giving it a romantic feel.

Everyone agreed to meet up in front of the offertory box. The guys arrived there first, and the ladies about twenty minutes later.

The guys, especially the older ones, couldn't help but stare at the sight before them. Although of the girls were wearing the same yukata they had worn during previous festivals (save for Chidori and Metis) they sported different accessories and hair styles to look different this year: Instead of her usual XXII hairpins, Minako had a sunflower pin in its place, her hair let down instead of a ponytail. Yukari opted for a pair of dangling pink earrings, while Fuuka's hair was held neatly in place by a comb with white calla lilies painted on it. For Mitsuru, she tied her hair in a low ponytail instead of the usual up do, making her look more down-to-earth instead of like a rich heiress. Aigis and Metis had ribbons in their hair, courtesy of Nanako. Chie had placed the fake flower she bought at Okina above her right ear, and Yukiko wore her usual red hair band with a pink gerbera pinned on it. Rise tied her two pigtails with colorful beads, and Nanako wore the Featherman hairpin Minako got for her. Chidori had her hair made in a stylish bun.

Kanji however, couldn't stop staring at his new girlfriend. Her yukata matched her eyes and holy crap, what did she do with her hair? Instead of the detective cap, there was a headband with a blue bow on the side. Kanji's face turned redder than a strawberry, his nose was close to bursting from all the cuteness that is Naoto Shirogane.

Koromaru was wildly wagging his tail from happiness. He pranced around in his new outfit; rather pleased at the attention he was getting from the passing children and adults alike. A little boy even fed him some takoyaki. Rise didn't miss the opportunity to record all of the guys' reaction on her video camera. She was especially enjoying Kanji's, and not surprised at Teddie's drooling.

The girls couldn't help but stare at the guys too. There was something rougishly handsome about a man in a traditional Japanese outfit. However, there was one item on somebody's head that caught Minako's attention. "Shinji, can't you take off that beanie for one night?" she whined. "It doesn't suit the yukata." She stood on her tip-toes to remove the offending item. Oddly enough, he didn't protest. He was however, a bit surprised when his girlfriend sneaked in a kiss as she did so, causing him to blush different shades of crimson.

"Wow, this brings back a lot of memories..." Minato said, surveying the surroundings. "It has a different feel to it than the one at Naganaki, but I'm excited!"

"I have to admit that last year's displays were a drag, but now I can't wait to get started," Souji said.

"Aniki, we should take a group picture before we start," Minako suggested. "Then we can go and have some fun!" Minato, being an avid photographer, agreed wholeheartedly.
Everyone cheered and made silly poses, joining in on the fun. Shinjiro didn't like the attention he was getting, but softened a little when Minako smiled sweetly at him. 'Damn it, Iori was right. I really am turning into a sap,' he thought, the warmth in his chest refusing to go away. 'But I guess it's times like these that makes it worth it.'

Souji was miffed when Teddie coaxed Nanako and Ken to pose for a picture together, but he didn't show it, not if it means ruining his cousin's happiness. Yukiko noticed this and giggled to herself.

After that, they took off into the crowd. The sights, the smells, the sounds - the gang took it all in as they tried to decide what game or food they should try first. The separated into smaller groups, agreeing to meet at the takoyaki stand in another hour and a half.

Minako dragged her brothers to scoop for goldfish. "The last time we did this was when we were kids. I remember throwing a huge tantrum when I couldn't scoop a single one," she said happily.

"Don't remind me..." her twin groaned. "Dad had to get you five boxes of takoyaki and two cotton candies to calm you down. Then he got scolded by Mom for spoiling you too much."

The youngest of the three sweatdropped. Yes, he remembers that particular event and it wasn't pleasant. He hid behind his mother the whole time until Minako had quieted down. Hopefully, the two of them wouldn't be at the receiving end of her wrath if she decided that the goldfish were outsmarting her again.

"Hey, check it out. It's Souji!"

The silverette turned around when he heard his name being called. It was Kou and Daisuke, in normal street attire.

"Whoa, look at you dude! All dressed fancy for the party," Daisuke praised, "and Minato-san too. Now I wished I wore a yukata."

"Ai-san wanted you to wear one, remember? And you had to go say something stupid and now she and Yumi ditched us. Nice going," Kou said sarcastically, rolling his eyes. Then his eyes landed on Minako. "Oh, hey there. I haven't seen you around here before."

Souji introduced both parties. "Kou, Daisuke, this is Aniki's twin sister Minako. Aneki, this is Kou Ichijou from the basketball club. And this guy is Daisuke Nagase from soccer."

Minako bowed slightly. "Hi, nice to meet you guys."

Kou reciprocated the gesture. "Nice to meet you too." He then turned to Souji. "Dude, there's a game booth not far from here where we can win prizes by shooting hoops. Let's show these suckers how it's done, eh? Since the murders are put to rest, they decided to add more games to attract more people to come."

"That does sound pretty awesome," Souji said, "but I promised to go and scoop goldfish with them first. Why don't we go after that?"

"Sure, we'll wait for you there," Kou said. "Meanwhile, I gotta help this lug find something to make it up to Ai-san. I have no doubt that he'll even screw that up." He turned around quickly and sped off before his friend could catch up.

"Hey!" came Daisuke's indignant yell as he gave chase.

Minako giggled. "Wow, those two are quite the tag team. They argue like Kenji-kun and Kazushi-
kun." She then preceded to the scooping booth, her brothers not far behind her.

They never made it there though, because Souji kept bumping into many of his friends who were also enjoying the festival; Naoki and Ayane, Hisano who was accompanied by her grandchildren, and Ai and Yumi (the former kept complaining about her boyfriend). The twins had fun getting to know their little brother's friends, whom he had created strong bonds with. They did manage to meet Kou and Daisuke at the mini basketball booth, where all five participated. Souji and Kou won the grand prize; a pendant each with weird markings on them, and the other three got to choose between a phone strap and two keychains.

On the other side of the shrine, Mitsuru and Yukari were browsing at the stalls which sold specialty items and foods. Ken and Nanako looked at the masks and sculptures on display with Koromaru and Yosuke. Dojima couldn't come unfortunately, due to work, so the little girl was determined to get a souvenir for her dad with Ken's help.

Yukiko and Chie were throwing miniature hula-hoops, hoping one would land around the many sake bottles of different colors. Chie wailed when all of her hoops were used but didn't hit - she was hoping it would land around a red bottle because those would have won her a pair of new boots. Yukiko had better luck when one of her hoops landed around a green bottle and won herself a blue paper fan.

Junpei was trying to win Chidori a giant teddy bear at a game of darts, but he wasn't doing so well. Fortunately the booth owner was kind enough to give him a consolation prize for trying; a beautifully painted wooden bangle. Chidori even thanked the owner by offering one of her sketches from her drawing pad.

Not far, Akihiko and Shinjiro were joined by Naoto and Kanji at a shooting range. A while ago, Akihiko openly challenged Naoto to a shooting competition, and she was wiping the floor with him. So far, she managed to shoot down fifteen duck cutouts while he only shot seven. Shinjiro was enjoying himself, watching his best friend lose to a girl as Kanji munched on ikayaki, cheering his girlfriend on. In the end, the detective won the ultimate prize; an expensive-looking ring with decorative blue stones while the former boxer got a Persian cat phone accessory, which he planned to give to Mitsuru later.

Teddie and Rise were showing Aigis, Metis and Fuuka around the festival. The blonde in the bear suit even managed to charm the ladies who were manning the snack booths with his sparkles to give him discounts or free food. Rise only rolled her eyes at his behavior, scrunching her face in displeasure as he almost spilled mustard on her yukata - she wasn't a sucker to fall for his wiles. Fuuka and Metis giggled while Aigis disapproved; he reminded her too much of another flirt who used his charms to get his way.

After trying out different games and winning a few more prizes, the gang met at the takoyaki stand as promised. They sat down together in a huge group and ordered takoyaki, shaved ice and okonomiyaki with various toppings. Rise kept herself busy filming the entire scene while the others ate and talked.

Souji recognized the people who sat at the table beside them. "Eri-san, Yuuta, fancy meeting you guys here."

Eri Minami's eyebrows shot up at the familiar voice, and smiled. "Souji-kun, what a surprise. I heard rumors you were back in town. It's nice to see you again."

"Souji-san!" Yuuta got up from his seat and shoved a plastic toy under his nose. "Look what I won! A rare action figure of Black Condor! Mom even got me an awesome t-shirt. I can't wait to wear it
to school!" The excited little boy had to be calmed down before getting introduced to the rest of Souji's friends.

"Guys, this is Yuuta Minami and his mother, Eri-san. I worked part-time at the daycare where he was sent to last year," he said. "Yuuta, Eri-san, these are my friends from Tatsumi Port Island. And this is my cousin, Nanako."

Nanako smiled at Yuuta. "Oh, I already know him Big Bro. Yuuta-kun goes to my school. I didn't know that you know him."

Souji was about to say something when yet another familiar voice interrupted him. "Sensei, what a surprise. You're here too?" He turned his head around to see Shu Nakajima, in his normal attire of a blue checkered shirt and brown pants. He smiled at the boy and introduced him. "Guys, this is Shu. I used to tutor him, and he's one of my best students."

Shu grinned playfully. "Please, I was your only student." He then exchanged friendly conversations with the rest of the group when Souji invited all three of them to join in.

"Wow, Souji sure is popular huh?" Junpei whispered to Yosuke.

"You don't know half of it," Yosuke replied. "He got to know a lot of people here. I swear the whole town is in love with him or something. Don't get me started about school…"

"I hear ya. That pretty much sums up the twins too. Mina-tan is especially popular because of her cheerful personality. I doubt Shinjiro-senpai is gonna enjoy that piece of info, though."

By the time they finished eating, they separated again but in couples this time. Eri volunteered to take Shu, Yuuta, Ken, Nanako and Koromaru to go play games and watch the fireworks, which Souji was thankful for. Rise stuck by Teddie to prevent him from flirting with random women. Fuuka and the two androids decided to help her keep him out of trouble. The other couples roamed around the festival, enjoying the view. It was almost time for the fireworks to start and everyone went to find a good spot to view it.

Minato and Yukari strolled near the edge of the shrine, on top of a small hill and away from the stalls. Not a lot of people were there, and there was a nice, shady tree where they sat down under. Crickets and cicadas sang in the night air - the perfect romantic setting. They looked up to the sky, where the fireworks exploded in a multitude of colors. The festival this year coincided with a full moon, so the sky looked more beautiful tonight. The two lovers held hands and closed the gaps between them.

Yukari rested her head on Minato's shoulder. "I have to say, this is much more beautiful than the one at home." She sighed contently. "I feel…peaceful and happy. Not just for us, but for everyone."

"I feel the same way," Minato said, looking down at his girlfriend's face. "It's ironic…looking at the full moon used to bring me much sorrow; losing my parents and Minako, Shadows, The Fall. Never in a million years would I have thought that I get to reunite with my family and friends again after I died…or thought I did." He paused for a while before smiling. "Now the full moon reminds me of what I gained after that, and what I must protect. I never want to lose any of you guys ever again."

The young brunette smiled, looking into Minato's grey eyes. "And we'll stay by your side all the way through. I don't want to lose you either." She tilted her face up and pressed her lips against Minato's, the same moment when a particularly bright firework shot up into the sky, showering the
night with bright pink sparkles. The gasps of surprise and awe among the spectators were ignored as the blue-haired teen returned the kiss.

After a while, they broke apart.

"I love you, Yukari."

"I love you too, Minato-kun."

Both of them continued to watch the fireworks. Sometimes, they would spot their friends among the people below. Fuuka's group was chasing after Teddie, who seemed to have offended a group of older women – probably he did something perverted and they wanted revenge. Ken was accompanying Nanako by himself. They must have separated from Eri, Yuuta and Shu. The little girl was smiling broadly, hugging a ginger cat plushie while Ken was carrying a Daruma's mask they had picked for Dojima. From the looks of it, the boy had won both items for her. Minato chuckled, 'Banchou-kun isn't gonna like that...' he thought. Not far from where they were sitting, Koromaru was watching the fireworks with Fox and her cubs. The other couples were enjoying themselves, eating snacks and holding hands.

Yukari spotted Minako and Shinjiro. She was holding her boyfriend's hand, dragging him around everywhere, and the other held a rather large pink cotton candy. Shinjiro grimaced when Minako began consuming the fluffy sweet. The two watched on with amusement; Shinjiro was giving one of his lectures about how that crap wasn't good for her, and fell on deaf ears when Minako shoved it into his face, effectively shutting him up. Her laughter rang through the air when his face was covered with a pink beard, and laughed some more when he shot her a death glare. Yukari smiled – Shinjiro should know that glaring wouldn't work on Minako, especially when it came from him. And he could never stay mad at her for long anyways.

The young woman continued to observe the couple in amusement. Minako took out a handkerchief and cleaned Shinjiro's face for him, and he let her. Minako then gave him a kiss, and Shinjiro blushed after that. "That guy still isn't used to romance, huh?" she giggled.

"Give him time," Minato said. "Minako enjoys teasing him like that, and you have to admit it doesn't get old." He grinned and pointed to another couple walking in the distance. "Look over there...it's Souji-kun."

Souji was walking with Yukiko at the other side of the shrine where there weren't many people. They were keeping a slow pace, hand-in-hand and talking. Occasionally she would giggle at something he said. They passed a small stall selling flowers, and he bought a small bouquet of red peonies for her. She blushed the same shade.

Minato smiled. "It looks like Yukiko-san understood what he wanted to tell her."

"Eh? He only bought her flowers..." Yukari tapered off, looking confused.

"According to the language of flowers, red peonies symbolize devotion. And the color red suits Yukiko-san the best, the color of passion and love." Personally, Minato agreed with his sister that Yukiko was the perfect girl for their little brother; he was quiet and serious, kind and observant. She was passionate and determined, but also loving and patient. A match made in heaven.

"Do you have to know everything?" Yukari asked, rolling her eyes playfully.

"What's the problem? You can brag to the rest that you have a super-smart and super-strong boyfriend," Minato answered. "I already made it clear that my girlfriend is the most awesome thing
to ever happen in my life."

It seems that Yukari was satisfied with his answer and snuggled closer. They stayed that way until it was time to go back.

Everyone was already waiting at the entrance of the shrine to head back together, their expressions happy but tired, carrying loads of prizes and items. Teddie sported a few bruises but nothing too major. There was still room for some light teasing before they separated, heading to their own homes.

It could be said that this was the most memorable summer festival they ever had, and Minato had a camera full of photos with Rise's camera footage to prove it.
The summer festival came and passed, and now it was time to go back to their routine of fighting Shadows and investigating the mystery behind the Dark Hour and the Fog. It also meant that Chidori needed to return to Port Island, for her own safety. So the entire group, plus Nanako, had gathered at the station to see her off. The day of her departure was a tear jerking moment for her and the girls, as they had become quite close friends.

"Take care, Chidori!" Minako said, hugging her. "We're gonna miss you so much!"

"I'll miss you guys too…" Chidori was trying not to cry. "You're the best friends I've ever had…"

Yukari smiled at her. "Hey, don't be sad. We'll visit you when we come back to Port Island. We can go shopping again."

"We can also chat online with the web cam I gave you," Fuuka added. "That way we'll always stay connected."

Chidori gasped when she recalled something important. "But what about - "

"I already took care of that," Mitsuru said. "Regarding your absence, I already contacted your college and explained that due to 'health issues', you were invited by us to spend time in Inaba to rest."

Thank you, Mitsuru-san." She then turned to the guys. "I can't thank you enough for what you all did for me, especially Hanamura-san and Teddie-san."

"There's no need for that, Chidori-san," Yosuke said, giving her an embarrassed smile. "I'm glad to help."

"I love to help pretty ladies like you, Chidori-chan. By the way - " Whatever pick-up line Teddie almost tried, was cut off by a smack on the head from Yosuke. "Ow! You meanie! Jerk!"

A giggle escaped Chidori's lips when she was approached by Minato and Souji. "I owe you two my thanks as well."

"Your friendship is gratitude enough for us, Chidori," Minato said.

"The same goes for me. Have a safe trip," Souji added.

She smiled at them. A hand landed on her shoulder. She turned around and her eyes met Junpei's. "Chidori…" He was trying his hardest to keep a straight face. "Junpei…" The red-head lolita smiled warmly at him. "Can you…can you give me a farewell kiss?"

Junpei blushed. He turned his back to his friends, shielding Chidori as well, not wanting them to see an intimate moment between them. Very slowly, deliberately, tenderly, he pressed his lips to hers in a single, passionate kiss.

As they parted, she softly whispered, "Promise me. Promise me you'll take care of yourself and
come back safely, okay? I'll be waiting for you."

The train whistled loudly, signaling its almost-departure. Junpei nodded and embraced her once more. "Of course, Chidorin." He gently stroked her hair. "I promise." His voice held strong conviction and finality.

With final hugs and goodbyes, Chidori boarded the train. She continued waving to her friends as it took off, until they could no longer be seen.

A few days later…

Souji was preparing breakfast for his family, but his mind was crowded with concerns and questions as he tossed some vegetables into the sizzling wok.

The rumors of the supernatural phenomenon continued to grow as sightings increased, many more people have witnessed the undeniable evidence, such as the ghost lights and blue fire. But so far, everything appeared harmless - for which the group was immensely glad and relieved for. At the same time, the sightings were becoming almost... normal... to the townspeople of Inaba, as if it was an everyday occurrence that sparked little attention from the desensitized populace, save for the few that knew something worse could be on the horizon.

*Yip!*

He paused – had he heard something?

*Scratch scratch*

There it was again! He turned, looking outside the living room glass door, and blinked at what he saw. He turned off the stove and quickly opened the door, dropping down to one knee as Fox nimbly stepped inside, two cubs on her back and the third dangling from her jaws.

"Taking me up on my offer?" he asked.

The Fox placed her cubs down before nodding once in reply.

He scratched a spot behind her ears. "There should be a comfortable space beneath the patio, and I'll let my family know you're here after breakfast, okay?"

She let out a small yip of gratitude and reached over to give him a quick lick before disappearing outside with her cubs.

'What a nice family...‘ His memory drifted back to his parents, but he quickly pulled back, reminding himself over and over to snap out of it. 'C'mon, get a grip of yourself! As long as there's a chance, no matter how small it may be, I gotta cling to the belief that they're still alive!' Sighing softly, he continued his task of making breakfast and brought a bowl filled with water to the back, setting it down on the grass for his unexpected (but not unwelcomed) guests, before going back to his room and get ready for the day.

When Souji came back down, he was greeted by Nanako carrying one of the fox kits in her arms, cooing over 'Kyu-chan' as she affectionately called the tiny creature. The kits were so adorable that even Dojima wasn't immune to their cuteness, and he gave his approval for Fox and her family to stay with them once Souji explained their situation.

With that settled, the family had a nice breakfast together and Souji left to meet up with the others.
"Sensei! Sensei!" Teddie was running towards Souji, in his hand was a small sack of some kind. "Look what I found near Nao-chan's dungeon!"

Souji and the Investigation Team, including the members of SEES, were resting in the entrance hall after a training session in the TV world. "What is it, Teddie?" he asked.

He lifted the small sack high enough for everyone to see. "I don't know what it is though. I was just passing by and a Shadow ran away and dropped it. I think it was looking around for something."

"Guys, we should be careful with that," Yosuke interrupted. He snatched the sack out of the blonde's hands. "He did say he found it in Naoto's dungeon. Who knows what sort of freaky science experiment he'd find there, not to mention the weird side effects." Everyone's interest, especially SEES, were piqued. As of this day, no one had yet to explain what those dungeons meant.

"So ~ what about that particular place?" Junpei asked, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively. An instant later, he was smacked by Yukari. "Get your head out of the gutter, Stupei! Yosuke-kun doesn't mean it like that." She shifted her eyes to the young detective, and shook her head. When Naoto admitted to SEES that she was actually a girl upon their first meeting, all of them had a hard time believing it. Junpei found it highly amusing when the detective told them she managed to fool their entire school for months. An instant later he was crestfallen when Rise blurted out how Naoto won the school beauty pageant because she was also popular among girls (which Junpei was not) causing everyone to laugh.

"You say that these 'dungeons' were created by the people who were thrown into this world. What exactly do you mean?" Aigis inquired.

The Investigation Team looked at each other with mixed expressions. Of course, they haven't mentioned the embarrassing stories that followed suit said dungeons. Nobody else had to know about that! All seven heads turned to their leader. "Why don't you tell them, partner?" Yosuke prompted. "You're the one who's actually good with words." However his eyes were pleading for him to skip the parts about their personal revelations.

"Come on, Banchou-kun. We wanna know too!" Minako pleaded. She was sitting between her twin and Shinjiro.

Sighing, Souji turned his attention towards the others. "Well, where do I start? We told you how in each dungeon, it was crucial that we rescue those trapped in here before the fog sets in, right?" Everyone nodded. "Each dungeon also harbors that person's unique characteristics. For instance, Naoto here is knowledgeable and very passionate with detective-related stuff, especially mechanical trinkets. Even the Shadows and objects there look a lot like things you would find in a science fiction or espionage movie."

"Ooh! Remember that huge robot Shadow we had to fight before we could precede to the next floor?" Chie exclaimed. "It looked like something out of the Featherman series."

Ken's eyes sparkled. "I wish I could have seen that!"

"Anyway, Yosuke is right." Souji got up, dusting off his bottom. "We should probably put that somewhere safe until we know exactly what it is. If it's from Naoto's dungeon, I wouldn't be
surprised if it contains some sort of untested chemical reagent or whatever. It could be nothing, but better safe than sorry."

"Doesn't look like any healing item I've ever seen," Minato said with a thoughtful look. The brownish gurney sack looked normal, but there was a symbol representing radioactive substances painted in yellow on it.

Minako also came to join the conversation, her ruby-colored eyes shining with curiosity. "I wonder what it does. The restorative items that we use in Tartarus often look like gems..."

As the team leaders were discussing about the possible contents of the sack, Teddie started to fight with Chie and Kanji for the last piece of egg roll Souji had packed in their lunch. Yukiko was trying to calm them down, but one could clearly see the strained smile she had on her face. "Come on, guys. I'm sure Souji-kun can make more tomorrow!"

"But you guys always get to eat Sensei's cooking at school!" Teddie complained. "It's my turn to have some!"

"Dude, you're the one who pigs out on them every chance you get," Yosuke scolded.

"Piss off, Ted!" Kanji growled. "That egg roll was in my lunchbox." He emphasized this by pointing his chopsticks to a messy scrawl in permanent black marker on one side of the container. "I don't see your name on it."

Chie too tried to fend Teddie of, but eyed the eggroll like a piece of meat. "Like I care! You already had two servings for crying out loud!"

"Could you please stop quarreling over food like children?" Naoto drawled. Such childish behavior was beyond her comprehension, and she didn't want to be part of it.

"Please give me some, Kanji!" Teddie pleaded, trying to wrestle the container out of Kanji's large hands.

"Get bent!"

Shinjiro smirked, glad to be as far away as possible. It's been quite a while since he heard meaningless banter. He forgot the last time he and Akihiko fought over food. The former boxer was also amused. In his mind he was comparing his best friend with the high school delinquent and found many similarities, letting out a faint chuckle. If he voiced his thoughts aloud though, Shinjiro would get pissed.

A vein in Yosuke's forehead began throbbing. Being second-in-command was a pain in the ass sometimes, especially since he was the only other male senior in their team. As their leader was busy figuring things out, it was his job to keep the situation under control. "SHUT UP!" he yelled. "If you don't stop fighting over that damn egg roll, I swear I'm going to blow you guys over with Magarudyne!"

Kanji immediately let go of his container. It wasn't worth it to anger his senpai any further. Despite being a jokester most of the time, Yosuke could get pretty scary when he got upset, and that frightened him a little. He remembered one time the brunette got hit with Pulinpa and turned against the team, knocking him out with a powerful Garula which he's weak against. His body was sore for the next three days.

When Kanji let go, Teddie lost his balance and crashed into Yosuke, the egg roll flying out of the container, landing right in front of Koromaru. The dog was only too happy to receive free food and
ate it, tail wagging all the way.

Having lost his balance, Yosuke's arms flailed. The sack flew out of his hands.

Time seemed to pass very slowly as the Investigation Team and SEES helplessly watched the sack fly in the air, its projectile clearly indicating it was about to land on top of the oblivious Wild Card trio. It landed on Minato's head, engulfing the three in comically yellowish smoke.

As the smoke started to clear, Shinjiro was the first one to approach, worried about Minako. "Oi, are you guys alright?"

"Minato-kun?" Yukari called out, followed by Yukiko's "Souji-kun?"

Everyone now surrounded the area after the smoke completely cleared. Right smack in the middle, three toddlers stood. Their expressions that of dumbfoundedness, in clothes that were three times larger than their size.

A thick silence followed, before…

"Holy crap, we're in seriously deep shit!" Yosuke hollered, being the first to break the silence.

Mixed expressions could be seen on everyone's faces; horror (Yosuke, Naoto, Mitsuru and Akihiko), surprise (Chie, Yukiko and Fuuka), amusement (Junpei, Ken and Rise), shock (Shinjiro, Kanji, Teddie and Yukari) and deadpan (Aigis, Metis and Koromaru). The three children looked around, obviously confused because they didn't know how they got here in the first place.

Little Minako walked towards Shinjiro with great difficulty in her big clothes. She stared at him straight in the face, her mouth forming a cute pout. "Umm…Mister, do you know where my Mommy is?"

Shinjiro blushed at the cute gesture. Despite the confusion and shock, he was relieved that the little girl wasn't afraid of him. The others weren't sure how to answer her question, because everybody already knew what happened to her parents 13 years ago.

"Minako, don't talk to strangers!" Little Minato scolded, pulling his sister away from from the tall man. He stuck his tongue out at him before turning away, which annoyed Shinjiro in so many ways.

"Yeah! Leave our sister alone, you meanie punk!" Little Souji exclaimed, pulling down his bottom eyelid and sticking his tongue out. It was an adorable attempt at aggressiveness, causing the other girls to coo in delight. Shinjiro's eyebrows twitched.

"Onii-chan…Banchou-kun…" the little girl protested, but went with them anyway. "I don't think he's a meanie…"

"Don't you remember what Dad said about approaching people we don't know?" her brother reminded her, pointing to the other grown-ups, a frown plastered on his face. "We don't know any of them. Now let's get out of here," he added with finality.

"Aniki's right. Let's get the hell outta here." The children were completely oblivious to the fact that they were wearing such big clothes.

Their sister's pout became longer. "Stop swearing, Banchou-kun. Don't make me tell your mom that you were watching yakuza movies with your dad again."
"Sensei...likes yakuza movies?" It was Teddie's turn to pout while holding his chin. His eyebrows were scrunched together, trying to imagine Souji in a yakuza getup. It wasn't that difficult really - Sensei's skill with a katana and the appearance of his Persona matched the stereotype perfectly, causing the blonde Shadow to shiver in fright should Sensei ever become violent.

Meanwhile, everyone else was close to panicking.

"Oh...my...GOD!" Yosuke was attempting to tear his hair out, refraining from swearing out loud. "Don't tell me these guys don't remember us?!"

"I'm afraid so," Naoto sighed. "It seems that they have forgotten about everything that proceeds their current age. But they seem to know each other. I would estimate them to be between the ages of three to six."

"This is a nightmare indeed," Mitsuru groaned, holding her forehead.

"It's that weird powder!" Junpei concluded. "It turned them into kids? How the heck does something like that even exist?!" With that, everyone panicked, causing Teddie to run around as if his head just disappeared.

Fuuka, Yukari and Yukiko were rational enough to try and dissuade the children from leaving and wonder around by themselves. It was obvious that leaving them alone in the fog-filled world was dangerous.

"First things first, we have to get them out of here," Kanji said. "We don't want what happened to Nanako-chan to happen again."

**Junes Food Court...**

The three children fell asleep as they were carried out. Shinjiro, Metis and Aigis were holding Minako, Souji and Minato respectively. Everyone hurried to their usual spot at the food court despite the thinning crowd.

Yosuke rubbed his temples. *This day just gets weirder and weirder...'*

Everybody was silent for a moment before Yukiko said "I don't think we should take Souji-kun back to Dojima-san's house."

"Yeah, she's right," Akihiko added. "He won't have trouble believing that something turned his nephew into a kid, but I don't think that he'll have the time to take care of another one."

"We'll tell him the truth if need be," Naoto said. "But I suggest that the three of them stay at the inn with you guys until we figure out how to turn them back."

"Yeah, that would be best. We did promise not to lie to Dojima-san after all," Yosuke agreed, but still felt uneasy. How else was he supposed to feel? His best friend was turned into a child and showed no signs of turning back to normal any time soon.

"This is seriously going to cripple our investigation," Chie groaned. "How are we gonna do it without our leaders?"

Mitsuru's expression turned dark. She stared down at everyone around the table. "Yes, that will be a problem. But in the meantime, somebody will have to babysit these three. We can't have them causing trouble while we try to find out how to turn them back."
"Err…come on Mitsuru, you know I'm not good with kids," Akihiko stated, blushing a little. He hated admitting his weakness in front of others, and after Miki's death he never really interacted with young children much.

The group of teenagers looked at each other, faces filled with confusion. From the looks of it, it seems that nobody here possess any knowledge of taking care of toddlers. "Actually, the only one among us who have had any experience of babysitting is Souji-senpai," Kanji pointed out. "He took care of Nanako-chan and worked part-time as a daycare assistant last year. I dunno how he did it…"

"Come to think of it, I sometimes see Minato-kun and Minako-chan playing with an elementary school girl at the shrine back home," Fuuka said. "Does that count as babysitting?"

"We're officially screwed either way," Junpei sighed, leaning against his chair. He crossed his arms and swung his left leg over his right thigh.

The three toddlers were left to sleep on a bench nearby. Yukari, Yukiko and Rise were watching over them, whispering and fawning. Yukiko let out a soft squeal as Minako scrunched up her nose, followed by Minato and a little while later Souji. They were smiling and giggling, mumbling something about candy.

"Oh my goodness, that was so cute!" Rise cooed.

"I always wondered what our kids would look like," Yukari sighed, her gaze settling on Minato with a gentle smile on her lips.

"Then I guess this is close enough," Yukiko giggled.

Rise turned around to see Shinjiro sitting nearby, his body language clearly indicating that he was listening to their conversation despite his slight scowl. A wicked grin appeared on her face for a microsecond. "I wonder how Minako-senpai and Shinjiro-san's kid might look like? Hopefully they'll be as cute as her~!" she sing-songed, clearly trying to get a rise out of him. Just like Akihiko, she too secretly compared Shinjiro with Kanji.

It worked. Shinjiro cringed, blushing furiously at the implication of future children, and pulled his beanie down further to hide his face. He turned his head in another direction to avoid being seen by the others.

Rise was watching his reaction with delight. 'Aww...he's so cute!' She approached him and immediately plopped down beside him.

He scowled at her, face still red. "What do you want?!

"Hehe, it's nothing to be embarrassed about. I knew you were listening~" Rise sing-songed again, swinging her legs back and forth.

The intensity of Shinjiro's blush increased again. "Wha-what the hell are you talking about!?!"

"Sooo…" She scooted closer to him, which Shinjiro inched himself away. "When are you gonna pop the question?"

"Huh?"

"When are you going to propose to her?" Rise asked bluntly, invading the older teen's personal space again. "Minako Aragaki…it has a nice ring to it, don't you think?"
Shinjiro was feeling very uncomfortable. A part of his mind was questioning how Souji put up with such straightforward shamelessness. The other part was still processing the question, not sure how to give an answer. Never in a million years would he admit that he liked what the young idol's was insinuating to her face, or anyone for that matter. He prayed for an escape.

His prayer was answered when Mitsuru approached them. "Shinjiro, I need you to babysit the children while the rest of us investigate inside the TV to find a cure," she ordered. "Ken will help you."

Grey-brown eyes went wide. 'Straight from the fishing net and into the frying pan.' He really should be careful what he wished for. "Are you kidding me?! I don't know anything about taking care of kids!" he protested. "Can't any of the girls do it?"

"Come on Shinji, don't be like that. Remember what a great job you did when the twins fell sick during the typhoon?" Akihiko stated, approaching just in time to back his girlfriend up. He ignored the glare his best friend threw at him. The two then started to argue.

Minako was the first one to wake up after her short nap. She rubbed her sleepy eyes and yawned widely. Yukari and Yukiko had to stifle their squeals at seeing how cute she was. As soon as she was on her feet, her stomach gave a loud growl. Everyone swiveled their heads at her direction.

"Uh...umm..." the little girl stuttered. It was clear she was embarrassed and confused, staring at her feet to avoid eye contact with the others.

Yukiko was the first one to approach. "Are you hungry, Minako-chan?" she asked kindly. "It's almost dinner time. Why don't we go back to the inn and I'll make you something to eat. Would you like that?" Minako nodded shyly, giving her a small smile.

"Over my dead body!" Yosuke interjected. Quick as a flash, he stood in between, separating them. "Look, I don't care what Chie said about you training under the head chef at the inn. You and the girls are forbidden to feed them any form of Mystery Food X!" he decreed, arms crossed with a scowl, completely serious.

"Uhhh...what's Mystery Food X?" Junpei asked Kanji.

"It's basically anything cooked by Chie-senpai, Yukiko-senpai and Rise. Our leader and Yosuke-senpai almost died eating it last year, though I don't know much about the details," Kanji answered with a shrug.

"Why isn't Naoto-kun included?" Rise whined, which he ignored.

The other girls glared dangerously at Yosuke. "What the hell...you all know I'm right!" he yelled back, flailing his arms. Despite being so serious, his actions were comical.

"It tasted awful too!" Teddie chirped, a little too cheerily. It earned him piercing glares from the girls (especially Chie) causing him to run and hide behind Kanji.

Junpei chuckled. "Yeah, I know the feeling. You can say the same about Fuuka's cooking. The only girl who could make anything decent was Mina-tan." Fuuka only hung her head in shame, a dark depressed aura surrounding her. The memories of the food she cooked being the likely cause of sending some of her dormmates to the hospital came flooding back. The unlucky SEES members shuddered.

Shinjiro was mortified. He wasn't expecting there were other girls as bad as Fuuka at cooking, and
he felt sorry for the boys for having to put up with it. He mentally thanked Yosuke for the sudden intervention.

"I think that Shinjiro-san is a good choice. We will not have to worry about the children going hungry," Aigis added logically.

Koromaru barked in agreement. "He says that we should also include Nanako-chan to help, since she is a child herself, she can understand them better," Metis translated.

"A sound idea, Koromaru. But first we will have to inform Dojima-san that Seta will be staying with us tonight," Mitsuru said.

"I'll do it," Yosuke volunteered. "Me and Teddie will also be picking up Nanako-chan tomorrow, morning so expect us early."

Akihiko smirked at Shinjiro. "Looks like the decision is final, Shinji. You're the babysitter," he said, patting his friend on the shoulder. The latter hung his head in defeat.

Minato and Souji woke up due to the commotion. Just like Minako earlier, their tummies growled loudly. Souji started to cry. Ken rushed to one of the counters and purchased three sandwiches and apple juice. "Here guys," he said, handing the sandwiches and drinks to the toddlers. "Don't cry anymore, okay?" He patted Souji softly on the head.

"That should hold them until dinner is ready. We should head back," Shinjiro sighed. "Thanks, Ken."

"I still have some clothes from my childhood," Yukiko said. "Kanji-kun, can you come to my place later and lend the boys some of yours?"

"Sure. S'not a problem."

Meanwhile, the toddlers were talking amongst themselves. "Where's Mommy and Daddy?" Minako whined. Her brother just gave a shrug, munching his sandwich.

"Are you sure they didn't run away?" Souji asked, on another verge of tears. Before he could cry again, Minato conked him on the head.

"Don't be stupid, Banchou-kun. They would never do that!" he said gruffly, but with a gentler tone.

"But what about those people? Did we get kidnapped by bad guys?"

Minako smiled brightly. "I don't think so, Banchou-kun. I like them, they're so nice. Nice people don't kidnap kids. Besides, they gave us food!"

Nodding at his sister's logic, Minato slung his arm around Souji's shoulder. "She's right, so don't cry." Like magic, Souji's tears disappeared and he smiled.

Yukiko approached them. "Alright, kids. It's time to get back. You'll be staying with us for a while," she told them. The toddlers nodded and followed the grown-ups.

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Amagi Inn...

Yukiko managed to persuade the chefs to let Shinjiro use the kitchen, and also invited the Investigation Team to stay for dinner.
Shinjiro asked Kanji and Yukari to help him prepare food for everybody. He didn't want the bad cooks anywhere near the kitchen for fear that they might accidentally screw up and poison the food.

An hour later, dinner was ready. Everyone somehow managed to squeeze themselves in the private dining hall (which was usually used for drinking parties) Yukiko reserved especially for them. The table groaned with dishes and dishes of good looking and even better smelling food. "Oh man, I didn't think I'd be able to eat Shinjiro-senpai's cooking ever again," Junpei whooped. A silly grin was plastered on his face. "Delicious dimension, here we come!"

"All this is cooked from scratch?" Chie asked, flabbergasted. "It's like looking at one of those fancy cookbooks."

Akihiko laughed at her reaction. "Shinji is always full of surprises."

Shinjiro grinned, no longer burdened of keeping his cooking skills a secret. "Alright alright, stop yammering and dig in. We don't want to keep the kids waiting."

Plates heaped with food and drinks were passed around. Squeals of delight could be heard from the girls, while the boys were chewing noisily. Mitsuru and Naoto were reprimanding those without manners. The children were giggling at the funny scene. Koromaru was eating from a doggie bowl at the end of the table, wagging his tail furiously, indicating that he was enjoying himself very much.

"This food is just AWESOME!" Kanji exclaimed, pumping a fist in the air. Yosuke and Teddie nodded in agreement as their mouths were full, continuing to stuff themselves.

"Too bad Souji-senpai is a child. I wanna eat his cooking~" Rise griped while stuffing a piece of fish into her mouth.

The three toddlers were eating with incredible gusto, their appetites not ruined the least by their early snack. At least that part of them had not changed. Children would eat anything if they are hungry enough, after all. After finishing their dinner, everyone pitched in to help clear their mess. Yukiko accompanied Yukari and took the children to the front garden to play with Koromaru. Hopefully chasing the white dog around would keep them occupied for a while, tiring them out faster in time for bed.

The rest of the Persona-users gathered around. Mitsuru cleared her throat. "While we are still gathered here, let's quickly discuss our plan of action."

"We already agreed that Shinji and Ken will babysit the kids," Akihiko started. "But I'm worried about the Dark Hour."

"We should have a backup team outside of the TV World. That way, while the others are exploring the dungeons they could help protect our leaders from a safe distance," Yosuke suggested.

"I'll stay," Fuuka volunteered. "Rise-chan is more suitable for analytical support inside the TV anyway."

"We'll be needing Koromaru-san and Fox-san to help sniff out for clues," Aigis said.

"No!" Shinjiro cut in. "Fuuka should also go in there with you guys. You need all the help you can get and find something to reverse the state those kids are in."

"Are you sure about this, Shinjiro-san?" Chie asked.
"I don't think we need to worry too much, Senpai," Naoto said. "Shinjiro-san is a capable fighter and Ken-kun has healing skills in case anything goes wrong."

Everyone pondered at this idea. "Then I guess it will have to do," Metis said, breaking the silence. "Shinjiro-san is right. We should focus on finding an antidote of some kind. We need their Wild Card abilities soon if we want to continue our investigation."

"Y-you're right, Metis. We can't forget our main objective," Fuuka said.

Yosuke got up and smoothed his shirt. "In that case, we should be heading home. Remember guys, we'll be meeting here early in the morning, so let's get some sleep."

Little Souji tossed and turned in his futon, beads of sweat trickling down his forehead as he was struggling with a nightmare.

*He felt odd, because Souji wasn't a child in this dream. He was wearing his Gekkoukan High uniform. His parents were sitting in the front, his mother at the wheel. The radio played some kind of classic English rock from the early 90's, and the conversation between them were reminiscence of their younger years. Souji couldn't remember the last time he saw his parents smile like that, so jovial and carefree. The three of them continued to talk about trivial things.*

*The small car had already crossed the Moonlight Bridge, just stopping by a red traffic light when a speeding delivery truck headed towards them from the opposite direction. It made a sharp turn and crossed the divider, successfully ramming the Seta family's smaller vehicle. All he could feel was the impact of the crash to his skull, ribcage and arm. Flashes of a manic grin and echoes of maddening laughter could be heard amidst his father's and mother's screaming. His vision began to blur and disappear. The last thing he saw before blacking out was the flutter of blue butterfly wings...*

The boy woke up abruptly, gasping for air. He rolled to his side, instinctively grabbing the nearest object which happened to be Minato's torso. The older Arisato twin stirred from his slumber, and snapped his eyes open when he heard Souji crying beside him.

"Banchou-kun, what's wrong?" he asked in a low whisper.

"I had a bad dream," Souji answered tearfully. "Mommy and Daddy were in a car crash, and I never saw them again!"

Minato sat up and hugged his little brother, patting his back softly. "Wanna go for a walk?" Souji nodded weakly.

Luckily for them, the grown-ups forgot to lock the door. They quietly sneaked out, only to find Minako waiting for them, wearing a pink nightgown.

"Aniki, I felt that you were awake and I ran here as fast as I can!" she gushed. "Is something wrong with Banchou-kun?"

"He had a bad dream, so we're going for a walk. How did you get out of your room?"

"I unlocked the door myself. I had to use a chair to reach it, though."

The children silently made their way to the flower garden, illuminated by the moonlight. The sound of the water fountain in the middle of the koi pond was peaceful as the kids huddled together for warmth. They didn't mind, being this close to each other was comforting in itself. The twins
patted Souji's head and whispered soothing words to calm him down.

Footsteps echoed behind them, causing the three to panic. They hid behind a few bushes just in time to see three tall figures approaching the center of the garden. All of them were clad in blue. There were two women and a taller man, their golden eyes shining like a cat's under the moonlight.

"Are you sure this is the correct location, Sister?" the lady with the bob haircut asked the one with long, wavy hair.

"I am positive, Elizabeth. Master Souji's compendium tells me this is where he is staying," she answered curtly. "Be thankful that I am supervising you two in this world lest you get over your heads and anger Igor-sama like last time."

The tall man sighed. "You don't have to lecture us, dear Margaret. We are perfectly capable of taking care of ourselves in this world."

Margaret pursed her lips in an annoyed manner. "Your overconfidence will be the ruin of you, Theodore. Let me remind you that our master has no tolerance for mistakes this time, and finding our guests is our upmost priority."

"Master is worried, Brother. Even if he doesn't show it," Elizabeth said with a frown. "The reality altering spell that he detected was by no means casted on a whim. The enemy is up to something. Unless we find those three now, we will not be able figure out what they are up to."

The rustling of bushes caused the Velvet siblings to tense. Unable to hide themselves any longer, the children stumbled out of the bushes in a heap, with Souji and Minako landing on top of Minato.

"Well well, what do we have here?" Theodore inquired, unable to hold back his curiosity. He approached the children and crouched down to their level as they picked themselves up and dusted their clothes. "Children like you should not be allowed to wander outside this late at night." When the little girl lifted her head to look at him, Theodore took a sharp intake of breath. He recognized those ruby red eyes anywhere. "Could it be? Is that you, Minako-sama?" He reached out a gloved hand to touch her head, but was violently pushed aside by her twin.

"Don't touch my sister!" Minato growled. Souji hid behind his back, unsure of what to do. Despite his anxiety due to the nightmare, he didn't feel like these people would cause him and his friends any harm.

Margaret and Elizabeth heard the commotion and approached their brother. When they saw the toddlers, they had the same reaction as he did. "Now this is unexpected," Margaret said. "Why would the enemy turn them into children?"

Unlike her ever-so-logical sister, Elizabeth let out a small squeal. "Sister, they are so adorable. Very much like the Jack Frost dolls that Minato-sama gave me for one of my requests."

"Elizabeth!" the eldest scolded. "We have a crisis here. Focus!" Unfortunately her warnings went unheeded as her siblings attempted to touch the children. Minato didn't have a problem with Elizabeth, but he slapped Theodore's hand away when he tried to pat his sister's head yet again.

Souji shyly glanced at Margaret from behind Minato's back. The eldest Velvet sister's cheeks began to heat up. She always knew Souji was handsome, as even she was unable to resist his charms. But seeing him this small and cute, it took huge reserves of willpower to refrain herself from acting like her siblings. She did notice something else though - the children didn't seem to recognize who they were. This information bothered her, and she would make sure to report this to
Master Igor when they got back.

Elizabeth was pinching Minako's cheeks and Theodore was trying to get through Minato's defenses, which Souji quickly joined in to help keep the adult male away. Margaret really did blush this time; the entire scene before her was just too cute to ignore. All that was ruined when she felt a shiver up her spine, and quickly her golden eyes darted to a rose bush that wasn't too far from them. Margaret furrowed her delicate brows, noticing the light rustling of said bush which could be mistaken for a breeze, but she knew better; they were being watched, and closely at that.

Theodore and Elizabeth noticed the tension in their eldest sister's shoulders and immediately put their guard up.

"Souji-sama," Margaret said gently, kneeling on the ground in front of the silverette. "I need you to tell me why you're not asleep right now. Perhaps I can be of help."

At first Souji hesitated to answer, but something inside his head told him that he could trust this person. "I…I had a bad dream where my Mommy and Daddy and me were in a car accident. And then there was a round moon, and a blue butterfly, and lots of screaming. Th-that's all I can remember."

"I told him it was just a bad dream," Minato added, placing his arm around Souji's shoulder. Minako hugged him from behind to let him know that he's safe.

Margaret gently ruffled his hair. "Please do not distress over this matter. Minato-sama is right, and you have my word that we will try our best to get to the bottom of this." She stood up and held his small hand. "Now let us get you three back to bed. Your friends might panic if they find you missing."

The next morning, everyone woke up early to prepare for the mission. Unfortunately things didn't go as smoothly as planned when you add kids into the equation. The children didn't appreciate being awakened so early, trying to get away from the adults when it was bath time. The little boys managed to squirm their way out into halls, running around naked. A few of the chambermaids and guests shrieked as the guys chased them around the inn. At least Akihiko had the workout of his life; they were sweating bullets by the time they caught little Minato and Souji and hauled them to the bathroom. Who knew that such passive and aloof teenagers would have so much energy? Trying to get them dressed was a different story altogether…

The young women were having an equally difficult time with Minako, but that was expected. What they didn't expect was for her to dash out of the room like a bullet train in her undergarments when Shinjiro opened the door to check up on her. Thus the chasing began yet again.

Yukiko greeted the rest of the Investigation Team plus Nanako, and ushered them to the dining hall. SEES and the Wild Card trio were already seated, waiting for the other group. Breakfast was being served.

Nanako was surprised when she saw the children, especially the little boy who had dark silver hair like her Big Bro. After a simple explanation from Teddie and Yosuke, the little girl giggled with delight. "So you want me to help take care of Big Bro, Aniki and Aneki?" Nanako concluded. "I'd love to! I get to be the big sister this time!"

"Sorry we couldn't take you to that place, Nanako-chan. It's pretty dangerous there at the moment,"
Chie told her. Nanako nodded in understanding.

Breakfast was finished in a matter of minutes. After the table was cleared, everyone prepped themselves for their mission.

"So you're going there to find something to turn them back?" Nanako asked. She looked a bit worried.

"Yeah, we're all going except for Shinjiro-san and Ken," Yosuke informed her. "They'll be babysitting you and the little guys."

"We should get going," Mitsuru said, adjusting the buttons on her blouse. They were all dressed, armor hidden under their school uniforms. Their weapons were hidden away in a vacant store room at Junes.

"Right!" everyone echoed in unison.

Mitsuru turned around one last time. "Shinjiro, once we are out of that place, I'll give you a call."

"Yeah, yeah. I know the drill." He and Ken watched them leave as Nanako played with the kids.

"Hey, why don't we go play at Samegawa? It's nice there this time of year!" the elementary school girl suggested.

Shinjiro thought about it for a while. "Sure, I don't see why not. Better than being cooped up here, I guess."

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**Samegawa river bank…**

The air was nice and cool despite the summer heat. Cicadas were buzzing and birds chirping amongst the many trees surrounding the area. It was a nice change of scenery.

Nanako guided the toddlers to her favorite spot near the riverbed, where her mother used to take her when she was alive. As if on cue, an old man came fumbling along. He spotted Nanako and gave her a big toothy grin. "Well, if it isn't little Nanako Dojima. How's your father doing these days?"

"He's doing great. Busy catching bad guys like always!" she stated with pride. "Oh, and these are Big Bro's friends from the city. Shinjiro Aragaki-san and Ken Amada." At the mention of the latter's name, her cheeks turned pink.

"Souji's friends, huh? So it's you guys that he was borrowing some of my fishing gear for," the old man said. "It's a pleasure to meet such fine looking young men. Where is Souji anyway? I haven't seen him lately."

Nanako fidgeted at that. She didn't like to lie, but…

"Souji is showing the rest of our friends from the city around town. He asked us to take care of Nanako for a while," Shinjiro answered for her. He saw her sigh a breath of relief and smirked.

"Is that right?" the old man mumbled, rubbing his chin. He looked at Shinjiro for a minute. "I was hoping Souji could help me catch the Samegawa Guardian again. My tinker almost stopped when he presented that monster to me last year. I'll never forget it!"
"Big Bro fished a lot during the summer. He caught me my first pet goldfish," Nanako told Ken. "He's so thoughtful."

"Tell him I said 'hi' for me, will ya? I'm sure he'll want to challenge the Guardian again." With that, the old angler walked away.

"Exactly how big is this 'Guardian' he keeps talking about?" Shinjiro asked Nanako.

The girl merely giggled. "You should have seen it! Big Bro said it could swallow me whole..." she emphasized her point by extending her arms horizontally to give them an idea of how big the legendary fish was. "I'm sure Dad still keeps the picture somewhere."

The Wild Card children were playing nearby, splashing water at each other. Nanako joined them to play with the fish.

Ken laughed at their antics. "Look at them, you'd think this is the first time they see what a river looks like."

Shinjiro chuckled. This was nice; being able to relax without any distractions of their current life, in a beautiful countryside town. His eyes settled on little Minako, and he blushed, recalling Rise's question the previous day.

"You're blushing, Shinjiro-san," Ken pointed out. He sat down beside him on a rock nearby, putting the small duffel bag which contained extra clothes for the toddlers (just in case) by his feet.

"It's just an embarrassing question that Kujikawa girl asked me yesterday," he answered vaaguely. "And before you ask, I'm not telling you about it."

The middle-school student just shrugged. His thoughts wondered about the others in the TV World. 'I hope they're alright...'

\[Inside the TV World...\]

"It's weak against wind spells. Finish them off!" Fuuka informed them.

"Zap 'em with thunder, guys!" Rise cheered.

"Go Susano-O!"

"Isis!"

"Psyche!"

"Caesar!"

"Crush them, Rokuten Maoh!"

In a blink of an eye, the Gigas and Raven type Shadows surrounding them were eliminated.

In order to cover more ground, they divided themselves into two groups but spread out in pairs. The Fox stayed with Fuuka and Rise.

After a few hours of dungeon grinding, they were nowhere close to finding anything that might reverse the condition of the Wild Cards. They even checked other dungeons, but all they found were the normal items used for healing or support during battle. Even Fox and Koromaru were
about to give up on sniffing.

At the Entrance Hall, the Persona-users finally had a chance to catch their breath. The Fox was passing around leaves for the injured members. In one corner was a heap all the items they collected earlier, but nothing out of the ordinary.

It was quickly turning to be a frustrating day.

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**Back at Samegawa…**

After playing at the riverbank until it was almost noon, the temperature became unbearable. Shinjiro decided to call it quits and head back to the inn, but the kids didn't want to go just yet.

"I want ice cream!" Minako chirped.

"I want soda!" Souji demanded.

"I'm hungry…" Minato groaned, his stomach growling. He had to pat it in order to calm it down.

"Madam Shiroku's shop is not far from here," Nanako pointed out. "We can get some tasty snacks there."

"I am getting a little hungry myself," Ken admitted sheepishly.

At first Shinjiro was reluctant to do so; sugar and children weren't exactly a good combination. But Minako gave him the puppy-dog eyes and he couldn't say 'no' after that. He cursed himself at his weakness and sighed. "Fine, let's go get snacks." The toddlers whooped with joy.

Madam Shiroku greeted them, a warm smile adorning her gracefully aging features. Nanako and Ken made small talk with her as the kids ran around, trying to figure out what snack to get. Shinjiro waited for them outside. While waiting, he thought about the menu for today's lunch. Mitsuru gave him a credit card in case he needed to shop for groceries.

The toddlers were chattering happily when they exited the small shop, each one carrying a small bag filled with rice crackers and sweets. They used their free hand to hold a Topsicle which was slowly melting from the hot sun.

"What flavor did you get, Aniki?" little Minako asked her brother.


"I got sour apple," Souji said, scrunching up his face in displeasure. "What about you, Aneki?"

"I think it's pineapple," she said. "It's yellow and doesn't taste like banana."

Ken also walked out of the shop with a small bag in hand. He was halfway through his animal crackers when he pulled out a small sticker. Thinking that he didn't need it, he absent-mindedly offered it to Nanako.

"Wow, a rare sticker of the Featherman badge! I was looking for this forever!" Her eyes sparkled. "Thank you!"

Realizing his mistake of not checking his prize before giving it to someone else, Ken felt torn. He wanted the sticker, being a huge fan of the series, but he didn't want to disappoint Nanako and look like a jerk for retracting his offer. Like the gentleman he is, he gave it her anyway.
"Wait till Yuuta-kun sees this," Nanako exclaimed. "I completed my collection before he did!"

Before Ken could ask her about it, Shinjiro cleared his throat loudly. "Are we done here?" he asked. They nodded, and so did the toddlers. "Let's head to Junes before going back. I need to get some groceries."

It looks like Shinjiro was right all along; sugar and children were a bad combination. When they arrived at Junes, the toddlers, in their hyperactive sugar-rushed state; dashed in three different directions at the same time, leaving their babysitters speechless. Shinjiro cursed under his breath and ordered the other two to chase after them.

Half an hour later, exhausted and out of breath, Shinjiro, Ken and Nanako managed to gather the troublemaking midgets together at the electronics department.

"I told you guys…" Shinjiro panted "…that giving them snacks early wasn't a good idea."

"But you said it was okay Shinjiro-san," Ken countered.

"Whatever. We still have some shopping to do," the tall teen grumbled. Nanako on the other hand, looked like she was in heaven despite being tired - it was Junes after all.

Meanwhile, the children were in front of the giant flat-screen TV used as the gateway to the Shadow Dimension. They were in awe by its size.

"It's so huge~!" Souji said, his mouth still hanging open.

"It's flat too," Minako stated. "I wonder if we're allowed to touch it."

"I dare you!" Minato challenged her.

"Not if you do it first!"

"What's the matter? Being a scaredy cat?" Minato taunted. "Mi-chan is a scaredy cat, scaredy cat~" he sang.

"Aniki, stop it…" Souji whispered timidly when he saw anger flash in Minako's red eyes.

"You're going down!" she screeched, and tackled her twin brother. Souji tried to stop her, but ended getting caught in the tousle.

Shinjiro's temper wasn't cooling down. He was about to snap at the three to be quiet, until he saw what they were about to hit in their petty struggle; the television. "Shit!" was all he could say before they collided and got sucked into the screen. He was quick enough to catch Souji's ankle, but the combined weight of the children and the suction of the portal was enough to pull him in. A few unpleasant words echoed out of screen.

"Shouldn't we go after them?" Nanako inquired, sweatdropping.

"Yeah, I think we should," Ken said exasperatedly, holding out a hand for her. "Let's go." The girl blushed and took his hand and together they leapt into the TV.

Inside the TV Entrance Hall, Shinjiro's backside hit the ground, bearing the full brunt of the fall and his body acting as a cushion of sorts for the toddlers. They simply rolled off of him as if nothing happened. A few seconds later, they heard another thud nearby.

Ken managed to land on his feet, but he lost his balance and fell flat on his behind. "I'll never get
used to this," he groaned. "Are you alright, Nanako-chan?"

"Yes," Nanako said. "I'm fine." She stood up and dusted her dress with her hands. "But I don't think Shinjiro-san is."

The tall teen was still lying on the floor, breathing heavily. He then stood up and rubbed his tailbone. "Those damn brats! I can't wait until this to be over. Now we can't get out of here until that bear shows up. Just perfect!" he grumbled.

Said brats were looking at their surroundings, curiosity shining brightly in their eyes and mouths hanging open in a perfect 'O' shape as they ogled the fog-filled world. The fog at the Entrance Hall wasn't as thick as the other places, so they could still see some of the surroundings.

Minato saw something shining on the floor from the corner of his eye. He immediately went and picked it up. "Look what I found!"

Souji and Minako snapped out of their trance and approached him. Shinjiro, Ken and Nanako turned their heads to Minato's direction and gasped. The blue-haired boy was holding an Evoker! Ken and Shinjiro checked their holsters, and sure enough, both were empty. 'I must have dropped it when I fell,' they thought at the same time.

"I found another one!" Minako shouted proudly.

"I want one too!" Souji pouted, flapping his arms wildly.

"There aren't any more. You can have this weird hat, Banchou-kun." Shinjiro immediately felt his head. His beanie was gone too!

"B-but..." Souji tried to protest, but Minako shoved it on his head anyway. Souji took the opportunity to grab the Evoker.

"Hey, give that back!"

"No!" Souji stuck his tongue out. Minako proceeded to wrestle the gun-shaped object from his hands. The toddlers continued to bicker and grapple each other.

Shinjiro finally snapped. "THAT'S ENOUGH!" he roared. He grabbed the Evokers by force as well as his beanie, and returned one to Ken. "You three are going to sit here and be quiet until the others come back. Understand?!" He shot them a glare for good measure.

All of a sudden Minako's eyes begin to water, her bottom lip trembling. She inhaled a huge breath of air…

'Oh shit, she's gonna cry!' The waterworks finally began, and Shinjiro felt guilty all over again. Upon hearing Minako's distress, Souji and Minato were immediately by her side and patted her back to comfort her, disputes forgotten, and shot an equally devastating glare towards the grown-up 'culprit' at the same time.

Nanako stifled a laugh. She never would have thought that her Big Bro would be so rebellious and cute at the same time.

As soon as Minako stopped crying (much to Shinjiro's relief) the three Fools' attention were now on a glowing blue butterfly which fluttered past them. As if Shinjiro's warning didn't exist, they ran off to chase it.
"What are they doing?" Nanako wondered. "It looks like they're chasing something."

"Chasing? I don't see anything," Ken answered.

One of Shinjiro's eyebrows twitched with annoyance, a vein in his forehead throbbing. Seeing that arguing was not going to make them stay put, he decided to take action and secure them by force if necessary. But the topic of the other kids' conversation got him worried. "If Ken and Nanako-chan can't see that blue butterfly, then something is about to go wrong," his gut told him. "Ken, stay here and protect Nanako. I'll be right back," he ordered, and put on the glasses Teddie gave him.

Ken and Nanako already had their glasses on. "Alright. Be careful, Shinjiro-san!"

"Damn kids and their short attention span," Shinjiro grumbled. "Wait till those brats return to normal…I can't wait to give them a piece of my mind!"

The trio hadn't run off very far. Shinjiro recognized the area they were in; it was the shopping district on the North side, albeit a creepier version. 'Oh yeah, Hanamura told us that this is the place where he and Souji awakened to their Personas.'

The blue butterfly was fluttering around an electric pole in front of Konishi's liquor shop, the children running around in circles trying to catch it. The butterfly floated lazily above them, so they jumped up and down to reach it. It was giving Shinjiro a headache. He was going to grab and possibly tie them up when his ears heard growls somewhere nearby.

Five Shadows emerged from the shop. There was one Shadow which looked like a lion, chained to a floating ball wearing a blue mask. The other four were literally enormous floating balls with black and purple stripes. It had huge grey lips, their tongues hanging out. They had their sights on a very particular target; the Wild Cards.

By now, the toddlers saw the Shadows and cowered in fear. The twins were hugging each other, with Souji protectively in the middle. The butterfly was the last thing on their minds right now. They screamed when the lion pounced on them.

Shinjiro quickly whipped out his Evoker. "Pegasus, Fatal End!" The celestial horse did as commanded, but as soon as it came in contact with the Shadow, the attack deflected and hit his master instead. He was fast enough to dodge it before it caused serious damage. 'Another one that reflects physical attacks. Just my luck!' He didn't notice as one Halberie sneaked behind him, and it went downhill from there.

While Shinjiro was struggling, the other Shadows continued to approach the kids menacingly. The children continued to back away before hitting a wall. They gasped in dismay as they were surrounded, their fear of getting eaten growing and growing. One of the balls lunged, its tongue sticking out much longer than before. They were too scared to scream this time.

Blue smoke glowed at their feet, and three familiar figures hovered above them.

Orpheus counter-attacked first, managing to hit one Shadow with his lyre while Eurydice casted Agi as a follow up attack, causing the rest of the Shadows to back away. Izanagi zapped the lion-shaped Shadow that was a bit further away with Zio, nearly hitting Shinjiro.

Distinct shouts could be heard from the distance (Junpei and Teddie's stood out so far) as the cavalry arrived. Shinjiro never felt more relieved. The children were exhausted from the oppressive atmosphere of the fog-filled world and the summoning of their Persona. They immediately fainted,
and the three Personae disappeared.

Seeing the window of opportunity, the Shadows attacked again. But before they could do so, Shinjiro blocked them with Pegasus. He grunted as a piercing sting coursed through his body when some of his Persona's pain was transferred to him.

"Guys, the Halberie Shadows are weak to fire. Burn their asses!" Rise shouted.

"That Beast Shadow has a weakness to Light. Naoto-chan, please get rid of it!" Fuuka ordered.

Yukiko was furious. She summoned Amaterasu. *If those Shadows think they can hurt my boyfriend and get away with it, they've got another thing coming!* She glared at the enemies dangerously. Her anger fueled her flames and the Halberies were ash in no time. Junpei and Koromaru didn't even need to help.

"Yamato Takeru, Hamaon!" A symbol with runes of yellow light flashed beneath the Beast Shadow before the light engulfed it. And the Shadow was no more.

"Shinji, are you alright?" Akihiko approached his childhood friend. "Don't move. I'll heal you." He summoned Caesar and casted Diarahan.

"Thanks, Aki." Shinjiro let himself relax as his cuts and bruises healed, letting the cool sensation of the healing spell wash over him. "How did you guys know we were here?"

"Rise-chan said she sensed a bunch of Shadows moving towards this place. Mitsuru had a bad feeling about it and we had to check it out. I'm glad we did."

Yukari and the Fox ran towards the toddlers, followed by Yukiko, Yosuke and Teddie.

The young brunette knelt beside Minato and began to look for injuries. She sighed with relief and checked on the other twin. Yukiko was cradling Souji while Yosuke casted Diarahan on him. Teddie used the Fox's leaves to help them regain their energy.

"Shinjiro, how did you even get here?" Mitsuru questioned. "I thought you were supposed to be babysitting them in our world."

He scowled. "I was. We were just doing some grocery shopping when they started to fight. One thing led to another and they got sucked here. I'm never taking babysitting duty ever again!"


"Don't worry. I left them at the entrance," Shinjiro grunted. He stood up and dusted himself off before picking Minako up bridal style. "We should head back before the fog does anymore damage to them."

Junpei took the opportunity to say something. "Senpai, was that Orpheus, Eurydice and Izanagi we saw when we got here?"

"Yeah, I'll tell you about it later."

Once they reached the Entrance Hall, they were greeted by Ken and a very worried Nanako. "Are they alright?" she asked when she saw Minato asleep in Kanji's arms and Souji in Yosuke's.

"They are fine, Nanako-chan. They're just very tired," Metis answered.
"We are sad to report that our search has not been successful," Aigis said in a depressed tone. Koromaru whimpered beside her.

"Yes. So far we checked most of the dungeons and found nothing of remote interest," Naoto continued. "Teddie, if you would be so kind to let us out of here."

Teddie nodded. He tapped his foot three times and the stack of televisions appeared. They exited TV World.

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**Back at Junes Food Court…**

Yukiko and Yukari were cradling Souji and Minato respectively, on their laps, cooling their foreheads with a damp cloth. Shinjiro did the same with Minako. The little girl giggled in her sleep and snuggled into his chest, feeling safe in his arms. Behind him, Akihiko snickered. His best friend did have his soft moments, but never in front of this many people. It was a first. Mitsuru smirked when she saw what her boyfriend was smiling at.

Teddie was fussing over Nanako, offering her some of the Fox's leaves and poking and prodding her for injuries. If she was feeling uncomfortable, Nanako didn't show it. The rest slumped on chairs or the benches, exhausted out of their minds. On the table were the heaps of items they managed to collect so far.

"We've been through them three times. Most of them are just the normal stuff we use for healing or support," Chie reported.

"I'm so tired. I can't wait to get back to the inn and soak in the hot springs," Junpei sighed.

"You can say that again," Yosuke echoed. "But I'm never spending a night at that place after what happened last year." He shot Yukiko a dirty look, which she didn't seem to notice.

"That was worse than the camping incident," Kanji said as a depressing aura surrounded him.

"We agreed to never speak of that again," Yosuke hissed. "Do you want to mentally torture yourself to death?"

"You started it…" Kanji mumbled before becoming silent.

Everybody else was too tired to ask what both of them meant. There was one more important question to ask, and Junpei was the one to voice it out. "How did the little dudes summon their Personas without their Evoker? I thought we left them at the inn."

"Interesting…” Akihiko mused. "I have long suspected that it is possible to summon a Persona without one. These guys proved it." He gestured to the Investigation Team. "How else did you summon yours during your awakening, Junpei?"

"It must have been some sort of defense mechanism," Fuuka theorized. "They were in extreme danger when those Shadows attacked, and they unconsciously summoned their Persona. Minato-kun did that when Minako-chan and Souji-kun were in extreme danger when we faced Adachi, remember?"

"Really? Aren't they a bit too young to have any sort of emotional baggage or trauma?" Rise asked. But then she lowered her voice to a whisper. "I mean, remember what we told you about Nanako-chan?"
"The same logic may not apply to them, Rise. After all, they did possess the power of Persona before turning into toddlers," Naoto said.

Shinjiro overheard their conversation while he nursed an unconscious Minako. He had a strong feeling that the blue butterfly helped them, and if anything was connected to the three Wild Cards, then it had to be the Velvet Room. While he was confused of its existence, at the same time he was thankful that everything turned out alright. He might have to thank Igor if he ever saw him again.

"It looks like we should just call it a day," Mitsuru concluded. "Why don't we all grab a bite to eat before we head back?"

Night time, Amagi Inn…

"Stupei actually made a good suggestion today," Yukari said as the girls headed for the hot springs in their yukata. They had invited Yukiko to join them, but she declined saying she was busy helping her mother.

"This will be a new experience for me," Metis chirped. She was extremely happy; she had never been in a hot spring before.

"As long as what happened in Kyoto never occurs again," Aigis said in a grim tone.

"Still mad about that, huh? Don't worry, I haven't forgiven Junpei yet either," Yukari reassured the blonde android.

"I'm sure the boys know better now," Mitsuru smiled triumphantly. The other girls shivered at the memory, grateful for not ending up on the other side of their senpai's 'execution'. Behind them, the Wild Card toddlers happily trotted in their little bathrobes. In each hand they carried their bathing items and a towel in the other. The girls were okay more or less with Minato and Souji joining them - they would be playing at the kiddie pool anyway, so it wasn't really a bother.

When they reached the hot springs, the girls took Minako to the locker rooms to undress. Souji and Minato were already in their swimming shorts and made a dash for the shallow kid's pool.

The girls came out of the locker room in only their towels. Yukari was holding Minako's hand as she guided her to the hot springs. The little girl was jumping up and down in excitement, causing the others to smile at her limitless energy. They could hear the little boys splashing each other in the distance.

Mitsuru, Yukari and Fuuka sank their tired bodies into the hot water of the springs, letting out satisfied sighs as they let their muscles relax. Aigis and Metis sat at the edge of the pool with their feet in the water. Minako was at the shallow end, mimicking the three girls while chatting with the androids who were closer to her.

"Hey, let's have a breath holding contest!" Minako announced, waving her chubby arms excitedly. Seeing the girl's enthusiasm the female SEES didn't have the heart to say no. 'She's just too cute!' they thought.

Before they can start, Minako had already disappeared under the water's surface. At the same time the girls heard loud voices coming from the kid's pool, but it didn't sound like they belonged to children.

"That sounded like a man's voice!" Yukari hissed, reaching for her towel. "That stupid moron, he's trying to peep on us again!" The other young women immediately wrapped themselves with their
"It will be my pleasure to get rid of him," Aigis said nonchalantly and walked stealthily to the small pool, readying her guns.

"I'll come with you, Sister," Metis volunteered.

Two loud, manly screams followed soon after. Yukari and Mitsuru were out of the hot spring and into their fighting stances, with Fuuka behind them. They heard the bushes rustling nearby and readied themselves to beat the crap out of whoever dared to sneak in while the women were bathing. To their utter surprise, Aigis and Metis pushed two young men from the bushes; and it happened to be Minato and Souji, who weren't kids anymore but full-grown teenagers!

Not just full-grown, but half-naked as well. The swimming shorts they wore when they were in their child forms now closely resembled speedos. Yukari blushed as she caught herself briefly comparing Minato and Souji's physique; her boyfriend was lean and muscular, while the latter had a bit more bulk and wider shoulders.

There was a few seconds of silence before Fuuka screamed. A few moments after that, the sliding door opened to reveal Shinjiro.

"What the hell happened? I thought I heard Fuuka shout–"

"I win!"

Everyone heard a splash of water coming from the middle of the hot spring as a grown-up Minako emerged from the water with her arms raised in a victorious manner.

The three young men blushed at what they saw. Since Minako was facing the opposite side of the pool, they only saw her smooth, naked back, slightly covered by her wet, chestnut brown hair. Her lower half was (thankfully) still in the water. Dirty thoughts began to form in Shinjiro's mind.

Minato's over-protectiveness kicked in. "Minako, for goodness sakes cover yourself!" He saw her body stiffen at the sound of his voice before she tilted her head downwards and gasped at what she saw.

"KYAAAA!" She submerged into the water once more and wrapped her arms around herself.

Mitsuru found her voice again. "GET OUT OF HERE, YOU DAMN IDIOTS!" she thundered. At the same time Yukari picked up a bucket and threw it at the guys. Fuuka, Aigis and Metis followed suit.

The situation was becoming all too familiar. Minato and Souji high tailed it out of there, dragging a still blushing Shinjiro and dodging buckets in the process. The sliding door slammed shut behind them. The young women swore they heard Yukiko shriek in the hallway a few moments later.

Yukari threw Minako a spare towel and they rushed to the locker room to get dressed, no longer in the mood for another dip in the hot spring.

Somewhere in the inn, a silver-haired boxing champ and a cap wearing class-clown shivered in the warm night.

Mitsuru quickly booked a conference room the next day and called the rest of the Inaba Persona-users to join in the meeting to deliver the good news. Everybody was already seated as Yukiko and
Rise passed around some refreshments.

"So let me get this straight..." Yosuke sighed, pinching the skin between his eyebrows. "We went through all that dungeon grinding, found nothing, and all it took to cure you guys was a bath in the hot springs?!

Souji rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah, that pretty much sums it up."

Nanako hugged her Big Bro. "I'm so glad that you guys are back to normal." This earned her a pat on the head.

"Why do bad things happen to us at hot springs?" Minato uttered grimly. His twin was grinning sheepishly between him and Souji, who looked just as dejected.

"So it's like putting clothes in the dryer after a wash...they expand!" Kanji said suddenly, punching a fist into his other hand.

Everybody sweatdropped at his analogy.

"Ugh...I'm just glad this whole ordeal is over," Chie grimaced. She knocked Teddie, who was sitting on her left, at the back of his head. "For the record, this is your fault!"

"What did I do?" the small blonde whined. Everyone ignored him.

It took a while for everyone to notice that Minato was avoiding Yukari's stare, Souji blushed and quickly looked away when he spotted Yukiko (which is weird because she wasn't sitting beside him like she usually does) and Shinjiro was sitting by himself in one corner trying desperately to avoid a certain crimson-eyed girl.

"Uh...what's going on here?" Yosuke whispered to Akihiko.

The silver-haired boxer seemed uncomfortable at the question. "Well you see...the girls didn't know that this would happen when they took Minato and Souji, when they were still in their kid forms, to play at the hot springs. Shinji kinda barged in on them when he heard Fuuka screaming," he whispered back.

Getting a sense of what might follow afterwards, Yosuke just nodded. 'I'm just glad they weren't hurt in any way, if past experience helps,' he thought.

"They did WHAT?!" Chie shrieked, making Akihiko and Yosuke jump in their seats. She happened to be eavesdropping, and swiveled her head towards her leader. "Even after what happened last time, you still haven't learned?!

"This happened before...?" Fuuka asked.

"They peeped on you guys too?" Yukari gasped.

Souji gulped. He was very much aware of what Chie was capable of when angered enough. "It was an accident, I swear!" he defended.

"You can't blame us! We didn't even know that would happen!" Minato stressed.

"Aniki is right. You shouldn't get too worked up, Chie-chan...Yukari-chan and Fuuka-chan too. Like Souji-kun said, it was an accident." Minako tried to pacify the martial artist. But when she caught Shinjiro's eye, she blushed and found the floor more interesting instead.
Yukiko was also very red. During the hot spring incident last year, all she remembered was throwing wooden pails at the guys. Last night she saw Souji half-naked, and she couldn't help but stare and admire. When she became aware of what she was doing, she screamed her head off and ran away covering her eyes. 'I wonder what kind of impression I left on him,' she sighed sadly.

The atmosphere in the conference room was getting awkward, and fast. In one corner of the room, Shinjiro sat by himself trying to avoid people, especially Minato and Souji. He stole occasional glances around the room, but mostly he just stared at the ceiling or the carpet.

…Flashback….

The three of them managed to return to their room without running into other guests. Minato dashed to the bathroom while Souji just grabbed a robe from the closet to cover himself up. Junpei and Akihiko were shocked when they barged in suddenly, two of them in skimpy clothing. Junpei had the decency not to laugh, which made the situation a little more bearable. Ken and Koromaru were already fast asleep so neither of them noticed the commotion.

A few minutes later, Minato came out of the bathroom fully dressed. Souji took his turn.

"Damn, that was one freaky experience," Minato mumbled, pinching the bridge of his nose as a headache was forming. "I'm just so glad Mitsuru-senpai didn't execute us this time."

"Dude, you had to bring that up?" Junpei whimpered. He could still feel the prickle of ice on his skin after all of these years."But wait...weren't you guys little kids a little while ago?"

"Yeah...you're going to fill us in on that. All I remember was us training in the TV World, surrounded by yellow powder, and then pushed by Aigis and Metis in front of the girls."

Akihiko grimaced. "That is never a good situation."

Souji stepped out of the bathroom, dressed in a t-shirt and pajama bottoms he borrowed from Shinjiro. "So you guys had a hot spring incident too?" he chuckled, rubbing his hair dry with a towel.

"It was Junpei's idea," Minato deadpanned. "Why Akihiko-senpai and I listened to him and Ryoji was beyond me."

Shinjiro found this amusing, but it angered him as well especially when it regarded his girlfriend. "You had a part in peeping on girls, Aki? How low can you get?" he glared dangerously.

Akihiko sighed. "Like Minato said Shinji, it wasn't our fault."

"Tell us about yours, Souji, while we're still on the topic," Junpei said, grinning. Akihiko only rolled his eyes at his perverted intentions.

"It wasn't really our fault either," Souji began. "We were a little jumpy because of the whole murder business and a tiring day at the school's cultural festival. We took the chance to go relax in the hot spring since the front desk called to inform us that it was the guys' time. When we arrived, the girls and Nanako were already there. Long story short, we got chased out by wooden buckets. But what happened after that was a lot worse though, and that time it was Yosuke and Teddie's fault." Gooseflesh crawled up his skin as he tried to scrape the horrible memories from his brain.

"Is that what Hanamura and Tatsumi were mumbling about earlier?" Akihiko wondered. Shinjiro shrugged.
"Women really are scary," Junpei muttered. "We were lucky we didn't get frostbite after Mitsuru-senpai executed us."

"So us guys escaped, but not without injuries, huh?" Minato laughed lightly. Then he turned sharply to Shinjiro and narrowed his eyes. "Senpai, I hope you don't get any ideas about my sister after what you saw in there. Just because you weren't in Kyoto when it happened doesn't mean you're entitled to a chance."

"That's right, Shinjiro-san. What Aniki said," Souji clasped a hand on the senior's shoulder. His face was smiling but the malicious aura he radiated indicate otherwise.

Shinjiro gulped, but still kept his stoic exterior. He was never one to be intimidated, but it was different when being confronted by two powerful Wild Cards who also happen to be overprotective brothers to the girl he loves.

"Whatever." That was all he could say at the moment without getting into some kind of squable. He was too tired for that shit.

Junpei and Akihiko had a newfound respect for Shinjiro, but they also made a mental note not to cross these two – no, scratch that. Make it three since Minako could be just as scary.

…End Flashback…

Before Mitsuru could say something to break the ice, Rise beat her to it. "This calls for a celebration! How about a karaoke party?"

"That won't be necessary, Rise," Souji told her. "Us leaders decided to make lunch for you guys instead."

"Yeah, to thank you guys for braving the Shadows to help us turn back to normal," Minato added.

"I'll even bake a cake!" Minako cheered.

"It's the least we could do. We'll be hosting it at my house."

Yosuke could barely contain his excitement. "Awesome! More delicious food!" His enthusiastic cheer was echoed by Kanji and Teddie, while the girls pouted.

"It's been a while since we tasted anything you made, Minako-san. I can't wait," Ken said.

The hostility was temporarily forgotten as the conversation steered to the topic of food. The Investigation Team were praising their leader's cooking skills while the SEES members were reminiscing about Minako's home-made sweets or Minato's whacky but delicious ramen combinations. Even Shinjiro was in the mood to join the conversation.

Hours later, they returned from Junes carrying bags of groceries and gathered inside the Dojimas' small kitchen. The Wild Cards got to work, waiting for the resident patriarch, his daughter and their friends to get here.

Give or take a couple of hours later, everyone arrived, squeezing themselves into any space available. Some even had to sit outside or on the stairs. The smell that wafted through the air was unbelievably delicious; chicken skewers, salad, and yakisoba with a side of tamagoyaki. To top it off, there were fruit tarts and chocolate pudding for dessert.

The noise levels inside the house were bordering outrageous, but Dojima assured them that he
would personally apologise to his neighbors the following day. This was a summer that he would never, ever forget.

The Persona-users took pleasure of being surrounded in the company of their friends, fully aware that tomorrow would bring even more challenges and possible dangers. But for now they were content with the time they have to just enjoy their youth.

Chapter End Notes

This was a weird chapter to write. But it does have a point. Inspired by an episode in the anime 'Black Cat' and this artwork >>
https://www.deviantart.com/orcatea/art/Babysitter-Shinji-213421439
Two days after the Wild Cards turned back to normal, they decided to resume their training in Void Quest before moving on with their investigation.

"It's weak against thunder, Senpai!" Rise said. "Zap it!"

'Time to try out the Minor Arcana cards' power,' Souji decided. "Izanagi!"

The original god emerged and effortlessly eliminated the Shadow with a single Ziodyne. Despite being executed with perfection, Izanagi lingered around for a bit longer than usual, staring at Souji with his golden eyes, as if questioning or doubting him, before dismissing himself.

The silverette frowned.

"Hey, partner!" Yosuke tapped him on the shoulder. "Everything okay? You look kinda zoned out."

"Huh?" Souji regained his focus. "Oh, it's nothing...just a little surprised at how much powerful Izanagi's magic turned out..." he lied.

As they headed to the entrance hall, Souji tried to understand what happened just now. 'Izanagi, what's wrong with you?' He got no reply. 'I'll have to talk with the twins about this.'

At a lower floor...

"Its weakness is fire!" Fuuka reported. "Please, defeat it!"

"Hey, Aniki, why don't we try out those new cards we got?" Minako suggested.

Minato smirked. "Sounds like a plan to me." He drew out his Evoker.

The Shadow swarmed while the rest of their teammates backed away.

"Orpheus...!"

"Eurydice...!"

"Agidyne!"

The combined fire spell completely roasted the final Shadow. However, the Master of Strings and Mistress of Melodies lingered for much longer than usual, glaring at their masters as if accusing them of something, before vanishing.

The twins exchanged worried glances, when they felt someone tapping their shoulders. They turned to face Aigis and Metis.

"Is anything bothering you, Minako-san? Minato-san?" the former asked.
"You two seem distracted," her android sister added.

Minako managed a smile. "No, not at all! We're just amazed at how easy that was."

"Yes, that went way better than I expected..." Minato scratched his head, before turning to the rest of his friends. "At any rate, we're done here. Let's meet up with the others."

On their way back, the twins tried to understand what had just happened. 'Orpheus, why are you not answering me?' Silence. 'I wonder if Souji-kun knows anything about this...'

'Eurydice, you were never one to give me a cold shoulder, so why now?' No answer. 'This is bad... we need to speak to Souji-kun about this.'

_____________________

**Heaven's Pearly Gates...**

After their training run, Souji took the twins here while their friends rested at the entrance hall. Even though this place brought back some of his worst memories, it also made him feel at peace - who wouldn't be if they were surrounded by a garden from paradise?

Their friends might not have noticed, but they certainly felt that something was off with each other and themselves.

"So...we're all feeling something weird with our Personas, right?" Minato started. "Namely, our starting ones."

"Yes, Eurydice is not talking," Minako said sadly. "She used to be quite the chatterbox, commenting about everything I do or see from inside my head."

Souji sighed. "I can't hear Izanagi's voice either. Battlewise, he remains the same, but somehow... I don't know how to put it... he feels...distant."

"Same goes for Orpheus. Even though he obeys my commands, his sudden lack of communication bothers me." Minato closed his eyes, holding his chin pensively. "And it all started after we got turned into kids...or rather, after we changed back to normal."

Minako played with the hem of her skirt, staring at the ground. "Actually, about that time, I...I started having nightmares..." Her voice barely came out as a whisper. This admission earned her wide-eyed stares from her brothers. "What...you guys too?" They urged her to continue. "The dream starts out kinda nice. We were hanging out with our friends and having fun, but the sky suddenly turned dark and everybody disappeared. I then find myself standing before the Great Seal as if it was calling out to me...I tried to back away, but chains came out of it and wrapped themselves around me, dragging...I-I couldn't fight, I couldn't scream for help. When I thought I was going to die... I heard Shinji's voice and woke up."

"I... I had that dream too! Same scenario, same feelings... I felt completely helpless...so alone... Yukari's voice snapped me out of it," Minato admitted.

Souji took a deep breath. "I dreamt about my parents. They were with me, and with Uncle and Nanako. And then my friends and you guys arrived. We were all having fun..." His voice started to tremble. "Suddenly, fog enveloped the area. I was alone...I couldn't see anything. I called out for help, but no one came. Next thing I knew, something grabs me by my neck and starts choking me! I couldn't shout... I couldn't breathe. Then, everything went black. I thought I heard Yukiko calling out to me before I woke up."
Minato pinched the bridge of his nose. "Okay, this is getting seriously disturbing. It can't be mere coincidence."

"Dreams are said to be insights into our future. Does that mean...something bad is going to happen, specifically to us?" Souji asked, fingernails digging into sweaty palms.

"Don't say that, Banchou-kun! Nothing bad is going to happen to us as long as we're together!" Minako scolded. She looked to her twin. "Right, Aniki?"

"You're right, Minako. We gotta keep it together. If we break, the others will fall apart as well, and they'll be left vulnerable. We can't let that happen!"

The silverette calmed down a little. "You're right, both of you. We will protect them. If we don't, then who will?"

"Exactly. Let's head to the Velvet Room before we head back outside," Minato decided. "If anyone can help us with this, it's Igor."

Minako smiled. "Great idea, Aniki. Theo and his sisters always manage to cheer me up! I'm sure we can find our way out of this maze of confusion if we do it together."

Before Souji could say anything, another voice interrupted them from a distance. "A maze, you say? Well, to my 'a-maze-ment' you've been doing an astounding job so far."

That voice...the terrible pun...

Blue-grey and red eyes widened. "No way..."

Sensing danger, Souji quickly sprang into action and brandished his katana. "Who's there?!"

Loud footsteps echoed, the sound coming closer. The gates of Heaven opened. A figure stepped out, silhouette blocking the bright light; it was a middle-aged man with long, wavy brown hair and dark brown eyes behind round glasses. He wore a black turtleneck sweater under a crisp, tan suit.

"Ikutsuki?!"

"My my, if it isn't the Arisato twins," the man tittered politely. "You two look quite well. So...lively."

Minako pointed the tip of her naginata at his direction, stance in offense. "Don't give me that crap, you asshole!"

"Oh dear, Minako-chan, you possess much better manners than this."

"Shut up, you good-for-nothing creep!" her brother growled, swinging his sword and pointing it at said creep. "Don't think we've forgotten the things you've done!"

Ikutsuki wasn't fazed one bit. "Dear me, you two have become quite naughty while I was away." He turned his stare towards Souji. "Perhaps your friend here can demonstrate proper manners."

That voice...Souji's skin turned pale and clammy. He couldn't fathom why, but Ikutsuki's presence made fear grip his heart like nothing before. 'Wh-what's wrong with me?!' His hands were shaking so much, he almost dropped his katana.

The twins' anger turned into concern at his reaction. "Souji-kun, what's going on?" Minako asked.
"I-I…I d-don't know!" he stuttered. "I c-can't s-s-stop sh-shaking…!"

"Why so scared, Souji-chan?" Ikutsuki became bolder and took a few steps forward. "You were much braver than that when you were a little boy." He gave them a condescending smirk.

The silverette narrowed his eyes. "What are you talking about? I don't even know you!"

"Hmm...looks like your memory got a bit jammed. Perhaps you should ask you parents." The man's mocking stare never left him. "That is, if they're still alive!"

Souji flinched. 'H-how?! How does he know about my parents?'

Before Ikutsuki could get any closer, the twins stood in front of the silverette, weapons at the ready. "Don't you dare come any closer!" Minato warned sharply. "You already screwed up our lives once. You're not doing it again!"

"Is that so? We'll see it about that." Ikutsuki snapped his fingers. A void of darkness opened up on the ground beside his feet. The loud sound of rattling chains vibrated through the air as a male figure clad in black emerged from the whirlpool. Two sets of steel chains criss-crossed its torso, floating as if unbound by gravity. It also wielded two long-barreled revolvers. What made it scarier was its face, shrouded in blood-soaked bandages with only an ominous yellow eye to observe its surroundings.

There was no mistaking the Reaper, a.k.a Death.

The Wild Cards recalled their bad run-ins with the powerful Shadow: Back when the twins set out to rescue Maiko, who had wandered into Tartarus after she tried to run away from home late at night, they barely survived his onslaught to ensure that their friends made it to the exit with the little girl. In Souji's case, he encountered Death while frantically searching for Nanako in Heaven. He accidentally opened a treasure chest with hopes of looking for items that could be of aid, and the deadly Shadow burst out of it, leaving him with no other choice but to try and stall so his friends could escape safely. He himself barely made it out alive.

Sure, they fought it again afterwards and won, but they had their friends fighting alongside them.

They immediately sprung into action.

"Light and Darkness spells don't work on it, so we'll have to hit him with everything else we got!" Minato reminded the other two, who nodded in agreement.

The Reaper floated towards them, the yellow eye moving around it all directions to keep lock on its targets.

"Here I go!" Minako shouted, making the first move. "Ragnarok!"

The fiery Norse giant casted a giant pillar of flames that erupted from the ground, trapping the Shadow in the middle. The immense heat caused the Persona-users to choke on sooty air. Coughing, they uncovered their nose and mouth to see the results.

The Reaper was unfazed by the assault, advancing towards them slowly.

Souji's mouth formed a small "Tch!" before summoning Loki. "I've got this one! Niflheim!"

Once the ice pillar shattered, the Reaper shivered slightly, but no noticeable damage was taken. Still, the Wild Cards refused to give up. Surely that thing had something it was weak against.
Minato called upon Odin. "**Thunder Reign!**" A loud crack of thunder exploded in the atmosphere as the Allfather raised his hand, conjuring the attack to strike the Reaper head on.

They felt fairly certain that this was it. But then they looked up to see the Shadow stunned, but not quite paralyzed. Unsatisfied, they summoned their last elemental skill on him together.

"**Panta Rhei!**"

A giant gust of wind soon turned into a tornado, trying its very best to wipe the powerful Shadow off its feet. Looking on with hope, the Wild Cards' shoulders sagged. The Reaper remained where it stood, an invisible force holding it down. Looking closer, the Reaper seemed to have casted a Gravity spell to remain grounded. Having had enough of the assaults, it aimed its guns to the sky and fired several times, unleashing Myriad Arrows.

The Wild Cards were unable to dodge fast enough, trying to shield themselves with any Persona that had physical resistance as a shower of bullets fell from the sky. Wounded, but refusing to give up, they slowly stood up and prepared to fight again.

"If elemental skills don't work, then that just leaves us with physical and Almighty attacks!" Souji crushed another card. "Futsunushi, **Primal Force!**"

The Reaper blinked its yellow eye when a small cut appeared on its arm. Seeing the difference compared to the other attacks, gave the Wild Cards hope to win this battle.

Minato summoned Michael. "**Heaven's Blade!**"

The Reaper nimbly dodged the Archangel's blade by stepping aside, apparently with a smirk underneath all those bandages.

Another shot from an Evoker came from Minako. "**Metatron, God's Hand!**"

The Persona-users gasped in surprised as their opponent withstood the falling hand, grabbing it and spinning like a ballerina to gain momentum before swinging it away, coming out unscathed.

'You've got to be kidding me!'

There was only one option left. The only skill they had yet to try - an Almighty spell.

However, the Reaper has other ideas. It put its guns away and removed the chains from its torso, swinging it around like a whip. As it gained more speed, it looked as though the chains were multiplying, slashing through the air like they had minds of their own, spreading across the area surrounding the three Wild Cards.

A flying chain missed Minako by a few inches. "What is it trying to do?!

"I don't know, but I don't like the looks of this!" Minato said, narrowly dodging a chain from hitting him in the face.

Souji dodged another chain. "We need to get rid of those first!" He called his card. "Belial, **Maragidyne!**"

Catching on, the twins summoned Personas with similar skills.

"Surt!"
"Asura!"

The combination of the powerful fire spell melted a few chains whilst the shattering the rest, as pieces of red-hot iron rained down like a scene from the apocalypse. However, the Reaper wasn't about to give up that easily. With a roar, it slammed its remaining chains into the ground, like tree roots digging into the earth.

Cautious of their surroundings, the Wild Cards kept their guard up. They couldn't fight with what can't be seen.

A thick chain silently emerged from the ground and snaked around Souji's ankle. He fell down face-first into the dirt as more chains emerged and yanked the silverette towards the Shadow. Before the twins could react, the chains quickly wrapped themselves around his body as he was lifted into the air.

"Banchou-kun!" Minato and Minako cried.

Souji couldn't even get his voice out. Chains of various thickness were slithering up the main one and wrapped itself around his neck and limbs. The more he struggled, the tighter they gripped him. He felt weaker and sleepier. 'Damn it, this could only mean one thing…'

His vision blurred...

At the Entrance hall, the others waited for their leaders to return.

"Man, what's taking them?" Yosuke whined. "Something's not right. They said they're only going to talk in private."

"Is it just me, or do they looked kind of bothered by something?" Yukari wondered.

"Yeah, they weren't focusing on fighting earlier," Chie pointed out.

Metis wrung her hands. "Umm…I'm not sure if I should tell you this, but…" she started. The nervousness in her voice and posture drew everyone's attention. "Yesterday, Minako-san woke up suddenly in the middle of the night. She just stared blankly at the wall for some time before going back to sleep. I secretly checked on her vital signs, and they showed her to be rather agitated."

Koromaru added to the conversation by barking and whining. "Koromaru-san is saying that the same happened to Minato-san as well," Aigis translated. "Koromaru-san saw him pacing down the halls, but what's unusual was how tense he looked."

Fox yipped. "Fox-san says the same also happened with Souji-san," Metis continued. "During her night stroll, she saw Souji-san staring out his house's patio as if he was trying to calm himself down."

Akihiko crossed his arms, narrowing his eyes in suspicion. "First they got turned into kids and now they're having nightmares? Okay, this can't be a coincidence."

"Shouldn't we go check on them?" Ken asked. "Just in case?"

Suddenly, Fuuka let out a small shriek, startling her friends. Her face turned pale and she started shaking. "Death…Death is near…! Oh no, it's attacking them!"

"What? Who?!" Junpei asked frantically.
Rise also started shivering, looking at her teammates with fear in her eyes. "I can sense it, too! It's the Reaper!" She clutched her head. "No! It's sucking out Senpai's life and spiritual force! He's getting weaker by the second. Minako-senpai and Minato-senpai are hurt too!"

"Minako!" Shinjiro drew his axe and ran towards the direction the leaders had walked off. "Hang in there, I'm coming for you!"

"Hey, wait for me!" Yukari shouted after him.

Yukiko said nothing and went on ahead.

"Yukiko, wait a sec!" Chie called out to her best friend, but wasn't successful at stopping her.

"Shinjiro! Yukari!" Mitsuru warned them, but in vain. She turned to the others. "Let's go! If those three are in danger, we must help them no matter what!"

"Hang on, Sensei! We're gonna save you!" Teddie cried.

Minato and Minako stepped towards the Reaper. The look in their eyes could send shivers up one's spine - they were angry and out for blood.

"Let our brother go!" Minako seethed, gripping her Evoker tighter.

"You're going down, HARD!" Minato readied his Evoker to his temple, with his sister doing the same. A huge swirl of bluish smoke appeared at their feet.

"Shiva…"

"Parvati…"

The Reaper wasn't impressed.

"ARDHANARI!"

A gigantic burst of fire exploded and started to burn and melt the surrounding chains, instantly crumbling under the intense heat. The fire seemed to have a mind of its own, because while it destroyed the chains and attacked the Death Shadow, it wasn't affecting Souji. He fell on the ground with a heavy thud as the shattered chains could no longer hold his weight.

Once he was safe, the twins stopped their Fusion Raid and rushed to his side, panting hard from fatigue.

"Aniki… Aneki…" Souji breathed out, trying to stand up.

Minako supported his body weight. "Banchou-kun, please save your strength," she said gently. "It's okay. We're here."

"You're okay now…" Minato told him, holding onto his shoulders. "We got you."

Gunshots rang in the air. Looking up, they saw the Reaper casting Power Charge on itself, followed by a Mind Charge. Their eyes widened - that could only mean one thing!

Ikutsuki laughed mockingly. "Let's see you survive a fully charged Megidolaon!"

The twins stood up, shielding Souji. "Two can play that game!" Minato retorted.
"Make it three!" his sister echoed.

The Reaper unleashed its spell, and the twins countered.

"Satan, Black Viper!"

"Helel, Morning Star!"

Bright light pillars and dark crimson orbs fused together, creating a massive wave of energy as they collided with the Reaper's spell. At first it looked like they were evenly matched, but all too soon, the charged-up Megidolaon tore through their attack, merging with it... and heading straight for them!

It was as if time stood still or slowed down. The twins couldn't really tell. Without time to dodge or energy to fight back, they did the only thing they could; they hugged each other, with Souji protectively in the middle. "Please help us..." they whispered, merging the last remnants of their energy together. "Messiah!"

The collision released a tremendous explosion, sending huge shockwaves all over the place. Trees and plants surrounding the gates were reduced to ashes, the castle-like walls cracking and crumbling down.

The Reaper roared in victory as the smoke cleared. The twins fell to the ground face down, barely breathing while shielding Souji underneath them. Above them hovered a Persona with masculine features; he looked like Orpheus and Eurydice in facial appearance, but carried a chain of silver coffins like Thanatos' in on hand, and a cross-like artifact on his back. His complexion was pale as ivory, with red eyes that pierced into the soul. It vanished soon after.

"Aneki... Aniki..." Souji felt sore, but he understood what had happened. At the very last minute, the twins summoned Messiah and used his Enduring Soul to protect them from the explosion, only for them to receive the worst part of the attack as they protected him with their bodies.

The Reaper approached the fallen leaders, still looking for a fight when Ikutsuki held up a hand. "That's enough!" he ordered brusquely. "We need them alive. For now..." The Shadow grunted in annoyance, but complied.

"No...! Don't..." Souji pleaded weakly, feeling the weight taken off of him as the Reaper carried off with the twins.

Ikutsuki stared down at him with a look of disgust. "You want them back? See if you can save them." The former chairman and his Shadow lackey then vanished into the fog along with their hostages. "If you survive, that is...!" his voice echoed. Once his laughter faded, several weaker Shadows emerged and made their way to Souji, who was still too wounded to pull himself together.

"Aniki... Aneki... I...I'll come back for you... I promise!" he vowed before passing out.

The rest of SEES and the Investigation Team rushed towards Heaven, startled by the gargantuan shockwave that nearly knocked them off their feet.

"What the hell was that?!" Kanji wondered. "Shit, that felt like an earthquake!"

"I'm not sure, but it can't be a good sign," Yosuke said. "Stay on your toes, guys!"
When they finally made it to the Pearly Gates, they were met with a shocking sight - Souji had passed out on the ground and was about to be attacked by Shadows.

"Souji-kun!" Yukiko cried as the Shadows surrounded the silverette. Her eyes blazed with anger. "Don't you dare! **Maragidyne**!"

The Perpetual Sands were burned to a crisp, but the Maniacal Books were still on the loose.

"You're gonna pay for hurting Sensei!" Teddie growled, actually sounding angry. **Mabufudyne**!

Fueled by his anger, Kamui's attack eliminated the Maniacal Books. With the path clear, Yukiko immediately rushed to her boyfriend's side, followed by their friends behind her.

"Souji!" Yosuke called from his other side. "C'mon partner, wake up!" He shook the silverette's shoulder.

Naoto checked his pulse. "He's still breathing, but is severely weakened," she reported, trying not to show nervous she was.

"Hang in there, Souji-kun," Yukiko said. She closed her eyes and casted Samarecarm.

A soft, rainbow-coloured light surrounded his body for a few seconds, and sure enough, Souji came to. He shakily got to his feet with Kanji and Yosuke's support. "Nghh…wha-?" was all he could get out before his girlfriend wrapped him in a bone-crushing hug. "Yukiko…"

"Don't scare me like that!" she whispered-scolded.

Souji sighed and gently caressed her back to calm her down.

The serenity didn't last long. "Where's Minako?!" Shinjiro demanded harshly, anger and concern clearly written on his face.

"And Minato-kun?" Yukari echoed.

"Seta, what happened?" Mitsuru asked, serious yet worried.

Souji looked down, hoping to hide his guilty expression. He took a deep breath. "After the whole 'turning-into-kids thing', we started having nightmares almost every night. Izanagi, Orpheus and Eurydice were no longer communicating with us…” Anger and sadness laced his voice. "We were about to head to the Velvet Room and ask Igor about it when this man suddenly appeared. They called him…” He pushed back the bile at the back of his throat. "Ikutsuki."

The former members of SEES gasped.

"The chairman?! What the hell!" Junpei yelled. "That bastard died after he jumped off the Gekkoukan observatory! How can he possibly still be alive?!

"I don't know, alright?!" Souji snapped. He held his chest, taking several deep breaths to calm himself down. "Something about him...something about that man frightened me. I've never felt that scared before." He stared at his shaky hands. "H-he...he knew my name... he knew about my parents, and how close the twins are to me…” He clenched his fists to dampen the shaking. "When they tried to protect me, he summoned the Reaper to attack us. We didn't stand a chance… it was so much stronger than our previous fights…” Unable to withstand his emotions, Souji fell to his knees. He didn't want the others to see him crying, but this was too much. "When that Megidolaon tore through theirs, they used Messiah to protect us from harm. They... they protected me using themselves as a shield! The Reaper grabbed them when Ikutsuki said he needed them alive...and
now...and now they're gone!" As much as he tried, tears still ended up staining the ground. "I...I couldn't do anything to help them!" He pounded a fist on the ground. "Some brother I am...!"

It broke the Investigation Team's hearts to see their leader so broken and sad. The former SEES members were also disheartened by the news, but at the same time concerned about their own leaders.

"It's not your fault, Souji-san," Aigis said gently, trying to comfort him while Metis held him steady.

"Damn, right! If anyone's to blame is that damn chairman!" Akihiko acceded. It was rare to see the athlete display anger so openly.

Mitsuru nodded. "That's right. Even with Death's powers, I doubt the chairman can leave this place without Teddie's help, or with the Dark Hour being active outside. Then it means that they still must be somewhere in this world." She turned to address Fuuka and Rise. "Fuuka, I need you and Kujikawa to use your abilities to track down their location. Once we find it, we'll set out to rescue the twins."

The Investigation Team however, had other opinions.

"What?! You can't be serious about heading out just like that!" Yukiko protested. "Souji-kun can barely stand! He's in no condition to fight. He needs some time to recover!"

"And what about Minato-san and Minako-san!?" Ken retaliated. "Souji-san said they both got hurt. If we don't hurry, they might die!"

"And if we head off reckless like that, we're all are gonna get killed!" Chie shouted back.

"If you don't want to help, that's fine with me. But I'm going!" Yukari countered. "I lost the only guy I love and my best friend once. I'm not losing them again!"

"Same here. I'm not letting anything or anyone who hurt Minako and her brother get away with it!" Shinjiro agreed aggressively.

Kanji got right in his face. "Screw you! We'll be in even worse shit if Senpai ain't in the right condition to lead us!" Once again, the former delinquents had a glare-off.

"I know you are all concerned about the twins' condition and trust me, so are we, but please remain calm!" Naoto tried to reason for both sides. "We're not abandoning them! We're just asking for a bit of time to regroup and think on our strategy!"

The atmosphere was becoming tenser by the second, both sides refusing to back down.

"Quiet!" Souji commanded. Despite in the position he's in, his voice held authority. Even the other team didn't dare dispute. "We're all going. Yosuke, do you still have any of those Somas we found during the murder investigations?"

"Uhh, yeah. I got 'em here somewhere..." The second-in-command dug into his pockets and found the vial he was looking for before handing his leader the rare item. "You always said to have one in hand in case of an emergency."

"And this is one of those emergencies." He downed the entire thing, which was supposed to be shared by four people. His injuries instantly healed and his energy returned with impressive speed. "I promised myself I'll protect them both. And I don't intend on breaking that promise!"
The Investigation Team nodded. "We're with ya, buddy," Yosuke said. "After all, they're are our friends too."

"Thanks, guys. I'll be needing your strength." Souji turned to SEES. "As well as yours."

"You can count on us!" Junpei said on behalf of his team.

Once that was cleared, Fuuka and Rise their Personas to scan the area, trying to find the twins' whereabouts. After what seemed like forever, they finally got something. "A new dungeon has appeared," Rise said. "And the twins are still together."

"Something doesn't feel right about that dungeon…" Fuuka said hesitantly. "It feels awfully familiar somehow."

"We'll just have to see it for ourselves," Souji said. "Everybody ready? Let's move out!"

"Of all places they could create, it had to be this?!" Yukari moaned in dismay. Her SEES teammates reacted in a similar fashion.

They immediately recognized the front door of the palace that their leaders had created in this bizarre world – the entrance to Tartarus. Although it wasn't as tall, it's just as spooky and intimidating as it was in the past.

"So this is the infamous Tower of Demise that you all have spoken about…" Naoto said, looking upwards. "I remember specifically that you said it has more than 250 floors. How come it looks so…small?"

Rise spoke up next. "Well, this isn't exactly the real tower of Tartarus. It has the same concepts of Chidori-san's dungeon, and I can also sense a lot of emotions coming from inside. I never felt anything like this before with the other dungeons."

"According to my readings, this place only has seven floors. Each floor has a different structure, but other than that it's exactly the same as Tartarus," Fuuka reported. "I wonder what it means?"

"What are we still doing out here?" Shinjiro growled. He looked like he wanted to kill somebody. "They're inside that damn tower. Let's go in and rescue them before they get seriously hurt!" He shoved Yosuke and Junpei out of his way, but Akihiko grabbed his shoulder and spun his friend around to look him in the eyes.

"Calm down, Shinji. We can't just rush in like that!" he warned. "I want to rescue them as much as you do, but we have to consider what Souji saw. Ikutsuki is back, and more likely a hell of a lot dangerous…probably even more dangerous than Adachi. We have to think this through!"

The tall brunette calmed down a bit and cursed under his breath, looking away. He let his anger and worry get the better of him for a moment there, which was ironic since he was comforted by Akihiko.

"He's right, Shinjiro. Something about this whole mess is much too organized to be a random attack, and I don't like it," Mitsuru said. "Seta, while Fuuka and Kujikawa scan the tower, let's go over our battle formation to reach the top floor."

Souji nodded. "That's a good idea. Fuuka-san, Rise… use everything you got to scan every floor, and while you're at it, try to scan the Shadows inside as well. We need every advantage we can grasp on so the enemy doesn't take us by surprise. Aigis-san, since you've been team leader before,
you'll be representing Aniki and Aneki.

"I understand."

There wasn't really much discussion for the team formations. Just like in Adachi's dungeon, they formed two sub-groups, only with Aigis and Souji as team leaders this time. The dividing of sub-members were still the same as before. After Fuuka and Rise finished their scanning, they pushed open the tall crystal door and entered the tower.

Unlike the real Tartarus, there was no entrance hall or a large clock in the center of the floor, nor was there a door to the Velvet Room. SEES immediately recognized the structure of this particular floor – it was Thebel, the first block they encountered in Tartarus.

"So this is what it looks like inside…" Yosuke commented, side-stepping a puddle of blood. "It's damn freaky!"

"Tartarus, a type of hell in Greek mythology," Naoto mused. "I still find it hard to believe that this tower manifested every single day at midnight in the past. It makes me kind of glad that I didn't have a Persona back then."

The Shadows in Thebel were the exact same ones they have fought in the past, only they were much stronger than what SEES remembered. But it was still relatively easy for the Persona-users to fight them because Fuuka still had the data on their weakness and skills.

Once they reached the center of the maze, a giant, glowing golden door with strange hieroglyphic-like carvings stood waiting for them. On each side of the structure, tall torches with bright red and blue flames stood proudly, enhancing the extra creepy factor.

"This…this is just like the Abyss of Time," Ken said. There was slight concern in his tone. "Fuuka-san, do you detect anything behind this door?"

"No, I don't sense any threatening presence behind that door," she told him. "If this is anything like the Abyss of Time, then there must be a memory projection behind it. There is no other explanation, but we won't know until we open it."

Yukari tried to push open the door, but it wouldn't budge. Junpei, Yosuke and Teddie tried next, but it still won't move. Akihiko, Shinjiro and Kanji had the same results as well.

"Damn piece of shit," the latter two cursed before giving up.

Finally, it was Souji's turn. His fingers simply brushed against it and the door swung open, engulfing them in bright, white light.

When they could open their eyes, they were in what seems to be a theater room and the movie was playing. Yukari, Junpei, Mitsuru and Akihiko gasped - they recognized this place; the Kirijo mansion in Yakushima, and the scene being played out in front of them was familiar as well.

Yukari fled the room after the video showing her father's confession and how he died ended. Mitsuru sighed, understanding that the young woman needed some time alone to sort out her thoughts. But she was still worried.

"Can either one of you go after her?" she asked the twins. Minato was reluctant at first since he wanted to give Yukari some space, but his sister nudged his ribs hard, and gave him a look which could be translated as "What are you waiting for? Go after
her, you dumbass!"

In return, he raised an eyebrow at her. He gave her a bored expression which could only be interpreted as "Why don't you go?"

Minako rolled her eyes, and shot him an angry glare. Her brother replied it with a shake of his head, his features softening, silently telling her to leave Yukari alone for the moment. She then used her secret weapon, the puppy-dog eyes. Minato returned her stare for about a minute, sighed in defeat, and went after Yukari.

The others who were watching the two remained silent. Only after Minako had gone off to check on her brother did they start to speak again.

"Okaaay...did any of you just understand what they were telling each other?" Junpei asked. "It was like...they were mentally communicating or somethin'. Freaky..."

"I think that is to be expected," Fuuka said in a quiet voice. "Some psychologists believe that twins have the ability to communicate telepathically with one another. And from what I can see, their bond is strong enough to allow them to do just that."

"Iori, what are you waiting for?" Mitsuru chided the cap-wearing boy. "Go and accompany her. It's too dangerous for a young lady to be wondering around this late at night." She narrowed her eyes to emphasize that this was an order, not a request. Junpei gulped and ran off after Minako.

Akihiko sighed and wiped down his face. "Damn, that was depressing. I feel bad for keeping this from Takeba."

"We lost a lot of good people in that explosion," said a man wearing an eye-patch. He sat down on the sofa, looking wearier than when he came in and exhaled loudly. "I wish every single day that I could go back and change everything...but I don't have the power to stop it. The only thing I can do is support you youngsters in the battle against the twelve Shadows."

The scene ended there, and a stairway materialized before them. The ones who were actually there when the event happened were befuddled, because it didn't play out the way they remembered it.

"This happened before the summer vacation started, when we went to Yakushima," Yukari said. She then proceeded to tell everyone what happened during that night, what was on that tape and what happened after she ran off.

"Wait a sec...how come both of them were there? I don't remember anything like that," Junpei stated.

"I think that's because when the two realities merged, it changed past events," Souji answered. "Aneki mentioned that her memories were fused with Aniki's, and that the past altered to include both of them in it. Perhaps none of you remember this because your memories haven't caught up yet." He was thoughtfully silent for a while before speaking again. "They used to do that a lot you know...when we were kids. They could never hide secrets from each other, and on rare occasions I could correctly predict what exactly they're thinking." A smile formed on his lips as he reminisced. "I guess reason for that is because we're so close. We've been inseparable since I was born."

"You told us before that those who are trapped here and have not yet awakened to their power, their innermost thoughts could be heard in their dungeons," Metis said. "How can this be happening, and a memory projection at that?"

Akihiko stroked his chin in thought. "Back in the Abyss of Time, it showed us the moment just
before awakening to our power. Do you think it's trying to do the same here?"

"That's a good question," Aigis said. "Perhaps we will know more once we ascend the tower."

Souji walked ahead. "Let's go, guys."

The second floor had much more blood puddles than the previous one, where the walls were purple and had faces carved into them.

Arqa.

To say it creeped everyone out was an understatement. Rise even screamed and nearly suffocated Teddie in a vice grip. The team had little trouble battling the Shadows here despite them being stronger than the ones in Thebel. Just like the centre of the previous floor, a door awaited to be opened, and the only one who could do it was Souji.

Their surroundings began to blur as the projection started. This time, everyone recognized where this was – the Moonlight Bridge.

A loud explosion just occurred in the distance. The sky tuned an eerie green, and the area surrounding them was covered in smoke and dust, before turning quiet as a grave.

A lone car stood middle of the bridge. The back door opened, and two small children stepped out – a boy with blue hair and an auburn-headed girl. They gasped when they saw two coffins in the front seats where their parents sat. Feeling frightened, the girl began to cry. Her brother pulled her into a hug, trying to put on a brave face.

The explosions got louder and closer. "Aniki, what was that?" the girl whimpered.

Her brother's voice shook slightly, despite his effort to sound fearless. "I don't know...but we're not leaving Mom and Dad!"

The next explosion rocked the ground. A feeling of protectiveness prompted to boy to pull his sister and hide behind the other side of the car, which was a good move. Seconds later, a giant blast engulfed the bridge. The shock sent them tumbling back, at a distance that was considered slightly safe.

When they came to, the first thing they noticed was the smell of smoke, and not their grave injuries. Their car was nothing but a burnt crisp, including those inside it...

"MOMMY!"

DAD!"

The scene suddenly shifted.

Dark clouds were floating in the sky. It looked like it was about to rain and thunder could be heard in the distance. The only people standing before the fresh graves were a man, a woman, and three small children. Everyone recognized the children to be the Wild Cards. The man was about Souji's current height, and quite handsome, with messy dark-silver hair and dark brown eyes, almost black. He was wearing half-rimmed rectangle glasses and a black jacket over a green shirt, and a pair of jeans. The woman was slightly shorter than the man with a slender build. She had medium long black hair, tied in a French braid, and soft grey eyes. She wore a black knit cardigan over a white blouse paired with a black pencil skirt that reached below her knees.
Little Souji held on to his surrogate siblings' hands as they mourned over their parents. When their crying got too loud, the adults would comfort them.

"I remember this..." Souji said. "It's their parents' funeral. After they were released from the hospital, my parents took us to visit their graves."

"Those are your parents?" Yukiko asked softly. She used present tense instead of the past, so as not to offend him, because she knew that deep down Souji was adamant that they were still alive, even if the odds were against it.

"Yeah..." he tapered off, not wanting to bring up that particular topic.

Everyone was saddened to hear that, but they remained silent as they focused on the vision in front of them. The scene shifted from the cemetery to a small house somewhere in Iwatodai. Souji commented that this is where his family lived before they moved away.

The children were gathered in an almost-empty living room. They spoke in small, hushed tones that made it difficult for the others to make out what they were saying. That was before the twins started wailing.

"What do you mean you're moving away?" little Minako bawled. "You can't move away...you just can't!"

"I'm sorry..." little Souji mumbled. "Daddy and Mommy just told me yesterday."

"But...who's gonna play Featherman with us, or go on super secret missions, or take care of our secret base?" Minato whined. "Who's gonna hide the candy when you're not here anymore?"

"First Mommy and Daddy, now you..." They sniffled, fat drops of tears rolling down their cheeks. "We don't want you to go!"

Four-year old Souji remained silent, guilt and sadness reflected in his eyes. He didn't want this anymore than they did. The three of them embraced each other in a group hug, never wanting to let go.

Souji's father entered the living room, and cleared his throat to get the children's attention. They stared at him, startled at first, but then their eyes began to water simultaneously. It was so heart-breaking that the man had to look away, accurately guessing what they were talking about before he came in. "Souji, go upstairs and pack your things. Our departure to Osaka is long overdue. We have to leave tomorrow."

"But I don't wanna go!" Souji sobbed, hugging Minako.

Loud voices could be heard in the kitchen, before Souji's mother entered the living room, her pale cheeks red with anger. She was followed by an older couple, but the expressions on their faces weren't exactly friendly. The woman had an uptight smile on her lips, and the man just looked bored. Despite wearing rather nice and expensive clothing, their aura was that of hostility.

"Minato-kun, Minako-chan, this man is your mother's cousin and this is his wife. They will be taking care of you as of now," Mrs. Seta said, trying hard not to look annoyed at the other couple. "They live two cities away. You'll be going to live with them."

The twins gaped at the older man in pure horror. They didn't like the way he looked, and immediately hid behind Mrs. Seta, cowering in fear.
"Aunty, we don't wanna go with them," Minako whimpered, hugging the woman's right leg.

"Can't you and Uncle take us with you?" Minato begged.

Mrs. Seta kneeled down to look at them in the eyes. "I'm sorry, but that would be against the law. The people who are legally bound to take you in are your blood relatives." She tenderly wiped their tears with her thumbs. "I really wish we could take you two in with us after what happened to your parents, but we can't. At least, not now. These people will take good care of you instead."

"Now come with us, you two," said the other woman with fake sweetness. "The car is already waiting outside, and your things are all packed up. We'll be leaving after you say your goodbyes to your friend." Her husband grunted, probably having nothing polite to say to the children.

"Aniki, Aneki, I don't want us to be apart!" Souji cried, hugging them again. "You're my only friends!"

"We feel the same way Banchou-kun," Minako said. She then brightened up. "Hey, let's make a promise! Let's promise that we will never forget each other."

"And that we'll meet each other again someday," Minato added. He held up a pinky to seal the deal.

The children curled their little pinkies together, singing the nursery rhyme that goes with it. "We promise. And you'll always be our little brother, Banchou-kun." They embraced each other one last time before their distant uncle had enough and dragged the twins to the car.

Souji adamantly didn't want to let go, so his parents had to pry him away. He pressed his face to the front window, hoping to catch a glimpse of them one last time.

The memory ended there.

"They told me that they kept shifting from one relative to the next while growing up," Souji said, continuing the story. "All of them didn't want them staying for very long, and some weren't even treating them properly. The last straw came they were forced to separate, so they moved to an orphanage before coming to Gekkoukan."

His friends gasped at the last part. Akihiko and Shinjiro bit their lip, knowing what it was like in that kind of institution.

"First their parents, and then they were forced to separate from the people who truly cared," Junpei said. "Now I kinda understand why Minato was cold and distant when I first met him in class."

"Actually, that's the same impression I got from Souji-kun when he first moved to Inaba," Chie added as an after thought.

"But Minako-chan...she's always so cheerful, so I never really understood why she was like that after knowing what they've gone through," Yukari said sadly. "They never really said anything about it either."

"I guess she was hiding her pain behind her smile as an emotional defense mechanism," Fuuka said. "It's just like her to not let anyone worry. Minako-chan is too kind for that."

Not wanting anyone to feel guilty about something that happened in the past, Souji quickly spoke up. "Come on guys, don't let it get you down. If Aniki and Aneki are willing to get past all this, then so should we. They've moved on and that's all that matters." The grip on his sword tightened
as he walked ahead with purpose.

Mitsuru smiled, wiping a small tear in the corner of her eye. "He's right. We should move along."

Shinjiro clenched his fists. 'I'm such a selfish bastard. They watched their parents get killed by Death, went through some serious shit and still moved on with smiles on their faces. They even forgave Death after that! While I...I made Minako's pain worse by throwing my life away...’ He was angry at his past self, but shook it off. 'Now isn't the time to get distracted! What's important is to kick Ikutsuki's ass and get those two back!'"
Yukari rolled her eyes at her often declared statement, but followed her anyway.

After a few minutes later, they returned to the lounge. "I have unfortunate news," Aigis said, drawing everyone's attention. "Minato-san and Minako-san are incapacitated with a cold. They are unable to join us tonight."

"I hope it's okay for them to share a room temporarily. We didn't want to risk infecting anyone else, and I doubt they'll want to be separated while they're sick," Yukari added. "Aigis and I agreed to place them in Minato's room for the time being. It's easier to keep an eye on them if they're together."

"Good thinking, Takeba," Mitsuru praised. "While they rest, we still have a lot of work to do to reinforce the dorm. I expect all of you to pitch in."

Junpei started to complain about how lucky the twins were that they got sick so they didn't have to do slave labor, unlike himself, which earned a lecture from Mitsuru and a threat from Yukari that she'll throw him out of the dorm to suffer the typhoon if he didn't shut up soon.

"Oh, that's too bad," Fuuka said disappointedly. "I was hoping Minako-chan would help me with our Cooking Club project." Koromaru whimpered when he heard this. Ken gulped in horror.

That night, Shinjiro made rice porridge for their sick leaders. Earlier, Mitsuru assigned him and Yukari as caretakers while the others helped reinforce the dorm. Despite the scowl on his face, he didn't complain.

In Minato's room, the twins were lying on thick futons laid out on the floor. A tray of dirty bowls, a jug of water and two glasses were placed on the desk. Extra towels and blankets piled up on the bed.

Yukari placed a wet cloth on Minako's forehead and proceeded to do the same for her brother. They immediately fell asleep after taking their medicine.

A little while later, Shinjiro placed a hand on Minako's damp forehead. "Shit, it's so hot." Her face was red and she began to pant softly.

"Senpai, her fever is getting higher. You have to keep her cool so that she'll feel comfortable," Yukari reminded him. She replaced the damp cloth on Minato's forehead when it got too warm, and pressed a cool pack she often used for sports injuries against his neck. He calmed down after that.

"I know, I know...jeez!" Shinjiro did the same thing, but he felt awkward. It wasn't like he never took care of a sick person before, but it was different when that person was Minako. She was the reason he often felt hot and bothered every time he thought about her.

"Ma...mommy...daddy..." Minako began to mumble in her sleep. She started to whimper, possibly from pain.

Shinjiro wondered briefly whether or not to comfort her with Yukari in the same room, but seeing Minako in pain wasn't something he could push aside. He gently held her hand, and placed his other on her forehead, rubbing his thumb at that one spot between her eyebrows. "Hey, take it easy, alright?" he whispered.

"Nnh...no...don't...don't leave...me..." Her grip on his hand tightened.

For once, he let his guard down. "I ain't going anywhere." His face softened at her sigh of content.
Minato was also having feverish dreams. "Ban…chou-kun…wait…don't go…"

Yukari frowned. 'They must be dreaming about their parents, but who is this 'Banchou-kun'? she wondered. Her thoughts were cut off when he began to cough, his expression showing he was in pain as well. Yukari ran her fingers through his hair and began to massage his scalp, whispering soothing words, hoping to ease his pain.

The girls from the Investigation Team cooed at Shinjiro's display of affection – it was painfully obvious he was in denial of his feelings back then. The scene flash forwarded to the next three days, when the twins' fevers were starting to let up.

According to Minato's digital clock, it was way too early in the morning. A snick of the lock was heard and the door opened, revealing Aigis. "Door unlocked in 92 seconds...My time has improved." There was a hint of pride in her voice as she slowly approached the futons the twins were sleeping in. They were oblivious to her presence, slumbering peacefully side-by-side.

Aigis kneeled and inspected each twin, her face so close as if about to kiss them. "Surface body temperature reads...98.7 degrees...No fever." She straightened up. "At this rate, they should make a full recovery by morning. The pillows I prepared in the freezer will not be necessary." She nodded to herself. "...I mustn't stay too long, or Yukari-san will reprimand me again...and Shinjiro-san for that matter." She stood up, about to leave when a sudden thought hit her. "There are 4 hours and 12 minutes until sunrise..." A short pause. "I need only sneak out again before morning." She turned around, and sat on the floor at the foot of the makeshift bed, staring at the twins intently. "I...will keep watch over them for a little while longer."

A pregnant silence followed after the vision ended. The staircase that appeared was temporarily ignored.

"What the hell, Aigis!?!" Yukari exploded. "How many times has this happened? Even after I told you not to enter their rooms without permission!"

Junpei sweatdropped. "I kinda understood her need to be close to them. But this...I never knew that Ai-chan was this much of a stalker."

The others murmured their agreement.

"What? Wait...It's not like that!" Aigis protested, waving her arms in front of her face. "It is true that I sneaked into their rooms a few times, but that was-" She realized her blunder and shut her mouth.

"So you're not denying it then..." Yukari sighed.

"Please do not judge her too harshly." As always, Metis came to her defence. "My sister only had their best interests at heart. She did her best to protect them."

"Wait a minute...how can they remember this if they were unconscious at that time?" Ken wondered. Fuuka shrugged.

A vein in Shinjiro's forehead threatened to burst. "What the hell are all of you bitching about? We still have four more floors to go. I'll be damned if Minako and her brother gets killed while all of you are arguing about stalkers!"

Souji gripped his shoulder. "I agree with you Shinjiro-san, so please calm down." He felt tension in his shoulders loosened a bit, and turned to the others. "Let's save this topic for after we rescue Aniki and Aneki. We can't afford to waste any more time."
Ashamed at themselves for getting distracted from their main objective, they hurried on ahead.

Tziah was a lot more challenging to fight through. The Shadows were growing much more powerful after every floor, and they had to be careful with their restorative items. Luckily, Souji purchased leaves from the Fox in advance to replenish their energy. He ordered everyone to stop and rest before opening the next door.

The scenery was now inside of a classroom. Everyone recognized it to be class 2-F of Gekkoukan High.

The bell rang, indicating that school session was now over.

Minato stood from his seat and immediately pulled his sister out of the classroom. In one hand she held a bag, which contained something very precious to her. They made their way to the monorail station, where the streets were filled with couples and lovebirds celebrating the special day of Christmas Eve.

"I…I hope he likes it," Minako said softly, her voice muffled by her red scarf. She clutched the bag closer to her chest.

"I'm sure he will," her brother replied, patting her head softly. "You're the one who made it for him after all."

They finally reached their intended destination - Tatsumi Memorial Hospital.

Inside the waiting area, decorated Christmas trees were placed in every corner. Streamers and cards dangled on the walls, and mistletoe hung from the ceiling, filled with messages of encouragement and wishing everyone a happy holiday. However, none of that was enough to lift their mood.

The twins took the elevator to the sixth floor, where the private room Shinjiro was being held in was located. They knew where it was, thanks to Keisuke-senpai. A few days ago, Minato asked him to check it out for him as a favour. They stealthily maneuvered through the hallways, making sure not to attract the attention of any doctors or nurses.

Shinjiro's room was easy to find, if the 'No Visitors Allowed' sign was any indication. It was ignored as they silently entered the room. The patient Minako wanted to see lay on the bed, almost lifeless. The only thing indicating he was alive was the beeping of the heart-rate monitor.

The auburn-haired girl stood by his bedside, lovingly brushing the hair out of Shinjiro's face. "Senpai, I finally made it." She tried to smile, though some of her tears were threatening to spill out. "Onii-chan is with me, but he has to go soon. Don't worry, I'll be here the whole day to keep you company."

It broke Minato's heart to see his sister like this. He knew she couldn't be broken that easily, but right now she was so emotionally vulnerable that it might not take much for her to snap. But he had faith that Shinjiro will pull through, for both their sakes. He pulled her into a gentle hug and kissed the top of her head. "I'll be going now. Yukari's waiting for me at the mall," he whispered into her hair. "Make sure to get back before curfew, alright?"

"Okay, I promise. Thanks for helping me out."

With a last wave, Minato left.
Minako pulled a chair and sat beside the bed. Being careful not to touch any of the equipment, she grabbed his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Hey Senpai, I hope you're dreaming of nice things. If Mitsuru-senpai and Akihiko-senpai found out that I came here, I'll be executed for sure." She gave a small laugh before continuing. "I made you a present. My friend from Fashion Club helped me out with it. Since I don't know what your favorite colours are, I put in some of mine." She rummaged the bag she was holding earlier and took out a handmade scarf. It was orange with maroon and white stripes. She wrapped it around his bare arm. "I figured that you must be cold being in a hospital all by yourself. And knowing you, you're probably complaining about the food on a daily basis. But...I like you that way. Don't ever change, ya hear me?"

She could no longer hold back her tears when the upperclassman didn't respond.

Shinjiro watched in silence. There she was, the girl he loved more than his own life, crying her eyes out for him and looking so broken. He wished that he could turn back time and undo that one event, but knew there was no way to do so. The only thing he could do now was to fulfill the promise he made to her.

The other felt uncomfortable at the vision. It felt like they were intruding a private moment.

The scene shifted again. They were still in the hospital, but it was already night. Minako stood up. "I should be going now. I don't know when I'll be able to see you again." She leaned down, gently pressing her lips on Shinjiro's stiff ones. "Merry Christmas, Senpai. I love you, and always will."

She smiled at him one last time before leaving.

When she got back to the dorm, she was greeted by the livid faces of Mitsuru Kirijo and Akihiko Sanada.

"Arisato, where have you been?" the former questioned. There was a snap in her tone as she tapped her foot impatiently, posture rigid and straight.

"Senpai, what are you –"

Minato came down just in time. "Leave her alone!" he demanded. "She didn't do anything wrong." He stood in front of his sister protectively.

"Watch your tone, Minato," Akihiko warned. "Mitsuru got a call from the hospital saying that Minako sneaked into Shinji's room. Do you know anything about that?"

"Even if I did, I don't see how that is any of your business," Minato retorted. "It won't affect our performance as leaders if that's what you're worried about."

Mitsuru narrowed her eyes in annoyance. "You both know the reasons why the doctors isolated him. His condition is so serious that even the slightest excitement could kill him. Is that what you want?"

Minako flinched at the accusation, looking down as tears pooled in her red eyes.

"I don't give a shit about what the doctors think!" her brother hissed venomously. The others in the dorm cautiously backed away. They could sense that their leader was furious and overprotective; a deadly combination. "Look at this from her's and Shinjiro-senpai's perspectives. Do you think that what they're going through is easy? We're about to face the fight of our lives and she can't even go see the guy she loves? That's a load of crap! I shouldn't even be hearing this from you, Akihiko-senpai. I know that you've also been sneaking into his hospital room for some time without permission."
Akihiko was taken aback. "How did you…?"

"It doesn't matter. Confirm with the doctors of Senpai's condition if you must. I just wanted to help him and my sister. Is that so bad?"

"Onii-chan…it's okay…please…" Minako pleaded.

"No it's not! It's not fair for you or for Shinjiro-senpai either. C'mon…" He grabbed her hand and ushered her upstairs. The loud sound of a door slamming shut was heard shortly afterwards.

The vision ended there. Some of the girls started sniffing.

"Now I remember," Mitsuru said glumly. "I actually did contact the doctors that night. They told me that Shinjiro's condition remained unchanged, but there was a slight improvement. He showed minor signs of movement, as he was gripping that scarf tightly and was also smiling. I guess they did the right thing after all."

"After seeing that, I feel like a total jerk right now," Akihiko sighed, running a gloved hand through his silver hair. "I was pretty insensitive to Minako's feelings. I think Minato was ready to kill me back then too."

"This memory must have been important to both of them, even if it was unpleasant," Metis commented. "In fact, all of the memories we saw must have had a huge significance in their lives before becoming the Great Seal."

"That would make sense since this is the dungeon that their hearts have created," Teddie said.

Another stairway materialized before them. The group took a deep breath and composed themselves, preparing for what other important memories that lie ahead.

Wails and groans of frustration could be heard once the two teams arrived on the fifth floor, which so happens to be the disco-themed Harabah block.

"I thought it was impossible for another place like Void Quest to exist," Kanji moaned as they made their way through the maze. By the time they reached the giant door, everyone was either rubbing their eyes or temples, trying to readjust their eyesight from the bright colours.

"I feels like throwing up a rainbow," the Junes mascot mumbled, his eyes turning into swirlies.

Yosuke sweatdropped. "That doesn't even make sense…"

"Shut up, you guys!" Chie scolded. "It's about to start!" She made it sound like they were about to watch a movie.

This time, it was inside someone's room. The SEES members recognized it to be Minato's dorm room.

The twins themselves were sitting on a bed with blue covers. The auburn-headed girl was crying her eyes out on her brother's shoulder, as he patted her back in an attempt to comfort her, but the look on his face was anything but. His eyes reflected fear, panic, and mostly sadness as he stared out the window.

"Did…did we make the right choice?" Minako sniffled, her tears soaking the fabric of her twin's school jacket.
He sighed. "To be honest, I have no idea." He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, while his other hand ran through his blue hair. "But I'd be lying if I told you that I'm not scared."

"Why? Why us?" she asked no one in particular. "All this happened just because we were crossing the Moonlight Bridge with Mom and Dad all those years ago…"

"Hey, look on the bright side…" Minato gave her a wry smile. "At least we're still together, right? I mean, yeah, Mom and Dad are gone. But at least I still have you. Doesn't that count for something? Either one of us could have died that night."

Minako stopped sobbing as she lifted her head. Despite her brother always carrying a gloomy demeanor and rarely smiled, they assumed he was pessimistic as well. That wasn't true at all. His calmness was like an anchor to her impulsive nature, keeping her grounded and most importantly, out of trouble. Even at a time like this, he found a silver lining in their predicament. It was a far cry from the apathetic teenager he was early this year. "Y-you're right, Aniki. At least we're not alone. Despite the crazy year we had, I wouldn't exchange it for anything." She smiled and caressed the strap of her wristwatch. It was becoming a habit lately. It made her feel better whenever she was sad or angry.

"You and I both know why we chose this. We want to protect the people who are precious to us," Minato said. A small smirk made its way to his lips. "You haven't called me 'Aniki' for almost ten years. It's nice to hear it again."

"You think so?" she giggled. "You're right though. I do want to protect everyone. I don't want the world to end. In a way, we'll be protecting Banchou-kun too, right? Even if he'll never know what we did."

"Yeah, we will. And this way, I get to always stay together with you."

"Do you think we'll get to see Banchou-kun again? I miss him so much. Does he even remember us?"

"I think so. Even if he is far away, he'll always be our little brother. And someday, we'll see him again."

The two of them continued reminiscing their childhood until late in the night. Minako spent the night in her brother's room.

The vision ended. The atmosphere remained grim.

"Tch, why do they have to smile like that?" Junpei said, voice strained. "They decided not to kill Ryoji that night, knowing that the world was gonna end, yet they still didn't complain. They were scared like all of us, but they continued to fight."

"I'll never forget how they floated up to the moon and single-handedly defeated Nyx," Akihiko added. "They knew what was to come, but they still did it anyway."

Ken nodded. "I really admire what they did back then. None of us could have made such a sacrifice."

Souji closed his eyes. 'Even after ten years of being separated, they still remember me? And they had me in mind when they made that decision?' His respect and love for them grew. He had no doubt he would have done the same. 'Please, let us make it in time…'
The white and polished silver surfaces of Adamah made the already cold atmosphere drop a few more degrees. Everyone was shivering their asses off, wishing for the heat of summer.

"Will we find the twins at the top?" Shinjiro asked, heaving his giant battle axe on his shoulder. The cold wasn't really bothering him with their goal in mind.

"They should be," Fuuka said. "I sense them up there. There should be one last door before we can reach them."

After fighting off some seriously strong Shadows, they finally made it.

"Hopefully this is the last door," Souji said. "I get the feeling that they're trying to tell me something…but what?" He pushed it open, and they were engulfed in white light.

The scenery was the rooftop of Gekkoukan High.

There were three people there; a blue-haired boy, an auburn-haired girl, and a blonde android, sitting on one of the stone benches overlooking the ocean of Iwatodai Bay. The boy and the girl rested their heads on each the robot's shoulders, tired and out of breath.

"I am sure they remember the promise we made," Aigis them, looking at them lovingly. "They should be here soon." She grabbed each of their hands and squeezed gently.

"Minato-kun!"

"Minako...!"

The door slammed open to reveal Yukari and Shinjiro. The latter looked like he'd seen better days as he just escaped from the hospital. He was clutching his chest and coughing. Hanging around his neck was an orange scarf with maroon and white stripes.

Yukari slung Minato's right arm around her shoulders and helped him stand up. She stumbled to the next bench, supporting his weight as best as she could and helped him lie down, resting his head on her lap. She played with his hair as she talked. "Minato-kun...I finally remembered! About you! About us! We... we're like boyfriend and girlfriend weren't we...?" Tears fell from her eyes."I really...truly...love you...more than anything. And you...you returned my feelings. I can't forgive myself for forgetting it...I'm sorry...I'm so sorry..." She sobbed, holding him close. However, she smiled when she saw the strap she had given to him neatly attached to his MP3 player, close to his heart. "You look exhausted. Right now, you can stay like this. I'll always be with you...I'm not letting go of you ever again." Her smile widened when she heard footsteps. "Listen! Everybody's almost here." She gently kissed his forehead. "Just...just...stay with me for a little while. I love you, Minato-kun."

Shinjiro made his way to Minako's side. Aigis kindly picked her up and placed her on his lap, seeing he was in no condition to carry anything. She then walked away to stand by the door to give the couple their privacy.

Shinjiro let Minako's head rest on the crook of his neck. He cradled her body gently in his arms, her slow breath tickling his skin. "Minako..." he said softly, panting a little. "Hah...that hospital can't hold me forever..." He finally managed to catch his breath and looked down at her. "Looks like I forgot about everything... it's kinda pathetic of me. And even then... my feelings...your feelings never changed." He let out a weak laugh. "Hah... I really don't deserve you. In my dreams...I saw you, the girl of my dreams... That was you. You were crying and laughing like usual. You really do love a horrible person like me. Haha..." He tightened his embrace. "Ah...this
ain't a dream. You're really here..." A rare smile formed on his lips when he heard the voices of the others approaching and chuckled. "Geez, those guys sure know how to ruin a moment." He turned his attention back to Minako and kissed her cheek gently. "I'm so glad... that I met you. I love you...Minako..."

Basking in the spring sunlight and the warmth of their loved ones' arms, and their friends' presence growing closer, the Arisato twins felt at peace. They had fulfilled their role. The world and the people they love were now safe.

There were faint voices in the background, loud enough for everyone to hear. They looked around to find out who it belonged to, and realized that they were hearing the twins' last thoughts.

"I'm sad to leave everybody, but I wouldn't change this year for nothing in the world..." said Minako's disembodied voice. "We kept our promise to our friends, and I got to say goodbye to Shinjiro-senpai. I just feel bad for not being able to see Banchou-kun one last time...please...take care of each other..."

"Guys...thank you...for everything that you gave us. Without you, our lives would have been meaningless. Despite everything we went through, it was worth it..." Minato's voice echoed. "The promise we made, we fulfilled it. Yukari...I got to be with her for one last time. I only regret not doing the same for Banchou-kun. Take care of yourselves, guys... I'll never forget you..."

With smiles in their faces, the twins closed their eyes and let themselves fall into a deep slumber.

Yukari fell to her knees once the vision ended. "I...I never knew...that they felt that way...about us..." she murmured, tears shimmering in her eyes. "Minato-kun...Minako-chan...it must have hurt them to leave us that way."

She wasn't alone in her sadness. Koromaru began howling to the ceiling. Metis was crying. 'No wonder Sister was so full of grief when she arrived at the Abyss of Time. Now I understand why she was so desperate to see them again, even if it meant undoing the past and breaking the Seal,' she thought. 'Those two are more than just her friends...they were part of her world...her reason to live.'

The back of Shinjiro's eyes stung as he saw, once again, his girlfriend closing her eyes, never open them again. 'Damn it, Minako,' He grit his teeth. 'Of all the memories you made, you had to cherish this one? You really are a piece of work...'

"Snap out of it you guys!" Souji shouted, startling everyone. He was trying his best not to tear up. "Whatever happened in the past should stay that way. I won't let it happen again! Right now, they're alive. Waiting for us to come and take them back!"

The force of his voice shook everyone to the core. Those who were crying hastily wiped their tears and composed themselves.

"Damn straight!" Shinjiro added. "I promised myself to make it up to Minako. I won't disappoint her again." He swung his axe back on his shoulder, looking confident as ever.

"Let's go!" Souji said, leading the way.

With a new found determination, the Persona-users moved forward.
Yukari. Slowly but surely, they made their way up the spiral stairs leading to the top floor.

"Hey, do you think their Shadows are waiting for us up there?" Yosuke had to ask. All of their past adventures in each other's dungeons led up to that point.

"I don't know Yosuke. If you think about it, since Izanami isn't here anymore, there's nothing that could awaken their inner Shadow," Souji said. "But we have to be careful. Whatever's waiting for us up there, I have a bad feeling about it."

"Knowing that bastard, he's gonna keep them guarded," Akihiko said. "There's no telling what it is, so we should stay on our toes."

Everyone kept that in mind.

The top floor looked like one gigantic room. There were puddles of blood on the floor, the walls with color schemes of grey, black and red. Four tall pillars resembling the Greek Parthenon supported the entire structure at each corner. SEES recognized it as Monad Depths, the mysterious block where the twins faced Elizabeth and Theodore all by themselves.

In the middle of the room were two figures slumped on the ground, unconscious.

Souji, Shinjiro and Yukari recognized them immediately.

"Aneki! Aniki!"

"Minako!"

"Minato-kun!"

They rushed to be by their sides. Before they could even get close, they were thrown back by a strong gale.

Shinjiro cursed a string of expletives under his breath. Souji readied his katana while Yukari took out an arrow from her quiver. "Who's there?!" she demanded.

"So you guys finally decided to show up?" a strange but familiar male voice said.

" Took you long enough," a feminine one said haughtily.

From behind the twin pillars opposite to the group of Persona-users, two figures clad in Gekkoukan High uniforms emerged. They gasped in disbelief - these two were completely identical to the Arisato twins! The only difference was the colour of their eyes: gold and devoid of emotions.

"But…how can this be?" Yukiko stuttered.

"This must be some kind of sick joke…" Kanji said, readying his fighting stance. "How the hell can their Shadows manifest if they already have Personas?!"

The Shadows gave them a creepy smile.
I'm Yourself; You're Myself

Teddie was flabbergasted. "H-how can this be? I thought people like Sensei didn't have Shadows…!"

Said Shadows snickered at their reaction.

"What a stupid bear," Shadow Minato snidely. "No matter how powerful the Wild Cards are, they're still human. Of course they'd have Shadows dwelling within them."

Shadow Minako giggled teasingly. "We're just better at hiding it," she added.

"If Izanami is gone, then how are you here?" Naoto questioned. "There's no way you could have awakened without her help." The others murmured and nodded their agreement.

The Shadows burst out laughing.

"You guys don't get it, do you?" Shadow Minako goaded. "It's true that Izanami-no-Okami is no longer here to do that, but the both of us have always existed. Even when Aigis gained our power after we became the Great Seal, did you really think we disappeared? Thanks to her retaining that power for us, we were able to return. And thanks to this world, attain physical forms." She shot them a crooked smile that sent shivers down their spines.

"We are Shadows, the true self. What part of that statement don't you dumbasses understand?" Shadow Minato taunted. "Think about it this way…why would we need help awakening if that was already done when our power was awakened? Ask Akihiko-senpai and Mitsuru-senpai, they saw the whole thing." He smirked at Yukari. "Oh yeah, so did you, right Yukari-chan? You were lucky enough to have witnessed it up close and personal."

Akihiko and Mitsuru flinched at the accusation.

Yukari's eyes went wide. "April 2009, on the rooftop…" Her eyes narrowed in anger. "You're lying! There's no way you can be them! You're just - "

"No, they're not lying," Souji cut her off, holding out an arm to silence everyone, his tone calm and firm. "Shadows represent humanity's dark truths. They can't lie about what they represent." He glared the form of his surrogate siblings' dopplegangers. "I get it now. There's no mistaking it… those two are Orpheus and Eurydice, reverted back to their Shadow forms."

The Investigation Team stared at him in disbelief. "How can you be sure, Sensei?" Teddie asked. "Is that even possible?"

"A Shadow and Persona are two sides of the same coin. The only difference is that a Persona can be controlled at will, while a Shadow runs on basic instinct."

Shadow Minato clapped his hands in applause. "Good guess, Souji-kun. But I'm not surprised you managed to see right through us. You've always been the observant one."

"But that's impossible..." Junpei mumbled. "We kicked your asses in the Abyss of Time. Why are you still here?!"

Shadow Minako's expression soured. "As if, you empty-brained tin can! What you defeated was a physical manifestation of your collective grief that took our form after we died. Or was it a coma
that we're not expected to wake up from?" She then sneered at them. "We on the other hand, are
the negative emotions those two have been keeping pent up for so long. Such an unhealthy thing to
do by the way. Did you enjoy the little memory trip inside their heads?"

Soft moans were heard when the twins started to stir. When they finally got their bearings straight,
they were shocked to see their own look-alikes.

Shadow Minako cheered. "Yay! You're awake now. This is great. Now we can properly finish
what we started!" She clapped childishly, as if she was at the circus.

The others cringed; it was rather disturbing to see a Shadow acting so much like its master, slightly
on the infantile side.

Souji stepped forward and brandished his sword, not taking his eyes off the Shadows in case they
did something unexpected.

"Wh-who…what are they?" Minato questioned, feeling uneasy as Yukari helped him stand.

"Why, I'm hurt that you don't recognize me," his Shadow gasped, feigning shock. "I am you, and
you are me. That's all there is to it."

Minako was confused, looking imploringly at Shinjiro, who acted as her crutch. She stared back at
her doppelganger. "You…are me?"

"Of course I'm you, silly," her Shadow counterpart giggled. "I know everything there is to know
about you. Your thoughts, your dreams, your fears…" She snickered when Minako instinctively
snatched Shinjiro's arm. "That's right. Your greatest fear is letting the ones you love go and being
left alone again. It wasn't all sunshine and rainbows when you were stuck as the Great Seal, was it?
All you could do was gaze at your friends below…living their lives while you had to hold back
Erebus for all of eternity."

"I... I chose that of my own free will!" Minako tried to sound brave, but the fear in her eyes
contradicted her words. Shinjiro wrapped his arms around her, trying to calm her shaking body.

"Of course you did," Shadow Minato replied sarcastically. "Don't bullshit with me now. Admit it,
you were scared as hell at your sudden return. Did ya tell Souji that when he found you in the
middle of the street during the Dark Hour?"

Souji raised an eyebrow in confusion, but maintained his stance. "Aniki, what is he talking about?"

"What am I talking about?! I'm talking about how the Seal is weakening the longer we remain in
this world. If we don't return to it, then the world will end! Have you idiots not figured anything
out yet?!" Shadow Minato's sudden mood swing caught them by surprise. "Did you ever think that
us being here isn't going to have any consequences?!"

"We were freed for a reason. There has to be!" Minako shot back. Yukari was supporting him since
he didn't have enough strength to stand upright.

"Aniki is right. We'd do anything to protect our family and friends, even if it means doing it all
over again!" his sister added, almost missing the pained look in Shinjiro's eyes.

The black smoke swirling around the Shadows' bodies became thicker. The Investigation Team
immediately went into battle mode, readying their weapons. Normally they wouldn't interfere with
a Shadow and its owner's revelations, hoping they could sort it out, but it always ended up with a
fight. The rest of SEES followed suit.
'This isn't good,' Souji thought. Their emotions are starting to become unstable. The Great Seal is most certainly a touchy subject...and their Shadows are making the situation worse. Come on, think! What would make them say these things?' A revelation hit him; a Shadow represents the inverse of a person's arcana. Being a Wild Card meant that the twins and himself have multiple arcanas, but their dominant ones were the Fool, Judgment and World. 'According to the book I read about tarot reading, the Inverse Fool represents foolishness, losing the path in one's life, or making decisions that will end in doom and regret. Could that be related to the Great Seal? They thought that that was all they were good for? Their only purpose?'

"My dear master, that's a blunt-faced lie and you know it," Shadow Minako pouted, becoming childlike once more. "Your memories showed that you didn't have any regrets sacrificing yourselves to protect everyone, but is that really true? You were fated to be all alone up there for all eternity. No one in their right mind would choose that. But I guess great power comes with great responsibility, right?"

Minako closed her eyes and covered her ears, tears leaking from the edges.

"I'll just say it. You guys are selfish," Shadow Minato announced the last word. "Once you got the taste of freedom, you don't intend to go back. Even if it is for the greater good, you guys are too scared to lose the life you have, the people you love. SNAP OUT OF YOUR RIDICULOUS FANTASIES AND WAKE THE HELL UP! The realities are out of balance because of you!"

Minato was on his knees, holding his head. "No...no! We wanted to protect everyone! We didn't mean to cause anyone any heartache..."

Souji continued to process this information. The inverse Judgment represents the inability to move forward. That could be why most of the memories shown were the painful parts of their past. And the inverse World...the refusal to accept the truth. I guess deep, deep down, they thought that this chaos that we're going through is their fault. But I'm positive it isn't! They were definitely freed for a reason!" He wanted to so badly to slice the Shadows and force them back, but he knew it doesn't work that way.

Shadow Minato continued his rant. "These people aren't your friends. What did they ever do to help you, when you guys were suffering in silence? Nothing!"

"SHUT UP!" Minako screamed. "Leave them out of this. They have nothing to do with it!"

Hysterical sobs escaped her throat as she fell on her knees. Shinjiro tried his best to console her, but nothing he said was working as her sobs got harder.

"Minato-kun, please get a hold of yourself," Yukari said softly, tightening her grip around him. "If this continues, those things will go berserk."

Shadow Minako laughed like a maniac. "Berserk? Berserk?! You're so damn clueless, Yukarichan. None you could even fathom the loneliness we felt, or comprehend the pain of being bashed by Erebus day after day when we were trapped up there! And Shinjiro...you don't deserve any happiness, because you were the entire reason for my misery!"

Yukari gasped and covered her mouth, while Shinjiro looked like he'd been shot. He momentarily loosened his grip on Minako.

"No...that's not true!" she screamed, shaking her head violently.

"We never thought like that!" her brother yelled.
Souji had enough. He put his sword down to turn and face them. "Aniki, Aneki, stop it! Stop it…please…" His voice grew softer. "I know. I can understand your pain and loneliness…all of it, because I went through them myself. Of all the people in this room, I understand that the most. You guys are my family. I wouldn't judge you if you had all these emotions pent up inside, because I felt them too. So please…don't deny it anymore…I'm here, aren't I? You guys can tell me anything. Please…don't suffer alone!"

The sincerity in his voice snapped the twins out of it. "Banchou-kun…"

The rest were silent, the Investigation Team even more so. They never knew that about their fearless leader, despite their close relationship with him. They were starting to wonder just how much he was hiding beneath his calm exterior. But their thoughts were cut off when they heard creepy giggles coming from the two Shadows. Black mist swirled around and engulfed them.

"Too late ~ " the Shadows sang. The Persona-users could feel the malicious aura they were emitting.

"What the…" Yosuke was stunned. "How can this be? Those two haven't completely rejected their Shadows yet!"

"It must be because of their Wild Card powers, so their Shadows aren't like ours," Naoto said, filling bullets into her revolver. "We also can't rule out the overwhelming levels of emotional pain those two have gone through, and the length of time they kept it all pent up. Our problems were considered normal compared to theirs."

"Ikutsuki must have been the trigger, and seeing Souji get hurt must have made them snap," Akihiko said. "That bastard…wait till I get my hands on him…"

"So it is safe to assume that their Shadows are much more dangerous than any of yours were," Mitsuru concluded. "If so, then expect a tough battle ahead."

The twins felt their strength drain out and fainted. Luckily, Yukari and Shinjiro caught them before they could hit the floor. The five of them were thrown back as a burst of energy exploded from the black mist. Two tall figures started to materialize and take shape, suspended in the air. One of them looked like Orpheus Telos, except his metallic body was black and his limbs were white. The color of his skin and hair were disgusting shades of grey, causing him to look extremely ill. He was carrying silver coffins on a chain like Thanatos, and mounted on his back was a rusty lyre with sharp, jagged edges. The stereo speaker on his chest was rusted as well, vibrating irregularly. His eyes were bluish-milky white, crying tears of blood. The other one looked like Eurydice Telos with the exact same discoloration and accessories as her male counterpart.

"We are Shadows, the true self," the Shadows echoed in unison. "We're tired of losing what means the world to us, so we might as well cut off everything away and feel nothing, end the source of the pain…starting with YOU!" They glared at Souji, and started to swing the coffins around. When enough momentum was gained, they aimed the attack at the silverette.

"LOOK OUT!" their friends cried.

Souji had to act fast before the attack could cause any direct and collateral damage. He threw himself directly at front and crushed his card. "Ganesha, Tetrakarn!" The elephant deity casted the reflective barrier and Souji mentally ordered it to expand, just in time when the coffins made impact. With the barrier activated, the full force of the attack was redirected back to the Shadows. It could have killed them, Souji knew, but they were seemingly unharmed. Whatever it was, he wasn't about to let them harm his siblings and casted another two Tetrakarns on them for good
"Shit…I never thought that their Shadows were so volatile. And I almost got them to calm down too…" he groaned. But he didn't have time to dwell on it and got up, gearing himself for battle. "Yukari-san…Shinjiro-san…get them to safety. I'm taking both of you out of the fight so that you can focus on protecting them." The latter wanted to protest, but Souji gave him a glare so fierce that he was forced to obey. The silverette continued to give out orders. "Ken and Yukiko, you two are our main healers right now. Their attacks are likely to cause a lot of damage, so I don't need you to waste your energy on fighting. We'll tackle them on as two separate teams; I'll take on Shadow Eurydice and Aigis-san will take on Shadow Orpheus. We need to take them down fast, so don't hold back!"

The others scattered around but stayed close to their assigned sub-group. Fuuka and Rise remained close to Yukari and Shinjiro, scanning the Shadows as quickly as they could.

Souji made his first move. "Zaou-Gongen, Vorpal Blade!"

Being one of Souji's high level Personas, the Shinto mountain deity's attack slashed Shadow Eurydice with great accuracy. She let out a high-pitched shriek, unsuited for her title as Mistress of Melodies. 'She must have been injured by that reflected attack after all.' Feeling confident, he summoned another Persona. "Surt, Ragnorak!"

"I'll back ya up, parter!" Yosuke said, summoning his card. "Garudyne!"

The giant pillar of magma engulfed Shadow Eurydice, and Yosuke helped amplify its fire power. Koromaru added his own Agidyne into the mix. The female Shadow screamed as she tried to put out the hell inferno with little success.

Meanwhile, Aigis ordered a full assault on Shadow Orpheus. "Give it all you got!" she told her team. A flurry of magic and physical attacks hit the male Shadow simultaneously. Though it didn't beat him into submission, it managed to injure him just enough to give Mitsuru an opening to cast Mind Charge on herself and release a powerful ice storm, successfully wounding him even further.

As the magic attacks and blizzard died down, they watched with bated breath, anxious to know if their opponents had given up. Shadow Eurydice had severe burn wounds and there were shallow cuts on Shadow Orpheus, but that was about it.

They laughed and continued to taunt their opponents. "We represent the arcana of unlimited potential. Did you really think that your measly attacks could hurt us?" Both of them tied the chains of their coffins around their waists and dismounted their lyres.

Souji cursed in his mind when he heard Rise's voice. "Senpai, both of them have very high resistance to physical and magic attacks, and they nullify Dark and Light," she reported.

"Not only that, their evasion rate, strength, defense and agility are at the maximum," Fuuka added. "Please be careful…I sense that they have a few hidden abilities which will be very troublesome in battle."

"This isn't good…" Souji mumbled to himself. He turned his team. "Akihiko-san, I'm afraid you're going to have to debuff their stats constantly. Yosuke, be on the lookout if they buffer up and nullify them immediately. They seem to be attacking in sync, so finding an opening for an All-Out Attack is going to be a huge problem." He spoke loud enough for the other sub-team to hear.

"If they are the Shadows of Minato-san and Minako-san, then they might also have the knowledge
of our Personas and their skills," Metis said worriedly. "We are at a disadvantage."

"So what?" Kanji interjected confidently. "If they know about yours, then we have the upper hand. They don't know much about ours, and I'm sure Senpai own a few Personas which they don't."

"That may be a good idea Kanji, but we have to do better than that if we want to defeat them before our energy runs out," Souji reminded him. 'And before they kill all of us.'

A strange, hypnotic melody was being played as the Shadows strummed their lyres. It was soothing like a lullaby, yet at the same time aggravating as the rusty strings vibrated, sending the music across the air.

"So…pretty…" Teddie said, swaying back and forth to the music. Junpei and Yosuke's eyes were getting glassy, and a few of the others seem to be in a trance.

Souji's eyes widen when he realized what was currently happening. "Cover your ears! Don't listen to the music!" he shouted. He quickly reequipped his Persona to one with multiple ailment nullifying skills. Those who weren't yet affected plugged their ears, including Shinjiro and Yukari. After what seemed like an agonizing minute, the rusty speakers on both Shadows' chests vibrated faster, and a loud screech echoed through the floor where the force of it was enough to push them backwards slightly.

And then, silence.

The silverette's eyes scanned his teammates. Those who covered their ears in time were fine, but Teddie and Junpei seemed to have been hit with confusion, Akihiko was silenced, and Chie and Koromaru were ailed with fear. "Fuuka-san was right. Their music can cause random ailments, and with that they have complete advantage. This is troublesome indeed..."

"It will be more troublesome if they cast mind-control like Kunino Sagiri did," Naoto said. "We can't have anyone stabbing us in the back."

Yukiko knew what she had to do. Since Souji put her on the sidelines, she could better observe those who needed any aid. "Salvation!"

Those with ailments quickly recovered, able to focus on the fight once more. They sent magical and physical attacks at the Shadows, but whatever the Persona-users sent them wasn't having a major effect. Akihiko was trying his best to lower their status, but he was having trouble avoiding the ice attacks aimed at him by Shadow Orpheus. It was nearly impossible to get close and land a direct hit with a short range. The Shadows also have a tendency to switch positions when the team least expected it, causing much confusion amongst them.

"Rise, do they have any passive abilities that you can tell?" Souji asked his team's analyzer.

"Give me a sec, Senpai. Even combining Kanzeon's scanning abilities with Juno's, it's gonna take some time for accurate results."

The Persona-users had to constantly keep their guard up whenever the Shadows played their instruments, making it worse by amplifying the sound with their speakers. When some of them were distracted, Shadow Eurydice would hit them with a shockwave, followed by powerful elemental spells, specifically targeting anyone with a weakness to it. Ken and Yukiko were kept busy healing their teammates, but even they were close to their limit. And their supplies were slowly diminishing, namely Stimulants, Mouth Washes and Dokudami Teas. Fatigue and mental strain from the surrounding fog were catching on, too.
Meanwhile, Shinjiro and Yukari were trying their best to wake the twins up, but to no avail. Shinjiro had to summon Pegasus a few times to block any attacks coming their way, while Yukari used her wind magic to cushion any of her friends who were about to collide with the gigantic pillars.

After what felt like an agonizing long time, the scanners finally got something. "Senpai, I don't think they have any resistances to Enervation and Exhaustion. Fuuka-senpai said she never even heard of these ailments, so I guess they didn't develop any skills to counter it back in Tartarus," Rise said triumphantly, although her voice sounded tired.

"That does make sense, because the properties of this world are very different from Tartarus," Fuuka added.

Souji smirked. "Thanks for the update, guys. It's time for a strategy change!" As he went through his Personae arsenal, he gave the entire team new orders. "Yosuke, take over our sub-team and bombard it with any attacks that you can think of. Aigis-san, you do the same. I need you guys to keep them busy while I try to weaken them even further."

Yosuke wasted no time shooting a series of wind spells and physical attacks on Shadow Eurydice, nimbly avoiding her counter-attacks with his acrobatic moves and speed. As he was playing decoy, Mitsuru, Akihiko and Koromaru combined their magic spells and sent it straight to the Shadow when she got too distracted.

"Don't give him any chance to play his lyre! Destroy it if you have to!" Aigis ordered. She boosted her sub-team's speed and accuracy with Masukukaja, and proceeded to shoot Shadow Orpheus with her ammo. Naoto pulled her revolver trigger non-stop, hoping to damage his instrument. Kanji, Metis, Junpei and Chie assaulted him with powered up physical attacks while Teddie conjured ice blocks to hinder his movements.

Souji was waiting for the right opportunity to use his special attack as his tarot card spun on his palm. When the twins' Shadows were close to each other and his teammates some distance away, he crushed it. "Shiki-Ouji, Navas Nebula!"

It took Souji a few tries for the Exhaustion effect to kick in, causing the damage done to increase by 50%. The Investigation Team smirked and doubled their efforts in attacking, followed by SEES. Souji wasn't about to stop there now that he knew his strongest advantage.

"Alraune, Old One!"

After three tries, the Shadows were enervated, their stats dwindling by half. The damage caused by the Persona-users were starting to show, but it still wasn't enough to take the Shadows down.

"Damn tough bastards…" Shinjiro muttered under his breath as he watched his teammates fight. "I guess that's to be expected of a Wild Card. They never go down easy."

Yukari summoned Isis and casted Samarecarm on the twins, but it wasn't working. "That's one of my strongest healing spells too. I guess until their Shadows are defeated, they'll stay unconscious." She dismissed her Persona and continued to watch over them.

"Why…why won't all of you just disappear!?" Shadow Eurydice screeched, banging her rusty lyre to the ground, sending large chunks of the floor to Aigis and Metis who were protected by Athena's shield.

"It hurts…" Shadow Orpheus cried, mounting his lyre on his back to use his chain of coffins once
more. "The pain of lost…IT HURTS SO MUCH!" He started attacking Yosuke and his group, everything about his movements wild and reckless, without any sense of purpose but to destroy.

"Even with their stats halved, they are still very resilient," Fuuka said, starting to sound worried when the dungeon began to rumble. "Guys, I don't think this floor will hold out much longer. They are causing too much destruction. You have to defeat them quick!"

Thinking furiously about how he should weaken the Shadows further, Souji had an idea. Popping a few Soul Drops onto his mouth, he readied his next Persona to be summoned from the sea of his soul. "Trumpeter, Debilitate!" The archangel of the Last Judgment materialized, blowing his trumpet at their direction. They started to become slightly weak, movements sluggish. Koromaru and Yosuke took advantage of this and casted Masukukaja on everyone, doubling their speed to avoid getting injured by their opponents. The rest combined their attacks to maximize the damage.

Souji changed his Persona to Yoshitsune. He planned on using him for his final and strongest physical attack to end this fight.

"Power Charge! Heat Riser!"

The ancient Japanese war general appeared, casting a golden light on his master. Souji felt stronger, his senses more alert. "Get out of my way!" he ordered his friends. "And take cover…I'll end this once and for all!"

Without needing to be told twice, the Investigation Team and SEES scrambled out of range. Shinjiro carried Minako while Junpei helped Yukari with Minato and took them to safety behind a pillar. The rest also took shelter behind the other pillars.

"Yoshitsune…" The Persona nodded, readying his twin daggers. "HASSOU TOBI!"

Crimson rays shot up into the sky, followed by a rain of arrows, piercing the Shadows at every angle possible. They screamed in pain, an unearthly cry filled with sorrow that vibrated through the air like a melody from Hell. Their lyres and coffins shattered, leaving them defenseless as they fell to the ground in an unceremonious heap. A puddle of blood oozed on the floor as they started to sob, twin streaks of red liquid streaming from their eyes.

The Arisato twins were beginning to stir, and the others finally knew that the Shadows have been defeated. All that was left to do was for them to accept the darkest side of themselves, but that was another thing altogether.

"Guys!" Souji made his way to his surrogate siblings, panting hard. Aside from Adachi and Izanagi-no-Okami, that was the toughest battle he had endured. "Are you guys alright? Are you hurt?"

"Just my head…" Minako groaned, helped to her feet by Shinjiro.

"What happened to the Shadows?" Minato asked groggily, supporting his weight on Yukari.

"About that…" Souji began by giving them a stern look. "I don't need to say this again, but I'm sure you're aware that if you reject them once more they will go berserk and attack us." He suddenly pulled them into a hug. "I'm sorry…" he said shakily, gripping them tighter, "for not being aware of your pain. As your brother, you guys can tell me anything. You don't have to go through that alone anymore, because I'm not going anywhere." His gaze met that of Shinjiro, Yukari, and the others who were starting to crowd around them. "Correction…we are not going anywhere." He gave them a sincere smile. "Go on, be honest with yourselves. The truth will set you free."
The twins broke away from the hug and timidly approached their Shadow selves.

"I wanted to deny you guys so bad," Minato told Shadow Orpheus. "But I knew you were telling the truth. Every single detail. You were right; all I could focus on when I was the Great Seal was how my friends have moved on, and eventually they'll forget about me. Just because we didn't have any regrets doesn't mean it wasn't painful. If you really are me, then you must have felt the same pain. I'm sorry…I really am."

"When Aniki and I returned after the reality merge, I was so happy that I got to meet everyone that I held dear. It was a dream come true," Minako admitted to Shadow Eurydice. "But it also scared me that if I was forced to return back there, I'll lose it all over again. That's something that I don't want. I held onto it desperately, even if it meant that I couldn't move on…remaining fixated to the past." She began to cry. "I apologize for causing you so much pain."

From their positions on the floor, the Shadows looked up to their respective masters, and held out a hand. The twins grasped them and smiled, letting them know that they no longer rejected their existence. The four of them were surrounded by soft blue light as the bulky forms of the Shadows reverted back to Orpheus, the Master of Strings and Eurydice, the Mistress of Melodies. As the Personas returned to the sea of their souls, the twins felt as if a heavy weight was lifted from their chests.

Feeling dazed and tired, they were about to faint again but luckily were caught by their respective lover.

Souji saw the look of content on his siblings' faces. "I'm glad that they accepted their other selves and moved on. I forgot that they also have another dominant arcana – Death. The inverse of that represents a mentality of being stuck in life, unable to mourn any loss and cannot accept changes that come with the future. I couldn't blame them for that. They've gone through and sacrificed so much, it's only human to feel that way. Hope...is really a wonderful thing.'

Taking charge once more, he addressed the gang. "Let's get out of here. Aniki and Aneki are gonna need a lot rest after that ordeal, and so do the rest of us."

The trip back to the Amagi Inn was longer and quieter than usual. The Persona-users were exhausted from the vicious battle, immersed in their own thoughts. Shinjiro carried Minako on piggyback, with Akihiko doing the same for Minato, Yukari silently walking beside him. Both of them were fast asleep. Souji kept turning back to look at them every now and then as if to make sure they were both okay.

Once they arrived, both twins were taken to their rooms. Due to the late hour, Mitsuru ordered the reception counter to call in a doctor to check up on them, and to confirm they hadn't suffered any major injuries that been missed when healed by their magic or the Fox's leaves earlier. After a thorough examination, the doctor didn't find anything wrong with either one of them, only that both were exhausted with low blood sugar. He prescribed some multivitamins and painkillers in case they had headaches, instructed their friends to help them change bandages often, and told them to get extra sleep.

Once the twins were tucked in bed and left alone to get some well deserved rest, both groups of Persona-users headed to the lounge. There weren't a lot of people around, since most of the guests were enjoying dinner in the dining halls.

"So, what do we do now?" Junpei asked. "The chairman is still on the loose, too."
"Yes, as long as he's around with the Reaper to do his bidding, he's a menace to all of us," Mitsuru said in a serious tone. "It's so obvious that he has a role in the return of the Dark Hour and the series of events involving our leaders."

"First Adachi, and now Ikutsuki. They're using our old enemies against us..." Akihiko gritted his molars. "I don't like where this is going."

Souji closed his eyes in thought. "I understand what you mean, Akihiko-san. The stakes are higher and things are bound to get more dangerous. But for now, the best we can do is to get some rest and allow them to recover. Once we're in better shape, we can all discuss more properly about what to do in regards to that man."

No one could argue with that. They were all physically and mentally drained, definitely not in the condition to deliberate such a serious topic.

SEES left for their rooms, leaving the Investigation Team by themselves in the lobby. Souji was about to leave too when Yukiko tugged on his arm. He turned to face her. "Yes, Yukiko?"

"Souji-kun, about what happened in Tartarus... I mean, about what you told Minato-san and Minako-san when we faced their Shadows..." "Yes?"

Judging from his sigh, Yukiko knew he was way exhausted. "Never mind. We can talk tomorrow." She looked away. "You should go home and rest... Dojima-san and Nanako-chan will worry about you if you're late."

As if knowing what was worrying her, Souji gently kissed his girlfriend's forehead. "Don't worry. I'll take care of myself. Nothing's gonna happen to me, I promise."

"Souji-kun..." Yukiko smiled, feeling more at ease. "Thanks."

"You take care too, okay? I love you." He kissed her again before heading home. "See you tomorrow." With her boyfriend gone, Yukiko finally let out a sigh.

"So you couldn't ask him about it either, huh?" Yosuke asked as he and the rest of the Investigation Team walked up to her.

She sighed again and shook her head. "I didn't have the courage to. After everything that's happened today..." She turned her gaze towards the direction that Souji left. "He's exhausted... physically and emotionally."

Chie nodded. "I know! I didn't have the guts to ask him about that either." She frowned. "But what he said... about him understanding their pain because he felt the same thing..."

"Makes me wonder how well we really know Senpai..." Rise said morosely. "He understands us so much, but do we really understand him?"

"But Senpai is such a straightforward guy! Does he really have anything to hide?" Kanji asked.

"Wild Cards are better at hiding their inner feelings... that's what their Shadows said," Naoto stated.

Teddie sniffled. "Does that mean the reason Sensei understands us so much is because he felt more pain and sadness than we did?"
Everyone turned to the blonde Shadow. "Maybe that's the case, but I don't think he's ready to talk about any of that right now," Yosuke said. "Whether or not he's hiding his pain, whether or not he does have a Shadow like Minato-san and Minako-san, he needs his time. What happened today really shook him up. You saw how worried he was about the twins. The only time he was that worried was when Nanako-chan-" He sighed, and stretched his tired limbs. "Anyway, we should bring that up only after things settle down for a bit. Let's go home and head to bed. I don't know about you guys, but I'm beat."

That was something they could all agree on.

Yukari and Shinjiro quietly made their way to the rooms where the twins were resting. Everyone else made up excuses not to go to bed yet; Junpei was going to get himself and Koromaru something to eat, Fuuka wanted to help Aigis and Metis fix minor damages they had suffered in battle, Akihiko and Ken went to the hot springs to soothe their sore bodies, and Mitsuru had to make a few phone calls – family business, she claimed. That gave them both a chance to check on their loved ones without anyone interfering.

Yukari quietly entered the boys' room and looked around. Minato was fast asleep in his futon with a soft expression on his face. He looked so peaceful in his slumber inside the dark room; he reminded her of ethereal guardian spirits from old fairy tales. She smiled and knelt beside him. It didn't take long before her eyes began to water.

"Minato-kun… I'm sorry…" she whispered. "I was so self centered that… I never understood what you were going through. I'm your girlfriend and I still… Oh, I'm so sorry…" She started to sob, wiping some of the tears straying down her cheeks. "I couldn't do anything right on my own, and I never saw how much pain you were in. You've always been this amazing leader and hero… if you weren't by my side… I – I wouldn't know what to do…" Hesitantly she reached out, gently brushing Minato's bangs away from his eyes. "I always felt close to you…because you understood me, cared about me, and listened to me more than anyone else did when I was so lonely. When you left us, I took it really hard. But after seeing all those memories, I came to realize that life was way harder for you and Minako-chan. I'm so sorry, Minato-kun…" The tears wouldn't stop.

She was about to get up and leave when something reached out and grabbed her by the wrist. Frozen in her spot, Yukari let out a small squeak.

"Don't go…" Minato mumbled, slowly opening his eyes. They were dull with exhaustion due to the day's events. "Please, Yukari… don't… leave me… alone…"

The young woman's eyes widened as she watched a tear trail down his cheek, something which she had never seen before - he heard her all along. He released his grip on her as his hand dropped back on the futon, but she remained where she was, heart rapidly pounding as she stared at her boyfriend. In the dim lighting of the room, the soft moonlight reflecting his tears.

"I was always protecting Minako, and to do that I took everything on my own. The same applied when I became field leader of SEES. It never occurred to me that I didn't need to shoulder my burdens alone… I – I didn't want to worry you or the others… I felt it wasn't right to bother you with my problems when you guys were going through so much on your own…"

Inhaling deeply, Yukari swallowed as she listened to his confession. It was beginning to make some sense now, why he looked so upset when he thought she was leaving. For that one instant, what she saw then was Minato at his most open, his most vulnerable… she had seen him unguarded, witnessed a side of himself that he hardly showed anyone. She could tangibly feel how lonely he really was.
"It's okay." She pulled the covers and slid herself inside his futon, snuggling her face in his chest. "You can talk to me about anything you want. This time… I'll be listening."

Minato wasn't sure how to handle the understanding gaze in Yukari's eyes. It was an entirely new experience for him being comforted rather than comforting others. He tentatively wrapped his arms around her, holding her close. Something in his chest throbbed, making the whole situation awkward for him, leaving him uncertain and confused.

But as Yukari's warmth enveloped his body, Minato found that for now, he didn't really mind. In fact, he could get used to this warm feeling. They chatted for a while until he eventually fell asleep in her embrace.

**At the same time, in the girls' room…**

Shinjiro quietly stepped inside the dark room. Minako was asleep in her futon, with a gentle smile on her face, her free auburn hair messily splayed on the pillow. Witnessing his girlfriend sleeping like this was a rare event and Shinjiro was taking it. It probably sounded cliché – heck, it still is – but Minako looked like an angel.

Carefully, he seated himself at the edge of her futon. His fingers slipped between hers, her warmth spreading in his cool palm.

Minako shifted at his touch, turning onto her side to face him. Shinjiro's heart lurched as he recalled the words from her Shadow.

"You don't deserve any happiness, because you were the entire reason for my heartache!"

He may not have showed it (or so he thinks) but his heart broke at the Shadow's statement. "I was such an ass back then… I caused you so much grief, Minako. I kinda deserved that as much as it may have hurt hearing it..." He felt his eyes stinging, but he willed the tears back. "You changed me for the better. You helped me come to terms with my pain… my past. You gave me a reason to yearn for the future..." He closed his eyes tightly. "And I... I never thought about how much pain you and your brother were going through, because I'm a selfish bastard who can only think about myself. Hell, you're only human… I'm sorry... Really..."

Not realizing his grip on her hand had tightened, Minako whimpered in her sleep. Hearing the sudden gasps, Shinjiro immediately let her seemingly fragile hand go. His move was too hurried, causing her sleep-induced breaths to become irregular, as if trying to break free from a dream.

Shinjiro sensed her about to wake, not wanting to be there in case he caused her more pain. Just as he was about to get up, the left sleeve of his coat was pulled back.

"Shinji... Don't go..." Minako pleaded softly, slowly opening her eyes. Tears pooled in her red depths. "Please... Please stay with me..."

Shinjiro took his place again by her side, gave her a reassuring smile as he kissed her cheek. "I ain't going anywhere."

"Good..." She sighed and closed her eyes. "I thought it was easy to just smile and hide what I felt, so that Aniki didn't have to worry about me all the time. I – I didn't want to burden him. I did the same thing when I joined SEES so I wouldn't worry the others and help them... I never realized that others could do that for me, too..."

As he listened, Shinjiro caressed her forehead, running his fingers through her hair. Feeling a strong urge to be close, he lied down next to her, propping his elbow up to support his head.
Without thinking he lowered his head and pressed his nose against her hair, inhaling deeply. 'Good god, she smells so good,' he thought. It was a cross between strawberries, honey and sunflowers; a scent he was not likely to forget any time soon.

Minako giggled at the sudden display of affection. She felt a large hand cup her cheek, turning her face to his direction. Her heartbeat suddenly sped up tenfold as she looked into his gentle eyes, sinking into his touch, the warmth radiating from his hands making her vulnerable and safe at the same time.

"Don't hide anything from me anymore," he said, rubbing her cheek gently with his thumb. "When I promised to make it up to you, I meant every single word of it. And I'll be damned if I break that promise."

She gave him a small smile, filled with love and a myriad of other emotions.

Shinjiro shifted to make himself comfortable, pillowing her head with his arm and taking the actual pillow for himself.

Minako blushed as he gingerly wrapped her inside his oversized coat, where both of them fit in snugly. He encased her in a hug for more security, warming her up at the same time. Nothing was said between them as she fell asleep, all her fears washed away just being in this man's embrace.

Once Souji finally got home, it was already evening. Dojima was already home, reading his paper while Nanako was watching TV. The usual scene. "I'm home..." he announced, voice low.

As both father and daughter took notice of his presence, Nanako quickly went hug him. "Welcome home, Big Bro!" She greeted him with a smile, but frowned upon seeing her cousin's worn out expression. "Are you okay? You don't look so good..."

"I'm okay, Nanako. Just had a long day." He slumped on the couch, sighing heavily.

Dojima got up and put his paper away. "Nanako, can you please get his futon ready?"

The girl nodded and went upstairs. Dojima sat next to Souji, the sofa groaning slightly by their combined weight. "Long day, huh? Does it have to do with those things?"

Souji looked down. He didn't have to hide things from his uncle anymore, but today's events were still bothering him, specially the run-in with Ikutsuki. "Yes... more related to Aniki and Aneki actually..." He explained to Dojima what had happened, giving him the bare facts.

The older man narrowed his eyes as Souji finished explaining. "Okay... I can almost understand you and the twins transforming into kids, but a dead guy coming back to life? That's going a little too far..."

"Yeah. He tricked them in the past, almost leading to the end of the world as we know it, and died in the process. But it isn't that part that bothers me the most... it was the fact that he knew my name, and that something happened to my parents."

Dojima frowned in concern. He knew his nephew wasn't entirely over his parents' disappearance, although he was still recovering from the trauma. "Your parents are good people. That guy is probably lying to try and get to you." He put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "What matters now is that you kids are safe."

"Yeah, you're right." Souji gave him a smile of gratitude. "Thanks, Uncle."
Dojima grinned and patted Souji's back, just as Nanako came back down. "The futon is ready," she said.

The detective nodded at his daughter and then turned to Souji. "You, go have dinner, take a shower, and sleep. You look almost dead."

As his nephew made his way upstairs followed by Nanako, Dojima began to contemplate. Something about all this didn't sit well with him. His detective's intuition kicked in, churning out all sorts of questions: Just how well did he know his own sister? What about her husband? The Arisato family? Now that he thought about it, he almost lost contact with his sister for over ten years before he got a surprise call from her, asking him to look after her teenaged son for a year during their overseas business trip. What exactly happened during that gap? Did this Ikutsuki person have anything to do with it?

He was determined to find out.

The next morning, Minako woke up to the tantalizing smell of warm pancakes. Her tummy growled loudly, demanding to be filled. Yukari's smiling face greeted her as she opened her eyes.

"Good morning, sleepy head!" she chirped.

Minako yawned. "Mmm…morning. What time is it?"

"Still early for Junpei's standards, and that's telling how late it is," Yukari snorted, laying the tray down beside the futon. There was a stack of pancakes, a bowl of fresh fruit, a glass of milk and a cup of tea. "Hope you're hungry. Shinjiro-senpai woke up early and made everyone breakfast with Souji-kun's help. He asked me to bring it to you since you're still tired from yesterday."

"Souji-kun's here?" Minako asked, already stuffing her mouth with pancakes drenched in syrup and butter.

Yukari sweatdropped. Her friend's gluttony never ceased to amaze her. "Yeah, he wanted to check up on you guys. Shinjiro-senpai should be with Minato-kun right now, serving him his breakfast." She then grinned slyly. "Although I have a sneaky feeling that he wanted to personally serve you, but Mitsuru-senpai would kill him if he sets foot in this room again."

Minako was enjoying her food too much to even blush.

Meanwhile, in the room the guys were staying, Shinjiro was feeling rather annoyed. 'Damn Mitsuru and her stupid rules. She couldn't even cut me some slack this one time,' he thought grumpily as he watched his girlfriend's twin eat with incredible gusto. "Slow down, you moron. The food's not going anywhere. Chew properly before you swallow!" he snapped.

"Hey, don't get all pissy at me just because you couldn't serve my sister breakfast," Minato shot back, pointing his fork to Shinjiro's face. "Besides, I'd be happier if Yukari was here but you don't hear me complaining."

The tall brunette blushed. "Wh-whatever. Just finish that up before Aki gets back. That idiot will get all whiny if he saw I made you guys pancakes and he didn't get any."

Minato shrugged, not in the mood to argue with his senpai. But one thing is for sure, the man was an awesome cook.

Shortly after breakfast both twins took a shower and got dressed. They decided to take a stroll in
the garden together, wanting to get some fresh air and collect their thoughts.

"Ah, this feels great!" Minako smiled as the warm sunlight showered her and her brother. "It's like all of our worries were washed away."

"I know… my body feels so light," Minato stated, stretching his muscles and grinned at a satisfying 'pop' from his backbone. "I've never felt so… alive!"

Minako giggled. She was about to inhale the scent from a rose bush when a glowing blue butterfly flew past them, followed by another one, then another, and another. Soon enough an entire swarm of butterflies were flying above them. She was in awe. "Okay… you don't see that everyday…"

"That's not natural…" Minato said, warily backing away. He wasn't moving an inch however, as his whole body felt stiff. "What the?! I can't move!"

It was like some invisible force was holding them down, causing Minako to panic. "Aniki, I… I can't move either!"

The butterflies landed before them, swirling around and merged into a humanoid figure. A tall, slender male with dark brown hair tied in a short ponytail walked towards them. He wore a black turtleneck underneath a white suit and polished black shoes. His face was concealed by an elaborate butterfly-shaped mask that showed off his golden eyes.

"Who are you?!" Minato questioned.

The man said nothing as he calmly walked up to them. Minako glared at him. "What do you want with us?!"

Once again the man remained quiet as he stood before them. They tensed at first, but upon gazing into his eyes, they didn't sense that this mysterious stranger was a threat, instinctively knowing he meant no harm. He gently placed two fingers on each of their foreheads, soft blue light emanating at the tips. The twins calmed down despite being unsure of what was going on. A feeling of light-headedness took over, as if surrounded by a blanket of fuzz, falling into a trance.

Not too far from there, Souji, accompanied by Yukiko, Yukari and Shinjiro, entered the garden, looking for them.

"I'm really glad Aniki and Aneki are recovering so well from yesterday," Souji said, sighing happily. Despite still being tired, he wanted to come by early and check up on them personally.

"Yeah, I was worried about them after what they went through, but they picked themselves up and seem stronger than ever," Shinjiro commented.

"I think that's because they have such great friends with them, Shinjiro-san. Your support, along with Yukari-san and Souji-kun's means a lot to them." Yukiko smiled. "They must've felt more at ease after you two went to see them last night."

Yukari smiled back. "Yes… Wait, what?!" she nearly shouted, her face a deep shade of pink. "Y-You mean, you saw us going into their rooms?!"

Yukiko nodded, and realized what she just said. "O-oh, I was on my way to my room when I saw you and Shinjiro-san heading there." She started to blush. "I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to spy on you!"

Shinjiro grunted, annoyed and embarrassed, but before he could say something, he spotted who
they were looking for. "There they are." His eyes narrowed when he saw the stranger standing very close to them. Too close, in fact. "Who the hell is that freak? What is he doing to them!?!"

Souji's protectiveness kicked in. "Aniki! Aneki!" he shouted. The two young men immediately sprinted towards them.

The masked man, startled by the sudden arrival, quickly backed away. The twins swayed slightly in their spot at the disconnection, sinking to their knees. Souji and Shinjiro stood protectively between them, while Yukari and Yukiko supported them from falling to the ground.

"Who are you? How did you even enter this place?" the raven-haired girl asked in anger. An intruder on her family's property was something she would never tolerate.

"What are you trying to do with Minato-kun and Minako-chan?!" Yukari demanded.

Shinjiro got into a fighting stance. "Stay the hell away from them, you creep, or you'll be dealing with me!"

"If you tried to hurt them, I'm gonna make you pay!" Souji threatened. Even though he didn't have his sword at hand, he was more than willing to fight whoever tried to hurt his family.

Without warning, the man turned around and took off in a swift run. "Oi, get back here!" Shinjiro shouted, sprinting after him.

"Shinjiro-san, wait! Yukiko, stay here with Yukari-san. I've got a weird feeling about that man."

"Please be careful!"

Yukari drew her cellphone. "I have to tell the others…" She dialed a number. "Mitsuru-senpai, we've got a problem!"

Meanwhile, Souji and Shinjiro were still running after the masked man, who headed for the main gate.

"You ain't getting away, bastard!" Shinjiro growled.

The stranger almost reached his destination when the remaining members of SEES blocked his way, giving Souji and Shinjiro enough time to catch up and surround him.

Akihiko cracked his knuckles. "Going somewhere, wise guy?"

"You're gonna pay for trying to hurt Minako-san and Minato-san!" Ken said. Koromaru growled, baring his fangs.

"Are you working with the chairman?" Mitsuru asked coldly. "If so, then expect no mercy!"

The masked man remained silent, instead turned around to face Souji, his expression unreadable. The silverette cocked his head in confusion. 'Why is he looking at me like that? Do I know him?' Before he could say anything, the stranger's body started to glow, disintegrating into blue butterflies. The winged creatures flew all over the place, blinding them for a few seconds. When they reopened their eyes, he was gone.

"What the hell?! Where did he go?" Junpei shouted, shocked. "How did he do that?"

"That man…was not human," Metis stated.
"But he's also different from any Shadows we've encountered so far," Aigis added. "Why do I get the feeling that I've seen something like that before?"

"What could he possibly want with Minato-san and Minako-san?" Fuuka questioned.

Shinjiro huffed in annoyance. "If he's connected to the chairman, that can't be a good thing."

"I'm not sure that's the case..." Souji interjected, holding his chin in deep thought. This earned him skeptical gazes.

"What makes you so sure, Seta?" Mitsuru questioned.

"When he stared at me... I don't know why, but something about him felt odd... Almost nostalgic..." He looked up to the sky. "I can't explain it, but something in me tells me he's not a threat. And I also have a feeling we haven't seen the last of him."

"Tch, whatever. If that guy tries anything funny, I won't answer for my actions," Shinjiro said, unconvinced.

"Anyway, we should go back to Yukari-san and Yukiko to check on them...just in case."

**Back to the garden...**

The twins had finally recovered from their daze, finally able to stand up when Souji and the others arrived. "Aniki! Aneki!" He rushed to their side. "You two okay?"

"Yeah. Head feels kinda light though," Minato said, shaking his head to snap out of it.

"What happened to that masked man?" Yukari asked.

"You're not gonna believe it, but he turned into a bunch of butterflies and disappeared," Junpei said, making elaborate gestures with his hands.

"Actually, we do believe that, because he appeared from a bunch of butterflies..." Minako said, holding on to Shinjiro's arm to stay steady.

"Did he try to hurt you?" he asked. His eyes scanned her for any injuries he might have missed.

"No. All he did was touched our foreheads," Minato said. "But when he did, I heard a voice. It wasn't from Orpheus or any other of my Personas though."

"That also happened to me, and I'm pretty sure that wasn't Eurydice or the others talking..." Minako closed her eyes in recollection. "I am you, and you are I... I am always within you, watching over you. That's what the voice said. Right, Aniki?"

Her twin nodded. "That's correct. I'm not quite sure what to make of it, but that man didn't feel like a threat. Call me crazy, but... there was something...nostalgic about him."

Souji grinned. "I know the feeling."

"Looks like Souji was right about him after all," Akihiko said. "Still, we gotta be really careful for now. No way I'm gonna let anything happen to you under my watch."

"Akihiko-senpai is right," Fuuka said. "We don't want you two to be in any more danger than we already are."
"After yesterday, we saw how much we took your feelings, and yourselves, for granted," Mitsuru said. "While we do treasure the bonds we have, it never occurred to us how much of an importance it means to you."

"From now on, we'll always be by your side, not only in battle, but in life as well," Aigis assured them.

"We'll never leave you," Metis said.

"In the times of joy as well as sadness," Ken said. "Just like you've been there for us."

Koromaru barked, wagging his tail happily. "Koromaru-san says that he'll stand by your side until the end," Aigis translated.

Junpei grinned. "That's right, dudes. I'm with you two for the long run too."

Yukari held Minato's hand with a warm smile, Shinjiro doing the same with Minako. There was no need for words; their eyes said it all.

Minato was touched. "Everybody… thanks."

"From the bottom of our hearts," Minako added.

They all walked back into the inn, smiling and laughing together.

In the small confines of the meeting room that Mitsuru was able to book last minute, SEES and the Investigation Team were squeezed in together. The red-head herself was standing at the front of the room, in her no-nonsense business-like manner.

"I thank you all for coming on such short notice," she began. "Since summer is about to end, this matter can no longer be delayed."

"I believe you're talking about the second semester of school starting next week," Naoto said. "I too, was wondering what your future plans are since you're only staying here temporarily."

Mitsuru nodded at that. "Yes, that's true. At first, we were only here on vacation and to confirm the internet rumors which Iori told us about. After all that's happened, I'm positive that the TV World is the source of all the Shadows' activities, and might hold the key to solving this mystery. For that, I have decided for SEES to set base here in Inaba."

The others murmured amongst themselves.

"But what about our life in Port Island, especially college?" Fuuka questioned. "And as for Ken-kun, he has school to think about."

"I understand your concern, Fuuka. I took the liberty of negotiating with your professors to allow all of you to study long-distance, myself included. Since it was such an unusual request, a few of them demanded a couple of extra-credit assignments depending on your majors," Mitsuru explained. "As for Ken, I have submitted the paperwork needed for his transfer to Yasogami Middle School. When the school session starts, he will be attending there."

"So does that mean I don't have to wake up early and go to class?" Junpei asked with a stupid grin on his face. "That's awesome!" His excitement was short-lived when Yukari and Minako smacked him.
"Long-distance study doesn't mean you can skip the studying, you dumbass!" Yukari reprimanded. Minako's glare shut him up completely.

Everyone else looked at Ken, who had an unreadable expression on his face. He then gave them a small smile. "I don't mind," he said. "In fact, I kind of saw it coming, to be honest."

"What about me and my brother, Mitsuru-senpai?" Minako asked. "We didn't even start our senior year at Gekkoukan High, so technically we're still high school students."

"According to Officer Kurosawa and our friends from school, we were in a coma for over two years. As far as the world is concerned, our lives have stood in a standstill," Minato stated.

"I was waiting for you to bring that up," Mitsuru said. "Yes, both of you are correct. I found medical records from Tatsumi Memorial Hospital confirming that story. Using those, I managed to secure you two, Shinjiro and Metis a place in Yasogami High. Well, for Metis's case I had to use the foreign transfer student angle. I was able to convince them that your grades are well enough to enter you into senior year, and they informed me that the four of you will be in the same class as Seta. Despite our secret activities, I expect all of you to do whatever is needed to blend in."

Minako stood from her seat and cheered. "Did you hear that Souji-kun? We're gonna be in the same class!"

"I sort of missed going to school," Minato grinned. "Now I'm getting all excited! I wonder if there's a photography club in Yasogami?"

"I shall cherish this experience," Metis said, clapping her hands. "If my sister managed to do it, then so can I." Beside her, Aigis smiled proudly.

Junpei pointed at the twins, horror-struck. "Are you guys serious? Dudes, you're not normal!" he screeched. To him, this was a new level of crazy.

Shinjiro resisted the urge to clean his ears. Did he just hear that correctly? **Him? Enrolled in Yasogami High as a senior?** For once, he agreed with Junpei. "Wait just a damn minute!" He slapped the surface of the table and stood up, startling the others. "Why the hell do I have to go to school? I'm twenty frickin' years old! I don't belong there anymore!"

Mitsuru glared at him in return. "Shinjiro, you are aware that you yourself have not even finished your senior year," she stated in a menacing tone. "I don't care how long it takes, you will graduate."

As she said this, the temperature in the room dropped dramatically.

Akihiko took this opportunity to tease his best friend and calm Mitsuru down in the process. "You can't argue with that, Shinji. But look on the bright side; now you can watch over Minako at school instead of waiting for her to come back to the dorm like you used to." A broad smirk appeared on his face as he watched his friends blush madly.

"Think of this as a chance to redeem yourself, Senpai," Yukari said. "You're given a rare opportunity here. You better use it wisely."

"Based on Shinjiro-san's appearance, he seems to be the delinquent type that often skips school, like Kanji-kun before we rescued him," Yukiko pointed out thoughtfully. "Thank goodness for the mandatory attendance policy. Otherwise he'd be in such big trouble."

"As if he wasn't in trouble enough," Rise snickered.

"Yeah. Kanji is always getting in trouble for not wearing the proper school uniform," Chie
smirked.

"Don't remind me of that, Yukiko-senpai," Kanji groaned. "That's just some stupid law the school made up to torture the students. It's not my fault that classes are boring as hell."

Shinjiro bit his tongue to prevent himself from spewing curses.  *'I'm so screwed…and why the hell are they comparing me to Tatsumi?!!'*

Minako gripped his hand, which got him to sit back down. "Don't worry about that, Shinji. My friend Saori-chan from the Health Committee is two years older than I am when we were juniors back in Gekkoukan. She had trouble fitting in at first due to the age difference, but she overcame it." She gave him a bright smile. "Besides, I think you'll fit in just nicely. And since we don't know the people there, we can start over."

He considered his options, re-thinking about the perks Akihiko just mentioned.  *'I guess it wouldn't be that bad…'*

"So where are we going to live?" Ken inquired, "It's not like we can stay here in the inn forever."

Mitsuru opened her laptop and plugged in the projector. "When Iori told me about the internet rumor that took place in the countryside, I did some research on a few of the real estate here." She clicked the mouse a few times, and the projection screen showed a rather old stone mansion near a hillside. "I found this house by pure chance, and confirmed the purchase two weeks ago. I originally wanted to use it as a vacation home, but under the current circumstances it is being remodeled into a dormitory for SEES to use. It has three floors and exactly twelve rooms. Granted, it might not be as big as our previous dorm, but all the facilities are there. The entire place is scheduled to be completed in three days time. I have also arranged for your things back in Iwatodai Dorm to be shipped here and expect them to arrive in the next five days. Any questions?"

Her teammates' jaws dropped, but no one dared say anything.  *'Just how long has she been planning all this?*’ they thought simultaneously, rather shocked.  *'As expected of the Kirijo Group heir!*' She showed everyone a picture slide of the interior and exterior of their soon-to-be home, earning a few impressed murmurs and nods.

"I hope you can all understand why I made this decision without consulting you all first," Mitsuru said. "Whatever is causing the disturbance of balance between the worlds is no laughing matter, and takes top priority. Until we can find out what's causing all this chaos, we shall remain here to deal with it. Not to mention that Seta's friends and family are likely to be endangered if this keeps up."

The others were silent after that piece of information. Souji looked guilty, but was comforted by Minato and Yukiko.

"I'm surprised that Senpai managed to arrange all that in such a short time," Minako muttered. "Her foresight is amazing…"

"Don't worry, Mitsuru-senpai. I agree with you completely, and adjusting to life here shouldn't be that hard to do." Yukari said, earning nods of agreement from SEES. They made a vow to protect everything they held dear, and were willing to temporarily sacrifice their lives back in Iwatodai to deal with the problem.

"Now I remember where I've seen that house…!" Kanji said suddenly. "That place is not too far from the Ichijo Estate. It's been abandoned for a long time, but it's a nice place even if it is a little secluded."
"We'll help out any way we can. I'm pretty sure there's still a lot to do when you guys start moving in." Souji offered.

"Now that that's taken care of, I have one more announcement." Mitsuru was smiling wide. All sense of formality had dropped, and there was a playful glint in her eyes. "Who's up for a trip to Yakushima?"
The King's Game? Again?!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Velvet Room…

"Welcome," Igor greeted with his usual enigmatic smile. "It is delightful to see the three of you unharmed after facing the most difficult ordeal so far."

The three Wild Cards decided to pay a visit to the Velvet Room after the latest events, hoping that the long-nosed man might have some answers for them.

The Velvet siblings, beneath their calm and sophisticated façade, were relieved to see their guests safe and sound.

"I see you already know what we went through, huh?" Minato asked, not really surprised. "Might as well get straight to the point then. What can you tell us about it?"

"As you already know, one's Shadow self are born out of the darkness of one's heart, a myriad of unsorted negative emotions, in order to deceive and confuse them," Elizabeth started. "However, your Shadows were different."

"Different? How so?" Minako asked.

"Instead of leading you to reach any kind of resolution, their intention was to kill you, plain and simple," Theodore continued.

"Hmm… That explains why they transformed before Aniki and Aneki could fully rejected them," Souji stated, deep in thought.

"Correct. The loss of control over your suppressed feelings caused their original Personas to revert into their primitive state as Shadows," Margaret said. "Such an unnatural origin caused them to be more unstable and violent than regular Shadows."

Minato closed his eyes in thought. "That happened because we ran into the chairman, but before that our Personas were already showing changes in their behavior because of the nightmares."

"Which in turn started after we were turned into a bunch of toddlers," Souji added. "Come to think of it, why would our enemy change us into 4 and 6 year-old kids to begin with?"

"It is said that the ages between 1 to 7 years are the most influential in the lives of human children and the development of their personalities," Theodore said, offering his theory. "Yet the human brain cannot store that much information, so it ends up forgetting a very huge portion of it as the child gets older."

"The most influential period…" Minako suddenly gasped. "Aniki, the car accident!"

A metaphorical light bulb lit above Minato's head. "Of course! That incident and its consequences were the start of all, the defining moment of our lives…" He finally understood. "Reverting us back to that age forced us to recall the memories, opening old emotional wounds and causing those disturbances to our Personas, leading up to the nightmares. The chairman's return was just icing on the cake." He turned to Souji. "But what about you? I mean, that incident also affected you, but not
"I see your point, Aniki. I really can't recall any incident that affected me with a similar impact."
Souji closed his eyes, trying to recollect his childhood memories, but got nothing. "Then again, it could have something to do with that chairman character we ran into."

"I'm afraid that we cannot be of much help on that matter, but we can provide you with our encouragement and support," Elizabeth consoled.

"Never forget that your Persona's strength lies with your emotions and bonds," Margaret said. "Should Souji-sama or any of you lose control over them, your Personas could revert back into Shadows and might successfully kill you next time."

Minako nodded. "We understand that now. Thanks to the bonds we've made, we'll never again drown in despair, even if our darkness are made to manifest." She smiled at her brothers. "We'll grow from the lessons our Shadows taught us, bonding us closer instead of shattering it."

Minato and Souji smiled back at her. The strength in their resolve could be sensed by Igor and his assistants.

The strange, long-nosed man was pleased that his guests' progress. "Well done! Your strong resolve to find answers will be a most valuable asset in your journey." He clasped his hands. "Now, I also have something to aid you." With a wave of his hand, two cards materialized on the table. "I am sure you recognize these."

"The Justice and Aeon arcanas?" Souji wondered.

"Correct. As you bond with different people of similar arcana, your Social Links expands and grow stronger, thus new possibilities have been revealed to you."

"We can create more new Personas?" Minato questioned.

"Indeed!" Igor chuckled. "The possibilities will show before you, even if they may seem difficult to grasp. But, I'm positive you'll understand."

Minako grinned. "Alright! This will certainly come in handy."

"Remember, the stronger your bonds become, new paths will open up to you. Where they shall take you, is entirely up to the choices you make."

"Now that sounds familiar," Souji chuckled nervously. "Alright, let's see who we can fuse so far."

They walked up to their respective assistants to check on their Compendiums. Sure enough, there were more empty pages waiting to be filled. When the Justice Arcana chapter came up, one page caught their attention, showing the glowing silhouette of a winged female.

Minato studied it. "Hmm… this one looks interesting. And I think we got all the Personas necessary for it."

His sister had an idea. "Hey, guys, why don't we all use different Personas to fuse her? Since there are several possible combinations, we can give her different skills."

"That could be useful when facing a difficult situation," Souji said.

"Agreed," Minato decided.
They approached Igor with their Compendiums in hand. The long-nosed man then extracted the Personae needed in the form of cards and laid them on the table in a circular pattern of three different sets. Souji had chosen Angel, Virtue, Hariti, Gabriel, Michael and Isis while the twins chose Angel, Virtue, Hariti, Raphael, Uriel and Cybele.

Each Wild Card then shuffled the deck until they were satisfied with the skills the new Persona will inherit. With a wave of Igor's hand, the cards began to levitate as a glowing blue symbol in the shape of a six-pointed star appeared.

Igor then combined the cards. The Velvet Room was blinded by a brilliant white light before a figure sporting a pair of black wings and a mourning hat materialized before the trio. Her body was fully covered by a black mantle, her face adorning an ever-smiling mask. "I am Lailah the Divine. All life is born, laid to rest, and frozen. Hello, young ones," she said in a gentle, soothing voice before vanishing into three different cards and merged into the sea of the Wild Cards' souls.

Inside their Compendiums, the glowing silhouette was filled with a proper image of their new Persona, along with a description. "Lailah is the Jewish angel of conception, the angel that brings souls and the seed together and then sees to it that the seed is planted in the womb. While the infants grow in the womb, Lailah places a lighted candle at the head of the unborn infant, so he or she can see from one end of the world to the other. She also teaches the unborn child the entire Torah, as well the history of her soul," Minako read the new entry aloud for her brothers to hear. "Then, when the time comes for the child to be born, the angel extinguishes the light in the womb and brings the child into the world. And the instant the child emerges, the angel lightly strikes its finger on the child's lip, as if to say 'Shh' and this causes the child to forget everything learned in the womb. It's implied that the knowledge is still there, but merely forgotten."

"Fascinating… she'll be really helpful," Minato said.

Souji turned to the long-nosed man. "By the way, there's something else I wanted to ask you."

"Go ahead, my dear guest."

"A man wearing a butterfly-shaped mask approached Aniki and Aneki after we fought their Shadows, leaving a cryptic message. He appeared and disappeared as a bunch of blue butterflies. You wouldn't happen to know who he is, would you?"

The three assistants wore looks of surprise. Nameless and Belladonna paused their music act and the Demon Artist stopped working on his canvas, everyone staring at the Wild Cards incredulously. For a split second, they could have sworn that even Igor was taken aback, but he quickly regained his creepy smile.

"Hmm…? This strange visitor… Who could he be? Is he a friend? Or someone you already know? Perhaps someone that watched over you in the past? Or is he just a mere observer?" he rambled vaguely, tapping his fingers in a strange rhythm. "All of these are true. And yet, they're not…"

The Wild Cards groaned. "Why am I not surprised that you'd give us a vague answer again?" Minako sighed. "Oh well, he's not a threat. That much I'm sure of."

"Guess we'll just have to figure it out on our own." Minato turned to his siblings. "C'mon, guys. We should get going. We still need to pick up Kanji, Ken and Nanako-chan at Madam Shiroku's."

After bidding good bye to the residents, they left.

"That was an unexpected turn of events…" Nameless said once he was sure their guests were gone.
"It seems the past has come back to haunt us," Belladonna crooned.

The Demon Artist tapped his canvas with the other end of his brush, a deep frown etched on his face. "Or rather, look for new targets."

Igor drummed his thin fingers on the table. "Indeed. The last time this happened…" His brows arched upward, the balls of his eyes almost fell out of its sockets. "Unless…no, that can't be! He would have told me…"

"Master, what's really going on here?" Margaret questioned, clearly worried. For someone like Master Igor to be out of the loop, something disturbing was about to happen.

"Nothing to concern yourselves for the time being," Igor said. "Elizabeth, I need you and your brother to head back to the Great Seal. Margaret, continue your research. I need some time to reminisce…" He exchanged looks with the other three, and closed his eyes. "But for now, we can only wait and see what happens."

Belladonna continued singing to Nameless' melody. The scratching of paintbrush on canvas accompanied the aria.

The LED signboard above the ticket counter flashed the arrival of the next train, which would be another half an hour. A large group of teenagers, a middle school student, a young girl and a white dog were giddy with anticipation (except for a scowling, beanie-wearing young man). They couldn't wait to board the train and head off to their destination – Yakushima Island.

Everyone would be lodging at the grand mansion of the prestigious Kirijo family, where Mitsuru made the arrangements a day before. It's been a while since any of the Investigation Team members had gone to the beach. More importantly, they could finally fulfill their promise to Nanako that they'll be eating this year's summer watermelons the proper way. All they had to bring were some clothes, toiletries and swimwear as everything else would be provided at the mansion.

Kanji on the other hand, carried an extra bag stuffed with snacks, mainly packets of animal crackers. "What?!" he asked those staring warily at his additional belongings. "I get hungry okay…"

"This is so awesome!" Yosuke exclaimed. He looked like he was about to leap off the platform. "A fully-paid vacation at a beautiful island, surrounded by beautiful women. It's good to be alive!"

Teddie was already daydreaming about the girls in swimwear, but caught himself in time when he remembered that Nanako was with them, and the scary glare Souji shot him as warning to behave.

"You said it, dude!" Junpei was grinning from ear-to-ear. "Now we have twice the amount of cuties to look at." He yelped loudly when Yukari stomped on his foot.

"Don't get any ideas, Stupei," she growled. "Do something perverted and I'll tell Chidori on you!"

"It's been such a long time!" Minako interjected, not wanting an argument to occur between her friends. "We also met Aigis for the first time there too."

Akihiko, Junpei and Minato groaned at that, particularly at the memory which involved a dare and attempts at picking up random women.

Nanako was holding Minako's hand, the little girl looking particularly cute in a pink summer dress. "I've never been to the beach before," she admitted. "Dad wanted to go on a picnic last year, but he
was called away to work. Big Bro and his friends made it up to me though. Too bad there weren't any packed lunches..."

Souji ruffled her hair. "Don't worry about it. I'll make you as much as you want when we get there, then we'll have a real picnic."

The train finally arrived. The Persona-users hurriedly rushed into the train.

Minato on the other hand, was keeping an eye on his little brother. He was concerned, mainly after how Ikutsuki seemed to recognize him before their Shadow incident two days ago.

...Flashback...

Junpei jumped out of his chair at the mention of the island paradise. "Yakushima, baby! Oh man, that brings back memories..."

"I read about that island in a travel pamphlet once," Yukiko said. "It's supposed to have some of the best beaches in Japan, and the natural beauty is like nothing else."

"I thought the rest of us could use a little vacation after yesterday's incident. I've arranged a three days stay," Mitsuru said, before turning to the leaders. "The three of you must still be exhausted, and the school session is starting soon. We should take this opportunity to recuperate while we still can."

Excited chatters soon broke out.

"Hey, didn't we promise Nanako-chan last year that we'd break a watermelon by the beach?" Chie wondered, but then doubled back when she caught Mitsuru staring at her. "Uhh...I mean if it's okay with you, of course!"

The red-head smiled. "Why wouldn't it be? If her father gives his permission, then I will allow it. The more the merrier, right?"

"So, when do we leave?" Ken asked eagerly. He had never been to a beach outside of Port Island before.

"The day after tomorrow," Mitsuru answered, smiling at the positive reaction she got from everyone.

When the meeting ended, Teddie sprinted out of the inn, excited to tell Nanako the good news. Souji chased after him, since he intended to tell his cousin about the trip after talking with his uncle. The rest laughed and a playful chase ensued.

The twins approached Mitsuru after Yukiko left for her room. "Senpai, there's another reason for this trip isn't it?" Minato asked seriously, loud enough to catch the attention from the rest of SEES.

"You want to go check out the labs there, right? I mean, the chairman is back, so he might try to access any data from the Kirijo Group's files," Minako deduced. "But that doesn't explain how he knew Souji-kun and his parents."

Mitsuru sighed lethargically. "Yes, you are both correct. I want to see if anything has been tampered with over there. Seeing that he was dead, I didn't take the precautions to block any of his access. Now that you mention it, I don't think that it was a coincidence when he suggested we go to Yakushima three years ago." She rubbed her temples, trying to rid of her frustration.
"I see where this is going. He must have purposely orchestrated me crossing paths with Minato-san and Minako-san," Aigis concluded. "And also the meeting with your late father. He had it all planned out, using Yukari-san's father as the scapegoat."

"Please don't mention any of this to Seta and his friends. We should just enjoy what we can before we officially settle here. I have a feeling that things will get worse after the semester starts, and we need to be prepared."

...End flashback...

The train and ferry ride was filled with happy chatter and laughter. Everybody was excited as they got closer and closer to their destination.

Souji smiled. Seeing everybody in such high spirits after everything they had gone through helped him relax.

However, that didn't put his mind completely at ease. There was Ikutsuki and his alleged knowledge of his parents' disappearance, the mysterious butterfly-masked man, and to top it off Izanagi's behavior still puzzled him. After the twins' Shadows were defeated, he resumed talking to his inner self, but there were moments when the Original God remained silent, refusing to speak at all.

A vision flashed through his mind, bits and pieces of hazy memories being played like an ancient film reel.

_He was a toddler, holding hands with his parents. There were men dressed in white, surrounded by weird machines. One of them stepped closer to him, holding out a hand to grab his. For some reason, it made his heart beat faster and his head heavy._

Izanagi got agitated, pounding Souji's head like crazy, as if he wanted to escape his wielder's skull. The silverette pressed the heel of his hand on his forehead and closed his eyes, letting out a small groan.

"Souji-kun, are you okay?" Yukiko asked, drawing some attention towards them.

"I'm fine. Just a small headache..." he assured her. Izanagi quieted down after a minute.

The twins frowned and exchanged looks, but said nothing as to not worry the others, and because they knew Souji wouldn't say what was wrong until he felt the time was right.

Sensing the others were getting concerned, Souji looked out the window and grinned. "Hey guys, we're almost there! Look at that view!"

That turned the mood happy again and they resumed talking about the trip. Souji smiled and joined in the conversation, trying not to think about what just happened.

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_Kirijo Mansion…_

The Investigation Team, including Nanako, Ken and Metis, walked along the halls with their mouths hanging open, staring at the immense wealth the magnificent mansion possessed. They were even more flabbergasted when a group of maids lined up to greet their mistress. Even the younger members of SEES haven't gotten used to it, but their reactions were very much toned down.
"Welcome back, Kirijo-sama. We have the rooms prepared for you and your guests as per your orders."

"Thank you. Please show our guests to their rooms," Mitsuru said curtly. The maids bowed and left.

Yosuke gaped like a fish out of water. "Real life maids… Dudes, I don't think we're on the same planet anymore…"

The others nodded in agreement, still speechless. Kanji had a small nose bleed, earning disgusted comments from his female teammates.

"Damn it…all this fancy stuff and formal shit is giving me allergies…" Shinjiro grumbled, walking off in the directions of their assigned rooms. Souji frowned at his crude words, especially with Nanako in hearing distance.

Akihiko sighed. "I better go with him and keep him out of trouble," he told Mitsuru, and went after his best friend. "Shinji, wait up!"

"Aneki, do you want to share a room with me?" Nanako shyly asked her new 'sister', a small blush tingeing her cheeks.

Minako smiled. "Sure, let's go! If we hurry, we can go for a walk at the beach and collect seashells before dinner." They playfully raced each other to their room.

"If we're choosing roommates then I'm staying with Yukiko," Chie said, already picking up her bag. Yukiko nodded and they both headed off.

"Naoto-kun is mine!" Rise cheered. Nobody missed the mischievous glint in her eye. The Detective Prince shivered. Before she could plead for help, Rise was already dragging her away.

"I'm going with Fuuka then," Yukari said, stretching her stiff muscles. "I'm pretty sure Metis is gonna want to share with Aigis anyway."

Fuuka hummed her agreement. "If you two ever need any help, you can come to me anytime," she told them before leaving with Yukari. The two androids followed before separating to their own room.

"Then I'll be leaving for my own quarters as well," Mitsuru announced. "I still have some work to finish before dinner."

That left the rest in the hallway. Yosuke made a hopeless face and sighed. "Looks like I'll be bunking with Ted. I'm sure you and Minato-san are gonna want to catch up more, partner."

"But I wanted to share a room with Sensei!" Teddie protested. "You never let me have any fun, Yosuke. You meanie!"

A thin vein surfaced on Yosuke's forehead, throbbing dangerously. "And if you don't stop annoying me, I swear I'm going to shave off all the fur from your bear suit when you're asleep."

Teddie paled. "No! Anything but that!" He picked up his bag and scurried to their room.

"That's what I thought," Yosuke grumbled, and headed off.

The others sweatdropped. "Junpei-san, why don't you and Kanji…" Souji stopped midway of his
sentence and reassessed the situation. "Nah, Kanji should take care of Koromaru. He seems to like the little guy a lot."

Kanji kneeled down to scratch Koromaru's ears, his own turning red in a mixture of happiness and embarrassment. "We're gonna have some fun…right, boy?" The Shiba Inu wagged his tail and trotted after him to their shared space.

Junpei grinned at Ken. "Looks like it's just you and me, little dude."

The youngest member didn't really mind; Junpei matured a lot after getting together with Chidori so he wasn't as annoying as before. In fact, he was a lot more fun to talk to.

Only Souji and Minato remained. The former gave the latter a questioning look. "Aniki, what's going on? You've been staring at me all day. Is there something wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong," Minato lied. Until Mitsuru found something definitive, he wasn't going to worry his brother. He patted his shoulder. "Let's get settled in, shall we?"

Souji narrowed his eyes, but followed anyway. As they headed for their room, the visions resurfaced again. Izanagi became agitated, giving his master another headache. 'Damnit, not again!' He held his head. 'Calm down, Izanagi!'

Minato sensed the tension and paused in his steps. "You okay?"

"My headache came back…" Souji groaned, still not ready to tell anyone the real reason for it. The visions slowly faded and Izanagi fell silent once again.

Feeling conflicted, Minato crossed his arms. While knowing something was up, he decided to let it slide for now. "You can ask one of the maids for some aspirin if you need it, but if it still won't stop, you better tell me what's going on," he warned, before resuming his walking.

Staring at his back, Souji sighed and followed. 'Looks like I'm not the only one holding things back…'

After the group unpacked and had dinner, they gathered in the break lounge for some final activities before bed.

Minako was constructing a few bracelets from seashells that she and Nanako gathered from the beach. Metis watched her with great curiosity, fascinated by the variety of different shapes and colors.

Nanako and Ken entertained themselves by playing a board game. As Minako worked on her craft, she took occasional glimpses at the pair; she caught on that Ken would smile whenever Nanako scored a point. She could tell he was letting her win on purpose, and almost melted at the cuteness.

Rise was singing along with the karaoke machine, hitting up one of her idol dance routines. Junpei and Teddie cheering her on. Even though Rise was currently on break from her career during summer, her talent still shined. Minato was chilling on a couch, sharing a tall glass of orange juice with Yukari, who snuggled up next to him as they enjoyed the performance.

At the bar countertop, Aigis and Naoto were having a chess match; the android and young detective were equally matched in the game of wits.

Meanwhile, Akihiko and Kanji were locked in a battle of fists, or rather, an arm wrestling
competition at another table. Chie and Yosuke watched on, noisily making bets on who was going to win. Close enough to observe but far enough to not participate, Shinjiro rolled his eyes at their antics, scratching Koromaru behind the ears as the pooch took a nap on his lap.

On the other side of the lounge, Yukiko and Mitsuru were engaged in a conversation about what activities the group could do during their stay.

Fuuka sat next to them with her laptop. She was chatting online with Natsuki, giggling and blushing whenever her friend brought up the topic of her soon-to-be doctor boyfriend, Keisuke Hiiraga.

Souji was quietly reading a book in the furthest corner of the area, becoming increasingly engrossed in it. It was a sci-fi thriller he had bought at the start of summer but didn't get a chance to read it until now. The plot was fascinating and helped distract him from his concerns and troubled thoughts.

"I win!" Nanako exclaimed triumphantly. The joy didn't last long after she let out a wide yawn.

Souji checked his watch. "Whoa, look at the time." He put his book aside. "Nanako, it's time for bed," he ordered in a tone that almost matched his uncle's.

His cousin gave him a defiant pout, but eventually obeyed when she let out another yawn. The shuffling of her feet woke up Koromaru, who got off his spot and walked up to her. Nanako held his furry face. "Big Bro, can Koro-chan sleep with me?" she asked.

"Of course he can." He took her hand. "Let's get you ready for bed."

Ken stood up and stretched himself. "I think I'll hit the sack too…" he yawned. "The trip here was a really long one."

The others wished them goodnight before Souji led them back to their rooms. As soon as the silverette was out of sight, Teddie's eyes gleamed, a ghost of a devilish grin taking over his face. Without a word, he dashed out of the lounge, surprising everybody.

"What's up with that dude?" Junpei asked.

Yosuke rolled his eyes. "Whatever it is, it can't be good."

A while later, Souji returned. He looked around and noticed someone was missing. "Where's Teddie?"

"Ran out of the room right after you left," Yukari replied. "Anyway, we still got time. What else do you guys want to do?"

A blonde blur crashed into Souji from behind, sending him face first into the ground. "Augh! Teddie!" he groaned as the boy fell on top of him in a rather compromising position.

"Oopsie! Sorry Sensei." Teddie grinned sheepishly as he stood up, cradling an object in his arms with the utmost care.

"Just…try to be more careful, okay?" Souji narrowed his eyes at the thing he was holding on to, pointing at it. "What's that?"

Teddie grinned wildly as he held it out for everyone to see - a cylindrical container filled with chopsticks, labeled with numbers all except one with a red mark. "Ladies and gentleman, the time
has come!" he announced dramatically. "Our trip to Port Island last year was fun, and so is this one. Of course, no trip would be complete without a game of skill and courage! It's time to play… THE KING'S GAME!"

From the looks of his teammates' faces, one might think they had just seen the scariest thing in their existence.

"W-WH-WH-WHAT?!" Chie shouted.

"Are you crazy?! No way I'm going through that crap again!" Yosuke protested, crossing his arms in a huge 'X'.

"U-umm…" Fuuka looked around timidly at her own teammates. "Have you guys played it before?" No one heard her among the commotion their Inaba friends were making.

Rise and Yukiko lowered their heads. Not long ago, they were told about what had happened in Escapade. Needless to say, they were rather embarrassed about it.

Naoto frowned. "I refuse to take part in that nonsense again!" Despite her placid expression, she was trying hard not to lose it.

"Damn right!" Kanji agreed. His face clearly expressed discomfort about that idea for some reason – his red cheeks were a dead giveaway.

Souji sighed again. "Sorry Teddie, but I don't think anyone is willing to play it again."

Teddie's blue eyes became glossy a little too suddenly. "No fair! Nobody wants to play with me..." he whined, bottom lip quivering. "I never get to have any fun!"

Metis and Minako instantly felt sorry for him. "Aww c'mon guys, let's give it a try," the auburn-haired leader encouraged. "I mean, it can't be that bad."

"I want to learn more about that game too. It sounds challenging!" Metis added, red eyes gleaming with excitement. There were some murmurs of agreement and curiosity among them, but definitely none coming from the Investigation Team.

Souji sighed in defeat. How could he say no after being so kindly treated with this trip? "Fine, we'll play..." he begrudgingly agreed.

"YAY!" Teddie squealed, jumping up and down. "We just need some music and drinks!"

"I'll arrange it," Mitsuru said, getting up from her seat. "I'll ask the kitchen to bring us more juice."

Before she could leave, Kanji shyly tapped her shoulder. "Umm… Mitsuru-san…? There will be only juice, as in from a fruit... right?"

The red-head raised an eyebrow at that. "Of course, Tatsumi. Why do you ask?"

"N-no reason…" Kanji went back to his seat, ignoring the stares.

"Dude, what's with the paranoia?" Junpei whispered to Minato.

"Dunno..." the latter shrugged. The lounge turned silent as preparations were made and everyone waited for the refreshments to arrive.

"So, how do we play this anyway?" Shinjiro asked, breaking the ice.
Yosuke began explaining. "See those chopsticks? If you draw one with the red mark, it means you're the King. The other chopsticks have numbers on them. The King then chooses a number and says a dare that person has to do. No one knows who has which number until the King gives out the order, and no take-backs are allowed. You can't refuse the dare either."

"Heh, I ain't the type of guy to back off from a challenge anyway," Akihiko grinned, holding up a tight fist. "Let's do this!"

"Before we start," Souji began, giving Teddie a serious glare. "For the purpose of keeping the peace, I'm setting some extra rules." His team members sighed in relief, knowing their leader would ensure that things wouldn't go crazy like last year's game.

"Of course Sensei," Teddie nodded in agreement, not wanting to anger his beloved leader.

"If the King chooses a dare that involves more than one person, the person who has to do the dare must do it with either their lover or a very close friend in order to avoid jealousy or any awkwardness."

The rest glanced at each other. The couples blushed at that, but agreed that it was fair. In no time everything was set. Seated comfortably, they refreshed themselves with juice.

It was finally time. Teddie passed around the chopsticks. Everyone stared at their respective number, anticipating the order.

"So…" Rise started. "Who's the King?"

Yukari stood up. "That would be me." She looked around to choose a victim. "I choose number 6!"

Junpei jumped out of his seat. "What the hell?!"

"Hehe, this will be good…" She grinned evilly. "Junpei, your challenge will be…! Put an ice cube in your pants, and keep it there until it completely melts!"

"You gotta be kidding me!"

"The King's word is the law! Minato-kun, can you help him out?"

Minato kind of felt sorry for his friend, but now wasn't a time for sympathy. "Sorry man, but she's right, the King's word is absolute." He handed Junpei the ice bucket. "Go ahead."

"Just my luck…" Junpei muttered. He pulled the waistband of his trousers and dropped the ice cube in. At first it was fine, but soon enough the freezing sensation got to him and he started pulling all sorts of weird faces. "C-c-cold!"

Everyone just laughed at him.

"This ain't bad at all," Kanji grinned, seeing it was just a normal prank and began to relax.

Another round of chopsticks were passed around again.

"Looks like I'm next," Minato smirked. "I choose… Number 11! I dare you to moonwalk across this room."

Yosuke stood up. "Heh, piece of cake."

"Pffftt…I bet you can't even get across half," Chie teased.
"Oh yeah? Watch me!" He walked to one end of the lounge and pulled off the moonwalk magnificently. He then smirked at his girlfriend. "A dancer of my talent should be able to bust that move with no problems."

Chie gaped. Yosuke looked... cool... and totally irresistible! Her face remained red for the entire round.

"Alright, next!" Teddie shouted.

"I'm next!" Yukiko giggled. Souji and Chie tensed, wondering if she's drunk already. "Number 15 must imitate someone in this room, and the rest must guess who that person is." They were relieved when that wasn't the case.

Rise got up from her seat and struck a masculine pose. "Watch where you're going, dumbass. I'm walking here!" She was scowling, her voice deep and rough. "Get the hell out of my way before you regret it!" She shook a fist in front of her. And then she acted bashful for some reason, rubbing the back of her head. "Th-this ain't nothin'. It's not like I'm thanking you or anything..."

"That's totally Shinjiro/Shinjiro-senpai/Shinji!" SEES shouted.

"That's totally Kanji/Kanji-kun!" the Investigation Team shouted at the same time.

Suffice to say those two weren't pleased. "Why are you comparing me with this moron?!" they roared in unison, then glared at each other. "Quit copying me, dumbass! What the -? Quit copying me!"

Their friends laughed until their stomachs were sore. Rise grinned. "Actually, I was imitating Kanji, but I guess you two are rather similar in the trash-talking and tsundere department."

Before the two could start a fight, Mitsuru intervened. "That's enough! Onto the next round."

Akihiko didn't waste any time when he got chosen. "Number 4 must do a handstand and last for one minute."

Chie stood up. "What?!" she squeaked.

"You heard me. Or are you chicken, Satonaka?"

The short-haired girl growled. "Fine! You're lucky I can't Galactic Punt you right now. Thank goodness I'm wearing shorts," she mumbled the last part. She had to use the wall for support, but managed to last more than a minute. "Hah, beat that!" she exclaimed in victory.

For the next round, it was Shinjiro's turn as King. "Let's see..." he pondered. "Number 9, I want you to get off your ass and cartwheel across the room."

Akihiko shot up this time. "Are you insane?!" He scowled at his best friend. "The floor is slippery in here. How do you expect me to pull it off?"

"Hey, I don't make the rules here. The King's word is law," Shinjiro grinned sadistically. The others watched in anticipation.

It was Akihiko's turn to growl. Karma can be a bitch, but he had no choice. Taking off his shoes and socks, he attempted the dare on the smooth floor. At the last turn, his hand slipped and he crashed into another sofa, causing everyone to wince at his pain. Shinjiro cackled at his misery instead.
"Shinji, that's not nice!" Minako scolded. "Senpai, are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Akihiko groaned in pain. "I almost twisted my kneecap. Damn it, Shinji, you owe me beef ramen."

"Okie-dokie, it's time to choose the next King!" Rise said, shaking the chopsticks in its container. No one noticed that her cheeks were becoming a little red.

Mitsuru pulled the red chopstick. "Umm...I've never played anything like this before," she said nervously. After thinking for a while, she finally spoke. "Number 3 must be moved from one end of the lounge to the other by their most worthy adversary, by any means necessary." She said it in such a serious and formal manner that the others had to sweatdrop.

"A worthy adversary, huh?" Naoto mused, holding her chin. "Well, I would say Souji-senpai, but that would be breaking the rules. However, I had a fun chess match with Aigis-san just now...so I guess she'll be doing the honors."

"The pleasure is mine, Naoto-san." Aigis replied.

It wasn't difficult for a robot to carry a human of Naoto's size. However, the way she carried the young detective like a sack of potatoes over her shoulder made it funny to watch.

The next King was Minako. She looked around the room at her friends before choosing her target. "Number 5 must tell us where they are most ticklish, and their best friend will do the tickling!"

Fuuka began to panic. "M-M-Minako-chan!"

Minato remembered the secret video he and his sister watched in the command room all those years ago. 'Fuuka, huh? Judging from that video, her reaction will be hilarious!' he chuckled silently.

"Umm...I'm q-quite t-t-ticklish at my m-mid s-s-section," Fuuka stuttered, wondering if Minako had planned this beforehand, because it didn't seem like a coincidence.

Yukari flexed her fingers. "Don't hate me, Fuuka. King's orders!" she smiled and began tickling, focusing particularly on her friend's stomach and sides.

The scanner was convulsing so hard after Yukari was done that the others wondered if she needed medical attention. "I-I'm...I'm okay..." she heaved, trying to get her heart rate under control.

The game picked up after that. Seeing how most of the challenges were rather harmless, the Investigation Team let their guard down. The next King was Kanji, who told number 16 to rest their head on their lover's lap. Number 16 happened to be Metis, but since she didn't have a lover, placed her head on Aigis' lap. She looked quite content, feeling much closer to her sister as the blonde android stroked her hair.

Souji was next. He ordered number 13 (Yosuke) to give a piggyback ride for anyone they wanted. No surprise, he chose Chie. She was embarrassed enough after the dare was completed, but looked like she enjoyed herself.

Chie smirked when she was next. She commanded number 7 to give her a shoulder massage, which happened to be Kanji. "Heh, someone big and strong. I picked a good one for once. What are you waiting for? These shoulders aren't gonna rub themselves, y'know!"

Kanji was hesitant to touch her, but the command and underlying threat in Chie's tone snapped him
out of it. Feeling that a jealous Yosuke was way easier to deal with than an angry Chie, he started his massage. Later when he went back to his seat, he gave his upperclassman an apologetic look. "Sorry man. I know she's your girlfriend and all, but I didn't want to get kicked."

"It's okay Kanji. I wouldn't want to deal with that myself," the brunette admitted.

Metis came next, who challenged number 2 (Souji) to rub noses with their beloved, which Yukiko was more than happy to do. The challenge was innocent enough to say the least.

Not wanting to be left behind, Fuuka told number 1 (Kanji, again) to hug someone. Kanji being his awkward self, decided he should man up by hugging his girlfriend, and silently congratulated himself when he didn't get a nosebleed. Naoto was slightly uncomfortable at the public display, but didn't pull away either, blushing like mad.

Aigis took it up a notch by daring number 10 (Yukari) to sit on his/her lover's lap. Naturally Yukari was embarrassed at first, but Minato didn't mind. In fact, he enjoyed how nervous she was as he snaked his arms around her, causing her to squeak.

When it was Naoto's turn as King, her eyes had a mischievous glint. "As revenge for spying on me and Kanji-kun before the summer festival, I dare number 8 to kiss their very special person in front of everyone!" she declared proudly. Much to her dismay, she could tell her plan was about to quickly backfire when Teddie enthusiastically jumped out of his seat.

"But everyone is my bear-y special person. It's your lucky day, Nao-chan, because I choose you!" Teddie closed his eyes and puckered his lips, making his way towards her.

"Like hell you are!" Kanji roared. Using his quick reflexes, he pulled Naoto onto his lap. The blonde then clumsily tripped on his feet and landed on Rise. Her eyes widened to its fullest when she felt his lips on hers. Her brain disconnected for a while, wondering what on earth was going on.

When Teddie started to wrap his arms around her, Rise finally snapped. With all her might, she punched him right in the gut, earning a loud wail from the human Shadow.

Kanji laughed out loud as Teddie hit the floor, until Rise changed targets and kicked him hard in the right shin. He howled in pain and stood up, forcing Naoto off his lap. "What was that for?!"

Rise glowered at him. "For letting that perverted bear kiss me!" She gave him another kick, but Kanji did a good job of holding back his cries of pain this time.

He started to panic when she began to cry. "Hey, what's wrong with you!?" Uncertain about how to pacify her emotions, he began making weird gestures with his hands, unsure of what to do. But he did notice that her face was becoming rather red.

Rise abruptly pushed him aside and went to hug Naoto, who just stood up and dusted her pants. "Naoto-kun, I'm so proud of you~" she slurred, swaying back and forth, pulling the young detective with her in an awkward waltzy embrace. "You remembered *hic* the rule...about how the... next *hic* dare should be more daring than the last. I never thought that you'd come up with *hic* something like that!"

This was the perfect time for one of Yosuke's 'Oh shit!' moments. "Nobody was supposed to know about that!" He wildly waved his arms in denial, earning strange looks from the other team.

The looks on Naoto and Chie's faces were akin to that of horror. Kanji quickly jumped over the sofa to hide behind it. Teddie, who was still on the floor, let out a giddy belly laugh.
"Wait a minute…is she drunk again?!" It was Souji's turn to panic. He turned to his girlfriend and sure enough, Yukiko started to hiccup and giggle uncontrollably, her cheeks a dark, rosy red. "Damn it, I shouldn't have let my guard down!"

The bizarre turn of events had SEES even more confused and slightly frightened.

"What the hell?" Shinjiro snatched a glass off the coffee table and sniffed its content. "Doesn't smell anything like booze… Oi Mitsuru, are you sure this is juice?"

She frowned. "I personally made sure. What's going on here?"

Instead of answering, what Souji asked next didn't help the situation either. "Was this room used to entertain people and serve alcohol at some point?"

"My late father used it to entertain his favorite clients in the past. But that was a long time ago. Why?" Mitsuru was taken aback when Souji, Yosuke, Kanji, Chie and Naoto groaned and face-palmed.

Akihiko raised an eyebrow. "Hey, has this happened before?"

Before anyone could answer his enquiry, Teddie shot up from the floor and laughed like a hyper child on sweets. "Let's get on with the game!" he cried, snatching everyone's chopsticks out of their hands and jumbled them up in the container. And just like that, the situation went from harmless fun to extremely awkward. Everyone hesitantly took a chopstick as Teddie passed it around, whereas SEES were still confused at what the hell was happening.

Yosuke was the next King. He was sweating profusely as Rise and Yukiko glared at him with scorching intensity, promising him pain if he screwed the game up or broke the rules. In his state of distress, he blurted the first thing that crossed his mind. "Number 14, you are to take off your partner's shirt!"

Everyone except the drunkards and Metis blushed.

"Yay! I'm the lucky one again!" Yukiko cheered, waving her chopstick. "Not that it's something I haven't seen." She winked sultrily at Souji.

Rise fell asleep in an upright position on her seat, snoring lightly. Souji let out a relieved sigh. 'One less person to see me topless, I guess...' he thought. He faced Yukiko. "Ready when you are."

It was agonizing torture for him as Yukiko slowly unbuttoned his shirt. The heat between them was growing uncomfortable that he had to grit his teeth. The raven-haired girl didn't notice any of this in her tipsy state. When she finally unhooked the last button, she pushed to fabric off his body to reveal a well-toned chest and muscled arms. If possible, the sober girls blushed even harder. A pink tinge dusted Metis' cheeks.

The sexual tension was getting unbearable and Yosuke had to scream "LET'S CHOOSE THE NEXT KING!" to get everybody's attention. Rise who woke up with a start. Souji quickly put his shirt back on before Yukiko could do anything else.

"I thought I would never get chosen!" Junpei smiled widely as he showed off the King's chopstick. His grin twisted into that of a pervert as he gave the order. "Number 3 must transfer all of the juice in this glass -" He filled an empty glass with juice. "Have their partner drink it -" He paused for effect, "- without the use of any utensils!"

Rise and Teddie clapped for the unfortunate victim, which happened to be Shinjiro. "How the heck
am I supposed to do that?" he questioned irritably.

"I dunno, Senpai. Figure it out yourself." Junpei grinned, waggling his eyebrows. "King's orders."

Shinjiro was tempted to punch him in the face, because he just figured what Junpei wanted him to do. "I'm not doing anything like that!" The second those words left his mouth, he was subjugated to the same scathing stare that Yosuke got, along with Teddie's whines of disappointment, which in his opinion, was a lot more annoying.

"Just do it, Shinji!" Akihiko groaned, covering his ears. "I'm pretty sure he's not gonna stop until you do."

Minako could only stare at the floor, her entire face strawberry-red with embarrassment. 'Junpei-kun is so gonna get it later!'

"Minako," Shinjiro's voice cut through her murderous thoughts. He pulled her up from her seat so that she was standing in front of him, the glass of juice in one hand. "Let's get this over with. That bear is starting to annoy the hell outta me," he told her, rubbing the back of his neck.

She noticed the slight blush on his cheeks, and giggled softly. 'He's just too cute…'

Tilting the glass to his mouth, Shinjiro drank about half of its content but didn't swallow. He gently grabbed Minako's head with his free hand and placed his lips on hers. Understanding what he was doing, Minako parted her own lips and accepted the liquid, letting it flow slowly down her throat as she gulped. In her opinion, the juice that had been warmed from his mouth tasted so much better than drinking it cold from a glass. After three rounds of mouth-to-mouth transfer, the dare was complete. Still in a daze after they parted, the couple were in their own little world...

Until it was broken by a chorus of "They lllllooooovvve~~ each other!" by Yukiko and Rise.

Minato and Souji stared dumbly. It wasn't like they haven't seen their sister kissing her boyfriend before, but seeing it this up close was rather mind-boggling.

"How come Mina-chan gets to kiss but I don't?" Teddie griped, crocodile tears starting again.

"Maybe we should stop here -" Souji began. His intention was for the game not to get awkward, but the next dare would sure to go beyond that.

"NO!" The blonde stopped his melodramatic crying and snatched all the chopsticks, furiously mixing them up.

"Stupid bear is getting way too serious," Yosuke muttered, wishing that Teddie would pass out already. Too bad that wasn't happening anytime soon.

Everyone waited with bated breath for the next King to announce his/her identity. Rise gave it away when she started to chuckle rather loudly. "I'm the King...the King~" she sang. She stood up and did a little pirouette. "As King...Queen...whatever! I decree that number 5 must lay on top of their lover!" (A/N: double meaning on 'lay')

Mitsuru spit out her drink, her face the color of her hair. Even Junpei had the decency to look embarrassed. Kanji was pinching his nose, and the others were right there with him.

"I take it that it's you *hic* right Mitsuru-san?" Rise slurred, face warm. "I think that *hic* order came out wrong. What I meant was, you have to *hic* sit on top of Akihiko-senpai for say...seven minutes?" She giggled some more and flopped back on her seat drunkenly.
"Th-that's highly inappropriate behavior!" Mitsuru almost shrieked.

"Nooooo take-backssss~" Rise mumbled before falling asleep once more.

Akihiko got up. "S-so…how d-do you want to do th-this?" he asked his girlfriend. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get rid of his blush.

"Umm…just lie down on the floor, and I'll s-sit on your b-back…" Mitsuru stuttered. "Arisato, p-please take note of the t-t-time." Minato gave her a thumbs-up as Akihiko placed himself on the floor, lying on his stomach. He supported his head with his forearms.

Like Souji, this was the worst possible torture for Akihiko. He was sweating with anticipation, waiting for Mitsuru to sit on him. When he felt something soft touch his hard back, his body temperature skyrocketed. He thumped his forehead on the cool floor, hoping to gain some control over his traitorous hormones. 'At least the floor is clean…' he thought sarcastically.

Mitsuru was a little hesitant to place her entire weight on him, but she constantly reminded herself how strong he was and fully placed herself on the middle of his back. 'I hope he's alright…'

If Akihiko thought that his situation was unbearable, for the sober ones it was downright frustrating. They scrunched their faces in discomfort as wave after wave of sexual tension slapped them in the face. Minato was silently berating his watch, wishing it would go faster and get them out of this mess. Even Shinjiro felt sorry for his friend and held his tongue. Only Rise's snoring could be heard.

Unsettled about the silence, Mitsuru softly asked Akihiko if he was alright, twisting her torso a little to place both her hands on his shoulders, lightly pressing the tense muscles there. Despite hiding his face in his arms, Akihiko's face grew redder than humanly possible.

Junpei was the first one to speak, unperturbed by the scene at all. "Hahaha! Dude, check out Akihiko-senpai's face…it's as red as Mitsuru-senpai's hair!" He nudged Minato in the ribs to get his attention. "No wonder he likes that color so much, eh? Look, he's almost glowing in the dark!"

Metis giggled softly at Junpei's joke, and tension eased enough that others were slightly amused. The couple on the floor tried to ignore the snickering.

3…2…1!

Minato finally announced that their time was up, earning relieved exhales. If that went on any longer, they would have fled the room!

Rise woke up with an unladylike snort, and realized she didn't get to watch her dare. "Huh, it's over already?" she whined sleepily.

By now Souji saw that things were spiraling downhill. He had to do something before it got completely out of control. 'Shit, this is even worse than last year…' A sudden thought hit him. 'Oh crap, Teddie hasn't become King yet. If he does, we're all screwed…' Quickly scanning around the room, he noticed the other guys were silently watching the human Shadow like hawks. 'Guess I'm not the only one worried.'

Said Shadow/human/bear was watching every round unfold with heightened anticipation, hoping to finally get his turn. This made Souji extra suspicious. 'He is behaving so far. But Teddie is innocent one minute and devious the next…'

"C'mon! One more! One more!" Teddie gaffawed, shaking the container while Yukiko and Rise
cheered.

The sober ones of the Investigation Team were close to panicking, while SEES were still confused as hell and uncomfortable at how things were developing. The twins were starting to wonder if they should interrogate Souji about the previous King's Game some time tomorrow.

"Draw your chopsticks!" Teddie ordered, passing them around. "Choose your destiny!"

They hastily did so, hoping things wouldn't get any worse.

"Who's the *hic* King?" Rise slurred.

Silence. The atmosphere was a mix of dread and suspense until…

"Mine's red! Red!" Teddie cheered, jumping and bouncing around. "I'm the King!"

A wave of groans and protests echoed throughout the room. Souji sighed in defeat. "Let's just get this over with already."

Teddie stood in a regal pose. "I, the King, hereby declare that all commoners present in this room must do everything that I, King Teddie, order them to do for the next entire hour!"

Everybody's jaws dropped and their eyes widened. Even Yukiko and Rise sobered up in an instant.

"What are you peasants looking at? A King's order cannot be denied!" Teddie pompously huffed. He looked serious and didn't sound drunk anymore.

Everyone was caught off guard. They expected some kind of misuse of power, sure, but for Teddie to take full advantage of the King's game like this? Nobody anticipated it.

"Tell me this ain't real," Kanji groaned, wiping his face down. "This can't be legal..."

"How the hell did we let this happen!!" Yosuke wailed, attempting to rip his hair out. "You…you planned this all along! You conniving sack of honey!"

"Whoa! Smooth move, dude!" Junpei praised, immediately receiving hateful glares. "What? I at least gotta give him some credit for pulling this off."

Teddie puffed out his chest, holding his chopstick as if it was a scepter. "Thank you, Junpei! For your loyalty, you shall become my champion knight!"

"Sweet! This is even cooler than those MMORPG's!" He then bowed low like a royal servant. "Thank you, Junpei! For your loyalty, you shall become my champion knight!"

"Sweet! This is even cooler than those MMORPG's!" He then bowed low like a royal servant. "I mean, thank you Your Majesty."

The others sweatdropped. "You're actually enjoying this?" Yukari asked in disbelief. "That's Stupei for you..."

"Lighten up, Yukari-cchi. It's just a game of roleplay, no different than those TV dramas you girls like to watch."

Seeing that his friends were hesitant in playing along, Teddie started throwing a tantrum like a bratty child that doesn't get his way, forcing everyone to cover their ears.

Minato rolled his eyes. "Let's just amuse him, okay? The sooner we do what he wants, the faster this is over." Without any another options, they agreed.
Teddie did a complete one-eighty and squealed with joy. "Yay! This calls for a celebration!" At their confusion, the blonde's grin became wider. "Fear not, my loyal knights and fair maidens, for King Teddie has already provided the perfect outfits for you all!"

'This can't be good...' everybody but Junpei thought.

Teddie pulled several bags from behind a couch and handed one to each person in the room. "Wear this! I'm sure you all will love it!"

Mitsuru glanced inside the bags. There was something familiar about them. "Now where have I seen these before?"

"Try it out! Try it out!"

Having no choice, the girls went to another room to change while the guys did so in the nearby living room. The karaoke lounge's lights were turned off to set the mood for the King's Game and Teddie insisted to keep it that way, so the others couldn't see what they were wearing until he was ready.

When they opened the bags and saw what they had to wear, everyone (sans Junpei) thought the same thing - 'I'm going to murder that bear!'

Despite not wanting to, they put the clothes on anyway and headed back to the lounge, where they found that the couches had been moved and formed a heart shape outline. At one end, Teddie was donned in his bear suit, seated on the most comfortable armchair, wearing a paper crown on his head and a red blanket adorned with gold and silver stars as a cape. The only dim light source in the room was a tall lamp he placed behind his chair, giving him a look of faux superiority.

"Welcome to King Teddie's Heart Table, my loyal subjects," the bear greeted with a cheeky grin. "I see that I have chosen the right outfits for all of you." He clapped his hands twice and the lights flickered on.

The girls gasped. The guys' eyebrows twitched. All of them were dressed as butlers and maids. Save from Metis and Aigis, the girls were blushing in different intensities while out of the guys, only Junpei seemed comfortable with his outfit, even taking off his top hat and bowed like an English gentleman.

"Teddie, where did you find these?" Rise asked, rather annoyed.

"In one of the bedrooms! I found them when I got lost looking for the kitchen to make a snack earlier."

Yukari glared lightly at Mitsuru. "Senpai, why did you keep these outfits?"

"I… I didn't have the heart to throw them away…"

"What's so bad about these outfits? It's rather comfortable." Metis cutely spun around, causing a few of the guys to blush.

The girls exchanged glances. "M-Metis, you see, maid and butler outfits aren't something you can use all the time..." Fuuka tried to explain.

She didn't seem convinced. "Why not? My sister said you wore those outfits several times while exploring Tartarus."
The Inaba girls' eyes widened and the older girls blushed some more. "W-wait, you guys had to wear weird outfits too?!!" Naoto flustered.

Yukari sighed. "Those were Minato-kun and Minako-chan's idea." She glared at the twins. "Sometimes I think they misuse their position as leaders to get us to wear these, and a few others which I don't want to mention…"

Chie threw a dirty look at the silverette. "Souji's the same…"

The Wild Cards smiled sheepishly. "Hey, we only found them randomly. It's not like you can't blame us for existing or for being effective armors," Minato reasoned.

Kanji ran a hand through the lapels of his suit. "He's right though," he said, sounding impressed. "But I gotta say, this is some really quality fabric here. It's strong and sturdy material, good enough to be used as armor yet light enough not to hinder in battle." Everybody stared at him weirdly. "What?! I live in a textile shop. I gotta know this stuff!"

Minako giggled. "Kanji-kun's right. They work affectively as armors. Besides, when we were short on money, we had to improvise."

"Yeah. We often found unusual outfits during our explorations too. Some could be used underneath our uniforms, while some couldn't." Souji rubbed the back of his head. His team would probably kill him if he mentioned that he deliberately bought some of the costumes, so he kept mum about that particular info.

Teddie's sharp claps caught their attention. "Enough idle chatter! Your King has orders for you to carry out!"

"And what do you want, your M-ass-jesty?" Yosuke hissed with a hint of sarcasm that his foster brother failed to notice.

"The King is hungry and thirsty!" He shot a look at Minato, Souji and Shinjiro. "I order you three to make me a tasty snack and a delicious drink!"

"How 'bout a big knuckle sandwich, ya little-' Shinjiro stepped forward menacingly, but was stopped by Souji who grabbed his shoulder and shook his head. The older teen was disgruntled to say the least. "Tch, whatever, 'King'."

They then left for the kitchen, Shinjiro muttering several expletives along the way. Teddie then turned to Rise and Yukari. "Oh fair maidens with beautiful voices, entertain the King with some singing." He then turned sharply to Yosuke and Kanji. "As for the two of you, I order you to dance lead by Sir Junpei!"

"D-dance?! That ain't my thing!" Kanji protested. "So much for my pride…"

"Or what's left of it after last year…" Yosuke snickered.

"Shut the hell up before I punch that mug of yours!"

Luckily for Yosuke, Junpei came to his rescue. "Bros, bros, cut it out! We're here to have fun, not punch our buddies! Even the toughest of men gotta know when to get their groove on every now and then."

Kanji cocked his head in thought. "I…guess…?"
Junpei grinned and turned to Yosuke. "C'mon dude, you said you were good at dancing, didn't ya? You can nail this just fine!"

A smirk of pride lit his voice. "Fine, just try and keep up with me."

Rise and Yukari sweatdropped as Yosuke taught the other two some simple dance steps. "What a bunch of idiots..." Yukari groaned.

"It's a guy thing. No point in trying to understand them," Rise said.

Teddie tapped his foot impatiently. "Ahem! The King said he wanted some singing!"

The two girls glared at the bear, before making their way to the karaoke machine. Once it was up and running, they started off with one of Rise's hit singles while Yosuke, Junpei and Kanji acted as backup dancers, making it quite a sight to behold.

It wasn't half bad, but Chie couldn't help rolling her eyes. "Ugh... how did it come to this?"

"Now this is some high-quality entertainment!" Teddie clapped his hands in delight before he laid eyes on Fuuka. "Oh, Fuuka-chan~ Can you give me a shoulder rub, please? Being a king can be so tiresome..."

"Uhh um... O-Okay..." the teal-haired girl said shyly. She walked over and stood behind Teddie. In his bear suit, he was the only one she could loom over, and was a bit pleased by that. "Ah... where are your shoulders, Teddie-kun?" When he didn't answer, she continued, "Hm... Where does it hurt? Where should I massage you?"

"Oh, anywhere you like, Fuuka-chan ~ " His tone was subtly lecherous, blushing in a way that didn't look innocent at all. After hesitating another moment, Fuuka placed her hands just below Teddie's head and began making light, circular motions with her fingertips. She looked quite uncomfortable.

"Ooooo, Fuuka-chan...! This is even better than that chair at Junes!" he purred, eyes closed in content, not before taking a glance at Yukiko. "Say, it's kinda warm in here... Cool me, Yuki-chan."

Yukiko drew out her fan. "Fine..." she gumbled. In her mind she was scheming several ways to get back at him for this. 'When I get my hands around his little neck...!'

"Ahhh... This is the life..." Teddie sighed contently, enjoying the cool breeze before turning his attention to Chie and Mitsuru. "The King now wants some petting! Can you and Mitsu-chan do the honors, Chie-chan?"

Chie cracked her knuckles. "It'll be my pleasure..."

Mitsuru wasn't pleased, especially since Teddie had ice-immune abilities just like her and would not be effected by her ice powers.

Both girls started stroking his fur, Chie harder than Mitsuru, but Teddie didn't seem to mind at all. "Oh, Chie-chan, Mitsu-chan, you have angel hands..." he cooed. 'Good thing I have my suit on,' he silently added.

Chie growled in frustration. 'Grrr... When this is over, you're so gonna get it, Teddie!'

Souji, Minato and Shinjiro returned with a tray of sandwiches, a bowl of grapes and strawberries
and a glass of smoothie. They sweatdropped at the scene before them. 'On the bright side, Ryoji isn't here to screw things up even further...' Minato thought sarcastically.

Souji cleared his throat to get Teddie's attention. "Sorry to interrupt, but your meal has arrived, Your Majesty."

"Good timing. Thank you, Sensei!" He stared at the girls surrounding him. "You may stop for now. Just sit beside me and look pretty like you always do." He giggled like a little kid. "I feel like a hot stud already!"

Fuuka blushed deeply, Chie and Yukiko growled, and Mitsuru held back a frustrated groan and the bubbling desire to execute the blue-furred creature for his behavior as they took their seats.

Teddie turned to Aigis and Metis. "After a good massage, the King's fur must be brushed to become extra shiny and fluffy! Ai-chan, Metis-chan, brush me!" Without a word, the sisters obeyed. Neither of them seemed annoyed at doing such a task.

"Ahhh… This is even better than those spas they show on TV." He closed his eyes. "Bring me my meal!"

The three guys walked up to him, but were rudely halted. "Not you!" Teddie pointed to Minako and Naoto. "Them! I want Nao-chan to serve me my drink and Mina-chan to feed me!"

Naoto fought the urge to shoot him while Minako tensed, but not too much. "I knew we wouldn't be let off the hook so easily, huh?" the latter sighed. "C'mon, Naoto-chan, let's feed His Majesty."

"Fine…!" Naoto agreed through clenched teeth and took the smoothie from Minato's hands.

Minako took the tray of sandwiches and bowl of fruits from Shinjiro. "It's okay, it won't take long," she whispered and gave him a playful wink.

Her cheerful attitude managed to calm Shinjiro down a little bit, though he wasn't comfortable with their situation at all.

The two girls then made their way to Teddie to feed him, but he was having trouble getting in a comfortable position. "Ngh…this isn't working..." He fidgeted around in his seat. "Sir Akihiko, come here!"

Disgruntled, Akihiko did so. "Yes?"

"On fours!"

The former athlete blinked dumbly, confused. "What?"

"I said, on fours!" Teddie repeated, pointing to a spot on the floor in front of him.

Akihiko clenched his fists, clearly pissed, but got on his hands and knees. Next thing he knew, he could feel some weight landing on his back. His eyes widened– Teddie was using him as a foot stool! "You gotta be kidding me!" Humiliation flooded his cheeks. "If it was Mitsuru, I wouldn't be complaining that much..." he grumbled under his breath.

The guys felt awful. Their situation was bad, but Akihiko's was so degrading that not even Junpei found it funny.

"Ah, that's better..." the bear sighed, ignoring his foot stool's predicament. "Please ladies, my
Minako decided that she didn't like this game anymore, but was powerless to stop it. She frowned as she handed a sandwich to Teddie's hungry mouth, while Naoto held up the straw for the smoothie. He slurped noisily.

"Is it just me, or does the food taste even better when you're feeding me, Mina-chan?" He talked while his mouth was full, and winked at her. "Ooooh, I'd like some grapes now."

Not far, a certain butler was trying his hardest to suppress the need to strangle the human Shadow as he watched his girlfriend serve fruit to the stupid bear.

"Nao-chan, lift the straw higher. A king of my importance need not bend down like a petty commoner!"

Kanji was seeing red. 'One of these days, I'm going to dress that fuzz ball in a maid outfit and see how he likes it!' he promised himself. He smirked as an image of human Teddie cross-dressing as a French maid doing chores for their school and shops around Inaba came to mind.

"Ahhh, this is the life! A bear can sure get used to this!" Teddie crossed his short legs on Akihiko's back. "Ladies, be a dear and sit quietly like Fuuka-chan, Mitsu-chan, Yuki-chan and Chie-chan. Let the boys take away the dirty dishes." He waved a hand in a lazy fashion to emphasize his order.

Souji, Minato and Shinjiro growled, but complied. They took the dirty dishes back to the kitchen and returned a minute later.

Teddie got to his feet, relieving Akihiko of his shame. "Now, for the highlight of the hour!" He went behind his 'throne' and pulled out more bags. "My faithful subjects, you have proven yourselves worthy of the great King Teddie. In order to prove yourselves even further, all of you are to put on a fashion show in my honor!"

The girls of the Investigation Team immediately became wary at that idea. "You're not gonna pull anything like the school's beauty pageant, are you Teddie?" Chie asked, ready to give him a good punt.

"Nonsense, Chie-chan!" Teddie replied nonchalantly as he handed out the bags. "Aren't we going to the beach tomorrow? I can wait, you know. You're gonna be in swimsuits there all day long!"

As perverted as that sounded, he did have a point. 'Well, at least this can't get worse than maid outfits...' the girls assumed, exchanging suspicious glances with each other.

"While you ladies go get ready, they will set the catwalk for your glorious show." Teddie turned to the guys. "Get to work, peasants! Chop chop!"

Muttering curses and angry growls, the young men got to work moving the carpets and couches to create a stage for the fashion show. The girls sighed and left to change.

The 'King' got back on his 'royal' seat. "Now, Sir Junpei. As my champion knight, you are also my wing man. That means you must announce each girl as they walk in, got it?"

"Alright! This is gonna be awesome!" Junpei cheered.

"How come he gets the easy work?" Yosuke complained as he helped the guys moved furniture around.
"Because he's as dirty-minded as that overgrown stuffed animal!" Shinjiro grunted.

"When I get my hands on that spoiled brat..." Akihiko hissed, his fists itching to destroy something.

"Not if the girls get to him first, Senpai," Minato reminded slyly.

"If he survives that, I'll take care of the leftovers," Souji muttered with a dark undertone. "You have my word."

Kanji shuddered. "When Senpai says he'll do it, he'll do it alright. Teddie's really gonna get it this time..."

It didn't take long for the improvised catwalk to be ready. Several carpets were joined together as the runway, and rows of chairs on both sides were placed so the audience could watch the models walk. "It's show time!" Teddie cheered. He turned to door of the room where the girls were. "Are you girls ready?"

"Like we had a choice!" Naoto shouted from the changing room.

"Sir Junpei?"

Junpei nodded with a grin, a hairbrush in his hand as a pretend-microphone. "Ready when you are." He cleared his throat. "Ladies and gentleman, King Teddie's very first Yakushima Fashion Show is about start. Tonight, we feature the most beautiful, elegant and amazing girls from both Iwatodai and Yasoinaba! So fellas, open your eyes wide, get your cameras ready and prepare yourselves for one heck of a show!"

Junpei's enthusiasm regarding the whole thing was perplexing his friends. Then again, he wasn't the jokester of SEES for nothing.

"And now, for our first lady to walk in... Say hello to Chie Satonaka!" Junpei announced as the door opened. "Ohooo! Looks like Christmas came early this year!"

Everybody's eyes turned to the door as Chie walked in. She was wearing a red mid-thigh length dress which covered her decently, red high heel boots and a Santa hat. Her walking was rather stiff and a tad clumsy, since she had no real experience with high-heeled footwear, but she managed to keep a feminine pose and pass through the entire catwalk without stumbling.

"What d'ya think, Yosuke? Can she pack one heck of a kick with that outfit or what?" Junpei wagged his eyebrows at his fellow Magician.

Said Magician was too busy staring at his girlfriend to reply. 'Man, she looks so hot in that outfit... I mean, just look at those nice, smooth legs...!' He kept his thoughts to himself though, going as far as to keep both hands on his mouth so he wouldn't blurt out anything stupid and bring forth her wrath upon him later.

Chie was aware of the stares, but Yosuke's gaze was all she could focus on. 'I hope he likes what he's seeing, because I'm not doing this ever again!' Somehow, her desires were contradicting her thoughts.

"Oh, Chie-chan, you look marvelous! If I be a good bear will you give me a nice present?" Teddie winked at her, bouncing on his seat.

Chie and Yosuke glared at him. 'Hell no, you sneaky fur ball!'
Thinking fast, Junpei acted. "Thanks, Chie! Now for our next model..." He glanced at the door and grinned. "Ooohh yeah! Looks like we've got a double performance now! Say hello to our dear scanners Fuuka Yamagishi and Rise 'Risette' Kujikawa!"

Fuuka and Rise walked in. Fuuka wore a long red gown with a red Christmas shawl and a white jasmine flower adorning her teal-blue hair. Rise's dress had short sleeves with an even shorter skirt and a big bow on her bust, paired with thigh high pink and white stripped socks and ballerina flats. Her pigtails were tied with two identical ribbons. It was quite the contrast seeing the two walking side by side: Fuuka wasn't used to attention, fidgeting all the while. Rise was more flamboyant as she was used to being on stage, so it came naturally for her.

"Whoa... you two look so... so... nice! Fuuka and Risette! What a great combo! You girls should wear this more often!"

Fuuka blushed and quickly hid behind Rise.

"Junpei! One more bad comment and I'm telling Chidori on you!" Yukari's voice hollered from behind the changing room door.

Junpei gulped. "Anything but that!" His panicked plea earned some snickers from the guys.

Rise giggled and winked at him. "Don't worry, Junpei-san. I get that a lot." She turned to Fuuka. "But she does look great, huh?"

"R-Rise-chan!" Fuuka squeaked.
'I really didn't want any attention wearing these clothes...even if they are beautiful. I thought if Rise-chan came with me they'd focus more on her rather than me...'

"C'mon Fuuka-chan, don't be shy. You look smashing!" the 'King' assured her. "And so does Rise-chan. This is such a treat! It's even better than last year's beauty pageant!"

Fuuka turned redder than what was humanly possible. Rise threw a him dirty look. She wouldn't admit out loud that she liked the outfit, but him taking advantage of them kind of ruined it for her.

"Alright! Thank you, ladies. On with the show!" Junpei continued. "Our next girl is our gracious host, so let's welcome the one and only...Mitsuru Kirijo!"

Mitsuru walked in with a confident yet arrogant stride, her hips swaying gracefully. She was wearing a strapless red knee-length gown with red high heels and a Santa hat.

"Oh wow, Senpai! You look so graceful!" the host turned to Akihiko. "Don't you think so, Akihiko-san?"

The boxing-champ said nothing but stare at his girlfriend. Though it wasn't the first time he saw her wearing that outfit, he couldn't help but admire her natural beauty.

Mitsuru on the other hand, willed hard not to blush with the way Akihiko was staring at her. 'This is so embarrassing... Quit staring at me like that!'

"My, my, Mitsu-chan, you really are a beauty queen. I must be in heaven because I'm surrounded by angels~" Teddie purred.

"Hmph!" Mitsuru turned her nose away as she took her seat. 'The nerve! When this is over, I'll give him the worst execution ever!'

Junpei and the others gulped, shivering slightly as the temperature dropped, and the slight tingle of
electricity in the air. "Ehehe! Our next model is… Alright, another double feature! I'm happy to announce our favorite Anti-Shadow Suppression Weapon sisters, Aigis and Metis!"

Metis got hit by stage fright as she stood by the doorframe. Not only didn't she know what a fashion show was, she also felt rather out of place and intimidated of being stared at. "I… I don't know if I can do this…” she whimpered. Aigis gently grasped her hand. "Sister?"

"It's okay. We can do this together."

Feeling more confident with her sister by her side, Metis nodded. "H-hai!" She let herself be pulled and guided through the runway.

Aigis wore a red knee-length long sleeved dress with a white puffy headband, while Metis' dress was a shorter, sleeveless version, with red gloves and red and white earmuffs. Though they still had a robotic-like walk, it was done with a semblance of grace and consistancy.

Junpei grinned. "Wow…! You two look so cute. Especially you, Met-chan."

Said android blinked at the nickname. She didn't dislike it, but it gave her a weird, warm feeling inside; the same feeling she had whenever she was with Aigis, or playing with Nanako, or spending time with their leaders. It was the feeling of belonging. "T-Thank you, Junpei-san…"

Teddie clapped his hands. "I agree with Sir Junpei! You two are heavenly beautiful! Truly wonderful! I feel like I could stare at you two all day long~"

Aigis narrowed her eyes in mild annoyance. The creature was acting too much like a certain person she knew, and she didn't like how he was flirting with her sister. 'Do all Shadows with human appearance behave like this, I wonder?'

"This just keeps getting better and better!" the appointed MC crowed. "Next girl to do the walk is our number one detective! Welcome…Naoto Shirogane!"

Everybody's eyes turned to the door but no one came out, causing slight confusion. "Huh? Naoto-chan?" Junpei called again.

"I'm not doing this! I'm not walking out wearing…wearing this!" she screeched from the changing room.

Chie rolled her eyes. "Oh great, she's trying to bail out on us again."

"Come on, Naoto-kun, the sooner we get this over with the better it is for everybody!" Yukiko argued back.

"NO!"

"Don't make me get Kanji-kun to drag you out!" Minako threatened.

Kanji stood up at the call of his name. "What the hell?" He was at a loss, not knowing what to do.

"Ugh…! Fine! FINE! Stop pushing me! I'm coming…!"

"Kanji, sit down," Souji calmly ordered, taking something out of his pocket - a handkerchief. "Here."

The tall underclassman sat back down and took the item, knowing what he meant. "Th-thanks,
"Senpai…"

"What's up with that?" Shinjiro asked.

"He's gonna need it. Trust me."

Everybody's eyes turned to the door as the shy figure of Naoto finally made an appearance. She wore a short red, spaghetti-strapped tube top which exposed her belly and arms, red denim shorts which showed off most of her legs, knee-high boots, long gloves and a Santa hat. She was walking rather stiffly and awkwardly, her face a dark shade of crimson.

"Wow Naoto-chan, what a bold choice of an outfit! I like that!" Junpei cat-called.

The amount of skin Naoto exposed was too much for Kanji as his nose started bleeding. Luckily for him, Souji had anticipated that. Using the handkerchief, he quickly stuffed his nose before anybody noticed. 'Dammit, Naoto… Why do ya have to be so… so…socute!'

Naoto's blush deepened. 'K-Kanji-kun, don't stare at me like that… I-I must look horrible…'

"Whoa Naoto-kun…never thought you'd look so hot!" Yosuke complimented. Souji nodded in agreement.

Naoto blushed harder. Kanji glared at Yosuke as if saying "Quit staring at my girl or I'll kick your ass!" Luckily, he quickly got the message and shut up.

"My my, Nao-chan… You're certainly worthy of the title Miss Yasogami 2011. I feel like a VIP for being able to see you like this!" Teddie cheered.

The female detective pulled her hat down with both hands, trying not to scream out in frustration. 'When I'm done with this, you'll be punished severely!' was what she wanted to say out loud, but kept it inside.

"Thank you, Naoto-chan. The next model is..." Junpei paused to the beat of an imaginary drumroll. "Alright! Let's hear it for my good friend, Yukari Takeba!"

Yukari walked down in an off-shoulder red dress paired with a red tank top underneath, short gloves, high heels and a Santa hat. She walked in with the grace and confidence of a real-life runway model.

"Yukari-cchi, my dude! I bet Minato thinks you're super hot right now. Ain't that right buddy?"

Minato couldn't help but smile, clapping in approval. She noticed this and blushed, knees starting to shake. 'Ohhh, why do you have to smile at me like that, Minato-kun...I mean, the clothes are nice, but I'm not fond of wearing these in public…' She gasped. 'What am I thinking?! I'm not fond of wearing these at all!'

"Bravo, Yuka-chan! You're a natural! Such attitude, such poise, such beauty and grace! Oh, how talented you are and how delightful it is to stare at you!"

She wanted to stomp on the bear right then and there. 'Gah, and I thought Junpei was a pervert! He's so gonna get it!' She scrambled to the seated girls, fuming with rage.

Minato was very displeased with Teddie's innuendos to put it lightly. 'Enjoy it while you can, bear… for when this is over, you're in so much trouble!'
"Thanks, Yukari-chi. This is quite a show, huh guys? Let's keep going," Junpei egged on. "Our next model is quite a refined young lady. Say hello to Yukiko Amagi!"

Yukiko's outfit was a red plain halter-neck dress with a big bow on the front, black stockings, red high heels, short gloves and her trademark red headband. Being raised to wear a kimono so often gave her an elegant and natural balance so she had no trouble walking along the runway.

"Wow Yukiko-chan, you're a natural at this!" Junpei praised her. "Hey, Souji, am I right or am I right?"

The silverette wouldn't admit it out loud, but Junpei was indeed, right. 'Red never looked this good. Then again, everything she wears looks good on her.'

Yukiko's face turned redder than her headband at Souji's intense gaze. 'Mou, Souji-kun... why do you have to stare at me like that? I mean, it is a pretty outfit, but... Oh, this is so embarrassing.'

"Yay! Yuki-chan, you're so, so, so, sooooo pretty! So hot! Whoohoo! I'm having the best time ever!" Teddie almost fell off his chair in excitement.

"Eeeek!" she shrieked at that, clearly disturbed by his behavior as she rushed to her seat.

Souji gritted his teeth. 'Even if you're drunk, I can't forgive you for taking advantage of us. Sorry, but I'll have to teach you a lesson when this is over.'

"Now for the cherry on the cake! The last girl to walk in!" Junpei continued. "She's one of our leaders and everybody's best friend! Give it up for... Minako Arisato!"

Minako walked in, donned in a strapless mini dress with long red gloves and matching high-heel boots, and a pair of furry white earmuffs. She walked like usual with a bright smile on her face.

"Mina-tan~ looking good as ever!" Junpei threw a smirk at her boyfriend. "Wouldn't you agree, Senpai?"

Shinjiro had never seen his girlfriend wearing that outfit, since he was in a coma by the time she had found it. 'Where the hell did those come from? And why does it have to show so much skin?!' He was torn between his desires and the need to hide her far, far away. 'Dammit, she's pretty damn cute!'

Minako noticed him ogling her and blushed, giving him a little wave. 'Shinji, I hope you like it!' She was so busy staring at him to watch where she's going. At the end of the catwalk, she tripped on the loose edge of the carpet and stumbled. "Whoa...!"

Souji and Minato quickly jumped out of their seats to catch her, but Shinjiro beat them to it and grabbed her before she could hit the ground and end up with a broken nose.

Minako kept her eyes shut tightly, waiting to hit the floor...but it never happened. She felt strong arms around her waist, supporting her and pulling her up. Slowly opening her eyes, the first thing she saw was Shinjiro staring back at her as he held her gently. "You okay?" he asked.

"Y-yeah..." she blushed, getting back on her feet. "Thanks to you..."

"Tch... What am I gonna do with you?" He tried to sound stern, but the pink hue on his cheeks betrayed him. Minako giggled at that.

Minato and Souji smiled. This was one of the reasons why they approved of her relationship with
Shinjiro; he really knew how to look after her.

"Aww Mina-chan, why does a pretty girl like you have to hug him, but not the King?!!" Teddie whined. "I'm two times fuzzier than he is!"

Minako stuck her tongue out at him and she buried her face into her boyfriend's chest to hide her blush. Shinjiro on the other hand, gave him a murderous glare. He was about to tell the pervo off, even make a rude gesture or two, but Minako's arms around him acted as restraint and cooled down his temper. "Tch…whatever…"

"Hmph! Oh well, I'll let this pass," Teddie pouted. "Thank you, ladies, for the delightful performance! Now, for the second act…"

"Hey, wait a minute!" Yukari stood up, pointing an angry finger at the guys. "How come only us girls have to go through this? Why can't they cosplay too?!"

The girls were in agreement and glared at Teddie, who stroked his chin in thought. "Hm…? Glad you brought that up, Yuka-chan!" A sneaky grin appeared on his face, giving the guys a bad feeling.

"Don't think all of you are out of the woods just yet! The show must go on! My next order is for the men to walk the runway wearing -" He rushed behind his chair and pulled out the outfit of choice for all to see. "These!"

It was a Shirt of Chivalry, or festival jinbei if you want to be technical about it. Everyone except Junpei groaned. The girls giggled – at least Teddie was being fair. "I was saving these for Sensei and the others to wear tomorrow at the beach, but I think you girls deserve a little treat!" he said, grabbing yet more bags.

Yosuke hung his head in shame. "You gotta be kidding me. You guys actually wore those too?"

"Got a problem with that, dude? They're awesome!" Junpei said, pumping a fist in the air. "Kicking Shadow butt had never been so cool!"

"Speak for yourself…" Shinjiro muttered.

"Aw c'mon guys, you looked really good wearing those," Minako praised, smiling at the memory. "I bet Souji-kun and his friends would look great in it too."

"I agree with Minako. Besides…" Mitsuru glowered at them threateningly. "It wouldn't be fair that you all sat back and watch us expose ourselves now, would it?"

The girls' united murderous stares sent shivers down their spines. Unless they were crazy or had a death wish, they didn't dare decline.

"Okay, okay. You girls win," Minato sighed in defeat as he took a bag. "We'll do it…"

Souji sighed and took another. "C'mon guys. Let's go get ready."

The others grabbed the remaining bags and headed to the makeshift dressing room to prepare, Shinjiro and Kanji were muttering curses all the way.

"Mwahaha! This is gonna be good!" Teddie crowed, seated back on his 'throne'.

The girls waited for about 10 minutes. "C'mon! We don't have all night, you know!" Chie called
"We're coming already! Jeez..." came Yosuke's muffled reply.

Rise suddenly had an idea. She walked up to the front of the catwalk and stood beside Teddie. She took the hairbrush Junpei left behind and used it in the same manner. "Okay ladies, I'm taking the host role now!" she announced. "The mistress of ceremony is in the house!"

The girls clapped and cheered, impressed with Rise's enthusiasm. Teddie's eyes sparkled at being so close to her, especially in that short skirt.

"Alright! Now for our man-only fashion show. Exhibit number one, we have our blue-haired, music savvy leader... I'm happy to announce Minato Arisato-senpai!"

Finally, the has begun. As announced, Minato came out first, wearing the traditional Japanese festive set for men, with straw sandals and hachimaki. He walked casually with his hands in his pockets, MP3 player and headphones swinging from his neck, not bothered by the outfit at all.


Hearing that, Minato took a quick glance at his girlfriend and felt his own cheeks heating up. 'Sheesh, now I know how models feel...'

"It seems like the Iwatodai guys are taking the lead. Not that we would have a problem with it. Ain't that right, girls?"

The girls gave an enthusiastic response to that, hooting and cheering. Minato quickly took his previous seat, extremely glad that his turn was over.

"Our next exhibit is a hunk of man-flesh. Too bad he's already taken, ladies. Give it up for Japan's hottest law enforcer of the future, Akihiko Sanada!"

Akihiko walked in. He had a neutral face plastered on. It would seem that he's so used to girls staring at him that he didn't want to waste energy expressing his displeasure. He couldn't help but grin when he caught Mitsuru staring at him unabashedly, inflating his ego a bit.

"Mmm... I can see why he's Gekkoukan's golden boy. He's such a knock-out!" Rise fanned herself with her hand. "Here comes our next contender. Let's welcome the yankee of Gekkoukan, or should I say Yasogami now...Shinjiro Aragaki-senpai!"

The moment Shinjiro stepped out, he scowled at everyone present. Unlike the previous two, he wore a bandana to hold back his long hair instead of a hachimaki. He spotted the object of his loathing - the human Shadow in a bear suit. With purposeful strides, he really did intend to strangle him this time, but was intercepted by Rise. "What are you doing, Senpai? This is a fashion show! You're supposed to walk slower so everyone can admire you in your outfit!" she scolded, hands on her hips.

"I don't have to do anything you say!" he retorted, a huge red mark ticking above his head.

"Not if she has anything to say about it." Rise pointed to Minako, who was watching Shinjiro unblinkingly with her mouth slightly open. "Now go back and start over!"

There was something about the way she was staring at him that sent a tingle of pleasure up his spine. 'Wait, is she... is she drooling?!' Shinjiro was a bit unsure how to feel about it. Reluctantly,
he turned around. "I'm doing this for Minako, and no one else!" he told himself.

"Wow, now I know why Minako-senpai can't take her eyes off him. He's got such a nice ass!"

Minako's cheeks burned in mortification having been caught red-handed. "R-Rise-chan!"

Shinjiro hastily finished and took his seat, clearly uncomfortable at the attention after Rise said that.

The teen idol resumed her commentary. "Okie-dokie, the next guy we're about to see is King Teddie's wing man and ultimate class clown, Junpei Iori!"

Junpei stepped out onto the runway with all the confidence in the world, a stupid grin on his face and his usual baseball cap on. Halfway, he struck a pose like a bodybuilder's, and a few more ridiculous ones after that, all the way to the end. He was clearly enjoying making a fool of himself on stage. Yukari captured every single one on her phone for future use. She needed some ammo if he ever annoyed her again.

"Well…that certainly was…interesting..." Rise said, sweatdropping. She cleared her throat. "So we have seen what Port Island has to offer, and it wasn't disappointing! And now for the delight of us girls, our first contender from Yasoinaba is…" She looked at the door, but there was no one there. "Huh? I said our next contender is…"

The audience could hear them arguing in the changing room.

"You go first, Kanji!" Yosuke said. "I went first the last time!"

"Hell no! Don't blame me for you screwing up last year!" Kanji retorted.

"What?! You were the one that agreed with it, numbskull!"

"And you were the one that got us into that mess in the first place!"

"Will you two shut up already?!" Souji yelled, startling them and everybody else outside. His patience appeared to be running out.

"Listen, I'll go first, Yosuke is second and Kanji is third! Got that?!"

"Yes, sir!" they squeaked, not wanting to anger him any further.

Souji sighed and regained his cool composure before he started walking. Like Minato, he wasn't bothered by the outfit at all.

"Ooooh, Senpai! You look so cool!" Rise fan-girled at the sight. "Right, Yukiko-senpai?"

The other girls nodded in agreement. Yukiko couldn't help but admire how the outfit highlighted Souji's well-toned physique. It looked like every muscle in his abdomen rippled beneath the singlet he wore under the Japanese shirt. It was so impressive she ended up letting out a small squeal, embarrassing herself and her boyfriend.

"Bravo, Sensei! You're the man!" Teddie clapped. "As expected of the 'Amagi Challenge' winner."

Souji smiled at him, but there was something frightening about it, which caused his friends to shudder. Except Teddie, who felt invincible as the King.

"Alright, our next male model is our number one clumsy jokester and future owner of Junes... Give it up for Yosuke-senpai!"
Yosuke walked in, looking a bit awkward and self-conscious.

"C'mon Senpai, you don't look bad at all," Rise winked. "It could be worse, ya know…"

'Well, this certainly beats cross-dressing anytime,' he thought, but it still didn't boost his confidence.

"C'mon dude, this is a hero's armor!" Junpei tried to encourage him. "Gotta look good for Chie-chan, right?"

Yosuke turned his attention to Chie, who seemed to be shyly gawking at him. "Heh, this isn't so bad after all…" he smirked. "Alright, Chie, this one's for you!" At the end of the catwalk, he struck a pose making a peace sign, grinning cheekily and winking at her. While most rolled their eyes, thinking that he was being his silly and cheesy self, Chie smiled back at him, knowing it was his way to show affection.

Rise giggled. "Alright, next one to do the walk is our favorite badass and doll maker! Let's hear it for Kanji-kun!"

Kanji dragged his feet lazily, since he clearly wasn't wholeheartedly into this whole fashion thing. Like Shinjiro, he kept his shirt open so his bare chest was exposed.

"Wow, Kanji-kun, you clean up nice after all…" Rise teased him. He glared at her. "Aww, c'mon, you know it's true. Right, Naoto-kun?"

When he realized that Naoto was, in fact, staring at him with intensity, he could feel the heat of her blushing cheeks burning his skin. Millions of thoughts crossed his mind as he tried to figure out what she was thinking about him, until he felt something warm ran down his nose. "Oh, shi-!" He made a dash to the nearest bathroom.

"Jeez… again?" Yosuke said exasperatedly.

"Does Kanji-kun have some sort of circulatory condition that makes his nose bleed so easily?" Naoto questioned, blissfully unaware of the actual reason.

Rise snickered. "Oh Naoto-kun, you're so naïve."

"What's that supposed to mean? Do you know something that I don't?"

"Hehehe, not at all!" Rise said slyly, trying to change to subject.

Naoto, however, was unconvinced. Before she could further question Rise, Kanji came back, blowing his nose into some toilet paper. "Damn nosebleeds…” he muttered.

"Are you okay, Kanji-kun?" she asked.

"Y-Yeah… J-just a stupid nosebleed. N-no big d-deal…"

"Are you sure?" Naoto moved closer to him. "Perhaps you should have that checked by a doctor."

His eyes bugged out as she came closer, and got an eyeful of her outfit, including everything else it didn't cover. Thinking fast, he stuffed more tissues up his nose before he could bleed to death. "R-really, I'm fine now!"

Before things could get awkward, Metis spoke up. "Umm… Can I ask you guys something? What are those symbols on your backs? They all look different." Her curiosity and innocence were quite
adorable.

"Those symbols are called kanji, Metis, characters used in Japanese writing along with hiragana, katakana, Indo-Arabic numerals and occasionally the Latin alphabet," Aigis explained. "Each kanji has a different meaning."

"Yeah, like Minato-kun's for example," Yukari pointed at her boyfriend's shirt. "The kanji on his shirt means 'honorable man'. Very fitting if you ask me."

"Oh, oh! Tell her what mine means!" Junpei said, flailing his arm excitedly.

"Well, if I'm right, yours mean 'color', Junpei-kun," Fuuka started. "But…"

"Alright!" he cheered. "Wait 'til Chidorin hears that!"

"But it can also mean 'dirty-minded'…"

Minako laughed. "That's Junpei-kun alright!" The others laughed with her.

Junpei rubbed the back of his neck. "Eheh… let's keep that just between us, okay? Chidori doesn't need to know that…please?"

"Don't worry, Junpei. It's not like Chidori doesn't know that side of you anyway," Yukari teased.

"Hey, I resent that!"

"Back to Metis' question, Akihiko's symbol is 'fight'. Needless to say it's perfect for him," Mitsuru stated with pride. "Although his hot-headedness in another thing altogether…" she trailed off worriedly.

"He only seems to mature when Mitsuru-senpai is by his side. So that's a good thing, I guess," Minako added with a giggle.

Shinjiro smirked. "You got that right."

"Shut it, Shinji!" Akihiko hissed. "What does yours say anyway?"

"It means 'life'," Minako answered for him. "Makes sense when you think about how much of an impact he has on our lives, especially Ken-kun's and Akihiko-senpai's."

"There's more to it," Shinjiro added, surprising everybody. "Before, I could only wish for death." He looked into his girlfriend's eyes, his stare gentle. "But now I have more reasons to live." She held his hand and gave an understanding smile.

"Heh, that's pretty deep…" Yosuke hummed. "I wonder what mine means."

"If I'm not mistaken, that one stands for 'swift'," Souji said.

"It does fit you, since you're the fastest and skilled using wind spells," Chie pointed out.

"Now, the symbol on Kanji-kun's outfit stands for 'manly', 'hero' or 'superior'," Naoto stated.

"Do I sense some irony here, or is it just me?" Yosuke joked. This comment earned him a punch in the shoulder from Kanji. "Ow!"

"You were saying, Senpai?" he growled, ready to do it again.
"Nothing! Nothing!" Yosuke whimpered.

"That answers your question, Yosuke-senpai," Naoto drawled.

"Souji-kun's means 'truth' or 'reality'," Yukiko said with a small smile. "It really suits him, after what we've gone through."

Further discussion was interrupted when exuberant music filled the air, confusing everyone. Half of the lights in the lounge were turned off, highlighting the stage closest to the changing room. The Persona-users couldn't help but focus their attention there. The door slammed open, revealing Teddie dressed in a festival jinbei over his bear suit. He walked with pomp and grandiose, nose in the air as he strode along the runway, reveling in the attention he was attracting.

They face-palmed at the display. One word came to mind – desperate.

As Teddie turned around to strike a pose, the kanji on his shirt was visible for all to see. Everyone but Metis sweatdropped. "And that one? What does it mean?" she asked in naïve curiosity.

"That one means 'predator'…" Rise said flatly. "No comment…"

"..."

"..."

"..."

"Yes, yes, I know I'm marvelous, no need for further words!" Teddie boasted, misunderstanding the silence in the room. "And now, for the final act of tonight's fashion show, all the girls must wear one last outfit!"

"What?! Aren't we over this?" Chie protested.

"Actually, Teddie-san still has fifteen more minutes of reign..." Aigis said, depressed.

"Yes, I'm still the King and that's an order! The outfits are already in the changing room. C'mon, this is gonna be the best part!"

Sighing, the girls headed inside for one last change.

"Can somebody tell me who comes up with this stuff, anyway?" Kanji asked. "As weird as they are, it's really high quality clothing."

"Beats me. We often found them in rare treasure chests lying around in Tartarus," Akihiko said.

"Tartarus is similar to the TV World where we often find peculiar outfits…" Souji crossed his arms in thought. "If the other side represents mankind's heart, could these outfits and the other items we found represent some hidden desires of mankind?"

"If that's the case, I can name at least two sources for it," Shinjiro said, glaring at Junpei and Teddie, who were too distracted waiting for the girls to come out to listen.

"How many outfits do you guys have anyway?" Yosuke asked Minato.

"Well, for us guys there were the butler suits and the Shirts of Chivalry," he replied, ticking off his fingers. "While the girls had the maids set, the Christmas dresses and the – " He was cut off by girlish screams, Naoto's easily the loudest.
"Yay! The girls loved my surprise!" Teddie beamed.

"The hell?! Naoto!" Kanji shouted, running towards the room in panic.

Minato tried to stop him, having an idea of what was going on. "Kanji, wait! Don't go in there!"

He paid no mind. As he was about to open the door, it swung open revealing a very flustered Naoto.

"That does it! I can't take this anymore!" She dashed out, only to crash into Kanji and sending them sprawling on the floor.

"Naoto-chan, wait!" Minako called as she and the other girls rushed out.

If things could get more awkward, they did just now. The young men's eyes were wider than saucers and the girls started blushing madly.

Teddie's choice for the last set of outfits was the infamous High-cut armors, the women's armor that resembled a bikini! Minako's was white, Yukari's red, Mitsuru's black, Fuuka's teal, Yukiko's magenta, Chie's aqua-green, Rise's pink and Naoto's navy blue. Not even Aigis and Metis were spared as Teddie had managed to find black and white mechanical parts that resembled the bikini armor for both androids to wear.

Without realizing it, Souji and Yosuke had minor nosebleeds. Kanji nearly passed out as his nose squirted a red waterfall. Minato, Akihiko and Shinjiro could only gape. Junpei and Teddie drooled, their imaginations going haywire.

"Oh, no, I've had enough of this… this **tomfoolery**!" Naoto huffed.

"Me too! I should have known that the last outfit is going to be worse than the others!" Yukiko added.

Chie stomped her foot. "I'm tired of making a fool of myself for your own little fun!" Yosuke would swear that he saw cracks forming underneath her heel and backed away.

"I… I'm sorry… But I don't feel comfortable with this anymore either…" Fuuka shyly protested.

Rise put her hands on her hips as an act of defiance. "Your fun is over, 'King'! We rebel!"

Teddie's next reaction was unsurprising. He sat on the ground and burst into tears, real ones this time. "Wahahhhhhhh! This was meant to be my best night ever…!" He started to ugly-cry. "After all the pretty outfits I found for you all… You guys are so mean! Wahhhhhhh!"

While most of the PErsona-users covered their ears trying to block out his crying rant, Minako and Metis felt sympathy for him. "There, there… It's okay. Don't cry, please…" Metis said gently, stroking his fur.

"The ending is always the best part they say," Minako tried to cheer him up. "Don't cry, Teddie-kun, we'll do it."

"Minako, are you serious?!" Mitsuru questioned, the others staring at her in disbelief.

Teddie sniffed and whipped some of his tears away. "You mean it, Mina-chan?" he asked with sparkling eyes.

"Yes, I do," she confirmed. "C'mon girls, let's get this over already." Sighing, they headed inside
for one last walk.

Teddie danced in glee when the girls came out of the dressing room one by one, no following commentary this time. They attempted to salvage any amount of modesty they had left by covering the exposed parts with their arms, especially their chests.

'Damn bear!' the guys who weren't Junpei cursed. On the other hand, they couldn't tear their eyes away from the girls wearing outfits that highlighted their nice bodies.

"Ugh... After this night, I swear I'll never complain about the qi pao ever again!" Chie groaned, recalling the pretty Chinese dress Souji had given her months ago during their TV World expedition. "At least it was decent!"

"Oh yes! YES! YES! YES! This is the best night ever!" Teddie burst with happiness, running around like a kid inside a toy store.

The martial artist finally snapped. "That's it! I hereby sentence you to a million kicks to the head!" She lunged at the bear, only to be held back by Yosuke, who held her waist, while Junpei and Minato restrained her arms. "Let go! LET ME GO!"

Out of fear, Teddie stopped running and hid behind Minako, since at the moment she and Metis were the only ones who sympathized with him.

"Chie-chan, calm down! It's not that bad. You look really nice, you know," Minako praised. "Yosuke-kun agrees with me, right?"

When she realized her boyfriend was hugging her from behind, Chie stopped struggling. Junpei and Minato released her. Yosuke, afraid to receive another critical hit to a very sensitive area for males, slowly let go of her, face burning.

"Awww, you two look so cute blushing like that!" Minako chuckled at the pair.

"Thanks for the save, Mina-chan..." Teddie exhaled in relief, and threw himself at her for a hug.

Surprised at the sudden gesture, but being oblivious to his intentions, Minako hugged him back. "Your fur is so soft, Teddie-kun." She rubbed her cheek against his head. "It's even fuzzier than the bunny plushy Akihiko-senpai gave me."

The others sweatdropped. Minako was too nice for her own good sometimes. However, her brothers and Shinjiro weren't pleased at what they're witnessing.

"He does have a soft, fuzzy coat..." Kanji mumbled, earning glares from the three. "What?! I like plush animals, okay!"

Minako's giggles drew their attention. "That tickles!" She laughed as Teddie wrapped his arms around her waist.

Metaphorical red alerts were blaring...quite loudly.

"Hehe... Mina-chan is ticklish!" Teddie taunted as his furry hands went lower... lower... until they were almost touching her backside.

That was the last straw. Minato snapped. "Dammit, Ryoji! How many times do I have to tell you NOT TO TOUCH MY SISTER?!" he thundered, his usual calm replaced by overprotective fury. His team members backed away, knowing that when Minato was like that, he became quite
The Investigation Team didn't know who Minato was talking about, but knew that things were serious when Souji had a dark glint in his grey eyes, so they too backed away. "Teddie, remember what I told you about not hitting on Aneki and her friends for your own safety? Has it ever occurred to you that I would be the one who might hurt you if you do?" His tone was low and dangerous, like a cobra ready to strike.

"Get your filthy paws off her, bear!" Shinjiro roared.

Sensing their murderous vibe, Teddie started shaking and released Minako. "C-c'mon, guys. It's just for f-f-fun, right? I'm still the King. You can't hurt m-me…"

"Sorry to interrupt, but Teddie-san's time as King just ended now," Metis announced, pointing to the clock.

"Uh-oh… Wah!" Teddie yelled, accidentally shoving Minako to the ground. "Eeeekk! I-I'm sorry! I didn't mean to!"

"Ow! That hurt!" Minako whined, rubbing her bottom as she stood up. "Teddie-kun, that was mean of you!"

"Now you're gonna get it!" Shinjiro cracked his knuckles, and the girls looked ready to squash him.

The bear/human Shadow was too frightened to move as they started to close in.

"Don't just stand there!" Junpei shouted. "Run for your life, dude!"

Suddenly Teddie perked up, looking even more panicked. "Oh no! Oh no! Oh no! Oh no!" He ran around in circles before making a break for the exit. "Not good! Not good! Not good! Not good at all!" he screamed.

"You're not getting away!" Akihiko yelled, about to give chase.

"Hold it!" Minato ordered, stopping his former upperclassman with an extended hand. "Mitsurusu-sanpai, aside from these armors, did you keep any of our weapons?"

"Yes, I still do," Mitsuru replied. "It's in the same room where Teddie discovered the outfits."

"Good." Souji turned to his team. "Guys, better prepare yourselves."

The command caught them off guard. "C'mon, guys. Ain't that going a little too far?" Junpei asked. "I mean, sure he got carried away, but -"

"Something else is up. We were too distracted to notice before, but I think Teddie-kun felt it first," Minako said, her tone serious. "His punishment will have to wait. Come on!"

The Persona-users went to arm themselves before chasing after Teddie.

Chapter End Notes
Read and review please?
Still in their High-Cut Armor and Shirt of Chivalry, along with some weapons they procured, the Persona-users stumbled out into the hallways and chased after Teddie. The bear was waddling towards the direction of the beach, looking frantic.

"Slow down, ya damn bear!" Shinjiro yelled. "When I'm through with you, you ain't gonna have any stuffing left!"

As soon as they stepped outside, the Dark Hour hit. The sky turned dark green, the only source of light being the eerie glow of the pale full moon. "Wow, we detected the Dark Hour coming a lot sooner than last time," Minako commented. She shared a look with her brothers that the rest couldn't decipher.

Teddie stopped in his tracks at the beach, sniffing around madly. Yukari recognized it as the same area where Minato hugged her for the first time all those years ago.

"Fuuka-chan, Rise-chan, do you guys sense anything?" Minako asked.

The scanners summoned their respective Personas. "There are definitely Shadows lurking around here. I'll try to expand my readings to get a gist of our surroundings. We never know where they might conceal themselves in this type of environment," Rise warned. No Shadow could hide from her Enemy Radar.

"Good thing we got prepared." Minato said, taking out his Evoker from his waistband. "I hate to admit it, but I'm glad to be wearing some armor right now."

"And we even brought our own stuff for such emergencies," Yosuke said. He lifted up his undershirt to reveal a thin leather belt wrapped around his waist, with sheaths holding his kunais. Yukiko reached for her fan and Naoto brought out her revolver.

Akihiko slipped on black leather gloves. "At least I can take out my anger on Shadows." The tone of his voice let everyone know that he was still pissed.

"Tch, bear got lucky…" Shinjiro muttered, unhappy that Teddie couldn't be punished right away. He wrapped a terry cloth around his knuckles to enhance his grip on his battle axe.

"Wha-? Not even a 'thank you' for sniffing out the Shadows?!!" Teddie gawked dramatically. "How ungrateful!"

"Don't push it, Ted…" Kanji growled. The bear whimpered at the underlying threat. He also didn't miss the 'we'll deal with you later' glower everyone was giving him.

The Persona-users tensed when Fuuka let out a sharp gasp. "Guys, I sense about eight of them nearby. There are six Magus and two Mushas," she reported. "I'll scan for weaknesses immediately!"

It didn't take long for the Shadows to find them. They came from different directions with the intention to ambush and corner them. The Mushas wore silver and metallic red samurai armor, their swords encased in ruby-encrusted scabbards. As for the Magus Shadows, they had blue and
green stripes on their robes, holding scepters almost tall as themselves with a pink jewel on the tip.

Thinking on his feet, Minato gave out orders. "Those Magus types are probably prone to physical attacks. Shinjiro-senpai, Metis, Aigis and Chie; the four of you should take out those three," he said, pointing to a small gathering of enemies on his left. "Kanji, Junpei, Akihiko-senpai and I will take care of the rest."

"Yukari-chan, Mitsuru-senpai and Yukiko-chan are with me. We'll take out that Musha," Minako commanded, eyeing the targeted Shadow. "They're likely strong or immune to physical attacks, so hit it with all the magic you've got!"

"The rest of you are with me. Let's buy Rise some time to complete the scanning," Souji ordered, already summoning his card. "Be careful. From past fights with Musha-types, I'm pretty sure they'll have plenty of Evasion skills."

"Got it, Senpai!" Rise replied. "Be on your guard though. I can sense that they're stronger than the usual ones we've encountered so far."

Both Mushas released a combined Myriad Arrow attack that rained on the Persona-users. Aigis blocked them with Athena's shield and Souji reflected some with Rangda's Physical Repel while the rest dodged just in time. Some of the arrows ricocheted back to the enemy, but they seem unharmed.

"So they're immune to pierce attacks..." Minako observed, readying her Evoker to summon a Persona with high magic status. "Byakko, Ziodyne!" The giant winter tiger zapped a Musha with electricity, but it seemed to have little effect.

The girls in her group also tried to hit their targeted Musha with their own magic, trying to figure out their weakness. But the Shadow was swift and evaded all of them.

Souji distracted the other one the old fashioned way; by challenging it to a sword fight. While it was busy with him, Yosuke, Naoto and Teddie aimed their attack. They had better luck than the girls, but Yosuke's wind and Naoto's Vorpal Blade didn't seem to work either. Teddie quickly healed Souji when his shoulder was pierced by the enemy's sword. Luckily, it wasn't too deep.

Meanwhile, Minato and his group weren't having that much trouble landing hit after hit on the Magus Shadows. What frustrated them however was the Shadows' tendency to cast Tatrakarn on themselves or their comrades. Whenever one of them got too close, they would cast Marin Karin or worse, Sexy Dance. Kanji and Junpei were the unlucky ones who got charmed.

Fortunately Minato thought fast. "Garuda, Amrita!" White, shimmering light surrounded them before disappearing with a 'pop'.

Junpei blinked in confusion. Kanji snapped out of his trance, a stupefied look on his face. "What the hell happened?!" the latter demanded.

"You and Junpei were charmed. Don't worry, it wasn't your fault," Akihiko assured him.

"What...the hell is that?"

"It's a type of ailment that makes you side with the enemy and attack your friends against your will. It's sort of like Confusion, but you can use your powers to aid the enemy."

"Basically they make you fall in love with them," Minato added, and grinned when he saw the enraged look in Kanji's eyes.
The high school punk summoned Rokuten Maoh in a heartbeat. "Damn you…I love Naoto and only Naoto! You shits better remember that!" He put all of his rage into a Primal Force and obliterated a Magus. The side effect however, was that he used up a lot of energy, and was on his knees after dismissing his Persona.

The other two Magus took advantage of Kanji's vulnerable state to attack him with Bufudyne. Minato reacted quickly and absorbed it by summoning Alilat. Akihiko casted Marakunda and Matararunda on the Shadows while Junpei released a barrage of Torrent Shots.

Meanwhile, Shinjiro and his group were toughing it out. He was pissed because the Shadows were immune to the Fear ailment but was satisfied that his group had strong physical-based skills. They took out two with teamwork, but were starting to wear thin. The last Magus standing wasn't about to give up. It let out a maniacal laugh and its scepter begins to glow a brilliant red.

"I have a bad feeling about this…" Aigis said, ready to summon her Persona.

Fuuka finished her analysis just in time. "Everyone, those Magus-types are weak to wind and light! Be careful, it can use Last Resort!"

Rise announced her results about the same time. "Guys, the Mushas have a weakness against Darkness. Their strength is rather high, so even the weakest of attacks could cause significant damage!"

Shinjiro grinned. He and Metis nodded in understanding. Aigis and Chie readied their attacks just in case.

"Pegasus..."

"Psyche..."

"Garudyne!"

Before the scepter could explode, the double wind attack hit the Shadow just in time and destroyed it, its ashes mixed with the sand in the air.

Minato was glad Fuuka finished scanning when she did. The two Magus looked weakened, but he knew never to judge a Shadow's condition by their appearance alone. "Senpai, lower their evasion rate. I need to make double sure my attack hits," he ordered. "Then all of you stay back. I don't want you guys in the crossfire." Akihiko nodded. Junpei and Kanji backed away.

"Caesar, Masukunda!"

"Time to test her out," Minato grinned. "Lailah, Samsara!"

The black angel of conception smiled a serene smile, raising her candle. Glowing runes of bright light barricaded the two Shadows from all sides, making it impossible to escape. Before they could shriek, the runes dissipated and nothing was left.

Akihiko release a breath of relief. "That was close..." he panted. "I wonder how the others are doing."

Minako and her team were constantly bombarded with pierce attacks by the Musha. Yukari and Yukiko were kept busy healing while Mitsuru and Minako kept attacking. Although their armor helped amplify their magic slightly, it didn't protect them much from breaking skin. When Rise's analysis came through, Minako was glad. Mustering up all her strength, she summoned a Persona...
with Mudo skills.

"Chernobog, Mudoon!"

After the Shadow was defeated, the girls slumped together on the sand, trying to catch their breaths.

Meanwhile, Souji was having troubles of his own. Each time he tried summoning a Persona to cast a spell, his body would immediately feel drained. If it wasn't for Teddie or Yosuke healing him, he wouldn't have the strength to even move. 'What's going on?' he thought. 'Why aren't my Personas responding like I want them to?'

At this point, the Musha was pissed. It charged towards the silverette in hopes of decapitating him.

"Partner, look out!" Yosuke screamed. With his speed, he made it just in time and pushed his leader out of harm's way. They were rolling in the sand when they heard Rise's telepathic voice, informing them about the Shadow's weakness.

Teddie and Naoto made their way towards their upperclassmen. "Are you two alright?" the latter asked.

"I'm fine," Souji said abruptly, standing once more. He tried not to show how tired he felt. "I'll take care of this. Naoto, that cut on your arm needs tending to. Don't think you can hide your injuries from me," he reprimanded.

Naoto covered the injury in embarrassment. Teddie was immediately by her side to heal her.

The silverette summoned another card. 'Please, let this work...' The Musha was glaring at him, waiting for his next move.

"Alice, Mudoon!"

The demonic English girl appeared, but instead of a single target spell, a bunch of red and black card soldiers fell from the sky and pierced the Musha without any mercy. However, some of Souji's friends were within its range and they almost got skewered if he hadn't been fast enough to dismiss his Persona. The amount of spiritual energy needed for that spell wrung him dry, and he was teetering on the brink of consciousness. Yosuke ran to his side and gave him some Soul Drops to chew on, and he felt a bit better. The Magician's expression was a mix of worry and confusion, but he knew better than to question his best friend in this state.

Yukiko and Minako approached Souji, who was still trying to regain his breath, but kept their distance when Yosuke shook his head.

There was no time to rest however. "I detect a few Fuzz-types heading towards the mansion. Nanako-chan and Ken-kun are in danger!" Rise said, panicking.

"I sense..." Fuuka murmured, still within Juno's womb. "I can sense that their weakness is thunder, and they're strong against wind and fire attacks."

Akihiko stepped forward. "Leave those to me!" He dragged Teddie by his collar, surprising the bear. "You're coming with me as my backup. No excuses!"

For once, Teddie didn't argue. 'Nana-chan is in danger, so I must rescue her like the prince I am!' He waddled behind Akihiko, missing the evil smirk the former boxer had on his lips.
"Aigis, Metis, you should go with them. Minako and I will take care of the rest," Minato ordered. The android sisters nodded and went after the two.

The four of them spotted three rotund Shadows in police uniforms heading for the mansion entrance. Akihiko wasted no time in pulling out his Evoker. "Maziodyne!" All the Shadows were hit and fell on their butts, struggling to get up but failing due to their roundness. Aigis and Metis then took over.

"Athena, Akasha Arts!"

"Psyche, Herculean Strike!"

It didn't take long for the Fuzz to be eliminated. They were basking in their victory when all of a sudden, were showered with bullets. Taken by surprise, all four managed to evade just in time, but some of it grazed Metis' body. Aigis was quick enough to protect them with Athena's shield.

Another Fuzz, bigger this time, appeared from a coconut grove, holding up its gun to fire another round.

"Kala-Nemi, Ziodyne!"

The Shadow became paralyzed by the sudden thunder strike, and was then destroyed by a Vile Assault, courtesy of Kala-Nemi.

Ken appeared through the gate, armed with an scrubbing brush, Koromaru at his heels. "I saw the whole thing from my room. Are you guys alright?" he asked.

"We are now. Thank you for the help, Ken-san," Metis said, smiling at the youngest member. Koromaru whined.

Just then, the other Persona-users arrived, making a big commotion by the gate. Souji approached Ken, which the boy noticed that he was limping slightly. "Ken, is Nanako alright?" he asked, panting heavily.

The young teenager didn't like the silverette's pale complexion. He was sweating so much that his shirt stuck to his skin, but Ken answered nonetheless. "Yeah, she transmogrified. We don't have to worry about her being targeted by Shadows." His curiosity got the best of him, that he had to point it out. "Are you feeling well, Souji-san? You don't look so good…"

The twins had worried expressions on their faces. They had noticed something went wrong when they saw Alice perform *Die For Me!* earlier, but Souji wouldn't say anything about it. Yosuke gave them a look telling them that he would explain later. The others brushed it off however, stating that accidents like that has happened every once in a while.

When Rise assured them there were no more Shadows in the area, Akihiko grinned. 'It's now or never, while the Dark Hour is still active…' he thought. He took out a Lightning Ball from his pocket which he found in the TV World, and threw it at the bear. The Lightning Ball activated, a small stream of electricity zapping Teddie's backside, causing him to yelp loudly, echoing throughout the deathly silent beach. The smell of burnt fur permeated the air.

Teddie spun around, clutching his buttocks, trying to locate the culprit responsible for damaging his pride and joy. It couldn't have been more obvious; Akihiko was the only one standing behind him, hands behind his back and looking away, one corner of his lips twitching with mirth.
Shinjiro, who saw the entire exchange, smirked. He never would have thought that his childhood friend could pull off something like that - Akihiko was often the good boy who rarely got into trouble, while he was the exact opposite. *That idiot needs a better poker face, though…*

Teddie scowled and pointed to the former boxing champ. "You!" he cried. "You almost killed me!"

"What are you talking about?" Akihiko said in a sugar-coated tone, smiling just as sweet. "I didn't do anything of the–"

Teddie cut him off. "Of course you did! My Bear-sona is weak to electricity…you want to kill me on purpose!" He threw his arms in the air, being all dramatic about it.

Akihiko kept smiling, which was starting to get creepy. "But I didn't do anything. Ask anybody."

"I don't believe you!" Teddie turned to the others for confirmation. "You guys saw it, didn't you? How he almost killed me?!"

Everyone saw through Akihiko's lie, and unluckily for Teddie, were still angry about the King's Game. So they did the only thing they could at the moment – cover for him. "No, Ted. Akihiko-san wasn't the one who shocked you," Yosuke said, trying hard to hold back a grin. "Don't go around accusing him just because he uses thunder-based attacks. That's like blaming Kanji for everything gone wrong."

"That doesn't make sense, asshole!" Kanji roared from the background. 'Nice save, Hanamura!' Akihiko silently applauded.

"That bear deserves a harsher punishment!" Chie growled, cracking her knuckles. "If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be wearing such a skimpy outfit!" The other girls instantly turned murderous, causing Teddie to shake in fear for his life.

"Now, now, I'm sure it was an accident, just a fluke of the Dark Hour," Minato reasoned, trying to break up the tension. It wasn't his style to hold a grudge, but after being taken advantage of, he couldn't blame the others for wanting to see him suffer. "What do you think, Souji-kun?"

Just then, the Dark Hour disappeared, and they could all breathe easy. Some of them checked their watches and were surprised that it was very late at night.

Souji sighed tiredly. "You know what? Let's just all go inside and get some rest. I'm too tired to deliver any punishment right now. I'll think of something when we get back."

The Investigation Team members grinned evilly; Souji could come up with something really good if he wanted to. The pissed-off SEES members groaned with disappointment, but there was nothing they could do.

Yukiko was by her boyfriend's side in an instant, trying to support his exhausted form. "He's right guys," she said. "Let's get back inside. We'll discuss this tomorrow." Minako went to his other side to help him walk, since Yukiko wasn't strong enough to do it herself.

They all headed back to their rooms to change out of their armors and head straight to bed. Just as they reached the floor of their sleeping quarters, they spotted Nanako. It seems like she was looking for something, or someone.

Souji's gaze softened as he approached her. "Nanako, what are you doing out of bed at this hour?" he asked softly, patting her head.
"I woke up to use the bathroom. But then Koro-chan wasn't by my side anymore and I got worried," she answered. "Umm…why are you all dressed in weird clothes?"

Everyone tensed, not sure how to answer. Ken, who only just noticed, sent them a questioning look. "Oh yeah, why are you wearing those?" he asked, recognizing their attire. "I thought you said you hated those. Well…except for Junpei-san."

Even though the three Wild Cards, who were exceptional with kids, didn't know to get out of this one - the truth was too much for a child to handle.

"Ah, Nana-chan. You see, we were playing this game – Mmphh!" Teddie was immediately smothered by Yosuke and Chie, and got dragged to the back of the crowd.

"You will shut up if you don't want to die tonight!" Yosuke hissed harshly. "I swear I'll do worse things to your bear suit if you ever mention that again!"

Chie glared, almost suffocating Teddie with her grip. Not wanting to get injured any farther, he kept his mouth shut.

Nanako sent a questioning look at their direction, but ignored it before turning back to her cousin. "Are you playing dress up? I wanna play too!"

The Persona-users almost fell to the ground in shock. They had not expected the outcome to be like this!

"Sure ya can, Nanako-chan!" Junpei blurted. "We'll let you dress up if Ken and Koromaru here put on a costume as well."

"Really? Yay!" the little girl cheered, clapping her hands.

No sane person could deny Nanako when she smiled cutely like that, so they agreed. Ken was appalled at being involuntarily dragged in, but he wasn't immune to the young girl's pleas.

Mitsuru stroked her chin in thought. "I might have something suitable for her to wear. It's one of my dresses from when I was a child." She left the group and headed to her room.

"Let's get back to the karaoke lounge, guys. Ken here can get changed while we wait for Mitsuru-senpai," Junpei suggested, grinning like the cat that got the canary. Still exhausted from their fight, everyone else could only glare at him.

Just as Ken finished changing, Mitsuru returned with a pink silk dress. She and Minako helped Nanako put it on in their makeshift dressing room, and added the finishing touch by tying a red ribbon around her waist and removing her pigtails so that her hair was free. Minako placed Teddie's paper crown on her head and she was set.

"Give it up for Princess Nanako!" Minako announced, as the little girl strutted down the runway. She twirled around cutely as Teddie and Junpei cheered for her the loudest. Minato couldn't resist taking a picture. Teddie escorted her to his former 'throne', which was just a big, comfy armchair.

Koromaru pranced along the runway in his doggy tux, basking in the attention and praises, especially from the girls and Kanji. Teddie was jealous that he didn't get the same reaction when he was the King.

Ken followed shortly after, embarrassed at having to wear the Shirt of Chivalry once again. He noticed that Nanako - the dress and hair style made her look a bit more mature, in his opinion - was
staring at him intensely than usual. His cheeks heated up, not understanding why having her full attention on him got him all flustered.

Souji noticed this, but was too tired to do anything about it. The grandfather clock down the hallway chimed twelve times, indicating that if they didn't sleep soon, they couldn't enjoy their activities tomorrow.

After the particularly traumatizing night and everything that came along with it, the Persona-users decided that some physical outdoor activity might help them relax. The beautiful beach was beckoning them - it's calm winds, soft receded tides and clear blue waters made the image too tantalizing to resist. After some light breakfast, they packed their bathing suits and were good to go.

It didn't take the boys long to get ready. They were wearing either swimming trunks or swim shorts of various colors. As they waited for the girls, they slathered themselves with sunblock, chatting while they did so. Fortunately, there weren't many people coming to the beach today, so they had an entire section for themselves.

"Ah…the fresh air here feels so nice…" Yosuke said, inhaling a huge breath. Koromaru sniffed and barked in agreement. "You think so too, huh?"

"Too bad I didn't bring my special camera with me," Minato said, gazing at the horizon. The white sands and pristine waters of Yakushima haven't changed at all. "The view is stunning!"

Souji looked around and noticed there were a few people missing. "Hey, where are Akihiko-san and Shinjiro-san? And Kanji's also late…"

As if on cue, Akihiko approached them, parading in a speedo. He wore a white shirt to cover his upper half. "Did someone call me?" he asked.

Yosuke turned around to greet him, just as Kanji joined in. The brunette's eyes burned at the sight. Just like the former athlete, Kanji was also wearing the same thing, only black. Not-so-thankfully, his top half was bare for the world to see. "What the hell, man?!" he spluttered, turning away instantly. "Oh god, now I'm seeing more than I wanted to see, only double!"

"The hell's that supposed to mean, bastard?" Kanji growled. "This is the only pair I have, and it's black! Ain't nothing wrong with black!"

"Uh…Akihiko-san? Why are you wearing that?" Ken looked at the him curiously. "It's even smaller than what you used to wear in the boxing ring."

"Oh, you mean this?" Akihiko gestured to his outfit. "It's for training. Did you know that it reduces water resistance and–"

Souji sweatdropped. He started to wonder if similar tastes in fashion were the only things that people of the same arcana shared.

"Yeah, yeah, we get it," Junpei interrupted, not interested at hearing the same speech for the second time. "What are you guys waiting for? The sun and sea awaits!" He held a rubber tube around his midriff, about to dash off to the ocean any second now. His excitement was infectious that Teddie were riled up for it too.

"Geez…even after all these years, you still haven't matured." A female voice drawled behind them as Yukari appeared in all her pink glory. Fuuka and the rest of the girls followed behind her. Aegis
and Metis didn't wear swimsuits; instead they covered their mechanical bodies with sundresses. Aegis' was sky blue and Metis' was pastel orange.

Junpei leered at the girls, taking an eyeful of their attires. "Oh come on Yukari-cchi, loosen up. Man, talk about a feast for the eyes!" He whistled flirtatiously. "You girls from Inaba...I never would have thought that you'd look this good in bikinis." He waggled his eyebrows for emphasis.

Rise giggled, not bothered by his perverted stare. "Of course we do! We're not country bumpkins, y'know."

"I thinks so too!" the blonde Shadow agreed gleefully. His happiness was short-lived when everyone present glared at him with the force of a thousand suns. He squeaked and ran for cover behind his only ally.

Souji turned to Yukiko and smiled, his mood changing rapidly at the sight of her. Her blush almost rivaled her headband.

"Now I wish I really brought my camera," Minato commented, giving his girlfriend a sly grin. Yukari's face turned pink like her bikini top.

Chie blushed when Yosuke slung his arm around her shoulders. "I hope you won't push me in the water again when I say you're one fine lady!" he grinned playfully.

Kanji stopped playing with Koromaru to greet the girls, ignoring their gasps of shock at this attire and noticed there were another three people missing. "Where's Naoto, Nanako-chan and Minako-senpai?"

"Minako and Nanako are helping Shirogane with her outfit," Mitsuru answered. "Akihiko, why are you wearing that?" She narrowed her eyes dangerously at her boyfriend. "What happened to the swimming trunks I got you? What did I say about indecent exposure?"

"Huh? What are you mad at me for? Tatsumi's wearing the same thing!" Akihiko accused.

The others backed away and minded their own business, not wanting to get caught in an argument between silver and red, the former gulping nervously. Rise and Teddie, nosy as they were, stayed to watch. Yosuke and Junpei raced with Aigis and Metis to the water. Yukiko and Chie, along with Fuuka and Yukari, went ahead to find the perfect spot for sunbathing. Kanji and Ken took turns playing fetch with Koromaru. Souji and Minato stayed to wait for the rest.

Before the argument could go very far, Shinjiro showed up, not looking pleased. "Aki, you asshole! How dare you run off with my clothes!" he growled, striding menacingly towards them in a pair of swimming trunks that reached a few inches above his knees. It was black in color, with red and green flames on the sides.

"Hey, if I didn't do that, you wouldn't have put those on would you?" Akihiko pointed to the trunks, smirking. "Besides, I don't think it's that bad. You look decent."

Shinjiro snorted at his friend's irony. "Who the hell picked this out for me anyway? They have poor taste."

A sniffle from behind them caught their attention. Minako, in her pink and white striped bikini, stood motionless, her red eyes watering and bottom lip trembling. Holding her hand was Nanako in a bright yellow one piece with frills on the waist. Behind the two, Naoto was trying to make herself appear smaller. She stared down at her blue flip-flops, ears an unearthly shade of red. The cause for this was the dark blue bikini, paired with a white sarong, that she was forced to wear by a
Minako pulled her hand out of Nanako's grip, turned around and ran off in the opposite direction.

"Minako?! Wha-" Shinjiro stared after her dumbly. Everything just took a turn for the awkward.

It was lucky that Kanji defused the situation, having fainted from a nosebleed after his brain finished processing what Naoto was wearing. She, along with Ken, Akihiko and Mitsuru came running to his aid. Rise and Teddie pulled Nanako away and offered to help her build a sand castle with Koromaru. Nanako, being young, didn't understand the circumstances much and happily accepted the distraction.

Minato and Souji on themMinako grinned cheekily.e other hand, were furious. The wind around them seemed to have picked up speed, crackling with faint charges of electricity as they unconsciously summoned Beelzebub from their psyches and released his intimidating aura, slowly stomping towards Shinjiro. Said young man felt as if his lifespan shortened a few decades, but managed to keep up his tough guy facade.

"You had to go and say that, didn't you?" Minato hissed, as he and Souji cornered him.

Shinjiro might be one fearless fighter, but that doesn't mean he was stupid enough to go against these two at the same time, with or without Personas. 'Damn it, of all the times to open my big mouth!'

"Did you know how hard it was for Aneki to find a pair your size at the last minute? That was the only one left!" Souji glowered, poking the older man's chest with each syllable. Shinjiro could have sworn his grey eyes turned a blackish hue. "You better go apologize before we kick your ass."

Feeling guilty and slightly insulted, Shinjiro didn't need to look back to see that they were watching him as he hastily made his way to the direction Minako ran off to, hoping that she's okay. He got away far enough that the oppressing air wasn't suffocating him anymore. Following a small footpath connecting the beach to a more secluded spot, he found his girlfriend leaning her palm against a giant boulder and hunched down, trying to catch her breath. He saw her back stiffen, becoming aware of his presence.

Shinjiro sighed. "Look, I'm sorry about what happened." Minako didn't say anything, just gave a loud 'Hmph!' and crossed her arms, her back to him, nose stuck in the air. He sighed again. Under normal circumstances, he would have found her pouting cute. He became more angry at himself. 'Damn it...she should know by now I'm not good at this kind of thing. Why can't I do better?' Unless he wanted to lose the love of his life, he better get this over with. He slowly approached her, and hugged her from behind. He didn't miss the surprised gasp which escaped her lips.

"Please don't turn away from me…" he whispered in her ear. "I know I can be inconsiderate and insensitive, but I can't stand to see you upset. I said it before, didn't I? You look best when you smile." He tightened his hold, afraid he'll lose her again.

Minako's face softened. Hearing him talking like this, so sincere and intimate, was enough to turn her legs to jelly and melt her heart. She slowly turned around and pulled him into a hug, placing her forehead against his bare chest. "Sorry…I didn't mean to make you worry…"

"Why are you apologizing for? I was the one who hurt your feelings, even after I promised I wouldn't do anything of the sort." He hugged her tighter. "I'm sorry. If I'd known how much trouble you went through to get me this, I would have just kept my freakin' mouth shut."
He felt a bit disappointed when Minako released him, but kept his fingers entwined around her waist. "Does it still hurt?" she asked timidly, touching the scars on his chest.

Shinjiro tried not to flinch at her question, but he couldn't blame her; he was topless after all. "Sometimes... when the bad memories come once in a while," he answered. "So, have I earned your forgiveness?"

"On two conditions!" She held up two fingers. "The first one is... to give me a kiss!"

Shinjiro couldn't say no to that. After all that's said and done, Minako was willing to forgive him, and that's all that mattered. He dipped his head and gave her what she wanted, even a little extra.

After pulling away, Minako looked very proud of herself. "Wow! If I could get you to kiss me like that all the time, then I would have to sulk more often," she giggled, cheeks pink.

He was about to snort and give her a small lecture until he looked down and saw, really noticed, what she was actually wearing. He blushed. In all honesty, Shinjiro never saw his girlfriend in a bathing suit. It barely covered anything! Her skin was soft and smooth under his hands, the two-piece did a very good job of showing off her curves. The expectant but innocent puppy-eyes she gave him flooded his brain with impure thoughts. Memories from last night's King's Game only added fuel to the fire. 'Like hell I'm turning into a lightweight like Tatsumi!' he growled inwardly when his nose felt funny. 'And why does she have to be so damn cute?! Shit, I better not be ogling her the entire day... Who knows what Minato or Souji might do to me.'

"Shinji, come on..." Minako tugged his arm, pulling him to the direction where the others were. "Let's go for a swim. You can buy me ice cream after we're done playing."

At that (somewhat?) innocent statement, Shinjiro let his imagination get the better of him, and he had to mentally slap himself. 'I just hope that those two aren't mind readers...'

They met Minato and Souji halfway to their destination, casually leaning against a large tree.

"Aniki! Souji-kun!" Minako waved at them, a huge smile on her face.

Shinjiro gritted his teeth, trying to contain his annoyance. "You didn't have to spy on me, you know."

"I know," Minato shrugged, grinning. "We just wanted to make sure you didn't screw it up."

Souji grabbed Minako's hand. "Come on, Aneki. Yosuke and Junpei-san just challenged Akihiko-san to a volleyball match and asked us to join."

"Then let's team up, the three of us!" Minako said excitedly. "We'll totally kick their asses! Go Team Wild Card!"

Taking a break from the volleyball game after two rounds, Souji sat down next to Nanako. The little girl was busy filling a small glass bottle with sand and sea water. "Hey, Nanako, what are you gonna do with that?"

"Oh, I told my friend Pharos-kun I'd bring him and his brother a bottle of sea water and beach sand."

Souji raised an eyebrow. His cousin had told him a while ago about her strange stripped-pajamas friend, but this was the first time she mentioned he had a brother. "His brother? When did you meet
"When you were out with Aneki to help her find swim shorts for Shinjiro-san."

...Flashback...

"A trip to the beach?" Pharos asked curiously. He and Nanako were tending the Dojima vegetable garden when the latter brought up the topic.

"Uh-huh! We're going tomorrow. One of Big Bro's friends has a house at a really beautiful place called Yakushima! We're gonna have a lot of fun there."

"That's really nice." Pharos smiled at her excitement. "What's a beach like?"

"It has really pretty white sand, and the sea is so huge with sparkling blue water! The sky is always blue and the sun shines really brightly!" Nanako described, her enthusiasm growing with every sentence.

The little boy's blue eyes sparkled. "Oooohhhh...that sounds so beautiful! I wish I could see it!"

A sudden idea came to Nanako. "I know! I'll bring you a bottle with water from the sea and sand from the beach. That way you can see what it's like!"

"That's a great idea!" a voice interrupted them.

Surprised, the kids turned around. A black-haired young man wearing a long, yellow scarf walked up to them.

Pharos smiled. "Hello, big brother!" He went up to greet him. "Nanako-chan, this is my older brother Ryoji."

Ryoji kneeled down to Nanako's height. "Hey, there. So you're the cute little girl my brother keeps talking about? Nice to meet you."

"Hi! Nice to meet you too, Ryoji-san!" Nanako returned the greeting, bowing respectfully.

He chuckled softly. "Wow, you sure take after Souji-kun."

"You know my Big Bro?"

"Yup! We met at the hospital some time ago. I also know Minato-kun and Minako-chan." Ryoji grinned. "They're close friends of mine, but I didn't have the chance to talk with them ever since Pharos and I arrived in Inaba." He looked around. "Speaking of which, they wouldn't be around here, would they?"

Nanako shook her head. "Big Bro and Aniki went to Junes with Aneki to buy a swimsuit for Shinjiro-san, but they'll be back soon. You can wait for them if you like."

"Thanks for the offer, but I've got some work to do." The young man playfully ruffled her hair. "We'll probably bump into each other soon enough. In the meantime, have fun at the beach."

"Okay! I'll bring the bottle to you and Pharos-kun!"

"I know you will." Ryoji turned to the other child. "Come on. Time to go." Seeing Pharos pouting, he smiled. "Wanna buy a Topsicle on the way home?"
Pharos brightened up at the offer, then proceeded to hold Nanako's hand and kissed it. "See you soon, my dearest Nanako-chan. Have fun!"

Nanako blushed at the gesture, but quickly recovered. "Bye Pharos-kun! Bye-bye Ryoji-san!" She waved them off.

…End Flashback…

Souji remained silent after Nanako finished her story. 'The guy with a yellow scarf…it's gotta be Ryoji-san! But Aniki and Aneki never said he had a brother. And who is this Pharos kid? And why did he befriend Nanako? If he's with Ryoji-san then I can trust him, but still…there's a lot of things going on here…' So many questions left unanswered.

Nanako gently poked his arm. "Big Bro?"

He was snapped out of his thoughts. "Yes?"

"Aneki and Aniki are calling you for another game." She pointed at the twins, who were indeed calling him over.

"Oh, right. I'm coming!" He got up and walked towards them. 'I'll have to ask them about Pharos later.'

After who knows how many rounds of beach volleyball, those who participated were completely worn out, except Chie, who was hassling Yosuke for another round. After cooling off in the sea, Yukiko called out, "Hey, isn't it about time to start breaking the watermelon?"

"Watermelon! Watermelon!" Nanako cheered.

"Then we better get started!" Souji said. "I'll get the watermelons from the cooler. Yosuke, can you help me get the blindfolds and hitting stick from my bag?" Happy to have an excuse to get away from Chie for a while, Yosuke obliged.

Minato, Junpei and Akihiko left to get some snow cones from a vendor. "Damn, I'm gonna be sore for weeks. You could have toned it down, Senpai," Junpei complained as they walked.

"I was fired up. And I don't back away from a challenge!" Akihiko retorted.

"Come on you two. I'm tired and it's getting hot," Minato grumbled. "We should rest up. Mitsuru-senpai told me that we'll be heading to the village next. We didn't get a chance to visit back then."

The three of them chatted as they hung around the vending cart, gobbling a few snow cones for themselves before buying some for the others.

"My my my, what do we have here?" A seductive female voice echoed behind them. "I'm sure three good looking boys like you didn't come to the beach by yourselves. Do you want some company?"

Shivers ran up their spines. The hot weather suddenly turned ice-cold. And that voice…sounded oddly familiar. Too scared to look, Minato, Junpei and Akihiko slowly turned around.

A busty woman of questionable age wearing a rather revealing black swimsuit stood, hand on her hip, attempting to pull off a sultry pout. When she got a look at the three boys, recognition hit her. "Oh…if it isn't the three delicious cuties I've had the fortune to meet three years ago. My my, you
havent changed one bit!” The three young men tensed when her voice lowered to a husky whisper. "What brings you here? Could it possibly be that you came all the way here because…you want me?” It was followed by a suggestive wink.

Memories flooded Minato’s mind. Now he remembered who this woman was! ‘Shit, she doesn’t even remember the part where Junpei insulted her!’ he realized, frantically looking around for an escape. Unfortunately, not many people came to the beach today, so he couldn’t call for help and their friends were rather far away. He noticed the look of despair Junpei and Akihiko wore. ‘Looks like they remember, too...’

Meanwhile, Souji was walking back to the group, carrying four large watermelons in net sacks. Yosuke was walking beside him, blindfolds and a stick in one hand another watermelon in the other. "Man, I can't wait to give this thing a good whack!" Yosuke said, eyeing the melons.

"Easy there, partner." Souji grinned. "Nanako gets the first honors. You know that." They approached the girls and handed them the fruits. "By the way, where's Aniki?" he asked his cousin. "We shouldn't get started without him."

"Oh, Aniki said he's going to buy me some ice cream," Nanako beamed, but then she pouted. "But he has been gone a while…"

"Why don't you help the others set up? I'll go look for him."

"I'll come with you," Yosuke offered. "I kinda want some myself."

As the duo made their way to the vending stand, they spotted who they were looking for…and another who they weren't even expecting. "What the hell…?" Yosuke squinted to get a better look. His eyes widened a second later. "Dude, is that who I think it is? Holy crap, it's really Kashiwagi!"

There was no mistaking it. She was wearing the same swimsuit that burned retinas in last year's beauty pageant, and her flirty body language was unmistakable. "You're...right..." Suddenly Souji wasn't feeling so well. "Wait, what the heck is she doing to Akihiko-san?!" The silver-haired boxing champ backed away when Kashiwagi attempted to feel up his biceps. She did the same with Minato, and it didn't look like they could avoid her for long.

Junpei spotted them immediately. "Dudes, over here!" he shouted. "Help us!"

'Why does he have to be so loud?' Yosuke and Souji thought, sweatdropping. There was no turning back now. Kashiwagi was looking straight at them.

"If it isn't Seta and Hanamura!" She winked at them. "Couldn't stay away, could you?"

The two were instantly reminded of the room mix-up incident back home. They shuddered even more.

"Oh dear, so much eye candy and so little time..."

"H-h-hey there, Kashiwagi-sensei..." Souji greeted, feeling extremely uncomfortable. It wasn't helping that they were all shirtless, and their former homeroom teacher was drinking it all in with her eyes.

"S-Sensei?!" Junpei gagged, close to freaking out even more. "She's your teacher?!"

"Hanamura, I never knew you had muscles under that uniform. And Seta..." Kashiwagi sauntered her way towards them. "...yummy as ever, I see." She grabbed his arm. "Why don't we go have
Close by, Minako dragged Shinjiro along to get some ice treats. He didn't seem too keen on the idea, but complies anyway - a promise was a promise after all. Suddenly she stopped in her tracks. "Hey, what's the matter?" he asked.

Her eyes were bulging, staring out at something. Shinjiro followed the direction of her stare and saw what looked like a group of young men, whom he recognized as his friends, being sexually harassed by an older woman. Before he could swear, Minako ran to help them.

She got close enough to hear what the old hag was saying to her brothers and friends. "Come now, Seto. Surely you don't mind spending time with your dear teacher, do you?"

"I…I'd rather not..." Souji said brokenly, trying his hardest to decline politely.

"Don't be shy..." Kashiwagi tried again. "I rented a room at a chalet not far from here. You can even invite your friends." Her voice got huskier. "Nobody will interrupt us."

Souji tried to pull his arm away, but Kashiwagi had a tight grip. From the look on his face, he'd rather be skinned alive. Yosuke tried hard not to puke. The others gagged.

Minako had enough. "You old bag!" she shrieked. She stomped towards the older woman and snatched Souji away from her, who winced in pain at his arm almost being ripped out. "Go hit on someone your own age!"

Kashiwagi scowled. "Wh-who are you calling old bag?!"

"You! Stop hitting on my brother!"

While the two started arguing, the guys made their escape and took refuge behind Minako. That pissed Kashiwagi off. "Speak for yourself, you immature jailbait. You must be some kind of playgirl to have this many boys take your side. I wonder what kind of deceitful tricks you used... you're even worse that I am."

Before Minako could lash out, Shinjiro was already by her side. "Hey, what's going on here?"

"Oh, and who do we have here?" Kashiwagi's interest turned to Shinjiro. She eyed him from head to toe. "A delinquent, I see. I don't usually go for the bad boy types, but I'll gladly make an exception for you~" she purred.

For once, Shinjiro was unable to defend himself. There was something about the way this woman stared that made him feel so... so violated. "Get the hell away from me!" he shouted, swatting the older woman's wondering hands away.

"You pedophilic slut!" Minako seethed. Tendrils of hellish, black aura emanated from her body, causing the other Persona-users to gulp in fear. Minato and Souji recognized which Persona she had unconsciously summoned; Thanatos. Thank the heavens she wasn't able to use him right now, or else Kashiwagi would have died on the spot. "Bullshit! You say that I'm immature, but what about you? Preying on younger men, making them scarred for life... you're just compensating for your lack of confidence, thinking you can get an image boost by snagging a boy toy!"

"Hmph, a little bitch like you... You're a hundred years too young to be lecturing me!" Kashiwagi scoffed.

Souji could see that his former homeroom teacher was starting to lose her composure. "Uh oh, this
is gonna get bad, fast…” Judging from Minato's expression, he was thinking the same thing. "Kashiwagi-sensei, I think you should leave us alone now," he suggested, trying to defuse the situation.

Too bad she was too stubborn to listen.

Minako's deadly aura was getting heavier. Without warning, she lunged at the older woman, intending to claw her eyes out. "STAY THE HELL AWAY FROM MY MAN!" she screeched.

It was a good thing Shinjiro was standing close to her before any damage could be done. He wrapped his arms around his girlfriend's abdomen, trying to ignore the way she wriggled against his body. Minato and Souji also took action by restraining her arms.

Around the same time, Kanji and Teddie were heading their way. After Nanako informed them that the other guys were going to get some frozen treats, they wondered if the vendor sold any Topsicles. Arguing over which flavor was better, they stopped in their tracks when they saw what was going on. It was impossible to miss, especially with all that shouting and hissing. Topsicles forgotten, they ran back to their group of girls and hid under a pile of their belongings, unceremoniously interrupting their second sunbathing session.

"Hey, what's the matter with you two?" Rise questioned their odd behavior, lowering her sunglasses. The other girls were slightly miffed at the intrusion, but curious nonetheless.

Kanji and Teddie wrapped themselves in towels and tried to blend in with the pile. "I'm scared…" the blonde shivered.

"It's Kashiwagi-sensei. She's here," Kanji answered. "Apparently she said something that ticked Minako-senpai off. Damn, that girl's scary when she's mad."

"Really?" Rise said, her eyes gleaming.

"If Kanji's this scared of Minako-san, then I wonder how Kashiwagi must fare?" Chie had an impish grin on her face. "Let's go and watch!" The Inaba girls were all too eager to do so. Wondering what the fuss was all about, the SEES girls tagged along, leaving behind Nanako, Koromaru and Ken to comfort a whimpering Teddie.

And it wasn't disappointing. Minako was restrained by her brothers and boyfriend, looking like a pissed hellcat more than anything else, spewing out threats and curses. Kashiwagi's looked terrified, mostly because nobody had ever stood up to her like this before. The stall vendor was nowhere in sight.

"Akihiko, what's going on here?" Mitsuru questioned. "Why is Minako acting like that?"

The former boxer sighed. He told his girlfriend everything that happened. By the time he finished, Mitsuru had a tight smile on her face, scaring the guys even more. The surrounding temperature dropped all too suddenly. Apparently, Minako felt it too and ceased her struggling.

Mitsuru stepped up to the high school teacher. "Excuse me, Miss. I believe you should leave before I report your indecent behavior towards my friends to the authorities."

Regaining her composure, Kashiwagi frowned. "And who are you to tell me what to do?!" she sniped back.

"My name is Mitsuru Kirijo, and I believe you were harassing my friends. Leave now before I personally execute you," Mitsuru demanded in her most authoritative voice.
Kashiwagi narrowed her eyes and turned to leave, cursing under her breath. There was no way she was going against a Kirijo, let alone if higher ups were going to get involved.

After she was long gone, the guys could finally exhale a breath of relief. Rise was the first to break the silence and gave Minako a tackle-hug. "Senpai, that was amazing!" she squealed. "That old hag has been giving us nothing but trouble ever since Naoto-kun won the beauty pageant by a landslide. Serves her right!"

Minako was then surrounded by hugs and praises from Yukiko, Chie and Naoto. "You're our hero!" they chorused.

'Wow, who knew Aneki was the possessive type,' Souji thought amusedly. Then he remembered Nanako. "Hey guys, aren't we forgetting something? Let's get the watermelon party started!"

The whole beach fiasco was forgotten after they cracked a few melons, and the mood returned to normal. They decided to take the scenic route back and rented scooters to explore the villages and sample their specialties. They even stopped at a local restaurant for an evening meal.

When Chie suggested they go for a short hike, Mitsuru guided them to a small hill not far from the mansion. She then openly challenged anyone to race her to the top of the hill. Akihiko took it a little too seriously, stating that the loser had to buy the winner beef bowls for the rest of the week. Everyone sweatdropped as they were left in the dust of the two muscle maniacs.

Souji and the twins walked at the back of the group. Halfway through the trail, Izanagi started acting up again. This time, the images were of black blobs and his parents' concerned faces. The headache became unbearable, causing him to stop in his tracks.

The twins noticed his pain and tried to comfort him. "It's happening again, isn't it Banchou-kun?" Minato asked, handing him a bottle of water.

"Yeah..." Souji groaned, still trying to calm his Persona down. When Izanagi finally stopped, he chugged down the entire bottle's content.

"Tell us what's wrong. Maybe we can help," Minako offered.

Her gentle and concerned stare finally wore Souji down. He sighed and told them everything. By the time he was done, the twins exchanged looks of surprise.

"That's weird. How come we don't feel that? We've been through the same thing..." Minato wondered aloud.

"Now it's your turn to talk. What are you guys hiding from me?" Souji demanded.

With no other choice, they told him about Mitsuru's suspicion and the labs located on the island, including Aigis' theory about what took place here three years ago.

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" the silverette muttered, rubbing his temples. "But still, the biggest question is how Ikutsuki knows about me and my parents. I just hope we find the answer to that soon."

"We hope so too, Banchou-kun. We hope so too..."

"Big Bro!"
Nanako's voice snapped the three out of their revelries. Having felt a bit better, Souji jogged to his cousin's side. It turns out the little girl had captured a kabuto beetle and was sharing her find with Yukiko. She was excitedly telling Souji all about it, flailing her arms about. Ken came to join them and she had to tell the story all over again.

Having seen the distraction, with Souji out of hearing distance, Yosuke approached the twins. "So how is it going with him, guys?"

"He's seems to be doing okay now, but I dunno…" Minako answered him with uncertainty.

"What exactly happened last night, Yosuke? When he performed that spell, something went wrong. I could sense it," Minato stated, his tone serious. "Knowing him, he wouldn't risk something like that over a single target."

"I thought it was unusual too. I could have sworn when he summoned that little girl Persona of his, he was commanding her for a Mudoon spell." Yosuke shrugged. "Maybe I heard it wrong."

Minako shook her head. "His Personas have been giving him headaches recently. Did he ever tell you guys about any of that?"

"Knowing Souji, he wouldn't even speak about his problems unless withholding any info could put us in danger," Yosuke sighed. "This happened before you know…during our fight with Kubo."

Minato raised an eyebrow. "The copycat murderer? What about him?"

"When he got trapped in one of Kubo's mind tricks, I saw him crushing card after card but couldn't call out a single Persona. The weird thing was…those cards were blank. Usually, it would be glowing blue and has a picture of our Persona on it. I overheard Kubo saying something about Souji being empty like him. I managed to pull him out of there before that lunatic strangled him."

Yosuke shuddered at that. "He was so angry at Kubo, we were afraid he would snap and lose control of his power. We didn't think much about it after that because thanks to his frenzy summoning, we were able to defeat that Shadow."

The twins looked at each other and then at the ground, biting their bottom lip. Yosuke found it funny how much they look alike at this point, despite their polar opposite appearances. Then a thought hit him. "Hey guys, I was wondering about your Shadows. Do you think—"

"Aneki, Aniki, Yosuke! If you don't hurry up, we're leaving without you!" Souji called them over in the distance. They were almost out of the small forest and the mansion was in sight.

The twins' stomachs growled. "Oh yeah, it's almost dinner time," Minato grinned sheepishly, rubbing the back of his head.

"I wonder what Shinji is gonna make tonight?" Minako thought aloud, and then turned her attention to their soon-to-be schoolmate. "Oh right, what was it you wanted to ask us, Yosuke-kun?"

He shook his head. "Never mind, it's probably nothing. I must be over-thinking things..." When they turned their backs to him, Yosuke frowned. 'I guess I'll have to ask them some other time."

Dinner was the most memorable event of the day; Souji and Shinjiro prepared the skewered meats, fish and vegetables for the barbecue while Junpei and Yosuke fired up the charcoal grill. The girls set up the area and made drinks. They were having a picnic under the open sky, at the mansion's deck facing the sea. Shinjiro didn't trust the girls to watch over the food with the exception of
Minako. Kanji and Minato assisted him with the meats and seafood, and Souji took care of the vegetables. He even taught Nanako how to grill her own eggplants. For dessert, Minako treated everybody with s'mores.

After an amazing meal, the girls laid out straw mats on the deck, so everyone could sit or lie down. The sky was cloudless that night, making it perfect for stargazing.

"Damn, that was some good food..." Kanji commented, on his back with propped hands behind his head, staring up at the sky. The salty breeze of the ocean blew softly.

"This is the best vacation ever!" Nanako beamed, hugging Koromaru who was snuggled up beside her. "I wish my dad was here though..."

Sensing the loneliness in her tone, Minako brought up the topic of their next activity. "Hey, since we're outdoors, does anyone know any campfire songs? Ooohh, better yet, ghost stories!"

"No way!" Yukari and Chie shrieked.

Minako giggled. "Relax, girls. I was only kidding."

Nanako tugged her cousin's shirt. "Big Bro, the stars are pretty. Do you see any constellations?"

Souji looked up to the sky. "Hmm...I think I see the Dipper over there. I'm not sure if it's the big one or the little one though. " He pointed to a group of stars slightly to the right. He had to lie down to get a better view, Nanako nestled by his side to join him.

"My science teacher said that's part of the bear constellation. Is that true?" she asked.

"Yeah, the big bear is called Ursa Major, and the little one is called Ursa Minor."

Yukiko elegantly sat by his other side, and pointed to three brightly shining stars in a row. "I think I see Orion's belt, although I could be wrong..."

Seeing how comfy those three were, the others wasted no time in pairing off to partake in the activity. Teddie and Junpei were kicked away from Rise's group, which consisted of the two scanners, Koromaru and Ken. Feeling dejected, the two went off to a corner to sulk.

The Persona-users never knew that stargazing could be so relaxing, and helped calmed their minds from all that has happened during summer. They hoped that the skies were just as clear when they get home, so they could do it again.

After a few more hours of stargazing and chatting about trivial things, Nanako fell asleep. That was the cue to end their activities for the day. Souji carried her to her room and Minako tucked her in with her Loveline doll.

The next morning, everybody had full reign on their time and were free to do anything they wished. One thing's for sure, no one wanted to set foot on the beach again. They were content just walking around the mansion's gardens or lounging about before they had to leave after lunch.

Meanwhile, Mitsuru took Fuuka, Aigis and Metis to the Kirijo Ergonomics Research Lab. She wanted to find out if anything has been tampered with or stolen.

"Senpai, I found nothing in the database about Souji-kun, nor his parents," Fuuka said, looking away from the large screen. "Even going through the past files, I got nothing."
Aigis came back with Metis. "We checked the inventories, every single one, but we found nothing out of place," the former reported.

"We even checked the abandoned basement where Sister had been sleeping before she reawakened, but there was nothing there," Metis added. "What are we looking for exactly?"

Mitsuru sighed. "I'm not entirely sure myself. So far, we found no evidence of anything being tampered here. Even if these laboratories no longer support Shadow research, I doubt that they've discarded everything after the explosion. We just have to look a bit harder." That said, she turned back to one of the computers and began typing.

"Senpai, if you would give me permission, I'd like to check something in the mainframe servers," Fuuka requested. "There might be some sort of clue there that could point us to the right direction."

Mitsuru pulled out a shiny black card from her pocket. "Then take this with you. It's my master key. It will override all the security protocols and give you full access to anything you might need. Hack it if you deem it necessary. I'll take full responsibility. We don't have much time left before the ferry arrives to take us back."

"I understand." Fuuka gingerly took the card and headed to another room.

A thought occurred to Aigis; she suddenly remembered the time they fought the Justice and Chariot Shadows in an underground basement. "There are places we haven't thought of looking yet," she mused. "Are there any blueprints of this place when it was first built? There might be nooks and crannies that only the original designers were aware of. Someone might just be smart enough to hide something there."

"You have a point." Mitsuru stroked her chin in thought. "Yes, I can get those for you. Just be as thorough as you can." A few keystrokes later, she pulled up the old blueprints on screen. Aigis memorized them and headed off, Metis following close behind.

Two hours later, the four gathered in an empty office. Fuuka opened her laptop and typed furiously while Mitsuru shuffled some papers, sighing disappointedly. Aigis and Metis were sorting the contents of a rust-proof box they had found.

"I discovered nothing on my part, but I have blocked all access for Ikutsuki and changed all the passwords," the heiress declared. "If he does try anything, I will know of it."

The other three turned to Fuuka. "I haven't found much as I dug through the entire system, but I did find some anomalies in the data, and blanks that were not made recently. It's possible to reconstruct the erased information, but it'll take a while."

"Then I'll confiscate anything you need," Mitsuru told her. "Aigis, I hope you and Metis had more luck."

"It's not much," Metis answered. "Only this air-tight box hidden in an old air vent located in the basement. I must admit, it was cleverly hidden."

Aigis looked at the box's contents displayed on the table: A few pieces of paper and a hard disc drive. "Whatever it is, someone took the time and thought to keep it hidden and preserved. Judging from the manufacturing date on the disc, I'd say this thing is more than 12 years old…"

"Around the time of the explosion. Uncanny timing," Mitsuru commented. She checked her wristwatch. "We should wrap this up. The ferry will be arriving in three hours and I haven't packed yet. There's still enough time for lunch with everyone before we head back to Inaba."
Fuuka also asked if she could have all of the remaining gadgets developed to function in the Dark Hour. They left the labs carrying three big boxes.

The long train journey back to Inaba lulled everyone to sleep, except the three Wild Cards. Souji was spacing out a lot and this worried his surrogate siblings.

"Banchou-kun, is anything wrong?" Minato started. "I noticed that you haven't been yourself lately."

"Is Izanagi giving you trouble again?" Minako asked, worried.

Souji snapped out of his trance. "Huh...Oh no, no. I was just thinking about what Nanako said to me at the beach." He paused for moment, then continued. "Tell me, who is Pharos?"

It was the twins' turn to pause.

"Apparently he's Nanako's new friend who often plays with her in the evenings. She told me that his brother, Ryoji-san, came to pick him up the other day when we were out shopping for swimwear."

Minako stared at him as if he'd grown two heads. "Pharos can manifest himself in this world like Ryoji can? And Nanako-chan can see him?"

Before Souji could question her any further, Minato quickly answered. "Pharos was...is...the Death Shadow in its incomplete form. He's like a six-year old version of Ryoji, only more cryptic and a lot less talkative. He would often come and visit us in our rooms during the Dark Hour before the full moon appears, and once more after an operation. We never saw him again after the twelve Arcana Shadows were defeated."

"And what did you mean by Nanako 'seeing' him?"

"Well, Pharos-kun lived within our minds, since Aigis trapped him inside of us. So it makes sense that only Aniki and I are the only ones who can see him," Minako answered. "But still, he's not a bad person if that's what you're worried about."

Souji pressed his back further into his seat, arms crossed in thought. "If Pharos and Ryoji-san are the same being, then how come both of them exist at the same time, right here and right now?"

The twins mimicked his body language. "It must be the same case as Aigis and Metis. They're like two sides of the same coin. Despite being one and the same, they are two entirely different individuals with different personalities," Minato said. "Maybe that's why he calls Ryoji his brother, just like Metis claims Aigis is her sister."

A pained look crossed Souji's features. "But why would he approach Nanako though? She's not involved in any of this."

Minako tapped a finger on her chin. "This is only a theory, but...maybe Pharos is attracted to Nanako-chan because they're in the same age group, and she has a strong bond with you? He...he might be trying to look after her, just like what he did with us."

"I'm sure Ryoji is aware of how important Nanako-chan is to you, Banchou-kun. Unlike Yukiko, she can't defend herself using a Persona," her twin added. "Remember what Margaret said - the strength of our powers lies within our bonds and emotional stability. Nanako-chan is the key that hold yours together."
"I guess you're right," Souji sighed, calming down. "I just hope Ryoji-san can explain everything if we ever see him again." He stretched and yawned wide. "Sorry guys, that was a bit much to take in. I'm gonna take a nap."

"Sounds good," Minato yawned, followed by his sister. "We still have a lot of stuff to think about…" They fell asleep in a matter of minutes.

Unbeknownst to them, Shinjiro, who sat behind Souji, was eavesdropping on their entire conversation. 'Tch, things are getting a lot more complicated…' he thought. 'First Aigis and Metis, now this Pharos kid and 'Ryoji'. Oh right, he must be the Mochizuki guy Aki was telling me about. But why aren't they telling anyone else about this?' He closed his eyes to clear his mind, a few of the gears clicked into position. 'Wait just a damn minute…! The guy who had the balls to ask Mitsuru out… the same Mochizuki who, according to Iori, was considered a playboy among playboys…?' He remembered Minato's explosive reaction towards Teddie last night, and put the pieces together. 'The same bastard who got too touchy-feely with Minako… my Minako!?'

A silent growl escaped his lips. 'If that playboy so much as looks at her inappropriately, I'll beat him up so bad he'll go crying back to Nyx!' With a satisfied grunt, Shinjiro closed his eyes and drifted off in light slumber. There was only one tiny problem though; he had never even laid eyes on the guy.

'Shit!'

Chapter End Notes

Some more shinanigans before we start the next arc. Happy reading and reviewing!
"Wow, it's even prettier than the photos," Minako said as the group arrived at SEES' new home. Today was the day they all gathered early in the morning to clean the new dorm that had just been renovated, which was why all of them were dressed in loose T-shirts and trousers or shorts, something which they were comfortable in and not afraid to get dirty. According to Mitsuru, the reason for this activity was to strengthen their teamwork off the battlefield. They hauled an artillery of cleaning equipment and supplies behind them, which had been purchased from Junes or borrowed from their homes.

The old estate was gorgeous. Behind the intricately carved iron gates was a cobblestone pathway leading straight to the house. According to the realty office, the land was once owned by a wealthy traditional family much like the Ichijo clan, but after the last heir passed away, it was sold to an Englishman prior to World War 2, whom had built the manor for his family. After they moved away, the manor exchanged hands a few times, but eventually abandoned for years unknown.

The housing structure was made of sturdy stone of various shades of black, grey and brown, with a patio half-protected by an awning on the left side, surrounded by stone walls and iron fences. The front garden was barren at the moment, but Mitsuru planned to blanket it entirely with grass. A few large trees of various species, some in full bloom, stood tall and proud, scattered randomly across the bare garden. A swing was tied to a low branch of a willow tree nearby. Overall, it was peaceful and secluded.

"You're right, Minako-chan," Yukari said. "Hey, check out those flowers!" She pointed to a small tree. It was in full bloom; its flowers had trumpet shape with five white petals and a yellow, hollowed centre. She stood on her tip-toes to pluck one from a low branch and sniffed it. "They smell nice, too." She placed it behind her left ear.

Aigis inspected the flower closely. "If I'm not mistaken, these flowers are called 'frangipani' or 'plumeria'. They're mostly found in tropical countries, typically in South East Asia and parts of South America."

Yukari caressed the flower. "They're so beautiful."

"They are commonly associated with death because the trees are mostly planted in graveyards," Aigis continued, not caring for tact. "According to folklore, it is said that when one detects the scent of frangipanis in the air, the spirits of the dead is thought to be nearby."

The brunette barely held back a startled squeak, backing away from the tree. "Th-that's just some silly ghost story to scare kids..." she stammered, trying to put up a brave front. Unlike her, Metis stared at her sister with adoration, impressed by her wealth of knowledge.

"How strange..." Mitsuru said thoughtfully. "I don't recall seeing these here when I first came to this property to purchase it."

"That's not funny, Mitsuru-senpai!"

"I'm serious, Yukari. I don't remember these at all." Mitsuru shook her head, disturbed by the appearance of the strange plants. "Perhaps it only blooms during hot summer months? That could
be why I didn't notice before."

It didn't stop the others from feeling bothered. "Another supernatural sign?" Minato wondered out loud.

Souji crossed his arms. "Could be," he said. "Things have remained peaceful on this side for the past few days. The effects of the Dark Hour must steadily be increasing."

"Oh great. Next thing you're gonna tell me is that this house is haunted," Yukari muttered unhappily.

"Well, if this place is as old as Kou-kun's or Naoto-chan's family estates, we can't rule out the possibility of those spirit lights appearing around the area," Minako stated nonchalantly.

"Minako-chan, you're not helping!"

Junpei snickered. "Yukari-cchi, you're really afraid of our spooky new house?" he teased, only to get stomped on the foot by his former classmate. "Ow! What the hell, I was just joking!"

"You know how I hate those lame type of jokes, Stupei!"

Minato quickly stepped in before his girlfriend got physical with her emotions. "Calm down, Yukari. You don't have to worry about anything." He held her hand, squeezing lightly. "I'm here, remember? I won't let anything bad happen to you."

And just like magic, she forgot about her anger, a reddish hue blooming on her cheeks. "Thank you, Minato-kun. Unlike somebody-" she glared at the culprit, "you know just what to say."

Junpei rolled his eyes at the corny-ness of the pair.

"Are we going in or what?" Shinjiro growled, fidgeting with impatience.

"Ah, yes..." Mitsuru walked up to the front doors, keys in hand. "Before we go in, I must warn you; this place has been closed for quite a while, so it is rather dusty inside. The renovations were mostly for the exterior, bathrooms and kitchen, so the rest of the place is relatively untouched."

"That won't be a problem, Mitsuru-san," Souji said. He eyed Teddie, who was donning on his bear suit. "In fact, it'll be just perfect."

Yosuke and Kanji snickered.

Minako shrugged. "C'mon, let's go see what the inside looks like."

Mitsuru unlocked the door and pushed it wide open, letting the sunlight stream in. Slowly they walked inside, careful of their steps. Indeed there was dust all over the place - on the covered furniture, framed pictures, and window sills - which looked like it was inches thick. Koromaru sniffed the floor, causing a small dust cloud to fly up. The Shiba Inu sneezed and the size of the cloud expanded.

"Bless you, Koro-chan," Fuuka told him. "Achoo...! Oh my, it is quite dusty here..."

"We have a lot of work ahead of us," Ken pointed out. "When is the truck coming again, Mitsuru-san?"

"The moving truck should arrive after lunch," she replied. "We should start immediately."
"So, which floors are our rooms?" Metis asked.

"The boys' rooms are on the second floor. The girls' are on the third one. The ground floor will double as a lounge and a meeting room," Mitsuru explained. "There are two extra rooms at the back which I intend to convert into a laundry room and a pantry. The washing machines, driers, stove, refrigerator and new furniture should arrive about the same time as the moving truck."

"I'll help!" Teddie 'volunteered' eagerly. "I'll start by cleaning up the girls' rooms!" He was about to make a dash for the stairs when Souji grabbed him by the collar of his suit.

"DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT!" the girls protested.

Teddie pouted. "Aww… I can't help just a little?"

"Oh yes, you will be helping, Teddie," Souji said with an evil grin. "You can help by cleaning up the lounge and meeting room."

"Oh, sure Sensei. If I knew we were going to be cleaning all day, I would have left my suit at home. Just let me take it off and--"

Souji cut him off and shook his head. "No, Teddie. You'll clean up the entire first floor… with your suit on."

Teddie's eyes widened. His teammates smirked devilishly. They all knew how much he treasured his bear outfit, and now understood why Souji insisted he brought it along to the new dorm. "B-b-but this has gotta be the dustiest place in the house! My precious suit will be ruined!" he cried, flailing his arms in dismay.

"Consider this your punishment for your poor behavior at Yakushima," Souji declared, hands on his hips. "And I'm not sorry. I did warn you."

Teddie stared up at him with his biggest, teary eyes yet, but the silverette was unmoved. "Woe is me…"

"Senpai, aren't ya forgetting something?" Kanji asked, hiding something behind his back with a lopsided smirk.

"Oh, yeah. Thanks for reminding me. You brought it, right?"

"You bet'cha!" Kanji's grin got broader as he revealed what he was holding - the pinkest, frilliest, kitchen apron ever, adorned with red hearts and lace. "Here ya go! Tatsumi Textile's top selling item. Made it myself. Custom sized, just for Teddie!"

"That way you won't get too dirty while cleaning up here and doing overtime duty at Junes," Yosuke snickered.

Teddie was horror-struck. "WHAT?!"

"Yosuke and I agreed that cleaning up wouldn't be enough for what you put us through," Souji explained, forcing the apron over Teddie's large head. "So for the next few weeks, you'll be working extra night duties at Junes along with your normal shifts; three times a week and on weekends."

That was the icing on the cake. Yukiko burst into laughing fits at the sight. "O-Oho… S-Souji-kun… Ahahaha! Th-that's… p-perfect!" she giggled, not able to catch her breath.
Akihiko chuckled. "Yeah, a fitting punishment for that rascal, alright!"

"This'll teach him from pulling something like that ever again," Chie grinned. Oh, she was going to enjoy every second of this!

Almost everyone laughed at Teddie's predicament, a few of them snapping a photo with their phones. Junpei was struggling not to guffaw at his buddy, his cheeks puffing up with glee, since he did have fun during the King's Game. But the sight of the bear in an apron –where the pink really clashed with his blue fur– and the look on his face was simply priceless.

"While Teddie cleans up here, we'll assist the ladies with their rooms and hallways," Naoto said. She pulled out a little cubic-shaped device from her pocket and placed it on a dusty end table. "This is a special security alarm. If Teddie dares to leave the house without permission, it'll go off."

"So I advise you to behave and do your chores as told, or your punishment will be worse." Souji gave Teddie a flat stare as he handed him a few rags, a broom, a mop, bucket and some cleaning solution. "I'll come down to check on you later." They walked away, leaving him to wallow in his misery.

"I gotta hand it to you guys, you really planned this out," Shinjiro grinned.

Minako knelt down to face Koromaru. "Koro-chan, why don't you keep Teddie-kun company down here? If he starts to boss you around, come upstairs and tell me, okay?" She rubbed the dog's head, promising a treat for him later.

"Alright, so what are we waiting for? Let's get this cleaning started!" Chie announced vigorously.

As they headed upstairs, Minato approached Naoto. "Did you really make an alarm to prevent him from escaping?"

"Not really. It's just a camouflaged camera recording his every move," she answered, a small grin tugging the corner of her lips. "Nothing like a little mind trick to help him focus. Rise came up with the suggestion and I must say, it was a brilliant idea."

Rise giggled. "Serves him right for taking advantage of us like that!"

They couldn't agree more.

Second floor…

When the boys reached their assigned floor, they were greeted by the same view as the one below, with fewer covered furniture. The floor, which was once polished parquet, was coated in years worth of dust. The windows were grimy, giving the atmosphere a sense of gloom.

Akihiko looked around. "Wow, looking at all of this is rather overwhelming. I wonder where we should start."

"Mitsuru-senpai said that the bathrooms were were renovated, so we can save that for later," Junpei said. "But man, I'll be sooooo glad when this is over! At least I know I don't have to do it again." Cleaning stuff up wasn't exactly his forte.

"Let's look around to see how much we have to work with, yeah?" Minato suggested. The others nodded and separated, half of them went to the left wing while the other half went to the right. There were two bathrooms, one at each end of the hallway. In the left wing, the guys noticed that
there was a room larger than the rest with its own private bathroom, which they assumed must be the master bedroom. The other five rooms were about identical in size. They re-gathered in the middle to discuss their findings.

Souji observed the furniture and carpet. "From the condition of the stuff in here, I don't think anything could be salvaged anymore. Kanji, Yosuke and I will throw them out while you guys decide on your rooms."

"Good idea, Souji-san," Ken agreed. "By the way, the layout on this floor reminds me of the one in Iwatodai dorm. Convenient, huh?"

"Mitsuru also said the big room is off limits," Shinjiro told them. "I'm guessing she has plans for it. Not that I care."

"Okay, here's the game plan," Minato said. "Each of us will choose our own room to clean up. Souji-kun, Yosuke and Kanji will haul out the old stuff and clean the big room. Once everyone is done, we'll gather back here and clear out the hallway. How does that sound?"

"Sounds good," Kanji grunted, followed by the rest voicing their agreement.

"Oh right, I almost forgot. Shinjiro-senpai, Mitsuru-senpai has put you in charge of the kitchen. After we're done here, you can head there and start on it while we do the rest," Minato told him.

Shinjiro nodded. He headed straight for the room at the end of the right wing, the one next to the bathroom. "I'll be taking this one. We should get started if we wanna finish early."

Junpei chose the room at the end of the left wing, opposite the biggest room. Ken's room was between his and Akihiko's. Minato settled for the one opposite to Shinjiro's.

They cleaned in silence. The only noise that could be heard was Souji, Yosuke and Kanji carrying out the old furniture. That wasn't the case for Junpei though - he kept whining about the amount of chores he had to do for his room without actually being productive, so much so that Shinjiro stormed out and threatened him to "Shut the hell up!" or else he'd stuff his mouth with moldy carpet and slap duct tape over it so he couldn't spit it out.

Kanji, who wasn't the most patient person in the world, groaned. "Damn, I never thought that someone more annoying than Yosuke-senpai actually exists."

"Hey, I take offense to that…but I have to agree with you," Yosuke muttered while washing the windows.

Souji silently chuckled. 'That's the Magician for ya…'

Unlike the silence below, the girls were multitasking by gossiping and cleaning. Just like the guys below, they cleaned up their own rooms before starting on the hallways. Aegis and Metis took the rooms in the left wing while Fuuka and Yukari took the ones in the right. Minako conveniently took the room that was located above her brother's - some things never change.

It was with mutual agreement on the girls' part that Mitsuru should take the largest bedroom, since she's the owner and technically the matron of the dorm. Yukiko and Rise assisted her as it was too much work for a single person to do. Chie and Naoto hauled the old furniture, which wasn't much, to the second floor in hopes that the boys would dispose of it for them before helping the other girls.
The acoustics of the indoor structure carried sound surprisingly well, girlish giggles and conversation arousing curiosity among the men downstairs. Most of the SEES guys finished with their rooms and just started on the miniature lounge. They paused in the middle of their tasks, wondering what the commotion was all about. It wasn't too difficult when the girls weren't exactly keeping their volume down.

"Minako-san! I bet that living with a bunch of guys in the same dorm, you'd have the privilege of going into their rooms, right? Being the leader and all…" came Rise's voice, using that sweet, sing-song tone which Shinjiro hated so much.

"Well, I only had free access to Aniki's room, since he gave me a spare key to it," Minako answered. "But other than that, I've only been inside the other guys' room once when they invited me. Mitsuru-senpai imposes strict rules for that kind of thing, especially at night." A collective of insinuating Oooohhhh's followed. "H-hey, don't get the wrong idea!" she cried. "I was invited to play video games in Junpei-kun's room, but I couldn't stand being in there for more than 10 minutes because it smelled real bad!"

The eavesdroppers downstairs lightly snickered at that. Junpei looked offended, but didn't say anything.

"So what about those other rooms?" asked Chie.

"I helped Ken-kun with his crafts project one time. He didn't want to take it out of his room because he thought it was embarrassing. Akihiko-senpai dragged me to his and requested for a private conversation. Turns out he wanted to ask for some advice, specifically on how to ask a girl out."

Yukari spoke up next. "Let me guess. Mitsuru-senpai, right?"

"Bingo!" As the girls giggled at Mitsuru's likely red face for that revelation, Akihiko could feel his own cheeks heating up, earning a snort from his childhood friend.

"And what about Shinjiro-san?" Rise sang, dragging the words out like a quiz show host. Her voice was dripping with mirth, clearly enjoying the role of interrogator.

Minako started to stutter, incoherent sentences sputtering out of her mouth. Shinjiro almost choked on his spit, and started sweating when he felt Minato glaring at him.

"What's that? I can't hear youuuuuuu~"

"Rise, enough!" Naoto's stern voice commanded. "If she doesn't want to talk about it, she has the right to remain silent."

"Don't tell me you've been in Kanji's room as--"

"No I haven't! Stop making such ridiculous presumptions!"

"It's no secret that Yukiko had been in Souji-kun's room a few times. She even lied to her parents about spending Christmas Eve at my house when she was actually spending it with him," Chie supplied, laughing at her best friend's wails of "Shut up, Chie!"

Fuuka hummed thoughtfully before speaking her mind. "You know...there were actually a few times where I could have sworn I saw Mitsuru-senpai exit Akihiko-senpai's room at night…"

"What are you guys doing?" Souji asked, startling the eavesdropping guys who were gathered close
to the stairs. He emerged from the big room, holding a few rags and a bucket, looking at them with a puzzled expression. Yosuke and Kanji were behind him, raising an eyebrow at their conspicuous behavior.

"N-nothing! Nothing at all!" Akihiko quickly replied, thankful for Souji's well-timed intervention. 'If Junpei or Shinji finds out about our night dates, we'll never hear the end of it.'

Shinjiro also felt relief, as it distracted Minato from questioning about him and his sister. 'I'm dead meat if he finds out she slept on the same bed with me that one time...' He suppressed a shudder at the memories. 'It's not like we did anything naughty. Besides, she was the one who barged in...' Souji shrugged it off, until they heard Minako's voice again. "But it wasn't just me. Aniki has been into every girl's room as well!"

Everyone turned silent. The blue-haired twin's eyes went wide.

"Minako-chan!" Yukari shrieked. "Don't you dare...!"

"Hey, let her talk!" Rise quickly interrupted. "I'm curious now. C'mon, spill!"

"Aniki and I tell each other pretty much everything," Minako's said coyly. "When he and Yukari-chan became a couple, she snuck him into her room and they spent a really nice evening together talking and listening to music. That's what he told me anyway..."

The other girls started giggling. Minato was blushing, and he could imagine Yukari's face turning pinker than her tank top right now.

"Tell us more! Tell us more!" Rise squealed, enjoying herself way too much with all the gossip.

"There's nothing much really. I was there with him when Fuuka-chan invited us to try the cake she baked in our cooking club. It was rather tasty."

"Too bad I couldn't bake another one like that again," Fuuka sighed. "Nobody wants to try out my cooking..."

Everyone shivered. The last time anyone agreed to taste-test Fuuka's cooking, the outcome wasn't pretty. Yosuke and Kanji shivered too as they recalled their own similar mishaps.

"What about Mitsuru-san's room?" Rise asked.

"Oh, Mitsuru-senpai wanted to watch a DVD, so we picked out a horror movie. We watched it in her room since she has the biggest screen. It was okay at first, until the good part came on. She was so scared, she kept holding onto our hands throughout the whole show."

Akihiko shot Minato a dirty look, which he replied with a nonchalant shrug. Hey, it wasn't like he left without any injury; Mitsuru almost crushed his hand with her vice-like grip.

"Minato-san and Minako-san has also been in my room at my request," Aigis said. "They have taught me so much about life and what it means to be alive, so I wanted to give them something, to prove that I will never forget and will always be with them."

There was an awkward silence as they tried to process what she meant. As human as Aigis had become over the past two years, she still lacked in social tact when it came to sharing certain bits of information.
"What? I just gave each of them a charred screw from my body as a token of my appreciation."

"That's really nice, Sister," Metis said. "When I get my own room ready, I'll ask them to come visit me. Maybe I should ask Souji-san to join as well."

"Metis! It doesn't work like that!" Mitsuru snapped. "There are rules!" Everyone laughed at her attempt to cover her embarassment.

Below them, the guys sweatdropped at how things turned out. Junpei gawked. "Man, do you and Souji have to be such a huge hit with the ladies?"

"Why? You jealous, Iori? Don't you already have Yoshino to worry about?" Shinjiro scoffed.

"Speaking of worries," Minato began. "What was that part about you and my sister, Senpai?"

His former upperclassman gulped.

"Hey guys, we still have a ways to go," Souji interrupted, ignoring how his psuedo brother was glaring at Shinjiro. "We'll get scolded if we don't finish up soon."

While silent the entire time, Ken heard everything and shook his head. "Grown-ups can be so immature..." he muttered, continuing his work.

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**Ground floor...**

Teddie jumped up and down trying to reach one of several cobwebs adorning the walls with a feather duster, with very little success. "Oh...! This is not work for a bear of my quality!" he huffed in indignation before staring at the floor hopelessly. "But if I don't get this place spotless, Sensei and Yosuke will give me even worse punishment..." Trying one last time, he jumped as high as he could, trying to reach the spider web only to trip over the bucket, falling face first onto the dusty floor. A huge dust cloud covered the room.

"AAAAACCCCHHHHHOOOOOO!" The force of the sneeze made the airborne dust scatter further. "It's no use... I'll never get this place cleaned on time!"

Panic gripped the bear's being as he imagined the angry look on Souji's face upon seeing that he had failed his task. To Teddie, failing Sensei was a thousand times worse than having the girls mad at him all at once.

Koromaru sneezed again. He started to whine, clearly unhappy about being attacked by an army of dust bunnies before making his way out through the front door which was left open.

"Even you're abandoning me, Koro-chan?" Teddie plopped on the floor, a depressed aura surrounding him. "Could this get any worse...?"

"Teddie! I don't hear you doing any cleaning down there!" Yosuke's voice boomed from upstairs. "Move your lazy butt or Souji and I will be coming down!"

Quickly, Teddie got back to his feet again. "Everything is under control! This place will be super spotless in no time!" he shouted back, faking enthusiasm.

"It better be, or I'll have Dad give you even more night shifts!"

Once he was sure Yosuke wasn't listening, Teddie sulked. "How un-bear-able..." he whimpered.
"What am I gonna do?"

The sound of shuffling and something being dropped next to him caught his attention. Looking to his right, Koromaru was staring up at him, a long tree branch on the floor. "Huh? What's this, Koro-chan?" He took the item and frowned. "Sorry, I can't play fetch now."

Koromaru shook his head and pointed a paw to the feather duster. Teddie looked at the utensil before looking back at the branch. He repeated the movement several times before something finally clicked in his brain. "That's it! If I tie the feather duster to this branch with a rag, then I can get those pesky webs off the walls!"

Koromaru barked in approval. Teddie gave him a hug. "Oh, Koro-chan, I knew you'd never abandon me! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" he cried in joy. "You're so loyal! Man's best friend indeed. And now I know you're a bear's best friend too. I promise to give you a nice bath after I'm done cleaning!"

Hearing that, the Shiba Inu nuzzled against Teddie's face, making the human Shadow giggle. "Hehe, let's keep going!" he exclaimed with renewed resolve.

The ceiling and walls were cleared without much trouble. "Phew… This place is looking better already!" Teddie adjusted his apron. "Remind me to thank Kanji for the apron later. Despite its garish design, it does a great job of protecting my suit from the evil dust!" Koromaru barked in agreement, pointing his nose to the direction of a window. "You're right, Koro-chan! Time to wash those windows!"

Grabbing a bucket, he filled it with water from the kitchen sink and then mixed in some cleaning solution. Once it was ready, he started washing the windows one by one. Koromaru helped by keeping the clean rags at hand so Teddie could easily change them once one was too filthy to be used.

While trying to work, he had to stop at intervals because he was frying inside his suit due to the summer heat. "It's so hot…" He wobbled a bit before steadying himself. "No, I can't stop now!" Koromaru panted and wagged his tail, as if encouraging him. "You're right Koro-chan. There's one more thing to do before this place is finally clean!" He grabbed the mop and bucket. "Time to clean the floor!"

Teddie swept furiously before proceeding to mop. He swung and twirled back and forth as if he was in a ballroom, pretending that the mop was a pretty girl dancing with him. Koromaru, being a dog, didn't really understand this, but as long as the job got done and the place was clean, he didn't mind.

Finally, everything was sparkling like brand new. Teddie completed his tasks. "Yay! This place is super clean now! Sensei will be so proud of me!" he cheered. He plopped on the floor, exhausted out of his mind. "I'm so tired…" He unzipped his suit so his blonde head could pop out, placing the bear-head aside. "Sensei won't mind if I open my suit. I did finish after all." Koromaru walked up to him and hopped inside. The blonde was surprised, but grateful for the Shiba Inu's company and too tired to mind. "You're fuzzy like me, Koro-chan!" He hugged the dog. "Let's take a quick nap before Sensei comes back, okay?"

After Teddie fell asleep, the others were just about finished. It was hard work, so they decided to take a little break before resuming. Once done, they headed downstairs for a break. In the middle of the floor, Teddie and Koromaru snuggled up together in his bear suit. Thankfully he wore clothes on the inside this time. The short blonde was snoring, audible enough for everyone to hear.
Despite his flirtatious tendencies and sparkly 'charm', at that moment he looked like an innocent child hugging a favorite toy.

"Oh my goodness, isn't that the sweetest thing!" Fuuka cooed softly, not wanting the pair to wake up.

Kanji blushed at the cuteness of it all. In his mind, a design for a new doll popped up and he made a mental note to sketch it at home later. The other girls took out their phones to capture a picture.

Souji looked around and was mildly surprised. 'Looks like I underestimated him. He did a pretty good job,' he thought, pleased with the sparkling clean surfaces of the lounge, hallways and meeting room. The light scent of citrus was a pleasant change compared to the previous musty smell of dust and mold. "Come on guys, let's get out of here and leave them be. They deserve it."

"But we're not telling that to his face. Remember the last time he got a compliment and it went straight to his head?" Yosuke warned. The others got the hint and left them alone.

A short break later, Souji helped Shinjiro with the kitchen while the rest divided themselves between the pantry, laundry room, porch, and storage room. By the time they finished, it was almost lunch time.

"I'm too tired to go out, but I'm so hungry~" Chie whined in a very unlady-like manner, her stomach grumbling loudly. Everybody sweatdropped.

Kanji took out his cellphone. "I'm ordering some take-out from Aiya's. You guys want anything?"

Taking advantage of that, the others gave him their order. Teddie woke up just in time to add in his. Too dizzy to remember everything, Kanji told the person on the other line that they would be having the party special of Chinese fried rice, sweet and sour shrimp, vegetable tempura, and an additional special meat platter for Koromaru. Chie and Akihiko insisted on an extra side order of beef bowls, which they agreed to pay for themselves. After hanging up, he gave his friends a glare which meant "You guys better pony up on the bill!"

An hour later, as they were waiting in the dining room, the tell-tale sounds of a delivery scooter was heard in the distance - Aika Nakamura finally arrived with their lunch. She was greeted warmly by her schoolmates.

"Hey Aika. Long time no see," Souji said.

"Seta-kun, welcome back." Aika gave him a small smile. "I already heard from Ichijo-kun and Nagase-kun. Every time they came in class, the only thing they could talk about was you. Are you really staying for good this time?"

Souji looked away. "Yeah…" he said softly. Quickly enough, he changed the topic as he took the order from her hands and handed them to Minato. "Thanks for the food. Why don't you come in and meet my other friends? Some of them will be transferring to our school next week." He ushered her inside and introduced her to the rest.

"Hey there, Aika-chan! I'm Minako, and this is my older twin brother Minato!" the auburn-haired girl greeted boisterously. "Souji-kun told me a little about you. You're Inaba's legendary delivery girl who delivers any order, anytime, anywhere. That's so awesome!"

Aika blushed. "That's…I'm just doing my job…" she answered, staring at her shoes. Minako and Souji continued with small talk, the latter asking her about any updates in her life.
Some were already digging in, sitting on the floor of the dining room while the girls sat at the stairs on the porch. Mitsuru was appalled by the lack of manners the guys were showing, particularly Junpei and Teddie. Akihiko and Chie were no better, and she could have sworn those two were siblings if it weren't for the lack of family resemblance. However, there was still much to do and she wanted to conserve her energy.

Aika silently approached Kanji, tapping his shoulder and nearly scaring him out of his skin. "Don't do that!" he scolded her, lightly punching his chest to calm his beating heart, simultaneously coughing up some rice he choked on.

"Have you thought about my father's offer, Tatsumi-kun?" she asked, brown eyes wide with anticipation.

It creeped Kanji out a little. "How many times do I have to tell the old man I ain't got the time for that?!" he mumbled under his breath. "Sorry Nakamura-senpai, it's just not happening. I got too much going on at Ma's shop to be workin' for him."

"Okay, I'll tell him that. Sorry to bother you. That'll be 16,870 yen." She made a hand gesture to demand payment. Everyone took out their wallets or purses and pooled their money in. Chie's mood turned sour when Akihiko reminded her of their little bet back in Yakushima, resulting her having to fork out another 500 yen for his beef bowl.

"It was nice meeting you, Aika-chan!" Minako waved the girl goodbye as she left on her scooter.

Souji sat down beside Kanji and opened his food container. "What was that about?" he asked his tall kouhai.

"Mr. Aiya's been buggin' me about working part-time as a cook at his place," Kanji explained through mouthfuls of shrimp. "One of his cooks quit and moved to another town, so he's understaffed at the moment. Since I live just across the street, he figured I could give him a hand. The thing is, I'm already helping Ma with the shop, the dolls and classes, so I ain't got the time. I feel sorry for the dude, but my hands are tied." He opened another container of rice and heaped more shrimp and crispy vegetables onto it.

Shinjiro's ears twitched, which didn't go unnoticed by Minato. "Shinjiro-senpai could do it," the blunette supplied, slowly chewing his food. "It's the perfect job for him. He can handle working in the pressures of the kitchen better than anyone I know."

"I'll suggest it to the old man when I get home. I'm pretty sure you'll be hired immediately," Kanji told Shinjiro. "Just come by the diner later and tell him when you want to start."

"Speaking of part-time jobs, there should be new job postings on the bulletin board. I should check it out soon," Souji mused, munching on a tempura-fried bell pepper. "I hope the daycare is hiring again…"

"And Junes is looking for part-timers if any of you are interested," Yosuke informed them. "Although I think you guys should wait until after Teddie finishes up his punishment. I don't want him slacking off thinking that more workers are willing to cover his hide."

Teddie muttered a quick curse at that, before wolfing down his meal. He later excused himself, mentioning Koromaru over. "Sorry guys. I promised to give Koro-chan a bath after we're done cleaning. See you in a bit." The white dog followed him out, wagging his tail excitedly. He loved baths!
"That was pretty sweet of him," Minako mentioned.

"When it comes to a promise, Teddie always goes an extra mile to keep his," Souji said.

The others cleared their mess and threw out the garbage once they finished eating. They continued to rest and chat with each other, talking about all sorts of trivial things. Outside in the front yard, Teddie's laughter and Koromaru's barks were heard.

"Those two are having a good time," Minato chuckled. "I wonder who is having more fun?"

A bit later, Teddie and Koromaru returned. The blonde was soaking wet, but looking rather satisfied at his work and went to change into dry clothing. Good thing Yosuke had insisted that they all brought a spare set. Koromaru on the other hand, looked like a puffed up cotton ball after shaking off the water from his fur. Minako giggled, taking out a towel and brush from her bag. If the Shiba Inu was a cat, he would be purring loudly in pleasure as she groomed him. After everything had settled down, the Persona-users decided to wait for the trucks full of their belongings, which should be arriving any minute now.

And then, it happened.

Koromaru started growling at no particular direction, the hairs on his back raising up. "Hey, what's the matter Koro-chan?" Teddie asked.

Minako stood up quickly. "Uh-oh, I know that look. Koro-chan was just like that before the Shadows attacked me and Kanji-kun at Tatsuhime Shrine!"

Everyone was on high alert. "I swear if Shadows mess up all the hard work to get this place clean, I'm whooping their asses!" Junpei exclaimed angrily.

"On guard, everybody!" Souji warned. They braced themselves for the worst.

The Wild Cards could barely suppress a shiver, feeling as if several sets of eyes were watching them, although there was nothing and no one in sight other than their friends.

Out of nowhere, several large, floating balls of fire appeared, glowing in various pale colors of amber, blue and yellow. It materialized all over the room, with some dragging long, flickering tails behind them.

No one spoke or moved as the spirit lights harmlessly floated and danced in the air, moving around in an almost playful manner, as if enjoying the shocked expressions stamped on the Persona-users' faces. They twirled and danced in glee.

Yukari clutched onto Minato's arm, trying really hard not to shriek at the freaky sight before her. 'Don't scream... don't scream... don't scream...!' she chanted to herself. However, not even her willpower was strong enough when one of the floating orbs appeared before her and touched her face. The sensation of a cold, slimy residue dripping down her cheek was the last straw. "EEEEEEEEEEKKKKKKKKKK!" She latched onto her boyfriend's neck, hugging him as if her life depended on it.

"Y-Yu-ka-ri....too... tight...C-can't...breathe..." Minato choked, his face turning blue like his hair.

Before anyone could help him, the spirit lights started flying around erratically and aggressively, their frenzy triggered by Yukari's scream. All hell broke loose from there.
Sobbing hysterically, Minako buried her face in Shinjiro's chest after a ball of ghost fire phased through and past her head.

Mitsuru lost her cool and screamed when a fireball took shape of a flaming skull and chased her. She ended up in Akihiko's arms, who took her to a secluded corner to shield her from it.

Chie was frightened in the same manner and hugged her boyfriend, who tried to calm her down while swatting the floating lights away with little success. In her panicked state, she wrapped her arms around Yosuke's middle and squeezed him like the Heimlich maneuver, causing him to choke breathlessly.

Souji stood in front of Yukiko, shielding her from the floating fireballs in case the really did cause harm. Unlike Chie, Yukiko bravely stared at the dancing lights, their hypnotizing rhythm putting her in a trance. He had to shake her a few times to snap her out of it.

Acting on instinct, Fuuka embraced Ken, trying to protect him from the rampaging ectoplasms. This disabled Ken from moving or doing anything. Despite having outgrown her, Fuuka was surprisingly strong when she was scared.

Koromaru tried to chase the ghost lights, but they either faded away or phased into the floor whenever the Shiba Inu was close to catching them. At a desperate attempt, he ended up crashing into Junpei, sending the capped jokester to the ground in an unceremonious heap.

Kanji wasn't freaked out one bit. However, another distraction prevented him from lending a hand to the others. Said distraction was Naoto, who wrapped her arms around him, shielding her face against his abdomen (she wasn't tall enough to reach his chest) too frightened to scream. Blood gushed from his nose.

Aegis and Metis, driven by curiosity rather than fear, attempted to catch them. They jumped up and down trying to reach them.

Teddie and Rise were both so frightened that they ended up hugging each other. Teddie didn't even have the time to enjoy his situation when Rise glared at him. "Do anything funny and I'll kill you!" was the silent message. As another ghostly orb dashed by, the idol shrieked and used the blonde as a human shield, shaking him so aggressively that swirlies appeared in his eyes.

Just like before, as sudden as they appeared, the ghost lights vanished. The atmosphere turned to normal.

Minato, having passed out from the lack of oxygen, fell to the ground with Yukari on top of him. She ended up straddling him as she tried to get up.

In a secluded corner, Akihiko tried to calm Mitsuru down by embracing her tightly. He thanked his lucky stars that Junpei was nowhere near them (Koromaru was trying to wake him up by licking his face) and Shinjiro was busy trying to calm Minako down.

Chie, during her panicked state, accidentally head butted Yosuke, knocking him out and sending both of them sprawling on the floor. Once she regained her bearings, she started shaking her boyfriend in a rather violent manner, trying to wake him up. "C'mon, Yosuke! This is no time to be lazy!"

Naoto was still plastered against Kanji, shaking like a leaf. The latter's nose was still dripping blood.

Teddie and Rise cowered in another corner, eyes tightly shut and holding onto each other, too
afraid to see if things were okay. Teddie might have had a slight concussion after all that shaking, since he didn't try to grope Rise despite his advantageous position.

Yukiko and Souji were the only couple still standing on their feet, the raven-haired girl with a glazed expression as Souji whispered soothing words, trying to get her back to normal.

The android sisters were crestfallen that neither had successfully captured a floating ball of ectoplasm.

The loud sound of a truck horn continuously honking at the front gate, woke up those who were unconscious and nearly giving everyone a heart attack. Some even screamed.

"What, the trucks are here already?" Mitsuru gasped, gently pushing herself away from Akihiko. "How come nobody heard them coming?"

"Beats me, but they sound pretty pissed," Shinjiro said. "Great, more work..."

Minako giggled. "You're starting to sound like Junpei, Shinji-kun."

"How can you guys be so calm?!" Yukari shrilled. "Did you just not witness that? This house is haunted!" She began to hyperventilate.

Minato held his girlfriend's face to calm her down. "I don't think those were actual ghosts, Yukari. Minako and Souji-kun felt it too. They were definitely connected to the Shadows."

"How come the Dark Hour didn't appear this time?" Yukiko wondered.

"You have a point. I can't say for sure if that occurrence was an indicator of the strange phenomenon or effects caused by the Dark Hour," Souji answered, deep in thought. "It was, how can I put this... it felt like a playful type of warning."

Naoto spoke next. "So the next question remains: A warning from whom?"

Another loud honk broke them from their reverie. Mitsuru sighed. "At least we have some extra help this time. Come on, we have to finish loading everything in before sunset. We can arrange the furniture tomorrow. Worry about those ghost lights later."

The others nodded and headed off to the front door (although Yukari wasn't really pleased), where a moving truck carrying all their stuff from Iwatodai was parked in the driveway. Behind it was a giant Junes delivery truck with their new furniture. Mitsuru didn't waste any time barking out orders to the moving men and the placement of the new equipment inside the house. Shinjiro supervised the kitchen while the rest of the guys and Chie helped the moving men carry the heavier items and placed them in their respective areas. The girls on the other hand, helped carry the lighter stuff such as clothes bags and boxes, mattresses and pillows for the rooms.

It soon got a little crowded and noisy, mostly due to the teenagers shouting at each other.

"Damn it Tatsumi, stop stepping on my foot!"

"Teddie, quit throwing your sparkles at Fuuka and help me carry this bed frame upstairs!"

"Watch where you're going, dumbass!"

"Get out of my way!"

"Rise-chan, don't you dare look into those boxes!"
"When the heck did we get a piano?! It sure looks old and expensive. Hey Mitsuru-senpai, where is this thing supposed to go?"

Despite the chaos, they managed to finish loading everything into the dorm in under three hours. The moving and delivery men were slightly traumatized, but other than that, nothing was broken. Mitsuru tipped them generously, causing the men to forget their troubles and left with smiles on their faces.

With the strength they had left, they arranged the furniture in the lounge and reception area. Rise dictated the guys around for a bit, only to be sent to a corner by a combination of Kanji's and Shinjiro's infamous death glares. After that was done, they plopped on the floor or sofas, exhausted and out of breath.

Yet another honking was heard outside. This time however, only the Arisato twins and Souji seemed excited about it. The three of them dashed out of there before anybody could comment on it.

"It's finally here!" Minato exclaimed when he and his siblings returned to the lounge. In his hands was a guitar case.

"Definitely worth the wait," Souji added, carrying in a rectangular one.

"And it was a buy two free one deal too," Minako chirped, jingling a tambourine. "And good thing Mitsuru-senpai placed the piano between the reception area and the lounge. We can really relax here!"

Shinjiro took off his beanie and ruffled his hair. "Okay, I'm lost here. What the hell are you guys talking about?"

The trio grinned. "We ordered these musical instruments from Tanaka's Amazing Commodities last Sunday," Souji told them. "Since I knew they'd arrive today, I told them to deliver it to this address."

"So what did you buy, Sensei?" Teddie asked, unable to hide his curiosity.

Souji placed his case on the coffee table and opened it. Inside was a finely polished brass saxophone. "I've been meaning to get one of these for a while now, but we were too busy with Shadows and I couldn't afford to splurge since most of our money went to purchasing armors and weapons." He placed the strap over his shoulder. Taking a deep breath, he blew into the mouthpiece and started to play a short little jazz number.

Yosuke was impressed. "Dude, I didn't know you could play the sax."

"I've been practicing since I was away. It's not that different from the trumpet...in theory, anyway."

Minato took out his acoustic guitar and strummed a sweet little tune. "I don't think I ever told you guys this, but my dad was a middle-school music teacher. He was the one who taught us how to play and appreciate music."

"Aniki always had an affinity for stringed instruments. But he likes guitars the best since they're much more convenient to play," Minako said, and then pouted. "On the other hand, I could never graduate from the piano..."

"Maybe that's why your Persona is Eurydice, Minako-senpai," Rise said. "The piano has a wider range of melodies and sounds compared to any other instrument. It's quite versatile if you ask me."
"So you guys are gonna put up a little concert for us?" Junpei said, a wide grin on his face egging them on.

Minako blushed when she caught Shinjiro staring at her. "Umm…uh…I never played for a bunch of people before…" she mumbled. "What do you think, Aniki? Souji-kun?"

Souji smirked. "I think we should go for it."

"Well, we do qualify for a band," Minato said, stroking his chin. "Okay, why don't we play one song? I want to test how well we work together."

"Whoa, you guys are actually doing it? I was just kidding…" Junpei said, rubbing the back of his head.

Minako smiled at him assuringly. "Don't worry Junpei-kun. We want to play. It'll be fun!"

"Then what song will you guys be playing?" Ken asked. Their friends watched them with great interest.

Souji pondered for a while, before snapping his fingers. "How about 'Fly Me to the Moon'? That was your mother's favorite, wasn't it?"

"Just like old times," Minato whispered, a nostalgic look in his eyes. "Mom really loved that song…"

His sister took her place by the piano. "I haven't played that in a long time... I guess I couldn't bring myself to until now." She pressed a few keys in a light rhythm, testing out the pitch and played 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star' before she was satisfied.

"Hold on..." Minato told them as he adjusted the tightness of the strings. "Okay guys, ready when you are. One…and a two…and a three…"

Not even half-way through their mini-concert, their audience was blown away. It felt like their leaders were trying to show a new side of themselves; the melodies of the individual instruments blending together to create perfect harmony, the combined sounds was like flowing water, relaxing and uplifting at the same time.

Koromaru was wagging his tail to the beat as the others were tapping their feet or drumming their fingers. Even the usually stiff Shinjiro started to smile.

When the Wild Cards finished playing, their friends gave the loudest encore they could muster, leaving them speechless. Seeing them so happy caused the trio to smile as well, and gave their audience a dramatic bow.

Yukari couldn't believe her eyes or ears. Even back when they were living in Iwatodai dorm, Minato never mentioned that he could play an instrument. Perhaps it was a painful subject for him back then, having it remind him of his parents. She knew the feeling all too well. Seeing him and Minako open up like this was a good sign.

Yukiko was blushing, imaginary steam blowing out of her ears. If Souji looked cool playing the trumpet before, playing the saxophone made him a hell of a lot sexier! "Better be careful, Yukiko," Chie said teasingly, elbowing her friend. "I'm sure Souji-kun will be even more popular if the girls in school find out about this."

"I'm pretty sure Teddie already stole the hearts of most of his fans," Yosuke grinned. "Although
Naoto's fangirls are still going strong.”

"Don't remind me of that," Naoto muttered darkly.

Rise had hearts in her eyes. "Kyaaa~ you guys look so cool together! Encore, encore!"

Shinjiro could only roll his eyes at that, but silently admitted that he wouldn't mind listening to Minako playing the piano in the future, all the better if it was for him and him alone.

Mitsuru suddenly stood up. "Speaking of school…" she said. "I have yet to order your school uniforms." She focused on the twins, Metis, Ken and Shinjiro. "But aside from that, I have an important announcement. Would all of you please come join me in the meeting room?"

Confused yet curious, the group followed her into the meeting room. As they sat around the huge table, most of them were still chatting and overall being noisy until Mitsuru gave a glare which got them to quiet down, and cleared her throat. "Thank you for coming," she started. "I apologize for calling you so suddenly, but there are some pressing matters we have not discussed in the previous meeting and it requires our attention."

Minato and Minako exchanged glances. "It's about the chairman, isn't it?" they asked in unison.

Everybody looked at the twins and then back at Mitsuru, who sighed. "Yes, Arisato. It is regarding that man."

"So, what can you tell us about that guy?" Yosuke asked. "From what you mentioned before, he was an even worse of a manipulator than Adachi."

"As you must be aware by now, Shuji Ikutsuki, also known as the chairman, had a pivotal role in the Port Island Incident and the threat of The Fall," Mitsuru began. She needed to come clean with the younger group, even if the subject was rather painful for her. "He was among the highest ranked scientists in the Kirijo Group, which was run by my late grandfather Koetsu Kirijo at that time, and was involved in the research of Shadows and their power. Originally, they intended to harness the Shadows' power as a means of time manipulation."

Chie blinked, surprised. "Time manipulation? As in a time machine?"

"Correct, Satonaka. However, in his later years, my grandfather seemed to have only nihilism in his heart. And the Shadow research deviated from its original goal. Through the experiments with Shadows, the lead scientists came to know about The Fall and nearly all of them embraced it, gathering a large mass of Shadows in hopes of resurrecting Death and bringing forth The Fall. Only one of the head scientists opposed to it." Mitsuru took a deep breath and glanced at Yukari, who nodded in understanding. "That man was Eiichiro Takeba, Yukari's late father."

The Investigation Team gasped, and turned to focus on Yukari. "My father prevented Death from being completed, and left a video warning about how to avoid The Fall from happening." She closed her eyes, shoulders shaking slightly in anger. Minato immediately held her hand to comfort her. "But the chairman…he altered the video and used it to trick us into doing the opposite of what my father wanted! And when we finally found out he had been using us all along, he tried to kill us as sacrifices for Nyx."

"He reprogrammed me to do his bidding, but fortunately, my bond with Minato-san and Minako-san was stronger, and it released me from his control," Aigis continued with a bitter expression. Metis placed a hand on her shoulder. "But…"

"The damage was already done." Mitsuru was trying her hardest to keep a neutral face. "He
murdered my father and then committed suicide after being wounded in the stomach by a bullet. His mission to revive Death was long completed by the time he jumped to his own death."

No one was more shocked than Souji. He was aware of the story his surrogate siblings already told them, but had no idea what sort of hell Ikutsuki had put their friends through. It also brought up another question.

"Assuming this 'chairman' that attacked our leaders is the same one that nearly brought the end of the world in the past, how could he know about Souji-senpai, or his parents for that matter?" Naoto questioned, earning murmurs of agreement from her teammates.

"I'm afraid I don't have an answer for that at the moment, Shirogane," Mitsuru said. "During our trip to Yakushima, I took the liberty of investigating the labs located on the island with Fuuka, Aigis and Metis to see if any of the equipment there had been tampered with, and to find any possible information regarding Seta's family."

"We did find some data, but it's heavily encrypted. Decoding all of it will take time. But as soon as I uncover something, I promise to let you all know," Fuuka said.

"Don't forget, the chairman's not above using others for his own goals," Minato said. "For all we know, he could simply be lying about knowing Souji-kun and his family to try and mess with our heads, just like he did with me and my sister to bring out our Shadows."

"Since he doesn't have a Persona, it'll be very difficult for Fuuka-chan and Rise-chan to track him down, not to mention he also has the Reaper to do the dirty work for him. So yes, he's even more dangerous than Adachi," Minako added. "This means we'll have to be extra careful during our expeditions to the other side."

"Which brings us to the other reason for this meeting," Mitsuru continued. "This dorm will act as our official venue for discussing any Shadow-related findings, while the 'Special Headquarters' at Junes will be our meeting place for training and investigations to the other side. Our activities cannot be openly discussed at school or any other public areas, so they must be addressed in a more confidential manner."

Souji had an idea what Mitsuru was proposing. "Mitsuru-san, are you suggesting that…"

The red-head nodded with a small smile. "Correct, Seta. While we have already joined forces, I would like to make it official. Henceforth, a new team will be formed and for that, a new name is needed."

As soon as she finished that sentence, the room became noisy again. Everybody was talking at the same time trying to voice out their opinions and suggestions, followed by Koromaru's incessant barking. Only Shinjiro remained silent, preferring to observe.

Junpei shot up from his seat and waved an arm in the air like an over-excited child. "Oh, oh, me, me! Let me make up a name for our new team!"

The former juniors of Gekkoukan rolled their eyes at this. It was expected of Junpei after all. Minako, being nice and decided to humor him, asked "So what do you have in mind, Junpei-kun? I bet it sounds awesome."

"Cuz it is!" He gave her a flirtatious wink. "We'll call our team 'The Super Shadow Destroyers!'" He made a superhero pose to add more effect.

Everyone sweatdropped. Honestly, how childish could he get?
"Junpei, that's the most ridiculous name I've ever heard," Yukari deadpanned.

"Since our former secret club was called S.E.E.S, how about P.E.E.P?" the capped young man suggested again, ignoring Yukari's comment. "Ya know, since the 'S' stands for 'Shadow', then the 'P' can be 'Persona'!"

The girls blushed at that. Was the idiot even aware of what he just said?

"Oh yeah, and what does the E's in between stand for?" Akihiko questioned, not impressed whatsoever.

"Uhhh…" was Junpei's intelligent reply.

Minato sighed. "You really didn't think about it, did you?"

"What a moron…" Shinjiro scoffed.

"Oh! Oh! I've got one!" Teddie exclaimed, flailing his arms. "Bear-sona Rangers Association!"

The girls, minus Yukiko, glared daggers at him for the suggestion, while the men face-palmed. Koromaru seemed indifferent about it, silently wagging his tail.

Teddie blinked owlishly, clueless as to why they were mad at him. "What? It sound pretty cool!"

Yukiko cocked her head in confusion. "Huh? I don't get it. Bear-sona…Rangers…Association…? 'B'…'R'…'A'…" Once she finally understood, her cheeks flushed red and she glowered furiously at the human Shadow, who sat beside her. "Haven't you learned your lesson already!?" She slapped him so hard that his eyes were spinning in their sockets.

"Ouch! That's gonna leave a mark…" Kanji winced. He knew firsthand just how hard Yukiko could slap a guy; must be all those heavy trays she had to carry while working at her family's inn.

"Wheee ~ I'm seeing stars all over the place ~ " Teddie sang dizzily.

"Any other ideas?" Naoto exasperatedly asked. "And please, one without an inappropriate meaning hidden within the acronym?"

"What's so hard about combining the two former names to make a new one?" Yosuke said, leaning back against his chair. He closed his eyes and thought really hard. "Hmm…Persona Investigation and Execution Squad…" His eyes opened and he looked pleased. "Hey, I like the sound of that!"

"Th-that does sound good…" Fuuka agreed softly.

"Are you kidding me?" Chie got up from her seat and hit her boyfriend on the head. "Yosuke, you just called our new team P.I.E.S. Pies! That a food! People won't take us seriously when we sound like food!"

The brunette rubbed his head and glared back in return. "Oh yeah, why don't you come up with something then?!" And from there the two went at it, arguing like a married couple.

Mitsuru grew impatient after hearing all of the ridiculous and immature ideas, and the couple's arguing didn't help on the matter. More than annoyed, she slammed the table with a fist. "You two! Stop that childish banter this instant!"

The loud sound and her snappy voice cut through the noise, effectively shutting them up. 'Looks like Akihiko-senpai/Aki rubbed off on her…' the twins and Shinjiro thought simultaneously.
The Kirijo heiress sighed and flicked her red hair, regaining her composure. "I already thought of a name, though I admit Hanamura almost got it right."

"For real?" Yosuke smirked and pointed a finger at Chie's face. "Ha!"

"Do you want a kick in the face or below the belt?" she growled warningly. He immediately shut up.

Mitsuru ignored them and continued. "For now on, our group will be known as the Specialized Paranormal Investigation and Execution Squad, or simply S.P.I.E.S for short."

"SPIES…" Rise grinned widely. "Sounds like something out of an action series, huh Naoto-kun?"

Naoto smiled. "I admit it's got a nice ring to it."

"Yeah, it sounds really cool without being silly," Ken supplied, trying to hide his enthusiasm about it.

Everybody else agreed, including Koromaru who barked happily. "Very well then. It's settled." Minato stood up, accompanied by Minako and Souji. "Starting today, SPIES is officially formed."

"Together we'll find the culprit behind the return of both the Fog and the Dark Hour," Souji added.

"And kick the asses of whoever tries to stop us!" Minako concluded. "You guys with us?"

"YEAH!" The team joined in the cheer, determination shining brightly in their eyes.

Time seemed to stop for the Wild Cards when a card flashed in their mind's eye - a card they knew very well - followed by the familiar inner voice:

\[
\text{Thou art I... And I am thou...}
\]

\[
\text{Thou hast established a new bond...}
\]

\[
\text{It brings thee closer to the truth...}
\]

\[
\text{Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Fool Arcana...}
\]

They exchanged secret smiles.

Souji checked his watch. "Oh wow, it's getting late. I promised Nanako I'd be home early to help with her homework."

"That's right! Summer break is just about over," Yukiko said. "Thank goodness I already finished up more than half of my assignments."

"What?!" Chie gasped. "Oh crap, I totally forgot about that! Yukiko, please help me... I-I haven't even touched that thing!"

Kanji cursed. "Of all the things to remember, it had to be that…"

"Don't worry, Kanji-kun. If you ever need help, you can always call me," Naoto consoled her boyfriend, failing to hide her blush.

Yosuke looked like the world was about to end. "Noooo...! Queen Tut will punish me even worse if I don't complete her assignments!" he wailed. He then perked up. "Wait a minute...Souji's here.
Partner, let me copy yours!"

Yukiko sweatdropped. "Yosuke-kun, he just transferred here. Have you forgotten already?"

"Yosuke is dimwitted as always," Teddie teased.

"Shut up, you stupid bear! You didn't even touch yours as far as I'm concerned!"

Yukari turned to Fuuka, who sat beside her. "I'm glad we finished our assignments early, or else we'd be cramming before classes even start."

"Yeah, I'd hate for that to happen. The first week is always the stressful part," Fuuka said.

Junpei had the same expression as Yosuke's. "You guys finished already?! B-but…that's not fair! You started without me!" he accused.

Red tick marks appeared all over Yukari's forehead. "What's not fair, Junpei? I lost count on how many times Fuuka and I had to remind you!"

Minato chuckled. "Jeez, you never change, do you?"

Souji laughed at their antics. "Come on guys. Even if I just transferred, I'm pretty sure I'll be getting some extra credit assignments to make up for the time I was hospitalized, if that makes you feel any better. I guess I'll just be reviewing the materials while I'm helping Nanako."

"Looks like we're in the same boat, Senpai," Rise piped in suddenly, earning glances from everybody. "I guess I forgot to tell you after all the excitement that's happened. I'll be taking an even longer hiatus to finish school like a normal student, effective immediately."

That information surprised her teammates. "But what did your family say to that?" Souji asked. He knew how much she enjoyed showbiz, despite the harshness that comes with being a starlet. "What about your manager?"

Rise smiled a bit sadly. "Grandma and Inoue-san already approved of my decision. My parents already moved back here to help me with anything I need." She quickly changed her tone to a more cheerful one. "Sorry I didn't tell you guys earlier. Shouldn't you be heading home now, Senpai? Nanako-chan is gonna get worried."

"Does that mean I have to do extra-credit assignments too?" Metis asked, sounding anxious.

"Most likely," Minako answered. "And we also have to work extra hard to make up for the lessons before summer break. I'm just curious how the teachers might grade us, given our...circumstances."

"Well then, we should be heading back to the Inn," Mitsuru interjected. "We'll be back here tomorrow to arrange everything properly, and after that discuss any school-related issues that might crop up. Akihiko and I understand how hard it is to balance school and Shadow activities, especially when you're a senior." She glared threateningly at Shinjiro. "And I expect you to participate, or else."

Shinjiro waved her off. "Yeah, yeah...college entry exams and all that shit."

"Then I better get going," Souji said, standing up. "And don't worry, if you guys need any help tomorrow, we'll be happy to stop by. I might even bring Nanako with me."

"I'll go with you," Minako offered. "I wanna help Nanako-chan with her homework!"
"Then I might as well come along to keep her company," her twin added, putting his blue earphones on and pumping up the volume.

"Very well. This meeting is adjourned," Mitsuru said with finality. "We'll see you tomorrow."

**Shopping District…**

Kanji walked Rise and Naoto back to their homes. Due to all the weird stuff happening, Souji advised everyone to always walk each other home, especially after the sundown.

Rise was chattering as usual, commenting about all the gossip the girls had talked about previously. She was about to tease Kanji and question Naoto about her having been in his room, when she spotted a moving truck parked in front of one of the previously closed shops. "Hey, check that out. Never thought I'd see two moving trucks in one day."

Kanji raised an eyebrow. "A shop? Didn't think any would re-open here after Junes."

As they walked past it, they spotted a banner hung above the entrance. "Shinshoudo Antiques. Grand opening soon!" Naoto read it out loud. "An antique shop? How peculiar…"

"Why would anyone open one here of all places?" Kanji wondered.

Rise shrugged. "Beats me." Her attention was diverted to the people exiting the truck. "Hey, look over there!"

A middle-aged woman with tanned skin and black hair, dressed in casual beige dress and oval spectacles, walked into the front door, carrying a box filled with terracotta vases. She was soon followed by a girl around their age, or not much older. She had pale skin, blueish-gray hair and piercing red eyes. She was dressed in a long, grey summer dress. Both women stared at the trio briefly before they entered the shop, not bothering to say hi.

Kanji was confused. "What the hell was that all about?"

"Judging from their body language, they must be mother and daughter," Naoto deduced. "I don't see any paternal figures to speak of, so that girl might be raised by a single mother, or perhaps adopted."

"Alright, a new girl in town! Now I'll have someone else to talk to and hang out with while doing errands for Grandma!" Rise cheered.

"That won't stop you from pestering me time to time though…" the former delinquent muttered in annoyance.

"Aw c'mon, Kanji. I know you secretly enjoy my company!"

"Come on, you two, we should be going," Naoto reminded them. "It's getting late."

Rise pouted. "Fine…" she groaned. "We'll probably meet her when school starts. I hope she attends Yasogami too. She looked like she could use some friends."

As they walked away, none of them noticed the girl sneaking a peek from the door. "Yasogami… School… Friends…" she murmured, grinning excitedly. "I can't wait!"
Fun facts:
1. Frangipani (or Plumeria) are flowers associated with graveyards in my country located in South East Asia. They are forbidden from being planted on residential grounds, especially the white ones, which are known to have a strong fragrance. "In the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia, the plumeria is often associated with ghosts and cemeteries. Plumerias often are planted on burial grounds in all three nations. They are also common ornamental plants in houses, parks, parking lots and other open-air establishments in the Philippines. Balinese Hindus use the flowers in their temple offerings. The plumeria's fragrance is also associated with the pontianak, an evil vampiric spirit of a dead mother in Malaysian-Indonesian folklores." (Source: Wikipedia)
2. We chose 'Fly Me to the Moon' because we were inspired by both the Sinatra and Evangelion versions when writing this chapter.
3. The Wild Cards look like they could be in a jazz band.
4. According to Greek mythology, both Orpheus and Eurydice were the children/descendents of Apollo, the god of music, truth and prophecy, healing, the sun and light, plague, poetry and more (Source: Wikipedia). We wanted to reflect their origins by having the twins' father be a music teacher.
"Is everybody here?" Souji questioned as he scanned the faces of his teammates. They agreed last night to meet up at Dojima's house the next morning, and to bring their summer assignments. The only ones who didn't protest to this were Yukiko, Naoto, and surprisingly Yosuke. Satisfied that none were absent, he smiled to Nanako standing beside him. "Alright, everyone's here. Did you bring all your stuff?" He proceeded to lock the front door.

The little girl smiled and nodded. "Yup! I brought all my homework I couldn't finish yesterday."

"Why did we have to bring ours with us?" Kanji mumbled unhappily. "I thought we were just helping them arrange their furniture."

"Yeah," Chie agreed. "Why are we having another group study session? I mean, the last time we did that, all of us ended up not studying. I blame the animal crackers."

"Hey!" Kanji and Rise protested.

"Chie, I'm pretty sure you won't get everything done with the amount of time we have left. School starts in a week," Yukiko reminded her. She knew her best friend was rather slow when it came to academic matters, and with her pace she'll never finish her assignments by herself on time.

Souji walked on ahead, holding Nanako's hand. The others trailed behind him, chatting excitedly. Yasogami High was sure to become more colorful after this.

"So partner, what's the plan for today?" Yosuke asked.

"After I got home yesterday, I had a talk with Aneki and Aniki," Souji said. "Turns out, those transferring to school with us also have a lot of homework to do."

…Flashback…

"I wonder what kind of homework Nanako-chan was given," Minato wondered aloud as he fiddled with his MP3 player. They were walking back to the Dojima Residence after the twins offered to help him with Nanako's homework.

Souji blew out a warm breath against the cold night air, a thin wisp of mist condensed and faded. "Last year she mostly had essays and reading assignments, along with a crafts project. Kanji helped her with that. But my favorite was the picture diary."

"Picture diary, huh?" Minako mused. "I remember helping Maiko-chan with that one. We had a lot of fun!"

Minato then proceeded to explain who Maiko was before Souji could even ask, including the arcana of her social link. "And she moved away with her mother after her parents' divorce," he concluded. They already reached their destination without even realizing it.

"We're back!" Souji announced, taking off his shoes. The twins followed, and were greeted by Dojima sitting at the dinner table, reading the newspaper.

The older man grunted, and turned his gaze from the miniscule texts. "Ah, Souji. I was wondering when you were getting back. " He bent down and placed four brown paper-wrapped packages on the table. One was rather thin, but the other three were thicker. "These came to my office while
you were away. It's from your previous school."

Souji raised an eyebrow. "From Gekkoukan High?"

"It's not just for you. It's also for you two —" Dojima pointed to the twins, "— and Aragaki. I'm pretty sure the post office sent it to me all at once because they came from the same address, and assumed it was all for me."

Nanako came rushing down the stairs, excited when she heard the voices of her cousin and his surrogate siblings. "Aniki, Aneki?" she squealed, glomping them in record speed. Minako almost fell over from the force of the hug. "Easy there, Nanako-chan," she giggled, patting her hair. "We came today to help you with your homework. Souji-kun said it was a lot."

"Un!" Nanako nodded. "We'll start after dinner. Dad just brought back some really delicious side dishes. I cooked enough rice for all of us!"

Dojima laughed light-heartedly. "You guys can stay. If I'm right about those," he nudged his chin towards the wrapped packages, "you'll need to be starting soon."

"Alright, I'll go put these in my room while you guys set the table," Souji said. Minato helped him carry half while his twin helped Nanako.

After a wonderful family dinner, Dojima continued to read the paper as Souji, the twins and Nanako sat around the short table in the living room, their books and stationary strewn all over the surface. They had opened their packages earlier and found that the teachers from Gekkoukan had mailed them their revision materials, including those the twins had missed during their coma, plus some mock exam sheets and tests. Souji and Minato browsed through what they had to do in the next seven days, while Minako was happily helping Nanako with her essay.

Minato grabbed a fistful of his hair and let out an exhausted sigh. "How are we gonna finish these in a matter of weeks?" he groaned. "I don't mind the extra work, but this is too much..."

Souji could understand his frustration, but he dared not complain since his workload was much, much lighter. "Don't worry, Aniki. I can tutor you with the lessons that you missed for the previous semester, and I'm sure Yukiko is willing to help as well."

Minato nodded. Perhaps Yukari could also help him with his studies. He grinned at the thought. 'I'll be looking forward to that.'

"It looks like Shinjiro-san's pile is the highest," Souji sweatdropped. "I'm guessing it's because he missed two years of school, and this is the teachers' punishment. He's not going to be happy."

"Then why don't we have a group study session starting tomorrow?" Minako interrupted while Nanako's focus was elsewhere. "I'm pretty sure there are more people who might need help with their homework. After all, more heads are better than one, right?"

Souji sighed. "Tell that to my team. The last time we gathered for a group study, we didn't get any work done. All because Kanji and Rise were arguing over animal crackers, trying to find the elusive penguin."

"Yeah, I can totally see that happening with Junpei," Minato snorted.

His sister beamed them a smile. "Then it's a good thing Mitsuru-senpai will be there. She's a real discipline enforcer, so I'm sure all of us can finish on time. After all, she isn't the only one who wants to see Shinji graduate."
Souji and Minato sweatdropped, but they couldn't refute what she said either. They took turns between helping Nanako and discussing how to manage their time during the last stretch of the holidays.

Dojima offered to send the twins to the inn in his car after Souji had put Nanako to bed.

…End flashback…

"So, do you think this time it will work?" Naoto asked, looking a bit skeptical.

"Yes. From what Aneki and Aniki said, Mitsuru-san can be quite…forceful…when it comes to academics. And you already saw what happens when someone gets her annoyed." Souji received sweatdrops and shivers. "So guys, no fooling around this time. You got that?"

Everybody nodded. That's when Kanji noticed someone heading their way. "Hey, ain't that Shinjiro-san and Koro-chan?"

They looked up ahead and indeed, Shinjiro was walking Koromaru. Judging from the look on his face, anyone could tell he was in a foul mood. "Damn asshole teachers and their shitload of schoolwork!" he complained, loud enough to hear. "I oughta shove their assignments up into their asses and *$^#-+%*!" He kept spewing obscenities until he noticed them, Souji covering Nanako's ears for obvious reasons. "Oh…it's you guys."

"Hello, Shinjiro-san~" Souji greeted back with a tight smile, purposely calling Lucifer from his psyche. His teammates and Koromaru instinctively backed off, feeling the murderous vibe radiating from the silverette. "I know you're upset about your workload, but I must ask you to refrain from cursing, especially in front of Nanako." His released his cousin, who rushed up to the Shiba Inu and showered him with pets and kisses. With long strides, Souji came face-to-face with Shinjiro, and whispered in his ear "Do I make myself clear?"

Shinjiro gulped. He wasn't stupid and knew this guy wasn't kidding around. "Yeah yeah, I get the point…” He stared down at Nanako. "Sorry. My bad."

The youngest leader smiled with satisfaction. "I knew you'd understand." He dismissed Lucifer instantly, a huge smile on his face. "Then, shall we get going?"

No one dared to object as they moved on. Shinjiro followed them from the back, trying to remain calm despite his racing heart. Although he wasn't wearing his coat for a change, he was sweating even more than usual for a cool summer morning. 'Damn Wild Card ability. Another close call like that and I'm done for…'

Nanako was impressed with the size of the dorm building, especially the front yard where she played fetch and a few other games with Koromaru. The rest got to work, arranging the furniture and putting everything in their proper places. After assisting with the new dorm, it was starting to look like a proper dwelling minus the personal touches, but that would be added with time. The former SEES crew had already checked out of the Amagi Inn first thing in the morning and brought all their stuff in.

A short break and an icy glare from Mitsuru later, SPIES gathered in the meeting room, seating themselves around the large meeting table and piling their books on it. They broke into small groups or pairs to assist each other with their homework.

"Okay, this is the part where you really need to be careful guys. No Chie, we're not taking a break
until we finish this page! Now, as I was saying, you multiply it with this specific trigonometric
identity and then it becomes easier to solve because…Yosuke, 'sec' is short for secant, and not
pronounced as 'sex'!" Souji threw a booklet at his friend's face. "Get your brain out of the gutter!"
While he was having difficulty tutoring his friends, Yukiko wasn't having any problems with the
Arisato twins. She went through snippets of the revision subjects, making sure to go slow. It was
overwhelming at first, but the twins managed to catch up and the lessons became much easier.
As expected, Shinjiro wasn't happy with the amount of work assigned by his former teachers. Since
nobody but Minako and Koromaru could handle him in a bad mood, Akihiko bravely took up the
challenge to prompt his best friend into studying. "Come on, Shinji. You can totally do this! Long
division isn't that hard! You just have to hit the variable with the highest degree first, and knock
them down by order until you obtain the smallest nominator. See?" He scribbled onto a piece of
paper, showing Shinjiro the steps to solve a particular math problem.
Shinjiro could only roll his eyes, bored out of his mind. 'Typical Aki. Always with the boxing
jargons...' Despite not wanting to, he sucked it up and listened. A huge part of him wanted to
impress his girlfriend and make her proud. And if he didn't graduate, Mitsuru would murder him
for sure.
On the other side of the table, Naoto was going through English with Kanji and Rise. Kanji seemed
serious at first, but if one paid enough attention, they could see his eyes were starting to swirl while
reading the literary passage. Halfway, Rise got bored and started flipping through a teen magazine.
It was only when Teddie, who sat beside her, made perverted comments about the models in them
did she slap him with the magazine and continued to study. Seeing her struggle, Yukari decided to
step in and tutor Rise instead. The two Lovers soon found a comfortable rhythm. Rise didn't even
complain once about the difficulties of the lessons; Yukari's perspective made it easier to
understand.
Teddie, who was ignored completely, wallowed in sorrow behind his textbooks. "The wind of
society is a cold breeze…" he kept mumbling.
Aigis was going over everything with Metis, her patience knowing no bounds to quench her sister's
insatiable curiosity. Fuuka was also patiently watching over Junpei doing math, correctly him
gently whenever he made some missteps. The capped young man was sincerely trying his best, but
everyone could see how much he was struggling. Yukari and Rise were making silent bets on
when his brain would finally explode.
At the other end of the table, Ken was helping Nanako since he was the only one free and capable
to do so. The little girl was trying hard not to squeal or blush at being so close to her crush, nodding
furiously every time he asked her if she understood or had any questions. Souji was too busy with
Yosuke and Chie to notice this.
Watching over them was Mitsuru, who was sitting at one corner of the room with her laptop on a
foldable desk, typing a report of some sort. Anyone who dared to complain or whine would answer
to her. Fortunately, everybody behaved to avoid her wrath. Koromaru, being the only one who
didn't have to study, snoozed contently at her feet.
It was early evening when everybody had enough and demanded a break. "Now would be a good
time for tea," Minako said, stretching her back. "I think there are enough ingredients in the kitchen
to bake some sugar cookies."
"Let me help you," Yukiko offered.


"And I'll make some sandwiches. I don't think cookies are enough," Fuuka said. As she followed the two to the kitchen, she failed to notice how everyone's faces turned pale, aside from Nanako. Even Koromaru had woken up and started to whimper. He nuzzled against Nanako's leg, hoping she could save him from the impending doom. The little girl soothingly pet him, puzzled by his behavior.

Akihiko nudged Shinjiro's ribs. "Shinji, go keep an eye on them!" he hissed. "Who knows what those two will come up with without you backing Minako up!" Shinjiro wasn't concerned at first, but when he remembered Yosuke's comment regarding Yukiko's cooking and Fuuka's destructive tendency with utensils, he worried for his pristine kitchen and made a dash towards it, leaving the others exhaling in relief.

"That was a close call…" Junpei said, slumped tiredly against the table surface. "If not, it would've had a double whammy of sore brains and an upset stomach."

"Do you even have a brain, Junpei?" Yukari teased.

"Hey, it's rude to call Sir Junpei brainless!" Teddie protested.

"You're still calling him that?" Kanji sweatdropped. Light teasing and laughter soon followed.

While the girls and Shinjiro worked on the snacks, Souji headed for the garden to get some fresh air. He was rubbing his temples and sighing, with light groans between intervals. Most assumed he was just tired from all the studying and tutoring, but Minato knew better and decided to join him.

Underneath a shady tree, Souji lied himself down. Minato sat beside him. "Izanagi again?" he asked softly.

Souji nodded. "I don't know what's wrong with him," he sighed. "In the middle of tutoring, he started getting agitated again. It took a lot out of me to keep my focus."

Minato crossed his arms. "I wonder why that keeps happening to you, but not to me or Minako."

"I'm not sure. It all started after we met that masked butterfly man." Souji closed his eyes. They sat in silence for a while before he spoke again. "I can't help but feel there's a connection there."

"Maybe there is," Minako said as she approached them, balancing a tray with sandwiches, three cups of tea and a plateful of cookies. "It's strange...but after meeting that man, I felt something different with Eurydice and my other Personas." She placed the tray on the grass and sat next to her brothers. "I don't know how to put it, but they kinda feel like they're more in tune with myself, like, in complete harmony." She emphasized the last word by pressing her right palm above her heart.

"Now that you mention it, I do feel the same regarding Orpheus and the rest of my Personas," Minato said thoughtfully as he took a bite of a sandwich. "At first I thought it was because wholeheartedly accepted our Shadows, but I felt they became more…I don't know how to say this...complete after we met that man."

"So, he had a hand in your power becoming more stable?" Souji questioned, taking a sip of tea.

"That I can't be sure, but it seems like it." Minako munched on another cookie. "When Izanagi gets agitated, does anything come to your mind, Banchou-kun?"

Souji closed his eyes in thought. "Well, sometimes there are these images flashing across my mind and when that happens, then he starts pounding inside my head like crazy." He massaged his temples. "They go too fast. I see men in white clothes, my parents, black blobs... I can't really
make out anything else."

"Hmm, that's really odd," Minato said. "There's gotta be a connection between those images, Izanagi's behavior and your headache."

"Yes, but what is that connection?" Souji ran his fingers through his hair in frustration, pulling at the dark silver strands. "And why does this keeps happening? Is it connected to my parents? Or is it related to that chairman? I just don't know anymore!"

The twins frowned, not knowing what to say to comfort their surrogate younger brother, who continued eating their light meal and dealing with Izanagi's constant hammering. They knew that he was finally pain-free when his tense shoulders relaxed, and his eyebrows weren't scrunched up together. They continued to sit in silence, listening to the birds singing.

The silence was broken by the sound of footsteps. Chie and Akihiko were walking up to them. From the looks of it, they were in a good mood.

Akihiko smirked at her. "Alright! Ready to go, Satonaka?"

"You bet!" Chie grinned back at him, overflowing with enthusiasm.

Whatever they were talking about, it hooked their curiosity. Forgetting their concerns, the Wild Cards stood up and approached them. "Hey, what are you two up to?" Minako asked.

"We're gonna go train!" Chie replied excitedly.

Souji raised an eyebrow. "First Yosuke, and now Akihiko-san?"

"What can I say? Satonaka is the best sparring partner I've had in a while." Akihiko punched the air before grinning back at Chie. "Besides, I need to get back at her for our first match."

Minato's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Your first match? Wait, so you guys sparred before this and you lost, Senpai?"

"Yeah..." he mumbled, rubbing the back of his head. "That was a little while before you guys showed up in Inaba."

"Oh, that's right. We walked Nanako-chan home and were heading back," Chie said. "It wasn't dark yet, so I wanted to train a bit since we didn't get any action after visiting the TV World."

...Flashback...

After his crew arrived in Inaba and met the younger group of Persona-users, even getting to know them a little, Akihiko wondered how they fought and trained, despite living in a remote area far away from the proper training facilities found in the city. He himself was lucky that he at least had a coach while he was in Gekkoukan High's boxing club, and Officer Kurosawa supplied them with some of the best weapons available.

Akihiko looked around. This small town didn't have anything he was accustomed to having back when he and SEES fought Shadows. Just hours ago, the Investigation Team introduced them to Master Daidara, the person responsible for crafting weapons the team used when they were venturing into the TV World. It wasn't a big establishment, and the whole town knew what the old man did for a living. The shop had a mysterious air about it, nothing sinister of the sort, but his mind still he wondered. Even the general store where the younger team bought their supplies of medicinal and restorative items gave off the same, mystifying aura. Not that Akihiko minded;
dealing with Personas and Shadows tend to have that effect on you.

"Yosuke, how about you and me go and get some training done at our usual place?" Chie asked her companion when they were headed home after dropping off Nanako at her house.

Yosuke shook his head. "Sorry Chie, not today. My dad asked me to come back early and pitch in restocking duty," he answered, followed by a groan. Out of all the chores he had to do, that was the one he hated most.

The word 'training' had Akihiko’s ears twitching. Ever since he started college, he hadn't been able to keep up with his regimen as much as he wanted to, thanks to a mountain of assignments and tight deadlines. He also wanted to see their skills in action - it'll be killing two birds with one stone. His next words flew out of his mouth. "Instead of Hanamura, why don’t you train with me, Satonaka?"

Every head around turned to the three. The conversation just got a tad interesting.

Chie was taken by surprise. Never in her lifetime had somebody volunteered to train with her. Even if Yosuke was her constant training buddy, she was the one who had to drag him along. "Are you alright with that, Sanada-san? I mean…an amateur like me…"

"All the better to start training, right? Besides, ever since I entered college I think I've gotten soft. I couldn't keep up with my training as much as I want to."

Yosuke let out a big chuckle. "Haha, good luck with that. I should let you know that there are only two things Chie is passionate about. Meat and training."

"Why you little—"

Mitsuru let out a chuckle. "So it would seem that Akihiko isn't the only one who has the same train of thought." She had cut Chie off before the girl could leap at Yosuke. "And to think meeting such a person who happens to be a Persona-user as well, I must say the odds of that are close to zero. Today is just full of surprises."

Akihiko’s ears turned red. "What's that supposed to mean?" he mumbled.

"If you're serious about it, I recommend safety pads," Kanji chimed in. "I, uhh...have some at my house if you wanna borrow 'em."

Akihiko started to notice how the other Emperor, despite his size, seemed to shrink whenever Chie turned to look at him. 'Is that fear in his eyes? What exactly happened between these two?'

Junpei grinned. "Dude, he probably doesn't need any of that. Senpai used to be a boxing champion back in high school. But I would sure love to see his ass get kicked, especially by a girl."

A nerve on Akihiko's forehead was throbbing. "Junpei…"

Fuuka decided it was her time to speak up. "Umm...I think it's a good idea to wear safety pads for protection, even if it is for training. What do you say, Senpai?"

Before he could reply, Chie cheered with renewed vigor. "Awesome, then let's start the training immediately!" She started to throw some jabs into the air, almost hitting Teddie square in the jaw.

"Watch it, Chie-chan! I can't let you hit my bear-ry beautiful face," Teddie said as he threw some of his sparkles at Yukari and Yukiko. They both felt disturbed.
Yosuke let out a sigh. "You are helping me since we both work there, Ted. No excuses this time."

"But that's not fair!" he complained.

"Then why don't you go train with Chie instead?"

Teddie's forehead started to sweat. He didn't like where this was going. "Uh...I change my mind. I'll help you!"

The blonde's swift change of behavior from whiny to compliant had the outsiders bewildered. Yosuke and Teddie took their leave after bidding everyone goodbye.

"Yosh! Kanji-kun, go get those safety pads. Meet us at the riverside!" Chie ordered.

"Good luck. Ya gonna need it..." Kanji mumbled under his breath, loud enough for Akihiko to hear, and sauntered off to the direction of his house.

As they headed towards the flood plain, everybody's curiosity was at its peak. The former boxing champion wondered time and time again just how strong this Satonaka girl really was. For someone like Kanji (who reminded him strongly of his foul-mouthed, punk-ass best friend) to be scared of her, she must be really strong indeed, or perhaps a bit violent. He couldn't help but smile at this newly awaited challenge.

When they reached their destination, it was Ken who finally broke the silence. "How come Yosuke-san is the only one willing to train with Chie-san? Kanji-san looks more suitable if you ask me."

Yukiko chuckled. "Well, you could say he had a...bad experience...with Chie last year. I don't think he'll like it if I told any of you."

"Aww, come on Yukiko-senpai. I always wanted to know about that. Kanji never tells me anything!" Rise whined.

"While it is true that Kanji-kun is strong, I do think that Chie-senpai has too much stamina for her own good," Naoto said. "She should cut back on the beef bowls and steaks."

Everyone laughed at that statement. Akihiko turned red again. 'Now why does that sound so familiar?'

"Don't let Senpai hear that, Naoto. You know how she feels about that particular food group," Kanji warned her as he rejoined them. Fortunately, Chie already ran ahead and couldn't hear. He was panting, trying to catch his breath after making it back from his house. He carried two sets of safety equipment in his arms, and handed one to Akihiko.

"What kind weapon do you use, Chie-san?" Aigis asked.

"My kicks of course," Chie said, eyes sparkling. "Hwa-taaaaa!" She doubled back and did a spinning kick in the air.

"Then this fight is fair, to say the least." Mitsuru commented. Other than that, didn't know what else to say. As far as she knew, Akihiko had never gone against a girl in hand-to-hand combat before.

"I suggest we let Aigis be the referee, Misturu-senpai," Fuuka suggested. Koromaru voiced his agreement in barks.
"A sound suggestion. Do you have any objections, Akihiko?"

Said young man donned on black leather gloves. "Nope, sounds good to me." He did some light stretches and warm ups.

"Then I suggest that two out of three hits are necessary to determine the winner," Aigis stated. "What do you think?"

Chie didn't hesitate to agree. "No problem. That's what Souji-kun and I used to do all the time before he left."

"Yeah, I think that's fair," Akihiko added.

As both fighters stretched and prepped themselves, the other spectators kept their distance.

Aigis stepped forward. "Fighters, man your stations!" Both Chie and Akihiko took their places at a distance, readying their stances. The blonde android took out a pink handkerchief from her pocket and held it above her head. "Let the battle commence!" She gave the starting signal. "Begin!"

The fighters stepped forward, eager to start. Chie scanned Akihiko, her brain doing some serious calculation, and decided to aim for his ribs from the get-go because she was shorter in height. She wanted to get a feel of his fighting style before hitting any other targets on his body.

At first, Akihiko was nervous because he had never fought a girl before (sparring with Mitsuru during the Dark Hour didn't count). He wasn't thinking when he accepted Chie's challenge. But then he realized from her fighting stance that the girl wasn't just a martial arts enthusiast, merely copying fighting styles from movies - there was a spark in her eyes that told him she was out to prove something, and he immediately understood. He threw his nervousness away, and gave 100% focus to the fight before him, just like he always did.

Chie successfully dodged Akihiko's punches. She side-stepped to his left when he tried to give her a right hook, leaving his right side wide open. She stooped down and spun around, the momentum collected in her right leg hitting Akihiko's side with a good amount of force.

Wincing in pain, the young man retreated and put up a guarding stance.

"This girl is better than I thought,' he silently praised.

Junpei was filming the fight with his camera phone. "Ouch, that has gotta hurt. Haha, Senpai is getting owned!"

"It was a good thing you suggested the safety pads, Kanji-kun. Those are some dangerous legs," Yukari commented.

Rise shook her head. "You should see the special attack she uses on Shadows."

Seeing Akihiko's focus waver, Chie attacked him with a frenzy of kicks. He did his best to block them.

'What is with this girl? Her kicks are so hard my arms feel like they're gonna break!' Nonetheless, Akihiko continued to block her attacks, waiting for a chance to strike. It finally dawned on him that she was aiming for his ribs, most probably because of her height. 'So she's playing it like that, huh? Guess it's time to show her I'm serious too.' He set his footwork into motion. Instead of blocking Chie's attacks, this time he dodged them. After all, winning a fight doesn't consist of brute strength alone. However, side-stepping and ducking her high kicks proved to be difficult because she was still shorter than he was. Any sloppy evasions would mean a direct hit to the head, and that was
extremely dangerous. An opening presented itself when Chie aimed one of her kicks directly to his
left rib. He used his left forearm to block, he aimed a right hook toward her stomach. Fist made
contact with gut, knocking the air out of her. The force was enough to get her stumbling
backwards, but not enough to send her down.

Chie stood her ground.

"One point for Chie-san, one point for Akihiko-san," Aigis announced.

"That was friggin' awesome!" Junpei half-squealed half-shouted, still recording the fight. "Never
thought Senpai had it in him to hit a girl though."

"Akihiko-san isn't holding back," Ken commented. "He usually holds back a bit when training with
the freshman boxers back in school. I've seen him do so."

Yukiko smiled. "Chie wouldn't be happy if he was either. That means he's taking her seriously."

The martial-arts enthusiast couldn't help but feel excited. Adrenalin rushed to her head. She
clutched her sore stomach and grinned at her now silver-haired rival. 'If he thinks that little punch
was enough to take me down, he's got another thing coming!'

'The stubborn type, huh?' Akihiko grinned back. 'Then it's a good thing I'm not holding back.'

This time, Chie decided to change tactics. Instead of just using her legs, she mixed a combination
of kicking and punching, something she learned from watching a Thai action movie. Although she
hadn't practiced any of its moves, now was a good chance to start. She blocked and swiped
Akihiko's fists with forceful palm thrusts. It was tough, because his punches were much stronger
than her own, so she had to focus really hard in order to redirect them.

Akihiko immediately became suspicious when she diverted from her usual style. 'She's up to
something…' He kept his jabs short but fast in order to thwart her into creating an opening, never
taking his eyes off her.

Training with Yosuke had its advantages. Thanks to him, Chie's footwork improved and her
evasion speed increased. Yosuke's specialty in battle was his high evasion and hit rate,
compensating for his lack of range in physical attacks. She used it to her advantage to dodge the
boxer's swift jabs. Timing was important, her brain calculating furiously. In order to pull off this off
successfully, she needed the full use of her lower body strength.

The boxer was starting to become impatient, seeing his opponent focusing solely on dodging. 'Time
to finish this!' he thought. 'However, dropping my guard would mean I'll be open to her kicks,' his
reason rationalized. Impatience battled with reason, and impatience won. He drew his left arm
back a bit further, intending to land a harder hit and making it much more difficult for her to swipe
away his attacks.

Of course, Chie saw this, so it was now or never. As the punch came down her way, she side-
stepped to her right as swiftly as possible. Quick as a flash, she used her Galactic Punt and aimed
for Akihiko's stomach.

Her speed surprised him, having no time to dodge or guard himself as the kick hit his abdomen. He
cursed himself for being too brash as he was sent flying backwards and landed on his back, luckily
missed hitting a tree. It took ten seconds for the adrenalin rush to go away before he started
coughing and wincing in pain. Mitsuru was by his side in an instant.

"And the winner is Chie-san!" Aigis announced, raising both arms dramatically in the air.
"Congratulations!"

Junpei whooped, jumping up and down in excitement. "That was too awesome to describe in words! Former boxing champion got his ass handed to him on a silver platter by a martial-arts wannabe, and I got it all on recording!"

"Stupei, keep your voice down!" Yukari scolded.

The Investigation Team were crowding Chie, patting her back and congratulating her.

"That was amazing, Chie-senpai!" Kanji and Rise exclaimed. The amount of respect (and fear) they had for their upperclassman shot up tremendously.

"I knew you could do it, Chie!" Yukiko beamed at her best friend.

"Souji-senpai would be proud!" Naoto added, smiling.

Junpei came to join them. "You totally kicked ass back there. I'm sure Yosuke and that Teddie dude would be happy to watch, since I got it all on video." He held up his digital camera for Chie to see.

Meanwhile Mitsuru, Ken and Koromaru surrounded Akihiko. They sat him up against a tree, making sure he was comfortable.

"Deep breaths, Akihiko," Mitsuru said softly, guiding his breathing. She felt his ribs for anything broken, satisfied that there was none.

"You got impatient, Senpai," Ken said calmly. "She used that against you." Koromaru barked in agreement.

Akihiko coughed twice. "Yeah, I know. If Shinji was here he'd hit me and scold me about that," he chuckled.

Chie made her way to her new rival. "Are you okay? I'm really very sorry if I hit you too hard." She held out her hand to help him stand up.

"Don't worry about it". He took it, and with some help from Mitsuru managed to get back on his feet. "Where did you learn that, though? It certainly hurt like hell."

"That's Chie-senpai's special attack, Galactic Punt," Naoto explained. "She made it up along the way during our battles in the TV. At least the full effect of that attack was toned way down since we're not able to use our Personas in the real world."

The former boxer gulped. Now he was afraid to know what happened to the Shadows she used that move on.

"The way her face was screwing up during the entire fight, it looked just like the one during math class," Yukiko giggled.

Chie rolled her eyes. "If only my brain is that good for class though," she sighed.

"Looks like I need to double my training in order to keep up with you, Satonaka." Akihiko smiled painfully, his hand poised for a handshake. Not only was his body mildly injured, but his pride was hurt as well.

The high school girl shook it enthusiastically. "You were pretty awesome yourself. I look forward to training with you again."
"Then I suggest we all head back for some well-deserved rest," Mitsuru said. "Akihiko will need some treatment for his injuries. It has been a long day, after all." She turned and faced Chie. "Congratulations, Satonaka. I believe this fight will be a lesson to him as well."

Chie blushed. "Ahahaha, no problem. So I guess we'll see you guys later."

And with that, the Persona-users parted ways to head back to their homes.

...End Flashback...

"And that's pretty much what happened," Akihiko explained. "Hurt my pride, but it also gave me back my drive to train."

"I take it Junpei didn't leave you alone for a while after that," Minato snickered.

"You don't know half of it. He bugged me all the way back to the inn until I challenged him to a fight. That effectively shut him up."

Minako giggled. "That's Junpei-kun alright."

Akihiko suddenly turned sheepish, scratching his cheek. "Hey, do you guys mind not telling Shinji about this? Junpei was bad enough," he pleaded. "If he finds out, I'll never hear the end of-"

"Too late." Shinjiro appeared from behind a nearby tree, walking up to them with a wide smirk on his face. "You've really gotten soft, Aki."

"C'mon Shinji, cut him some slack," Minako scolded him in Akihiko's defense.

"Pssh, fine. Satonaka's proven herself, so I'm not gonna tease Aki - " Shinjiro said, a mischievous glint in his eyes. " - for now."

Akihiko ignored his best friend and turned his attention to Chie. "Let's get started. You know what they say, a strong mind and a strong body makes a strong soul." He then addressed the Wild Cards. "Wanna join us? A workout should do you guys some good, too."

The twins had trained with Akihiko before, and knew how hard it was to keep up with him – Minato was often asked to be his sparring partner whenever the blunette was free, and he picked up boxing skills along the way; his sister often jogged with their overzealous senpai. The silverette on the other hand, trained with Chie enough to know that she could give anyone a run for their money with her swift but deadly moves and nearly endless stamina.

"I'll pass. I get tired just watching you guys go at it over and over," Shinjiro said, picking up the now empty tray and cups. "Just a piece of advice - don't mess with the garden. Mitsuru will have your heads for it." He headed back to the kitchen.

"Shinjiro-senpai does have a point though," Minato stated, scratching his head. "Also, if the neighbors or any passers-by spot us training, it'll attract attention. Mostly unwanted for sure."

"Yeah, you're right." Chie pouted, but perked up instantly. "Oh! Maybe there's a more hidden place around here we could train at...like a secret garden or forbidden training ground!"

"You watch too many movies, Chie-chan," Minako giggled. "But you do have a point. We haven't looked around the area that much when we moved in, so it's possible something like it exists. Let's explore!"
The small group walked out of the compound, exploring the area around the nearby foothills behind the mansion. After a while, they stumbled across a rather secluded path which lead uphill. They climbed until they arrived at a rather flat plateau, surrounded by lush trees, bamboos and bushes. There was a tiny old shrine nearby – judging from the looks of it, it must have been neglected for ages. They could see the entire neighboring area, but no one could see them.

Chie spoke up first. "Wow, it reminds me of those old training grounds the grand master would take his pupils for the final part of their training. So cool!"

"This place is perfect," Souji said. "We can make as much noise as we like without bothering people." He grinned at Akihiko. "Is your training offer still up, Akihiko-san?"

"Of course it is. You guys are amazing in a fight with your weapons, but you should learn some basic hand-to-hand combat too. You never know what you may run into. I said it earlier and I'll say it again; a strong mind and a strong body makes a strong soul."

Souji mulled on his words for a bit. 'Maybe he's right. By strengthening my body and my mind, my soul will get stronger. That should keep Izanagi calm and my other Personas under control.' With a small nod to himself, he returned his attention to the former boxing champion. "If you agree, then I'd like to train with you whenever possible." Everybody blinked in surprise the request. "There's a lot going on right now…not only the case of the Dark Hour and the Fog, Shadows, and that chairman…" He stared at the clouds in the sky. "My parents' disappearance…the pressures of school life as a senior…as one of the field leaders. Anything I can do to help me handle all this and grow stronger to protect what's important to me, can only be a good thing, right?"

Akihiko couldn't help but admire the youngest leader. His reasons for fighting and to get stronger were completely selfless by putting others before himself above all things. But in order to do that, he was aware that he also needed to improve himself without going overboard. "No wonder Satonaka looks up to you. You're a true fighter, Souji." He gave him a sincere smile, holding out a hand. "It's a deal. Don't expect me to take you lightly just because you're younger. As one of the leaders, you always gotta do your best!"

"Deal." As they shook hands, Souji felt a bond forming with Akihiko. A familiar card flashed in his mind's eye as his inner voice echoed.

\[
\text{Thou art I... And I am thou...}
\]

\[
\text{Thou hast established a new bond...}
\]

\[
\text{It brings thee closer to the truth...}
\]

\[
\text{Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Emperor Arcana.}
\]

He could feel Izanagi calming down, gently buzzing off to the back of his mind. 'Phew... That feels a lot better!' They then talked about planning a training regiment.

"I think this will be really good for Souji-kun," Minako chirped.

"Why don't you two join us?" Chie offered. She stared at the ground, scratching one foot in the dirt. "W-well, y'know... Just to make sure you guys don't overdo it either. It's kind of a bad habit you three have." She paused, trying to find the right words. "When I saw your memories with everyone, I realized how tough being a leader is. Not just for you two, but for Souji-kun as well. Always putting others before yourself, pushing your limits to make sure everybody is safe, often hiding things trying not to worry them. It is kinda noble, but really reckless too..." She looked at them straight in the eyes. "As team mates - no, as friends," she corrected, "we gotta trust each other and stick together during the good times and the bad ones too, right?"
The twins were touched. Chie barely knew them and yet here she was, concerned about their well-being as if they had been friends forever. "You've got a point there," Minato smiled. "I see why Souji-kun, Yosuke and Yukiko rely on you so much."

"Yeah! Thanks for looking out for us, Chie-chan," Minako beamed warmly. "You're a great friend!"

Chie blushed, a goofy smile on her face. "No problem, guys! You can count on me!"

The twins nodded, feeling a forming bond with the kung-fu fan. Just like Souji, a familiar card flashed and an inner voice told them:

\[
\text{Thou art I... And I am thou...}
\]

\[
\text{Thou hast established a new bond...}
\]

\[
\text{Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Chariot Arcana.}
\]

Akihiko and Chie continued to spar, and the Wild Cards watched on. It was amusing to see how much fun they were having muscling it out.

"Feeling better now, Banchou-kun?" Minako asked, seeing her surrogate brother wearing a calmer expression.

"Yeah. It's strange...after I formed a social link with Akihiko-san, Izanagi calmed down. I wonder why..."

"Bonds are humanity's true power," Minato stated. "By getting to know and bonding with different people, our resolve becomes stronger and we gain new understanding about our Personas."

"So you're saying that if Banchou-kun forms new bonds, he'll get stronger and Izanagi will become more stable?" Minako wondered.

"Hmm...that makes plenty of sense," Souji said. "I see you have also become stronger by forming new bonds. That'll definitely help prevent you guys from going through the same problems I'm facing, and to make sure your Shadows don't come back."

"That's probably be for the best," Minato agreed.

"Let's do this!" Minako cheered. "Whoa, look at them go!"

They continued observing the training session until it was time to head home.

For the next few days, gatherings at the dorm were becoming more and more frequent. While most of them were for study and homework sessions, they only went training inside the TV World once during that period. The twins and their crew discovered that they could summon their Personas much easier and keep them out for longer periods of time, thus relied less on their Evokers. They spent that entire day exploring Mayonaka Tartarus, as Rise would like to call it.

Souji on the other hand, was struggling to keep his headaches under control. Izanagi still refused to communicate with him, and a few of his higher leveled Personas were showing signs of rebellion as well, such as casting the wrong spells or attacking the wrong targets. Luckily, the disobedience didn't cause major damage, and none of his friends were suspicious. They only noticed the difference in his fighting style but never questioned it. The Arisato twins kept a close eye on him to make sure he didn't overdo it.
It turns out that Mayonaka Tartarus wasn't much different from the actual Tartarus. Items or money that were commonly scattered around were found in silver briefcases, and the golden treasure chests didn't need any golden keys to be opened (much to the surprise of the Inaba residents). It was worrying however, because the effects of the Dark Hour were also seeping into the TV realm, and Teddie commented that the fog was starting to become denser than usual.

Overall, the final week of their summer break went off without a hitch. The only minor inconvenience was that those who went to college had to order their books and study materials in advance from the local bookstore or obtain them from Okina, since it was hard to find them in rural areas. On the final day of summer break, the new uniforms finally arrived for the transfer students. The delivery man came with five packages as they gang was gathered for yet another study session.

When Minako opened her package, she squealed in excitement and immediately dashed to her room to try it on. Metis was excited too, and asked her sister for assistance. Shinjiro held up his uniform top and scowled at it. A glare from Mitsuru got him off his chair and heading upstairs, followed by Akihiko's snickers. Ken didn't say much as he followed Shinjiro with his own uniform.

"So we're finally senior students, huh?" Minato said as he held up his own Yasogami High uniform, eyeing the third-year insignia on the collar. "At least we get to experience some of what we missed during our coma. I'm glad we were given a second chance." He then headed off to change.

"While I'm here, might as well make some needed adjustments," Kanji declared. "I need a break from studying anyway."

Those from Port Island looked at him with skeptical expressions. "How are ya gonna do that?" Junpei asked incredulously. "Don't tell me you brought a sewing kit along with you."

Kanji pulled out a clutch from his bag. It was constructed from brightly colored felt and had flaps that resembled bunny or fox ears which no one could be sure of. It was incredibly well-made. The girls commented how cute it was, earning a blush from the maker. Junpei was about to make a sexist joke when he was kicked in the knee by Yosuke. The capped young man glared at his fellow Magician, flummoxed at the panic in his eyes and the furious shake of his head, warning Junpei to shut his trap.

"A wonderful idea, Tatsumi," Mitsuru praised. "At least that way, they won't be panicking about their uniforms on their first day of school. Way to think ahead!"

A little while later, the new transfer students descended the stairs. Their friends were already waiting at the lounge, as if waiting for a fashion show to start. No one dared mention the disastrous event from Yakushima unless they had a death wish.

Minato was first. The dark colors went well with his hair, and the visible stitches on the uniform made him seem taller. He left the blazer open like he did with his Gekkoukan uniform, but he tucked in the collared shirt unlike Souji, who preferred to leave it out. The blue MP3 player around his neck complemented his image.

His twin sister came next. She wore the Yasogami girl's uniform properly, along with knee-length white socks. The trademark XXII hairpins and red MP3 player remained unchanged.

Metis soon followed, accompanied by Aigis. It was surprising how well the uniform looked on her. Aigis had to remove her visor so that she wouldn't garner too much attention. Overall, the female
Hierophant looked like a normal teenage girl. A blush made its way to her cheeks when she was told of this. She felt awkward not having something on her head though, and substituted a red ribbon to hold back her hair.

Ken came down soon after. The middle school uniform was a bit different than the high school ones. It was a dark blue gakuran. Instead of Gekkoukan's much more western style, it had no necktie or ribbon on the collar. It was a completely different experience for Ken. To make up for it, he attached a pocket chain to his pants, which made a huge difference to his style. Not so modern, but not very traditional either. The girls whispered their complements to each other regarding this. Nanako's face burned when he looked her way.

Lastly came Shinjiro. Anyone could tell he was just anxious to get this fitting session over with, and didn't even bother to tidy up his uniform. He just wore the blazer over his black turtleneck sweater and that was it. The beanie still remained on his head. The thought of going to school wasn't making him agitated though; he choked on his spit when he saw Minako twirling around, her pleated skirt fluttering around her thighs. From a young man's point of view, the outfit looked stunning on her. It fit her nicely and emphasized her curves, especially her chest and hips. The yellow neckerchief looked good too, though he preferred the red ribbon of her Gekkoukan uniform. However, from a protective boyfriend's point of view…

"That skirt is too short, dammit!" he grumbled, and turned to Kanji. "Tatsumi, I don't care what you do to that thing, just make it longer."

The auburn-haired girl turned to smile at him. "Shinji, this is the standard skirt length. It's the same as the one back in Gekkoukan, and you didn't have a problem with that," she said sweetly. It was on purpose of course - Minako knew first-hand how to get what she wanted from him, and she happened to like the uniform just the way it was. Her boyfriend on the other hand, was having an inner conflict of protectiveness and personal desire.

Teddie couldn't hold a perverted compliment from escaping his mouth any longer. "The skirt makes your really nice legs look super long, Mina-chan. Oh, you should see how Rise-chan wears hers. It's shorter than that!"

Souji beat Shinjiro to it and pulled the blonde's ear. "Teddie, what was it you promised me to never, ever do?" he asked darkly. The bear shook in fear, cursing himself for not having learned his lesson yet.

'That bear is so dead later…' the others thought.

Kanji took out a measuring tape, some pins from his clutch and approached the five, checking for any rips on their uniforms or asking them if they felt uncomfortable, whether it was too tight, too loose, or somewhere along those lines.

"Man, just look at the lovely ladies here," Junpei said good-naturally, winking at Minako and Metis. "I'm pretty sure these two will be a huge hit in school."

"Actually, there will be three new girls going to Yasogami, making it five transfer students in total," Rise chirped. "Oh, including Senpai, there's gonna be six!"

"Six transfer students in one semester?!" Yosuke exclaimed. "That's a whole new record, even for the city!"

"You don't know for sure if that new girl at the shopping district will be attending," Kanji shot back. "It's not like Yasogami High is the only school around here."
"I agree with Kanji-kun," Naoto said. "But the new shop was very interesting. An antique store, to be precise."

"Well, I guess that makes sense. The shopping district is a perfect place to open up a specialty store like that," Yukiko said. "It should be a hit with the flea market crowd. Oddities in a place like Inaba attract all sorts of people."

"But I forgot what it was called…" Rise touched her forehead, trying to remember. Giving up, she turned to Kanji. "What was it called again, Kanji?"

"Uh…Sunso - no, it was…hmm…Shinsou…Shou… Arghh! I forgot!"

"Anyway, the owner has a daughter around our age!" Rise added, ignoring Kanji's futile attempts to remember and pricking his fingers in the process. "She looked a bit withdrawn and gloomy, but I hope she goes to our school and make a lot of friends. At least I won't be the only girl living there!"

"Ohoooo! Then I must try my best too!" Nobody wanted to know what Teddie meant by that.

Mitsuru decided to steer the topic another way before the others start losing focus. "Speaking of school, the ones who are college-bound must also follow a strict schedule. I don't want anyone wasting their time and garner suspicion in regards to our secret activities. Remember, we're suspicious enough as it is if we don't make up a believable excuse to be here, instead of studying in a proper learning facility."

Junpei grimaced slightly. "But what sort of excuse should we make? Isn't it better to hang out and relax? We can just tell people we're on a long break."

"Are you stupid, Junpei?" Yukari said. "This isn't the time of year for college students to take a break. We're supposed to be studying our butts off, plus we're already being suspicious because we came here as a group and staying long after summer is over."

"Yukari-san is right," Rise said. "In a small town like Inaba, false rumors spread fast and stick in people's minds regardless of efforts trying to correct them."

"May I offer a suggestion?" Naoto piped in. By now, Kanji had finished the minor alterations and everyone took their seats. "How about working on something that has to do with your college majors? For example, Akihiko-san majors in criminal law, so I would recommend him to spend some time with me and Grampa solving a few cases on the pretense of completing his college thesis."

Akihiko raised an eyebrow. "Is that a job offer, Shirogane?"

The young detective smiled. "Yes, it is. Our extensive archives have more than enough material to help you with your case studies. As for the rest of you, it all depends on your creativity to make use of your time here. There are quite a lot of opportunities and part-time jobs if you know where to look for it, except for Ken-kun, since he's not at a legal age to be working."

"The job offer at Junes is still open," Yosuke reminded. "Just tell me about it if you're interested, and I'll find a way to fit you guys in."

"The billboard at the north part of the Shopping District advertises all sorts of jobs. We should check it out sometime. I'm in need of one myself," Souji added.

Kanji broke off from his little daze, a few seconds away from falling asleep. "That reminds me… Oi! Shinjiro-san," he called gruffly. "The old man decided to take you in as his part-time cook
starting tomorrow. Whatever it was you made for him, he was so impressed he wouldn't shut up about it. Came all the way Ma's shop all giddy and happy, it was creepy."

"Man, you guys are always so busy. How the hell am I gonna spend my time here?" Junpei whined.

"I dunno…studying?" Yukari muttered sarcastically.

Nanako raised a timid hand, which took a while for the others to notice. Chie quickly told everyone to shut up and listen to what she has to say. "Umm..." the little girl began shyly. "I heard the teachers in my elementary school speaking about needing an assistant coach for the baseball club. Um, you're funny, Junpei-san..." she trailed off, then hid behind Souji's chair.

Everyone laughed at the last part.

"Well, that solves one problem," Mitsuru said. "I expect all of you to try your best and fit in. This may not be the city, and things work differently around here, but we'll manage."

"But what about you, Mitsuru-senpai?" Fuuka questioned. "What will you be doing?"

"That's a surprise. You'll know about it after the school session resumes."

**Later that night...**

Standing by the fishing dock was a young woman with dark hair, her sharp spectacles shining under the scarce moonlight. The black business suit she wore made her almost invisible in the backdrop of the night. Judging from her foot tapping on the ground, she was waiting for someone.

A little boy with shining blue eyes appeared from behind a tree. He walked soundlessly towards the lady, hands behind his back. His loose, stripy pajamas fluttered around his little body as the wind blew against him, the rustling of fabric giving away his presence.

"Pharos, where have you been?" the woman asked sharply, not turning around to face him.

"At Nanako-chan's place. She just returned from her study session at the new dorm. Where's Ryoji?"

"He's investigating something. That playboy doesn't know how to stand still." Her eyes softened as she took in the little boy's appearance. "How's Souji doing?" she asked, smoothing his hair down with her fingers.

Pharos remained still, blushing at the attention. "Nanako-chan said that he's fine and healthy. It looks like he's hiding it better than I thought. So that means it's still under control."

"He won't be able to keep that up, no matter how strong he is. I just hope Ryoji finds something useful so that we can actually help him."

"Have faith in them, Marie. With the Arisato twins and his friends by his side, they can overcome anything." Pharos gave her a little smile, brilliant blue eyes shining. "Just you watch."
The new semester has finally began, much to the twins and Metis' excitement, and Shinjiro's chagrin. It was their first day of attending school after a long time.

Souji and Nanako decided to meet up with them at their dorm to walk with them together. Ken was a little nervous about attending a new school that was far removed from the environment he was used to, but encouragement from the others put him a bit more at ease. After waves of goodbyes and wishes of good luck from the rest of their dormmates, they headed off.

When they reached the Samegawa plains, they had to split up. Ken and Nanako parted ways with the high-schoolers towards the elementary and middle schools, continuing their chat about TV shows, manga and books without missing a beat.

The morning walk was nice and the weather was cool. The sun shined with light wisps of clouds in the sky as the transfer students walked along the path to Yasogami High. As they got closer to their destination, more and more students appeared, each in their own world as they passed by or dawdled, greeting each other or complaining about how the vacation was too short. The twins smiled, remembering the last time they walked amongst peers over two years ago, and looked around for familiar faces.

Souji quickly spotted Rise and Kanji walking together ahead of them, the bleached blond towering over the pop star, so he picked up his pace and jogged over. "Rise! Kanji!"

Rise immediately turned around at the sound of his voice and pounced, latching onto his arm with glee. "Senpai, I'm so glad you're back! You have no idea how much we missed you here!"

"I know, I know. No need to knock me down," Souji chuckled as the others caught up with them. She grinned and turned her attention to the other four. "And you guys? Excited?"

"Yeah!" Minako cheered, giggling at Shinjiro's scowl.

"We're seniors this year...big year for us. Of course we're excited," Minato replied.

Kanji playfully punched Minato's shoulder. "You guys've got nothin' to worry about. Senpai here swears that you guys're geniuses."

"Thanks, Kanji. Hopefully, this year will end well."

They continued to walk until Yasogami High's building was finally within sight. "It's... It's so big!" Metis exclaimed.

"Not as big as Gekkou, but ain't really shabby either..." Shinjiro said, unimpressed at the enthusiasm surrounding him. The twins stared at their new school with curiosity and joy.

As excited as she was, Metis began to fidget. "Um...guys? Why is everyone staring at us?" she nervously asked.

Yukiko and Chie arrived and joined them. "I guess they're just curious since they don't know you guys. Or because Souji-kun is back," the former said. "I just hope him being here doesn't spark anymore rumors. In a town as small as this, it's quite hard to keep a secret for long as information travels so quickly."
"You make it sound like you don't want me here," Souji fake-whined, pulling her in a half-embrace.

"Wha-! No, no! That's not what I meant!" Yukiko squeaked, her face a deep shade of pink.

He chuckled. "Hey, calm down. I'm just messing with you." They continued teasing each other, already in their own little bubble.

The rest of their teammates were waiting for them beside the school's main gate.

"Hey, partner!" Yosuke waved, an easy-going grin in place. "It's gonna be great having you back in school!"

Souji snickered. "Do you miss me giving you all the answers in class?" He received a playful punch in the arm.

"Damn straight! The teachers keep picking on me now, so I actually have to pay attention to the lessons!"

"You make it sound like it's such a hardship."

"Well, not everyone's a genius like you are, you know. You make everything look easy."

"I do not! I just crack open a book every now and then. Besides, I might not be in the same class as you guys are, so you still have to pay attention in class."

Minako giggled. "Déjà vu, huh Aniki?"

Minato chuckled in response. "Yeah, just like with Junpei. I'm starting to think it's a Magician thing."

"Hey, I ain't the only one that asks Souji for answers," Yosuke rebutted. "Even Chie and Yukiko do that from time to time!"

"Hey, it's not our fault some of the teachers explain things in a way that makes no sense at all!" Chie defended.

"By the way, do you guys have a normal homeroom teacher this time?" Souji asked. "It's not Kashiwagi-sensei again, is it?"

Upon hearing that name, Minako's usual smile was replaced by a scowl. Obviously, she hadn't forgotten how that... that woman... harassed the men in her life so shamelessly. Sensing the change in her mood, Shinjiro held her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. She was startled out of her anger, and smiled at him for his thoughtful gesture.

Chie pulled a face in disgust, sharing the same opinion as Minako's towards the Biology teacher. "Nah! Kashiwagi got moved to a freshman homeroom, but we'll still have her teaching some of our classes. I just hope none of the freshmen have their minds soiled by her."

"Our homeroom teacher now is Sofue-sensei, who teaches history," Yukiko said. "Definitely much more pleasant than Kashiwagi-sensei."

"Yeah! Queen Tut-sensei is so nice in classes even though she always scares me with her Egyptian hat and rod thing!" Teddie piped in.

Minato contemplated this information. "Is that so? Sounds an awful lot like Ono-sensei, our history
teacher in Gekkoukan with his Sengoku fetish." He turned to the juniors. "What about you guys? What's your homeroom teacher like?"

"That'll be Hosoi-sensei, our literature teacher," Rise said. "He's kinda eccentric with that hand puppet of his, but way better than Kashiwagi-sensei for sure."

"Geez, and here I thought Gekkou was full of freaks," Shinjiro muttered.

"You don't know half of it," Yosuke said gloomily.

"While it is true that our school's faculty members are...peculiar...to say the least, most of them are competent teachers, Kashiwagi-sensei included," Naoto said, making her appearance in full.

Souji was somewhat surprised to see the young detective in the school's uniform for girls, rather than the boy's uniform she donned the previous year. "Naoto, you look good. Embracing your femininity?"

She blushed, but smiled nonetheless. "Yes, it's actually somewhat of a relief, to be honest. It greatly reduced the amount of female attention and love confessions I have received."

"Nao-chan looks so pretty in that uniform!" Teddie said with a dreamy expression.

"Yeah, she made quite an impact on the first day of the school year." Yosuke snickered at the memory. "The moment Kanji laid eyes on her wearing a skirt, he blacked out. I was lucky enough that Nagase and Ichijo were passing by, or else I'd have to drag his sorry ass to the infirmary by myself."

"You wanna pick a fight or somethin'?" Kanji growled, his voice turning high-pitched from embarrassment.

Minako patted him on the back. "It's okay, Kanji-kun. Yosuke-kun just likes to tease you."

"And he does a damn good job at it..." he grumbled. It took him forever to be around Naoto wearing that uniform without passing out or having a nosebleed. *That was a giant achievement for me, dammit!*

"Hehe, Kanji can't take the beauty that is a girl in a school uniform~!" Teddie sang.

"Shut up, ya damn furball!"

With a startled squeak, Teddie hid behind Souji for protection. That was when he and the twins noticed that the blonde was also wearing a Yasogami uniform. Even then he still had not lost his sparkling appeal. The rose he usually wore on his white shirt was pinned onto the uniform's front pocket, making the style uniquely his.

"Whoa, Teddie-kun! You look so cute!" Minako praised.

"Thank you, Mina-chan!" He beamed at her, but quickly hid again when he felt Shinjiro and Minato glaring at him.

"How the hell did he manage to enter school anyway?" Shinjiro questioned.

"My folks enrolled him after he kept whining about how bored he was at home and that all he did was work at Junes," Yosuke explained. "How he passed the admission exams and entered the second year...I'm not sure myself."
"That's easy! I studied and studied hard, just like Sensei does!" the bear stated proudly. "Sensei always does his best, so I should too!"

Minato couldn't help but admire his determination. "That's...actually pretty mature of you."

"And besides, I can't score with the ladies with only my good looks. I gotta show them my smarts too!" And with that statement, Teddie ruined everything.

"So much for that..." Souji sighed in defeat. What else could they expect from him? "As long as he focuses on his studies as much as he does his flirting, he should be able to survive through the school year, so I shouldn't be worried."

Minako laced her fingers together behind her back and smiled. "He did make it this far, didn't he? I don't think school will be a problem. He's able to handle many situations quite well with that personality of his."

"Since we're all in the same class, we've been checking on him periodically," Naoto said, gesturing to her fellow juniors. She readjusted her hair band, the same one she wore to the summer festival. "While he spends an awful lot of time having 'fun', he pays close attention to the lessons and I found him studying in the library quite a few times. Overall, he has done a fine job as a student."

"Studying, paying attention to lessons..." Metis wondered out loud. While excited, she also felt nervous. "I hope I can do it well."

Chie contemplated on the android's situation, but ended up giving her an encouraging smile. "Everything's gonna be okay, Metis. Right, guys?"

A chuckle escaped from Minako and she waved a hand. "It's no big deal! You'll will fit in nicely, and the teachers were okay with this whole thing from what Mitsuru-senpai said. They didn't even ask many questions about her past. And if they do, we can come up with something believable. That's what we did with Aigis."

"I admit that Aigis' first day at school was awkward, but I don't think there will be a problem seeing as Metis is more human now than ever," Minato said, expressing his opinion on the matter.

"Going to school is a good step to help her acknowledge the variety of cultures and general views there are in this world," Souji added. "Plus, you'll get to meet other people."

Rise gave Metis a hug. "Welcome to Yasogami, Metis! I'm sure you'll have a great time here with us! We'll guide you with everything you need."

The warmth Metis felt from the young Lover's embrace was more than enough to melt her doubts away. "Everyone... Thank you so much!"

Further conversation was cut off as the first bell rang, and they rushed into the school building to change their shoes before heading for their respective homerooms. The new transfer students broke away to finish up some last minute administrative paperwork at the faculty office.

Souji knocked on the faculty office door. Upon seeing him, the secretary immediately ushered the small congregation over to an out-of-the-way table where some last minute paperwork awaited them.

As they were finishing up, another knock on the door was heard. A female student walked in and was guided to an empty teacher's desk nearby to fill out her own forms. Minako took a peek and
noticed the girl's long, ocean-blue hair held back by a strange metallic accessory. She had piercing red eyes, and wore a beautiful grey cardigan sweater over her standard Yasogami summer uniform.

Wasting no time, Minako walked up to her with a warm smile on her face. "Hi, I'm Minako! Are you a new student?"

The girl blinked, startled at the sudden greeting. "Y-yes..." she said shyly.

"Hey, it's okay. I don't bite! What's your name?"

Slowly the girl eased up. Minako's smile and friendly nature was contagious. "L-Labrys..." she answered. "My name is Labrys."

"Labrys...what a unique name," Minato said. "And beautiful, too."

Labrys blushed. "T-Thanks..."

"Nice to meet you, Labrys-chan! Oh, this is my twin brother, Minato." Minako pointed to the others. "And those are our friends. Souji-kun, Shinjiro-kun and Metis-chan. We're all new students too!"

"Hello there. Pleased to meet you, Labrys." Souji bowed his head politely.

"Hey," Shinjiro said flatly.

"Greetings, Labrys-san." Metis got off her chair, bowing deeply.

Labrys smiled at each one of them, but stared a bit longer at Metis. For a second, her gaze turned into a hard glare at the mechanical maiden, who in turn just blinked in confusion. Her smile returned. "Pleased to meet you. I hope we can be good friends."

"Sounds great to me. Which classroom are you in?" Minato asked.

"Hm..." Labrys read her class schedule. "That would be 3-3."

"Oh, that's the same class as Daisuke if memory serves me," Souji said. "He's good friends with Kou, Ai and Yumi from class 3-1. They're a little on the goofy side, but really nice people. You'll likely to meet them soon."

"That does sound nice." Labrys said. The school bell rang again. "Oh, I should get going. I'm supposed to meet my homeroom teacher in class. It wouldn't be nice if I was late for my first day."

"Yeah, you're right. It was nice to meet you," Souji said. "We'll see you later, okay?"

"Of course. See you later." Labrys bowed and headed for the door. She took one last glance at Metis, and left.

"Rise-chan was right. She is kinda shy, but she's also pretty nice," Minako commented.

"Yeah, she could use some friends," her brother said. "It is tough being the new kid, especially when you don't know anybody around here."

"Just like us when we started attending Gekkoukan." she added. "Junpei-kun was the first person to greet us in class. He even stood up against that peeping tom who was taking secret photos of me and spreading them around school."
"He helped me find the perv and we taught him a thing or two," Minato smirked evilly. The lecher managed to give Junpei a bruise, but Minato gave him an even worse one in return.

Shinjiro turned speechless. He had a new-found respect for the capped jokester, and also made a mental note to keep any strange men away from his girl.

The office doors opened and a woman wearing a royal Egyptian headdress walked in. "Ah, if it isn't my favorite student!" The ever-passionate historian pointed her dowsing rod at Souji. "Welcome back, Seta."

"Thank you. It's nice to see you too, Sofue-sensei." He gave her a respectful bow.

"And you four must be the new transfer students," she greeted, referring to the others. "Minato and Minako Arisato, Shinjiro Aragaki and Metis Papillion, correct?"

"Yes ma'am," Minato answered. The others just nodded.

"I'm Kimiko Sofue, your homeroom teacher." The historian nodded back at them before turning to the twins. "My brother spoke very highly of you two. I see that he's correct...for once."

"Umm... Pardon me, Sensei, but who is your brother?" Minako asked curiously.

"A history teacher at Gekkoukan High. You'll probably remember him by his foolish samurai helmet."

The twins' eyes widened. "Ehhh?! Ono-sensei?!"

"Correct," Ms. Sofue laughed. "I also talked with one of his co-workers on the phone. Isako Toriumi told me that you two are wonderful students. She sent you her regards."

"Toriumi-sensei..." Minako beamed. "That's so sweet of her."

Ms. Sofue then turned to Shinjiro. "Aragaki-san, correct? Your previous records are far from perfect, so I must insist that you take classes seriously. Otherwise there will be dire consequences."

"Yes Sensei..." Shinjiro drawled, feeling even more unenthusiastic than when he walked through the gate. 'Now what? Mitsuru told the teachers to keep me on a leash or something?!'

"As for you-" Sofue observed Metis from head to toe. "Ah, a foreign exchange student, I see. You shall fit in nicely here."

Metis smiled shyly. "Thank you, Sensei."

"Very well, class is about to start," the teacher announced. "Let us head to class 3-2."

"Alright! We're in the same class as Yosuke-kun, Yukiko-chan and Chie-chan!" Minako cheered. They followed their teacher and headed to homeroom.

Souji grinned. "Just like old times."

Class 3-2 was as noisy as ever. Excited chatter could be heard between the students – news and interesting happenings from their holidays, and most likely included rumors as well. Some were bragging about where they've been to, some complaining about chores, some whining about not having gone anywhere, and so on. The classroom somehow felt emptier because quite a few students transferred out of Inaba after the fog incident, but that didn't cut down the noise level.
Yukiko, Chie and Yosuke talked among themselves, anxious to know which class Souji and the others would end up in.

All conversation ceased when Ms. Sofue walked into the classroom. Although her reputation as a friendly and easy-going teacher remained intact, she was also known for her strict attitude when lessons commenced. She stood at the teaching podium. "Class, I have an important announcement to make. From this day forth, we'll have new companions joining our journey of learning. I know it is a rather sudden and unusual transfer, so I hope that none of you dare pry into their personal lives." She headed to the door and opened it for those outside. "You may come in."

As the newcomers made their appearance, Yosuke, Chie and Yukiko held back gasps of surprise.

"Now, I'm sure you all remember our former student, Souji Seta," Ms. Sofue said, not hiding the pride in her tone. "Please greet your fellow classmates, Seta."

"It's wonderful to study with you all again." Souji gave them a quick bow, sneaking a quick wink at Yukiko's direction.

She blushed and smiled back at him. Yosuke and Chie could barely contain their happiness to have him back as their classmate.

Ms. Sofue then turned to the other four. "Please, introduce yourselves."

Minako went first. "Hehe, hi there! I'm Minako Arisato. From now on I'm a senior in this school!" Her smile was overflowing with energy as she waved to everyone. "It's great to meet you!"

"Hello. I'm Minato Arisato, her twin brother. Please take care of us."

Shinjiro grunted, but a nudge from Minato convinced him to open his mouth. "Name's Shinjiro Aragaki."

Metis shyly hid between Minako and Souji, so they had to step aside to make her visible. "I'm Metis… Metis Papillion… P-please, go easy on me…"

"Very well. You may sit now in any available seat, then we can start today's lesson." Ms. Sofue then busied herself with her lesson plans and material as she gave them some time to find their seats.

Souji took his usual spot next to Chie and in front of Yosuke. The twins picked an empty pair of seats next to Souji, Metis sat behind them and Shinjiro walked over to a desk by the window located way in the back. He preferred the back seats; they were much more relaxing than the ones in the middle where the teachers often picked someone to answer questions.

As soon as they sat down, they could hear the other students whispering about them. While most of them already knew of Souji, they were curious about the rest.

The girls were unsubtly squealing in delight. "Kyaaa~! Souji-kun's as handsome as ever!"

"Did you see that new guy, Minato-kun? I think he's hot too! There's something mysterious about him...but it makes him even cooler!"

The guys were commenting about the new girls.

"Man, that Arisato girl is so cheerful and cute!"
"The black-haired girl is really pretty too. That shy blush is completely adorable!"

However, Shinjiro was drawing the most comments from both genders, some not doing a good job of keeping it below the range of hearing.

"Dude, doesn't he look like...a little old to be attending high school?"

"Oh crap, he's totally giving off Tatsumi's vibe here. Better keep away from him or he'll hurt ya, just like what Tatsumi did to those biker gangs!"

"He would be very good-looking if he doesn't scowl so much...and perhaps get a trim too. That long hair of his looks too wild."

"As long as he's not one of those playboys with an attitude, I'm fine with it."

"You know that junior, Tatsumi? He has the leather thing going on, but this guy wears a beanie. Isn't it creepy how they're almost similar?"

"Maybe they're relatives?"

That last comment had Yosuke writhing in laughter, trying to control himself as he muffled his sounds. Shinjiro glared at the back of his head, promising payback. The others couldn't help but chuckle, silently acknowledging the similarities between the two former delinquents.

The rest of the morning passed by in a blur as the Persona-users quickly settled in a familiar routine. The teachers were ecstatic to have Souji back, and continued to pick him and the twins to answer their spontaneous trivias. Apparently, word about their impressive academic records got leaked, at least throughout the faculty office. Metis and Shinjiro were called on as well, but did fine with some help from the Wild Cards. Nearing the end of the first half, the silverette had already heard whispers about weird lights at night, commonly appearing at Tatsuhime shrine and a few other locations. He made a mental note to check them out sometime.

It was a relief when the bell signaling the lunch hour rang. Souji and his friends took the new transfer students to the school's rooftop to meet up with the rest of their group.

All twelve of them were all seated at the rooftop, preparing to eat lunch. They began to drool at the sight of Souji's and Shinjiro's lunchboxes.

Souji already anticipated this when he prepared them last night. "It's okay, guys. I've made plenty of extras." He pulled out a large container from his bag and opened the lid, presenting the content to his friends. There was tempura, potato salad and handmade onigiri with different fillings. It was quickly passed around.

The Inaba girls munched quietly with the exception of Rise, who made approving sounds as she chewed. The twins happily ate, thoroughly enjoying their little brother's cooking. Metis was also enjoying the meal, even though she couldn't consume much because her body was a machine. Shinjiro also tried some, surprised with the silverette's skills. Teddie, Yosuke and Kanji were eating noisily; the manager's son and former delinquent literally shedding tears of joy.

Their behavior had Metis confused. "Hm? Are you three feeling well? Aren't people supposed to be happy when eating food instead of crying over them?"

"Better than ever now!" Yosuke exclaimed after he swallowed a mouthful, washing it down with a box of juice. "You have no idea how much I missed having a decent lunch at school!"
"Hell yeah! Senpai's lunches are number one!" Kanji concurred, throwing a fist in the air. "No more guinea pig job for me!"

His statement roused some curiosity among those from Iwatodai. "Guinea pig?" Minato asked.

Yukiko, Chie and Rise nervously avoided eye contact, while Naoto stared holes into the ground. Souji could already tell where this was headed. "Is there something that I should know about?"

Yosuke and Kanji whimpered quietly, but didn't answer the question.

"Uh, not that it's really any of your business, but Yosuke, Kanji and Teddie have been our taste-testers while you were away, so we can practice our cooking," Chie said.

"And they're still alive? Glad to see you're improving, then." Souji had never felt more sorry for his male friends there and then.

The kung-fu maniac shot him a dirty look and slapped his shoulder. "Of course they're still alive, you idiot!"

"Can't blame him for thinking that," Yosuke finally spoke. "We've had unfortunate experiences with your cooking. Remember Mystery Food X? We went hungry for the entire camping trip!" The was no mistaking the accusation in his tone.

"Or the omelet rice fiasco..." Kanji shuddered. "Thank heavens Nanako-chan didn't get food poisoning that day. Damn, those 'dishes' could be used as weapons of mass destruction."

Yukiko pouted. "You're never going to let that go, are you?"

"Only when I can start singing praises about anything you make," Yosuke said through a mouthful of onigiri.

Rise stuck out her tongue at them. "You meanies!"

"Aw, don't be sad Rise-chan. Your cooking is great!" Teddie praised, trying to cheer her up. "Sure, it looks and smells weird and tastes even funnier, but still is great!"

Rise shot him a glare. "Thanks a lot!" she huffed sarcastically.

"There there," Minako said, trying to pacify the situation. "I'm sure your cooking can't taste that bad."

"The bentos still need more work, but the Christmas cake we baked for Nanako-chan turned out really good!" Yukiko said.

Naoto sighed. "Although it took us three attempts to get it right..."

"But it was thanks to you that they got that cake right, Naoto," Kanji said, a tiny blush on his cheeks.

Chie narrowed her eyes at him. "Well yeah, since Naoto-kun kept telling us to focus on the cook book and keep trying until we got it right. She's the one who taught us how to use the measurement utensils correctly."

"I already told you, that's what you should have been doing from the start!" Yosuke exclaimed.
"As the saying goes, practice makes perfect," Minato said. 'Although some may need more practice then others. Way more practice...' he added silently.

"Aniki is right. If you try hard enough, I'm sure you all will become great cooks!" Minako said as she opened the bento she prepared last night. The other girls stared in awe at her food. It was neatly arranged with a variety of items, and the aroma was completely irresistible. They couldn't help but feel a tinge of jealousy at the female leader's skills.

"Mmm-mmm! Mina-chan, that looks so tasty!" Teddie complimented as he threw some sparkles at her. "It looks like something out of a five star restaurant!"

"Oh this? It's just some sweet tamagoyaki and steamed veggies." She held out her bento to him. "Wanna try some, Teddie-kun?"

The blonde nodded frantically, taking a piece of the omelette. Stars sparkled in his eyes as he chewed the first bite. "Holy...! This is the best thing I've ever tasted! Any girl's cooking is just plain awful in comparison to Mina-chan's!"

Hearing that only pissed off the other girls, angry tick marks throbbing on their foreheads. The guys sweatdropped. Teddie's tact plummeted to zero when Nanako wasn't around, the blonde blissfully unaware of the death glares the girls were shooting at him as he kept gushing over and over about how delicious Minako's cooking was.

It wasn't long before Shinjiro saw through Teddie's attempt to flirt with his girlfriend. Being the possessive guy that he was, scooted closer to her, while glaring at the human Shadow. "You still hungry? Here, you can have this." He offered some of his own food to steer the bear off, while holding Minako's waist for good measure.

"Yay, more yummy food! Thank you bear-y much!" Teddie dug in without hesitation, the rest of the world forgotten.

Minako giggled, resting her head on Shinjiro's shoulder.

"So, you guys heard anything unusual in class?" Souji asked, deciding it was time to change the topic.

Everyone turned serious. "Other than people talking about your return with five new transfer students, not much," Rise informed. "By the way, is the fifth student who I think it is?"

"Yep! It's the girl you told us about. We met her at the faculty office," Minako answered. "Her name is Labrys. She's in the same class as Daisuke-kun."

Rise turned to the others with an 'I-told-you-so' smirk. "I knew it! Never doubt my powers of preservation!"

"It's 'observation', Rise-chan," Yukiko corrected.

"Great, now she's gonna ramble about that all day," Kanji grumbled.

Rise paid no mind to him. "So, what's she like?"

"We didn't get to talk to her much, but overall she seems pretty nice," Minato said. Before he could elaborate any further, the rooftop door slammed open, revealing the grinning faces of Kou and Daisuke.
They zoomed in on Souji. "Told ya he'd be here!" Kou said, his grin smug. "Hey, man. Talk about making a comeback! You're the talk of the school."

"And Labrys and you guys!" Daisuke completed Kou's sentence. "It's probably the most exciting thing that's happened here for a long time. And I mean a really long time."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?" Minato wondered out loud. It was obviously in jest, but Daisuke didn't seem to catch on.

He scratched his head. "Uh...yeah...? I guess?"

"Speaking of Labrys-chan, what is she like in class?" Minako interjected.

"My first impression was the quiet, passive type. But when Yumi and I were recruiting volunteers to help the student council with planning the school festival, she was the first one to step up," Kou said. "I really didn't expect that she was outgoing, enthusiastic even. I guess first impressions can fool you at times."

"That's a good way to help others and meet more people," Minato said, recalling his and Minako's experience in Gekkoukan's own student council.

Kou leaned down, placing one hand on Souji's shoulder. "So, you made up your mind about rejoining the team? There's still time before the winter championship sets in."

"Sure thing. I'll stop by the gym once classes are over," the silverette said. "Just need to get some things settled first."

Kou nodded. "Sounds good. I'll see ya later then."

Their conversation immediately died as the bell rang, signaling lunchtime was over.

The bell rang once more, and classes were finished for the day. Most of the students were packing their stuff, either to go home, their part-time jobs or club activities. In Souji's case, it was the latter. He promised Kou he'd stop by in order to confirm his decision about joining the basketball team and becoming one of the front-line players.

"Souji-kun, you going somewhere?" Minato questioned, stuffing his books inside his bag.

"I'm heading off to the gym. Kou should be waiting for me there."

"Do you mind if we come with you?" Minako asked. "I want to ask around about any clubs we can join."

"Sure. If that's the case, we should stop by the faculty office and get the permission slip from Sofue-sensei."

Minako turned to her boyfriend. "Shinji, do you want to come along?"

Shinjiro shook his head. "No thanks. I'm heading off to work. I'll see you at the dorm later."

Yosuke heading out the door in a hurry. "Sorry guys, can't talk! I gotta go get Ted and supervise his punishment. See ya!"

Yukiko, Chie and Metis approached next. "We'll see you guys around. Yukiko and I are gonna take Metis on a tour of the school," Chie informed them.
"I can't wait to see what this establishment has to offer," Metis said with shining eyes. The three of them left, talking excitedly.

Shinjiro scoffed lightly, not sharing her enthusiasm. "Oh well, I'm off." He gave Minako's hand a reassuring squeeze before making his exit.

"Everyone's so busy," Minako commented.

"Since we're not training today, they've all made their own plans," her twin said. "Come on, let's get those permission slips and see which clubs we can join."

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_Yasogami High Gym…_

"Souji, you came!" Kou Ichijo ran as fast as he could from one end of the gym to where the trio just entered.

The silverette smirked. "Well, I couldn't just leave you to run the team by yourself. You're pretty much hopeless without me. Right…Captain?"

Kou laughed at the title. "Don't you mean the one-man-show? The club still lacks motivation, but a few recruits have joined since you left." He gestured to three guys practicing their footwork. "If we're lucky, we might be able to snag a place in the district championship and bring back the drive to move Yasogami High forward." He turned to the twins and noticed the permission slips in their hands. "Looking to join a club, I see. Any interest in basketball?"

"I never played basketball before. In my previous school I was in Kendo," Minato said. "But we'll observe for a bit before making our decision."

"That's cool, no pressure," Kou said. "After Souji warms up, we'll be having a friendly one-on-one match between members to see the level of skill the guys are currently at. You're more than welcomed to stay."

"Thank you, Kou-kun. We're more than happy to do so!" Minako chirped. She had yet witness a basketball game up close, because she was had been busy with the tennis club at Gekkoukan.

Out of the blue, Daisuke appeared at Kou's side and gave Minato a hearty pat on the back, nearly giving the latter a heart attack.

Kou raised an eyebrow. "What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be training the rookies for the upcoming tournament?"

"Nah, those guys can handle themselves," Daisuke said, dismissing his responsibility with a wave of a hand. "I had them running laps and practice passing the ball. Nothing too heavy for the start of the semester."

"Yeah right, you're only here to stare at Ebihara," his friend scoffed. "Instead of drooling over my team manager, why don't you take care of yours?"

"Didn't you hear? He quit just before summer break started. Something about focusing on exams and mock tests." Daisuke's usually smiley disposition darkened a little. "Kondo-sensei gave him the okay, despite his workload having doubled with all the paperwork that's been swamping him lately. I think he'll fall sick at some point if he doesn't get any assistance."

"Kondo-sensei is still teaching two subjects _and_ coaching?" Souji interjected, having finished
changing into a muscle shirt and three-quarter bottoms.

Kou sighed. "Sadly, yes. From what I heard from Yumi, the school is low on funds so they couldn't hire more teachers for classes or coaches for the sport clubs. Rumors started floating around that some of them were voting to lay off one or two clubs from the school program to cut corners. The school newsletter has been raving about it since April."

The twins silently communicated to each other with their eyes. Souji picked up on this and wondered what they were discussing about.

The captain picked up a ball and spun it on the tip of his finger, a challenging smirk on his lips. "Souji, care to demonstrate at how much you improved the last time you were here? Loser has to polish balls for a week."

"I'm confident enough to kick your ass," Souji said calmly, a competitive spark in his eyes. "Bring it on!"

Instead of breaking off into pairs and playing against each other, the team members scattered around the edge of the basketball court to watch two of their best players battle it out, waiting for a while as they warmed up first. Ai agreed to be the referee and scorekeeper. She held the ball between the two, a silver whistle between her lips. She tossed the ball into the air and backed away. When the ball reached zero velocity mid-air, she blew the whistle to start the match.

The battle was on. Everybody cheered as the adrenaline level started picking up. The two had skill and technique – dribbling, dodging, and feinting their way to score a point. Kou used his shorter stature to elude Souji and sped his way towards the hoop, but Souji took advantage of his height to knock the ball out of its trajectory and jumped again to snatch it away when it rebounded. He used his shoulder to block Kou as he tried to make a grab for the ball. It was an intense battle, a blur of orange that kept switching from one player's hand to another, neither willing to give it up. The crowd went wild whenever a point was scored, the noise attracting more people from outside to stop what they were doing to come and watch. The twins noticed how much fun their brother was having, and couldn't help but cheer him on.

After 15 minutes, Ai blew the whistle, indicating the friendly match was over. "Alright, that's enough you guys!" she shouted, her voice barely making it through the crowd. "Ichijo – 3, Seta – 3. It's a tie!"

The crowd dissipated soon after. Souji and Kou shook hands, sweaty and out of breath. Looks like both of them would have to polish balls for the time being.

"Dudes, that was awesome!" Daisuke exclaimed, giving Kou a surprise noogie.

"Get off!" the Ichijo heir shoved his childhood friend away from him.

"That was so cool, Souji-kun!" Minako squealed as she grabbed his arm.

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised," Minato said, a proud smile on his face. "You really did enjoy throwing balls around when we were kids. You used to run off every time you caught it though."

Everyone laughed, including Souji albeit a bit embarrassed. Kou then turned his attention to the twins. "So, any interest in joining yet?"

"Yo, not so fast!" Daisuke quickly interjected. "I got dibs on Minato here. We're going to the soccer field to shoot some goals. You're not the only one who wants new members."
Minato had a huge metaphorical question mark above his head. "We are?" Daisuke dragged him away before he could protest.

"I used to be in the tennis club before this. I think I'll go and check them out," Minako said. She put on her MP3 and cranked up the volume before leaving the basketball court.

"So, you fired up for practice now?" Kou asked Souji, who gave him an enthusiastic grin. "Alright! Time to train some freshmen!"

Minako wondered around the school grounds, reminiscing the time she came here previously with the Gekkoukan tennis team. She giggled at the memory of her fellow teammates teasing Kanou-sensei behind her back. "I hope she's doing well in Kyushu…I wonder if she married her fiancé yet? Maybe she did, since Kenji-kun lost interest in her to finally date Rio-chan. I'm so happy for them~!

It surprised her that she remembered where the tennis court was located. Minako watched them practice their swings from a distance. The members who hosted the fellowship have all graduated, so it was awkward to try and approach them now. There were no familiar faces…except one. "Yumi-chan!"

Yumi Ozawa turned to look for the voice who called her. The girl who was talking to her earlier walked off, leaving Yumi by herself. "Oh, it's just you Arisato-san."

"No need to be so formal with me, Yumi-chan. You're a friend of Souji-kun, so I also consider you one. Please call me Minako."

Feeling rather flustered at her display of friendliness, Yumi relented. "A-alright…Minako-san…"

Minako gave her a bright smile. "What are you doing here? If I recall correctly, Kou-kun said you're in student council. Do you play tennis by any chance?"

"No, I was just checking up on something with the captain. They'll be participating in a fellowship with another school in a neighboring prefecture instead of hosting it this time." Yumi then noticed the pink slip in her hand. "Are you looking to join the tennis club?"

"Yeah, I am." At Yumi's slight frown, Minako's enthusiasm wavered. "Is something wrong?"

"The captain told me early this year they aren't accepting any more members. I'm afraid you'll have to join elsewhere."

The auburn-headed girl's smile turned upside-down, shoulders slumped in disappointment. "Oh…"

Yumi suddenly felt guilty. "B-but…! I heard that the soccer team is in dire need of a manager. Perhaps we can have a look? Ever done any management duties?"

"Actually, I have. I used to be a member of the student council in my previous school, so I'm familiar with the paperwork." Minako's spirits rebounded. "My twin brother should be there with Daisuke-kun Come on, Yumi-chan. Let's go and watch them practice!"

Yasogami High soccer field…

"Alright guys, listen up! We've got a new teammate!" Daisuke slapped Minato's back. "You guys heard about Minato Arisato, one of the new transfers, right? He's from the city and I'm sure this
guy's got some great moves he's just waiting to show off!"

The other members exchanged groans, whispering among themselves.

"A skinny guy like him playing soccer?"

"Poor sap won't last five minutes here."

"Really? We are not that desperate for new members...are we?"

Minato had expected this. 'Far from a friendly reception, huh?'

"Hey, man. Don't let 'em get to you. Just play hard and have fun." Daisuke tossed him a spare jersey. "Here, put that on and show 'em what you can do."

With a nod, Minato headed to an empty bench to put on socks and cleats.

"Looking good!" Daisuke placed the soccer ball on the ground, barking orders to the other players to take their positions. "Alright, you guys know what to do. Get to it!"

The moment Minato kicked the ball, the other players closed in, trying to disarm him. Smirking, he made a swift dash to the left and bypassed the first player. Calling on his footwork, he dribbled around two more who charged at him. He didn't hesitate to shoot a curled shot from 30 meters away, sailing above the goalie's head and right into the top-right corner of the goal.

"Whoa! Nice shot!" Daisuke cheered.

The other players were in shock and awe. "That was crazy!" One member shouted. "I've never seen someone hustle like that!"

"With those moves...we might actually have a shot at this year's tournament!"

"I'm glad you came along!" Another member praised. The others were starting to change their tune as well.

Minato grinned bashfully. "Thanks, guys."

The captain slung an arm around his shoulder. "What'd I tell ya? I know a good player when I see one. But man, how did you get so good? You played soccer before?"

"Not really, but when I was in kendo, my footwork improved a lot," Minato explained. 'And fighting Shadows on an almost daily basis, we had to run fast or else we'd be dead meat.'

Claps and cheers were heard, and it was coming closer. "That was so awesome, Aniki!" Minako shouted as she ran up to him, Yumi calmly following behind her.

"Thanks. Apparently, I'm a natural," Minato said.

"Yo!" Daisuke greeted the girls. "What's up?"

"Minako-san here is interested in becoming the manager for your club," Yumi told him.

"Yeah. Tennis club aren't accepting members anymore, so I figured that helping out in another team would be the next best thing to do."

Daisuke's face lit up. "Are you serious?! That'll be awesome! We could really use someone reliable
like you to help around."

That got the rest of the team excited.

"For real?!"

"That's awesome!"

"Alright! Finally, a girl on the team!"

Minako turned to her twin, hugging his arm. "This will give me more chances to hang out with my big brother!" The other members' expressions slowly fell.

Her brother's eyes glared daggers at them. "And before you get any ideas, she's already got a boyfriend and trust me, neither of us are the types to tolerate harrassment."

The boys backed off. Daisuke laughed heartily. "Okay, enough fooling around!" His expression turned serious. "Let's run a few more laps! Get moving!"

Everyone except Minato moaned and grunted, but complied in the end.

"That's gonna keep them busy for a while." Daisuke finally turned to Minako. "I'll fetch the papers you're gonna need for manager duty. Thanks again for helping us out, Minako-san."

"Don't mention it, Daisuke-kun."

"Well, if things are all set here, I should get going. I need to check a few things with the other clubs," Yumi said. "I'll see you guys some other time."

"Okay. Thanks again, Yumi-chan! See you later."

After their run, practice began in full swing with shuffles, passes and scoring goals. Minako breezed through the paperwork on the side, occasionally looking up to check on her brother. When the day was over, the rest of the members took off, leaving Daisuke and the twins to take down the goal nets and clean up.

"Not bad for a first day, guys!" Daisuke praised them. "With you two around, looks like the team finally got some motivation."

A voice from around the corner interrupted him. "Good, 'cause they need all the help they can get." Kou appeared with a teasing grin, flanked by Souji and Ai. "Pretty weak team, know what I'm saying?"

Daisuke frowned at him, a big red tick mark above his head. "Shut up! Your team is just as lame!"

"Come on guys, don't start with this again," Souji sighed.

Kou rolled his eyes. "Seriously though, it's gonna be good for the team to have you guys around." He then glanced at Ai. "A woman's touch is just what these guys needed."

Daisuke stared blankly at him, clueless. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, nothing. You'll figure it out soon enough."

The twins laughed, feeling a faint bond forming with the athletic duo as they kept back-talking and teasing each other. Time suddenly stopped, with the familiar voice in their heads:
Souji, who noticed their blank expressions and glazed eyes, understood what was happening.

"What do you say we help you guys clean up so we can go grab a snack after?" Kou suggested.

"Good idea," Daisuke cheered. "I'm starving!"

Ai playfully rolled her eyes. "Boys..." She stood next to Daisuke, intending to loop her arms around his firm biceps. The soccer captain unintentionally pulled away from her touch when he left with Kou and Souji to collect stray soccer balls on the field, leaving her behind. She frowned, trying not to appear disappointed as she stared at her feet.

Minako knew that look all to well, which reminded her of her friend, Rio Iwasaki. She slowly approached the other girl. "Hey Ai-chan, how was basketball practice today?"

"Oh! It actually went pretty good." Ai forced on a smile. "Kou-kun and Souji-kun's match really got the others motivated to play better. I haven't seen them fired up like that in quite a while."

"That's great to know! So, as a team manager, what do you do?"

"Mostly paperwork, like registration of new members, booking venues for participations like the culture festival, sports carnivals or competitions. And you're also the secretary whenever there are meetings with the club members, student council or external parties. To tell you the truth, I was forced into this job by the counselor in order to pass my junior year because I was skipping too many classes, but I didn't think I'd end up sticking to it by my own will. It's hard work, but I met some great people because of it."

Minako's lips turned up in a mischievous grin. "I take it you catch a lot of attention from the guys, huh?"

Not missing a beat, Ai flicked her hair back. "I guess..."

"Like Daisuke-kun's?"

Ai's cheeks turned crimson. "Y-yeah..."

"You two started dating recently, right? How's that going?"

"I wish I knew..." sighed the wavy-haired girl. "I like him a lot. I really do, but I don't know..." She wrung her hands. "At first I thought he's just a little dense when it comes to girls, but there are times I really don't know what he's thinking when we're together. Kou-kun convinced me that he's still getting the hang of it, but that doesn't exactly make me feel any better."

"Perhaps he's shy?" Minato suggested. "From what Souji-kun told me, this is his and your first serious relationship, isn't it?"

"So, maybe I'm rushing things?" Ai stared at Daisuke's form as he chased Kou around the field, most probably caused by bad joke from the basketball captain while Souji laughed at their antics. "I just wish I could understand him better."

Minako tapped her chin. "Since we officially joined the team, we'll be hanging out with him quite often. If you want, we can help you gather more intel about him."
Ai's sharp eyes widened in disbelief. "You guys… You would really do that for me?"

"Why not? That's what friends are for." Minato gave her a gentle smile. "It's not a substitute for intimacy by a long shot, but by seeing things from different perspectives might help you gain some understanding about yourself and others."

"I'm not really sure I understand what you mean, but I really appreciate it." Ai's blushed darkened in color. "I'm just... I'm afraid of messing things up."

"No need to rush it. All good things take time," Minako said. She noticed the three friends heading back towards them. "Ah, speak of the devil."

Minato waved at them. "We'll talk more about that some other time, okay?" he said, winking at her.

Ai immediately cheered up. "Okay!"

Once they finished up their tasks, the headed to Souzai Daigaku for a quick snack.

The following day started out without any major incidents. The transfer students had no trouble setting themselves into a normal routine to the eyes of the public.

However, not all was okay with Souji. A sigh escaped his lips as he tried his best to listen to Hosoi-sensei’s lecture. He almost regretted not staying home today when he woke up feeling exhausted. He had not been getting enough sleep, caused by Izanagi's pounding and the ominous images plaguing his dreams. Still, he pushed himself forward. The last thing he wanted was to trouble his friends with things that not even he himself understood at the moment.

Luckily, he was able to get through classes unnoticed. Since everybody had their own things to do after school, Souji decided to attend basketball practice again, hoping it could help him unwind.

On his way to the gym, the silverette stopped by the bathroom and checked himself in the mirror. Dark, slightly puffy circles formed under his eyes from lack of rest, but it was nothing serious. He only hoped his Persona would give him a break and focus on things he enjoyed. With a deep breath, Souji washed his face, trying his best to appear healthy.

Halfway through practice however, the headaches appeared again with full force. He had a hard time focusing, but managed to avoid suspicion from the rest of the team. Kou and Ai noticed something was off with his gameplay, but decided to keep quiet about it...for now.

After they finished up, they headed to the soccer field. Minato and Daisuke were practicing penalty kicks, while Minako and Yumi chatted at the edge of the field.

"Alright, one more shot and I'm done!" Daisuke shouted, getting ready for another kick.

"Dude, you said that five times already!" Minato shot back. "The rest of the team already took off, so let's wrap this up."

At least Daisuke had the decency to grin apologetically. "Sorry man, I got too fired up. Alright, this one will be the real final one. Here goes!" He took a few steps back, broke into a sprint and kicked the ball with all his strength. It ricocheted off the goalpost and changed trajectory, flying full speed towards an unsuspecting Souji.

Minato tried to warn him. "SOUJI-KUN! LOOK OUT!"
Because he was fighting a headache, Souji didn't hear the warning, nor had the focus to dodge in time. The ball hit him square on the side of his head, knocking him off his feet and onto the ground. His friends rushed to his side, shouting his name.

"SOUJI-KUN!"

"SOUJI!"

The silverette groaned as he looked up, surrounded by the faces of his friends. His sight became blurry as the world began to spin.

Daisuke panicked the hardest, caused by his guilt. "Oh my God, man! Are you okay?! I'm sorry! I'm really sorry!"

"Hey, say something!" Yumi called. "Souji-kun!"

Kou's face turned pale. "Dude, talk to us!"

"Hey, come on... Don't scare us like that!" Ai said nervously.

The twins kept repeating his name. Before he could answer them, everything faded to black.

He was surrounded by darkness.

Souji could hardly see a thing in front of him. Izanagi started acting up again, which didn't help the situation. "Where am I?" he asked himself. "How did I get here? I was leaving school and then-"

He groaned and held his head. It hurt too much. "Damn it, Izanagi! Give it a rest!"

"Souji..." a woman's voice called out to him. It was so soft that he almost mistaken it for a non-existant breeze.

He looked around. "Wh-who's there?"

"Souji..." another voice called; this time it was male.

Izanagi stilled - something about these voices calmed him down. Souji could never mistake who they belonged to. "M-Mom? Dad? Is that you?!"

"Souji, my baby... It really is you..." his mother's disembodied voice said. It sounded sad.

His father's voice sighed with relief. "You're safe... Thank God..."

"Where are you? What happened?" Souji frantically looked around, hoping to see them. "Are you okay?!!"

"Son... No, we can't tell you... Not yet..." If his father were here, he would be shaking his head. "It's not safe..."

"That man...he's still on the loose," his mother warned. "If he finds you... He'll take you away from us..."

"Man? What man? Who are you talking about?!!"

His father's voice started fading away. "Please, stay safe..."
"We love you…" His wife's did as well.  
"Wait! Don't go!" their son screamed. "Mom! Dad!"

"FOOLISH CHILD!" Another voice boomed out from the darkness. Souji did not recognize this one. It was cold and evil. It sounded like a distorted version of the chairman's. "THEY MAY TRY TO PROTECT YOU, BUT YOU WON'T BE SAFE FOREVER! I WILL FIND YOU!"

"Who are you?! What did you do to my parents?!" His anger overrode his fear, until Izanagi started pounding again. "Gah! Damnit Izanagi! Calm down!"

"DO NOT WORRY. WHERE YOU'RE GOING… YOU'LL NEVER SEE THEM AGAIN!"

Souji felt himself sinking into a pool of darkness. He tried to escape, but his feet were held in place. The shadows surrounding him started to solidify, taking form of hands and arms, pulling him down even further. No matter how much he struggled, its grip was viciously strong and suffocating. 'D-Dammit…' He felt devoid of strength, already chest deep. 'Am I…. gonna die here…?'

Just when Souji was drowning up to his eyeballs, a light shined from above his head. He felt something grasp his outstreched hand.

"Don't give up!" a disembodied male voice said. This one sounded younger than his father's.  
Another female's voice, also sounding younger, joined in. "You're not alone!"

Souji felt himself being lifted, the pressure crushing his chest loosening up as warm light wrapped around him. The solidified shadows' grip were no longer there. His eyes tried to adjust to the light, but all he could make out were two bright silhouettes. "You two…? I know you!"

"You should really stop talking…" the female voice chastized. There was something familiar and comforting about her. "You're safe now."

"Everything's gonna be okay," the male one said. Souji couldn't see his face, but could tell he was smiling. "We're here to help, so don't worry."

As light surrounded the dark space, the Wild Card felt his eyelids droop, a peaceful feeling enveloping him. "Thank you… Marie… Ryoji-san…"

Souji's eyes slowly flutterted open. He felt his body lying on something soft, the white ceiling and florescent lights looking familiar – he was in the infirmary.  
A soft-spoken voice greeted him. "Souji-san, you finally came to. Thank goodness!"

"Huh?" It took a short while for the silverette's eyes to adjust to the light. "Naoki? How…"

"Minako-san pretty much crashed into me when she was heading here. When she told me you had been hit by a soccer ball to the head, I called in the nurse. Ichijo-senpai and Nagase-senpai helped Minato-san bring you in here. According to the nurse, she said it was a pretty nasty hit, but luckily for you not bad enough to get a concussion."

Souji looked at the other side of his bed. His friends and the twins were there, relieved smiles on their faces.
"Dude, you're alive!" Daisuke exclaimed. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to hit that hard! Hell, I didn't mean to hit you at all! I know I'm strong and all, but - I don't wanna give you a cracked skull or anything like that!"

The others sweatdropped. Souji grinned weakly. "I'm fine now, Daisuke. No worries."

"Man, 'bout time you woke up," Kou complained. "Daisuke here was so panicked while you were out cold, I had to ask Yumi and the girls to go get him tea or something to calm him down. Hell, I would've forced him drink alcohol from the chemistry lab if none of that worked."

The soccer captain blushed. "Hey! You didn't have to bring that up!"

"How are you feeling, Souji-kun?" Minako asked as she sat on the edge of his bed, softly stroking his arm.

"I'm fine. I could use some water, though..." He rubbed his forehead, wincing when he felt a large bump. 'Ouch...that's gonna hurt for a while. At least Izanagi's calmed down. But...what the hell was that dream about?'

"Just to be on the safe side, you should take it easy, okay?" Minato said. His expression was gentle, eyes filled with concern.

'Did...did something else happen while I was knocked out?'

Moments later, Ayane, Ai and Yumi walked in, giggling at something one of them said as they brought in a few cans of cold drinks. When they caught sight of Souji sitting upright, they rushed to greet him. However, Kou's hardened expression had them stopping in their tracks.

"Souji..." the basketball captain started. "While you were unconscious...you were calling out for your parents."

The silverette flinched. The twins looked away. "You came back from the city without any sort of notice and resumed studying at our school. I was really happy when I heard about it, but still, I couldn't help but wonder the reason for your sudden return." He looked at his friend directly in the eyes. "It has something to do with your folks, am I right?"

Souji clenched his blanket. His thoughts warred with themselves - he didn't want to hide from them, but at the same time, he wasn't ready to disclose anything about the subject. Even though the twins and his teammates helped him through his grief, the wounds were still fresh, especially after the run-in with Ikutsuki. He still didn't know why that meeting effected him so strongly.

"Dude, if you don't wanna tell us what's going on, we understand," Daisuke forced a small grin, but it was clearly visible that both he and Kou were disappointed by their friend's unwillingness to share his problems.

Minako bent down slightly to his level. "Souji-kun..." she said softly, grasping his hand. "Please, don't keep your feelings bottled up inside. It's not healthy... Aniki and I learned that the hard way."

"Your Personas' power lies in your bonds with your social links," Minato added, speaking even softer so the others couldn't hear. "If you reaffirm those bonds, it might help you calm them down and stop your headaches."

Souji knew they were right; back when he faced Kubo's Shadow, it was his doubts over the bonds he created with his friends that had caused his Persona to fail him, almost falling victim to the psychotic teen's illusion. Only when he realized that his friends and family would never abandon
him, that they truly cared for him, was he able to unleash that power to defeat the Shadow.

"Alright..." he finally, heaving a sigh. "You guys better sit down then. It's a long story..." His friends gathered closer around him, some sitting down while the two athletes preferred standing up. The silverette took a deep breath before he once again recited the events of that fateful night. The twins, already knowing the full details, helped him fill out the blanks, mentioning nothing about their secret activities for obvious reasons.

Ayane started to sniff, eyes brimming with tears. "Senpai... I'm... I'm so sorry!" she cried.

And she wasn't alone. Yumi and Ai were already shedding tears while Kou and Daisuke held stunned expressions. But it was Naoki's reaction which surprised everybody. "Senpai, I can relate to the pain you must be feeling right now."

"Naoki..."

Everyone in town knew the tale of the Konishi family, but only those who knew Naoki personally that deep down, the boy still grieved over the death of his sister from time to time. "I know you probably can't grieve in front of everyone, but please don't push yourself so hard." He gave Souji a gentle, wistful smile. "So please... I may not be that reliable, but I'll be here for you."

"Yes, I understand how you feel too," Yumi said. "Just like with my father, you were there for me. Please let me be there for you in return."

"Yumi..." Souji recalled the days when the former drama club member would pour out her mixed feelings out about her parents to him.

"Don't stop thinking about your parents, but don't forget to think about yourself too," she continued. "Don't run away from it. Otherwise it will just hurt you more."

"When you're going through tough times, you can't carry all that weight in your shoulders, Senpai," Ayane said softly. "It's selfish, and hurtful to the ones who care about you."

"That's right, knucklehead. You gotta take care of yourself too!" Ai added. "I know it's tough, but your parents will worry about you if you remain like this."

"Ai... Ayane..."

"You've got the guts to pull through this!" Daisuke said loudly, pumping a fist in the air. "You gotta be brave, man!"

Kou offered an assuring grin. "And if there's anything we can do for you, let us know. You know we're here for you. After all, we're best of friends, right?"

Small tears pooled in Souji's eyes. "Thank you, guys... All of you..."

The twins couldn't help but smile; their surrogate brother found some truly wonderful friends.

A few minutes later, the nurse came back and shooed the healthy students out of the room so she could give Souji another check-up, and evaluate if he should go home or to the hospital. While waiting outside, the twins approached Naoki while the others chatted among themselves.

"Naoki-kun...thank you," Minako said softly.

The junior blinked, confused. "Huh? For what?"
"For what you said to Souji-kun," Minato answered. "Even though my sister and I also lost our own parents when we were young, your words and actions really had an impact on him."

Naoki's eyes went wide. "I… I'm just doing the right thing..." he finally said, averting his eyes. His cheeks heated up. "My sister Saki… she passed away not too long ago." He stared at the door. "When I saw Senpai like that, I couldn't stand it. I think… I think he reminded me of myself..."

Minato nodded in understanding. "You are still going through a lot yourself, huh?"

"I guess you can say that…" He fidgeted slightly. "Do you… do you still miss them? Your parents I mean."

"Every single day," Minako answered.

"I see… I guess that feeling never goes away, huh?"

"Time heals all wounds, even if some scars may never completely fade," Minato said. "I believe, I'm certain that things will be okay given time."

"Because in the end, that's what we all need, right?" Minako continued. "Time to grieve, to experience each of its stages and then come out knowing we're just a little bit stronger."

"I've never thought about things that way..." Naoki mumbled. "That does lift a weight from my shoulders. Thank you."

They smiled back at him, feeling a bond forming with the junior when they felt time stop. A card flashed and the familiar voice spoke:

_Thou art I... And I am thou…_  
_Thou hast established a new bond…_  
_Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Hanged Man Arcana;_

Souji finally walked out of the room. He was greeted with a bombardment of questions and words of relief that were immediately quieted by his raising hand. "I'm okay now, guys," he told them. "The nurse said I'm good enough to go home. Some rest and painkillers, I should be 100% in a few days, though I'm not allowed not play sports for at least two days."

Upon hearing that, Kou smacked Daisuke upside his head. "Thanks a lot, numbskull!" he said, faking anger. "Now who else is gonna help me get the freshmen motivated to train?"

"Ow! C'mon man, could've been worse," Daisuke whined, rubbing the sore spot. "At least they still got the captain to make them work their butts off. Besides, Souji here can still watch you guys practice and stuff."

"Oh sure, leave it to me to do the dirty work!"

Souji chuckled at their gag routine.

"You two are a real piece of work," Ai grumbled, grinning amusedly as she grabbed Daisuke's arm. "Hey, it's getting late. You're supposed to be walking me home, you know."

"Oh, yeah. You're right." He gave her a smile before turning back to Souji. "You gonna be okay, man?"

"Yeah, I think I'll manage to get home in one piece."
"We'll make sure that happens," Minato said. His sister giggled. Souji rolled his eyes, knowing that there was no arguing this time.

"I guess you're in good hands then," Yumi smiled. "Just don't get careless, okay?"

"See you tomorrow, Senpai." Ayane bowed politely. "Please rest well."

Kou patted his shoulder. "Take it easy, dude. I'll handle the rookies."

"I'll help too, so don't worry, okay?" Ai assured. "See you later."

Daisuke grinned and waved as his girlfriend guided him out. "Later, dude!"

Naoki was the last to leave. "Take care, Senpai."

Souji nodded with a small smile as the trio saw the six friends off.

The twins accompanied Souji home, despite the silverette insisting that he was well enough on his own.

As they walked in silence, Souji reflected upon his dream, his parents and the two figures he saw. He knew Marie and Ryoji had a hand in pulling him out of that unknown malevolent entity's grasp before it was too late, yet he couldn't help but wonder. *How could they have known about that? Now that I think about it, why haven't I seen Marie ever since I arrived in Inaba? I'm certain she's not avoiding me, but... Ugh! Why do I have a knack of befriending the unknown, mysterious types?* He sighed in frustration.

His loud exhale had the twins turning their concerned gazes to him. "You okay, Banchou-kun?"

Minako asked.

Minato's frown deepened. "Your head's still hurting?"

Souji stopped in his tracks. "No... Well, it's not as bad as before. At least Izanagi's calmed down. Just thinking about that dream I had while I was out cold..." He shook his head. "No, that wasn't a dream. It was a vision."

"What was it about?" Minako asked. "I mean, aside from you calling out for your parents."

He closed his eyes in recollection and explained the dream to them. Needless to say, they were surprised about the last part.

"Okay, I might understand how it was possible for Ryoji to interfere with your vision, since that part of his power came from Pharos," Minato started. "But Marie? How was it possible for her to do that?"

"I never told you guys before, have I? Marie isn't a real denizen of the Velvet Room. After we met, she became an assistant there trying to find herself."

"Find herself?" Minako repeated.

"I first met Marie on the day I arrived in Inaba. She was rather cold and anti-social at first, but it turned out that her apparent lack of emotion was basically just a way to deal with her own insecurities and naiveté," Souji explained as they continued walking again. "She was questioning her own existence in life, having no memories of her past. That's why she wanted me to show her around Inaba, to learn about the world and who she really is. Kind of like Teddie when Yosuke and..."
"Those who reach the Velvet Room are destined to go on a journey in search for identity," Minato pondered. "Maybe that's how Marie ended up there."

"I think so too. Anyway, after my friends and I defeated Ameno-Sagiri and cleared the fog from the real world, Margaret told me about Marie's sudden disappearance. I had no idea where she had gone to or why she left that way. It was only during a trip to a ski resort during winter break did we find out she had trapped herself inside the TV World after regaining her memories and remembered who she really was."

The twins looked at each other. This story sounded way too familiar...

"We fought our way through the Hollow Forest, a reality she had created within the Midnight Channel. When we finally found her, we discovered the truth – she was actually Kusumi-no-Okami, one part of a greater power like Ameno and Kunino-Sagiri, and her role was to spy on our world." Souji took a deep breath before continuing. "While Ameno-Sagiri's purpose was to cloud the world with fog, it was Kusumi-no-Okami's role to absorb it, and to die after. She tried to push us away by making us forget about her, trapped in a dilemma between self-sacrifice or to lose all we had worked for by returning to the real world."

"Just like Ryoji-kun..." Minako whispered.

"I suppose you can say that. Unable to reason with her, we had no choice but to fight. After her first defeat however, the remnants of both Ameno-Sagiri and Kunino-Sagiri used the fog she had absorbed to take control over her, turning her into Kusumi-no-Okami. It was a difficult battle, but we managed to free her because she sealed away her consciousness, thus protecting herself from death and allowing her to return to the real world with us. After Izanami-no-Okami's defeat, I learned that Marie was also the other half of a whole: Izanami-no-Mikoto."

"Eh? The other half of Izanami?" the twins chorused.

"Yes. Izanami-no-Okami was the half that granted people's wishes, while Izanami-no-Mikoto was the half that actually believed in the good of people. Over time, Izanami-no-Mikoto lost her powers and memories, while Izanami-no-Okami's increased and her views on mankind grew twisted. When she was defeated, Marie vanished along with her." Souji rubbed his eyes in mild frustration. "I was hoping to meet her after returning to Inaba, but so far no luck. And now, her appearance alongside Ryoji-san looking out for me, it makes me wonder... do we really have a grasp on what's actually going on here?"

"Marie-chan seems to care a lot for you, Banchou-kun. Just like Ryoji-kun for me and Aniki," Minako said. "When we meet them again, I'm sure they'll tell us what they know."

"Minako is right. They must have a reason to act like that. We just need to trust them," Minato added. "When the time is right, they'll show themselves to us."

Souji nodded, a small smile on his lips. "You're right. They know what they're doing," he said. "Let's go home. It's getting late."

From afar, two people were watching their backs - none other than Ryoji and Marie.

"Looks like we acted at the right moment," Marie said, letting out a breath she was holding. "But we're running out of time. I don't know how long Souji will be able to keep his powers in check under these circumstances."
"C'mon Marie-chan, don't be so pessimistic," Ryoji said, trying to cheer her up. "You're underestimating him."

"Maybe I am, but he has no idea what he's dealing with here! Then again, neither do we."

Ryoji fiddled with his scarf. "Look, trust me when I say this – as long as Minako-chan and Minato-kun are there for him, Souji-kun will be fine. We'll also be here for him when he needs it, right?"

"You're right." Marie turned her attention to the setting sun. "And I'll be there for him, just like what he did for me." She turned to look at Ryoji. "You know Mochizuki, you're a nice guy after all."

"Really?" His face lit up like an eager puppy. "Then would you like to have dinner with me at Aiya's? Or maybe that nice restaurant in Okina? My treat."

Marie rolled her eyes. "Don't push your luck, Casanova. You still need to pick up Pharos at Nanako-chan's place while I need to get ready for my new job. I have to keep a low profile here for now, you know."

"Can't blame me for trying," Ryoji chuckled. "Very well, shall we be on our way?"

Souji wasn't feeling so well the following day. He knew the nurse ordered him to take it easy for a few days, and that meant heading straight home after school. But a stubborn part of him wanted to attend music practice today. The twins already went ahead. Ayane wouldn't be pleased, but if he didn't go, then neither would he. As he made his way to the end of the hallway, the disturbing visions hit him full force, instantaneously triggering the pounding in his head. It was more intense, and Souji couldn't be sure if the headache was more painful because of the slight head injury, or that Izanagi was getting worse.

He shakily made it to the washroom. The nausea hit, and he emptied his stomach contents into a toilet bowl. *There goes my lunch…'*

A large, warm hand on his back eased his discomfort. "Are you okay?" a rough voice asked him.

Heaving the last remnants of his lunch, Souji flushed the toilet and wiped his mouth with some toilet paper. "Yeah… thanks for asking, Shinjiro-san."

"You look like shit. What are you still doing here, anyway?"

Souji sighed. "I'm guessing Aneki told you about that, huh?"

"Yeah, she did. She also said you're supposed to be at home, resting."

"I thought I felt better enough to attend music club. Obviously, my stomach doesn't agree with me."

Shinjiro slung Souji's left arm around his shoulders. He pulled out his cellphone with a free hand and dialed a number. A few seconds later, someone on the other line picked up. "Nakamura, it's me. Tell your dad I'll be coming in late today. Got some business to take care of first… No, I'll deal with that later. He'll understand after I explain. Okay…later." He pocketed his phone. "Go wash your face. I'll take you back to the dorm. You probably don't want Nanako-chan seeing you like this."

The silverette mumbled a quiet thanks as his tall friend practically dragged him off the school grounds.
When they reached the dorm, Shinjiro pulled out a stool and sat him at the kitchen's island counter. "Stay put," he ordered. "I'll whip up something to ease that stomach of yours."

Souji groaned lightly, but complied nonetheless. He rested his elbow on the counter surface, and supported his head on his hand, watching his classmate work.

Shinjiro measure some rice in a pot and washed the grains at the sink, filling half of it with water. While waiting for that to cook, he boiled some water in an electric kettle. He took a ginger root out of the fridge, peeled it, sliced it thinly, and put it in a mug along with a regular tea bag. The boiling water was poured, and left to steep. In the meantime, he rummaged the fridge for more ingredients. "Here." He pushed the slightly cooled cup to Souji, who had dozed off slightly. "Some ginger tea should help ease the nausea."

The Wild Card sipped the spicy tea, the soothing aroma calming his queasy stomach, simultaneously relieving his headache. The two of them chatted about mundane things as Shinjiro worked, chopping and putting various ingredients in the pot, stirring it a few times. The silverette fell into light slumber as their conversation began to lull.

Shinjiro sighed affectionately, his brown-grey eyes softening at the sight of the sleeping Fool. He was pulled back into memory lane, of when Miki was still alive. That protective, nurturing feeling he had then resurfaced once more. Thinking that calling out to him would be rude, he opted to pat his head instead. "Oi…wake up, will ya?"

Souji snorted lightly, rubbing his sleepy eyes. The aroma of something warm provoked his senses. A bowl was placed in front of his face.

"Eat up. After puking your guts out, you need to regain your energy."

Souji looked into the bowl's contents – rice congee. It smelled wonderful. He swirled the soft porridge around with a spoon. There were Chinese red dates, mushrooms, a piece of ginseng, sliced ginger and shredded chicken. "Thanks for the food," he said, and scooped a spoonful into his mouth. The temperature was just right; slightly on the hot side but not enough to burn his tongue. As he swallowed and ate some more, his mind began to clear and his energy levels picked up. "This is delicious!" he complimented. "It must have taken a lot of practice to get this recipe right…"

"You got that right." Shinjiro began cleaning up. "I made it quite often when Aki and I were kids. That dumbass always got sick easily, mostly from jogging in the rain. I also made it for the twins once, as you already saw."

"Hrm…" While he ate, Souji observed his friend. Unconsciously, a small smile made its way to his lips. Shinjiro was tough, stubborn, and intimidating to a fault, but that was just a cover-up. Behind that unapproachable exterior was a tender-hearted soul. Kanji shared the same traits, but comparing those two side by side felt wrong. There was something about Shinjiro that felt more mature. 'Heh, I can easily picture him settling down with Aneki. Not fooling anyone with that scowl of his. He'll probably be too busy spoiling their kids rotten, especially if they have a daughter.' The thought made him chuckle.

"Hey," Shinjiro started, wiping his hands with a dishcloth after cleaning. He gave the silverette a lopsided grin. "Feeling better?"

Souji felt at ease, not just because of the wonderful meal, but being in his presence as well. He felt a brotherly bond forming between them, the trust they shared strengthening. That's when he heard the familiar inner voice.
Thou art I... And I am thou...
Thou hast established a new bond...
It brings thee closer to the truth...
Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Hierophant Arcana.

'Ah, so that's why. Uncle and Shinjiro-san certainly share more similarities than I realize. Makes me wonder if Uncle was a former delinquent too.' Souji laughed to himself at the thought. After finishing his meal, Souji was much steadier on his feet. "I'll walk myself home if you don't mind. You still need to get to work, so don't worry about me."

As they were about to separate ways at the front gate, Shinjiro reminded him once more about resting.

"Hey," Souji called out when they were some distance away. "Teach me that recipe sometime."

Shinjiro grinned and waved back.

Souji calmly headed home. His head wasn't pounding like before and his stomach was at ease, thanks to Shinjiro's delicious meal. He was closing in on the Dojima's residence and saw an unknown figure squatting by the driveway, talking with a stray cat. His eyes squinted to get a better look; it was a young boy in stripped pajamas.

"Hello there, little one. Are you waiting for someone too?" the little boy asked the cat. The feline rubbed its head against his leg, meowing cutely. His bright blue eyes widened with happiness at the gesture, and gently patted its head.

'Black hair, stripped pajamas... There's no doubt about it, that's Pharos. He must be waiting for Nanako,' Souji thought. He took a deep breath. 'There's no need to worry. Aniki and Aneki said he's a good person. He's probably just looking out for Nanako."

He quietly walked towards the young boy, hoping not to startle him. However his presence was given away by his feline friend who spotted and pranced up to him. "Hey, little guy." Souji kneeled down, affectionately scratching behind its ears. The cat purred happily.

"So, we were waiting for the same person after all..."

"No need to be shy." Souji gave him a gentle smile as the cat walked back to the boy. "You're Pharos, right? I'm Souji."

"Yes, that is my name." Pharos picked the cat up. "It's great to finally meet you, Souji-san."

"I could say the same. Nanako spoke a lot about you and your brother."

"She did?"

"Yeah, she did. She said you're a great playmate." Souji opened the small gate that lead to the back porch. He gestured for Pharos to join him.

The young boy blushed at the praise. "Nanako-chan is just so much fun to be with. When I'm with her... I feel... happy. Like... Like..."

"Like the time you spent Aniki and Aneki?"

"Yeah! Just like those days!" Pharos grinned up at him, the cat resting on his lap as they relaxed
on the porch. "The times we talked during the Dark Hour are the best memories I have of them. Whenever I play with Nanako-chan, or this little cat, I feel the same joy."

"I'm glad to hear that. Doing fun activities together, or just enjoying the warmth of their presence... having a companion you can trust and feel safe with is a wonderful feeling."

Pharos nodded in agreement, amazed at the friendly warmth that the Wild Cards seem to miraculously share. He frowned when he noticed Souji's pale face. "Um… Souji-san?"

"Yes?"

Pharos gently scratched the cat's chin. It purred like an engine. "I… I honestly didn't expect you to come back so early," he said. "Nanako-chan says you're usually busy after school." His intense, blue eyes peered into Souji's gray ones. "Something's… wrong."

The silverette was taken aback, not knowing what to say.

"A Persona is like a mirror, so you can never escape yourself. But, if that mirror shatters, you'll lose yourself. And with that, all that's dear to you…"

Despite the cryptic and disconcerting message, Souji detected worry in his tone. It was genuine concern for his wellbeing, despite them having met literally minutes ago. He felt a faint bond forming with the mysterious boy.

\[
\text{Thou art I... And I am thou...}
\]

\[
\text{Thou hast established a new bond...}
\]

\[
\text{It brings thee closer to the truth...}
\]

\[
\text{Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Death Arcana.}
\]

Souji stared at the clouds in the distance. 'He's right though. If things go unchanged, all that we have worked for will be lost.' He tightly clenched his fists. 'I can't let that happen!'

"Thanks, Pharos. You're a good friend." He turned to face the boy, only to realize he had mysteriously disappeared. "Huh? Where did he go?" The cat meowed repeatedly, confused as it circled the spot the little boy previously sat. "He is mysterious, I'll give him that. I'm sure Aniki and Aneki will be happy to hear from him." He petted the cat. "You hungry? I think I got some fish for you."

The cat purred and rubbed against his body. Souji picked it up and went inside his house, failing to notice Pharos watching him from afar. "You're a great friend too, Souji-san." In a blink of an eye, he disappeared.
Yasogami High…

For once, Izanagi had not been bugging Souji the entire day, and for that he was extremely grateful. It was a relief to finally be able to focus on his lessons for once. Feeling lucky, he decided to try again for music practice after school was over. ‘Finally! I can hand over my permission slip to Ayane. I can't wait to see the band's progress. I bet Aniki and Aneki made a huge impact on the performances.’ He smiled to himself, humming a catchy tune as he walked along.

His happiness didn't last long as two pairs of arms pulled him into a dark corner and under the staircase. Guided by keen fighting instincts and weeks of physical training, Souji elbowed one perpetrator in the ribs, and swiftly caught the other one in an arm-lock, tightening his hold until they whined for mercy.

"Ow! Seta, what the hell?!"

Souji loosened his hold and pushed away his captive towards the other guy, who held his ribs in pain. They collided with each other, almost toppling over. "Blame yourselves for that. Next time, don't try to grab people out of the blue," he huffed, straightening his blazer.

Quickly regaining their composure, the two approached the silverette with better manners this time. "Yes, we apologize for that," one of them said. "But we prefer not to be seen in public." He was of medium height and skinny, his bedraggled black hair all over the place. He reminded Souji of an underfed kitten. His friend didn't look any better, with prominent dark circles under his eyes, contrasting his bright brown hair.

Souji squinted at them, trying to remember their faces from somewhere. He got nothing, but their jittery postures recalled his memory. "So, care to tell me why the Occult Club needs to unconventionally grab my attention?"

Unfazed, they continued with their eerie stares. "Yes, but first off we would like to thank you for the Darkness Idol that you got for us last year. It has been very...useful...in our endeavors to understand the paranormal," Black Hair said.

"Our research has been…very fruitful," Brown Hair said, rubbing his hands in glee. Souji observed that this guy had not cut his nails in a while. "We have called upon you to require your services once again."

Having been used to hearing cryptic sentences, the silverette raised an eyebrow. Whatever these guys were working on, it had 'BAD IDEA' written all over it. But before he could flat-out refuse, Black Hair spoke up.

"Of course, we will reward you for your efforts. In our possession is a rather rare item. Let's just say that if Sofue hears about it, she'll probably…no, she will fight tooth and nail to add it into her impressive collection of ancient artifacts."

Intrigued, Souji listened on.

"We are in dire need of the dolls that you got for us last year. If it's not an inconvenience, we would like another 20."

"Why so many?"
The Occult Club members smiled at each other creepily. "Let's just say that the supernatural sightings around town has gotten people excited, and began to take more interest in our little club. We need the dolls for a mass initiation ceremony for the new members."

One of Brown Hair's eyes twitched. "Help us, and we'll gladly hand you the artifact," he said.

Souji thought about it for a while. 'Well, I am looking for new accessories to bring into battle. I have no reason to doubt the authenticity, these guys take that kind of stuff too seriously for it to be a fake. It might even help me with my problem here...' A few more seconds of deliberating, he finally gave in. "Alright then. We have a deal." He shook hands with both. "So, 20 dolls. Any particular deadline that you need it by?"

"We would like to have it in the next 13 days, to coincide with the phases of the moon," Black Hair said, nervously playing with his fingers. "But this time, we require more...variety...regarding the dolls. All shapes and sizes are acceptable as long as they fit the descriptions we're looking for."

"Just hand it over, and we'll give you your reward by then. I believe you know where to find us," his partner finished ominously. He gave Souji a creepy grin, and both boys turned around and left. Not even bothering to at least mention their names.

Souji blew out the breath he'd been holding. 'What have I gotten myself into?'

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**TV World...**

After much discussion the night before (along with some mathematical probability calculations and what-not by Aigis, with Fuuka doing the explanations; it wasn't fun for those who hated math) SPIES decided to try out a few strategies that would optimize the use of their many team members and limited time. They would still follow their previous strategy of dispatching two teams into the dungeons, but a third team was optional with Mitsuru or Teddie as the scanner. However, one of them must remain behind to keep a lookout for the Reaper.

"This is just a precautionary measure," Souji reasoned. "Call it paranoia or whatever, but I think it's better to be safe than sorry in this kind of situation."

Everyone agreed. After Souji was given the clear by the doctor, they continued their investigation inside the TV World. Minako insisted that if he wanted to train, he'd best take it easy and fight in the lower dungeons. Souji argued that that wasn't feasible, so they compromised; he would form a tag-team with her. That way, she could watch his back and he could get proper training in return. Teddie insisted on being his scanner, so Mitsuru had no choice but to remain behind.

A few hours later, Souji's team got back from the dungeon of his choice, carrying a bag full of dolls obtained from slaying various Magus Shadows that the people from the Occult Club requested. Thankfully, the Shadows in there weren't difficult, so he didn't need to rely on his more powerful Personas. Minako and her team had already gone on ahead. As he reached the Entrance Hall with Yosuke, Naoto and Koromaru, there seemed to be a shouting match going on.

Akihiko looked pissed. "Shut up, Shinji! No one asked for your opinion!"

"Hey, everyone's entitled to their own, Aki. You and Satonaka have the same obsession about protein, so I have a completely valid point," Shinjiro retaliated coolly, a teasing smirk on his lips.

"That's such a lame name! My idea was way cooler. Who doesn't like 'Game of Death'?!” Chie argued passionately, stomping her foot. "That movie was a classic! The manliest of all kung-fu
"movies out there!"

"More like 'Meat Lover's Combo'…"

As they were having their three-way verbal fight, Souji approached Minato, who was rubbing his temples in exhaustion. "Aniki, what's that all about?"

"Akihiko-senpai and Chie made up a new combo attack while we were fighting some really strong Shadows." He sighed lethargically. "It was so damn destructive that I pray they wouldn't have to use it outside if the Dark Hour hits. The topic of steak bowls popped out of nowhere, and Shinjiro-senpai started to laugh his ass off. I swear if they don't stop soon, I might get lucky with Midsummer's Night Dream…"

Souji sweatdropped. By now he knew all the possible Fusion Raids that the twins were able to perform. "That's taking it too far…” He looked around, taking in the energy of seriousness. Some of the team members were practicing their moves, sparring with each other and making up new attacks. 'Now that's what I call group effort!' he thought, highly impressed.

"That looks fun," Minako commented. Even after returning from a dungeon, she still had an impressive amount of energy. "Hey Yukiko-chan, want to spar with me? Haven't you mentioned about that new attack using two fans you always wanted to try out?"

"Oh, that's right. Thanks for bringing that up," Yukiko said. "Let's go over there, where there's more space." She pointed towards an empty area heading towards her Shadow's castle, but not too far from the Entrance Hall.

Far left from where the girls were practicing, Yosuke was training Ken on how to handle agile opponents. The youngest member was a quick study, but more often than not was just as quick to fall prey to any ailment spell Yosuke dished out.

Junpei and Kanji were napping beside the TV exit, snoring loudly. Koromaru decided to join them and snuggled between the two males.

Since everyone was back, Fuuka and Rise were relieved of their scanning duties, and thought it would be fun to combine their powers and see if they could refine their search radius to an even wider area. Mitsuru decided to join them since she wished, even back in high school, to improve on her scanning abilities.

The only ones who weren't in the vicinity were Aigis and Metis. The android sisters were scouting around the perimeter, looking for any clues that they might have missed. Their leaders weren't particularly worried about them going off alone since they were stronger than an average human. They could easily communicate with the scanners if they detected any danger.

"My my, this place is so lively, almost like a party," Teddie remarked. "I've never seen it this noisy in all of my existence. We should do this more often! All it needs is some food and entertainment. Bring out the party girls!" Out of nowhere, an arrow whooshed past his left ear, narrowly snagging it off.

Yukari held her bow in one hand and an arrow in the other, smiling evilly. She nocked the arrow into the bow, ready to pull the string once more. "What was that, you overgrown Daruma? Did you suggest something perverted?" she hissed. Naoto was beside her, replacing bullets inside her pistol as she glared at him.

The bear gave a sharp "Eeep!" and ran for cover.
The girls grinned in satisfaction. "Nice technique you have there, Yukari-san," Naoto praised. "Using your wind powers to manipulate the direction of the arrow's trajectory and improve its accuracy. We should team up sometime."

"Thank you, Naoto-kun. It took me quite a while to refine my aiming skills before I figured out how to manipulate it in battle. Your marksmanship is impressive as Aigis'."

Naoto gave her gun a flamboyant twirl before placing it in a leather holster at her hip. They too headed out somewhere nearby to train.

Souji felt some of the tension in his shoulders draining away. He agreed with Teddie on this one – he could get used to such a rowdy and lively atmosphere.

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**The Velvet Room…**

"Ah, if it isn't my dear guests. It's been a while," Igor greeted. His three assistants bowed respectively.

The Wild Cards decided to pay a visit to the Velvet Room. They had not gone there for over a week, so most likely the residents there became slightly worried.

"Thank you Igor," Minako returned his smile with her own sweet one. "We came by to check on any updates regarding the threat."

"And maybe fuse some new Personas as well," Souji added.

The long-nosed man tapped his fingers together, his gaze piercing. The three teenagers tensed. Souji was immediately reminded of Pharos' cryptic message. Igor spoke again. "I do sense further disturbance in the balance of the realms. It may not be strong enough to be seen or felt from your world, but it is there nonetheless. How it will manifest itself… only time can tell."

"What about the Great Seal?" Minato asked.

"Nothing there is out of the ordinary from what we observed," Theodore informed them. "It is still doing a wonderful job of holding Erebus back as far as we're concerned."

"Then I guess we have no choice but to wait for our next clue," the blunette sighed. "In the meantime, we would like to check up on our Compendiums, please."

The assistants approached their charges. "Of course. We're always happy to serve," Margaret said, smiling politely. They placed the books on the pedestals before the Wild Cards.

Quietly, the trio browsed through the pages of their respective tomes. Two additional chapters have been added for the social links they gained.

"Hmm, this one looks interesting," Minato said, stopping at the Strength chapter. "Berserker? He looks strong. He'll be a great asset in a fight that needs muscle power."

"Oh, look at this one, Aniki! Her name is Lorelei." Minako pointed to a Persona in the Hanged Man chapter. "This one has multiple ailment spells, including one I never seen before. I wonder what it does."

Souji read through both the Hierophant and Emperor. The ones available to fuse were Futotama and Osiris respectively. He started to feel worry. 'They seem to be pretty strong. I wonder if I can..."
control them. Hopefully they won't be as stubborn as the other ones I have...'

The weekend had finally arrived, and it was time for some rest and relaxation for the group youths; one entire day to take a break from school and whatever Shadow business if they could help it. They needed it, or else they would go stark crazy from all the stress and responsibilities.

Souji was in bed, sleeping in since everyone had agreed not to bother each other for the day. Nanako had a school project with her friends and Dojima was working, so he had the house to himself. Izanagi had been bothering him the entire night, so he wasn't able to any decent sleep. The headaches had been going on and off for the past week. Deciding to skip Tanaka's Amazing Commodities, he curled himself under the blankets, enjoying the soft warmth as he drifted off into dreamland.

The incessant ringing of the doorbell woke him up. He groaned and ignored it, hoping whoever it was went away.

*Ring* *Ding* *Rrrrrriiiiiinnnnnggggg*

No such luck. When the annoying ringing was followed by the pounding of fist on wood, Souji had no choice but to drag his sorry ass out of bed to answer the door. Yawning widely and mumbling a few incoherent curses, he unhooked the safety lock and glared at the intruder who dared mess with his slumber.

"Hey," Shinjiro greeted.

"What do you want?" Souji groaned, rubbing his face. At least his head wasn't feeling like it was about to split open, but that didn't mean he wasn't allowed to be cranky on an early weekend morning.

Shinjiro snorted, but he wasn't angry or anything. He cut straight to the chase. "Look, I got a favor to ask of you. It's time for Koro's medical checkup, so do you mind taking him to the vet? The others are pretty busy with their college workloads, the twins got a study date with Amagi and Satonaka, and Ken's occupied with homework. Metis has no social skills with this kind of stuff. I'd dump it on Iori, but I don't trust that idiot with something this important. I ain't comfortable asking Hanamura, Tatsumi or the other girls either." He rubbed the back of his head. "I was called in to work extra shift today, and you're the only one I know who I can actually trust with this kind of stuff...so..."

Looking up, Koromaru began to wag his fluffy tail, staring at Souji with his puppy-dog eyes. He sweatdropped. 'Aneki should really stop influencing the people she hangs out with.'

After Shinjiro left and Souji got dressed, the latter hooked a leash on the Shinba Inu's collar and they were off. He had to text Chie earlier for an address, because she was the only person he knew who actually owned a pet.

Koromaru panted happily as he walked side-by-side with Souji, whose mood seemed to be shifting from cranky to pleasant. It wasn't too far, as the vet opened up his practice beside his very own house. The albino Shiba Inu even made a few fast friends with the neighborhood dogs.

The vet did a physical exam, took a few blood samples and gave the standard worm medication before signing Koromaru off with a clean bill of health. The good weather only made Souji sleepier, so he decided to head straight home. He stopped by Madam Shiroku's store to get a few cans of dog food before heading back.
Souji unleashed Koromaru in the back yard. "I guess you can crash at my place while waiting for the others to pick you up," the silverette said, rubbing the canine's back. He picked up the empty water bowl for the fox cubs and refilled it with fresh water, and filled another one with the wet dog food. The mischievous cubs sniffed the delicious odour and came out of their hiding spot, eagerly waiting for a meal. "I hope you don't mind sharing. I bought extras anyways." A huge yawn made it out of his mouth, so he lied down on the couch. "I'll just take a nap. It's been a busy week." The last thing he heard was four hungry canines scarfing down food as his eyes closed.

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**Amagi Inn, private family study…**

"Oh no, look at the time! I'll be late to walk my dog and Dad will scold me again," Chie whined, silently cursing the yellow smiley face decorating her wristwatch. She threw her books and notes into her backpack.

"We're just about finished, Chie," Yukiko said, closing up her note book. "I'm surprised we made this much progress in half a day."

Minako beamed. "That was fun! You're an awesome tutor, Yukiko-chan."

"Thanks to you, we now understood most of the basics so we can catch up with the others in class," Minato praised, giving her an easy-going smile.

"Too bad Shinji had to work today. He would have benefited from this study session." A worried look crossed the female twin's pretty face, plump lips tugged down in a frown.

"Don't fret, Minako. That guy goes at his own pace and makes his way out of sticky situations through pure grit and perseverance. He's not gonna fail you. Not this time."

Minako blushed, a warm smile forming on her lips at her brother's reassurance. Her little daydream was interrupted when Chie almost knocked over a lamp as she hastily left, bidding them a hurried goodbye before heading out the door.

"That Chie…" Yukiko tutted affectionately, turning her attention to the twins. "All that studying has made me hungry. How about we go and make ourselves a snack? I did some shopping yesterday, so we can make whatever we want." Two tummies growled loudly and simultaneously. She giggled. "That's a yes, then. Come on, the kitchen is this way."

Said kitchen was just some paces away, solely for the Amagi family's personal use. It was neat and tidy, relatively small compared to the inn's gigantic one, but cozy with enough space for three people to maneuver in. Yukiko opened the fridge and took out a container of cold sushi rice. "The chefs made too much of this for the breakfast courses, so they gave me some of the leftovers. I was thinking of making onigiri."

"You read my mind, Yukiko-chan!" Minako said. "What flavors shall we make?"

"Let's see...I bought a lot of salmon and sardines since they were on sale yesterday. There are some pickled vegetables as well if you like."

"That's plenty enough. We don't want to ruin our appetites for dinner," Minato said. "Shinjirosenpai is cooking today, and I absolutely don't want to be on his bad side for not cleaning off my plate." His sister giggled at that.

The small island was soon piled with ingredients. The three of them merrily made their own batches, not really paying attention to the others, preferring to focus on their own work. After
rolling out the rice, filling them, and compressing the balls into triangle shapes with the finishing touches of seaweed, Yukiko made some tea as they gathered in the family's dining room to eat.

"Those look as good as the ones Souji-kun makes," Yukiko praised the twins' dishes. "They even smell great!"

"Here, have some, Yukiko-chan." Minako passed her plate over so she could grab some. "Aniki, I'll trade you this salmon roe filling for your pickled veggie ones."

Shyly, Yukiko offered some of hers. "I…I know I'm not the best chef around, but I've been practicing a lot. Would you please taste some and see how it is?"

Now, Souji never actually told them in detail of the horrors of Mystery Food X. Even so, they had an idea of how bad the situation was. After all, Yukiko and Fuuka share the Priestess Arcana and that was enough to keep their guards up. Declining would be rude, so they grabbed one onigiri each from her plate and took a cautious bite. Just one tiny nibble, they hadn't even started chewing yet, the twins knew something was wrong. No, it wasn't the rice… in fact, the rice acted as a tight seal to whatever unpleasant odor that wafted from the filling. It smelled of decayed fish, the sharp sourness of rotting fruit, and burnt toast… which also described the taste.

Not wanting to hurt the girl's feelings, Minato forced his throat to swallow whatever content was in his mouth. He watched Minako's face turn green before she swallowed as well. Thanks to previous experience with Fuuka's cooking, they managed to control their gag reflexes and gave Yukiko a pleasant smile at the end.

"That was, uhh…an interesting flavor, Yukiko-chan…" Minako started, ignoring the horrid after-taste on her tongue. "Out of curiosity, what did you put in these?"

Yukiko beamed. "I was thinking of adding some sweetness to the sardines since it has an oily flavor, so I put in some chocolate powder. And I never tried using mustard in cooking so I was curious how it will taste. And I read in a cooking magazine that sour cream is sometimes used for fish dishes. Pretty neat, huh?"

'Does she even know the difference between chocolate and cocoa?!' Minato wondered, feeling sick to his stomach. 'I...might not survive this again…'

Not able to take it any longer, the twins downed an entire mug of steaming hot tea each, not minding getting their tongues getting burned. Once they were certain the awful flavor had been significantly toned down, they took a moment to sort out what to say.

Minato began first. "Yukiko-san, allow me to be brutally honest. That was one of worst flavor combinations I have ever tasted," he deadpanned.

"I agree with Aniki, Yukiko-chan. I appreciate your creativity, but some things are just not meant to be mixed together," Minako said.

Light tears began to form in the raven-haired girl's dark eyes. "It's hopeless! No matter how hard I try, I can never make anything right..." A sob escaped her throat. "At this rate, I'll never be able to cook Souji-kun a meal he can enjoy!"

Minako pulled her into a side-hug. "That's not true, Yukiko-chan. I've always been an avid believer that anyone can cook, as long as they get their basics right."

"I lost how many times Shinjiro-senpai drilled that into Fuuka's head," Minato muttered. "She started out rather horribly. Not only was she lacking in skill, but she was also putting the wrong
kind of effort into correcting it."

Yukiko tilted her head. "The wrong kind of effort…?"

Minako nodded. "Fuuka-chan is smart, and meticulous to a fault. That's why she's so good at what she does, but when it comes to cooking she overthinks things. Did you know she almost dumped in salt instead of sugar when we were making muffins, just because she was too distracted trying to remember what she scribbled in her notes? She focuses so much on the details that she couldn't keep up with the actual basics of cooking a recipe. You're just about the same, focusing too much on flavor combos that you forget the real purpose of cooking."

"The real purpose…of cooking…?"

"Both you and Fuuka treat cooking like a science experiment. While that is true to an extent, you can never reach that stage until you master how to make proper, edible food. What's the point of cooking for people if they can't eat it?" Minato said.

"You're…you're right…"

Seeing that Yukiko was about to cry again, Minako gently tugged her back into the kitchen. "Come on. Let me teach you how to make a basic onigiri filling and hosomaki. If it goes well, you can make Souji-kun a proper bento next time."

The younger girl blushed at that.

"It doesn't have to be something fancy, you know. Love makes the simplest food taste even better," the blunette added, smirking when Yukiko's face bloomed a shade of red.

"Please teach me again, if you don't mind." She gave them a smile filled with gratitude. The twins felt a bond forming between them and the young manager-to-be.

_Thou art I… And I am thou…_  
_Thou hast established a new bond…_  
_Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Priestess Arcana._

Just as Souji slipped into unconsciousness, an image of Izanagi drifted in his mind's eye. The God of Creation's back was facing him; he was tall, radiating authority and power.

His heart began to beat out of rhythm. He never felt this way before; it was almost as if he was…_afraid_…of his own Persona. Unsure of the situation, he reached out to him slowly.

Sensing the hesitance, Izanagi turned around, swinging his naginata at the same time. Souji jumped back just in time to avoid getting sliced, gasping in shock when his Persona's helmet began to crack. Red and black filth splattered the front of his jacket, emitting an awful smell of rotting corpses. His movements were twitchy and violent.

"You…you're not Izanagi…" Just as he uttered those words, his head started to pound. It was so painful he fell on his knees, hardly able to breathe. Izanagi, or whatever it was, approached him menacingly, ready to strike again…

A strong tug in his gut woke him up, returning him to reality. He gasped loudly, coughing as he tried to gulp in as much air as he could to his deprived lungs. He was sweltering profusely, vague images of his nightmare dancing across his blurred vision.
Sensing his distress, Koromaru ran back into the house, leaving the fox cubs to play in the garden. He saw Souji curled up on the couch while holding his head, eyes closed, shaking like a leaf. Whining softly, the white dog approached apprehensively, nudging the silverette's cheek with his cold, wet nose.

The difference in temperature on his cheek snapped Souji out of it. The albino pooch licked his face to cheer him up. "Koromaru…" he whispered, reaching out to pat his head. "Thanks, boy. You're a life saver."

Feeling that affectionate licks weren't enough, Koromaru jumped on the couch and snuggled beside Souji, placing his head on his chest. The warmth radiating from the canine was a comfort like nothing else. The cold sweat was gone, replaced by a feeling of security. Souji hugged him, his fears slowly dissipating. He wasn't much of a dog person and mostly hung out with cats, but at that moment, he felt closer to Koromaru.

_Thou art I… And I am thou…_
_Thou hast created a new bond…_
_It brings thee closer to the truth…_
_Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Strenth Arcana._

His head no longer hurt. "Thank you, Koromaru. You really are a man's best friend." Both fell into a peaceful slumber.

And that was how Dojima, Nanako, and the Arisato twins who came take Koromaru home, found the two. The chibi foxes were sleeping in a doggy pile under the coffee table. The picture Minako took with her phone became her new favorite wallpaper.

_Yasogami High, after school…_

Teddie escaped his clutches yet again. As Yosuke inspected each corridor, looking for his idiotic and lazy Junes mascot all over school to drag his sorry ass to work and supervise his punishment, the music playing from the practice building caught his attention. Forgetting about the annoying bear for a second, he decided to go and check it out. As he got closer, the sweet music grew louder. It wasn't playing any song that he knew, but he liked the upbeat rhythm nonetheless. Opening the door carefully, he took a peek inside the room, curious to find out who was diligent enough to practice at school without the other music club members.

"Yosuke-senpai? What are you doing over there?"

Said senpai gave a startled squeak, almost falling to the ground because the shock messed with his footing. Quickly regaining his composure, he turned around to find Rise staring up at him with a scowl on her face, hands on her hips. 'Uh-oh, she's in a bad mood."

"Have you seen Teddie anywhere?" Rise demanded. "He stole some of my magazines from my desk, which happens to have a limited edition poster of my role model. Do you know how hard it is to get one of those?!"

"I'm looking for him myself. I was actually going to take it easy on him today, but after pulling off this stunt, he just dug his own grave," Yosuke answered sourly.

"Anyway, if you see him, give him a good smack! I'll personally deal with him tomorrow!" The pop-star turned away and walked off in a huff.
The door to the music room opened, revealing Minato Arisato, holding up a violin. "Yosuke? I thought I heard a commotion. What are you doing here?"

He sighed again. "Have you guys seen Teddie? It's his punishment day, but I can't seem to find him anywhere." He rubbed his temples in frustration. "Urrghhh, screw that bear! I need a goddamn break. Dad's been on my case since the semester started and-" The sounds of piano-playing snapped him out of his rambling trance. "Hey, is that Minako-san?"

Minato opened the door wider to invite him in. "Yeah, that's her. We stopped by to take a short break, then we'll be heading off to the shopping district for some food before tackling that project Yamada-sensei handed out."

"Oh, it's Yosuke-kun," Minako greeted, standing up from her piano seat to wave at him.

Yosuke waved back. "Hey, I couldn't help but notice you guys playing when I walked past here. Where's Souji?"

"He said something about leaving early to rest at home. Shinjiro-senpai even gave him the evil eye before leaving for work," Minato answered. He gently placed the violin back in its casing before picking up a bass, plucking the thick strings and producing the weirdest vibrations Yosuke had ever heard, fascinated by the way his nimble fingers manipulated the strings.

"Hey, that's a cool trick there. I didn't know you could play one of those without the stick thing," he said.

"That's called a fiddlestick, Yosuke-kun. All stringed instruments work on the same principle. It's the size and the craftsmanship that influences how it'll sound," Minako answered. "Souji-kun told me you taught him how to play the guitar. That's really neat."

Yosuke's cheeks heated up. "He told you that, huh? It was actually a bass. And I'm not that good anyway…"

"You sell yourself short, Yosuke," Minato reprimanded, slapping the bass strings lightly to silence it. "What about that concert you guys did with Rise? If it hadn't been for your quick thinking, your dad would've been fired, correct? You handle yourself pretty well as one of the brains of the team if I say so myself."

The heated cheeks turned into a dark blush. "Th-thanks, guys. It's always nice to hear that…"

Minako smiled at him. "Aniki's right, you should give yourself more credit. In fact, if it wasn't for you, the Investigation Team wouldn't have existed, you know? Souji-kun told us all about it. It was you who initially brought up the connection between the murders and the Midnight Channel, and prompted the investigation. I'm pretty sure Souji-kun would have figured it out in due time, but by then Yukiko-chan would have been dead."

Minato approached the manager's son, expression gentle as he held out a hand for a handshake. "I never got the chance before, so I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart. You've always had his back, in battle and in life. Thank you for protecting him."

"Souji-kun is who he is now, because of you guys." Minako clasped her hands around her brother's and Yosuke's handshake. "Thank you Yosuke-kun, for starting everything. Call it 'fate' or 'the bigger picture' but…if Souji-kun wasn't involved in the murders, and didn't have your support, we might have never gotten another chance to see him again."

Yosuke was stunned. He never thought of it like that before. His heart swelled with emotion,
knowing that he was a part of something that could change the universe, surrounded by people who genuinely cared. Suddenly, all the hardships caused by his Junes connection felt like nothing. "Souji...he's my best friend. He understands me more than I do. Of course I'll protect him in any way I can."

The mutual understanding they shared triggered the mysterious voice only the twins could hear.

\[ \text{Thou art I... And I am thou...} \]
\[ \text{Thou hast established a new bond...} \]
\[ \text{Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Magician Arcana.} \]

"So, you guys need a drummer?" Yosuke asked, rubbing his palms together. He took a seat at the drum set. "After seeing Kanji play last year, I started learning it myself. It has more attitude compared to an electric guitar, if you get what I mean," he grinned. "Just...don't tell him that..."

The three spent the next hour talking about music and testing out some tunes before leaving school.

"Honestly, Miss Kirijo, I can't see what benefit will come from this proposal of yours."

Mitsuru held back a frustrated sigh. Business meetings via video conference was never a pleasant duty for the Kirijo heiress, but this time, it was worse than usual. A majority of whom joined the meeting were her father's business partners, but the ones that gave her the most trouble were her late grandfather's.

"Gentlemen, I've already explained this to you many times. Sponsoring a school is highly beneficial to any company," Mitsuru explained again, slowly as not to lose her already thinning temper. "Not only does it improve our image, it is also a tremendous help for future generations."

"That much I agree with you, Miss Kirijo. But sponsoring a school in Yasoinaba? Why choose such a backwater place like that?"

"It is true that Inaba is a small town, but I can assure you its people hold incredible amounts of potential, especially the students from Yasogami High. Our duty is to help them fully reach it."

"What potential could a bunch of hillbillies like them possibly have? I mean, sponsoring Port Island's Gekkoukan High like your late father did is one thing, but this? This is a waste of our resources and time!"

"If we really must sponsor a school, why don't we choose a private one, like the one my grandchild attends? Clearly that'll attract more attention from possible investors and future partners than any third class public school."

The red-head was losing her patience. "That kind of stuck-up attitude won't help our companies' images, sirs. It never worked and never will!"

"So stubborn... Just like your foolish father..."

That was the one thing Mitsuru never tolerated. "What did you say?!"

"Why care so much about second-rate people when you can surround yourself with the best society has to offer? And yet you prefer to spend your time with those lowlifes from your high school days. If it wasn't for inheritance, you'd never be the head of such an important company!"
That was the last straw. Ice crystals formed at the edge of the giant screen Mitsuru was facing. "Now listen here! You may question my decisions, or any actions that I take on behalf of the company, but if you ever **dare** disrespect my father's memory or my friends in my presence, I can guarantee that your ties with the Kirijo Group will be permanently severed and that none of your companies will have an easy life!"

The conglomerate higher ups shuddered at her display of anger and quickly logged off.

"Ugh, why must some people be so aggravating?!" Mitsuru fumed as she turned off her computer. A knock on the door was heard. "What is it?!" she snapped.

"Mitsuru-san? It's me, Metis." The android slowly opened the door, having sensed Mitsuru's sour mood shown by her vital signs. She came with some papers. "My sister asked me to deliver the papers you required earlier…"

Mitsuru took a deep breath. She had forgotten she asked Metis and Aigis to be her assistants. "Thank you, Metis, I'll go over them later." She took the papers, placing them neatly on her desk. "Tell the others I'll be leaving for a while, and that I do not want to be disturbed."

"Of course, Mitsuru-san." Metis left the room.

Mitsuru ruffled her hair, exhaling long and slow. "I need some fresh air…"

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Rise stomped her way to the shopping district, her mood darkening even after she left school. A bunch of different ideas swarmed her thoughts on how to punish Teddie for stealing her precious magazines, each one more painful than the last. 'It'll make Senpai's punishment a piece of cake compared to what I'm gonna do to him!' she thought darkly.

When she got to the tofu shop, her grandmother was already at the front, arranging items to sell out on display. "Had a good day at school, Rise dear?" she asked sweetly.

"You can say that," Rise huffed, careful to watch her language and mannerisms.

Her grandmother didn't miss the anger in her puffed-up cheeks. "Why don't you take the day off, dear? You don't seem to be in the best of moods. Besides, business is rather slow today so I think I can handle things by myself."

"Are you sure, Grandma? Don't we still have that huge order from the Amagi Inn to take of?"

"I can get everything prepared before we work on it tomorrow. They insisted that it must be freshly-made this time," the old woman assured.

"Okay, if that's what you think is best."

"Oh, before you go off and play with your friends, please take some of this stuffed tofu for our new neighbors." She handed her granddaughter a container wrapped in one of her best furoshiki.

'Wow, Grandma must really want to impress them,' Rise thought, stroking the soft, silk-textured cotton. It had soft blue background, patterned with intricate weaves of green bamboo and their leaves with splashes of yellow, brown and silver. An imaginary light bulb flashed above her head. 'I wonder if Labrys-senpai is there? I haven't had a chance to meet her because that idiot bear keeps getting me in trouble.' Putting on her shoes again, Rise waved to her grandmother before taking her leave.
The new antique store was located just two shops away from the Konishi's, a strategic place to catch the eyes of people in cars going to and fro on the main road, or people waiting at the bus stop. Kanji never mentioned running into her or stopping by the shop to get a closer look. His house is even closer to it than mine! I know, he probably didn't tell me anything on purpose to throw me off or something. He can be so selfish...!" She continued her monologue grumbling until she reached the front door of the antique shop.

As Rise pushed the door open, the smell of coffee and cinnamon with a light whiff of incense hit her nose. The sound of ornate wind chimes placed above the door greeted her ears. In the back of her mind, Kanzeon started to hum, tingling her senses. The tinkle of the chimes rang softly through the air. "Hello...?" she called, eyes scanning around. Finding no one, she decided to look around.

The place was filled to the brim with stuff that interested her and a few which creeped her out – particularly a scroll painting of an old man whose eyes seemed to follow her wherever she went. The shuffling of stringed beads acting as a curtain and barrier to the back room alerted the scanner of another presence. Turning around, she saw the girl who just transferred to her school carrying a saber encrusted with semi-precious stones and intricate carvings, gently placing it in a glass display. The polished silver seeming to entice people who would look at it to contemplate its purchase. The girl with sea-blue hair and red eyes noticed Rise's reflection on the glass and looked up, an easy-going smiled readily on her lips. "Welcome to Shinshudo Antiques. How can I help ya?"

Rise couldn't help but notice that her dialect was different from the rest of the townsfolk. "Wow, nice Kansai accent. I didn't know you were from way over there, Labrys-senpai."

"Huh?" Labrys blinked. "Oh... I guess you can say that." She turned her gaze to Rise's uniform. "So we go to the same school, huh? What's your name?"

"Oh, where are my manners. My name's Rise Kujikawa and I'm a junior. My family runs the tofu shop just down the street. So we're actually neighbors!"

Labrys smiled, wider this time. "Glad to know. There ain't girls my age around here. It gets lonely, y'know?"

"I know, right?!"

From there onwards, the girls started to chat excitedly, ranging topics from the other neighbors to school. So distracted they were, none of them noticed the owner of the shop just came back with bags of groceries. "Aren't you that girl from the other day, along with another girl and a tall boy?" the older woman asked sharply, startling the teenagers.

"Momma, you're back!" Labrys greeted.

'Momma' raised an eyebrow at Rise. "Who's this, Labrys?"

"This is Rise-san. Her family runs the tofu joint down the street. She was just comin' in for a look-see." Labrys took the groceries and lifted them in one go, which Rise noticed, was a lot.

'She's really strong...' the scanner noted. Turning back to the woman, she introduced herself again. "Hi, I'm Rise Kujikawa. It's a pleasure to meet you." She gave a small bow. "Oh, I almost forgot about this. Here!" She handed over the cloth-wrapped container. "My grandma made this for you as a welcoming gift. It's her famous stuffed fried tofu, a family recipe."

The older woman's face softened. "That's very nice of her. Thank you, my daughter and I will most
definitely enjoy this for dinner."

"Enjoy what, Momma?" Labrys asked as she returned from the back. She still wore her grey cardigan.

'Isn't she hot in that?' Rise wondered. Her phone suddenly vibrated, indicating a text just came in. Her smile turned upside-down after reading the screen. "Aww man, how did Naoto know that I'm off from work early? Now she wants to advance our study session. Grandma must have told her!" she whined.

"That does sound important. I guess I'll be seeing ya at school tomorrow then," Labrys said, extending a handshake.

"Yeah. If I'm late, I'll never hear the end of it," Rise sighed, and shook hands. A cold jolt ran across her skin, causing goosebumps. 'Her hand... it's hard. And cold too...' She ignored the humming from her Persona as she made her way out of the shop, waving and smiling at her new friend.

The woman narrowed her eyes at Rise as her daughter waved back, the girl unaware of what was going through her mother's mind.

Mitsuru tore down the streets on her motorcycle, the engine roaring loudly, as if providing an outlet for her frustrations. 'Those arrogant miscreants... the nerve of them! Badmouthing Father and my friends like that!' she all but screamed. 'Who do they think they are? All they care for are their social statuses and company profits!' Her professional and high-class upbringing prevented her from swearing. So distracted was her state that she barely noticed the red traffic light. 'If they ever dare to repeat those words again, I'll – !'

Her thoughts were cut short by a startled shout. "Hey, look out!"

Mitsuru gasped and made a sharp turn, barely avoiding running over a passerby crossing the street. The motorcycle skidded and stopped, its rider trying to balance herself and the vehicle from toppling over. "My goodness... That was a close call!" she murmured, trying to calm her racing heart.

"Mitsuru-san?" A familiar voice called out to her. "Are you okay?"

Blinking the shock out of her system, the heiress turned her gaze to find out the person she almost ran over was Souji. "S-Seta? I'm so sorry! I wasn't paying attention and I-!"

"Hey, hey. Calm down. It's okay!" Souji raised his hands as if surrendering, trying to ease the situation.

Having regained the right state of mind, Mitsuru turned off the engine and balanced the motorcycle on its stand by the side of the road. "You should be more worried about yourself. I almost run you over and you're asking me if I'm alright." She gave him a small smile for his concern.

Souji picked up the plastic bag containing the milk and bread he bought earlier. He just returned from school, deciding to take Shinjiro's advice a bit seriously this time. "I wasn't paying attention when I crossed the street either, so I'm to blame as well." He observed how her forehead creased, dark brown eyes tense. She looked like she was thinking too hard about something. "Did something happen?"

Mitsuru hesitated before answering "It's... It's just some business issues. Nothing that concerns you."
The silverette crossed his arms, raising an unconvinced eyebrow. Instead of bugging her for an answer, he decided to change the subject. "Nice bike…” He took a good look at the motorcycle, impressed by the shape and design; most likely custom-made given her wealthy background. "Would you like to go for a ride with me? I find that a calming scenery is often needed when I'm stressed out."

"A ride? But-"

"Don't worry. I have a riding license and the old scooter my uncle gave me should still be good to go. So, what kind of place do you find calming, Mitsuru-san?"

"Well, I suppose a ride to somewhere else would be a nice change of pace…” Although a bit hesitant since she never had a partner to partake such activities with, Mitsuru's smile widened as she closed her eyes. "The ocean… I always found it to be soothing."

"Then I know just the place. My house is not that far from here. Let's go."

Curious about Souji's intentions, she followed him to his house. She was surprised to see his scooter; a rather old but classic model which wasn't manufactured anymore, still in wonderful condition despite its age. She had to admit, both Dojima and his nephew had good taste.

In no time, they were on the road. Mitsuru was amazed by the serene countryside. The lush forests and fresh air were working its magic on her already. After maneuvering the twisted roads, they finally arrived at Shichiri beach. The sun was still shining brightly, the sea glistening in its entire splendor. A gentle breeze blew by, toning down the heat.

"What a beautiful view…” Mitsuru and Souji stood at the pier watching the sea. "I had no idea such a place existed so close to Inaba."

"This is Shichiri beach. My friends and I came here last year during summer vacation," Souji started. "It was really fun…until Teddie decided to pull off his 'wardrobe malfunction' plan…” His enthusiasm withered at that.

Mitsuru raised an eyebrow, her curiosity piqued. "Wardrobe malfunction?"

"You see, Teddie thought it would be a good idea to 'accidentally' untie and remove the girls' swimsuits…"

The heiress facepalmed. "Why am I not surprised at such behavior coming from that bear?"

"Yeah, but the worst was yet to come. While he was underwater, Teddie confused Kanji with a girl. How? I think it was because he was wearing a speedo. Anyway, Kanji caught him red-handed and dragged him to the beach only for Yosuke and me to realize he had lost his swimsuit in the confusion."

She blushed at that piece of information. "And Akihiko still complains why I'm so adamant on him wearing decent swimwear…"

"The girls were coming out of the water and we knew we'd be in trouble if they saw him like that, so we had to think fast. Luckily, Yosuke was quick to find some seaweed and we used that to cover him up, though barely…" Souji could no longer contain his laughter as he recalled the memory. "They totally freaked out! Luckily, we managed to recover Kanji's swimsuit, so the whole outing turned out okay."

As he finished telling his tale, the Kirijo heiress began laughing loudly, having trouble keeping her
composure. To Souji, it was a refreshing sight to see. Then out of the blue, her expression turned serious, a faint blush tainted her cheeks. "What if that happens to Akihiko one day?" she mused out loud.

Souji sweatdropped, but smiled when he sensed that she had calmed down. "Glad to see you're not so tense anymore," he chided her lightly. "Now, care to tell me what's bothering you?"

Mitsuru sighed, knowing that tone. It was the same one the twins used whenever they wanted her or anyone else in SEES to open up to them. "There are some... people... making things difficult for me and my representation of the Kirijo Group. I'll convince them that it is a wise decision, though... eventually..." she finished, though not sounding confident.

Knowing better than prying over such a topic, the silverette nodded. They remained silent for a few minutes, the tension slowly creeping back. It was up to him to defuse it. "Mitsuru-san would you like to see a magic trick?"

She blinked at the sudden question that was completely off topic. "A magic trick?"

He pulled out a medium-sized coin. "See this coin?" At her nod, Souji twirled it between his fingers to show the coin was there. With a flick of a hand, he opened up his palm and it suddenly vanished. "Now you don't."

"What on earth..? Where did it go?!"

"I'll show you." He reached out to her, and pulled something from behind her ear. "Ta-da!"

"What? How? Where?!" She was at a loss of words. "How did you do that?"

"A magician never reveals his tricks. That would ruin the mystique." Souji pocketed the coin, a smirk on his face.

"Magic, you say?" Mitsuru smiled. Her sheltered upbringing didn't allow her to experience the joys of watching magic tricks. "Well, I'm sure there is a logic explanation for this. Please Seta, repeat that trick again."

Souji did so, but no matter how carefully Mitsuru watched his moves, she couldn't figure out how he did it. The silverette didn't mind repeating the trick a few times so she could try and solve it, but remained clueless about its workings. Despite that, she was enjoying his company so much neither noticed time passing by.

Only when the sky turned a reddish hue did they finally take notice. "Look at the time," Souji said, glancing at his wristwatch.

Mitsuru gasped when she suddenly recalled something. "We should return. I left in such haste that I forgot my cell phone. The others might be wondering where I am."

"Don't worry. I'm sure they know you can take care of yourself pretty well." He pocketed the coin for the last time. "Shall we head back?"

It was almost sunset when they finally reached the dorm. As they stood by the front gates, Mitsuru let out a tired but satisfying sigh, a small smile on her lips. "Thank you so much for showing me the beach, Seta. I really needed that." She held out her hand for a handshake.

"It was a pleasure, Mitsuru-san." Souji returned the gesture. "Whenever you want to ride together again, give me a call. I know some other great spots, and it's always more fun with company."
"That would be wonderful." Mitsuru's face brightened up. "I didn't expect to find a fellow motorcycle enthusiast here. It's wonderful to share it with someone else."

As they shook hands, Souji felt a familiar sensation as the mysterious voice echoed in his head.

\[
\text{Thou art I... And I am thou,} \\
\text{Thou hast created a new bond...} \\
\text{It brings thee closer to the truth...} \\
\text{Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Empress Arcana.}
\]

He headed back home, humming an upbeat tune as the sun began to set.

\begin{center}
\textit{Shopping District...}
\end{center}

The Arisato twins were wandering around the shopping district after school. They stopped in front of the billboard, where certain job ads caught their attention.

"So this is the billboard Banchou-kun was talking about." Minato said, eyes browsing the headlines. "Hmm... Let's see..."

\begin{center}
\textbf{Newspaper Delivery Person Needed!} \\
\textbf{Looking For Gas Station Attendants!} \\
\textbf{Help wanted! Daycare centre looking for assistants with the ability and patience to care for and handle children between 3-11 years of age.}
\end{center}

Minako ripped off the last one. "Aniki, check this out. They're hiring people to work at the daycare centre on the hill Banchou-kun took us to that day. They need help with kindergarten and elementary school kids. This is perfect for us!"

"I agree. Remind me to tell Banchou-kun about this when we get the chance. He'll be happy to know about it."

She nodded. The siblings decided to explore more, and made a stop in front of Tatsumi Textiles. "Why don't we check out what Kanji-kun has for sale? I bet it's really cute!"

"I don't see why not. We didn't get a chance to look at more of the stuff there last time."

Once they entered the threshold, Kanji appeared from the back and began to arrange an armful of dolls on the display shelf. All of them were stuffed animals wearing various types of costumes, from Victorian era dresses to modern occupation uniforms.

"Oh my gosh, Kanji-kun! Those are the cutest things ever!" Minako squealed, rushing over to the display with hearts in her eyes.

"Whoaaaah!" The junior-year student all but threw the remaining dolls in the air, startled out of his skin. "Damnit Senpai, don't scare me like that! Rise's squeals are bad enough!"

"Sorry~!" Minako giggled then turned to her brother. "Rise-chan is right. Messing with him is so much fun!"

Minato sweatdropped. "Excuse my sister for her poor behavior." She stuck out her tongue at him playfully. "That said, I agree with her." He picked up a stuffed tiger dressed as a samurai. "These
dolls are fantastic, Kanji. You designed and crafted all of them?"

"You mean all these? Yup, just finished the last batch!" Kanji beamed with pride. "They sell out so fast that I need to make loads of 'em. It's really fun, though."

"Man, I wish I can make something like this…" Minako sighed, petting a bunny doll dressed like an angel. "I actually want to make Shinji a new set of oven mitts, but I don't know how."

"I know what you mean…" her twin lamented. "I'd love to give Yukari a handmade present. The hard part would be deciding what to give her. Something like this is pretty neat though."

"You can always learn, y'know," Kanji interjected, cheeks turning pink. "I-I mean, you guys already have some basic sewing skills, so learning how to make dolls and other stuff wouldn't be that hard. Didn't you tell me you worked on a kimono once? Making stuff like this should be a piece of cake for you guys."

Minako grinned mischievously at him. "Kanji-kun, are you inviting us to your sewing classes? Because if you are…" She noticed her underclassman holding his breath, adam's apple bobbing up and down nervously. "Then I'd love to learn from the best!"

The former delinquent almost fell over at the change in attitude, berrating himself that he fell for her prank. He tried his best to hide his embarassment. "H-hell yeah! After all, if ya gotta do something, might as well give it all you've got!"

"Can't argue with that," Minato chuckled. "Our schedules are a bit crazy, but I'm sure we can find some time for sewing lessons."

"Alright! When I'm done with you two, you'll be pros!"

"Yosh!" Minako cheered, catching his enthusiasm.

As the two of them talked about when the classes would be held, Minato browsed more of the doll displays. On top of the tallest shelf, his eyes caught sight of something he thought he recognized. He plucked it from its perch. "This…" It was a stuffed pink alligator.

Minako turned her attention to him and noticed the doll in his arms. Her eyes widened. "That…that looks just like-"

"Oh, the pink alligator," Kanji said. "That's the most popular dolls with kids and housewives, probably because of that famous storybook."

The twins stared at each other, shocked and confused. "Storybook…?" they said in unison. "May we see it?"

Not sure what to think of it, Kanji simply nodded and disappeared up to his room to fetch the item. He returned with a colorful book. A whimsical picture of a pink alligator and a small bird was on the cover. "Here ya go. Dunno what got you guys so worked up… I mean, it's a neat story and all, but it's just a kid's book."

They snatched it from his hands and quickly flipped through the pages. Halfway, tears welled up in their eyes.

"It is his work…" Minato whispered in awe.

"Akinari-kun…" His sister closed her eyes, twin streaks of tears running down her cheeks.
"S-Senpai?" Kanji began to panic when Minato shed a tear as well. "I-I... I'm so-soory! I didn't mean it... I...!" He started blubbering apologies and nonsense.

Minako interrupted him. "Kanji-kun... It's not your fault..." She gave him a watery smile. "It's just that...this book brought back memories..."

"This story's author..." Minato said quietly. "He was our friend..."

"Say what?"

"His name was Akinari Kamiki," Minako started. "He was really intelligent and loved books. When we first met him, Akinari-kun was a rather depressed guy."

'Was?' Kanji thought. 'Are they saying...'

"You see, Akinari-kun was born with a rare, incurable and life-threatening genetic disease. And because of that, he wasn't expected to live long," Minato continued.

Minako nodded sadly. "Under such circumstances, you can't blame him for having a rather bleak outlook on life. And it was no surprise he had a bit of trouble relating to normal, healthy people."

"But that story...it started out happy, then it got sad. B-but it had a happy ending..." Kanji muttered. He remembered crying after reading the story for the first time. His mother even cried with him after he read it to her. She said it reminded her of her late husband; his dad who passed away from illness.

"To lose a precious friend, yet at the same time to learn that our existence in this world is never for naught," the blunette said. "That's the last story he wrote before passing away."

"Even if his time was short, he learned that life is always worth living to its fullest, and he was grateful to his mother for giving birth to him and taking care of him. His mother expressed the same thing." Minako smiled at the memory of their first and final meeting. "And it was that understanding that ultimately drove him to end it on a happy note."

"I think... I think I can relate to Kamiki-san," Kanji said. "Ma always looked out for me, especially after Dad passed away. When he died, I took it really hard. Even now, she's always bailing me out whenever I get in trouble. I worry her so much she's got way more white hairs than she should..."

The twins were snapped out of their thoughts at his confession. The former delinquent paid no mind to them as he continued his musings. "Ma's getting old and her health ain't that good anymore. I gotta take care of her. If I don't, then who will?"

Minako touched his arm, breaking him from his thoughts. "You don't have to do it all on your own, you know."

Kanji turned to them, surprised that they were smiling warmly at him. "Losing a parent when you were young is always hard, because you're suddenly thrust with more responsibilities than you should," Minato said.

"It's not easy and it's painful, but you're never alone. There will always be someone who understands the same pain you went through," Minako added. "Me and Aniki, Souji-kun, Yukari-chan, Ken-kun, Mitsuru-senpai..." A tiny, mischievous grin tugged at her lips. "Naoto-chan..."

At Kanji's faint blush, Minato smiled a little. "We all need a helping hand every now and then. There's nothing to be ashamed about asking for help."
"When you're ready, come talk to us. We'll be more than happy to hear you out."

"Senpai..." The junior sniffed, trying to control his tear ducts. "You guys really are the best. Just like Souji-senpai said you are." Once again, he was strongly reminded of how similar they were to the upperclassman that he admired most. He hugged the book closely to his chest.

They could feel the bond they shared being forged through the related understanding of lost, manifesting into power.

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Thou art I... And I am thou...
Thou hast established a new bond...
Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Emperor Arcana.
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Yukari drummed her fingers on her desk, staring at the email on her laptop screen for almost half an hour. Her delicate brows furrowed in stress, thinking about the message's contents. According to her lecturer back in Iwatodai, the latest assignment was for her to design and create an autumn collection, along with a mock proposal on marketing said collection. It was easy enough, but the only problem was that she needed to have it completed in a short period of time, and the finished product must be delivered to the teacher's doorstep two weeks after submitting the proposal. Thanks to her secret Shadow-fighting activities, Yukari was having designer's block.

Deciding that asking for help would save time than trying to solve the problem herself, she marched out of the dorm with her handbag and plastic folder in tow. 'I should probably consult with Rise-chan. I can't ask for Minako-chan's help this time, or Minato-kun's for that matter. They're busy with their own thing. Maybe Rise-chan might have some ideas... I mean, she's a pop idol! Or maybe Kanji-kun! This should be interesting.'

Once she arrived at the shopping district, the first detour Yukari made was to Tatsuhime Shrine, having remembered that she needed to get herself a protective charm. The amount of stress it was causing her thanks to the ghost apparitions that appeared the day they cleaned their dorm, was enough to give her a nervous breakdown. It wasn't that she didn't trust her friends to help her out; sometimes relying on superstition helped with her peace of mind. As she ascended the stairs, Yukari's thoughts took her back to when she and her mother lived in Kyoto. The ancient city capital was filled with superstitious beliefs, having heard most of them while she grew up, could be the main reason for her phobia.

She purchased a protective charm from the priest on duty. Deciding that her luck might improve if she was more generous, the healer threw some money into the offertory box, rang the shrine bell, clapped her hands together, and prayed. 'Dear Kami-sama, please protect me and my friends from ghosts and spirits wishing to harm us.' She ended it with 'Let me ace this assignment and make it through college in one piece!'

Nothing prepared her heart when someone suddenly tapped her shoulder.

"KYAAAAA!!"

"Whoa! Yukari-san, calm down! It's me."

"Souji-kun..." she gasped, grasping her chest. All of a sudden, her eyes narrowed dangerously and she slapped his shoulder. "Don't ever do that again!"

Souji sheepishly rubbed the back of his head, a small glint of amusement in his eyes. "I'm sorry! I didn't know you'd react that way." He saw the protective charm in her hand and pointed to it.
"You're here for that?"

Embarrassed, Yukari blushed. "Y-y-yeah! What's it to you?"

"To be honest with you, I don't believe in that stuff. But they do make pretty effective accessories with the armors when fighting Shadows." He added the last part as an afterthought.

The healer huffed, but her anger simmered down. "I used to live in Kyoto, if you must know. Charms were pretty much a part of daily life. I guess it never left me."

"Did those ghost lights appear at the dorm again?"

"N-no, not since that day we cleaned it up, but it still scares me," Yukari confessed. "Junpei thought I was being silly and teased me about it all day. Thank goodness Minato-kun shut him up for me. I had to secretly sleep in Minako-chan's room for a week and— " She blushed at her straightforwardness. "F-forget I said that!"

Souji found it strange for someone who dealt with Shadows on a constant basis to be scared of the supernatural. Then again, Chie and Naoto were no better. "Don't worry, I won't tell a soul. Your secret is safe with me."

"Thank you." Yukari sighed in relief. She couldn't believe that she blurted her secret out so easily to a guy other than her boyfriend. Perhaps this was another special trait of the Wild Cards; they could easily persuade people to tell them anything without even trying. A bird tweeting in the distance reminded the two that they were alone. The memories of her childhood in Kyoto lingered, including the reason why she moved there in the first place. "Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"What... what was your dad like?"

Souji's eyes widened in surprise. His friends avoided asking him questions related to his parents. Even Dojima dodged that topic until he had more conclusive evidence that they were still out there. Despite his tumultuous emotions, Souji wasn't offended. 'Perhaps talking about it will help ease my mind,' he thought. 'After all, Yukari-san grew up most of her life without one. Must be tough...'

"I remember he wasn't always around when I was a kid, because of his and my mom's job. Even so, my parents always made it up to me by celebrating important events with the twins and their family, or even something simple like a bedtime story. Actually, only my mom did that. Dad played music for me. His favorite has always been slow jazz. I guess I admired him for that, which is why I took up playing the trumpet as my first instrument. Sometimes we would watch samurai or yakuza movies together. Mom often got mad at him because of it, especially whenever I tried to imitate the moves from TV." Souji held an imaginary sword in his hands, mimicking a slashing action. "After the twins' parents died, they took it really hard. We moved around a lot after that, because my parents were taking up projects all over Japan. I felt ignored and lost, because they weren't around anymore. Even when they were distant, I always felt their warm presence. After the accident, I couldn't sense anything at all. Dad even stopped playing music..."

Yukari remained silent. 'So he's not that different from me.'

"It was after I got back from Inaba, that I noticed a huge change. They looked...happy. I haven't seen them like that for a very long time. And I thought I was the only one who changed," Souji continued, smiling at the bright sky. "They were more open...warm. It wasn't awkward talking to them anymore. I felt like... like I could be myself around them. Dad started playing jazz again.
was the one who taught me how to play the saxophone."

"I can sort of relate to that," Yukari said. "After we lost my dad, my mom was in depression for a long time. It didn't help that the public ridiculed us, thinking that the explosion on Port Island was Dad's fault. We even moved around, too. It put a strain on our relationship. When she started dating again, I got so angry at her because I thought she wanted to forget about Dad. After enduring her many failed relationships, I couldn't live with her anymore and moved back to Iwatodai. I've been living in dorms ever since. Meeting Minato-kun and Minako-chan made me realize that I'm not the only one who's sad. My mom must have been terribly lonely, because she loved Dad too. That's why I decided to reconcile with her. We're still working on it though, but we're improving."

"That's good to hear," Souji said. "I still haven't given up hope that my parents are still alive, but it's a relief to talk about them. Avoiding the subject will only make the pain worse, and I never want to forget about them. Thank you, Yukari-san."

"Same here. If you ever need to talk again, you know where to find me." The brunette and silverette exchanged smiles, a bond of trust forming between them.

Thou art I... And I am thou...
Thou hast created a new bond...
It brings thee closer to the truth...
Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Lovers Arcana.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go and see Rise-chan or Kanji-kun to see if they can help me with my assignment."

"Out of curiosity, what major are you taking?" Souji asked.

"Fashion design. I hope to be a designer one day and create my own line."

"Does it have anything to do with Aniki's photography skills, now that you guys can work hand-in-hand as a couple?" the silverette teased.

Yukari squeaked and headed for the stairs. "I'm not answering that!"

Souji chuckled before catching up with her.
The Clash of Anti-Shadow Weapons

It wasn't every year that a school out in the boonies received transfer students; but the probability of six students in a single semester was next to zero. They stood out amongst the rest of the student body, just like Souji did when he first arrived back in April 2011. Three weeks had passed, but they were still garnering a lot of attention from the other students.

The relationship between Souji and the twins was obvious enough, although rumors did tend to fly when either brother was alone with Minako, mostly caused by the confusion that both males didn't resemble the auburn-haired cutie whatsoever. Heck, they even thought that Minato and Kou were long-lost brothers having been separated since childhood, given Kou's adoption history. Having dealt with this type of situation before, the trio just left the rumors alone to let it die a natural death. The rest of Souji's friends also did a pretty good job of spreading the word that he and Yukiko were dating, just so that creepy guys would leave the future inn manager alone.

Shinjiro had better luck of keeping people away from him. A death glare here and a threatening growl there was enough to warn others that he wasn't one to be trifled with. There was one downside to this tactic, and that was the spreading of rumors about him being a relative of Kanji Tatsumi, which annoyed the both of them to no end.

Labrys on the other hand, was no longer the shy girl the transfer students met in the office. Having joined the student council, her confidence blossomed. She could make friends with others easily, yet gain respect at the same time. She could be seen all over the school grounds, scolding boys who were breaking the rules or greeting girls during her 'patrols'. She reminded them of Mitsuru, only less scary.

In a nutshell, school life was normal. Homework was a pain and tests even more so. The teachers talked too much and whined occasionally about their lives, namely Kashiwagi, often taking it out on the class. Completely normal.

The gang always looked forward to having lunch together. And it was nice to have someplace else to escape to after school, even if it was a part-time job or fighting Shadows.

Rumors didn't just spread in schools. Even in town, people's tongues wagged; the focal point being the supernatural sightings, strange occurrences, and the new addition of town - the dorm. It just so happened that Yukari and Fuuka were returning from Okina one day, passing by Souzai Daigoku and housewives gossiping amongst themselves. The two girls caught on some of their conversation.

"My son told me about the new transfer students in his school. City kids by the looks of it, just like Detective Dojima's boy," one of them said. She wore a yellow apron.

"That's old news. According to my daughter, they're staying at that so-called dorm. And get this… it's co-ed. And they're sharing it with a few college kids," another woman in a red apron chipped in.

Her friends gasped, scandalized. "Why would they build such a thing…doesn't the mayor know about this?!"

"Haven't you heard? The building that dorm is occupying used to be the haunted mansion on the side of the hill."

"Maybe that's why the real estate office was so eager to do something about it. I heard my husband
mentioning about that house being unable to sell for decades!"

"Oh, I remember back in my high school days when the boys would go to that awful place and test their courage during the summer. Why, one of my husband's friends…"

And from there the topic steered another way. Fuuka had to drag Yukari away before she could barge in on their conversation demanding to know more about the ghosts. As they got further away, sure enough, the pink-clad girl was shaking. "Now now Yukari-chan, don't listen to them. It's just a silly little rumor being passed down for a long time. You know how it is with the countryside," the petite scanner consoled her friend. "Besides, after you got that talisman, we haven't experienced something like that since it happened."

"Fuuka, you don't understand. It's happening all over town now. It's only a matter of time before whatever the hell's going on out there reaches us!"

"You don't know that. If anything weird is going on, don't you think I'd have been able to sense it by now? Besides, Kanji-kun, Yukiko-chan and Chie-chan never mentioned anything like that to us, and they've lived here their whole lives."

Yukari went silent. Never had she doubted Fuuka's scanning abilities, but all this talk about ghosts was spooking her out. "You're...y-you're right. It's just a s-silly urban legend being passed down from one person to another. Some of the facts got twisted along the way."

"That's right," Fuuka said. "Remember what happened to me back in school? People just assumed I died because they didn't know what was really going on behind the scenes."

"Thanks Fuuka. I feel a little better," Yukari sighed. "Mind coming with me to Junes? Minako-chan needs some groceries to make dinner. I'd hate to run into Teddie and he starts following me all over the place."

"Sure, let's go."

**Meanwhile, at the Dorm…**

Mitsuru was walking along the halls of the boy's floor, and knocked on a door. She heard a grunt, indicating the occupant was inside. "Akihiko, may I have a word with you?" She waited patiently for him to come out.

The handsome former boxer opened the door. His thin cotton shirt was drenched in sweat, a towel thrown over his neck. He must have been training.

Mitsuru resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "I need to talk to you about something. I'll be waiting in the meeting room." She walked off without another word.

Akihiko raised an eyebrow. She hadn't used that crisp tone on him since they graduated. Whatever it was, it sounded important. He quickly changed into dry clothes and made his way downstairs. He found his girlfriend already seated, in front of her on the table was a laptop and some papers. "You wanted to see me?"

"Ah, yes. Please have a seat." She gestured to the chair opposite to her.

'I wonder what this is about,' he wondered. It was only him and Mitsuru in the dorm today.

"How is your schedule? Everything to your preference?" she started the conversation.
"Yeah, pretty much. Thanks to Shirogane's personal archives, I have enough reference for my studies so I don't have to travel to Okina's library. The rugged terrains here are more than enough for my training regimen."

"I see. Have you ever considered taking a part-time job while we're staying here?"

"I did, just haven't found one that caught my interest yet."

Mitsuru gave him a smile. "Then today is your lucky day." She slid a piece of paper towards him across the table.

Akihiko read it. His eyes opened wide. "Assistant coach? At Yasogami High?!!"

"The twins came to me one day and told me about one of their teachers desperately needing an assistant for after-school activities. Sadly, they're low on funds to hire extra help. I plan to do something about that. I have also spoken to the headmaster on the phone regarding this, and he agrees wholeheartedly."

"You're gonna ask The Group to sponsor Yasogami?" he asked in a sarcastic tone, having heard enough from her about the pompous stuck-ups that were currently governing the board.

Mitsuru smirked. "You don't need to worry about them. I will make it happen, no matter what it takes." The firmness in her voice caused goosebumps to run along his arms, but in a good way. "So, are you taking it or not?"

"Count me in!" Akihiko gave her a devilish grin. "Besides, I can't wait to see the look on Shinji's face when I start my first day."

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**Yasogami High, track field...**

It was the time of the week for Physical Education again, everybody donned in their Yasogami jerseys. Those who sincerely loved sports welcomed it. A majority of the class liked it, because it gave them a chance to mingle around outside the classroom. Some hated it, because they would prefer to be in class, catching a snooze. Souji had learned that this was one of the best times to catch up on some school gossip before the teacher showed up. He ordered his friends to spread out among their fellow peers and try to catch on some of their conversations. Currently, he was standing in front of a group consisting of three girls whom he recognized were always seated near the class entrance, pretending to ignore them but listening intently.

"Hey guys, I discovered something neat while I was browsing my favorite fashion blog last night—" one of the girls started talking.

"Oh come on, not that again. You haven't shut up about that stupid trend going on in the city right now. Trust me, that look never does anybody any favors," her friend rudely cut in.

"But it's different this time, I swear!"

"Come on, let's hear her out. This might actually be interesting," the other friend said, trying to avoid an argument from forming.

There was a small hush before the fashion-obsessed girl from earlier continued. "Okay, as I was looking through the various forum threads there, a weird link suddenly popped up. I clicked on it out of curiosity and my computer went blank for a second—"
"Oh, for goodness sake! What did I tell you about clicking on shady links?!"

"Wait, I didn't finish yet! Suddenly a text came in my cell. I didn't realize that it was already so late, so I checked the time the text came in, and it was precisely at twelve midnight. I thought it was spam at first, but I opened it to see what it was about. It said 'If you want to see the life of the person you hate totally destroyed, just reply to this message and send the name of that person.' It completely creeped me out and I shoved my phone into my desk drawer. I was going to show it to you guys this morning, but it totally disappeared from my inbox!"

'Now this is new…' Souji mused, sharpening his ears even further. He felt a familiar presence standing beside him.

"Are you for real?!" the rude friend asked incredulously. "Are you absolutely positive you weren't dreaming?"

"Hey, if you don't believe me, try it out for yourself!"

Souji felt the person beside him grab his arm. It was Shinjiro.

"That sounds awfully familiar," he growled softly.

The silverette could see the muscles of his jaw tightening. He knew what that meant. "We'll definitely need to meet up after school."

Mr. Kondo stepped out into the field with a pep in his step, taking his usual place by the soccer goalpost, a broad grin on his face. It wasn't uncharacteristic for the teacher to display his cheerfulness, but his panda eyes did make him look rather creepy. "Alright guys, gather around before I announce what sport the guys and the girls will be playing for today!"

The students immediately obeyed. For some reason, the PE/English teacher's grin broadened even further. "We won't be having our usual pop quiz today. Instead, I have an important announcement. Those of you who have read the school paper must probably know that we're a bit understaffed lately. Which is why today is such a special occasion!"

The students stared at him blankly as crickets chirped in the background.

"Uhhh…okay, that was awkward. Without wasting anymore time, I'd like to introduce you guys to my new assistant. He was made so because he doesn't have the qualifications to be a teacher, but given his track record from his school days and his passion for sports, he'll be helping me train you lot. Hey, come on out here already!"

Anticipation thrummed as footsteps were heard from around the corner. His bright silver hair, red shirt and white windbreaker gave away his identity to the senior SPIES. "Hi guys. My name is Akihiko Sanada. I'll be Kondo-sensei's assistant from today onwards. Pleased to meet you," the former boxer greeted politely. It didn't take long for the majority of the females to emit high-pitched squeals.

"Kyaaaaaa! He's gorgeous!"

"Oh my God, he's so hot!"

"That body...that face. He's perfection given form!"

Shinjiro face-palmed, and pulled his beanie down to cover his ears, trying to block out the noise. He wasn't successful. 'I should have expected this... I knew something was up when he couldn't
The twins shook their heads, grinning in amusement at Akihiko's annoyed reaction to the screaming. 'Poor Senpai. Even after all these years, he still can't catch a break.'

Souji and his friends were dumbfounded, not sure how to react. Neither did the rest of the male population of their class.

After much effort from the teacher and the class representative, the screeching girls managed to calm down somewhat. "As I was saying before..." Mr. Kondo cleared his throat before continuing. "Sanada-san here will be my assistant. His duties will include assisting me with some of the PE classes, and he will also be working with the basketball and soccer teams with their training. I was made to understand that his stay in Inaba won't be a long one, so I hope you guys can get along with him!" The girls were either pouting or voicing out their disappointment. "Alright, now that that's settled, I'm gonna announce what you guys will be doing today. The girls will head off to the indoor gym and get started on volleyball. The boys will remain out here to practice soccer under Sanada-san's supervision. Now go on and scatter, all of you!"

Souji caught Akihiko throwing a superior smirk at Shinjiro's direction. 'School is definitely becoming more interesting.'

School rooftop...

As usual, the gang gathered at the roof top during lunch period. They chatted and swapped news.

The door slammed open and immediately closed again, revealing a flustered Akihiko. "Tch, I finally lost them. To think the boonies has this much of a crowd..." Then he went to join his friends as if nothing had happened. "So, what's up guys?"

"Had a rough day, Aki?" Shinjiro sneered, polishing off his bento. "Seriously, things never change around you."

"Tell me about it. I thought it'll quiet down, y'know. But the girls here are just as loud and annoying as the ones in the city. No offense to you guys," the former boxer apologized quickly. "None taken," Naoto sighed. "I understand your current predicament. Unfortunately, they're also just as relentless, so you're going to have to bear with it for a while."

"If you ask me, the solution's obvious," Rise chipped in.

A question mark appeared above Chie's head. "Solution? What solution?"

Rise made an annoyed gesture with her hands. "Could you guys be any more clueless? Make out with Mitsuru-san in front of the entire school, of course!"

Everyone did a spit-take of their lunches except for Shinjiro, who continued to chew his food properly.

"Rise-chan, how could you even suggest such a shameless thing?!" Yukiko scolded.

"Doesn't surprise me. I've been telling him to do that since middle school, way before they even started dating," Shinjiro said, ignoring his best friend's blush. "Of course, she would've flat out refuse...and execute him for good measure. Still, nobody would dare mess with the Ice Queen."
"That's right. A woman of high class, intelligence and beauty like Mitsuru-san…" Rise's eyes lit up and sparkled. "There's no way those girls could ever stand a chance in the short amount of time that he's staying here," she boasted, happy that at least one person was backing her up.

Everyone stopped shoving food into their mouths and gave it some thought. It was a sure fire way of ensuring that people got the message in the shortest amount of time. It would be embarrassing to do, but they had to admit that it might just work.

"Yeah, Shinji's right. Nobody would dare mess with Mitsuru-senpai. I was lucky enough not to get harassed too much by Akihiko-senpai's fangirls back in Gekkoukan, mostly because they knew that I was living in the same dorm with her," Minako said. "Girls can be pretty cruel, especially to each other."

"I actually overheard a girl telling her friends she was going to put Minako's name up in that sick website Strega was handling," Minato said. His eyes darkened with anger, gripping his chopsticks so hard that they almost broke in half. "I threatened that girl somewhat, but she got the message and avoided Minako after that."

"Aniki…"

"Strange website, you say? That kinda rings a bell," Yosuke interjected. "I heard about something like that before I transferred here from the city. Remember the ghost story I told you guys at the ski resort, the one about my friend's sister? He told me something about a revenge website that can help you get rid of the person you hate. Just type in their name, and bam! The next day something bad happens."

"You're not wrong. That was Strega's M.O. Once they got a target, they will track that person down and take 'em out during the Dark Hour, leaving no evidence they committed a crime," Shinjiro said.

Souji clenched his fist. "So, those girls weren't making things up…"

"Making what up, Sensei?" Teddie asked.

The silverette told them about the conversation he overheard in PE class. The rest of the Investigation Team gasped.

"What does it all mean?" Chie wondered. "Will more people get hurt because of this?"

"I don't know. But just as we said before, things will get worse. I'll have Fuuka look into that angle, but we still don't have a solid lead on who is behind all this, so we'll just have to keep our eyes and ears peeled for anything," Minato said. "Speaking of, have any of you guys seen anymore spirit sightings? The dorm has been quiet after the cleanup event."

"Nope, I haven't heard anything new from the Housewives Network. Unless you want to count the amount of people into horror movies these days," Yosuke pointed out. "I just found it unusual after doing inventory for the entertainment section last night. Apparently it's selling out like hot cakes for the past few weeks."

"Now that you mention it, I noticed that trend too. Many of the guests staying at our inn kept asking the staff about local ghost stories. My mother worried it might attract unwanted attention from shady reporters again, so she ordered them not to say anything," Yukiko added.

"Shady reporters?" Akihiko repeated while munching on a yakisoba roll.
"The Amagi Inn received a lot of unsavory media attention after word got out that the late Mayumi Yamano was staying there before her death," Naoto explained. "But this ghost story angle is worth looking into. There might just be a pattern there."

They pooled in all the info they collected from people around town. So far no luck…

"Another dead end," Kanji sighed. "I haven't seen any spirits floating around either, seeing that I live next to the shrine. Good thing too. I'd hate for them to scare Ma in the middle of the night."

"We'll just have to continue gathering more information," Metis concluded.

The bell signaling recess was over rang throughout the school. The Persona-users quickly cleaned up their mess and headed to class.

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After school, 2nd floor…

Standing beside a stairway leading up to the 3rd floor, Souji waited for the members of the Occult Club to pick up the requested idols after class. Luckily, no one paid any attention to the large sack he was carrying. They simply passed him by, or glanced at the out-of-place object and disregarded it.

As if emerging from the shadows, the two creepy students walked up to him. "Ah, Seta. Perfect timing as ever," Black Hair praised, anxiously eyeing the sack. "I see we were right in trusting you with such an important request."

Souji passed said item to them. "Always glad to help. Feel free to check them and make sure they're suitable for your needs."

Brown Hair wasted no time pouncing on the sack, his hands greedily disappearing into the opening, inspecting the contents. "Perfect!" His creepy eyes glinted and his voice was filled with rather disturbing glee. "These will certainly provide us with enough spiritual energy for all the members' initiation!"

"Once again, Seta, you never fail to impress." Black Hair grinned toothily, in such an ominous way that Souji felt shivers running down his spine. He pulled out a small velveteen box from his pants pocket. "And of course, such a feat cannot go unrewarded. I'm sure you'll find this artifact to be more than worthy your troubles."

Souji hastily picked the box out of his bony hands, wanting their exchange to be over as soon as possible. He pried it open and took a quick glance at his reward, blinking in surprise. "This... This is definitely better than I expected…" He looked back up. "Thank…you…?" The occult members were no longer there. He didn't even notice them leave. "Were they this mysterious last year?" he mused. "Hey, you two can come out now. The coast is clear."

The twins appeared from their hidden positions at the upper staircase. "That was weird alright," Minako said as they descended. "Not as weird as most of the requests Elizabeth and Theo-kun asked of us, but close enough."

Minato was more interested in the small box Souji was holding. "So, what kind of item did they give to you as your reward?"

Souji showed them the artifact - a silver dragonfly pendant, decorated with tiny precious stones of different colors. The way it glinted under the hallway lights was mesmerizing, the smooth metal cool to the touch. The silverette gripped it in his palm, the cool silver sending delightful tingles...
across his warm skin. Smiling softly to himself, he felt at ease in a way that he hadn't felt in a while.

"Woah, that's so pretty!" Minako cooed. "You're so lucky, Banchou-kun! I've never seen a piece of jewelry like this. It looks pretty old, so it must have been an heirloom of some kind."

"I agree. There's something special about this artifact. I can sense it," Minato nodded. "It's certainly fits you."

"Really? How so?"

"Think about it. Dragonflies are believed to be a symbol for maturity and depth of character. It also represents the sharpness of one's inner mind, looking beyond the surface and into the deeper implications and aspects of life, opening one's eyes and defeating self-created illusions. Actually, it explains a lot about what you've been through before."

Minako nodded enthusiastically in agreement. "They're also a symbol of power and poise, especially here in Japan. It's a creature that's admired and respected, so much so that samurai use it as a symbol of power, agility and victory. Many imperial crests were decorated with dragonflies." She rubbed the back of her head and stuck out her tongue. "Ono-sensei made sure to remind us of that on a daily basis. That man has an unhealthy obsession with the Sengoku era."

Souji chuckled at that. "I know. Kanji mentioned it to me after last year's school trip. He and the first-years got stuck with a special lecture in his class. I also remember Ono-sensei crying a lot in the middle of lessons about Masamune Date when I attended Gekkoukan. I swear, I've never seen anyone get so emotional over a historical figure."

They burst into laughter.

"Anyway, those guys from the Occult Club seem to take this paranormal subject way too seriously," Minato said, turning solemn. "Such fascination can't be a good thing."

"Aniki, don't be so paranoid," Minako scolded lightly. "But then again... we've had our share of problems with cults and occult fanatics in the past." She caressed the leather strap of her wristwatch, trying to shake off the bad memories of Strega and the Cult of Nyx.

"From what I know of them, their curiosity is mostly harmless," Souji said, trying to ease their concerns. "Besides, discretion is the key element to their club, so I doubt they'd do anything drastic that could expose them to the whole school."

"That makes sense. But still, I think we should be cautious about them for the time being," Minato decided. "Let's go get food before we head for the daycare. I'm starving for some Chinese."

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After school, the 1st floor…

"Get back here, ya damn bear!" Yosuke shouted as he chased Teddie down the hallway. "You're not getting away this time!"

"But Yosuke, Sensei said I already made up for what happened at Yakushima!" Teddie whined, trying to keep himself at a safe distance from his foster brother.

"That was before you bailed on me last time! Do you have any idea of the freaking, ear-bleeding lecture I've got from Dad for that?! You're coming with me, or I'll rip off your bear suit and use it as a cleaning rag!"
The blonde panicked as Yosuke closed in on him. Even without his suit, he wasn't fast enough to outrun the wielder of the Storm God. He could only pray for someone or something to save him.

"HALT! BOTH OF YOU!" A feminine voice commanded. The owner came into their field of vision, holding up a hand as a stop sign.

Startled, Teddie screeched to a halt, causing Yosuke to crash into him and sending both of them face first to the ground, only a few inches from her feet.

"Why does this always happen to me?" the brunette muttered.

"Yosuke…get off! You're squishing me…" Teddie moaned, feeling very displeased about their current position.

"Are you two alright?" the same voice asked, now filled with concern.

The boys quickly got back to their feet. "L-Labrys-san!? I'm sorry! Are you okay? We didn't hurt you, did we?!"

"Whooa, calm down, Yosuke-san. I'm okay, but what about you and Teddie-san?"

Teddie beamed, always loving the attention. ""Even better now that you're with us, Labby-chan!"

"Now, care to explain why you two were running in the hallway?" The self-proclaimed prefect crossed her arms, expression stern. "You know that's against the school's rules."

Yosuke was quick to point a finger at Teddie. "It was this runt's fault! He was trying to ditch his responsibilities!"

"What?! That's a lie!" Teddie protested dramatically. "I was just heading out to Junes! I'd never run away from my duties!"

"Is that so?" Labrys' expression softened. "Since it was for a good reason, I'll let it slide this time then. But you two must promise me that you won't do it again, okay?"

"Of course, Labby-chan! You're so understanding~ And too sweet~" Teddie tried buttering her up, eyes gleaming with happiness, throwing in some sparkles for good measure. The girl couldn't help but giggle, not minding his attempts.

Yosuke raised an eyebrow at how quickly Teddie suddenly changed his mind, knowing the bear was only doing it to impress Labrys. A sneaky grin made its way to his lips, deciding to use it to his advantage. "Alright, Teddie, let's get going. We don't want to be late for work now, do we?" He gripped his shoulder and clenched it very tightly, to make sure the sneaky little bugger wouldn't escape again.

Teddie let out a small 'eep' of pain, knowing that his flirting tendencies have backfired on him once again. "S-Sure thing!" he stuttered, trying to act brave in a girl's presence.

Labrys giggled again. "You two are funny." She turned to make her leave. "Anyway, I must get going too. Momma's waiting for me. See ya tomorrow."

"See ya!"

As Labrys was about to turn a corner, she almost bumped into someone. "Oh, I'm sorry about—" Her sentence paused when she saw it was Metis. Immediately her eyes narrowed. "Metis…" she
"Oh, hello Labrys-san!" The other girl smiled at her, her eyes wide with innocence.

The self-imposed prefect snorted arrogantly. She walked past her, not bothering to look back.

The black-haired android cocked her head in confusion. "Was it something I said?" she mumbled to herself as Yosuke and Teddie walked up to her.

"What's up, Metis-san?" the former greeted.

"I don't know… Labrys-san's mood always seems to change whenever I'm around."

"What do you mean?" Teddie asked.

"Remember when Chie-san and Yukiko-san gave me a tour during the first day of school? Along the way, we met her. She was really happy when they offered to show her around, but when she noticed I was with them, she glared at me several times. She's been showing signs of hostility towards me ever since."

"I think you're just imagining things," Yosuke waved it off. "Labrys-san can be strict, I'll give ya that, but only when she's sure she's right. Discipline seems to be her thing."

"Maybe… I'm not really good at reading human emotions compared to vital signs. Labrys-san is hard for me to understand. I just don't want make her upset."

"You? Never, Metty-chan!" Teddie exclaimed. "You try your best to help everybody! Why would anyone be upset at you?"

Metis felt slightly better. "Thank you, Teddie-san."

Before he could open his mouth and use cheesy pick-up lines on her, Yosuke grabbed him by the collar of his shirt. "C'mon you little troublemaker, you're coming with me to Junes and that's final!" He turned to Metis, ignoring a pouting Teddie. "Sorry, but we need to get going. Want us to accompany you to the school gates?"

"I appreciate that, Yosuke-san. Thank you."

The school building was empty, except for a young couple walking through the hallways of the main school building, making their way to the shoes lockers. It was already late, and they were anxious to get home.

"Hey," The boy inched closer to his girlfriend. "Did you hear something?"

"Oh please, if you're trying to flirt with me, you're gonna need a better line," she huffed in annoyance, pulling her outdoor shoes out to replace her school-issued ones.

"No, I'm serious! I heard something." He cupped a hand to his ear. "Listen."

She frowned, but complied. At first she heard nothing, but then it started – a chanting, monotone chorus that started faint, almost a whisper that it was barely audible. It steadily grew louder and louder, as if was alive and stomping towards them. "W-What was that?!"

"I-I dunno…"
"C-Could it be those ghost lights thingies that people keep talking about?!!"

"Hear us..." the disembodied voice echoed throughout the halls. "As the pale golden moon rises in the sky and the crimson fog covers the land, the spirits of the damned will rise to plunge the world into chaos once again!"

Shrieking loudly, the couple broke into a mad dash for the exit as moans and wails erupted from everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

In a secluded classroom...

A group of students, all of them wearing masks, were chanting around a rune circle drawn on the center of the floor, occasionally interrupted by moans and wails. Posters of arcane symbols and characters were plastered all over the walls. The curtains were closed so that the only light source was coming from the five candles surrounding the drawn circle.

The leader of the group suddenly raised a hand, and everyone went silent. "Very well, that'll do for today." He took off his mask and stood to his full height. It was Black Hair. "Well done, my fellows in the practice of the Dark Arts. Extracting the spiritual power within these idols have been difficult, but we're so close!"

"Once we tap into that power, we shall be able to delve further into the forces of paranormal," Brown Hair added as he rubbed his bony hands together. "And then... we'll finally be able to find the truth behind all mysteries!"

The members of the eccentric club cheered.

Black Hair lifted his hand once more. Silence. "Remember, remain secretive," he ordered. "No one shall interfere with our plans!"

They cleaned and split up, leaving no traces of their presence of having ever used that classroom.

Daycare, on top of the hill...

The Wild Cards were surrounded by children, most of them kindergartners tugging them from all directions, trying to get the new assistants to focus their attention to any sort of trouble their young minds could conjure up, while making as much noise as humanly possible.

"Mister, Mister, Kaoru pooped in his pants again!"

"I did not! Stop lying, you big fat liar!"

"I'm thirsty. I want juice!"

"No! He's gonna get me takoyaki!"

"Toki-kun is bullying Haruhi-chan again. Please save her, Yuuta-kun!"

"Featherman Ultra Chop!"

"Onée-chan, do you have a boyfriend?"

Luckily for Minako, she was pulled aside to attend to a fussy little girl about three years old, because she didn't like being near other boys. And lucky for the flirting kid, he was still a kid, so
Minato and Souji couldn't do anything to him for using a pick-up line on their sister.

When their shift was almost over, the trio sighed in relief as the number of children dwindled down after their parents picked them up. The only ones left were Yuuta and the little girl Minako was taking care of earlier, Reiko-chan. She was an adorable child, a bit small in size compared to average children her age, with chestnut brown hair and big, cocoa eyes. Having taken a strong liking to Minako, she stuck to her like glue.

Yuuta was playing Featherman with Minato and Souji when Eri showed up. "Yuuta! Are you ready to go home?"

The little boy's face lit up. "Yup, I'm ready!" he announced boisterously, running to his stepmother's side and gripping her hand.

"Oh, I remember you two," the young mother said. "You're from the summer festival, with Souji-kun's other friends. Thank you for taking good care of Yuuta for me."

"It's not a problem. We love kids," Minato said. "It was really fun playing Featherman with him. He really knows his stuff."

Souji was staring at Eri the entire time. Despite not knowing her for long, he noticed there was something different about her. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but the young mother's smile was brighter, her skin and hair more radiant. Overall, she was glowing. Before stating that however, he decided to ask the most obvious question in mind. "Eri-san, out of curiosity, why did you send Yuuta back to daycare again?"

"Oh that. You see, he missed the friends he made when he was here last time. So my husband and I talked about it, and we decided to send him here twice a week so he can play with them."

Minako smiled. "That's very considerate of you. At least that way, you'll get to have some time to yourself." Little Reiko's hold around her tightened, so the auburn-haired girl swayed her body gently, rocking the fussy girl in her arms to sleep, rubbing soothing circles on her back.

"You're such a natural. You'll make a wonderful mother someday," Eri praised, rubbing her stomach gently. "That tall, scowling young man you were with at the festival... I'm positive he'll make a great father, too."

Minako cheeks turned as red as her eyes. "Eeeehhh!? Eri-san, that's...!"

The silverette noticed the gesture the older woman was making and finally put two and two together. "Eri-san, could it be... that you're... Are you pregnant?"

Her smile widened even more. "Yes, I am. I just found out yesterday. Only Yuuta knows, and we're planning to surprise his dad with the news."

"I'm going to be the bestest big brother ever, just like you, Mister!" Yuuta boasted, puffing his chest out proudly.

"Congratulations! Wow, that's quite the news. Why didn't you break it to your husband first before telling us?" Minato asked.

"To be honest, I was going to tell him the minute I found out, but I got nervous. I needed to tell someone though, and if you haven't noticed, the people in this town aren't that good at keeping secrets. But I trust Souji-kun, and he honors you both very much, so I know I can keep this between us until the time is right."
The twins felt flattered that Eri had entrusted them with a precious secret without any doubts. They felt a familiar connection with the expecting mother.

**Thou art I... And I am thou...**

**Thou hast created a new bond...**

**Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Temperance Arcana.**

They were interrupted when the head caretaker came over with their paychecks. "Here you are." She handed them a brown envelope each. "With all the chaos today, you deserve every single yen! Oh, and Reiko-chan's parents just called. They'll be here in another half an hour. I'll watch over her until then, so you can go home."

"Ah, that's alright. She's sleeping right now, so I don't mind waiting until they arrive," Minako said.

"I should be getting home too. I'm making Yuuta's favorite croquettes today," Eri said, her son cheering beside her. They left the daycare holding hands.

Minako turned to her brothers. "You two can head back first. I promise to be home before dark."

Her twin checked his watch. "You better. In the meantime, Souji-kun and I will stop by Junes to pick up some stuff."

"See you tomorrow, Aneki."

Once they left the daycare grounds, Minato texted something on his phone. After buying the things they needed from Junes, they headed towards Samegawa flood plains.

"By the way, who did you text before this, Aniki?" Souji asked as an afterthought.

"Shinjiro-senpai," Minato answered. "I figured his shift was going to end soon and is available to walk Minako back home. I asked him to pick up some tofu as well since he was in the area."

Just as they were about the reach the plains, they bumped into Daisuke, unsurprised to see him in his Yasogami jersey, breathing heavily - no doubt from jogging. He was sweating all over, his hair plastered on his head like a strange skullcap.

"Daisuke, fancy seeing you here," Souji greeted.

"Souji, Minato. Yo!" He stopped, but continued with his stationary paces. "Training as well?"

"Nah, we're just heading back after our part-time job at the daycare, and Junes obviously." The latter lifted the grocery bags to show him the supermarket logo.

"Whoa, pretty hardworking aren't ya? No rest for the wicked, as they say. I never knew what that meant, anyway..." Daisuke admitted shamelessly. His friends sweatdropped. As they were about to continue their conversation, a loud grunt interrupted them, followed by the sound of whipping air.

"What was that?" Souji wondered. They walked further to the wide open space beside the gazebo, and saw a young man dressed in kendo gear, practicing with a bokutō (wooden sword). His back was facing them, so they couldn't see his face.

"That stance... and that swinging style. It looks familiar," Minato mused. "Almost like..."

"Oh, him? That's Hayase-san. He moved here about 4 months ago with his mom and brothers," Daisuke told them. "Around the same time that new factory opened up near Okina, where he works
at. He's always training here after his day shifts are over."

"Hayase?!"

"You know him, Aniki?"

The young man stopped what he was doing and took off his helmet, distracted by someone calling his name. His gaze immediately zoomed onto the blunette. "Minato?!"

"I knew I recognized you, Mamoru! Wow, you haven't changed a bit!" The two friends embraced each other and exchanged pleasantries, almost forgetting the other two on the side, until Minato introduced them. "Mamoru, meet my friends. This is Souji Seta, my childhood friend, and Daisuke Nagase, captain of Yasogami High soccer club."

"I've seen you around," Mamoru told the latter. "Always gotta admire a fellow athlete. You remind me of myself from my high school days. I should get my little brother to join your club when he starts high school next year."

"Speaking of high school, are you still continuing your pursuit for kendo?" Minato asked.

Mamoru's grin widened even more. "Heck yeah! I'll never give up kendo!" He then crossed his arms, expression solemn. "To tell you the truth, I'm having a bit of difficulty adjusting here. It's not that I hate this place…"

"Then what is it?" Souji queried.

"I like this place, I really do! Ever since my mom's health deteriorated, the doctor suggested we move to the countryside because the city air wasn't helping. A former colleague told me about a job opening at the factory, and we made a unanimous decision to move. My brothers love it here, and so does my mom. Her health is improving ever since she started gardening and stopped working so hard. It's just that—"

"Oh, I see. You miss your kendo buddies from your old place, right?" Minato finished the sentence for him. "Haven't found the perfect rival you've been looking for?"

"That's what I like and hate about you, Minato. You always could read my mind." Mamoru rubbed the back of his head, frustrated. "You know I always like a challenge, but this place isn't giving it to me. Honestly, the only worthy rival I ever had was...well...you."

The blunette chuckled. "You flatter me."

"Now that you're here, care to have a go? You can even use by back-up shinai." Mamoru looked at him imploringly. "Come on, dude! Don't make me beg."

The blunette thought about it for a while. "Alright, you'll get your challenge, but it won't just be coming from me." The others were confused when he said that, until he pushed Souji forward. "Why don't you try out against him, too? He hasn't had many swordsmen to spar against lately."

The fire in Mamoru's eyes burned brighter. "Really now?" He eyed the silverette from top to bottom. All of a sudden, he threw his bokutō towards him. "Here! Show me your stance." Souji caught it with ease, and did what he asked. "Wow, you look so natural, like you were born to hold a sword. Have you ever even taken kendo lessons before?"

"No... To tell you the truth, I've never touched a sword until I moved here last year."
Mamoru's surprised grin widened into a smile. "That does it! You're going to spar with me whether you like it or not. You might even be more of a challenge than Minato here."

"Hey watch it," Minato protested lightly. "I gave you a run for your money in the regional try-outs. Don't think I can't do it again."

Souji couldn't help but feel excited. There was something about this Hayase character that stoked the spark of competition in him.

Thou art I... And I am thou...
Thou hast created a new bond...
It brings thee closer to the truth...
Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Star Arcana.

The three of them made plans on when to meet and start their training, Daisuke watching them on. Somewhere along the line, the subject of Aiya Diner's new menu item came up. They roped in Kou into their plans without his knowledge, and decided to show what Mamoru had been missing these past months. Since it was getting dark fast, they parted ways, eager to test their strength against each other in the upcoming days.

A few days later…

Souji crossed paths with his classmates from the dorm on his way to school. Once they approached the school gates, most of the student body seem to be whispering to each other in hushed tones, causing a feeling of uneasiness. The Wild Cards, who were more sensitive to these kind of things, felt it even stronger, but kept silent until they had a better notion of what's going on.

"Why's everybody so worked up?" Shinjiro asked, not amused.

"Not sure. I don't think it's good, though," Souji replied.

"Let's check it out," Minato said.

They were greeted by the worried faces of the rest of their friends, which only intensified their sense of dread.

"Hey guys!" Minako waved, but not as her usual cheerful self, despite the effort. "Something wrong?"

"You guys read the school paper?" Chie asked nervously.

At their negative, Naoto handed them her copy. They huddled around to read together. On the front page in big, bold letters, the headline read: **Yasogami High Is Haunted!**

"Students claim to hear unearthly chanting along with moans and wails after class," Metis read the accompanying article aloud. "Could it be related to the ghost lights surrounding Inaba? Or is it the ghosts of those murdered last year, having returned to punish society for their demise? The principal, the teaching staff and student council members refuse to comment on the subject."

A heavy silence fell over them. "What does all of this mean?" Yukiko asked after a stretched period of silence.

"The stakes are getting higher," Minato concluded, his eyes never leaving the paper. "This is one of the things Igor warned us about."
"We might be running out of time," his sister added, sounding worried.

As the Persona-users chatted among themselves, two members from the Occult Club were slinking around in the shadows, eavesdropping on the conversations around them. "Our prayers were answered! The spirits have manifested themselves!" Brown Hair whispered to his partner excitedly.

"You know what that means. We must double our efforts!" Black Hair said. "We'll hold club meetings daily! We must not let our otherworldly comrades wait any longer."

They left, and not a single person felt their presence.

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Metis stood next the school gates after school. The students paid no mind to her, though occasionally some guy would walk up to her, asking if she'd like to hang out together or offer to walk her home. She always refused, claiming to be waiting for someone. Soon enough, said person arrived. "Hello Metis," Aigis greeted her warmly. Beside her, Koromaru barked his own. "How was school today?"

"Oh Sister, today was wonderful! I never knew school could be so exciting!" Metis' red eyes gleamed as she knelt down to pet the Shiba Inu. "And how are you, Koromaru-san?" He licked her face in response, making her smile. "I see."

"Ready to go home? Everybody's waiting to discuss the spike in supernatural activity."

"Yes! Let's go."

As the two sisters and white dog headed back, they failed to notice another pair of crimson eyes watching their every move.

"Unit #024… Snowy…" Labrys' grip on the corner of the wall tightened, small cracks started to appear. She shook her head. "No! Don't be ridiculous!" she whispered harshly to herself. "Those are not them. The-they're long gone…"

"Spying on people this time?" a rude voice snickered behind her. "Tsk tsk, Miss President. You're not setting a very good example, are you?"

Startled, Labrys spun around, coming face to face with a young man. He had short, bright red hair, dark grey eyes, a very pale complexion. An X-shaped scar cut right across his face. He wore the blazer of the Yasogami High uniform around his waist, paired with a dark green collared shirt and a yellow armband with a black star on his left arm to match his sneakers.

"Minazuki-kun…"

Sho Minazuki from class 3-1 was what people would call a genuine troublemaker – always cracking bad jokes, delivering terrible puns and/or breaking the school rules to get people's attention. Labrys would often run into him during her patrols, so they were acquainted with each other to say the least.

"Skip the formalities, will ya? I already told ya to call me Sho," he berated. "Anyway, what's with spying those two?"

"I wasn't spying on them! It's just - I mean…" Labrys sputtered, then groaned in frustration. "Fine! Metis reminds me of someone I once knew. Satisfied?!"
Sho smirked. "S'that so? I'll be honest with ya, she's cute. But I won't bother trying to get to know her. She hangs with a huge and weird crowd anyway. Not a fan of those."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Since you just moved here only recently, you probably won't know. Let me tell ya, things were pretty dull when I started living here over a year ago. Man, this place really is out in the sticks. But then, the ghost lights started. Around the same time Metis and her city friends settled in." He gave a shrug, like all of this was normal. "Probably a coincidence, but I gotta admit it made things around here way more exciting."

"Way more concerning you mean," Labrys corrected him. "The whole school won't stop talking about it. No one knows if those things are real or not, and if they are, whether or not it could cause any harm!"

"You think way too much. If it were dangerous, shouldn't there already be proof?" The young man flashed her that annoying smirk of his. "Or maybe… Maybe you're just jealous of her."

"E-Excuse me?!"

"She may not walk around with a stick up her ass like you do, but she's considered to be pretty smart and cute by everyone here." He crossed his arms, hunching his back to level their eyeline. "But I get the feeling you two are more alike than you think."

"I'M NOT JEALOUS!" she shouted, and blushed faintly when people began staring in their direction. She lowered her voice to a sharp whisper. "That's completely and utterly ridiculous!"

"Whatever. I gotta go before the old man gets on my case for not helping him… again." He picked up his school bag and slung it over his shoulder. "Want me to get in trouble so you can scold me tomorrow? That always seems to cheer ya up."

Her cheeks flushed red. "Hmph! You wish!"

"Heh, told ya you were cute," Sho teased, walking away. "See ya around." He lazily waved at her without looking back.

'Ugh…! Why are boys so aggravating?!' Once he was out of sight, Labrys exhaled a deep breath. "Me? Jealous of Metis? As if!" she huffed. "Why would I be jealous of her? Just because she has friends, gets to come school... Everything #024 deserved to have. And that was denied to her because… because-" As she paused, something clicked in her mind. "Because there can be only one…" She turned her gaze to the direction Metis and Aigis went. Her expression turned dark. "There can be only one…" Even her voice turned raspy. "I'm settling this. Once and for all!"

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The next day…

Metis walked out of the school building and headed towards the gates. Aigis always instructed her to walk home together with someone, be it the twins, Souji, or any of their friends to avoid trouble whenever she was unable to pick her up in person, but a classmate had requested her help with math homework earlier and she really couldn't refuse. She ended up late and none of her teammates could be found. Just as she entered the courtyard, a cold voice stopped her.

"You're not supposed to be here."

"Huh? Who's there?" Metis clutched her schoolbag, looking around. "I… I know we're not
supposed to remain on school grounds once after-school activities are over, but I was just leaving."

"You really don't get it, do you?" The voice sounded more annoyed as its owner approached her. Labrys appeared from around the corner. Her body language was even more hostile than usual. "You're not supposed to be in this school, or any other for that matter!"

"Labrys-san? How could you say that?" Metis asked. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

"You're not a normal student. You're not even a human being!" Labrys said, breathing hard. "You're a machine! An Anti-Shadow weapon!"

Metis froze. 'How could she see through my disguise?! Even Sister and Yukari-san said my camouflage was flawless!'

"If you keep coming here, our dream will be ruined!"

"Huh? Your dream?"

"A normal life... to live a normal life. That's what I've always wanted. And here in Inaba, I've finally achieved it!" Labrys' glare hardened. "But then you had to show up and bring along all these weird things goin' on around here! All my hard work to fit in as a normal student will go down the drain!"

"A normal student...?" The puzzle pieces finally fit together in Metis' mind. "So that's why you're always hostile towards me! You're not a human yourself!"

Labrys gritted her teeth. "That's right. I was created to destroy Shadows. A weapon. But when I fully awoke, they were no longer a threat, so I had no other purpose for existing before Momma took me in..."

"Momma...?"

"She didn't treat me like a machine and taught me how to behave like a normal girl. For her...for myself...I won't let anyone take that dream away from me!" The angry girl pointed her finger at Metis. "Anti-Shadow weapons like you have no right to be a high school student!"

"Labrys-san, how can you say that when you're an Anti-Shadow weapon yourself? Isn't that denying your own dream, denying who you are? That makes no sense at all!"

"J-j-just... Just shut up, okay!? If you don't plan on leaving this place by your own volition-" Something leaped from behind her back and a huge axe materialized before her, accompanied by mechanical sounds. Labrys grabbed it with a single hand and pointed it to the other girl. "I'll just have to force you!"

Metis tensed. 'If Labrys-san is as strong as Sister - I'm confident I can take her down,' she thought. 'But, fighting on school grounds is not allowed. It will cause problems for everyone.'

"Well, what's your decision?" Labrys asked, tentatively swinging her giant axe.

"Labrys-san, I have no intentions to stop coming to school, but I won't fight you here," Metis said firmly. "Not only is it against the rules, but it will also cause trouble for my friends."

"Hmm... I suppose you have a point," Labrys said thoughtfully. "Then we'll just have to take this fight somewhere else!" She threw her axe in the air and it morphed into some sort of jetpack. While it was still mid-air, she jumped up and the jetpack attached itself on her back, allowing her to hover
above Metis.

The black-haired android was impressed by the sight before her, but she had no time to gawk as Labrys dive-bombed and rammed into her, carrying them towards the direction of the floodplains.

"You give me no choice… I'm sorry…"

Down below, there were others who stopped bickering long enough to witness what had happened.

"What the…! Wasn't that…?" Yosuke spluttered. "What the hell was that?!

Just minutes before, Chie, Yosuke and Teddie arrived, turning back from the direction of Junes after Teddie whined about leaving some important item under his desk and he absolutely had to get it back, when they heard two voices arguing. Deciding to investigate, they were shocked to learn the existence of another android attending their school, and even more so when they saw her turn violent and attacked their friend.

"L-Labrys just s-sent Metis flying!" Chie choked on her sentence, barely believing what she had just seen.

"I-I know!"

"We should help Metty-chan!" Teddie announced, snapping them out of their stupor. "Labby-chan looked mad as heck!"

"You're right, Ted. Metis could be in serious trouble. I'm calling Souji." Yosuke took out his cellphone. "Let's follow her. Chances are they'll end up in a fight."

After a short hand-to-hand sparring session, Souji and Akihiko headed to the shopping district. They bumped into Shinjiro as he was just leaving from his part-time job at Aiya's. He said goodbye to Aika, who silently nodded and waved passively.

"Hey Shinji," Akihiko greeted him. "How's the job coming along?"

"Tch…" Shinjiro was still not used to telling other people what he was up to. "Fine." The fact that he answered at all showed he was in a good mood.

"Looks like you and Aika are becoming good friends," Souji said.

"The girl's quiet, only asks what she needs and doesn't fool around when it comes to delivering the orders. She's pretty easy to work with."

"Better be careful, or Minako might get jealous," Akihiko teased.

"You wish. It was her idea in the first place." Shinjiro smirked darkly at his best friend. "If I were you, I'd be careful about getting too friendly with those new fangirls of yours. Pissing off Mitsuru is another kind of execution, wouldn't you think?"

Souji chuckled silently at the duo's bickering, until he spotted the new antique shop. "Hey, that's the new shop Rise and Kanji mentioned."

"Shinshoudo Antiques…" Shinjiro read the name out loud. "Hey, doesn't that name ring a bell?"

"Yeah, I do know that name from somewhere…" Akihiko scratched his chin. "That's right! It's the name of that store at--"
The ringtone from Souji's cellphone cut him off. He saw it was Yosuke's ID and answered. "Yosuke? What's up?" The other two beside him heard panicked shouting and even something squealing in the background, despite the phone not being on loudspeaker. "What?! Say that again...Labrys is a what?! Okay...okay, I get the picture! Listen, just head over there before Labrys tries to hurt her. I'll be there soon."

He quickly hung up. Akihiko and Shinjiro knew the news wasn't good. "What happened?" the former questioned.

"Metis was attacked...by Labrys."

Shinjiro was surprised. "That school president wannabe?! She's never been friendly towards Metis, but..."

"According to Yosuke, Labrys is an Anti-Shadow weapon too," Souji explained. "Apparently that's the reason she's always so hostile towards her."

"No way! Aigis and Metis were supposed to be the only ones left!" Akihiko said.

"That's not the point right now. If Labrys is serious about not allowing Metis to attend school just as Yosuke said, I fear she might be in big trouble. I'll head to the flood plain to find her before Labrys does. I need you guys to let the others know about this."

"Got it. I'll call Minako and her brother," Shinjiro offered, taking his own phone out. Akihiko did the same and started dialing. "Watch your back."

"I will." Souji ran off, making a quick stop at Daidara's. The other two also splitted up a few moments later, failing to notice the owner of the antique shop walking out the door, a frown etched on her face.

"My child...What have you done this time?"

Aigis was smiling all the way as she headed towards Yasogami High. She couldn't help but feel happy for her sister, experiencing the joys of school life and how much she had matured in the past weeks. It was amazing to witness her growth and be a part of it, just like what her friends had done for her in the past.

Something whizzed past above her, catching her attention. At first glance, it looked like a humanoid figure with mechanical wings. "What was that?" Aigis wondered out loud. "And why... why does that look familiar... somehow?" She didn't have to dwell on it as she saw Chie, Yosuke and Teddie franticly running towards her. Judging from their expressions, something was wrong.

"A-Aigis-san!" Yosuke halted suddenly, causing those behind him to crash into his back.

"Yosuke-san, what's the matter? You all look agitated."

The three of them looked at each other and back. Despite the emergency, they had no idea how to explain what they just found out.

"What is wrong?" Aigis insisted, her concern growing. "Maybe I can help if you tell me."

"Metty..." Teddie panted. He took a deep breath before blurtling out "Metty-chan is hurt!"

"What?!"
"W-we saw the whole thing!" Chie described what they saw, in full speed. Yosuke and Teddie never heard her talk so fast.

Aigis turned around and ran to where the flying thing was headed. A turmoil of emotions built up inside her. Concern for Metis' well-being, and anger, because someone attacked her sister for no apparent reason. She didn't know how to feel about this 'Labrys' character. Who was she? Where did she come from? What was she doing in Inaba? And why did she attack Metis?

She'll find out soon enough.

Metis groaned as she opened her eyes, attempting to get herself upright after being dropped from a height at the bank of the Samegawa River.

Labrys landed before her, the jetpack turning back into an axe. "Now, we can fight without interruption," she declared, pointing the sharp tip at Metis. "Draw your weapon!"

"Labrys-san, it doesn't have to be this way…" Despite that, Metis fished around in her bag and pulled out a cylindrical object. It expanded into her Cross Rod after pressing a tiny button.

"I have to do this!" The discipline enforcer took aim and swung her axe, rocketing towards her opponent. "Here I come!"

Their weapons collided, both mechanical maidens equally matched in strength. Labrys swung her weapon violently, trying with all her might to break through Metis' defense. The latter was hesitant to fight at full power, trying to break away from the other.

"Fight back! Fight back!" Labrys shouted, her frustration growing as she struck harder and harder, with Metis successfully blocking each one. "Why. Won't. You. Fight. BACK?!!"

As she parried the blows, Metis' mind wandered back to when she first appeared at Iwatodai Dorm back in March 2010. She had injured Ken, Mitsuru, Junpei, Koromaru and her own sister. Even if they all had forgiven her, she still felt guilty about it. "If I fight at full power, I'll just cause problems for them."

"Are you mocking me?! Do you think I'm JOKING?!"

"No! That's not it-"

"Enough fooling around!" Labrys twisted her axe at an angle, the striking force so hard it was enough to knock the rod out of Metis' hands and shoved her backwards, knocking her off balance. "I've had it with you!" She raised her giant axe above her head.

Metis had no choice but to close her eyes and wait for the blow.

That's when the Wild Cards arrived in the area. "Labrys, don't!" Minato shouted.

"STOP IT!" Minako shrieked.

Their pleas went unheard. Surprised by their arrival, Labrys jumped back, but she wasn't done yet. She threw out her fist, her hands which were connected to a chain from her arm extending far beyond her normal reach. It grabbed Metis by her blazer collar, and pulled the defenseless android towards her, using the other hand to swing down her axe. "You're finished."
The three could only watch in horror. Time seemed to slow as their friend was getting beaten up badly by the vicious attack. But Labrys didn't stop there; using the momentum from the previous swing, she redirected it to slash Metis again, and again and again. By the time she was done, Metis slumped to the ground, defeated. Her uniform was completely ripped to shreds, and the mechanical parts of her exposed body were leaking motor oil and sparks from the massive damage taken. Her white arm was literally broken in half, her hair was a mess, and a huge gash marred her left cheek.

"Hmph!" Labrys sniffed with disdain and turned her back on them.

As of time resumed again, the Wild Cards were by her side. "Metis! Metis!" Souji called to her as he held her in his arms. "C'mon, say something!"

Metis stared up at them sadly. "S-Sorry…"

"Why are you apologizing?"

"I didn't…want…to cause…trouble…" She was struggling to even speak. "Fighting…without a reason…only hurts…others…"

Minako gently brushed a few stray hairs aside and caressed her cheek. "Metis, hang in there."

Labrys turned back around, rage in her deep, red eyes. "If you can't stand up for yourself, how are you suppose'ta accomplish anything?!"

Souji and Minato stood up, while Minako held their injured friend. "What's the meaning of this, Labrys? It's not like you to attack people out of the blue!" the eldest Wild Card scolded.

"I've already told her my reason. There can't be Anti-Shadow weapons attending school. It's dangerous for the other students!" She pointed at Metis. "And all the strange incidents that's been happenin' started after she came along just confirms it."

"How can you put the blame of that phenomenon on Metis without any evidence to back it up? That makes no sense!" Minako protested.

"But you're an Anti-Shadow weapon yourself, aren't you?" Souji said. "You understand better than anyone how beings such as yourselves can mingle among humans and befriend them. Isn't saying Metis is dangerous and cannot attend school saying the same thing about yourself?"

A pained look crossed Labrys' face, before the anger returned once more. "S-SHUT UP!" she shouted, eyes glazed with tears. "I know what I'm doing! It's the only way!" She lifted her axe once more and made her way towards Metis, but the Wild Cards blocked her path. "Move it! I'm finishing what I started!"

"Sorry, but we won't allow that," Minato said, pointing a titanium baseball bat at her. Souji armed himself with a golf club and Minako did the same with a composite hockey stick. These were the only weapons the silverette could borrow from Old Man Daidara on such short notice. "Metis is our friend. Mess with her, and you mess with all of us."

"It doesn't have to come down to this, Labrys. You're not a bad person. I know it," Minako said, trying to find a middle ground.

"I can't back down now. If I do, all my efforts will be for nothin'!" Labrys swung her axe down at them, missing on purpose. "Get back! This is your last warning!"

"Please… don't…" Metis coughed, using the last of her energy reserves to stay conscious.
"It'll be okay, Metis," Minako told her. "Don't overdo it."

"You just rest for a bit, okay?" Minato added, giving her a gentle smile. "Fuuka and Aigis will be able to get you back to normal. They should be on their way."

"We've got this. Don't worry," Souji assured her.

Metis gave them a brief nod before closing her eyes, her systems shutting down to save energy.

Labrys was growing impatient. "I'm not repeating myself. If you insist on siding with her, you'll be punished as well!"

"Must you be so stubborn?" Souji sighed. "If we can't talk some sense into you, then we'll just have beat it in."

"Fine! Have it your way!" Immediately, Labrys lunged forward, swinging her axe horizontally. Despite the size and weight of the weapon, she had full control over every strike.

"Yikes! And I thought Shinji was good at handling axes!" Minako dodged the blow, and blocked another one with a good parry of her hockey stick. The shock as the weapons clashed vibrated the bones in both her arms.

"We don't have the advantage of a steel body, either," Minato added, ducking another strike. "Without our Personas, we're in for a tough fight."

Souji parried a blow that almost sliced his head off, his golf club ending with a massive dent. "No kidding. Subduing her will be hard. Our best chance is to attack all at once."

"You're right. You two ready for it?" They kept dodging and blocking, waiting for the right opportunity. Minako finally spotted a good one. "Get ready...!"

"NOW!"

They ran up to their opponent simultaneously, and aimed their attack from different sides. To their shock, Labrys easily blocked them all with her axe and arm. "Too slow!" She spun around the same time her axe glowed red, slicing cleanly through their weapons. A shock wave knocked them off their feet and onto their backs.

"Dang... She packs a punch harder than Akihiko-senpai on training day..." Minato groaned, rubbing his head. "You guys okay?"

Minako shook her head. "Just a bit dizzy..."

Souji shot up suddenly, ignoring the throbbing in his temples. "Hey, where did she go?!!"

Labrys slowly made her way towards the fallen Metis. Her eyes were hidden behind a metallic visor. Paired with her gigantic axe, it made her look like an executor ready to carry out a death sentence.

"Stop this madness, Labrys!" Souji commanded, standing in her way. The twins backed him up and shielded their friend. They were bleeding and bruised in certain areas, but they weren't about to give up just yet.

"I told you already, I can't! Once I'm given a duty, I must finish it! I don't wanna hurt you guys, but I will if I must!"
"Get away from them!" Another voice shouted, followed by what sounded like a shooting machine gun.

"?!", Thinking fast, Labrys jumped backwards, narrowly missed getting pierced by a volley of bullets.

With a somersault, Aigis landed in front of the leaders, smoking coming out of her fingertips that were aimed at the ocean-haired girl. "Come any closer to my sister and friends, and I'll show no mercy!" she warned, tone ice cold.

"Another Anti-Shadow weapon? Where are they coming from?!"

Yosuke, Chie and Teddie finally caught up. "Sorry we didn't get here any sooner. Dang, she's fast!" Yosuke said between pants, catching his breath with every word.

Chie froze upon seeing Metis' condition. "Oh no..." She kneeled down to cradle her.

"Labby-chan, please stop! This... this isn't you!" Teddie pleaded.

"Teddie..." Labrys shook her head. She had a soft spot for him, despite the blonde always flirting with her every chance he got, not minding her rejection time and time again. This time though, that wasn't the case. "No, this is for the best. I'm takin' you all down!" Unprompted, she attacked again, the thrusters in her axe firing up, giving her a boost of speed.

Aigis narrowed her eyes, the processors in her brain calculating that the next strike would be harder and faster. She could tell Labrys just activated her Orgia Mode and removed her limiters, anger and determination preventing the school girl from backing down. "Two can play at that game! Activating: Orgia Mode!"

The Anti-Shadow weapons seemingly vanished into thin air, reappearing on the wide grass field near the gazebo. They were exchanging blows at such amazing speed, it was impossible for the humans to keep track of their movements. They could only see blurry figures moving at incredible speeds, and the sounds of gunfire and metal colliding echoing through the air.

"They're evenly matched," Minato observed. "If they keep fighting at this pace..."

"Neither of them is gonna win," his sister finished his sentence. "It's a losing battle on both sides."

"B-b-but Sensei! We can't let Ai-chan and Labby-chan fight like that forever! They'll just get hurt like Metty-chan!"

"I know Teddie, but as we are now, we're powerless to stop them," Souji said, feeling frustrated.

After what felt like an eternity, the battling mechanical maidens stopped, smoke evaporating from their metallic bodies in order to cool down due to the overheating of their internal machinery. Despite that, they kept an offensive pose, a clear sign that neither was willingly to give in.

"I'm... I ain't done yet!" Labrys panted, using her axe to support herself upright. "I'm ending this!"

"Not... Not if I end it first!" Aigis said. She was running out of ammo, given the amount of bullet shells scattered across the ground, yet she was adamant on winning.

The rest could only watch, unsure of how to stop them since intervening would only get them killed. Before the fight could take a turn for the worst...
"LABRYS!" A female voice yelled from across the plains. "STOP THIS IMMEDIATELY!"

Said girl froze, dropping her axe.

Aigis and the others were confused, until the other person made their presence seen. It was a middle-aged woman with black hair and big, round glasses.

"M-Momma!"

The woman grabbed Labrys' hand. "Explain to me why you're acting in such a barbaric manner, young lady!" Anger and disappointment oozed out of every syllable.

Her daughter said nothing as she stared at the ground, her expression a mix of pain, sadness, shame and guilt as her body trembled from the strain of the battle and emotional turmoil she was currently feeling. Her bottom lip quivered, eyes becoming glassy.

Her mother's expression softened. "What am I going to do with you?" She sighed softly, pulling the girl into an embrace. "There, there…"

While Labrys was being comforted by her mother, Aigis deactivated her weapons and turned her attention to her sister, still and silent in Chie's arms. Without saying a word, she lifted her up gently, careful not to cause further damage. "It's okay, Sister… I'm here now."

"If only I can use my healing powers…" Yosuke groused, feeling guilty over something he had no control of. Chie held his arm, trying to comfort him.

However, the twins were surprised at the sight of the older woman. "Her mom is... Shinshoudo-san?!"

Aigis' ears perked up at the familiar name. She took a better look, blue eyes widening in recognition. "You?"

"You guys know her?" Souji asked his surrogate siblings.

"She has helped SEES in the past," Minato told him. "I had no idea she's the owner of the newly opened shop at the shopping district, because whenever we pass by, only Labrys was there. Even though the shop's name was familiar, I never made the connection until now."

"I've always found her ability to fuse Personas into weapons quite unusual, but-" Minako said hesitantly.

"F-fusing Personas into w-weapons?!" Yosuke sputtered. "How is that even possible?!"

Further discussion was interrupted by Shinshoudo. "You two! I've heard about you and your SEES friends living here, though I didn't expect us to meet under such circumstances…" She sighed languidly. "I suppose I owe you all an explanation."

"You can start by telling us who Labrys really is," a cold, demanding voice interrupted. It was none other than Mitsuru. The rest of SPIES were right behind her.

The older woman sighed again, looking away from Mitsuru's direction. "I should've seen this coming," she muttered sarcastically. She turned to face them again after letting go of Labrys. "My daughter... She is a Fifth Generation Anti-Shadow Suppression Weapon."

That revelation left the Persona-users speechless for two different reasons: confusion (SEES) and
cluelessness (Investigation Team). Before anyone could say anything, Shinsoudo held up a hand. "I intend to answer all of your questions, but I suggest we discuss this in a more proper location." She took a glance at Metis. "And she needs expert care immediately. I can help with that, but I don't have any equipment on me at the moment."

Everybody murmured in agreement. Despite the situation, a teammate's well-being was far more important. "On one condition. You are allowed to use our equipment, but Fuuka and Aigis will be the ones to assist you while the rest of us will keep your 'daughter' under careful watch," Mitsuru said, her tone holding no hint of negotiation.

Shinshoudo gripped Labrys' hand. "Very well."

They all headed back to the dorm in silence, various questions lingering in the air. The thick cloud of tension surrounded them, unlikely to disperse soon.

Not one person noticed a certain red-headed young man spying on them. "Will you look at that? Things keep getting more and more interesting around here," Sho said to himself, smirking devilishly. He twirled one of two short-bladed katanas in the air and caught it by the sharp tip, repeating his little game as he tailed them from a safe distance. "I wonder what'll happen next..."

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